# THE DESERT FIDDLER

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HAMBY

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TOM HENRY OF WAHOO COUNTY

WAYS OF SUCCESS; IF A MAN FAILS SEVEN TIMES; AND OTHER STORIES

*"He began to play . . . the song of the rose that blossomed with fragrance in the night"*

# THE DESERT FIDDLER

BY

WILLIAM H. HAMBY


FRONTISPIECE

BY

RALPH PALLEN COLEMAN

GARDEN CITY, N. Y., AND TORONTO

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## CHAPTER I

BOB ROGEEN slept in the east wing of the squat adobe house. About midnight there was a vigorous and persistent shaking of the screen door.

"Yes?" he called, sleepily.

"They have just telephoned in from the Red Butte Ranch"—it was Dayton, his employer, at the door—"the engine on that tractor has balked. They want a man out there by daylight to fix it."

Bob put up his arms and stretched, and replied yawningly:

"Well, I guess I'm the fixer."

"I guess you are," agreed the implement dealer. "You know the way, don't you? Better ride the gray; and don't forget to take your gun." The boss crossed the *patio* to his own wing of the house.

The young fellow sat up and kicked along under the edge of the bed, feeling for his shoes.

"A love—lee time to go to work," he growled, good-naturedly. "Here is where the early bird catches the tractor—and the devil."

When he came out of the door a few minutes later, buttoning his corduroy coat—even in Imperial Valley, which knows no winter, one needs a coat on a March night—Rogeen stood for a moment on the step and put up his long arms again to stretch some of the deep sleep from his muscles. He was not at all enthusiastic about odd jobs at midnight; but in a moment his eyes fell on the slanting moonlight that shone mistily on the chinaberry tree in the *patio;* the town on the American side was fast asleep; the wind with the smell of sagebrush stirred a clump of bamboo. The desert night had him—and when he rode away toward the Mexican line he had forgotten his gun and taken his fiddle.

He passed through Mexicali, the Mexican town, where the saloons were still open and the lights over the Red Owl, the great gambling hall, winked with glittering sleeplessness; and out upon the road by the irrigation canal, fringed with cottonwood and willows.

He let the reins drop over the saddlehorn, and brought the fiddle round in front of him. There was no hurry, he would be there before daylight. And he laughed as he ran his right thumb over the strings:

"What a combination—a fool, a fiddle, and a tractor."

Bob could not explain what impulse had made him bring a fiddle with him on the way to mend a balky gasoline engine. As a youth—they had called him rather a wild youth—he had often ridden through the Ozark hills at night time with his fiddle under his arm. But in the last eight years he had played the thing only once, and that once had come so near finishing him that he still carried the receipt of the undertaker who came to bury him the next day.

"Oh, well," Bob grinned into the night as he threw his right knee over the saddlehorn and put the fiddle to his shoulder, "we'll see how she goes once more."

For three miles he rode leisurely on, a striking figure in the dim moonlight—a tall young man on a gray horse, fiddling wildly to the desert night.

He crossed the bridge over the main canal, left the fringe of cottonwood and willow, and turned

across the open toward the Red Butte Ranch. The fiddle was under his arm. Then he saw a shack in the open field to the right of the road. It was one of those temporary structures of willow poles and arrow weed that serve for a house for the renter on the Mexican side. The setting moon was at its back, and the open doorway showed only as a darker splotch. He lifted the fiddle again. "Chinaboy, Jap, Hindu, Poor Man, Rich Man, Beggar Man or Mexican—I'll give you a serenade all the samee."

The gleeful melody had scarcely jigged its way into the desert night when, in the black splotch of the dooorway, a figure appeared—a woman in a white nightdress. Swiftly Bob changed the jig tune into a real serenade, a clear, haunting, calling melody. The figure stood straight and motionless in the dark doorway as long as he could see. Someway he knew it was a white woman and that she was young.

He put the fiddle back in the bag and turned in his saddle to mark the location of the hut in his mind—there was a clump of eucalyptus trees just north of it. Yes, he would know the place, and he would learn to-

morrow who lived there. That listening figure had caught his imagination.

But again he grinned into the night, ruefully this time as he remembered the disaster that had followed his last two experiences with this diabolical instrument of glee and grief.

"Oh, well," he shook his head determinedly and threw his leg across the saddle, "the first time was with a preacher; the second with a gun; now we'll give the lady a chance."

The fiddle and the figure in the doorway had stirred in Bob a lot of reflections. At twenty he had given up his music and most of the careless fun that went with it, because a sudden jolt had made him see that to win through he must fight and not fiddle. For eight years he had worked tremendously hard at half a dozen jobs across half a dozen states; and there had been plenty of fighting. But what had he won?—a job as a hardware clerk at twenty dollars a week.

"Oh, well"—he had learned to give the Mexican shrug of the shoulder—"twenty dollars in a land of opportunity is better than fifty where everything is already fixed."

That must be the Red Butte Ranch across yonder. He turned into the left-hand fork of the road.

"Hello, there!" A tall, rambling fellow rose up from the side of the road. "Are you the good Samaritan or merely one of the thieves?"

"Neither," replied Bob, guessing this was a messenger from the Red Butte, "but I work for both. Where is your balky tractor?"

"This way." The rambling fellow turned to the right and started down the road, talking over his left shoulder:

"I'm the chauffeur of that blamed tractor—I told Old Benson I didn't know any more about it than he does of the New Jerusalem; but he put me at it anyhow.

"I'm a willin' cuss. But the main trouble with me is I ain't got no brains. If I had, I wouldn't be on this job, and if I was, I could fix the darn thing myself.

"My dad," continued the guide, "was purty strong on brains, but I didn't take after him much. If I was as posted on tractors as the old man was on hell fire, I wouldn't need you."

Something in this hill billy's tone stirred in Bob a sudden recollection.

"Was he a preacher?"

"Yep, named Foster, and I'm his wandering boy to-night."

Bob lifted his head and laughed. It was a queer world. He inquired about the trouble with the tractor.

"I sure hope you can fix it," said Noah Ezekiel. "Old Benson will swear bloody-murder if we don't get the cotton in before the tenth of April. He wants to unload the lease."

The sun was scarcely an hour high when the steady, energetic chuck, chuck of the tractor engine told Bob his work was done. He shut it off, and turned to Noah Ezekiel.

"There you are—as good as new. And it is worth ten men and forty mules. Not much like we used to farm back in the Ozarks, is it?"

"We?" Noah Ezekiel rubbed his lean jaw and looked questioningly at the fixer. "I'm from the Ozarks, but as the silk hat said to the ash can, 'Where in hell does the *we* come in?'"

"You don't happen to remember me?" There

was a humorous quirk at the corner of Rogeen's mouth as he stood wiping the oil and grease from his hands with a bunch of dry grass.

The shambling hill billy took off his floppy-brimmed straw hat and scratched his head as he studied Bob with the careless but always alert blue eyes of the mountain-turkey hunter—eyes that never miss the turn of a leaf nor forget a trail.

Those eyes began at the feet, took in the straight waistline, the well-knit shoulders. Bob weighed a hundred and eighty and looked as though he were put together to stay. For a moment Noah Ezekiel studied the friendly mouth, the resolute nose, the frank brown eyes; but not until they concentrated on the tangled mop of dark hair did a light dawn on the hill billy's face.

"Well, I'll be durned!" The exclamation was deep and soul-satisfying, and he held out his hand. "If you ain't Fiddlin' Bob Rogeen, I'll eat my hat!"

"Save your hat." Bob met the recognition with a friendly grin.

"I never saw you but once," reflected Noah Ezekiel, "and that was the Sunday at Mt. Pisgah

when my dad lambasted you in his sermon for fiddlin' for the dance Saturday night."

"That sermon," Bob's smile was still a little rueful, "lost me the best job I had ever had."

"Oh, well," consoled the hill billy, "if you hadn't lost it somethin' might have fell on you. That's what I always think when I have to move on." And he repeated with a nonchalant air a nonsensical hill parody:

*I eat when I'm hungry,*
*I drink when I'm dry,*
*And if a tree don't fall on me*
*I'll live till I die.*

Then his eyes veered round to Bob's fiddle lying to one side on the grass.

"I notice," he grinned, "dad did not convert you."

"No," said Bob, "but he cured me—almost. I've only played the thing twice since."

Rogeen picked up his fiddle and started for his horse.

"Well, so long, Noah. You've got a nice place to work out here." His eyes swept almost covetously over the five-thousand-acre ranch, level as a floor, not a stump or a stone. "If I had this ranch

I'd raise six thousand bales of cotton a year, or know the reason why."

"That ain't what the last fellow said," remarked the hill billy, grinningly. "Reedy Jenkins was out yesterday figuring on buyin' the lease; and he said: 'If I had it—I'd raise the rent.'"

## CHAPTER II

BOB was out in front of the hardware store dressed in a woollen shirt and overalls, and bareheaded, setting up a cotton planter, when an old gentleman in a linen duster, who had been pacing restlessly up and down the walk like a distant relative waiting for the funeral procession to start, stopped on the sidewalk to watch him work. Whether it was the young man's appearance, his whistling at his work or merely the way he used his hands that attracted the old gentleman was not certain. But after a moment he remarked in a crabbedly friendly tone:

"Young man, you know your business."

"The other fellow's business, you mean," replied Bob without looking up from the bolt he was adjusting. "It is not mine, you know." Bob had been repeating during the last two days the remark of the hill billy—"I'm a willin' cuss, but I ain't got no brains." He had begun to wonder if he was not in

the same wagon. He had always thought he had brains, but here he was at twenty-eight no better off than the hill billy. Perhaps not as well, for Noah Ezekiel Foster was getting more per month for riding one tractor than Bob was for selling twenty.

The old gentleman made a noise in his throat that corresponded to a chuckle in a less belligerent man.

"Do you sell farm machinery over there?" The store faced the line; and he nodded toward the Mexican side.

"Yes," answered Bob.

"Know the country pretty well?"

"Yes." The young man rose up with the wrench in his hand, and looked for the first time into the gray-blue eyes under the bushy iron-gray brows. "The country is the same as it is on this side. The people somewhat different."

"Any good chances to invest money over there?" asked the old gentleman.

"I suppose so." Bob stopped to pick up another nut and started to screw it on. "I'm not bothered much hunting for investments. But I reckon there is a chance for a man with money anywhere."

"To spend it," added the other fellow, sharply.

"Any place will do for a fool and his money to part. But, young man, it is easier to earn money with brains than it is to keep it without them."

Bob's eyes looking past the old gentleman saw a youngish woman dressed in widow's weeds—very expensive weeds—coming rapidly down the walk from the hotel, and knew she was coming for the old man. As she came nearer, Bob saw she had tawny yellow hair, with slate-coloured eyes and a pious mouth. Her carriage was very erect, very ladylike, and patently she was from the East.

"Oh, Uncle," she gurgled and, as the old gentleman turned, with a little burst of enthusiasm she threw her arms about his neck.

"When did you get in, Evy?" The old gentleman managed to disengage the arms without giving the appearance of heartlessness. His voice was crabbed, but sounded as though it might be from the length of the vocal cords rather than the shortness of disposition.

"Last night." There was an aggrieved touch of self-denying complaint in the tone. "And the little hotel is perfectly wretched. I had such a horrid room—and I felt so conspicuous alone. The landlady told me you had been there looking for me this

morning before I was up. I'm so glad to see you, Uncle; just as soon as I heard of poor Aunt Ellen's death I felt that I must come and look after you at any sacrifice." There was a slight pause in which the old gentleman did not venture a remark. "But, Uncle"—there was accusation in the tone—"why did you ever come out to this awful country? The dust was simply awful—I think some of my clothes are ruined."

"The old horse is across the street." The uncle turned and started toward a very high-powered, expensive car.

"Who was that old chap?" Bob asked of Dayton, who came up from breakfast just as the car drove off.

"That's Jim Crill—Texas oil fields. Staying at El Centro and looking for a place to drop his money, I hear. But I wonder who's the lady? I saw her get off the train with Reedy Jenkins yesterday evening."

"A dear relative," remarked Bob with a grin, "come to take care of him since his wife died—and he struck oil."

After a moment—the planter finished—Bob asked casually:

"Does Benson own the Red Butte Ranch?"

"No," answered the implement dealer, "it belongs to the Dan Ryan tract. Dan is one of the very few Americans who has a real title to land on the Mexican side. When Benson leased it two years ago it was merely sand hummocks and mesquite, like the rest of the desert. Spent a lot of money levelling it and getting it ready to water. He lives at Los Angeles, and is one of those fellows who try to farm with money instead of brains and elbow grease. Lost a lot on last year's crop, and now he wants to get rid of his lease."

Bob had been thinking of that ranch most of the time since he fixed the tractor. He loved the soil, and surely a man could get real returns from a field like that.

"I wonder," he remarked without meeting his employer's eyes, "if he would sublease it?"

"Don't know," replied Dayton; "Reedy Jenkins is trying to buy the lease."

"Then," thought Bob as his employer went into the store, "Jenkins ought to offer a market for farm machinery. I'll go up and see him."

On his way to Jenkins' office Bob's mind was busy with his own personal problems. He had been

struggling with his ambitions a long time and never could quite figure why he did not get on faster. He had thought a great deal the last few days about Jim Crill, the old man with bushy eyebrows—and oil wells. Two or three things the gruff old chap had said stuck in Bob's mind. He had begun to wonder if it was not just as easy for a fellow to make a bad investment of his brains and muscles as it was with his money. "That's it," he said almost aloud at a definite conclusion; "I haven't been making a good investment of myself. I wonder if I could sublease that Red Butte Ranch?"

The more he thought of it, the more anxious he was to get hold of something he could manage himself. Of course, the idea of farming a five-thousand-acre ranch without capital was merely a pipe dream; but still, if Benson was losing money and wanted to get loose from his lease—it might be possible.

Reedy Jenkins' office was upstairs and on a back street. It had an outside stairway, one of those affairs that cling to an outer brick wall and end in a little iron platform. The only sign on the door was:

REEDY JENKINS,
Cotton.

It did not explain whether Mr. Jenkins raised cotton, bought it, sold it, ginned it, or merely thought about it. The office was so located that in a morally crusading town, where caution was necessary, it would have suggested nocturnal poker. But as it was not necessary for a poker game in Calexico to be so modestly retiring, Reedy's choice of an office must be attributed solely to his love of quiet and unostentation.

As Bob turned up the side street, two people were coming down the iron stairway—one a dry, thin man who looked as though he might be the relict of some dead language, wearing a stiff hat and a black alpaca coat; the other, a girl of more than medium height, who took the narrow steps with a sort of spring without even touching the iron rail with her hand, and her eyes were looking out across the town.

"I beg your pardon," Bob met them at the foot of the stairs, "but can you tell me if Mr. Jenkins is in?"

It was the girl who turned to answer, and at one look Bob saw she was more than interesting—soft light hair, inquisitive eyes, an intuitive mouth—nothing dry or attenuated about her.

"Yes," she replied, with a slight twist of the

mouth, "Mr. Jenkins is in. Have you a lease to sell?"

"No."

"Then go on up," she said, and turned across the street following the spindle-legged man who was unhitching two horses.

"Blooming sunflowers!" exclaimed Bob, his heart taking a quick twist as she walked away, "as sure as I'm a foot high, that's the girl who stood in the doorway that night."

As Bob entered the office Jenkins sat tipped back in a swivel chair, his left arm resting on his desk, the right free as though it had been gesturing. Reedy had rather large eyes, a plump, smooth face that was two shades redder than pink and one shade pinker than red. He always looked as though he had just shaved, and a long wisp of very black hair dangled diagonally across the corner of his forehead, such as one often sees on the storm-tossed head of an impassioned orator who is talking for the audience and working for himself.

"Sit down." He waved Bob to a chair. "I've been wanting to have a talk with you—got a proposition for you."

## CHAPTER III

REEDY JENKINS lighted a very good cigar and sat studying Rogeen with a leisurely air. Bob was a good salesman and began at once: "Understand you have been buying up leases, and I came up to sell you some farm machinery."

Reedy took the cigar from his wide mouth and laughed at the joke. "I don't raise cotton, I leave that to Chinamen—I raise prices. I'm not a farmer but a financier."

Then returning the cigar to the corner of his mouth he remarked with a pink judicialness:

"I should say you have a way with the ladies."

Bob blushed. "I never discovered it, if I have."

"I have, myself." Reedy bit the end of his cigar and nodded with a doggish appreciation of his own fascination. "But I'm too busy just now to use it."

"Rogeen"—Reedy laid the smoking cigar on some papers on his desk and faced Bob—"I've had my

eye on you for some time. I am buying up leases across the line. I need a good man to work over there. What is Dayton paying you?"

"Twenty a week." Bob was surprised at the turn of the conversation.

"I'll give you a hundred and fifty a month to start, and there'll be a fine chance for promotion."

"What am I to do?" inquired Bob.

"Here is the whole thing in an eggshell. No doubt you are acquainted with the situation over the line. You know, excepting one or two big concessions, no Americans own land on the Mexican side. The land is all farmed under leases and sub-leases. If a Chink or a Jap or a wandering American hayseed wants to open up a patch of the desert, he takes a five-year lease. As it costs him from ten to twenty dollars an acre to clear off the mesquite, level the sand hummocks, and get his ditches ready for water, he pays only one dollar rent the first year, two dollars the second, and so on.

"Now"—Reedy picked up his cigar, puffed a time or two, and looked speculatively over Bob's head—"if a fellow wants to speculate on the Mexican side, he doesn't deal in land; he buys and sells

leases. That is my business. Of course, once in a while I take over a crop that is planted or partly raised, because I have to do it to get the lease. But you can say on general principles I'm about as much interested in farming as a ground hog is in Easter.

"The price of cotton has been low, and for various and sundry other reasons"—Reedy squinted his large eyes a little mysteriously—"a lot of the ranchers over there after getting their land in good shape have got cold feet and are willing to sell leases that have three or four years yet to run for nearly nothing.

"I'm acquiring a bunch of them and am going to make a fortune out of them. One of these days the price of cotton will take a jump, and I'll be subleasing ten thousand acres of land at ten dollars an acre that cost me three.

"Now what I want you for"—he brought his attention down squarely to Rogeen—"is to buy leases for me—I'll give you a list of what I want and the prices I'll pay. If you get a lease for less, I'll give you half the rake-off in addition to your wages."

Bob thought fast. This looked like a fine opportunity; perhaps he was worth more as a buyer than as a salesman.

"I'll have a try at it," he said. "But I won't sign up for any length of time until I see how it goes."

"That suits me," Reedy assented readily. His one fear had been that Bob might want a term contract.

"I'll see Dayton," Bob arose, "and let you know how soon he can let me off."

Dayton liked Bob and hated to lose him, but was one of those employers who prefer to suffer some inconvenience or loss rather than stand in the way of a young man's advancement.

"A hundred and fifty dollars a month is more than I can pay, Rogeen," he said. "You'd better take it. Begin at once. I'll get Jim Moody in your place."

At one o'clock Bob was back at Jenkins' office and reported ready for work.

Reedy reached in his desk for the map on which all the ranches below the line were carefully marked.

"The ranches I want to get first are along the Dillenbeck Canal. It is a private water system, and the water costs more; but the land is rich enough to make up the difference.

"The first one I want you to tackle is here"—he made a cross with his pencil—"Belongs to a little

dried-up old geezer named Chandler. He is ready to sell; talk to the girl. Five hundred is my top price for their lease and equipment."

As Bob went down the outside stairway he passed a Mexican going up—a Mexican with features that suggested some one of his immediate forefathers was probably a Hebrew. Rogeen recognized him—his name was Madrigal; and he remembered that someone had told him that the Mexican was in the secret service over the line, or rather that he was an unofficial bearer of official information from some shady Mexican officials to some shady American concerns.

When the Mexican entered the office, Reedy got up and closed the door. Then he took the map again from a drawer and opened it out on the desk.

"I'll get Benson's lease this week." Reedy put his pencil on the Red Butte Ranch. "And these," he pointed to smaller squares along the Dillenbeck Canal, "are the ones I have marked for early annexation. How many of them have you seen?"

"Thes, and thes, and thes." Madrigal pointed off three ranches.

"I've sent the new man down to see Chandler,"

said Reedy. "He's the sort that can win over that girl. I must have that ranch. It is one of the best of the small ranches."

"*Si, si.*" Madrigal grinned, and smoothed up his black pompadoured hair. "Eet will be easy. I gave them big scare about the duty on cotton next fall."

"And then my friend who manages the Dillenbeck system gave them another about the price of water this summer," smiled Reedy. "But"—he frowned—"if the girl should continue obstinate, and they refuse to sell?"

"Then I'll attend to the señorita"—the Mexican put his hand on his heart and bowed gallantly—"the ladies are easy for Señor Madrigal."

"Yes," said Reedy, shutting his wide mouth determinedly, "and if he fails, I'll 'tend to Rogeen."

## CHAPTER IV

IT WAS a little after sundown when Bob rode up to the Chandler ranch. The girl was out under the cottonwood trees by the irrigation canal gathering up dry sticks for stove wood. He hitched his horse and went to her.

"Good evening," he said.

"Where is your fiddle?" There was a faint twist of amusement at the corner of her mouth.

"How did you know?"

"Guessed it," she replied, with a little lift of the eyebrows; and then stooped to pick up the armful of dry sticks she had gathered.

"Let me have them." He stepped forward to take the wood.

"Why should you?" she said, without offering to relinquish them. "I prefer to carry my own sticks—then I don't have to build fires for other people." He laughed, and followed her up the path toward the shack.

"Let us sit down here." She led the way to a homemade bench in the open. "Daddy has had a hard day and has gone to bed, and I don't want to disturb him. He's very tired and has been upset over this lease business."

That was an opening, but before he could take advantage of it she abruptly changed the conversation:

"But you haven't told me why you didn't bring your fiddle this time. I'd love to hear it on a night like this." Dusk was coming swiftly and the stars had begun to glimmer.

"Oh, I don't carry it round as a business," he answered. "Fact is, until the other night I had not played it but twice in eight years."

"Why?" She turned to him with curious interest.

"It hasn't usually brought me good luck."

"What happened the other two times?"

He looked off at the very bright star in the west and smiled with whimsical ruefulness. "I love music—that is, what I call music. When I was in the Ozarks I fiddled a lot, but discovered it did not bring me what I wanted, so I went to work. I got

a job in a bank at Oakville; was to begin work Monday. I was powerful proud of that job, and had got a new suit of clothes and went to town Saturday. That night there was a dance, and they asked me to play for it." He stopped to chuckle, but still a little regretfully. "My playing certainly made a hit. Sunday morning a preacher lambasted the dance, and called me the special messenger of the devil. My job was with a pillar of his church. I didn't go to work Monday morning. It's a queer world; that preacher was the father of Noah Ezekiel Foster, who is now working for Benson."

She was looking out at the west, smiling; the desert wind pushed the hair back from her forehead. "And the other time you played?"

"That was up at Blindon, Colorado." He showed some reluctance to go ahead.

"Yes?"

"An old doctor and his daughter came to the camp to invest. I overheard them in the next room at the boarding house, and knew a gang of sharks was selling them a fake mine. I tried to attract their attention through the partition by playing a fool popular song—'If you tell him yes; you are sure to cry, by and by.'"

"Did you make them understand?" She had locked her hands round her knees and leaned interestedly toward him.

"Yes—and also the gang. The camp made up money to pay the undertaker to bury me next day. I still have the receipt."

"You have had a lot of experience," she said with a touch of envy.

"More than the wisdom I have gathered justifies, I fear," he replied.

"Experiences are interesting," she observed. "I haven't had many, but I'm beginning. Daddy was professor of Sanskrit in a little one-horse denominational college back in the hog-feeding belt of the Middle West. Heavens!" she spoke with sudden fierceness, "can you imagine anything more useless than teaching Sanskrit? His salary was two hundred dollars a year less than the janitor's. I hated being poor; and I hated worse the dry rot of that little faculty circle. The deadly seriousness of their piffling, pedantic talk about fine-spun scholastic points that were not interesting nor useful a thousand years ago, and much less now that they are absolutely dead. I hated being prim and preten-

tious. I could not stand it any longer, and made Daddy resign and go somewhere to plant something. We came out here and I thought I saw a fortune in cotton.

"Daddy's worked like a galley slave getting this field in; he's done the work of two men. With one Chinaman's help part of the time he's got in a hundred and sixty acres of cotton. We've put through two hot summers here; and spent every dollar we got for our household goods and his life insurance. And now"—she was frowning in the dark—"we are warned to get out."

"Who warned you?" Bob asked quickly.

"A Mexican named Madrigal. He has been right friendly to us; and warned us last week that the Mexican Government is going to raise the duty on cotton so high this fall that it will take all the profit. He advises us to sell our lease for anything we can get."

"Have you had an offer?"

"Yes," she shrugged in the dusk and spoke with bitter weariness, "a sort of an offer. Mr. Jenkins offered us $500. Daddy wanted to take it, but I objected. I guess, though, it is better than nothing."

Bob stood up, his muscles fairly knotted. He understood in a flash why the Mexican Jew was going to Jenkins' office. They were stampeding the small ranchers out of the country, and virtually stealing their leases. The stars ran together in an angry blur. He felt a swelling of the throat. It was lucky he was miles away from Reedy Jenkins.

"Don't take it!" he said with vehemence.

Reedy Jenkins had just opened his office next morning and sat down at the desk to read his mail when Bob Rogeen walked in. Reedy looked up from a letter and asked greedily:

"Did you get it?"

"No." There was something ominous in Rogeen's tone.

"Couldn't you persuade them to sell?" Jenkins was openly vexed.

"I persuaded them not to." Bob's hands opened and shut as though they would like to get hold of something. "I don't care for this job. I'm done."

"What's the idea?" There was a little sneer in Jenkins' tone. "Decided you would go back to the old job selling pots and pans?"

"No," and Bob's brown eyes, almost black now, looked straight into Reedy's flushed, insolent face, "I'm going across the line to *raise cotton*."

Reedy's wide mouth opened in a contemptuous sneer.

"It's rather hot over there for rabbits."

"Yes," Bob's lips closed warningly, "and it may become oppressive for wolves."

Their eyes met defiantly for a moment, and each knew the other understood—and it meant a fight.

## CHAPTER V

BOB had never known a resolution before. He thought he had, but he knew now that all the rest compared to what he felt as he left Reedy Jenkins' office were as dead cornstalks to iron rods.

One night nearly nine years ago, when returning through the hills with his fiddle under his arm, he had stopped at the door of his cabin and looked up at the stars. The boisterous fun of an hour ago had all faded out, leaving him dissatisfied and lonesome. He was shabbily dressed, not a dollar in his pocket—not a thing in the world his own but that fiddle—and he knew he was no genius with that. He was not getting on in the world; he was not making anything of himself. It was then that the first big resolution came to him: He would quit this fooling and go to work; he would win in this game of life. Since then in the main he had stuck to that resolution. He had not knowingly passed any opportunity by;

certainly he had dodged nothing because it was hard. He had won a little here, and lost there, always hoping, always tackling the new job with new pluck. Yet these efforts had been simple; somebody had offered him a job and he tried to make good at it—and usually had. But to win now, and win big as he was determined to do, he must have a job of his own; and he would have to create that job, organize it, equip it.

"What I'll make it with—or just how—I don't know. But by all the gods of the desert I'm going to win right here—in spite of the thermometer, the devil, and Reedy Jenkins."

To raise cotton one must have a lease, tools, teams, provisions—all of which costs money; and he had just $167.35. But if that girl and her Sanskrit father could get in a cotton crop, he could. It was not too late. Cotton might be planted in the Imperial Valley even up to the last of May. He would get a field already prepared if he could; if not, then he would prepare it.

And a man with a good lease and a good reputation could usually borrow some money on which to raise a crop. Bob's mind again came back to the Red Butte Ranch. It was so big that it almost swamped

his imagination, but if he was going to do big things he must think big. If he could possibly sublease that ranch from Benson. But it would take $100,000 to finance a five-thousand-acre cotton crop. Then he thought of Jim Crill, the old man of the Texas oil fields who was looking for investments.

It was daring enough to seem almost fantastic, but Bob quickened his step and turned toward the depot. He could yet catch the morning train for Los Angeles.

But he passed Benson on the way. The same morning Bob called at the Los Angeles office Benson went to Reedy Jenkins in Calexico.

The Red Butte lease had three years to run. Benson began by offering the lease and all the equipment for $40,000. He had spent more than $90,000 on it.

Reedy pushed back the long black lock of hair from his forehead, shook his head lugubriously, and grew pessimistically oratorical. Things were very unsettled over the line: there was talk of increased Mexican duty on cotton, of a raise in water rates; the price of cotton was down; ranchers were coming out instead of going in; no sale at all for leases. He himself had not had an offer for a lease in two months.

They dickered for an hour, Reedy watching with a

gloating shrewdness the impractical fellow who had tried to farm with money. He knew Benson had lost money on the last crop, and besides had been thoroughly scared by the sly Madrigal.

"I'm tired of the whole thing." Benson spoke with annoyed vexation. "I tell you what I'll do: I'll walk off the ranch and leave you the whole damn thing for $20,000."

"I'll take it." Reedy knew when the limit was reached. "I'll pay you $2,000 now to bind the bargain; and the balance within ten days."

As Benson left the office with the check, Reedy began figuring feverishly. It was the biggest thing he had ever pulled off. The lease, even with cotton selling for only eight cents, was worth certainly $50,000, the equipment at least $10,000 more. And the five thousand acres was already planted and coming up! In the Imperial Valley the planting is by far the most expensive part of the cotton crop up to picking. It costs from seven to ten dollars an acre to get it planted; after that it is easy. There are so few weeds and so little grass that one man, with a little extra help once or twice during the summer, can tend from forty to eighty acres.

It was such an astounding bargain that Reedy's pink face grew a little pale, and he moistened his lips as he figured. He was trying to reassure himself that it would be dead easy to borrow the other $18,000. He did not have it. In truth, he had only two hundred left in the bank. He thought of Tom Barton and two of the banks from whom he had already borrowed. They did not seem promising. Then he thought of Jim Crill, and the pinkness came slowly back to his face. He smiled doggishly as he picked up the phone, called El Centro, and asked for Mrs. Evelyn Barnett.

Mrs. Evelyn Barnett sat on the porch shaded by a wistaria vine, her feet discreetly side by side on the floor, her hands primly folded in her lap; her head righteously erect, as one who could wear her widow's weeds without reproach, having been faithful to the very last ruffle of her handsome dress to the memory of her deceased.

She had insisted on taking Uncle Crill from the hotel, which was ruining his digestion, and making a home for him. She had leased an apartment bungalow, opening on a court, and with the aid of three servants had, at great personal sacrifice, managed to

give Uncle Crill a "real home." True, Uncle was not in it very much, but it was there for him to come back to.

"Uncle," she had said, piously, showing him the homelike wonders that three servants had been able to achieve in the six rooms, "in the crudities of this horrid, uncouth country, we must keep up the refinements to which we were accustomed in the East." The old gentleman had grunted, remembering what sort of refinements they had been accustomed to, but made no outward protests at being thus frillily domesticated after ten years in the Texas oil fields.

And as Mrs. Barnett sat on the porch this morning, fully and carefully dressed, awaiting the result of that telephone message from Calexico, she watched with rank disapproval her neighbours to the right and left. It was quite hot already and Mrs. Bordon on the right had come out on the porch, dressed with amazing looseness of wrapper, showing a very liberal opening at the throat, and stood fanning herself with a newspaper. Mrs. Cramer on the left, having finished her sweeping, had come out on the porch also, and in garments that indicated no padding whatever dropped into a rocking chair, crossed her legs, made

a dab at her loosely piled hair to see it did not topple down, and proceeded to read the morning newspaper. It was positively shocking, thought Mrs. Barnett, how women could so far forget themselves. She never did.

Directly her primly erect head turned slightly, and her eyes which always seemed looking for something substantial—no dream stuff for her—widened with satisfaction and she put her hand up to her collar to see if the breastpin was in place.

It was Reedy Jenkins who got out of the machine which stopped at the entrance. He took off his hat when halfway to the porch—his black hair was smoothly brushed—his face opened with a flattering smile and he quickened his step. Mrs. Barnett permitted herself to rise, take two short steps forward, and to smile reservedly as she offered her hand.

Reedy Jenkins had not exaggerated when he said he had a way with the ladies. He did have. It was rather a broad way, but there are plenty of ladies who are not subtle.

"You have a lovely little place here." Reedy gave a short, approving glance round as he took the offered chair. "It's wonderful what a woman's

touch can do to make a home. No place like home, if there is some dear woman there to preside."

Mrs. Barnett's mouth simpered at the implied flattery; but her eyes, always looking calculatingly for substantial results, were studying Reedy Jenkins. He certainly had handsome black hair, and he was well dressed—and the manner of a gentleman. He reminded her of an evangelist she had known back in Indiana. She had intended to marry that evangelist if his wife died in time; but she did not.

"It is very hard to do much here," Mrs. Barnett said, deprecatingly. "There is so much dust, and the market is so poor, and servants are so untrained and so annoying. But of course I do what little I can to make dear Uncle a good home. It was a great sacrifice for me to come, but when duty calls one must not think of self."

"No, I suppose not." Reedy sighed and shook his head until the long black lock dangled across the corner of his forehead—he did look like that evangelist. "But I wish sometime that we could forget the other fellow and think of ourselves. I'd have been a millionaire by now if I hadn't been so chicken-hearted about giving the other fellow the best of it."

"We never lose by being generous," said Mrs. Barnett with conviction.

"No, I suppose not," Reedy sighed. "No doubt it pays in the long run. I know I've been put in the way of making many thousands of dollars first and last by fellows I had been good to." Then Reedy looked at Mrs. Barnett steadily and with wide admiration in his large eyes—looked until she blushed very deeply.

"It may be a rough place to live," said Reedy, "but it certainly has been good for your colour. You are pink as a—a flower; you look positively swee——" He broke off abruptly. "I beg your pardon; I almost forgot myself."

Then Reedy changed the subject to the matter of business on which he had come.

"Yes," Mrs. Barnett said, giving him her hand as he rose to go, "I'll see Uncle to-night; and I'm sure Mr. Jenkins"—he still held her hand and increased the pressure—"he'll be most glad to do it."

## CHAPTER VI

THREE days after Bob had returned from Los Angeles and found that Reedy Jenkins had bought the Benson lease, he rode up from the Mexican side and jumped off in front of the hardware store. Dayton was talking to the old man with bushy eyebrows and a linen duster.

"Here's Rogeen now," said the implement dealer. "Mr. Crill was just inquiring about you, Bob."

The two men shook hands.

"How you comin'?" asked the old man, his blue eyes looking sharply into Rogeen's.

"I'm starting in on my own," replied Bob; "going to raise cotton over the line."

"Why?" The heavy brows worked frowningly.

"Got to win through." Bob's brows also contracted and he shook his head resolutely. "And I can't do it working by the month. Some men can, but I can't."

"See that?" The old gentleman pointed to a

tractor with ten plows attached. "That's success. Those plows are good and the engine is good; but it's only when they are hooked up together they are worth twenty teams and ten men. That's the way to multiply results—hook good things together. Resolution and hard work aren't enough. Got to have brains. Got to use 'em. Organize your forces.

"Don't tell me," the old chap spoke with some heat, "that a man who uses his brains and by one day's work makes something that saves a million men ten days' work is only entitled to one day's pay. Not a bit of it. He's entitled to part of what he saves every one of those million men. That's the difference between a little success and a big success. The little one makes something for himself; the big one makes something for a thousand men—and takes part of it. Has a right to. Those Chinamen across the line get sixty-five cents a day. If you can manage them so they earn a dollar and a half a day and give them a dollar and thirty cents of it and keep twenty cents, you are a public benefactor as well as a smart man. That is the way to do it; use your brains to increase other men's production and take a fair per cent. of it, and you'll be both rich and honest."

Bob's brown eyes were eagerly attentive. He liked this cryptic old man. This was real stuff he was talking; and it was getting at the bottom of Rogeen's own problem. All these years he had tried to produce value single-handed. But to win big, he must think, plan, organize so as to make money for many people, and therefore entitle himself to large returns.

"I'm going to try that very thing," he said. "I've just leased one hundred and sixty acres. Half already planted in cotton, and I'm going to plant the rest."

Bob was proud of his achievement. He had been really glad he failed to get the Red Butte Ranch. It was entirely too big to tackle without capital or experience. But he had found a rancher anxious to turn loose his lease for about half what he had spent improving it. Rogeen then convinced a cotton-gin man that he was a good risk; and offered to give him ten per cent. interest, half the cotton seed, and to gin the crop at his mill if he would advance money sufficient to buy the lease and raise the crop. The gin man had agreed to do it.

Crill jerked his head approvingly. "Good move.

That's the way to go at it. Think first, then work like the devil at the close of a revival."

Crill paused, and then asked abruptly:

"Know a man named Jenkins?"

"Yes," replied Bob.

"Is he safe?"

Bob grinned. "About as safe as a rattlesnake in dog days."

As Jim Crill stalked up the outside stairway of Reedy Jenkins' office, the wind whipping the tail of the linen duster about his legs, he carried with him two very conflicting opinions of Reedy—Mrs. Barnett's and Bob Rogeen's. Maybe one of them was prejudiced—possibly both. Well, he would see for himself.

Reedy jumped up, gave his head a cordial fling, and grabbed Jim Crill's hand as warmly as though he were chairman of the committee welcoming the candidate for vice-president to a tank-station stop. Reedy remembered very distinctly meeting Mr. Crill in Chicago five years ago. In fact, Mr. Crill had for a long time been Mr. Jenkins' ideal of the real American business man—shrewd, quick to think, and fearless in action; willing to take a chance but seldom going wrong.

"Evy said you wanted to see me about borrowing some money," the old man dryly interrupted the flow of eloquence.

"Yes—why, yes." Reedy brought up suddenly before he had naturally reached his climax, floundered for a moment. "Why, yes, we have an investment that I thought would certainly interest you." Reedy had decided not only to get the old man to finance the Red Butte purchase but his whole project.

He began to explain his maps and figures as volubly as though he were selling the Encyclopedia Britannica, and again the old man cut in:

"How many acres you got leased?"

"Ten thousand—practically." Reedy paused to answer, his pencil touching the Dillenbeck Canal.

"What did you pay for them?"

"I got most of them for about a third to half what they cost the ranchers."

"Why did they sell so cheap?"

"Oh," Reedy waved, vaguely evasive, "you know how that is; fellows are like sheep—stampede into a country, and then one makes a break, and they stampede out. Now that Benson has sold, a lot more of them will get cold feet."

"Altogether how much money have you put in over there?"

"Forty-two thousand dollars," replied Reedy, consulting a memorandum. "You understand," he continued to explain, "I'm not a cotton grower at all; I am an investor. I'm dealing in leases; and I merely took over the planted crop on the Benson leases because I got it so cheap there is bound to be money in it."

"What is it you want?" demanded Crill.

"Seventy thousand or so for the lease and the crop. I have 8,000 acres already planted, some of it coming up. I'll pay you 10 per cent. for the money, and half the cotton seed, and give you first mortgage on the crop. Those are the usual terms here."

The sharp blue eyes under the shaggy brows had been investigating Reedy as they talked. He wanted to make loans, for he had a lot of idle money. "There are two sorts of men who pay their debts," the old man said to himself. "One who wants to owe more, and one who doesn't want to owe anything." Jenkins would want to borrow more, therefore he would pay his first loan. Even rascals are

usually good pay when they are making money. And it looked like this fellow would make money on these leases. Anyway, Jim Crill moved a little annoyedly in his chair at the thought of his niece. It would be almost worth the risk to be rid of Evy's nagging him about it.

"Fix up the papers," he said, shortly, to Reedy's delight. He had expected to have to work much harder on the old man.

The next morning after the interview with Jim Crill Bob was at the hardware store assembling the implements he had bought, when a tall, shambling hill billy sauntered up.

"Hello, Noah Ezekiel Foster," said Bob, without looking up.

"Hello," responded the hill billy. "Reckon you know a hoss at long range."

"Reckon I do." Bob resumed his whistling.

"Don't also know somebody that wants a chauffeur for a tractor? Benson sold out my job."

"No." Bob straightened up and looked at the lank fellow appraisingly. "But I know a fellow who wants a chauffeur for a team of mules."

Noah Ezekiel shook his head. "Me and mules

have parted ways a long time ago. I prefer gasoline." Then in a moment: "Who is the fellow?"

Bob grinned and tapped himself. "I'm the man."

Noah Ezekiel shook his head again.

"You look too all-fired industrious; I'd rather work for a fellow that lives at Los Angeles."

Bob laughed. "Just as you like."

But Noah Ezekiel ventured one more question: "You workin' for Reedy Jenkins?"

"Not much!" Bob put emphasis in that.

"Where is your ranch?"

"On the road a couple of miles north of Chandler's."

The hill billy's forehead wrinkled and his eyes looked off into empty space.

"I reckon I'll change my mind. I'll take the job. How much am I gettin' a month?"

## CHAPTER VII

SOME men fail because they invest their money in bad business. More fail because they invest themselves in sorry human material. They trust their plans to people who cannot or will not carry them out.

Bob from his first day as an employer realized that to be able to plan and work himself was only half of success. One must be able to pick men who will carry out his plans, must invest his brains, his generosity, his fair treatment, and his affections in human beings who will return him loyalty for loyalty.

He had made no mistake in Noah Ezekiel Foster. Noah was a good cotton planter; moreover, he knew a good deal about Chinese. Bob had employed six Chinamen to help get the ground in shape and the cotton planted.

"Noah," Bob stopped beside the disk plow and its double team, "you understand mules."

"I ought to." Noah rubbed his lean jaw. "I've been kicked by 'em enough."

Bob smiled. Somehow Noah's look of drollery always put him in a good humour. He noticed it also tickled the Chinamen, who thought "Misty Zeekee" one of the greatest of Anglo-Saxons.

"You see," remarked Noah, picking up the lines again, "as my dad used to say, 'He that taketh hold of the handles of a plow and looketh back, verily, he shall be kicked by a mule.' I never calculate to be kicked in the back. But if that Chinaman over there"—he frowned at a Chinaboy who was fumbling over a cotton planter—"don't get a move on him, he'll be kicked wherever he happens to hit my foot first. Hi, there"—Noah threw up his head and yelled to the Chinaboy—"get a move on. Plantee cotton. Goee like hellee." And the Chinaman did.

Bob laughed.

"Do you reckon you could let me have five dollars to-night?" Noah Ezekiel asked, looking down at his plow. "I want to go up to the Red Owl at Mexicali."

"Not going to gamble, are you?" Bob asked.

Noah Ezekiel shook his head. "No, I ain't goin'

to gamble. Goin' to invest the five in my education. I want to learn how many ways there are for a fool and his money to part."

After supper, when Noah Ezekiel had ridden away to invest his five dollars in the educational processes of the Red Owl, Bob brought a stool out of the house and sat down to rest his tired muscles and watch the coming night a little while before he turned in. Bob and his foreman occupied the same shack—the term "house," as Noah Ezekiel said, being merely a flower of speech. Although there were several hundred thousand acres of very rich land under cultivation on the Mexican side, with two or three exceptions there was not a house on any of the ranches that two men could not have built in one day and still observe union hours. Four willow poles driven in the ground, a few crosspieces, a thatch of arrowweed, three strips of plank nailed round the bottom, some mosquito netting, and it was done. A Chinaman would take another day off and build a smoking adobe oven; but Bob and Noah had a second-hand oil stove on which a Chinese boy did their cooking.

Bob sat and looked out over the level field in the dusk. A quarter of a mile away the light glimmered

in the hut of his Chinese help, and there came the good-natured jabber of their supper activities. He felt the expansive thrill of the planter, the employer —the man who organizes an enterprise and makes it go.

The heat of the day was already gone, and pleasant coolness was on the night wind that brought the smell of desert sage from beyond the watered fields. Bob stirred from the chair and got up. His tiredness was gone. The desert night had him. He went into the shack and took from an old scarred trunk his fiddle, and started down the road that passed his ranch to the south. He had not yet called on the Chandlers.

The little house was dark. Rogeen wondered if the Chandlers were asleep. But his heart took a quicker turn; he fancied he saw something white in the yard—the girl was also feeling the spell of the desert night.

Then suddenly, but softly, a guitar thrummed, and a voice with the half-wailing cadence of the Spanish took up the melody.

Bob stood still, the blood crowding his veins until

his face was hot and his whole body prickled. This was Madrigal, the Mexican Jew.

The song ended. Faintly came the clapping of hands, and the ripple of a girl's laughter. Bob turned angrily and walked swiftly back up the road, walked clear past his own ranch without noticing, and finally turned aside by a clump of cottonwood trees along the levee of the main irrigation canal. The water, a little river here, ran swiftly, muddily, black under the desert stars. Bob lifted his fiddle and flung it into the middle of the stream.

The heat of his anger was gone. He felt instantly cold, and infinitely lonesome. There upon the muddy water floated away the thousand songs of the hills—the melody, the ecstasy, the colour and light of his early youth.

With sudden repentance he turned and dashed down the bank after the hurrying current. The fall is rapid here, and the fiddle was already far down the stream. He ran stumblingly, desperately, along the uneven bank, dodging willows and arrowweed, stopping now and again to peer up and down the stream.

It was nowhere in sight. A sort of frenzy seized

him. He had a queer fancy that in that moment of anger he had thrown away his soul—all of him that was not bread and dollars. He must get it back—he must! Another dash, and again he stopped on the bank. Something darker than the current bobbed upon the muddy water. Without a moment's hesitancy he plunged into the stream and waded waist deep into the middle of the current.

Yes, it was his violin. Back on the bank, dripping wet, he hugged it to him like a little girl with a doll that was lost and is found.

## CHAPTER VIII

THE next morning at breakfast Noah Ezekiel remarked:

"I wonder where that skunk got the money."

"What skunk and what money?" Bob was pouring sirup on a pancake, a product of much patience both on his part and the Chinese cook's.

"Jenkins." Noah answered both questions in one word. "Not long ago he had to borrow a dime for a doughnut. Last night he was at the Red Owl gambling with both fists. And I heard he's bought altogether ten thousand acres in leases. 'Verily,' as dad used to say, 'the sinner flourisheth like a thorn tree.'"

"Do you know if he has bought Chandler's?" Bob asked, casually, not meeting Noah's eye.

"No, but I reckon he will. He seems out for a clean-up."

"If you see the Chandlers," suggested Rogeen, "advise them not to sell."

Noah Ezekiel reached for the towel to wipe his mouth, and shook his head.

"I ain't strong on giving advice. I believe in doin' as you'd be done by, and most all the advice I ever got was as hard to take as castor oil. Advice is like givin' a dog ipecac—it may break him of suckin' eggs, but it sure is hard on the dog."

Bob laughed and got up and started to work.

The first Saturday in June Rogeen and Noah quit at noon, for the rush was over.

"I reckon," Noah insinuated, suavely, "if you are feelin' right good I might strike you for another five to-night."

"Certainly," said Bob. "But look here, Noah, you ought not to gamble away your wages."

Noah Ezekiel pulled a long face.

"You sound like my dad. And I ain't fully persuaded you are enough of a saint to preach."

"You are incorrigible, Zeke," Bob laughed. "And I think I'll go with you to-night to the Red Owl."

Noah shook his head. "I wouldn't advise it.

Gamblin' ain't to be recommended to employers. It's liable to put wages in japordy."

"I am not going to gamble," said Bob. "I am looking for a man—a couple of them, in fact."

Reedy Jenkins had returned to his office about two o'clock after making a complete circuit of his leases. The crop looked fine—so everybody told him. He knew little about cotton, but Ah Sing was a wonderful farmer—he knew how to handle the Chinese labourer.

Then he looked at his watch and frowned. He wished that blankety-blank Mexican would be more prompt in keeping his appointments. He wanted to get away. He was to drive to El Centro for a visit with Mrs. Barnett and then to-night he would return for a little recreation across the line.

It was nearly four when Madrigal finally appeared, wearing an expensive white summer suit and a jaunty straw hat. "He is a handsome devil," thought Reedy, eying him with disfavour because of his lateness. The Mexican took off his straw hat attached to a buttonhole by a silk cord, and pushed up his black pompadoured hair.

"Have you got the Chandler ranch yet?" Jenkins came directly to the point.

"Not yet, señor." Madrigal's bold, dark eyes smiled with supreme confidence. "Not yet—but soon."

The Mexican stood up and returned his hat to his head. He put up his hands as though strumming a guitar, turned up his eyes languishingly, and hummed a flirting air.

"If this, señor," he said, breaking off, "does not win the señorita, we will try—what you call hem—direct action. You shall have your ranch, never fear."

"And that damned Rogeen—what of him?"

The Mexican smiled sinisterly. "He get news to-night that make heem lose much sleep.

"Now may I trouble Señor Jenkins for fifty dollar?"

Reedy grumbled, but paid. The Mexican lifted his hand, pressed it to his heart, and bowed with mocking gallantry.

"Until to-night, señor."

## CHAPTER IX

REEDY JENKINS and Mrs. Barnett sat in a cool, shadowed corner of the porch. Reedy took a plump yellow cigar from his vest pocket, and with a deferential bow:

"Will you permit me?"

"Certainly, Mr. Jenkins." Mrs. Barnett spoke in a liberal-minded tone. "I do not object at all to the fragrance of a good cigar—especially out of doors."

"It is a vile habit," said Jenkins, deprecatingly, as he began to puff. "But after a fellow has worked hard on some big deal, and is all strung up, it seems to offer a sort of relaxation. Of course, I think a man ought to smoke in reason. We are coarse brutes at the best—and need all the refining influences we can get."

"I think it is bad for the throat," said Evelyn Barnett. "That is what I tell Uncle Crill. He smokes entirely too much."

Uncle Crill was absent. He usually was. The old chap was willing for Evy to save his digestion within reason—but not his soul.

"My dear friend," Reedy made a rather impetuous gesture with his right hand toward the demure widow, "it was splendid of you to persuade your uncle to lend me that money for the big deal. It was the sort of thing that one never forgets. We have plenty of friends willing to help us spend our money, but only a few, a very few loyal ones, willing to help us make it.

"Depend upon it, my dear young lady, I'll not forget that favour—never. And as I promised before I shall give you personally one fourth of the profits."

Mrs. Barnett gave her head a little depreciating twist and smoothed the dress over her right knee.

"That will be very generous of you, Mr. Jenkins. But of course one does not do things for one's friends for money. Not but I can use it—to do good with," she hastened.

"My poor husband would have left me a comfortable fortune in my own right if it had not been

for the meddlesomeness of some one who had no business to interfere.

"Mr. Barnett was a mine owner—and a most excellent business man. He had large interests in Colorado. One mine he was going to sell. An old gentleman and his daughter were just ready to buy it. The papers were all drawn, and they were to pay over their money that evening. But some horrid young man, a wandering fiddler or something, got to meddling and persuaded them not to trade.

"It was an awful loss to poor Tom. He was to have had $60,000 out of the sale—and he never got one cent out of that mine, not a cent."

"What did they do to that fellow that broke up the trade?" asked Reedy, puffing interestedly at his cigar.

"Oh, Mr. Barnett said they taught him a lesson that would keep him from spoiling any more trades." Mrs. Barnett laughed. And then accusingly: "Isn't it queer how mean some people are. Now just that little interference from that meddlesome stranger kept me from having a small fortune." A deep sigh. "And one can do so much good with money. Just think if I had that money how many poor people around here I could help. I hear there

are families living across the line in little shacks—one or two rooms with dirt floors—and no bathroom. Isn't it awful? And women, too!"

Reedy twisted his chair about so he looked squarely at the widow. The sun had gone down, and the quick twilight was graying the row of palm trees that broke the skyline to the south. Jenkins was in a hurry to get away, but his visit was not quite rounded out.

"You must be very lonely," he said with a deep, sad voice—"since your husband died. Loneliness—ah loneliness! is the great ache of the human heart."

"Y-e-s. Oh, yes," Mrs. Barnett did not sound utterly desolate. "But of course, Mr. Barnett being away so much——" There was a significant pause. "He was an excellent man—a good business man, but you know. Well, some people are more congenial than others. We never had a cross word in our lives. But—well—our tastes were different, you know."

Reedy smoked and nodded in appreciative silence. The dusk came fast. Mrs. Barnett rustled her starched skirts and sighed.

"You know, Mr. Jenkins," she began on a totally

different subject, "it has been such a pleasure to me to meet someone out here in this God-forsaken country with fine feelings—one who loves the higher things of life."

"Thank you, Mrs. Barnett." Reedy bowed in all seriousness.

A moment later when he took his leave he held her hand a thought longer than necessary, and pressed it as though in a sympathetic impulse for her loneliness—or his—or maybe just because.

It was dark as Reedy threw the clutch into high and put his foot on the accelerator. He was out of town too quick to be in danger of arrest for speeding. He was late. The three others who were to seek recreation for the evening with him would be waiting.

And biting the end of his cigar he said fervently:

"Thank God for Jim Crill—and his niece."

Reedy's three friends were waiting—but dinner was ready. They had ordered a special dinner at the Pepper Tree Hotel, served out in a little pergola in the back yard.

They were all hearty eaters, but not epicures; and anyway they did not take time to taste much. From where they sat they could look out between

the latticed sides of the pergola across the Mexican line, and see above and beyond the squat darker buildings a high arch of winking electric lights.

That was the Red Owl.

And while they talked jerkily and broadly of cotton and real estate—and women, their thoughts were over there with those winking lights.

Just across the line there was the old West again—the West of the early Cripple Creek days, of Carson City and Globe. Still wide open, still raw, still unashamed.

Over there underneath these lights, in that great barnlike structure, were scores of tables across which fortunes flowed every night. There men met in the primitive hunt for money—quick money, and won—and lost, and lost, and lost.

There, too, the tinkle of a piano out of tune, the blare of a five-piece orchestra, and the raucous singing of girls who had lost their voices as significantly as other things. And beyond that, along shadowy corridors, were other girls standing or sitting in doorways—lightly dressed.

"Well, are you fellows through?" Reedy had pushed back his chair. "Let's go."

## CHAPTER X

IT WAS perhaps an hour later that Bob Rogeen went down the main street of the Mexican town, also headed for the Owl. Off this main street only a few lights served to reveal rather than dissipate the night. But under the dimness Mexicali was alive—a moving, seething, passionate sort of aliveness. The sidewalks were full, the saloons were busy. In and out of the meat shops or the small groceries occasionally a woman came and went. But the crowd was nearly all men—Mexicans, Chinamen, American ranchers and tourists, Germans, Negroes from Jamaica, Filipinos, Hindus with turbans. All were gathered in this valley of intense heat—this ancient bed of the sea now lower than the sea—not because of gold mines or oil gushers, but for the wealth that grew from the soil: the fortunes in lettuce, in melons, in alfalfa, and in cotton.

"Odd," thought Bob, "that the slowest and most conservative of all industries should find a spot of

the earth so rich that it started a stampede almost like the rush to the Klondike, of men who sought sudden riches in tilling the soil."

Across the way from a corner saloon came the twang of a mandolin; and half a dozen Mexican labourers began singing a Spanish folk song. In a shop at his right a Jap girl sold soda water; in another open door an old Chinaman mended shoes; and from another came the click of billiard balls. But most of the crowd was moving toward the Owl.

As Bob stepped inside the wide doors of the gambling hall the scene amazed him. There were forty tables running—roulette, blackjack, craps, stud poker—and round them men crowded three to five deep. Down the full length of one side of the room ran a bar nearly a hundred and fifty feet long, and in the rear end of the great barnlike structure thirty or forty girls, most of them American, sang and danced and smoked and drank with whosoever would buy.

Bob stood to one side of the surging crowd that milled round the gaming tables, and watched. There was no soft-fingered, velvet-footed glamour about this place. No thick carpets, rich hangings, or exotic perfumes. Most of the men were direct from the

fields with the soil of the day's work upon their rough overalls—and often on their faces and grimy hands. The men who ran the games were in their shirt sleeves, alert, sweatingly busy; some of them grim, a few predatory, but more of them easily good-natured. The whole thing was swift, direct, businesslike. Men were trying to win money from the house; and the house *was* winning money from them. This was raw gambling, raw drinking, raw vice. It was the old Bret Harte days multiplied by ten.

And yet there was a fascination about it. Bob felt it. It is idiotic to deny that gambling, which is the lure of quick money reduced to minutes and seconds, has not a fascination for nearly all men. As Bob stood leaning with his back against the bar—there was no other place to lean, not one place in that big hall to sit down—the scene filled him with the tragedy of futile trust in luck.

All these men knew that a day's work, a bale of cotton, a crate of melons, a cultivator—positive, useful things—brought money, positive, useful returns. And yet they staked that certainty on a vague belief in luck—and always, and always lost the certainty in grabbing for the shadow.

Most of these men were day labourers, clerks, small-salaried men. It cost a thousand dollars a day to run this house, and it made another thousand dollars in profits. Two thousand dollars—a thousand days' hard work squandered every night by the poor devils who hoped to get something easy. And some of them squandered not merely one day's work but a month's or six months' hard, sweaty toil flipped away with one throw of the dice or one spin of the ball.

While Bob's eyes watched the ever-shifting crowd that moved from table to table he saw Rodriguez, the man for whom he was searching. He was with Reedy Jenkins and three others coming from that end of the building devoted to alleged musical comedy. Besides the natty Madrigal, the sad-looking Rodriguez and Reedy, there were a Mexican and an American Bob did not know. All of them except Rodriguez wore expensive silk shirts and panama hats, and had had several drinks and were headed for more. Reedy, pink and expansive, chuckling and oratorical, was evidently the host. He was almost full enough and hilarious enough to do something ridiculous if the occasion offered.

After two more rounds of drinks the party started

for the gaming tables. The crowd was too thick for them to push their way in as a body, so they scattered. Reedy bought ten dollars' worth of chips at a roulette table, played them in stacks of twenty, and lost in three minutes. As he turned away he caught sight of Bob Rogeen and came across to him.

"Hello, Cotton-eyed Joe," he said with drunken jocularity, "let's have a drink."

"Thanks," replied Bob, "my wildest dissipation is iced rain water."

Bob just then caught sight of Noah Ezekiel and moved away from Reedy Jenkins. He felt it safer —especially for Reedy, to stay out of reach of him.

Noah Ezekiel's lank form was leaning against a roulette table, a stack of yellow chips in front of him.

"Hello," said the hill billy as Bob edged his way up to his side.

"How is it going?" asked Bob.

"Fine," answered Noah, carefully laying five chips in the shape of a star. "I got a system and I'm going to clean 'em up."

Bob smiled and watched. The wheel spun around. The ball slowed and dropped on 24. Noah's magical

star spread around 7. The dealer reached over and wiped in his five chips.

"You see," Noah explained, taking it for granted Bob knew nothing of the games, "this is ruelay. You play your money on one number and then rue it." The hill billy chuckled at his pun. "There are 36 numbers on the table," he pointed a long forefinger, "and there are 36 numbers on the wheel. You put your money or chip—the chips are five cents apiece—on one number, and if the ball stops at that number on the wheel, you win 35 times what you played."

"But if it doesn't stop on your number?" said Bob.

"Then you are out of luck." Noah Ezekiel had again begun to place his chips.

"Of course," he explained, "you play this thing dozens of ways; one to two on the red or black, or you can play one to three on the first, second or third twelve. Or you can play on the line between two numbers, and if either number wins you get 17 chips."

Noah won this time. The number in the centre of his star came up and he got 67 chips.

"Better quit now, hadn't you?" suggested Bob.

"Nope—just beginning to rake 'em in," replied Noah.

"Wish you would," said Bob, "and show me the rest of the games."

Noah reluctantly cashed in. He had begun with a dollar and got back $4.60.

"You see," said Noah, clinking the silver in his hands as they moved away, "this is lots easier than work. The only reason I work for you is out of the kindness of my heart. I made that $4.60 in twenty minutes."

"Here is craps." They had stopped at a table that looked like a gutted piano, with sides a foot above the bottom.

"You take the dice"—Noah happened to be in line and got them as the last man lost—"and put down say a half dollar." He laid one on the line. "You throw the two dice. If seven comes up—— Ah, there!" he chuckled. "I done it." The face of the dice showed ⁘ ⁙ "You see I win." The dealer had thrown down a half dollar on top of Noah's. "Now, come, seven." Noah flung them again.

Sure enough seven came up again. A dollar was

pitched out to him. He left the two dollars lying. This time he threw eleven and won again. Four dollars! Noah was in great glee.

"Let's go," urged Bob.

"One more throw," Noah brought up a 6 this time.

"Now," he explained, "I've got to throw until another 6 comes. If I get a seven before I do a six, they win." His next throw was a seven, and the dealer raked in the four dollars.

"Oh, well," sighed Noah, "only fifty cents of that was mine, anyway. And the poor gamblers have to live.

"This," he explained, stopping at a table waist high around which a circle of men stood with money and cards in front of them, "is Black Jack.

"You put down the amount of money you want to bet. The banker deals everybody two cards, including himself. But both your cards are face down, while his second card is face up.

"The game is to see who can get closest to 21. You look at your cards. All face cards count for ten; ace counts for either 1 or 11 as you prefer.

"If your cards don't add enough, you can get as many more as you ask for. But if you ask for a

card and it makes you run over 21, you lose and push your money over. Say you get a king and a 9—that is 19, and you stand on that, and push your cards under your money.

"When all the rest have all the cards they want, the dealer turns his over. Say he has a 10 and a 3. He draws. If he gets a card that puts him over 21, he goes broke and pays everybody. But if he gets say 18—then he pays all those who are nearer 21 than he; but all who have less than 18 lose."

While Noah had been explaining, he had been playing, and lost a dollar on each of two hands.

They moved on to a chuck-a-luck game.

"This, you see," said Noah, "is a sort of bird cage with three overgrown dice. You put your money on any one of these six numbers. He whirls the cage and shakes up the fat dice. They fall—and if one of the three numbers which come up is yours, you win. Otherwise—ouch!" Noah had played a dollar on the 5; and a 1, 2 and a 6 came up.

As they moved away Noah was shaking his head disconsolately.

"Money is like a shadow that soon flees away—and you have to hoe cotton in the morning."

"Don't you know," said Bob, earnestly, "that everyone of these games give the house from 6 to 30 per cent., and that you are sure to lose in the end?"

"Yeah," said Noah, wearily. "You're sure to die in the end, too; but that don't keep you from goin' on tryin' every day to make a livin' and have a little fun. It's all a game, and the old man with the mowin' blade has the last call."

"But," persisted Bob, "when you earn a thing and get what you earn, it is really yours, and has a value and gives a pleasure that you can't get out of money that comes any other way."

"Don't you believe it," Noah shook his head lugubriously. "The easier money comes the more I enjoy it. Only it don't never come. It goes. This here gamblin' business reminds me of an old dominecker hen we used to have. That hen produced an awful lot of cackle but mighty few eggs. It is what my dad would have called the shadow without the substance. But your blamed old tractor gives me a durned lot more substance than I yearn for."

They were still pushing among the jostling crowd. There were more than a thousand men in the hall—and a few women. Soiled Mexicans passed through

the jostle with trays on their heads selling sandwiches and bananas. Fragments of meat and bread and banana peelings were scattered upon the sawdust floor. It was a grimy scene. And yet Bob still acknowledged the tremendous pull of it—the raw, quick action of the stuff that life and death are made of.

Noah nudged Bob and nodded significantly toward the bar, where Reedy with his three friends and two or three Mexicans, including Madrigal, were drinking.

"He's cookin' up something agin you," said Noah in a low tone. "Better go over and talk to him. He's gettin' full enough to spill some of it."

Bob took the suggestion and sauntered over toward the bar. As he approached, Reedy turned around and nodded blinkingly at him.

"Say," Reedy leaned his elbows on the bar and spoke in a propitiatory tone, "I'sh sorry you went off in such a huff. Right good fello', I understand. If you'd asked me, I'd saved you lot of trouble and money on that lease." Reedy stopped to hiccough. "Even now, take your lease off your hands at half what it cost."

"So?" Bob smiled sarcastically.

"Well, hell," Reedy was nettled at the lack of ap-

preciation of his generosity, "that's a good deal better than nothing."

"My lease is not on the market," Bob replied, dryly.

"Now look here!" Reedy half closed his plump eyes and nodded knowingly. "'Course you are goin' to sell—I got to have four more ranches to fill out my farm—and when I want 'em I get 'em, see? As Davy Crockett said to the coon, 'Better come on down before I shoot, and save powder.'"

"Shoot," said Bob, contemptuously.

"Now look here," Reedy lurched still closer to Bob, and put his plump fingers down on the bar as though holding something under his hand:

"I got unlimited capital back of me—million dollars—two million—all I want. That's on 'Merican side—on this side—I got pull. See? Fifty ways I can squelch you—just like that." He squeezed his plump, soft hand together as though crushing a soft-shelled egg.

"You are drunk," Bob said, disgustedly, "and talking through a sieve." He moved away from him and sauntered round the hall. At one of the tables he came upon Rodriguez, the man he was looking for.

He looked more Spanish than Mexican, had a moustache but did not curl it, a thin face and soft brown eyes, and the pensive look of a poet who is also a philosopher.

"Well?" Bob questioned in an undertone as they drifted outside of the gambling hall and stood in the shadows beyond the light of the open doors. "Did you learn anything?"

Rodriguez nodded. "They have two, three plans to make you get out. Señor Madrigal is—what you call hem?—detec—detectave in Mexico. Ver' bad man. He work for Señor Jenkins on the side."

Bob left his Mexican friend. He stood in the shadow of the great gambling hall for a moment, pulled in opposite directions by two desires. He remembered a red spot on Reedy Jenkins' cheek just under his left eye that he wanted to hit awfully bad. He could go back and smash him one that would knock him clear across the bar. On the other hand, he wanted to get on his horse and ride out into the silence and darkness of the desert and think. After all, smashing that red spot on Reedy's cheek would not save his ranch. He turned quickly down the street to where his horse was hitched.

## CHAPTER XI

ONE of the hardest layers of civilization for a woman to throw off is the cook stove. She can tear up her fashion plates, dodge women's clubs, drop her books, forsake cosmetics and teas, and yet be fairly happy. But to the last extremity she clings to her cook stove.

Imogene Chandler had her stove out in the open at a safe distance from the inflammable weed roof of the "house." The three joints of stovepipe were held up by being wired to two posts driven in the ground beside it.

The girl alternately stuffed light, dry sticks into the stove box, and then lifted the lid of a boiling kettle to jab a fork into the potatoes to see if they were done. The Chandler larder was reduced to the point where Imogene in her cooking had to substitute things that would do for things that tasted good.

Chandler, in from the field, filled a tin washbasin at the tank, set it on a cracker box, and proceeded

to clean up for supper. He rolled his sleeves up far above his elbows and scrubbed all the visible parts of his body from the top of his bald head to the shoulder blade under the loose collar of his open-necked shirt. About the only two habits from his old life that clung to the ex-professor were his use of big words and soap.

Chandler sat down at the little board table, also out in the open. It was after sundown and the heat was beginning to abate. As Imogene poured coffee into the pint tin cup beside his plate she looked down at him with protective admiration.

"Dad, I'm proud of you. You've got a tan that would be the envy of an African explorer; and you are building up a muscle, too; you are almost as good a man in the field as a Chinese coolie—really better than a Mexican."

"It has been my observation," said the ex-professor, tackling the boiled potatoes with a visible appetite, "that when a man quits the scholarly pursuits he instinctively becomes an agriculturist. Business is anathema to me; but I must confess that it gives me pleasure to watch the germination of the seed, and to behold the flower and fruitage of the soil."

Imogene laughed. "It is the fruitage that I'm fond of—especially when it is a bale to the acre. And it is going to make that this year or more; I never saw a finer field of cotton."

"It is doing very well," Chandler admitted with pride. "Yet, ah, perhaps there is one field better, certainly as good, and that is the American's north of here; the person you referred to as a fiddler."

"Daddy," and under the tone of raillery was a trace of wistfulness, "we've lived like Guinea Negroes here for three years, and yet I believe you like it. I don't believe you'd go back right now as professor of Sanskrit at Zion College."

The little professor did not reply, but remarked as he held out the cup for another pint of coffee:

"I notice I sleep quite soundly out here, even when the weather is excessively hot."

The girl smiled and felt fully justified in the change she had forced in his way of living.

"I think," remarked Chandler, reflectively, "at the end of the month I'll let Chang Lee go. I think I can some way manage the rest of the season alone."

"Perhaps," assented Imogene, soberly, as she began to pick up the knives and forks and plates. She had

not told him that when Chang Lee's wages for June were paid it would leave them less than twenty dollars to get through the summer on. "I've been learning to irrigate the cotton rows and I can help," she said. "It will be a lot of fun."

The ex-professor was vaguely troubled. He knew in a remote sort of way that their finances were at a low ebb. Imogene always attended to the business.

"Do you suppose, daughter," he asked, troubled, "that it is practical for us to continue in our present environment for another season?"

"Surest thing, you know," she laughed reassuringly. "Run along now to bed; you are tired." He sighed with a delicious sense of relief and sleepiness, and went.

But Imogene was not tired enough either to sit still or to sleep. She got up and walked restlessly round the camp. Known problems and unknown longings were stirring uneasily in her consciousness.

She stood at the edge of the field where the long rows of cotton plants, freshly watered, grew rank and green in the first intense heat of summer. There was a full moon to-night—a hazy, sleepy full moon

with dust blown across its face creeping up over the eastern desert.

Just a little while ago and it was all desert. Two years ago when they first came this cotton field was uneven heaps of blown sand, desert cactus, and mesquite—barren and forbidding as a nightmare of thirst and want. It had taken a year's work and nearly all their meagre capital to level it and dig the water ditches. And the next year—that was last year—the crop was light and the price low. They had barely paid their debts and saved a few hundred for their next crop. Now that was gone, and with it six hundred, the last dollar she could borrow at the bank. Just how they were going to manage the rest of the summer she did not know. And worst of all were these vague but persistent rumours and warnings that the ranchers were somehow to be robbed of their crops.

She turned and walked back into the yard of the little shack and stood bareheaded looking at the moon, the desert wind in her face. Another summer of heat was coming swiftly now. She had lived through two seasons of that terrific heat when the sun blazed all day, day after day, and the thermometer

climbed and climbed until it touched the 130 mark. And all these two years had been spent here at this shack, with its dirt yard and isolation.

The desert had bit deeply into her consciousness. Even the heat, the wind-driven sand, the stillness, the aloneness of it had entered into her soul with a sort of fascination.

"I'm not sorry," she shut her hands hard and pressed her lips close together, "even if we do lose—but we must not lose! We can't go on in poverty, either here or over there. We must not lose—we must not!"

She turned her head sharply; something toward the road had moved; some figure had appeared a moment and then disappeared. A fear that was never wholly absent made her move toward the door of her own shack. A revolver hung on a nail there.

And then out on the night stole the singing, quivering note of a violin. Instantly the fear was gone, the tension past, and the tears for the first time in all the struggle slipped down her cheeks. She knew now that for weeks she had been hoping he would come again.

When the violin cords ceased to sing, Imogene

clapped her hands warmly, and the fiddler rose from beside a mesquite bush and came toward her.

"I'm glad you brought it this time," she said as he approached and sat down on a box a few feet away. "That was the best music I have heard for years."

"The best?" he questioned.

She caught the meaning in his emphasis and smiled to herself as she answered: "The best violin music." Although her face was in the shadow, the moonlight was on her hair and shoulders. Something in her figure affected him as it had that night when she stood in the doorway—some heroic endurance, some fighting courage that held it erect, and yet it was touched by a yearning as restless and unsatisfied as the desert wind. Bob knew her father was incapable of grappling alone with the problems of life. This project had all been hers; it was her will, her brain, her courage that had wrought the change on the face of this spot of desert. Yet how softly girlish as she sat there in the moonlight; and how alone in the heart of this sleeping desert in an alien country. He wished she had not qualified that praise of his playing. Bob knew very little about women.

"How do you like being a cotton planter?" She was first to break the silence.

"Oh, very well." He turned his eyes from her for the first time, looked down at his fiddle, and idly picked at one of the strings. "But of course I can't truthfully say I love manual labour. I can do it when there is something in it; but I much prefer a hammock and a shade and a little nigger to fan me and bring me tall glasses full of iced drinks."

She laughed, for she knew already he had the reputation of being one of the best workers in the valley.

"But this country has me," he added. "It fascinates me. When I make a fortune over here I'm going across on the American side and buy a big ranch.

"You know"—he continued softly to strum on the violin strings—"this Imperial Valley seems to me like a magic spot of the tropics, some land of fable. Richer than the valley of the Nile it has lain here beneath the sea level for thousands of years, dead under the breath of the desert, until a little trickle of water was turned in from the Colorado River, and then it swiftly put forth such luxuriant wealth

of food and clothes and fruit and flowers that its story sounds like the demented dreams of a bankrupt land promoter."

"I am glad you like it," she said, "and I hope you'll get your share of the fabled wealth that it is supposed to grow—and, oh, yes, by the way, do you happen to need another Chinaman?"

"No, I've got more than I can pay now."

"We are going to let Chang Lee go the last of the month. He's a good Chinaman, and I wanted him to have a job."

"Why let him go?"

"We won't need him."

"Won't need him!" Bob exclaimed. "With a hundred and sixty acres of cotton to irrigate and keep chopped out?"

"I can do a lot of the irrigating"—the girl spoke a little evasively—"and daddy can manage the rest."

He knew this was another case of exhausted funds.

"Can't you borrow any more?"

She laughed a frank confession.

"You guessed it. We haven't money to pay him. I've borrowed six hundred on the crop, and can't get another dollar."

He sat silent for several minutes looking off toward the cotton fields that would cry for water to-morrow in their fight against the eternal desert that brooded over this valley, thinking of her pluck. It made him ashamed of any wavering thought that ever scouted through his own mind.

He stood up. "And are you going to see it through?"

Alone beside the field as the moon rose she had wavered in doubt; but the answer came now with perfect assurance.

"Most surely."

"So am I," he said. "Good-night."

But before he turned she put out her hand to touch his violin—her fingers touched his hand instead.

"Please—just once more," she asked.

He laughed whimsically as he sat down on the box and drew the bow.

"I'm proud of the human race," he said, "that fights for bread and still looks at the stars."

He began to play: he did not know what. It might have been something he had heard; but anyway to-night it was his and hers, the song of the

rose that fought the desert all day for its life and then blossomed with fragrance in the night.

At the sound of the violin a man sitting on the edge of the canal by the cottonwood trees stirred sharply. There was a guitar across his knee. He had been waiting for the sound of voices to cease; and now the accursed fiddle was playing again. He spat vindictively into the stream.

"Damn the Americano!"

## CHAPTER XII

BOB saw as he turned into the Bungalow Court at El Centro a youngish woman in white sitting on the second porch. In spite of the absence of the weeds he recognized her as the widow who had come down the street that other morning to meet Jim Crill. This, then, was Crill's place. Evidently the twelve months of bereavement had elapsed, and Mrs. Barnett, having done her full duty, felt that the ghost of her departed could no longer have any just complaints if she wore a little white of her own.

Bob had come to see Crill. Since that evening with Imogene Chandler he had worried a good deal about their being without money. He had tried to get the ginning company that had advanced his own funds to make them a loan. But everybody had grown wary and quit lending across the line. Bob as a last resort had come up to see if Crill could be induced to help.

"Good morning." Rogeen lifted his straw hat as he stood on the first step of the porch, and smiled. "Is Mr. Crill at home?"

"No." Mrs Barnett had nodded rather stiffly in response to his greeting, and lifted her eyes questioningly. She was waiting for someone else, and hence felt no cordiality for this stranger, whom she dimly seemed to remember.

"When will he be in?" The young man was obviously disappointed, and he really was good to look at.

"I don't know exactly." Mrs Barnett relented slightly, having glanced down the road to be sure another machine was not coming. "But as I attend to much of his business, perhaps if you will tell me what it is you want I can arrange it for you. Won't you come up and have a chair?"

Bob accepted the invitation, not that he intended to mention his business to her, but he had a notion that Jim Crill was due to arrive about lunch time.

"Are you from the East?" That was Mrs. Barnett's idea of tactful flattery. She asked it of all callers.

"Yes."

"What part, may I ask?"

"All parts," he smiled, "east of here and west of the Mississippi."

"It is so different here," Mrs. Barnett lifted her brows and raised her eyes as though she were singing "The Lost Chord," "from what I am used to."

"Yes," assented Bob, "it is different from what I am used to. That is why I like it."

"Oh, do you?" Shocked disappointment in her tone implied that it was too bad he was not a kindred spirit. "I find everything so crude; and such loose standards here." A regretful shake of the head. "The women especially"—she thought of her tact again—"seem to have forgotten all the formalities and nice conventions of good society—if they ever knew. I suppose most of them were hired girls and clerks before they were married."

Bob made no comment. He did not know much about "nice formalities," but it had struck him that the women of Imperial Valley were uncommonly good, friendly human beings, and he had seen a number of college diplomas scattered round the valley.

"I heard of a woman recently," Mrs. Barnett went on, "who in the East was in college circles; now she's

living in a hut. Think of it, a hut over on the other side among the Chinese and Mexicans! The only woman there, and practically alone. It seems perfectly incredible! I don't see how any decent woman could do a thing like that. Why, I'd rather work in somebody's kitchen. There, at least, one could be respectable."

Bob got up.

"I guess I'll not wait longer for Mr. Crill," he said, and he went down the steps, walking with rapid aversion. If Jim Crill left his business to this female, he didn't want any of his money for the Chandlers.

The ginning company had agreed to lend Bob up to $1,500 on the crop, advancing it along as he needed it. He was renting his teams, and had bought very little machinery, so he had managed to use less than his estimate. On his way back to the ranch he stopped at the company's office in Calexico, and drew two hundred dollars more on the loan.

A few days later Rogeen, watching his opportunity, saw Chandler riding alone toward town, and went out to the road and stopped him. After some roundabout conversation Bob remarked:

"By the way, a friend of mine has a little money

he wants to lend to cotton growers at 10 per cent. Do you suppose you would be able to use a couple of hundreds of it?"

"Ahem!" The ex-professor ran a bony hand over a lean chin. "It is extremely probable, young man, extremely probable. I am very much inclined to think that I can—that is, provided he would esteem my personal signature to a promissory note sufficient guarantee for the payment of the indebtedness."

"That will be entirely sufficient" Bob smiled reassuringly, and pretended to write out—it was already prepared—a note. Chandler signed, and Bob gave him two hundred dollars in currency.

The next evening when Bob returned from the field he found a sealed envelope on the little board table in his shack. It contained $100 in currency and a note which read:

> You can't afford this loan; but we need the money so darned bad I'm going to split it with you. I like the fiddle better than any musical instrument that is made.
>
> I. C.

Toward the last of June old cotton growers told Bob that his field was sure to go a bale and a quarter an acre, and Chandler's was about as good.

On the twenty-sixth of June a Mexican officer came to the ranch and arrested Rogeen's Chinese cook and one of his field hands. Bob offered bail, but it was refused. The day following the remaining Chinaman was arrested.

Bob got other hands, but on July first all three of these were arrested.

"I see," Bob said to himself, thinking it over that evening, "this is the first of Jenkins' schemes. They are going to make Chinamen afraid to work for me. Well, Noah and I can manage until I can hire some Americans."

At nine o'clock it was yet too hot to sleep, and Bob too restless to sit still. He got up and started out to walk. Without any definite intention he turned down the road south. He had gone about half a mile and thought of turning back when he saw something in the road ahead—something white. It was a woman, and she was running toward him.

## CHAPTER XIII

BOB hastened to meet the figure in the road. He knew it was Imogene Chandler, and that her haste meant she was either desperately frightened or in great trouble.

"Is that you, Mr. Rogeen?" She checked up and called to him fifty yards away.

"Yes. What is the matter?"

"I've been frightened three times in the last week." She caught her breath. "A man hid in the weeds near the house, and his movements gave me a scare; but I didn't think so much about it until Saturday night, when I went out after dark to gather sticks for the breakfast cooking, a man slipped from the shadow of the trees and spoke to me and I ran and he followed me nearly to the house. I got my gun and shot at him.

"But to-night," she gasped for breath again, "just as I was going from papa's tent to my own, a

man jumped out and grabbed me. I screamed and he ran away."

Bob put his hand on her arm. He felt it still quivering under his fingers.

"I'll walk back with you," he said in a quiet, reassuring tone.

"Can you lend me a blanket?" he asked when they reached the Chandler ranch. "And let me have your gun, I'll sleep out here to one side of your tent."

She protested, but without avail.

Next morning when Bob returned to his own ranch he spoke to Noah Ezekiel Foster.

"Noah, this afternoon move your tent down to the Chandler ranch. Put it up on the north side of Miss Chandler's so she will be between yours and her father's. I'm going to town and I'll bring out a double-barrelled riot shotgun that won't miss even in the dark. You and that gun are going to sleep side by side."

Noah Ezekiel grinned.

Bob went to the shack, put his own pistol in his pocket, and rode off to Calexico.

Reedy Jenkins sat at his desk in shirt sleeves,

his pink face a trifle pasty as he sweated over a column of figures. He looked up annoyedly as someone entered through the open door; and the annoyance changed to surprise when he saw that it was Bob Rogeen.

"I merely came in to tell you a story," said Bob as he dropped into a chair and took a paper from the pocket of his shirt and held it in his left hand.

"This," Bob flecked the paper and spoke reminiscently, "is quite a curiosity. I got it up near Blindon, Colorado. A bunch of rascals jumped me one night when my back was turned.

"Next day my friends hired an undertaker to take charge of my remains, and made up money to pay him. This paper is the undertaker's receipt for my funeral.

"The rascals did not get either me or the cash they were after; but they taught me a valuable lesson: never to have my back turned again."

He stopped.

"You see," went on Bob in a tone that did not suggest argument, "there is a ranch over my way you happen to want—two of them, in fact. The

last week the lessees have both been much annoyed; the one on the south one especially.

"Now, of course, we can kill Madrigal and any other Mexican that keeps up that annoyance. But instead, I suggest that you call them off. For the Chandlers have fully made up their minds not to sell, and so have I."

Bob rose. "If anything further happens down there, I'm afraid there'll be an accident on this side of the line. It was merely that you might be prepared in advance that I dropped in this morning to make you a present of this." He tossed the paper on Jenkins' desk and went out.

Reedy picked up the receipt. The undertaker, after Rogeen's recovery, had facetiously written on the back:

This receipt is still good for one first-class funeral—and it is negotiable.

Reedy felt all the sneer go out of his lips and a sort of coldness steal along his sweaty skin. Underneath this writing was another line:

Transferred for value received to Reedy Jenkins.

BOB ROGEEN.

## CHAPTER XIV

IT WAS five minutes after Bob Rogeen had gone out of the door before Reedy Jenkins stirred in his chair. Then he gave his head a vicious jerk and swiped the angling wisp of hair back from his forehead.

"Oh, hell! He can't bluff me."

He sat gritting his teeth, remembering the insulting retorts he might have made, slapped his thigh a whack with his open hand in vexation that he had not made them; got up and walked the floor.

No, he was not afraid of Rogeen, not by a damned sight. Afraid of a twenty-dollar hardware clerk? *Not much!* He would show him he had struck the wrong town and the wrong man for his cheap bluffs. And yet Reedy kept remembering a certain expression in Rogeen's eye, a certain taut look in his muscles. Of course a man of Reedy's reputation did not want to be mixed up in any brawls. Whatever was done, should be done smoothly—and safely.

He telephoned for Madrigal, the Mexican Jew. Madrigal could manage it.

While waiting for his agent, Reedy lighted a cigar, but became so busily engaged with his thoughts that he forgot to puff until it went out. Jenkins was taking stock of the situation. He had boasted of his influence with the Mexican authorities; but like most boasters he was talking about the influence he was going to have rather than what he had. Just now he was not sure he had any pull across the line at all. Of course as a great ranch owner and a very rich man—as he was going to be inside of three years—he could have great influence. And yet he remembered that the present Mexican Governor of Baja California was an exceedingly competent man. He was shrewd and efficient, and deeply interested in the development of his province. Moreover, he was friendly to Americans, and seemed to have more than an ordinary sense of justice toward them.

Reedy shook his head. He did not believe he could have much chance with the Governor—not at present, anyway. But perhaps some minor official might help put over his schemes. Anyway, Madrigal would know.

The Mexican Jew came directly, dressed in light flannels, a flower in his buttonhole. Debonairly he lifted his panama and bowed with exaggerated politeness to Jenkins.

"What great good has Señor Reedy clabbering in his coco now?" He grinned impudently.

Jenkins frowned. His dignity was not to be so trifled with.

"Sit down," he ordered.

Reedy relighted his cigar, put his thumbs in his vest holes, and began slowly puffing smoke toward the ceiling. He liked to keep his subordinates waiting.

"Madrigal," he said, directly, "I want those two ranches—Chandler's and Rogeen's."

"*Si, si.*" The Mexican nodded shrewdly. "And Señor Jenkins shall have them."

"We've got to get rid of Rogeen first. Then the other will be easy."

"Et es so, señor," Madrigal said, warmly. He hated Rogeen on his own account, for Señor Madrigal had formed a violent attachment for the Señorita Chandler. And the damned Americano with his fiddle was in the way.

"If," suggested Reedy, smoking slowly, "Rogeen should be induced to leave the country within three weeks—or in case he happened to some accident so he could not leave at all—we'd make four thousand-out of his ranch. Half of that would be two thousand."

Madrigal's black eyes narrowed wickedly, and his thick lips rolled up under his long nose.

"Mexico, señor, is the land of accidents."

"All right, Madrigal," Reedy waved dismissal and turned to his desk and began to figure—or pretend to figure.

The Mexican turned in the door, looked back on the bulky form of Jenkins, started to speak, grinned wickedly, and went down the outside stairway.

On the evening of the third of August Bob came in from the fields and prepared his own supper. Since the arrest of his Chinamen a few weeks before Rogeen had not employed any other help. The cotton cultivation was over, and he and Noah could manage the irrigation. The hill billy had gone to town early in the afternoon, and would return directly to the Chandler ranch where he was

still on guard at nights. Bob believed his warning to Jenkins had stopped all further molestation, but he was not willing to take any chances—at least not with Imogene Chandler.

Bob had been irrigating all day and was dead tired. After supper he sat in front of his shack as usual to cool a little before turning in. The day had been the hottest of the summer, and now at eight o'clock it was still much over a hundred.

In that heat there is little life astir even in the most luxuriant fields. It was still to-night—scarcely the croak of a frog or the note of a bird. There was no moon, but in the deep, vast, clear spaces of the sky the stars burned like torches held down from the heavens. A wind blew lightly, but hot off the fields. The weeds beside the ditches shook slitheringly, and the dry grass roof of the shack rustled.

To be the centre of stillness, to be alone in a vast space, either crushes one with loneliness or gives him an unbounded exhilaration. To-night Bob felt the latter sensation. It seemed instead of being a small, lost atom in a swirling world, he was a part of all this lambent starlight; this whispering air of the desert.

He breathed slowly and deeply of the dry, clean

wind, rose, and stretched his tired muscles, and turned in. So accustomed had he become to the heat that scarcely had he stretched out on the cot before he was asleep. And Bob was a sound sleeper. The sides of the shack were open above a three-foot siding of boards, open save for a mosquito netting. An old screen door was set up at the front, but Bob had not even latched that. If one was in danger out here, he was simply in danger, that was all, for there was no way to hide from it.

A little after midnight two Mexicans crept along on all-fours between the cotton rows at the edge of Bob's field. At the end of the rows, fifty yards from the shack, they crouched on their haunches and listened. The wind shook the tall rank cotton and rustled the weeds along the ditches. But no other sound. Nothing was stirring anywhere.

Bending low and walking swiftly they slipped toward the back of the shack. Their eyes peered ahead and they slipped with their hearts in their throats, trusting the Americano was asleep.

He was. As they crouched low behind the shelter of the three-foot wall of boards they could hear his breathing. He was sound asleep.

Slowly, on hands and knees, they crawled around the west side toward the entrance. In the right hand of the one in front was the dull glint of a knife. The other held a revolver.

Cautiously the one ahead tried the screen door—pushing it open an inch or two. It was unlatched. Motioning for the other to stand by the door, he arose, pushed the door back with his left hand very slowly so as not to make a squeak. In the right he held the knife.

Bob stirred in his sleep and turned on the cot. The Mexican stood motionless, ready to spring either way if he awoke. But the steady breathing of a sound sleeper began again.

The Mexican let the door to softly and took one quick step toward the bed.

Then with a wild, blood-curdling yell he fell on the floor. Something from above had leaped on him, something that enveloped him, that grappled with him. He went down screaming and stabbing like a madman. His companion at the door fired one shot in the air, dropped his gun, and ran as if all the devils in hell were after him.

The commotion awoke Bob. Instantly he sat up

in bed, and as he rose he reached for a gun with one hand and a flashlight with the other. In an instant the light was in the Mexican's face—and the gun also.

"Hold up your hands, Madrigal." Bob's tone brought swift obedience. Around the Mexican and on him were the ripped and torn fragments of a dummy man—made of a sack of oats, with flapping arms and a tangle of ropes. Bob had not felt sure but some attempt might be made on his life, and half in jest and half as a precaution, he and Noah had put this dummy overhead with a trip rope just inside the door. They knew the fright of something unexpected falling on an intruder would be more effective than a machine gun.

"Get up," Bob ordered, and the shaken Madrigal staggered to his feet, with his hands held stiffly straight up. "March out." Rogeen's decision had come quickly. He followed with the gun in close proximity to the Mexican's back.

Madrigal was ordered to pick up a hoe and a shovel, and then was marched along the water ditch toward the back of the field.

"Here." Bob ordered a stop. They were half a mile from the road, at the edge of the desert. The

Mexican had recovered enough from his first fright to feel the cold clutch of another, surer danger.

"Dig," ordered Bob. And the Mexican obeyed.

"About two feet that way." Bob sat down on the bank of the water ditch and kept the digger covered. "Make it seven feet long," he ordered, coldly.

Slowly Madrigal dug and shovelled, and slowly but surely as the thing took shape, he saw what it was—a grave. His grave!

He glared wildly about as he paused for a breath.

"Hurry," came the insistent command.

Another shovelful, and he glanced up at the light. But the muzzle of the gun was level with the light! A wrong move and he knew the thing would be over even before the grave was done.

For an hour he worked. Off there at the edge of the desert, this grave levelled as a part of the cotton field—and no one would ever find it. His very bones seemed to sweat with horror. Was the American going to bury him alive? Or would he shoot him first?

All the stealth and cruelty he had ever felt toward others now turned in on himself, and a horror that

filled him with blind, wild terror of that hollow grave shook him until he could no longer dig. He stood there in front of the flashlight blanched and shaking.

"That will do," said Rogeen. "Madrigal," he put into that word all the still terror of a cool courage, "that is your grave."

For a full moment he paused. "You will stay out of it just as long as you stay off my land—out of reach of my gun. Don't ever even pass the road by my place.

"Your boss has had his warning. This is yours. That grave will stay open, day and night, waiting for you.

"Good-night, Señor Madrigal. Go fast and don't look back."

The last injunction was entirely superfluous.

After the night had swallowed up the fleeing figure Bob rolled on the bank and laughed until his ribs ached.

"No more oat sacks for Señor Madrigal! I wonder who the other one was—and what became of him?"

## CHAPTER XV

IT WAS October. The bolls had opened beautifully. The cotton was ready to pick. As Bob and Noah walked down the rows the stalks came up to their shoulders. It was the finest crop of cotton either of them had ever seen.

"As dad used to say," remarked Noah Ezekiel, "the fields are white for the harvest, but where are the reapers?" There was no one in the fields at work.

Bob shook his head gloomily. "I have no money for the pickers. I owe you, Noah, for the last two months."

"Yes, I remember it," said the hill billy, plucking an extra large boll of lint. "I've tried to forget it, but somehow those things sort of stick in a fellow's mind."

In August the great war had broke in Europe. Ships were rushing with war supplies, blockades declared, factories shut down. The American stock

exchanges had closed to save a panic. Buying and selling almost ceased. Money scuttled to the cover of safety vaults, and the price of cotton had dropped and dropped until finally it ceased to sell at all.

"It is going to bankrupt almost every grower in the valley," remarked Bob. "I'm certainly sorry for the Chandlers. They're up against it hard."

"As the poet says," Noah Ezekiel drew down the corners of his mouth, pulling a long face, "ain't life real?"

Bob laughed in spite of troubles. "Noah, I believe you'd joke at your own funeral."

"Why shouldn't I?" said Noah. "You joked with your undertaker's receipt." He grinned at the recollection of that event. "You sure broke that yellow dog Jenkins from suckin' eggs—temporarily.

"But ain't he stuck with his leases though. If I had as much money as he owes, I could fix these gamblers at the Red Owl so they wouldn't have to work any for the rest of their natural lives."

"Noah," Bob turned to his faithful foreman, "I want you to stick until we put this thing through. I'll see you don't lose a dollar."

"Don't you worry about me sticking," said Noah Ezekiel. "I never quit a man as long as he owes me anything."

The loyalty of the hill billy touched Rogeen, but as is the way of men, he covered it up with a brusque tone.

"You get the sacks ready. I'm going in to town and raise the money somehow to pick this cotton. I'll pick it if I never get a dollar out of it—can't bear to see a crop like that go to waste."

The cotton-gin people were in a desperate panic, but Bob went after them hard:

"Now see here, that war in Europe is not going to end the world; and as long as the world stands there will be a demand for cotton. This flurry will pass, and there's sure to be a big jump in the market for cotton seed. The war will increase the demand for oils of all kinds.

"That cotton has got to be picked, and you'll have to furnish the money. When it is ginned you can certainly borrow five cents a pound on it. That will pay for the water and the lease, the picking and the ginning—and the duty, too.

"Now you get the money for me to pick my field

and Chandler's field. They owe only $600 on the crop; so you'll be even safer there than with me. We'll leave the cotton with you as security. And then after you have borrowed all you can on it, I'll give you my personal note for all the balance I owe, and see you get every dollar of it, if I have to work it out during the next three years at twenty dollars a week."

It was that promise that turned the scales. No man of discernment could look at Rogeen and doubt either his pluck or his honesty.

Two days later forty Chinamen, more eager for jobs now than ever, were picking cotton at the Chandler and Rogeen ranches—twenty at each place.

Tom Barton went up the outside stairway thumping each iron step viciously. Six months of gloomy forebodings had terminated even more disastrously than he had feared. He found Reedy Jenkins rumpled and unshaven, laboriously figuring at his desk.

Reedy looked up with a sly-dog sort of smile. There were little rims of red round his eyes, but it was plain he had something new to spring on his creditor.

"I'm not figuring debts"—Jenkins reached in the drawer and got out a cigar and lighted it—"but profits."

"Yes," said Barton, murderously, "that is what you are always figuring on. Debts don't mean anything to you, because you aren't worth a damn. But debts count with me. You owe me $40,000 on this bright idea of yours, and your leases aren't worth a tadpole in Tahoe."

"Easy, easy!" Reedy waved his hand as though getting ready to make a speech. "Perhaps I have temporarily lost my credit; but with a requisite amount of cash, a man can always get it back—or do without it.

"I admit this damn war has swamped me. I admit on the face of the returns I am snowed under—bankrupt to the tune of over $200,000. But nevertheless and notwithstanding I am going to get away with some coin."

"Well, I hope you don't get away with mine," growled Barton.

A laundry driver entered the door with a bill in his hand. Reedy grew a little redder and waved at the man angrily.

"Don't bother me with that now; don't you see I'm busy?"

"So am I," said the driver, aggressively, "and this is the third call."

"Leave it," said Jenkins, angrily, "and I'll have my secretary send you a check for it."

The driver threw it on Reedy's desk and left sullenly. Barton caught the figures on the unpaid bill—seventy-eight cents.

"I admit," Barton spoke sarcastically as he started for the door, "that your credit is gone. But if you don't dig up that forty thousand, you'll be as sorry you ever borrowed it as I am that I lent it."

The last of November Bob went down to the Chandler ranch to give an account of the cotton picking.

"You have 150 bales at the compress. I put up the compress receipts for the debts," said Bob to Imogene. "There is $3,123 against your cotton. I could not borrow another dollar on it."

"You have done so much for us already," the girl said, feelingly. "And we'll get along some way.

If cotton would only begin to sell, we would have a little fortune."

"I have 180 bales," said Bob, "but I owe something over $4,000 on it. I am going up to Calexico and get a job until spring." He hesitated a moment, looking at the girl thoughtfully. The summer and hard work and constant worry had left her thin and with a look of anxiety in her eyes.

"Hadn't you also better move to town?"

She laughed at that. "Why, dear sir, what do you suppose we should live on in town? Out here we have no rent and can at least raise some vegetables. No, we'll stick it out until we see whether this war is merely a flurry or a deluge."

For a week Bob hunted a job in Calexico. His need for funds was acute. He had managed to get enough on his cotton to pay all his labour bills but had not kept a dollar for himself.

Tuesday evening he had gone up to his room at the hotel, a court room with one window and broken plaster and a chipped water pitcher. There was no job in sight. Everything was at a standstill, and the cotton market looked absolutely hopeless. His note for the $4,000 fell due January first. If he could not

sell the cotton by that time, his creditors would take it over; and besides, he was held for any amount of the debt above what the cotton would bring at a forced sale.

He was bluer than he had been since he lost that first good job nine years ago. He went to the battered old trunk, opened the lid, and lifted the fiddle; stood with it in his hands a moment, put it against his shoulder and raised the bow. He was thinking of her, the girl left alone down there on the ranch—still fighting it out with the desert, the Mexicans, and the trailing calamities of this World War. He dropped the bow, he could not play. And just as he was returning the fiddle to his trunk there was a knock followed by the opening of the door. A chambermaid's head pushed in.

"There's a man down in the office wants to see you," announced the girl.

"Who is it?" asked Bob.

"Dunno—old fellow with eyebrows like a hair brush—and a long linen duster."

"I'll be right down," said Bob.

Jim Crill was sitting in a corner of the hotel office

when Rogeen came down; and he motioned to Bob to take the chair beside him.

"Notice a cotton gin being built across the line?" the old gentleman asked, crossing his legs and thrusting his hands into his trousers pockets.

"Yes," Bob nodded. "I wondered if you had."

"Reckon I have," remarked Crill, dryly. "I'm puttin' up the money for it."

"You are?" Bob was surprised. This upset his suspicions in regard to that gin.

"Yes; don't you think it's a good investment?" The old gemtleman's keen blue eyes looked searchingly from under the shaggy brows at Rogeen.

"Lots of cotton raised over there," Bob answered, noncommittally. "And the Mexicans really ought to have a gin on their side of the line."

The old gentleman cleared his throat as though about to say something else; and then changed his mind and sat frowning in silence so long Bob wondered why he had sent for him.

"Lots of cotton raisers 'll go broke this fall." Crill broke the silence abruptly.

"Already are," replied Bob.

"Know what it means." The old gentleman

jerked his head up and down. "Hauled my last bale of five-cent cotton to the store many a time, and begged 'em to let the rest of my bill run another year. That was before I ran the store myself; and then struck oil on a patch of Texas land. Haven't got as much money as folks think but too much to let lie around idle. Think this valley is a good place to invest, don't you?" Again the searching blue eyes peered at the young man.

"I certainly do," answered Bob with conviction. "The soil is bottomless; it will grow anything and grow it all the year."

"If it gets water," added the old gentleman.

"Of course—but we had plenty of water this year. And," went on Bob, "this war is not going to smash the cotton market forever. It's going to smash most of us who have no money to hold on with. But next spring or next summer or a year after, sooner or later, prices will begin to climb. The war will decrease production more than it will consumption. The war demands will send the price of wool up, and when wool goes up it pulls cotton along with it. Cotton will go to twenty cents, maybe more."

"That sounds like sense." The old gentleman

nodded slowly. "And it is the fellow that is a year ahead that gets rich on the rise; and the fellow a year behind that gets busted on the drop in prices."

"There are going to be some fortunes made in raising cotton over there," Bob nodded toward the Mexican line, "in the next four years that will sound like an Arabian Nights' tale of farming.

"I figured it out this summer. That land is all for lease; it is level, it is rich. They get water cheaper than we do on this side; and I can get Chinese help, which is the best field labour in the world, for sixty-five cents to a dollar a day. I was planning before this smash came to plant six hundred acres of cotton next year."

"That's what I wanted to see you about," said Crill. "Want to lend some money over there, and you are the fellow to do it. Want to lend it to fellows you can trust on their honour without any mortgages. Guess mortgages over there aren't much account anyway.

"Want to keep the cotton industry up here in the valley. May want to start a cotton mill myself. Anyway," he added, belligerently, "a lot of 'em are about to lose their cotton crops; and this is a good

time to stick 'em for a stiff rate of interest. Charge 'em 10 per cent—and half the cotton seed. I'm no philanthropist."

Bob smiled discreetly at the fierceness. That was the usual rate for loans on the Mexican side. And it was very reasonable considering the risk.

"Want to hire you," said the old man, "to lend money on cotton—and collect it. What you want a month?"

"I'll do it for $150 a month," answered Bob, "if it does not interfere with my own cotton growing next spring."

"We can fix that," agreed the old man.

"I think," replied Bob, "the best loans and the greatest help would be just now on the cotton already baled and at the compress. Most of the growers have debts for leases and water and supplies and borrowed money against their cotton, and cannot sell it at any price. Unless they do sell or can borrow on it by January first, these debts will take the cotton. If you would lend them six cents a pound on their compress receipts that would put most of them in the clear, and enable them to hold on a few months for a possible rise in price."

"That's your business." The old gentleman got up briskly. "I'll put $25,000 to your credit in the morning at the International Bank. It's your job to lend it. When it's gone, let me know."

"Oh, by the way," Bob's heart had been beating excitedly through all this arrangement, but he had hesitated to ask what was on his mind. "Do you mind if—if I lend myself five cents a pound on 180 bales?"

The old man turned and glared at him fiercely.

"Do you reckon I'd trust you to lend to others if I didn't trust you myself? Make the loans, then explain the paper afterward."

Next morning Bob bought a second-hand automobile for two hundred and fifty dollars and gave his note for it. It was not much of an automobile, but it was of the sort that always comes home.

Rogeen headed straight south, and in less than an hour stopped at the Chandler ranch.

Imogene was under the shade of the arrow-weed roof, reading a magazine. Rogeen felt a quick thrill as he saw her flush slightly as she came out to meet him.

"What means the gasolene chariot?" she asked. "Prosperity or mere recklessness?"

"Merely hopefulness," he answered. "I brought a paper for you. Sign on the dotted line." He handed her a promissory note, due in six months, for $4,500.

"What is this?" She had been living so long on a few dollars at a time that the figures sounded startling.

"I've got a loan on your cotton," replied Bob with huge satisfaction. "And you can have it as soon as you and your father have signed the note."

"Good heavens!" The blood had left her face. "You are not joking, are you? Why, man alive, that means that we live! It will give us $1,400 above the debts."

Bob felt a choking in his throat. The pluckiness of the girl! And that he could bring her relief! "Yes, and I'm going to take you back to town, where you can pay off the debts and get your money."

The exuberant gayety that broke over the girl's spirits as they returned to town moved Bob deeply. What a long, hard pull she and her father had had; no wonder the unexpected relief sent her spirits on the rebound.

"Thank the Lord," he said, fervently, to himself, "for that sharp old man with bushy eyebrows!"

As they drove up to the International Bank where

Bob had asked the compress company to send all the bills against the Chandler cotton, another machine was just driving away and a woman was entering the bank.

"By the great horn spoon," Bob exclaimed aloud, "that is Mrs. Barnett."

"Who is Mrs. Barnett?" Imogene Chandler asked archly. "Some special friend of yours?"

"Hardly," Bob replied, remembering that Miss Chandler knew neither Jim Crill nor his niece.

"And the man who was driving away," said Imogene, "was Reedy Jenkins."

"It was?" Bob turned quickly. "Are you sure? I was watching the woman and did not notice the machine."

As they entered the bank Mrs. Barnett, dressed in a very girlish travelling suit, was standing by the check counter as though waiting. At sight of Bob she nodded and smiled reservedly.

"Oh, Mr. Rogeen," she arched her brows and called to him as he started to the cashier's window with Imogene Chandler.

Bob excused himself and approached her, a little uneasy and decidedly annoyed. Her mouth was

simpering, but her eyes had that sharp, predatory look he had seen before.

"Mr. Rogeen," she began in a cool, ladylike voice, "my uncle told me of the arrangement he had made with you and asked me to O. K. all the loans before you make them."

"Is that so?" Bob felt a mingling of wrath and despair. "He did not say anything to me about it."

"N-o?"—questioningly—"we talked it over last night, and he felt sure this would be the better plan."

Bob hesitated for a moment. Imogene had gone to the other note counter, and was trying idly not to be aware of the conversation. It would be utterly too cruel to disappoint her now. It went against the grain, but Rogeen swallowed his resentment and distaste.

"All right," he nodded brightly. "I've got one loan already for you." He drew the papers from his pocket. "It is six cents on 150 bales of cotton now in the yards. Here are the compress receipts."

"Whom is this for?" Her eyes looked at him challengingly; her lips shaped the words accusingly.

"To Miss Chandler and her father." Bob felt himself idiotically blushing.

Mrs. Barnett's face took on the frozen look of a thousand generations of damning disapprobation.

"No! Not one cent to that woman. Uncle and I don't care to encourage that sort."

For a moment Bob stood looking straight into the frigid face of Mrs. Barnett. It was the first time in his life he would have willingly sacrificed his personal pride for money. He would have done almost anything to get that money for Imogene Chandler. But it was useless to try to persuade the widow that she was wrong. Back of her own narrowness was Reedy Jenkins. This was Reedy's move; he was using the widow's vanity and personal greed for his own ends; and his ends were the destruction of Rogeen and the capitulation of Miss Chandler.

Mrs. Barnett's eyes met his defiantly, but her mouth quivered a little nervously. A doubt flashed through his mind. Was she authorized to do this? Surely she would not dare take such authority without her uncle's consent. He might telephone, anyway, then a more direct resolution followed swiftly. He turned away from Mrs. Barnett and went to the cashier's window.

"Did Jim Crill deposit $25,000 here subject to my check?" he asked.

"He did," replied the cashier.

"Are there any strings to it?"

"None," responded the cashier promptly.

Without so much as glancing toward the widow, who had watched this move with a venomous suspicion, Bob went to Miss Chandler by the desk and took the papers from his pocket, and laid them before her.

"Indorse the compress receipts over to Mr. Crill."

Then he wrote two checks—one to the bank for $3,123 to pay off all the claims against the Chandler cotton and one to Imogene for $1,377.

"You don't know, Mr. Rogeen," she started to say in a low, tense voice as she took the check, "how much——"

"I don't need to," he smilingly interrupted her gratitude, "for it isn't my money. I'll see you at lunch; and then take you back home in my car." He lifted his hat and turned back to the counter where Mrs. Barnett stood loftily, disdainfully, yet furiously angry.

"Well," said Bob, casually, "I've made one loan, anyway."

"It will be your last." Mrs. Barnett clutched her hands vindictively. "You'll be discharged as quick as I get to Uncle Jim."

Bob really expected he would, but not for three jobs would he have recalled that loan and the light of relief in Imogene Chandler's eyes.

## CHAPTER XVI

MRS. BARNETT went direct from the bank to Reedy Jenkins' office. As she climbed the outside stairway she was so angry she forgot to watch to see that her skirts did not lift above her shoe tops. As she entered the door her head was held as high and stiff as though she had been insulted by a disobedient cook. White showed around her mouth and the base of her nose, and her nostrils were dilated.

"Why, Mrs. Barnett!" Reedy arose with an oratorical gesture. "What a pleasant surprise. Have a chair."

She took the chair he placed for her without a word and her right hand clutched the wrist of the left. She was breathing audibly.

"Did you see Rogeen?" Jenkins suggested suavely.

"Yes." The tone indicated that total annihilation should be the end of that unworthy creature. But her revenge, like Reedy's expectations, was in

the future. She hated to confess this. She breathed hard twice. "And I'll show him whose word counts."

"You don't mean," Reedy swiped his left hand roughly at the wisp of hair on his forehead, "that he disregarded your wishes?"

"He certainly did." Indignation was getting the better of her voice. "The low-lived—the contemptible—common person. And he insulted me with that—that creature."

"Well, of all the gall!" Reedy was quite as indignant as Mrs. Barnett, for very different if more substantial reasons. He had seen more and more that a fight with Rogeen was ahead, a fight to the finish; and the further he went the larger that fight looked. The easiest way to smash a man, Reedy had found, was to deprive him of money. A man can't carry out many schemes unless he can get hold of money. Jenkins had kept a close eye on Jim Crill, and had grown continually more uneasy lest the old chap become too favourably impressed with Rogeen. He had early sensed the old man's weak spot—one of them—Crill hated to be pestered. That was the vulnerable side at which Evelyn Barnett,

the niece, could jab. And Reedy had planned all her attacks. This last move of Crill's—hiring Rogeen to lend money for him, had alarmed Reedy more than anything that had happened. For it would give Rogeen a big influence on the Mexican side. Most of the ranchers needed to borrow money, and it would put the man on whose word the loans would be made in mighty high favour. To offset this, Reedy had engineered an attack by Mrs. Barnett on the old gentleman's leisure. She had worried him and nagged him with the argument that he ought not to bother with a lot of business details, but should turn them over to her. She would see to the little things for him. He had reluctantly granted some sort of consent to this, a consent which Evelyn had construed meant blanket authority.

"He flatly refused," Mrs. Barnett was still thinking blisteringly of Bob Rogeen, "to obey my wishes in the matter. I told him plainly," she bit her lips again, "that neither Uncle nor I would consent to money being furnished women like that."

"I should say not." Reedy agreed with unctuous righteousness in his plump face. "And to think

of that scalawag, making a loan right in your face, after you had vetoed it."

"He'll never make another." Mrs. Barnett's lips would have almost bit a thread in two. "Just wait until I get to Uncle Jim!"

"I'll drive you up," said Reedy. He reached to the top of the desk for his hat.

"Of course," remarked Reedy on the way, "your uncle is very generous to want to help these fellows across the line that are broke. But they are riff-raff. He will lose every dollar of it. I know them. Good Lord! haven't I befriended them, and helped them fifty ways? And do they appreciate it? Well, I should say not!"

"The more you do for people the less they appreciate it," said Mrs. Barnett still in a bitter mood.

"Some people," corrected Reedy. "There are a few, a very few, who never forget a favour."

"Yes, that is true," assented the widow, and began to relent in her mind, seeing how kind was Mr. Jenkins.

"I'm very sorry," continued Reedy, frowning, "that your uncle has taken up this fellow. I've been looking up Rogeen's past—and he is no good,

absolutely no good. Been a drifter all his life. Never had a hundred dollars of his own.

"By the way," Reedy suddenly remembered a coincidence in regard to that undertaker's a receipt, "where was it your husband lost the sale of that mine?"

"At Blindon, Colorado."

"By George!" Reedy released the wheel with the right hand and slapped his leg. "I thought so. Do you know who that young man with the fiddle was who ruined your fortune?"

"No." Evelyn Barnett came around sharply.

"Bob Rogeen—that fellow who insulted you this morning."

"No? Not really?" Angry incredulity.

Reedy nodded. "As I told you, I've been looking up his past. And I got the story straight."

"The vile scoundrel!" Mrs. Barnett said, bitterly. "And to think Uncle would trust him with his money."

"We must stop it," said Reedy. "It isn't right that your uncle should be fleeced by this rascal."

"He shan't be!" declared Mrs. Barnett, gritting her teeth.

"There are too many really worthy investments," added Reedy.

"I'll see that this is the last money that man gets," Mrs. Barnett asseverated.

"Your uncle is a little bull headed, isn't he?" suggested Reedy, cautiously. "Better be careful how you approach him."

"Oh, I'll manage him, never fear," she said positively.

Jenkins set Mrs. Barnett down at the entrance to the bungalow court. He preferred that Jim Crill should not see him with her. It might lead him to think Reedy was trying to influence her.

As Mrs. Barnett stalked up the steps, Jim Crill was sitting on the porch in his shirt sleeves, smoking.

"How are you feeling, dear?" she asked, solicitously.

"Ain't feelin'," Crill grunted—"I'm comfortable."

Evelyn sank into a chair, held her hands, and sighed.

"Oh, dear, it is so lonely since poor Tom Barnett died."

Uncle Jim puffed on—he had some faint knowledge of the poor deceased Tom.

"Do you know, Uncle Jim, I made a discovery to-day. The man who kept my poor husband from making a fortune was that person."

"What person?" growled the old chap looking straight ahead.

"That Rogeen person you are trusting your money to."

Jim Crill bit his pipe stem to hide a dry grin. He had often heard the story of the bursted mine sale. He had some suspicions, knowing Barnett, of what the mine really was.

"And, Uncle Jim, of course you won't keep him. Besides, he insulted me this morning."

"How?" It was another grunt.

Evelyn went into the painful details of her humiliation at the bank. When she got through Uncle Jim turned sharply in his chair.

"Did you do that?"

"Do what?" gasped Evelyn.

"Try to interfere with his loans?"

"Why, why, yes." She was aghast at the tone, ready to shed protective tears. "Didn't you tell me—wasn't I to have charge of the little things?"

"Oh, hell!" Uncle Jim burst out. "Little things, yes—about the house I meant. Not my business. Dry up that sobbing now—and don't monkey any more with my business."

Uncle Jim got up and stalked off downtown.

## CHAPTER XVII

EARLY one morning in March Bob picked Noah Ezekiel Foster up at a lunch counter where the hill billy was just finishing his fourth waffle.

"Want you to go out and look at two or three leases with me," said Rogeen as they got into the small car.

Bob had not lost his job with Crill over the Chandler loan. He was still lending the old gentleman's money and doing it without Mrs. Barnett's approval. But the widow had, he felt sure, done the moist, self-sacrificing, nagging stunt so persistently that her uncle had compromised by advancing much more money to Reedy Jenkins than safety justified. Crill had never mentioned the matter, but Bob knew Jenkins had got money from somewhere, and there certainly was no one else in the valley that would have lent it to him. For Reedy had managed to pick his cotton and gin it at the new gin on the

Mexican side, where the bales were still stacked in the yards.

"Why do you suppose," asked Bob as they drove south past the Mexican gin, "Jenkins has left his cotton over on this side all winter?" Bob had formulated his own suspicions but wanted to learn what Noah Ezekiel thought, for Noah picked up a lot of shrewd information.

"Shucks," said Noah, "it's so plain that a wayfarin' man though a cotton grower can see. He's kept it over there because he owes about three hundred thousand dollars on the American side, and as quick as he takes it across the line there'll be about as many fellows pullin' at every bale as there are ahold of them overall pants you see advertised."

"But cotton is selling now; it was six cents yesterday," remarked Bob. "At that he ought to have enough to pay his debts."

Noah Ezekiel snorted: "Reedy isn't livin' to pay his debts. He ain't hankerin' for receipts; what he wants is currency. His creditors on the American side are layin' low, because they can't do anything else. Reedy put one over on 'em when

he built this gin. He can hold his cotton over here for high prices, and let them that he owes on the American side go somewhere and whistle in a rain barrel to keep from gettin' dry.

"As my dad used to say, 'The children of this world can give the children of light four aces and still take the jack pot with a pair of deuces.'"

Bob knew Noah was right. He had watched Jenkins pretty closely all winter. Reedy had endeavoured to convince all his creditors, and succeeded in convincing some, that he had not brought the cotton across the line because there was no market yet for it. "It is costing us nothing to leave it over there, so why bring it across and have to pay storage and also lose the interest on the $25,000 Mexican export duty which we must pay when it is removed?"

"Noah," remarked Bob, as the little car bumped across the bridge over the irrigation ditch, "I'm taking you out to see a Chinaman's lease. He has three hundred acres ready to plant and wants to borrow money to raise the crop. If you like the field and I like the Chinaman, I'm going to make the loan."

"Accordin' to my observation," remarked Noah,

"a heathen Chinese has about all the virtues that a Christian ought to have, but ain't regularly got.

"The other mornin' after I'd been to the Red Owl the night before, I felt like I needed a cup of coffee. I went round to a Chink that I'd never met but two or three times, and says, 'John, I'm broke, will you lend me a hundred dollars?'

"That blasted Chink never batted an eye, never asked me if I owned any personal property subject to mortgage, nor if I could get three good men to go on my note. He just says, 'Surlee, Misty Foster,' and dived down in a greasy old drawer and began to count out greenbacks. 'Here,' I says, 'if you are that much of a Christian, I ain't an all-fired heathen myself. Give me a dime and keep the change.'"

Bob smiled appreciatively. "I've seen things like that happen more than once. And it is not because they are simple and ignorant either."

"You know," pursued Noah Ezekiel, "if I's Karniggy, I'd send a lot of 'em out as missionaries."

They were at Ah Sing's ranch. The three-hundred-acre field was level as a table, broken deep, thoroughly disked, and listed ready to water. The Chinaman, without any money or the slightest assur-

ance he could get any for his planting, had worked all winter preparing the fields.

Ah Sing stood in front of his weed-and-pole shack waiting with that stoical anxiety which never betrays itself by hurry or nervousness. If the man of money came and saw fit to lend, "vellee well—if not, doee best I can."

"You go out and take a look at the field," Bob directed Noah, "see if there is any marsh grass or alfalfa roots, and look over his water ditches while I talk to the Chinaman."

"Good morning, Ah Sing," he said, extending his hand.

"Good morning, Misty Rogee." The Chinaman smiled and gave the visitor a friendly handshake. He was of medium height, had a well-shaped head and dignified bearing, and eyes that met yours straight. He looked about forty, but one never knows the age of a Chinaman.

"Nice farm, Ah Sing," Bob nodded approvingly at the well-plowed fields.

"He do vellee well." The Chinaman was pleased.

"And you have no money to make a crop?" Bob asked.

"No money," Ah Sing said, stoically.

"I heard last fall you had made a good deal of money raising cotton over here," suggested Bob.

"Me make some," admitted Ah Sing. "Workee vellee hard many year—make maybe eighteen—twentee thousan'."

"What became of it, Ah Sing? Don't gamble, do you?"

The Chinaman shook his head emphatically. "Me no gamble. Gamble—nobody trust. Me pick cotton for Misty Jenkins."

Bob was interested in that. He knew that after raising Jenkins' crop Ah Sing had taken the contract to pick it. Bob had heard other things but not from the Chinaman. "Didn't you make some money on that, too?"

"No money."

"Why not?" Bob spoke quickly. "Tell me about it, Ah Sing."

The Chinaman sighed again and the long, long look came into his patient oriental eyes.

"Ah work in America ever since leetle boy—so high. After while I save leetle money. Want go back China visit. I have cer-tificate. When I

come back, say it's no good. Put me in jail. Don't know why. Stay long time. Send me back China. Then I come Mexico. Can't cross line; say damn Mexican Chinaman. I raise cotton—I raise lettuce—make leetle money. Maybee twent' thousan'.

"Misty Jenkins say 'Ah Sing, want pick my cotton?' I say, 'Maybee.' He say, 'Give you ten dollar bale. You do all work—feed Chinamen.' I say, 'Vellee well.' Lots Chinaboys need work. I hire seven hund'—eight hund'—maybee thousan.' I feed 'em. I pick cotton. Pick eight thousan' bale. Take all my money feed 'em. I owe Chinaboys fifty thousan' dollar.

"No pay. No see Misty Jenkins. No cross line. Misty Jenkins pay sometime maybee—maybee not." The old Chinaman shook his head fatalistically.

"And you spent all you had earned and saved in forty years, and then went in debt fifty thousand to other Chinamen to pick that cotton, and he hasn't paid you a dollar?"

"No pay yet; maybee some time," he replied, stoically.

"What a damn shame!" Bob seldom swore, but

he felt justified for this once. "Can't you collect it under the Mexican laws?"

Ah Sing slowly, futilely, turned his hands palms outward.

"Mexican say Misty Jenkins big man. Damn Chinaman no good no way."

Noah Ezekiel came in from the field.

"As my dad says," remarked the hill billy, "this Chink has held on to the handle of the plow without ever looking back. The field is O. K."

"How much will you need, Ah Sing?" Bob turned to the Chinaman.

"Maybee get along with thousan' dollars—fifteen hund' maybee."

"All right," said Bob, "I'm going to let you have it. You can get the money three hundred at a time as you need it."

Bob stood thinking for a moment.

"Ah Sing," he said, decisively, "how would you like to have a partner? Suppose I go in with you; furnish the money and look after the buying and selling, tend to the business end; you raise the cotton. Me pay all the expenses, including wages, for you; and then divide the profits?"

The Chinaman's face lost its stoic endurance and lighted with relief.

"I likee him vellee much!" He put out his hand. "Me and you partners, heh?"

"Yes," Bob gripped the hand, "we are partners."

## CHAPTER XVIII

NOTHING Bob Rogeen had ever heard about Reedy Jenkins and his schemes had so intensified his anger as this treatment of the patient, defenceless Ah Sing.

"A Chinaman has the system," remarked Noah Ezekiel as they drove away. "He'll lease a ranch, then take in half a dozen partners and put a partner in charge of each section of the field. Raisin' cotton is all-fired particular work, especially with borrowed water—there are as many ways to ruin it as there are to spoil a pancake. And a partner isn't so apt to go to sleep at the ditch."

"That is why I went into partnership with Ah Sing," said Bob. "I have never seen much money made in farming anywhere unless a man who had an interest in the crop was on the job."

"You bet you haven't," agreed Noah Ezekiel. "Absent treatment may remove warts and bad

dispositions, but it sure won't work on cockleburs and Bermuda grass."

For several miles Bob's mind was busy.

"Noah," he asked, abruptly, "how would you like to go into partnership with me and take over the management of that hundred and sixty acres we cultivated last year?"

"As my dad used to say," replied Noah Ezekiel, skeptically, "'Faith is the substance of things hoped for'; and as I never hope for any substance, I ain't got no faith—especially in profits. Whenever I come round, profits hide out like a bunch of quails on a rainy day. I prefer wages."

Bob laughed. "Suppose we make it both. I'll pay you wages, and besides give you one fifth of the net profits."

"I reckon that'll be satisfactory," agreed Noah. "But any Saturday night you find yourself a little short on net profits, you can buy my share for about twenty dollars in real money."

As they crossed the line Noah Ezekiel inquired:

"But if me and the Chinaman raise your cotton, what are you goin' to do?"

"Raise more cotton," Bob answered. "You

know," he spoke what had been in his mind all the time, "I never saw anything I wanted as much as that Red Butte Ranch. It is on that Dillenbeck System and its water costs about twice as much as on the regular canals, but it is rich enough to make up the difference."

"Well, why don't you get it?" asked Noah. "Reedy Jenkins is goin' to lose all his leases inside of a month if he doesn't sell 'em; and with cotton at six cents, they ain't shovin' each other off of Reedy's stairway tryin' to get to him first. It's my idea that a fellow could buy out the Red Butte for a song, and hire a parrot to sing it for a cracker."

"But that is the smallest part of it," said Bob. "To farm that five thousand acres in cotton this season would take round a hundred thousand dollars, and," he laughed, "I lack considerable over ninety-nine thousand of having that much."

"Lend it to yourself out of money you are lending for old Crill," suggested Noah.

After Bob dropped Noah at the Greek restaurant —"Open Day and Night—Waffles"—he drove down the street, stopped in front of an office building, and went up to see a lawyer that he knew.

"T. J.," he began at once, "I want you to see what is the lowest dollar that will buy the Red Butte Ranch and its equipment. Reedy Jenkins can't farm it, and he can't afford to pay $15,000 rent and let it lie idle. You ought to be able to get it cheap. Get a rock-bottom offer, but don't by any means let him know who wants it."

As Bob went down the stairs his head was fairly whizzing with plans. This thing had taken strong hold of him. He had longed for many months to get possession of that ranch but had never seriously thought of it as a possibility. But if Jim Crill would risk the money, it would be the great opportunity. Five thousand acres of cotton might make a big fortune in one year.

"Of course"—doubt had its inning as he drove north toward El Centro—"if he failed it would mean, instead of a fortune, a lifetime debt." Yet he was so feverishly hopeful he let out the little machine a few notches beyond the speed limit. At El Centro he went direct to the Crill bungalow.

Mrs. Barnett opened the door when he knocked, opened it about fourteen inches, and stood looking

at him as though he were a leper and had eaten onions besides.

"Is Mr. Crill in?" Bob asked.

"Mr. Crill is not in." She bit off each word with the finality of a closed argument and shut the door with a whack so decisive it was almost a slam.

Bob found Jim Crill in the lobby of the hotel, smoking; he sat down by him, and concentrated for a moment on the line of argument he had thought out.

"Mr. Crill, cotton is selling at six cents now. It won't go any lower."

"It doesn't need to as far as I'm concerned." The old gentleman puffed his pipe vigorously.

"It will be at least ten cents this fall." Bob was figuring on the back of an old envelope. "Much more next year."

Then he opened up on the Red Butte Ranch. Bob never did such talking in his life. He knew every step of his plan, for he had thought out fifty times just what he would do with that ranch if he had it. He outlined this plan clearly and definitely to Jim Crill. He carefully estimated every expense, and allowed liberally for incidentals. He figured

the lowest probable price for cotton, and in addition discussed the possibilities of failure.

"I feel sure," he concluded, definitely, "that I can put it through, that I can make from fifty to a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in profits on one crop. If you want to risk it and stake me, I'll go fifty-fifty on the profits."

"No partnership for me," Crill shook his head vigorously. He had made some figures on an envelope and sat scowling at them. He had a good deal of idle money. If this crop paid out—and he felt reasonably sure Bob would make it go—it would give him $10,000 interest on the $100,000; and his half of the cotton seed would be worth at least $10,000 more. Twenty thousand returns against nothing was worth some risk.

"Besides," added Bob, "the lease itself, if cotton goes up, will be worth fifty thousand next year."

"That's what Reedy Jenkins said," remarked the old gentleman, dryly. "Just left here an hour ago—wanted to borrow money to pay the rent this year and let the land lie idle."

Bob's heart beat uneasily. "Did you lend it to him?"

"No!" The old man almost spat the word out. "He owes me too much already."

For two minutes, three, four, Jim Crill smoked and Bob waited, counting the thump of his heart-beats in his temple.

"I'll let you have the hundred thousand," he said directly. "I've watched you; I know an honest man when I see one."

Bob's spirits went up like a rocket; but his mind quickly veered round to Reedy Jenkins.

"This will make Reedy Jenkins about the maddest man in America," he remarked. He knew now that Reedy would fight him to the bitterest end.

Jim Crill grinned. "So'll Evy be mad. You fight Reedy, and I'll—run."

## CHAPTER XIX

IMOGENE CHANDLER was washing the breakfast dishes out under the canopy of arrow-weed roof, where they ate summer and winter. The job was quickly done, for the breakfast service was very abbreviated. She took a broad-brimmed straw hat from a nail on the corner post, and swinging it in her hand, for the sun was yet scarcely over the rim of the Red Buttes far to the east, went out across the field to where her father was already at work.

March is the middle of spring in the Imperial Valley and already the grass grew thick beside the water ditches, and leaves were full grown on the cottonwood trees. The sunlight, soft through the dewy early morning, filled the whole valley with a yellow radiance. And out along the water course a meadowlark sang.

The girl threw up her arm swinging the hat over her head. She wanted to shout. She felt the sweeping surge of spring, the call of the wind,

the glow of the sunlight, the boundless freedom of the desert. She had never felt so abounding in exuberant hope. It had been hard work to hold on to this lease, a fight for bread at times. But wealth was here in this soil and in this sun. And more than wealth. There was health and liberty in it. No heckling social restrictions, no vapid idle piffle at dull teas; no lugubrious pretence of burdensome duties. Here one slept and ate and worked and watched the changing light, and breathed the desert air and lived. It was a good world.

The girl stopped and crumbled some of the newly plowed earth under the toe of a trim shoe. How queer that after all these hundreds and thousands of years the stored chemicals of this land should be released, and turned by those streams of water into streams of wealth—fleecy cotton, luscious fruit and melons, food and clothes. And what nice people lived out here. The Chinamen who worked in the field, quaint and friendly and faithful. Even the Mexicans with their less industrious and more tricky habits were warm hearted and courteous. That serenading Madrigal was very interesting—and handsome. He had fire in him; perhaps danger-

ous fire, but what a contrast to the vapid white-collared clerks or professors in the prim little eastern town she had known.

Of course Bob Rogeen did not like him. Imogene instinctively put up her hand and brushed the wind-blown hair from her forehead, and smiled. Bob was jealous.

But what a man Rogeen was! She had believed there were such men so unobtrusively generous and chivalrous. But no one she had ever known before was quite like Bob Rogeen. She remembered the black hair that clustered thickly over his temples, and the whimsical twist of his mouth, and the reticent but unafraid brown eyes.

She had thought many, many times of Rogeen, and always it seemed that he filled in just what was wanting in this desert—warmth of human fellowship. Always she thought of him just north over there—out of sight but very near. True he came very rarely. She wrinkled her forehead and rubbed the end of her nose with a forefinger. Why was that? Why didn't he come oftener? Wasn't she interesting? Didn't he approve of her?

A reassuring warmth came up to her face and neck.

Yes, she believed he did. His eyes looked it when he thought she was not noticing.

She reached down and picked up a stick and threw it with a quick, impulsive gesture into the water and watched it float on down the ditch. Yes, she was pretty sure Rogeen liked her—but how much? Oh, well—she took a dozen girlish skips along the path, her hair flying about her face, and her heart dancing with the early sun on the green fields before her and the brown desert beyond—oh, well, time would tell.

"Daddy," she had come up to where the little bald-headed man was plowing—throwing up the ridges, "don't you like spring?"

The ex-professor stopped the team, looked at her through his glasses, then glanced around the field at the grass and weeds and early plants that were up.

"I believe," he said, mildly, "that we are approaching the vernal equinox. But I had not observed before the gradual unfoldment of vegetation which we have come to associate in our minds with spring."

"Oh, daddy, daddy," she laughed deliciously, and leaned over the handle of the plow and pulled his ear. "You funny, funny man. Why, it's spring,

it's spring! Don't you feel it in your bones? Don't you love the whole world and everybody?"

Professor Chandler seriously contemplated the skyline, where the sunlight showed red on the distant buttes. "I should say, daughter, that it does give one a feeling of kinship with nature. I fancy the early Greeks felt it."

"I fancy they did," said Imogene, "especially if they were in love."

"In love?" The professor brought his spectacles around to his daughter questioningly.

"With everything," she said, laughing. "Daddy, I'm awfully glad we are back to the soil—instead of back to the Greeks."

"I am not discontent with our environment." And the little professor plowed on. She smiled maternally at his back. And then two swift tears sprang to her eyes. Tender tears.

"Dear old daddy. It has been good for him. He would have dried up and blown away in that little old college."

Returning to the shack she was still bareheaded. She loved the feel of the sun, and the few freckles it brought only added a piquancy to her face.

"I wonder if he"—she meant Rogeen—"will make it go this year. I hope he has a good crop. It makes one feel that maybe after all things are as they ought to be when a man like he succeeds. Wonder what his plans are?"

Then as she sat down in the shade and began a little very necessary mending:

"I do wish he'd come over—and tell me some more about cotton crops—and himself."

## CHAPTER XX

IT IS a good thing the wind does not blow from the same direction all the time. Things would never grow straight if it did. And if one emotion persists too long the human mind becomes even worse twisted than a tree. For that reason, if we are normal, buoyance and depression, ecstasy and pain follow each other as regularly as ripples on a stream. It is good they do, but it is hard to believe it when we are down in the trough of the wave.

As Bob started away with the promise of Jim Crill to lend him the money for the Red Butte Ranch, his blood was pumping faster than the running engine of his car. But directly enthusiasm began to slow down.

Suppose he lost—what an appalling debt for a man working at a hundred and fifty a month! It never figured in Bob's calculation to settle his debts in red ink. And there were chances to lose.

The lawyer was waiting for him at the hotel when he returned.

"I saw Jenkins," he reported. "Says they paid $20,000 for the Red Butte lease last spring. Half of it for bonus on the lease, and half for the equipment. He claims the mules and equipment are easily worth $10,000; and he offers to sell lease and all for that, but won't consider a dollar less. I heard on the street this evening that a Chinaman had offered them $7,500. I have an option on it until eleven o'clock in the morning at $10,000."

"Thanks, T. J." Bob was figuring in his mind the basis of this price. "I'll let you know before that time." He went up to his room to think it out. He could hardly see any chance for loss, yet of course there was. If this was such a sure thing, why had not some of the more experienced cotton growers in the valley jumped at it? But Bob dismissed that line of reasoning with a positive jerk of his head. That was a weak man's reason—the excuse of failures, sheep philosophy. Every day of the year some new man came into a community and picked up a profitable opportunity that other people had stumbled over for years.

The lease was certainly a bargain; the land was in excellent condition, and there would be no difficulty about labour with plenty of Chinese and Mexicans. The price of cotton could scarcely go lower. Bob had no fear of that. Then what were the dangers? The chance of a water shortage was remote. There had been little trouble about water. Of course bad farming could spoil a crop; but Lou Wing was an expert cotton grower, and you could trust a Chinaman's vigilance. With Lou as a partner he could be sure the crop would receive proper attention.

"It seems good!" Bob walked out of his room on to the balcony that ran the length of the hotel and stood overlooking the twinkling lights of the town. Calexico was getting to be quite a little city, and the string of lights were flung out for half a mile to the east and north. Across the line the high-arched sign of the Red Owl already winked alluringly.

He looked at his watch. It was only a quarter past eight. He turned back to his room, took his violin from the battered trunk, went to the garage, and in fifteen minutes was chugging south between the rows of cottonwood and willows that stood dim guardians in the night against the desert.

Imogene Chandler heard the machine coming. She put on her new spring coat and came out into the yard. The night was a little cool, and that new coat was the first article of wearing apparel she had bought for herself in three years.

"I'm glad you brought your fiddle again," she said as Bob came into the yard. She was bare-headed, and her hair showed loose and wavy in the starlight. "I've felt rather lilty all day." She snapped her fingers and danced round in a circle. "Just a little hippety-hoppety," she laughed, dropping down upon the bench. "Sit down and play to us—me and this wonderful night."

"I want to talk first." He laid the fiddle across his knees. In spite of the spell of the desert, figures were still running through his head.

"How like a man!" she said, mockingly. "And is it about yourself?"

"Of course," he replied, soberly. "You don't think I'd waste gasolene to come down here to talk about any other man, do you?"

"Before you begin on that absorbing subject," she bantered, "tell me, will our cotton now sell for enough to pay Mr. Crill that note?"

"Yes, but you are not going to sell it. He has extended the note another six months. Cotton is going up this fall."

"Isn't that great!" she exclaimed. "Here we have money enough for another crop, and can speculate on last year's cotton by holding for higher prices. Why, man, if it should go to ten cents we'd clear $3,000 on that cotton above what we already have."

"Yes, and if it goes to twelve, you'll have $4,500 to the good."

He sat still for a moment, gripping the neck of his fiddle with his fingers as though choking it into waiting.

"Well?" she prompted.

"I've got a chance for something big." He got up and walked, holding the fiddle by the neck, swinging it back and forth. "If I put it through, it will be a fortune; but if I fail I'll be in debt world without end—mortgaged all the rest of my life!"

Walking back and forth before her in the starlight he told Imogene Chandler of the big opportunity—of the rare combination of circumstances which made it possible for him, without property or backing, to borrow one hundred thousand dollars for a crop;

and marshalled his reasons for belief in its success. "The water might fail," she suggested, when he had finished and sat down again with the fiddle across his knee.

"Yes, it might," he admitted.

"The Chinamen might get into trouble among themselves or with the Mexicans and leave you at a critical time."

"Possibly."

"The duty might be raised on cotton," she added.

"Yes," he confessed.

"But," she continued, "there is one thing much more likely than any of these—a thing fairly certain. Reedy Jenkins will fight you in every way he can invent. First he'll fight to get your money; and then he'll fight you just for hate."

"I have thought of that," Bob again got up, moved by the agitation of doubt. If it were his own money to be risked he would not hesitate a moment —but one hundred thousand dollars of another man's money and his own reputation!

"For these reasons," continued Imogene Chandler, "I advise you to go into it—and *you'll* win.

"Now play to me."

## CHAPTER XXI

IMOGENE CHANDLER had spoken most confidently to Bob of his success. But after he was gone she began to be pestered by uneasy doubts —which is the way of a woman.

She and her father had been compelled to operate on small capital. They had figured, or rather Imogene had, dollar at a time. This new venture of Rogeen's rather appalled her. A hundred thousand of borrowed money! It was almost unthinkable. Anywhere else but in this land of surprises such a proposition would seem entirely fantastic.

With so much involved any disastrous turn would leave him hopelessly in debt. And besides—her thoughts took a more uneasy turn—she felt it was going to put him in danger. Reedy Jenkins and his Mexican associates would be very bitter over Bob's getting the Red Butte—and they might do anything.

The next evening, when Noah Ezekiel came over, Imogene had not gone to her shack.

"Sit down, Noah," she said, "I want to talk to you."

"That's what my maw used to say when I'd been swimmin' on Sunday," observed the hill billy as he let his lank form down on the bench.

Imogene laughed. "Well, I'm not going to scold you for breaking the Sabbath or getting your feet wet, or forgetting to shut the gate. What I want, Noah, is to get your opinion."

"It's funny about opinions," remarked Noah impersonally to the stars. "Somebody is always gettin' your opinion just to see how big a fool you are, and how smart they are."

"Noah Ezekiel Foster," the girl spoke reprovingly. "You know better than that. You know I want your opinion because I think you know more about cotton than I do."

"All right," said Noah, meekly. "Lead on. I got more opinions in my head than Ben Davis' sheep used to have cockle burs in their wool."

"What do you think of the Red Butte Ranch?"

"It's a blamed fine ranch."

"Do you think Mr. Rogeen will make money on it?" She tried to sound disinterested.

"That reminds me," replied Noah, "of Sam Scott. Sam went to Dixion and started a pool hall under Ike Golberg's clothing store. After Sam got it all fixed up with nice green-topped tables and white balls, and places to spit between shots, he got me down there to look it over.

"'How does she look?' says Sam.

"'She looks all right,' I said.

"'I'm going to get rich,' declares Sam.

"'That all depends' I says, 'on one thing.'

"'What's that?' says Sam.

"'On whuther there is more money comes down them stairs than goes up.'"

Noah twisted his shoulders and again looked up impersonally at the stars.

"You see makin' money is mighty simple. All you got to do is take in more than you pay out. But the dickens of it is, losin' it is just as simple—and a durned sight easier."

Imogene was smiling into the dusk, but her thoughts were on serious matters.

"Well, which do you think Mr. Rogeen will do?"

Noah twisted his shoulders again, and shuffled his feet on the ground.

"I always hate to give a plumb out opinion—because it nearly always ruins your reputation as a prophet. But Bob ain't nobody's fool. And he's white from his heels to his eyeballs—everything except his liver."

Imogene laughed, but felt a swelling in the throat. That tribute from the hill bill meant more than the verdict of a court.

"The only trouble is," Noah was speaking a little uneasily himself, "Reedy Jenkins is a skunk and he's got some pizen rats gnawing for him. There ain't nothin' they won't do—except what they are afraid to. Bob's got 'em so they don't tie their goats around his shack any more. But they are going to do him dirt, sure as a tadpole makes a toad.

"Reedy Jenkins has got hold of a lot of money somewhere again; and he's set out to bush Bob, and get away with the pile. I don't know just how he's aimin' to do it; but Reedy don't never have any regrets over what happens to the other fellow if it makes money for him."

The hill billy's words made Imogene more uneasy than before. And yet looking at the lank, droll

fellow sitting there in the starlight, she again smiled, and sighed.

"Well, I'm mighty glad Mr. Rogeen has you for a friend," she said aloud.

"A friend," observed Noah, "is sorter like a gun—expensive in town but comfortin' in the country.

"But really I ain't no good, Miss Chandler. As I used to say to my dad, 'if the Lord made me, he must have done it sort of absent mindedly, for he ain't never found no place for me.'"

Imogene arose. She knew this big-hearted, rough hill billy must be tired. She went over and laid her hand lightly on his shoulder and said with a solemn tightening of the throat—"Noah, you are the salt of the earth—and I'd rather have you for a friend than a diamond king."

Noah arose, emotion always made him uncomfortable, and shuffled off to his tent without a word.

But he turned at the entrance to the tent, and looked back. The girl sat quite still, her face turned up toward the stars.

"Well," said Noah to himself, "she's got me all right."

On the fourteenth of June Bob Rogeen and Noah Ezekiel Foster rode through the Red Butte Ranch.

The fields lay before them checkered off into squares by the irrigation ditches, level as a table. The long rows of cotton were five to ten inches high, and of a dark green colour. The stand on most of the fields was almost perfect. One Chinaman with a span of mules cultivated fifty acres.

"Lou Wing is a great farmer," continued Bob, enthusiastically. "He is doing the work for 45 per cent. of the crop. I pay the water and the rent; and of course I have to advance him the money to feed and pay his hands. He has twenty partners with a separate camp for each; and each partner has four Chinamen working for him. That is system, Noah. It certainly looks like riches, doesn't it?"

"All flesh is grass," Noah sighed lugubriously, "except some that's weeds."

"Cotton is going up every day," said Bob. "It was nine cents and a fraction yesterday."

"That means," remarked Noah Ezekiel, "Reedy Jenkins could sell them eight thousand bales he's got stacked up on this side and pay all his debts and have twenty thousand over."

"But Reedy is not paying his debts."

"Not yet," said Noah; "he is borrowin' more money."

"Is that so?" Bob was sharply interested. He had not feared Reedy much while he was out of funds. "When did you hear that?"

"Saturday night," replied Noah. "You can gather a whole lot more information round the Red Owl than you can moss."

"I wonder what he is going to do with it?" Bob's mind was still on Reedy Jenkins.

"He's done done with it," answered Noah. "He's bought the Dillenbeck irrigation system."

Instantly all exuberant desire to shout went from Bob's throat and a chill ran along his veins. In a twinkling the heat of the friendly sun upon those wide green fields with their fingered network of a hundred water ditches became a threat and a menace. After all, by what a narrow thread does security hang!

Bob walked as one on a precipice during the following weeks. Never was a man more torn between hope and fear. On the one hand, the cotton grew amazingly. Fed by the nourishment stored in that

soil which had lain dormant for thousands of years, watered by the full sluices from the Colorado River and warmed like a hotbed by the floods of sunshine day after day, the stalks climbed and climbed and branched until they looked more like green bushes than frail plants. Bob rode the fields all day long, even when the thermometer crept up to 127 in the shade, and a skillet left in the sun would fry bacon and eggs perfectly done in seven minutes. Often he continued to ride until far into the night, watching the chopping of the weeds, watching the men in the fields, and most of all watching the watering. Yes, the crop was advancing with a promise almost staggering in its richness. It looked now as though some of these fields would go to a bale and a half an acre. And slowly but surely the price of cotton had climbed since March, a quarter of a cent one day, a half the next, a jump of a whole cent one Friday; and now on the second day of August it touched 10.37. With a bale to the acre at that price Bob could add $30,000 to his estimated expense and still clear a hundred thousand dollars on this crop. When he thought of it as he rode along the water ditches in the early evening, he grew fairly dizzy with hope.

But then on the other side: the unformed menace —Reedy Jenkins owned the water system!

The fear had taken tangible shape when he got his water bill for June. But there was no raise in price. Again yesterday, the bill for July came, and still no raise in price.

It was ten o'clock that night when he got into Calexico and went to the hotel.

As the clerk gave him the key to his room, he also handed him a letter, saying:

"A special delivery that came for you an hour ago; I signed for it."

Bob's fingers shook slightly as he took it. Glancing swiftly at the corner of the envelope he read:

DILLENBECK WATER CO.

## CHAPTER XXII

REEDY JENKINS, the first night of August, sat in his office, the windows open, the door open, the neck of his soft shirt open, and his low shoes kicked off. But his plump, pink face was freshly shaven and massaged and he wore two-dollar silk socks. Even in dishabille Reedy had an air of ready money.

There had been dark days last fall when he had been so closely cornered by his creditors that it took many a writhe and a wriggle to get through. Nobody but himself, unless it was the dour Tom Barton, knew how overwhelmingly he was bankrupt.

But Reedy had kept up an affable front to all his creditors and a ready explanation. "We are all broke, everybody in same boat. Why sweat over it? Of course I've got some cotton across the line; we'll just leave it there and save the duty until it'll sell. Then I'll pay out."

He kept up this reassurance until cotton began to sell, and then he postponed:

"Wait; we are all easier now. Got enough so I can cash in any day and have plenty to pay all bills. But just wait until it goes a little higher."

And when it had gone to eight cents, eight and a half, and at last nine, his creditors had ceased to worry him. Now that Reedy could sell out any day and liquidate, and still be worth a hundred thousand or more, there was no hurry to collect. Nobody wants to push a man who can pay his debts any hour. Some of them even began to lend him more money. He had borrowed $25,000 as a first payment on the $200,000 for the Dillenbeck water system.

To-night Reedy had a list of figures before him again. Cotton had touched 9.76 to-day. Things were coming to a head. It was time to act.

Reedy had one set of figures in which 8,000 bales were multiplied by fifty and a fraction. It added $474,000. There was a column of smaller sums, the largest of which was, Revenue $28,000. These smaller sums were totalled and subtracted from $474,000, leaving $365,000—a sum over which Reedy

moistened his lips. Then he multiplied 15,000 acres by something and set that sum also under the $365,000 and added again. The total made him roll his pencil between his two plump hands.

Madrigal, the Mexican Jew, entered with a jaunty gesture, and took a chair and lighted a cigarette.

"When did you get back from Guaymas?" Reedy leaned back, lighted a match on the bottom of his chair and touched it to a plump cigar.

"Yesterday, Señor Reedy." There was always a mixture of aggressiveness and mocking freshness in Madrigal's tone and air.

"See Bondeberg?"

The Mexican nodded.

"Everything all right?"

"*Si, si.*" Madrigal sometimes was American and sometimes Mexican.

"I've had a dickens of a time getting trucks," said Reedy, speaking in a low, casual tone. "But I got 'em—twenty. Be unloaded to-morrow or the next day. I've arranged to take care of the duty. They are to be sold, you understand, with an actual bill of sale to each of the twenty Mexican chauffeurs you have employed."

Madrigal nodded lightly as though all of this was primer work for him.

"Have everything ready by the tenth. I think I can close up this water deal by that time."

As the Mexican left, Reedy reached for his telephone and called El Centro.

"Mrs. Barnett?" Soft oiliness oozed from his voice. "This is Reedy. What are you doing this evening? Nothing? How would you like a little spin out to the foot of the mountains to get a cool breath and watch the moon rise?—All right. I'll be along in about thirty minutes. By, by." The words sounded almost like kisses.

"Mrs. Barnett"—Reedy slowed down the machine as they drove off across the desert toward the foothills—"I owe everything to you."

The widow, all in white now—very light, cool white—felt a little shivery thrill of pride go over her. She half simpered and tried to sound deprecating.

"Oh, you merely flatter me." She was rolling a small dainty handkerchief in her palms.

"No, indeed!" responded Reedy, roundly. "No one can estimate the influence of a good woman on a man's life."

"I'm so glad"—the shivery thrill got to her throat —"if I've really helped you—Reedy." It was the first time she had used his given name, although he had often urged it.

"You know," he continued, "in spite of the great opportunities for wealth here, I do not believe that I could have endured this valley if it had not been for you. You can't imagine what it means to a man, after the disagreeable hurly-burly of the day's business, to know there is a pure, sweet, womanly woman waiting for him on the porch."

Mrs. Barnett gulped, filled with emotion. "I do believe," she almost gushed, "men like the shy, womanly woman who keeps her place best after all."

"They certainly do!"

"I don't see," mused Mrs. Barnett, "how a man really *could* care for a woman who becomes so—so—well, rough and sunburned, and coarsened by sordid work—like that Chandler woman, for instance. I mean, I don't see how any *good* man could care for that sort."

"Nor I," said Reedy, emphatically. He steered with one hand, and got both of her hands in the other.

"This year is going to be a great one for me.

Cotton is already over ten cents. I'll need only $25,000 more, and then I can clean up a fortune for all of us."

Mrs. Barnett, still thrilling to that hand pressure, moved a little uneasily.

"Uncle Jim has been right hard to manage for the last two times. He was real ugly about that last $40,000. I had to remind him how much my poor mother did for him and how little he had done for us before he would listen to me."

No wonder the widow quaked within her at the honour of being elected to do it all over again. It was not because she hesitated to attempt it for so noble a man; but for the moment she was desperate for a way to go at it. She had used in the last effort every "womanly" device known to conservative tradition for separating a man from his money. But she hesitated only a moment. A watery heart and a dry eye never won a fat loan. Undoubtedly her womanly intuition—or Providence—would show her a way.

"I'll do my best, Mr. Jenkins"—she lapsed into the formal again—"to get the loan for you. But Uncle is getting right obstinate."

"That's all right, little girl," he patted her hands. "I trust you to do it, you could move the heart of Gibraltar. And as I've promised you all the time, when I close up these deals I'm going to give you personally $25,000 of the profits in appreciation of your assistance. And that is not all"—he squeezed both the widow's hands a moment, then released them as if by terrific resolution—"but more of that later. We must close up this prosaic business first."

The next morning at ten o'clock Jim Crill stamped up the outside stairway, stamped through the open door and threw a check for $25,000 on Reedy's desk.

"That's the last," the old gentleman snapped with finality. "And I want to begin to see some payments mighty quick."

Reedy smiled as the old gentleman stamped back down the stairs, proud of his own ability as a "worker." And he was not without admiration for Mrs. Barnett's ability in that line. It would be interesting to know how she had done it so quickly.

"If the old man knew," Reedy picked up the check and grinned at the crabbed signature, "what this is going for, he'd drop dead with apoplexy at the foot of the stairs."

He reached for the telephone and called the freight agent:

"Are those motor trucks in yet? Good! We'll have them unloaded at once."

There are two ways to make a lot of money perfectly honestly: One is to produce much at a time when the product legitimately has such a high value that it shows a good profit. The other is to plan, invent, or organize so as to help a great many men save a little more, or earn a little more, and share the little with each of the many benefited. And there are two ways to get money wrongfully: One is by criminal dishonesty—taking under some of the multiple forms of theft what does not at all belong to one. The other is by moral dishonesty—forcing or aggravating acute needs, and taking an unfair advantage of them, blackmailing a man by his critical wants.

Reedy Jenkins had merely intended to be the latter. He had not planned to produce anything, nor yet to help other men produce, but to farm other men's needs—get hold of something so necessary for their success that it would force tribute from them. He planned to hold a hammer over the weakest link in others' financial deals and threaten

to break it unless they paid him double for the hammer.

Reedy indorsed Jim Crill's check, and stuck it in his vest pocket. He liked to go into a bank and carelessly pull $25,000 checks out of his vest pocket. Then he took from a drawer twenty letters already typed, signed them, and put them into envelopes addressed to the ranchers who bought water of the Dillenbeck Water Co.

"Now"—Reedy moistened his lips and nodded his head—"we are all set."

## CHAPTER XXIII

BOB tore the letter open with one rip, and read it with his back to the desk:

DEAR SIR:

We regret to say that dredging and other immediate repairs on our canal make a rather heavy assessment imperative. The work must be done at once, and the company's funds are entirely exhausted. Your assessment is $10 an acre; and this must be paid before we can serve you with any more water.

Very truly,
DILLENBECK WATER CO.,
Per R. Jenkins, *Pres. & Mgr.*

Ten dollars an acre! Fifty thousand dollars! Bob walked slowly out of the hotel. There was no use to go up to his room. No sleep to-night.

Jenkins' plot was clear now. He had merely been waiting for the most critical time. The next two waterings were the most vital of the whole season. The little squares that form the boll were taking shape. If the cotton did not get water at this time the bolls would fall off instead of setting.

Bob walked down the street, on through to the Mexican section of town, thinking. He must do something, but what?

It was a sweltering night and people were mostly outdoors. Under the vines in front of a small Mexican house a man played a guitar and a woman hummed an accompaniment. Across the street a little Holiness Mission was holding prayer meeting, and through the open windows an organ and twenty voices wailed out a religious tune.

Bob turned and walked back rapidly, and crossed the Mexican line. At the Red Owl he might hear something.

It was so hot that even the gamblers were listless to-night. The only stir of excitement was round one roulette wheel. Bob started toward the group, and saw the centre of it was Reedy Jenkins with his hat tipped back, shirt open at the throat, sleeves rolled to elbows, playing stacks of silver dollars on the "thirty."

Bob leaned against one of the idle tables and talked with the game keeper, a pleasant, friendly young chap.

"Wonder what the Mexicans are going to do with so many motor trucks?" the gamester asked casually.

"Motor trucks?" Bob repeated.

"Yes, they unloaded a whole string of them over here to-day. One of the boys said he counted twenty."

As Bob left the gambling hall Reedy was still playing the roulette wheel at twenty dollars a throw.

Rogeen got his car and started south. He would see for himself if there was any basis for Jenkins' claim that immediate work must be done on the water system. It was late and there were no lights at any of the little ranch shacks over the fields.

Chandler's place was dark like the rest. They were sleeping. Their notice would not come until to-morrow or next day. He would not wake them. Anyway to-night he had forgotten his fiddle, but he grimly remembered his gun.

He drove through the Red Butte Ranch without stopping. He could scarcely bear even to look to the right or left at those long rich rows of dark green cotton.

Turning off the main road south toward the Dillenbeck canal, something unusual stirred in Bob's consciousness. At first he could not think what was the matter; but directly he got it—the car was run-

ning differently. This road across a patch of the desert was usually so bumpy one had to hold himself down. To-night the car ran smoothly. The road had been worked—was being worked now—for a quarter of a mile ahead he heard an engine and made out some sort of road-dragging outfit.

The simplest way in the world to make a road across a sandy desert, or to work one that has been used, is to take two telephone poles, fasten them the same distance apart as automobile wheels, hitch on an engine, and drag them lengthwise along the road. This not only grinds down the uneven bumps but packs the sand into a smooth, firm bed for the machine's wheels.

That was what they were doing here. Bob stayed back and watched. He did not want to overtake them. The road-breaking outfit crossed the canal directly and headed south by east off into the desert. Bob stopped his machine on the plank bridge, and watched them pull away into the night. Then he gave a long, speculative whistle.

"I wonder," he said, "what philanthropist is abroad in the land at one o'clock in the morning?"

Rogeen left his machine and followed on foot along

the bank of the canal for two miles. The water was flowing freely. There was no sign of immediate need for dredging. Some of the small ranches were getting water to-night. He was glad of that. The Red Butte had finished watering its five-thousand-acre crop a week ago. It would be three days before they would need to begin again.

He went back to his machine and drove clear up to the intake from the Valley Irrigation Company's canal. The water was running smoothly all the way. The ditches seemed open, and in fair shape. Some work was needed of course every day; but there was no call for any quick, expensive repairs.

No, Jenkins' call for money was purely for himself and not the water system. The whole thing was robbery. But how could it be prevented? Injunctions by American courts did not extend over here, and Reedy undoubtedly had an understanding with the Mexican authorities.

There was nothing for it, thought Bob, but to choose one of two evils: Be robbed of $50,000, or lose five thousand acres of cotton. He set his teeth and started the little car plugging back across the sand toward the American line.

## CHAPTER XXIV

A LITTLE after daylight Bob was in El Centro. Jim Crill, always an early riser, was on the porch reading the morning paper.

"Come and have breakfast with me," Bob called from the machine. "Got some things to talk over."

He handed Crill the letter from the water company. Not a muscle in the old gentleman's face changed as he read, but two spots of red showed at the points of his sharp cheekbones.

"If it was your own money in that crop, what would you do?" asked Jim Crill, shortly.

"I'd fight him to hell and back." Bob's eyes smoldered.

"Then fight him to hell and back," said the old man, shortly. "And if you don't get back, I'll put up a tombstone for you.

"I've believed all along," said Jim Crill, "that Reedy Jenkins is a rascal. But," he lifted his left eyebrow significantly, "womenfolks don't always

see things as we do. Anyway, my trust was in cotton—it is honest—and sooner or later I'll get his cotton. He's got to bring it across the line to sell it.

"I've taken up all the other liens on that cotton," Crill continued, "so there'll be no conflicting claims. I've got $215,000 against those eight thousand bales."

He took a bill book from his hip pocket, and removed some papers.

"I was coming over to see you this morning. Been called away. Trouble in our Texas oil field. Main gusher stopped. May be a pauper instead of a millionaire. Would have got out of this damned heat before now if I hadn't wanted to keep an eye on Jenkins.

"Now I'm going to turn these bills over to you for collection. Get $215,000 with 10 per cent. interest, and half his cotton seed."

Bob's eyes were straight ahead on the road as he drove back to Calexico; his hands held the wheel with a steady grip, but his mind was neither on the road nor on the machine.

"Well," he smiled to himself, grimly, "at any rate, I'm accumulating a good deal of business

to transact with Reedy Jenkins. I suppose the first move is a personal interview with him."

Bob stopped the machine in the side street and went up the outside stairway of the red brick building, with purpose in his steps. But the door of the office was closed, a notice tacked on it. Bob stepped forward and read it eagerly:

"Mr. Jenkins' office is temporarily removed to the main building of the Mexican Cotton Ginning Co."

"And so," said Bob as he went down the stairs, "Reedy has moved across the line." That was puzzling, and not at all reassuring.

Rogeen did not go to the cotton gin to see Reedy. He wanted first to find out what the move meant. For two days he was on the road eighteen hours a day, most of the time on the Mexican side, gathering up the threads of Jenkins' plot. The other ranchers by this time had all received their notices, and there was murder in some of their eyes. But most of them were Americans, the rest Chinamen, and neither wanted any trouble on that side.

"Jenkins has a stand-in, damn him," said Black

Ben, one of the ranchers. "I'd like to plug him, but I don't want to get into a Mexican jail."

The second evening he met Noah Ezekiel at the entrance of the Red Owl. Bob had instructed Noah and Lou Wing to continue the work in the cotton fields exactly as though nothing impended.

"I was just lookin' for you," said Noah a little sheepishly.

"All right," responded Bob. "You've found me. What is on your mind?"

"Let us go a little apart from these sons of Belial," said Noah, sauntering past the Owl into the shadows.

"I picked up a fellow down by the Red Butte today," began Noah, "that had been on one of these here walkin' tours—the kind you take when your money gives out. After he'd stuffed himself with pottage and Chinese greens, and fried bacon, and a few other things round the camp, he got right talkative. He says they've broke a good road through the sand straight from Red Butte to the head of the Gulf of California. And that there is a little ship down there from Guaymas lying round waiting for something to happen."

"Noah"—Bob gripped Ezekiel's arm—"I've been working on that very theory. Your news clinches it. Reedy is never going to take that cotton across the American line. He is planning to shoot it down across that eighty-five miles of desert to the Gulf on motor trucks, ship it to Guaymas, and sell it there to an exporter. He is not even going to pay poor old Ah Sing for picking it; and as a final get-away stake he is trying to hold us up for $150,000 on the water. He has moved across the line for safety, and never intends to move back."

"He won't need to," said Noah Ezekiel. "He is due to get away with about half a million. But what do we care?" Noah shook his head solemnly. "As my dad used to say, 'Virtue is its own reward.' That ought to comfort you, Brother Rogeen, when you are working out that $78,000 of debts at forty dollars a month."

## CHAPTER XXV

EARLY next morning Bob went to the executive offices, and waited two hours for the arrival of the governor. Rogeen knew of course that Madrigal, the Mexican Jew, was engineering the Mexican end of the conspiracy; but he wanted to discover who the Mexican official was from whom they were securing protection.

Bob stated his business briefly, forcibly. He was one of the ranchers who got water from the Dillenbeck canal. The company was endeavouring to rob them. The ranchers wanted protection, and wanted water at once. The official was very courteous, solicitous, sympathetic. He would look into it immediately. Would Señor Rogeen call again tomorrow?

Señor Rogeen would most certainly call again tomorrow. When he left the office he went direct to Ah Sing's ranch.

"Ah Sing," said Bob, "I want you to turn over to

me your $80,000 claim against Reedy Jenkins for picking his eight thousand bales of cotton, and give me power of attorney to collect it."

"Allee light, I give him."

The next morning when the Mexican official came down to the office at ten o'clock he assured Bob most regretfully that although impetuous and violent efforts had been made to right his wrongs, unfortunately so far they had found no law governing the case. The Dillenbeck Company was a private water company, owned by American citizens; the Mexican officials had no power to fix the rate.

Bob went direct to the Mexican cotton gin.

"Jenkins"—Bob sat down on the edge of the offered chair, his feet on the floor, his knees bent as though ready to spring up—"I need to begin watering the Red Butte to-day, but your man tells me he has orders to keep the gates shut."

Reedy nodded, his plump lips shut tight, an amused leer in the tail of his eye. "You got my notice, didn't you? No cash, no water. Either ten dollars an acre spot cash or no spot cotton."

"Jenkins"—Bob's fingers were clutching his own knees as though holding themselves off the

rascal's throat—"that is the dirtiest steal I ever knew."

"That is not near what the water is really worth to you," said Reedy, nonchalantly. "It is only about 20 per cent. of what your crop will make—if it does not burn up."

The knots in Bob's arms flattened out, and his tone took on casualness again.

"Jenkins, I've got a couple of little bills against you that I'm authorized to collect. One on the American side is a trifle of $215,000 which you owe Mr. Crill; the other on this side is for $80,000 that you owe Ah Sing. Do you wish to take care of them now? Or shall I attach your cotton?"

Reedy's pink face and wide mouth took on a grin that fairly oozed amusement. "Attach my cotton, by all means."

Bob got up, hesitated a second, sat down again, and took out his check book. As his pen scratched for a moment, the grin on Reedy's face changed to one of victorious greed. Rogeen tore out the check and handed it to Reedy.

"There is $1,600. Turn water on the Chandler ranch. As for mine, you can be damned."

Reedy toyed idly with the check a moment, slowly tore it up, and threw it in the wastebasket.

"I'm sorry, but I can't get water to the Chandler ranch without the rest order it, too. Perhaps"—he again took on a leer—"if Miss Chandler should come in and see me personally, something might be arranged."

"Jenkins"—the coolest, most concentrated anger of his life was in Bob's tone—"I know your whole plot. You can't get away with it. You may ruin my cotton, probably will, but I'm going to smash you and sell the pieces to pay your debts."

Reedy got to his feet, and flushed hotly. The threat had gone home.

"There are six hundred Mexican soldiers and policemen that will answer my call. You won't make a move they don't see.

"Don't bank on any threat about the United States Government. Mexicans have been picking off Americans whenever they got ready for the last three years; and nothing ever happens. They aren't one bit scared of the American Government.

"Don't fool yourself, Rogeen; you are outclassed this time. I know what I'm doing, and I'm going to do it. If you don't want to rot in a Mexican jail or bleach on the sands somewhere, you'll walk softly and stay on the other side."

## CHAPTER XXVI

WHEN Bob left the Mexican cotton gin after the interview with Reedy Jenkins he had the feeling of furious futility which many a brave man has felt under similar circumstances. Yonder, two hundred yards away, he could see American soldiers patrolling the border; yet so little influence and so little fear did that big benign government wield over here that he knew that scoundrel and his villainous Mexican confederates could ruin his fields, throw him in jail and, even as Reedy threatened, bleach his bones on the sand, and no help come from over there—not in time to save him.

And yet there must be ways. There were other Mexican officials than the thieving one that Reedy had bribed to protect his movements and robberies. There were some fair Mexicans; and there were others, even if unfair, on whom the pressure of self-interest could surely be brought to bear.

It was unfortunate, Bob reflected, that Jim Crill had bought up all the debts against Jenkins' cotton. If these debts had been left scattered among the banks and stores and implement dealers, there would have been some influential coöperation in his effort to get action from the Mexican officials.

Bob went across the line and filed a long telegram to the State Department at Washington outlining the situation and asking for assistance. Then he caught the train for Los Angeles, where he had learned the American consul at the nearest Mexican port, whom he knew, was on a vacation.

The consul was very indignant at the treatment Rogeen was receiving and promised to investigate.

"Investigate!" Bob ran his fingers through his thick, sweaty hair, and unconsciously gave it a jerk. "But, man, I need water right now! It's the most critical time of the whole crop. Every day of delay means a loss of ten, fifteen, twenty thousand dollars."

"I know," said the consul; "but don't you see no officer can act merely on the word of one man. We have to get evidence and forward it to the department. If only I had the authority to act on my own

initiative, I could bring them to time in twenty-four hours."

"If you wired to the department for authority," suggested Bob, "couldn't you get it?"

The consul shook his head doubtfully. He really was impressed by Bob's desperate situation. "I'll try it, and I'll be down to-morrow to see what I can do."

Bob returned to Calexico with a little hope—not much but a little. Anyway, he was anxious to see the department's reply to his own appeal. But it had not replied. The Western Union operator was almost insulted that Bob should imagine there was a message there for him.

Bob wrote another appeal, a little longer, and if possible more urgent, and fired that into Washington.

The consul came the following day. He interviewed the other ranchers and verified Bob's statements. He took affidavits, and made up quite a bulky report and dispatched it by mail to Washington. In the meantime he wired, briefly outlining the substance of his letter, and asked for temporary authority to take measures that would force the Mexican officials to act.

Bob was fairly hopeful over this. He waited anxiously for twenty-four hours for some answer. None came. This was the third day since his cotton began to need water. The thermometer went to 131 at two o'clock. No green plant could survive long without water.

He rode all day enlisting the coöperation of influential men in the valley on the American side, and got several of them to send wires to Washington. Every night when he returned to Calexico he went eagerly to the telegraph office; but each time the operator emphatically shook his head. Then Bob laboured over another long telegram, begging for haste; he paid nine dollars and forty cents toll and urged that the message be rushed.

By the fifth day Rogeen was getting desperate. He returned to Calexico at seven o'clock, jumped out of his car, and hurried into the telegraph office.

A message! A telegram for him at last! He had got action. Maybe even yet he could save most of his crop. The message was collect—$1.62. He dropped two silver dollars on the counter and without noticing the change tore open the message. It

was from the department at Washington and was brief:

DEAR SIR:

If you file your complaints in writing, they will be referred to the proper department for consideration.

R. P. M., *Ass't to Sec. of State.*

Then Bob gave up, turned about gloomily, and went out to his machine, and started south toward the Chandler ranch.

## CHAPTER XXVII

AS THE sun, like a burnished lid to some hotter caldron, slid down behind the yellow sandhills that rimmed the desert, Imogene Chandler felt as though she must scream. She would have made some wild outcry of relief if it had not been for her father, who still sat in the doorway of the shack, as he had all day, gray and bent like a dusty, wilted mullein stalk.

It had been a terrible day—the hottest of the summer. And for a week now the irrigation ditches had been dry. To-day the cotton leaves had wilted; and the girl had looked away from the fields all afternoon. It tortured her to see those rich green plants choking for water.

The sun gone, and a little relief from the heat, she began to prepare supper.

As she stirred flour for biscuits, Imogene was blaming herself for ever bringing her father here. But it had looked so like the great opportunity to

escape from the fetters of dry rot and poverty. So near were they to success, with the rising prices this crop would make them a small fortune—five thousand, perhaps seven or eight thousand dollars clear—if only it had water. But to see it burn day by day, and all because of the greed of Reedy Jenkins! She had sent her father with the tribute of sixteen hundred dollars to Jenkins, but he had refused it. He could not turn on the water for so small a ranch. She knew he was trying to force Bob Rogeen through her to submit to the robbery.

Imogene and her father were dully eating their supper when Bob's machine stopped at the ranch. But the moment the light from the swinging lantern over the table fell on his face, she knew it was hopeless, and her mind leaped from her own trouble to his.

"It all comes down to this"—they had not discussed the fight until the little professor had gone to bed—"my backing must mean more to the Mexican officials than Reedy Jenkins'. If I could only get Washington to give the consul power to act, then we could apply pressure. But"—he shrugged his shoul-

ders fatalistically and looked moodily up at the glittering stars—"you see how hopeless that is."

She gave a jump that almost scared him, and grabbed his arm. Her face was so close to his he could see the excitement in her eyes even through the dusk.

"I can help; it can be done!"

She was electrically alive now. "Daddy was a classmate of the President's and was an instructor under him before we came West. He thinks a lot of daddy, but daddy would never use his friendship with the President to get a job. He's got to use it now—for you—for all of us! Write a personal telegram to the President—the sort that will get immediate action—and I'll make daddy sign it."

Bob was fairly white with excitement, and his hand shook as they sat down at the board table under the lantern and carefully composed that telegram. This was their one last hope, and it *must* get action.

"There, that will do it," Imogene nodded sagely. They were sitting side by side, their heads close together, studying the final draft of the appeal. The night wind blew a strand of her hair against his face, and for a moment he forgot the desert, forgot

the fight, forgot the telegram, and saw only her. Then he shook himself free from the spell. He must save the girl and himself before he dared speak.

Imogene roused up her father, and had him sign the message. And an hour later by a combination of bribes, threats, and pleadings Bob got a sleepy operator to reopen the telegraph office and speed the message to Washington.

At five o'clock the next day the reply came. Bob signed for it, and his fingers shook as he tore it open.

DEAR THEO:

State Department instructing consul by wire to take any action necessary to protect American ranchers.

W.

By eleven o'clock that night he got a message from the consul; and thirty minutes later Bob was speeding toward Tia Juana, a hundred and fifty miles west, to see the Mexican governor.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

EARLY next morning Rogeen got an interview with the executive of the Mexican province, whom he had never met. The governor received him most courteously and manifested both alert intelligence and a spirit of fairness. During that long night ride Bob had thought out most carefully his exact line of appeal.

"Your Excellency," he said, earnestly, "wishes, of course, for the fullest development of the Imperial Valley in Mexico. To that end the ranchers must know they have full protection, not alone for their lives as they now have, but also for their crops. They must know it is profitable to farm in Mexico. I, myself, have five thousand acres of cotton, which will pay in export duties alone perhaps $25,000. Next year I wish to grow much more. Besides, I'm the agent for a very rich man who lends hundreds of thousands of dollars to other ranchers in your province.

"But this can continue only if those who do business on your side of the line obey the laws and pay their debts. Such men as Reedy Jenkins must be compelled to deal honestly or get out."

The governor agreed to what Rogeen said, and promised to take prompt action.

"But," insisted Bob, "to save us, it must be done quickly. Jenkins' cotton must be seized and held for his debts, and the water turned into the canals at once."

This was also promised as soon as legal papers could be prepared. In leaving the office Bob dropped the telegram from the consul, accidentally.

"It apparently will not be needed," he said to himself as he left the office, "but it won't hurt to lose it."

The telegram left in the office read:

> Present your situation to the governor, and if immediate relief is not given I'll close the border within twenty-four hours so tight that not a man, a mule, nor a machine can cross it either way.
>
> LANIER, *Consul.*

Two hours later a secretary who spoke good English and a Mexican captain appeared at the Chinese hotel where Bob was waiting.

"We have here," the secretary presented Bob with two papers, "an attachment for Señor Jenkins' cotton and an order that the water must be turned into the canals at once, and at the old rate. El Capitan and I will accompany you in the governor's own machine to see these orders are obeyed."

Rogeen requested that no message be sent to Mexicali regarding these attachments, as that would give Reedy a chance to dodge.

"Can we go back over the Mexican road, and come into the valley round the Laguna Salada?" Bob asked. Reedy might already be rushing his cotton on those trucks down to the waiting boat on the Gulf, and by going this route they would intercept them.

The road over the mountains was not completed, said the secretary, but they could have another machine from the valley to meet them, and in that machine make the circuit as proposed.

At ten o'clock that night Rogeen, the captain, and the secretary left the machine and the chauffeur at the top of the mountain grade, and began the two-mile descent to the ancient bed of the sea—the desert round the Laguna Salada.

Bob's satisfaction at winning the governor was

more than overbalanced by the torturing fear that it would all be too late. He believed they would be in time to stop Reedy from getting away with his four hundred thousand dollars' worth of cotton. Jenkins would not start until he had lost hope of getting that $150,000 from the ranchers for water. But Bob feared he was already too late to save his own cotton and Chandler's.

The point on the mountain where they left the machine was almost a mile high. The descent to the valley was by a steep and precarious trail. The captain who was familiar with it took the lead.

It was twelve-thirty when they reached the road at the bottom which led to Mexicali. The machine was not there.

"What do you suppose is the matter?" Bob's voice sounded surprisingly cool but a little flat, even to himself. Although the hot winds struck them here, his skin felt clammily cold.

"He'll be here by and by." The secretary lighted a cigarette. He did not share Bob's anxiety and felt no undue fret over a little delay. "I telegraphed the *comandante* to send driver and car here about midnight. He'll be here before long," he reassured.

For an hour Bob walked back and forth peering at every turn far into the desert, listening until his ears ached. But no sight of car, no sound of puffing engine. Another hour passed, and another. His anxiety increased until the delay seemed unbearable.

They waited nine hours. At last they saw the black bug of a machine crawling snortingly across the twenty-mile strip of sand between them and the pass through the Cocopa Mountains.

At nine-thirty the car arrived, a powerful machine of expensive make. The chauffeur was a slender, yellowish young Mexican who delighted in taking dangerous curves at fifty miles an hour and who savagely thrilled at the terrific punishment his car could take and still go.

Through the secretary Bob told him of the plan to skirt the Laguna Salada and go south round the Cocopas instead of going through the pass. This way they would follow the ancient bed of the Gulf of California and forty miles south turn across the desert of the Lower Colorado, thence northeastward until they struck the trail along the river. By this route they could reach the Red Butte, the head of the Dillenbeck canal, almost as quickly as through the

pass and by Mexicali, while at the same time they would follow for thirty miles up the river trail down which Jenkins' trucks must pass on the way to the head of the Gulf.

"Do you think we can do it?" Bob asked the chauffeur.

The chap lighted a cigarette, shrugged, and replied they could do any damn thing.

"Let's be doing it then," urged Bob, jumping into the luxurious car.

The Laguna Salada is a dead lake made from the overflow of the Colorado River and salted by the ancient bed of the sea. There is no vegetation round it, no life upon it. Along the salty, sandy shore that glitters in the sun there is no road, no broken trail. But the reckless chauffeur hit the sand with the exultant fierceness of a bull fighter. And at every lunge Bob clung to the iron bar overhead and devoutly prayed that the machine would live through it.

It did. At one o'clock they swung round the headlands into the main desert—the worst of its size on the continent, the desert of the Lower Colorado.

As far as the eye could see stretched the dead

waste, so dead that not a mesquite bush, not a cactus, not a living thing grew or crawled or flew. And upon it smote the sun so hot it seemed a flame, and over it boiled a wind like the breath of a volcano.

It staggered even the four men, used as they were to the heat of the valley. But it was only forty miles to the river.

"Pretty damn bad," the chauffeur muttered in Spanish, and shrugged. Then he turned the nose of his machine northeast, and straight across the hard-packed sand shot into the blistering desert.

"Two miles, four miles, six——" Bob counted off, watching the speedometer. Every mile took him nearer the road, the water gates—and Reedy Jenkins.

"Eight—nine——" he continued. Then a terrific roar; the machine staggered; the chauffeur swore and applied the brakes.

They all jumped out. It was the right hind tire—a hole blown through it ten inches long. The chauffeur kicked it two or three times, lighted a cigarette, and stood looking at the burst tire. Finally he shrugged and glanced across the desert. The wind

was blowing hard; there was sand in it. He shrugged and sauntered round to the front of the car, got out his jack and wrenches, took the wheel off, prowled round a quarter of an hour, then lighted another cigarette, again stood looking at the burst tire, and kicked it a few times as though trying to make it wake up and mend itself.

"What is the matter?" asked Bob. He had been afraid to ask.

"He says," interpreted the secretary, "he has no inner tube. Forgot to bring any."

"Then he'll have to run on the rim," said Bob, desperately; "we've got to get out of this."

But the secretary nodded toward the radiator which roared as though about to blow up.

"Where is his water?" Rogeen felt more than the heat surging through his head.

The chauffeur sauntered round the car twice as though looking for it.

"Says," explained the secretary, "he had a can but must have lost it."

They tried running on the rim, without water and with the hot wind blowing the same direction they were going. The machine lasted four miles, and

then quit in the middle of a sand drift, with the most infernal finality in its death surge.

Bob got out and looked at the stalled car hopelessly. The boiling wind surged over the hot dust and smote him witheringly. The driven sand almost suffocated him. It was twenty-five miles at least to the river, twenty more to possible assistance. He looked at his watch—it was five minutes after one. Six hours before the sun would set, and until then walking would be suicide.

He climbed back into the machine, and sank limply into the shaded corner of the seat. Six hours of this—it would be torture; and there would be one long night of walking to reach water; another day of waiting for night—without food—and again a long, staggering walk before they reached a human habitation.

Two days and nights of delay—then it would be too late!

## CHAPTER XXIX

THERE are times when torture of the body heals the suffering of the mind, and times when mental agony blots out physical pain. But there are other times when the two run together. It was so with Bob as they toiled doggedly through that long night across the desert toward the river. He kept his course by the North Star, and lost little distance by getting off the compass. It was just daylight when they reached the river. The stream was bank full—midsummer is high water for the Colorado—and was very muddy. But its water was more beautiful than jasper seas to those four men.

After they had drunk and cooled themselves in it, they crawled under a clump of willows beside the road to rest through the day. Bob had just stretched out on his back and covered his face with a handkerchief, ready to sleep, when a chuck-chuck and a grinding noise came down the road. He was up instantly, and so were the three Mexicans.

"A machine!" they exclaimed. Relief! They would not have to walk that other twenty miles.

The deep chug of the engine indicated a powerful machine pulling heavily. It was coming rather slowly. The road was hidden by miles of rank wild hemp; but directly the machine came round a curve.

It was a motor truck loaded high with cotton bales!

Bob's heart beat quick. They were in time to save at least part of it, after all.

The captain bristled. Here was work to do, authority to display. He stepped into the middle of the road, put his hand on his gun, and gave a ringing call to halt.

The Mexican driver came to a sudden stop. He knew *el capitan*. And whatever faults may be attributed to the governor of Baja California, all admits he is a governor. When he speaks in person or by messenger there is never any hesitancy about obedience.

The captain read his orders to the chauffeur and commanded him to turn round. The four climbed on, and the truck started back.

The driver told them that only two trucks had

gone on ahead; sixteen were behind, with Señor Jenkins on the last, and each truck carried twenty bales of cotton.

They stopped the next truck when they met it, and then waited until all seventeen were backed up the road.

Reedy Jenkins leaped from the rear one, nervous and violent of temper, swore, and hurried forward to see what was the trouble. To his unutterable wrath he saw the end truck headed about.

"What the hell! you damned greasers." But then he quit. Something was wrong here. He strode forward angrily.

"Rogeen, get off that truck and do it damn quick."

"I'm getting off," said Bob. With a quick leap he landed in the road and went straight for Reedy. The secretary and the captain followed.

"I have a writ of attachment here," said Bob, bringing out the paper issued by the governor, "for your cotton in favour of Ah Sing. I have further orders from the governor to deliver the cotton to the compress on the American side and sell it in the open market.

"Captain," Bob turned to the officer, "order the drivers to turn back. You ride on the front one

with the driver, and I'll ride on the back one with my kind friend Señor Jenkins."

That night after Bob Rogeen had left her with the telegram Imogene Chandler was too wrought up to sleep. And the longer she thought of it, the more determined she became to take action herself. She had some faith that the telegram would bring results, but not much faith that those results would come in time to save their crop. While Bob was riding through the days and nights, fighting for them, she and the other ranchers were doing nothing but watch their cotton burn for water.

About eleven o'clock Imogene went to the corral and bridled and saddled a horse. With the bridle reins in her left hand and her revolver in her right, she galloped off north toward Rogeen's ranch to consult Noah Ezekiel.

A mile up the road she met Noah riding south.

"What's the matter? Your dad not sick?" He was much astonished to see her riding out at this time of night.

"No," replied the girl, "it is our cotton that is sick. And I'm going after a doctor. Noah, I want

you to go with me and show me where those water gates are. I'm going to have water or fight. They wouldn't shoot a woman."

"Oh, wouldn't they?" said Noah. "That shows how naturally scarce of information you are.

"No," said the hill billy determinedly but with a current of tenderness in his tone, "you ain't goin' to the water gates; you are goin' back to your ranch. You are just naturally sweet enough to gentle a horse, but you ain't cut out to fight Mexicans."

She had turned her horse round and was riding beside him back toward her ranch.

"Now, listen here," said Noah as he saw signs of rebellion in the swing of her body and the grip on her revolver, "you go home and get your dad and your Chinaman ready. There's goin' to be water in them ditches before daylight or there will be one less hill billy in this vale of tears."

During these fervid days Noah Ezekiel had not been asleep, although much of the time he looked as though he were on the verge of it. He had had his eye on both ranches—the Chandlers' and the Red Butte. Twice he had cautiously reconnoitred the full length of the water ditches.

At a point on the Valley Irrigation Company's big canal, about seven miles below the intake from the Colorado River, two diverting ditches branched off; the larger of these furnished the main water supply of the Mexican side of the valley, the smaller was the Dillenbeck system.

At these gates the Valley Company kept water keepers and guards day and night. As the Dillenbeck Company were merely private consumers, water was turned into this canal only on their orders, and charged for by the thousand feet.

Four miles below where this canal began to branch to the various ranches it supplied was the Dillenbeck water station. It was the keeper in charge here who ordered water from the main canal and who opened the sluice gates and apportioned it to the various ranches.

Noah Ezekiel on his reconnoitring discovered two things: The night water keeper had been reënforced by a Mexican guard; and besides Madrigal, the Mexican Jew, usually spent the night with these two. Expecting trouble, a company of twenty Mexican special guards was camped a quarter of a mile down the canal, in easy calling distance. These

guards, while authorized by the *comandante*, were hired and paid by Reedy Jenkins. It was their duty to patrol the canal above and below by the main water gates and be ready at all times to repulse any threatened attack.

Noah Ezekiel had been approached several times by infuriated ranchers with suggestions that they organize a mob. But American ranchers were too few and unpopular to make mobs highly hopeful. An attack on these guards would bring on a conflict with the whole Mexican garrison at Mexicali, consisting of several hundred well-trained troops. Noah Ezekiel advised strongly against this. Noah was opposed to strife of any kind. But he had been doing a little plotting of his own.

He knew the Red Owl employed a number of boosters for the games—men who went from table to table and gambled with the house's money. The psychology of gambling is like the psychology of anything else—the livelier the game the more there are who want to get into it. The job of the booster is to stimulate business by gambling freely himself. These boosters are paid four dollars a day; and the ordinary Mexican, if given his choice between being

secretary of state and a booster at the Red Owl, would pick the Owl every time.

After a reasonable wait to see if water was coming in by the due process of law and growing doubtful about it, Noah Ezekiel had begun carefully laying plans.

That morning he had gone to the Red Owl and had a secret session with Jack the Ace of Diamonds, one of the game keepers. Jack and the hill billy had become good friends, and Jack was more than willing to accommodate a friend.

"Now, Ace," said Noah, "the idea is like this: This afternoon you send a Mexican out to that camp on the Dillenbeck canal with the information that the Owl wants to hire about eleven good boosters to begin work at twelve o'clock to-night; and have the messenger casually but secretly give each of them a slip of paper that is dead sure to get him one of the jobs.

"And," Noah grinned, "you give every one of 'em that applies a job for two days—as a treat on me. You can fix it with the boss."

"Sure," grinned Jack, "I'll fix it." And a Mexican messenger had been dispatched on the spot.

Noah sat at the ranch shack as dark came on and counted them as they went by down the road. As he guessed, the officer would get away first, and the rest begin to drop away from camp one or two at a time soon after dark. By eleven o'clock he had counted seventeen; and then Noah saddled his horse. When he had met Imogene, he had thought she was another Mexican, but he was not alarmed at one or even three.

A little before one o'clock Noah tied his horse to a cottonwood tree a half mile below the Dillenbeck water gates.

He skirted through the fields round the deserted guard camp. His caution was not necessary, not a Mexican soldier was left. He grinned to think of the boosters about now in the Red Owl. Two hundred yards from the little open shack that served as office and home for the water keeper Noah took off his shoes and left his hat, and slipped toward the light. In his hands, muzzle forward, was the double-barrelled shotgun—the riot gun sure to hit its mark at close range that Bob had got for him with which to guard the Chandler ranch.

## CHAPTER XXX

NOAH, bent low, slipped forward in utter silence—more silence than necessary. The American water keeper, Madrigal, and the Mexican guard were too profoundly busy with a crap game on the floor under the lantern to be disturbed by the mere breaking of a twig.

But all at once from out the night came a drawling voice:

"Brethren, let's raise our hands." Three pairs of eyes leaped up from the dice and looked into the muzzle of the most vicious shotgun they had ever seen—not ten feet away. Six hands went up without a word.

"Stand up," was the next drawling command. "Turn your backs." Noah flung two small ropes at their feet.

"You," he ordered Madrigal, "tie the Mex's hands behind him—and stand him over by the wall."

"Whitey," he ordered the water keeper when that was done, "tie the Hebrew's hands and feet and set him down over by the wall, facing this way.

"Now," Noah again commanded the water keeper, "go to the telephone and order the water turned in. Tell 'em we are dry—that all the trouble is settled, and to shoot the water down banks full, right away, quick."

The water keeper was shaking as though with the ague. He knew danger when he saw it and he was perfectly sure he saw it.

He went to the telephone and called the keeper at the Valley Irrigation Company's office. As he started to speak Madrigal stirred on the floor as though trying to get up.

Still keeping the water keeper covered with the shotgun, Noah looked round at Madrigal and drawled:

"If I was you, Hebrew, I'd keep sayin' over that parable which reads: 'Once there was a Mexican who was shot in the stomach with half a pint of buckshot; and in hell he lifted up his eyes and said, "Father Abraham, send me a drop of water." And Father Abraham says, "Not a drop. Ain't you the

man that helped burn up the Imperial Valley? Hell's too good for you, but it's all we've got."' "

The telephone message was given.

"It sounded all right," said Noah to the water keeper. "Sit down over there and be comfortable, while we wait and see; and keep your eye on the muzzle of the gun. It is the only way to keep it from smokin'."

Forty minutes passed. Noah's eyes were on his prisoners, but his ears kept listening. Fifty minutes, then he heard a loud woosh—almost a roar. The water was coming!

"Now let's go out and open up all gates," ordered Noah. The water keeper obeyed.

"For the time being," drawled Noah, "you can lie down out there in the open beside the canal and take a nap. Shootin' craps has been sort of hard on your nerves. I'll look after the water for a spell."

About nine o'clock at night Imogene Chandler came in from the cotton field.

Out there in the dim starlight stretched the long rows of cotton, erect, green, luxuriant. The water had come in time. It had flowed into their ditches

at four o'clock the morning after Noah Ezekiel passed. They had been ready for it. For three days it had flowed abundantly, and all their fields were watered.

Imogene lifted her face to the wind. She loved the desert again. And yet there was restlessness in her movements; even in the stillness her ears strained to catch some other sound than the soft rustle of the wind.

Nothing had happened to him of course or she would have heard. But she had watched for him that first night after the water was turned in; the next night she was expecting him, and last night she felt sure he would come. If he did not come to-night—— Maybe something had happened, maybe he had been shot by some of Jenkins' hired assassins? Fear, which really had been hovering about for three days, but put off by her faith in Bob's utter competence to take care of himself, swooped down on her suddenly. Her throat grew dry, her heart beat like a frightened bird's, she whirled and started to run for the house. She would start in search at once.

Then came the sound that her ears had been straining for—the chuck, chuck of his little machine.

She dropped down on the bench under the arrow-

wood shelter and let herself go. But the sobs were over, her eyes dry, her lips smiling, as he came across the yard in the dusk with a dark bulk under his arms.

He had brought his fiddle. She did not stir from the bench. She felt utterly, blissfully relaxed. Her arm lay loosely along the back of the bench, her head dropped slightly forward, the wind still stirring her hair.

"Hello." That was her only greeting. But the tone of it went through him like a soft breath of wind in the woods following a lull in the storm.

"Hello," and that was his only reply as he sat down on the bench beside her, the fiddle across his knees.

Her arm lying lazily along the back of the bench was almost touching him; but he had not noticed it, and she left it there.

"I don't hardly know where to begin," Bob said directly, and laughed to try to cover up his emotions. He knew that no matter where he began he never could put in words the horror of the night when the ghost of utter defeat and failure walked with him over that terrible desert; nor yet the great upsweep of triumph that engulfed him when he reached the water

gates the next day and learned that Noah Ezekiel and a double-barrelled shotgun had saved the crops three days before—his and all the rest.

To feel one moment that he was in debt for life, beaten and wrecked, and the next to know he would be worth in three months at least a hundred thousand dollars! No, he could not put that in words; so he merely twanged softly the violin strings with his thumb, and remarked casually:

"Well, I got the money."

"What money?" Still the girl did not stir. She was so blissfully lethargic, and she was not thinking at all of money or cotton.

"For poor old Ah Sing, and for Jim Crill. I seized Reedy's cotton this morning and sold it this afternoon. Got $410,000 for the cotton and the seed. But Jenkins was in deeper than we knew. He's gambled away fifty thousand or so. After I'd paid up all his debts, including the duty, there was only $25,000 left for Reedy. And Mrs. Barnett came down on me like a squawking hen, demanding that. Said Reedy had promised it to her for getting the loans from her uncle. But Reedy denied it."

"What did you do?" asked Imogene as he paused.

"I compromised—told Reedy I was entitled to that much for commission and damages, but that I'd give it to him provided he and Mrs. Barnett married. They did."

Imogene laughed, a rich warm laugh in which there was no sting of revenge, only humour for human faults. This was such a good world, and such a beautiful desert!

Bob did not think of anything more to tell of his exploits. Somehow his mind would not stay on them. Instead, he looked up at the stars and sighed with deep content, then put the fiddle to his shoulder and raised the bow.

When he finished he turned to look down at her, and in that moment felt the touch of her arm at his back. She was very still; he was not sure whether she was crying or smiling.

"Do you know what it said?" he asked, huskily.

"Y-e-s," she answered, softly, "but I want to hear it in words, too."

He slipped his arm round her and drew her to him. "You wonderful darling," he said, kissing her, "you'll hear it a million times in words."

THE END

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