SHEEP LIMIT

GEORGE W. OGDEN

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BY GEORGE W. OGDEN

DODD, MEAD & COMPANY

NEW YORK MCMXXVIII

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CHAPTER I

A MAN GOES FORTH

WHERE it all happened is no matter now. Only that it was in the upland plains which lie between the mountains, somewhere in the great north-west. What is a difference of five hundred miles in a land where counties are bigger than kingdoms? When it happened matters less. The memory of man, at the best, is short, and time has swept over the record of those days of which you are to hear, as a summer shower erases the footprints of great and small alike from the dust of the highway which they have passed.

That is a broad country, the inter-mountain plains of our north-west, as it should be. Much land is needed to make stage-room for the tragedies of life. For its merriment, there is not required so much space, that being a thing which can be put into a corner, leaving the vastitude open for the fight.

It all began for Rawlins when he was forced to take a job in the stockyards at Kansas City the autumn before, after he had failed to obtain a position on one of the newspapers of that self-proclaiming city by the stinking waters of the Kaw. There was that difference between what he wanted to do and what he was obliged to take: one was a position, the other was a job.

Back of the stockyards job there had been the venture into politics. Not on Rawlins' own account, cer-

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tainly. He had gone out with the paint of the university still wet on him to put brains into Kansas politics, where that essential had been wanting, it appeared, for a long time. One who aspired to the governorship, with the United States Senate in the distant offing, had put young Rawlins into the editorship of a little boiler-plate weekly out in the short grass region. After a little more than a year of it the man who owned the paper decided Rawlins was not big enough for the task ahead of him. As for the editor, he had come to the emphatic conclusion quite a while ahead of his patron that Horace Greeley himself could not have boosted that man over the political fence.

Perhaps this is as far back as it is necessary to go in the history of a man who never became much of a hero at the best, and only mildly notable in a purely local way. Yet to explain that stockyards job it is only fair to Rawlins to say he was well qualified for it by early training. He was a product of the short grass region; he had left the cow camp for the campus; put down the branding-iron and reata to stumble along with the sage of the Sabine farm.

It was while on the stockyards job, shuttling cattle from pen to pen, that Rawlins became inoculated by the thought of sheep. He saw sheepmen come pouring trainload after trainload of lambs into the market for the Christmas trade, the increase and profit of their distant flocks, realizing such sums of money as newspaper reporters and editors could not hope to earn through the course of long and laborious lives. These sheepmen were so accustomed to gathering in the reward of their virtuous foresight that it seemed to

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make them sad to pack up a few more bales of it to bulge out the sides of the banks back in Wyoming and Montana.

It was just one recurring cycle of money in the sheepmen's life, Rawlins came to see clearly. After cashing in on the Christmas lambs, or the Easter lambs, the sly fellows had nothing to do but go back home, knock around in their way of silent, greasy contentment until spring, when they would shear the fathers and mothers of the Christmas lambs, gather in another large mass of money for the clip, and grin a little, maybe, over the heft of it in their jeans. Better still, and more of it, the lady sheep, duly shorn, would be suckling then and there another crop of Christmas lambs. So it went in the sheepman's happy life.

To add to the felicity of the sheepman's condition, he had neither rent nor taxes to pay on the land that nurtured his flocks. He roamed them over the wide, unclaimed public domain of his vast States, into the hills and mountains for summer grazing, back to the open spaces, wind-swept and bare of snow, for winter feeding on grass that had cured on the stem as sweet as the most succulent hay of eastern meadows. Nature fed his sheep, nature fended them, with nothing more expensive than a herder to every two or three thousand to keep them from straying off and falling to the wolves.

That was the life for a fellow; that was the short cut to fortune, although there might not be any to either learning or political success. A sheepman's life was the life for him, Rawlins decided, determined to

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lay the lines of his future to lead to that felicitous condition.

Working on that intention, he began to cultivate the acquaintance of sheepmen, even sheep-herders, who came to market from the far-off ranges beyond the mountains. He began to inquire and learn; to store up his information against the day of his need. Before long his plan lay straight ahead of him, with nothing left to do but invade the sheep country and put it into effect.

Sheepmen told him tales of men who had come to their country and made their start on a few pounds of beans tied in the corner of a sack; a few pounds of dried apples tied in the corner of a sack; a handful of oatmeal tied in the corner of a sack; a little of this, a little of that, never more than a little, and always tied in the corner of a sack. That method of transportation and conservation always gave the nucleus the common, human, down-to-the-grass-roots touch. Just a little of something in the corner of some old sack, to show that sheepmen's fortunes were not founded on over-reaching their fellow men.

What Rawlins was most deeply concerned about getting into the corner of a sack was money enough to buy two or three hundred head of sheep. The age of romance in the sheep business, the dried apple and bean era, was over with, he believed. Let him get enough money to buy two or three hundred head, then go to the sheep country and set up for a flockmaster from the very start.

Many of the old-timers had run sheep on share of the increase for several years, they had told him, be-

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fore beginning for themselves. Sheep-herders had told him they were employed on the same condition. That would not be so bad for a man of timid spirit, but for one who had been in the business of making governors and senators, it appeared too servile, too tame. The dried-apple chaps were the kind.

Rawlins had learned that a rigorous climate was most favored by sheepmen. The same conditions which cause the sheep-herder to wear three coats and several layers of shirts bring out the long thick wool on the backs of his charges. A flockmaster of the north-west will tell you that sheep spread out and lie far apart, even on the coldest nights of that bleak and bitter land; that they are as warm as stoves; that they thaw the snow around them for several feet as they lie asleep in comfort, without fold or fending except for a hill behind them to break the rough of the wind. All of which a greenhorn may believe or reject, according to his wisdom, and general judgment of the veracity of men and the heat of sheep.

Rawlins had chosen the latitude for his future operations. Concerning the longitude, he was yet uncertain. Five hundred miles, as has been said, makes little difference in a country so wide and deep as that Rawlins had fixed his hopes upon. He had maps from the Department of the Interior, covering public lands in two States of the north-west. After much investigation he had settled in his mind upon one, the exact spot in that one, where the foundation of his fortunes was to be laid.

On the map—Rawlins never had been west of Kansas—the region selected appeared white and sterile,

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watered by few streams, blank-staring, repellent. It could not be any bleaker in fact than it was in print, Rawlins well believed, even when winter had it locked under a pressure of thirty below zero, as he knew it frequently fell in that latitude so favorable to a long and heavy fleece.

There was public land to be entered in that place, millions of acres of it, for civilization had reached only a sprangling branch into that country at the time Rawlins put his finger down on the map and made his selection, his determined eyes toward the west. Right there, said Rawlins; that was the very spot. All that was wanting was a few pounds of something in the corner of a sack.

Rawlins began to count his money and make long calculations, to palpitate and sweat over it in anxiety lest sheepmen should have all that white place on the map gobbled up before he could break away from the stockyards job with enough in his pocket to justify the dash. He was dubious over the efficiency of this hoard, even when he cashed in on the job one spring day and turned his face toward the sheeplands of the west.

At the end of the railroad reaching into the sheep country in those days the little city of Jasper lay. Jasper was the wool capital of the north-west, as it remains, even to this day. Wool buyers from Boston, which is the wool capital of the world, came to Jasper in the spring to buy the clip. They took away millions of pounds of wool, leaving millions of dollars in the banks of Jasper and the far-lying villages of the great, grey sheeplands.

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When Rawlins arrived at Jasper on a day late in May, the clip was already coming down from distant shearing-pens, the long wool-sacks heaped on wagons coupled in trains. The pens at Jasper were crowded with thousands of dusty sheep waiting their turn at the shearers' hands, their coats brown from sun, soil and storm, their lamentations sounding as the wailings of Israel beside the waters of Babylon, rising in sad chorus night and day.

There was plenty of land left to the homesteader in the place where Rawlins had put his finger on the map, he found by inquiry at the United States land office in Jasper. The commissioner was a newspaper man on the side, very much of the kind Rawlins himself had been. He gave what information he had cheerfully enough, but seemed to look on Rawlins as a sort of oddity wanting to range off that way and go in for sheep. Rawlins thought he scorned him a little for his apostasy to the fraternity.

No stage ran from Jasper into the Dry Wood region, as that particular section upon which Rawlins had fixed his preference was called. He should have gone in on the railroad that skirted the Dry Wood country on the north, they said. A stage ran between the railroad and Lost Cabin, the business center of the locality for which he was bound.

The only way to get into Dry Wood from Jasper was to buy a horse, hire one, or walk. For a man with less than five hundred dollars in the corner of his sack, buying a horse for which he might not have any future need would be folly; to hire one, extravagance.

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There being no established rule against walking in that country, Rawlins determined to walk.

Oh, yes, plenty of people walked around in that country, the land-commissioner-editor said. Sheep-herders, mainly, and shearers on the go from job to job. Nobody cared how a man traveled, as far as he knew, the official said. It was only about a hundred miles; a man with a good leg and sound wind ought to make it in three or four days.

Rawlins thought so too. He rolled such of his possessions as he felt he should have immediate need for, making them as few as possible, in a blanket and roped it neatly; bought a canteen and put his foot on the road. It was a well-worn road, appearing as if much business must flourish along its way.

Except the newness of the blanket, and the rope binding it, there was nothing in the traveler's appearance either conspicuously strange or raw. He was a pretty well-set-up young fellow of twenty-five or six, perhaps a little above the general stature, quick-striding, alert. A fair-skinned man, rather large of visage, especially as to the nose and mouth; his hair dark, eyes grey, direct, deep-probing. At times he whistled a little tune with a peculiar melodious sharpness through his teeth as he walked, drawing his lips back to give it passage, making him seem to smile.

His brown duck coat and tall laced boots he had worn on the stockyards job; they were seasoned with livestock association. Likewise his broad-brimmed grey hat, of pattern in keeping with the accepted standards of the sheep country. He would pass very well in the eyes of ranchmen and flockmasters met on

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the road for a young fellow with his foot in his hand on the look-out for a job.

The way into the Dry Wood country lay along the river beside which the town of Jasper was built, keeping with it for a distance of twenty miles or so, leaving it then for the hills: This river, bank-full at that time, the springtime rise of it coming on from the melting snow, was an unlovely dark stream, full of swift whirlpools which bored like augers against the sandy shore. Looking at it from a hill-top, it seemed to lie flat, like a stream of quick-silver, on the white plain without confining banks, a few wind-torn cottonwood trees at its margin. It was a melancholy river watering a lonely land.

These harried cottonwoods along the river were only venturing their first tender leaves, for snow was to be found still in deep gullies, where it had packed hard as ice under the trampling of wild-raging winter storms; and on hillsides, where it had eddied in great drifts. Nature sweeps the sheeplands in that way, leaving the grazing-pastures bare, in a purpose that is beneficent and admirable, rough as its mighty hand may seem to man who must face it on the untempered wold.

For a country that appeared so empty, a great many people were traveling out of it toward Jasper that morning. Rawlins passed the salutation of the day with the grave and gay alike, taking their dust on his shoulders and hat, beginning to appear quite road-seasoned by the middle of the afternoon. There were wool trains, and single wagons loaded with wool; buggies carrying florid drovers and their rough-cheeked,

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broad-breasted wives; single horsemen, horsemen in pairs and troops; even a band of Indians coming down from the distant mountains with the moccasins and baskets representing their winter's work to be traded for the luxuries of civilization at Jasper.

Rawlins was offered a job along toward evening by a sheepman who had driven three hundred miles with eight loads of wool. This man had a most imposing train, twelve horses to a double wagon. He was making camp with his many teamsters when Rawlins met him, having a day's drive yet ahead of him to Jasper.

No, he wasn't looking for a job, Rawlins told the sheepman. He was heading for the Dry Wood range to start operations for himself. Not much of a country he was bound for, the sheepman said. It was better over his way, toward the south-west. Rawlins had his plans too complete and firmly fixed on Dry Wood to have his determination shaken by a disparaging report. He declined the friendly invitation to share camp with the opulent sheepman, pushing on until dusk.

Rawlins made camp that night by a brook that was already dwindling, soon to dry up and cease among its troubled stones. He slept with feet toward his little fire, as he had done many a time on the high, hillocked range in the old buffalo country of Kansas, feeling again quite at home.

When he kicked out of his blankets at the first streak of day, Rawlins felt himself considerably bunged-up and chilled to the bone, for which tenderness he despised himself. A man who intended to go in for the sheep business must case-harden himself against all temperatures, and not shiver around like a

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chilled dog in such mild weather as this. A sheepman had told him only a few months before, without any enlargement of pride or boasting, that he had not slept in a house for fourteen years.

Rawlins passed a road-ranch that evening, the proprietor eying him with disfavor from the door. Several horses were hitched at the gnawed racks, several men could be seen at a card game just within the window, the "Well-appointed Bar," announced by the tavern sign, in the background. There was a look of cattle about the patrons of the place, type familiar to the traveler. From the attitude of the man at the door, Rawlins concluded they were the favored of that locality. There was an expression of contempt in the landlord's face for a man who passed his door on foot.

Beyond the road-ranch there was no habitation, nor sign of one, during the journey of the next two days. It was a hilly country, and waterless, it seemed; Rawlins would have gone dry only for the gallon canteen which he had included, wisely, in his meager outfit. There were neither sheep nor cattle along the way, nor traces of them on the hills, where sparse grass was springing green among the grey sage and spiked soapweed. Nobody had passed him; he had met nobody since leaving the road-ranch. It appeared as if everybody going out had been taken with the notion at the same time, and poured down to Jasper in a drove.

At sundown of his fifth day on the road, Rawlins sighted a sheep-wagon on a distant hill. Without stopping to debate the question he headed across country toward it, determined to find out where he was, and

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where Dry Wood began; where Lost Cabin, the supply center of that region, lay, and how far he was distant yet from that broad white place on the map, where there seemed to be room for all the sheep that ever ranged the earth since the days of Abraham.

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CHAPTER II

THE LAND OF DUSTY FLOCKS

THERE was nobody at the sheep-wagon, although Rawlins could hear the distant voice of the herder and the barking of his dogs, urging the flock along with the same lonesome, far-reaching cry that he had heard the drivers lift when scuttling a shrinking drove of sheep through the chutes to the slaughter-houses in Kansas City. He was to know this cry better still in the sheep-lands, lonely and long-wailing; appealing, supplicating, the inheritance of the craft older than the memory of man.

Rawlins never had seen a sheep-wagon before, although he knew in a general way that such vehicles were the homes of those who follow the flocks year in and year out. This was an old one, its hubs were cracked by age and weather, the canvas of its top was patched. The body, or box, was deeper than that of an ordinary farm wagon, the bows high enough to give a man standing room beneath them. A stove-pipe projected through the front end of the canvas, surrounded by a broad piece of tin, a little door opened at the tail, where a step eased down to the ground.

A water keg was slung to one side of the wagon, an axe to the other. A little pile of fuel, cut from the scrub pines which grew sparsely on the hills around, lay under it, as if the herder expected a rain.

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The shouting and barking drew closer; Rawlins saw the flock break over a hill close by, and come flowing like a dusty avalanche into the bowl below the wagon. This little valley, he noted, was trampled and hoof-cut, evidently the bedding-ground of the flock while it grazed in that vicinity. The sheep poured into it like a stream of milky coffee into a grimy cup, as if they would fill it to the brim.

The flock had been shorn, the black brand of the owner, stamped on the animals' backs, was plainly seen, although dust was reclaiming the new coats with the sheepland grey. Knobby-legged lambs, in great numbers, were as white as daisies among the fathers and mothers of the flock. They tugged along wearily beside their dams, marvelously preserved in this billow of sheep that came rolling down to the bedding-ground.

There was a sound of tremulous complaint going up from the sheep, heartless, weary, forlorn, as if hope were departing from them with the day. The herder stood on the hilltop, watching the sheep down to the bedding-ground, shouting and scolding, his dogs marshaling them, hastening to bring in the stragglers which spread away from the main body and stopped now and then to nibble a last thin blade of grass.

Once in the little valley the clamor of the dependent creatures ceased. They became as suddenly quiet as a baby hushed to sleep in its mother's arms. The two dogs stood on the flanks of the flock, waiting as if they did not trust such irresponsible things to settle down and behave at once.

The gloom of night was on the hills, the flock a

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dun splotch in the bottom of the bowl, when the shepherd called off his dogs and came to the wagon, where his visitor had stood watching the bedding of the sheep, taking his first lesson of the many unlearned ones shut up in the grim book of that morose and sullen land.

The shepherd was a grimy, smoky, dirty old grub of a man, spare of frame, narrow in the shoulders. He looked as if he had been dried in smoke. His scrubby grey beard grew almost to his eyes, which were sharp and clear, drawn to a squint as from a habit of peering into great distances. He wore an old duck coat that flared at the skirt as if he had all his portable possessions concealed in its lining, as a hunter appears when he comes home with rabbits in his jacket. His fingers were fixed in a grasping position, and they were knotted and gnarled as if he had fought hard to retain the fortune that had been wrenched away from his hold at last, but had left his hands set in lasting memory of the fight.

He greeted Rawlins in a friendly way, no curiosity apparent in him, no concern whether the traveler meant to remain or pass on about his business. He took some whittlings out of his pocket and kindled a fire in a little sheet-iron camp stove that he brought from the wagon, while directing Rawlins to the spring down the ravine near the sheep.

When Rawlins came back from refreshing himself inwardly and outwardly at the spring, the old man was slicing bacon on a table made by propping up the broad end-gate of the wagon. He had lit his lantern, which was dirty, dim and smoky like himself, and he seemed

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a most self-contained and reticent person for one who must not have been crossed by a visitor for days at a time. Rawlins asked if he might prepare his slim supper at the fire, and was told that he could not.

"You can eat my grub or go empty," the old shepherd said.

He paused in his bacon-slicing as he spoke, looking sternly at his visitor, an unaccountable ring of lightness, almost white in contrast to the general grime of his face, around his eyes. Rawlins wondered if he had washed while he was away, or whether that was an area which the old fellow swept daily to keep the accretions from shutting off his view.

Rawlins was glad enough to accept on the terms proposed, for his own material promised a slim repast. He had not been able to replenish his supplies along the way at ranch houses, as he had expected. The old man's supper was quite a banquet to one who had been living mainly on Bologna sausage and sardines for four days. There were biscuits and beans, bacon and canned tomatoes, even a tin of milk for the coffee and a little glass of preserves at the end.

"I don't always live high like this," the old-timer explained when he had scooped the last of the preserves out of the glass with his finger, which he licked clean, taking off more of the grime in the process than had been removed by any ablution in months. "I'm celebratin' this evening on account of you lookin' like a friend I used to have in my young days. They hung him down in Texas."

"I'd be proud to take his place in every particular but that," Rawlins said, with a droll way of humor

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that he had which made friends for him among old hardshells like the herder.

The old man chuckled; that pleased him very well. He made a cigarette, with admirable deftness considering his stiff fingers, dribbling a little stream of loose tobacco on his beard as he sat holding it unlit in his lips a while.

"Everybody knows old Al Clemmons, from the Rio Grande to the Little Missouri," he said. "I never stole but four horses in my life, and that was so long ago the heirs of the men that owned 'em 's all dead, nobody left to prosecute."

Rawlins felt the satirical exaggeration in this old fellow's account of himself and his friend of long ago, but was at a loss, naturally, to understand the purpose of it. Perhaps he laughed at the world when he seemed to laugh at himself, like that other ancient gentleman whose neglect of sanitary details brought him down to an undignified end at last.

Clemmons had not taken his hat off since coming in from his labors with the flock. He wore it tilted back a little, pressed down to his ears, a high-crowned hat of medium broad brim, a look of newness about it rather out of keeping with the rest of his garb. He took it off now, suddenly, as if he had remembered something hidden in it that might melt, and scratched his head with great vigor and a rasping sound.

The old man's hair was shaggy, thick and straight, and grey as dusty cobwebs. There was so much of it, suddenly revealed by the removal of his hat, standing up so high in front, that it gave him the appearance of being most shockingly surprised.

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"They know me," he went on with his biography; "they can tell you about Al Clemmons. I drove stages when they *was* stages, not job wagons like they run now, all over this mountain country for thirty years. I've drove 'em where it was a hundred and seventeen in the shade, and I've drove 'em where it was forty below. I never froze my feet off, like some of the boys, but I've had my fingers froze to the lines so hard more than once I had to have help to let go of 'em. They can tell you about Al Clemmons. He's a man that ain't got nothing to hide."

Rawlins took this revelation as something more than a respectful bid, almost a demand, for news of himself and his intentions. He made short work of it, reserving nothing bearing on his expedition afoot from Jasper, which the old man told him was more than a hundred and twenty miles away.

"Rawlins, heh?" the old shepherd said, reflecting over it, turning the name as if he found something familiar in it, yet could not place it among the rusty accumulations of his memory. "What did you say the handle was?"

"Nathan, generally cut down to Ned."

"That's a good name for a feller," Clemmons approved. "Ned. Got a hard kind of a sound, like a wagon goin' over a rocky road. Yes, that's a good name for a feller—Ned. Strikin' out for Dry Wood, was you, Ned?"

"That was my aim. Have I missed it?"

Clemmons put his hat on, probably to indicate an end to the period of interrogation on his part. It seemed as if he had replaced some part of his anatomy,

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some member that he had removed with startling effect upon the beholder, and assumed his proper and familiar shape again.

"No, you ain't strayed off a mile. This is the Dry Wood country. You're at sheep limit right now."

"Sheep limit, did you say?"

"Them's the words I used," said Clemmons, as testily resentful, it seemed, as if his veracity had been challenged.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Clemmons. I couldn't understand what a sheep limit might be, or why there should be a sheep limit."

"Nobody else can, but in the morning I'll show you the deadline. If you want to satisfy yourself it *is* the deadline, all you've got to do is cut them wires and run a band of sheep over it."

Rawlins avowed he did not question Clemmons' exposition of the case at all, but that he was curious to know more about it: who had set the deadline, what force there was behind it, and what right.

"No more right than there's right to stop me breathin' air," Clemons declared. "But there's force enough, I guess, to satisfy most people. You know, if you're a United States senator, son, you can do a whole lot of things other folks can't."

"Yes, that's so; I've seen them do it."

"Well, if you've had experience with 'em you know the breed. If you're one of them senators you can turn many a trick that'd send men like me and you huntin' our holes, includin' fencin' in public land without no more lease on it than a rabbit, and hirin' a lot of horse-

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thieves to ride around it with guns on 'em to keep honest people out of their rights."

"So, that's what you mean by a sheep limit?"

"Right ahead of us," the old man nodded. "I'm plumb up agin it."

"He's a United States senator, is he?"

"Senator Jim Galloway. He's held the job so long he owns the steps leadin' up to the Capitol in Washington. Rough estimatin', he's got fifty miles square of Gover'ment land fenced under four wires. That fence cost sixty thousand dollars, they say, but that's cheaper than buyin' land, or even leasin' it from the Gover'ment, not to say nothing of the hired hands it saves runnin' them cattle. Yes, if I had a map I could show you where that chunk of gobbled-up land lays."

Rawlins produced a map without a word, a feeling as of some cold, disintegrated heavy thing in his vitals. It was as if he had rolled up and swallowed a section of the senator's barbed-wire fence.

They spread the map out between them, the lantern on a corner of it. Clemmons ran his bent finger over it in a seeking line, as a hound runs here and there picking up a scent, coming in his own way to the checked and charted place that Rawlins had fixed upon for exploitation. It was the map Rawlins had got from the land office at Jasper; what had been the white and sterile place on his own little map was shown here plotted in township and section lines, with creeks and timber indicated, localities designated, all as plain to Clemmons as the first lesson in a primer.

"That's a good map," he said; "them Gover'ment boys sure know how to git up their maps. Right here's

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about where we're at. Lost Cabin, you see, is off to the north-west about thirty miles from here, and right along here's where the fence runs. In the morning I'll show it to you."

"What's Senator Galloway got inside his fence?" Rawlins asked, knowing pretty well what the reply would be. The sickness of disappointment was depressing his spirits, the shadow of defeat for his confidently arranged plans was falling already at his feet.

"Cattle and sheep, mister," Clemmons replied. "That's what Senator Jim's got back of that fence, ten thousand head of cattle and eighty thousand head of sheep, they say. He runs 'em cheaper than any man or outfit on this range can do it, three or four horse-thieves ridin' fence and a few sheep-herders are all the hands he needs, 'cept at shearin' and when he goes to round up them cattle and cut out the ones he wants to ship."

"I don't suppose he's got all the range fenced up, even then," said Rawlins, drawing a breath that carried him a little relief of hope.

"He's got it blocked with his fence nearly from mountains to mountains, and back of him there's a gang of cowmen makin' their last stand on the open range in this part of the country. No, son, if you come here expectin' to take your pick out of that land you might as well go back where you come from. There ain't no land somebody ain't usin' on anywhere in the Dry Wood country. Outside of Galloway's fence sheepmen they've grabbed every foot of it and split it up between them."

"It don't look very bright," Rawlins admitted.

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"But that man Galloway has no right to fence up Government land he doesn't lease. The map shows every section of it open to entry back there for a hundred miles."

"He ain't got no more right to it than the King of Ireland," Clemmons declared. "There's land enough goin' to waste inside of that fence to make twenty sheepmen rich. If I could take my little band up there I'd be independent in five years."

"You're a flockmaster, then?" said Rawlins, in undisguised surprise.

"What did you take me for—one of them sap-headed herders? I never run sheep for no man but myself in my life, foolish as I look. I never aim to."

"You darned sheep magnates run around lookin' like you didn't have the price of ham and eggs on you, and fly up when somebody takes you for a hired hand. If you're underrated sometimes, it's your own fault."

"What do you expect us sheepmen to do, son, so folks can spot us from hired men? Put on knee pants and golf stockin's?" The flockmaster chuckled with the thought, more pleased than offended that his own importance had not been duly appraised.

"Or put a feather in your hat, or something," said Rawlins. "How many have you got in that band?"

"Seven hundred and fifty-two, countin' lambs. I'm just a little feller, but I could be a big one if I could go back there on one of them cricks where the question of water wouldn't bother me. There's a dozen or two other little fellers strung out along that fence in the same fix as me, all held down on account of water.

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We can water just so many, and no more; we have to sell our increase every year."

"It looks to me like there ought to be some way to break that man's hold on that country," Rawlins reflected.

"To a man from the outside it may look that way, but put it up to anybody that lives in this State and he'll understand the why and the wherefore of it, as the widder woman said."

"I don't say it's a one-man job, but if all you sheepmen would move together, wipe that fence out of the way and march in, what is there to stop you?"

"Galloway'd have the United States marshal down here with a hundred deputies before you could say scat. It ain't a question of law or who's got the right, but a question of who's got the power and pull. If the United States marshal couldn't handle it, Galloway'd bring the army in. Let me tell you, boy, these sheepmen around here ain't no babies, but they're drivin' thirty-five to fifty miles around that fence to git to the post office at Lost Cabin from this neighborhood, and they've been doin' it a long time, when it's only twelve miles straight acrost. And every section line's dedicated and set aside by law as a public road. Why don't they open a public road straight acrost that land, then? Why don't a iron dog chase a rabbit!"

"I don't question the nerve of you sheepmen in here," Rawlins said, but with mental reservation. "Only I wondered."

"I've shot at men in my time, and I've been shot at —and maybe hit in a little no-'count place here and

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there—but I've always had some kind of a long chance on my side."

"The only hope seems to be in a new senator, then."

"Galloway's got a cast-iron cinch on the job. He'll be there till he dies, then I guess they'll put his son in after him. By that time they'll claim they've got a deed to that land, I reckon."

"You never can tell about politics. You sheepmen ought to be able to frame him—it would be worth trying, anyhow. Do you make your headquarters far from here, Mr. Clemmons?"

"This wagon's my house and home, has been for nine years. It looks older than that, but I bought it second-handed off of a sheepman that was quittin'. I guess it'll hold together to roll me out of here to the railroad when I decide I'm whipped."

"You don't depend on that little spring to furnish water for all those sheep, do you?"

"No; I've got me a couple of tanks up in the hills. Back in Newbrasky or Kansas you'd call 'em stock ponds. I can pull through this many sheep on the water I ketch in them tanks, but they wear down lean on account of the long drives I have to make."

"I was wondering how you watered them, grazing over the wide territory you must cover on the thin cropping there is around here. They'll not go more than two or three days without water, will they?"

"Back in the country where you come from they can't, but here they'll go five or six days easy enough, longer in a pinch if there's plenty of dew. They toughen to it. But it's a hard life, both for man and beast. I think sometimes the sheep must be glad when

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they're shipped out to be butchered at the packin' houses. I can't see why any man wants to leave a country where corn grows to come out here."

"It's pretty well crowded back in that country. A man wants to have a place to put his feet down somewhere, with room enough to turn round. Land's high back in Kansas, too high for a man starting out to try to buy."

"Yes, a man's got a achin' in him for a home of some kind. That's what drives so many of them wanderin' and searchin', I reckon. Them home-seekers come through here right along, drivin' their batty old wagons with kids bulgin' out the canvas, lookin' for a place to light and put a plow in the ground. They've been kep' on the move from Git-out to Go-on, as the widder woman said, kicked out by the cowmen first, hustled on by the sheepmen next. Nobody in this country wants 'em.

"They come up here to Dry Wood with maps from the land office down at Jasper, hopin' they've found a place to unload them kids at last. Where they go from here, Lord knows. Over the mountains into the desert, I reckon, and keep a-goin' till they wear their tires out."

"If you sheepmen would lease a block of that country inside Galloway's fence I believe you'd have the key to the situation. The Government would be back of you then."

"We're agin leasin', in the first place. We've seen too much country hogged by the big fellers that way. Open range; that's sheep gospel. It's gettin' harder for us sheepmen up in this country every year, with the

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Gover'ment settin' aside them mountains for forest reserves, some of 'em without a tree on 'em as high as your head for twenty miles. Second place, nobody's got pull enough to lease a single foot of that land Jim Galloway's got his fence around. It couldn't be done."

"It looks raw; it looks scandalously raw."

"You're right; it is. I'm just about edged off of the map, I tell you, mister. If some feller comes along here one of these days purty soon when the weather begins to dry up and wants a cheap job-lot of sheep, I'll be standin' on the top of the hill waitin' to grab his money."

"Maybe I'll take you up on that one of these days," Rawlins said, laughing a little, not to make it look too serious, or himself too foolish, in the dusty old flock-master's eyes.

"Whenever you're in the notion," Clemmons replied.

It didn't seem so unreasonable, or such a remote possibility, to Rawlins as he sat with his back against the wagon wheel, looking out over the mysterious duskiness of the sheeplands, at peace under the near, bright stars. Somebody would break through that baronial fence one of these days. Perhaps fate, or fortune, or circumstance had plotted with him in all his building upon that mysterious white spot on the map, shaping and guiding his own hand to the task.

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CHAPTER III

WHERE NONE MAY PASS

RAWLINS was abroad again early next morning, traveling northward along the senatorial fence, his well-laid plan for beginning the foundation of his fortune thrown into chaos by this wire barrier shutting him from the land of his fervent calculations. Nothing in the corner of a sack would avail against that arbitrary boundary stretched across the frontier of the sheeplands, if the story told by shaggy old Al Clemmons was true.

Clemmons had come with him as far as the fence, which was not more than a mile from the old man's spring, pointing out to him from a hilltop the long line of posts diminishing down to dots in the level distance southward. To the north one could not follow the line so far, the land lying rough and unpromising in that direction.

The old sheepman said the best of the enclosed territory was in the northerly direction, in spite of the sterile and forbidding character it presented opposite his range. A few miles along, a considerable valley began, he said. A creek ran through this, making the paradise of pasturage and water for which the sheepmen of Dry Wood longed.

In that direction also, Clemmons informed the adventurer into Dry Wood, there were several important

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flockmasters. He would find their ranches scattered along a creek, the waters of which they had appropriated to their own selfish uses by homesteading, buying or stealing, every mile of land fronting upon the stream. Clemmons was an uncharitable man when considering the prosperity of other men in relation to his own.

This bitter intolerance was so evident in all the old man's discussion of other people's affairs, except those no better off than himself, that Rawlins parted from him with a slight renewal of his overwhelmed hopes. Perhaps the dusty old fellow was incapable of granting that a prosperous man could be an honest one, a prejudice common to the self-defeated and the malcontents wherever they are found. Investigation might reveal conditions in Dry Wood far different from what the old flockmaster represented them. In addition, there might be some selfish design behind all this talk of oppression and fencing of public land.

Rawlins continued northward, following the fence, his object being further exploration and investigation. One of the big sheepmen would be a more reliable source of information than Clemmons, whose yearly trip down to Jasper, with perhaps a visit to Lost Cabin every six months to replenish his supplies, gave him all the contact he had with the affairs of men. There was not much in a life of that kind, Rawlins reflected, isolated in dusty servitude to sheep. Instead of being a flockmaster, as he proudly believed himself, Clemmons was mastered by his flock. That was not the sort of sheepman Rawlins designed to be.

As Lost Cabin had been his primary objective, he

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still considered continuing on to that place. It would be the community center of those widely separated ranches, the place where information might be secured relative to sheep and land. Not that anything he might learn there would alter the fact of Senator Galloway's fence. That was there, right beside him. It gave him a jolt, Rawlins admitted, to find it dividing him from that white spot on the map by which he had plotted his first scheme. But it was there, and the man who put it there had the power to keep it there, against the demands of thirsty flockmasters and homeseekers from afar.

Lost Cabin lay on the western boundary of this fenced domain, Clemmons had said, the way to the town from his location being almost fifty miles around. The town, having been there first, had been granted an outlet by the imperious land-eater, the flockmaster said. But the senator had run his barbed wire on three sides of it, leaving it sitting in an indenture on his western frontier.

Fine business, thought Rawlins, viewing the fence with growing indignation, to allow one man to grab and hold such a big fistful of the public domain.

The hour was early in the morning, the sun not more than a span from the hilltops, for Clemmons had roused his guest at dawn to share his coffee and bacon. A sheep-herder, the old man explained, must get his flock out while the dew was on the herbage. They would not leave the bedding-ground without the herder; they had been bred to a dependence upon man that seemed to deepen with each succeeding generation. Much more the old flockmaster had told the adven-

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turer into Dry Wood, so much more, in fact, that Rawlins was beginning to think he was no fit guardian of sheep, knowing as little about their habits, and the rigors and peculiarities of that country, as he did.

Take a job with some big sheepman, Clemmons had advised. Stick to it two or three years, learning all he could in that time, before venturing his capital in a flock of his own. A man must go through two or three winters, and the exacting period of lambing, up night and day for days on end caring for the ewes and tender lambs, with the snow still on the ground and the bitter winds of early spring blowing, before he would be qualified to set up on his own responsibility.

Even if he had unlimited capital he stood to lose a great deal of it unless he knew the business from the start to the finish. Of course, a man could hire brains, the old man said, but it was a whole lot better to get a handful into one's own head that could be depended on in a pinch.

Good advice, disinterested advice, Rawlins knew. There was only one side to old Al Clemmons; that was as plain as the whiskers on his face. If he didn't like a man he could no more dissemble than a sheep could shear itself. It would be the wise thing, without a doubt, to hit some big sheepman for a job. A greenhorn was put out with an experienced herder, Clemmons had told him, until he learned the ways of sheep in a measure, and got acquainted with the dogs. The prospect took a good deal of the romance out of the plan of becoming a flockmaster, but it was sensible and sound.

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For a simple, pastoral pursuit, as old as civilization, there seemed to be a great deal to learn about this business of growing sheep. In a fenced pasture, with bluegrass and clover, water and shade and a shed against the winter storms, it was simple enough; here on the wild grey range, so vast that a man caught his breath and flinched from it, as from his first step into the sea, it was a different matter.

Why, Rawlins said, with frank astonishment over his own ignorance, he never knew before that morning that lambs' tails must be cut off—Clemmons said some sheepmen bit them off as they went about after the yeaning ewes—to keep them from matting up with burrs and sand and dragging upon the animals, a fatiguing, useless weight.

Perhaps it was just as well that he had run against that fence, stretching there from horizon to horizon between him and the unimproved white waste on the map. It might prove the first check in the precipitate dash of ignorance, saving him an inglorious fall in the end. Senator Galloway could not hold that land always; public pressure would remove his fence in time, probably soon enough for Rawlins' purpose. Meanwhile, nobody else could take up the land. When the lessons of sheep had been learned, maybe the fence would be down. Then a homestead on some creek, and a band of his own to range, with alfalfa growing to carry the sheep over winter hardships when the range was under snow or sleet.

The vision broadened out of the obscurity of first disappointment as Rawlins followed the fence up hill and down, holding his way toward the north.

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One thing about it was certain: the pressure of haste was gone out of the adventure. The fence across the frontier of his great white spot had put a new aspect on the entire proceeding for Rawlins. Time was no longer the essence of that business.

He proceeded on his way leisurely, his intention of becoming a flockmaster in no way altered, although the means to that end had undergone a sharp revision overnight. His dollar watch told him it was eight o'clock, near enough to the correct time for all purposes in a country where hours and miles were alike insignificant in the broad pattern of men's lives, when he brought up on a hilltop to project his inquiring gaze over grey slope and green vale for the ranches the sheepman had told him would be found in that direction.

Nothing in the shape of man's habitation was in sight. Except for the fence, the country appeared as empty as on the day it was finished and left there for the solemn sage to cover with its charity, the spiked soapweed to rear its forbidding spears among. Rawlins wondered if the fence-riders would object if he cut across the senator's ranch to strike Lost Cabin, which place Clemmons had told him could be seen from a high hill a little way north of his range.

Concluding that no grounds for opposing a peaceful trespass could be advanced by the guards, chancing that he might run across any of them, Rawlins decided to risk the encounter when he came to the hill from which he could lay his course.

Rawlins got his first understanding of what a sheepman meant by a "little ways" that morning. Clem-

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mons had said it was only a "little ways" to the prominent hill from which the hamlet of Lost Cabin could be seen across the twelve or fifteen miles of Galloway's enclosure, which was narrow in that place owing to the indenture made in its opposite border by the town. Rawlins was certain he had traveled no less than fifteen miles when he hauled himself up to the hilltop about noon. He knew it was the hill Clemmons had meant, for the little white houses of Lost Cabin were as plain as dice on a table, almost due west of him.

If that was only a little way, spare him the long ways, Rawlins thought. From that he fell to speculating, sitting on top of the hill where the grass was green and promising, on the postulation that these unfilled reaches of the north-west had something in their very vastness that contributed to men's success there.

Men grew into the way of thinking in large terms in that country. Five hundred sheep were only a few, three thousand but a band. When a man spoke of a flock, he meant thirty thousand, fifty thousand. Thinking in big terms was followed by planning and doing in big terms. The country was responsible for it, more than the men themselves. That would account for some of the dumb-looking flockmasters he had met at the stockyards. The country had laid hold of them, mediocre seed dropped in its fecund soil, and turned out prodigious growths which might have been only stunted starvelings in another clime.

Nature had cleared the air for human enlargement there; man's field of vision was almost painfully enlarged. His hitherto valued possessions, accomplish-

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ments, ambitions, became dwarfed in the immensity that mocked them. He was so suddenly revealed to himself in his insignificance that he was ashamed of the small things of the past, and began moving his feet at once to keep pace with the sudden enlargement of his horizon. Nature simply took hold of him and stretched a pigmy into a giant.

It was easier to understand Senator Galloway's fence in the light of this revelation. The man had grown so big through his mere association that he had enlarged to fit his environment. Hundreds of square miles under one unbroken fence did not seem extraordinary to him; the fact that it was not his land, nothing to trouble his conscience. A man naturally hardened as he broadened and grew immense.

That might explain the fencing-in of the public lands, but it did not justify it in any degree. In the vast territory held without warrant of leasehold or contract of any kind, hundreds of homeless families might find lodgment from their wandering quest. Rawlins pictured them as Clemmons had described them, driving on in eager hope, expecting to find this land open to homestead entry, only to bring up against that insolent fence like tumble weeds before the wind. Tumble weeds, uprooted by the winds of adversity from the soil in which they had grown, destined never to take root again.

So Rawlins rested there in the warm sun of noonday, his thoughts passing from one phase of speculation to another, imagination quickened by the strangeness of all that spread around him, and out of the distance one came riding across the fenced lands from the

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direction of Lost Cabin, horse and rider appearing no bigger than a fly.

There was new interest in this movement in the landscape. Imagination, conjecture, leaped across the two or three miles—perhaps more—that lay between, to fix upon the rider, now seen, now lost, as he came on over hill and swale.

The rider seemed to be holding a direct course for the hill on which Rawlins sat. If he had been one of Galloway's fence-riders coming to warn the stranger away from that forbidden territory he could not have ridden a straighter line. Coming right for him, Rawlins thought, feeling a little queer, just as if his telescopic eye had revealed the stranger to him as he rode the fence miles away on the other border.

Rawlins felt the absurdity of such a thought, even while the premonitory crinkling of something like the advance breath of trouble ran through him. He had a feeling of undue prominence on that hill. He felt it was time to be getting on his way.

Down through a tangle of unfamiliar shrubs, which grew ranker on the north side of the hills than the south, Rawlins hastened toward the fence, curious to get a closer sight of the rider. Clemmons had given the fence-guards a hard name. It would be interesting to see whether a man so employed in the service of oppression would carry the arrogance of his delegated authority in his face.

Green greasewood stood high among the grey sage at the foot of the hill, so rank and thick the fence was hidden. Rawlins pushed along through it, breaking out suddenly into a promising little glade, which the

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view from the height had indicated, rather than revealed. Here he came across the first proof that Galloway's fence was not accepted passively by all whom it barred.

Somebody had cut the fence. The ground was marked here by a horse's tracks, seeming to indicate to Rawlins' eye, not unpracticed in such things, that the rider had leaned from the saddle to snip the wires. The trespasser had ridden into the forbidden lands with a bound, deep hoof-prints showing where the animal had leaped under the spur. Now he was returning after his defiant excursion, the hill his landmark, heading for the cut in the fence like a bee to its tree.

Rawlins stood grinning beside the gap in the wires, taking a great satisfaction in the sight, feeling friendly and partisan toward the daring fellow who had made the breach to save himself a ride of thirty-five or forty miles. He would wait there until the rider arrived, pounding headlong for the hole in the fence, and give him greeting, with a word of endorsement, as he passed.

At that moment the interest of the situation began to increase. Somebody else was coming along inside the fence, descending the flank of the hill which Rawlins had come down. Rawlins could not see this rider, the bushy growth being high and thick along there, but he could hear the horse picking its way carefully down the steep slope, the rustle of its passing through the bushes, the noise of dislodged stones. Easy enough to piece out the shaping comedy, or tragedy, or what

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it might prove to be. A fence-rider had discovered the cut, and seen the trespasser heading back for it.

Rawlins was keen to hear what might pass between the two, but doubted the wisdom of being present in the character of innocent bystander, upon whom the bitterest blow of public altercations too often lands. He withdrew rapidly and discreetly behind a tall clump of bushes about a rod from the opening, palpitant in his suspense and expectation, just as the fence-rider appeared.

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CHAPTER IV

A LITTLE BIT ROUGH

THERE was nothing startling in the aspect of Senator Galloway's patrolman. Rawlins had consorted with dozens of his type in cow camps on the Kansas plains, lined up with scores of them at the long bars of the stockyards' saloons. He came riding out of the bushes with stealthy precision, his horse restrained by careful hand, reins held high above the saddle-horn, free and untrammeled in his dark-blue woolen shirt, coat and slicker behind the saddle, rifle in scabbard under the bend of his knee.

Rawlins watched the fence-rider from his covert as he drew his horse up across the cut panel of wire, near enough to him to see that he had left his youth behind him by at least twenty years. His face was thin, his features were prominent, with a look of inflexibility and determination about him that did not promise well for the trespasser. Rawlins concluded from his neat appearance that his camp was not far away.

The fence-rider waited, horse blocking the gap in the fence, something of injured innocence in his bearing, conveying the impression that it was his fence which had been abused, and he had suffered a deep insult along with it. He glanced at the wire-ends which lay in the dust beside him, the lean muscles of his jaws bunching as he chewed hard on something that prob-

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ably was not gum. It looked like a bad hour for the man who cut the fence, Rawlins thought, and with the thought the person in question burst suddenly into view on top of a little rise not more than twenty yards away.

The person who had ridden across the forbidden territory, desecrating the sacred institution of a fence to do so, appeared on the crest of the little rise under such headway that it was impossible to bring the horse up sharply and cut it for safety away from the sentinel who blocked the exit. Some effort was made to check the horse's plunge down the rather abrupt little hill-side, which was not effective until the bottom had been reached.

There the rider swung round as if to give the fence-guard a run for it, no doubt with the design of cutting the fence farther along and escaping from the trap. Not until that moment, horse and rider presenting side view, had Rawlins seen, or even suspected, that the bold trespasser on Senator Galloway's usurped pastures was a woman.

Whether she considered a race on her winded horse against the fresh one of the guard lost before it was begun, or whether it was against her code to turn her back to a foe, Rawlins could do no more than guess as she turned her mount with decisive hand and faced again toward the fence. Rawlins had a pretty good notion that the latter condition was the one which moved her, basing his belief on the defiance proclaimed in every line of her body, from her sombrero-covered head to her spurred boots.

The fence-rider sat waiting her arrival, his lean jaws bunching in hard little knots at the hinges as he bit

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determinedly on whatever it was between his teeth. It might be a piece of his own barbed-wire fence, from the grimness of his face.

The horse came forward at a walk, it being of that distinctive cow-country breed and training that knows no intermediate gait between its fastest and slowest. The beast had been pushed hard; its long winter coat, giving way in ragged patches here and there, was drenched with sweat as if it had forded a river. The fence-rider stiffened for action as the trespasser drew near, lifting himself in his stirrups as if all set for a race or a row. Rawlins wondered what he would do if she ignored him and tried to ride past.

She was not an uncomely girl—a closer view discovered that she was scarcely more, nineteen or twenty, Rawlins judged—in spite of her broad hat with leather band, her riding breeches and man's coat, knee boots which bore the mark of many a scramble over rough ground and through thorny bushes. Her hair was completely hidden under the hat, jammed down at an angle which appeared most uncomfortable, as it was most unbecoming, on the back of her head. It had the advantage of revealing her face, however, for which Rawlins was pleased, for he had done some tall figuring since he discovered her sex, trying to form an advance picture of a lady who had the temerity to cut a fence guarded by rough-handed men and ride on her business across the interdicted miles.

It was refreshing to find her better than his mental artistry had devised. That added to the interest of the situation. It would be easier to deny a plain girl passage than a handsome one. At least

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Rawlins knew it would be so in his case if he stood in the fence-rider's place.

The fence-rider's horse was squared around to stand broadside across the cut panel, which it filled almost completely, the posts standing not more than twelve feet apart, leaving no room for passing without a clash. The girl rode up slowly, her blown horse carrying its head dispiritedly, showing no interest in the stranger of its own kind. Rawlins noticed with quickening of anticipation that the girl was gathering her reins with surreptitious movement as she held the fence-rider in her eye. His heart gave a jump with her horse as she roused it from its listless plodding with a touch of the spurs.

It was what Rawlins had expected of her, seeing her come up in that apparently disciplined, defeated way. But her sly trick failed; the fence-rider was expecting it, also. He whirled his horse to meet her charge, which she had begun with no more than a rod between them, catching her horse's neck across the withers of his own, grasping her reins with quick and certain hand.

In the dust of the compact the man leaned out, one leg crooked up, the stirrup on his toe, jerking the bit, setting her horse back on its rump, giving her a busy moment to hold her seat.

"What a' you doin'? What a' you doin'?" he asked, a jerk on the bit with each explosive demand, which was more censorious than interrogative. "Don't you know this ain't no road?"

The girl's horse scrambled up, backing off, dodging, trying to break its captor's hold, succeeding only in

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stirring the fellow's anger against it, which he relieved in cuffs and curses, as he might have misused a man.

"Where do you think you're goin' to?" he asked the girl, red to the gills, furious in his mounting anger, which his abuse of the horse appeared to rouse to sudden heat.

The girl was pulling at the reins, which she had twisted around her hand. Between the two of them the horse was having an unhappy time, pitching and lunging, sidling and twisting, its mouth dribbling the foam of torture. Rawlins was so engrossed in the struggle that he forgot his place as a neutral, leaving his concealment, drawing near to see the outcome. Neither of the parties to the squabble saw him, although he had come to the fence in his eagerness.

"Let go that bridle!" said the girl, panting in a white fury that was the hotter for its helplessness.

"No, I'll not let go! No, I'll not let go!" the fence-rider declared. "What a' you doin' inside of this fence—say?"

He fired that at her several times, yanking the bridle savagely, fingers through the ring of the bit, repeating himself explosively.

"Take your dirty hands off my horse and let me go!" the girl demanded, giving up her struggle to break loose out of consideration for her horse.

"This ain't the first time you've cut this fence!" the guard accused.

He left off jerking the horse to lean over and jaw at her, making a menace with his free hand.

"That ain't half of it," she returned, as defiant as he was angry.

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"You'll think a long time before you cut another waar," he threatened. "You're not goin' through this gap—you hear me? You're goin' to turn that horse around and ride ahead of me acrost this past'r out the way you come in on the other side. You'll go around this fence, you darn little forkid streak of devilment!"

Rawlins went a little nearer. He noted that the girl had no defensive weapon about her, nothing at all but a little buckskin bag at the horn of her saddle, a gunnysack behind her with something lumpy, like groceries, in it. It would be a shame, he thought, to allow that ruffian to send her back. She would hardly be able to make it home that day, considering the long ride around the fence. He was thinking he'd have to throw in a word or two when she flung her leg over the saddle and flipped to the ground.

"I'll not go; you can't make me go!" she said.

"All right," the fence-rider replied, accepting the situation coldly. "It'll cost you your horse and saddle for cuttin' this fence to-day, and next time it'll cost you more. You can take them things off. I don't want your grub."

"You're not going to take that horse!"

"Ain't I? You watch me."

"You'll not dare to steal my horse!" she said, but with trembling, doubtful voice, clutching the bridle opposite the fence-rider's hold with both hands, looking up at him with more of appeal than threat in her pale face.

"You can git me arrested," he suggested, insolent in his certainty of security.

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"You'll never dare to ride this fence again if you take that horse!" she said.

"I'll give you leave at me," he derided. "I'll be right along here to-morrow. Take them things off of that saddle if you want 'em."

"You'll not dare—you'll not let him take my horse, will you?" she appealed, catching sight of Rawlins, her voice quick with new hope.

The fence-rider was at a disadvantage, left hand wound in the reins of the captured horse, his back to the stranger, whom he glimpsed in one quick flash of his eyes around, but he was a fellow who had one kind of argument for a woman, another for a man. His hand was on his rifle; he had it half-way out of the scabbard when Rawlins caught his arm, wrenching the gun away from him.

"No call for a break like that," Rawlins reproved him.

"Who asked you to horn in?" the fence-rider wanted to know. "Who in the Billy Hell are you?"

"I guess it don't matter. You heard what the lady said. Let go of that horse and make yourself scarce around here!"

The fence-rider swept the stranger with an apprais-ing eye, noting his calmness, the way he held the gun, and the general bearing of inflexibility that put up the bars to further argument.

"I guess you're the doctor, pardner," he said.

Rawlins waved his hand in a general direction of Lost Cabin, indicating the fence-rider's business just then lay in that quarter, but said no more. There was

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nothing more to be said, indeed. It was a case of put up or shut up.

The girl gave a little sobbing gasp of relief when the fence-rider galloped off as suddenly as if the gun had been fired for the start of a race that he was determined to win. She looked at Rawlins, her lips puckered in a tremulous struggle that seemed indecisive between a grin and a sob, dragged her sleeve almost viciously across her eyes, hiding her face a moment in the crook of her arm. There was a little sniveling sound, a little agitation of quick-caught sobs in her bosom. She faced him, then, smiling, tears in her eyes.

"Darn him!" she said.

"He's a rough sort of a guy, ain't he?" Rawlins said, looking after the man as he mounted the hill she had ridden down a little while before, passed over it in a flash, and out of sight.

"He'd 'a' stole my horse, all right, if you hadn't happened along."

"I don't see how he could get away with anything like that," Rawlins remarked. "I think it was a bluff to scare you off. More than likely he intended to turn it loose in a little while."

"No, he didn't," she corrected him seriously. "He'd 'a' got out of it—they can get out of anything."

"You ought to carry a gun, it seems to me, when you go out fence-cutting."

"Yes, I know I ought to," she admitted, "but I didn't want them to have anything on me. They can't do anything to you by law, I mean, for cuttin' the fence on a section line—that's a public road, you know—but if you go in with a gun on you and happen to

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take a shot at one of them, they'd send you over the road."

"That's only a bluff. They haven't got any more rights inside the fence than they have outside."

"I don't know," shaking her head doubtfully. "They make everybody think they have, anyhow. Are you from the land office?"

"No; I'm a stranger here."

"Well, I'm darn glad you happened along, anyhow." She breathed out a big sigh of relief, looking at him gratefully. "We'd better go away from here—that fence-rider'll double back if he meets another one, and from the way he started off I think he had hopes. What are you going to do with his gun?"

"Leave it here. I don't want it."

"I think you'd better hold on to it till we leave the fence. You can stand it against a post, he'll find it."

She led her horse through the fence, refusing his offer to help her to the saddle, saying she would walk along with him if he was going her way. If that way led over to the settlements on the creek, he said. Sure; their ranch was the first one, about two miles east. She'd be glad to have him stop for dinner.

As they walked along the fence she explained her reason for coming to that spot to make a breach in the wire.

"I generally cut it along here, because I can see this hill from a good ways off when I'm comin' back. If there's anybody snoopin' around I come in below here and cut my way out in another place. That man's laid for me a long time, but he never caught me before to-day. I guess I'll have to go around after this."

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"An old sheepman named Clemmons told me about the way this fence cut you folks around here off from Lost Cabin," Rawlins said. "I never heard of it before last night."

"It's been here a long time, but nobody ever cuts it but me. Well, once a man cut it in the night to go after the doctor, but they threw such a scare into him I guess he'd let the whole family die before he'd do it again."

Her adventure with the fence-rider did not appear to trouble her very deeply, now she was out of it. She was more interested in the appearance of a stranger of such unusual type in the sheeplands. As Rawlins was in that country to know and be known, he made short work of unfolding his plans and intentions, feeling himself very well rewarded for his confidence when she told him she belonged to a sheep family, and that she would be glad to help him in any way she could.

Close-mouthed and wary, in the true sheepman fashion, she closed up on her personal affairs with that, not even revealing her name, nor showing any curiosity about his. Rawlins leaned the rifle against a post at the point where she said their way turned off from the fence, marching along beside her down into the valley of a little stream that came winding out of the north over a stone-broken course.

Rawlins wanted her to ride, which she refused to do, saying she welcomed the chance to get out of the saddle and stretch her legs, which particulars of her anatomy she mentioned with frankness as ingenuous as their proportions were plain to the eye in her mannish garb. She passed the bridle-reins over her arm and took her

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hat off to wind up her hair, which seemed to be coming down, although not a strand of it was to be seen before she revealed it by this sudden uncovering.

There was plenty of it, braided and wound in the German way about the head, light and fine, harmonizing with her fair skin and blue eyes. Her femininity was enhanced greatly by the simple removal of her hat, her comeliness established beyond a doubt. She stood somewhat above the height of romance, her newly-wound top-knot but a few inches short of Rawlins' own crown as he trudged beside her taking inventory of her sheepland charms.

She did not have the appearance of one who lived in a sheep wagon, or followed the flocks over the hills, as Clemmons had told him many sheep families did in that neighborhood of small flockmasters. While she slammed around somewhat carelessly with her words, there was an edging of a better understanding in her manner. She had not spent all her time on the sequestered ranch at the mountain creekside, Rawlins was very sure.

Sequestered ranch was about the name for it, he thought, as they wormed along the trail beside the crooked stream, its bright clear water making a rumpus among the stones, the red-barked willows along its course showing a little dressing of green leaves and pendant blooms.

They burst upon the ranch at once, with no preliminary hint of its nearness, not even in the broadening of the trail as much as the breadth of a hand. A comfortable, snug place it was, a low log house, long and commodious, with a jutting wing, a veranda between.

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There were folds and shelters of various kinds in the background, and sheep pens enclosed by a wattled fence that must have been an effective windbreak in winter storms. There was a patch of alfalfa, green as a daub in some crude painting, a brown spot where corn and cabbage stalks marked last summer's garden, a little orchard whose trees leaned as if to lie down out of the rigors of that bare, wind-trampled land.

An irrigation ditch, having its source up the stream at some point out of sight, carried the water for these domestic enterprises. It ran brimful in the bright spring sun to-day, a fringe of springing grass, of green that almost paled the vivid alfalfa, along its brink. There was a wire fence enclosing house and grounds, with a gate that one could open from the saddle by a lever. Bits of wool clung to the barbs of the fence, where incautious grazers had pressed too close. A lilac bush stood in the otherwise bare dooryard, its fat buds swelling to burst.

"This is home," the girl said, pausing, turning to him, throwing out her hand in a gesture of revelation and presentation, as if she offered it all, just as it stood. "You're welcome to it, such as it is, Mr. ——?"

"Rawlins, of Kansas."

"I am Edith Stone. I live here with my aunt, Mrs. Duke. We run the ranch. Come on in and meet her."

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CHAPTER V

MISTRESS OF THE FLOCK

LILA DUKE, widow of a good sheepman, was a large red lady with a double chin. Her sleek black hair was rolled into a little wisp with a protruding end at the nape of her neck; her sharp black eyes were shadowed by a hedge of heavy black eyebrows which came together end-on at the bridge of her nose. She appeared to be inflamed to the sweating point, red and moist as if she fed mainly on peppers and fat mutton stew. But she was a surprisingly nimble woman on her feet, with a hearty voice that must have carried from hill to hill like a hunting horn, and a ready laugh lying always in the curl of her tongue.

Mrs. Duke was Edith Stone's maternal aunt. She had been made a widow by the little creek that ran before the ranch-house door. Duke had attempted wading it during a spring freshet; the current had flattened him against a boulder and held him until he drowned. His picture was on the wall of the sitting-room, showing him to have been a neutral sort of force, a curve in his face as if something had been put down on him when he was very young. Not unlike a ram in expression, no collar to his large-breasted white shirt. Rawlins was thankful, looking at the portrait in air-brush and crayon, that Edith Stone had not

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come from Duke's side of the fence. For the young lady's sake, of course.

They did not explain to Rawlins the status of the concern, whether they were partners in the business, or whether Edith was merely a ward of her relative, making her home there pending the coming of better fortune. Mrs. Duke was a sheep-wise woman, shrewd, inquisitive, quick to find out about another's affairs while saying nothing at all of her own that an assessor or tax collector could profit by.

It did not require long for her to come to the bottom of Rawlins' aims and intentions, for he had nothing to reserve or hide.

"Yes, I can tell just about how you felt when you run up against that fence," she said with friendly sympathy. "I guess it was about the same as if somebody you trusted and depended on had gone back on you at the last minute, leavin' you holdin' the sack."

"Just about like that," Rawlins admitted. "I couldn't conceive, and I can't yet, how one man could sprawl out over a chunk of country as big as that, with a lot of high-minded free American citizens around the edges afraid to lay a hand on his unlawful fence."

"You've seen how he does it, you know now. We'd 'a' been out a good horse and saddle if you hadn't happened to be at that gap in the fence this morning. We might 'a' lawed 'em till we couldn't stand up without ever gittin' hide or hair of that horse back. Senator Galloway owns the law up in this part of the country, except a few offices over at Lost Cabin. They're sore on him there because he strung his fence around the town and cut off its future, they say. It

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never had any more future than a graveyard. The little opposition to Galloway in that corner don't cut much ice when he can name all the other people that's to be elected or appointed, from federal judge down. It's a wonder they tell people down at the land office at Jasper there's any land open to entry in this part of the country at all."

Edith contributed little to the conversation during the meal, or afterwards as they conducted the stranger around the ranch, Mrs. Duke taking great pride, entirely justified, Rawlins thought, in the complete appointments of the place. Rawlins attributed the young woman's silence to the reaction from her unpleasant adventure, knowing that sensitive people suffer more in retrospection than in the moment of peril. She went along opening gates in a perfunctory, disinterested sort of way.

Edith had changed her garb for one more domestic and graceful, adding greatly to her native attractions, which Rawlins found refreshing as a flower in an unexpected place. She had taken the plaits out of her hair, which was wavy either from the crinkles of them or from a natural ripple, very pleasing to see, let it be due to nature or art. It was a shade darker than Rawlins had thought, with gleams and shadows in it as she moved, such as he used to watch in the ripening wheatfields from the window of his newspaper office out in the golden belt of Kansas.

"This is a hospital band," Mrs. Duke explained, stopping at a corral that contained two or three hundred sheep.

"Sick ones, eh?" said Rawlins, thinking how much

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taller Edith appeared in that nice blue dress with its edging-around of red. A woman's clothes belonged to a woman, and a man's to a man.

"Under suspicion and observation, most of them," Mrs. Duke said. "The State veterinary he's watchin' us sheepmen like a hawk. Mighty good thing, too. He's afraid of scabies this spring. We're dippin', finished with 'em all as fast as we sheared, holdin' these till some of the cripples picks up a little. Over there's where we dip 'em. Ever see it done?"

"Millions of 'em," Rawlins replied recklessly, not meaning to deceive by making his figures so high, but carried off by a careless exhilaration that appeared to have taken hold of him.

"Thousands, I should say, I guess," he amended under Mrs. Duke's suddenly stern eyes. "I worked in the Kansas City stockyards, you know. Feeders have to be dipped before they ship 'em out—same kind of arrangement as you've got there, a chute full of dip that swims them, a man on the platform above to duck their heads under with a forked stick as they pass. Sure. Just the same."

"Well, I'm glad there's something you know about sheep," Mrs. Duke said drily, her inflection implying that he knew nothing at all. "If you ain't got anything better to do to-morrow you can help me dip that band. I want to get the hearty ones out on the range."

"I'll be glad to do it," Rawlins agreed so readily that Mrs. Duke's momentary displeasure was dispersed out of her broad red face.

"There's not enough dip in that trough for the

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job," she calculated. "It's been 'vaporatin' away in the sun."

"I'll mix up some if you've got the ingredients," he offered, with the modest way of a man who knew his job.

"You can mix dip, can you?" She eyed him shrewdly, as if to penetrate his bluff. "Where did you learn at?"

"I put in four years at the best agricultural college in the world," he replied, not so much boastfully as with confident pride.

"Oh, you're one of them chemical farmers," apparently fully and satisfactorily enlightened now. "Well, I guess that helps, but I don't know how much. We used to have an old feller with us when Mr. Duke was alive, back on the farm in Iowa. He never had done a day's work of farmin' in his life before we took him in, but you couldn't mention anything to him he couldn't do. 'Sure I can,' he used to say, cheerful and bright; 'sure I can do it. I'm an old soldier.' I'm afraid you chemical farmers are a good deal like that old feller."

"The general public opinion agrees with you," Rawlins admitted, neither disposed to argue down her prejudices nor defend his qualifications.

"Runnin' a band of sheep on the range is the only way anybody can learn the business in this country, no difference what they teach in college. You seem to have sense enough to 'a' got that through your head already."

"Thanks," said Rawlins, turning to her with his

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honest, ready grin. "It's something to know even a little bit of sense shows through."

"Them onery cowboys and cowmen throw the slur at us sheepmen that we ain't got the courage to come out and fight, just like there was only one kind of courage in this world, the kind that makes a man brawl and booze and yelp around a-straddle of a horse where gittin' away 's easy. They hole up in the winter time, never showin' their noses outside the door when a blizzard hits the range, leavin' their stock to shift the best they can.

"When the blow's over they go out and see how many head they've lost, instead of headin' 'em around to some sheltered place the way a sheepman does. Hot or cold, snow or dry, you'll find a sheepman with his flock, takin' the weather the same as they take it, workin' 'em to some shelter in a storm if there's any to be reached."

"Yes, I've had other sheepmen tell me the same thing, Mrs. Duke."

"They say up here a handful of corn a day will carry a sheep through a blizzard and save its life. I've never had to try it, but I've got the corn, right there in that barn. I'd wade in snow up to my neck, forty below, to a band of blizzard-bound sheep. Show me a cowman that 'd do as much for his starvin' herd. Oh, here and there you'll find one that'll drive out with a little jag of hay and pitch it off, tryin' to save enough cows to breed him another start, but there ain't many of 'em.

"If you'd 'a' been here two years ago you'd 'a' got a sight of what the cowmen's courage and common sense

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and humanity amounts to. Over on the range west of Galloway's there was places along the cricks where you could 'a' walked on dead cattle and never put your foot on the ground for a mile at a stretch."

"I remember the big winter kill of that year," Rawlins said.

"It wasn't the winter killed them cattle as much as it was the improvidence and shiftlessness of the cowmen. You never heard of no big winter kill of sheep. We lose a lot of lambs sometimes, when a late storm catches the little things before they're hardly dry, but that ain't because the sheepmen and herders, and every mother's son and daughter of their fam'lies, ain't out in the weather workin' night and day to save the lambs. Maybe we ain't as brash as some onery yelpin' people about pullin' out a gun and shootin' some poor feller, but that's because we think more of other folkses' rights, and law and humanity."

"Sheep raisin' always has been the business of peaceable men," Rawlins remarked. "They never have been fighters, as far as sacred or profane history tells us. Abraham was a notable example of a sheepman, but he hasn't got much of a record with a gun."

"These cowmen say it takes the fight out of a man to live around with sheep, the peaceablest creatures in the world, I guess, and the most dependent on the care of humans. It'd do me good to see some sheepman take the conceit out of them fellers. I'd nearly give forty dollars to see some sheepman step out of the end of his wagon some night when them cowboys 're raidin' his band and knock a few of 'em stiff with a gun. It sure is the dose they need—not that they bother us

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here any more. But I've seen the time right here in Dry Wood when they raided beddin'-grounds and burnt wagons and killed sheepmen and herders, right along. That's what'd happen to us now if we was to try to run our sheep on that fenced-up range."

"I wonder if it would?" Rawlins speculated, his thoughts with his eyes, it seemed, where they sought the low hilltops to the west, beyond which the forbidden country could not be espied.

"If I was a man, with all to make and little to risk, I'd go in there and homestead," Mrs. Duke declared. "Well, I may do it anyhow one of these days—I've never used my homestead right, Uncle Sam owes me a hundred and sixty acres of farmin' land, or a half-section of grazin'. I think that's all called grazin' in there, but some of it's as good farmin' land as ever laid out of doors. I'd locate on the crick, four or five miles west of the fence, if I was goin' in. There's some mighty purty land in there, level and rich, only needin' water to grow any kind of grain but corn. Corn don't do no good up here; the seasons 're too short."

"Clemmons was telling me about that valley last night. He says it's easy to irrigate, plenty of water available. It looks to me as if a few determined homesteaders could go in there and hold their own against Galloway."

"I ain't hopeful of ever seein' it done," she sighed, shaking her head. "You'd better change your clothes before you mix that dip, it's a mussy job, and smelly stuff to splash on a person. If them's the worst you've got I guess I can lend you a pair of overhauls. Ain't that a purty buck? He's a registered Rambouillet. I

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imported him last fall; he cost me seven hundred dollars put down at Jasper."

Edith had been standing off a little way beside the corral gate while they talked, as if she had no interest at all in the sheep, sick or well. She was pensive and preoccupied; Rawlins wondered what her thoughts might be. Perhaps she was tired of that place; longing to be away among people and scenes she had known, her heart wandering off up the wagon trail that came down the other side of the creek, upon which her eyes were fixed.

Three horses were sunning themselves dreamily in a corral; a few hens wallowed like indolent odalisques in the warm grey dust. These, with the sheep, were the only creatures about the place. In the sheeplands fashion, such milk as was used on that ranch came out of a tin, along with many other necessities and delicacies of the table.

Whether she owned a thousand or ten thousand sheep, Mrs. Duke did not say. She was silent likewise on the number of men she employed, and whether she gained or lost in the business. Yes, she said, in reply to Rawlins' question, she guessed a man could do right well if he had a ranch he could irrigate and grow alfalfa to sell to the sheepmen around there. It took a farmer to do that, not a sheepman. Sheepmen were against farming. It cut up the range.

Fine place, fine location, fine breed of sheep, said Rawlins, looking around approvingly. How long had she been there? Longer than she cared to tell, Mrs. Duke replied, considering that it might give away her age. She laughed it off, turning the talk to something

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else. Rawlins wondered if she counted her money with one eye shut to keep the other from seeing how much she had, her sheepman-caution seemed so preposterously extreme.

"So you come out here to this country with it all planned out to be a sheepman?" Mrs. Duke said, as they rejoined Edith and walked slowly toward the house. "It's a shame that fence of Galloway's was in your way, but maybe it saved you time and money, after all."

"That's what I concluded after talking with Clemmons," Rawlins admitted.

"It'll not always be there in people's way," Edith said, with positiveness that seemed portentous. "A man will come along here one of these days big enough to make Galloway move his fence—or he'll move it for him."

"Somebody you've been writin' to?" Mrs. Duke suggested, letting Rawlins into the joke by a sly, slow wink.

Edith made no answer to this banter, although she flushed and turned her head as if resenting the introduction of a stranger into her private affairs. Mrs. Duke was not sensitive in the matter at all, nor conscious of any reservation of delicacy.

"That's what took her to the post office this morning, riskin' her neck cuttin' that fence," she said.

"Oh, Aunt Lila! You know we were out of coffee."

"She's got a mail-order beau, away back in Saint Joe, Missouri. She never set eyes on him in her life," Mrs. Duke continued in unfeeling revelation of the family secret, as much to Rawlins' distaste as to the girl's.

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"Spare him the details, Aunt Lila," Edith pleaded, attempting a lightness which it was plain she did not feel.

"He's a tailor, he's got a moustache a foot long—she's got his picture propped up on her dresser."

"Oh, *Aunt* Lila!"

"Ain't it so? Sure it's so. Never saw him in her life, met him in an advertisement. Mail-order beau, I call him."

Mrs. Duke laughed, either unconscious or careless of the embarrassment her raillery caused the young woman. Rawlins glanced at Edith, trying to express sympathy, and his apology for the unavoidable part he had taken in her discomfiture. She grinned, but it was a costly effort, her face looking worried, even anxious, he thought, out of all proportion to the gravity of the case.

Mrs. Duke must keep her eye on the mixing and dilution of the sheep dip, not entirely convinced of the chemical farmer's ability to do all he claimed. When she discovered him fully experienced in the niceties of the compound she grew quite friendly and confidential, for a sheepman, as she invariably called herself, almost ready, it appeared, to accept him into the fraternity.

When Rawlins applied the sheep-shears, with expedition and success, to the coats of several ewes which had, by reason of their invalid condition at shearing-time, escaped the general denudation, she began to watch him out of the corner of her eye, and to question him shrewdly, sometimes cryptically. She suspected he was more than he represented himself to be, not willing to

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accept his explanation that shearing was part of the curriculum in the college which gave him his degree.

The mistress of the flock was so pleased with her visitor's dexterity as he worked over a forlorn and chastened-looking ewe up-ended between his knees, that she called Edith from the house to witness this almost unbelievable thing. Edith appeared at her loud whoop, suddenly, with a look of consternation.

"Look at him—look at that chemical farmer shearin' a sheep!"

Mrs. Duke offered the spectacle proudly, as if all credit for this small accomplishment in animal husbandry belonged to her alone. One might have thought she had given the young man his first lesson but a minute before, and he had surpassed his instructor after the first six strokes.

"Oh, I thought the place was afire!" said Edith, neither electrified nor surprised.

"But look at him—just *look* at him!" Mrs. Duke insisted. "He can shear a sheep dang near as good as I can."

"Why, of course, Aunt Lila. I knew he could all the time."

"He's a natural-born sheepman. That's what that boy is."

"Maybe he is," Edith allowed indifferently, her interest apparently hard to move and harder to hold. She was gazing up the road again, a look of worriment in her eyes.

The object of their discussion was the width of the corral distant, operating in the door of a shed, a wool-sack hanging beside him into which he tossed the fleece,

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which he had removed like a good shearer, all in one piece. He held the ewe's head between his knees while he marked with brush and paint a big black D on its side, Mrs. Duke nodding approval, her bare arms on the fence.

Rawlins came across the lot for further instructions. A wagon was coming down the road at a brisk pace, having that moment broken into view around the turn, a cloud of dust rising high in the still air behind it. The two women had turned to watch the approach of the wagon, travelers on that road being few.

"That's a livery rig from Lost Cabin," Mrs. Duke said in surprise. "Ain't that Smith Phogenphole drivin'?"

"Yes," said Edith weakly.

"I wonder where he's takin' that man? It can't be a wool-buyer around this late. Why, they're turnin' in here!"

The stout spring wagon was bouncing and jolting across the rocky ford of the little stream, the deepest of its water not more than up to the hubs, the passenger clinging desperately to the seat. The vehicle struck dry land with a lurch, nearly pitching the passenger out on the horses' backs. The driver made a sudden clutch for the man's coat and hauled him back, laughing loudly.

Mrs. Duke confronted her niece with open mouth and staring eyes.

"Edith Stone! That's him!" she said. "I'd know that moustache in a million. That's him—that's your mail-order beau!"

"I didn't think he'd come," said Edith miserably,

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looking around as if for some place to hide. "I got a letter this morning, he said he was coming, but I didn't think he'd have the nerve—nobody asked him to come. What in the world am I goin' to do?"

"That's what you've been watchin' that road so anxious for, is it? Well, he's here."

"Yes, darn him!" said Edith, vexed to her wits' end. "What am I goin' to *do* with him? That's what I want to know."

"Why, marry him," Mrs. Duke replied with easy conclusion. "You've got to marry some time, you might as well begin right now."

"Marry him?" Edith repeated in shocked surprise. "Why, I never had the slightest idea of marrying him! Mr. Rawlins"—in desperate appeal—"I only wrote to him for fun. I know you can understand how it was, Mr. Rawlins—I was so lonesome I'd 'a' corresponded with a dog!"

"Sure," said Rawlins cheerfully, immensely diverted by the situation, unprecedented in all his experience.

Edith was almost frantic. She stood there wringing her fingers, a look of humiliation, surprise and fright in her face that was truly moving. Mrs. Duke was answering the driver's waved salutations, which he now began to supplement by shouted hails, the sheepwoman giving them back to him as good as they came. The driver came on through the gate, rounded to and stopped.

The passenger got down from his uneasy seat, trying his legs tentatively with little bendings at the knees as if he had serious doubt of their working order after that rough ride. Mrs. Duke put her hand over her

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mouth to mask her gaping astonishment, turning to her niece.

"He's seven foot tall and nine inches wide!" she marveled. "I never saw such a scissors-legged man in my life!"

"What made him come, what in the world made him come!" Edith lamented.

"Well, heaven above!" said Mrs. Duke. "After all your writin'! Come on and meet him and take care of him—don't expect to pa'm him off on me."

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CHAPTER VI

THE MAN FROM ST. JOE

Dowell Peck, the mail-order beau, presented anything but a romantic appearance as he stood beside his luggage where the driver of the livery rig had unloaded him. He was a long, lean man, a peering inquisitiveness in his sharp features, adorned by a sprangling brown moustache, so long, so immense and so heavy, he appeared to carry his head to balance it, as a buck his spreading antlers. His nose was singularly juvenile, his light eyes were large, outstanding in their sockets, such a glassy brightness of artificialty in them as caused the beholder to wonder if he could see.

Peck carried his head thrust forward a little on his long, gaunt neck, as if to keep his moustache clear of entanglements. This pose, taken with the sharp angle of his neck that looked like something in a stocking, gave him the straining appearance of a horse stretching its neck to relieve the pressure of an uncomfortable collar. He was enveloped to the knees in a garment once popular with travelers from such places as St. Joe, known as a linen duster. Few of them were linen, Peck's being no exception. His was cambric of a greenish hue, wrinkled, drawn, drooping. It had large mussel-shell buttons, large packets of some weighty stuff in the pockets of it which contributed nothing to the engaging appearance a man might well desire to

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present when arriving on a tender mission such as his. A narrow-brimmed derby hat, pressed down hard to the eyebrows, topped off his extraordinary ensemble.

It required both hands to pry Peck loose from his hat, he had fixed it so firmly against the inequalities of the road. He had it off in due time to salute the ladies when they approached him, stepping out from his three pieces of luggage with great elegance, hair so well protected by the tortoise-shell hat that the plaster had not even cracked.

"So this is little old Edith!" he said. "Well, well, well!"

Edith was so embarrassed by this climax in her mail flirtation, together with the presence of Rawlins, whom Mrs. Duke had fairly brought forward by force, and the stage driver, who was hanging out over his seat in eagerness to hear, that she had no words ready for this ardent and familiar courtier. She gave him her hand, grinning ruefully, making the best of it she could.

Peck was not dampened by the reception, if sensible of its coolness, at all, which Rawlins doubted as he watched the forward fellow.

"And this is Missus Duke, natural as life and twice as big," Peck rattled ahead. "Give us a kiss, Aunt Lile."

"Well, I like your gall!" said Mrs. Duke, but not severely, not entirely displeased, although she did not offer her lips to the proposed salutation. She backed away, a capable hand raised to fend against the impetuosity of the man from St. Joe.

Smith Phogenphole, who plainly had possessed himself of the particulars of this romance along the way,

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chuckled his appreciation of Peck's method. He appeared as a man whose doubts had been removed, comfortable in his enjoyment of the scene, keen in the anticipation of the stir his report would make when he got back to town.

"Come on into the house, Mr. Peck," Edith invited, more concerned about getting out of Smith Phogenphole's eyes than the matter of hospitality. "Grab your gripsacks and come in."

She led the way, Mrs. Duke lingering for a chat with the liveryman, Rawlins going back to the sheep-lot again. He was not sorry for Edith, try as he might to get up a little sympathy for her. Ordering by mail was such an established business in the sheep country, he supposed, that a girl naturally thought of getting her romance that way. She had drawn a high prize from the catalogue; that was a cinch. Peck was a rarity fit to put in a case and keep.

Rawlins went grinning about the things he found wanting done around the sheds and lots, wondering what the girl had written that had moved this sample of St. Joe's chivalry to pack his three bags and point his moustaches into the west. He wouldn't have come without encouragement; he hardly would have risked the jump, forward and indelicate as he plainly was, without a pretty strong hope. Peck was not a man to allow any grass to grow between his toes. He would push things along; right along. He was the kind that would take a crack over the nose like a hound, his head popped back in the pot before the yelp was out of his mouth. It was a situation of large possi-

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bilities, mainly humorous, as it looked to Rawlins just then.

Vaguely wondering how the young woman was to rid herself of this long-shinned suitor, pretty certain in his own opinion that a little thing like telling him he was not wanted would make very slight difference to Mr. Peck, Rawlins pottered around the place, tidying up the generally neglected aspect of the premises. He was too deeply concerned with his own future, the plans for which must be laid and developed anew, to allow Peck's advent to remain long a matter for speculation.

The sun was low on the hill when Rawlins concluded he had done about all there was lying around loose. He was turning to the house to change his clothes and get ready for supper, when Edith came bursting across the lot, throwing a wild look back over her shoulder as she approached, considerably agitated, panting as if she had just wrenched herself from Peck's ardent but unwelcome arms.

"There's some motherless lambs—five of them—that the ewes wouldn't take," she panted, "back in the far shed. I'm afraid they'll starve."

"They're all right," he assured her cheerfully. "I found them. I divided them up among three ewes—they'll be all right now."

"You *did?*" she questioned, incredulous and grateful in a breath. "I couldn't do a thing with the selfish old things, I tried all morning before I went to town. How did you do it?"

"Oh, just blarneyed 'em along a little," he replied, discounting his success.

"Well, I couldn't do it, and me a sheepman," she

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declared. "Aunt Lila must be right, you're a born sheepman."

"Thanks. What's on your mind, Miss Stone?"

He knew well enough it was not the lambs. No sheepman would be that much concerned over a few motherless lambs.

"That pop-eyed Peck wanted to kiss me—he *tried* to kiss me!"

She was hot enough to fry pancakes, her face as red as if Peck's horny stubble of beard had come too close for comfort. She looked toward the house, fearful that the mail-order suitor might be following her in pursuit of his amorous design, drawing the back of her hand spitefully across her cheek as if brushing away a pestiferous insect.

"Yes, and he did," Rawlins said, laughing unsympathetically.

"He did *not!*" she denied with high indignation. "He kissed Aunt Lila—he's made a big hit with her already. Darned fool! he thinks I'm going to marry him! He told Aunt Lila I sent for him."

"Didn't you?"

"No, I didn't. I never as much as hinted I wanted him to come. Oh, Mr. Rawlins!" appealingly, her hands extended in earnest supplication—"can't you have a little sympathy for me? Don't you see I'm in a devil of a fix?"

"You certainly are—if you really don't want that chap around."

"He writes a whole lot better than he talks, or looks," she pleaded her excuse for the affair, "and the picture he sent me didn't show *all* of him."

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"I'll bet you. It'd sure take a whopper to do that."

"He'll stay here always, he'll never go away!" she moaned.

"He does look like a pretty good stayer," Rawlins granted cheerfully.

"I want you to help me out!" impetuously, her hands held out in that ingenuous appeal.

"What do you want me to do? take him off and drop him in a hole somewhere?"

"Oh, can't you be serious?" a bit pettishly, very much ashamed of her fix.

"Seriously, then, I'll do what I can to relieve you of him, Miss Stone. You remember the story of the unwelcome suitors?"

"I wouldn't ask you to shoot him, though," she replied, answering him doubly, but too serious for even a smile.

"But I'm afraid that ancient gentleman's method with self-appointed beaux is about the only one that will ever break Mr. Peck loose."

"If he thought there was somebody else—if I gave him to understand there *was* somebody else," earnestly, her troubled eyes holding his own, her troubled voice like a reproving finger laid on the smile that twitched his lips—"if I could tell him I'm already engaged, and show him the ring."

"Fine! That's the ticket. Slip on a ring and tell him somebody beat him to it. That ought to put him right."

"Yes, and the first thing he'd want to know would be the man's name, simple!" she said. "There's got to be a man, and men aren't so plentiful up in this country

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you can go out and tag one when you want him. Even that old lizard ain't green enough to believe I'd marry a sheep-herder. I've got to have a real *man*. Won't you help me out, Mr. Rawlins? Please, won't you help me out?"

Rawlins was uncomfortable, hot in a flush, and red as a gobbler. But he tried to be calm, and accept the proposal in the spirit of frankness in which it was made.

"You mean you want me to be the man?"

"Yes, if you'll only do me the favor, please, Mr. Rawlins. Only temporarily, you know, not in earnest. It'll only be a bluff, it'll all be off as soon as he goes away and leaves me alone."

"I don't know whether I'm going to be around here longer than to-morrow," Rawlins objected.

"That don't make any difference."

"But if it got talked around that we're engaged, you know, it might be kind of awkward for us. We couldn't explain that it's only a bluff; that would defeat the purpose."

"Oh, he'll leave—he'll leave right away when I tell him I'm engaged to you."

She was confident, and beaming in her confidence so brightly, Rawlins thought it wouldn't be any great hardship to be engaged to her, even though there was no bluff about it.

"It's a little bit cheap, though," he said, "and I wouldn't want you to do anything cheap. There's a better way—there must be a better way—not that I wouldn't feel the honor of being only temporarily engaged to you, Miss Stone. I'll do all I can to help you

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in any other way, but I don't believe it's necessary for you to—to—frankly, cheapen yourself by announcing your engagement to a perfect stranger just to get rid of this nuisance from St. Joe."

"I've made a fool of myself—I'm always making a fool of myself!" she said, bitterly ashamed, hiding her burning face between her hands, turning away.

"No, you haven't, not in the least. You've just come to a stranger offering him a confidence he doesn't deserve. I couldn't let you do that, you know. The idea came to you in your desperation——"

"When he tried to kiss me," she nodded, her face puckered to hold back the tears of vexation and shame. "He said engaged people always kissed when they met. I thought of you—I thought I could get you to help me."

"I will help you, too. You don't have to marry that man, you know. There's no way on earth he can make you do that."

"But he'll hang around!" she wailed. "No telling how long he'll hang around tryin' to make me change my mind."

"We'll see about that. Don't you worry over Mr. McDowell Peck."

"Dowell. There's no Mc to it. I used to think it was kind of cute—but look at him! just look at him!"

"I took a pretty good squint," Rawlins told her. "I think you can have a lot of fun out of Peck if you handle him right. Don't worry. If I stick around this neighborhood a little while, and I'm hoping, I'll see if we can't put something hot under Peck's feet that will start him back to St. Joe on the jump."

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"If you only would!"

"Treat him like a Dutch uncle," Rawlins advised, "ride around with him, show him he can be a friend, and nothing but a friend. What's he doing now?"

"He was going to shave, he got out a mug as big as the well-bucket and stood in the kitchen door stirrin' up his mess of lather, talkin' all the time. It's something terrible the deception they can put in a photograph of a man."

"Yes, and even of the ladies now and then."

"He took off his collar to get at his whiskers. You've only seen about half of that man."

"Was it before, or after, that he tried his little loving pass with you?"

"Before, darn him! He slopped his old lather all over the kitchen floor—some of it got on my face. Aunt Lila nearly split herself laughin'. I never saw her take such an off-hand shine to a man—I don't see where her sudden interest in seein' me married comes in. She's my guardian, and will be till I'm my own man."

"That will be a good while yet," he said, not believing it, but following the age-old custom for men to pretend women are younger than they seem.

"No, only a few weeks more. I'll be twenty-one in June, but I don't expect to kick anything over when I am."

"Except Peck's fond hopes, maybe."

"I'd hang myself if I thought he was going to stick around here that long," she declared.

"If that's the way you take it, something's got to be done to start him on his way."

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"I hope to God!" she said, with the reckless fervency of people who live aside from the restrictions of theological discipline. "I'll try to handle him the way you say, but if he ever tries to kiss me again I'll slap him to sleep!"

"No, that wouldn't be the way to handle him," Rawlins said. "He's used to ladies who express themselves that way. A man like Peck considers a blow from a lady's hand nothing less than a love tap. It only makes him keener. Be cold; be severely dignified. Back away, put up your hand, and tell him 'Sir!' That always gets a man like Peck: 'Sir!' You could do it about right to freeze him to the floor."

"I'll try it on," she said, greatly encouraged, doubtless believing she was getting advice from a very worldly and sophisticated source.

"That'll be the game. He's been training with slapping ladies all his life, but put him in front of one of the dignified, icy kind and he'll be as helpless as the frog that swallowed the shot."

"Thank you for helping me out, Mr. Rawlins," she said, truly grateful, more for the confidence she had reposed in him, if she had stopped to think about it, than any assistance he had given.

"There's no thanks due on a promise—I haven't helped you yet," he reminded her.

"But you've promised, and that's the same as done."

"I do try to make it come out that way," he said, with somewhat bashful modesty.

"If you're going to learn the sheep business you might as well learn it on this ranch," she suggested

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hopefully. "I'll speak to Aunt Lila about it, if you're not too proud to take a job from a woman."

"No, that might look like politics," he said. "Let her offer me a job if she wants a man. That would be better."

"Hiring and firing are pretty much in the hands of her foreman, Elmer Tippie," said Edith. "Maybe you'd better strike him for a job. You could do that all right."

"Sure I could, and I will. Where is he?"

"He's on the road home from Jasper; we expect him this evening. He took the last of our clip down last week; he's bringin' up supplies."

"I'll talk to him. There are reasons—several reasons—why I'd rather put in my sheep-raising apprenticeship on this ranch than any other in the world."

"Mr. Peck, for one," she suggested.

"He's only a comical incidental," he said, looking at her warmly, so warmly that her eyes retreated, and a little flush, that was not from the fire of displeasure, brightened in her cheek.

"You'd better come on in and get ready for supper," she said. "Aunt Lila will be yellin' for you in a minute."

He followed her through the corral gate, where she waited until he had fastened it, when they went on together, chatting as if years lay behind the time of their first meeting. Dowell Peck appeared on the kitchen porch, apparently as much at home as a stray dog that has found an open door. He waved at them, flapping his long arm like a railroad semaphore. Then he fell to preening his luxuriant moustache, giving it

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an upward twirl with elegant crook of the elbow, well satisfied with the sheep country and all in it, but satisfied with himself above all the objects in art and nature that the whole world contained.

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CHAPTER VII

ELEGANCE WITH A SPOON

ELMER TIPPIE made his appearance a little after sunset, his approach announced by the noise of the three wagons in his train long before they came in sight. There were four horses to a wagon, each of the vehicles being pretty well loaded with boxes, barrels and sacks. Rawlins beheld this wholesale provisioning with amazement. He thought that must be a heavy-feeding family if that represented only six months' supplies, as Mrs. Duke had told him her foreman was bringing along from Jasper.

On this point Rawlins received considerable enlightenment while he helped Elmer and the drivers put the teams away. That generous providing was mainly on account of twelve sheep-herders who were looking after a matter of thirty thousand sheep carrying the big black D on the adjoining range.

That was a business of considerably more importance than the modest homestead indicated. Ewes were selling in that day around five dollars a head on the range; wool at forty cents a pound. It required no very difficult computation to arrive at the conclusion that Mrs. Duke was one of the big ones in the sheep world of whom Clemmons had spoken.

One of the drivers said that was the third trip they had made to Jasper in the past month with the spring

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clip from Mrs. Duke's flock. Not from the ranch; few sheep were sheared on the ranch. There were some big shearing-pens about half-way between there and Jasper, where flocks for miles around were assembled at shearing-time. Yes, they'd marketed a right smart of wool that spring, the driver said, which was as close to a specific statement as he appeared willing to go, in the manner of suspicious caution that seemed to afflict everybody who had anything to do with sheep.

Edith had not said anything to reveal the magnitude of their enterprise; Mrs. Duke had kept her voluble mouth shut on her numbers and extent. Rawlins had concluded them to be considerably more important than Clemmons, yet far below the greasy plutocrats from whom he had drawn his inspiration on the Kansas City market.

Rawlins wondered, in the light of this information gathered from the driver, what part Edith had in the concern, if any at all beyond her position in the household as ward of her aunt; whether she was native to that country, and if not, whence she had come, and when. It was not extraordinary that a young man should think more about a young woman at that juncture of events than of sheep, even thirty thousand sheep. The mind of youth commonly turns to such contemplation. It is a sort of entrancing obligato to the solo of a young man's life.

Rawlins made it a point to introduce himself to Elmer Tippie before going in to supper, explaining his presence at the ranch, and putting in his application for a job. Tippie looked him over slowly, being a deliberate and cautious man, and said he'd let him

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know in the morning. This being as nearly a direct answer as could be expected of a sheepman, Rawlins was satisfied.

Tippie appeared to be an austere and unfriendly man. He was somewhere between fifty and sixty, a dark, sinewy man of medium stature, his corduroy pantaloons, laced into knee boots, bagging like a zouave's. It might have been that whiskers were bringing forty dollars, where wool brought forty cents, a pound, judging by the closely shaved appearance of Tippie's lean, brown, tough-skinned face.

He wore a black leather coat that appeared to be made of whaleskin, or the skin of some creature that lived in water, it was so oily and glistening. Tippie scarcely opened his thin lips when he spoke, his words coming out with a nosy, surly sound. He gave the impression of a man who had been cheated early in life, and never had ceased brooding over it.

The two drivers kindled a fire by the creek, dipping water from it for their coffee, neither invited to their employer's table nor expecting to be. Rawlins stood watching them while Tippie talked in the kitchen door with Mrs. Duke, wondering how he should take to that sort of life, and whether the social distinction that appeared to bar them from the ranch-house table would be enforced in his case when he put on a duck coat with sheepskin collar and became the warder of sheep on the dusty hills.

A long table stood in the big kitchen, room at it for a dozen men, one end, only, being prepared for use of the present company. Mrs. Duke sat at the top, Tippie at one hand, Dowell Peck across from him. Edith

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was beside Peck, Rawlins opposite looking into her troubled eyes. Below them there was a barren of white cloth, as if the table had grown since the dishes were placed, stretching out in rebuke of the inhospitality shown the two men at the creekside, calling reproving attention to the fact of there being plenty room for all.

There was ham on a large platter; there was canned corn. There were potatoes, shipped from Colorado, and butter that was made in a Kansas City packing house from the fat of Texas beeves; it was currently known as bull butter in the sheep country, where it was generally favored above the natural product. Perhaps this was on the argument that any kind of butter that involved the life and carcass of the cow in making was the best kind of butter for people who were the uncompromising enemies of cows. There was milk in a tin from New Jersey, there were preserves of chemical composition, palely pink, gelatinously quaking, which came from Chicago. It was a largely artificial meal, but there was plenty of it.

Tippie had removed his leather coat and hung it on a hook that appeared to be reserved for him on the back of the kitchen door, disclosing a neat black jersey, and necktie of hue somewhat shocking in the light of his sour countenance and unfrivolous mien. Opposite him Peck sat with elbows spread wide on the cloth, amazingly arrayed in a Tuxedo coat with satin lapels, a low-cut, brocaded vest, a white shirt with bosom as big as the ham platter, and of similar form. All that could be seen of him above the table was correct to a

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hair, even to the balance of a hair, which was parted to equilibristic exactness on the roof of his sharp head.

Mrs. Duke surveyed the mail-order beau with approbation and pride. She said that was the cutest little coat she ever saw; she never wished she was a man so much before in all her experience as at that minute, so she might wear one of its pattern. Mr. Peck must be careful of the ham gravy. It would be a shame to splash it on that fine garment, especially the satin lapels, where it would be harder to remove than freckles.

Peck smiled, serenely, supremely. Plebeians might splash gravy on their coats; trust a man of his finesse to come through with his Tuxedo as spotless as a cherry blossom on the topmost twig.

"Did you bring some magazines for the men, Elmer?" Mrs. Duke inquired.

"Um-m-m," said Tippie, making a grudging noise that might have been interpreted variously by one unaccustomed with his speech.

"I'm glad you did, I never had such a readin' bunch of sheep-herders as them boys. One of 'em's got a lot of law books out there in his wagon, studies 'em all the time. I think he's a little cracked."

Tippie was not interested in the literary hunger of the herders. He was mixing potato and corn, morosely absorbed in the enterprise, chopping and stirring with practiced hand. When he had it right, he added ham gravy.

Peck watched the preparation of this dish with patronizing amusement, which was spiced with a dash of disdain, as the set of his moustache expressed. He

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turned to Mrs. Duke with a knowing smirk, as if he would slyly call her attention to the crude fellow's method contrasted to the feeding of a gentleman from St. Joe. Mrs. Duke's attention was fixed on her own plate, where she was mixing potato and corn.

Peck flushed a little, lifting his thin shoulders in expression of growing disdain, the left wing of his moustache twitching as he raised the corner of his lip to vent his contempt. He leaned toward Edith, nudged her with his bony elbow, all fixed to give her a knowing look that would contrast the crudities of certain of the company with his own refinements. Edith looked up with startled face, dropping her fork on her plate with a clatter. Peck's flush deepened; his look of high disdain was clouded over by one of sad disappointment. Edith had just begun to mix potato and corn.

Across the board in Rawlins' quarter there was neither sympathy nor support for Peck. Rawlins was reaching for the ham gravy that moment to pour it over his potato and corn.

Determined to show them this was not the method, even though he stood alone, Peck took one of the dishes reserved by Mrs. Duke for the pink preserves, filled it with stewed corn and began to eat it elegantly with a spoon. He dipped from him, leaning forward to meet the spoon with each replenishment, his implement held with thumb and three fingers, the fourth member extended in the crook of true refinement.

Even though Peck's performance might have been marred a little to the fastidious person by the gawping sound he made each time he leaned forward and opened wide his big red mouth, like a young robin

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stretching its beak for a worm, it was carried off with an air of censuring triumph. Mrs. Duke suspended her own replenishment to watch him, following each dipping and lifting of the spoon with a movement of the eyes and head, very much as a dog watches the transference of every morsel his master raises from the dish.

Mrs. Duke was so engaged by this exposition of deportment as to forget her own standard mixture until Peck had dipped the last grain of corn from his dish. She drew a long breath, apparently as much relieved as if she had watched her guest through some danger into which his ignorance had enticed him. She did not comment on Peck's performance, although it was plain she had been impressed by it, probably not altogether in the way he had intended.

Peck dabbed his napkin to his moustache in a truly dainty and high-bred way, looking around the silent table with the triumphant, greedy expression of a cat that has just finished a bird. It was plain that some vindictiveness had attended this lesson in table manners, which Peck was not wholly able to conceal.

"I met that little wool buyer from Boston down at Jasper," Tippie said, speaking above his operations on a large piece of ham which he was cutting into bites before beginning to eat, pushing the severed pieces out of the way to the farther side of his plate.

"Mr. Murray?" inquired Mrs. Duke.

"No, not Murray. Feller that bought your wool three years ago."

"You don't mean Mr. Fairweather, Elmer?"

"Yes, Fairweather. Couldn't think of it. Nearest I could come was Blizzard."

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This attempt at a joke, lame as it was, came so unexpectedly from the glum mouth of Tippie that it set Mrs. Duke back on her heels, figuratively, with laughter. Even Edith forgot the shadow of her mail-order beau for a moment to laugh, looking across at Rawlins for his support, which he gave heartily. Peck seemed rather bewildered than amused. He looked from one to another as if the point of the joke might be flying around the table and he expected to nab it by being alert.

"Oh, yes, I got you," he said. "Wool—blizzard—darn good joke!"

When Peck laughed, as he did immediately on his discovery of what he thought to be the humor of the thing, he elongated himself like a worm, making a croaking, dismal, distressing noise that was comparable to nothing but the working of a dry pump. Tippie, whose face had not shown a crease of mirth while the others laughed, looked up severely at Peck's outbreak, and solemnly offered him water.

"No, thanks," Peck declined, seeing no reason for such an act of courtesy at all.

Tippie put the pitcher down.

"Sounded like you needed primin'," he said.

"You was startin' to tell me about Fairweather," Mrs. Duke reminded her foreman.

"He was about to start off up here to see you, but I told him he might as well save his time. He wanted to contract for your clip next spring at forty cents, willin' to advance a dollar a head to bind you."

"I wouldn't 'a' took it, just as well he had sense enough to take your word. Wool's goin' to see sixty

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cents before next shearin'; sheep's gittin' scarcer on the range every day, with all this fencin' and farmin'. I tell you, us sheepmen that's in the business now stands to cover up our past losses if we can stick."

"How many have you got, ma'am?" Peck inquired.

"Oh, I've got several, enough to keep me busy," Mrs. Duke replied. "Did you bring that change up from the bank, Elmer?"

"Um-m-m," said Elmer. "Out in the wagon. Forgot to bring it in."

Seeing that he was down to the last bite of ham, Elmer pushed back, refusing the dessert, saying he'd bring in that change. He returned soon with a bulky package done up in a newspaper, resumed his place at the table, removed the wrapper, displaying a bale of money big enough to choke a cow.

"Used the dern stuff for a piller comin' up," said Elmer. "I guess it's all there, I told 'em to put it up a thousand in a bunch."

Elmer passed the change, which he seemed to contemn with some sort of deep-seated grudge, along to his employer, who began nonchalantly to count the bunches which contained a thousand each, piling them carelessly on the side next to Peck. There were fourteen bundles of the banknotes. When she had verified the count by this rough operation, Mrs. Duke nodded, as if fourteen thousand dollars were but a small item in her daily doings, nothing but change, indeed. She handed a bundle to Tippie.

"I guess you'd better start around to-morrow and pay the boys," she said.

"Um-m-m," said Tippie. He put the money in the

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pocket of his jersey, the end of it protruding like the come-on roll of a capper at a game.

Peck's exophthalmic eyes enlarged four diameters, apparently, at sight of the money. He turned pale with amazement, his moustache seemed to droop in the close proximity of wealth so carelessly handled.

"Gosh all fiddlers!" he said, leaning toward Mrs. Duke, touching the pile of greasy sheeplands currency with his finger as if to assure himself that it was real. "Ain't you scairt somebody'll come along and hold you up?"

Mrs. Duke looked at him sharply, rebuke in every feature, strangely altered from their good-natured cast to one of stony hardness.

"We don't have that kind of people in this country," she said.

"I wouldn't trust nobody no further than I could see 'em on a cloudy night," Peck declared, with such vehemence that his sincerity could not be questioned.

"You was brought up in a city," Mrs. Duke returned, softened by his honest concern for her money. "In this country we don't go around stickin' folks up with a gun—if we want to rob 'em we build a fence. Nobody'd touch money in this country if they found it layin' at the fork of the road—they'd think somebody'd left it there to pay off one of their hands. We do it, right along. If we can't find one of our sheepherders when we want to pay him off, we just leave the money in a split stick till he comes along and finds it."

That was a standard sheepman joke for pulling on greenhorns; Rawlins had heard it many a time before. Sometimes a sheepman could get it off as if he believed

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it; Mrs. Duke had it down pretty well herself. It was another wonder of an unaccountable place to Peck. His eyes bulged again; he stared at the complacent sheepwoman in amazement too great for words.

"The dickens you do!" he said at last, feebly, almost overcome by the enormity of his surprise.

"Yes," she said. "How's business in St. Joe?"

"Rairin'," said Peck, brightening. "Excuse me a minute—I've got something I want to show you boys."

Tippie looked after him with considerable interest as he unfolded his great length and left the room briskly.

"What's he got them stripes down his pants for?" he asked, turning to Rawlins. "Is he a soldier or something?"

"He's a mail-order man," Mrs. Duke whispered, not waiting for Rawlins' reply. "He's Edith's mail-order beau."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Aunt Lila!" Edith protested, furiously red, about at the end of her endurance for this joke.

"Mail-order?" Tippie repeated, mystified, but not in the least amused, as far as any expression of his features disclosed. "You mean ordered out of the catalogue on one of them yellow blanks?"

Peck was in the door before Mrs. Duke could go into the romantic affair any farther. He came to the table bearing a large folio book of some sort, with a picture in colors of a sprucely dressed man on the cover, which he put down on the cloth. Rawlins recognized it as a tailor's style book. On this Peck spread a number of

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little squares of cloth, bound by brass clips, sorting among them for the one he wanted.

"I've got a line of nifty suitings to show this spring," he said, offering a block of samples to Tippie, another to Rawlins. "You boys run your eyes over these plaids—Scotch tweeds, genuine imported stuff, can't be matched for the money between here and Chicago."

He centered on Tippie, misled by his curious inspection of the little squares of samples into the belief that he was a promising prospect.

"You ought to have a sport suit or two, just the thing for this sheep business, runnin' over the country—knee pants, you know, free and roomy—just the thing for this sheep business, don't you think?"

"Um-m-m," said Tippie, turning the cloth leaves of the little book of samples.

"I could take your measure to-night and have your suit back here in three weeks, fit guaranteed," Peck proposed enthusiastically. "Or, if you don't fancy a sport suit, I'd like you to run your eye over these coatings and vestings. I've got as fine a line of pantings as you'll find in this country—I defy any tailor between New York and St. Joe to beat 'em, or match my prices and workmanship. If them pantings——"

"No," said Tippie, handing back the samples. "I bought me a pair of shoesings and a hatting down at Jasper. I won't be needin' any more clothes for a couple years."

Rawlins withdrew from the company shortly after Peck's mercantile efforts had fallen flat, feeling himself an embarrassment, rather than a help, to Edith in her ridiculous situation. He took his pack to the bunk-

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house, where he was joined shortly by Tippie. They sat outside with backs against the wall, smoking, becoming quite friendly, much to Rawlins' surprise and gratification.

"Mail-order man," Tippie reflected. "What in the devil did she mean by mail-order man?"

Rawlins explained the situation, giving Edith the innocent end of it, although he did not feel that she deserved it entirely. He could not get away from the thought that she must have been pretty warm in her correspondence with Peck to lure him on a journey so epochal for the tailor as that, but he was almost eloquent in his assurance that the young lady of the ranch was miserable over the adventure the way it had turned out, sharing with Tippie the confidence she had placed in him that afternoon.

Tippie was keen for the diversion it would afford them to work out a scheme for the discomfiture and routing of the mail-order beau. He pledged his full assistance, giving Rawlins to understand that he was one of the attachés of the ranch thenceforward.

"I'd like to put a split stick on that feller's tail," Tippie said. "I'd like to see him throw his feet and run."

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CHAPTER VIII

NOW COMES A VALIANT MAN

IF A MAN expected to hang around that ranch expecting to do nothing but talk and eat canned corn with a spoon he had bet on the wrong card. That was the substance of the information Tippie put into Dowell Peck's private ear early next morning. Come along out and help dip sheep, and get his first taste of what he must expect if he carried out his plans for marrying into a sheep family.

Peck took the order with good humor, even with eagerness to show himself a man among men. Mrs. Duke was barred from any part in the operation, keen as she was to bear a hand. When he wanted any women mussin' around in such affairs, Tippie said, he'd express his desire in plain words.

The sheepwoman was quite in accord with Tippie's apparently inhospitable attitude toward Peck. No man could loll around under her roof eating the ham and canned corn of idleness. Rawlins' initiative in putting his hand to the things he found to be done around the place had made a hit with her. By that ready spirit and proof of competence he had won a job. She had fixed that with Tippie last night before the foreman joined the adventurer at the bunk-house.

They outfitted Peck with a sheep-herder's brown duck overalls and jumper, although they were unable

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to find a pair of shoes or boots on the place that would fit him. Peck's feet were extensive. If traction would get him there, Peck was equipped to go to the top. His pride increased as he tried and rejected the puny footgear handed him by Mrs. Duke where he sat on the kitchen steps in his stockinged feet. If they had any man's shoes, he said, bring them along.

Mrs. Duke was greatly impressed by the size of Peck's feet, although she seemed a little disappointed when one of the late Duke's hats fitted him exactly. It was an old black hat, low in the crown, broad in the brim, flapping, greasy, bandless and forlorn. But it fitted Peck as if it had been modeled to his head.

"Yes, Mr. Duke was a sharp-headed man like you," she said, softly reminiscent. "He didn't have a business head, but he was a tender-hearted man."

Peck did not present a very engaging figure in the sheep-herder outfit. The overalls had been designed for a broad man, the jumper for a short one, but Peck appeared to get a good deal of fun out of the rig, posturing and posing to the great edification of Mrs. Duke. She said he was the comicalest feller she ever saw, and poked him in the back, and told him to go on.

Tippie delegated Peck to the business of driving the sheep out of a little pen which held only about a dozen, into the trough of dip. It was not a very savory mixture, the sheep were not disposed to plunge into it for the little swim, Rawlins standing aloft to shove their heads under as they passed. Nothing but coercion availed against the creatures' antipathy for the dip. Peck did not spare himself the labor. He pushed them along, calling "Yo, yo, yo!" after the example of Tip-

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pie and Rawlins, enjoying the vocal part of it greatly, in which he very soon excelled.

That was a small job, and soon done. Peck was proud of the dip that had splashed on his hands and face as a boy is proud of a bloody nose. He asked Tippie how he had done, glowing in satisfaction of his own performance, bidding for a boost.

"You'll be worth as much as a dog around a band of sheep in a year or two," Tippie replied.

Peck laughed, unconscious of how nearly that was a compliment. Rawlins saw that Tippie wouldn't have said it if he had meant it, for no sheepman will admit a beginner ever can become as valuable as a dog.

"Well, if that's all, I think I'll go in and scrub up and shave," Peck proposed.

"That ain't half," Tippie corrected him severely. "This is your day for makin' good. All of these mail-order fellers 're handed over to me. I've got to see the first one of 'em yet to make good."

"All of which?" Peck inquired, head to one side like a chicken looking at the sun.

"Mail-order fellers, I said; these beaux that Edith orders by mail. It's a rule of this ranch no man's fit to marry her if he can't make good. The same test I've always put the rest of 'em to I'm goin' to put you to. If you fall down on it you pack up and light out of here without another word. If you don't want to go up agin this test, you're out. You pack up your duds and go."

As Tippie delivered this in his close-mouthed, nasal growl, apparently so resentful and severe, Peck's craw-fish eyes seemed to push out a little farther. The

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warmth of his pride in the recent job cooled, the animation faded out of his sharp face.

"I didn't know there ever was another man out here settin' up to Edith," he said, helpless as if somebody had broken him in two. "Has there been—been—many of 'em?"

Tippie took a little memorandum book from his pocket and consulted it.

"You make thirteen," he replied. "All of 'em failed. Maybe your luck'll change, you've got the lucky number."

"She never told me there was anybody else, she never told me nothing about no test," Peck declared in injured tone. "Let me ask you one thing?"

"Shoot."

"Has that girl got anything of her own? I mean, is she a pardner in this ranch? Before I go up against any tests for a girl that's had twelve men on the line already, I want to know how much she's worth."

"She's worth a million, if she's worth a red dime," Tippie replied.

"Well, I don't know," Peck demurred. "I ain't got no dead cinch on it she'd have me if I was to put through that test you're talkin' about. She's as cold as kraut, she treats me like a stranger."

"She's been disappointed so much in these mail-order fellers that's come out here from Boston and Kansas City and places. You can't blame her. Show her what's in you and you'll be ace high. This is a dangerous country, men ridin' around achin' to take a shot at a sheepman all the time. You've got to prove you can take care of yourself and her, and protect her

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property, before she's goin' to spread any 'lasses around on you."

"You said she was worth a million?"

"Nearer two, I'd say, if I was 'praisin' her."

"Well, what is that test you was talkin' about? What's it like?"

"In the sheep country we say to a man: 'I've got a job for you.' If he's the right kind of a man, he says: 'Lead me to it.' We ain't got any use for any other kind of a man. Edith ain't. Missis Duke ain't. Nobody ain't."

Peck stood kicking the dust of the trampled corral like a boy under rebuke. Rawlins was doubtful of Tippie's bold scheme going any farther as he watched the reflection of Peck's thoughts in his face. The man was suspicious; he was looking slyly toward the kitchen door, across which the generous form of Mrs. Duke paraded frequently. He was thinking of an appeal.

"Go on in and ask her about it if you've got doubts," Tippie challenged, rather than proposed, startling Rawlins almost as much as Peck by his penetration. "When you come back, you and me we'll measure it off and mix. No man's goin' to question my word or authority around this ranch. What I say goes."

"All right," said Peck, throwing up his head, reckless as a man who has decided to place his last money on a bet, "I'll go you. Win or lose, I'll go you. Jumpin' or runnin' or standin' on my head—I don't care a dern what it is—I'll go you."

"That's more like it," said Tippie, but grudgingly. "Bring them horses out, Ned."

They helped Peck aboard of a small roan horse

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with white eyes, a treacherous-looking creature that did not act up to its appearance. It carried its long-legged burden placidly, nipping at things as it went along. Peck's legs were pretty well drawn up in the short stirrups, his knees hugging the animal's shoulders. He preferred that adjustment, he said; it gave him a better grip.

Mrs. Duke watched them curiously as they rode past the house and turned up the road along which Rawlins had come with Edith the day before. She did not hail them, or question them about their purpose as they passed, knowing too well that Tippie had a time and a way for doing what there was to be done, and no satisfaction of her curiosity on this expedition would be had out of him.

Tippie laid a course, once they were beyond sight of the house, which brought them in the most direct way to the fence that marked sheep limit. Here he pulled up, slewing round in his saddle, calling Peck's attention to the fence with a sweeping motion of the hand.

"There it is, young feller. There's your test," he said.

Peck, of course, was no nearer the explanation of the thing than he had been at the beginning. He goggled at the fence, his long neck stretched in the straining, with the curious, baffled expression of a rooster trying to see over the edge of a coop.

"Wire fence," said he.

"Wire fence," Tippie agreed. "That's right. You said it. Wire fence."

"What the dickens has that got to do with it?"

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Peck wanted to know, testily, a color of anger in his face.

"Everything. Didn't you ever hear of this fence?"

"Me? No. Do you expect me to know about every wire fence in the United States? What's a derned old wire fence more or less to me?"

"Let me tell you," said Tippie portentously. "Come on up here."

He led the way to a hilltop that gave them a view of the fence for a considerable distance, where he drew away from the barrier a few rods, stopping among a growth of shrubs that concealed them pretty effectively.

"It's this way," said Tippie. "The man that built that fence built it agin the law. The land he's holdin' inside of it belongs to me, and you, and Rawlins, and every other citizen of this country that ain't ever used up his homestead right. But we can't go in there and take it. Why? Because that robber inside of that fence says 'No.' He don't give any reason, he ain't got no law nor right back of him, but he says 'No.' "

"What's to keep you out, then?" Peck asked, contemptuous of the valor of such men.

"Fellers ridin' up and down inside of that fence with pump-guns. That's all. No law behind 'em, no right. Nothing but power and bluff. There's never been a man come into Dry Wood big enough to break the cast-iron cinch Jim Galloway's got on that land inside of his fence. We're looking for that man."

"Huh! You don't expect *me* to do it?" said Peck.

"I don't," Tippie admitted, "but Edith does. That's your test. I bring all of her mail-order fellers up here and put it up to 'em the same way I've put it up to

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you. Edith don't ask you to go in there and take up a homestead and hold it down, but she does ask you to show you've got the stuff in you to do it if you had to."

"I don't git you," said Peck.

"Cut that wire—you'll break no law when you do it —and ride two miles inside of that fence to the top of that hill you see off yonder. When you git there, shoot your gun three times, wave your hat and yell. Edith's standin' on a knob back there by the house watchin' for you. That's all you've got to do."

"Yes, you say it easy, but suppose one of them fellers shoots me? It's a dang big risk to ask a stranger to take, I'm here to say!"

"You're playin' for big money. It's worth a big risk."

"I don't know about that," Peck said, twisting his head seriously, his eyes on the hill inside the fence. "What did the other fellers do when you put it to them that way?"

"Seven of 'em tried it, the rest of 'em passed it up."

"What happened to the ones that tried it?"

"Them fence-riders shot 'em. The others——"

"The dickens you say! Well, not me, not me!"

"That settles it for you, then," Tippie said conclusively. "You just ride along and foller the fence that way, turnin' when it turns, and it'll take you to Lost Cabin. Put the horse in the livery barn, tell Phogenphole I'll send for it. I'll start Rawlins over with your grips this afternoon."

Tippie headed back toward the ranch, followed by Rawlins, who was full of admiration for the effective method of getting rid of an unwelcome suitor. He

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had hoped very little for it, feeling that Tippie had allowed somewhat too free rein to his imagination in the number of mail-order men who had come to disaster in the trial of the fence. It did not appear credible that any full-grown man would be simple enough to swallow all that at a gulp, but Peck seemed to have got it down.

Peck was riding slowly along the fence in the direction pointed out by Tippie, a drooping and dejected look about him that was a strong bid for sympathy. It must be that the fellow could write a whole lot better than he talked, or his appearance promised, indeed, to lead a girl like Edith on to the point where he could take her affections as won.

Rawlins rode abreast of Tippie, grinning his appreciation. If the foreman got any pleasure out of the incident, none of it was apparent in his face. It was as solemn as a ham. Rawlins made no comment. He rode along trying to picture Peck's arrival at Lost Cabin, wishing he might be present to hear his explanation of his sudden going from the ranch in that rig, to the liveryman, who had pumped him dry of his romance in the trip over to the ranch.

Tippie looked as if he might say something pretty soon; Rawlins rode on beside him in that hope. They were heading down to the creek when a commotion of hoofs sounded behind them. Peck, riding like a sack of bran, came tearing in pursuit, waving his hand for them to stop.

"Must 'a' seen a rabbit," Tippie said.

"That fence-rider, I expect," said Rawlins.

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"I guess you'll have to go with him. He ain't got sense enough to last him from here to Lost Cabin."

Peck came jolting up, leaning back on the reins, which he held shoulder-high, bringing the horse to a sliding stop. The little roan shook its head in surly protest of this treatment, rolling its wall eyes in an effort to see what kind of a man was in the saddle.

"Say!" Peck began, fairly sweating excitement, "I'm game! I'll take you on!"

This was an unexpected turn, for which Tippie was unprepared, as Rawlins could see. It had come when the foreman had concluded Peck disposed of, and out of the way for good.

"Say," Peck went ahead, scarcely breathing in his hurry to get it out of his chest, "I believe you've been stringin' me, right along, about them other fellers. I'm here to call your bluff. You've got to show me where the danger is cuttin' that fool fence and ridin' in there —you've got to show me!"

"All right," Tippie agreed, that being one incidental, at least, over which there would be no difficulty, chancing that one of the fence-riders was somewhere around. "We'll go back."

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CHAPTER IX

A HOT FINISH

PECK had his feathers up properly; he was in a fighting frame. It had taken him a little while to come to the conclusion that he was being made the subject of a conspiracy, the purpose of which was to disgrace him and drive him away from his amorous quest. There was fire in his lobster eyes, the flush of defiance in his face.

"I come from a place where you've got to show 'em," he said as they jogged back toward the fence. "You can't pull any of your bluffs on me. You ain't got no better men out here than where I come from. They ain't makin' 'em any more."

Rawlins was not altogether unsympathetic, nuisance that the fellow was, knowing he was not solely to blame for being there in the character of gallant to the sheep-lands belle. He had been led up to it; there was som[illegible] thing just a bit too drastic in this method of ge[illegible] rid of him.

There was no question of the danger Peck w[illegible] running his long neck into if he cut the wire a[illegible] ro[illegible] for the hill Tippie had pointed out as the goal. That fence-rider had a mean eye; he would be as sore as a scald to-day in his resentment of the affront he had suffered yesterday, and only too keen to take it out of somebody who looked at a distance like a sheep-

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man. The chance was against Peck ever coming out alive if allowed to go ahead with this thing.

Rawlins went along in silence, feeling that it was not his day to talk. Tippie might turn it off some other way to save his face, although there did not appear to be any way around the event now. Tippie had a pair of wire-nippers along, and a large, old-time pistol in his saddle holster. He was the type of man familiar to Rawlins in his range experience, who appreciated the joke in proportion to the discomfort, even peril, the victim suffered. There was no telling how far he would go.

"Well, it's up to you to prove it," Tippie said as they drew up to the fence again.

"I'll eat it up," said Peck. "Maybe you could string a greenhorn along with that stuff about seven men gettin' shot at this game, but it don't go with yours truly. Edith's in on this; she's soured on me. But if I was to let you read some of her letters to me you'd think you was in a Turkish bath."

"My notion of a man," said Tippie severely, "is a feller that keeps them things under his hat."

"I was just a tellin' you. I come out here to marry that girl, and I'm goin' to marry her. She didn't fall for me when I got out of that blame hack yesterday—no man can ride over a rough road like that in a hard hat and look the same when he gits there."

Rawlins was looking along the fence; Tippie was engaged likewise. The fence-rider was not in sight along the mile or two that could be seen on either hand. It was a likely moment for Peck to make his start.

Peck got off his horse, going across the saddle to do

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it. He stood spying around a little while among the bushes, selecting the tallest one, which was considerably above his head, which he bent down and tied his handkerchief to the tip.

"I want something to head back to," he explained. "Give me them nippers."

Tippie handed the tool to him. In a moment Peck had the wires down. He came back to his horse, returned the nippers to Tippie, held his stirrup with both hands, elevated his long leg and inserted his foot.

"You'd better take my gun," Tippie suggested.

"Wait till I git on him," said Peck.

He hung the pistol over the saddle-horn, sawed on the reins, flapped his knees against the horse's shoulders and clucked. Tippie reached over, a malicious pleasure in his glum face, and cut the animal a sharp blow with his quirt. The horse started with a bounce that nearly upset Peck. The clip of his hunched knees held him, although he lost a stirrup, and he had the fortune to hit the cut panel of fence by his erratic steering. The last they saw of him among the bushes inside the fence he was scraping the horse's side with his foot like a man trying to climb a blank wall, in his desperate efforts to regain the stirrup.

"Don't you think I'd better go after him and give him the nippers, so he can cut his way out if he's crowded?" Rawlins asked.

"He wouldn't have sense enough to do it," Tippie replied. "I don't want him to have 'em, anyhow. Let him figger it out his own way."

So saying, Tippie rode to the bush to which Peck had affixed his handkerchief to mark the hole, snatched

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the signal down and dropped it on the ground. Rawlins thought that was hardly fair, but he did not remonstrate. He did not feel himself responsible for the outcome of Peck's adventure.

"We'll go up the hill and watch him," Tippie said.

It was rather a silly business, the way it had turned out, Rawlins thought. If Tippie's imagination had been kept in bounds to make the thing look a little more probable, Peck very likely would have kept on his way to Lost Cabin. Suppose, attended by the luck of a fool, Peck should go and come on the business he had undertaken? That would make him a champion in his own eyes; he would set himself up as a prince of valor in that country. He might even think, believing as he did that Edith had a hand in the plot to humiliate him, that he had overcome all obstacles in his way to her heart.

Peck might then claim the girl as the reward of his deed, and stick around until she would have to marry him to get rid of him. Rawlins was glad it wasn't his scheme.

Foolish, he said to himself, thinking of Edith, to write such warm letters to an empty-pated swain like Peck. The mail-order beau had a case. There wasn't a bit of doubt on that.

They pulled up at the top of the hill, where they waited concealed by the tall bushes.

"Look!" said Rawlins, rising in his stirrups, pointing. "There's that fence-rider!"

"Um-m-m," said Tippie. "He was layin' for us, watchin' all the time."

There was a note of satisfaction in the foreman's

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voice. It was coming out just the way he had calculated it from the beginning.

"He may kill the darned fool!" Rawlins protested.

"Sure," Tippie replied, quite pleased by the prospect, it appeared.

"Don't you think we ought to do something? I'd hate to see anything serious happen to him."

"I ain't got no gun," Tippie replied, his conscience entirely untroubled.

"I'll go back and get some guns, if you say the word," Rawlins offered.

"It'd be all over before you got back. Let him go."

Very likely it would be so, Rawlins knew. Peck was out of sight over the first hill, the fence-rider cutting after him like a streak.

"Anyway, I think I'll go in there and whoop around a little," Rawlins proposed, making a tentative start. "That might split his attention and give old Peck a chance for his neck."

"If you go, you'll go afoot," Tippie said, stern and threatening. "One horse is all I'm goin' to risk on a fool to-day."

"You're the doctor," Rawlins yielded. "But it looks a little raw."

"What did you suppose was goin' to happen?" Tippie inquired.

"I didn't believe the darned fool'd try it."

"Well, neither did I."

"If he comes through with his hide whole he'll think he's won the girl. She'll never get rid of him then."

"He won't be half through," Tippie growled.

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"He'll have to lick me before he goes back to that house."

Neither the trespasser nor the defender was in sight now. Tippie's face was a shade more stern as he posed in stiff attention, head turned to catch the first sound of encounter beyond the hill. As if unconsciously drifting with his thoughts, he began to ride slowly toward the fence, Rawlins trailing. Tippie was thinking of the horse he had risked in that foolish venture, and the price of it he should be obliged to make good if it were lost. That was plain as the fence posts to Rawlins' eyes.

When shooting began presently over the hill, Tippie's uneasiness increased. He fidgeted, stretching himself, toes in the stirrups, to see something where nothing offered to the anxious eye. It was not Peck's pistol they heard, but a high-powered rifle, fired at intervals, as a man might shoot at something that came into sight by starts.

Rawlins took some hope for Peck from the uncertainty the fence-rider would have on the identity of the trespasser. It was likely he would believe the girl of yesterday had invaded his pastures again, as she had threatened. The fellow hardly would risk shooting a woman, impossible as it would be to mistake Peck's gender a quarter of a mile away.

Peck broke over the top of the hill behind which he had disappeared but a few minutes before. There was no mistaking Peck, although he was half a mile or more distant, his pose in the saddle being somewhat eccentric, and truly original.

The little roan flashed across the bare hilltop, plung-

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ing down the slope into the bushes, dodging the thick clumps like a rabbit. He was traveling independent of Peck, whose wishes in the course he ignored, if Peck had any thought in that emergency except the one of putting space between himself and that gun. The course the horse was shaping would bring Peck to the fence a long distance from the hole.

Seeing how it was to terminate, Tippie kicked his horse forward, signalling Rawlins to follow. The fence-rider popped up that second as if he had been produced by a trick, taking a crack at Peck from the top of the hill, darting down after him as hot as a hornet.

"He'll corner him and take that horse!" Tippie shouted to Rawlins, who was scrambling to overtake him. "We've got to beat him to it and git that gun of mine!"

Maybe they could do it, maybe they couldn't, Rawlins thought. It all depended on the way Peck's horse took a notion to turn when it struck the fence. Peck had a good lead on his pursuer; his horse appeared to be as fully conscious of its peril as anybody around there. If it happened to head their way when it struck the fence, Tippie could grab his gun from Peck, they could slash a hole and let him through.

They lost sight of the race as they scurried down the slope into a grassy dip, but Rawlins knew Peck was still up and traveling by the report of the rifle that reached them as they rode silently across the spongy ground in that little hollow of green. They clawed up the steep ridge before them, reaching the top to see Peck shoot into a clear spot several hundred

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yards ahead, making for the fence as if he intended to take it at a jump and go right on.

Only Peck had no such intention. It was improbable that he even realized his proximity to the fence, or anything at all except that he was on the run, a persistent man behind him trying to make a mussy ending of his romantic career. Peck's hat was gone, his reins were flying wild. He was holding to the saddle-horn with both hands, bumping considerably, his long legs clamped on the horse's neck, bending forward in earnest effort to reduce to short and inconspicuous appearance a figure that nature had made uncommonly prominent and long.

The fence-rider was not in sight, that being a place of irregular small hills looking pretty much as if nature's dump-wagons had been emptied of their last loads there, ridding themselves of the left-over from the job. Tippie humped to the race, to get to the spot where Peck must hit the fence before the guard could overhaul him and take the horse as liquidated damages.

It was a hopeless race, as Rawlins could see from the jump-off. They had not covered half the distance when the little roan dashed up to the wires as if he hadn't been figuring on a fence within forty miles.

When he discovered his mistake, the little horse braced himself for a stop, forelegs stiff as posts, hoofs driven into the ground. It was a beautiful slide for home, the horse coming up suddenly with his nose against the wire. Peck was not prepared for this abrupt stop. Perhaps he would not have been prepared if he had known it was coming. When the horse stopped, Peck rose from the saddle with the ease and

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celerity of an eagle from his rock, going on over the fence supremely immune from its threatening barbs.

Peck spread like a frog on the leap, or a breast-stroke swimmer exemplifying his art. So spread, he came down on his narrow breast-bone in the top of an inhospitable bush, at the exact moment when the fence-rider broke from the shrubbery which fringed the brow of the hill.

Peck's horse gathered himself from the shock of his sudden stop, starting up the fence in the direction of his friends on the outside. Seeing him heading right, Tippie wheeled around and started back toward the cut in the wires, there being no time, under the fence-rider's gun, to make a new opening for the swift little creature that had carried Peck to safe ground and unloaded him.

"Head him off at the gap!" Tippie shouted, neck and neck with Rawlins, the roan coming on hot-foot after them, closing up on them surprisingly. He surely was a comer, Rawlins thought, and he had all the reason in the world for stretching himself and keeping it up. The fence-guard was after him, rifle put away for rope, determined to have the horse, having lost the man.

"Cut in there and head him—he's so scairt he'll pass it!" Tippie yelled, his voice breaking high, his mouth open as he rode.

Rawlins pushed ahead of him, the little roan abreast inside the wire, the fence-rider not more than a hundred yards behind. But no need to rush about heading that little horse off and turning him through the gap. He beat them all to it, knowing where it was as well as

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the wisest of them. When he came to it he cut through like a cat scuttling under a crib, his stirrups dancing a mocking jig in the eyes of the man who surely would have roped him if they'd had another mile to go.

The roan struck for home, Tippie and Rawlins veering off suddenly from the fence to follow him. When they had pulled out of sight of the irate fence-rider, with whom neither of them cared to stop and argue just then, Tippie said he guessed they'd better take a look for Peck and see if he was hurt.

They had no trouble finding the place where Peck had crossed the fence, nor the bush in which he had landed. But there was no Peck around there. Tippie was relieved.

"He's lit out," he declared, positively. "That's the last we'll see of that feller around here. We might as well go on to the house and throw his things in the wagon. Maybe if you'll drive fast you'll overhaul him between here and town."

They swung off in a gallop for the ranch-house, Tippie pretty well pleased with the result of his plot. When they rode over the hill that looked down into the snug little pocket where the ranch buildings stood, they saw the roan horse standing by the corral gate, and something that looked like, very much like, indeed, the leg of Dowell Peck disappearing in the kitchen door.

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CHAPTER X

SANCTUARY

At the sight of Peck's extremity drawing into the sanctuary of the door, Tippie strained his breath through his teeth, making a sound similar to that produced by certain gross feeders when eating juicy fruit. It was meant to express Tippie's stunned condition of amazement, which purpose it answered very well.

"That's him!" Tippie said.

"I'd know that foot if I saw it stickin' out of a mud-hole," Rawlins agreed, immediately forced to close up his face and hold it buckled tight to keep in the laughter that was beating against his teeth.

"He didn't need no horse, he can outrun any horse on the range," Tippie declared, but not as a man giving credit where credit was due.

"He's a wind-splitter, all right," Rawlins said. "He can run like an Arkansaw hog. What's next?"

"I'll show him if I can git him out of that house!"

"Mrs. Duke's likely to give him his walkin' papers, don't you think?"

"No, somehow I don't. She wants that girl married off, she's itchin' to git her off of her hands."

"It oughtn't be much trouble, with all that money," said Rawlins. They were riding slowly toward the house.

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"What money?" Tippie asked, facing around in his challenging, surly way.

"That million or so you mentioned to Peck. Of course, I understand you stretched it a good deal."

"I wasn't 'praisin' property when I said she was worth a million and more; I was talkin' about the girl. If I was a young man I'd take her ahead of any money. A good woman's worth more to a man than a million of money, any day. Edith ain't got no money—nothing to speak of."

"Is that a fact?"

Rawlins was interested. If that could be poured into Peck's ear it very likely would start him on his way to St. Joe quicker than any amount of plotting against his valor and dignity.

"Her folks died when she was a little tad, left her a few thousand, but nothing to speak of in this country where money's so common it's a bother to pack it around. I remember the day she come here. Duke was alive then. She was a little spindle-shanked, tow-headed kid that looked like she'd been raised on soup. I learnt her to ride a horse. And look at her now! They don't grow any purtier, and they don't grow any better."

"I believe you," Rawlins said, with the sincerity of one who had needed no argument to convince him.

"So you can see how it is. If I git a chance to boost anybody she likes I go the limit, and if I have to hit somebody she don't like, I'll hit him double hard."

"Plain enough," said Rawlins.

Tippie measured the sun and said it was dinner-time when they had put the horses away and thrown them

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a forkful of hay. After dinner, he said, they would drive out to the range. The men would be needing grub. If they ran low on it they would butcher sheep, and the old lady didn't like that.

Edith met them on the kitchen porch, appreciative of what they had tried to do for her, but downcast because of the failure. She couldn't get a laugh out of it at all. The disappointment overclouded the humor of Peck's dramatic return to the kitchen door.

"He came back like he belonged here," she said.

"Where's he at?" Tippie inquired.

"In there," Edith replied, nodding hopelessly toward the door.

"Tell him there's a man out here wants to see him on business—wants to give him an order for knee pants," Tippie requested. He peeled off his leather coat, took off his hat, pushed up the sleeves of his jersey as if he prepared to wash.

"It wouldn't work, Elmer," she said glumly. "He's strung out on the sofa with a wet towel on his head. Aunt Lila's takin' care of him like a sick sheep."

Elmer said no more. He plunged into the basin, washing himself viciously. Edith returned to the kitchen, where she had set out their dinner on the end of the long table. Mrs. Duke joined them after the meal had begun.

"I never saw a man shook up like that long-hungry feller was when he come slammin' in here a little while ago," she said. "It was quite a while before I could git head or tail of what had happened to him."

"Um-m-m," said Elmer, busy over his plate.

"It was a fool thing for you to do," she said, mildly

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corrective, shaking her head over the broken-down plot gravely. "That feller might 'a' shot him. I don't want to be mixed up in no murder. It's bad enough to nearly lose a horse."

"Nowhere near it," Tippie denied.

"It ain't hardly right to steer a green stranger into a dangerous piece of business like that," Mrs. Duke went on with her lecture, all the time putting things on her plate, cutting, mixing, stirring, making ready. "I guess we'd be as green in his ways as he is in ours if we was to go to the city. The poor feller didn't know he wasn't welcome here; he didn't come on his own move. He was led on to it, he had a good excuse. The way you boys has played your hand I don't see what Edith can do but marry him now. You put it up to him that way, and he took the bet. After leadin' him on with them letters, too!"

"I never led him on, Aunt Lila," Edith protested, red to the ears, weakly indignant, knowing that she was in no small measure to blame. "I never expected he'd come here any more than I expected the moon to fall."

"Maybe you didn't expect him, but you led him on. It was like givin' a man your note and never expectin' him to ask you to pay it."

"Well, I'll not pay it!" Edith declared in no uncertain spirit.

"I don't see what else you can do and be honest with the man," Mrs. Duke insisted. "He's got a good business back in St. Joe, he tells me."

"It wasn't any more than a little innocent pastime as far as I was concerned," said Edith, no longer slow

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to defend herself publicly, seeing that she was publicly arraigned. "You ought to have sense enough to understand that, even if he hasn't."

"When I was a girl we didn't have mail-order beaux," Mrs. Duke said, superior in her uncontaminated innocence. "But I know right and wrong, and the way you're treatin' that boy's wrong."

"Boy! Aunt Lila, he's thirty-five, if he's a day."

"He's a boy in experience. He don't know what you mean when you write 'Yes' and say 'No.'"

"Did it hurt him when the horse pitched him over the fence?" Rawlins inquired, hoping to turn the current of Mrs. Duke's virtuous argument.

"His face is scratched up a little, but he didn't break anything, as far as I can tell," Mrs. Duke replied.

"No, he couldn't have made that time with anything broken," Rawlins told her. "He had farther to go than the horse, but I believe he nearly beat it."

"It ain't no laughin' matter," she reproved. "Just look at the mess we'd 'a' been in if he'd 'a' been killed."

"Trouble to find a coffin long enough without doublin' him," said Tippie, rancorously.

"Well, you let him alone," Mrs. Duke admonished. "When he finds out he ain't wanted I guess he's got sense enough to leave. I took him for a kind of a joke myself till I saw him come in that door with his eyes popped out of his head so fur I could 'a' hung my shoes on 'em. His face was a-bleedin', he was a-gaspin' and a-gappin' like a feller that was about gone. He stood leanin' his back agin the door, holdin' it shut like he was scairt somebody was tight after him, openin' his mouth without a bit more sound comin'

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out of him than a snake. Mr. Duke acted that way one time when he took a spoonful of camphor. It cut off his breath, slick. I thought that time he was a goner, sure as you live."

She lapsed off into silence there, eyes on her dinner, as if overcome by the recollection of Duke's agony. Rawlins glanced over at Edith. She was not taking much enjoyment out of that meal.

"Yes, you boys leave Mr. Peck to me," Mrs. Duke ordered, rather than requested. "I guess when Edith makes up her mind for good she won't have him, he'll pack up his things and go."

"It's ridiculous for you to talk that way, Aunt Lila," Edith said. "I never intended to have him, I never thought of having him. I told Mr. Rawlins how it was—Elmer understands how it was. Nobody but you and that silly fool thinks there was anything serious about it at all."

"No man's goin' to come away out here from St. Joe to see a girl without reason," Mrs. Duke argued.

"He came because he's got a better opinion of his charms than anybody else," Edith returned, hotly contemptuous of Peck's assurance. "He thinks no girl can resist him."

"He thinks you wanted him; I can see that stickin' out all over him," Mrs. Duke insisted.

"I told him yesterday, the minute I took him in the house, it was all a mistake—him coming away out here on a wild-goose chase like that. But he'll not take 'No' for an answer. He's the kind you've got to knock down and drag out."

"Now, honey, don't you worry over it," Mrs. Duke

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counseled her kindly. "No use in hurtin' the man's feelin's, even if he is simple. You can tell him nice and pleasant you won't have him, and I guess you'll git rid of him without sendin' him over there for them fence-riders to shoot."

"I did tell him nice and pleasant, and the darned fool tried to kiss me!"

"Any dog'll try to lick your face if you treat it too well," Tippie said.

"Well, don't you worry, honey, don't you worry. Just so you don't abuse the feller. I ain't goin' to have him abused, after orderin' him by mail that way, or courtin' him by mail, anyhow. You've got to treat him decent. I guess he's got feelin's, like any other man."

"I don't want him hangin' around," Edith complained. "He told Smith Phogenphole he'd come out here to marry me—I could see that in Smith's old dish face as plain as biscuits on a plate."

"You'd better marry him, then, and save your name," said Mrs. Duke, forgetting her counsel of calmness, throwing in a handful of worry seed already sprouted.

"You talk foolish for a woman of your age sometimes, Aunt Lila," Edith reproved her solemnly.

"I'll bet he's got his ear to that keyhole right now," Tippie said, giving the door a savage look.

"He's stretched out with a wet towel over his eyes——"

"I'll stretch him out with a glass over his face!" Tippie threatened, squaring around as if to charge the door.

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"You let him alone, Elmer. After dinner you and Ned load up a wagon and go out to the boys. You leave Mr. Peck to me."

Mrs. Duke worked herself up into considerable heat over Peck's wrongs, and her position as defender of his well-meaning simplicity. She was a lady who loomed large at the table, seeming to be elevated by a cushion, or a dictionary, or a Dr. Gunn, in the manner many a child of sturdy American freemen received its first contact with knowledge. This was accounted for by the uncommon length of her back, which hoisted head and shoulders to a level with any man when she was sitting.

She was wearing a red dress with white dots, the collar of it somewhat disproportionate to the generous mold of her neck, a very leaflet of a collar indeed, of one width all around, edged with a narrow white binding. It was altogether too juvenile for Mrs. Duke's figure, which, while still growing, was no longer young.

"You can throw that hospital band in with old Alvino's," she directed Tippie. "He's a good herder, that man knows more about sheep than any human I ever saw. You'd think he was related. You'll be a week or more gittin' around to the boys, I guess, won't you, Elmer?"

"Not unless I break a leg," Elmer replied ungraciously.

"Take your time. Let me know how that lawyer feller's doin'—Riley—you know the one."

"Um-m-m," Elmer grunted.

"And after this, you leave Mr. Peck to me."

There was no other way for it, in the face of such

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direct orders. Tippie told Rawlins she was designing to put something over on him while he was away among the herders stocking their wagons and paying them their wages.

"She can't force that girl to marry him, it's preposterous to think she can," Rawlins said.

"You don't know Lila Duke as well as I do. It wouldn't surprise me to come back and find that girl married to that pair of scissors and sent off to Missouri. It's bad enough to come from there, but it's worse to have to go back."

"Is Edith from Missouri too?"

"Kansas City. Her father was a railroad man, killed in a wreck."

"I feel like her neighbor," Rawlins said.

But he did not see any such end to the mail-order romance as Tippie feared. It was too ridiculous to have a serious possibility in his eyes. Edith was so heartily ashamed of her part in it, of Peck's boasting to the liveryman, and resentful of the fellow's familiarities, that she could not be reconciled to even a friendly footing.

However agreeable Peck may have been in a mail-order course of courtship, he was a disappointment when reared up before Edith on his big flat feet. Rawlins was not particularly concerned in the case at all. Edith was not in a situation deserving any broad sympathy, yet he had been, and still was, willing to bear a hand in prying Peck away from what he doubtless thought to be a pretty good thing.

In the course of a few days a true appreciation of his standing and chances with Edith would penetrate

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Peck's sharp-roofed head. It was Rawlins' belief they would return to the ranch to find his place at the table empty. So thinking, he drove away with Tippie to the range, four horses to the heavy wagon loaded with supplies for the herders' camps.

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CHAPTER XI

THE VOICE OF AUTHORITY

WHILE Tippie did not break a leg in that expedition, he was longer about making the round than he had anticipated. There was considerable camp-moving to be done, on account of it being a dry spring and the grazing poor. In June the sheep would be driven to the Government forest reserve in the mountains, leaving the range grass to grow for winter pasturage. Tippie growled about the Government restrictions and rental for the forest reserve as if he had been owner of the flock, resentful of this invasion, as all sheepmen held it, of their personal rights.

During this time on the range Rawlins had borne an inconsiderable part as Tippie's helper. In a few days, the foreman said, he would put Rawlins with the old Mexican herder, whose understanding of sheep was Mrs. Duke's marvel. He would learn under that master of the craft how to handle dogs and sheep, to prepare himself for taking a band on his own responsibility when they went to the mountains for summer grazing. All of which was quite satisfactory to Rawlins, his desire to become a sheepman in no particular diminished by the solitary lives and morose aspect of the herders, alone with their bands of sheep for weeks at a time.

They returned to the ranch on an evening eight or

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nine days after leaving it. Edith came running from the house to welcome them, frisking about altogether too gay and light-footed for a reluctant bride, Rawlins thought. Tippie had the same thing moving in his mind, as his first words revealed.

"I see you ain't married," he said.

"Me? I'm farther from it than ever," she laughed.

"Where's he gone?" Tippie inquired, keeping his seat on the wagon, foot on the brake, looking down at her with such stern face and eye of judgment as if to try her on the charge of making away with Dowell Peck.

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry," she replied, in words that did not answer him in the least. "Here—look at this."

She handed him a bit of paper, which Tippie unfolded and read, passing it along to Rawlins without a line of his rueful face softening or hardening, no more change in it, indeed, than a picture of H. Clay on a revenue stamp.

It was a childish-looking piece of writing, immature, uncertain. Rawlins read:

I and Mr. Peck have went to Lost Cabin to be married. I and Mr. Peck will be back Monday.

AUNT LILA.

"Well, I'll be ditched!" said Tippie.

Rawlins, standing by the wagon wheel, clung to it and turned loose the charge of laughter that had been accumulating in his chest ever since the arrival of Peck in the sheeplands. The humor of this mail-order romance had grown during their absence until it had

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burst like a head of cabbage in wet weather. To Tippie it seemed to have no remote relation to comedy. He sat there on the wagon, leaning a little, foot on the brake, looking as glum as if he had been planning for years to marry the widow himself.

Whatever doubt Edith had held in the matter was swept away on the gale of Rawlins' laughter. She joined him, spinning on her heel, bending and weaving like a willow in the wind, happy to be rid of her mail-order suitor even though he had come into the family through another door.

"'I and Mr. Peck,'" Tippie quoted ironically. "She's placed him; she's put him where he'll stand all the rest of his life. Mr. Peck he'll toot a darned weak horn by the side of his wife's loud one. I don't know as I could 'a' wished the feller any worse luck."

"Uncle Dowell!" said Edith, looking from one to the other, eyes bright, face lively in appreciation of this new relationship. "Here's your shavin' mug, Uncle Dowell. Do you want some hot water?"

"It won't be no laughin' matter to have that man warmin' his back at the kitchen stove," Tippie said, conjuring up such a picture by his solemn words as to throw the two young ones off in another spasm of hilarity.

"All the loafin' he'll do!" said Edith, disparaging the chance to nothing.

"He's marryin' her for her money, and she's marryin' him for his hair, as the song used to say. Well, for his moustache, anyhow, I guess—that's all there is to the feller, except feet." Tippie growled it as if his animosity grew with reflection. "I hope he'll git

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his paws on her dough and burn a streak from here to Boston you could drive a elephant through."

"I see him doin' it, right now," Edith said.

"I'd like to see him follerin' a band of sheep in a pair of them knee pantings," Tippie said, yielding at last to the painful process of a grin.

"And a cute little coating with stripes on the back of it like a chipmunk," Edith suggested.

"Or a skunk," said Tippie. His grin spread. It appeared to hurt him outrageously, but provocation was too great; it could not be suppressed.

"Monday. That's to-day," Rawlins said, eager in his anticipation of the return home.

"I've been expectin' them all the afternoon," Edith said, the laughter fading out of her eyes. "They sneaked off Saturday night and left that note."

"It's going to be kind of awkward for you as the jilted lady, isn't it?" Rawlins asked, turning to her vivaciously.

He was sorry for the break next moment. The humor of such a situation was not apparent to Edith. She was grave and thoughtful; her face betrayed some anxiety over her position in the house under that new arrangement.

"I hope the old snipe won't try to boss me around," she said.

"If he does, bust him wide open," Tippie advised.

"Well, hurry on in to supper," she said, briskly. "I was expectin' somebody, and two of one kind can eat as much as two of another, I guess. It's all ready."

She ran into the house, Tippie looking after her thoughtfully.

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"If she's got half as much spunk as I think she has, she'll pack up her duds and scoot," he said.

Bride and groom arrived, in the family buckboard with a sack of oats tied on behind, before supper was over. It was early dusk, the homecoming was proclaimed well in advance by the wheels among the stones at the creek crossing, and witnessed by two who went to the window to see. Tippie was not moved by any curiosity at all. He remained at the table, feasting on canned green beans.

Mrs. Peck turned the team over to her new mate, snatched the suitcase that was wedged in between the sack of oats and the back of the seat, and came hobbling toward the kitchen door, cramped in the legs from her thirty-five miles' ride. Rawlins and Edith hurried back to the table, where they were decorously seated when the mistress of the manse opened the door.

Mrs. Peck burst in on them, in a manner, as if she wanted to come so suddenly that the conventional things which people say, and do not always mean, on such occasions would have no time to pop out at her. To make doubly sure, she began to talk as soon as her red face struck the lamplight.

"Well, you beat me home, after all," she said, addressing Tippie, no word of greeting for her niece, not any coyness or bashfulness about her such as might be expected of even a well-seasoned bride.

"Um-m-m," said Tippie, his mouth full of beans.

Which made no difference in his form of expression at all. It would have been the same from an empty mouth. He was not interested in these goings off and

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getting married, his indifferent attitude seemed to say. He was not impressed.

Edith was grinning nervously, a little too white for a joyous occasion, all on edge to say something, but lacking the words. Rawlins rose respectfully, greeting Mrs. Peck with a little nodding bow, which she passed like a signal unseen. The bride dropped her suitcase, pushed it snugly against the wall with her foot, shook her skirts, making a dust which spread around her in the lamplight like an aura. She took off her hat, sighing with such intense satisfaction that it was almost a grunt, her manner and expression saying as plainly as words: "Now, that's over with."

"It's awful dry; I don't know when I've seen the range this dry," she said. "How's the sheep lookin', Elmer?"

"Middlin'."

Not a word about the husband, not a word about the wedding, not a hint of her changed status before society and the law. Edith got up, with a pretence at briskness and welcome home, bustling around, taking her aunt's things, running with her hat to put it on the bed, which could be seen through an open door, dashing back to pour hot water in a basin and tone it down to the comfort of Mrs. Peck's red face. All these little attentions the red-necked bride accepted without a nod or smile, only talking to Elmer, or rather at him, about sheep, pulling the tight sleeves up from her large-boned wrists preparatory to ablution.

"It's goin' to make short wool if this dry weather keeps up," she predicted; "it's goin' to be hard on the lambs. How's that lawyer feller, Riley, gettin' along?"

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"He's no good," said Elmer. "He ain't got as much sense as your—pair of shears."

Mrs. Peck laughed, not seeing the implied slur on the intelligence of her long-forked partner. She went to the door, towel to her face, where she stood listening, peering toward the barn.

"Dowell! hurry on to your supper," she called.

There was no reply. She completed her ablutions, gave her front hair a quick raking before the kitchen glass, and joined the others at the table, filling her accustomed place. Rawlins passed the ham and beans. She did not wait the coming of her new encumbrance.

Peck made his appearance presently, looking somewhat fanned. He pushed the door open doubtfully, or perhaps he was restrained by more modesty than anybody present gave him credit for from presenting himself too suddenly before the company's eyes. He first introduced his head, which he turned and tooled on his long neck with a curious, inquisitive grin.

It seemed that it was Edith he was concerned about, not the others. It was probable the fellow believed she thought herself flouted by this unexpected turn of affairs, and might rush at him and grab his ears. He jerked his moustache with a sneer of triumphant superiority when he saw Tippie and Rawlins at the table, pushed the door wide and entered, assuming a pose of dignity and hauteur that was no more felt than it belonged to him by right.

"Looks like we've got a blow-out goin' on," he remarked lightly, but with a leer in his voice and edged

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face that seemed to say inferiors soon would be put in their places around that house.

"How much oats did you give them horses?" Mrs. Peck inquired, with a distrusting uplifting of the eyes.

"I give each one of 'em a big double-handful," Peck replied, presenting the measure, speaking proudly of himself, as if he took great credit for a generous deed.

"Double-handful your granny!" his wife said, derisive, disparaging, in her sharp tone. "Punkinhead! don't you know half a peck's a feed for a horse? Go on back and give it to 'em—that little wooden measure you'll see in the bin."

Peck went on the chore, a little taken down. He came back presently, whistling, making out that he hadn't felt the rebuke, which perhaps was the case. As he washed his hands he hummed lightly the tune of "After the Ball."

"What am I supposed to know about a horse, anyhow?" he asked, simpering as he turned his glassy crawfish eyes on Edith. "I don't hardly know which end you feed him at."

"You're in a good place to learn," his wife assured him, with deep significance, disapprobation of his refined humor in her broad red face.

"I'll git me a style-book on colts; I'll figger 'em down to a fare-you-well," Peck said facetiously. "Well, Edith, old sport, how're they comin'?"

This little friendly sally, as Peck parted the tails of his Prince Albert coat and took blind aim at a chair, did not win him any recognition from Edith. Mrs. Peck rolled her eyes, looking across her nose in reproof at the new asset of her ranch. It was lost on Peck,

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whose vivaciousness was rising in him like a fever. He passed up his cup toward Edith, smirking familiarly as he held it out. Edith ignored the appeal for refreshment. She brought the coffee-pot from the stove and stood it in its accustomed place on the tray at Mrs. Peck's hand, and retreated.

"I put one over on you, didn't I?" Peck turned to shoot after her as she left the room. "Ain't you goin' to come and kiss your unkey-punky, tweet?"

"Oh, shut up!" Mrs. Peck ordered, altogether displeased with this attempt to play up his shrewdness in his dealings with the marriageable women of that ranch.

"Comin'," the humorous, irrepressible Mr. Peck returned. He presented his big coffee cup to his wife, giving her the smile that used to knock them over back in St. Joe.

Rawlins excused himself; Tippie pushed back without a word, his pipe already out of his pocket, the other hand fishing around for his sack of tobacco.

"Well, Tippie, did you pay off them guys?" Peck inquired briskly, looking as much like a proprietor as his doubtful standing allowed.

Tippie grubbed around for matches, the little sack of bran in his hand, its yellow strings dangling between his blunt, calloused fingers. He might have been a mile away from any voice of interrogation, assuming from the expression of his face.

"Of course he did, Dowey," the new wife replied for her glum foreman, pleased, and very plainly pleased, to see her husband taking interest in such an essential feature of the business.

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"Where's the change?" Peck demanded, leaning toward Tippie across the table, his frog eyes starting as if he had a potato in his gullet.

Tippie got up with a bored, pained air, went to the stove, scratched a match, lit his pipe. It was all a pantomime of the utmost disdain, the most lofty contempt. He said nothing; he did not even waste a glance at Peck, who held his waiting pose of demand, long neck stretched across the table as far as it would go, which was no inconsiderable distance. Tippie started for the door, trailing smoke, Rawlins following.

Mrs. Peck's red face grew a shade redder; her big black eyebrows pinched together, running a crease down her fat nose. She didn't like Tippie's attitude of contempt for the specimen of civilization she had taken to her bosom. Peck was quick to see this; his hauteur increased as his courage came a little farther out of the hole.

"Where's the change, I said?" Peck repeated, beating time to the demand with the flat of his hand on the table.

"I ain't accountable to you," Tippie replied loftily, still making his streak of smoke toward the door.

"That's where you're off!" Peck declared, his severity insolently overbearing. "I'm the lawful and legal head of this fam'ly. I want them figgers, I want to know how much you paid out and where the balance of that money is. That's what I want to know."

Tippie was standing with his hand on the doorknob, Rawlins at his heels. At this insolent challenge to his business methods, if not his honesty and honor,

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Tippie turned with a start so sudden and threatening that Rawlins caught him by the shoulder and pressed him back against the door.

"Ya-a-a! you can't run none of your sandines on me!" said Peck, leering and goggling in his feeling of security. "You tried to git me shot up, you tried to bluff me out of here, but I turned the trick on you, I punctured your sausage. I've had enough of you—you're fired. And you too, Rawlins. You're both fired. You git to the doodle—you git to—hell out of here!"

"Tut, tut, Mr. Peck; tut, tut!" said Rawlins, with ladylike remonstrance, greatly entertained by Peck's effort to show himself a real rough sort of sheepman with warts on his neck.

"Does that go?" Tippie inquired, turning to Mrs. Peck.

"He's the head of the fam'ly; what he says goes," Mrs. Peck replied, enforcing the decision by a solemn nod.

"All right," said Tippie, "but there's goin' to be a clean-up around here before I go."

He knocked the fiery charge out of his pipe against the palm of his hard hand, spilled the embers on the floor and smothered them with his foot. Mrs. Peck understood the movement as a preliminary to a charge that must end in the overthrow and humiliation of Peck. She grinned, winked, held up a placating hand.

"What he says goes—just so fur," she said. "He's fired you, Elmer, but I've hired you over. I need you. Go ahead with your work the way you always have. But that don't go with Mr. Rawlins," she supple-

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mented, perhaps to save Peck's face. "He's fired. Pay him off and let him go."

"Now, dern you!" said Peck.

The fired man and the hired man went out, going towards the barn.

"Well, he's nearly half boss, anyhow," Rawlins commented. He was not in the least troubled over being the first object upon which the new master of the ranch had exercised his authority and made it stick.

"I'll squnch that feller under my foot like a toad if I ever ketch him five miles away from home," Tippie engaged. "He looks to me like a fishin' worm. He ain't got no more blood in him than one. I'll bet he's as cold as a dog's nose. She cert'nly drawed a picture card, right from the bottom of the deck."

"He's beginning to show executive ability," said Rawlins.

"I'll execute him; I'll rub him out like a chalk-mark on a barrel of kraut if he ever opens his head to me about change agin."

"I wish you all kinds of luck in your good intentions," Rawlins laughed. "I don't suppose he'll pitch me out on my ear if I camp in the hay to-night?"

"If you'd let him, that wouldn't be half what you'd deserve."

"I'll hit the road early in the morning—I don't want to get hurt. He's a bad man, Elmer; he swore. Didn't you hear him swear?"

"It come out of him like coughin' up a tack," said Elmer. "That old woman can give him cards and spades and beat him at that game with her eyes shut.

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He's got a whole heap to learn he never heard anything about."

Tippie got out the much desired change after he had lit the lantern, and paid Rawlins a month's wages at the current rate for herders, which was forty dollars and found in those days. He added fifteen dollars to take the place of rations, protesting that it was only just, and according to custom. Rawlins did not know about the custom, but he approved Tippie's way of it, right or wrong, and pocketed the money without scruple, feeling that the first chapter of his adventures in the sheeplands had come to no very glorious end.

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CHAPTER XII

ENTRENCHMENTS OF THE MIGHTY

AL CLEMMONS had worked his little flock a long way from sheep limit; Rawlins had some trouble locating him. The old man was crippling around with rheumatism, feeling rather blue, full of forebodings of hard luck for sheepmen in the Dry Wood country that year. It was starting badly, he said; no rain, no grass, sage making a slow growth. Nature was laying a conspiracy against the sheepmen, especially the little ones, trying to wipe them out for good.

The old flockmaster had ranged his sheep miles from the place where Rawlins had first encountered him, his battered wagon on top of a hill, as sheep wagons usually are stationed, overlooking a rugged and unpromising stretch of country that seemed to offer sufficient proof of the old man's contention that nature had turned its hand against the sheepmen in that place. He was about ready to quit, he declared, although not very heartily. If he could find somebody fool enough to buy him out he'd strike out for some hot springs he knew about over in the Wind River reservation and soak the misery out of his hinges. But there were no such fools as that ranging around any more. They seemed to be all used up.

To make conditions more gloomy, the Government had notified sheepmen that only half the usual number

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of sheep were to be permitted in the forest reserves that summer. The reserves had been overgrazed, the rangers claimed, although the ancient flockmaster believed it was all part of a conspiracy to kill the sheepmen. True or false, the sheepmen would have to leave half their flocks on the plains that summer, where they would eat the range bare, leaving no provision for winter. It was a woeful outlook. It took the heart out of a man.

All this Clemmons poured into his visitor's ear as they sat on the sunny hillside above the grazing sheep, which were foraging industriously among the sage, the trembling complaint of the lambs rising in almost human appeal from hollows and braes.

"Well, where have you been since you got fired by that long-hungry speciment the Widder Duke's took in to raise?" Clemmons asked, after he had emptied himself of his own news and grievances, which every man considers of first importance, everywhere.

"So you've heard about that?" said Rawlins, surprised that news should travel in that thinly peopled country about the same as anywhere else.

"Elmer Tippie come by the other day. He was tellin' me."

"Oh, I see. I've been looking around a little on my own hook since Peck fired me."

"I thought maybe you'd left the country, or got a job with one of the big fellers further north."

"No, I didn't strike any of them. I've been back of sheep limit, spying out the country."

"Oh, you've been inside of Galloway's fence, heh?"

"Yes, I knocked around in there several days."

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"Purty country in there along that crick."

"Fine. Grass shoe-top high over hundreds of acres, a crop of hay coming on there that would winter a lot of sheep, and not a head of cattle or a sheep in sight. Galloway seems to be hoggin' more than he can use."

"He winters up there. So you was in there lookin' around, heh? What're you figgerin' on? Tryin' to bust up his combination?"

"Nothing very startling, I guess. I just wanted to see what it was like. I'm on my way down to Jasper. Wondered if you wanted to sell a horse?"

"Might as well," said Clemmons; "might as well begin to clean up and make ready to leave." His end was in sight there, anyhow; he was a whipped man. In spite of this gloomy talk, Rawlins found the old codger shrewd enough at a bargain. He had a line of antique specimens, of about his own period, it appeared, which he tried to work off first. Seeing that he was not dealing with a man who never had met a horse face to face before, the sheepman produced a younger animal, but a scrawny one, wild and devilish, that jumped as if socked with a branding-iron when a hand was laid on it.

Unpromising as it was, Rawlins drove a bargain for the creature, a ratty, bald old saddle going with it. He considered himself pretty well skinned when he gave up thirty-five dollars for the outfit. Clemmons said the horse's name was Graball. He admonished Rawlins to be kind to him, with a watery look about the eyes as if it wrung his smoky old heart to let it go. Rawlins promised to be as kind as Graball deserved,

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although he knew that kindness was something the beast never had known in its life.

Graball was casting his winter coat, which was long, dingy-brown, weather-bleached. It was coming off in patches, showing a promising new covering that looked like open grass in a bushy meadow. The animal had a bumpy, bony head, but bright, alert, intelligent eyes. He never had been shod; his long hoofs were chipped as if he had begun to grow toes, like a camel. Not a very prideful mount, certainly, but one in which its owner had hope.

The journey down to Jasper fully met the best hopes which Rawlins had reposed in his unpromising steed. Graball justified his name by eating everything in sight at every opportunity, but he had wind and a good leg, and was enlivened by the spirit of youth and spring. A currycomb on the outside of him, a course of oats within, might turn Graball into a fair sort of horse in time, his new owner believed.

Rawlins had evaded Clemmons' sharp inquiry into the purpose of his visit to Jasper. He was beginning to understand the reticence of sheepmen. There was wisdom in keeping one's own business under cover in a country and a calling in which everybody was on the look-out for an advantage. Rawlins was on his way to the railroad and telegraph wires to put into practice some of the things he had learned as editor of a political paper.

There was a congressman from the wheat belt—the golden belt, they called it there—of Kansas who owed the one-time editor something on account for political favors. This man was in Washington,

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covered by glory and a long coat. Department doors were open to him; public records were as accessible to him as the almanac hanging back of the kitchen stove at home.

What this adventurer in the Dry Wood country wanted to be informed upon through the Departments and records was, why a block of public lands shown to be open to homestead entry on the Government land-office maps should be surrounded by a barbed-wire fence and guarded against lawful entry by bad-looking men with rifles under their legs.

Was there some agreement, secret arrangement, compact of favoritism, between the Department heads and this western senator under which he was permitted to scorn the law and the rights of the landless? That was what this man from Kansas wanted to know.

Did Senator Galloway hold this big piece of grazing and agricultural land under a lease that was not a matter of public record? If not, what was there in the way, but the fence and the armed men guarding it, to prevent a qualified person exercising his right of homestead entry thereon?

These were the questions which this indignant Kansas man was going down to mail service and telegraph wires to shoot into his home congressman's ear.

As has been said, Jasper was at the end of the railroad in the kingdom of sheep at that time. It was not very important in appearance. It was very much like a beggar who goes about in tattered garments weighted down by gold pieces and padded with bank notes. Big money was so common to the daily transactions of the town that sheep-herders and others who came there

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to waste their few hundreds on its dissipations were looked upon with scorn.

The mark of sheep was on Jasper. The grease of wool was on the planks of the long platform and loading sheds at the railroad station; the grease of wool from sheepmen's clothes had polished the chairs in the hotel, and left its rancid scent on pillows and blankets.

In spite of the large money they received, especially at this season of the year for wool, sheepmen were stingy spenders. Luxury was unknown to them; the refinements, even the comforts, of life were largely despised. Due to this the hotel rate was not high. Rawlins installed himself in a wool-tainted room to wait the outcome of his investigation.

In the course of three weeks, after a telegram had been shot in to kick him along, the congressman's reply to the land-seeking wanderer's letter came. It was a long letter, full of political subtleties, insincerities, evasions; but it settled the doubt, if there had been any doubt in Rawlins' mind to be settled, concerning the legality of sheep limit at the edge of the Dry Wood country.

As far as he could find out from the Department, as far as the records showed, Senator Galloway had no lease covering the public lands in question, the congressman wrote. But why should he have a lease to something nobody ever had wanted, or ever would want? What was all this trouble and inquiry over, anyway? Rawlins knew how such things went. It might be called one of the pleasant perquisites of senatorial eminence, one of the outside emoluments of political service. Wasn't there land enough lying

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around unfenced in that State to give everybody a whack? What was the sense in kicking up a fuss over this particular piece?

Maybe a few covetous sheepmen wanted to get in on that land, which was no better and no worse, as far as the congressman could learn, than millions of acres open to anybody who came along. Nobody else ever had raised a complaint about it, and the general reputation of sheepmen in Washington did not place them above hogging on their own account when opportunity offered.

Let it be as it might, it was one of those things you could not do anything about. Senator Galloway had the confidence of the people in his State; they were not making any row about his fence. Just accept it as it was, and turn somewhere else for a homestead, if he wanted to take one up in that country, which was a desire in any sane man that passed the understanding of the Kansas congressman, indeed.

Rawlins was not inexperienced in such matters the congressman said; it was not the same as talking to one of the voters at home. Drop it; let it pass. He might as well try to break into the Treasury building at Washington as to pry Galloway's cinch loose on that land.

And so on. Plenty of advice, all manner of political excusing, justifying, side-stepping. But not a word of encouragement, not an offer of help. Galloway was a high man; he stood in with the Secretary of the Interior, he had a baling-wire tie with the President. Right or wrong—not admitting for a moment that there was any injustice or wrong in the fence—it was

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a situation that would pay an outsider to keep his hands off. Come back to God's country if he wanted land; come back to Kansas, where human life averaged five years longer than anywhere else, and the climate beat Italy and California so far you couldn't even see its dust.

All of which did not alter Rawlins' designs on Senator Galloway's fenced lands in the least. He had come to Dry Wood with his plans arranged, the very base of them being a homestead on some creek in that white place on the map. Exploration had revealed to him that Galloway had appropriated to his own use the best land in the Dry Wood section.

There were thousands of acres of agricultural land, watered by numerous streams, lying inside the fence not more than four miles from sheep limit. A half-section of that land belonged to him, under the semi-arid homestead provisions, his birthright as an American citizen, and he was going in there to take it.

Galloway might be a big man in the affairs of that State, but he was nothing in Rawlins' scheme. Galloway had not been there, designated and set down on the map, when that scheme was drawn. With the Government behind him to uphold and defend him in his rights, Rawlins the homesteader would be bigger than Galloway the usurper.

Galloway had put a personal affront upon him by building that fence; the injustice of it bore directly on him, the oppression was his load. His life had been shaping for a long time, in toil and hope and far-projected intention, towards that white spot on the map. The more he thought of it the hotter his resent-

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ment rose. That was his land; nobody had a right to fence him out of it.

Rawlins put the congressman's letter in his pocket, thinking it would be worth saving as an example of political insincerity. The registrar in the land-office looked at him queerly when Rawlins identified on the map the parcel of land he wanted, and paid the entry fee, taking in return the preliminary papers which put the United States Government back of him to warrant and defend him in his rights.

Within an hour he had Graball out of the livery barn, a little of something in the corner of a sack to sustain both of them on the way, and had turned his face towards the Dry Wood range, where the guarded fence stretched league upon league, barring the homeless from their inheritance and their rights.

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CHAPTER XIII

TRAVELERS MEET

SIGNS do not always hold in the sheeplands. It is a country, indeed, where it might be said, as of other climes in time of dry weather, all signs fail. One must even beware of those soft white cumuli such as the so-called old masters used to put into their pictures for gross, fat, pigeon-winged cherubim to loll upon. In other summerlands these white mountain-peaks and shaded vales of clouds are assurance of fair weather; in the sheeplands they cannot be trusted to carry on as they appear.

Almost while one's back is turned these cherubim beds sometimes mass and grow dark over the far-off hills, forming stormlets which appear not much wider than one's dooryard. These little strips of storm come bearing down across the sheeplands, blustering furiously, pouring rain as if the bung at headquarters were out above the small brush-strokes of dark cloud. Half a mile wide, perhaps, or a mile, they drench the grey sheeplands, bright sun shining on either side, frequently sending torrents of brown water rolling down dry canyons, holding up sheepmen in their Fords on their dust-dry banks for an hour or two until the freshet subsides.

Such a rain as this overtook Rawlins on his way back to Dry Wood, driving him to the shelter of the road-

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ranch which featured in a broad sign its well-appointed bar. Night was drawing in when he rode into the fenced enclosure; the first big splashing drops of the shower were knocking up dust in the corral like spent bullets as he led Graball under the shed. Man and horse were both well content to call it a day and try the comforts of the wayside rest.

A man named Lineberger was running the place, assisted by his wife and daughter. Lineberger appeared to be a cattleman out of place. He was a scragged tall man, taciturn, gloomy of countenance, grudging and ungracious in his speech, for which deficiency his wife made ample amends. This was a stubby, quick woman, red, raucous, full of loud laughter which spilled over every time she tipped. Her eyes were alert, eager, and nothing so friendly as her words. Her husband called her Dell.

The daughter seemed indifferent, of herself as well as of those who came and went. She was a long-backed, flat, moping young woman with a scant wisp of dusty hair, looking rather lachrymose about the nose, keeping her eyes downcast as if she had been warned against the wickedness of horseback-going men. Her mother called her Nadine, with a lingering fondness for the name.

Lineberger's was an old ranch-house transformed into a wayside inn. Whether the present owner had degenerated with the house into that business, Rawlins only speculated; he did not have the courage, before the host's formidable countenance, to inquire. The house was built of hewn logs, long, L-shaped, with diminishing additions upon the foot of it which ter-

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minated in the kitchen, where an astonishingly tall stovepipe projected from the comb.

On the front ridgepole a broad-spreading pair of elk antlers rode, a sign once as familiar over the doors of refreshment places in the inter-mountain country as the polished steer horns were in mid-western saloons. Dispensers of ardent liquors always have appeared to be peculiarly attached to horns.

Business was dull at the road-ranch that evening; there was not a horse but Graball under the long shed; no guest but his master in the bar. The rain had come with furious outburst, lashing the windows with streams, the young quaking-asp trees set in front of the house bending like bows before the wind. By the time Rawlins' supper had been thrown together by the hostess and his plate and cutlery laid out by Nadine on one end of the long table, the vicious burst of storm had passed.

This table shared the main room of the establishment with the well-appointed bar, the visible appointments of which were seven bottles of varying size and color, one lemon, and a pistol. The bar, being the institution first under requisition by visitors, and last in the thoughts and desires of departing guests, was near the door, a long stretch of floor between it and the dining-table. In this intervening space were chairs and round-topped card tables, a square in the center marking where the stove, lately removed, had stood. The room was lighted lugubriously by a lamp swinging from the ceiling.

Rawlins was just putting his feet under the table when somebody rode into the yard, calling the host out

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with a halloo before the door. Lineberger went to answer the summons, returning presently with a long streak of a man who was dripping from the corners of his brown duck coat like a leaky keg.

This traveler who came at the tail of the storm had the lines of familiarity to Rawlins' eyes, though his features were obscured by the shadow of his hat, which seemed the very exaggeration of Texas hats, the crown of it twisted into a peculiar peak. The traveler had jammed the hat down to his ears, leaving little of his features visible, and that little insignificant and shadowy in the dim lamplight.

But what little of him there was visible under the remarkable hat was enough to identify the man as the notable Dowell Peck, late of St. Joe. If there had been any doubt in the case Peck's first word dispelled it. He said he was cold to the gizzard and wanted a spike of something fiery, facing to the bar, taking both hands to his hat as he had the day he arrived with Smith Phogenphole from Lost Cabin.

Peck stood slinging water from the brim of this romantic hat, inquiring about a change of clothing. The landlord said he didn't think there was anything around the place long and narrow enough to fit him, unless it might be a woolsack, his sarcasm far in excess of his hospitality, knowing very well that guests must bear with one to enjoy the comforts of the other, there being no competition within eighty miles on either side.

A pair of overalls and a shirt would hold him, Peck said, until he had forked some supper into him, when he intended to go to bed. No, there wasn't anything available, Lineberger replied, sulky and contemptuous

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of his guest's demands. That was a road-ranch, not a clothing-store. He'd have to keep his duds on till they dried, or go to bed and hang them on a chair.

"All right," said Peck, with a sneer for the accommodations of that joint which matched pretty well Lineberger's best. He put his hat on his peaked head to show his indifference, if not his scorn, for the crudities of the place and the people in it, turning toward the table.

"Why, hello, Rawlins," he hailed, with a sort of hearty surprise. He came striding over, offering his hand with more affability than condescension. "I thought you'd left this daddled country; I thought you was where you was hearin' street-car bells by now."

"I'm just coming back," Rawlins told him. "Won't you sit in?"

Peck would, and did. Nadine came, her discreet gaze on the floor, carrying them biscuits, ham, eggs; turgid coffee, milk in a tin to go with it; portions of cottage pudding dampened down in a sad grey sauce. She laid it out indifferently all at one operation, as if to say there it was; they could take it or leave it, either course being equally acceptable to her.

"Just comin' back, heh?" said Peck. He turned the ham critically with his fork, looking out the largest and most likely piece. "I don't see what anybody wants to come back to this country for when he can go the other way."

Rawlins was not inclined to allay the curiosity in Peck's bulging eyes. While he never had felt a shadow of animosity for the man, he wondered how Peck had put aside and forgotten so entirely his own rancor.

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Perhaps that little splurge at the exercise of his new authority when he had discharged Rawlins had mollified him. Whatever the reason, he seemed now to accept Rawlins as an equal and a friend.

"How are things on the ranch?" Rawlins inquired, just a bit curious to know what business had brought Peck so far from the bosom of his wife.

"You can have it; you can put that sheep business in your hat and take it away with you," Peck replied, somewhat too intense and heated, Rawlins thought, for a man newly-married to a fortune.

"No?" said Rawlins, with amused depreciation. "What's up?"

"I am—up and a-goin'," Peck replied.

"Going? Going where?"

"Let me tell you," Peck proposed, his knife upended in his big fist, dribbling egg down the blade. "I thought I was marryin' a woman, but I wasn't. I wasn't marryin' nothing but a crowd of sheep. Take it from me, Rawlins: don't marry no woman that's got sheep on the brain. They ain't got no room in their hearts, no, nor even their houses, for no man. Let 'em alone. Walk away from 'em and let 'em alone."

"What's happened? Won't she come across with the money?"

"You said it," Peck nodded fervently. "Tight ain't no name for that woman. One of them iron barrels they ship gasoline in's wide open compared to her. She married me to save a hired man; that was her game, but she figgered on the wrong side of the door. She don't seem to know I ain't the kind of a man a woman can put a fence around and show him off like

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a giraft. I can make my little old thirty a week, any day. I ain't no woman's married hired-hand."

"Well, I should hope not," Rawlins encouraged him.

He wondered how far Peck's rebellion had gone, or how far it would go, with little faith in its force or ultimate success.

"She put me out there with that old Mexican feller to learn the game, goin' to make a sheepwoman's man out of me, she said. I've been out there with that old squint-eyed Indian ever since you left, and I ain't heard eight words out of him all that time. That man talks with his eyebrows; he sics his dog on them dan sheep with his hands."

"You don't take to the sheep business, then?"

"Take to it? I should say I don't! That ain't no life for a man, settin' around on a hill watchin' a gang of sheep. I'd ruther pump air in the hot place at two cents a jerk."

"She'll be cashin' in on her sheep one of these days; then you'll come into your own, Peck. She'll have a roll of money as big as a barrel. You can take her back to St. Joe, build a house with a cupola on it like a courthouse and sit on the front porch in your slippers, with nothing to do the rest of your life but figure the interest."

"It listens fine!" said Peck, making a sniffing of disdain. "Any time you see that woman leavin' this country you'll see her goin' to buy some dan fool buck for a thousand dollars, or a bunch of ewes—I call 'em stews, makes her hoppin'—guaranteed to shear nine pounds of wool a year. It ain't for me, this here life. I'd ruther have my little old thirty a week and be back

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where I can hear the girls' heels knock the sidewalk. I'm done; my experimentin' with these here sheep-ranch women's over. You can tell her you saw me, and I was on my way."

"But you don't mean you're quitting her, Peck?"

"Cold. I'm quittin' her cold."

"What do you suppose she'll say?"

"Plenty," said Peck, with deep conviction. "Let her rair, it'll do her good. She'll think double next time before she deceives any stranger into marryin' her. Say, Rawlins; you remember that bundle of money Tippie brought her the day I hit the ranch?"

"Sure I remember it."

"So do I," said Peck, sadly. "And that's all I've got of it—a remembrance. I ain't never seen the color of that long-green since; I never would if I hung around there the rest of my life. What's the use of bein' a husband to a woman and a stranger to her money? That's what I say. I'd ruther punch transfers on the end of a street-car in St. Joe."

"So you're on your way. Well, I thought you had more nerve than that, Peck. I never took you for a quitter. In fact, Tippie and I thought you'd be about as hard to lose as a tick."

"You see me," said Peck, significantly. "I didn't tell that old Chinaman anything about my scheme, I just throwed a saddle on my horse—*her* horse, I don't even own its snort—and headed south, trustin' to luck to hit the railroad."

"When was that?"

"This morning while that old Dago feller was wakin' up the sheep. He won't miss me before a couple of

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days; he didn't even know I was around. Tell her I'll put her pony in a livery at Jasper. She can send somebody down after it."

"If I see her I'll tell her, Peck."

"You might tell her, if you want to do me a favor, to send me my grip-sacks and clothes. If she don't want to let go of 'em, case she picks up another man and wants to save dressin' him, tell her I'd request, special extra, that mauve silk shirt with red polka-dots, and that pair of pants with the pencil stripe. She can keep the rest if she's got another man in sight she thinks they'll fit. I'll charge it up to experience and let it go."

"Why, I'll tell her, Peck—I'll be glad to tell her—if I see her. But I don't know when I'll be around her way."

"Any time'll do. She may not be there, anyhow. Last I heard of her she was goin' along with a swarm of sheep to the mountains. I don't wish the old lady any bad luck, but I wouldn't grieve if one of them mountain lions was to jump on her neck."

"Who's been running your business while you've been experimenting out here in the sheep country?"

"Well, that's one of the things the old lady got sore at," Peck confessed. "I ain't got no shop of my own, you see, Rawlins. I work for the man I learnt the trade under, but I'm just the same as one of the firm, been there so long, you know. If I'd 'a' been wise, I'd 'a' married one of his girls—I could 'a' had the pick of three—and made my nest right there in St. Joe. But I didn't, Rawlins."

"No, you didn't, Peck. And now you can't."

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"Not till that dan old sheepwoman gits a divorce off of me."

"She'll never do it, Peck. She thinks too much of you, she adores you, I could see that in the dovy look she gave you when you came in from feeding the horses oats that evening—remember?"

"Don't I!" said Peck, with a bale of regret compressed into the words.

"She likes the name of Peck, too, much better than she does Duke. It suggests something—pecks of money, maybe."

"If I could 'a' got my hands on some of it wouldn't I 'a' made a streak!" said Peck.

"Wouldn't you!" said Rawlins, knowing very well that Peck was right for once.

"Well, don't forgit about them pants, will you, Rawlins?"

"No. I'll remember them—pencil stripe, polka-dots."

"That's the shirt," Peck corrected him severely. "I'd better write it down."

"No need. I can make her understand the ones I mean."

"If you happen around there before the old lady gits back Edith she'll hand 'em over to you, everything I left behind me. She's a good little kid; I made a fool of myself when I turned that girl down to marry the old lady. Little old Edith likes me, too. She tries to hide it, but she likes me. I can see it in her eyes."

Peck tinkled on the saucer that held his pudding, drew a heavy breath of regret, sighed.

"Tell her I said I was sorry I done her any wrong,

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Rawlins. Tell her if she wants that mauve shirt with the polka-dots to make a waist out of, she can have it. Just send me the pants, tell her. I'll let it go with the pants."

"I'm sure she'll appreciate it," Rawlins said, wondering how much of this was pure simplicity, how much rank egotism.

"She'd have a right to. It cost me seven dollars. I used to be a classy boy among 'em back in St. Joe, I'm a-tellin' you, Rawlins."

"You'll make a hit in St. Joe with that outfit," Rawlins said, viewing the sheep-herder rig, which was far from new, with a grin.

"I'll buy me a hand-me-down suit when I hit Jasper. I can pass that off all right. They think I've been knockin' around out here for my pleasure and so on. They don't know anything about this dan marriage."

"What will you do if she picks up and follows you one of these days, Peck? Which she's likely to do, or I don't know the signs of a strong-minded woman."

"She won't," Peck declared confidently. "She'll never spend that much money chasin' a husband when she can bait 'em right up to her back porch and marry 'em. A new one'd be cheaper than trackin' the old one. That's the way she'll look at it."

"But if she did take a notion to go after you with her gun you'd have to do some lively steppin', Peck."

"Maybe I won't be where she thinks I'll be," Peck said, easy in both mind and conscience. "A firm in Omaha wants me to come up there. I could dodge her easy enough; I'd change my name. Anyhow, if she follers me I'll have her on *my* ground, she'll be where

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I know the ropes. If she thinks she can come to St. Joe and run any of this big boss stuff on me, let her try it. I'd stitch her ears to the back of her neck. You can tell her I said so, too."

"I'll leave it to you," said Rawlins. He got up, reaching into his pocket for his pipe.

"Well, I'm goin' to fly up," Peck announced. "I'm goin' to hit the road early in the morning, then I'll have to lay out one night before I git to Jasper, I guess, won't I? Well, that won't be anything new; I've been sleepin' out like a wolf for three weeks. I tell you, Rawlins, little old St. Joe never looked as good to me as it does right now."

"I never was there," said Rawlins, indifferent to the charms of that town, which pulled so hard on Peck from afar.

"And if I ever marry any more, it won't be a woman that's got sheep on the brain," Peck said, so solemnly that he seemed to be taking an oath. "If I find out she even likes mutton chops before I marry her, it's all off. Well, so long, Rawlins. About four days more and I'll be in the old town once more."

"I wish you luck," said Rawlins, perfunctorily, not caring very much how or where Peck's adventure ended.

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CHAPTER XIV

SHEEPMAN CAUTION

RAWLINS saw no more of Peck, that errant partner of the sheeplady having gone on according to his intention. Let Mrs. Peck learn as she might of her husband's desertion, Rawlins said; he was not going around to the ranch to carry the news.

He was not sorry for her, knowing that it had been pretty much as Peck had said. She had married him to save the expense of a hired man, and he had married her in the lure of that bundle of money which Tippie had complained of as being troublesome to carry around. Both of them had been properly soaked.

Beyond the track of the storm that had driven him to shelter last night, Rawlins found the range parched under the ardent sun of July. It looked as if no rain had fallen in the Dry Wood country for months. The meager grass, standing in bunches, thin-bladed, feeble, was dry; the sage grey and dusty, showing little of the bright green at its tips upon which the sheep thrived, their flesh taking its flavor, making the mutton of the inter-mountain ranges the choicest in all the world.

It looked as if hard days might be ahead for the sheepmen in that country, as Clemmons had predicted, with half their flocks left to eat this sparse grazing

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by the Government restrictions shutting them out of the forest reserves. Winter must bring heavy losses unless copious rains fell soon, of which there was no promise in the placid skies.

Rawlins left the road along about noon, to strike across the range to the place where he had left Clemmons on his way down, not expecting to find the old sheepman readily, owing to the constant shifting this dry range would make necessary. Clemmons had figured largely in Rawlins' scheme for taking up land inside Galloway's fence. So much, indeed, depended on Clemmons' co-operation that it amounted almost to a gamble.

Rawlins calculated correctly that Clemmons would be found in the neighborhood of one of his tanks. He rode down a hillside upon the venerable shepherd that evening as he was yelling at the edge of his flock to get it started toward the resting-place for the night.

Clemmons was hobbling lamely along in the dust of his complaining sheep, putting dependence on a stick where he never had depended on anything outside his own bodily and mental strength before. He appeared glad to see Rawlins, although he eyed him questioningly, unable to understand why a man should spend so much time riding up and down the country when he might employ it to so much better purpose looking after sheep.

Rawlins relieved the ancient flockmaster of his task, telling him to go ahead to camp and rest. It was dusk when Rawlins got the sheep huddled in the hollow below the wagon; the old man's fire was twinkling on the hill. Graball was tied to a wagon wheel, a bag

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of oats on his nose, when his master went to inquire about water to wash off the day's dust.

Clemmons was sitting on a box beside his little tin stove, assembling the components of supper in coffee-pot, saucepan and skillet, the three utensils which he employed on special occasions such as this. Ordinarily he used but two: coffee-pot and skillet, warming his beans or whatever he might turn out of a can, in the skillet after frying the bacon, the cooked slices meantime laid out neatly across his knee.

There wasn't any water for washing, he said. They were lucky in Dry Wood that summer to have a swig to put down the inside of them once in a while. Dry Wood was no place that season for people who were afraid to carry dirt around on their hides a few months.

"I noticed the range was pretty dry, but I didn't know it was as bad as that," Rawlins said, very much concerned.

"It'll be worse," Clemmons predicted. "We can't expect any rain till September, except these little streaks like I saw pass south of here last night."

"I just got to Lineberger's ahead of it. Rained like fury for half an hour, but it was only a streak, as you say. How are sheep holding up on the range?"

"I ain't lost any yet, but one of my tanks is dry. Sheepmen that's got livin' water'll pull through, but they'll have to feed all winter. This range'll be gnawed to the ground if we don't get rains between now and fall. I don't look for any. There ain't nothing in any of the signs of heaven or earth that promises rain."

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"There'll not be much profit in feeding all winter," Rawlins remarked.

"Sheep eat their heads off in three months of winter feedin' in this country, away from the railroad as far as we are," Clemmons agreed, gloomily. "It ain't like it is back in Kansas where hay and corn-fodder grows. There'll be so many feeders throwed on the market this fall them easterners won't be able to take half of 'em. They'll name their own price, and that won't be enough to pay the freight. Might as well let 'em starve on the range as lose 'em that way. That's the way I look at it."

"But fat lambs are going to be worth money along about November," Rawlins said, in his thoughtful, judicial way.

"Nine or ten dollars a hundred, maybe fifteen. I've known 'em to fetch that for the Thanksgivin' and Christmas trade. But mine'll be so lean they won't be fit for anything but glue."

Rawlins let the old man unwind his long bill of complaints against the country, the elements, the sheep business and the unwise men such as he who had put in the best years of their lives to establish it against such overwhelming odds. Speaking of himself, specifically, his bitterness increased. He had stuck to the business so long he had used up all of his hope, he said, and dissipated what little sense he had at the beginning. If it hadn't been that his stock of hope, courage and common horse sense was used up long ago, he'd have quit the struggle and turned somewhere else.

Rawlins heard it for what he knew it to be worth.

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It required more courage, and vastly greater hope, to stick there than to quit. It had been a big drain on these essential qualities from the very start, and would continue so as long as those dusty, sage-dotted hills sustained their flocks. That would be a long time, as far as the young man was able to foresee, for if nature had worked with any design in shaping that country, sheep had been the purpose when the plans of that fretfully tossed land lay on the trestle-board of creation. It was good for nothing else, but admirable beyond any other place for that.

Clemmons would no more quit the business than he would stop breathing voluntarily. He would die in his old wagon, or propped up against a bush on some hillside, his last effort given to the welfare of his sheep.

"I came by to talk over with you a plan for saving your sheep, and not only saving them, but putting your lambs in condition for market," Rawlins told him, when the old flockmaster appeared to have come to the end of his scroll.

"I heard they had rainmakers in Kansas," Clemmons said with dry sarcasm, "but I didn't reckon they let 'em get loose and wander off."

"You're wrong. I've not got any scheme for making rain. That's one of the sciences I never took up."

"What else in the kingdom of cats is goin' to save the sheep on this range but rain? If you've got any kind of a scheme that ain't got rain back of it, you might as well pass on."

Rawlins told of taking up a claim behind Galloway's fence, on a stream of living water, where the grass was tall and green. He proposed that Clemmons pick

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up bodily—wagon, flock, dogs and all, work over to the fence, and leave the rest of it to him. Rawlins proposed to take the sheep at that point, drive them to his homestead and care for them on the usual arrangement of half the increase, with the altogether unusual stipulation that half the profit from the sale of the present crop of imperiled lambs be paid to him for his work of breaking down sheep limit and saving the flock.

Clemmons heard him through without comment. If he was surprised to learn of the young man's intention to homestead beyond sheep limit he did not indicate it in his dusty, hard-whiskered face.

"No, I'd ruther let 'em die in peace here on the range than have 'em murdered in there," he said.

"I'll have the United States Government behind me; I've *got* it behind me," Rawlins said.

"But Galloway is a standin' in between," Clemmons said. "They'd murder my sheep and they'd murder you, and no more recourse on 'em for one than the other. But if you pull out a gun and plug one of them fellers they'll hang you higher than Samson ever hung his hat. No, son, there ain't no salvation for me in that scheme."

The flockmaster's stand put a crimp in Rawlins' plans. He had worked along on the belief, unfounded except on Clemmons' complaints and gloomy forecast, that the old man would be glad to stock him up with at least two or three hundred sheep for the venture into the rich grazing-lands inside the fence. For Rawlins believed it would be a safe venture. Galloway

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would not go to any severe measures to dislodge him, he believed, once he saw he was not a speculator.

If the fence-riders began throwing lead, they'd get lead thrown back at them. Rawlins had come provided with the means for protecting himself on his homestead. And the Government stood behind him. A man could go a long way on that assurance.

"You don't seem to get it through your head that Galloway's the Gover'ment around here," Clemmons complained. "The only cure for you will be to go up agin that man and his outfit once—just once. That'll be plenty, that'll cure you if it don't kill you, as the widder woman said. I don't want to see a bright young feller like you go wrong when he might as well go right. Take a band of my sheep and run 'em out here where they'll be safe from everything but the wolves and the weather, and I'll learn you the business as well as I can, but I wouldn't even give you a sheepskin to sleep on inside of Jim Galloway's fence. I wouldn't even sell 'em to you, for that'd be the same as robbin' the dead."

Rawlins said he was sorry, but determined to go ahead. If he couldn't get sheep he'd go without sheep, and buy them when he was able. There was no way the Government officials in that State could evade their responsibility to him, even if Galloway did own them. They were obliged to protect him in his rights, and his rights were undeniable. What warrant did Clemmons have, or anybody around there have, for saying Galloway's men would murder anybody who tried to homestead inside the fence? Had anybody ever tried to do it?

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Sheepmen had tried to run their flocks in there, in times past, Clemmons said. Not right around there; farther south. Two or three had been killed, and nothing done to the killers. That was enough for most people. Around there they kept their hands off that fence, for they knew Galloway, and the extent of his power.

"My opinion is he's simply got you all buffaloed," Rawlins told him.

"Go up agin him, then," said Clemmons, grimly.

"I'm going," Rawlins replied, quietly, firmly; no brag or bluster about him.

For a dry summer, Clemmons was suffering a "powerful misery in the j'ints," he said. This led him off on a discourse concerning "j'ints," and the necessity of brass ones in a sheepman, so they would not corrode. He berated the discomforts of that life and its small rewards, dismissing the homestead and its perils as a distasteful, at least a profitless, subject upon which there remained no more to be said.

"If I was a young man," he said, "I'd go back east and get me a good eighty in Iowa and marry me a woman and settle down. A man can see life and enjoy the world back in that country. Here he's bound down by sheep, unless he's a herder or a shearer, or one of them loose-footed boys, free to pick up his bundle and light out whenever he feels like it.

"What good does money do a sheepman if he makes it? He don't dast to turn his back on his flock a week without something goin' wrong that wipes out all he's made. He's got to stay with 'em, and nuss 'em day and night, year in and year out. Other men can go to

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town and take a little toot for a week or two once in a while, but a sheepman can't. He's a slave to them nigger-headed beasts."

Rawlins enlarged on his designs of becoming a sheepman in the country he was about to open, but without moving the old man from his avowed intention of keeping his feet clear of Galloway's domain. In the end Rawlins was forced to the conclusion that all the talk Clemmons had made on a previous occasion about becoming a big sheepman if he had room to expand was nothing but gab. He had weathered it there in his small way all those years, and there he would stick, no matter if the earth were spread before him and the best of it offered for his taking.

There was no better place for sheep than the well-watered homestead he had chosen, Rawlins believed. It lay in a little valley where the offrun of rain from the hills soaked deep into the earth, storing moisture against drought such as the range was suffering at that time. The grass would be ready to mow now. He considered the feasibility of harvesting the crop and selling it to the hard-pressed sheepmen the coming winter.

That would call for an outlay of more money for machinery and help than he could command, after making such improvements as the law required on his claim. His haymaking would have to be confined to scythe and rake that summer, in which primitive fashion he could put up enough to make Graball comfortable. He'd have to run a double wire around that hayland of his to keep Galloway's stock out of it. There must be close to a hundred acres fit for mowing,

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he estimated. That would take a heavy outlay for wire, granting that he could cut posts in the hills on a permit from the forestry supervisor.

So Rawlins sat with the old flockmaster at the tail of the sheep-wagon, thinking and planning for the future in what he still thought of as that big white spot of unrevealed opportunities on the map. Only there was one persistent little oasis in it now which no amount of adversity or opposition ever should erase and throw back again into the unchartered desert of white. He saw it all as clearly as if the labor of twenty years lay behind him. There was his oasis, his flocks ranging out from it, his prosperity centered there, all as plain to his far-leaping vision as a thing accomplished.

In fact, there was nothing more than a half-section of what the United States Government designated semi-arid agricultural and grazing land, lying inside a guarded fence that must restrict his coming and going for a long time to come, as it had hampered the free movement of people in that section for many years in the past. Overhead there were stars as bright as youth's untarnished hopes; around him the huddled hills of the sheeplands, silent as a sleeping flock. And there facing him in the gloom of starlight sat old Al Clemmons, a man who had remained little to balance, in the arbitrary apportionment of fate, it seemed, the ambitions of a man who was determined to become big.

The situation did not have its warning for Rawlins, confidently extending his plans, comfortably designing for the homestead inside the fence, for youth believes, always has believed, always shall believe, that excep-

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tions will be made for it, opening the way to its triumph. It is that sanguine confidence of youth that saves the civilization of human kind.

Clemmons was not able to get out of the wagon next morning. If Rawlins had not been there it would have been a sorry day for the old man, for he had spun out the thread of his endurance against his pangs and miseries so long he hadn't the strength left in him to bend his stiffened joints and spread the sheep out while the dew was on the sage.

Rawlins volunteered to stand by until the crippled flockmaster could hire a man to follow his flock. Perhaps the young man was not entirely unselfish in the business; maybe he hoped the old man's affliction might turn out to be his own profit. It might work Clemmons round to contributing at least part of his flock to the design for breaking down sheep limit and opening that land to the oppressed.

Clemmons said if he had a rattlesnake to render down and rub the grease on his joints he would make a speedy recovery. It never had failed in the past, and he was without that specific remedy now only because he had not been able to find a snake.

That was another indication of what the Dry Wood country was coming to, Clemmons said. Time was when he was as limber as any rattlesnake that ever crawled, and look at him now! Tied up in the wagon, flat on his back, not worth the baking powder in his biscuits, and all because that country had degenerated to that low plane, under the crowding of big sheepmen and the fencing-up by land hogs, that a good, decent rattlesnake was no longer to be found.

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CHAPTER XV

A PRISONER OF THE SHEEPLANDS

CLEMMONS would have been a big sheepman years ago, Rawlins believed, if unsparing driving of himself, rigorous parsimony and avid willingness to profit by the friendly services of somebody who pitied his plight could have advanced him. The old rascal had no intention of hiring a herder; that was as plain as the burrs in his whiskers after Rawlins had been substituting for him three or four days.

He'd be all right to-morrow; there was no use paying out money to a man for doing something one was able to do for himself. Just stick around with the sheep a day or two longer, and he would be all right. Coal oil was a pretty good second for snake grease; it was bringing him around in fine shape.

Just help him along a day or two more, then, the old man begged. It was only play for a young man like Rawlins, and the experience would be worth money to him when he came to running sheep of his own. A man had to learn all sides of that business, the dry side as well as the wet. Rawlins would learn a lot about the habits and needs of sheep in a dry time like that. The old man stressed the benefits of the education so hard Rawlins believed he would put in a bill for it at the end.

Between the rest and the kerosene Clemmons lim-

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bered up in eight or nine days enough to resume the care of his flock. Rawlins' sympathy for him had played out long before that. He was just a hard-rined old grafter who would spraddle out over as much land as Galloway if he had the chance. But he stopped with him a day longer to see that he did not relapse.

Clemmons softened up a little in gratitude for Rawlins' help toward the end, to the extent of revising his position on permitting his sheep to go into the country beyond sheep limit on any condition. He removed that restriction in the case of fifty old ewes and an ancient, tottering ram, which he offered to sell Rawlins for the price of breeding stock. That was as far as his generosity went. Rawlins saddled Graball and went on his way, poorer by ten days in time than when he came.

There was nothing to be hoped for from Clemmons in sheep; that was settled for good. Rawlins wondered if the other small sheepmen who had drifted up against the barbed-wire barrier were as flighty on the subject of going inside the fence as Clemmons. He hoped they were. As long as he must go in there and start things, he was entitled to some handicap.

Rawlins had taken an early start, thinking it would be well to ride over to the ranch for a passing visit to Mrs. Peck and Edith Stone, seeing they were to be his nearest neighbors. It might be possible to negotiate with Mrs. Peck for another horse, and one of the numerous wagons he had seen around her place.

Mrs. Peck might even be engaged in his venture to the extent of stocking him to a little band of sheep, although he doubted the likelihood of that. She was

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a cautious woman who owned several miles of unfailing water. Still, the dry range and short grazing, with the prospect of a winter's feeding ahead of her, might move her to take a chance.

Speculating on these things, Rawlins rode along, laying his course for the ranch, which he calculated to reach conveniently about noon. He had covered about half the distance when he ran into a scattered band of sheep whose shepherd was nowhere in sight. There was nothing strange in that, for the shepherd, as Rawlins knew, might be hiding behind a bush or lying in a hollow, staring at him like some creature of the wilds.

Those solitary men developed queer streaks frequently. He had heard, long before coming to the range, that sheep-herders commonly developed a mild type of melancholy insanity. Rawlins wondered if it might be a philosophic contempt for the garrulity of other people, the outgrowth of contemplation in their close association with nature, which runs all its business on the silent plan.

When Rawlins came to the top of the next hill and looked down into a little valley where a twisting streak of green willows marked a living stream, he saw the shepherd sitting by a crude shelter of canvas and bushes, engaged in what appeared to be the unbelievable task of preparing breakfast. Dinner it could not be, for it was then only about half-past nine. Here was a sheep-herder worth meeting, Rawlins thought. He proceeded on down the hill, lips drawn back in his way that looked like a desperate grin, whistling a quick little tune between his teeth.

Dowell Peck rose up in flapping garments like a

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scarecrow in a garden, a stewpan in his hand, and shouted a delighted greeting as Graball came skating down the steep hillside behind the tattered canvas spread over a bush which formed Peck's tent.

"Well, of all men!" said Rawlins, greatly surprised.

"Yes, it's me," Peck admitted, in that fatuous way a man does when he would deny the obvious fact if he felt there was any chance of making it go.

"But I thought you'd jumped the range, I thought you were back in St. Joe listening to the music of a sewing machine by this time, Peck. How come? What happened?"

"I thought at first you was a bear comin' at me down that hill," said Peck, evading the friendly inquiry. "Did you see anything of a gang of stews over that way?"

"Yes, they're right over the hill. Where's your dog?"

"Darned if I know," Peck said, looking around for the animal with hostile eye; "him and me don't mix. He thinks he's boss of them sheep, tries to go over my head every move I make. If I had a gun I'd plug him, and plug him right!"

Rawlins dismounted, Graball standing docilely by after turning his wise eye around to mark the entirely denuded and stripped condition of that particular spot. Peck doubtless was not ranging the sheep very far from his camp. They had gnawed the bushes to the wood, the grass to the ground.

"So Mrs. Peck is making a sheepwoman's man out of you after all?"

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"You see me," said Peck, disparaging the exhibit to a most contemptible object, indeed.

"You changed your mind and came back? I thought you would, somehow."

"Did I?" Peck challenged, looking up from his overheated bacon, which was already black around the curled edges before it was half done. "Well, you've got another guess comin'. Dang this cookin' out here in this blame country! Nothing to cook but sowbelly and flopjakes, and canned beans warmed over in the grease. I'm so full of canned beans I spill 'em when I gape."

"Kind of early for dinner, unless you got your sheep out before daylight?"

"It ain't dinner; it's breakfast," Peck corrected, as Rawlins knew he must if he told the truth. "You don't ketch me gittin' up at daylight to wake up a bunch of stews and spread 'em out with their dang noses the right way accordin' to the wind—either with it or agin it, danged if I remember which—but the old lady's particular on that point as I used to be about my neckties before I come to this dad-blamed country.

"What the dickens do I care which way they ought to point in the wind? Head or tail, it's all the same to me. If they ain't got sense enough to turn around the right way if I start 'em wrong, I say let 'em go to the doo—let 'em go to hell!"

"So she followed you to Jasper and grabbed you before you could get your ticket to St. Joe, heh? Tough luck, Peck. But it may work out for the best, after all."

Peck took his smoking skillet from the fire, shook

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the charred pieces of bacon as if he intended to throw them like dice and read his fortune, emptied them into the stewpan and reached around for his can of beans.

"Eatin' out of a pan, like a dog," he said, lifting his reproachful eyes, his one-time trim and elegant moustache looking ragged and cindery, a growth of reddish, cow-colored beard on his gaunt cheeks and chin, his hair long around his ears. "No, she didn't foller me, Rawlins. She rode over to a ranch where they've got a telephone and called up the sheriff down at Jasper. She told him to arrest a man ridin' such and such a horse with her brand on it, and let it go at that."

"Oh, I see."

"Yeh. She made out she didn't know it was me on that horse. When she come after that blamed skate I was peekin' through them bars. 'Oh, it's my husband,' she says, when the sheriff led her in to take a squint at the thief. 'I thought he was out on the range with a band of sheep. Let him go, Mr. Sheriff—it's my mistake.' That's what she had the gall to do."

"That's hard sleddin', Peck. But it was a pretty shrewd way of keeping a husband; you'll have to hand her that."

"Yeah, took all the money—my own personal, private money—the sheriff frisked off of me, and wouldn't give me back a cent. She said I could either come back here and go to work, or go to the pen for stealin' that horse. It was a bluff, but it worked. I didn't know the law then, but I know it now, and if I could lay my hand on anything else around that ranch I'd show her! Riley—you know Riley, the lawyer that's herdin' for her? Riley he told me the law. A

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married man can't rob his wife, nor a married woman can't rob her husband. What belongs to one belongs to the other. If I'd 'a' knew the law then I'd 'a' told her to go to the doodle."

"I don't know, but I expect Riley's right. It sounds like he ought to be right, anyhow. So if you can raise the wind you'll strike for St. Joe again?"

"You watch me. Ain't that a h— a dickens of a mess for a man to have to eat and call it a breakfast? Hog grease and beans! I'm so fed up on hog I leak lard when I git a bug in my eye. Yeah, she said she was goin' to make a sheepman out of me. Never expected I'd be as good as that warp-faced feller she had ahead of me—I wish she had him now, I wish to the mighty he'd raise up from the dead and come back —but she'd make a kind of one out of me or bust her hame-strings a tryin'. She can bust 'em, and she can bust herself, wide open, for all the sheepman she'll ever make out of me!"

"How long does she calculate it'll take, or did she say?"

"She said after I'd run around with a bunch of stews two years I'd begin to see some sense, and then maybe she could trust me. You can see how she trusts me now—not even a sheep-wagon to hang up in at night like them hired herders have, and no grub but that you see there in that blame sack. She's a-scairt if I had a wagon I might hitch myself up to it and pull out, I guess. Well, I wouldn't try to give her the dodge that way any more. When I go next time I'll go with some money funds in my jeans. I may be green, but I ain't as simple as I look. I've got a line on something, and

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when I'm good and ready to go next time I'll burn up the road."

"You'll think better of it after a winter on the range, Peck. They say it takes a winter to break a man in and make him stick."

"I don't see why she didn't marry Tippie," Peck complained, passing over the probabilities of the future. "She trusts him with a roll of money as big as my leg and never asks him for the change. I'd have to give her a bond before she'd let me look at a dime."

"I expect it's because Tippie knew she bore down pretty hard on husbands, Peck. He's been around here a long time, you know."

"Yeah, he was wise, he knew her game. If I'd 'a' been smart I'd 'a' stuck to that little Edith. I didn't think she had money enough to make it worth a feller's time, but what's money? Here I am the husband of a woman with money up to her neck, and me eatin' hog and beans when I ought to be trimmin' a T-bone. Well, I can do that on my little old thirty a week back in St. Joe. But I'll be sway-backed before I ever hit that old town agin, if I can't turn a trick on that old woman."

"If my opinion's worth anything in the case, Peck, I'll bet you turn out a better sheepman than Duke ever was. She'll be so proud of you before your two years are up that you'll be the delegate runnin' around the range with the big wad of money payin' off the hands. My tip to you is, stick; hang on till the ewes come home, seeing there ain't any cows."

"They wouldn't come home, Rawlins," Peck said in reproachful, sad voice, "no more than good luck'll

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ever come to me on this range. Leave a bunch of them sheep to find their way back to the place where they bunked last night and they'd end up down in Mexico."

"You seem to be learning their ways, anyhow."

"Yes, I'm learnin' more about sheep every day than I ever suspicioned of 'em. One thing I know for sure, and that is you can't starve 'em. The old lady put me off here about a week ago with this bunch. She said I'd have to hunt up a new place for my camp in about three days, as they'd clean everything out around here in that time. I thought if I could starve the dang sap-heads she'd throw a fit and fire me, but I tell you, Raw-lins, it can't be done. They eat the leaves off of the sage, then they eat the limbs. I look for 'em to begin on the main stems of the danged dwarfy stuff to-mor-row, and then go after the roots. Well, where're you headin' for, Rawlins? What's on your mind?"

"I've taken up a homestead north of your ranch a few miles on a little creek. I'm on my way up there now."

"Say, you mean back of that fence where you and Tippie tried to git my gizzard shot out?"

"We didn't have any such design as that on you, Peck; we only wanted to throw a little scare into you. But there's where it is."

"Yes, and it'd been better for me if your dang scheme'd worked out. But say! If I had me a claim up there I could shake that old woman to a fare-you-well, couldn't I? She wouldn't dast to throw her leg over that fence. I'd be as safe as gold money. Say, Rawlins! what do you think of me drivin' that bunch of stews up in there? That'd put a crimp in the old

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girl! Yeah, and I could drive 'em out on the other side and sell 'em, and raise myself a stake. What do you think? Wouldn't that put a crimp in her?"

"It sure would," Rawlins agreed, thinking that Peck must be desperate in his dissatisfaction to consider so eagerly that plan of escape from his wife's tyranny.

"But I don't suppose I could git by with it!" Peck sighed. "I wouldn't have any grub in there, for one thing, and I expect she'd stand sheriffs all around that fence waitin' for me to come out. That's about what she'd do. They couldn't do anything to me, but they'd grab the sheep off of me before I could drive 'em over to the railroad. I guess I'll have to stick to my other scheme to put a crimp in that old lady. If there was any other woman around here I could run off with, derned if I wouldn't do it. Not Edith; I wouldn't think of runnin' off with Edith, but it'd serve the old woman right if I did."

"That's noble of you, Peck," Rawlins said, his sarcasm wasted on the shepherd's peaked head, where it split like a raindrop on the edge of an axe. "But you don't cut very much of a figure right now, to be honest with you. I don't believe you could run off with the greasiest sheepman's wife in this country."

"If I had a shave and a haircut, and my other hat and that pair of pencil-striped pants," Peck regretted, sighing as if his heart were wrapped in the gay garments and put away in moth-balls to wait the completion of his education in sheep. "I don't suppose I'll ever set eyes on them clothes of mine any more. Well, if I can't put over what I've got lined up, I'll hop a freight and bum my way to St. Joe."

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"It's hard on you, Peck, and it's going to be harder when it gets twenty below along in the winter, but she'll give you a wagon before then. You may think she's cruel, but all she's trying to do is reform you from your town habits and make a man of you according to her own pattern. If she can put it through you'll be the one to win. Pull up your puckerin' string and stick to it. Just think of all the money Tippie brought out that time for current expenses, and only skinned the top of her pile."

"I am thinkin' of it, Rawlins," goggling up with his frog eyes knowingly, as if to say there was a lot in the back of his head on that subject which he was keeping to himself.

"I'll be riding on then, and leave you to your sheep and pleasant dreams. Is Mrs. Peck over at the ranch?"

"Maybe she is. I ain't seen her since she kicked me off down here and drove away. She'll be around somewhere, Rawlins; nothing ain't goin' to happen to her. It's her husbands that gits caught between two rocks in the crick and drownded. Nothing like that's ever goin' to happen to her."

Rawlins wished the discontented shepherd well, and went on his way. Peck was getting nothing more than he deserved, or would deserve if he never should succeed in breaking his bondage and escaping back to his lamented St. Joe. Peck came shouting after him as Rawlins was mounting the hill, waving his hat.

"Say, Rawlins," Peck panted, "it just struck me. Sell me that horse, will you, Rawlins? I'll give you

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my note for any price you ask, and that's as good as gold money. I'll take it up the minute I hit St. Joe."

Rawlins grinned at Peck's impetuosity, shaking his head in denial.

"Not because I don't trust you, Peck. You'd pay me all right. I need the horse, I'm used to him and don't know where I could get another one for the price I'd have to make, between friends, to you."

"You don't need to let the price stand in the way," Peck argued. "Double it—I'll pay any money to git away from that old girl."

"Besides, I think I'd be doing you an injury instead of a favor if I sold you the horse, Peck. This is going to be the making of you if you'll see it through—things will begin to look different to you in two or three months from now. There's a whole lot of generosity and kindness in your wife if you take her right. Show a willing spirit, Peck, and hop to it."

Peck wilted as the animation of his big and sudden scheme died. He looked reproachfully at Rawlins, as a dying man might look when fixing the guilt of his death on the one who had laid him low; turned back to his camp with slow, spiritless step, his shoulders seeming not much wider than a clothespin under the brim of his broad-winged hat.

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CHAPTER XVI

RIGHTS OF DOMAIN

RAWLINS was feeling his oats in those days, which time was something more than three weeks after his parting with Peck on the range. It looked as if his bold invasion of Galloway's pasture had bluffed them.

Mrs. Peck had done better than sell him an old wagon and a horse to work with wall-eyed, voracious Graball: she had gone on a spree of generosity, actuated by selfish calculation, to be sure, and supplied the adventurer a good wagon and team. That was her contribution to the opening of sheep limit, she said. If Rawlins made it stick, he could pay her for the outfit in his own time; if he should lose them in the unequal battle against the forces of the mighty, she would check the account off her book.

More than that Mrs. Peck proposed. If he could make his bluff of Government backing—she could not see it in the light of anything but a bluff—go over with Galloway's fence-riders and hold down his homestead for three months, she would let him take in a band of five hundred sheep to run on shares of the increase and shearing, which was considerably more generous than the established rule. The wool of the original flock always went to the owner under the rule of the range.

Rawlins had set out with his wagon and team,

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Graball trotting beside the near horse, tools and such farming implements as Mrs. Peck could lend him in the box. He had made a streak for the spot where the Government surveyors' witness stone marked a township line, which was a public highway under the law, cut the wire fence, pulled up one post, making a gap about as wide as the ordinary county road. From there he had gone to his homestead, left his tools and driven across the forbidden country to Lost Cabin.

He had to cut the fence again on that side, of course, to reach town, but it was such an unexpected event for anybody to cross there with a wagon that his breach went undiscovered by the guards, at least until he had returned safely with his load of lumber and supplies.

So there he was that bright summer day, established on his homestead, a little box house, with a window as big as a handkerchief, a stovepipe through its comb, all finished, and several tons of hay cut and stacked against the needs of winter. Nobody had molested him, nobody had visited him.

While he was several miles inside sheep limit, he knew the fence-riders must have followed his wagon tracks and looked down on his activities from the surrounding hills. They knew he was there. Why they had not come with notice to clear out he did not understand. Maybe they were waiting instructions from headquarters; perhaps lying for him when it should become necessary to go to Lost Cabin for mail and groceries.

In all those days since coming into that hole and pulling it in after him, as Rawlins considered the step

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he had taken, he had not heard a word from the outside. There might be wars and disasters making havoc in the world for all he knew. That was complete isolation, compared to which a sheep-herder's life was one of social gaiety.

A herder saw the camp mover once in a while, and heard the gossip of the range; he got the old newspapers and magazines in his turn as they circulated from wagon to wagon, and occasionally a wanderer came by, stopping at his camp for the night. Inside Galloway's fence nobody roamed. Herders and shearers on the go from job to job made the long detour that everybody else in that country took to get to Lost Cabin. The fear of a trespasser's fate was heavy over them all, far and near.

Edith was not cutting across the fenced land any more, her aunt having put a stern prohibition on such daring enterprise. Once in two weeks, Rawlins knew, she rode the thirty-five miles going and thirty-five miles return in a day to get the mail, and such little luxuries as salted peanuts and chocolates as a sort of compensative premium. He was only seven miles from the post office, in a straight line, quite an improvement over the condition of the bluffed and subjugated sheepmen on the outside. And his mail would be accumulating. He must saddle Graball one of these days and go after it.

That was his thought that morning as he tinkered around his haystacks completing a wire fence to keep off such stray animals as might wander around in the night or when he was away from home. It might be as well to go over that afternoon, for he was beginning

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to have a feeling that weeds were growing behind his ears, he had been cut off from news of the world so long.

He should have gone to the ranch, also, long before that, to let Mrs. Peck know her wagon and team were still safe in his possession, and that he was holding down his own in peace and quiet. That would be his day's work after he had made the fence snug: a trip to the post office, and go on to the ranch after coming home. There would be a big bundle of papers and magazines; they would take the edge off his lonesomeness for days to come.

Looking ahead to that cheerful prospect, Rawlins worked on with wire stretcher and hammer, lips pressed down hard against his teeth in that queer, rather senseless whistling grin of his, the little tune he had learned to whistle that way from a Scotchman when a boy coming through his parted teeth as merrily as the pipes ever trilled it in old Caledonia. Thus occupied in thought and hand he did not hear the visitor until he rounded the little stackyard suddenly and gave him a friendly "Good-morning."

Rawlins was more pleased than startled by the sudden appearance of the man on horseback, for he was a mild-mannered person with a pleasant voice and undoubtedly friendly intention. He rode up, leaned over, offered his hand, smiling amiably.

"Hewitt is my name," he said.

"Rawlins is mine. Glad to meet you, Mr. Hewitt. Won't you get down and stretch your legs?"

"Oh, no," Hewitt returned, in the easy, comfortable way of a man who had not come far and hadn't far

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to go. "That's a purty little bunch of hay you've got. How long have you been here?"

"A little over three weeks."

Rawlins was wondering where Hewitt had come from. He couldn't recall having heard his name mentioned at Mrs. Peck's ranch, where the affairs of everybody within forty miles were discussed. He was a clean, lean man of forty or a little more, his khaki overalls inside his laced boots. He was not wearing spurs, he carried no gun, nothing but the usual little roll done up in a slicker behind his saddle.

"Looks like you're preparing to stay a while," Hewitt remarked, with apparent appreciation, looking around the place, lively interest in his keen, alert face, which was brown and bearded.

"Yes, I've homesteaded here," Rawlins replied, thinking Hewitt looked like a geology professor he used to have.

"That so?" said Hewitt. He put his hand to the cantle, twisting around in the saddle with freshened interest. "Well. Aren't you a little—that is to say a trifle—premature?"

"No, not so very. I'm the first one in here, I guess, but the country's been open to homestead a long time—ever since it was surveyed."

Hewitt shook his head in denial of that, urbane as ever, even smiling as he made the correction.

"It would be open to homestead ordinarily, but Senator Galloway has a big block of it leased from the Government. His lease has several years to run yet."

"Are you connected with Senator Galloway's—enterprise?"

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"Yes," Hewitt replied cheerfully, "I'm superintendent of this ranch."

"Well then, Mr. Hewitt, I'd just as well tell you there is no record of a lease between Senator Galloway and the Government covering this land. I had my congressman look into the matter thoroughly before I entered this homestead. There is no record of any lease whatever."

Rawlins spoke of his congressman in that easy, proprietary fashion common to the intelligent American voter when discussing those whom he sends to legislatures to bargain off his rights in pacts and compromises and personal ambitions. It was as of something he had under his hand, some little thing to roll like a pencil or flip away like the burnt end of a match. It sounds intimate, consequential, bombastic, and deceives nobody at all.

"Is that so?" said Hewitt, evincing surprise. "He must have gone into the wrong office, or got hold of the wrong records. The senator's right to this land is incontestible—but we're not going to have any argument over that."

"I hope not, Mr. Hewitt."

"Not at all," said Hewitt heartily. "You're an unusual type of man to be staking out your life homesteading in this country, Mr. Rawlins. A young man of your intelligence and education could get a whole lot more out of life, it seems to me, in some other pursuit. What was your business before you came out here, if you'll allow me to inquire?"

"Certainly. I used to ride the range in western Kansas. Later on I was editor of a little one-horse

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weekly in the short grass country—they call it the golden belt now, the wheat belt, you know."

"So, you're from Kansas? That's a great State, remarkable people. Editor of a paper? Well, that's more like it. There's about where I can see you—editor of a paper. You fit that job, but you don't belong here in this sheep country, especially on a lonesome little homestead. You're not the type of man to make it go, Rawlins, even if you had the legal right to take up this land. What was your object? Not a kind of a—holdup, was it?"

"Not at all, sir," Rawlins replied stiffly.

"No offense intended, Rawlins. That happens; there's a class of men who go around and squat on leased land with the premeditated intention of holding the lessee up to get them off without going to law. It's cheaper, sometimes, and saves a lot of bother, especially where a man doesn't want to shoot anybody up. I didn't think you looked like that kind of a man, but you never can tell."

"My intentions are honest, then, as far as that goes," Rawlins said, passing it off with a laugh. "I've been figuring on this country a good while—long before I left Kansas—planning on going into the sheep business. That's why I picked this location to homestead. There's plenty of water here."

"Yes, it's a good location for a sheep ranch," Hewitt agreed, not with much warmth. His manner implied, in fact, that it was an excellent spot for Senator Galloway to establish a sheep ranch, but a very poor place for Rawlins.

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"Have you bought your stock?" Hewitt inquired, shrewdly interested.

"Not yet."

"That's lucky." Hewitt was genuinely relieved, it appeared. "I'd hate to see you throw away your investment. Frankly, Rawlins, we can't let you run sheep in here, or stay in here at all. If we let the bars down to one we'd be overrun with farmers and sheepmen in a month. You can see that as well as anybody."

"I don't want to have a row with you folks over it, Mr. Hewitt, but I know I'm acting in my legal rights, and I'm going to stay. We might as well come to that first as last, since you've served notice on me to get out. I've entered this homestead, paid my fee, and have my receipt from the land agent at Jasper. Here it is."

"I'll waive the reading of it, Mr. Rawlins," Hewitt laughed, with a graceful gesture. "That fool feller down at Jasper has made a mistake. There's nothing to it, Rawlins; it won't stick. We've got this land under lease, and of course we'll defend our rights. You'd expect us to do that, you'd do that under the same circumstances yourself."

"Exactly, Mr. Hewitt. That's what I'm going to do. If Senator Galloway has a lease, let him bring an action against me for trespass, or unlawful occupation and retention of his land. If he can produce his lease in court, I'll back down as gracefully as a badly mistaken man can back, but on no other terms."

"We don't do things that way in this country, Rawlins. You can see where that would lead us. If we go to lawing with one squatter a hundred of them

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would rush us while we're waiting the court's decision. We'd never get anywhere. But we'll give you better terms than we would another man in your shoes, seeing that you've come from a long way off and been misled. We'll let you take your improvements out, and we'll buy your hay, although we could prosecute you, when it comes to talking of law, for coming in here and cutting it. I'll send a couple of men over to help you tear down your shanty and load it on your wagon, if you want me to."

"When the United States Government says it has made a mistake in granting me homestead entry to this land, I'll move the house, Mr. Hewitt. Otherwise, it's there to stay. And I haven't any hay to sell. I'll need that for my sheep next winter."

"You're a kind of a brash young feller, Rawlins, but that's because you don't realize the hopelessness of the thing you're up against here. These sheepmen around here can tell you what a man can expect if he tries to put anything like this over on Galloway. You'd better take a couple of days and inquire around."

"I've heard all about it. I knew what to expect when I came in here."

"We've got all the sheep this pasture will carry in here now, Rawlins; there's not a ghost of a show for any more. You think it over. Day after to-morrow I'll send two or three men over to help you tear down your shanty if you've changed your mind. If you haven't, I expect they'll tear it down anyhow. You'd might as well go gracefully, and save your pride."

"I'll be here when they come, and the house is not going to be torn down."

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"A couple of days can make a big difference in a man's opinion, sometimes," Hewitt said, laughing a little in his sure and easy way. "I've known a man to change his politics in two minutes down in Texas. Would eight dollars a ton be about right for that hay? I guess we can figure it near enough in the stack. I'd just as well give you a check for it now—I don't know when I'll be over this way again."

"You don't seem to get me right," Rawlins found himself arguing with this persistent, suavely-inflexible man. He was annoyed because he had to argue it, when his purpose was so unalterable to himself. "The hay is not for sale at any price. And there are two sides to this advice about thinking it over. You've got a big think coming to you before you make a move to throw me out of here without process of law. If I'm a trespasser, prove it in court and I'll go without a word.

"These people all around here know Galloway grabbed this land out of the public domain and fenced it. He has no lease; he isn't paying the Government a cent for the use of it. And these poor rabbits are riding forty miles for their mail around Galloway's fence when they've got a legal right to tear it down anywhere. It's a principle of common law, established by centuries of practice, that anybody has a right to remove a common nuisance. There's not a bit of use to argue and bluff around, Mr. Hewitt. I'm here to stay."

Hewitt stiffened up at this, looking somewhat hurt by the first defiance he ever had taken from a man in the Dry Wood country. He looked at Rawlins with

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a wrinkling of concentration around his eyes, steadily, sharply, for a moment.

"You mean well, Rawlins, but you're a damn fool," he said dispassionately, entirely free of contempt. It was merely a mild statement of what he plainly believed a fact so apparent to everybody that no stress was required.

That said, Hewitt rode on, cantering easily, riding as lightly as the just and law-abiding man he would have the homesteader believe him to be.

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CHAPTER XVII

NEWS FROM THE RANGE

THAT night Rawlins drove Mrs. Peck's team to the ranch, leading Graball to carry him back. He found the fence hooked up loosely at the township line where he had cut it to enter, as if they had deferred permanent repairs until he either had been expelled or eliminated from the contest in some other effective way.

Mrs. Peck was relieved to see the wagon and team again. Her satisfaction increased when she learned that Rawlins had returned them until he had made his homestead within the fence secure. There was no intimation in his act of a doubt on the outcome of the purely physical contest scheduled to start on the day after to-morrow. He said he didn't want anything to happen to the team.

Mrs. Peck said she wished him good luck, and that it was a darned good thing she hadn't let him take any sheep in there. Her interest in the impending clash was lively; the prospect of a fight in which neither she nor her property was involved appeared to cheer her up mightily. It would give them something to talk about in the sheep country.

Edith Stone had little to say in the matter, but there was an anxious strain in her face that betrayed a more

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sympathetic interest than her aunt's. Rawlins was grateful for her unspoken support.

Mrs. Peck's marital adventure had not changed her for better or worse in appearance, although the disappointment she felt in her husband might have been sufficient to make lines in a less hardy woman's face. On this phase of her domestic relations Mrs. Peck was outspoken, with a frankness embarrassing to Rawlins in Edith's presence.

"It would be a grand thing for us sheepmen up here in Dry Wood this summer if you was to throw that country open to our sheep," Mrs. Peck said. "I wish I had a husband that was man enough to help you, but no woman ever had a poorer excuse for a man than me."

"A poor excuse is better than none, they say," Rawlins reminded her, reserving the opinion that she ought to be thankful for what she had grabbed out of the bag, considering her years, her flesh and her red neck.

"It may be in some things but it ain't in a man," she insisted with the certainty of wide experience. "Duke would 'a' made forty of that gogglin' gander. He said you run acrost him as you was comin' up to your claim, but you never said nothing about it to us."

"Yes, I met him on the range that day. He was looking well, taking it kind of easy."

"I guess easy!" she said meaningly. "He thinks he's workin' in a bank, he lays asleep till the sun burns him out. I went over there at eight o'clock one morning and found him still sawin' gourds, his sheep bellerin' so you'd think a man couldn't sleep in a mile of

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'em, not if he had any heart in him, anyhow. He thinks I'll git disgusted with him and take them sheep away from him and kick him out, but I started to make a sheepman out of him and I'll either make him or break him. Did he tell you about tryin' to run off?"

"Yes, he said something about it. I met him, in fact, the night he was on his way."

"*You* did?"

"He stopped at Lineberger's, where I had taken shelter out of a storm. I felt kind of sorry for him to see him prisoner on the range again. Why don't you take the string off his leg, Mrs. Peck, and let him go?"

Edith had been making a pretense of looking at the pictures in a magazine. At Rawlins' suggestion in behalf of her one-time mail-order suitor the girl threw the magazine down with a slap, broke out in a sudden burst of laughter, rocking back and forth in her chair as if the net of merriment had made her as much a prisoner as Peck, and she was struggling to break through to liberty.

Mrs. Peck looked at her sourly.

"If you was married to him you'd laugh out of the other side of your mouth, young lady," she said.

"I'm not," said Edith, provokingly comfortable in her security.

"You're to blame for him, you brought him out here. By rights you ought to be the one to have the trouble with him."

"He cut me cold for you, auntie. He wouldn't have me. I lost out the night Elmer brought you the money to pay off the men."

"Yes, he tried to rob me," Mrs. Peck accused, turn-

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ing to Rawlins, nodding ponderously. "He turned the house upside-down that time he made his break to run off with one of my horses. It'll take a smarter man than him to git his paws on any of my money, I'm here to tell you!"

"Where's the change?" said Edith, repeating Peck's well-remembered demand on Tippie. She looked her question straight into Rawlins' eyes, holding out her hand, severe, mandatory, gruff—to go off into another rocking fit of laughter the next moment, the demanding hand pressed to her side, where her riotous mirth was struggling like a cat in a sack.

"Maybe I'll surprise you one of these days by makin' a man out of that feller yet," Mrs. Peck almost threatened, her disapprobation of this hilarity strong in her face.

"You would," said Edith soberly.

"I think if you'd give him a dime now and then he'd be more contented," Rawlins said, so seriously that Edith collapsed, flinging her arms on the table, smothering her face in them, sputtering and gasping in the very climax of mirth.

"When he earns it like any other hand, I'll give it to him," Mrs. Peck said, resenting the criticism of her methods of making a man. "When any skite-poke like him thinks he can marry me and honey around till he gits his paws on my money, he's got a whole lot to learn."

"Well, he's yours," said Rawlins, in a manner dumping Peck and the subject of his proper subjugation on her hands at the same time. "Go to it. I wish you luck. Is Elmer up in the mountains?"

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"No, he's out on the range somewhere. I look for him in to-night. He's been around payin' off the men —this is the first week in the month, you know."

"I'd kind of lost track of time," Rawlins laughed. "A man surrounded by a wire fence is like a castaway on an island. Nobody ever passes his way to remind him whether it's to-day or to-morrow."

"If Elmer was here he could tell you a lot about Hewitt. Elmer used to be over west of here runnin' sheep of his own five or six years ago. A couple of sheepmen cut Galloway's fence over there one time and tried to take their sheep in. Hewitt's fence-riders killed 'em both. Nothing ever was done to 'em, they never as much as arrested 'em for it, because them sheepmen had guns on 'em. That'll be the end of it if they shoot and kill you in there. They'll say they was defending their lives."

"They would be," said Edith, with conclusive emphasis. "Do you think Ned's going to stand there hands down and let anybody shoot him off the face of the earth?"

"I'd like to have it said a man of mine was standin' by the side of you when you put up a fight for your rights in there," Mrs. Peck said wistfully. "But I might as well wish for self-shearin' sheep. Duke wouldn't 'a' done it, much less this stumble-over-nothin' I've got now. Duke was a good sheepman, but he was juberous about a fight. But I stick to what I said: if you make good holdin' your homestead in there till fall I'll let you take in a band of sheep. I guess if you can stand Galloway's men off you can stand off these little sheepmen around here that's

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watchin' and hopin' for a chance to go in there and hog the water."

"When it's open to one it's open to all," Rawlins said, putting a cold hand on her greedy plans.

"That'd be foolish," Mrs. Peck chided him severely. "What a man fights for and wins is hisn."

"According to Galloway's argument it is," Rawlins agreed. "If I take sheep limit off for myself, I take it off for everybody."

"Well, I wasn't figgerin' that way when I said you could have a band of mine to run on shares," Mrs. Peck said. "If we couldn't git the good out of it I might as well keep my sheep at home. I thought you was aimin' to go in there and have it all to yourself for a year or two, anyhow."

"You misunderstood me then," Rawlins corrected her, more disappointed than surprised to see this narrow greediness.

"If it's goin' to be throwed open to all comers I might as well put my herders in there as to put in a band on shares with you. I never did go shares with anybody, although Duke started up two or three of these sheepmen around here that way. I only made the offer to you, Ned, because I thought we'd have that land to ourselves. You can see how it'll be if it's open to everybody that comes along. Homesteadin' farmers'll grab the land, us sheepmen won't have any place to go inside of a year."

"I wouldn't think you'd go back on your word, Aunt Lila," Edith declared, flushing with shame for the family honor.

Rawlins had a sort of gone feeling as he listened to

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this repudiation of the bargain upon which his hopes were shaped. He saw himself a struggling homesteader in a land where he had almost everything to learn, surrounded by sheepmen who knew all there was to be acquired in their tricky trade. Unless he could compete with them on their own terms he'd just as well save his energies for a more promising field. There was about as much honesty on one side of Galloway's fence as the other.

"Business is business," Mrs. Peck said in reply to Edith's criticism of her ethics.

"You ought to feel like a horsethief even to think of such a backdown on your word, Aunt Lila."

"Well, I ain't goin' to lose no sheep next winter, no difference whether Galloway's fence comes down or not," Mrs. Peck said, defiant in her stand. "I can feed, I'm ready to feed, but I'm not sayin' it wouldn't be cheaper for me and better for my sheep to run 'em in there where the grass ain't been touched all summer. I ain't beholdin' to nobody for openin' up no land. I'm purty well fixed the way I am."

"You promised Ned you'd let him have a band on shares if he held down his homestead three months, and now when you see it's going to be a free-for-all you pull in your horns."

"It's all right," Rawlins hastened to interpose in the interest of family peace, "your decision one way or the other doesn't make any difference to me, Mrs. Peck."

"If I were you," Edith advised him, "I'd take a shot at the first sheepman to show his nose within five miles of my place."

Edith was hot about it; her cheeks were as red as if

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she had just turned from the kitchen stove. Rawlins grinned assuringly, grateful for her interest in his diminishing chance of a band of sheep to run on shares, although his spirits were as low as the water in the creek before the sheepwoman's door.

"I ain't said I'll not let him have a band," Mrs. Peck defended herself, calmly, with no resentment of her niece's hard handling of her business methods; "but I am sayin' I'd lose money by it if that's the way it's to be. I thought Ned was openin' that land for himself, not everybody that comes along; I thought he'd make Galloway build a lane up to his claim to let him out and in, and the rest of it would be shut up as tight as it is now."

"Mainly for the benefit of Mrs. Peck," said Edith. "If I were you, Ned, I'd throw over the whole business. These sheepmen around here are all standin' on one leg waitin' to jump the minute you show 'em it's safe inside of that fence."

"I suppose that's to be expected," said Rawlins.

"And they'd be about as grateful as the sheep."

"She always is hard on us sheepmen," Mrs. Peck laughed, "and she'll end up by marryin' one, I'll bet."

"I've had enough of sheep-wagons, thank you."

"They don't all live in wagons," Mrs. Peck giggled. "I know one that's begun by buildin' him a house—even before he's got any sheep. She can say what she pleases about sheepmen, Ned, but she's as good a sheepman as any of 'em, and she likes the business, too. I learnt her, and I learnt her good. There's Elmer. Yes, that's him. I'd know that man's step in a thousand. It's funny I didn't hear him ride up."

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"We heard him," Edith said, grinning knowingly at Ned. "You're gettin' deaf, Aunt Lila. And what would Mr. Peck say if he heard you talkin' that way about another man's step? I'll bet you wouldn't know his if he had mule shoes on his heels."

"Oh, you git out!" Mrs. Peck said, red as inflammation.

Tippie saved her from being drowned in confusion, the two young people laughing unfeelingly. The ranch foreman opened the door without ceremony, standing a moment with hand on the knob after closing it behind him, hat on his head, looking as glum and sour as if he might be the householder returning home unexpectedly and surprising a scene of unauthorized festivity.

"Hello, Elmer," Edith greeted him, jumping up nimbly to begin getting out his supper, kept in the warming oven in expectation of his coming.

"Um-m-m," said Elmer, in his usual close-mouthed form.

Rawlins shook hands with him, a ceremony which Tippie entered into with more spirit than his unsmiling face and severe eyes gave warrant for expecting, for he liked Rawlins and was glad to see him. He doubtless felt that his friendly handclasp was sufficient expression of his regard and interest, turning without a word to hang his leather coat and floppy hat on the accustomed hook behind the door.

"How's the range lookin' by now, Elmer?" Mrs. Peck inquired.

"Dried up and blowed away," said Elmer.

"How's the sheep lookin' on the south range?"

"Like skins hangin' on the fence," said Elmer.

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He was ladling water from pail to washpan, solemn of face, fixed and attentive as if he must measure an exact quantity before putting a finger in it. A dipperful more or less might throw it off balance with shocking result. He washed with a dry, rasping sound, as if he had sandpaper on his hands. While he stood drying himself on the clean towel Edith handed him, Mrs. Peck gave him an edgeways look, as if sizing him up for some question she wanted to ask, but was not certain whether the time had arrived for its friendly reception. She chanced it, win or lose.

"Did you see that long-hungry, step-on-his-feet-and-fall-down man of mine over there around Lost Horse Canyon?"

"Um-m-m," said Elmer, giving the grunt an inflection of affirmation.

"You didn't give him any money, did you, Elmer?" Anxiously, wetting her dry lips with her tongue, which she lopped around with a little more effectiveness than elegance.

"Did he have any comin'?" Elmer inquired, pausing in his wiping to fix her with stern eyes.

"You know he never."

"He got all that was due him, then."

"What was he doin'?"

"Readin' a book Riley lent him."

"You don't tell me?" Hopefully, a little proudly. "It must 'a' been a law book, Riley don't read anything but law books. Did you see what it was about, Elmer?"

"Divorces," said Elmer shortly.

But that was plenty. Mrs. Peck rose slowly, as

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if about to start out on some duty, distasteful and long deferred. She had a grim, combative look on her shallow forehead, where her large eyebrows were bunched over her nose like a swarm of bees. Over at the stove Edith's unruly laughter jumped the fence again. She stood swaying back and forth in the gale of merriment, beating the pot, from which she had been dipping mutton stew, with the big iron spoon.

Even Tippie was robbed of a grin in the surprising assault against his short ribs. Rawlins turned to the window, pretending to look out, although it was so dark nothing but his own picture could be seen in the pane. Mrs. Peck glared around at them, as if she suspected everyone present of a hand in the conspiracy.

"I'll learn him about divorces!" she announced, so cold in her rage she almost shivered. "I'm goin' over there this very night and wear him out with a strap!"

"Go on," Elmer encouraged, getting a grim pleasure out of it. "That's what he's achin' for. The minute you lay a rough hand on him he's got you by the short hair."

"The man never lived that could git a divorce from me!" Mrs. Peck declared furiously. "I'll cut the livers out of him!"

"Damages is what he's achin' for," said Elmer, provokingly calm.

"I'll damage him! I'll give him all the damage he can pack—oh, shut up!"

This adjuration was fired at Edith with a passionate shriek that shivered and broke at the end, as if it had hit the wall. Edith wiped her eyes on her apron, neither sorry nor subdued.

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"You poor old fat goose," she said, with a sort of gentle pity.

"I'm none so fat, I'll thank you!" Mrs. Peck shot back, her tenderest point touched, for the delusion of a fleshy lady is not confined to social circles and city squares.

Edith grinned, her corrective douche having shown the desired effect. Mrs. Peck's flurry of wrath began to subside. She sat down, panting as if she had been chasing a scattered band of sheep.

"I'll learn him!" she promised. "He'll stay there with them sheep till wool grows down to his eyes like a ram. I'll go over there in the morning, I'll law-book him! I'll wear it out on his head."

"You better take him a pie," Elmer suggested.

"And give him a dime for chewin' gum," Edith contributed to the domestic advice.

"I'll comb that long hair of his with a board full of tenpenny nails! I'll learn him that no man that ever marries me 's goin' to hop up and quit because he can't squander my money on hair oil and fancy vests."

"He's learnin'," Elmer assured her from his place at the table. "I wouldn't be surprised if he rared up and bit a sheep one of these days. He knows all about divorces and property."

"He can't touch a cent of my money, divorce or no divorce."

"Alimony," said Elmer, with glum finality. "If you marry a cripple you've got to support him."

"He'll be a cripple when I git through with him! I'm goin' over there early in the morning, and if that excuse opens his head to me about a divorce I'll lay him

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out. I'm not goin' to be disgraced by no divorce. I'd sooner have it said I was married to three livin' men at one time than divorced from half a one."

Mrs. Peck left the kitchen, and the three unsympathetic ones who were passing grins between themselves at her expense, probably to prepare for her visit to the range next morning, or perhaps to relieve her anger and dread of disgrace in unsheepwomanly tears. That seemed the more likely, indeed, as her voice had quivered even in the most dreadful and threatening passages against the security and beauty of her spouse.

Edith at once swung the talk to Rawlins' situation and the notice he had received from Hewitt to tear down his house and be gone. Elmer heard this with a deeper seriousness clouding his face. He advised Rawlins to quit the venture. He knew Hewitt of old. He was a soft man with his words, but a hard one in his deeds. They would come against him in such force he'd have no show to hold his own.

Taking off sheep limit was not a job for one man, Elmer said. It was a task for a hundred, organized and armed and ready to lay down their lives. Even then Galloway would beat them. Come along out of there, Elmer advised, while the coming was good.

Rawlins heard the advice in good spirit, non-committal on whether he would act upon it or allow it to float away on the wind. Edith went with him when he left to mount Graball and return to his perilous homestead beyond sheep limit.

"You didn't tell Elmer whether you're going to come

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out or stay," she said, a strange, strained anxiety in her face, an unwonted timidity in her manner.

"No, I didn't tell Elmer," he replied.

Rawlins was standing at the open gate ready to mount, hand on the saddle-horn. It was a clear, placid night, the wind coming from the mountains refreshed and scented with the spicy dryness of sage and drought-withered herbs. There did not seem to be a mote in the age-old path of the starbeams, spearing through cold space to find their journey's end in the transitory reflection of a human eye.

"Are you going to give it up?"

"What do you say about it, Edith?"

"I haven't got anything to say. I was just wondering, after Elmer's talk."

"Elmer's talk was well-meant, and maybe I'd be wise to follow his advice. But I'm not going to do it."

"I'd have been disappointed in you if you had," she said, drawing a deep breath of satisfaction. "Hewitt expects you to leave, he thinks you'll act like a sheepman. I don't."

"You're not very strong for sheepmen. Aren't you a little disloyal to your craft?"

"I may be a little rough in my judgment of them," she admitted, "but they don't inspire much admiration when they'll ride forty miles around a fence to get their mail. I've hoped for years," she confessed wistfully, "that some man would come along here big enough to make them take down that fence. I've been betting on you, Ned. It would have given me an awful jolt if you'd let Elmer's talk scare you out."

"Now, I've *got* to make good!" he laughed.

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"I can see your house from the top of that hill where I cut the wire that time," she said.

"You can?" He was more pleased that she had taken the interest to look for it than to know it was so conspicuous from afar.

"Yes," she sighed, "but it's out of range. I couldn't help you any from there."

"You can help me a whole lot anywhere, Edith. Just wish me good luck from the top of the hill—or anywhere you happen to be."

"Always," she said, with simple sincerity.

She gave him her hand with the word, for one quick, warm, assuring little clasp, and turned and ran to the house in a queer break of shyness not at all in keeping with her boisterous hilarity and unreserved fellowship of a little while before.

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CHAPTER XVIII

A MATCH BURNS OUT

THERE was not much in the immediate outlook conducive to a calm spirit and peaceful repose. Such sleep as Rawlins had that night was crowded with strife and battle. The subconscious man inside him seemed allied with the enemy, for his sleepless imagination contrived dreams which harassed him by scenes of perils having neither beginning nor end, leaping from one to another like broken fragments of flame.

In all of them he was trammeled by some unseen force that made him impotent against his tormentors. When he shot in desperate defense of his threatened life, it was only a weak fizzle, the smoke dribbling from the muzzle of his gun as from a cigarette; when he battled bare-handed, punching for all that was in him, Hewitt, or the variations of Hewitt which all his enemies assumed, stood unmoved. No matter how much steam he put into his punches, his fists seemed to float gently against jaws and ribs of leering Hewitts as if he moved in a vacuum which affected nobody else.

If he had been a man who put any stock in visions, Rawlins would have packed up a day ahead of the date set for him to go. He was up at dawn, heavy, unrefreshed, feeling as if sand had blown into his eyes, distrustful of the truce Hewitt had set. He expected them to appear any moment, with destructive designs

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against his house, and his life if he should interpose to protect it.

He had not slept in the house that night, Tippie's counsel in that particular being heeded. Galloway's men might come in the night, drench his little house with kerosene, and roast him in it. Many a sheepman and herder had gone that fiery way in the contests of the northwestern range. Rawlins was no stranger to the hideous practice.

Rawlins' faith in his venture was shaken. Of course a man had to start somewhere, but, as Clemmons had said, there were safer places and more comfortable. Mrs. Peck had found a convenient excuse for repudiating her agreement; the sheepmen around would be quick to hop in and profit by his victory, chance it that he should win, and he would be left holding the sack.

But he could not abandon the venture now. His honor was involved, his courage had been challenged. More than that, the old feeling of resentment against Galloway for building that barrier, fencing him off from his destiny, as he regarded it, rose up renewed. Sheep or no sheep, he would hold that homestead, if for no other purpose or reward than the vindication of an American citizen's rights.

It was an aim entirely altruistic, somewhat uselessly heroic. Galloway would close the gap in the fence at the township line after Rawlins had been forced, by lack of funds to carry out his enterprise, to pursue his fortunes in some more congenial atmosphere. Or perhaps the sheepmen would be strong enough to hold it by that time, and one of them would jump his claim the hour his back was turned.

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For all Rawlins' qualms, that day passed uneventfully. Hewitt evidently was a man who respected his word. Rawlins felt that he would be as inexorable in the other extreme as he was faithful in the observance of his truce.

Rawlins spent the day in vigilance, planning what his action should be if they appeared on this side; how he would move to defend his little house if they came up on that. His situation was in a valley about two miles wide, the hills on its borders dwindling down to blend with it out of their rough cast and sullen aspect, their slopes refreshed with abundant grass and green shrubs. By day, a surprise was impossible; even at night a watchful man would have warning of an approach, unless made stealthily on foot, an unlikely way for Hewitt's men to come on that business against a man whose puny defiance they would despise.

They would come in determination to wipe him out so effectually, and humiliate him so thoroughly, as to discourage others. The success of this bold homesteader would mean the loss of their idle jobs of fence-riding, for others would pour in if he could make that piece of paper from a misguided land agent hold. Rawlins realized that he faced the anomaly of being in greater danger on account of his unquestionable tenure, a situation not uncommon in the relations of might and right.

There would be no sleep for him this night, the last before the great issue between him and Galloway's men.

The strategy of the savage man, instead of the careful planning of the trained mind, is the resort of one

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matched against many, almost invariably. Instead of plotting some cunning method of defense in which one man might equal several, Rawlins withdrew a discreet distance from his haystacks and house, posting himself in a little depressed circle which he recognized, from old association on the Kansas prairies, as a buffalo wallow.

Greasewood and small bushes had grown thick around the edges of this embankment, which was about fifty yards from his house. It made a screen and shelter behind which a man might lie and do considerable damage with a rifle before even ten men could drive him into the open. At night it would be almost unassailable from any direction except the front, screened in the rear and flanked on either hand by a thick growth of sage and taller greasewood.

It must have been thirty years since a buffalo bull rolled and wallowed in that pit, rubbing off his shaggy winter coat, but it had been worn so deep, and trampled so hard, that no seed or shoot of shrub had sprung there in all the intervening leap of time. Grass had crept in and woven its tenacious sod, as some faithful custodian keeping the castle of an absent baron ready to his repose against his long-deferred return.

A man could watch there in comfortable security, Rawlins believed. He could creep out, dodging in the skirting bushes, and approach within twenty yards of the house, even in daylight, without being seen. He was grateful to the old buffalo that had planned so well to meet his needs these long years after its bones had whitened in the sun and gone back to dust in the pasture of the plains. In the security of this place he sat

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down, canteen at hand, to wait the turn of the card that was to decide his destiny in the Dry Wood country.

There was a little lemon-rind of new moon in the south-west, which was down before ten o'clock, leaving the earth starlit, and full of baffling shadows. It was as if the dregs of night had settled to the ground, like the precipitate of clarifying water, in a shallow stratum of obscuration. The tops of trees along Rawlins' stream, the roof of his house, the peaks of his haystacks, reached above this low-lying darkness. Below that height things were indefinite, merged in the low-pressing shades. The ear, not the eye, must be a man's sentinel a night like that.

It was well enough, Rawlins thought, accustomed as he was to night-watches over herds. A man could not strike a match behind house or haystack without betraying his presence; in the quiet of the valley, no live stock except Graball to stamp and make a noise, Hewitt's men would have to ride on air to surprise him. Graball was picketed well out of the way of wild bullets under the bank of the creek, yet near enough to reach him if the desperate necessity of getting away in a hurry should come.

A surprise was out of the question, Rawlins assured himself. What he should do when they came must be resolved by the event. Planning and imagining ahead was only a waste and strain. He hoped it would not be necessary even to wound anybody, although he knew they would not come with any such charitable reservations toward him. Justice and the law were on his side, which was a comfortable assurance, although he

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had been told that Galloway was bigger than either in that part of the State.

Rawlins got out his pipe after the moon had been gone two hours or more, to ease the tension of his silent waiting. There was no honesty in secrecy, let the smoke betray his presence as it might. He was not hiding out from anybody, only availing himself of the advantage that caution might give him. He did not want them to believe him absent, but to take it that he was standing off just that way, watching and ready, with his gun at his hand, determined to fight for that little chunk of earth that was his birthright as a citizen of the United States.

So he reasoned, back against the bowl of the old buffalo wallow, hands clasped behind his head, looking up at the cold blue points of the stars.

Rawlins sprang out of what he thought a momentary doze, alarmed by the creak of riving planks, the splintering crash of breaking glass. He cursed his treasonable lapse when he saw that it was daylight, and that four men on horseback were trying to drag his house down with ropes tied to their saddle-horns.

Another mounted man, who was supervising the job, was posted before the door, as if watching for the inhabitant of the little plank box to appear. This man was holding his gun poised ready to throw it down in a quick shot, just as if he waited for a rabbit at a hole in a hedge.

Rawlins was not concerned about the house coming down, for he had anchored it well at the corners to posts set deep in the ground, as he had seen such houses on the Kansas prairies tied down against the wind. It

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would take more than four horses with ropes tied to saddle-horns to budge the building, although his little window had burst under the strain.

It was the thought that these scoundrels believed he was in the house, and that they were putting over a great joke on him by upsetting and exposing him in his confusion like a bug under a rock, that put the torch to his resentment and wrath. He jumped from his concealment with a yell, throwing a shot toward the bunch as he came into the clear.

Whether his shot cut one of the ropes, or whether it broke at that exact moment, Rawlins had no way of knowing, but a rope parted at any rate, letting the straining horse down so suddenly it rolled over, throwing its rider clear. The man watching the door pitched a shot at Rawlins, which went wild on account of the shooter's trouble with his horse. It was plunging to break and run, frightened out of its wits by the horse that had fallen and come rolling toward it in a scramble of legs and dust.

There was confusion among the three whose ropes were still attached to the house, their horses threatening disastrous complications with legs and lines. Between trying to cast off the ropes from their saddles and preventing the excited horses getting their legs snared in them, these fellows had no hands for their guns. The battle was left for the moment to the one who appeared to be the leader, and he was doing a lot of shooting for one man, it seemed to Rawlins as he hopped and dodged from bush to bush, cracking away at the whirl of dust, horses and men beside his little house.

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The one who had been thrown made a flying tackle for his horse's neck as the animal scrambled to its feet. Rawlins had a fantastic glimpse of him, spread against the animal's side, one hand on its mane, one heel over the saddle, as it dashed wildly around the house and out of sight.

Much to Rawlins' satisfaction the free horse ridden by the shooting man broke away to follow it, but only to appear on the farther side of the confused bunch in a moment, its rider to go right on shooting with the same mean persistency as before.

Two of the men emerged from the tangle now, leaving the third hung up at the end of his lariat, which he seemed unable to untie or cut. They began to shoot, nothing more substantial between them and Rawlins than a little greasewood bush about shoulder high and not wide enough to hide a post. Lucky for Rawlins their horses were out of hand, pitching and dashing around, wild to be away out of there. The man who had stood at the door rode in and cut the rope that held, freeing all hands to the unequal fight.

It was time to get back to cover. Rawlins realized that when the four of them began to shoot, spreading out to encircle him, their purpose deflected from the destruction of his property to himself. He crouched behind the bush, holding his fire while he figured the chance of dashing back to the buffalo wallow.

He had come too far in his first hot charge to get back to that shelter. They were getting mean, their bullets were cutting close, for the horses were steadying down to control, the dust settling, giving them a clear drive. The haystacks were too far off to do him

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any good, the creek bank where Graball stood saddled and ready to go was behind him nearly a hundred yards, the way to it blocked by bushes, the ground rough for a man to make his get-away across on foot. Besides that, he was not ready to retreat; he would not be ready to retreat until he could no longer pump a cartridge into his gun.

To the left of him a little way, roughly estimated forty feet, there was a clump of sage, ancient and grey, with the dead wood of many years in the center of its slowly spreading ring. After the manner of this grim, deep-rooted desert shrub the soil had heaped around it as snow drifts around a shock of corn. Here it held in a little hummock against the attrition of wind and water, the solemn plant fortifying itself to withstand drought and fire in its island by clinging to every particle of soil whisked to it on the desert winds.

Rawlins drove back the two who pressed in nearest with a few quick shots not intended to knock anybody off his horse, for he did not want to hurt a man of them if they could be dispersed without it. He hoped to cut their horses from under them, knowing very well from the way they rode and slung their guns with little snapping jerks, elbows against their ribs, that they would be as helpless as worms on foot. They were range men; panic would defeat them when they saw their horses begin to go.

As Rawlins dropped behind the clump of sage after a breathless spurt to reach it, a bullet spread a fan of dust before his face. He thought they had him, blinded a moment by the dust, but the bullet must have struck after he hit the ground. It was only dust in the

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eyes, but that was bad enough for a man with a fight against good gunmen like those fellows on his hands.

Rawlins gasped and rubbed, able presently to make out his assailants in watery contortion where they were bunched over near the haystacks, looking in his direction questioningly, holding up on their shooting as if they believed they had disposed of that annoying incidental of their day's business, but would wait a little while to make sure before going on with the rest.

Considering it a very good move to encourage this belief, Rawlins lay flat, a copious outpouring of tears washing the dirt in some measure out of his eyes, his vision improving momentarily. Two of them had their rifles out, keen for the first motion of life behind the sage-mound. The other two had ridden up to the wire fence around the haystacks, where one of them dismounted, hesitatingly doubtfully before making a dive through it, which he did presently, disappearing from sight.

Rawlins did not believe they intended to burn the hay. Hewitt would want that. There were several tons, worth a considerable sum, but there was no way of stopping them now if they had changed their minds or got their orders wrong. He could live without the hay; it wasn't worth killing a man over, or getting killed to save.

They were not going to burn the hay; they only wanted an armful of it to kindle the house. The man came to the fence with a big armload, which he threw over, crawling after it. He tried to kick the door in, the hay in his arms, appealing to his companions for

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help when he failed, for it was a strong hand-made door of vertical planks, hung on heavy strap hinges.

The boss of the outfit told him to push it through the broken window and throw a match on it. One of them rode up and kicked in the sash.

The man who had carried the hay was striking a match when Rawlins fired. The fellow turned from the window, the burning match in his fingers, running toward his horse as if he had snatched a brand from the fire and rushed out in the night to light his way. He ran with such desperate eagerness, hand holding the blazing match extended as if he hurried to save the precious flame, that Rawlins believed he had missed.

The others evidently shared this belief. After they had made a quick scurry to get behind the stacks, Rawlins heard them laughing at their friend's ridiculous efforts to save the match. As the man made a sweeping reach for his saddle, he fell.

The others rode out and looked at him, where he lay stretched full-length and still, his face to the ground. None of them dismounted to inquire into his condition, all hurrying off behind the house as if to consult over this unexpected, and perhaps unprecedented, resistance from the homesteader. Fearing they would set fire to the house from that side, Rawlins left his hole again, edging around the fringe of his little clearing, keeping out of sight as well as he could behind the sparse bushes.

Two were riding out from behind the house to draw a long encircling movement and get back where they supposed him to be; the third was whittling a shingle torn from the eaves, preparing to make a fire in the

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roof. The man nearest Rawlins let out a yell when he discovered him, pulling up short, cutting loose with his rifle, a one-handed shot. Rawlins felt the breath of the bullet in his face.

After that, things mounted to a turmoil in which Rawlins felt himself a shaving driven before a flame. He had a confused sense of dodging from sage-clump to sage-clump, doubling, firing; oppressed by a suffocating desperation, a wild hopelessness. He did not know whether he was wounded or whole, for his body seemed a thing apart, a sort of dumb ally who handled the hot rifle, above whom his frantic mind fluttered like a mother bird which screams at sight of a serpent at her nest.

It ended with Rawlins standing in the open not far from the corner of his house. How he got there, moved by what intention, he did not know. A horse was down by the wire fence around the stacks. The man who had ridden it had taken the riderless horse and gone off with the other two—there they were, galloping off down the creek, bending low, trying to make themselves small in the sight of this most unreasonable person that ever took up a homestead in the Dry Wood country.

The one who had gone running with the match was lying there, his hat a little way ahead of him, stretched out as if he had reached with his last strength to stop the closing door of life. His right arm was extended, the wasted match-end lying close by his finger-tips.

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CHAPTER XIX

THE SHERIFF COMES

Rawlins walked around the place in a dumb, cold daze. His hat was lost, his clothing was dusty and disheveled as if he had striven for his life hand to hand. It did not come into his thoughts to inquire whether he had passed through the fight unwounded; it was enough in his dumb state that he was not conscious of any pain.

It seemed to him that a profound silence had settled over his lonely homestead; that the three men riding like thieves in all haste down the creek had snatched something away from him, neither the nature nor value of which he was fully conscious of, leaving him altogether unlike what he had been only a little while before.

How long before? How long had that battle lasted? Not a great while, scarcely more than a few minutes, he calculated, looking up for his measurement of time to the spreading morning. It was daylight when they woke him in their efforts to pull his house down; the sun was only making a far-off candle-flare on the horizon now. It would be almost an hour yet until sunrise. And he had killed a man.

It gave him a shocking start to think of it that way: the sun an hour away yet, and he had killed a man. What connection there was in the peculiarly divided

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thought he did not know, nor trouble to adjust. There was a great stillness over the grassy valley, a growing fear in his breast. Could he justify the killing of that man to authority when it came to inquire? Could he justify it to himself?

There was a sickening feeling of revulsion for the whole unfortunate adventure. The pitiful things which he had there to defend were not worth the life of any man, were not worth the upbraidings of conscience, the years of regret this morning's hot-headed work would cost. It had taken this tragedy to adjust his sense of values. Before the fight he had believed his position unassailable by the most exacting moralist among mankind. Now it looked as if the whole project had been founded on a wrong conception. What was the homestead worth to him, now he had shed blood to defend it? How far would public opinion in that one-man country support him in his defence?

It was a troublesome thing, an appalling thing, to rise up and confront a man. He had reasoned, in a feeling of security—false security, specious reasoning, he feared—that the United States Government would stand behind him in the defence of his rights. Would it do so? What was the United States Government but an oligarchy of influence? The isolated individual, especially in a strange place, had no claim of kinship that he could enforce if the influential were bent on his destruction.

Rawlins withdrew a distance from the trampled scene of his dooryard, and sat down on a little rise behind the house. He was beginning to sweat and palpitate in the heat of doubt and fear that his dis-

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turbed imagination generated. The raiders had disappeared in the hills, heading for the nearest camp, he believed, to gather reinforcements and come back. It would not be their way to give it up.

In case they came back, what should he do? Would it be wiser to jump his horse when he saw them coming, and leave it to them, or stand and fight as he had begun? There was no answer to it forthcoming at that moment. He thought he'd better look around and find his hat.

As he turned to go about this errand, so trivial in the grim business of that day, Rawlins saw somebody approaching, riding hard. Edith Stone. There was no doubt about it. He knew her manner of riding, and he knew the horse. He went to meet her, running in his desire to stop her before she came in sight of the dead man lying in that stretched, straining posture, his face against the ground.

Edith arrived in a flurry of dust, leaning eagerly as she came on, to pull up beside him panting as if she had run the five miles from the ranch on foot. She was pale and frightened; there was a fearful look in her eyes.

"Oh, they didn't, they didn't!" she gasped, catching her breath with open mouth, the sound of it like a sob.

"No," said Rawlins stupidly.

He was standing with the rifle under his arm, pale, and dazed-looking as if he had fallen from a great height to a marvelous preservation.

"I saw them up there—I saw them through the field-glasses!" she shuddered.

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"Yes," he seemed to agree, clogged and heavy in his understanding.

"What happened to you, Ned? Are you hurt?"

She flung out of the saddle, confronting him in fresh concern.

"No, not hurt."

"What happened, Ned? What did they do?"

"They tried to drag my house down, and I shot a man. He's up there; he's dead. I shot him."

"Oh, well," she said, looking at him curiously, "what could they expect? They came here huntin' trouble, didn't they?"

"You must not go up there," he said in terrible earnestness. "You must go back home."

"You don't want to let 'em get your nerve that way, Ned," she admonished, her own composure regained. "Come on down to the creek and wash your face—you'll feel better then."

She took him by the arm and led him down to the water's edge, her horse following. The animal sprawled its forelegs and drank gratefully from the shallow stream, while Edith took the rifle and Rawlins bent down to refresh himself according to her counsel.

"Didn't you meet them?" he asked, with a start as if the thought had frightened him, the water wasting through his cupped hands.

"They turned off into the hills. Go ahead and wash."

He obeyed in a spiritless way, as if nothing mattered, now he had killed a man. One might as well wash as do anything else under the distressing circumstances.

"You knew you might have to shoot some of them if you held your own," she said gently, yet with a little

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hardness of accusation or censure, as if to say he had failed in her expectations of him in not standing up under it like a man.

"It isn't so much a question of right as of values," he said, looking up gravely, water streaming from his face.

This was puzzling to her, and vexing because she did not understand. She flushed, frowning her displeasure.

"Did you know any of them? Was Hewitt there?"

"No, Hewitt wasn't with them, but I thought I recognized the man we had trouble with that day at the fence."

"Yes, he was apt to have a hand in it. Were you in the house when they came?"

"I'd been on the watch for them two nights, outside. I must have dozed off—they were at their devilment when I first saw them."

Rawlins pulled a deep sigh, shaking his head sorrowfully, the weight of his tragedy still pressing him down, making his senses blunt.

"They came huntin' trouble," she repeated, "they got what was comin' to them. You act like you're sorry."

"It's an awful thing to kill a man over an outcast chunk of ground like this!" he said.

"I don't suppose they tried to kill you, I don't suppose they even took a quiet little shot or two at you to scare you off!"

"He was going to burn the house, he'd just struck a match when I—he'd just struck a match."

"What did you want to spoil his innocent little joke

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for if it's going to make you feel so sick?" she asked, out of patience with his shocked and shaken state. "Didn't they shoot at you?"

"I expect maybe they did, Edith," he replied dully.

"You expect maybe they did!" she said with scornful reproach. "Look here!"

She took hold of his shirt-sleeve, on the side towards his body, near the arm-pit, showing him a bullet hole, her manner as sternly corrective as if she had convicted him on suppressed evidence of some grave offence.

Rawlins looked at the place curiously, and tucked it under his arm to hide it, apparently ashamed to have his past peril known. He muttered something that she did not understand, holding his arm tight against his side as if to deny her any further exploration. His attitude nettled her, it seemed so sulky and petulant. It was as if he resented her producing evidence to justify him in the deed for which he had such remorseful qualms.

"Two or three inches over and it would have been your heart instead of your sleeve," she said. "And you stand there like you wanted to apologize for them! You make me sick, whinin' around here because you happened to kill a man that was tryin' to burn your house. What are you goin' to do when they come back with Hewitt to wipe you off the earth?"

There was an insolent challenge in her demand, a flaunting of open scorn.

"Come back with Hewitt?" he repeated, stretching his eyes as if the thing had an astonishing sound. His face darkened with a rush of hot blood; he stood feet

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wide apart, clenching his fists till he trembled in the vehemence of his sudden passion. "Damn them! I'll fight them to a finish!"

"You're all right now, honey," she said, a tremor in her voice, a dimness of tears in her eyes. She looked at him, smiling, a twisted little smile that hovered over an outbreak of downright tears.

"It's my property, it's my home, even if it don't amount to much. I'll defend it down to the last kick there is in me!"

He stepped over briskly and picked up his gun, scraping the trickling drops of his late ablution from his cheek with the rim of his hand.

"Yes, I knew you would," she said. "I'd like to stick around and help you, Ned, if you'll let me."

"You can help me more, Edith, if you'll cut across to Lost Cabin and send the sheriff and coroner over here," he said. "They had a double turn of rope around my shack—" indignantly, pounding the air in denunciation of the outrage—"with four horses hitched to it, trying to drag it down. It's there yet—the sheriff can see—right there yet!"

"If you think I'd better go, Ned," she consented.

"Somebody'll have to go, and I can't leave it to them to come back here and finish it off. Have you got anything to cut the wire?"

"I always carry something to cut the wire."

"Bring the sheriff in the short way—if he's got the nerve to come."

She nodded, starting up the bank for her horse. He caught her arm.

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"Ride around the house," he said, giving her a straight, meaning look. She nodded again, going on.

Rawlins went up the creek to unsaddle Graball and turn him out in a hobble, seeing no remote exigency that would impel him to desert his homestead now. He was exhilarated by his recovery from his dazed oppression of spirits. He looked back from new altitudes at the numbed, shocked man who had usurped his proper place for a little while, thinking there was nothing to equal cold water to right a man up when staggering around from a nervous jolt like that. If he had been entirely himself, judging another in a fix like his own, he would have said that water was very good in its way, but it was nothing compared to the sharp prod of a woman's scorn.

That was a pretty decent sort of sheriff, a sheepman kind of sheriff. Whatever influence Senator Galloway had in politics generally around there, his foot must have slipped in the election of that man. So Rawlins thought that morning, when the sheriff arrived in quick time after Edith's summons, the coroner coming along more deliberately with a proper conveyance for carrying off the wreckage of the fight.

That was about all there was to it, the sheriff said, looking with keen interest at the double rope around the house, with the outrunning lariats lying as they had been cast off. If a gang of cusses came to shoot a man's home up he'd be a damn fool if he didn't shoot back. Rawlins had done a man's job, and that was about all there was to it, as far as the sheriff could see.

All of which was a great relief and cheer to Rawlins.

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The world expanded again, with sunshine, hope and ambition warming it, making it a desirable place.

The coroner arrived in due time, bringing with him a jury of sheepmen, being an expedient man and determined to have the case investigated and disposed of on the ground. The inquest was held over the slain man where he lay on the ground with the half-burned match beside his fingers. The whole proceeding did not occupy more than ten minutes, the jury not only finding Rawlins justified, but commending him warmly for his defence of his rights, which was, they said, in no small measure the defence of the public rights, too long defied in the Dry Wood country.

The inquest over, these sheepmen cast their calculative eyes around the country, knowing themselves safe in their official position, taking advantage of the event to do a little locating against some future day. They spoke admiringly of Rawlins' fine location for sheep, looked at his hay, pulled handfuls of it out of the stacks and smelt it, their faces almost beatific in the satisfaction of its sweet scent.

Edith hung back out of the proceedings until they had lifted the body into the wagon and covered it with a sheep-herder's tent. Then she came over to shake hands with Rawlins, as the rest of the sheepmen had done, and do the best she could to make it appear that killing a man under the proper circumstances was nothing to worry over or remember with remorse.

The sheepmen all knew Edith, for fifty or sixty miles was a small matter between neighbors in Dry Wood in those times. It is just about the same even to-day. They talked about the drought, and kicked the ground

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judiciously, turning up the soil to note its qualities, and chewed pieces of hay from Rawlins' stacks, making quite a neighborly reunion out of it. The dead man in the wagon was the smallest part of their thoughts.

Not so with Rawlins after the coroner, the jurymen and the sheriff had gone back to Lost Cabin, taking the short cut across Galloway's land for the first time in their lives; and Edith had ridden away to the ranch to relieve whatever anxiety her aunt might feel over her unexplained absence. It was a grim and disturbing thing to stand before him, even with the question of justification smoothed away. It would take a long time to wear the hideous accusation from his own conscience, that upbraiding that it might have been avoided, that weighing of values in which his end of the balance seemed to rise so emptily.

An unworthy man, an outlawed man, a vicious and murderous villain. Yet he had been human, worth more at his basest evaluation than the little oblong of semi-arid land that a perverse infatuation had urged this sheep-mad stranger from afar to enter upon in peril and attempt to hold in strife.

There would not be much in that life, hiding out of a night that way like a cat, to wake soon or late with the bold challenge of fire in his eyes. This resistance, this first success, would only embitter them, lending vengeance to their other grievances, fancied or contrived.

So Rawlins reasoned as he made his bed in the buffalo wallow that night. Not in the intention of standing sentinel over his possessions again, for he was weary to the bone. Let them come when they would

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and do what they might if he could not wake in time to stop them. If it came to a battle again he would stick to his hole and give them the best he had. Even the sheepmen, who plainly expected much of him, could not demand more.

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CHAPTER XX

A FOREHANDED SHEPHERD

IT WAS NOT the gleam of fire on his eyeballs nor the sound of guns in his ears that woke Rawlins when morning was breaking grey over the sheeplands. He heaved himself up suddenly when the sound of it struck through his heavy slumber, bewildered for a moment, sleep-cloyed, as one commonly feels on waking in strange surroundings, believing for a little while that it was the continuation of a dream.

Sheep. The tremulous, pleading, helpless babble of a band of sheep.

Rawlins took a cautious peep through the fringe of his hiding-place, seeing nothing of the complaining creatures which seemed to be near at hand in large numbers. There was a fog in the valley, or a skim of fog, which pressed close to the ground, common to that valley in the early morning. Rawlins often had seen it before, so shallow that the tops of the taller cottonwoods along the creek protruded above it. The sheep were bleating out of it beyond the creek; none of them was to be seen.

He came out of his hole cautiously, relieved to see his house and haystacks still there. He wondered whether this was a new scheme of Galloway's men, running their flocks over to his valley, hoping to drown

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him in sheep, or whether the herders had acted on orders predicated on the certainty that he would be ousted by that time. It was a trespass, any way they had worked it, for the sheep were on his land. He intended to send them out of there in short order. He wasn't going to have sheep in there ruining his hay crop.

Making a stealthy circuit of his premises, Rawlins encountered the sheep under the creek bank where he had tied his horse the day before. Along there the bank was high on one side of the stream only, the other being a pebbly slope which high water covered. At its present low stage the stream pressed against this high bank, only three or four yards wide, the pebbly shore making a sort of sheltered nook very good for a bedding-ground. Here the shepherds had brought their sheep while he slept, either ignorant of their proximity to his house or assured in their belief that all was safe.

What puzzled Rawlins was that no shepherd was in sight, no smell of his breakfast fire on the air. It is a law among sheep-herders of the north-west that flocks must be moved from the bedding-ground at dawn, faced into the wind and spread to graze while the dew is on the herbage. By careful attention to this rule of the craft, a flock is able to subsist for many days without water. It saves the shepherd labor, and the sheep flesh in long drives to tanks and streams.

There was no voice of sheep-herder rising in the age-old cry that marshaled the sheep forth from the bedding-ground; there was no shepherd to be seen. Not even a dog to bristle and give the alarm of the peering

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stranger's presence. It was mystifying to Rawlins, who did not care to push his investigations too far.

He would wait until the fog cleared, as it would with the first spears of sunlight lancing over the hills. It was lucky the sheep had not come into his uncut grass, which stood knee-high, ready for the scythe. They would have done great damage trampling there, for it was a middling big band, a thousand or more, from what he could see. There was nothing to do but wait, and act according to what should be revealed.

Rawlins went back to the house, which he had not examined for intruders, thinking the herder or herders might have taken possession and be sleeping late on account of the unaccustomed luxury of a bed beneath a roof. There was nobody in the house; it remained just as he had left it yesterday, the hay on the floor where the incendiary had thrown it, the broken glass from the window littering the ground. He had not thought it worth while, in his uncertain state, to right things up around the place. There might be something bigger to come off around there yet which would muss things up worse than they were.

It was assuring, at any rate, to find things undisturbed. Uneasy as he was over the presence of the sheep, he was strongly tempted to make a fire in the stove and get breakfast, having slighted the matter of sustenance the day before. He pushed the temptation on ahead of him and returned to the creek, where he sat down overlooking the sheep to wait the breaking of the fog.

The sheep were huddling and crying below him, lambs nuzzling their breakfast, not much concerned

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over the delay in the day's proceedings. A wind began to stir, moving the shallow layer of dense fog, making rifts in it here and there, opening momentary vistas. Rawlins had a glimpse of a dog through one of these rifts, sitting in stolid patience on the farther rim of the flock. It was a big, white-breasted animal, morose in its pose, implacable in its delegated authority, holding the restless flock like a stone wall.

Rawlins got up, a creepiness of apprehension crinkling over him. It was not a stray flock, as he had begun to believe; the herder was somewhere near, tired from his labor of the night in bringing the band into the disputed pasture. As he turned and peered, the quickening wind came with a rush down the creek, dispersing the fog in a breath, revealing what he sought.

The herder was lying beyond the dog, ridiculously covered across the middle part of his body by a blanket and the canvas of his little tent, as if he had struggled against phantoms in his sleep and worked both extremities of his body out of the cover. His arms were thrown out as if he had been staked down; one long leg was drawn up, the bony knee sharp as a stake.

Rawlins' first amazement gave way to humor. He chuckled as he hastened down the creek bank and struck across the shallow stream. For there was not a double of that long figure in the Dry Wood country. It was the romantic form of Dowell Peck.

The dog backed off, bristling, silent, menacing, as Rawlins approached the sleeping keeper of the flock. It retreated within a few yards of its master, where it crouched, ready to repel any intrusion on his weary

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slumber. Rawlins did not care to test the creature's fidelity any farther. He stood where he was and let out a whoop that brought Peck up in a comical tangle of blanket and tent.

Peck had a gun hung on him; he was making a two-handed effort to haul it out of the scabbard when Rawlins yelled to him not to shoot.

"It's Rawlins," he called. "Don't you know me?"

Peck's long hair was over his eyes, his long moustache drooped in dejection like a wet rooster's tail. He cleared his countenance of the fog-damp locks, one hand still distrustfully on his gun.

"Oh, all right, Rawlins," he said, his voice hoarse and rough-edged from sleep. "Come on over."

Rawlins went up the gravelly strand, opening a way through the flock, water overflowing his boots. He was carrying his rifle, a pistol buckled on him, for he had crawled out of the buffalo wallow expecting a fight. Peck kicked the encumbering covers aside with a gay leg, capering joyously.

"I was headin' for you, and I hit you," Peck called over the diminishing distance. "Purty dang good for a greenhorn in the night, I'll say!"

"Good? Darned good, I call it," Rawlins shouted back over the confusion of the sheep. "But what the devil does it mean? How did you get here—where are you going?"

"Right here," Peck replied, sticking out his long arm in greeting. "I started for right where I'm at and I got here."

"You certainly did," Rawlins marveled. "But how did you do it? What's the object?"

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"Well, I tell you, Rawlins, them dan sheep they're more to blame than me, in the first place. If they hadn't started it I never would 'a' thought of it, or if I had thought of it that 'd been the end of it, I guess. They run away a couple of days ago, and I couldn't stop 'em. They was wild-eyed for a drink, I guess, they hadn't had one for two or three weeks."

"Oh, they bolted on you, did they?"

"They sure did. I couldn't no more stop 'em than I could a freight train. We struck a hole in that dang fence, where you come in at, I guess, and I shot 'em through. I saw your house from the top of a hill out there, and I said there's where I'd break away from the old woman and take a little stake along with me. We hit that hole about sundown, and I kep' them dang stews on the trot till midnight. I'll bet you a bottle of pop *they've* got enough of runnin' off from yours truly! I'll bet you the drinks *they'll* think it over a long time before they try a dodge like that on me any more."

"Peck, you're a wonder!" Rawlins commended him in genuine praise. "But how did you know you'd hit my place? You couldn't see it from this side of the creek."

"I knew you'd be on a crick, all sheepmen's nutty about cricks, and when I struck it I stopped. I was goin' to take a look around for you this morning."

"But what possessed you to bring that band of sheep in here, Peck? Don't you know there's a war going on between me and Galloway's gang?"

"Let 'em come," said Peck, with portentous confidence, slapping his gun. "I'm with you."

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"What will your wife say when she hears you've run that band of sheep in here?"

"I'd like to hear," said Peck, comfortably.

"She'll raise the roof."

"Let her," said Peck, easy in his mind. "There won't be anybody but her for it to fall back on."

"Things are kind of uncertain in here, Peck, mighty uncertain, to tell you the truth. Darned if I know what you're going to do with that big band of sheep."

"I'm going to run 'em around in here and fatten 'em up, then I'll sell 'em and hit the breeze," Peck announced. "I had that all figgered out when I was shootin' 'em through that hole in the fence. The old lady she'll not bother me here, she's a-scairt to set her leg inside of that wire fence. And I tell you right now, Rawlins, I'd ruther stand up and fight seventeen men a day than live around where that woman can get at me."

"Darned if I know what you're going to do with them," Rawlins said, perplexed, apparently oblivious to Peck's vehement announcement of his readiness to fight.

"I'll have to hustle them stews out on the grass," Peck said, with proprietorial air. "I don't want 'em to run on you, Rawlins. Which way'll I head 'em?"

"Keep them on this side of the creek," Rawlins directed, "and you'll be all right with me. I've got a nice patch of hay over on the other side I want to cut."

"Sure," Peck agreed.

He sent his dog to turn the sheep away from the creek, and set up a whooping that could not have been

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equaled in volume from one end of Dry Wood to the other.

"I want to bum some breakfast off of you, and git you to hold me up a few days till I can put me in some grub," Peck said, putting it up as a proposal between equals, no favor asked and no thought of being denied.

"You're welcome. Right up that bank—you can see the tops of my haystacks over there—when you're ready. I'll go on and get things started."

Peck came to the house in due time, carrying his scanty bedding and scrap of tent. He threw them down with contemptuous air, kicked them into a corner and grunted.

"That's what a man's wife gives him to lay his bones on and put over his head in the night," he said. "Any hired man of hers has got his wagon or his good tent, and plenty of grub brought to him right along. If she ever puts a leg in here I'll stitch her ears to the back of her neck."

"I see she gave you a gun. She must be loosening up a little."

"All the gun she ever give me!" Peck discounted, drawing the weapon from the scabbard, presenting it proudly for inspection. "Yeah, I bought this old he-gun off of Al Clemmons—I give him four stews for it. He'll carry a mile."

"It sure looks like it would," Rawlins agreed. "It's an old war-time Colt—I used to play with one like it when I was a knee-high little shaver back in Kansas."

"Yeah, it was a Colt when they branded it," Peck said, rubbing his thumb affectionately over the factory

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stamp, "but it's a stud-horse now. Say, feller, you orta hear this old boy snort!"

"It's an old-timer, Peck, but it looks like a good one. Can you hit anything with it?"

"Sometimes," Peck confessed ingenuously. "But I'll bet you the pop I can throw a bluff with it as big as any man around here."

"I don't believe it would pay you to try it inside of Galloway's fence, Peck. When you pull your gun here you want to begin to shoot. They're not much on the bluff, I'm afraid. You know, I thought they'd run that band of sheep in on me. I took it so much for granted I never thought to look at the brand."

"You'll see another brand on 'em before long. I'm going to cut me a stencil out of a coal oil can and print capital Peck on the sides of them stews a foot high. I'll let that old woman see who's boss of this gang if she ever throws a leg over that fence."

"Maybe you've got a right to claim 'em, Peck. I don't know much about the law in such matters."

"Sure I have. What belongs to the wife belongs to the husband, but what the husband gits his paws on is his. It's going to be that way in this case, I don't give a dang what the law says."

They sat at breakfast, Rawlins with one leg in the door, his guns at hand, watchful against a surprise. Over across the creek Peck's sheep could be seen, making a cheerful picture in a landscape that Rawlins had found empty to lonesomeness in the days past.

"You've got a nice band of them there," he said.

"Yeah," Peck agreed, with the easy, offhand way of a regular sheepman. "It's a good joke on the old

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woman, the way she loaded me up with that band of sheep, Rawlins. You know Riley, the feller that had the law books in his wagon? Yeah. I was talkin' to Riley one day about gittin' a divorce off of the old woman, but he said I didn't have much of a show. A man had to watch his step not to give his wife an openin' for a knock-out, Riley said. He let me have a book on divorces; said if I'd read that and study up and walk a straight line I might be able to flop her one of these days. Tippie come by one day and caught me readin' that book."

"I heard about it."

"Yeah. She was red-headed. She come tearin' over to my camp next day spittin' fire like a Chessie cat. She said she married me for keeps, and the only way I'd ever shake her was by goin' under ground. She said she'd put me there if I ever made a move to git a bill off of her, and I believe she meant it, Rawlins. She looked as mean as a fried buzzard. She went over and fired Riley, right off the bat. She split his sheep up among us other hired hands, comin' out ahead one man on the deal, the way she figgered it. I had about four hundred before that; she loaded me up with six or seven hundred more. She said she'd give me something to think about besides divorces; she was goin' to make a sheepman out of me or kill me a-tryin'. Glad she loaded me up with them extra stews now. I'm just that much ahead."

"Darned if I see how you're going to come out on it, Peck, but I wish you luck. I suppose you've got a right to sell the sheep if you want to, but I doubt if anybody around here would buy them from you."

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"I'm goin' to ship 'em to Kansas City when them lambs grow a little more. I think I'll go over to the bank at Lost Cabin and see if I can't raise a little loan on 'em. If I can, I'll hire some feller to do the work. No sheepman that herds his own sheep ever amounts to anything, Rawlins, no more than any other business man that tries to do it all himself. Look at old Clemmons, look at twenty more of 'em out there like him, dribblin' around with a handful of sheep. That's what keeps 'em down. They ain't got the brains to do the figgerin' and hire somebody to do the work."

"You're not far wrong about it, Peck," Rawlins agreed, knowing that it was true.

"That's where the old woman started off wrong with me. I was workin' at my trade before I come out here, and that ain't no secret, but I had my plans laid to branch out for myself as soon as I got a few hundred more saved up. Well, that's blowed; I busted myself on this dang fool marryin' trip out here. But I'd 'a' made it, all right, if I'd 'a' married Edith instead of that old cow. That little girl and me we'd 'a' went back to St. Joe and started us up a nice little tailorin' and cleanin' and dyein' business. She never would 'a' had to stand behind the counter and wait on the trade, neither; I'd 'a' hired help from the jump. But that's all off. I blowed that chance when I married that old cow."

Rawlins had no comment to nake on the collapsed romance, although he wondered at Peck's perverse stupidity in clinging to the delusion that he could have married Edith at pleasure. He still believed himself

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an irresistible man, although a less attractive figure scarcely could have been imagined.

Peck was dressed in offcast garments, presumably those of his late predecessor, comprising a faded blue shirt, a brown drilling jumper and overalls of the same material, all much worn and in need of soap. The overalls were too short by many inches, which discrepancy was fully made up in width, Peck's cheap cotton socks running down his thin shanks to the tops of his shoes, displaying a section of briar-scratched, dusty skin between. He was far from the dashing, devilish, perfumed, perky mail-order beau who drove up to the ranch with Smith Phogenphole on a well-remembered day.

"What busted your winder, Rawlins?" Peck inquired, coming alive to his outward surroundings, now that his inner void was filled. "Looks like you 'd clean up this shack a little," he went on, not waiting for an answer. "What do you want hay throwin' around on the floor that way for? You been feedin' your horse in here?"

"I mentioned to you a while ago that there's a war going on between me and some of Galloway's men. They came here yesterday morning to tear my house down. They kicked in the window and tried to burn it after they'd failed to upset it with ropes. That accounts for the muss. I haven't had time to clean up."

"What the dickens was you doin' to let 'em bust your winder that way?" Peck wanted to know, with an uncharitable challenge that seemed a reflection on Rawlins' manhood. He got up, walking around the room, peering through the broken window.

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"I did the best I could, Peck," Rawlins replied, sighing as with a sad regret.

"Did you shoot some of 'em?" Peck inquired eagerly, pointing to the dark splotch in the yard where the dead man had lain waiting the coming of the coroner. "That looks like somebody'd been bleedin'. Did you plug one of 'em, Rawlins?"

"I'm sorry to say it was necessary, Mr. Peck."

"The doodle you did? Was he hurt bad?"

"No," said Rawlins, slowly, reflectively, that note of sadness in his voice; "I don't believe it hurt him much."

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CHAPTER XXI

A PROFANE WISH

THAT day passed as peacefully as if no question of a homesteader's rights inside the fence ever had been raised. Rawlins was under a heavy strain of expectation, which relaxed in some degree as evening fell and Peck gathered his sheep in a little bowl which seemed to have been ordered by nature to meet this exigency. Peck's bedding-ground was about half a mile beyond the creek, on Rawlins' land, where the new proprietor of the flock spread his canvas over a bush and crawled under it to his repose after smoking an after-supper pipe with Rawlins.

Peck's attitude toward sheep had undergone a radical transformation, such as is common to men when they pass from a situation of journeyman to master, wage-earner to capitalist. It has been noted often how completely the vision warps around to fit the new position. Peck was a capitalist now, at least in his own belief. How far Mrs. Peck would confirm him in that blissful importance Rawlins held little doubt. Peck was in for a sudden and rude disillusionment at no very distant hour, he believed.

As it was, Peck had all the zeal of a proprietor. He handled the sheep as if he had a personal interest in the welfare of the weakest of them, showing a surprising craftiness for his short apprenticeship on the range.

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He was planning to go to Lost Cabin the next day and see about raising a loan on the flock. Off there to himself inside Galloway's fence, Peck felt that he had put an insurmountable barrier between himself and his wife.

Rawlins did not encourage this proprietary view, nor the flight into finance which Peck proposed to try. He was greatly disturbed by Peck's invasion of his valley with the sheep, and troubled over the prospect of being blamed by Mrs. Peck for harboring her runaway husband, even if she did not charge him with connivance in the entire plot. It would be difficult to convince the lady, with her present low estimate of Peck's initiative and resourcefulness, that he had brought the flock inside Galloway's fence alone.

The wise thing to do, Rawlins concluded after he had seen Peck stowed away under his bush for the night, was to go to the ranch and inform Mrs. Peck of her husband's adventure. While this course might appear treasonable to Peck, for whom Rawlins was beginning to feel a little sympathy and kindness, it was only just to himself.

Aside from putting himself in the way of being blamed by Mrs. Peck, the presence of the sheep at his place would add to his own complications. Galloway would come down on him hard for this apparent publication to all sheepland that the limit was off for sheep in Dry Wood. Rawlins' secret hope was that Mrs. Peck would move in the matter at once and take the sheep home.

Rawlins felt that it was safe to leave things unguarded for a while at night. After Galloway's men

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had been shown his determination to hold his own there, they would not be likely to risk an assault by night, in which all the advantage would be his. Hewitt had not been along with them; it was likely they were waiting for him to come, or at least instructions from him, before making another move.

So concluding, he saddled Graball and rode to the ranch, hoping, as he went along, to find Tippie there. Tippie could return with him; they could take an early start and have the sheep outside the fence by sunrise.

Edith was at the gate, a saddled horse standing by. The house was dark and silent. As Rawlins rode up and dismounted, Edith flung the gate open eagerly, greeting him in the exuberance of relief.

"I was about to start over there and see if I could find out anything," she said. "I didn't get to go up to the hill to-day. I was worried about you, Ned."

"It's been as quiet as Sunday up there to-day, Edith. I'm beginning to think they're going to let me alone."

The little paring of moon was very bright, cheering the whole sector of the sky where it seemed to hang not much more than the height of a man above the hills. Rawlins could see the anxiety of her face as she shook her head slowly in denial.

"You know they're not going to," she said. Then quickly, as if her words had been waiting: "Give it up, Ned, give it up! It isn't worth another fight, it isn't worth what you've gone through already. Let them have it—give it up!"

"No, I'm not going to give it up," he replied with argumentative briskness. "I did think of doing it, as you know to my disgrace and——"

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"No, no!" she protested, remembering her own scorn in the moments of his remorseful weakness.

"But I've got over all that. After the sheriff had been there, after my talk with him and those sheepmen, I felt all right. I was shaken at first—nearly shaken loose from my grip. There's more at stake for me there than my homestead now, Edith: there's every principle of justice and manhood. I'd be a coward to quit it now."

"I urged you on," she said repentantly. "I was always blowin' about a man that would come along some day with nerve enough to open that country. I was proud of you when you went in, but I didn't think you'd ever have to kill anybody, I didn't think they'd crowd you that far. Now they'll kill you to even it up. They're not the kind to let it drop now."

"I'm not worrying about that so much, Edith, as I am about my hay," he said, trying to lighten it with a laugh. "I've got fifty tons or more to cut yet. I've been hoping all day they'd drop it, so I could take the team in again and get a mower. I could make some money out of that hay next winter."

"I was going over to see you," she said, with a manner of dull insistence, as if her long anxiety had stunned her.

"It's all right, and it's going to keep on being all right," he assured her. He took her hand, chafing it, consoling it by his caress, as one comforts a child for a hurt.

There never had been any eye-making between these two, no sentimental passages, no courting, in the sense that that homely word is generally understood. Raw-

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lins did not know just what his feeling toward Edith was. At the best a sort of hopeful, perhaps a bit wistful, friendship, very like his feeling towards that country where he had taken up his claim. There was something big to be done before he could call it his own.

Youth has its way of adjusting these things without many words. It is only when the eye begins to grow flat, the waistline to expand, that the lover has need of sonnets. Youth does not require pretty sayings, lengthy presentations of its case in sentimental speech. It arrives at the contest fully equipped.

In that way the case stood without words between Rawlins and Edith Stone. There was something big to be accomplished before he could think of her in nearer terms. Maybe with Edith it was different. The woman leaps on to her conclusion without so much as barking her shins on the roughest obstacles which lie between the now of reality and the then of her desire.

Only when Peck talked of Edith in that loose-tongued, regretful way, Rawlins felt his interest in her to be something more than remotely friendly. Perhaps that was only the resentment of youth for the man's boorish familiarity.

"It's going to be all right," Rawlins repeated, rubbing it in her hand like a liniment; "everything's going to be all right. Has your aunt gone to bed?"

"No, she's not here. We've had a sensation of our own here to-day, Ned. What do you think? Peck's run away again, and not only run away, but taken a band of eleven or twelve hundred sheep along with him. Aunt Lila's out on the range hunting them now

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—especially the sheep. I was with her all day, but we didn't find a trace of them."

"That's what I've come over about," Rawlins said, the shake of a laugh in his words.

"Have you seen him?"

"I left him not an hour ago. He's over there with me."

"Peck?"

"Sure enough. Peck, sheep, dog, and all."

"Peck, of all men! Taking a band of sheep into that country—Peck!"

"To Peck, and nobody else, the honor belongs. Well, the sheep must be given some credit for initiating the movement, I must admit. Peck says they ran away from him, or with him, and came to the hole in the wire, when he shot 'em through and headed for my place. He'd spotted it from the hills."

"Peck! And he's in there?"

"He seems to be easy, and very much at home. He says he'd rather fight men every day than face his wife once in a while. He's got a gun a yard long hanging on him."

"Peck?"

"The surest thing you know. He says he can hit things with it sometimes, and I believe him so well I'd want to be back of something thick when he turns it loose."

"It knocks me cold!" said Edith, backing up against the fence for support. Then that irrepressible spirit of laughter laid hold of her. She jerked off her hat, slapped her thigh with it, doubled over and whooped.

"It's no laughing matter, young lady," he said, with

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pretence of great severity. "If you had him on your hands——"

"That's what Aunt Lila says."

"If you had him on your hands with twelve hundred sheep, more or less, you wouldn't laugh. I've got troubles enough of my own without your dear old Uncle Dowell. I don't want him and his sheep around there."

"And he won't leave. The poor man wants to stay there where he can fight his way in peace, and not have to study divorce books and have his moustache pulled."

Edith struck her well-known high key of wild, abandoned laughter with that thought, rocking back and forth, hitting the fence as she swayed one way, threatening to pitch into Rawlins' arms when she swayed the other. He stood grinning, ready to catch her if she should collapse at last, worn out by the excess of merriment due to Peck's unprecedented adventure. But Edith did not pitch forward into his ready arms. She seemed as well-rooted to that spot as a young aspen, and as supple.

"You unfeeling little rascal?" said Rawlins, hand on her shoulder in affectionate chastisement. He went a little farther in the daring of his chiding; he embraced her quivering shoulders, and drew her close, and pressed her as if to compress the laughter out of her and set her up in a straight and reasonable mood.

Edith hunched her shoulders and ducked her head, face averted, the laughter shut off as completely as if his reproof were serious. This defensive shrinking was as effective with Rawlins as a kick. He didn't

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press his advantage, taking for granted the show of reluctance that a more sophisticated man would have known for an invitational bluff. He let her go, feeling scared and confused, afraid he had gone too far.

They were both sobered. Edith found an urgent business in putting back her hair, hat under her elbow; Rawlins making pretence, in a foolish subterfuge, that he must get hold of Graball's bridle reins and hook them over his arm.

"Is Elmer out hunting Peck, too?" he asked, his voice a little shaky in the uncertainty of his standing.

His trepidation was unwarrantable; Edith was as placid as the moon. She gave her hair a twist and a stab, put her hat on precisely, laughing at his inquiry.

"Can you imagine Elmer trailing around after Peck? He's in the mountains."

"I hoped I might get him to go back with me and start that band of sheep out of there at daylight."

"What if Uncle Dowell pulled his gun and said 'No'?"

"He might do it, too. He's got his plans made away ahead for that bunch of sheep. Do you know what he calls them? Stews."

"Aunt Lila told me. She takes it like a reflection on her own dignity. I'm afraid that St. Joe brand of humor failed to make a great big hit with her."

"The question is, will she go after him?"

"I wonder. She's always had a mortal terror of that fence. That's why I had to stop cuttin' it. She used to sweat agony every time I went after the mail."

"My worry is that she'll implicate me in Peck's break for liberty, especially as I'm harboring him. But I was

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as much surprised to see him as she'll be to hear he's there."

"I don't think she'll blame you, Ned. But it certainly will jolt her when she finds out where he's gone."

"She said she'd glory in a man of hers standing up to them inside that fence with a gun. Do you remember, Edith?"

"Yes, I know she said it, but she wasn't figurin' on him havin' ten or twelve hundred of her sheep along. A man's one thing in Aunt Lila's life, and sheep are something else."

"Peck isn't planning to come out of there in a hurry, at least not back to this range. I don't know what I'm going to do about it, unless I shove him out on his own resources entirely."

"What kind of plans is he making for the sheep, Ned?"

"I'm afraid they're all disloyal to the hand that married him and took his pencil-striped pants away from him. He's says he's going to put a mortgage on them, for one thing, to raise money for hiring somebody to do the work while he does the thinking. I'm afraid Mr. Peck hinted darkly that he intended to drive them out and ship them to Kansas City as soon as the lambs were a little heavier, but I think we'd just as well keep that between us. It wouldn't contribute to harmony between Mr. and Mrs. Peck if she recaptures him, which I feel she's bound to do."

"You wouldn't think that darned old worm had sense enough to plan it all out that way, like a regular man, would you?" Edith said. "I'm beginning to think there's hope for Uncle Dowey after all."

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"He's developing sheepmanly traits right along. I was surprised to see it, but it's true. Maybe the gun's got something to do with it."

"Of course she'll get him if he ever breaks out of there, and he'll have to come out when you leave, Ned."

"When I leave? If he stays till I leave he'll be a mighty old man."

There was not very much faith indicated in Edith's voice when she spoke of him leaving. Even in her first almost passionate request that he give it up, Rawlins could read an undertone of reservation, he believed, as if she kept the secret hope that he would refuse while the plea was on her tongue.

He believed now he understood Edith's position in the business. Her conscience was pleading, like an attorney appointed by the court to defend a malefactor for whose case he had not the slightest sympathy. She felt a responsibility for his adventure against such odds, and her conscience argued for acquittal while her honest desire was that he stick to it and show the sheep world, and especially her, that he was indeed a man.

That was his intention, With that friendly sheriff only a few miles away, and those eager sheepmen around Lost Cabin waiting the hour to come in, Rawlins no longer felt himself unsupported and alone. Those sheepmen were ready to jump the day they felt it a little less than half-way safe; Rawlins had seen that sticking out of them like pumpkins in a sack when they sat as jurors in the coroner's inquest. A little while, if he could hold on, and there would be neighbors enough to carry everything inside the fence.

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"I wish I was a man," Edith sighed.

"I'm glad wishing can't make you one," Rawlins told her, so seriously it amounted to a rebuke for her profane desire.

"Well, I do," she insisted stubbornly. "But maybe I can help you anyway."

Whatever opportunity this offered for saying something gallant, Rawlins allowed to pass untouched, for sincerity has a slow tongue.

"Do you expect Mrs. Peck home to-night?" he asked, after the chance for saying something that he knew should have been said, and was expected to be said, had fallen as flat as a cake prematurely taken from the oven.

"She was headin' for Clemmons' range when I left her. If she don't hear anything of her sheep down there—and of course she'll not—I expect she'll turn back home. It may be morning before she gets here."

They discussed the probability of Mrs. Peck's invasion of the forbidden territory, Edith being of the opinon that the chances were all in Peck's favor. It was impossible for her to see anything tragic shaping up in the situation for Peck, the comedy outweighing everything else.

The moon was touching the hills when Rawlins left her, lighter of heart and stronger of hope than when he came. Danger was drawing away from him, he believed; peace was about to descend on his valley, where the price it had cost him already was marked by the brown splotch in the white earth before his door.

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CHAPTER XXII

A MAN AT LAST

PECK was up at daylight next morning, whooping in high and exultant voice as he spread his sheep to graze in due and ancient form. He was in high feather when he came to the house for breakfast to find that his industry surpassed Rawlins', if early rising was to be taken as a measure. He found the homesteader sitting on the edge of his cot, yawning away the dregs of sleep.

Rawlins had chanced a surprise by sleeping in the house, going on the argument by which he had convinced himself last night that they were due to leave him alone. The peaceful morning, Peck's cheerful countenance in the door, the feeling of eagerness to be up and at it, all contributed to strengthen the belief that untroubled days were before him. He set Peck to making a fire in the sheet-iron stove while he assembled biscuit materials, designing to begin that felicitous morning with the first good meal in two days.

Peck stood on his knees before the little stove, regulating the damper to control the roaring fire he had made, chuckling to himself in what Rawlins took to be the excess of spirits in his unaccustomed liberty.

"I was just a-thinkin', Rawlins," Peck said, twisting his long, spiny, dirty neck to look round, hand on the check-draft of the stove-pipe. "I fired you one time, didn't I?"

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"You bet you did, Peck."

"Yeah. That was one thing I made stick with the old woman. But I was a new rattle to her then, the paint was shiny on me. Well, I tell you, Rawlins, I'm goin' to be a feller that can hire 'em and fire 'em as fast as they come in the future days to come. I'm done with that woman. She ain't got money enough stacked up to coax one leg back to that ranch."

It was best not to say anything to Peck about his wife's hot hunt for him on the range, or the mystery his disappearance had been to everybody outside. Peck would be better off for knowing nothing of the trip to the ranch last night; at least he would be easier in his mind.

"I was just a-thinkin', Rawlins, where I'd 'a' been if I hadn't fired you that time. And where you'd 'a' been, too. I give you a start by firin' you, and made a place for myself to light when I come to the jump-off. I'm darned glad I fired you that time, Rawlins."

"It does look like it was for the best, all around, doesn't it? Well, I never held it against you. I wasn't very much struck on working as a herder for your wife, or anybody else."

"Yes, it was best for me and good for you, as the song says. That bunch ought to clean me up thirty-five hundred, maybe four thousand, freight and everything paid. That'll put in as nice a line of suitings as you can find west of St. Louis, and I can pull in the business as fast as I can handle it, for I've got style to my garments, Rawlins. I give 'em personality."

"You do if you give them the same touch you put in your own, Peck. I saw a pair of your pants hanging

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on the line down at the ranch one day, and it was hard to believe you weren't inside of them."

"*You* did, Rawlins? Was it that pencil-striped pair?" Peck inquired wistfully, a tender look in his goggling eyes.

"I don't remember the pattern, but it looked like somebody had cut you in two and your legs kept right on going. You've got more than personality in your clothes, Peck; more than individuality. I think you might advertise it as spirituality. I never saw so much soul in a pair of pants in my life. There was a coat of yours hanging on Tippie's hook behind the kitchen door——"

"Was it a light-blue worsted, shaped to the waist, full silk-lined, roll——?"

Rawlins shook his head solemnly, his hands spread on the biscuit dough as he paused an impressive moment in patting it out.

"I didn't notice the color, Peck; I was so struck by the resemblance to you I didn't have an eye for anything else. You take off more and leave it inside your clothes than any man I ever met. I think your wife feels your essence in your garments, too, from the loving look she turned on that coat every little while."

"Yeah, she was thinkin' how she'd like to have me inside of it to slam around with a bed slat, I'll bet you, Rawlins. Any time that old girl takes her heart out of the moth balls for the man she's married to you can straddle the Missouri River."

"My opinion is you've got her sized up altogether wrong, Peck."

"What the doo—*devil* do you know about it?" Peck

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challenged, the heat of anger on having his authority questioned giving a ripe tint to the sheepmanly tan his weeks on the open range had spread on him. "You never got a thump on the side of your head with a five-pound law book, you never had her grab both hands a-hold of your moustache and pull you down and spit in your face. I tell you, Rawlins, you don't know what you're talkin' about."

"I guess not, Peck. I yield the floor; the argument's yours. How'll you have your beans—with grease, or plain?"

"I like 'em floatin' in it. That's all the inside dope a single man's got on this marriage business," Peck went on, carrying on his complaint. "He sees 'em when they've got company, he don't know nothing about the sessions they have off on the side. Well, a man can't kill 'em off; he can't go that fur to shake 'em, Rawlins. Arsneck and strickenine wouldn't have no more effect on that old girl than powdered sugar, anyhow. I don't believe there ever was a pizen made that 'd fase her, but if she ever throws a leg over that fence to foller me in here, I'll stitch——"

They both broke for the door, Rawlins dropping his breakfast preparations as Peck dropped his threats against the peace and dignity of his wife. There was a burst of shooting, an outbreak of yells, across the creek in the direction of Peck's sheep. Peck made it into the open first, where he turned, his face white, his crawfish eyes wild.

"It's them fence fellers—they're killin' my sheep! Git your gun and come on!"

Peck streaked away like a hound with the last word,

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never looking back to see whether Rawlins was going to support him in the battle or leave him to the defence of his flock alone. He was out of sight under the creek bank when Rawlins came out with his rifle.

Four men were stirring confusion among the sheep, the witless animals contributing to their own destruction by crowding together in bunches. Rawlins believed these were the four men whom he had repulsed two days ago, come back to adjust the account. He hurried on to overtake Peck, not so much because he counted on him to be of any use, but to keep him from making a rash exposure of himself and getting killed the first rattle out of the box.

Peck was across the creek, loping up the gravelly shore where he had bedded his flock the night he arrived. The fence-riders who were clubbing and shooting the sheep had not seen Peck, although he was making no effort at all to conceal himself, tearing towards his abused flock, gun out, his concern for his property so great he had no thought of danger.

Rawlins paused on the high bank, where he had a vantage from which he could have worked great and sudden damage among the slaughterers of the flock, holding his fire on account of Peck. The new flockmaster, suddenly grown valiant in his liberty and property rights, was at least a hundred yards in the lead, but still far more than a pistol-shot distant from the nearest rider working havoc among the sheep. Rawlins knew the raiders carried rifles; it would be a small matter to knock Peck flat at that distance with one well-put shot.

Down the bank, through the shallow stream and

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after Peck the homesteader charged, heavy with the water that filled his boots, sagged down by the ammunition he had loaded every available pocket with, yelling to Peck to lie down and wait. If Peck heard, he didn't even look back. Straight toward his abused flock he went charging, his long legs straddling sage-clumps or taking them in clean leaps, at least sense enough in control above his roused and boiling anger to know he couldn't do any damage with his gun that far away.

When Peck came within what he calculated as shooting range, he stopped, braced himself with legs straddled wide, lifted his gun, gripping it in both hands, and cut loose. The roar of that ancient rim-fire forty-five drew the first notice of the fence-riders to the defenders of the flock. If they had seen Peck and Rawlins before that moment they evidently had thought them still too far away to be taken into account. They had been clubbing and shooting, and riding into the huddling little bunches of sheep as if bound to do as much destruction in the flock as possible before turning their attention to whoever was responsible for this insolent invasion.

They probably had concluded that Rawlins, or whoever was herding the sheep, had cut for safety at their approach. It was likely they had not counted on anybody but Rawlins having the effrontery to bring sheep inside the fence. A homesteader who would shoot a man exercising the feudal prerogative of burning his shanty might do something else equally dishonorable, even to driving a band of sheep inside the long-respected limit.

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At the sound of Peck's gun the man at whom he had fired whirled around from his atrocious slaughter, yelling warning to his friends. He threw down the club he had been mauling the sheep with, jerked his rifle from the scabbard under his leg, pinged a bullet so near Peck's head that Rawlins saw him jerk it, and duck as if a hornet had come at him.

That only appeared to make Peck hotter. On he went, slinging his long legs over brush and gully, waving his gun, yelling in high-pitched, rage-shaken voice: "Let them sheep alone! Dan your hides, let them sheep alone!"

Rawlins tore along after him, going with more caution and considerably less speed, crouching like an Indian as he dodged from bush to bush, ready to pitch in a shot the moment he saw he could do any good. The others began to peg away at Peck, who stopped again, legs braced wide as before, gun steadied in both hands, head to one side a little as he deliberately squinted and aimed.

To the surprise of Rawlins, and no doubt to the astonishment of the other side—for it was a long pistol-shot—Peck's careful aim was good. The man who was pushing forward in a bearing of contemptuous security, rifle raised to throw down in a one-handed shot, jerked back in the saddle as if he had ridden into a rope stretched across his way. He rode on that way a little distance, rifle and reins dropped, slumped off to one side, and fell.

Peck's pause had brought Rawlins up within a few yards of him. He made a spring and came alongside as Peck was throwing his feet for another charge.

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Rawlins made a grab and caught the back of his jumper.

"Get behind something, Peck! Here—down with you—quick!"

Rawlins was down on elbows and knees behind a clump of sage, with its little wart of earth heaped and held around its deep-striking, wide-spread roots. Old Peck stood looking down at him curiously, both hands gripping his gun, as if he did not understand the reason for a man whose valor he never had doubted up to that moment being in such a sweat to get something between himself and trouble.

The three sheep-killers were charging up, well spread out, their shots cutting the bushes over Rawlins' head. He pulled Peck's leg, wasting valuable time to get the old rascal, brave in a simpleton's ignorance of his danger, down out of that buzzing hot stream of lead.

While Rawlins' hand was still gripping Peck's bony shin, Peck's legs gave way as if he had been hamstrung. He sank down in a dazed, groping way to his knees, still holding to his gun with one hand; settled slowly, without a word or groan, and lay in a huddled bunch close beside Rawlins behind the little knuckle of earth.

Rawlins did not know whether Peck was killed or seriously wounded. There was no blood. He had heard the bullet strike Peck with a spat almost equal to hitting a stump with an axe. There was no time to investigate, or give Peck the assistance upon which his life, if life there was in him, might depend. The sheep-killers were standing off not above fifty yards, their guns quiet since Peck's disaster, spying cautiously

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around for sight of Rawlins, who had not fired a shot. It was likely they thought they had got him, too.

Now they came ahead, cautiously, to close in and finish it if anything remained to be done. Rawlins flattened down, and fired. They gave it back to him, hot and fast.

There was a confusion of striking bullets around him, an obscuration of dust, and smoke from his own gun. At the next sight he had, the middle saddle was empty. The horse was charging on straight toward him; it passed in terrified stampede, so near the earth flung up by its hoofs showered him where he lay.

The two remaining of the band had no intention of giving up the fight, for Hewitt was one of them, Rawlins saw. He had come to-day to close the matter; there would be no running away before a single man of the homesteader breed again.

They separated wider still, to flank him and drive him out. Rawlins shifted as the bullets began to cut in from the side, snaking himself on elbows, reserving something for the rush. He worked himself a few feet away from Peck, hoping the poor fellow might escape any further damage if there was an ember of life in him still.

Hewitt was on the right; he came pushing in with steady determination, holding his restive horse down to a slow walk. Rawlins resented his mean persistence. He slewed around, threw his gun across Peck's body, and fired. With the jump of his gun Hewitt threw in a shot that got Rawlins between elbow and wrist, twirling the rifle out of his hands.

Rawlins scrambled for Peck's pistol, Hewitt shout-

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ing to his companion, both of them rushing in for the finish. Rawlins was rising to his feet, Peck's gun in his left hand, to have it out in a whirlwind close, the chances all against him, as he knew too well. He was dazed; his right arm was numb and unresponsive. It was a bad corner for a man to be caught in; it was the end.

Hewitt was not twenty feet away, pistol lifted to throw down for the last shot, when a diversion was set up in the rear. Somebody began to shoot; somebody was riding in headlong charge through tall greasewood and sage, with a wild, high whoop that raised the hair to hear. Rawlins took a left-handed chance shot at Hewitt as he whirled his horse and galloped away.

Whoever it was that had charged in that desperate moment went on after the sheep-killers, the strident challenge, sharp as a steam siren, cutting over the noise of quick shooting. Rawlins stood on the little hump of earth to see what there was to be seen. The sheep-killers were hitting it up in a panic to get out of there. The one in pursuit pulled up and looked around, as if to see if there were any more.

Rawlins came down from the mound in amazement, which became double amazement on beholding Peck sitting up, looking very pale and sick, but far from a dead man yet. Peck was staring with the biggest eyes Rawlins ever had seen in a human head, hands pressed to his belly, breathing in sharp little puffs.

"It's your wife!" Rawlins said, wildly excited. "Peck———Peck! I tell you it's your wife!"

He shook Peck, as if to wake him. Peck looked up weakly.

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"She shot me!" Peck gasped. "She shot me through the guts!"

"No, no, Peck. She saved us—she saved us, I tell you. It's your wife!"

Peck had no time for comment or question, if he had the capacity or the interest for either. Mrs. Peck came tearing up, flinging herself from the saddle before the horse had answered her hard hand on the rein. She was on her knees beside Peck in a moment, his dazed head gathered against her pillowy bosom, groaning over him, tears streaming down her range-chafed face.

"Oh, Dowey darlin', you're all shot to slithers!" she moaned. "Oh, why didn't I git here sooner! Why—didn't—I git here—sooner!"

There was such a note of remorse and accusation in her wail as to verify Rawlins in the belief he had held all the time: that she was fond of Peck, and her harshness was only the rigor of her kind intention, her loving effort to reshape him to fit a place of honor in the land of sheep.

"Where are you shot, honey?" she asked, reclining Peck tenderly, his head on her lap.

"Here," said Peck, pressing his bread-basket, rolling his head from side to side as if the agony of his wound was beginning to make itself felt.

Mrs. Peck began to explore with tender hand, a doleful look of pity in her fat face.

"Why, there ain't no hole in you there, Dowey," she said gently, greater relief than surprise in her voice.

"Slammed clean through me—right there," Peck insisted, pulling his breath with a rattling sound.

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Mrs. Peck began to lay his anatomy bare in her anxious explorations. Rawlins, partly through delicacy, mainly on account of the blood he was losing and the pain of his own wound, turned aside. He began making such repairs as a handkerchief would provide, relieved to see no artery was cut, although one bone was broken.

This gave him great concern, involving the probability, as it did, of losing part of his arm. His anxiety over Peck was subsiding as that notable's strength increased, and Mrs. Peck declared there was no bullet hole in any part of his body between neck and crotch. Peck resented this, declaring he knew very well he was shot through the place to which his hand returned with solicitous hovering. He closed his eyes and lay with his mouth open, groaning, making a noise with every intake of breath like an old hinge.

Mrs. Peck removed the brooding hand after a gentle struggle, and bent over for a closer inspection of the spot.

"There *is* a bruise there, honey—it's turnin' purple and blue over a place as big as my hand!" she said. "Wherever in the world could that bullet 'a' went to? What made it flatten out agin you, honey, do you suppose? I never heard of one doin' that before. You've got a charmed life, Dowey—sure as you're born you've got a charmed life."

"What did you have in the pocket of your jumper, Peck?" Rawlins inquired, managing to grin, although his arm hurt him as if it was under a wagon wheel.

"Did you have a rock or something in your pocket, honey?" Mrs. Peck asked with gentle solicitation.

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Peck made a remarkable recovery when the investigation turned to the contents of his pocket. He sat up with a jerk, a red rush of resentment coming into his thin-edged face. He put his wife's hand away rudely.

"None of your dang business what I got in that pocket, or any other pocket," he said. "I'm my own man; I'm goin' to carry whatever I dang please in my pockets from now on."

"Why, of course you can, Dowey darlin'," Mrs. Peck said soothingly, looking at him with anxious uncertainty in her eyes.

"If anybody goes monkeyin' around my pockets hereafter in the future I'll stand 'em on their heads!" Peck threatened, his confidence in his position growing as he enlarged his articles of independence.

"Of course you will, Dowey, and you'll serve 'em right," said Mrs. Peck.

Peck glowered around, red veins in his big glassy eyes, looking savage and mean.

"Where in the hell's my gun, Rawlins?" he asked.

"There—your hat's on it, Peck."

"I'm goin' over to find that feller I shot," Peck announced, grabbing his gun, getting up with as much iron in his legs as he ever had. "If he ain't dead I'll finish him—comin' in here killin' off my sheep!"

Mrs. Peck looked at him with beaming admiration. She got up, proud of her husband's new importance, proud of the second place she had taken in that team.

"I'll go with you, darlin'," she proposed.

"You'll stay where you're at till you're called for, old lady," Peck put her in her place severely, turning

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on her as if he might begin a regimen of manual correction at any moment. "I'm goin' to stir my own kittle of mush from now on."

"All right, Dowey," she yielded meekly, happy in his mastery, Rawlins knew.

Peck went on about his vengeful business, Mrs. Peck turning to Rawlins as if to share her admiration, discovering his plight.

"Why, Ned, you're bleedin' all over the place!" she said. "Here—let me see your arm."

Rawlins told her there was nothing more to be done for temporary relief than what he had contrived already, but that he would be grateful if she would allow him to ride her horse to Lost Cabin to have the doctor attend his hurt, to which Mrs. Peck heartily agreed.

She brought the animal up, took the holster with her two efficient pistols from the saddle, and urged him to go at once. She was dressed as Rawlins never had seen her before, in complete male attire, her brown duck coat strained over her large back, a turn of more than a foot taken in the bottoms of her wide overalls.

Rawlins paused before mounting to thank her for her assistance in the moment of his extremity.

"It would have been all over with us in a minute more," he said.

"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner," she replied, with the modesty of true valor. "Edith left me a note that Mr. Peck was over here with you, but I didn't find it till after breakfast. I guess she went out lookin' for me, I guess she was worried when I was gone all night. Did he"—hesitantly, her eyes raised with a timid

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eagerness he never had seen in them before—"did he shoot one of them fellers, Ned?"

"He certainly did! He went after them like a hornet, left me so far behind I thought I'd never catch him. You've got a man now, Mrs. Peck; a man right down to the backbone."

"Yes," said Mrs. Peck serenely, sighing happily. "I've got a man at last!"

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CHAPTER XXIII

ANOTHER RUNAWAY

RAWLINS returned from Lost Cabin before noon, attended by the sheriff and coroner, the latter official bringing with him the identical set of sheepmen jurors that had served a few days previously over the first victim of the homesteader's war.

The coroner found a double job cut out for him this time. The raider who fell before Rawlins' rifle in that morning's battle was not dead, although shot through the body. He was a virile scoundrel, with the snake's tenacity of life in him, and if the coroner was disappointed in having the fellow as a subject for his official investigation, he was compensated by getting him as a patient. Peck had made a clean job of it. There was nothing left for the doctor side of the coroner to do in his case.

That was undoubtedly the most enthusiastic verdict ever returned by a coroner's jury in the Dry Wood country. It sounded much like a resolution by a chamber of commerce welcoming some new and important industry. The presence of these two handy men holding their own against great and vicious odds inside Senator Galloway's fence; that big band of sheep grazing peacefully, the morning's terrifying visitation quite forgotten, opened the gate of possibility to a new and prolific range.

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They made short work of that inquest, passing jokes over the subject as he lay on his back in the spot where Peck's big gun had brought him down. They loaded him into the coroner's wagon and hauled him away like so much refuse, the wounded man beside him on no higher plane of respect or valuation. They were liegemen of the oppressor, brought low in their arrogance, and nobody was sorry for their plight.

As before, the sheriff had nothing but praise for Rawlins, enlarged this time to include Peck, whom he surveyed with a perplexed look of questioning surprise. There was something like reservation of credulity in his attitude toward Peck, as if somebody had told him a tale of being bitten by a sheep, and pointed out that one as the animal responsible for the unexampled assault. But he was a discreet sheriff, with complete control over his tongue, no matter what his thoughts. He cast his eye around the country in sheepmanly appraisement, evidently not without plans of his own.

Mrs. Peck's pride in her valiant and efficient husband was beyond all measure. Whatever Duke had done to build up the fortunes and consequence of the family before his unromantic end in the creek, it was reduced to a point in comparison with Peck's deeds. Peck had taken sheep beyond sheep limit; he had broken the oppressor's hand and battered down his will.

That was the way Mrs. Peck saw it, at least. Rawlins' part in the venture was not considered or, if taken into account at all, only as a minor force in the historic event of Peck's sweeping invasion. Even the sheep, which had stampeded Peck into this glorious eminence

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against his power and intention, were not given the smallest word of credit in her glowing praise.

After the coroner's business was settled and the official party had gone away, Mrs. Peck transferred her saddle to Graball's back and returned to the ranch to fetch up a wagon and supplies. She and Peck appeared to have come to a complete understanding during Rawlins' absence. Neither of them had any intention of taking the sheep out of that refreshing pasture. She was puffed up with the red arrogance of a conqueror; all her fears of the fence and its lawless defenders had dissolved. She had a fighting man in the family now, who had made his place in that land of dusty flocks.

Mrs. Peck had put in the morning skinning the sheep killed in the raid. They had found forty-three, Peck said. Several more were crippled so badly they would have to be killed. Cheap, Peck said, echoing his wife's declaration, Rawlins knew. That was a small price to pay for a pasture that would take care of their sheep shut out of the forest reservation by Government restriction, which permitted drovers to pasture but half the number of animals they had run in the reserves in past years.

"I'll order Tippie to bring 'em in," Peck announced, swelling around in the double importance of large proprietor and handy man with a gun.

They were at Rawlins' house, which Peck, from his grand air, appeared to think he had acquired by right of conquest along with the rest of the territory inside Galloway's fence. Rawlins was lying on his cot, feeling pretty well out of the game on account of the pain

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in his arm; Peck getting dinner ready. The biscuits of the morning had burned up in the oven, and Peck was concentrating his talents on the preparation of a new batch.

"How's your arm?" Peck inquired, turning suddenly from his mixture, hands in the flour, as if it had just struck him to inquire into the misfortunes of a man whose part in that historic encounter had been so unheroic and small.

"Pretty good, Peck."

"You look kind of white around the gills, Rawlins, you'd better take it kind of easy for a while. Leave 'em to me if they come back."

"I'll nearly have to, old man."

"Yeah, that'll be all right. Doctor say he'll have to take any bones out of you, or anything?"

"No, he says he can save my arm. Did you help skin the sheep?"

"Yeah. Me and the old lady thought we might as well save them hides—they're worth six bits apiece. I'll order Tippie to bury them dead ones when he comes, and kill off the cripples and skin 'em. Me and the old lady——"

"Did you find that bullet in your pocket, Peck?"

Peck looked around again, leaning on his long bony arms, hands flat in the pan. His face was reproachful, his animated countenance under a cloud of displeasure. But he brightened up in a moment, making the dry, croaking sound in his throat that stood him for a laugh.

"It was there, all right, Rawlins," he confessed. "It was smashed as flat on one end as if it'd struck a rock."

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"You old iron-bound scoundrel!" said Rawlins, expressive of admiration.

This cheered Peck up. He chuckled, the elbow-joint of his neck working up and down.

"You remember the divorce book Riley lent me, Rawlins? Yeah. The old lady tore it up after she banged me around with it a while, and throwed the pieces in the fire. It didn't burn, though, not much of it. When she was gone I picked out some of the importantest pieces of it. I doubled 'em up and put 'em in my pocket, savin' 'em to have something to read on more than I ever expected it 'd ever do me any good in court. Them leaves made a wad two inches thick, I guess. Sleepin' on 'em, you know, and everything, pressed 'em as tight as if you'd put 'em through a steam pants-presser."

"Darned lucky thing for you, old feller."

"Wasn't it? I guess that pocket swung around in front of me when I was holdin' that old gun on 'em. The bullet got me right over my solar complexion. That's what knocked me out. If it hadn't been for them pieces of divorce book it 'd 'a' went clean through me."

"Well, I'll be darned!"

"Yeah. I know how a man in the ring feels when old Fitz puts one there on him, I tell you, Rawlins. It's one of them all-day-and-gone feelin's."

"It looked like all day for us, all right. If your wife had been a few seconds later you and I'd be gettin' out of the boat on the other side of the river about now. She's a fine woman, Peck. Be good to her, now you've got things coming your way."

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"That's where you're off, Rawlins; that's where you show you ain't experienced with 'em. I ain't goin' to ease off on her too dan quick. I'm goin' to camp right up here with that little bunch of stews till she comes up with all the cash money I want and gives me back my clothes. You can bet your neck I'm goin' to have a check book of my own, too, and a square break on all the profits of this game, if I hang around here. She's promised me."

"That's only reasonable. She can't expect to keep a man like you out on the range with a band of sheep, in the standing of a hired man around the place. You've shown her you can do some thinking. Keep it up."

"Yeah, and I've showed her I can do some shootin', too. That's what put a crimp in the old girl. That water-melon-faced man she had before me wouldn't fight a snake. I guess I'll show Tippie where he gits off at, too, the first time I see him."

"I believe I'd go kind of slow with Tippie, if I were you," Rawlins suggested, with friendly warning. "Tippie's a man of few words, but you might get a surprise if you stepped on his feet. Why not treat him just as if nothing had ever passed between you? Tippie's a valuable man; you'll need him to do the field work if you're going to sit in the office and think."

"I'll handle him in my own way, Rawlins."

"Go to it, then. I was just suggestin' something for your own profit."

"And if I ever ask him for the change again," Peck said ominously, "I'll git it, or I'll tell him to hit it up out of here."

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"Well, you're the man of the family at present, anyhow. Don't let your tail-hold slip."

"You watch me, Rawlins."

Peck's mess of biscuits did not turn out very blithesomely. One of them would have served very well in place of the pages from the divorce book, Rawlins thought, finding them about as hard as oysters to open, especially with one hand.

"I guess I left out the bakin' powder, Rawlins," Peck explained, "and I guess maybe I forgot the salt."

"You got in the flour and water, anyhow, Peck. They're all right."

"I've et worse," Peck said, with a sort of vindictive exculpation for his culinary crime. "When I first tried my hand at makin' flopjakes on the range they was tougher than any sheep-hide you ever stuck a knife in. I used to read in story books how them hunters and cowboys cooked their bread by windin' a lump of dough on the end of a stick. Did you ever try it, Rawlins?"

"No, Peck."

"It don't work," said Peck solemnly. He looked across the table, flour on one wing of his moustache, a choking stare of seriousness in his big eyes. "It's a fake; it won't work. No man ever lived that could bake a piece of dough fit to eat on the end of a stick over a fire. It gits ashes on it, Rawlins, and mine got full of ants and bugs."

Peck's recollection of his experiments with a wad of dough on the end of a stick seemed to make him sad. He sat looking at his plate as if he saw the past mar-

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shaled for review under his eyes like phantoms in a crystal.

"Funny about that divorce book, too," he said, looking up quickly. "I'd been studyin' up on that book like a lawyer, thinkin' it was goin' to be the wedge I'd use one of these days to split me off from the old lady, but it works around the other way on in the end. It made me solid with her by savin' my life. If I'd 'a' been killed this morning, Rawlins, I believe she'd 'a' kicked me into my grave like a cat."

Rawlins shook his head in forceful denial, although he felt that Peck was not so very far off the truth, hollow instrument of understanding that he was.

"I think you've got her sized up wrong, Peck."

"No, I ain't," Peck declared hotly. "You never had her grab her hands in your moustache and try to bat your brains out agin a rock. But I'll forgive her for all her rough work and raw deals if she'll show me she's reformed enough to hand over a bale of that long-green. If she ain't, my first plan goes through. I'll sell them sheep and hit the breeze back to St. Joe. She's got to show me; she's got to hunt Riley up and give him back his job. If it hadn't been for Riley lendin' me that divorce book where'd I 'a' been right now? She'd 'a' been plantin' toadstools on my grave."

Peck went off to attend his sheep after dinner, his gun against his leg, no more troubled over having killed a man than if he had been doing that sort of thing right along. He seemed to take so much satisfaction out of the event, and enlarge himself to such overspreading importance, that Rawlins wondered whether he was in the way of becoming a killer, as he had heard

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of trifling and insignificant men turning out in the old days of Dodge City, and other lawless towns of the Kansas frontier. Peck was like a sheep-dog that had tasted the blood of its flock. He would do to watch.

Mrs. Peck drove in when the sun was low, bringing supplies. She reported everything quiet at the fence, nobody in sight, no interference with her passage, which she had been ready to contest with any force, her courage had mounted so high. But she wore a worried look, in spite of her day's triumphs.

Peck was still afield with the sheep; they could hear him singing "After the Ball." He would be starting them to the bedding-ground soon, and was getting himself in tune for the melodious whooping with which he would round out the labors of the day.

Mrs. Peck got down from the high seat of the wagon, her eyebrows pulled together in a black knot. She looked at Rawlins, who had come to the door to greet her, as if she had something to say that concerned him; seemed to reconsider, going about her unloading silently.

"Ned, what do you think?" she said presently, turning to him abruptly. "Edith's run off!"

"Run off?" he repeated in amazement, his heart seeming to fall like a bucket in a well. "What in the world would she want to run off for?"

"You can search me! Unless it's a man. I think maybe she's been writin' to some more of them mail-order fellers, and one of 'em's coaxed her to run off and meet him."

"I don't think she'd do a thing like that."

"She left early this morning—Elmer come in, he

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said Al Clemmons saw her pass, headin' toward Jasper. She can't git there before to-morrow afternoon—I'll have plenty of time to go over to Albin Jacobsen's in the morning and telephone the sheriff to stop her. I wanted to ask you if you think I ought to, or just let her go her way."

"Let her go her way," Rawlins replied, resentful of Edith's treachery, as he felt the desertion to be. "If she wants to cut out and leave us that way, let her go. But why would she run away? She wouldn't have to do it, would she?"

"No, she's her own man now. But it looks mighty queer to me."

"It certainly does look queer."

"She didn't leave me no letter nor nothing, only that little note tellin' me Mr. Peck was up here."

"I'm pretty sure she's got something in view we don't understand, and I can't believe it's a man," Rawlins said, his generosity rising up to the girl's defence. "She'll probably be back in three or four days."

"I don't know what to do—I don't want to see her go wrong—but she's her own man."

"I don't believe I'd interfere in her plans, whatever they are," he advised. "If she's running off with—if she's just running off, that's her own business; you couldn't stop her if you wanted to. If she's just gone to Jasper to get some pretty clothes or a little hat, or something, she'd resent your interference, don't you think?"

Mrs. Peck looked off across the valley, on the farther rim of which Peck was beginning to raise his voice

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in the evening round-up of the sheep. She drew a big breath, as of inspirational relief, the perplexity of her brows relaxing, calm settling over her face.

"I'll ask Mr. Peck about it," she said.

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CHAPTER XXIV

A FOOL AND HIS GUN

THE seriousness of Rawlins' wound made a daily trip to the doctor necessary. Mrs. Peck had gone back to the ranch the same evening she came with the wagon and the startling news of Edith's desertion, leaving the two men to hold what they had won. Peck's great interest in the welfare of his sheep took him abroad early and kept him away all day, except for a dash in at noon for dinner.

This threw Rawlins on his own one-armed resources very largely, and he found little that he could do. He had not been able to devise any scheme by which a one-armed man could wash dishes, for one thing. Owing to that, things had a distressing way of accumulating about the place, Peck being content to scrape the plates of the last meal for the next. Peck had not even thought to volunteer any help in saddling Graball for the daily trip to Lost Cabin. By using his teeth Rawlins had managed the cinch in a hazardous fashion that held until he got to town, where the doctor tightened the girth to carry him home.

Several days passed that way, with no further interference by the forces which had dominated that illegally occupied territory so long. While Mrs. Peck had visited them daily, news of Edith was still lacking. The sheepwoman appeared to have recovered from

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her first flurry, but Rawlins was beginning to feel the strain of anxiety. He believed there was something between Mrs. Peck and Edith which the sheepwoman had concealed, responsible for the girl's sudden desertion of the ranch.

A feeling of resentment toward Edith for her precipitate action, her cold expression therein of complete aloofness from his affairs and all interest in them, had hardened Rawlins to her welfare for a while. Now this feeling was clearing out of his mind, giving place to fear that Edith had not gone entirely of her own free will. The girl was not so shallow and heartless as to pull out like that after the unworded understanding that had grown up between them. She would have come to him with her troubles, he believed, unless she had been goaded beyond forbearance or driven away outright.

Rawlins had returned from Lost Cabin shortly before noon on the fifth day since the fight, a cloud of anxiety concerning Edith darkening the outlook, even obscuring everything beyond that hour. He seemed to be living in little jerks of time, hope, expectation, clearing a space an arm's length ahead, like a man traveling in a heavy fog.

He unsaddled Graball and turned him out to graze, the horse having become so entirely domesticated and affectionate that he would come running at a call or a whistled summons, and turned his one-handed efforts to preparing the mid-day meal. He had brought potatoes and unions, unusual luxuries, from town that trip, with anticipation of an old-time Kansas dish of the two vegetables sliced and boiled together for sup-

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per that evening. If he could get Peck to prepare the vegetables when he came in for dinner, the rest could be managed with one hand.

Rawlins was not quite certain that his own gloomy state of mind was responsible, or whether Peck had been sulky the past two days. He had appeared to be somewhat less communicative and voluble than usual, his manner sarcastic on the least provocation. Fancied or real, Peck's attitude had not given much concern. Now, when Peck came in for dinner, there was no mistaking his ill-humor. Rawlins wondered if he had stepped on the new flockmaster's toes.

"Taters, huh?" said Peck, taking a peep into the sack. "It's about time you was chippin' in something on the grub, Rawlins. You've been eatin' off of me ever since the old lady brought up that grub."

"All right, Peck," Rawlins returned good-naturedly, although he felt a desire for a hot retort to the inhospitable charge. "There's some onions in the sack, too. I thought maybe I could get you to clean some of both of them for supper. I could manage to cook them all right."

"It don't look like you've managed to cook very much dinner," Peck said contemptuously. "I tell you right now, Rawlins, I'm gittin' dan tired of doin' all the work around this joint. And you've got the gall to ask me to clean onions on the side. I wouldn't clean the dan things for a dollar apiece, and I wouldn't eat 'em for five. You can't put all the dirty work off on me around here, I tell you, Rawlins."

"I'm sorry, old feller, but you'll have to take it as it comes," Rawlins said in a friendly dispassionate way.

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"I've been doin' it ever since I landed here," Peck sneered, his glassy goggle eyes seeming to advance and recede in their shallow sockets as he leered at Rawlins. "Look at them dishes, look at this dan crummy joint! It looks to me like you'd clean things up, Rawlins. You can afford to, me furnishin' the grub."

"The door's open, Peck, if you don't like the kind of hospitality I'm able to offer," Rawlins said.

"Is yat so?" Peck chattered, with insolent boyish mockery. "You wait till I go, then, will you? You ain't got nothing on me because you killed a man. Them coroner fellers said the one I killed was twice as big as yours. You kind of want to watch your step when you talk about firin' me out of any door, Rawlins."

"Peck, you're talkin' like a fool," Rawlins said calmly.

He was not afraid of Peck, although his pistol was hanging on the wall behind the door, where he had relieved himself of it on his return from town, nor was it surprising to see this villainous streak of egotism and overbearing selfishness in the man. Rawlins had seen it growing from the day when Peck's lucky shot knocked a man over in the fight, but it had developed faster than expected.

"I've got as much right here as you have," Peck declared, scowling and glowering as he slammed a slab of bacon down to haggle off some for the pan in his bungling way. "Where'd you 'a' been at if I hadn't run them sheep of mine in here and stood them fellers off? Who done the fightin' that time? that's what I want to know. I'll bet you money if you found the

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bullet that went through that other feller you'd see it come out of my gun. And that ain't no dream."

"You're welcome to all the glory, Peck."

"You and Tippie tried to git me shot up over there when I was green and didn't know the ropes. You thought you was pullin' something smart on a dude from St. Joe; you thought you'd either git me killed off or run out of here so I'd be out of your way with Edith. I was green, all right, but I wasn't so green I couldn't see your game. Where 're you at now with Edith? She's shook you cold; she's gone chasin' off to meet some man that's pumped her full of hot air. Maybe he'll marry her, maybe he won't. I know how I'd bet."

Rawlins sat still, keeping his mouth shut. But he was considering, with gravity that amounted to a great peril for Peck, whether he ought not to grab the hammer that lay on a cross-studding and knock the slanderous scoundrel cold. His muscles were setting for a quick reach and a quicker blow, when his more generous nature restrained him. Peck was not without justification in his rancorous recollection of that plot against his safety and dignity. There was not much that he could say in self defence.

"You ain't got nothing on me," Peck insisted meanly. "This is as much my place as yours. You couldn't 'a' held it down if I hadn't been here to stand 'em off."

Peck allowed the argument to rest there, concentrating his talents on frying the bacon, which he always managed to put a black border around, with curled-up ends almost raw. He slashed and speared his food vin-

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dictively all through the meal, looking up from his operations occasionally with his round glassy eyes more bulging and expressionless than usual, as if to begin the one-sided quarrel again. But he evidently thought better or worse of it, and held his peace until he was through.

When Peck pushed back, everything cleared up, he seemed to be in a better humor. His thin face was glowing with replenishment; he stroked the grease and coffee out of his prideful moustache with both hands, giving a twirling, wringing movement to his fingers that was marvelously efficient for the job. He looked at Rawlins with the expressionless round stare of an octopus in his big eyes, in which there seemed to be something of insolence, something of malevolent greed, yet all so far dispersed over the hard glittering globes as to be elusive and undefinable.

"I'm goin' to be square with you, Rawlins," Peck said, producing a wallet as suddenly as it was astonishing. "I'm goin' to pay you, cash money, for your shack and so-called improvements on this place, and take your receipt for it. Then you're goin' to hit the breeze."

Rawlins was so amazed by this sudden discovery of Peck's hand that he sat across the table from him, staring. He was uncertain whether Peck was trying to pull off some kind of a joke of his own, to even past scores, or whether he had some fool notion in his head for getting possession of the homestead, the choicest site for sheep headquarters in that locality, as the sheepmen on the coroner's jury had said.

"What the devil are you drivin' at, Peck?" he asked

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at length, as Peck began to put money down on the table beside a folded piece of paper he had taken from the greasy leather wallet that never could have been his own.

Up came Peck's gun, which he steadied in his peculiar fashion with both hands, the left clasping the wrist of the right.

"I mean you're goin' to hit the breeze out of here," Peck announced, trying to look mean, succeeding fairly well. "There's five hundred dollars, and there's a bill of sale for you to sign. If you make a break for a gun I'll bust you wide open!"

"Peck, you're a bigger fool than I thought you were," Rawlins told him, apparently without any deeper feeling than a man would have in stating an obvious fact.

"I'll show you how big a fool I am if you keep on talkin', Rawlins. I'm just big enough fool, maybe, to shoot you like I did that other feller. Who's here to swear you didn't pull your gun first?"

"Well, anyhow," said Rawlins, apparently undisturbed, "I decline your offer for my improvements and possession of this place. It wouldn't do you any good even if you could make your bluff go."

Rawlins, calm as he seemed, was boiling with inward rage. He was picking up and casting away the fugacious schemes which came rushing into his mind for getting the upper hand of Peck. It was as if he ran swiftly along in a dream, snatching at something on which his life depended, only to clasp nothing, his despair increasing at every step. Peck's cupidity, his new sense of importance, with the promises of reward

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which Rawlins knew to be behind it all, might impel him even to murder. He was cunning enough to know he had a long chance, in that none too particular community, of getting away with his plea.

"You'll have to pull your freight, money or no money—you can take it or leave it—that's up to you."

And this was the man, thought Rawlins, who talked simperingly a few days ago about suitings, and the allurements of St. Joe, and bewailed the loss of pencil-striped trousers, and a blue coat cut waist-form, with roll lapels. Cupidity had made a tyrant out of a fool, as had happened before in the history of princes and potentates, and plain scrubs of the stripe of Peck. Here was declaration of war following war, as always falls out among the victors, a new and more distressing conflict over the spoils.

The best thing to do was to try to play him on a little while for an opening, and grab his chance when it came.

"I'll send your things over to the hotel at Lost Cabin in a day or two," Peck said. "You can go and claim 'em or you can leave 'em, but if you ever show your face around here agin I'll bust you wide open!"

"All right, Peck; you're the boss right now," Rawlins seemed to yield. "Shove that paper over here—I'll sign it."

"No, you don't! You don't git me to put this old gun down till you're saddled up and gone out of here. Come around here and sign it, and watch your step!"

Peck got up, backing away from the chair, keeping his gun held on Rawlins, his bony shoulders haunched up, head to one side, one eye squinting along the barrel. Rawlins pushed his chair away from the table, trying

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to assume a dejected and conquered mien. He went slowly around the end of the table where Peck's old Mexican hat lay on the slab of bacon from which their dinner had been cut. The handle of the butcher knife presented a hopeful invitation to Rawlins' eye as he passed, unseen before that moment, unthought of until that breath.

Rawlins snatched the knife and made a lunge at Peck, who backed off trying to cock his pistol, a precaution which he had overlooked, one to which Rawlins perhaps owed his life. Rawlins jabbed the knife against Peck's ribs, disconcerting his business of raising the hammer—it was a single-action, old-time weapon—which slipped from under his thumb and came down with a roar. The bullet went somewhere; Rawlins was not concerned where just then, knowing it had not gone through him.

"Drop it!" he yelled, making Peck jump with the threat of sudden death he put into the command.

Peck let it go. There was a look of terror in his bulging eyes as he lifted his long arms and begged for his life. He backed off, his legs striking the cot drawn against the wall, bloodless agony in his face, Rawlins pressing him unmercifully.

"Don't kill me, Rawlins! For God's sake, don't kill me!" Peck begged. "I wasn't goin' to hurt you—it was only a bluff."

"Yes, I'm going to kill you!" Rawlins said savagely, pushing the knife till it bit. "You're not fit to live, you traitor!"

Peck begged in broken ejaculations as Rawlins faced him to the wall and stood him there with raised hands

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appealing to the roof. Rawlins dropped the knife, snatched his gun from the holster hanging in its accustomed place behind the door.

"Yes, I'm going to kill you!" he said again, with the unaccented tremolo of passionate rage rising from a base wrong. "Yes, I'm going to kill you!" repeating it like the click of a wheel in stated revolution.

"It's the old woman's fault!" Peck pleaded. "Kill her if you kill anybody. For God's sake, don't shoot me—don't shoot me!"

"Yes, I'm goin' to shoot you!" Rawlins said, in that same panting, hasty, hard voice, believing in his soul that he was going to do it.

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CHAPTER XXV

THE PENITENT

RAWLINS began to cool down in a little while, seeing the ridiculousness of the situation. Peck was only a comedian, take him at his worst; he could not enact tragedy without a clowning grotesqueness that made it a joke. There was a laugh for the sheriff even in his method of killing a man.

"Peck, I'm going to let you live—just now," Rawlins told him, after holding him against the wall, hands up between the low joists, until he was stiff with fright. "But if I ever catch you with a gun on you again, anywhere, any time, I'll kill you on sight. Take off that belt!"

Peck fumbled at it, weak in the knees, trembling in every joint. Rawlins motioned him to throw it under the cot, which he did, staggering as he tried to stand straight again, terror had made such a drain on his strength. This business of killing men was not all he had thought. It seemed to have its drawbacks and humiliations, as well as its flashes of glory.

Rawlins kicked Peck's gun under the cot along with the belt that had sustained it in its brief days of swelling triumph and growing insolence. Peck's eye was on the greasy wallet and pile of greasy, sheepland money on the table.

"Rawlins," he appealed, turning in the supplication

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of abject cowardice, "let me take that money and hit it to hell out o' here before the old woman comes!"

"Not on your life!" said Rawlins. "Get the dish-pan."

Peck moved limply about the order, rolling his unquiet eyes on Rawlins' gun, which followed him in every movement, not more than two feet from a vital part.

"Fill it up with onions," Rawlins commanded, as Peck stood with the pan, a dumb appeal in his glassy eyes.

"For God's sake, Rawlins!" Peck pleaded, "I never could stand 'em—they'll kill me!"

"You'd just as well die one way as another," Rawlins told him, the gun inexorably approaching his ribs.

Peck filled the pan, fishing the last onion out of the sack, and sat on the floor under Rawlins' directions, the utensil between his long legs, where he went to work on his bitter penance. Rawlins sat in the chair that Peck had occupied lately, his gun close to the back of Peck's long neck, sending chills that raised his hair through that valiant man-slayer now and then by putting the cold muzzle of it to his skin.

"I've got myself in a hell of a fix follerin' that old woman's lead," said Peck, his fright beginning to turn from cold to hot. He sweated as he worked and wept, his burning eyes on the door.

"You have," Rawlins agreed coldly.

Peck shook his head like a dog that has been dosed with cayenne, shivering in the agony of his torture. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve, making a little squealing groan.

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"Let me go without the money, Rawlins," he begged. "Let me git out of that door and I'll travel so fast it 'd take two men to count me."

"When you're through with that job we'll talk about what's next," Rawlins replied. He touched Peck's sweating neck with the gun, sending his temperature down ten degrees.

"I'll give you them sheep—you can take 'em—if you'll let me git out of here," Peck proposed.

"If I took all your interest in them I wouldn't even own a bleat," Rawlins said. "You've done a lot of talkin' about showin' people where they get off, Peck. You're pretty close to the edge right now yourself. Get busy!"

Peck peeled along in the lachrymal vapor that even his long back and neck could not hoist his eyes above, sniffling, snorting, tears dropping on his degraded moustache, which seemed so dejected and limp that it never could stiffen in its old-time pride again. Presently he began to talk, trying to make a case against his wife.

"She was behind that dang fool move of mine, Rawlins," Peck said, information which Rawlins scarcely needed, after seeing the wallet and greasy bills.

"She said if I'd take my old gun and bluff you out of here she'd give me that check book she promised and I could go the limit. She was stuck on this place for sheep; she wanted it worse than she ever wanted to marry a man in her life. You was a cripple, she said; you couldn't do nothing with it, and some sheepman'd come along here some day before long and boot you

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off. But I wasn't goin' to hurt you, Rawlins. That gun-play of mine was all a bluff."

"I told you once that was a dangerous thing to try inside of this fence, Peck."

"I believe you, Rawlins. But I wouldn't 'a' hurt you. If you'd 'a' said you wasn't goin' to take that money and stood up for your rights, I'd 'a' backed down. That's what I had it lined up to do. I figgered you'd let me have that money if you didn't want it."

Rawlins was not moved to abate the penance in any degree by this plea. He said nothing; only put the creepy gun-barrel to Peck's sunburnt neck.

Peck worked on in desperate expedition for a while, keeping his mouth shut except when he released a groan of agony or sigh of hopelessness for his prostrate greatness.

"She's comin' up here this afternoon," Peck said after a long silence. "By thunder! I believe that's her now!"

"Keep your seat," Rawlins said.

Peck thought better of his attempt to scramble up out of his disgraceful posture, the pan of onions between his thighs. But he looked round at Rawlins with one last plea in his red eyes.

"Let me tell her I'm just a-peelin' onions for supper," he begged. "Put your gun up, Rawlins, and let me tell her that. If she knows you made me do it she'll set on me the rest of my life."

"You were my guest," Rawlins reproached him, "and you pulled your gun on me and tried to rob me,

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you skunk! I believe you'd 'a' killed me if you'd got a chance at my back. Go on with that job."

Peck's imagination was at work through his ears. It wasn't his wife; it wasn't anybody at all. He went on with his melancholy task, working silently except for his sniffling and snorting and peculiar little squeaks of torture when he dropped the knife now and then to drag the sleeve of his jumper across his eyes. He came to the last onion in time, his eyes so swollen and red that he seemed to leer malevolently on his tormentor when he looked round to announce the completion of his penance.

"Rawlins," he begged contritely, "let me have one bill of money off of that pile and turn me loose. I'll leave this country so fast it'll singe my hair. You can see how it'll be with me, Rawlins, if that woman comes here and ketches me. I'll be sentenced to jail all the rest of my life."

Rawlins knew Peck was right about that, for Mrs. Peck's respect would vanish like the plating on base jewelry the minute she saw her husband's failure in the underhanded thing she had inspired him to undertake, and his degradation to the level of a worm before a one-handed man. He was not moved by any pity at the prospect for Peck. Whatever he might get out of that marital adventure in future would be no more than he deserved. But there was another side of it to consider, which Peck's proposal suggested.

That was the punishment and humiliation of Mrs. Peck by aiding her disaffected spouse to quit her in that cold and summary style. That would hit her about as hard as a divorce, for the story would go over the

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sheep country, from the railroad on the north to the railroad on the south, and sheepmen and their red ladies would laugh over it in greasy delight, for Mrs. Peck was not a universal favorite, Rawlins had learned lately. Her reputation was bad in and around Lost Cabin, where she had the name of hard and tricky dealing, of hogging water and range to which she had no right under the apportionment such as other sheepmen respected.

There would be no sympathy for her on the range; the story of her comical mail-order husband's desertion would overshadow the diverting news of her marriage which had spread around with chuckles and grins lately. About the surest way for him to play even with Mrs. Peck was to speed her anxious husband in his unfaithful design. Peck went on with his argument, as if he had read Rawlins' thoughts and hoped to bring him around.

"If you'll let me take a bill of that money—just one bill, I don't care how little it is—I'll hit it up so fast away from here I'll set the grass afire. She'll never ketch me this time if you'll let me go, Rawlins. You can't prove nothing on her, you've only got my word for it she was at the bottom of this steal, but if you'll let me hit it up for St. Joe right now you'll put a crimp in her that'll double her up like she had cholera morbus. You can take the rest of that dan money and stick it in your jeans for damages and trouble and hurt feelin's and let me hop out of here before she shows up. She'll think I took it all."

"And you'll hop off somewhere and get a gun and come back and shoot me in the neck," Rawlins said

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with recriminatory bitterness. "You're so crooked I wouldn't trust you around the corner of the house."

"If I ever pick up a gun again," said Peck, lifting his hand as if taking his oath on it, "you can shoot me with a bootjack on sight. I've had enough of that dan gun, I wish to criminy I never saw it. I tell you, Rawlins, I'm done with guns; I'm through."

"If I thought you were tellin' the truth, Peck, I'd let you go. But how am I to know?"

"Well, I tell you, Rawlins: you come with me to Lost Cabin and hold that gun of yours agin my ribs till you see me on the stage hittin' it up for the railroad, if you doubt my word. I tell you I'm cured. I wouldn't no more touch another gun than I'd pick up a red-hot horseshoe. Give me a bill off that pile to pay my way to the railroad and I'll ride the bumpers to St. Joe. You can keep the rest; you can tell her I took it all."

"I don't want any of it, Peck. Leave me the wallet and this paper you had drawn up for me to sign. I can use them. Take the rest and go."

Peck jumped at the word as if he had heard thunder. He stiffened eagerly, his red eyes shining.

"Say, you ain't stringin' me, are you, Rawlins?" he asked doubtfully.

"Take it and go—before I change my mind."

Peck grabbed the money and put it in the side pocket of his notable bullet-proof jumper, snatched his big hat off the side of bacon and broke for the door. He stuck his head out for a look around, tooling it in his peculiar way as if testing the wind before hoisting his sail. Then he set out one foot, cautiously, with a long, strid-

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ing movement, just as if his wife stood sentinel out there a little way, and he had to go with great cunning to slip past her rough and ready hand.

The heel of the other foot was the last sight Rawlins had of anything belonging to the corporeal entity of Dowell Peck. Which way he went, or how fast, Rawlins never knew. When he went out in a little while to see, Peck had disappeared as completely as if he had taken one hop that was to land him in St. Joe.

Rawlins was not troubled about the possibility of Peck's vengeful return. Heeled with that much money, urged on by the desire to be free of his matrimonial entanglements and back among the sartorial charms of St. Joe, Peck would go right on. If he should miss the stage at Lost Cabin he very likely would beat it to the railroad. Rawlins believed, and correctly, as time proved, that the sheeplands would know Peck no more.

Rawlins picked up the unsigned bill of sale and read it, not having seen the contents before. It carried out what Peck had said, for, while the writing doubtless was Peck's, with many capitals for common words, many flourishes and some short cuts in spelling, there was a cunning about the composition beyond the capacity of that romantic cavalier. It was the hand of Peck, but the mind of his wife.

Together with the greasy wallet, now empty to the leather, Rawlins put the bill of sale in the drawer of the kitchen table that served him for all purposes, left the pan of onions where it was, but got Peck's gun and belt from under the cot and hung them behind the door.

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Then he went outside to watch around for the next act in that day's eventful doings.

It was at least two hours after Peck's going, the sun standing at mid afternoon, when he saw Mrs. Peck approaching from the direction of the sheep, which Peck had ranged out that morning some distance farther up the creek than ever before. She stopped at the top of every slight rise as she came along, to search the valley in the vicinity of the sheep, which were spread wide. She was looking for Peck, Rawlins knew. Very likely she had appointed to meet him there to get the news of his success, being too crafty to compromise herself by appearing at the house before the thing was settled.

Watching her wary, doubtful progress toward the house, Rawlins concluded to conceal himself in the buffalo wallow and see how she would take it when she arrived. He left the door standing open, the butcher knife on the floor where he had dropped it, the pan of onions beside the table as Peck had released it from the embrace of his romantic legs. But Peck's pistol he belted around himself, and his own rifle he took down from the wall and hid.

Mrs. Peck rode up from the creek in the same perplexed, hesitant, cautious way. Every little while she stopped, looking around anxiously. When she reached the house she hesitated a distance off, as if debating whether to dismount or ride to the door. Finally she rode on, slowly, drew up in front of the door some twenty or thirty feet away from it, leaned and looked into the house. Then she dismounted, leaving her horse standing, and went in.

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She came out almost at once, so quickly that Rawlins, who had left his concealment to go to the house and have it out with her, had to dodge behind a bush, for he was not ready to be seen as long as she was piling up evidence of her guilt by her baffled and anxious search of the premises for signs of something that would account for the apparent desertion of the place. When she had disappeared around the house, Rawlins went forward. He met her as she reappeared, bursting around the corner fairly panting with the impatience of her suspense.

"Oh, there you are, Ned," she said, startled, turning as white as her tough harsh skin could become without a long bleaching. "I've been lookin' all over for you."

"Without expecting to find me," he said, with such a cold, hard manner as to cause her to glance at him quickly, feigning she did not understand.

"I thought I'd either find you or Mr. Peck around the place," she said.

"Sure. Especially Mr. Peck. Well, Mr. Peck isn't here."

She was looking at the two guns swinging on Rawlins, one of which she recognized with a start that seemed to make her eyes jump. She read the suggestion of what had happened to Peck in the display of his gun, as Rawlins had intended her to get it right between the eyes that way.

She stood looking at Rawlins, the blood gone out of her face, her mouth open without a word to fill it. She was a squat, broad, coarse figure in her man's coat and upturned overalls, with greasy sombrero pulled down

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on the back of her head to the ears. Her sex did not assert itself in one gentle, comely line.

"He did the best he could to put through what you started him out to do, madam," Rawlins said with stern arraignment, "but you went too heavy on a chance shot that made a weak bad man out of a fool. Peck was a crow down in his gizzard. He isn't here any longer."

She stood there swallowing dry lumps, gulping, staring, wetting her lips with her tongue.

"You didn't—you didn't—kill him, did you, Ned?"

"He was too damned onery to kill!" said Rawlins vehemently. "But he's dead to you from this day on."

Mrs. Peck appeared entirely overwhelmed, whether by guilt, remorse, a sense of her treachery, Rawlins could not tell. Only that she was crushed, smashed flat, her boisterous assurance gone, her loud authority silenced in her vulgar mouth. She did not attempt any denial, nor utter one weak word of defence. She was caught and convicted, and she realized it. Whatever her accomplishments in a business way, effrontery she had not learned.

"Come in; I've got something of yours I want to give you," Rawlins ordered, rather than invited.

Perhaps Mrs. Peck thought it was the money. At any rate she did not hesitate, but entered as Rawlins stepped aside at the door to let her pass. She stopped short a little way within the door, looking around with renewed fear on sight of the disorder that had urged her out a few minutes before in search of the answer. She was about to get the answer now, and she was afraid.

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Rawlins took the empty wallet from the drawer, handed it to her, silently. She took it, opened it, turned it with hopeless blankness, a stricken, sick look in her eyes. Rawlins unfolded the paper with Peck's writing on it, which, if he had signed under the threat of Peck's gun, would have made him homeless, displaying it at arm's length before her eyes.

"You see it isn't signed," he said, and folded it again, and put it in his pocket. "Here," he offered, pushing the pan of onions toward her with his foot, "take these away with you if you want them—they're seasoned with Peck's tears. You'll never see him again. He took the money you gave him to force on me at the point of his gun, and left. He was glad to go. I let him leave because he said, and I believed him, it would hurt you more to have him desert you than to have him killed."

Mrs. Peck turned to the door, went out, stood a little while looking around as if she expected to see Peck's vanishing figure at the top of the hills somewhere. Rawlins went out after her, wondering what the reaction would be. Violent, he believed, judging from the smothered fire which was so entirely buried under this load of guilt and inescapable scandalous disgrace that not a spark of it was to be seen in her eyes.

"You're to blame," she said, sorrowfully rather than vindictively; "you drove him away."

"No, you're the one that did it," he corrected her. "He's been waiting for his chance ever since you started to make a sheepman out of him, and you know it."

Somebody was coming in a wagon from the direction

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of Lost Cabin, along the old trail that used to run across the creek at that place in the days before Galloway's fence was built. The mark of the old road was to be seen yet between Rawlins' stackyard and house, and this wagon, the sudden sound of its clucking as it lurched over the long-disused road startling their attention, was heading down that way. It was not more than a quarter of a mile off when they saw it first, two people on the seat, a led horse following behind.

Mrs. Peck turned to Rawlins with a little color in her face, a little glinting of unfriendly vindictive fire in her eyes.

"That's Edith and Tippie," she said. "He follered her to Jasper the day she left. They run off there and got married."

She said this with hateful, cruel malevolence, glad in this moment of her great humiliation to put her tongue to something that would give him pain.

"Give me an invellup and some paper—I want to leave her a note."

Whatever the writing, it was soon done. Mrs. Peck handed the message to Rawlins, requesting him to deliver it to Edith when she arrived. She was mounting to ride off about her business when Rawlins hurried to her, the unsigned bill of sale in his hand.

"You may have this—it's no use to me," he said, putting the paper in her hand. "Nobody knows anything about it but you and I and Peck. If you keep it under your hat nobody will ever know."

Mrs. Peck crumpled the paper and stuck it in her pocket, and swung to the saddle with an agility surprising for her weight and years. She looked down at

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Rawlins with something unsaid in her open mouth, and looked at the wagon which was drawing near, some indication of emotion in her hard features which Rawlins interpreted as sorrowful contrition. She thrust her hand toward him suddenly, without a word, as if asking him to forget and forgive while making it farewell.

Rawlins let her hand hang there unmet for a little while, the hardness of his wrong, the resentment of her cunning treachery, holding back all friendly concession. Then his redundant generosity rose and leveled everything. He took her rough hand for a quick clasp, and waved her away, secretly wishing her better fortune with her next man, although he knew she deserved no less than she was suffering that minute.

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CHAPTER XXVI

TO SAVE THE SHEEP

EDITH bounced out of the wagon as soon she drove into Rawlins' yard and came running to him, concern in her face, breathless in her inquiry about his wound.

"The sheriff told me about it, that was the first I'd heard of the fight you and Peck were in," she explained. "I was down at Jasper. I only got back today. I passed by here this morning and knocked on your door, but there wasn't anybody around."

Rawlins was not very successful in his attempt at unreserved cordiality, although he greeted Tippie warmly when he came over in his deliberate fashion, which neither mischance to other men nor good fortune to himself seemed sufficient to accelerate. The wound was troublesome, but not serious, Rawlins told them. The doctor said he would be all right in six weeks or two months. It was unlucky to happen to a man who had hay to cut, but he had to take the bad with the good.

"Wasn't that Aunt Lila lopin' off as we came up?" Edith asked.

Yes, it was Aunt Lila, and she had left a note. Rawlins produced it as he spoke, and delivered it, glad of the diversion it caused, thankful that the congratulations he felt bound to offer in keeping with conventions, although so contrary to his honest desire, could be

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staved off for a little while. Let them spring it, he told himself, with the feeling of a deeply injured party. He was not supposed to know anything about their business, although on the face of appearances it was plain enough for anybody to conclude.

"That's funny," said Edith, her face a puzzle of cross-running emotions as she stood looking at the brief writing Mrs. Peck had left. "That's darned funny," she amended, a little more forcefully, passing the note on to Tippie.

"Um-m-m," said Tippie, glum as glue, seeming to study the note. "Not as funny as some things I've read."

He handed it to Rawlins, who asked Edith's permission in a questioning glance. Edith flushed, laughed queerly, nodded.

Rawlins read the hastily written line or two; read again, grinned a feeble, knocked-out sort of grin, looking from one to the other. The writing ran:

Edith, I give you them sheep for a wedding present from your old aunt,

LILA DUKE.

"Wedding present!" said Edith, red as a geranium. "Well, I like——"

"Sure," said Tippie. "Weddin' present."

"I con——" Rawlins began, to be stopped by Edith with interdictory hand.

"Sh-h-h! you might say something," she said, a laugh in her eyes.

"Sure; weddin' present," Tippie repeated. "The old lady thinks you're goin' to get married."

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"No, she don't, Elmer," Edith corrected him, laughter growing in her bright, happy eyes, "she thinks we're married already!"

"You and Ned? How in the thunder could she think——?"

"No, you and I."

"She don't think you're that big a fool," Tippie said, sarcastically positive.

Rawlins felt as if he had gone through some dreaded initiation. The relief of having it over, and knowing that his worst fears were unfounded, gave him such a feeling of lightness he could have flapped his wings and crowed. He saw now how impossible it was. Tippie would have been the last man to think of such a thing, good old Tippie, honest old Tippie. Rawlins felt like embracing him, for saving him, in his goodness, from such a disaster.

"That's what she thinks," Edith insisted. "And look how she signs her name: 'Lila Duke.' What do you think she means by that?" Edith appealed to them with baffled eyes.

"Habit," said Tippie.

"She's a widow again," Rawlins explained.

"Did they kill him?" Tippie asked, eagerly hopeful.

"No; he's run off again. This time he'll make it stick."

"She'll be the feller to get the divorce, then," said Tippie. "That's what she means by signin' the old name. She considers it settled already."

Edith seemed indecisive between laughter and tears. The thought of Peck persisting in his efforts to get a free leg once more moved the deep appreciation of

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humor in her soul; but the reflection on her aunt's bitter humiliation and misery checked the outburst.

"Yes, it's off for good this time," she said. "Aunt Lila won't send the sheriff after him any more. Poor old soul! she deserves it, but I'm sorry for her, just the same."

"How long's he been gone?" Tippie inquired.

"I don't know just when he left—he was around here this morning," Rawlins prevaricated, determined that Edith never should know of her aunt's greedy plotting to oust him from his homestead if it depended on him to tell.

"I think I'd better go over there and keep my eye on your sheep a while then, Edith," Tippie proposed. "I'm afraid the old lady might experience a change of heart and drive 'em out of here."

Tippie took the saddled horse hitched at the tail of the wagon and rode off, Edith and Rawlins watching him go, the silence of embarrassment between them. Edith was the first to recover, as the woman always is.

"She had her nerve to think I'd marry Elmer," she said.

"Didn't she?" He thought it far better to say nothing of Mrs. Peck's first positive assertion that she had run away to meet a mail-order man.

"She knew all the time I was going to Jasper to file on a homestead in here—I told her I was going to, I asked her to tell you."

"File on a homestead! Edith! You don't tell me? Why, she never——"

"I've got the papers, I can prove it," Edith laughed. "That's mine, joining you on the east."

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"Well, I never thought I'd have you for a *neighbor,*" he said, his delight dampened not a little by the thought that she never intended to be anything more. "And she never said a word."

"We had a little fuss," Edith said.

"I thought as much."

"We'd had plenty of them before. About my money, you know. She said I'd used it all up in board, and education and care, and that kind of stuff, when I've worked my way ever since I've been with her. She never was my legal guardian, you know, Ned. She wasn't under bond, or anything. Father asked her to look after me when he was dying; he turned over his insurance and all he had to her to keep for me."

"So that was the way of it. I didn't know."

"There wasn't much. We compromised on fifteen hundred dollars, she paid me, and I struck out for Jasper to file on that land while the filin' was good."

"You took a long chance, I'm afraid, Edith. Hewitt was here with the last bunch that raided us, when Peck killed one of them. He isn't the kind of man to let it drop, even though we've got the sheriff behind us now. I've been looking for them every day."

Edith heard him out with a queer look of incredulity and surprise.

"Why, is it possible you haven't heard the news, Ned? Sheep limit's off; you've won your fight."

"Nobody's been around here to tell me about it," he replied, a little sarcastically, as if to say if that was her notion of a joke he couldn't see it.

"But you've been over in town to-day, and that's all they're talking about there," she said.

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"I didn't see anybody but the doctor, and he failed to mention it. What's the big news, Edith?"

"What I told you, Ned: sheep limit's off. Galloway was in town himself this morning trying to square it and explain all this shootin' up his gang's been doing to you."

"You don't tell me?"

"He was; the sheriff told us about it. The sheepmen are already hittin' the road to Jasper in droves to file on land in here—the sheriff says there'll be a hundred thousand sheep on this new range inside of a week."

"Well, I wish Galloway'd done his talkin' a little sooner," Rawlins said. "How does he explain it? What's behind his change of heart?"

"The Wool Growers' Association is behind it," Edith explained. "They're gettin' to be a power in politics in this country, and Galloway's uneasy about his job. He says his lease is just about out on this land, anyhow, and he intended to take his fence away. He's been passin' out the word that the limit's off, tellin' the sheepmen to go to it. He says the shootin' his men did tryin' to drive you out wasn't authorized by him. He side-steps all responsibility, the sheriff says."

Rawlins was not highly elated over the news that Galloway had declared sheep limit off. It seemed to him, somehow, that he had failed, that Galloway had forestalled his triumph and taken every mark of credit from his hand. It would appear to the public that his fight had been useless, untimely, ill-advised. If he had waited a little while, the general impression would be,

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he might have taken possession in peace, as the rest of them would do.

Still, there would be some who would understand Galloway's hand had been forced by his assertion of rights inside the fence. Those sheepmen who had been there twice as a coroner's jury knew the effort to oust him had been a viciously earnest one. It would be hard to make them believe Galloway had any intention of giving up the land until he saw this persistent homesteader was there to stay, and his staying would be the rift in the fence that would admit so many more that senatorial prerogative must give way before the rush.

Let the credit go where it might, sheep limit was off, the big white spot, like a desert in a geography map, would be blank and mysterious no more. He had won what he had put his foot inside the fence to win, and much sooner, even though at greater cost, than he had expected.

"It's all right," he said, drawing a deep inspiration, releasing all his straining and watch-weariness with it. "But I wish Galloway had begun to talk a little sooner. You've got your homestead, anyhow. You were lucky to get down ahead of the rush, and I appreciate your courage and—and your——nerve, much more than I can tell you. Are you going on to the ranch?"

"No, it's all off down there for me. I've got my tent and all I need in the wagon—that's what I went on to Lost Cabin for this morning. I traded in my saddle horse to Smith Phogenphole on that team and wagon. What do you think of the outfit, Ned?"

"It looks like a good team, and I guess the wagon's all right. You know more about that sort of thing

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than I do, Edith. Are you going to camp on your homestead?"

"Sure. I'm here to stay. And I suppose"—seriously, face averted—"I'll have to marry *somebody* now, or lose the sheep. No wedding, no present. That's the way Aunt Lila 'll figure it."

"I wish there wasn't a sheep in the world!" he said, with such bitterness it seemed he must have taken a sudden dislike for the woolly genus.

"That's no kind of talk for a sheepman," she corrected him gently.

"I couldn't ask you to marry me just to save a band of dirty sheep," he said, ridiculously, as he realized when he saw her put her hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh. "I always intended to," he drove on, "I've planned toward it ever since I first saw you, Edith. And now—darn it, Edith, you'd think I wanted to marry you just to save the sheep!"

"Foolish!" said Edith, facing round with an encouraging grin. "It would be just the same with me if there wasn't any sheep. What do you suppose I took up that homestead for?"

"Why," pleadingly, hopefully, "you didn't take it up just because you wanted to be my *neighbor* always, did you, Edith?"

"I took it up because I had to do it while I was single, and I wanted that land in the family."

"Edith," earnestly, firmly, "when Elmer comes back I'll ask him to stay around here till we go over to town and—and——"

"Get it over with?" she laughed. "No, there's not going to be any grand rush about this thing, Ned. I'm

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going to camp over on my claim, but I'm going to look after you till your arm gets well. It'll be all right—Elmer's going to be here with us. He's taken up the half-section on the west of you."

"The old rascal! not to say a word to me about it."

"Yes, he's quit Aunt Lila, he's going to stock up with a fine breed of sheep and go into it on a big scale. I expect Aunt Lila 'll sell out now; she's talked of it a good while."

Tippie was coming back from his survey of the sheep, evidently satisfied that Mrs. Peck was not hovering around them in the indecision of a changing heart.

"You're a hospitable and neighborly man, I must say," Edith pretended to accuse Rawlins, with the freedom of a lady whose claims on a man have been adjusted to her entire satisfaction. "I've seen the outside of your house from the hills a hundred times, and now when I'm up to it you don't even invite me to look inside."

"It's all kicked up and thrown around in there," he tried to justify himself. "I've been one-sided for a week, and Peck wasn't much good for housework. You must excuse appearances, Edith, and not judge my habits by what you see."

Edith laughed at the disorder, at the crude housekeeping attempts, and unwashed dishes which were spread around, some of them even on Rawlins' cot. But it was the pan of peeled onions under the table that threw her off her balance.

She rocked from heel to toe with the merriment the sight of such generous preparations of onions for one man—there was nearly half a bushel—moved in her.

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She pointed and pantomimed, speechless in her mirth, tears streaming from her eyes as if the vapors which had vexed Peck's orbs still lingered in the room.

She wore it out presently, and braced up, standing slim and flushed, graceful, strong and altogether lovely in a young man's eyes, sombrero in her hand, her sun-tinted hair coiled quaintly around her head.

"What on earth did you clean them all at once for, Ned?" she wanted to know. "Or did you do it? Of course not, with one hand. It must have been Peck. But why? Were you expecting company?"

Rawlins stood by grinning, feeling himself cornered for a reasonable explanation. He wished he had put the pan under the bed when he had come in for a minute after Mrs. Peck's departure to take off Peck's gun. And seeing the gun lying on the cot where he had thrown it, his lips pressed back in that foolish-looking tomcat grin, the little Scottish tune issuing faintly, very faintly and dispiritedly, indeed, between his teeth, the answer came.

"It was done on a little bet this morning between Peck and me," he said. "Peck bet me his gun he could clean all the onions without shedding a tear, and he lost."

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