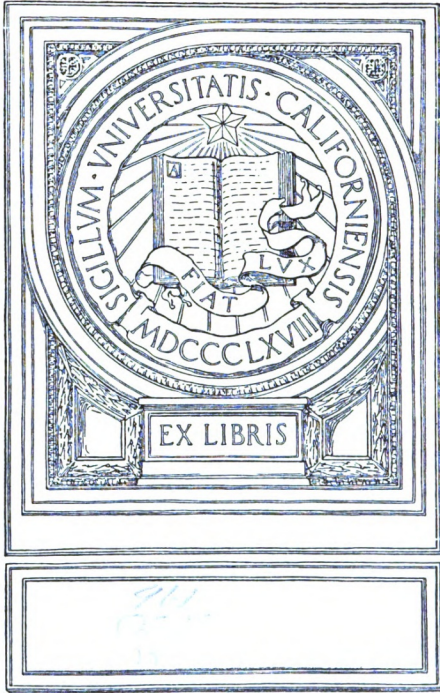


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# West of Dodge

GEORGE W. OGDEN



To Uncle Maurice from  
Alberta

April 16, 1928



# WEST OF DODGE



# WEST OF DODGE

BY  
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# WEST OF DODGE



CHAPTER I  
DAMASCUS

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WHENEVER one comes upon a town, such as Damascus was in those days, such as others of its type are even now in the less-trodden spaces beyond, let him look for the reason of it instead of vexing his imagination. For there never was a town without a reason, let both town and reason be as inconsequential as next to nothing at all. A town cannot live upon itself: there must be somebody around to come for supplies to its stores, to claim the letters in its post office, to stand horses at its swaybacked hitching-racks.

There was a reason for Damascus by the Arkansas, therefore, although it doubtless seemed remote and perplexing to those who passed by railroad train through that vast gray plain of western Kansas, tipping upward toward the sky. As you shall see in its time and place.

Damascus seemed only the seed of a town in those days, a seed blown far from its parent plant upon the straining winds which never ceased sounding in the ears day nor night; a seed that had sprouted weakly and languished for the need of rain. Here the Arkansas River came down from its mountain beginnings, as clear in the summer days as the sunlight that struck through it, revealing the ripples of its shallow bars. Flat upon the landscape it seemed to lie, as it seems yet to lie, as it will appear to the stranger who sees it for the first time as

long as the snows supply its fountains and the willows bend beside it where old trails of forgotten buffalo trace the sad gray slopes.

It was said, and generally believed by people situated in fairer parts of Kansas in those times, that there was not much chance for a man west of Dodge. Based upon appearances, this seemed a conclusion well grounded, for it was a land of emptiness; bald, bleak, swept by never-resting winds. In summer the heat mounted to torrid intensity; in winter the storm pounced with untempered strength upon a land that offered no shelter of forest or wooded brake, except the thin line of cottonwoods and willows along the meandering Arkansas and its feeble, far-spaced tributary streams.

A land filled from horizon to horizon with endless humps of morose gray billowing hillocks, swell after swell, naked of tree and shrub; a land in its very configuration suggestive of the vast vanished herds of buffalo that once fed upon its meager succulence. It seemed that nature had fixed their likeness there in everlasting earth, prophetic, before their time, of their coming; reminiscent of their presence long after their evanishment.

Not much of a chance for a man west of Dodge.

Indeed, it looked that way in those times. But the same had been said of Abilene in its day, when the frontier of civilization was staked there across the Kansas plain; it had been said of Topeka by the first to come with plows and seed of the field into the valley of the Kaw. Adventure laughed at the limitations of the timid; time pulled up the stakes and set them forward and on. For where water runs and grass grows there always is a chance for a man.

Nature had done much to keep man out of the country west of Dodge, it is true, with its lack of wood, its scarcity of water; arid fierce summers, long and bitter winters, thin air light in the almost-mountain altitude. Yet man is an adjustable creature, and the beasts which serve him share his adaptability to change and conditions. Cattle-men had found their way far west of Dodge in the day that you come to Damascus on the creaking wain of this story. They had spread their herds over the solemn hills which seemed to press forever like galloping buffalo down to the margin of the Arkansas; they had found profit in a land from which fear had withheld the unadventurous, and Damascus had risen by the side of the railroad to supply their needs, as well as to profit upon their follies.

The town was not as much then as it came to be in later years, as it is to-day, if you could identify it as you glide past on the California limited, cool bowers of elm trees in its green park, its paved streets swept clean by the wind that changes not with the years.

Yet it had its court house even that far back, it being a county seat. The people of Kansas always were a contentious lot: their history begins in controversies, their commonwealth was founded on a quarrel. Out of that ancient habit they always have been a great people for having court houses handy for the settlement, or prolongation, of their difficulties, as it may transpire after they bring them within the doors. The first thing they did was vote bonds for a court house whenever a few of them got together on the prairie and organized a county. It is altogether likely there are more court houses to the man, and better ones, in Kansas than any other state in the union.

Around this court house in Damascus, built of brick, although there was white limestone fit for palaces and railroad bridges close at hand, the town clustered its few dozen dwellings and flat-nosed business fronts. Damascus, being on the front of things, was a sort of permanent railroad camp in addition to its importance as a cattle-lands center. On its skirts there were settlements of dusty tents to shelter man, woman, and the inevitable result of such conjunction; where baled hay was piled high, and raw-boned mules stood hitched to long, unsheltered mangers chopping the sod to dust with stamping hooves.

Not a lovely place at all, this town; no umbrageous elm trees in that day along its sun-warped walks and dusty streets. If there was a flower of any kind within the confines of the place, it was a wild hardy one that wheel and hoof, and ground-gripping Kansas feet had spared. Somebody had set catalpa trees around the court house square, but the life had perished out of them when they had come no higher than the brim of a man's hat. A few of the dry, sad, twisted little trunks remained there still.

People were not thinking of ornamentation and beauty in Damascus in those days; only of the belief that a man hadn't much of a chance west of Dodge. Such of them as called it home were forging their efforts to hold on in the face of great natural odds, magnified by tradition and report.

The lights were out at Dodge City; the notorious characters who had given the town an infernal fame throughout the country were under the buffalo grass or scattered far. County attorneys were beginning to grow incor-



ruptible in western Kansas; the state prohibitory law, which had stood a dead letter in that part of the state since enactment, was beginning to be enforced. These two conditions supplied the fuel for a last flare-up in Damascus, out on the very edge of things as it lay. The prosecuting attorney of that county was not an incorruptible man. He was one, at least, who saw a big chance for a person of his stripe lying around loose west of Dodge, and immediately proceeded to turn it into cash.

The result was that Damascus was just about as wide-open as lawlessness could pry it. Not so violently picturesque as Dodge had been; not so romantically gory. Yet trouble never was so far out of sight that a man could not find it if so bent. Now and then one made the discovery. Not always with happy finale.

Now another kind of adventurers were coming into that land which had felt successively the feet of the soldier, the railroad builder, the stockman, and the scum of the earth which hung parasitically upon them, sweepings which the broom of the law had purged from the threshold of well-regulated society. These newcomers were adventurers of the soil, men who came singly, with eyes far-set, as if they had followed elusive hope from the old places to that frontier, doubt upon them that they had overtaken it yet; who came with young wives at their sides, fresh in the vigor of united courage; who came old and stress-driven, out of the long, long road set with abandoned hearthstones, markers in their progression of defeat; who came in the strength of middle life, ruddy and bearded, with stripling sons and half-ripe daughters, and little ones bulging the canvas of their

wagon-tops, as the Goths came to the Danube and knocked at the doors of Rome.

These home-hunters on the great tide that always has set the adventurers and the homeless of humanity sweeping into the west, were as alien to that raw country as fruit to the desert. That was a time of great unrest among the landless of the older states, the tenant farmers, small landholders, cramped and hopeless of better things. An infectious courage seemed to have swept the country that spring, which resulted in the breaking of old moorings, the uprooting of old ties, and a general rush to the wide unpeopled rim of western Kansas.

It was an unprecedented tide of emigration, even for that state, where the phenomenal is the rule; it carried farther than agricultural enterprise ever had dreamed of penetrating before. If these brave pioneers ever had heard of the saying that there was not much chance for a man west of Dodge, they were undismayed by it, and unchecked. At any rate, there was no other place left for them to go. East of Dodge the best of it was taken; to the west there was plenty of room for freedom and a home. Men live in Iceland for no other reason than they are free.

Damascus had its dusty beginning at the railroad, where the little dark-red depot stood across the mouth of the principal street. This was called Custer Street, in honor of the commander of the historic Seventh Cavalry, who had been the government's besom on that wild highland plain years before, sweeping the savages away, making ready for the peaceful tide of homeseekers which had been so long in sending its crest to the last Kansas frontier.

Custer Street led from the railroad station past great tiers and ranks of railroad ties, which gave off an astringent smell of fresh oak; past stores of gray steel rails, raw from the rolling-mills, built up in platforms with a symmetrical permanence as if to remain so forever; past the livery stable, with a whiff of horses and hay, and on to its end in the public square, into which it emptied all its consequence, however great that may have been.

At this confluence one found the West Plains hotel on one hand; the White Elephant saloon on the other. Across the square the flag waved high and hopefully above the little building of raw pine planks that housed the most important institution in the town, the United States land office, where busy deputies labored early and late over sectional maps, and records of those who came to draw their chance in a land where there was said to be no chance.

## CHAPTER II

### SEEKING A CHANCE

UPON this scene of Damascus, when the sun was red on the rim of the world one April evening, there arrived a stranger whose stride was so swift it seemed he must be hastening on in the fear that whatever slim chance there might be for a man west of Dodge would be used up before he could arrive. He carried an overcoat across his arm, a strapped suitcase with swelled sides in his hand.

There was something far more eager and alert about this stranger than the general drift of men who came to Damascus, although he seemed to be an indoors man who had not straightened his back from wrestling with the soil to come to that country looking for land. But there was something in his eye; he seemed to have it just before him as he poled along toward the hotel. Some of the loafers along the way said he looked like he'd been sent for to put out a fire.

At the corner of the square in front of the White Elephant, the stranger stopped, put his over-packed valise on the ground to rest his arm, and stood looking around the town, and such of the country beyond it as he could see. Not with the undecided, dazed look of a man who had come to the end of the road and did not know which way to turn, but with something of a glad expectancy, a swelling eagerness, as if he had made that

pause only to rest a moment, when he intended to gather himself and break forward faster than before.

He appeared to be smiling, although his face remained set, his lips immobile. It was that light of great eagerness, or great ambition, or great hope, in his eyes that seemed to illumine his face with pleasure. In a little while he took up his heavy luggage and crossed over to the hotel.

Jim Justice, proprietor of the West Plains hotel, was sitting on his porch in a chair bottomed with hickory bark, in the very spot where he would be found, from that time of the year forward, until the wind began to roll tumble-weed in the autumn, and whip clouds of dust against his windows in stifling assault. Jim's chair-posts had notches worn into the side of the house where he leaned; the hinder legs had sockets drilled into the floor of the porch. He was anchored in the serene comfort of proprietorship; he would no more lower his tilted chair to rise and meet a guest than he would stand on his head in the middle of the road.

Justice had been a Missouri bushwhacker in the days of the Southern rebellion. While he had been a rebel in spirit, it was a spirit small in proportion to his body, altogether inadequate to the task of carrying him out into the open to uphold his sentiments. Those days of brush-skulking were far behind Jim now, to be sure, but the habit of them endured as close-fitting upon him as his own skin. While he might not shoot a man from ambush any longer, he would take under-handed advantage of him in every other way.

Justice was a thick, short man, rounding out like a pigeon in front, standing with something of a pigeon

strut about him; a man vain of his parts and his properties, illiterate, bombastic, full of words. He had a walrus-like dignity about his face, more the dignity of impassibility than wisdom, not altogether unpleasant in its well-nourished rotundity. He was a brown and toughened man, having interests on the range which carried him abroad in sun and storm. His heavy gray mustache hung like a curtain over his mouth, his fat cheeks having the appearance of being distended always to puff it out of the way of his words.

The traveller passed Jim without as much as an eye turned in his direction, entered the office, where the winter stove still stood in its desert of tobacco-sprayed sand, its immense pot red and sullen from the ardor of past fires. The stranger paused a moment, questioningly, just within the door, seeing the place empty; advanced toward the counter, where the register lay spread beside a showcase displaying cigars.

Jim Justice retained the dignity of his repose outside the door, proclaiming, by his attitude, to the public of Damascus that he was contemptuous of business, especially business that passed so much importance with such indifference. Meantime, the stranger was looking around on the dingy discomforts of that frontier hotel.

There was a large map of Kansas on the wall, flanked by pictorial calendars of rival St. Louis breweries. These were very large, bright-colored oleographs, displaying ladies in startling undress, as if to suggest to the beholder the thought that beer and indecent exposure were to be associated, from what trade reason not revealed. A brown-painted, blistered wainscot almost the height of a man lent a cloudy gloom to the cheerless place, which the

row of chairs drawn back against the wall increased. It seemed as if these uninviting chairs had discharged the last of their guests from their crude, curved arms; that the business of the house was concluded and sealed. A little stock of tobacco in sacks and caddies filled the shelf behind the counter. There was a smell of lye; the boards of the floor were leached by it, with dark strips, where the joints had gathered greasy sweepings, running like column rules of a newspaper between.

Justice came in presently, placing himself behind the counter with something the manner of a high judge disposing himself to hear the plea of inferior counsel in a despised cause.

Judging him by his baggage, Jim did not rate the guest as first class. This single piece of luggage the traveler had put down in the middle of the floor, where its battered and kicked condition was apparent to the hotel man's critical eye. No man of consequence stuffed all his belongings into one suitcase, Jim Justice believed. He adjusted his small mental machinery to give the fellow a reception fitting the outward appearance of his bag.

The guest appeared to be either indifferent to the presence of the landlord, or too rustic to know what such appearance behind the counter implied. He stood near his bag, hands in his breeches pockets, looking at the pictures on the wall as if absorbed in a comparative study of brewers' art. Justice sized him up as a timber cruiser estimates a tree, scanning him for all that could be cut out of him in a sharp and frowning sweep of his bristle-shaded eyes.

Not much to him; just an ordinary gangle-shanked farmer who had been working in town through the winter,

Jim thought. A tall fellow, broad in the shoulders but rather flat, the kind that cannot be worn out on a job nor left behind in a race; bony and stringy-muscled, a look about his legs that suggested boots. Dark, not the kind of a man that bleaches working in a livery stable or store; big nose, hard, bleak-looking cheek-bones that looked as if they had been hammered and had stood it pretty well, and were up for more hammering if it came along.

That much Jim noted, taking the man side-on. It was at that point in the inventory that the stranger turned. Jim Justice felt as if somebody had opened a door and a cold breeze had struck him in the face. It was the man's eyes that gave him this unpleasant start. They reminded Jim of the eyes of the judge back in Clay county, Missouri, before whom he had been taken to stand trial once for stealing a horse. Jim had thrown the crime upon his partner and come clear, but he always shivered when he remembered the mind-reading eyes of that judge.

The guest pushed back his broad-brimmed black hat, a regular Missouri hat, Jim thought, resenting it somehow, just why he did not know. Only that it seemed lawyer-like, even judicial, creased sharply in that manner, its shadow over the stern features of this unaccountable, and not too welcome guest. Hair as black and straight as an Indian's, thought Jim. Needed the shears laid to it. Kind of a judge's coat, too, dang him. Long, nearly down to his knees. He kept one hand in his breeches pocket, like he was going to pull out a pair of brass knucks and smash a man between the eyes.

"Something you wanted?" Jim inquired.

"Can I get accommodations for the night—maybe sev-



eral days?" the traveler inquired, his voice deep and gentle, but with that judicial note in it exactly as Jim had expected to hear.

Jim was resentful. This thing was working out too unpleasantly all around. He could afford to be ugly and bullying with his guests, having no competition.

"What do you suppose I'm runnin' this ranch for?" he asked, whirling the register around, scowling as if the answer to his question were in his look, and that answer was robbery and murder of impertinent upstarts.

"To make money, I'd say," the stranger answered, unmoved by the landlord's sneering interrogation.

The reply mollified Jim a little. It had been given in such even, unmoved, unconcerned tone; the stranger had taken the pen so casually. He must not be as much of a rustic as at first supposed. Traveled around some; agent for something. Maybe some kind of a detective, dang his nickel-plated eyes!

"I might be runnin' it for profit anywheres else but this dern-blasted country," said Jim. "There ain't no show for no man to make money out of *no* hotel this fur west of Dodge. I'd sell to-morrow if I could run acrost a bigger fool than I am."

The stranger was so little interested in this complaint against the country that he did not glance up from the page where he was entering his name. Out of long practice in upside-down reading, Jim followed the pen as the stranger wrote:

*Andrew Hall, Topeka, Kansas.*

"I used to know a Hall that run a sawmill in Spickardsville, Missouri," said Jim, coming a little nearer now in

his mental attitude, seeing the guest had a common, human name. "I don't suppose you might be related?"

"No telling; it's a big family."

"Blowed up and killed one of the boys about your age. Aimin' to stay here some time, you said?"

"A day or two, maybe longer."

"Not much of a country for canvassin' in," Jim informed him, ready to talk to any length when he could knock the land that gave him his living. "People's comin' here in droves, but they ain't the kind to sell books or enlarged pictures to. Poor as snakes; not enough money, most of 'em, to buy grub to hold 'em over till they make a crop—if they ever do make one in this dad-dasted country, which I doubt like misery."

"I'm not interested in spreading either literature or art," the stranger said, his face as solemn as the back of a fiddle, Jim thought.

"I thought you might be one of them college students startin' out to sell something, they wander out here sometimes, but you're old for a student—thirty-five, I'd judge."

"You're near enough to it," Andrew Hall replied, leaving it worse than if he had said nothing at all, for all the satisfaction Jim found in it.

"Horse liniment don't go out here, nor insurance, nor chromos to hang on the wall, 'less you git 'em for advertisement, free gratis, like I got them of mine. A feller was through here last fall with foldin' lightnin' rods he carried in a valise, but he never sold none of 'em that I ever heard of."

"I don't handle them," said Hall. His face remained as solemn as before, but there was a grin in his eyes, as Jim described the humorous softening. Jim liked him a

little better for that. Curiosity had hold of him now like an itch.

“We ain’t got no use for a dentist this fur west of Dodge,” Jim speculated aloud again. “People’s borned with teeth out here and never loses ’em—they’ve got all the teeth they need. What’s worryin’ most of ’em is gittin’ something to chaw between ’em.”

“I expect that’s the big question everywhere,” Hall agreed.

He went to the window, where he stood looking out, his long legs spread a little in a rather ungainly way, hands in his pockets, the skirts of his black coat held back in that lawyer-like fashion of parting the curtain to display the watch-chain and vest.

“If you’re lookin’ for a business openin’ this hotel’s for sale,” Jim suggested.

“Not at all,” Hall replied indifferently. “I’m not a business man, Mr. ——?”

“Jestice,” prompted Jim.

“Mr. Justice. Thank you; hope to know you better.”

“Lookin’ at you,” Jim replied, in his most elegant bar-room style. “Just out here to take your pleasure and look around, heh?”

“I expect to settle here, Mr. Justice, for a while, at least. I’m an Esculapian.”

“A which?”

“Esculapian; a plain Esculapian.”

“Might as well be a ruffled one for all the difference it’d make to me,” Jim declared, highly resentful, feeling that the guest was poking covert fun at him, which was not altogether wrong.

"In other words, I'm a physician. I'm the railroad doctor."

Hall had turned to look at Justice as he revealed himself in language plain to the country west of Dodge. He was grinning, humorously and expansively, as if it might be some kind of a lark, out of which he expected to get a lot of fun.

"The hell you say!" Jim exploded in astonishment, being too shallow to receive the shock of a surprise without considerable splash.

"That's about it."

"Company doctor, heh? Old Doc Ross has been 'tendin' to the company cases here for two or three years. Does he know he's fired, do you reckon?"

"I don't know about that, but I suppose it's likely. I never heard of the gentleman."

"Bumped old Doc Ross out of his job, heh? Never heard of Old Doc Ross?"

"I never did. Is he especially famous in this part of the country?"

"He used to be a fit doctor, travelin' around with a wagon. Had a sign painted on the side of it: 'Old Doc Ross, He Cures Fits.' I remember the day he drove up here in that wagon. I don't reckon we had more than forty people in this town then."

"He must have found it fit headquarters to settle down here," Hall said, holding no high opinion of Old Doc Ross from this public fame.

"Well, if all of us didn't have fits he made us think we had," Jim said, laughing over the recollection, reddening in the heat of his mirth like a turkey gobbler. "Old Doc Ross can convince any man, woman or child they've either

got fits, have had 'em or will have 'em before long. He says fits is at the bottom of all human cussedness and diseases, but when I figger back I can't recall of anybody ever throwin' a fit here in Damascus, and I've been here since it started."

"How much a bottle was it?"

"Five dollars," Jim replied, impressively. "I guess the price had a good deal to do with folkses' confidence in it. He's give up the fit business now, settled down to regular practice."

"He's probably an infernal old quack, and no doctor at all."

"I'd go light on spittin' out things like that here in Damascus if I intended to stay over night," Jim cautioned. "No, you're off there. He's a good doctor, good as they make 'em, if you can ketch him sober. He's been on a tear now four or five days. Wouldn't wonder if it was the news of gittin' fired out of that railroad job started him off."

"He may be consoling himself for the loss of the job," Hall said indifferently, plainly indicating that Old Doc Ross was a creature beneath his consideration.

"He used to practice back in Dodge till it cooled down too much for him," Justice explained. "They say he put a good many men out of business with his gun, but I don't know, personal. All I know is he's put hot embers under the feet of a couple of doctors and one dentist that tried to settle here."

"He seems to be a picturesque old villain," Hall commented, entirely undisturbed by this report.

Hall had faced to the window again, where he stood lifting himself to his toes with slow, easy movements ex-

pressive of great strength and elasticity of limb. It exasperated Justice to behold him so unmoved by this account of Old Doc Ross' savage disposition in the face of rivalry.

"I wouldn't like to stand in the boots of the man that'd come to root Old Doc Ross out of that good-payin' job," Justice said, adding seriousness to the declaration by expelling his breath with hissing sound through his drooping mustache.

"I guess nobody's going to be murdered over it," Dr. Hall replied.

"I wouldn't be too dam' sure, mister. Married man?"

"Not yet."

"Lucky for your wife you ain't. It ain't no place to bring a woman to, starvation country like this west of Dodge."

"It looks pretty good to me—pretty good," said Dr. Hall, in that provocative, mild, serenely satisfied way of his. Jim thought he said it like the words of a taunt repeated by a vexatious boy.

"Maybe it won't look so dam' pleasant to you after you've met Old Doc Ross!" Justice nagged.

Dr. Hall swung around from the window, confronting Justice again in that judicial, breath-cutting, abrupt fashion of his, hands in his pockets, the skirts of his long coat held back.

"Doctor Ross is free to continue his business of curing the men, women and children of Damascus of fits in his notable and established style, Mr. Justice. I'm not here to take a single patient out of his hands. I'm the railroad doctor; I'm hired and paid by the year for my

services. I haven't the slightest intention of setting up opposition to your notorious Doctor Ross."

"That may help some," Jim admitted, but with a reservation of doubt.

"I want to buy a horse—"

"What do you want a horse for if you ain't goin' to practice around?"

"Because I take my exercise that way. Do you know of anybody that's got a good gelding for sale?"

"Yes, you can buy a crackin' good mare from Ed Kraus, the liveryman. Mares stand this country better than geldings. The hot wind don't seem to pull 'em down so hard."

"I prefer a gelding," said the doctor, in his sure and stubborn way.

He spoke like a man who was certain within himself that he was right on all questions, and was not to be turned aside for the consideration of anybody's opinion, nor taken in on anybody's scheme. That was the way Justice sized him up, forming a definite hope at the same time of seeing him brought low, and made a by-word in the scoffing mouths of Damascus.

"I reckon you can find one," Jim returned, coldly, to indicate that his interest in the matter had faded out with the possibility of a commission from Ed Kraus.

"No doubt," Hall agreed, dismissing it lightly, as if it were of no consequence at all.

Justice could have growled. Resentment filled him; indignation gorged his plump face with hot blood. This fellow was altogether too sure of himself to get along in Damascus. They didn't want educated fools of this kind

in the country west of Dodge. They were the kind that built high schools for the taxpayers to pay for, and agitated around and closed up the saloons. They'd have to be frostbitten in the bud, and that minute Jim had no frost on his breath. Fire, rather, which gathered in his bristled old badger eyes.

"Do you want supper?" he asked, implying that it would be an unwelcome desire, the desire of one aspiring to a place above him and a privilege belonging to his betters.

"Why not?" Hall returned, in that self-sure, serenely adjusted way of his. He still had his hands in his trousers pockets, the long coat divided back from his lean body, pencils showing in his vest pocket, the braid of his watch, with a gold swivel, looped across his breast.

"A lot of fellers stay at hotels to make a front and take their meals out in cheap joints," Jim replied. His words were acrimonious as alum, insulting without disguise. The guest turned to the window again, feet wide apart to adjust his stature to a pane from which the winter's grime had been rubbed.

"Not a bad scheme," he said, giving it a genial endorsement, as if to say it had not come into his mind to do it, but that he would not be above trying it on if he liked, with no consideration for the profit or opinions of any hotel keeper whatever.

"I'll let any man that tries it on me know his room's better than his company," Jim declared. "I've done it before to-day."

"I think you're wrong there, entirely wrong."

Hall stood lifting himself to his toes, settling back to his heels; lifting, settling. It was a kind of preoccupied



gymnastics, a habit of his argumentative mood, perhaps, which was a burning irritant to Jim Justice's already inflamed humor.

"If a man ain't got the money to set in at my table I don't want him sleepin' in my sheets," Jim blustered, intent on coming to a rupture with this unwelcome guest at any odds, it appeared. "Let any man I boot out of this hotel go and try to git a bed anywhere else in town, and see where he lands!"

Whether Andrew Hall appreciated the tragedy of such a situation, Justice was not to know at that time. Before the guest could have uttered any comment, if he had intended to do so, a sudden burst of shooting, attended by yells and a rush of galloping horses in the street directly in front of the hotel, broke the sunset peace of the town.

This noisy demonstration sweeping past his door seemed to strike Jim Justice with a tremendous fear. He turned from peering through the dusty window at the end of his counter, the red embers of anger dying in his fat cheeks as if doused by a sudden rain. He grabbed a canvas bag that lay with its mouth dangling from a little compartment of his open safe, his eyes bulging, his erect gray hair charged with the prickling shock of his fright.

"Git in there!" he directed, waving toward the open door that revealed the dining-room and interior of the house. "It's that Simrall gang!"

As he delivered this warning Justice stooped behind the counter and disappeared. Hall supposed he was reaching for his gun. He waited for Justice to reappear armed to defend his property and life against a raid of outlaws, greatly astonished and mystified when he did not come up

again from his dive. Hall concluded that the hotel keeper was crouching behind a bullet-proof barrier, or that he had gone to the cellar by a secret opening prepared for such emergencies. The noise was drawing off toward the farther side of the square. Curious to learn what it was about, Hall went to the street.

## CHAPTER III

### DAMASCUS IS AMUSED

**THERE** was a line of hitching-racks around the dusty plot in which the court house stood, like a fence dividing that seat of dignity from the iniquitous and worldly institutions which hemmed it on every side. There were wide gaps in this line of racks, through which footfarers passed in and out of the court house doors, or on short cuts on other business through the square. Between hitching-racks and business houses a broad roadway stretched, dusty and muddy by turns, according to the caprice of nature.

At this hour of the April day when Andrew Hall went to the door of the West Plains hotel to see what the shooting and yelling was about, the roadway was gray with a thin coating of dust that had been mud but a little while before. It was a hard road, resounding almost like a pavement under the feet of the three horses which their riders were holding in what seemed to be a neck-and-neck race around the deserted square.

These riders were doing all the yelling and most of the shooting, as they appeared to have chosen a bad hour for putting on a demonstration in the square of Damascus. Whatever the cause of their animosity, Hall concluded it must lie against the town, and not individuals, as they were shooting impartially at everybody's business front as they passed. Some of their shots crashed windows, the

tinkle of the falling glass sounding plainly in the turmoil of their assault; more of them seemed to find no mark at all, conspicuous as the targets stood.

Now and then somebody fired from a window or door; now and then a man appeared suddenly on the sidewalk, to wheel and run as if to arm, all in the manner of people who had been taken by disadvantageous surprise. The three riders galloped around the square in a headlong haste that seemed as if they must have accepted somebody's dare to do the trick, and must get it over with as quickly as possible. Before the citizens could assemble to check their defiant insult, they had rounded the last corner and were galloping again toward the hotel, coming back into the road by which they had entered.

At this moment Hall saw an elderly man come out of the court house door, and stand at the top of the short flight of broad wooden steps, a questioning alertness about him, as if he had been disturbed at some late official task by the unfriendly noise. He leaned forward a little, in attitude of cautious defense, the skirt of his long frock coat pushed back as if his hand rested on a weapon.

Hall could see him plainly, scarcely fifty yards' space lying between them, even to the sharp, concentrated expectancy of his face. A remarkable figure, tall and bony, his long black coat striking to his knees, his long white hair sweeping down to his shoulders in ringlets, a little dab of white beard on his lip, a long, pointed mustache extending beyond the outline of his dark, thin face.

This extraordinary old gentleman stood on the little landing before the broad door of the court house, which stood open behind him, bending in that watchful attitude

of defense, hand on the weapon under his coat. The three riders broke around the corner of the court house, two of them pulling up their horses to reload their guns for a parting salute to Jim Justice's windows as they rode out of town.

The one in the lead gave a yelp like a hound picking up a hot trail when he saw the venerable figure before the court house door. He waved his companions forward, reined his horse up sharply, fired. The old gentleman had his gun out, giving the fellow on the horse as good as he sent, with no damage on either side that Hall could see. The other two invaders came up, their horses raising so much dust that the immediate proceedings were obscured to Hall, whose station before the hotel gave him an oblique view of the court house steps.

At the next clear sight Hall caught of him, the defender of the town's honor was down, lying as though he had slipped at the top step and slidden. His body was presented full length to the three shooters, his feet on the ground, his white hair on the topmost step. He was making a vain effort to prop himself to his elbow and lift his pistol, the three scoundrels cracking away at him in what seemed to Hall a most unsportsman-like spirit, to allow for even a just provocation.

Without a thought of his own danger in meddling in a quarrel that might have as much merit on one side as the other, Hall ran into the road on the impulse of his resentful indignation. He only considered that this was an old man, whose white hair had been brought down to desecration by a trio of questionable courage. He shouted to the old man's assailants to stop shooting as he ran diagonally across, heading for the court house steps.

When the three invaders saw that the man dashing into the square was unarmed, they held up their shooting, but only long enough to make sure his errand was one of mercy to the object of their assault. Hall was still several rods distant from the wounded man when they began shooting again, the impingement of their bullets against the brick walls and wooden steps as plain to him as rain-drops in a field of corn.

Hall ran crouching, reaching the foot of the steps untouched. The old man appeared to have been struck again. He had collapsed from his outstretched rigidity in a broken crumple of dusty black coat and pure white hair, down to the bottom of the steps. His body was propped in a half-sitting posture by his right elbow in the angle of the bottom tread; his legs were doubled under him, his head was bent, the white veil of his long hair falling over his face. From all appearances he was dead, pistol still gripped in his hand.

As Hall bent over the old man he felt a bullet strike his hat; saw it fall brim upward, and flip over as if somebody had jerked it with a string when another bullet clipped it, not a yard from where he stood. He lifted his hand to show his pacific intention and unarmed state, turning his face toward the shooters, rising a little out of his stooping position over the fallen man. A bullet slapped the skirt of his long coat as if an insolent finger had flicked it in a challenge to fight.

“Cut that out!” Hall yelled, straightening up, shaking his fist in ridiculous menace, mad to the backbone, careless, if not entirely thoughtless, of his danger.

One man was doing the shooting in Hall's direction at that moment, the other two having advanced to the

middle of the road in front of the saloon, where some not overly valiant spirit had been throwing a shot now and then at them over the swinging door. Now men with guns were coming down the street, pitching a running shot or two ahead as they came. It was time to leave that exhilarating diversion of shooting up a town. The two raiders out in the road yelled to their companion and rode off, slamming a few shots into Jim Justice's hotel as they passed.

The fellow who had been cracking away at Hall was either a very vindictive man, or felt that his reputation was likely to suffer from all that shooting with so little damage. He ignored the warning shouts of his companions and, persistent scoundrel that he was, charged at Hall, his gun lifted to throw in an effectual parting shot.

The sight of the fellow coming clattering toward him down the gravel walk leading to the court house door, pistol lifted in that expressive gesture of determination, raised Hall's fighting temperature till it foamed over the sides of the pot. He was so mad that odds and perils were obliterated from consideration as he looked around for something loose to grab.

There was nothing but the bricks lining the gravel walk, set obliquely to present a serrated border, and they were bedded in cement. And straight down the middle of the walk this ruffian was coming to put a finish to that incidental of his busy day. There was no time to kick a brick loose, no time to cast around. In a panic of desperate chagrin over finding himself unprovided to meet this pressing exigency, Hall backed up against the court house steps. He saw the big pistol still gripped by the

old man who had fallen, its long barrel pointing down pathetically in his nerveless grasp, and thought of it for the first time as a ponderable article applicable to the needs of that perilous moment.

Hall grabbed the gun, whirling to meet the raider, a feeling of prickling exultation, of hair-lifting defiance, sweeping him refreshingly. The fellow's horse squatted and skated over the bricks as he pulled it up to veer off and bring his gun arm to the clear. It was a moment of confusion in which the rider was disconcerted in his scheme, and that was the moment when Andrew Hall, swinging the heavy pistol by the long barrel, just as he had snatched it from its owner's hand, let it drive at his assailant's head.

There was no aim about it; just the rough calculation one makes in throwing a rock, but not more than four yards divided the men, and Hall's calculation was good. The bandit, or whatever he was, heeled backward over his cante, where he swayed a breath, and slumped off to the ground. His horse gathered its legs and galloped away, reins flying, stirrups thumping its sides.

Hall piled himself on the prostrate ruffian, the feeling of outrage he had suffered, a neutral and peaceably disposed man, growing in his heated senses every moment. He had the scoundrel by the neck, bony knees pinning his arms to the ground, when several men came running up eager to relieve him of the responsibility for any further punishment.

It was Bud Sandiver, Hall heard somebody say, an awesome respect in his voice. There was blood on his forehead, whoever he was, where Hall's sinewy arm had slammed that desecrated old gentleman's pistol. The



fellow was coming out of it. They upended him, where he scowled bloodily at his captors, and tied his hands with the blue silk handkerchief he wore about his neck. Hall turned away from him at that point, his interest in him being concluded. He found the patriarch huddled at the bottom of the steps still breathing, although he had got a bullet through the lung.

Jim Justice had come out of his retreat, money untouched, hearty life illuminating his face again. He held the door open for them to carry the wounded defender of the town under the shelter of his questionably hospitable roof. Somebody told Hall the wounded man was Major Bill Cottrell, county recorder and treasurer. They stretched the old fellow on a bed, and some one went off on the jump to summon Old Doc Ross.

Hall returned to the hotel office, thought of supper dispersed by his adventure among the bullets in the square. Several men were there, talking with considerable excitement; others were collected on the hotel porch, where Jim Justice's chair stood like an abdicated throne. Hall went outside, wondering what had been the motive in the dash of the three shooters, and the reason for their animosity toward Major Bill Cottrell. He noted that the men in the office stopped talking when he appeared, some of them grinning in an unmistakably friendly way, but exchanging glances and grins between themselves which had another meaning, unaccountable to him.

While standing outside the door, noting the sudden animation of the town which this foray had awakened, Hall was approached by a man who offered his hand with a familiar grin, introducing himself as Burnett. He was a man of medium height, about Hall's age, that is to say

somewhat past thirty, stocky in appearance on account of his thick shoulders and slightly bowed legs. From the familiar deference shown him, Hall concluded that he was of some importance in the town.

Burnett was a fair man, tender-skinned as a faro dealer, with a little brown mustache and a continual smirk, which might have been a reflection of his satisfaction with himself and life as he found it, or a sneer at foolish persons who went up against his game, whatever that game might be. That he was a gamester of some kind Hall was certain at the first glance, for he carried about him that outward swagger of a man best described as a four-flusher. He was dressed flashily in a suit of small white and black checks, current in frontier places of that time among gamblers and come-on men. There was a large clear stone in his necktie that had all the appearance of a costly diamond; there were others of the same brilliance in rings which he wore on the third finger of each hand.

"You can sling a gun, all right, Hall, even if you don't do it the way it's generally done around here," Burnett said, his tone appreciative, his smirk broadening into quite a friendly and pleasing smile.

"I hardly know one end of a gun from the other," Hall confessed, feeling that his part in the affair had failed of the heroic in some way, in the eyes of Damascus, and Burnett in particular.

"You seemed to get hold of the wrong end of that one, all right," Burnett said.

A chuckle went around those on the porch, extending to others who stood inside the door.

"I'd like to know how old Bud Sandiver felt when he caught that gun between the eyes!" somebody speculated.

"It was the first time Bud ever had a gun throwned in his face that way," another declared with solemn emphasis, to the great entertainment of all.

Burnett stood by grinning. He reached into his trousers pocket with one chubby white hand, drew out something which he began pouring from palm to palm, abstractedly as a dealer shuffling chips at a gaming table between plays. What he poured from palm to palm in that detached way appeared to be small bits of glass, or even counterparts of the gems in his necktie and rings, if one could conceive such a possibility of careless wealth in a town so barren as Damascus.

Whatever it was, Burnett stood there pouring from hand to hand without even following the movement with a glance. He smiled as he shifted the bright fragments, winking at Hall as if to say they were two who understood each other, let the clowns have their laugh as they would.

"What was it all about?" Hall inquired.

"Oh, some of them Simrall fellers out tryin' to throw a little scare," Burnett replied, more annoyed than concerned over such a trivial business. "I guess they'll be holdin' you for the inquest."

"Inquest?" Hall repeated curiously, not getting the drift of it.

"Over Bud. If you're in a hurry—"

"Did somebody kill him?"

"Darn fool made a break to get away," Burnett replied, his annoyance growing into disgust.

"Oh," said Hall, fully enlightened.

He felt that his own poise and dignity had been unduly disturbed in the turmoil of that incident, as well as

Burnett's. More than that, it had thrown him uncomfortably before the public eye. Damascus was amused, rather than thrilled, by his effective interference in behalf of Major Bill Cottrell. In taking that gun by the handiest end that presented in that moment of necessity, he had broken the code of gentlemanly encounter.

It was a comical procedure, it seemed, to smash a man between the eyes with a gun that was still in service. The regular, the neat and gentlemanly, thing to do was shoot in such a pinch. Knocking Bud Sandiver out with a loaded gun took all the tragedy, all the heroism, all the thrill out of the incident for Damascus. It was nothing but a joke.

Andrew Hall turned himself about without another word, went into the turnip-flavored dining-room and arranged himself at a table for the ministrations of the snuffling, frizzled, young woman who bore on and off, leaving Damascus to get as much fun out of the case as it might.

There was no other guest in the dining-room, although there were several unfinished suppers spread around, tablecloths pulled awry on some of the tables from which the feeders had jumped to rush away and get the news. The waiting lady appeared to be greatly agitated, bringing the guest his meal a dish at a time, with starts and shyings which slopped the soup over and emptied half the cup of melancholy coffee into the saucer. She gasped and exclaimed, keeping a wild eye on the door.

It was a miserable meal; water-logged potatoes in the skins, bread that would have sunk a seine, butter from the odorous packing-houses in Kansas City, ingenuously

termed bull butter in frontier places such as Damascus, roast beef that was gray leather in a thin, brown slop. The pie was a pale-crust, watery wedge of something which curiosity alone could have tempted one to explore. Justice's bluster over people who slept in hotels and took their meals elsewhere was explained. It was about the only inducement he advanced that might bluff a timid man into eating at his board.

Justice came into the dining-room with a rush and a bang, shutting the door behind him as a man does when he reaches shelter out of a dust-driving wind. He hurried to Hall's table, such a solemn look in his face that it was almost a reproach.

"If you're a doctor, come out here and look after this man," Justice requested in a severe, commandeering way.

"What man?" Hall inquired. He looked up from a calculative study of the dough-covered pie, fork in hand, napkin across his thigh.

"Bill Cottrell, damn it! Who else do you suppose?"

"Oh, Bill Cottrell. Where is the eminent Doctor Ross?"

"Drunk, stinkin' blind drunk, laid out like a dead man over in the saloon. They've tried everything that's ever fetched him around: ducked him with ice water, drenched him with coffee in a beer bottle like you give medicine to a sick horse, stood him up and walked him, rolled him over a beer kaig, but they can't bring him to. If you're a doctor you'll have to come on and take the case."

Hall prodded the pie introspectively, not greatly moved by the town's gallant efforts to bring old Doc Ross out of his alcoholic trance.

“There must be another doctor around here somewhere,” he said. “Send for him. I’m the railroad doctor; I didn’t come here to practice in town.”

“Ain’t no other town in fifty-three mile of here but Simrall, and Doc Ross chased the feller away from there that tried to settle. He was a little homeopathical feller with whiskers in front of his years.”

“If you’ll stand for that kind of a doctor, then you ought to die. Is that old man still alive?”

“Yes, but he’s bleedin’ like a stuck hog. That bed of mine’ll be ruined! I tell you, you’ve got to come on out there, Doc, and do something to stop that blood.”

“Oh, well, if it’s to save your bed, Mr. Justice, that’s another thing.”

## CHAPTER IV

### THE COUNTY SEAT WAR

JUSTICE appeared to have been put in a high good humor by the shooting, perhaps because it moved recollections of his bushwacking days, when he rode on forays with the villainous Quantrell, scourge of the Kansas border. He assigned Dr. Hall a room adjoining the one in which Major Bill Cottrell lay, bringing up fresh coffee made from his private stock by his own notable hand. This refreshing drink he served the truly grateful physician on a precarious little table that he carried in for the purpose.

Dr. Hall had not left the wounded man's side for more than two hours. After doing all that surgical skill could accomplish to check the flow of blood that was doing so much damage to the hotel keeper's mattress and the body of Major Bill Cottrell at one time, Dr. Hall posted himself at the side of the bed, where he sat watching every breath of the perilously wounded, unconscious man. Now, as he sat drinking coffee in his own room, Dr. Hall could see the figure of Major Bill Cottrell through the connecting door, stretched as if ready for the grave.

"He's about gone, ain't he, Doc?" Justice inquired, tiptoeing away from the door.

"No, I wouldn't say he's about gone. He's near the edge, but there's life enough in him to hold him from going over for a while."

"Went slap through him, you said?"

Dr. Hall nodded, the cup near his lips.

"They used to say when I was in—in the—army, it was better to be shot clear through the lights that way. It makes a dreen, they say, when the bullet goes clean through."

Dr. Hall nodded again.

"It's an advantage, if there is any advantage in being shot."

"The other bullet grazed his head, furrered him, you said, didn't you, Doc?" Dr. Hall nodded gravely. Where his patient was involved, he was as tight as a whisky-barrel, Jim thought.

Justice interpreted this reticence to gossip about the case in his own way as a display of egotism and airs. He might be all right for railroaders, Jim thought, but for all-around household doctoring, give him Old Doc Ross.

"I've seen 'em lay dazed that way when I was in the—war," Jim said. "Sometimes it made 'em foolish, never did outgrow it. You don't reckon that'll happen to Major Bill if he ever gits well?"

"Not at all."

"Can't tell whuther he'll pull through or not for four or five days, I guess, can you, Doc? Have to wait to see if fever and mortification sets in. It used to nearly always take 'em when they was shot that way in the army."

"I think he'll live," Dr. Hall said quietly.

"He's the daddy of this town," Jim explained. "The main prop'd be gone out from under it if Major Bill was to die. Them Simrall fellers have been after him, they swore they'd git him, ever since the election went agin 'em and they lost the county seat. They said he put forty-two bogus ballots in the box and got 'em counted."



"Is it one of these county seat squabbles you've got on hand here?"

"It in't no squabble, Doc; it's a war."

"Is he alone? Hasn't he got any relatives?"

"Who? Major Bill? Yes, he's got relations, if you can call a wife a relation. Well, he's got a daughter, such as she is, and a son captain in the army. The old lady and 'Lisabeth they're down in Leavenworth now visitin' Captain Cottrell. I ain't never seen him, but I ain't got any use for them army men, specially them—"

"Has anybody notified them?"

"Yes, Judge Waters sent a telegram right off."

"They ought to be here to-morrow evening, then," Dr. Hall sighed, as if relieved of something that had worried him. "So they were after Major Bill, were they?"

"More than the rest of the town put together."

"Is he a real major, or a cattleman major?"

"He's a genu-wine brevet major, not one of them West Point manufactured ones. He got his title on the fightin' field time of the war. Wasn't on my side, but he's a ranks-up soldier, and a good one, I'm here to tell you."

"I'd like to know something about him, and this trouble you've got on your hands over the county seat," Dr. Hall proposed. He shifted to the edge of the bed, vacating the chair to his host.

"It won't hurt him, I guess, me buzzin' around in here? No, I didn't reckon it would. So you never heard of the war goin' on here between Simrall and Damascus over the county seat?"

"Not that I recall. There's been a good deal in the papers about county seat wars out in this part of the state the past four or five years."

“Yes, there’s been a host of trouble over ’em. Major Bill Cottrell he’s the daddy of this town, as I told you, and the daddy of this county, when it comes down to cases. He’s been here patience knows how long, used to fight Indians all over here when they was buildin’ the first railroad through Kansas. Him and Custer; he fought with Custer down in the Nation, cleanin’ up the Pawnees. They say he was all shot to pieces in them Indian campaigns. You must ’a’ run acrost some of them old scars, I guess?”

Dr. Hall nodded assent, his mouth buckled on further particulars of the major’s scars.

“He settled down here after he quit the army, years before this county ever was organized, picked on it so he’d be off of the main road of people comin’ and goin’ and passin’ through. Built him a big sod house, biggest ever put up here, six or seven rooms in it, they tell me—I never was in it. It was seventy miles to a railroad in them days, but that wasn’t any more than a nice little lope to Major Bill. He shipped his pieanno and furniture out from Leavenworth, and settled down here with his wife and boy. That girl ’Lisabeth she was born afterwards, right here in the sod house they’re livin’ in to-day. She’s a wild heifer, wild as hell.”

“She must be an old-timer,” Hall said, wondering what she could be like to fill Jim’s notion of wildness in that extreme.

“Not more than twenty to twenty-five, I guess.”

“Good looker?”

“Not accordin’ to my tastes she ain’t,” Jim declared with emphasis. “Kind of a ginger-topped gal, straddlin’ around on horseback all the time. She can jerk out a gun

and shoot quicker and better than any man on this range, knock a *see-gar* out of a man's mouth and never touch his mustache. Hell! She's done it, right here in this man's town!"

"Is *that* so?" Dr. Hall straightened up with a keen interest in this biography.

"Yes," Jim sighed, shaking his head over 'Lisabeth and her wild ways, "them old folks they've tried hard to make a lady of that girl, sendin' her down to Leavenworth to be educated and frilled up, but they've failed. The old man he's been hopin' to see her married off to some army officer, but she don't seem to go. Maybe they don't want a woman that handy with a gun around 'em. I know I wouldn't."

"It might make a difference to some people," Dr. Hall admitted, seeming to study over it as if it deserved the deepest consideration.

"You damn right it would! I don't want no *see-gar* shot out of my mouth just because a woman can't have something she wants."

"I should think not," Dr. Hall agreed. "The major went into the cattle business in those early days out here, I suppose?"

"Yes; he done well sellin' to the army. When they put this railroad through he organized the county, copied names off a hotel register down in Lawrence, I've heard, and put 'em on his petition, for this county didn't have sixty, much less six hundred inhabitants the law requires to organize a county, in them times. I don't care how he done it, he put it through. They put out bonds for a court house here in Damascus, and him and Judge Waters laid out this townsite on land the major owned.

They made fifty thousand apiece off of them lots, if they made a dollar. Boomed 'em clear down to Kansas City, sold lots by mail to people that never saw Damascus and never will."

"That was all square, wasn't it? just so they got the lots."

"Square enough, I reckon. If a man's fool enough to pay two hundred dollars for a lot away out here west of Dodge he ought to be skinned, I guess. Specalated on 'em, them buyers; sold 'em for less 'n half they paid, most of 'em. Well, some 's holdin' 'em yit, payin' taxes, hopin' for a railroad boom."

"Will it come?"

"Not this fur west of Dodge. If I could sell this dump out for thirty-five hundred you'd see me streakin' for the east. I'd go back to Dodge and open me a grocery."

"But how did this county seat fuss begin?"

"I started to tell you, mister," Jim replied, somewhat huffed over the implication that he did not know how to relate the history of Damascus, and he a citizen of it since the tumble-weeds were raked up and burned off the square to make ready for the court house foundation.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Justice. Please go ahead."

"A gang of specalators headed by a gambler by the name of Ora Simrall come out here from Dodge when they shut everything down there about four years ago and started 'em up a town about eight miles west of here. The railroad gradin' contractors had a big camp out there, the company had two or three boardin' trains full of jerries, four or five hundred men, all counted, I guess, in that camp in them days. It was purty good pickin' for Simrall when he opened a saloon and gamblin' joint.

He's runnin' a saloon over there now, but his game's shut up, I hear.

"Simrall he got the notion he'd have a private town of his own over there. He put in a big store and a hotel, got the company to build a depot and name the place after him, got a post office, and begun to spread it around he's goin' to build a big packin' house and git the railroad to put up shops, providin' the voters they'll vote to move the county seat over there. Simrall's collected a gang of men that was the very drugs of Dodge around him over there. They got up a petition two years ago to vote on movin' the county seat, and we voted on it. We beat 'em. They took it to court on the grounds we voted railroaders that didn't have no vote, but we beat 'em on that. The court down at Topeka handed down its decision in the case two or three weeks ago.

"Simrall got busy right away to have the question voted on agin at a special election. It's comin' off in June, goin' to cost us taxpayers a lot of money for no use on earth.

"Ever since Simrall and his gang has been tryin' to take the county seat away from us there's been hard feelin's between the two towns. There's been a good deal of fist-fightin' and shootin', two or three men's been shot up purty bad, but nobody ain't been killed till you laid Bud Sandiver out cold to-day."

"Why, man, I didn't kill him!" Hall protested, feeling a sweep of indefinable apprehension that seemed to lift his hair.

"It's all the same; you've got the credit for it," Jim assured him, comfortably, as if glad to be able to give praise and reward where they belonged.

"But I don't want the credit for it, Mr. Justice! Damn it all, man, I tell you I don't *want* the credit for it!"

Hall was sweating. In his excited denial of this honor, as Justice seemed to hold it, the railroad doctor got up, pushed the little table out of the way as if clearing a space to enforce his vehement word by physical demonstration.

"Well, I wouldn't git excited over it, as the Dutchman said when his wife swallowed the dollar. I don't know, of my own knowledge and belief, who laid Bud out. I just heard the boys sayin' it was you."

"Burnett knows better—Burnett can tell you I didn't even know the man had been killed till he told me. He said Sandiver made a break to get away."

"It don't make no difference who done it, Bud's dead. He was a bad egg, it's a darn good thing for this county he's out of the way. But it's goin' to aggervate this trouble, it's goin' to bring them Simrall fellers over here like a swarm of hornets. Every man in this town'll have to hang a gun on him now, and be ready to hop up and fight."

"Did you want the scoundrel to kill that old man and get away?" Hall demanded hotly, challenging Jim's manner, which was half complaining, half doleful, as of a man who had been wronged and yet was too generous to come out with open censure.

"No, you done the right thing; you done the thing any man with a grain of sand'd 'a' done," Jim hastened to make it right. "I was aimin' to tell you how it's goin' to be from now on till we settle this question for good at the polls next June. It's goin' to be shootin' and killin' right and left, or I miss my guess, and I tell you right

now, son, I'm gittin' too old and fat to sling a gun around like I used to thirty years ago."

Hall resumed his seat on the bed, that dragging apprehension sagging his spirits down, although he had no regret for his interference which, he knew for a solemn truth, had saved Major Bill Cottrell's life. He was not sorry that Bud Sandiver was dead, but he was considerably disturbed to have it going around that the credit belonged to him.

"Sandiver seems to have been pretty well known here," he said. "Was he a notably tough person, or what?"

"There was a pair of 'em, Gus and Bud," Jim explained. "Gus wasn't along this evenin', but I guess you'll—I guess this town's due to hear from him before long. Back in Dodge when I was there a few years ago, them Sandiver boys had the reputation of bein' horse-thieves. I don't know whuther they reformed when they hitched up with Simrall or not, but I don't guess it's likely.

"Gus and Bud was Simrall's special team. Their job's been ridin' around among the settlers and cowboys, throwin' a scare into them to keep 'em away from votin' when this county seat question comes up. They've been goin' around makin' all kinds of threats what they'll do to anybody pollin' a vote agin Simrall, and I guess it's been hurtin' our chances considerable. Them boys had a bad name around Dodge. It was said they held up a train, and robbed settlers on the road. They killed three or four men between 'em, they tell me."

"Oh, well, if that's the kind of a man he was," said Hall, greatly relieved to learn that his contributory efforts toward Bud Sandiver's end had not been applied against

one who had a single virtue or redeeming grace to rise and plead for him.

"Nothing to lay heavy on a man's conscience," said Jim, shrewder of insight than Hall had thought him. "They're goin' to have an inquest over him in the mornin', Judge Hawthorn was tellin' me. He asked me to tell you to consider yourself under subpoena, and not leave town. I told him you was here to settle; no danger of you leavin'."

"Certainly not," said Hall, coming a little farther from under the cloud that had gathered over him in chilling depression. Of course, Burnett and the others knew very well the crack he had given Sandiver with Major Cottrell's gun hadn't killed him. They had seen the fellow get up—they had helped him up—and tied his hands with his own handkerchief. There was nothing in Justice's relation of rumors and beliefs to throw a man into a cold sweat. It would all come clear at the inquest, when credit for the coup de grâce would be placed where it belonged.

"What is Burnett's business?" Hall inquired, feeling very much eased by this process of reasoning.

"Charley Burnett he's a stockman, the biggest stockman in this part of the country. He's grazin' five different herds of cattle between here and the Colorado line, worth a couple of million, they say."

"Is it possible? He doesn't look like a cattleman, he hasn't got any of the familiar marks."

"No, Charley, he's a gentleman cattleman, I guess you might say. He's got his office over the bank, with his shorthand-typewritin' girl and bookkeeper the same as any business man. Charley didn't grow up on



the range, like most cowmen you meet. He made his start as a telegraph operator for the railroad, they tell me. He had a gamblin' spirit in him that made him take long chances and risks where an old-time range man wouldn't 'a' risked a dollar, and he won out, every throw. Don't understand me to say Charley's a gambler in any other way. He ain't. He never touches a card. All the plays he makes are in cattle. He plays them cattle of his agin them Kansas City bankers like a man plays chess. I don't know, but I kind of look for Charley to hit the sky one of these days."

"He must be a remarkable sort of man," Hall mused, thinking he had not been so very far off in his estimate of Burnett, after all. He had taken him for a gambler, but not a gambler in such ponderous assets as herds of cattle.

"Charley's a funny feller in some ways," Jim said. He laughed, or rather made certain short and rapid expulsions of breath through his hair-nested nose, smothered, but unmistakable, sound of mirth.

"He seems to have at least one queer habit, if it is a habit," Hall admitted. "I mean of carrying a handful of broken glass around in his pocket, and pouring it from hand to hand while he talks."

"Glass!" Jim discounted the word, almost in derision. "Glass! Them's diamonds."

"No-o-o! Diamonds? Why, what on earth—"

"Diamonds, genu-wine, eighteen carat diamonds," Jim declared, conclusively. "Charley's been carryin' a tablespoonful of diamond rocks around in his pocket for two or three years—ever since he hit it big with cattle. He's got a chamois-skin pocket in every pair of his pants.

Carries them diamonds around like most men carry a plug of t'backer."

"They must be imitation diamonds. No man of sense would risk that much around loose in his pocket."

"Every one of 'em's a diamond," Jim defended, with a triumphant pride. "Charley'll hand 'em over to anybody that wants to test 'em out. There was a Jew drummer here not long ago told me Charley must have ten thousand dollars' worth of diamonds in his pocket, at the very lowest estimate. That Jew feller's eyes bugged out till you could 'a' scraped 'em off of his face with a trowel when he saw Charley pourin' them diamonds in that off-handed way of his when he's talkin' to somebody."

"It's enough to startle anybody that knows what they are. I never even thought of diamonds—I thought the man must be off a little, amusing himself playing with a handful of glass."

"No, I guess Charley's about as sound in the head as any of us out here west of Dodge," said Jim. He got up, making a show of being suddenly recalled to a sense of his responsibility to the house. "Well, I guess I've nearly talked an arm off you," he excused himself.

"Not at all. You've given me a lot of valuable information. I'm much obliged."

"If it's any help to you, you're welcome."

"This Gus fellow: he's a pretty tough case, is he?"

"He's as onery as castor oil. He'll lay for you, sure as taxes. If I was you I wouldn't put my foot out of doors without a gun on me—I wouldn't go a eench outside of my office without it."

"I didn't come here to fight," Hall replied, loftily. "I'm not a fighting man."

“Well, I wouldn’t let it git out on me if I was you,” Jim advised, with an inflection meant to show that he was not above a bit of humor if a man wanted to try it on. “But I’ll tell you, Doc, for a feller that don’t know nothing about fightin’, you’ve made a purty good start in this man’s town. You take my tip and git a gun, less you’ve got one in your valise. A man that’s got a reputation like you’ve made can’t live up to it out here west of Dodge without a gun buckled around his belly.”

“I guess I’ll manage, somehow,” said Hall, not exactly pleased with Jim’s manner. There was something in it not altogether sincere, something that seemed a wordy expression of the grins which Hall had seen reflected from phiz to phiz on the hotel porch a little while before.

“Well, the boys’re hangin’ around waitin’ to hear how Major Bill is,” Jim said in further excuse for his going, where no excuse was wanted. “I guess I’d better go on down and let ’em know. Um-m-m,”—with speculative drawl—“I’d like to know how old Bud Sandiver feels! Knocked cold with a gun throwed *at* him, heh-heh-heh! That sure was a joke on Bud!”

## CHAPTER V

### DAMASCUS STANDS FROM UNDER

WHEN it came to the inquest into Bud Sandiver's death next morning, Andrew Hall found himself, mildly speaking, the victim of a surprise. It was a soundly astonished physician, indeed, who sat in the coroner's office in the court house basement, next door to the jail, and heard witness after witness, old and young, mount the chair and swear that they did not know who was the public benefactor whose hand had ridded the county of the notorious ruffian.

According to the unvaried story, Bud Sandiver had collapsed and died on the way to jail a few moments after his arrest in the public square. Nobody had touched a weapon, nobody had laid a violent hand on the man. He merely had sagged down and died. Yes, he had been hurt. Yes, he was bleeding. His forehead was gashed, the bridge of his nose was smashed. Something had hit him, that was a cinch. But who it was, or what it was, no witness could, of his own knowledge and belief, as the coroner invariably put it, swear.

Everybody was well pleased to be testifying in the case. It was a fine thing, undoubtedly, to be rid of so worthless a fellow as Bud Sandiver. There were good-humored expressions mingled with the testimony, plenty of winks in aside, and grins enough to make Damascus

bright for a month. Through it all Andrew Hall sat, uncalled upon to add what he could tell of the tragedy, his first feeling of astonishment melting down like a lump of beeswax on a hot stove to a troubled and uneasy state of spirit that had hardly enough force behind it to resent this plain, concocted conspiracy to make him the goat.

Hall's indignation began to mount after a while as he listened to man after man, Charley Burnett among them, to his unspeakable astonishment, swear that Bud Sandiver had just lopped down that way as if somebody had cut his legs off with a scythe, and expired within ten feet of the jail door. Hall took the stand eagerly, when called by the coroner at last, after he had settled down into the fixed opinion that he understood the town's purpose in framing up the case this way.

The justice of the peace presided at the inquiry, by virtue of his office, in the absence of the coroner, the eminent Doctor Ross. The justice's name was Hawthorn. He was a benignant sort of large soft man, gray-whiskered, bald. He held an unlit cigar in a long holder between his teeth all through the hearing. Under his leading, Hall recited the facts in the case as they appertained to himself. When he recounted how he had taken the pistol from Major Cottrell's hand and thrown it at Bud Sandiver's head, the presiding officer nodded, such a satisfied nod, so intense in its expression of lucidity, that it was almost a bow. That nod plainly said: "Now you have enlightened me; now the hidden mysteries of this case are laid bare."

The people who crowded the room received this testimony in a little more intensified spirit of interest. Their faces brightened, they seemed easier and happier than

before, although the occasion had been anything but solemn or sad. Their nods and grins seemed to say to each other: "This man's testimony makes it plain. It's as simple as daylight now."

There was such a feeling of satisfaction over Hall's testimony that it amounted to a mild jubilation. One would have thought that Damascus hated a mystery above all things detestable. The coroner indicated that the witness had supplied all that was wanting, that nothing more of him would be required. He waved his hand in gesture of dismissal, elbowing over his notes to give the case into the jury's hands.

Hall remained in the witness chair.

"I'd like to say further, your honor," he began.

"Certainly. If you've got any more to say that will add to the clearing up of this point, go ahead."

"Why, yes," said Hall, crisply, coming at once to the point, "I must say I'm astonished at the general, the unvaried, trend of the testimony presented here, sir. I want to disclaim, emphatically and finally, any and all responsibility for the death of this man Sandiver. It's a fact that I threw the gun at him; it's undeniable that I hit him and knocked him off of his horse. But there are men here in this room, most of them witnesses who have testified, who came running up just about then and lifted Sandiver to his feet. There is the man, who says his name is Ed Kraus, liveryman, who took Sandiver's handkerchief and tied his hands with it. And there's another one, Dine Fergus, I understood him to give his name, who walked along beside Sandiver holding him by the arm as they started away."

"Certainly, Dr. Hall," said the coroner, regarding him

with curious surprise. "This is all part of the record; the clerk has it down in black and white."

"But I want to say that Charley Burnett told me, on the hotel porch not five minutes after they carried Major Cottrell to the hotel, that Sandiver had made a break to get away, and somebody had killed him. I don't want the doubtful honor—"

"I didn't tell you any such a damn thing!" Burnett denied, crowding forward, red to the ears with ill-held anger.

"Repress your language, Mr. Burnett," the coroner blandly advised.

"No man can charge a thing like that up to me and walk off with it!" Burnett declared.

"There's no attempt nor intention of laying a charge," Hall replied, undisturbed by the cattleman's bluster. "I'm just stating a fact that I ought to be able to prove by witnesses."

"You ought to be able to prove anything you say about me, stranger, and be damn sure you can prove it before you begin to talk," Burnett said.

"But from the trend of public determination, as I'll have to call it for lack of any other word, to shift the blame for this man's death from the hands responsible for it, I hardly think it would be any use to call Kraus and Fergus, and the witness who gave his name as Larrimore, back to the stand to substantiate what I've said. They were there on the hotel porch, not six feet from Mr. Burnett, when he told me Sandiver had made a break to get away."

"But I didn't tell you anybody killed him," Burnett said, with sneering triumph that won him a laugh.

The coroner rapped to command silence.

"This is all unnecessary, gentlemen," he admonished with placatory suavity. "Dr. Hall, this inquiry is nothing more than a matter of form to satisfy the requirements of the law in the case. Nobody is going to be prosecuted for killing Bud Sandiver. On the other hand, he will be considered a public benefactor and given the thanks of this community. Who that man was is immaterial. We have established what we started out to establish for the record of this case: that Bud Sandiver came to his death in the act of riot and defiance of the constituted authorities. It was justifiable homicide, and the jury will so find. Gentlemen, this closes the case."

"In justice to Mr. Burnett, I'd like to amend my statement of a little while ago," Hall proposed, turning to the coroner before vacating the witness chair. "When I come to think of it, Mr. Burnett is right. He didn't say anybody had killed Sandiver when he made the break to get away."

"I thought you'd crawfish!" Burnett said, with a strutting manner of contempt.

"Not at all," Hall assured him calmly. "You didn't say in so many words that somebody had killed Sandiver, but you implied it. Your implication was so evident it gave me the same impression as a direct statement in words. I got the impression that somebody had killed Sandiver when he made the break to run. I believe that was the impression you meant to convey."

"You'd better stand around in the sun with your hat off a while and let your head harden if you're goin' to stay in this country," Burnett suggested. "It takes im-



pressions too easy. It might take a dangerous one some of these days if you ain't careful."

"Gentlemen, the case is closed," the coroner hastened to interpose.

Without leaving the room the jury returned the verdict of justifiable homicide, as the coroner had directed. Bud Sandiver, said the jury, had come to his death in the act of riot against the constituted authorities of the state of Kansas and the city of Damascus, but at whose hands the verdict did not state. It was implied, certainly, that Sandiver had fallen at the hands of the constituted authorities mentioned. Public opinion gave the credit to Dr. Hall, the new railroad doctor who had come there to supplant Old Doc Ross.

Damascus was feeling pretty well over what it seemed to consider a comical piece of business all around. Whatever tragedy there had been in Major Cottrell's peril and wounding, whatever heroism in the intervention of this stranger, was overshadowed by the humorous phase of the incident. Everybody agreed it was a rare joke on Bud Sandiver to come to such an end, although as they laughed and passed winks it was evident some greater joke was being kept sequestered among themselves. Hall felt this. He was not slow in coming to the conviction that the town's big laugh was not at the expense of Bud Sandiver, but of himself.

Damascus was afraid of the Simrall shooting men; afraid in particular of Gus Sandiver, who would come on his day to demand a reckoning for his brother's life. How easily Damascus had side-stepped this responsibility by giving the perilous credit to a stranger who was

not even one of the town! The story would go to Simrall speedily; the wrath that should have been divided, at least, between Damascus and himself would fall alone upon his head. Truly a plastic head, as Burnett had said, to drive him so thoughtlessly into a quarrel among men as base as all present information indicated both sides to embrace.

Somebody had killed Sandiver. He had not died from that blow on the head with the pistol. Dine Fergus, son of the town milliner, who carried an ice cream, candy and tobacco business on the other side of the room, and a lunch counter across the back, and Ed Kraus, liveryman, were the noble spirits behind that conspiracy. The fatal blow—no shot had been fired—lay between them, Hall believed.

There was something treacherous in Kraus' long, dark face, in his indolent carriage, his rocking, bear-like walk. He was a tall man, sloping in the shoulders, the crudeness of unrefined strength in his long, tapering neck. There was a spark of savagery in him that a word might provoke to give a blow.

Dine Fergus presented a far different type. He was short, alert, active on foot, trimly made. His small round face was ruddy, specked by large freckles which rather added to its shallow, boyish prettiness. His black hair sprang straight from his low forehead, trained in the up-roaching fashion so popular with the small-town youth of that day. He was not more than twenty-two, ready with his words, flippant, half impertinent, a typical product of the atmosphere of daring and challenge to authority which had nurtured him from infancy. He was his mother's only child. In her eyes he was a mold contain-

ing all the ordinary virtues, with several seraphic qualities spread over them, like icing on a cake.

While giving his testimony a flicker of a smile had played around Dine's mouth, making a merry little dimple in his ruddy cheek. It was such a notable piece of humor they were framing on the strange doctor, Dine had difficulty holding in a laugh that would have given it all away.

That appeared to be the attitude of Damascus now. Many approached Dr. Hall when the inquest was concluded, all of them grinning in appreciation of this comical notoriety he had attained. There was something behind the grins, invariably, which the grinner shrewdly believed the simple stranger who took a gun by the wrong end could not see. Such is the common attitude of mankind who has been initiated into more or less mysterious things. One sees the same glimmer of humorous superiority in the eyes of secret brethren when they try grips on strangers who do not respond. What the grinner knows is little worth the trouble of concealing, and does him no good in the world.

Dr. Hall left the court house with a feeling more of resentment than concern. He was not so much troubled over his personal danger as he was concerned about his professional dignity. He had just come from a long service in the railroad hospital at Topeka, taking this outside position for the picturesque appeal it carried and the experience that it proffered. He knew railroad men, from jerry to president. It would be an uphill business to win their respect, their confidence and esteem, appearing before them in this false guise of a ridiculous fellow who had killed a man with the wrong end of a gun.

Still, there was nothing he could do to alter the situation. It would not make the town any more pleasant for him if he were to take a gun in hand and lay out the humorous citizens who had conspired to fix the responsibility for this worthless outlaw's life on him, after they had made away with him in their truly comical manner themselves. That would not help it at all. He might have taken a crack at Burnett, the fellow's crooked-mouthed smirk had been provocative almost past endurance, probably to have Kraus and all the valiant pack pile on him and batter him out of shape.

Thus considering his present case in relation to his future success, Dr. Hall directed his steps toward the railroad station to make inquiry of the agent concerning the whereabouts of Pete Farley, general superintendent of that part of the railroad. Farley had engaged to meet him in Damascus that day, and give him official installation as company physician.

Dr. Hall proceeded about this business moodily, head bent as he pondered the troubles which appeared to grow blacker and more portentous as he drew off to give them perspective. Beyond the livery stable he was overtaken by a man, who fell easily into stride with him after passing the greetings of the day in friendly and respectful way.

This overtaking stranger was a tall gaunt man of sixty-five or more, dry and well-preserved. There was a flaccid appearance about his waistcoat, which hung as if it touched him nowhere, a white garment originally, now yellowed through age and poor laundering. A watch-chain of large, heavy links dangled the badge of a popular secret brotherhood almost as big as a hardware sign.

This man's smoothly shaved face was brown and lean, leathery, ascetic, stern. He carried himself with a pre-occupied stride, although it was plain enough that he had his eyes about him, and very sharply about him, at that. This stately, seemingly abstracted, carriage made Hall think of a gander pacing along by the roadside with his head held high.

"I am Judge Waters," the stranger introduced himself.

"Hall is my name; a newcomer, the railroad doctor."

"Yes, I know," said Judge Waters. He stopped, offering his hand. "I want to thank you for your courageous action in behalf of my old friend, Major Cottrell. They'd have got him if it hadn't been for you."

"Maybe not," said Hall modestly, embarrassed by this frank acknowledgment.

"I was slow getting into action," Judge Waters explained. "I'd put my gun away, hadn't loaded it for a year or more. I made the mistake of trying to believe we could get along without guns out here west of Dodge, but I guess that time hasn't arrived. By the time I got down to the square the damage had been done, and those scoundrels were lopin' out of town. I appreciate your service to Major Cottrell, to all of us. He was my partner in this townsite; we laid it out."

"I'm not sensible of having done anything but make a sort of spectacle of myself," Hall replied. "There's a public disposition to give me entirely too much credit. I don't appreciate it."

"I noticed that disposition at the inquest, Doctor."

"I didn't kill that man Sandiver. The blow I gave him with Major Cottrell's gun, so funny to these comedians here, only stunned him for a few seconds. He was as

clear in the head as I am right now when they started to walk him to jail."

"I guess some of the young sports were practicin' on Bud," Judge Waters said.

"Did they frame their testimony at the inquest just to have the laugh on a green stranger, or because they really want to get out from under the responsibility?"

"The gang that rushed in and picked Bud up after the danger was over isn't notable for any high courage," Judge Waters explained. "They're not a fighting crowd, take them as they run. Ed Kraus drives over to Simrall with a drummer now and then; he's around the country a good deal of the time these days locating settlers or carryin' the surveyor here and there. He couldn't afford to have his name involved in the affair, you see. Larri-more—he's a skulker, he's a wolf."

"That Fergus boy?"

"He's a petty gambler, a ten-cents ante boy. He's not worth the room he covers when he's standing still."

"Are they fair samples of this town's citizens?"

"No, not at all, sir. We've got respectable people here, two or three dozen of them that could be counted on to defend the town, I expect—at least I hope so. They've never been called to the test before, except by voting for it."

"There's no very great incentive to fight for it, that I can see," Hall said, with more frankness than diplomacy.

"We've got our homes, our investments and our prospects," Judge Waters replied. "You have a stranger's misconception of the importance of Damascus. It will dominate this corner of the state within two years. There are ten undeveloped counties tributary to us, all filling up

fast. We are their natural supply point; the future of this town is written large."

"As you say, I've got the stranger's view of it, nothing more than can be seen and felt from the surface. Maybe I'm wrong. I'd like to see you have a second Kansas City here."

"We'll outstrip Kansas City in fifteen years," Judge Waters declared, striding along a little faster as his enthusiasm grew, the city of his vision no doubt plain to his inner eye. "We've got a certain amount of riff-raff here now, it's always that way with frontier towns. People that are thrown off and driven out by the orderly places naturally drift to the new ones and stay till things begin to stabilize and settle down. We've got a lot of that kind in Damascus, tin-horn adventurers, I guess you might call them. Real estate sharpers, crooked storekeepers, men that run shady little games of one kind and another, all of them with some kind of a crooked side to them. They're only temporary; they'll drift along to the next town that starts up."

They had come to the railroad station, where they paused beside the plank platform flanking the two-story red building, running parallel to the track.

"I'm looking for superintendent Farley," Hall explained.

"If he was in town his car would be on the house track back of the depot," Judge Waters said, looking around for that evidence of the superintendent's presence. "No, he's not in town."

"Frankly, Judge Waters, I'm troubled over this scrape I've got into," Dr. Hall confessed. "I didn't want to mix in the affairs of this town and county. Do you suppose they're going to report it around that I killed Sandiver?"

"I'm afraid that's the move. I suppose the boys figured they'd have a little fun with a stranger, maybe thinking you wouldn't be here long enough to be in any danger. But, of course, you will be in danger the minute that story gets over to Simrall."

"You mean Sandiver's brother will come gunning for me?"

"He's likely to, he's nearly certain to."

"One thing has struck me as strange through all this affair, and that's the absence of the sheriff. Where is he? What's he doing that he can't protect this town?"

"He was out servin' subpoenas yesterday, and hasn't come back yet. I guess that's why the Simrall outfit made their dash. They wouldn't want to embarrass their friend."

"Oh, the sheriff leans that way?"

"So hard he'd fall and break his neck if somebody was to jerk the prop from under him. It's going to be done, too, and that before long."

"I can't expect much protection from the side of the law, then, if I stay in this man's town," Hall said.

"I hope you're not thinking of quitting us?"

"No, I hadn't thought of it. But I didn't come here to take on a row. I'm a physician, not a fighting man."

"If you stay here," Judge Waters said weightily, "I expect you'll have to throw a shot or two sooner or later. Can you sling a gun pretty well?"

"I don't suppose I ever fired a pistol a dozen times in my life."

"That's unfortunate," Judge Waters said, frowning, pushing back his hat. "Well"—hopefully—"you've got plenty of room down by the river to practice, and I sup-



pose you'll have plenty of time. Shoot with a limber arm, that's the style of the best gunmen out here. You can pick it up fast with an hour's practice a day."

"And how about this man Ross?" Hall inquired, thinking it just as well to go through the list of his troubles while about it. "I've been told there's more trouble waiting for me when he sobers up and takes to his legs. Is he as dangerous as he's represented?"

"If anybody was to offer me Old Doc Ross' hide," said Judge Waters, "I wouldn't consider it worth stakin' out in the sun to dry. I'd forgotten you've come here to take his place as company doctor. Yes, he used to botch around at it as a side line to his general practice in town, but he was so erratic, Pete Farley told me, he was more harm than good. No, there's nothing to fear from Ross when he's sober. When he's drunk he's as mean as a briar. I expect likely you'll have a visit from him."

"It looks like I've stirred up a mess of trouble in this town," Hall said gloomily.

"That's something mighty hard to leave behind a man," Judge Waters said. "But you're not thinking of quitting?"

"Not the slightest notion of it," Hall returned.

He was standing with legs apart in that way of his that suggested bracing to face a hard wind, or a hard blow, or a hard tussle of any kind. He raised himself to his toes with the easy, confident strength of a man assured of himself and his destiny; settled back to his heels, looked Judge Waters in the eye, and smiled.

Judge Waters offered his hand again, his own close-fitting lips parting from his teeth in the thread-width crack that passed with him for a grin.

## CHAPTER VI

### NEIGHBORS

PETE FARLEY'S car was dropped off at Damascus by an east-bound passenger train that arrived toward the middle of the afternoon. Within a few minutes after the general superintendent's arrival the new company doctor had been installed in his office without ceremony.

This office was a dingy red freight car that had been lifted from its trucks and deposited on a bank of cinders near the main-line track, where it formerly had served as passenger depot and agent's office in the early days of Damascus. Later it had been occupied by the engineering crew which had surveyed the new roadbed now being graded west of town.

The side-doors of the car had been boarded up, a standard-size house door put in each end, four little windows cut high up in the sides near the eaves. A partition divided the car in two unequal portions, the larger of which was to be the doctor's office, the smaller his sleeping quarters, for it was one of the essentials of that position that the doctor be available at all hours of the day and night.

Pioneering in railroading is attended by many accidents, usually grave from the very nature of the weight and density of the materials and tools employed. There is nothing puny, or fashioned for grasping by delicate

hands, in the mighty business of laying and surfacing track. At any hour the doctor might be called to piece together some unlucky fellow who had been caught under a falling rail, or splint and bandage breaks and wounds of the most distressing severity. They might come for him with a handcar, to take him five miles, or with the work-train engine, to take him fifty.

If prominence was to be desired in a doctor's beginning in a strange place, the freight-car office left nothing unsatisfied in that respect. It stood at the end of Custer Street, protruding more than half its length beyond the building line of that thoroughfare, a barrier that swerved and deflected the stream of incoming and outgoing business. The car had been ceiled with bright new lumber, making it snug against the winter winds.

Pete Farley, the superintendent, was a big, gentle-spoken man with an Irish fairness in his broad face, an Irish strength in his long neck, brown splotches and red hairs on the backs of his walloping big hands. He made no ceremony of installing the new company doctor in his office. He turned over the surgical chair, the box of miscellaneous new instruments and supplies sent on from Topeka, the granite-ware water pails and basins, with a mention of Little Jack Ryan, who would keep the office scrubbed and provided with two white lanterns hung on each side of the door at night. For anything else he needed, Farley said, put on a wire to Topeka. Farley put on a wire for anything and everything. Operators along the line said he ordered a chew of tobacco that way. There was no time for letters in his busy life.

Farley warned the new doctor against the graders who lived in tents by the river at the edge of town. They

were employes of the grading contractor, and did not come under the doctor's ministrations as railroad physician. Whatever Dr. Hall might do for them he would do at his own risk of being paid.

Graders were the Gypsies of the railroad world, here this month, far away the next, taking advantage of everybody that trusted them, although this outfit might be here all summer, and longer. The men were out on the dump farther west; these tents were the more or less permanent homes of the women and children, with the men who looked after the used-up horses and mules while they recuperated on the grass. Tough outfit. Entirely God-forsaken and without morals, Farley said.

While he was in admonitory mood, Farley spoke of Old Doc Ross. There might be some trouble from that quarter, although he did not believe Ross to be as rough as his reputation. Just now the old sinner was on a bat which might continue for many days. Ross went off that way frequently, generally when needed most, a fact responsible for his removal from company employment. He'd go as straight as a thirty-foot rail for weeks at a time, then break out on a souse. Farley had no advice to offer on the manner of handling Old Doc Ross, believing every man sufficient to his business, according to the hard exactions of railroad life.

Might find it pretty dull in Damascus, Farley thought. It would be for him if he had to stay there himself. He was lucky; he had a family back in Dodge, and a private car that he could go bumping around in from place to place, out on the road most of the time between Dodge and Trinidad. If Hall should want him for anything, put on a wire.

So saying, Farley went about his business, which, at that hour, had something to do with getting his battered old car hitched to the end of a passenger train and whisked away on some pressing matter farther west.

Across from Dr. Hall's freight-car office, the main line, a sidetrack for the work-train and a cinder-covered space of trodden ground lying between, a long string of boarding-cars stood on a siding. There were a dozen or more of these cars, with ladder steps leading up to their broad side-doors, glimpses of bunks to be seen in some of them, cooking activities going forward in one.

Dr. Hall stood on the cinder bank at his own door after Farley's departure, looking across at the boarding train. It was then about four o'clock in the afternoon, and quiet as if the last man had gone away from Damascus and given up the struggle of making a town where there seemed to be so little need of one. The wind was moving in the tender leaves of the cottonwood trees along the river, their newly unfolded gloss glittering like bits of enamel as they fluttered and turned toward the sun, with the soothing whisper of gently falling rain.

Smoke was rising in vigorous column from a stocky stovepipe through the top of the car which Hall took to be the kitchen. This car was the last but one in the string, the other being a tank car with the train's water supply, and almost directly opposite the doctor's own. There was a flitting of skirts across the open door as those who labored within hurried like building birds about their duties. Now and then a face was turned, an eye flashed in his direction, as the white-aproned figures dashed back and forth across the open door, which had a close-fitting wire screen. Hall crossed the track, thinking that, as

they were to be neighbors, they would as well be friends from the start.

There were steps leading down from the kitchen door, battered by many a flight of those quick-scurrying feet which seemed going and coming on some endless task across the open door. A woman appeared suddenly on the threshold as Dr. Hall approached, smiling and nodding, wiping her hands on her apron, welcome radiating from her heat-inflamed face.

She was a spare little woman, an eager brightness in her eyes and smile. She gave the instant impression that her fitting office was welcoming strangers at the door. Her muscular short arms were bare to the elbow, her low-cut waist gave freedom and a look of comfort to her handsome neck and well carried head. Not an ordinary woman, in her genial self-possession, to meet in the door of a boarding-train kitchen, thought Dr. Hall.

"I was about to run over and make your acquaintance," she said. "Mr. Farley told us you'd be down to your office to-day—you're the new company doctor, ain't you?"

"Yes, I'm Dr. Hall."

"Glad you come over," said she, in her bustling, quick-arriving way. She came down the steps with a little rush, offering her hand. "I'm Mrs. Charles; glad you come over. Girls, come out and meet the new doctor."

The girls were not far away. Indeed, Dr. Hall was even then grinning at the sight of a neat foot and the flounce of a checked gingham skirt which their owner may or may not have fancied to be out of the line of vision of any male visitor outside the door. There was a little giggling within, a little delay as for adjustment of something or other that had become disarranged, such

as hair or apron-strings. Then the girls dutifully appeared, not with the same ingenuous self-possession as their mother, yet with assurance enough to carry them along.

“Meet my daughter Mary, Dr. Hall,” said Mrs. Charles, in the very best mode of railroad presentation. “Meet my daughter Annie, Dr. Hall.”

Dr. Hall declared himself charmed, which was not strictly in accord with the railroad formula. Annie and Mary looked as if it plagued them a little to hear him say so, twisting and blushing and putting their hands behind them like backward little things who never had met a man.

But Mary and Annie were neither backward nor small. They knew just about when and how to put a fresh rail-roader in his proper place in relation to themselves, even to the extent of a bat on the ear. It had been done. They were rosy, big-mouthed, comely girls, after the style of those who eat much, work hard and do not hold their attractiveness long.

Mary's hair was dark-red, her skin clear of a blemish, white and fine-grained as if she had been nurtured in shady gardens behind inaccessible walls, instead of the corned-beef and cabbage steam of a boarding-train. There was a provoking, mocking humor in her wide mouth; her eyes were brown. Annie was a fluffy-haired blonde, a bit snub-nosed and sniffing of features, but she had a rolling blue eye that stole glances cornerwise at the new doctor, and a ready giggle that came over her suddenly, making her throw her hand to her mouth as if to catch her teeth.

Dr. Hall was not expressing a conventional common-

place when he declared himself charmed with Annie and Mary. The wholesome vigor, the sprightly manners, of the boarding-train ladies gave him an agreeable surprise. He had expected to find slap-heeled slovenliness in keeping with the dull-red, rough-handled appearance of the cars.

"I hope you'll like it here," said Annie, sighing to signify that she did not like it, and was pining for fairer places that she had known.

"She'd like to go back to Dodge," Mrs. Charles said, as if a big sigh such as that, rising from the bosom of youth, must be explained. She spoke aside, with sympathy for her child's yearning.

"Huh! Dodge!" Mary sniffed. "Dodge's as dead as a doornail."

"It beats bein' hung up out here on the road," Annie argued with spirit. "Nobody out here in this hole to 'sociate with."

"Dodge is a division point," Mrs. Charles explained again. "Lots of trainmen lay over there. The girls used to have some good times at the dances down at Dodge."

"Do you dance, Dr. Hall?" Annie inquired hopefully.

"A little," Hall confessed.

"I'll bet you a little!" said Mary, her words full of complimentary meaning.

"Don't get too good opinion of me—I'd hate to disappoint you. Have you been in Damascus long?" This a general question, directed to the three.

"We've been here about four months—"

"About forty years!" said Annie, determined to show that she was above the limitations of that place.

"Well, I guess you'd better chase back and finish



settin' the table," Mrs. Charles suggested, rather than ordered, her manner gentle, her face bright with smiles.

Mary and Annie mounted the steps, considerable giggling and pushing going on between them without any apparent cause. Mrs. Charles looked after them fondly, full of pride.

"They're good girls, good obedient girls," she said.

"I'm sure," said Dr. Hall. "And pretty," he added, "as pretty a pair of young ladies as I've seen in many a day."

"I'm glad to hear you say so," Mrs. Charles said, her pride swelling, pleased beyond bounds. "A mother always likes to hear a good word about her girls. Well, I've tried to bring them up right, Doctor, but they never had much of a chance."

"Have you been in this business some time?"

"I've been boardin' railroad men all my married life," Mrs. Charles replied, proud, rather than downcast, in the admission. "My old man was extra-gang boss when we was first married, out in Colorado. There wasn't no towns in that country like there is now, nowhere for men to board. The roadmaster got me to take charge of a boardin'-train, and I've been at it ever since. I lost my husband seven years ago. He was foreman of a steel-gang when he died—or was killed, I should say. A rail fell on him, nearly cut him in two. The company's been good to me, though; always kep' me in a boardin'-train when a good many others had to go beggin'. I've got along, brought up my girls—raised 'em on wheels, you might say—and done real well. Wouldn't you like to look over the train?"

Dr. Hall was keen for it, a traveling hotel of that mag-

nitide being a thing unique in his experience. Mrs. Charles led the way up the kitchen steps, glowing with pleasure in having somebody to whom the commonplace of her daily life was wonderful. She pushed open the folding screen doors, fanning the waiting flies away with her apron.

"I'm feedin' between sixty and seventy men every day," she explained. "It takes a lot of grub to fill up that many railroaders."

"Why, it looks like a factory," said Dr. Hall, his amazement unfeigned.

An immense range occupied one end of the car, its commodious top filled with large copper boilers in which the evening meal was steaming with the mingled odor of potatoes, onions, cabbage and beef. A large dark woman was taking pies out of the oven, adding them to an astonishing array of their mates which stood on a long, narrow table close at hand.

"Angy and me do the cookin', all but the bread," Mrs. Charles explained. "Perry, her old man, he does the bakin' in a mud oven outside. He's a Mexican, his name's Perez, but everybody calls him Perry. We use close to a hundred loaves a day."

"That's a lot of bread for seventy men."

"The men say good bread's half the battle, 'specially the Irish. But they eat everything else accordin'. I buy more beef every day from the butcher in this town than all the rest of the people put together."

Mrs. Charles' cooking utensils hung around the walls near the stove, her thick cups and plates, classified like exhibits in a museum, filling many shelves in the other

end of the car. Everything was orderly and convenient for speedy service.

“The girls wash the dishes and do what waitin’ table we do, and that ain’t much outside of spillin’ ’em a cup of coffee when they want it. We set things on and let ’em pass the dishes. The men have to tidy up their own bunks and cars—I never let my girls set foot in the bunk-cars up ahead.”

The dining-room, a sway-backed furniture car of extraordinary length, was connected to the kitchen by a covered passage, or vestibule, which was removed, Mrs. Charles explained, when the train was shifted from place to place. Here Mary and Annie were at work at a long plank table, upon which the plates and cutlery were spread without a cloth.

The girls were standing big stacks of bread at convenient spearing distance apart, stationing at regular intervals between them bowls of bright-red jelly, which they dipped from wooden firkins bearing ornate—and deceptive—pictures of luscious fruit. They worked with the precision, coördination and speed of practiced artisans setting a stage.

“We can set in seventy men at this table,” Mrs. Charles explained. “If we have any more we have to set second table, but that don’t happen unless we have a bridge-gang, or a surveyin’-gang, or something like that, temporary. We don’t show much style, we’ve got work enough without that, but there’s not a railroad man, high or low, on this division that wouldn’t wait till second table any time rather than go to the hotel. I’ve got the name of givin’ ’em good chuck, believe it or not from the looks of things.”

"It looks good to me," Dr. Hall declared. "I think I'd like to sit in with them myself."

"They ain't got 'specially good table manners, I'm afraid," Mrs. Charles said doubtfully.

Annie lifted her head from bending over a bucket of jelly and laughed shrilly, stretching her mouth wide. Mary looked at her with comical surprise, a grin twitching the corners of her lips, then burst out in wild hilarity. They subsided with as startling suddenness as they had begun, bending over the jelly pails again, faces as red as the synthetic dessert which they were ladling out for the jerries' supper, with knowing glances passing between them, suppressed laughter breaking out of their merry mouths in sputters.

"Oh, you girls!" Mrs. Charles chided them, a little vexed by their unseemly behavior.

Dr. Hall could not forbear a broad grin along with the merry girls, wondering at the same time what pictures of uncouth feeding their mother's words had raised in their appreciative vision. Mrs. Charles led on, passing from the dining-car into the one ahead, connected by a similar vestibule.

"This is my commissary car," she explained, waving her hand toward a stock of such simple necessities as the jerries demanded from time to time, from overalls, jumpers and shoes, to peanuts, chewing gum and tobacco. A counter cut the stock off from the rest of the car, where there were chairs, and a number of books on a shelf.

It was a sort of gathering place for the jerries on winter nights, Mrs. Charles said. Here they smoked and read, such of them as were able and cared to put in the time

that way. The books belonged to Mary, who rented them at ten cents a week.

"I don't allow no cards here," she said. "They do enough card-playin' and fightin' up ahead. You'll have a lot of patchin' and darnin' to do on 'em after pay-day. I don't sell 'em booze, either, like most of the commissary cars do; I never did. I've seen many a man cut out for better things kep' down to jerryin' on account of booze. We've got one or two of them on this gang; you'll find them everywhere."

"Do you expect to be here long? Mr. Farley didn't hint to me how long he expected the work to last around here."

"Bill Chambers, our work-train boss, was tellin' me last night he thought he'd throw in a spur about twenty miles west of here and move us out this fall. I don't know. I'd rather stay here for the winter, but you know we have to keep the boardin'-train as close to the work as we can. They're layin' new steel, straightenin' the line, and surfacin' all this part of the road. It's a big job."

"I don't think I'd care to move out any nearer the edge," Dr. Hall said. "This is bleak enough for me. But I don't see where my patients are to come from when you folks pull out of here—if I ever get any at all."

Mrs. Charles looked at the young doctor curiously, as if she had not yet made up her mind about him, and had to stand him off that way to size him up a little longer. He was standing before Mary's little shelf of books, running his eyes absently over the titles, his big black hat in his hand, his long legs spread in ungainly pose. He needed a hair-cut, Mrs. Charles thought, and he needed

his neck shaved. A mane like that would go against him with the railroaders, who were great for the neck-shave. And a head of hair like his—it was thick as nature could sow it, black, smooth and long—a head of hair like his was something to bring him down to scorn in the critical railroad eye.

“If you’d get your neck shaved,” she suggested, not at all delicately, nor with any feeling whatever of invading a private preserve, “that might—”

She broke off suddenly into a laugh, loud, unmistakably derisive, with a big stretch of mouth and display of teeth. The doctor had clapped his hand to the back of his neck with her suggestion, as if a bee had stung him. He looked so startled, so innocently shocked, as if he had been caught in some grave trespass on the conventions of railroad life, that Mrs. Charles would have blown her teeth out trying to hold back that laugh.

“And your hair cut,” she said, stopping her laughter with that abruptness which seemed to be a family gift, just like shutting the oven door. She only smiled when the doctor ran his hand from his fuzzy mane to his long hair, forking it with his spread fingers like a farmer turning a windrow of hay.

“Gosh! I guess you’re right,” he said.

“They’re talkin’ of makin’ this town a division point,” Mrs. Charles informed him, as if her blunt suggestion for his personal adornment had been made to put him in line of preparation for the reward the future held. “If they do, it wouldn’t be a bad place for a young doctor to settle down.”

“I don’t know. Everybody I talk with here gives the country a hard name. They say there’s no chance for a

man out here at anything but railroading—it's too far west of Dodge. Just as if Dodge was the place where you jump off the edge of the earth."

"It is—nearly, I guess," Mrs. Charles replied. "But I wouldn't let 'em bluff me by any such talk as that if I was you. I wouldn't even let—mercy save us! Here comes Old Doc Ross!"

## CHAPTER VII

### OLD DOC ROSS

MRS. CHARLES shrank away from the door, white and unnerved as if she had trodden on a snake. Dr. Hall stepped in front of her with protective intention, expecting to see the notorious Dr. Ross, of whom everybody appeared to have such deep-seated fear, looming up before him as big as a white horse.

There was a spare small man, in remarkably disproportionate coat, standing about half way between the boxcar, of which Dr. Hall had taken possession that afternoon, and the railroad station, looking around as if undecided whether to turn off to one hand or the other, or keep going on straight ahead.

This man was arrayed in boots with bronzed-leather tops, such as cowboys of that period made the vogue on the range, with spurs to his heels, as if he had just dismounted from his horse. His black frock coat struck almost to the tops of the boots, showing a span of yellow trousers between. The fellow was topped off by a broad-brimmed hat with high round crown, which had been white or cream-colored once, but now was drab and dingy, as if the wearer had ridden many trips to market on top of cattle trains.

“Do you mean that little old horse-marine standing there?” Dr. Hall inquired, turning a surprised face towards Mrs. Charles.



"My Ga-hd!" said she, in that catchy, intaking way that railroad ladies of her station always have pronounced the name of deity when in tremor of great fear. "He's lookin' for you!"

"I guess he'll not have much trouble finding me," Dr. Hall replied.

He surveyed curiously the long-coated figure standing near the end of the station platform. Old Doc Ross looked like a man who had just got up from a heavy sleep, rising from the very spot where he stood. He moved his head this way and that, slowly, like a man in a cloud of doubt, standing entirely still, the wind flapping the skirts of his coat around his legs. He was a man past the south gate of life, his dark beard streaked with gray.

"He'll kill you!" Mrs. Charles panted, palpitating in her terror like a trapped rabbit. "He killed men down in Dodge—I know he killed men down in Dodge—he swears he'll kill any doctor that tries to settle here!"

"Never mind," Hall soothed her, his hand on her shoulder, the spark of a smile in his calm, wise eyes. "I don't believe he's half as dangerous as he sounds. I'll go and see what he wants."

"No, no! Don't you go!" she begged, making a quick clutch at his arm to hold him back.

"Sure I'm going," he replied, releasing her hand, holding it a moment as if to charge her with a little of his own steady confidence. "What would the railroad men think of me, hiding out from a little old rooster like that!"

"Wait a minute," she requested hurriedly, making a dash behind the little counter. "Here—take this gun—you've not got any on you—take this gun! When you hit

the ground, you shoot! Don't wait for him to start it—you shoot!"

Hall took the pistol, looking at it curiously, as if she had offered some rare thing for his examination.

"No," he said, handing it back, "I think I'd be better off without it. Thank you, just the same."

He swung out of the car door, his long legs being sufficient without the ladder, and struck straight across to his office as if unconscious of both the presence and identity of Old Doc Ross. At the sound of Hall's feet on the cinders, Ross turned, fixing him with malignant, inflamed eyes. There was only the length of Hall's shadow between them, and it was not much longer at that hour of the day than the substance.

Ross did not challenge him; Hall went on to his door. There he stopped, looking at the end of the car as if figuring on the best place to cut a stovepipe hole, or tack up a bill of some kind, or even hang a doctor's sign. There was a movement of heels in the cinders behind him. Hall turned.

"Are you the splay-footed reptile from the slime of hades that calls himself a doctor?" Old Doc Ross inquired, his voice rough and uncertain as if he spoke out of the fog of a heavy sleep.

"I not only call myself a doctor, but I am a doctor," Hall replied calmly. "But my ticket didn't read from the place you mention, if that's what you want to know."

"Don't try to get smart with me, you half-boiled squab, or by the gods I'll cut the heart out of you, by the gods!"

Ross parted the skirts of his long coat to show the handle of a sheathed knife on one hand, the butt of a gun on the other.

“You don’t know me, you never heard of Old Doc Ross. I’m brimstone, I’m croton oil, I’m hell-fire and oil of mustard! I’m red pepper, by the gods!”

“Kind of a hot prescription, ain’t you?” said Hall, smiling in a tolerant way, as he might have smiled at the efforts of somebody honestly bent on amusing him, whose efforts were outlandish and uncouth.

Ross was not very steady on his legs. This fact, taken together with the little gang of spectators hanging off a hundred feet or so up the street, was sufficient proof for Hall that this seedy, vile old fellow had been roused out of his alcoholic stupor to put on an afternoon’s entertainment for the town. The crowd of expectant on-lookers was growing; the portly figure of Jim Justice was prominent on the front line.

Hall flared up against this public eagerness to see him humbled. Not satisfied with having unloaded a sneaking, cowardly murder on him only a few hours before, they had put him up now for a public spectacle. They had gone to work immediately with their ice water and coffee to rouse this hairy little old tarantula from his drunken sleep, knowing very well how to do it in the shortest way by the experimentations of the past. Jim Justice, who had seemed friendly enough last night, was now the moving spirit of this diversion, it appeared.

Hall looked up from this momentary cogitation, to see Ross coming nearer, holding his coat spread to show the weapons in his belt. The blustering old scoundrel could not have been more than two or three inches above five feet, Hall estimated. It was impossible for him to associate any thought of danger with this man, strutting

before him like some battered old rooster with wings outspread.

Ross' hat was pulled down to the bridge of his nose, his red eyes glaring in vaporous hostility out of the shadow. His face was streaked where the restoring ice water had cut channels through the grime; his little snub nose was red as a haw among the tangle of his beard.

"I'm red pepper, I'm lye!" he declared, with a certain kind of burned-out, depraved pride. "When I light on a wolf's hide water won't wash me off—I burn him to the guts, I eat through him gristle and bone! What're you doin' in my town, tryin' to sneak in and eat my practice out from under me, you hell-branded hyena? You've got mud on your belly, you sneak so close to the ground! What're you doin' here in my town, I say!"

"Maybe I didn't know it was your town," Hall replied, feeling very cheap for passing words with the offensive old buzzard on any kind of terms.

"You know it now, you sore-eyed wolf!"

"I've not got any designs on your practice in this town, Doctor Ross. I'm the railroad physician, my territory doesn't extend past this boxcar."

"I'm the railroad doctor, I've never resigned my appointment," Ross declared. "You can't sneak in here and carry off your false pretenses on this town."

Hall felt the annoyance of his situation keenly. The gang up the street was increasing every moment; Mrs. Charles and her daughters were watching from their kitchen door; the station agent was looking and listening with his head out of his bay window, passing comment on the show with his wife, stationed at a window of their living-quarters upstairs. Hall wanted to spoil their en-

tainment. If he could get Ross inside, and talk it over with him quietly, he believed the old barbarian might be placated.

“This is no place for gentlemen to discuss their differences,” Hall said, trying to appear frank and equal, although it was like lowering himself to the level of a hog. “Come inside, Dr. Ross; we’ll talk it over in private.”

“No, I’ll not go in! I’ll not breathe the same air with a spotted polecat like you! You’ll stand right here before me and take your orders, by the gods!”

The gang came edging down the street, hesitatingly, with tentative feet put out like men trying doubtful ice, consumed by eagerness to hear both sides of it, yet held in restraint by the caution of experience. Fireworks might begin any moment, a bullet might come spinning in the wild course that bullets commonly take in a public fray, and crack the bone of some voter’s leg.

Jim Justice, well to the front, was near enough now to see that Dr. Hall was not bulging anywhere with a hidden gun. He had not believed from the first that this man would descend to the common level by sticking a gun in his pocket in preparation for his inevitable reckoning with Old Doc Ross. Take a man with nickel-plated, judicial eyes like his and he’d trust to his bare-handed sufficiency through any kind of a scrape. The delight would be all the keener to see him stretch his long legs and gallop down the track toward Dodge, Old Doc Ross popping hot pills after him in his well-known, handy style.

Jim led on confidently after confirming his belief that Dr. Hall didn’t have a gun stuck around on him somewhere. The others came after him like cattle trailing

back some alarming scent, heads up, ready to stampede. They were ready to break for cover at the first shot from anybody's gun but Old Doc Ross's.

"I'm mean!" Old Doc Ross declared, his voice hoarse and strained like a camp-meeting preacher's. "I was raised on catamount livers, I drink ox gall by the pint! No man can come into my town and set up opposition to me. I've got a graveyard full of 'em that tried it."

Dr. Hall took a step toward him, Ross drawing back with a nimble leap.

"Don't approach me, or by the gods!" Ross threw his hand to his gun, looking every bit as mean as his self-proclaimed reputation.

"I wasn't going to touch you, Dr. Ross; I only wanted to talk to you, not for the entertainment of that bunch of loafers. I don't want to jerk your damn town from under you—I wouldn't have it as a gift. I'm the railroad doctor, and I'm here to stay as long as the company wants me. You keep on your side of the town and I'll stay on mine—unless I have business on yours. I'm not after your patients. I wouldn't touch 'em if you offered them to me on a hot shovel."

"There's just one way you can stay in this town," Ross declared loudly, in blustering contrast with Hall's low-modulated words, "and that's to buy my practice. I put it to every starved-out wildcat of your breed that strays into this town smellin' for something to grab away from me; I put it up on the block before 'em, fair and square. My practice in this town's worth fifteen hundred dollars. You can hand me over the cash money for it, or you can hit the grit. Them's your orders. Put 'em in your craw and grind 'em."

“I wouldn’t give you fifteen cents for everything you own, past, present and future prospects,” Dr. Hall replied, loud enough to be heard by the deafest one in the crowd. “If you don’t like my company in this town, the road’s open for you to leave. It’s a cinch I’m not going.”

“By the gods!” Ross fumed, so wrathful over this bold defiance he seemed to stand there and chew his words. “By the eternal gods! if you’re hangin’ around this town in the morning, I’ll let daylight through you!”

“Now I guess that’s about all for you, old duck,” Hall said.

“It ain’t half, you lean-bellied whizzer! I’m red pepper, I’m concentrated lye! Whenever I touch a wolf’s hide I take the hair off, I burn him to the holler, I scorch him to the melts! If you’re sneakin’ around here at nine o’clock to-morrow morning, by the eternal gods! I’ll make a smoke behind you they can see from here to Dodge.”

“You poor old soak!” Hall said, more in compassion than scorn. “You couldn’t bluff a crow. When you’re sober and sensible—if you ever get that way—come around and talk to me.”

Hall had no feeling for this selfmade rival but half-pitying contempt. That there was any danger in so much bluster, such loud declamation for the benefit of those who had groomed him for his act, was not even in his thought. He turned his back to Old Doc Ross, went into his boxcar office and closed the door after him, to let the old villain see how seriously his bombast was appraised.

Old Doc Ross was not in any mind to have it that way. He began to prance around in the cinders after trying the door and finding it locked. He raged along the side of

the car to the other end, tried that door with no better success; came storming back to the more public end, where he stood commanding the interloper to come out and take his orders.

Dr. Hall sat in his untried surgical chair, greatly annoyed, not a little disturbed by a growing belief that Ross might be more dangerous in that clouded borderland between drunkenness and sobriety, than he appeared. He had nothing but a surgical knife to defend himself with in case the old scoundrel should break in, as he was threatening now in loud voice to do.

Hall was considering his situation with a cold feeling of apprehension, recalling Mrs. Charles' unfeigned concern. He regretted coming in. That was a bad move; it would look like dodging to the gang in the street, and it had worked on Old Doc Ross like a retreat before a hesitant dog. He was looking through the open door in the partition toward the exit in the farther end, thinking of going out that way, when Old Doc Ross began drilling bullets through the front door.

The surgical chair stood in the middle of the floor, in direct line of the bullets which were splintering through the thin planks of the door. Hall jumped over to the wall, where he stood trying to make himself flat, thinking that was a poor place for a man to be shut in, with a red-eyed old soak pegging away at his coop before an appreciative crowd.

"Come out and take your orders!" Ross yelled. Then a splintering crash, the roar of the gun, a little pause. "Come out and take your orders!" The bullets smacked the partition, going on through as if there was nothing in the way.



It was a trying situation for the new railroad doctor, pressing his shoulder-blades against the wall, hoping a bullet might not be deflected in passing through the door, twist over and bite him in that inglorious predicament. He had not been afraid when they were shooting at him in the square, but this was different. It was so different there was no comparison at all.

There was a break in the assault. Hall listened, sweating in suspense, hoping the old scoundrel would go away. But he was only loading his gun. When he opened up again it was without any shouting, two quick shots which sent the doorknob rattling to the floor. And there was Old Doc Ross, holding the door open with one hand, the other shoving his pistol in, leaning with a cautious, inquiring look, as if he did not know what to expect.

“Come out and take your orders!” he growled, hoarser than ever from his yelling. “I ain’t goin’ to kill you right now.”

The gang had come down to the railroad, no doubt disappointed in its turning out a one-sided show. They had seen Old Doc Ross perform before. The proper curtain to this show would have been the long-legged young doctor fading out in the distance down the track. They edged up a little when they saw Dr. Hall come out, Old Doc Ross backing away from the door.

“You’re to do the listenin’ and me the talkin’,” said Ross. “Stand there.”

Before he got his mouth shut on the last word, Old Doc Ross was sidewinding under an open-handed swipe to the side of the head that fairly set his whiskers on fire. He slammed up against the end of the car, where Dr. Hall laid hold of him with rough hands, wrenched the gun

away from him, doubled him ingloriously across his knee and stripped him of his holster and knife.

Then the assembled voters of Damascus saw the young doctor fold back the long coat-tails of his notorious competitor, and apply a spanking to his obscene old carcass such as a grown man never had laid on him before in the memory of those who watched. Old Doc Ross took the punishment with hoarse outbursts of blasphemous bel-  
lowing, with kickings of the heels, squirmings and twist-  
ings, all as ineffectual as the struggles of an infant across the maternal knee.

When Dr. Hall felt that the humiliating chastisement had gone far enough, he upended Old Doc Ross, planted him squarely before the crowd, held him steady by the back of the neck, and gave him a sound and solid kick. It sent the old ruffian off with such speed that his short legs were not equal to the pace. He fell, sliding his nose through the cinders, bringing up at the very feet of Jim Justice in a cloud of dust.

Dr. Hall turned around, as from some ordinary job, such as throwing a cat out of the door, picked up Old Doc Ross's formidable weapons, went into his boxcar office and kicked the bullet-splintered door shut in the faces of the gang that had come down to the railroad to see the thing played out to quite a different end. From the door of the kitchen across the track, Dr. Hall heard a loud burst of unrestrained, appreciative laughter.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE LADIES

**THERE** are always pantalooned bipeds enough to make a crowd in a town like Damascus, who have nothing to do but collect on some convenient roost and talk it over when something happens, nationally, locally, or even in the remote reaches of the earth. Local news is preferred above all others, to be sure. A fight in Damascus was of far more lively interest, and certainly of more importance in their conception of relativity, than a revolution in Mexico or the massacre of a British general in Egypt.

The crowd that had assembled to witness Old Doc Ross's suppression of competition in the medical field west of Dodge, and lend him the encouragement of its appreciative and partisan presence, reassembled on the hotel porch shortly after the downfall of their champion, to talk the thing over from all points, groping around to discover the weak spot in their tactics that had been responsible for the overthrow of Old Doc Ross.

Ed Kraus was there, and Larrimore, the town cobbler, who had a lean little stock of shoes on the other side of his cobbling room; Dine Fergus, ready with his wit, and Jim Justice, distended in his wisdom. Several others were on hand who have no part to play before you in this small drama of a far-off place and day. The downfall of Old Doc Ross was incomprehensible to them all.

The old feller was so bowed down by disgrace and humiliation, Justice said, they never need look to see him lift his head in Damascus again. In all his fighting experience Old Doc Ross never had suffered such contumelious subjection. To be boxed on the whiskers, spread out and spanked before the public eye, was more than his proud spirit could bear, Justice declared. Old Doc Ross's heart was broken. That would be the end of him.

Doc Ross had been stunned by the vulgarity of his competitor's fighting method, they all agreed. Nobody ever had man-handled him before, putting foot to his flesh in coarse expression of scorn. It seemed to Doc Ross, they said, taking it from his mumbled expressions and maudlin tears as he left the scene of his defeat, as if the upstart doctor had disdained to fight him as an equal, mauling him that way as if he were nothing but a common ruffian. What could a gentleman with a gun do, Old Doc Ross had asked, turning a sad face upon his disappointed partisans, against a scoundrel who fought like a mule?

That was what Old Doc Ross wanted to know, and there did not appear to be anybody well enough versed in chivalry in that town to answer him. Unable to find consolation in words, Old Doc Ross had gone back to the balm in bottles that was available to the hands of down-spirited gentlemen in Damascus. He had continued his carouse, his eyes black from the mauling he had taken, his little red nose rasped raw by his slide through the cinders.

That new company doctor, Jim Justice said, appeared to be a feller who always took hold of the wrong end of

the stick without getting his fingers burned. By the special dispensation in favor of fools, he had come through two scrapes in as many days with a whole hide, his high opinion of himself undiminished by the slightest degree. If that kind of luck continued there would be no putting up with him; they'd have to turn the town over to him and get out. It had been Jim's great hope to see the long-legged new doctor disappear like a pair of galloping shears down the railroad. He had given humorous expression to this anticipated pleasure, which made disappointment a very large and bitter pill.

"Yes, and what's this town goin' to do with Old Doc Ross drove off on another drunk that may last two weeks?" Larrimore wanted to know. "We might all break our legs or git pizenened, and nobody to look after us—nobody that I'd trust to set no leg of mine, anyhow."

"He couldn't cure a cat," Dine Fergus said, giving it such a twist of disdain in word and facial grimace that it was almost nasty.

"My wife's got to have somebody to 'tend to her purty soon, and that's a cinch," Kraus said, proclaiming the condition of his spouse with the peculiar indelicacy common to men of his class. "It ain't goin' to be a doctor that's so green he has to hold a book in one hand while he works with the other."

"Did he do that?" Fergus inquired greedily. "Did he git out a book to study up what to do to old Bill Cottrell?"

"He set there nearly all night readin' some kind of a book, it had a black back *like* a medicine book, but I can't say positive it was one," Justice testified. He said it with such mean innuendo that no doubt was left in the

one-thought heads of the loafers assembled before his door.

"Several other women'll be needin' a doctor's attention purty soon, from what I've noticed," Larrimore said. "I'm darned glad mine ain't one of 'em. I wouldn't trust that feller to fetch a calf into this world, let alone a kid."

Larrimore was a young man, dark and surly, resentful of his condition in life, spitefully envious of everybody whose profits or earnings were greater than his own. He had a dark saying that the world owed him a living, always hinting by his manner that he was just about ready with his plans for enforcing the collection. He had a hedge of upended black hair that gave him the appearance of one of those crested barnyard fowls of Mediterranean breed which is always a trouble maker among its kind. His wife, whom he was not above giving a slap now and then, was sitting cowed and saddened in the little room behind the shop, waiting to explain to customers that her husband had been so busy he hadn't got around to their half-soles yet.

"He says he didn't come here to practice in town," Justice sneered, "but I wouldn't like to tempt him by offerin' him a case."

"He was so anxious to get one he rushed in among the bullets after it," Dine said, feigning an appreciation of the enterprising spirit in his subtle way of wit so keenly relished by his world.

"He thinks he saved Bill Cottrell's life," Justice told them, chuckling over the absurdity.

"I wonder what Charley Burnett'd say about that?" Dine speculated, with scornful lifting of his upper lip in

the cute little smile so fetching among the young ladies of Damascus. "Old Charley cut loose at 'em from the winder of his office before—"

"He'll hear from Charley, don't you worry. Charley ain't around swallerin' no talk like that feller handed him at the inquest."

This came from Larrimore, whose greatest pleasure lay in the contemplation of collections and adjustments of matters in arrears.

"Do you suppose Bill's wife she'll keep him on the case when she comes?"

Kraus put it as a general question, an open bid for the opinions of all.

"I've been wonderin'," Justice replied.

Jim was sitting tilted back in his accustomed place, the legs of his chair in the little depressions which held them secure against a slip. His hands were clasped across his replete paunch, his walrus face expressed the satisfaction he always found in taking a crack at somebody behind his back. It had been a life-long diversion. Jim had started bushwhacking when he was seventeen.

"I'll bet if we could sober Old Doc Ross up she wouldn't keep Hall on the case a minute," Kraus said. "I think some of us fellers ought to take him down to the barn and see if we can't git him goin' straight."

"Couldn't be done in time," Justice said, shaking his head in sad expression of fatuity. "She'll be here on the ten-seven to-night. Judge Waters got a wire from her this morning."

"Might as well order Bill's coffin, then," Kraus declared.

"Well, Hall's got this town into a lot of trouble," Justice sighed. "If it hadn't been for him takin' a hand where nobody didn't ask him—"

"Nor want him," Larrimore cut in. "We can take care of ourselves here in Damascus."

"If it hadn't been for him interferin'," Justice continued, a little curved off from his main course, but determined, "we'd 'a' drove them fool boys off without killin' any of them. Simrall wouldn't 'a' had any come-back on us then. I told him as much last night."

"What did he say?" Dine inquired, craftily curious.

"He said did we want them fellers to murder old Bill Cottrell and go on away without anybody interferin' with 'em. I said I guessed we'd 'a' made out without any of his help."

"They know over in Simrall by now who they've got their come-back on," said Larrimore. A glance of appreciative understanding passed between him and Fergus. Kraus sat like a sack of bran, his long back against a post of the porch, his dull face inexpressive of any interest. Justice shifted a little, making his chair creak.

"Bill Cottrell was a derved old fool, slashin' around the way he did," Justice growled. "If he'd a kep' his danged old gun where it belonged they never would 'a' took a shot at him. When a man runs out with a gun in his hand lookin' for trouble, my experience has been he's purty sure to find it."

"Do you think he'll live?" Larrimore inquired.

"No, I don't. He's too old. Mortification'll set in tomorrow and he'll go. This slick doctor stands around tiptoein' like he's tryin' to lift himself by his boot-years, lookin' wise and knowin' nothin', actin like he's had a



thousand cases like it, but I'll bet money he never had one before."

"The company'll wish it'd kep' Old Doc Ross—"

"Here he comes!" Fergus warned, cutting Kraus short.

Dr. Hall passed the loafers as if they were so many stones, although he recognized all of them as members of the late moral force behind Ross. He relieved the woman whom he had engaged to watch by Major Cottrell. The patient had regained consciousness, she reported, and fallen into a weary sleep.

Hall felt that he had been unfaithful to his charge, in a measure, concerned to see that he had been gone four hours, although there was nothing more to be done for Cottrell in his present state. Not altogether undisturbed by what had passed since his arrival in Damascus, nor entirely quiet concerning the future, Hall took up his vigil beside the wounded man, the black book that had brought the scorn of Jim Justice upon him, in his hand.

This was a book not more than a quarter as big as the standard medical volume, and as much like such work outwardly as it was inwardly, although it had much to say of a man who had suffered a wound. Tristram Shandy was the name of that book. Dr. Hall sat reading it by the window until the light of day failed away in the west. He was reading it by the light of the lamp when Mrs. Cottrell and her daughter Elizabeth entered the room something past ten o'clock that night.

Mrs. Cottrell was a placid lady several years younger than her husband, a capable woman, firm without severity. She still had much of the grace of figure and face that had been her fame throughout the far-set army posts of the western frontier thirty years before. A comely woman,

warm in her manner, direct in her way, resourceful and self-reliant, as pioneer women, above all other pioneers, must be. Her dark, wavy hair was a little gray, embellishment, rather than detracting, to the youthful flush of her cheeks. Dr. Hall felt Major Bill Cottrell's chances advance thirty percent the moment she entered the room.

Elizabeth carried much of her mother's grace, standing tall like her, yet not assertively tall. She was wearing a broad-brimmed, low-crowned black Leghorn hat, rather floppy in appearance and pliant of brim, which was the mode among young women of that period. This headgear was adorned by nothing more than a broad ribbon.

Her serge dress had something of military look about it, probably due to the brass buttons on the jacket. Dr. Hall noted, in the quick look he gave her to see mainly how she came up to Jim Justice's description of her, that her face appeared thin and anxious, and that her eyebrows were too heavy; that her hair was the tinge of new cider, a dusty, cloudy blonde, which might be better, or worse, by day.

Justice came puffing into the room after them, leaving some luggage in the hall. Mrs. Cottrell went straight to the bedside, where she stood a moment looking into her sleeping husband's face, which was shaded by a card thrust into the burner of the lamp. Elizabeth followed, standing silently beside her. Dr. Hall stood by the little table supporting the lamp, finger between the pages of his book.

"This is the doctor, Dr. Hall," Justice said, seeming to disclaim any responsibility for him in his off-hand way of speaking.

Mrs. Cottrell turned quickly, offering her hand. Tears

were brimming her eyes, her lips were trembling, but her soft voice was steady when she spoke.

"I am Mrs. Cottrell," she said, finishing Jim's one-sided introduction. "My daughter, Dr. Hall."

Elizabeth was not as steady as her mother. Her grief at sight of her father stretched out as white and silent as if ready for the grave numbed her beyond words. The pain of it was reflected in her face and stricken eyes.

"Oh, now," said Dr. Hall, putting down his book, comfort, assurance, in his almost brisk words, "it isn't as bad as that."

"I can't tell you what relief we feel to find Major Cottrell in the hands of a competent physician," the mother said, at once brightened and cheered by his comforting manner of confidence. "We didn't know another doctor had come to Damascus, we trembled for the consequences, thinking all the time he was in other hands. Were you with him from the first?"

"I had that good fortune, madam."

"It was ours," she returned, expressing a volume in her simple words.

"Will he get well, Dr. Hall?" Elizabeth asked, pleading hope in her low-pitched voice, a great, heart-finding appeal in her solemn brown eyes.

"I think so."

Dr. Hall spoke brightly, with as much comfort in his words as if he had made no little corner of reservation at all. He looked very well satisfied, very easy in mind and conscience, very competent and kindly judicial—dang his nickel-plated eyes! thought Justice—as he stood lifting himself to his toes with slow, easy movement of confident strength.

"Oh, thank you!" breathed Elizabeth, sighing away a vast encumbrance of trouble and doubt.

"It was a godsend you were with him from the first!" Mrs. Cottrell said, her voice vibrant with emotion, softer for the great flood of thankfulness that suffused her eyes and made her hearty face pale.

"He was right here," said Justice, his coarseness so evident upon him in this refined company. "He's the feller—"

"I am the new railroad doctor, Mr. Justice would say," Dr. Hall interrupted, giving the old bushwhacker a silencing look. "I'm not a practitioner in general. The local doctor was—that is to say—I believe he—"

"Was drunk, as usual," said Elizabeth. "Thank heaven!"

"Blind," said Justice, with large elucidation. Then he added, to give it emphasis and remove all doubt: "Blind-stinkin' drunk."

Jim saw which way the wind stood for Old Doc Ross in that company. He wanted to make a show of coming over to the right side.

Mrs. Cottrell asked about the nature of her husband's wound, the cloud of trouble that had cleared for a little while out of her face settling darkly again as Dr. Hall explained. She had thought for a few moments, from the doctor's comforting assurance, that it had not been as serious as she had been informed in the news which brought her home.

"I don't look for any complications, everything is satisfactory, pointing to a quick recovery," Dr. Hall said. "He has vitality enough for two men."

"He's past sixty-five, Doctor," Mrs. Cottrell said doubtfully. "He looks so tired and hopeless."

"But, mother, Dr. Hall says he'll get well," Elizabeth reminded her.

"I'm sure he will, too," Mrs. Cottrell said brightly, either putting her fears aside or making a brave show of doing so.

"Your physician will agree with me, I'm certain," Dr. Hall declared, lifting himself with easy elasticity of muscle, settling back to his heels as if putting a period to all doubt.

"We have no doctor, there's no doctor in Damascus, nor anywhere near, but this besotted old ruffian, Ross. It was a special providence that saved Major Cottrell from his hands. It isn't a question of ethics at all, Dr. Hall—I know what you're thinking—but of necessity. You'll see him through?"

"Yes; I'll see him through," Dr. Hall returned, so quietly, so kindly, so full of that humane confidence of his that the hearts of the two women rose to him in a surge of great friendliness.

"He's sleepin' as peaceful as a baby," said Justice, determined to ingratiate himself by sympathy, strange as that way was to his scoffing habit.

"I'll stay with him till he wakes," Mrs. Cottrell said quietly. "Mr. Justice, please show my daughter to our rooms. Dr. Hall, you look tired—"

"He was with him all night, didn't shut his eyes," said Jim.

"You can tell me what there is to be done, I'm not inexperienced, to my past sorrow and anxiety, Dr. Hall. I

thought his fighting days were over. He's too old for that."

Dr. Hall gave her the few instructions necessary, while Justice went away with Elizabeth. When Dr. Hall was going to his room for the sleep he needed so acutely that it was almost pain to bear, Justice stopped him in the hall.

"I didn't have a chance to explain to you how I come to be down there with that crowd of bums this afternoon, Doc," he said.

"Oh, that's all right; I understand it perfectly," said Hall, annoyed by the interference, waving him aside impatiently.

"I don't want you to git me wrong, Doc," Jim insisted. "I told them fellers when they started that I'd see 'em carry their joke—it wasn't nothing but a joke, Doc—" blandly, suave discount in his tone—"told 'em I'd see 'em carry their little joke just so fur, and no funder. I told 'em that when they started down there with Old Doc Ross. I had my old gun on me, and I aimed to square off and use it if I saw that joke goin' too fur. That's what I was aimin' to do, Doc—I was goin' to square right off and throw lead."

"Thank you," said Hall, in the tone of a man unconvinced, and too indifferent to be either sarcastic or scornful. He went on, leaving Justice drawing his bushy eyebrows in a scowl as he looked after him.

"Damn your nickel-plated eyes!" said Jim, but well under his breath, not force enough in it to move his mustache the width of its thinnest hair.

## CHAPTER IX

### SOD HOUSE ARISTOCRACY

DURING the days of Major Cottrell's convalescence Dr. Hall did nothing to enlarge either his acquaintance or his popularity in town. He had removed his belongings from the West Plains Hotel to his boxcar apartment, where he was installed in comfort. Mrs. Charles had taken him into her boarding-train for his meals on the footing of one of the railroad fraternity. She favored him as she did the roadmaster when that general of the jerries stopped in for a meal, "settin' him in" as she expressed it, at her private table in one end of the kitchen, along with herself and daughters. There always was a cloth on the table, and a great deal of blackberry pie.

Dr. Hall was conscious of an unfriendly feeling as he passed through town on his daily visits to Major Cottrell at the hotel. The humorists of Damascus were not good dissemblers; their animosity stood in their eyes. Old Doc Ross was still out on his bender. Dr. Hall had seen him on the street several times, always headed toward the saloon, traveling as straight as a bee, stability of locomotion, even under a load, being a trait for which Ross was greatly admired in Damascus. More than once when he had passed the saloon Hall had seen the old rascal watching him over the swinging half-doors, furtive as a harried old badger at the mouth of its den.

It was a matter of indifference to Hall whether they liked or disliked him in that town. His future fortunes were in no way connected with it, he reasoned, his stay there being in its nature only vacational, a short break in the heavier exactions of his life. Beyond that little experience on the railroad frontier the serious business of his profession awaited for him to take it up again. Certainly that resumption would not be undertaken in the bleak town of Damascus. It was too far west of Dodge; that was what everybody said. Dr. Hall repeated the dismal refrain with a feeling of disdain. It always sounded to him like the defense of insufficient men who were to be tried presently for cowardice and failure, and shamefully convicted before the world.

Taking it by Jim Justice's demeanor, which Hall felt was a good barometer of public sentiment, Damascus appeared meanly resentful of the railroad doctor's presence. It was as if he had done the town a service which it was too mean to be grateful for, after the nature of small people everywhere, or an injury that it could not forgive.

Hall could not believe these slinking fellows with their come-easy little businesses, their traps for the unwary, their crooked small games, had any deep interest in the town. It could not be much to them whether Damascus held the county seat, or Simrall came with its wagons and teams, put skids under the brick court house and carried it away, as he had heard of triumphant factions doing with court houses in that country, where court houses seemed to be prized among the people above the justice which was vaguely supposed to have its seat within them.

The true defenders of Damascus, Judge Waters had



told him, were the farmers and ranchmen in the country around it. Their interests were lively, their partisanship fiery. To these whiskered, shaggy, sharp-eyed men who lived in the mysterious envelopment of the prairie, the court house at Damascus was the sacred Kaaba. They covered it with the holy carpet of their defense.

With this feeling of interest apart from the town, Dr. Hall walked through Custer Street one fair morning on his way to pay his first visit to Major Cottrell in his own home. The hardy old soldier had made a quick recovery under the ministrations of modern surgery. Damascus called it luck, with a sneer, and disparaging comparisons with the past achievements of Old Doc Ross. Mrs. Cottrell called it a marvel, and placed her gratitude where it belonged.

Hall met few people with whom he was acquainted that morning, although Custer Street was busier than he had seen it before. Many teams were hitched around the square, the sidewalks were thronged with rough-clad men carrying new tools and implements, weapons for the big battle they were engaging with the soil.

Major Bill Cottrell's sod house looked as if it had been built in the angle of a square. It was proportioned in the same manner as that principal working tool of a mason, being much longer in the main stem than the branch. There was nothing imposing about it, either in style or scope, where it stood gray and crumbling on top of a small knoll at the edge of town.

More like something designed for military, rather than domestic, purposes Major Cottrell's house appeared, its bleak angle presenting to the northwest, its doors and windows out of plumb, its situation as bare as if the rest-

less besom of the wind had swept away every shrub and plant like a lashing flame.

The structure showed joints in the clumsy masonry of sod, where it had been enlarged from time to time, although all of it appeared to be of one age. Rain had guttered its walls; it was pitted as if by cannon-shots where the grass roots which bound the sod had given away, dropping earth along the base of the wall. The attrition of winds which never quieted had rounded its corners: rains had made gullies of the narrow buffalo trails which ran down to the river past its door.

The roof was slightly conical, an arch greatly flattened, sod-covered, making all of it but the shallow plank gables seem one with the walls, and the dun earth from which they were fashioned. This sod covering served the triple purpose of insulating against heat in summer, turning the winter cold, and anchoring the roof against the gales which raged over the unfenced country in the fall.

There were three doors and four windows, almost as long as doors, their sills being but a few inches above the ground, in the front of Major Cottrell's house; two windows in the shorter wing. Behind the house some low sod buildings for sheltering livestock and fowls could be seen, flanked by a corral with high gate which could be opened from the saddle by a long lever. A fence surrounded the house, embracing about two acres in its enclosure. Tumble-weeds of last autumn were banked against its wires, which were bulged inwardly by pressure of the wind against this melancholy drift. There was not a tree nearer than the river, not a shrub nor flower; not even a bramble of wild prairie rose. Nothing but a mangy growth of buffalo grass, through which a deep

pathway was worn from gateless gap in the wire fence to the front door.

To this dreary appearing abode Major Cottrell had been conveyed the day before in his own phaëton, making quite a show of his virility by walking down and taking a seat in it without assistance. Dr. Hall feared he might have overdone himself. He expected to find the old man stretched out in bed.

Major Cottrell was sitting in an armchair by a sunny window, chewing a strip of dried beef. There was nothing equal to it, he said, for building a man up after the weakness of a wound. He was cheerful among the Indian scalps and war bonnets, robes, weapons and barbaric pictures on tanned skins, which adorned his walls.

The sod house was much more comfortable within than its crude exterior promised, even cheerful with its bright Indian trappings and trophies. A door stood open between Major Cottrell's apartment and another, where an ancient grand piano, huge and sombre, could be seen standing well out from the wall. A red tam-o'-shanter cap was thrown carelessly on the keys, yellow as the teeth of some old smoker. The cap suggested youth and sprightliness, but youth had not appeared.

In spite of his romantic appearance, Major Cottrell was a well-balanced, modest man. Living in the isolation of his prairie home, for almost a generation the outpost of civilization, he had kept to the fashions and habits of a time long past, not aware that romance and chivalry had perished out of the frontier when Custer fell on that bleak Montana hill.

His long hair and great white mustache, his little pat of beard, were not the theatrical affectations of a vain,

spectacular man. They were the caste-marks of his rank; he clung to them as one treasures the endearments of a day that cannot be lived again, unconscious of any incongruity in a smirking, short-haired age. He was a Merovingian prince among barber-shop slaves.

When Dr. Hall told him he could not see any need of coming again, Major Cottrell agreed that it was so. He made a dignified request for the physician's bill, to bristle up in affronted dignity when told there was no bill.

"You must not conclude from my poor surroundings, sir, that I'm not able to pay you, and pay you sufficiently," Major Cottrell said, injury giving place to his stern dignity.

Dr. Hall was standing beside the major, Mrs. Cottrell facing him, a tinge of shame in her cheeks. Dr. Hall smiled all her question and confusion away, rising to his tiptoes in his elastic, overtowering habit, as if he lifted himself above the perplexities of people for the satisfaction of smiling down on their petty troubles.

"I am the railroad doctor, you know, Major Cottrell," Hall explained, "on salary by the year. I have no right, really, to take any case outside railroad employes, and certainly no right to charge anybody for such casual service. It's all square; it was nothing but one neighbor giving another a hand."

"You mean, then, if I owe anybody I owe the railroad company?"

"When you come right down to cases, as these folks say, that would be the way to consider it. But—"

"Then I'll take this first chance in a lifetime to beat a railroad company out of something," Major Cottrell said, looking up at the towering tall doctor, crinkles of

humor around his lively bright eyes. "Money might pay you," he continued, his face clouding with seriousness, "for your surgical attention, but money can't reach the other service I'm indebted to you for, young man."

"There's no obligation at all," Dr. Hall protested, as he had protested at least ten times during the past ten days. "I ask you to forget it, sir, and say no more. Why," he hurried on, bending to look into the major's face, "do you know what they're saying down-town about me, Major? They say I was so eager to get a patient I fanned the bullets off like flies that day."

"The devil they do! Let me hear one of the scoundrels as much as intimate—"

"Pretty good joke on a new doctor, don't you think?" appealing to Mrs. Cottrell, whose appreciation of the town's humor was no less apparent than the major's.

"No, I do *not*, Dr. Hall," she replied indignantly. "It's the friends and supporters of that old quack Ross, and nobody else."

"There's a scoundrel who has imposed on this community too long," Major Cottrell declared hotly. "I'm going to have Elizabeth—Elizabeth! 'Lisbeth, honey! Where is that girl?"

"Co-o-oming, pop," an indistinct voice replied from a far-off portion of the house.

"Combing, rather, I think she means," Mrs. Cottrell said, laughing. "She sounds like a mouthful of hairpins. What do you want her for, William?"

"I want her to—Elizabeth," as the young lady suddenly flung open the door that led into the mysteries of the house beyond the major's room, stopping on seeing the doctor, but catching herself instantly in her well-poised

way, laughter in her eyes—"Lizzie, my dear, I want you to bring your typewriter in here and take a letter. I'm going to report Old Doc Ross to the board, I've been threatening to do it for a year. I don't believe the old villain's any more a doctor than I am. He's got to get out of this community with his bulldozing and quackery."

"Right now, pop?"

"Right now," the major replied, emphatically.

"We'll burn him up," Elizabeth said, turning away to get her machine.

"Dr. Hall will help us with the proper phraseology," Major Cottrell announced, rather than requested.

"And the typewriter, if I may?"

"Sure," Elizabeth agreed cheerfully. "Right this way—right along this way."

Mrs. Cottrell attended, for the sake of propriety, smiling appreciatively, young at heart as she was thirty years ago, the expedition leading into Elizabeth's boudoir, where the typewriter stood beside a window, with something in it that looked like verse. This the young lady snatched out of the roller with a rip, and sequestered in a drawer of her commode, which stood open. She slammed the drawer shut on its poetic, as well as its material, secrets, some of which had stood revealed in white and pink, laughing in gay relief, a teasing, challenging gladness in her eyes.

"'Roses is red, and vi'lets is blue'," said Dr. Hall.

"It was not—*it was not!*" Elizabeth protested, redder than any amount of roses that could be imagined, and lovelier—thought Dr. Hall—by far.

What of this Elizabeth? he wondered, following after her with typewriter and stand, she going ahead with

mock ceremony of opening the door and ushering him like a plenipotentiary. What of this Elizabeth? so radiant, so warm with the pulse of youth, something unroused, unexperienced, lying in the still depths of her brown eyes. It was something he could not answer, coming after her with the burden he had relieved her of, as he felt he should very cheerfully and happily undertake to do again, the happy chance presenting.

What of this Elizabeth, indeed! What of any young lady with the dare of youth in her eyes, the gleam of youth in her smile, the glory of youth in her glittering hair? That is man's eternal question. Let him answer it in his own way, in his own time, for there is none to help him, however great his perplexity or need.

When Major Cottrell had the letter drafted to his satisfaction, after several appeals to Dr. Hall, Elizabeth was put to the job of making a straightforward copy. As she wrote, Major Cottrell sat looking out of the window, which gave a view of the main road running between Simrall and Damascus, marveling on the number of vehicles and horsemen abroad in the land that day.

"They're beguiled by the promise of this country, poor devils!" he sighed. "It looks smiling and friendly and full of blooms these spring days, with water in every runlet, but it isn't a farming country, Dr. Hall; its temptations are spread to lure them to destruction. There's hardship ahead for these poor, deluded people who have rushed in here on the railroad land agents' promises and representations of a paradise."

"I've wondered what there is to all the talk about the hardships of this country," said Hall. "Nearly everybody I've talked to, Judge Waters, I think, is the one

exception, has knocked the country hard. It's too far west of Dodge, they say, for anybody, or anything, to prosper. But you've been here a long time; it hasn't broken you."

"It would have, if I'd been foolish enough to try to farm it, at least the way these corn-country men are trying to do it. I'll have to revise my general statement that it isn't a farming country. I mean it's not a farming country in the corn and hogs sense. If the right crop can be found to stand the drouths and hot winds, the land's as good as any that lays out of doors. But I don't know whether the Almighty ever made anything but buffalo grass for this country. If he did, I've never seen it."

"That very thing was brought to my notice yesterday by a man who is confident he has solved it, Major."

"What's he got? who is he?"

"A young fellow by the name of Holbrook, from southeastern Kansas. He's planning to put in forty acres of a stuff called kafir corn."

"I never heard of it."

"It's new to me, too, but I'm not a farmer. Holbrook bought a section of railroad land that somebody got on by mistake and worked for two years before they ousted him—"

"Milt Welch's place, I guess. The county surveyor was to blame. Welch thought he was on school land, broke in forty or fifty acres of sod. His work all went for nothing. So he's got that section, heh? Good location. How did you come to run into him?"

"His little boy, two years old, had a bad throat. They thought it was diphtheria. You know that old fellow



Ross isn't straightened up yet. In a terrible state, poor old sinner."

"So you went out there and looked after the baby? That place isn't more than a mile from Simrall."

"Holbrook and his wife are exceptional young people, both from the agricultural college at Manhattan. He says—"

"Did you have your gun?" Major Cottrell interrupted sternly.

"No, sir; I haven't even got a gun."

"I wouldn't go over that way without one, and it would be better if somebody went along with you. You must not ignore, or even attempt to ignore, the gravity of your situation in this community, Dr. Hall."

"But I haven't got any feud with Simrall, Major."

"I know, I know. You're carrying my troubles, but you'll not do it an hour after I'm on my feet again. If Damascus is afraid to take the responsibility for that worthless Bud Sandiver I'm not. But don't go out there again without some preparations for defense. If nothing else, carry a shotgun—it's nearer the deserts of that pack of hounds than any other weapon, anyway."

"Thank you. Holbrook says this kafir stuff stands six weeks or so of drouth and flourishes on it. He's got a contract with a Kansas City seed house for all he can grow, came out here for that purpose, where the country's new, so his seed strain will be kept pure, he says. He's to get two dollars a bushel for his seed, he says."

"But what eats the stuff? where's the market?"

"Every kind of domestic animal and fowl thrives on it, Holbrook says. They grind it for stock. It's an old-country grain, centuries old, he says."

"I'll have to look into that. There's something to replace range cattle in this country—the Almighty must have made something. I'll have to look into that. Two dollars a bushel is away too high for feed, though. It would have to come down to fifty cents to make it any practical use."

"I don't know, but I hope Holbrook can make a go of it. He appears to be a fine, clean young man."

"How is the baby?" Elizabeth inquired, turning abruptly from her letter. She had been sitting with fingers idle on the keys since the first mention of the visit to the hostile neighborhood.

"What baby?" Mrs. Cottrell asked, coming into the room at that moment.

"Some farmer's kid Dr. Hall went over to Simrall to see yesterday, mother."

"Why, Dr. Hall!" Mrs. Cottrell's eyes were as full of fear as if he had come from some notorious plague district, carrying contagion into her home. "You must not put your life in danger—"

"It was only tonsilitis," Dr. Hall said assuringly. "The child's all right."

"The child!" Elizabeth repeated with meaning stress, as if he had been caught in some woeful dereliction and offered a poor excuse. Her fingers rushed to their work again, with a sound like hail on a tin roof.

Mrs. Cottrell looked at the tall doctor tenderly, understanding him better than he understood himself.

## CHAPTER X

### A MAN WITHOUT A GUN

MAJOR COTTRELL would not trust the prying eyes and sharper curiosity of the local postmaster with that letter to the state medical board in the matter of Old Doc Ross. It must go by registered mail, which made an errand for Elizabeth to the post office. If Dr. Hall would wait a minute while she smoothed up her countenance, she said, she would trot along with him that far on his way back to the boxcar beside the track.

Dr. Hall was willing enough. He never had appeared in public with Elizabeth, he never had seen what her behavior abroad was like. He wondered if she would appear presently weighted down by a gun, and from that speculation galloped on to a more disturbing one: whether she ever had shot a cigar out of a voter's mouth in Damascus.

He discounted the probability to zero. That was some distortion of public report, a tradition without foundation taken up by new arrivals like Jim Justice, and colored to fit their own melodramatic tastes. Justice had called her a wild girl, profanely wild. Dr. Hall reflected that he had seen quieter, more retiring and colorless ones, but he never had met a more modest one.

He could not recall a girl half as charming out of all the clouds of them that had drifted like autumn butterflies across his road. He remembered sorority houses

full of them, a campus full of them, hospitals full of them, flitting in white uniforms and dainty caps, eyes all set for a young doctor, but none of them that made the heart quicken like this Elizabeth of the country west of Dodge.

His discernment must have been at low ebb that first night, he thought with scorn, when he had compared the color of her hair to new cider. It was comparable to no beverage so base as cider, but something more rare, more precious and volatile. Champagne, perhaps, although his acquaintance with that liquor was vague.

Elizabeth came back almost immediately, wearing a dark-blue sailor hat which made her look very summery, together with some kind of a light dress—with adorable little sprangles of pink flowers in it—that gave her a joyous and sprightly air. If Dr. Hall had known that she had put the dress on in anticipation of his coming, he would have been completely undone. As it was, he did not even suspect it. When a man is young, he knows so little about the ladies; when he is keen enough to understand them, he is too old for the wisdom to do him any good.

There was a picture of General Custer in the room where the prodigious piano stood; Major Cottrell wished the doctor to see it before going, for he held it above all the trophies and treasures of his campaigning days. Mrs. Cottrell and Elizabeth did the honors, Major Cottrell calling attention to the portrait's subtle excellence in loud voice—to the peril of his lately punctured lung—from his place by the window in the adjoining room.

The picture probably was a libel on the illustrious original—it had been enlarged from a small photograph,

in oil, and plenty of it—and unquestionably a profanation of art. In the mildly cynical core of him Dr. Hall would have admitted the truth of this anywhere else, but in the presence of Elizabeth he pronounced it good. That came out of his desire to serve her, even to calling poor pictures excellent, down to the last one in the gallery of life.

The parlor was narrow and deep, but surprisingly bright and cheerful. It comprised all the shorter wing of the house, the door entering abruptly into it from the outside, without hall or vestibule to ease one gradually into its somewhat overfurnished interior, which must have been grandeur once for that far-off ranch-house on the lonely plains.

The lime to plaster it must have been brought from a laborious distance, and the heavy furniture of the early fifties conveyed at great trouble and expense from the nearest unloading point on the railroad nearly a hundred miles to the north. Yet nothing much to a pioneer in those days, Hall thought; perhaps little more to the men who were crowding into this country at the present time to saddle its buffalo-backed hills to the service of husbandry.

There were walnut chairs with tapestry upholstery in the parlor, and a sofa with lions' heads carved in its arms, covered with haircloth that was wearing thin; there were bookcases which reached almost to the ceiling, filled with alluring volumes which had the stain of age; in the farther end of the room, before a wide fireplace, a table of such ancient type, so huge, so broad and strong, that it might have come from some ambassadorial hall. What a strange fancy in a man, to carry it all into the unpeopled

wastelands of the west and hide it away in that grim sod house.

There were other pictures besides the prized one of General Custer, some of them praiseworthy, others of pale, watery fruits and sickly flowers, such as young ladies do before marriage, when romance tinges the world with an Indian summer mist. Dr. Hall was afraid Mrs. Cottrell had done them; when he caught the half hopeful, half doubtful, look in her eyes as she ranged them over the collection, he was sadly sure.

A popular song was spread on the music-rack of the piano, the red cap close by it, and on the floor beside the stool the riding-whip that somebody had stripped from the wrist to hit off this sentimental melody. On top of the solemn old instrument there were blue and white flowers in an Indian vase, plucked from the gardens of this wild, wide-sweeping prairie.

So, this was the home of Elizabeth. She must have reached up with tiny fingers when her head came no higher than the fingerboard, to touch the keys of this instrument, strange and thrilling, as she stood with her hands stretched out now to touch the harp of life. He wondered if her heart had yearned back to it in the years she must have spent away, and if she was glad to be there now in the sad gray house that had nurtured so much comeliness.

Her shoulder was three inches below his own as she walked beside him, and the sun was in her hair. If an army officer had not married her, it was because she would not have him. Dr. Hall was as firmly convinced of that as if the conviction rested on the history of the

case. The shadows of anxiety were gone out of her face, now bright and winsome as the day. Not one of those round, well-fed faces such as the Charles girls flared like bold sunflowers beside the road, but he must have been perverse, indeed, the night she came, to think her a little too thin.

"Isn't it awful?" she asked suddenly, as if taking it for granted the matter of which she inquired had been running in his mind.

He looked at her in startled inquiry, guiltily, thinking she had surprised him in his thoughts and was attempting self-disparagement, after the facetious way of youth.

"What's that?" he blurted.

"The picture of General Custer. Isn't it a fright?"

"I've seen worse."

"Yes, and better."

"We can say that of so many things, and still not be severe," he said.

"Pop sent it to Kansas City to have the photograph enlarged in grease," Elizabeth told him, so seriously she seemed saddened by the recollection. "He wrote out full instructions for the color of General Custer's mustache and hair, so he always feels that he's one of the contributing artists in that memorable work. They got the color just right he says."

"It isn't bad, either," Hall said, but mildly, with little fervor.

"I wouldn't want pop to know what I really think of that picture for a horse! It doesn't hurt us to disassemble a little for somebody we love, does it, Dr. Hall?"

"Love," said he, looking into her eyes with what he

thought was nothing short of paternal gentleness, "has made more infidels than any other force in the world. We all forswear ourselves for love."

"You talk like you've had a lot of experience," she said gravely, with a rueful shake of the head. She looked across her nose at him then, archly, and laughed, throwing her head back to give it free vent, like a meadow lark.

"Are you laughing because I'm funny, or because you're gay?" he asked her, eyes on the curve of her chin and throat with an interest remote from anatomy, far removed from the thought of anatomy, indeed.

"Maybe the boarding-train ladies are responsible for all this forswearing. They say there's all kinds of swearing going on down there."

"I don't believe the girls swear, I never heard them, at least. Mrs. Charles sometimes exercises a lady's privilege that way, but the girls appear to leave it all to her."

"Nice people," she said, just a little edge of sarcasm in her tone.

"Considering that they were raised on wheels, as Mrs. Charles says, they are surprisingly nice girls. Nice in a railroad way, I mean, Miss Cottrell. That's a somewhat boisterous way, I'm afraid, but it can be honest, even though loud."

"Sure," she granted, cheerfully indifferent to the fine points of nicety among ladies raised on wheels.

"I know the three of them are mighty good to the poor jerries I've got in my hospital."

"Hospital? I never heard anything about a hospital in Damascus."

"It's a new institution, a boxcar with bunks in it, and



plenty of ventilation. Broken arms, minor cases of all kinds not serious enough to send down to Topeka to the company hospital. They'll get on better here where they can talk with the jerries in their own language, the language of the track—it's entirely unknown to me in wide stretches—and sit under the trees and read Mary's books. She lets them out free to the cripples—crips, they call them, down at the train."

"Mary; that's the red-headed one, isn't it?"

Elizabeth spoke with a respectable indifference, in the way the ladies have when they want us to understand that the thing under comment does not concern them in the least. Which is nothing short of confessing their great interest in it, in the cold masking of which nobody is deceived.

"Yes, Mary is the red-headed one. She's got the queerest collection of books ever assembled on a shelf. She's got Robinson Crusoe and the Roman Catholic catechism; a great deal of Laura Jean Libby and the poems of Robert Burns. She's got the sometime biennial report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture, and several of those uplifting tales by Mr. Alger of orphan youths who begin in grocery stores at fifty cents a week and end in large houses and long black coats, genial capitalists without a drop of rancor in their benignant breasts. You'd be surprised how these old tarriers like that kind of stuff. The boarding-train literary standard may be humble, but the appetite is strong."

"I've been wondering what you are going to do when they move the railroaders away from here. They never stay long in one place, you know. Are you going with them?"

"I'll probably have enough of it by then," he replied.

"You mean you'll settle here in Damascus?"

"I hadn't thought of it."

"Why not?"

"It's too far west of Dodge," he replied, his face serious, the flame of laughter in his eyes. "There's no chance for a doctor out here."

"There's the biggest chance for men of any calling that ever was," she corrected him, as openly serious as he was mockingly light.

"You're the first one I ever heard say it," he told her, quickened by her originality, although he felt that it was grounded in loyalty for the land of her birth, with little more justification.

"This is a different kind of a country, there isn't any like it in the world," she declared, not with the commercial enthusiasm of a land agent, but with the cool positiveness of belief. "Men can't come here and do the same old things over that they've been doing somewhere else and make it go. That's why they fail, and get sore and go to knocking. You've got to be original here; it's no place for small people. If a man can do some big and original thinking out here, and go in and put it through, he'll succeed. It calls for preëminence to make a go of it in this country west of Dodge. We're not looking for anything else."

"I'm afraid I can't qualify," he admitted, apparently saddened, or perhaps rebuked, by her glowing recital of requirements.

"I've been around the other places, even England and the European countries—"

"I never have," he confessed, in admiring tribute to

her modest repression of the fact for the more than two weeks he had known her.

“They don’t compare with this country, there’s nothing in America to compare with it. This is the one place on this earth I’ve ever seen where there’s room enough to live.”

“Do you really like it that well?” he asked curiously, not altogether convinced. “I thought you were only waiting your time, I looked on you as a sort of trusty outside the prison walls, just waiting till your time was up. Do you mean you’d stay in this country by choice?”

“Nowhere else,” she replied, pressing the words down so hard they seemed to cut a stencil in the recording plate of his mind.

Dr. Hall stopped, looking over the wide sweep of country that could be seen from the brow of Major Cottrell’s hill. They had been walking by the side of the road over the knotty turf, the new grass lively with flowers white and blue, as strange to him as the examples of Mrs. Cottrell’s early art. The river was a torrent of brown water to-day, tribute of mountain snows and way-side rains. It flashed among the tender green of cottonwood and willow, headlong in its haste to carry its waters safely through that land of harsh repute, without having them sucked down into the barley-brown sands of the bars.

Across the river several miles away, there was a heaving up of rugged hills, treeless, their backs patched with white outcroppings through the gray-green coat of grass like some earthy scabies, their nearer face white as chalk where erosion of dead ages had broken them down. Over there these hills filled in a boundary, making the world

on that side seem snug, but here, on the other hand, there was no boundary. The gray land merged dimly into the sky.

"Yes, I had that thought the evening I came here," Hall said softly. "The sun was only a hand's breadth high; I could look under it to the uttermost bounds of the earth, it seemed to me. I filled up on something I never had tasted before. It made me glad."

Elizabeth turned to him eagerly, appreciation in the line of her parted lips, her animated eyes.

"I felt as if I'd come home that evening, after long wanderings. I was glad to be here. I said, just as you have said, that it was a place for a man."

"Then you'll stay," she said conclusively.

"It didn't look so good to me next day. I think the people at the inquest spoiled it for me, together with the way the country seemed to pull me into its troubles and feuds as a sort of sardonic joke. I don't know, Miss Elizabeth, whether it will ever look as good to me again as it did that first evening. It seems a long time ago."

"We've got to have a doctor in Damascus," she said with business-like decision. "When the board investigates old Ross they'll find him nothing but a quack and a fraud. He'll have to go back to his peddling. But it makes little difference whether he goes or stays, we need a doctor here."

"It's not very alluring."

"This is going to be the biggest town west of Dodge."

"That's what the railroad people say. Even at that, it wouldn't be much of a place for a doctor to realize on his aspirations."

"What are this particular doctor's aspirations, then?"

"Well, service, in the first place; service to the greatest number of people possible in the life of one man. I think that's every earnest physician's aim."

"Where you have to divide service to humanity among a lot of physicians, there isn't humanity enough to go around sometimes," she said.

Dr. Hall glanced at her with a smile.

"If that's true in the big places, can't it be doubly true in the little ones?" he asked. "Ross has kept competition down with his gun, they say. I couldn't do that, you know."

"You could make yourself so indispensable nobody could compete with you," she declared. "We're just an example of it; we feel we couldn't do without you now."

"Do you feel that way?" he asked, his voice eager, bending toward her slightly, as if he feared his words might blow away.

"It's a family feeling," she said hastily, almost frightened, it appeared, by his gravely eager inquiry. "Aren't the railroaders going to have a dance to-night?"

Her interest in his career was gone, dispersed, he knew, by his blundering inquiry; his rude, thoughtless, unpardonable inquiry. She was too considerate to put him in his place with equal rudeness, as Annie or Mary Charles would have done. It was bad enough to apologize for, yet too crude to attempt to explain, when the intent was so obvious, the meaning so unequivocal.

"I'm happy in your family's confidence, Miss Cottrell," he said, feeling that he must venture something to make it appear less personal. "Yes, there's going to be a dance

on the station platform to-night, but it isn't altogether a railroad affair. Charley Burnett appears to be chief of the enterprise, with railroad coöperation."

"There'll be kegs of beer, as always."

"I don't know. Are kegs of beer the usual trimmings?"

"Everybody drunk toward the end. They begin to use pick-handles about the sixth keg; they lay the wounded out in rows."

"I suppose I'd better get ready for a busy night, then."

"Yes, there's always a lot of repairing to be done after a railroad dance. It's fun to watch them till the pick-handles begin to fly."

"Will you come down and stand on the sidelines?"

"Maybe I'll ride down after it gets a good start, and look on a while."

"I hoped you'd let me come for you. There's a moon; it would be a pleasant walk."

"You'll be needed every minute. They carve one another up horribly sometimes. No, I'd better ride down. I'll find you, if you're not socially or professionally engaged. The young ladies on wheels may be giving you a giddy time."

"My energies must be reserved for the hour of pick-handles," he said, pleased beyond anything to hear her speak that way, that lightly bantering, yet subtly disparaging way, of the buxom lasses of the boarding-train. The family feeling could not be carried as far as all that, he knew.

They were near the post office, lagging to prolong the walk, in which there was so much to say, it seemed, and so little said.

"Dr. Hall, why don't you carry a gun?" Elizabeth

asked suddenly, turning to him with a look as challenging as her words, as if she had led him up to it with the intention of surprising the answer from him.

"Because I don't need one," he replied, not in the least surprised. "Do you think so?"

"Nobody in this town needs one more than you do."

"Why, I can agree with you on that," he laughed. "I don't believe anybody in Damascus needs one any more than I do. I consider them as archaic as swords."

"It's the most foolish thing, walking around this way without a gun. What are you going to do when you meet Gus Sandiver one of these days?"

"I don't believe I've been figuring on meeting the gentleman."

"You'll meet him, all right."

"In that case, I don't know. But I'm not going to carry a gun around in anticipation of the event. You wouldn't expect to see the Methodist preacher walking around with a gun dangling on him, would you?"

"If you don't carry it for Sandiver you ought to carry it for these bums here in town. There's a crowd here that don't like the way you treated Ross."

"I'm aware of that," he replied, so easily, so self-satisfied with his own penetration, it appeared, that she knew he would have stretched himself up that way to his toes, like a tiger flexing its cage-bound muscles, if he had been standing still.

"You take my tip," she counseled seriously, "and get a gun. Get it to-day, right now, and hang it on you. Do you hear my words?"

"And thank you for them," he assured her sincerely. "But don't feel hurt when I fail to heed them. I'm not

going to get a gun, Elizabeth, to-day, to-morrow, or any other day. If it comes to the point where I can't waddle around this town without the bluff of a gun, I'll pull my freight. I'm not a gunman; I'm a physician. If I can't win without a gun I'll have to lose."

"There's not much chance for any man to win out in this country west of Dodge without a gun," she said, severely positive, almost to the point of rudeness. "Especially if there's somebody layin' for him. I'll see you to-night. So long."

Dr. Hall waved to her when she looked back from the post office door. He knew she had given her advice with the utmost friendliness and good intention. She seemed to have stepped out of her refined, girlish character to do it, astonishing him not a little by this revelation of a double self. There were two Elizabeths in one, he thought: the girl of cowboy days, and the young lady of the seminary. It was not hard to imagine the one just a minute ago revealed in her slangy seriousness belted around with a gun. Two Elizabeths there, as sure as night and day. He thought of the couplet he had learned when a little boy about Elizabeth, Lizzie, Betsy and Bess, who went somewhere or another to find a bird's nest. Which was the dominant Elizabeth? he wondered.

It was queer, he thought, how the best of them harped on a man's chances out there west of Dodge. Without this, lacking that, there was no chance for a man out there. This time it was a gun. Not much chance for a man without one, especially when there was somebody laying for him.

But it wouldn't do; the time for guns had gone by. Outside of this foolish feud over the county seat, there



was no trouble in that country. Let them fight over the barren prospects and trivial possibilities of the county seat; it was not his war. When it came to meeting Gus Sandiver, that emergency would have to take care of itself.

He was not going to let himself down to the class of gun-toters. That would be advertising himself as out for trouble, the one best way in the world to find it.

## CHAPTER XI

### LITTLE JACK RYAN

LITTLE JACK RYAN, who had been mentioned incidentally by Pete Farley as the person to whom Dr. Hall was to look for sanitary offices about the boxcar, was a sort of janitor to the railroad yards. He had come by his diminutive appellation in some place remote from Damascus, perhaps in some gang of tarriers where there had been another Jack Ryan of greater altitude. It was a common designation among Ryans, Dugans and Murrays of the railroad fraternity. It was not the fashion in that caste to call a man Shorty. It was simply Jack for the big one and Little Jack for the little one, or lesser one, an arrangement satisfactory to all concerned.

Ryan made his appearance regularly every third day, bringing with him his pail and mop, precisely at four o'clock in the afternoon, moving in comfortable deliberation, smoking a corncob pipe. He grew more communicative and confidential with each succeeding visit, although he had not been a reluctant man from the beginning.

He was a stockily built man, rugged as a slab from a sawlog, supporting a large iron-gray mustache at what appeared to be a heavy expense to his face. His features were gaunt and seamed, his eyes hungry and harassed. Only his chin, which was cleanly shaved, appeared to be thriving among all his facial appurtenances. It seemed as if this chin had grown in its clean prosperity while the

mustache had drained the substance out of his cheeks. It protruded in a challenging way, giving an insolent look below the mouth. Judging him by the anxious light of his eyes, that chin must have been getting him constantly into scrapes which kept him racked and strained to get out of with a whole hide.

When Ryan arrived at the boxcar office at precisely four o'clock this afternoon, he put his foot on the bottom step, removed the pipe from his mouth, nodded affably, on the footing of entire equality, his acquaintance with the doctor having progressed so far that Ryan could admit him to that plane.

"And how are you findin' thricks this evenin', Dochter?" Ryan inquired.

"Pretty fair, Jack. How are you?"

"Middlin' for an old felly with one fut in the cimit-a-a-ry. Wor you wantin' me to mop up the flure for you to-day?"

Dr. Hall said that, unless Ryan's present happiness and future prosperity depended on mopping up the flure, he would suggest a postponement of the operation until one of his patients, just about due, had come to have his broken arm looked over. Ryan said he guessed he could spare the time, although Ga-hd knew he was a much overworked and burdened man. He put down his pail, leaned his mop against the car, and sat wearily in the door, where he began to tell again about the troubles he had to bear incidental to the proper running of the railroad in that place.

The chief worry of Ryan's life was switch lamps. These had to be cleaned and filled, put up at evening, taken down in the morning, in unvarying program

throughout the seasons. Section bosses might come, station agents might go, but Ryan kept right there on that job pouring oil into switch lamps and mussing the soot of them around his melancholy eyes. Just as if all that responsibility was not enough to break a man down, said Ryan, they made him rustle baggage when there was any to rustle, and there most always was.

“Dhrummers,” said Ryan, “comin’ to this curred country to sell goods! Man dear, I tell you some of them fellys carry more in their thrunks than the biggest store in this town has got laid out on its shelves. And I’m the man that has to lift ’em, and h’ave ’em up to the thruck, and aise ’em down like a sore fut, besides fillin’ the lamps and puttin’ ’em out and bringin’ ’em in every blessed evenin’ and mornin’ the year through. And sweepin’ and moppin’ the office flure, and the flure of this harspittle you have here; and keepin’ the fires goin’, and dumpin’ the ashes in the winther days, and all of it done for the grand sum and reward of sixty dollars a month!”

Dr. Hall had heard it all before, for Ryan was not a man to permit his great public services to pass without acclaim, even though no other voice ever joined in his praise. The expected patient presently came across from the bunk-cars, passing the loquacious Ryan with high bearing. This man was straw-boss on a steel-gang, a strong broad fellow who looked down on Ryan, and all other men of his class who sought the easy waters beside the heavy current of railroad toil. He had got his forearm broken while at work, and was enjoying a vacation on full time, according to the railroad custom in those days. Mike Murray was his name. He was known to the boarding-train as Mickey Sweat.

"Are ye waitin' to have an aperation perfarmed on ye, Ryan?" he inquired with mocking solicitude, a gleam of humor in his light-blue eyes, over which his thin chalky eyebrows arched so sharply he seemed always on the point of exclamatory astonishment.

"I'm mindin' me own business," Ryan replied coldly.

"Oh, I thought the hard life ye lead had broke ye down, and ye'd come in to have y'r appendoolix cut out. Take it aisy, man; take it aisy. It's too much y're tryin' to do, holdin' up the dochter's office with the broad of your back agin it for hours at a time that way."

"I'm waitin' to sweep out the legs and arrums of ye, and throw them on the doomp," Ryan returned, equally high in his sarcasm. "There'll be nothing left of you but the stoomp when the dochter's through with ye to-day, Mickey me lad."

"O-o-oh, is that so?" said Mickey, comfortable in his distinction of being crippled and on full time. "Well, if ye ever take hold of an arrum of mine that's been coot off, Jackie me son, ye'll get the worst wallop ye ever felt since the cow kicked ye through the hedge. There'll still be enough stame left in me mumber to lay ye out cowld, man."

Ryan ignored the slur on that strength and endurance which he had stressed as so broadly essential to that trying situation of his but a few minutes before. He turned his back to fit it squarely against the end of the car, implying as plainly as a man could without words that he had no wish for further traffic in chaff with Mickey Sweat. He even allowed the straw-boss to go on his way when the doctor had finished with him, never turning an eye to acknowledge his parting shot.

"It's lucky the big stiff has the arrum of him broke," he said to Dr. Hall.

"The jerries seem to think you've got a pretty soft job of it, Jack," the doctor remarked.

"They're jillis. There's not a man on Bill Chambers's gang that has the brains in 'im to do me worruk. Wasn't I a jerry myself before I got me fut crooshed innunther the han'kyar and Pete Farley put me here to compinsate me for me sooferin'? I was. Many a year I hoomped me back over a tampin'-pick, dhrivin' rocks innunther the ties."

Ryan sighed over the recollection, in no hurry to get up and hump his back over the mop. Dr. Hall knew his habits very well; Ryan had explained the routine of his day many a time before. One hour every third day Ryan dedicated—that was the word he used—to the scrubbing of the car. He spent ten minutes in the actual work, the rest of the time getting ready to begin, and easing his tremendous energies down to stop.

Just then he was sitting as he had adjusted himself in his cold scorn of Mickey Sweat, back squarely against the car. Now he shifted a little to plant himself in the door, shoulders against the jamb. By degrees he would work around to the job that way, talking all the time. Dr. Hall sat in his surgical chair, never tired of Ryan, his complaints and self-praising, his views on the activities and ambitions of other men, always in relation to his own importance among them.

Ryan lived in a little tin house down the railroad. Snug on the bank of the river it stood, contrived out of cans from which railroaders and others in Damascus drew their chief sustenance. He had melted the tins apart in a

bonfire and tacked them over the boards which he had picked up along the track, salved from the wreckage of boxcars, and appropriated by night from open loads of lumber which stopped convenient to his site.

In his domestic economy Ryan was a forehanded and original man. He had a wife, big as a feather bed, soft as dough, one of those half-Indian leavings which remained after the tribes were swept out of the way to make place for farms and towns. On these sunny spring days she could be seen from afar, moving ponderously about in a little fenced enclosure where Jack had spaded up the ground for a garden.

"You've come up in the world since then," Hall commended him. "This job is far and away better than jerrying. There's no telling where a man of your capabilities might go. Are you in line for another promotion?"

"There's nothing here for a man except the job of poompin' wather for the ingins. I'm no scientific man; I'd do no good to set me heart on that job. It pays sivinty-five a month—it's a grand aisy job Tom Harris has, settin' in his nate little house watchin' the sthroke of the poomp, and never a lick of worruk to lay his hand to but shovelin' a bit of coal now and then. But it's not for me; I'm no scientific man."

"There ought to be something else for a man of your merit, Jack. Why don't you strike Farley for a change?"

"No; I'm too far west of Dodge. There's no chance for a man to better himself out here, savin' he might be a brakey, or one of them fellys. I've thought of takin' me up a bit of land and goin' back to farmin', as I was brought up to in Donegal, but they tell me murphys won't

grow here, although I'm goin' to try a hatful in me little garden. I've never seen a bit of a pig since I came out here. They say pigs can't live in this air so far west of Dodge."

"How long have you been in this country, Jack? this country west of Dodge, I mean."

"Three years!" Ryan replied, rolling his words solemnly.

"Not so long."

"It's more nor tin years in Arge'tine, where I was before. A man's cheated out of his life in this country where they put five winthers in one. Summer is the same. I've briled more grase out o' me body here than could be fried out of a whale. It's a ha-ard country; the ha-ardest country God made, and the last. The l'avin's he put in this place."

Ryan shook his head sadly, as if out of words to describe and denounce the atrocities of that country farther. He appeared to have fallen into a dream, his eyes fixed vacantly on some far-off place, while he moved his pipe-stem with precise stroke along his heavy gray mustache, now on the right section of it, again on the left, as if he drew that adornment into his features with deliberate pencil and careful hand.

"Tough country," said Dr. Hall. He got out of the chair, signifying to Ryan that he was ready for his professional stroke upon the floor.

"Tough," Ryan echoed feelingly. "It's cruel tough." He sighed, as for his bondage in a land he could not leave. "But I'll say for it, Dochter," hopefully, almost enthusiastically, looking around at Hall with a quickening light in his sad eyes, "it's the aiseyest country to shave



in of a-a-ny country I ever set razor to me face in, barrin' none."

Dr. Hall looked at Ryan with appreciative grin, not quite certain whether it was praise or satire. Ryan was gathering up mop and pail, solemn as a professional scrubman about to begin the exercise of his art should be. It was certain he meant it for praise, a sort of justification, perhaps, in explanation why a man with a large chin and many burdens should remain there to bear its cruelties.

When Ryan mopped, he made a hissing noise, as if he operated by compressed air, like the brake of a car. He accomplished this by flattening his lips away from his teeth, which gave his face a desperate appearance, such as a man might present under the stress of some woeful pain. He slopped and sloshed, slinging his soapy compound into corners with heedless profusion, spreading a smell of strong lye around him. Dr. Hall retreated outside.

The rough work was soon over, when Ryan came to the door to wring the mop for taking up the little pools left standing. He put the mop under his foot and twisted the stick, sighing as if the operation brought its deep regrets.

"They're jillis of me lifetime job," he said quite cheerfully. He did not wait for any comment, perhaps not expecting any, but turned to his drying-up with vigorous arm. "Well, a hoondred days is a hoondred dollars, as the old Jerry said, and it would be a dom mane man that'd charge ye for the boite ye'd ate."

"Are you going to the dance to-night?" Dr. Hall asked him, when Ryan appeared in the door presently with mop and pail, his work of purgation done.

"I'll be there to keep me eye on them they don't burn

down the daypo," Ryan replied. "They'll be throwin' segyars around innunther the platform, and maybe up-settin' lanterns. The divil will be to pay before midnight. Yes, I'll be there to keep an eye on 'em to see they don't destr'y the company's property."

Ryan took up the implements of his art and went down the track, singing softly to himself as he rolled along in his weaving, deliberate gait:

"She tied a r-rock in the toe av her sock,  
An' hit me daughter Judy in th' grine."

## CHAPTER XII

### A SOUND OF REVELRY

**THERE** was room for all the dancers in Damascus, both railroad and secular, on the station platform, which surrounded the building entirely and extended in a long wing on each side, up and down the track. Pieces of scantling had been nailed upright along the edge of the platform at frequent intervals, where lanterns were hung. The illumination was smoky and vague, but it had a gala effect in the eyes of Damascus. The engineer of the work-train had run his loose-jointed old mogul up the house track and backed and fiddled until he brought the headlight beam to bear on part of the rough floor. That was too much light; they told him to take it away.

Annie and Mary Charles were clearly the stars of the occasion, although Damascus had done its best to eclipse them by turning out the finest it had. The daughters and wives of resident railroad people, who held themselves a social notch higher than those who followed the frontier of construction, were there; the young woman who served the dining-room of the West Plains Hotel was present, ably escorted by a scented cavalier in bell-bottomed trousers. He was Mit Sniveley, who ran the Railroad Barber Shop. It was situated in a corner of Kraus' livery barn.

Pink Fergus, mother of the astute humorist, Dine, was there, the falsity of her curls apparent even in the smoky

light of railroad lanterns. These curls were as much an institution of Damascus as the bank. They were two strong shades lighter than the original hair which they amplified and adorned, a dusty brown, dry and lusterless as the winter coat of an old horse. Pink was the only honest woman in Damascus who painted her face. It was a weakness that brought her close to the dividing line. She had crow's-feet around her languishing dark eyes.

Larrimore was there in his shirt sleeves, the waistband of his trousers around his hips. His wife was not present, due to the jealous sequestration her husband exercised over her like a Turk. Larrimore was notable as a prompter of the dances most favored among the railroaders and others of the frontier at that time, the figures of which must be called out. If the caller had a high-pitched, wavering voice he could be heard to advantage above the fiddles, as a katydid among crickets. Dine Fergus, smelling of benzine, due to his mother's ministrations over his summer suit, was kicking a high heel among the first.

Charley Burnett was host of the occasion. It was through his influence as a big shipper that the company's permission to use the platform had been obtained, over the refusal of the local agent. Burnett always said he was more a railroader than a cattleman, having made his beginning as a telegraph operator before he was old enough to vote.

In deference to this early affiliation he appeared to-night without a coat, black sateen oversleeves to his elbows, a stylus and pencils in his vest pocket, clamped by the very three-barreled patented pencil-holder he had used as night operator on his first job. To make it ap-

pear just as if he had come out of the bay window of the depot, he wore a green eyeshade.

The railroaders were a cosmopolitan crew. Although the Irish predominated, there were representatives, singly and by twos and threes, of many lands, especially those northern countries which produce big men for the world's heavy work. There was a little band of Welshmen, who worked in stone abutments for bridges; some Swedish carpenters, two or three German jerries, and one lone Englishman. This was a short, grizzled little Cockney who had sailed the seas, Edwin Blewitt by name. He had a blue lady on one thick forearm, a blue anchor on the other.

Although the boarding-train supplied but three ladies, the resident railroaders brought many. Several came from the grading camp, social barriers being down. There was no need of going out of town to find fiddlers, for fiddlers in plenty always are to be found in places like Damascus. They go along with the frontier's painted women and come-on men. There is the same difference between violinists and fiddlers of this type as there is between a gentleman and a gent.

The jerries were not dancing men, as a rule, although there were a few nimble exceptions in the gang at Damascus. It was the old-timers who hovered around the battery of beer kegs over against the boarding-train. Two kegs at a time were hoisted on carpenters' trestles, with the proper slant for draining the last drop, every man free to draw for himself as frequently as he was able. The kegs came down from the saloon cold and dripping, and would continue to come until the last jerry was filled to the brim. Charley Burnett was paying for it all.

Being a Saturday night, there was no worry about steady legs for next day's work. In great amiability the older jerries crowded around the kegs, careful not to waste a drop. For his favored guests, his town cronies and close friends, Burnett had something in the baggage room considerably more potent than beer. Beer was no gentleman's drink at a dance.

Such of Damascus as did not regard it as an unholy affair, came down early in the evening to look on and take enjoyment out of the hilarious charge that enlivened the soft night air. These nonparticipants would go home before the jerries began to knock handles out of their picks. Burnett had a big bunch of cowboys in from his nearest camp.

Little Jack Ryan came to Dr. Hall's office when the dance was beginning to warm up to something worth while. It was then about nine o'clock; the third relay of kegs had come down from the saloon, Mickey Sweat, superintendent of the bung-knocking, giving his orders in loud voice, the way he sung to his gang when lining track. Jack approached from the direction of the kegs, wiping his mustache on the back of his hand.

Burnett's cowboys, as well as all other guests who came carrying arms, had been relieved of their weapons, which were hung around the walls of the baggage-room in barbaric array. The cowboys especially were limbering up to the night's merriment. When they swung the girls they whirled them high, heels clear of the boards, expressing their joy in sharp, quavering yelps.

"Them cow-whackin' boys are gettin' spiced up," said Ryan.

"It does sound like it," Dr. Hall agreed.

"It's a good job Burnett made them take their goons off, or they'd be shootin' up company property, let 'em take a few more dhrinks. Little good them cow-herdin' fellys are, with their goons swingin' on 'em. Give one of them a linin'-bar and order him to j'int ahead, and where would he turn? He couldn't arn his salt at a man's worruk, and if it's fightin' that's to be done, leave me take a pick-handle in me fist and I'll defate a rigimint of them."

"There isn't a doubt about it," Hall said heartily, without the slightest consideration of the valor or merits of either side.

He only thought that Elizabeth must have reconsidered her promise to come down and stand on the rim of the crowd a while. She was not among the spectators who fringed the platform, or sat off at a distance more aloof on piles of ties and rails. Several mounted visitors were present, but Elizabeth was not among them. Just as well, Hall thought. It was a rough affair, and likely to be rougher.

The station agent, whose name was Nance, inhabited the upper part of the depot with his young wife, who was famed as the prettiest woman in Damascus. He had come to that station only recently from the indefinite region known as the east, which included all the world on the opposite side of Dodge City. Dr. Hall saw him at an upstairs window now, looking down on the boisterous crowd that thronged his planked domain.

Nance was a frail pale man, disproportionately consequential in comparison with his situation, as station agents in small places usually are. Even among agents, Nance was an aggravated case. He was bitter over being

sidetracked in the matter of the dance, his authority overridden by Burnett's appeal. Instead of bringing his handsome wife down and airing his heels on an equal with the rest of them, thus making a place for himself in their regard, he sulked, nursing his abused dignity.

Dr. Hall had discharged his social obligations early in the evening. He had cut some high capers in a quadrille with Mrs. Charles, danced a schottische with Mary, waltzed with Annie. He had a reservation, soon to fall due, with Delia O'Hare, the saloon keeper's daughter, for another waltz. It wasn't so bad. The jerries had gone over the platform with their spiking-mauls, driving down the big nails which winter moisture and spring sun had started. There were six sets of quadrille going at that moment on the long platform, the pale face of the station agent at his window like a sour moon.

Elizabeth had not yet appeared when the ordeal with Delia O'Hare was over. Dr. Hall was relieved, rather than disappointed, to find that she had not come. She might, in that spirit of something glimpsed now and then in her eyes, want to take a fling at the dance. In such event, would she expect him to invite her out? He would not like to assume the responsibility for her caprice, being no authority on social usage in Damascus.

In that connection, Hall noted that none of the aristocracy was present, at least not mingling with the proletarians on the floor. There were only a few families of the exalted in Damascus, such as the circuit judge's, the county officials', and Judge Waters', the judge being president of the bank. Hall had not been introduced into any of these families, except by the adventure that



opened the Cottrell's door to him. He was, by the very nature of his connection, an outsider.

It was a warm night, the wind not more than a breath in comparison with its daytime vigor, a portent of rain in the gabbling of the frogs along the river. Hall returned to his office sweating from his exertions with the pudgy Delia O'Hare, to find Little Jack Ryan sitting complacently in the door as he had left him, smoking a cigar in honor of the celebration. Jack said Edwin Blewitt, sole representative of England on the boarding-train, was making trouble over among the kegs.

"Somebody'll lay the little divil out flat," Jack said, "and a good job it'll be for him. He has one song in him that he wants to sing when he's dhrinkin', no thought in him of the accoutrements of it. Last winther he sung it when Aggie Mooney, the section boss' daughter, was married to a Swede carpenter be the name of Sorenson. It was a lucky job—"

"What is the song?" Hall inquired, genuinely interested in such a musical sensation.

"I don't know the title of it, if it has one, and the worruds of it I never heard, barrin' the *big-innin'*. I've heard Blewitt attimpt it many times, but he's never gone past the worruds where he says: 'Hold Hireland, wot 'ast thou come to!' He got along with it to that p'int at Aggie Mooney's weddin', where they sthrangled him off. Siven sthrong men leaped on him and throwed him out on his neck. He's sthrugglin' with 'em now to mount the flure and sing that same song. The man has no dacency in him at all."

"So they'll not allow Blewitt to sing it?" Hall said,

hoping the little Englishman would succeed in making a start at it, anyway.

"They will not, then," Ryan replied.

Dr. Hall was hanging up his long black coat, having paid his social obligations, and preparing for more serious work. There was a new case, brought in only that evening from the west, a young man with a mangled foot which required an operation. Hall dreaded an amputation. He knew too well the terrible fear a laborer on trackwork had of becoming a maimed man. The doctor would have to bear not only the reproaches of his patient, but the censure, the suspicious distrust thereafter, of nearly every man on the train. A man's capital was taken from him, viewed from the point of an untrained laborer, and rightly viewed, when a hand or foot was taken off. He was a pauper from that day.

It was Hall's hope that the patient would recoup strength during the night to be sent in the morning, with one of his comrades of the gang as nurse on the way, according to the usage, to the hospital at Topeka. But it was a long journey for a case so grave, and all this noise and hilarity was not conducive to the patient's rest.

Coat and vest off, white shirt gleaming in the light of the two guiding lanterns at his door, hung there each evening with religious punctuality by Ryan, Dr. Hall started to the hospital car to see what more he might do to relieve the young jerry's pain. Jack Ryan slewed his knees out of the doorway to let him pass.

"Will you hang around here, Jack, and keep an eye on things?" the doctor requested. "Some of the town boys are sneaking around here to-night."

"I will do that," Jack assented heartily. "Poor young

Gallaher! I hear him groanin' and cryin' above the n'ise of the fiddlin'. You'll be givin' him a dhrop of something to aise his sufferin', Dochter?"

"Yes, Jack."

"The fut av him is crooshed bad, they say."

"Yes. I'm afraid it'll have to come off, poor fellow!"

"Ah-h-h! Don't say it, Dochter. Save the lad's fut to him, if you have to cut off his head!"

"One would be about as bad as the other, I'm afraid, Jack."

"You know best. Poor Gallaher! You'll be back soon?"

"In a little while."

Jack waved him on with his cigar, grandly expressive of his sufficiency to meet any exigency during his absence. Dr. Hall laid a diagonal course across the track for his hospital car, which stood on a short spur that Bill Chambers had thrown out among some cottonwood trees to accommodate it. The dance was becoming more noisy every minute, with much cowboy yelping and deep railroad laughter, the delighted shrill squeal of the ladies splitting the heavier noise like little red bursts of flame. But it was all so good humored and carelessly happy there did not appear to be a spark of trouble for some hot breath to blow into a blaze.

Another quadrille had begun, a cowboy caller standing on a kerosene barrel high above the dancers, bringing gales and shrieks of laughter by his frills and comical embellishments, even mixing them up in the figures by applying the terms of his trade to the movements of the dance. It seemed such an honest hour of enjoyment that Hall paused a moment to watch them. The dust danced

up out of the heavy planks made rings around the lanterns.

As he stood there on the border of the merry scene, instrument case in his hand, almost out of reach of the lanterns' sickly light, Dr. Hall saw the station agent appear in the baggage-room door. This door was broad, like a freight car door, running on rollers at the top. It was the only opening into the room, except the smaller door that connected with the agent's office. Nance stood there a moment, peering cautiously around the jamb. Then he closed the door, the noise of its movement drowned in the merriment of the dance.

Dr. Hall grinned in appreciation of the agent's trick. Although the little man had done it in assertion of his authority over the station, he had locked up the possibility of a lot of trouble. There was no window in the room. They scarcely would risk breaking a lock to get at their whisky and guns. A pretty good move, although the agent doubtless never had considered it in that light when he sneaked down and closed the door.

## CHAPTER XIII

### A STRANGER AT THE DANCE

GALLAHER was in a bad condition, his right foot having been all but severed by a falling rail. Dr. Hall had hoped to pass the operation on to the hospital surgeons at Topeka, and the suffering man, a big-jointed, lanky young fellow, a very steam-shovel of a man, was firmly determined that the foot should not be taken off at all. This fatuous determination had grown so strong in him, encouraged by the foolish counsel of his fellows, that he repelled all the doctor's efforts to alleviate his pain.

These same friends who were leading him on to destruction by their advice, had supplied Gallaher with a quart of whisky, which he had under his pillow, or such of it as he had not swigged and poured on his distressing injury. The air fairly quivered with alcoholic distillations around Gallaher, who declared he felt a great deal easier, and that he would have no ministration nor medicine except that first and last remedy of the jerry for all the woes, physical and mental, that overtake a man.

Red-eyed in his pain, fierce in his ignorant defense of his injured member, Gallaher would hear nothing of an hypodermic injection of morphine to give him a few hours' sleep before the arrival of the fast train from the west, on which Dr. Hall designed to ship him away to Topeka. No, they were not going to throw any such trick as that

on him, Gallaher declared, put him to sleep and rob him of his foot for no other reason in the world but to practice and experiment. Let 'em try it on, just let 'em try it on!

The other crips, none of them very serious, had left their cots in the hospital to buzz out like flies at a carrion banquet around the kegs of beer. Gallaher had the dreary place to himself, a lantern swinging from an overhead beam casting a shadowed light as cheerless as his own misery. Dr. Hall sat by him, trying to pacify and assure the unfortunate jerry, whose suffering had kept him sober in spite of the reckless slugs of whisky he had swallowed.

There was no use taking the bottle away from him, for his comrades would give him more; it would be mercy misapplied to attempt the use of the needle. Gallaher's groans and lamentations which had sounded above the noise of the fiddles, had been due, the doctor came to believe after talking with him a while, more to concern over losing his foot than from the pain of his hurt. These men were not sensitive to physical suffering in the degree more kindly nurtured people felt it. The hard order of their lives, the blunting rigor of their toil, made them indifferent to torn flesh and crushed bone. A whimpering man was a subject of ridicule and contempt, a sensitive one, of the deepest scorn. But no man was above moaning, and having a sympathetic chorus to keep him company, at the prospect of losing a limb.

Dr. Hall left Gallaher asleep after more than an hour of friendly and soothing talk. He had won the young man's confidence, all but a little corner of reservation and distrust, by going back to Ireland with him in review of the past, and giving him assurance that his claim

against the company for proper compensation would be sustained.

The other patients were still profiting, as they considered it, by the liberal hand of Charley Burnett, when Dr. Hall left Gallaher. He must round the crippled tarriers up, Hall thought, and caution them to come in quietly. He must first leave an order with the night operator for the fast train to stop and pick up the hospital case. Bill Chambers must be found, and told to detail a man to go with the patient to Topeka.

There was a waltz on the boards, the heavy tread of the dancers making the lanterns swing. In the noise of fiddles and feet Dr. Hall crossed the track. He stepped to the platform, the length of the depot between him and the dancers, coming suddenly upon a couple as he rounded the corner on his way to the office door. They were Charley Burnett, host of the evening, and Mary Charles of the train.

They were not making any effort at concealment, standing where the light from the waiting-room lamp shone dimly through a window; there was nothing at all questionable in their close and interested conversation, but Mary started as Dr. Hall passed, drawing back from the conference guiltily, as if she had been caught listening to something she ought not hear. Burnett was imper- turbable. He stood pouring his diamonds from hand to hand, probably having sought the light of the window to illuminate his opulent diversion. He nodded to Hall in unconcerned, rather patronizing recognition, and went on pouring his flashing trifles like a man in a field winnowing a handful of wheat.

Dr. Hall would not have given the encounter a second

thought if it had not been for Mary's guilty start and confusion. Burnett would be that kind of a man, he thought. He did not like the fellow's bow legs, nor his supercilious, sneering, crooked grin. Mary was a good girl. Her very innocence betrayed her. Burnett had a right to leave her alone.

They were gone when Hall came out; a quadrille was in swing with noise equal to a gang of jerries at work on the ballast with their tamping-bars. Hall walked along the track to avoid the pounding maze, thinking of Mary, and the queer little start and withdrawing, unwarranted alarm in the breast of innocence, yet the very weakness through which innocence always betrays itself when caught putting its foot into some forbidden pool.

Little Jack Ryan rose from the door as Dr. Hall approached his office. Jack excused himself hurriedly, on the plea of no telling what peril the company's property might be in with all that sowing of cigar and cigarette stubs. Dr. Hall was too considerate to watch which way Jack's anxiety directed him, but he grinned as he put his case away in the little closet that gave out a strong scent of germicidal drugs.

Hall put out the lamp after he had disposed of his instruments and arranged the interior of his office, closing up by that act, as it were, the business of the day. He filled his pipe and went outside, walking about on the fringe of the crowd of townsfolk and railroaders who were lending their moral, but not physical, support to the dance. Elizabeth had thought better of it and remained at home. Yes, he said, conclusively, it was better she had not come. It was a rough crowd, but hearty, and



Blewitt was making a row again over the restraint of his song. The hour for pick-handles was drawing near.

Satisfied that his social duties had been discharged, and quite easy on the point of his professional ones, Dr. Hall returned to his office, partly closed his front door to screen the light of his own lanterns as well as those illuminating the platform, and stretched himself out in his surgical chair for a little relaxation and ease.

He tried to picture what that place and country surrounding would be like a few years hence, after the rail-rovers had done their work of establishing the permanent track, tamping it as firmly as the Appian Way for the traffic between the seas to pass over in expedition and comfort; after those pioneers who flocked around the land-office in flopping hats and patched overalls, gaunt, eager, zealous as crusaders in this fight for freedom and home—what it would be like after they had broken the sod and mellowed the soil until it would receive in kindness and nurture in friendliness the seed from their hopeful hands.

It would not marshal, that array of triumphant husbandmen; it would not take shape, that picture of comfort and prosperity in a land so bleak and unpromising. He had looked with amazement on the poor homes men were building on their sections and quarter-sections between Damascus and Simrall. Few had taken advantage of the one building material the land offered in abundance—the sod beneath their feet. This was due in some measure to their ignorance of the method of construction, but more to their prejudice against that kind of houses, which, to these corn-and-hogs farmers, as Cottrell had called them, were a designation of shiftlessness.

Their minds ran to planks, out of which they built little coops, sides and roofs often of the same material, so frail, so unstable, so temporary in appearance, as to give the impression that a horde of squatters had come to camp there a little while in some speculative design, and that autumn would see them vanish away again, taking their raw little houses with them, never to return.

There were some—and these were not few—too poor to spare the money for planks. These burrowed into hill-sides, making holes which they roofed over with poles and sod, heaping earth over all until it seemed an effort to disguise their lodgment, either in craftiness or shame. Stovepipes were thrust out of the rounded roofs of these bank-side dwellings; sometimes there was a tiny window beside the door or, if not a window independent of that opening, a pane or two let into the panels. More often there was not a gleam of glass.

To such homes as these men had brought their wives and children; old wives and young, children puny and strong, adolescent, infantile, just crossing the line of puberty. There were widows with strong sons, wifeless men with long-backed daughters, broken home-forces which must unite in course to rear a new and strange race in this unsheltered land. What would the young be like, nurtured on the hardships of that bleak highland plain, housed in the caves and thin board huts which seemed so pitifully insufficient in the temporary quiescence of a land so cruel that no man remembered a kindness at its threshold?

It eluded him. The picture swirled unformed, as denying in its elusiveness as the blue smoky distances of that unfathomable land. Out of all this fervor of beginning,

this eagerness to grapple and overcome, to trample down and make smooth, what would come? What place was there for a man who did not have that dry-lipped, sharp-eyed hunger for the land in his soul? It was unanswerable. Yet it was compelling, a problem that stood with all the charm of mystery drawing one on to remain for its solution. And there was no power could solve it but time. Time alone; the one treasure that man cannot hypothecate, the one endowment to which all men are equal heirs.

This reverie was broken by a strange sense of quietude that had fallen suddenly over the revelers. The silence was as abrupt and complete as if the station agent had reached out of his upstairs window and turned a bowl over the dancers and fiddlers.

Dr. Hall sat up with a startled jerk, a premonitory coldness over him, a sinking feeling of foreboding, as if he had heard the step of a messenger bringing bad news. Before he reached the door he heard a shot, followed by a rush of feet; another shot, a yelp, and a husky voice ordering everybody to clear out of there.

"Scatter to hell out o' here!" the hoarse, flat-edged voice commanded, a shot underscoring the order.

When Dr. Hall looked out, the dancers had scurried from the platform like a flurry of snow before a wind. One man held the deserted boards, a booted, belted figure that towered tall and defiant, a pistol in his hand. Three of the five lanterns hanging along the edge of the platform had been extinguished. As Hall stood in his door looking at this person who had sprung so violently into the happy scene, the ruffian shot out another lantern, yelping in satisfaction as the glass tinkled to the boards.

"I'm a ant-eater, I'm a razor-back!" the long-legged, absurdly solemn-looking shooter announced, his voice hollow as a wind across a bung-hole. "Come and ride me! I've got horns on my backbone—come and ride me!"

Nobody ventured out to meet the challenge, although there was a crunching of many feet on the cinders over among the jerries who had been drinking beer, with a shouting for a rally, the sound of thumping as pick-handles were knocked from the eyes against the rails.

Fearing that his lanterns would draw the next shot, Hall turned them out quickly, dodging outside into the dark immediately, not caring to be made a blind target in that car a second time. The remaining lantern on its stake at the edge of the platform did not reveal anybody in sight but the shooter, who stood with his gun raised, apparently pausing to consider where to pitch his next shot.

At that moment Nance, the station agent, raised a window in his upstairs living quarters and stuck out his foolish head. He could be seen plainly, the light of the last lantern reaching to the broad eaves of the building. The despoiler of this pleasurable hour heard the sash slam as the outraged dignity of the agent put steam in his incautious arm. The visitor turned his gun on Nance, firing two quick shots, with a yelp between them like a hyphen connecting a fiery curse.

Nance disappeared from the window, leaving it open, the sound of glass trickling down to the platform. Whether Nance was hit, Hall did not know, any more than he knew what unmeditated resentment of such murderous villainy sent him in a leap from the shelter of the dark at the corner of his car, and carried him galloping

up the platform. At the sound of Hall's charge, the gunner wheeled around from the window to guard his rear.

The fellow came around with a quick spin on his heel, gun slung high, ready to throw it down for a shot. Hall was not more than twenty feet away, his white shirt making him a prominent target. He ducked to rush under the gun, aiming to tackle the fellow low and knock him off his feet.

Hall was not conscious of any danger of his own. His only thought was, as he bent low and shot ahead with all the speed a good toe-hold on the dry boards could give him, that the fool man would kill somebody if he wasn't stopped. Not him; not Andrew Hall, rushing up the platform where it came down to the cinders like a wedge; no thought that the pistol held on a level with the fellow's hat-brim was training down to stop him in his charge. Only that this fool man would kill somebody if he wasn't stopped.

That was the way of it that second when Hall came under the lantern: the gun coming around in a long, easy-going, confident swing, June-bugs bumping the lantern close by the wide hat of the gaunt, long-legged man. Then there was a shot, and the jolt of the collision. The gunman was scooped up in the rush as if a locomotive had hit him, thrown over Hall's shoulder clear of the platform, a humiliated wreck among the ballast between the rails.

In a moment the platform sounded to the rush of feet. Dine Fergus was the first to reach the spot, closely followed by Larrimore, others pressing forward into the light like closing water. Dr. Hall stood a moment where he had come up short after heaving the gunman over his

back, running the palm of his hand across his hair like a flat-iron, the outcome of the interference not quite clear to him yet. There was blood on his shirt, blood on the boards where he stood. But he was not conscious of any hurt.

Dine Fergus rushed up, stooped and made a sweeping grab for the intruder's gun, which lay almost at Dr. Hall's feet. Hall came out of his momentary daze, alert and aggressive, and gave Fergus a kick that rolled him a rod.

Jim Justice came puffing up, smashing his way to the inner circle. He stood on the edge of the platform, looking down at the man between the rails.

"Look at him bleed! It's spurtin' out of him like somebody'd knocked out the bung. He'd 'a' got you, Doc, if somebody hadn't took him that crack in the arm!"

"Who was it? Who done it?" eager voices inquired.

"Over there," said Justice, waving his arm vaguely toward the town. "I seen the flash."

Dr. Hall stuck the gun, which was long and heavy, between his body and the waistband of his pantaloons, a very unsatisfactory, insecure and uncomfortable way of carrying a gun, no matter for the piratical precedent which appears to be unquestionable. He had no other place to put the thing; he could as well have carried one of the jerries' picks in his hip pocket. The pistol made a harsh pressure against his ribs when he bent over the wounded man between the rails, lifting his bleeding arm to investigate the seriousness of his hurt.

It was bad enough. Somebody's bullet had smashed one bone and cut the artery. Hall did not stand to argue the man's worth to society, or his worthiness to live under

any condition whatever. The rascal's life was leaking out in jets from the wound. A piece of ballast twisted in the fellow's own neckerchief made a tourniquet that checked the flow. When he had made this swift repair, the pressing crowd looking on with interest, he looked up with sudden inquiry into Jim Justice's walrus face.

"Did somebody shoot him?" he asked.

"Did somebody shoot him!" Larrimore repeated in derision. "Hell!"

"It looks like somebody come purty near it," Justice chuckled. "Watch out for him! he's comin' to."

The gunman, who had been lying with his face in the ballast, lifted his head in the first surge of returning senses, shaking it weakly, with the bitter revulsion that shivers the old soak after slinging down a big slug of raw whisky.

"Tastes bad to him," Justice laughed.

"It'll taste worse!" Larrimore threatened. "Comin' here shootin' up this dance!"

"Must 'a' knowed our guns was locked up in that damn baggage-room," somebody growled.

Dr. Hall was helping the object of this public displeasure to come to a sitting posture between the rails, where he weaved weakly, his long legs spread wide. He had dislodged the bandage on his wrist in his efforts to get up. Dr. Hall was clamping the spurting artery with his thumb.

"Give me a hand with him, some of you men," he appealed. "He'll bleed to death unless I get him to my office and fix this arm."

"Jail's the place for that feller," somebody said.

"And that's where he's going," Larrimore declared. "Come on here, men!"

"No, you don't!" Hall said. "You're not going to throw a trick like that twice on me in this town."

He shifted the bleeding arm to his left hand, as if making ready to square off with the old razor-back's gun and defend the remnant of his unworthy life. Jim Justice pushed forward a little, leaning eagerly.

"Look a here, Doc; don't you know who that feller is?" Jim asked, a chuckle of appreciation in his thick voice. "He's old Gus Sandiver, about the last man you'd want to pull a gun for, I guess."



## CHAPTER XIV

### A SINNER IS SAVED

JIM JUSTICE'S revelation was not so astonishing to Dr. Hall's ears as Jim had looked for it to be. It was greatly to the disappointment and disgust of everybody that the doctor did not display any personal interest in the case at all. His one thought appeared to be professional, his one desire to get Gus Sandiver, or whoever the fellow was, into his office and attend that shattered arm.

The jerries were pushing in through the crowd with their pick-handles; Mickey Sweat at the front of them, his arm in splints across his chest.

"Lay hold," Mickey gave the order in his official, track-lining voice, "heave that man up and take him to the dochter's kyar. Let yees spread out now, min—let yees spread out!"

The citizens and cowboys had not succeeded in bluffing the night operator into giving them the key to the baggage-room, although there was much pressure being laid on by Charley Burnett and other influential citizens who believed the peace and security of all depended on instant arming and rushing out in defense. Gus Sandiver had not come to Damascus alone, it was said; there was a gang at the saloon.

Gus Sandiver was safely stretched out in Dr. Hall's chair, with a shot of something under his hide to clear his

head. He had taken on a little too much before starting out to clean up the dance, which the jolt against the main-line rail had not altogether offset. Mickey Sweat and the jerries had gone back to the kegs, there being a full one yet to account for before they could rightly turn in and call it a night, assured by Dr. Hall that he would not need their highly appreciated services again.

The jerries were not deeply concerned over the affair. They had little sympathy, and less admiration, for any man who went out with a gun in his fist to do his fighting, and precious small interest in him when he came down to merited grief at the end. The jerries did not hold the men whose guns Nance had locked in the depot a bit more worthy than the one who had dispersed them with his weapon. Give them a little time to knock the pick-handles out and they would have pounded to the charge, scornful of any weapons but their own, and landed without discrimination or favor on the head of every man with a gun, let him be friend or foe to the town.

Dr. Hall closed his door while he worked over the victim of the unexplained shot which probably had saved his own life. Gus Sandiver was ill-favored and morose of visage, forty-five or fifty years of age, narrow-shouldered, extremely thin and tall. His legs were so long that his high-heeled boots with fancy tops—there was a white star stitched into each of them—struck him about midway of his bony shank. There was not bulk enough, together with leg and pantaloons, to fill the boot-tops out and hold them snugly up where they belonged. In consequence of this the leather had sagged down and wrinkled, giving the man a skinny appearance in that region, altogether depraved and mean.

In keeping with the frontier fashion of that day, and a day long before, this man wore a huge mustache. It was red, coarse as a horse's mane, in harmony with his tufted eyebrows which gave him a fierce, inexorable, scowling look. The mustache had no spirit to it, but drooped over his mouth, well suited to his generally sulky ensemble. His face was sharp and narrow, his head reptilian, small. He had little more chin than a chicken. It was easy to believe that all the frontier viciousness was compressed into the fellow and reduced to its most virulent tincture by the slow dehydration that had made him stringy muscle and bone.

He lay blinking his red eyes, sullen and full of resentment, not understanding his situation any more than a caged wild eagle comprehends its case. After a little he began to clear out of his daze to the realization that something had happened to him and he had fallen into friendly hands. Outside there was comparative quiet, the dance being dispersed by the interruption. The jerries were not hilarious, for beer was not their liquor. It drowned the soul of a man, they said, before it warmed his heart.

Dr. Hall had not passed a word with the patient, nor attempted to. He had plenty to think of in connection with the ungracious ruffian as he worked rapidly to patch him up securely enough to send him on his way, vicious and unlawful as that way might be.

How to get rid of him, and keep him from falling into the hands of those notable town humorists at the same time, was a question. Hall was determined not to give Larrimore, Kraus, Fergus and the rest of them a chance to play another of their rare jokes at his expense. If that old wind-chafed, whisky-scorched scoundrel in the

chair was Gus Sandiver, he would make them a notable prize. Hall paused in the work of making a big white wad out of the stranger's wrist and hand, the strip of gauze drawn tight.

"Look here," he asked sharply, "are you Gus Sandiver?"

The crippled old villain did not reply. He lay back passively enough for surgical purposes, although the look of ingrained meanness seemed to deepen, his morose, fiery features to take on a more hateful and vindictive droop. He looked mean enough to be a horse-thief, with all the depravity of character Jim Justice had attributed to Gus. The question into his identity appeared to have roused the fellow like a hot poker to his foot. He evidently began to doubt his security, reaching stealthily across his lank body to fumble the empty holster at his side.

Dr. Hall watched the movement out of the corner of his eye as he went on winding gauze, thinking the ungracious old brute would not hesitate, if the weapon were there, to snake it out and shoot him in the back as he worked.

"This is only a temporary dressing," Hall explained as he tore the gauze, making a fork to tie around the bony arm. "If you take it off you'll bleed to death before you go ten miles. You can have somebody else fix it up when you get home."

No acknowledgment by the patient that he understood, no gleam of thankfulness in the hateful red eyes.

The people appeared to be going home, the dance evidently having suffered a setback from which it could not revive. There was a sound of many feet on the platform, and the cinder road between the end of it and the doctor's office.

"Here—we'll sling your arm in that business you wore around your neck," Dr. Hall said to the patient, picking up the bright-figured silk article from the floor. "You'd better cut out the booze till this thing heals, or you're likely to lose your hand. There's no doctor in Simrall they tell me. I'd advise you to hop the first train to Dodge and have it attended to there."

Not a word out of the glum, ill-favored mouth, not a shake of the head, not a shading of good will or gratitude in the savage, slow-blinking eyes. But there was a new alertness about the man which Dr. Hall was not slow to see. He was listening intently to the noise of scraping feet on the hard cinder road before the door.

Hall thought there was a movement as of men collecting at that point. He concluded that they had recovered their guns and their courage, and were waiting for Sandiver to come out. The fellow's pistol lay on a chair over against the wall, hidden by his dusty sombrero, where Hall had thrown them when he followed the jerries in with their burden. Hall went and got them, giving the hat to its owner, retaining the gun, not quite decided what to do with it, instrument fit for only a coward's hand, he thought.

While Hall was deliberating over what to do with the gun, somebody knocked on the door, striking it in rude and insistent demand with something hard, very likely the butt of a gun, the doctor believed. Sandiver sat a little straighter in the chair, moving one foot in his stealthy, sneaking way from the rest, as if he calculated on making a spring, recovering his gun and fighting his way out.

Dr. Hall broke the pistol, throwing the shells with a clatter to the floor. The summons sounded on the door

again. Sandiver—Hall was convinced he was nobody else—lifted his other foot with as much caution as if the slightest noise would be fatal to his hopes, and stood.

Hall threw back the spring-bolt and opened the door, which had been reënforced since Old Doc Ross' assault on it, and made thick to withstand violence. But he opened it only a little way, not far enough to give them a look into the car, blocking that small opening with his body to guard against a rush.

"We want Sandiver," said a man in front of the crowd.

He was a stranger to Hall, a mild-looking, fatherly sort of man with a beard. He was holding a railroad spike in his hand, with which he evidently had made the alarming thump on the door.

"Are you the sheriff?" Hall inquired.

"No, I ain't," the man answered, as mildly as he appeared, yet with something portentous in the very control of his voice. He gave the instant impression of having been abroad in the night on such business as that before.

"I'll have to ask you to wait a few minutes yet, gentlemen. I'm not quite through with him."

Hall was peering into the crowd, trying to see whether Larrimore and the others were there. The one lantern still hung on the stake beside the platform, fifty or sixty feet away, making a confusion of shadows among them. There appeared to be thirty or forty in the crowd, but Hall was not able to identify many. There was a hat like Larrimore's off a little way, and a dicer that surely belonged to Fergus. Kraus' bear-like figure Hall could not pick out among them.

"He'll do the way he is, Doctor," the spokesman said.

"Just a minute, and I'll be with you," Hall said, politely but decisively, closing the door as he spoke.

Hall turned to his patient, who stood as he had left the chair, his head within a span of the car roof, his meanness intensified by the trap he found himself in, with men clamoring at the door for his life. He did not merit a defensive word, a moment's risk, Hall knew, for he was altogether unworthy, outcast and defiled. But if there was any way to help him get out of the mob's hands he was going to send him off with a whole neck. Not for Gus Sandiver's sake, but for his own.

The jerries could not be called into the case to help him. It was not their affair; it would be ungenerous to ask them to take a risk for this old prairie rattlesnake, who was guilty of no knowing how many atrocious crimes. But hold on a minute. How about Nance? Had that bullet got him at the window? Was this knocking, this subdued, mild-spoken request for Sandiver based on something more than a desire to strike a stunning blow in their petty squabble over the county seat?

They were knocking again, growing impatient, suspicious. Some had gone to the back door; others had ranged along the sides of the car as if to prevent any escape by the windows, which would have been a squeeze for even Sandiver, snaky as he was. Dr. Hall called a cheerful assurance that he would be with them in a minute.

Even if Nance had been killed, he argued, it would not do to pass Sandiver over to the crowd. There would be another inquest, the humorists of the town would swear Sandiver died of the injury he got when Hall heaved him into the track. If Sandiver had shot Nance,

then he must go to jail, and he must go in no other company than Dr. Andrew Hall's. If Nance had escaped harm, then Sandiver must be put on his horse and turned loose to get out of town if he could do it.

"Sandiver, you've got yourself in a hell of a fix by coming over here to shoot up this dance," Hall said. "If you've killed the station agent, I can't save you; if you haven't, I'll do the best I can."

Sandiver did not answer. He stood glum and scowling, arm slung across his chest in the gaudy neckerchief, looking around the room for something to lay his hand to, his scalded eyes coming back to the pistol Dr. Hall held in his hand. Long since Old Doc Ross's gun had been taken down from its conspicuous place on the wall, where it had hung waiting for its owner to come and ask for it. It was lying at the bottom of the little closet, and Hall was thankful it was out of sight.

They were growling at the door, threatening to break it down. Hall believed they would hesitate some time before attempting that, knowing he was armed with Sandiver's gun. He tried to make his voice sound cheerful and friendly when he sung out that he was through, and coming.

Still he did not know just what to do, just how to bluff it through. One thing about it: they were not going to hang Sandiver, and then swear he was dead before they strung him up, or that he died on the way to jail.

There was a big sponge in a basin, standing on a box beside the chair, lately used in cleansing Sandiver's wound. Dr. Hall snatched a large bottle from his cupboard, swung around and opened the door. He threw it wide open, the light of his lamp striking the foremost of



the crowd so strongly they drew aside out of it, making a little channel the width of the door. Dr. Hall stood before them, the pistol in one hand, the big dark bottle in the other.

Nance, the station agent, was down at the farther end of this little lane. He hopped nimbly aside into the dark. Part of Hall's perplexities cleared away. He stood in the door, Sandiver remaining where he had planted himself after leaving the chair.

"Gentlemen, I'm not going to trust any more committees in this town to take my prisoners to jail," Dr. Hall announced in friendly, calm voice. He stuck the pistol in his waistband as he spoke, nobody but Sandiver knowing it was as harmless as the whiskered citizen's spike.

"We'll see he gets there, all right, Doc," somebody said, lightly assuring, the way one speaks to a child when playing to deceive it. The irrepressible humor of Damascus was beginning to spout.

"Pass him out here, and don't do so damn much stallin' around!" another demanded.

Dr. Hall turned to the basin, poured generously from the big bottle upon the sponge; picked it up, and turned to the door again. They fell away with a scramble before him, his movement was at once so determined, confident and threatening. He faced them, the dripping sponge in his hand.

"Gentlemen, I turned a man over to a crowd of you not so very long ago," he said, "a man by the name of Bud Sandiver. When that man left my hands he wasn't half as badly hurt as this one is, but five or six men swore he dropped dead on the way to the jail door, and he didn't have over fifty feet to go. You thought it was

a pretty good joke to swear the killing of that man off on my hands. I tell you, gentlemen, you're not going to put another joke like that over on me to-night. I'll take this man to jail myself. When we step out of this door, you spread out and stay spread."

Dr. Hall made a motion of menace with the dripping sponge; it was followed by a rasping and scurrying of feet. No mob is valiant; no man is courageous before a mystery. Hall took Gus Sandiver by the arm and marched him out, slamming the office door shut after him, the spring lock shutting up the secret of the big black bottle.

"Go to your horse," Hall whispered.

Fortunately, the way to the horse was the way to jail. The old horse-thief had tied his animal to a telegraph pole behind a screening pile of ties, close by the side of Custer Street. Hall had him in the saddle, the reins thrown around his neck, the unloaded pistol thrust into his undamaged hand, before the bluffed crowd, slowly reassembling a cautious distance behind, gathered what was going on.

A kick of the spurs and Sandiver had a big stack of steel rails between him and the baffled humorists of Damascus. The few shots they chucked in his direction did him no more harm than if they had been fired into the ground. Alone Gus Sandiver had ridden into Damascus, alone he rode out of it. He had not spared his rescuer a word, either a blessing or a curse.

Dr. Hall returned to his office deliberately, the scuffing of feet in the gloom around him like the noise of stalking beasts which lack the courage to spring; opened his door and threw the sponge in the basin, corked the dark

bottle and stood it in its place on the shelf. He stood before the open cupboard a moment, his legs spread in his ungainly way, lifting himself to his toes in that silent, self-satisfied flexing of the muscles which seemed so much like the exercise of a caged tiger eager for some contest worthy its untried strength.

## CHAPTER XV

### BURNETT PASSES A TIP

SUNDAY being wash day for the jerries, it was quiet that morning around the train. Nearly all the men were scattered along the river, washing out their extra shirts and overalls, modestly screened from the eyes of Mrs. Charles and her daughters by the willows, only their voices discovering their presence as they carried on jests and conversations in loud voice from point to point.

The regulation shirt for the jerry of those days was heavy wool cloth, generally navy-blue, a double-breasted garment with two rows of shell buttons, which a modern wringer would have made woeful damage among. There was an arrangement for throwing back the bosom flap to admit the breeze to a jerry's throat and chest. It was a very happy arrangement, a most satisfactory garment.

Two shirts of that sort would wear a jerry half a year, the only drawback about them being the length of time required to dry them, spread out on a bush or hooked along the wire of the railroad fence. This made winter washing entirely out of the question, a hardship that bore lightly on most of the jerries, indeed.

Many of these garments were variously and gayly patched as they blew in the sun that Sunday morning, for each jerry was his own tailor. He cut up old overalls and the arms of old shirts to repair the damage of time and mischance. There were always two parts of

a jerry's garments which long outwore the rest: the sleeves of his shirt, and that portion of his overalls which he sat upon.

A jerry worked with sleeves rolled up. Even in the sunny days of winter he laid the muscles of his brave forearms bare to winds which would have daunted the hardiest sailor that ever rounded the Horn. An old-time jerry was smothered with his sleeves about his wrists. It was no workin' weather for a man when he couldn't strip up the flannel and let the breeze to his skin. As for sitting down, there was not much of his life dedicated to that sport. He was away at seven in the morning, on the job till six at evening; in his bunk taking his repose as soon as it was dark enough to hide him, as it was currently expressed, from the boogs.

Gallaher had been sent away on the early morning fast train to the hospital at Topeka, somewhat assured by the hopeful manner of Dr. Hall. Hall was vastly relieved to see the poor fellow on his way. The jerries would accept it as the expected when word came back to them that Gallaher's foot had been taken off in the hospital. To them a hospital was a place of dark atrocities and heartless impositions, few of them having been in one, the old traditions and fears filling such place with horrors to the doors. A hospital could bear their curses and deep denunciations; it would be a hard matter for a lone doctor on the works.

Dr. Hall was feeling in pretty good form that morning. His pipe tasted good to him; there was hearty anticipation in the scents of roasting beef and mince pies which came out of the kitchen on wheels. Mary and Annie were flying back and forth across the door, as on

the day he first saw them, as they would continue flying on their tasks which came up day after day like some redundant growth of weeds in a field that no faithful application of the hoe can overcome, until somebody came along and married them, and carried them away to flit back and forth across other kitchen doors.

There would be no getting away from that flying in all haste to serve the hunger of mankind for Annie and Mary. They were mother birds serving a brood that imposed on them in loutish exaction, too simple ever to discover the fraud that fate and men had connived against them before they were born into their cabbage-and-beef saturated world.

Dr. Hall sat in the front door of his office, as Little Jack Ryan had sat the night before smoking his festival cigar, watching Annie and Mary as they came and went, thinking these thoughts of them, holding it a pity that the future had so little in store for them, unless by some extraordinary deflection from the charted course, when they deserved so much more for their years of ministration to the overgrown, greedy brood of men. So he sat, back against the jamb, probably more comfortable for the knowledge, not even subconsciously admitted, that fate had plotted a more agreeable voyage for him than for Annie and Mary, rushing like ants about their work.

And the most agreeable thought, the most pleasant reflection of that bright Sunday morning, was that he was not obliged to remain in that country west of Dodge. He was free to pick up and leave it on a few days' notice to the company. He was not bound there by any far-projected hope; his happiness was not centered in a quarter-section of that mangy land.

That thought was as comfortable as money put away in a safe place. He was a free man in a land that would make slaves of men in their labor of subduing it, ruin many of them and break their hearts, to cast them off in a tattered vagabondage, as other regions of that vast prairie had done by other men within the confines of the immense parallelogram called Kansas.

Charley Burnett was approaching, coming from the depot, where a little gang of loafers had collected in anticipation of the west-bound train, which would stop for water. Its news-butcher would alight in black alpaca coat and cap, like some impertinent young crow, offering newspapers from the centers of midwestern civilization.

The warm sun had brought Burnett out without his coat. He was wearing a white shirt with extremely full sleeves, which were drawn up baggily at the elbows by fancy elastic bands. He came swaggering down the slope of the platform, hands in his pockets, his narrow-brimmed straw hat pushed back to show the elegant sweep of hair that came down in a sleek-plastered loop over his left eye. Hall felt there was something obscene about the fellow; it seemed to be his legs.

Burnett was not grinning this morning, although there was a bland, patronizing expression in his face, a natural endowment that gave him the look of an affable good fellow in the eyes of men and women of a certain type. He stopped a few feet away from Hall's door, saying nothing, just standing with hands in his pockets in a thoughtful way, as if he turned the advisability of some contemplated action in his mind. Hall ignored him, caring little about the man, one way or another, neither curious nor annoyed by his silence.

"Hall, you kind of turned one over on the boys last night, didn't you?" Burnett said at last, facing around with his one-sided grin. "They're sore as hell on you for that little trick."

"It's a calamity, but I guess I'll live through it," Hall replied, his sarcasm not altogether lost on the late telegraph operator who had become the most sensational capitalist in the livestock industry.

"It ain't no joke, I'm here to tell you, Hall. The boys kep' hands off that old skunk on your word you'd take him to jail. Some of us had hard work to hold 'em back when they heard old Gus lope off."

"You might have let them go," Hall said quietly. "My interest in him ended when I got him on his horse."

"It wasn't him they wanted," Burnett sneered at the meddling stranger's simplicity, "it was you!"

"I wouldn't hang well, I'm afraid," Hall said.

"You'd purty darn certain had a chance to try it out if some of us hadn't held 'em back! They wanted to burn this shack over your head."

"Nice of you to come and tell me, Burnett."

Hall was undisturbed by the news, entirely unmoved except for a little edging of sarcasm to his words which nettled Burnett more than an angry retort.

"I don't pretend to be nice about it, Hall. Some of us stood between you and that crowd last night, but I'm here to tell you it won't happen that way twice."

"I don't feel myself under any obligation to you for your interference, Burnett, if you did interfere, which I doubt. I'm entirely capable of taking care of myself."

"You looked like it! Where'd you been at if one of



the boys hadn't took a shot at Gus Sandiver when he was throwin' his gun down on you?"

Hall got up, almost eagerly. He put out his hand in a quick, impulsive gesture, which Burnett plainly mistook for an overture of peace. He twitched his crooked lips in a derisive grin, backing out of reach.

"If you know who it was, send him to me," Hall requested earnestly, his appealing hand enforcing the sincerity of his words. "I'm under a great obligation to that man. I want to thank him."

"He's not out for any thanks," Burnett returned stiffly.

"Tell him, anyhow, Burnett, that I do thank him. He meant well, but I wasn't in any danger. Sandiver's gun was empty when I rushed him. He fired his last shot at Nance."

Burnett looked foolish, flushing angrily at this confident declaration, coming so close on the acknowledgment of service to the unknown shooter. He doubtless had overlooked the doctor's possession of Sandiver's gun immediately after the shooting. It took the sting out of his insolence, the triumph out of his bluff.

"Like hell!" he said, stalling for a new foothold.

"Yes. The shells are lying right there on the floor where they fell when I broke the gun. The gun was empty when I put it in Sandiver's hand. He couldn't have hurt a fly."

Hall pushed the door open, pointing to the empty cartridges.

"That would be darn poor evidence to save your neck on if you was up for murder," Burnett said.

"I'm not up for murder, Burnett."

"It'll be just about as hot for you if you don't keep your hands out of this town's business. You're an outsider, Hall; you don't belong. If you don't keep your fingers out of our pie you're liable to get 'em burnt."

"Last night's affair wasn't any of the town's business," Hall reminded him, coldly. "That man was on railroad property, shooting at a railroad man. I'm a railroader; it was my duty to put a stop to it if I could. The town didn't send an officer down here to arrest Sandiver. The marshal wasn't even in sight, keen as he is to loaf around the depot in the daytime. Sandiver was my prisoner. If you've got any case against him, send the sheriff after him with a warrant."

"I've always noticed," Burnett said, "that the crook they've got the stiffest case against has the most to say. But your talk won't get you anywhere in this town, Hall. You're due to meet a whole lot of trouble if you don't stick to your railroadin' and leave this town to run its own business. That's my tip to you."

"I didn't come here looking for trouble, Burnett. This damn country took me by the neck and pulled me into it the minute I arrived. It isn't my county seat war, I'm not trying to horn into it because I like a row. I wouldn't give a dime for your town if I had to take the people with it, I wouldn't give four dollars for the whole county if I had to live in it to make my title good. But I don't recognize the right of any man, or bunch of men, especially a bunch of petty gamblers and cheap sports, to tell me where I head in. If you're here as a delegate, take that back to the gang that sent you; if you're here on your own responsibility, put it in your pipe and smoke it."

Hall stood lifting himself to his toes; lifting and lowering, lifting and lowering, like a duck preening itself on a sunny bank. There was no other sign of mental turmoil about him; his face was calm, and expressive of the self-confidence which his defiance implied. He seemed merely to be working off an excess of spirits in the rapid levitation, the cinders making a grinding noise under the soles of his brightly polished shoes.

Burnett put his hand in his pocket, drew out his diamonds and began winnowing them from palm to palm, his face flushed, the nonchalance he attempted only a bluff.

"Oh, hell!" he said, in the sneering discount of a man who has no answer in an argument. It is the small person's last shot, into which he compresses his declaration of fatuity in contending against a fool. To such a man or woman, the person who disagrees is always wrong.

"First, you people in this town side-step a murder and hang it on to me. You can't crack a man on the head when his hands are tied and get away with it under any easier name, I tell you, Burnett. And you slinking cowards in this little outcast burg swore it off on me. That was your first offense."

"You'd better go easy on that line of talk, Hall," Burnett advised.

"Next, you set Old Doc Ross on me, hoping to see him chase me down the track a mile or two. Poor old soak, he thought he was putting on the big show for the bums and four-flushers of this town."

Burnett's pink face lost its color. He put his spoonful of diamonds in his pocket, his mouth shut tight as if he compressed it on something better left unsaid. He looked

away, as if the sight of the cool egotist before him might provoke an outburst that would be unseemly to his financial dignity, his eyes on the hills across the river. Presently he turned.

"Meanin' me?" he asked, his voice threateningly calm, as the voice of a man who has made up his mind to fight.

"You're free to apply it wherever you think it fits, Burnett."

"You're makin' some purty wide charges for a man that don't know any more about the people of this town than you do, Hall. Between me and you it'll pass—this one time. But when you make a talk about four-flushers and cheap gamblers again, you take pains to make exceptions to me—by name."

"I seem to recall another time," said Hall, a little laughing jeer in his tone, "when you made a big front warning me how I must talk about you. I haven't heard anything drop."

"You'll hear it, all right all right! And let me pass this out to you: Stick to your business down here with the railroaders. We've got our own doctor up-town."

Burnett put an end to the altercation with that, leaving his warning with Hall, to do what he liked about it. Hall stood at his door, looking after Burnett as he went swaggering back to the depot, feeling a contracting coldness coming over his spirits, portending more trouble for him in that miserable patch of scurvy town.

"Poor business to stand here jawing with that man," he thought.

Poor and undignified business, indeed, wrangling like an old woman, full of vain words, and declarations which time might check up on him with a demand to make good.

Only a few minutes ago he had been sitting there in complacent comfort, congratulating himself on being free to leave that country at any time. But the prospect of leaving it under the threats of four-flushers like Burnett was not at all to his taste. It appeared as if the country first had laid hold of him and pulled him into its troubles, and now was conspiring to keep him there. For he was not the one to take to his heels before any common pack of yelping curs.

Not at all, said Dr. Andrew Hall; not at all. He lifted himself to the tips of his polished shoes again, drawing a deep breath, his complacency returning, his serenity restored. Not at all, said he; not at all.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A LESSON IN PSYCHOLOGY

**JIM JUSTICE** looked in at the boxcar office as he was passing, he said, after the west-bound train had gone on its way to California. He found Dr. Hall comfortably seated in his surgical chair, the floor around him strewn with newspapers, the small doings of Damascus forgotten in the news of that other division of the nation east of Dodge.

Jim was dressed in his formal Sunday clothes, which appeared that morning to be largely a big-chested white shirt without a collar, the neckband of it clasped and locked as securely as the section boss' tool-house door by an onyx-ornamented arrangement with a spring top. He wore no coat, but a vest that was a considerable garment in its own right, being of green velvet, elaborately dressed with buttons of some metallic substance resembling zinc. Straps of strong suspenders were displayed with assurance below the vest, attesting that Jim's mournful, large-legged trousers were there to stay.

When Jim stepped, a movement of something stiff and tubular, like a joint of stovepipe, could be noted inside his trouser legs below the knees. Like a true, old-fashioned Missouri gentleman, Jim wore boots, hiding the tops of them away in this manner. He prided himself on his boots, and his way of concealing the tops of them under his pantaloons, feeling distinguished and superior

in his peculiar habit in a country where men tucked the bottoms of their trousers out of sight within their boots as if shame attended the display.

There once was a politician in Missouri who wore his boots in this fashion, hiding their tops away like a scandal. He walked through office after office in that state on no other virtue than his boots. Wearing boots when and where other men wore shoes made him famous in his day. He died at last in Washington, whither his boots had carried him, his nose in the public crib as the seventeenth assistant secretary of something, his boots on his feet. Justice had unbounded admiration for that man, whom he resembled in a way and was aware of it. If boots had made one man famous, why shouldn't they do as much for two?

Jim's feet were small, his boots tight over the insteps and wrinkled elegantly around the ankles; his trousers were long, rolled up in several turns as if he kept a quantity of cloth by him for an emergency. Over all he wore a smoky-dun hat that once had been white, with a broad brim and high, round crown.

This hat was not the happiest touch that Jim could have given his ensemble. Under it his bulging jowls and drowned-looking, slovenly mustache were not at their best, nature having assembled his features for a head-piece of a different sort. A cap with ear-muffs, Dr. Hall thought, looking at his visitor's portly figure in the door.

"No," Jim declined, when Dr. Hall offered him the chair, "I'll set over here in the door. I don't see how you can set there and take your ease in that chair, Doc. I'll be busted if I could. I'd be thinkin' all the time somebody was goin' to make a grab for one of my teeth. Well,

I reckon docterin' hardens a man. I've heard said it does."

"Yes, doctors and hotel men have a hard name," Hall agreed.

"Maybe a hotel man ain't as hard as his name sometimes," Jim said. "Take me: some of these people in this town think I'd drill the fillin's out of a man's teeth for a hotel bill, and here I've been down here this mornin' tryin' to give my blamed hotel away to a widder woman."

"You talk like she wouldn't take it."

"She wouldn't. That's the joke of it; she wouldn't."

"What's the occasion for all this liberality? Not going to quit us, are you?"

"If I could make that boardin'-train widder see money when it's spread out in her lap before her eyes, I would. I offered her the hotel as a gift, free gratis, if she'd buy the furnishin's. No; don't know nothing about a stand-in'-still boardin' house, she says."

"And that's a pretty good reason for letting it alone, too. If you can't make money out of it, how do you expect anybody else to?"

"Things is due to pick up in this town when the railroad makes this a division point and puts in a round-house and shops. Farley was tellin' me a few days ago it's all settled, provided we win the county seat in the election, and it's a cinch we will. It seems the company's made a deal to give it to Simrall if they beat us, but that was only to quiet 'em down, Farley says. They ain't got a chance in a thousand of beatin' us."

"Yes, Farley was telling me the same thing the other day. He says the company has been pestered and wor-



ried by county seat towns, and aspirants for county seat honors, all the way across Kansas. So they compromise the difficulty on promising what favors there are to be handed out to the winner where they have a contest on, like you have here. Queer situation, it seems to me."

"Not so danged funny as it might look to a one-eyed man. We've got our investments laid out in this town, and if we lose the county seat we'll bust. But we're not goin' to lose, and that's a cinch. This town'll be full of lay-over trainmen and shop mechanics when the company makes it a division point. That woman knows rail-rovers, she knows how to give 'em what they want. I thought I'd give her the first shot at it, but she wouldn't take a gift out of your hand if you wrapped it up in a silk hankachief."

"If you can see all that prosperity looming up, why not stay on and make your own fortune out of the hotel?"

"Well, Doc," Jim said confidentially, "I've closed out my cattle interests and sold my ranch. The hotel it's been a kind of a side-line with me, not enough in it to keep a man that's used to hittin' my gait busy. And that's the way it stands."

"I hope you did well," Hall said perfunctorily, in the way a man speaks when he has no interest in another's affairs.

"Yes, I think I made a purty good deal. I throwed in with Charley Burnett in his new company—he's makin' a company out of it now, you know."

"No, I didn't," said Hall, his interest growing lively.

"Yes, Charley's lettin' a few of his friends in with him. He's been makin' more money than any one man needs."

"I hope he'll keep it up—for the sake of his friends."

"Charley ain't got started on his way yet. He's goin' to be one of the biggest men in this country, he's goin' to wring the tails of some of them Kansas City sharpers that's been layin' down the law to us cattlemen out here in this country west of Dodge the past five or six years. Charley's the feller that's goin' to show 'em cattlemen can stand on their own legs, and make their own terms when it comes to loans and commissions, I'm here to say."

"I don't know," Hall said abstractedly; "I never knew their methods." He wondered how much of this confidence in Burnett was justified; whether it was founded on what he had accomplished, or the front he made with his handful of diamonds and his bluff. "So you took stock in the new company, instead of cash, for your ranch and cattle, did you?"

"It's better than dollar for dollar," Justice declared with such force one might have thought his security had been questioned. "I'll double on it between now and fall if I want to turn it loose."

"I wish you all kinds of luck," Hall said, but not with the honest warmth of unreserved faith.

"It ain't luck, it's know-how," Jim said, full of confidence to the neck. "That's why I want to let loose of that blame hotel. Time for a feller that's worked all his life as hard as I have to pull in to the bank and take a rest. If I could git shut of my hotel I'd go back east and settle down."

"Back to Missouri, heh?"

"No, I wouldn't aim to go *clear* back east. I guess Dodge'd be fur enough for me. I used to be there in the old days. Guess the town'd be kind of quiet to me

now, everything shut up. Made me think of it last night when that old raw-backed Gus tried to pull off some of the old-time religion. He might 'a' got you, too, if that dang little 'Lisabeth hadn't took a crack at him when he was swingin' down on you."

"Elizabeth? Why, it couldn't have been Elizabeth, Jim. She wasn't here."

Hall spoke with the calm certainty of one who had his data right. If there was any feeling evident in his manner it was one of mild amusement at Jim, who appeared to have replaced mystery with certainty since last night, in his determination to make Elizabeth fit the reputation he had given her.

"Who else?" Jim wanted to know, a large challenge in his tone. "Who else is there in this town, or anywhere around here, could stand off that fur and crack a man through the arm the first shot? And do it by lantern light, too!"

"I don't know about that," Hall admitted, still unmoved, "but I know she wasn't here. She promised me to ride down and look on a while, but I guess she changed her mind."

"She was right here, all right," Jim said, entirely sure of himself. "I seen her over on the edge of the crowd by them rails, settin' on her horse as plain as that pile of kegs. You was tinkerin' around with that Irishman in your hospital over there."

"Maybe she was here then, but she'd gone when I came back. I looked all around for her and couldn't find her."

"She loped back when she heard that shootin'," Jim said positively. "The sound of shootin' 's the same to that girl as a brass band to a kid."

“Have you ever seen her in any shooting scrapes, or is this just hearsay?”

Hall was severe. He frowned like a cross-examining lawyer as he bored Justice with a challenging look.

“I wasn’t right there, but I was in town. That was four or five years ago.”

“Why, she wasn’t anything but a kid four or five years ago.”

“She was wild when she was young. She was brought up wild, and I guess she always will be wild.”

“Was that the time she shot the cigar?”

“That was the time,” Jim said, nodding soberly. “She come to the post office one day wearin’ a pair of them straddle-leggid women’s britches—you know the kind I mean, the kind that looks like they’re all one piece till they straddle a horse, then they look like two women.”

“Divided skirts, I think they call them, Jim. A very sensible arrangement for riding, I think.”

“I wouldn’t feel right if any relation of mine was to come out in public with ’em on, Doc. I guess that’s what the feller thought when he made a remark as she went in the post office. She let that crack go by, but when the same feller got off something funny when she come out, she spun around on her heel and shot the *see-gar* out of his mouth as purty as you could ’a’ knocked it out with your hand.”

“He was lucky she didn’t shoot his darned head off. I think he got about what was coming to him.”

“I ain’t sayin’ he didn’t, Doc. I don’t approve passin’ remarks about the women-folks when they go by, no matter if they do put on things that provoke men to say something. I won’t stand for it, not a second. I’d

boot a man clean to the middle of the street if he was to shoot his mouth off in the hearin' of any lady that passed my place, I don't care if she had pants up to her knees."

"That's the spirit!" Hall applauded.

"But I ain't sayin' at the same time I approve of 'em puttin' on britches, wide or narrer. But all the women-folks in this country do it now," Jim sighed, shaking his head for the delicacy of the ladies west of Dodge. "I seen a woman—she was a young woman, too, and purty, purty as a peach—in here the other day wearin' overhauls, a pair of plain, blue-drillin' man's overhauls! She was drivin' a span of mules, handlin' 'em as good as I ever seen a man pull a gee-string over a jinny in my life."

"One of these newcomers, I suppose. I think she was a very sensible woman."

"Did you see her?" Jim inquired, in a tone at once depreciating and challenging, as if he questioned the right to approve her on a mere matter of report.

"No; I wish I had."

"I don't know how men as you take 'em feels when they see a woman steppin' around that way, but I know I felt like I wanted to sneak off. A woman with britches on always makes me think she's got something missin' behind, like a horse with a docked tail. I was so ashamed for that woman I felt ashamed of myself."

"You're altogether too modest," Hall laughed. "But how did that little shooting scrape of Elizabeth's come out? Did the old major go gunning for the smart guy?"

"No. No, the old man didn't take no more notice of it than if she'd shot a rabbit. He brought that girl up to

take care of herself, and knew she could do it, I guess. He never would 'a' been able to overtake the feller, anyhow. He was a cow-puncher from up north of here somewhere, in with some cattle to load. He drawed his time and lit out inside of thirty minutes. I never heard of anybody else gittin' fresh with that girl since then. They seem to kind of pass the word along."

"Very good," Hall approved.

"Yes, that made a name and a fame for 'Lisabeth out here west of Dodge."

"Was that the only wild scrape you ever heard of her being mixed up in?"

"The only shootin' scrape I ever heard of her bein' in. But she's rairin' to mix up in 'em every time she hears a gun pop. I've seen that girl come a ridin' in here with a gang of cow-punchers off the range when the old man was in the cattle business, whoopin' and hollerin' as loud as any of 'em, racin' 'em down Custer Street to the depot and back to the square, kickin' up dust till you'd think a cyclone'd struck town. What do you call that if it ain't wild?"

"Youthful spirits, I'd say. So you think she pegged old Gus through the arm last night, do you, Jim?"

"I'd nearly bet a dime it was her," Jim replied, with something of his native insolence, so contemptuously shown in the first days of Hall's dealings with him, carefully suppressed under a sham of familiar friendliness lately, which Hall accepted for what it was worth.

"Maybe you're right," Hall acceded, thinking it best to let the question stand for answer from another source.

Jim was not inclined to let go of a thing that gave him so much pleasure. He went over the ground of last night's

disturbance again, with a nod or a word now and then from Hall, which sufficed very well to keep him going. Jim was about as good a one-sided talker as ever came out of his loquacious state. One thing suggested another to him, which made his conversation as sprangling as a big raindrop on a rock.

"Whoever did the shooting under the impression that I was in danger might as well have saved the ammunition, Jim," Hall said at last, tired of hearing the endless fellow harp on the subject. "As I told Burnett a little while ago, Sandiver fired the last shot in his gun at Nance."

"*He* did?" said Jim, incredulity and disappointment comically mingled in his voice, in the astonishment of his belligerent features.

"Sure. I played safe. I stood in the dark and counted his shots, then rushed him. He didn't have any more chance to hurt me than a rabbit."

"*You* did?" said Jim, his countenance falling, the small look about him of a man who had been sold.

"There the shells are, right where they fell when I broke his gun to make sure it didn't have a load in it before I opened the door to speak to you fellows. I didn't want to have a loaded gun around me, I wasn't out to hurt anybody."

Jim was a little more curious, if not entirely so skeptical, than Burnett had been. He went in and picked up the shells, collecting them in his palm, where he stirred them with his stubby finger as if mixing some dose of destruction for an enemy.

"I reckon them's them," he said.

"Yes. I'm no kind of a hero, and I'm not in debt to anybody in Damascus for my life."

"Hum-m-m," said Jim, moving the shells around with his finger like a farmer looking over a sample of seed-corn. "Well, if these is them, how did old Gus come to slip one rim-fire in his gun?" Jim held up a shell, a look of stern accusation in his eyes.

"Why, I don't know," Hall replied, a feeling over him far different from the curiosity he attempted to feign. "Did he?"

"No, he never!" Jim declared. "Counted the shots! *You* never counted no shots. I saw Gus slippin' shells in his gun a minute before he took that crack at Nance—pity he didn't hit him, too!"

"What's the difference?" Hall inquired, taking the shell in question from Jim, looking at it with interest wholly genuine, no pretense in that phase of it at all.

Jim ignored the foolish question, the answer to it being plain to anybody who had the sense of touch.

"It might 'a' went off, I guess it *could* 'a' went off," speculatively, "but I wouldn't like to risk a rim-fire goin' off in a center-fire gun if I was out a gunnin' for somebody, and I'll nearly bet four bits Gus Sandiver wouldn't, either."

"But what's the difference?" Hall insisted, plainly honest in his perplexity over this technical nicety in ammunition.

Jim looked at him with his big eyebrows drawn threateningly, his face a fighting red above the snowfield of his big white shirt.

"Are you ignorant, or just a darn fool?" he asked. "Center-fire ca'tridges's got a cap in the end—look a-here."



"Is that so?" said Hall, reaching for the rest of the shells.

"Yes, that's *so*," tartly, with a scornful look for such a hollow piece of trickery. "You wasn't in no danger, you ain't under no favor to nobody for savin' you from gittin' a forty-four between the eyes! Where's that loaded shell?"

"You can search me," said Hall, making it as a disclaimer, rather than an offer which might have embarrassed him a little if Jim had accepted.

Jim's manner began to soften, the combative stiffness to relax, as he unkinked his eyebrows and pulled in his chin. He snorted as if he had dust in his nose, turning it off into a chuckle, a gleam of humor in his small, hog eyes.

"Well, Doc, I ain't a blamin' you for tryin' to make yourself look little where most men'd bust a hamestring to look big. Most men'd 'a' throwed in a few loaded shells in place of an empty one, to make a full house, but any man that knows a gun from a turnip'd 'a' throwed in the same kind of shells."

"That's funny," said Hall, red to the core, it seemed to him, he was so furiously confused.

Jim had some kind of a remote, dim feeling of sympathy for this painful mortification, but he wasn't quite ready to let the young man off.

"It wouldn't 'a' been a bad joke, neither, if you could 'a' got away with it, Doc. But I don't see why you want to pretend you wasn't in no danger when you was."

"Suppose we let it pass," Hall suggested, making it almost an appeal, looking up suddenly from his confusion over the shells.

"Sure," Jim agreed heartily. "I admired your grit when you butted into that feller and h'isted like a ingin hittin' a bull. But I'll be derved if I know yit whuther you're simple, or a plain derved fool."

"You'd just as well stop trying to figure out, Jim. Nobody ever could do it."

"Well, you got 'em, you got 'em when you opened that door and come out with nothin' but a sponge full of something to stand off forty or fifty men. I tell you, Doc, *that* got 'em! Some of them fellers 's sayin' this morning it wasn't nothing but a bluff, but if it was a bluff it was a dang good one."

"Thanks," said Hall, not insensible to the praise. It came in such relief of his late embarrassment that he felt himself soaring a little. He tiptoed and strutted, as if about to take off for a flight over Damascus and view it from the heights of a perfectly complacent egotism.

"But say, Doc, honest now: what was that stuff you had on that sponge?"

"That? That was psychology." Gravely, all his confusion gone, meeting Jim eye to eye.

"Si—whichery?"

"Psychology."

"That must be something new, I never heard of it in my time. Strong, heh?"

"One of the most dangerous things ever discovered."

"What does it do to a feller, Doc?"

"A little of it in either the ear or the eye has been known to make a man as crazy as a bat."

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" said Jim.

Jim was so eager to get back to the hotel and report success on his previously declared intention of getting out

of Dr. Hall what he had poured on the sponge, that he appeared abrupt almost to displeasure. He hurried off with an excuse about dinner, repeating over and over the name of the potent thing that went into a man's eye or ear and drove him mad.

Dr. Hall stood a little while, contemplating the empty cartridges in his hand. Presently he opened the closet door and took out Old Doc Ross's gun, slipped the rim-fire cartridge that had brought confusion on him into an empty chamber, tossed the weapon back again, wise in the humiliating discovery that something more than length and diameter is wanting to make pistol cartridges alike.

Foolish of him, he thought. In his great concern to hold himself free of obligation to anybody in Damascus, in case last night's unknown champion should prove to be one of the boys, as Burnett had said, he had only succeeded in giving them another laugh at his expense. For Elizabeth's eyes he had another cartridge, one that matched in every way the others from Gus Sandiver's gun, except for a plug of gray lead in the end. It was the one that had been under Gus Sandiver's hammer when the unknown shooter's bullet stung the old horse-thief in the wrist.

## CHAPTER XVII

### FINANCIAL ADVICE

**THERE** always was hot mince pie for Sunday dinner on the train. The filling for it came out of buckets similar to the jelly containers, bearing labels picturing the fruits, condiments, meats and liquors which were the traditional components of that barbaric dish. The pictures were only symbolical, designed to provoke the appetite and spice the anticipation, the mixture within the pails containing little of the fruits and delicacies shown there in vivid green and red. It would have been an unwise and profitless exploration for anyone who had eaten or intended to eat the mixture, to inquire too closely into the ingredients of that brown, spiced hash.

What it contained or did not contain caused neither speculation nor disquiet in the minds or stomachs of the jerries. It had a racy nip to it, which might have been vinegar, cider or champagne for all a jerry cared, with plenty of sharp spices to delight their smoke-toughened palates. Each jerry had his wedge of it, cut to a true and impartial form. It was the very first thing laid down on the long table by Mary and Annie when they set the stage for the midday meal.

There was one slight deviation from the weekday program in the Sunday dinner: the girls did not remain in the dining-car after the jerries were seated. Instead of

standing by with the coffeepots as on other days, the girls stood them on the floor, one at each end of the table. If any jerry wanted a second cup he must go after it, at the risk of somebody hogging his pie while he was gone. That was the Sunday concession to Annie and Mary, the one little break in the rule of service in the lives of the ladies who lived on wheels.

Mrs. Charles summoned the jerries to their meals by beating a resounding signal on a dishpan from the kitchen door. When she was ready for Dr. Hall, usually about half an hour later, she whooped shrilly, or sent Mary running across, or Annie put her head out of the door, fingers between her teeth, and whistled.

On hearing this latter signal this Sunday noon, Dr. Hall got to his feet with alacrity, newspapers flung around his chair, his speculations and conjectures over the doings of last night brought to an abrupt end. The signal to meals was always welcome. It was amazing how hungry a man got in that country west of Dodge.

Annie and Mary were fresh as wild roses in their long white aprons and crimped bangs, for not much is needed to make a young woman attractive when she has a hearty good humor and a clean face. Last night's party, even with its interrupted program, had been a refreshing interlude to them. They were gayer for it; Annie had many a laugh to stop in the door of her big mouth with hastily clapped hand.

They had spoken at breakfast of the trouble at the dance, discussed it briefly, and finished with it. Encounters between men were not a strange sight in their eyes; perils and small heroisms were things common to railroad life. To the women of the boarding-train and the

jerries, there was nothing to marvel over in Dr. Hall's close brush the night before. He had done well in putting a stop to the disturbance, better still by patching up the poor savage of the prairies and sending him on his way. That was done like a railroader. There was nothing more to be said.

Mrs. Charles was indignant, rather than amused, over the effort of Jim Justice to unload his unprofitable hotel upon her hands. It required no records nor balance sheets to enlighten her on the state of business in that establishment. Compared to her own busy boarding-house on wheels, it was only a stagnant eddy beside the stream of the passing world.

"The time's comin' when a hotel in Damascus will pay, and pay big, but it's never goin' to do it under the management of any old crawfish like Jim Justice," she said. "I can see the time comin' when I'd like to have a nice white hotel of about twenty rooms in this town, but I can't see that time near enough to buy that man out for four thousand dollars."

"The old rascal!" Hall blurted indignantly. "He told me not a week ago he'd be glad to sell for three thousand."

"Yes, and he'd take two if anybody offered it to him. But I'm not ready right now to start up a hotel on land."

"I wish you was," Annie said wistfully.

"Yes, but in some *town*, not this flag station away out here in this cussid country!" Mary added, bitter in her scorn of Damascus and its insignificance in the railroad scheme.

"Dodge is overdone on hotels," Mrs. Charles returned, corrective and sarcastic in a breath.

"There's other places besides Dodge," said Mary hotly,

redder for Annie's suppressed giggle, part of which would get out between her fingers. "Oh, shut up, or I'll slap you to sleep!" turning fiercely on her sister, who was undisturbed by her threat.

"They say it's all settled to make this a division point and build shops," Hall remarked, as indifferent to Mary's threat against her sister as the others, such outbursts between them being of daily occurrence. "That is, if they keep the county seat here. Otherwise it's going to Simrall, they say. But Simrall hasn't got much of a chance to win the election, according to the poll of voters, Judge Waters was telling me yesterday."

"They always say that about every railroad camp," Mary told him with high scorn. "Some people's ready to believe anything. I pity their ignorance!"

Hall was too well accustomed to the honest method of railroad expression by this time to be embarrassed by Mary's sniffing comment on his weakness. He helped himself to mashed potatoes without flush or tremor, only giving Annie a wink of understanding, as much as to say that, between them, it was appreciated as a joke. Mrs. Charles was cutting a slice of beef. She did not take her eyes from the operation to correct her outspoken daughter by as much as a frown.

"It's funny," Mrs. Charles commented, "how it gets out on a person if they've got a little money. I've got five thousand dollars—I guess everybody might as well know it now—in a savin's bank in Denver, but how Jim Justice ever got wind of it I don't know. Charley Burnett's found it out, too. Well, I don't mind about Charley; he's a—what do *you* think about that cattle company of his he's organized, Dr. Hall?"

"Does he want you to put your money in it?" Dr. Hall counter-queried.

"Yes," Mrs. Charles admitted, nodding several times, impressed by what she appeared to believe the doctor's shrewdness in the case. "Charley was down here bright and early this morning wantin' me to take some stock in his company. Everybody in town's gone in with him, he says. But I don't know. I wanted to ask you."

"I'm afraid Burnett is promising more than he can deliver," Hall replied, shaking his head gravely.

"He's made a lot of money speculatin' in cattle the last year or two, though," Mrs. Charles said.

"You can't go very strong on public report. Does he show any figures on his present condition?"

"A lot of cattlemen around here have gone in with him," she replied. "I guess they wouldn't risk their money in something that wasn't sound. Charley says cattle are bound to go away up on account of 'em cuttin' the range up in Texas for farmin'. He says he'll guarantee two dollars for every one a person puts in his company by next December."

While Mrs. Charles seemed merely to be repeating Burnett's assurances to her, she was in fact arguing for his scheme, in the way that a proselyte to some belief which he has not investigated and does not understand, argues with specious shallowness, more to confirm himself in his new convictions than in the expectation of convincing another. Hall was reluctant to advise her bluntly against putting a dollar into Burnett's company. He could not denounce the business, knowing nothing about Burnett's resources, although he questioned his intention and business probity.



"Don't you think Charley's honest?" Mrs. Charles asked him pointedly.

"Honest men lose their heads in business schemes sometimes, and get in deeper than they can wade," he replied. "He might be able to turn two dollars for one on his investment by next fall, but it sounds a little wild to me."

"What do you know about it? How many cattle did you ever raise?" Mary challenged in quick-fire questioning, taking no trouble to conceal her low opinion of him as a financial adviser.

"I've raised more beef right here at this table than I ever did before in my life," Hall replied, with no great success at railroad humor.

"Some people couldn't even raise hell with a spoon!" said Mary, her repartee more to the point, it appeared. It got a laugh out of Annie, which it took one hand clapped on the other to hold in, along with the first bite of mince pie which she had enveloped only a moment before.

"Would you put any money in the company yourself, Dr. Hall?" Mrs. Charles asked.

"Since you come at me that way, no. No; I wouldn't put a dollar into any scheme Burnett stood back of, if I had a barrel of it."

"I told Charley I'd have to think it over and ask some advice about it. If you don't think—"

"I wish to God somebody'd come along that's got brains enough to *advise* you, then!" Mary interposed. "What's it to some people if we never get out of this greasy, crummy old train! It's all right to somebody that don't have to slave and slop around here day in and year in for board and clothes. Clothes! Huh! I ain't

got clothes enough to flag a handcar, and me waitin' table for a gang of tarriers as long as I can remember."

"You might be worse off," Mrs. Charles chided her, but kindly, feeling perhaps that her bitterness was not altogether unjustified.

"You might be on the bum, kid," said Annie, soberly. "It ain't so worse feedin' jerries. I'd rather do it than slave in somebody's kitchen in the city."

"Wise girl, Annie!" Dr. Hall commended her, patting her shoulder with patriarchal caress.

"I know what I'd say to Charley Burnett if he wanted me to put money in his cattle company," Annie continued. "I'd tell him to go straight up."

"I ain't put any money in it yet, Annie," Mrs. Charles reminded her.

"Don't, then," said the genial Annie, shortly.

"Old rags and old shucks, over in the corner!" Mary derided her. "Workin' your arms off on this darned old train, marryin' some snoot of a jerry and livin' in a shack by the side of the track. I'd rather marry one of these grays on a farm."

"Everything looks better than the business you're in," Mrs. Charles sighed, knowing from long experience the uselessness of argument against Mary when she had a spell on like that. Mary was the discord of the kitchen, the rebel of the train. Everybody else was either satisfied with things as they were, or accepted them cheerfully in the hope of doing better in time. Only Mary chafed her heart sore; only Mary, of the three, was ashamed of her lot. To-day she was sharper than usual, careless of who heard her or of whom she hurt.

Dr. Hall was called from the table before he had finished

his pie, on the frantic summons of Little Jack Ryan, whose prodigious wife had broken her neck, he said, in a fall down the kitchen steps.

The fact proved to be less serious than the report, the break being no nearer the lady's neck than her collar-bone. She was making a great moan and commotion over the misfortune, apparently having inherited none of the Indian fortitude. Jack wanted the doctor to give her "a drap o' clariform," which being denied, he suggested whisky as a succedaneum. While the doctor did not prohibit it, knowing the interdiction would hold no longer than he was out of the door, he said she would be better off without it. Jack said if the doctor had no objection he would take a little snort himself, then, to assist him in bearing the sight of his poor dear's suffering.

Jack's next greatest concern was whether the accident could be listed as a railroad casualty, and himself relieved of doctor's charges through that arrangement. Dr. Hall was afraid it could not be done, but Jack could rest easy about the bill. There would not be any.

"It's a relafe," said Jack, "it's noble and grand of you, dochter, dear. I've been invistin' me capital. I've gone in the cattle business along of Charley Burnett."

"The devil you have!" Hall said, nothing complimentary for either investor or promoter in his surprised exclamation.

"It's a fine business he has, Charley Burnett, and a smart felly he is, too, with his pocket full of diamints. He'll turn every dollar I've put in with him into two before Christmas, as aisy as I'd clane a lamp. It's nothing to him to make money; he was born with the gift."

"He was born with some kind of a gift," Hall agreed.

"How much did he get—how much did you put in the pot?"

"Twelve hoondred," said Jack, easily, with an air of largeness, as if the sum amounted to so little in his expansive affairs. "It'll come back to me twinty-foive."

Hall considered it wiser to withhold comment. The affair was no business of his; expression of his doubts on this quickly promised turn of money would only set Ryan's anxiety working several months ahead of time. It would do for the simple fellow to sweat over his investment when dividend time arrived. Then it might turn out better than he expected. He had no warrant, based alone on his personal dislike of Burnett, to go around knocking his easy money scheme.

Hall finished bandaging Mrs. Ryan's shoulder, saying no more, regretful, indeed, of what he had said already in the way of advice that day. But he hoped fervently that Mrs. Charles would let her money rest in the savings bank, hard won as it was, slow as it must have been in growing to that comfortable sum. It was a golden bait in Burnett's eye, and he would not let it swing out of his grab if glib words and side-plugging with the ambitious Mary could accomplish his purpose. The fellow was altogether too eager, it appeared to Hall, to pull his neighbors into his sure thing, for a strictly honest business man.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### SENSATIONAL BUT SOUND

**THERE** was no organization, aggregation or collection by any name, in the country west of Dodge, as notable as Burnett's Cowboy Band. This band, numbering twenty-five or thirty, had been assembled by Burnett about a year before Dr. Hall's arrival in Damascus, as an expression of his importance which his own tongue and presence seemed insufficient to convey to the public appreciation. The most notable feature of the collection was the total absence of cowboys from the cast.

The leader of the band was the hardware merchant, a small Englishman with a brown-gray beard, whose name was Peters. He blew into a cornet with such spirit as to split the notes sometimes, making them high where they should have been low, but aside from that small fault of technique he was a most admirable musician, a sober man, with a family. He could go right ahead with his tune, afoot or ahorse, making the rest of them blow hard to keep up, and if he finished ahead of them, which he did frequently, it was nobody's business but his own.

That was one of the admirable things about the cowboy band: every fellow in it was so high-minded and independent that each of them pounded and puffed along according to his own gait. Off quite a distance, as one must stand to get the subject of a modern painting, one could identify a tune, or a fragment of a tune, now and

then when the band was at practice of an evening in the Woodmen's Hall.

Dine Fergus was the tuba, Larrimore one of the trombones, others of equal consequence filling out the band. Burnett supplied the instruments and cowboy regalia, Peters giving his services as instructor and leader for the honor of the town. The first public appearance of the band away from home had been made at the livestock convention in Wichita the autumn past. Burnett had provided a special car for the trip, with large advertisements of its contents along the sides.

This Sunday afternoon the band was out, expanding its bellows in the public square. There was a stream of music coming down Custer Street that seemed as if the dam had burst as Dr. Hall waded against it on his way to Major Cottrell's sod house, to learn how his patient fared. Hall thought of the noise as a flood, the impetuosity of it whirling and mixing things as it spread. It was as if orderly music had been turned out to go its way, losing its head in the exuberance of freedom.

The band had on its red neckerchiefs, sombreros, fringed pants, and all the other regulation adornments of romance cowboys, many of them being articles which the slow-headed smallwits who rode at the tails of cattle never wore, either at work or at play. Peters, a short man, stood on a box at the head of his double line formation, the base drum at the bottom end. They were just finishing a tune when Hall arrived at the square. He stopped on the edge of the crowd to see how they went about the business of mauling a tune so mercilessly, that being his first sight of the assembly as a whole.

Peters emptied his instrument genteelly, his example

followed by all who had metal contrivances which induced condensation. Probably something more than breath got into some of them. It was very likely, indeed. There was a great deal of unscrewing, jiggling of keys, upending, tapping. When all was clear, and everybody set, Peters put his cornet to his lips, parted his mustache with the mouthpiece, this way and that, delicately pursing his lips, showing the red of them under his beard.

Peters set the instrument to his mouth, took it away, looking around with questioning eye. There was a general bracing of feet, a spreading of legs, a settling down firmly for the struggle among the members of the band. Peters put the cornet to his mouth again, and took it away dry and unblown; pursed his lips once more with a tentative inflation, his eyes enlarging under the pressure.

“R-r-raidy!” said Peters, with a warning, portentous sound, the instrument approaching his lips. It was only two inches away from the place when he checked it, inflating his cheeks again in that tentative, testing way.

All was expectation; nobody breathed, the bandmen’s chests big with the stored vigor waiting the word to go. Peters gave the bugle end of his cornet a little flip, like the tail of a fowl taking to the air.

“R-r-raidy!” he warned again. “Pla-a-ay!”

To an outsider it did not appear that they made a very good start. In fact, it sounded to Hall as if somebody had jumped the gun. It did not take those whose toe-holds had slipped at the signal long to overtake their competitors, even to forge ahead. Notable among these was the base-drummer, who gained speed as he advanced. He made an amazing recovery.

This drummer was a young man known about town as

Frog Lewis, a tall, earnest chap with a long, thin face, and a gulping look about his mouth and throat from which his nickname had come. He finished the tune with a look of great satisfaction, plainly believing himself the winner, in which opinion Dr. Hall enthusiastically concurred. If he hadn't struck a fence or something, he would have been half a mile in the lead if the tune had continued three minutes longer.

The band was warming up to its work in fine style, although in the next piece Frog Lewis appeared to have lost step. He lagged, he labored, he laid on in the wrong place, out of all time or reason apparent to anybody but himself. Dr. Hall retreated, having got an earful that would last him a month. As he turned up the road toward Cottrell's, the piece came to an end, Frog Lewis giving a prodigious single and a quick double beat to close it, in his accustomed triumphant style. It seemed as if he had been lagging on purpose this time for his happy finale, which gave the impression that he had driven the tune into the barn and slammed the door.

Major Cottrell was sitting by the open window, listening to the distant band, Mrs. Cottrell near at hand reading a Leavenworth paper which featured army news. Elizabeth had gone for a ride. The house was insufficient without her. It seemed an old place to-day, dreary in spite of the blue eagerness of the spring afternoon.

Major Cottrell said he was gaining every day. That was due to home-cured dried beef, he declared, which he placed second only to the skill of Dr. Hall. But that skill had been expended in the beginning; science had done all it could do in the first few days. Now it was the turn of dried beef, which the major kept by him at all



times, cut in convenient strips for gentlemanly mastication.

They had heard in the sod house of Dr. Hall's adventure with Gus Sandiver the night before. He had taken the proper course, all through, Major Cottrell said.

"As a public official and the chief sponser of this town, I thank you," Major Cottrell said, offering his hand. "We don't want any lynchings in Damascus, nor any rioting of that kind to get us into the papers. On his own account Gus Sandiver wasn't worth the risk you took to save his neck—I'd shoot him as quick as I could pull my gun if I met him in the road—but you did more than save the life of a worthless man. You saved the honor of this town, and every good citizen in it thanks you. You've made friends by it that you'll never lose."

"I've been paid more than I earned then," Hall returned, uncomfortable under the old gentleman's high rating for his rash behavior in an affair that might have had a different ending only for that friendly shot out of the dark.

Did they know? he wondered. There was nothing apparent in their faces, nothing suggested in their unreserved manner. Elizabeth would not be the one to talk. But she would talk to him; he was resolved on that. Elizabeth would talk to him, compelled by his gratitude.

Major Cottrell was not a man to press acknowledgments to the cheapening point. He dropped the subject of Gus Sandiver and the honor of Damascus, turning to railroad news. From there it was a natural step for Hall to the affairs of Charley Burnett, upon whose new company he was curious to have the major's expression.

Hall told of Burnett's endeavor to draw Mrs. Charles into his scheme, of Little Jack Ryan's investment, and what he had heard of the town in general jumping to the new company like freezing people crowding around a fire.

"Yes, everybody's handing Charley their money," Cottrell said, laughing over Hall's comparison. "Maybe they'll be left out in the cold, instead of gettin' their fingers warm in Charley's financial blaze. He was up to see me last night. Oh well, I might as well own up I put a little in his game. Not enough to make me if he wins, nor break me if he loses. I never put all of my pile on any one card in my life. Charley's a puzzle; he's one of these financial sports that bursts out of nowhere and sets the world afire. He's sensational, but I believe he's sound. Did you think of throwin' in with him?"

"No," Hall replied, decisively.

Major Cottrell chuckled, growing grave and sober in a moment, nodding understandingly.

"I can see where Charley would look somewhat risky to a stranger. Easy enough, with his four-flusher front and handful of diamonds. But we know Charley pretty well here—that is, we know him as well as anybody, I guess. We've seen him grow from nothing to two million dollars' worth of cattle in the past four years. When a man does that, with you looking on all the time, it kind of makes you want to get in on it with him when the chance comes along."

"Naturally," Hall said. "The man's personality is disagreeable to me. He appears to me just what you've called him—a four-flusher. I'm sorry Jack Ryan's wife didn't break her collar-bone yesterday."

"Yes, it would have been better if he'd kept out of it.

I hope that railroad woman keeps clear. Nobody can afford to gamble, except on his surplus. This advice about puttin' all your eggs in one basket might do for a person that's only got one egg. I say if you've got two, put 'em in separate baskets, and see that the baskets are a good ways apart."

"Pretty sound finance, it seems to me," Hall agreed.

"Although I believe Charley's going to come out big," Cottrell said, somewhat hastily, as if to head off any impression to the contrary that might get abroad as having come from him. "He's got unlimited credit in the big Kansas City banks, they're fairly asking him to take their money. It's assurance enough for me when a business has the endorsement of a set of men as shrewd as those Kansas City bankers. I'd put some of them against the sharpest minds of Wall Street, any day."

"One of them told me once that the test of a banker's shrewdness was keeping clear of Wall Street," Hall recalled. "But I haven't seen him in a long time; I don't know whether they've got him yet."

"One mistake Burnett's making is that blame fool band," Cottrell declared with no compromising decisiveness. "It's a disgrace to this town to go haulin' that outfit around the country."

"They may improve," Hall said hopefully. "They appear to have a lot of individual confidence, if not any great amount of cohesion."

"They're as contrary as a crowd of old women when they begin to hammer on a tune. Well, I've got a reply from the state board in this matter of Old Doc Ross. The old rascal is a regular graduate of medicine, registered and solid as a rock. I'd have gambled the other way."

"I'm rather glad to hear of it," Hall said, speaking quite honestly, more honestly than he could have spoken, perhaps, if there had been any element of competition involved.

"Yes, I believe I am, too, to tell the truth about it," Cottrell confessed, laughing over it. "When the heat of vexation with the old scoundrel passes I always feel kind of sorry for him, for it's as these people say here: there's a spark of something good in the old scamp, either a native shrewdness or a professional competency, that leads him right eight times out of ten."

"I saw him as I came up," Hall said, "sober as a lark, shaved and clipped and dressed up respectably. I had to look twice to convince my eyes."

"He lifts his heels like he's skatin' when he's sober and got on a clean white shirt," Major Cottrell said.

"He's a disgusting old villain!" Mrs. Cottrell fired from the flank. "It's a disgrace to the state that he's allowed to practice."

"Now you hear it," Major Cottrell said, nodding to Hall gravely, but with a laugh in his eyes.

"I'm surprised to hear you half-way condoning his disgusting vices," she fired again.

Major Cottrell winked at Hall, with sly understanding, as if to say most of his excusing of Old Doc Ross had been done to provoke her, just to show the visitor what kind of metal was in that family.

"I look for him to take fire one of these nights when he goes to blow out his lamp," he said cheerfully. "Then we'll get some nice portly old gentleman to take his place."

"Portly old gentlemen are out of fashion as physicians,"

she corrected him, this time the laugh on her side of the field. "We require brains in our doctors instead of—"

"Belly," said Major Cottrell, filling out the hesitant pause.

"Major Cottrell!" she reproved him, blushing to the tips of her ears.

"You don't have to observe those old-maidish niceties when you discuss anatomy before a doctor," Major Cottrell assured her with off-hand ease, pleased to the ribs to see the flash of virtuous delicacy in his wife's face. "Maybe we can induce Doctor Hall to take the old man's place when he blows up. He could do worse—he could do miles worse—than throw in with us here and grow up with the town."

"It would be a hard life, but a full one," she said, looking at Dr. Hall with appeal more pressing than any her tongue could speak. "A doctor in a pioneer place is a missionary."

"Pioneer place!" Major Cottrell discounted the designation for Damascus. "We did the pioneering here twenty years ago. There's nothing to do in this country now but pick up the profits of our hardships."

"There'll be hardship and suffering among these poor people who are crowding in here expecting to farm," she said in prophetic sadness. "I see them drive past going out to their claims, all they possess in one wagon, and not overloaded at that. They're unprepared, they don't realize what's ahead of them."

"There's not much profit for a doctor in them," Major Cottrell said, with the cattleman's hardness for those who had come to displace him of his ancient rights.

"There's the profit of merciful deeds," she returned, correctively.

"A doctor can't live on that in this country," Major Cottrell said gently. "What do you think of the prospect, Doctor?"

"I haven't got down to thinking much about it."

"There'll be telephones strung all over this country in time, like they're getting them in the cities, though I don't suppose a doctor could bring a child into the world by telephone."

"Major Cottrell!"

"Nor operate on a man for this new disease you doctors have invented, this new affix, or suffix—or what is it you call it?"

"Appendicitis, I expect you mean, Major."

"That's the word. It's got an ominous sound."

"Have you had any more calls to the country, Doctor?" Mrs. Cottrell inquired anxiously.

"No, I'm happy to say. They seem to be pretty healthy out there on the prairie."

"They doctor themselves till they're in the last extremity," Major Cottrell said. "I've been among that kind—Missourians, and those people. Every family's got a bottle of salts and calomel, take 'em like sugar. So, you haven't been considering staying with us, Doctor?"

"Not to say seriously."

"It's a great opportunity, a splendid chance."

"I have been told so, Major."

"You don't want to follow a railroad camp all your days, even if you could. You'll have to settle down one of these days and build up a permanent practice. Why not here in Damascus?"

"I don't believe there's any particular reason I could argue against it," Hall admitted.

"Then think it over, will you, Hall? You could buy Ross out for a little of nothing, and you don't need to let the money stop you if that would be in the way."

"Thank you, Major Cottrell, sincerely. I will think about it seriously."

Elizabeth was approaching; Hall could see her from his place near the window, sight more interesting in his eyes, perhaps, than it would have been to the others if they had been situated where they could have seen. He wanted to make it appear, to Elizabeth, like a casual meeting at the gap in the sagging wire fence, which they spoke of at the sod house as the gate.

Major Cottrell shook hands again as Hall rose to leave, with a word about dried beef and appendicitis, advancing the sudden conclusion that men would not be cursed by that ailment if they confined their diet in times of trouble to the strengthening provender of plainsmen-soldiers and pioneers.

## CHAPTER XIX

### ELIZABETH IS SORRY

ELIZABETH seemed always to have an air of wistfulness about her when her features were in repose, as if she nursed a secret sorrow. But it was nothing but one of the tricks nature plays with the feminine face for the allure-ment of men. There was nothing brooding nor melan-choly about Elizabeth at heart. Laughter lay close to the surface; it woke in her eyes with even the stealthiest breath of mirth. Not the vacuous loud laughter such as exploded out of the mouths of Annie and Mary Charles, but the refinement of sympathetic merriment, when her expressive eyes sparkled through small slits of close-drawn lids, seeming to say: "I am laughing with you, not at you, my jolly friend."

Elizabeth laughed that way when she told Dr. Hall of standing back in the shadows, watching him waltz with Mrs. Charles.

"It was duty, not pleasure, a social obligation that had to be discharged," he protested, embarrassed in spite of her friendly appreciation.

"Of course," she said. "I wished there were a Mr. Charles to invite me out. It wasn't half as rough as I expected it to be. Railroad manners certainly are improving."

They were at the gateless gap in the wire fence, from which the posts on either hand leaned away as if to ac-



commodate people wide at the waistline, a style not current in Damascus in those hard-riding days. Elizabeth's horse was snipping around with free rein, forelegs spread to bring its nose down to the short grass.

"Yes, everything was going fine until the delegate from Simrall arrived," Hall said, ashamed of his part in the subsequent activities, looking down at his toes like a bashful boy.

"You oughtn't take such risks," she reproved him.

"I thought he'd shot the station agent, but I don't suppose it would have mattered. He seems to be an unpopular sort of man. The old fool was slinging his gun around kind of recklessly—he might have hit some of the women. But you know how it was."

"I've heard several versions and variations. I wasn't there when it happened; Gus put in his appearance after I'd left."

"Somebody shot him through the arm," he said, with such weakness of effect as to sound almost foolish in his ears.

"But you took a long risk when you walked out with that sponge in your hand," she told him, looking at him gravely, shaking her head with solemn disapprobation. "It was a fine bluff, but suppose it hadn't worked?"

"Providence, or some power, appears to raise up friends and protectors for me when they're most needed. I suppose somebody would have stepped up and piloted me out of the scrape, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth shook her head again, not touched by the deep note of gratitude in his voice, unmoved by his meaning glance. She did not change color; there was no embarrassment in her steady, frank eyes, such as one might

show when trying to cover a service for which she desired no acknowledgment.

"It was a fine shot, just a snap at the fellow's arm as he swung it up in the lantern light. There isn't one in a thousand could have hit him."

"I don't know anybody in town that could have done it," she seemed to speculate, a puzzled look in her face as she turned all the probabilities in her mind.

"Burnett says he knows who did it," he said, lightly scoffing.

"Maybe he does."

"So does Jim Justice, but their stories don't match."

"What does Charley say?" she looked up quickly, eagerness in her words.

"He says it was one of the boys."

"Maybe it was one of his men from the range," she said thoughtfully. "And windy old Jim says he did it himself?"

"No. He says it was a lady." A knowing glance went with the words, which seemed only to provoke her mystification.

"A lady? Who was she—did he say?"

"The same one I've been hoping it was." There was the vibration of hopeful eagerness in his voice, an appeal. "But she is so modest, she makes so little of her great and timely help to a foolish, impetuous greenhorn, that he's afraid to come right out and thank her the way he wants to."

"Meaning me?" she asked, truly amazed, touching her wishbone with a pointing finger.

"Wasn't it you, Elizabeth?" he almost pleaded, catching the hand with pointing finger that still rested against

her bosom in its astonished question of identity. "I'd rather owe it to you than anybody in the world, Elizabeth. Wasn't it you?"

She shook her head, her wistful face pale, her friendly eyes stretched wide.

"It wouldn't have been his arm if'd taken a shot at Gus Sandiver," she replied. She placed her hand impetuously over the one that clasped her own, as if to comfort him for the illusion he had held. "No, no, Doctor Hall; I wasn't there, I didn't even hear the shooting."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"So am I."

"I told Justice you were not there, but he was positive. I've been swelling around all day in the belief I was debtor to somebody I was proud to owe."

"Maybe it was one of the girls in the boarding-train," she suggested, the thought appearing to make her cold. She drew her hands away.

"They couldn't shoot with anything but a chunk of coal," he said miserably. "Who the dickens do you suppose it was?"

"There are not so many ladies running around loose in this town," she said, her manner implying they were altogether too numerous, at that.

"Justice is an infernal old liar!" he declared. "I don't believe he knows who fired that shot any more than I do."

"Maybe not," she said, assuming indifference.

"There's only one lady in the world I'd accept such a service of," he declared hotly.

"I don't see how you could help yourself," said she.

"I'd feel like a cad if I had to owe it to any other girl. If it wasn't you, Elizabeth, Burnett's right about it."

"I expect he is," she agreed.

"I asked him who it was, but he wouldn't tell me. He said the person who did it wasn't out looking for thanks."

"Let it go at that, then."

"I suppose I'll have to. But I'll feel like a sneak, going around in debt to somebody for my life who figures it's something that might hurt his reputation if it got out on him. That shows how I'm rated in this man's town, and yet there are people who tell me I ought to hang out my shingle here and settle down."

"That don't signify," she said, in her breezy, sure-footed way, her poise entirely recovered. "It's somebody that don't want to get in bad with that bunch of shooters over in Simrall. Pass it up."

"The trouble of it is I'll have to treat everybody in this town with a deference they don't deserve and I don't feel, on the chance of snubbing the real hero of the occasion."

"You'd make by it, maybe, if you would come down off your high horse now and then, call them by their first names and set up the cigars. A doctor's got to be more or less a politician, dad says, and I think he's right."

"Oh, if I wanted to stay here in Damascus and build up a practice I could do even that, I guess, but it's a kind of cheap way of getting where you want to go."

"Don't you want to stay in Damascus?" she asked, glancing at him archly, her words almost coaxing.

"Do you want me to stay?" he returned, boorishly, as he realized next moment.

Elizabeth nodded, not a shade of pink in her face.

"Uh-huh!" she grunted, like a tobacco chewer looking

around for a place to spit. "All the permanents want you. Judge Waters says you're the finest surgeon he ever saw."

"Judge Waters is a townsite boomer. Extravagant talk is his line of trade."

It pleased him to hear the judgment of that lean, slow-striding, meditative, old man, none the less. He would have stretched himself to his toes in another moment, catching his leg muscles as they were setting to the act, but for Elizabeth's expectantly provoking grin. She was watching for him to preen himself in his pride, probably with the intention of calling him down.

"Try walking around town with the mortals a while," she suggested. "You might as well get used to our ways, for we're not going to let you leave."

Hall was in no humor for trying out her suggestion as he went back to the town square, heading for his office. He hadn't mounted a high horse, he defended himself to his own conscience. He had been indifferent and aloof because he had not felt himself a part of the town, or ever likely to have any deeper interest in it than now. They had conspired against him from the first, throwing their own guilt at his door, trying to give it all the air of a great piece of public levity. It was about as funny as somebody leaving an unwelcome infant in a fellow-traveler's arms.

He held his deliberative way toward Custer Street, thinking of his situation in that town, an outsider who had come to camp on the edge of it, never intending to mingle in its life and affairs. How the swirl of events, small and local as they were, had laid hold of him like the vicious current in a despicable, brawling, muddy little stream, and rolled him until he came to his feet standing

more than waist deep in it, every move appearing to take him farther from the bank.

Burnett had served notice on him to keep hands off; others had invited him to lay hold and carry with them. He never had considered stopping permanently in Damascus until Burnett had come at him with that sneering order. His defiant answer to the diamond-shuffling speculator had committed him, in a way. Should he resign his railroad job and take up the challenge of Burnett and the invitation of the really responsible citizens at the same time? It was something to think about.

Here was Major Cottrell offering money to buy out Old Doc Ross, assistance that he did not need, although the proffer was assuring. These people had confidence in the future of their town, and there was some good sport among them who thought enough of the outside doctor to lift up his gun and put in a shot when it was needed most. Burnett had no inside knowledge of that gunner; Burnett's front was all a bluff.

But it wasn't Elizabeth. That took a lot of the edge off. It would have been a pleasantly romantic situation for him as debtor to Elizabeth. Even with her out of it, he could not believe it was anybody who would pop up some day and slam it in his face. Maybe Judge Waters had slung that timely gun. He liked the thought. But it was not Elizabeth.

Old Doc Ross was sitting in his little shack of an office next door to Pink Fergus' place of many enterprises, his door open to the warm air of late afternoon. There was nothing about his appearance indicative of any great amount of humiliation or anguish over the treatment he had received at the young doctor's hands.

Ross was smoking a long stogy, the end of it tilted in jaunty defiance, his feet on his flat-topped desk. His boots were polished, his clothing was in array, his entire appearance that of a person pretty well satisfied with himself and things which touched his orbit. There was no trace of his late dissipation in his face; his hand appeared steady when he reached for his long cigar to flick the ash from it delicately, and restore it with fixed and lofty eye. Not a bad-looking man, Hall thought; not a competitor to be despised anywhere, if he kept himself sober and in trim. The fact that he was a regular doctor, though bent toward quackery, had lifted him considerably.

As Hall passed the door he lifted his hand in a hail, nodded, and saluted his fellow practitioner with a hearty:

“Good evening, Doctor.”

Old Doc Ross did not move a whisker, nor deflect his lofty eye one point from an apparently deep study of a picture tacked to the wall before him. This was a chaste advertisement of yeast, a calendar beneath the young lady who stood knee deep in June with an armful of hops.

Hall grinned as he went on, suffering no feeling of being snubbed. Contrarily, he was considerably pleased with himself. That was making a start in the direction Elizabeth had advised.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE ENEMY ASSEMBLES

DAMASCUS lost the county seat election by seven votes. It was the fourth day after election when final results were made known, the farthest off precinct being that long sending in its returns by horseback from the northern county line.

It was a shock to Damascus when the county clerk attested the returns and this disastrous verdict of the county's electors was posted. The degradation of defeat lay doubly on Damascus, for the judges of election there knew that ten votes for Simrall had been cast by traitors in the camp.

A week before election day it became known in Damascus that ten voters of that town had banded together, acting on knowledge of a canvass showing how tight the contest would be, for the purpose of selling their votes to the highest bidder.

Damascus fairly laughed itself hoarse when this gang of speculators announced through an advertisement in the Damascus Press their patriotic intention and made known the channel of approach. That being such a seat of high and refined humor, nobody in Damascus thought of the advertisement as anything but a joke, a sly piece of ridicule aimed at Simrall's forlorn chance. It was thought nothing more than a sharp editorial jibe.

The day before election it became apparent that it was



not altogether a joke. Somebody was out for the money, and Ora Simrall, it was said, had taken a shot at the chance of being thrown down after the price was paid. Now it was certain there had been honor enough among the traitors to impel them to deliver what they had sold. Ten votes for Simrall were cast, duly counted and credited by the judges of election.

It was ground for contest which Damascus was not slow to begin. The county attorney was on his way to Topeka before the result of the election was announced publicly, to demand the proper writ from the supreme court to stay the hands of Simrall until the fraud of the election could be established in court.

Major Bill Cottrell had been able to go to the polls, but there his services to the county in this crisis had ended. He was scornfully impatient with himself for his slow recovery of strength after his wound had healed. In spite of large quantities of dried beef he remained as weak as a snail, pale and tottering, his hand palsied. Elizabeth had taken his place in the court house where, assisted by two other young women, she had carried on the work of county recorder and treasurer, no light job with this inrush of homesteaders and buyers of railroad land.

Cottrell was roused to fighting fervor by the news of his town's defeat through the treason of its own citizenry. He was for hunting out the scoundrels and shooting them where found, a proceeding which had the endorsement of other substantial citizens. He proposed rounding up all suspects, searching them, and dealing with them on the evidence found in their pockets.

But it was plain that such proceeding had its risks.

Some fairly honest man who had been lucky in a game might suffer. So Major Cottrell was obliged to confine himself to denunciations, expressed to equally indignant neighbors who called at his house, and through the newspaper, which ran off an extra in the middle of the week to spread the disastrous intelligence of defeat.

For a few days it appeared that Simrall's purchased victory was not going to avail the town anything. The county officials, with the one exception of the sheriff, refused to recognize the election as valid. They announced their intention of remaining in the court house at Damascus until the courts had passed on the question. The sheriff, whose sympathies had been with the opposition all the time, removed himself and the records of his office to Simrall, leaving a deputy in charge of the prisoners in jail.

The sheriff had no sooner removed his spittoon and swivel chair from the old county seat to the new, than the citizens of Simrall made demand on the remaining county officials to follow suit, and bring their records and books, as well as the county funds, along. The matter hung that way a day or two, Damascus standing fast in its entrenchments waiting word from the county attorney.

Dr. Hall was not particularly touched by the turn of the election, not having been able yet to imagine a possible future for himself in that town. The general disappointment reflected on him from his belligerent friend, Cottrell, and that veteran's townsite partner, Judge Waters. The judge had followed the county attorney to Topeka, called by telegraph to lend his argument to the cause. Hall missed his stately, gander-like presence on the street. It seemed as if the very essence of Damascus

had gone with him, that it must droop like a plantain leaf in the hot sun, to revive no more, if mischance should prevent his return.

Summer was beginning to concentrate its powers on the gray, buffalo-grass region west of Dodge. Inside the box-car office Dr. Hall found the heat intolerable from mid-day onward well into the night, although Little Jack Ryan protested cheerfully, even hopefully, that this was only a little sip of a sample. Wait till the latter days of July, and from then on to October, he said, with what seemed a pride in the man-killing rigors of those blazing, quivering, long white days.

Out of gratitude for Dr. Hall's ministrations to Mrs. Ryan, Jack had contrived an awning from an old tent which made a little thumbnail of shade before the office door. Here, in spite of his conspicuity in the eyes of all who traversed Custer Street between depot and square, Dr. Hall regularly planted a chair of afternoons, and took what comfort he could from a book.

The never-ceasing southwest wind had begun to blow harder, coming hot and shriveling from the grates of whatever inferno bred it to blast and torture the Kansas plains. It felt at times, along about three o'clock of a cloudless afternoon, that it would almost singe the hair. Wild sunflowers by the roadside hung despondently, the gray bunch-grass stood sere and brittle. On what had been the cattle range until a little while past, now dotted by plank huts of homesteaders, a vast transformation had fallen. The refreshing rills which had sparkled down the old buffalo trails a few weeks earlier, promising water in abundance, had dried up to the last drop; their hard-baked beds were cracked.

Good water was a grave problem among the settlers, who had depended largely on these springtime rivulets. One must bore deep to strike the living water that flowed from the mountains in widespread stream beneath those shaggy swells. It was a process beyond the means of most homesteaders, who were hauling water already long distances from the Arkansas River, or the few creeks which emptied into it. This water carried a heavy alkaline content, which brought illness to those unaccustomed to its use, especially true in the case of children. A few cases of typhoid had occurred; less dangerous enteric disorders were widespread.

Dr. Hall had responded to several calls from stricken families in instances where Old Doc Ross either could not or would not go. Ross was a hard bargainer, his invariable rule being the demand of payment for each visit in advance. His rate for country visits was two dollars, a large sum to the poor homesteader. If the caller could not produce the amount, or give satisfactory assurance that it would be paid on reaching his house, Ross refused to go. Hall never declined to attend one of these cases, feeling that, as he made no charge for his services and Ross had refused to act, he was not cutting any ground from under his unworthy confrère.

Due to Hall's charitable practice, the impression got sown abroad over the country that the railroad doctor at Damascus was a sort of free, public institution, something like the well in the court house square. It took a lot of explaining; many a man was obliged to go to Old Doc Ross and dig up two dollars after having counted on having the services of this public physician free. Whether Old Doc Ross appreciated this fair dealing, Hall did not

know. While the old fellow was holding an unprecedented streak of sobriety, he never bent from his stiff, unforgiving attitude of lofty indifference, passing Hall, ignoring his friendly salutations, as if he were a shadow in his path.

Dr. Hall was sitting under his awning on a certain afternoon while the event of the county seat contest was still swinging undetermined, no definite encouragement having come from Topeka. It was especially hot and parching that afternoon, the steady wind pouring over the shimmering, treeless spaces drying the skin until it had a sandy feel to the touch. Nance, the station agent, came out of his office, standing bareheaded in the blazing sun, looking up and down the track. Then he came down the platform toward Hall, walking fast, as if he must go somewhere and back on an errand before some unexpected train, carrying no telling what dread and mighty official, might come along and catch him off duty.

Hall noticed Nance's appearance, and start in his direction, watching him with a divided interest, thinking he might be going to the White Elephant for a glass of beer. He remarked how the rails wavered and seemed to throw off a hot vapor, as if they were dissolving in the heat of the sun; to writhe and shimmer in the distance, where they came to a point down the long stretch of straight track. He thought of the jerries out there, toiling with heavy sledges, tamping-picks, bars so hot they would take the skin off the toughest hand unless kept driven into the ground when not in use. People who complained of life's hardships must go up against something like that, he thought, before they could qualify for a certificate of experience.

Nance crossed the little desert of cinders, pulled up before Hall, and stopped.

"Hello, Doc," he said, looking around in his sniffing, rabbit sort of way, like a man who could not even call his body, to say nothing of his soul, his own.

"Hello, Nance," Hall returned languidly, eyes turned away from the fascination of the shimmering rails a moment, open book fluttering its pages in the wind.

"Say, Doc, it ain't none of my business, and I don't want to be buttin' in, and I may be gittin' in bad by tellin' you," Nance said, sparring and sidling, but all the time straining his buttons to keep in some kind of news.

"What's up?" Hall inquired, alert and interested.

"I don't know as I've got any business tellin' you, Doc, and I may be gittin' in bad when I do, but you'll keep it under your hat where you got the tip, won't you, Doc?"

"You know it, Nance. What's happened?"

"Nothing's happened, but something's goin' to happen. I've just been talkin' with the operator at Simrall—but this is on the q.t., Doc, you understand?"

Hall nodded, his interest beginning to wilt. It was too hot for a piece of railroad gossip to hold a man's backbone stiff, especially when he had to wait on a cautious man like Nance to come over the fence with it.

"He called me," said Nance, pausing to spy around to see that nobody else was near, "to tell me they're gittin' up a crowd in Simrall to come down here and move the court house—but of course that was only a josh. What they're comin' after is the books, records, money—everything loose. He called me to put me wise."

"When are they coming, did he say?"

"Right away. He said they had four wagonloads of

men and all kinds of guns. I thought you might want to tip it off to Burnett and the boys up-town."

"I don't know," Hall meditated. "I suppose they ought to be told, so they can get ready to stand them off—if they've got it in them to do it."

"Well, as a favor I ask you to keep my name out of it, Doc. I'm tellin' you because you stood by me one time when I needed a friend."

"You can breathe easy," Hall said. "Isn't that Six whistlin' up there?"

"She's about due, she was reported out of Simrall on time." Nance consulted his watch as he spoke, in the railroad habit of looking at a watch when any matter of time or circumstance of whatever nature is discussed.

"I'll tell them one of the boys on Six tipped it off to me," Hall said. "I'll ask one or two of them about it when she stops."

"You're a prince, Doc. I thought you'd want to tell that old major, anyhow—he's a good old guy, I kind of wanted him to know. But a man in my position's got to be careful. Sure. You know that, Doc."

"Thanks, old feller. We'll work it as carefully as if we were going to blow a safe."

Nance gave him the high-sign to show his appreciation of the promised secrecy, and trotted back to his bay window. There he was seen a few moments later, in due and official form, leaning out to look up the track at Number Six, which was rounding the curve three-quarters of a mile away, coming down under gravity, safety-valve singing, but scarcely a flag of the escaping steam seen in that superheated air.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE BETTER PART OF VALOR

DAMASCUS jumped to its guns with the fervor of a righteous cause. Major Cottrell spread the news of Simrall's impending raid, throwing off his weakness as a bed-ridden person is said to overcome his sickness in the menace of death by fire.

There were some who questioned the report at first, inquiring its source, the habit of humor being so well established in the town as to cause its citizens to poke every tied bag and turn every buffalo chip to look for the joke before accepting anything for what it appeared on the outside to be. Several young men leaped the saddled horses which always could be found hitched around the square, and rode off in the direction of Simrall to investigate, and the county clerk, who owned a spyglass, mounted the court house tower to take a peek at the road, which undulated over the hummocks like the picture of a tapeworm in the almanac.

It was a true report, the county clerk said, coming down from the tower white around the gills, sweating, with cobwebs across his extensive forehead, which occupied all the ground where his forelock used to be. He calculated them to be about three miles out of Simrall, with five to come. There were four wagonloads of them, escorted by a troop of horsemen, which appeared to number twenty or thirty. There were enough of them,



he said, to wipe Damascus off the map and never leave a mark.

This report from aloft flashed around the square, quickening the preparations for defense. Men were locking up their stores, piling goods boxes, barrels of salt and sugar, sacks of flour and even hams, in the windows to prevent the bullets doing damage among their shelves. Women and children were hurried into the cellars, with instructions to stay there until the fight was over unless driven out by fire. Many of these were struggling to their places of concealment carrying feather beds and pillows, the frontier faith in feather beds to stop bullets being firmer grounded than anybody's experience justified.

Major Cottrell was standing at the head of the court house steps, where he had fought his unequal battle against the Simrall raiders of another day, his pistol ready to his hand, a rifle on his shoulder. On account of his military experience and his official position in the county, the major was looked on as leader.

Other armed men were coming, not at all warlike in appearance, peaceable family men in shirt sleeves, the butcher with his apron tucked up at the corner like an ancient apprentice, the druggist with his eyeglasses and upstanding hair. The Baptist preacher was seen coming with a double-barreled shotgun. He stopped to question Kraus, who appeared to have a sudden pressure of business in the opposite direction.

Meantime, Elizabeth Cottrell and Dr. Hall were collecting the county's funds, small books and documents, which they carried to the bank and locked in the vault. The bank's safe was not large enough to admit the county recorder's books, the things most desired by the Simrall

people. The title to every piece of real estate in the county depended on those records, of which no complete abstract had been made. Let Simrall get its hands on the books, and the county officials would have to surrender.

Hall returned to Cottrell's office from a hurried dash across to the bank with some last sheaves of papers, to find Elizabeth standing before the pile of broad, flat books in which land titles were recorded. This array of records had grown fast in the past six months of the county's history; heaped as they two had stacked them in the hope of being able to get them into the bank vault, the pile was almost half as high as Elizabeth, three tiers wide.

"This is likely to be a very serious affair," Hall said.

"I'm afraid there's going to be a terrible fight!" she replied. She was standing with her hand on the books, in a pose of affectionate protection. Her face was very pale.

"Your father's in no condition to take a hand in this, but he'll not listen to anything. He's running on the pressure of excitement, likely to snap like an icicle any minute."

"They won't let me have a gun!" she complained indignantly. "Dad says I must go home, it's no place for a woman, but I'd be more good to them than the best man in the bunch, except him. They're not fighting men, Dr. Hall."

"No, that's the pity of it. They'll throw their lives away in this foolish quarrel, fighting for so little. This old dump! The whole thing involved isn't worth the life of one man, much less five or six—maybe more—that are

likely to be killed here to-day. I think your father's right. Home is the place for you, Elizabeth."

"What are you going to do?" she inquired, lifting her anxious eyes. "You haven't got any gun."

"It isn't my fight, Elizabeth," he replied gently, meeting her questioning glance steadily. He touched her hand where it pressed the books. She drew it away, subconsciously, it seemed, shaking her head.

"It's everybody's fight to-day," she said.

"I'm an outsider," he reminded her, "but Damascus doesn't appear to be a respecter of persons in its brawls. It has reached out and involved the innocent bystander before; it may do it again. If anything like that happens I'll have to act on the impulse. That's all I can say, Elizabeth."

"But you haven't got a gun," she insisted, in a half complaining, half blaming way.

"I'll make out without one," he replied, somewhat stiffly, his dignity touched by her manner of indictment for what she too plainly believed his remission in a manly duty.

"It's suicide to meet that Simrall crowd without a gun," she continued her censorious arraignment. "I've always told you a man couldn't face the music in this country without a gun, and now you'll see I'm right. Rustle around and get one, can't you, before they come?"

"That would spot me at once as an enemy to Simrall, which I'm not," he replied, disloyally, she believed, as the sudden flush of her cheeks gave token.

"I shouldn't think you'd want somebody else to do your shooting for you *all* the time," she rebuked him, a

little note of meanness in her voice, a little squint of meanness in her eyes.

If she expected to hurt him that way, or urge him by such nagging to abandon the calm attitude of indifference toward the quarrel which he held to be contemptuous and of small account, it was proof that she had not plumbed him any deeper than the rind. He grinned, untouched by her innuendo, bending the toes of his polished shoes as if he tried the flexibility of their soles for a race he was about to enter, lifting his heels slightly from the floor, legs spread a little, his whole attitude benignant, patronizing, tolerant.

"As long as I'm not in debt to you for it, I don't give a damn," he replied, so unexpectedly, so surprisingly out of his character, as to make her start, much as if somebody had sneaked up behind her and shot off a gun.

Whatever Elizabeth had in mind to say, and it was certain from her bridling look that she had plenty, was cut off by the arrival in the square of the young men who had ridden out on the Simrall road a little while before. They had gone a little sheepishly, like men who expected to be sold, making a joke of it, with light words and humorous quips; they had come back with the humor wrung out of them, feeling more like going on than stopping, if there had been any place to go.

Simrall was coming, every able-bodied man in the place, it seemed, approaching deliberately, the riders holding back to keep with the wagons. They were not more than three miles away.

Major Cottrell had been laying his plan of defense before the men gathered around him at the court house steps. The fervor that had seemed to animate this crowd

of citizens was cooling off like a blaze in a pile of shavings. It had come up with a roar, mounted to its height in a moment, and fallen to nothing more than a little wavering smoke before the excited scouts galloped up with their appalling confirmation of the county clerk's long-distance espionage. Some of them began to hedge; to debate the advisability of offering armed defense of a position which a court decision might pronounce illegal in the end.

Among the advocates of this policy stood the lumber dealer and a lawyer named Pettyjohn, the latter a lank usurer of hard repute, but a man of persuasive tongue. Burnett, Dine Fergus, and the other notable humorists of the town were not present, although Hall had seen Larrimore skulking on the edge of the crowd as if he dodged around in the hope of picking somebody's pocket or finding something that had been lost.

The weight of these men's opinion had effect; others spoke up in support of that policy of nonresistance. Some of the crowd began to drift around the corner of the building and disappear; others turned calculative eyes up the road toward Simrall, as if figuring on whether they had time to make it to cover and hide their guns before the raiders appeared. Their guns appeared to have grown heavy in their hands.

Major Cottrell heard these vacillating citizens with scorn. They were strangers in his country, men of another age. He denounced them as pusillanimous cowards, unworthy usurpers of brave men's places in a country that was too big for them in all its dimensions. He called for volunteers to stand by him and fight for the honor of the town and county.

To this call there was a very feeble response. Peters, leader of the cowboy band, sleeves rolled up from his stringy forearms, just as he had turned from making stovepipe to pick up his rifle and run to the square; the butcher, wearing his apron with the corner turned up, to get it out of the way of his legs, perhaps, or maybe to remove any doubt or question of the sex it shrouded; the blacksmith, who was a grave, slow-spoken negro, with a grayness creeping into his kinky beard; the druggist, looking frightened and anything but a dependable recruit.

These four, and these four only, out of the business men and others whose interests were centered in Damascus, stood forward to signify their willingness to fight for what they believed to be their rights.

Major Cottrell regarded this little bunch of volunteers, all that was left out of the first eager grabbing of guns and running, with a softening of his stern aspect. The others were leaving, singly, in pairs and groups, heads laid together, no doubt arguing the justification of their act.

"I don't give a damn how it looks," the lumberman said defiantly, turning for a shot in answer to Major Cottrell's unspoken contempt for them in comparison with the little group before him, "I've got thirty thousand dollars' worth of lumber in my yard, and I can't afford to have it burnt."

"Let the law take its course, as it inevitably will," said Pettyjohn, striding off beside the lumber dealer.

"Thank you, gentlemen," said Major Cottrell, speaking to the four men who remained with him defenders of the town.

He went down the steps, shook hands with them, with a hearty word of commendation for each.

“If they open my heart when I’m dead, as the old queen said, they’ll find your names engraved there,” he said. “But I can’t accept your sacrifice, gentlemen. For it would be a sacrifice with only a handful of us against them. You are honorably discharged. Go home; leave it to me alone.”

Dr. Hall and Elizabeth had gone to the window when the scouts arrived, where they had stood listening to the report from the road, and the subsequent proposals and arguments. As Major Cottrell turned from his few valiant townsmen, after dismissing them honorably, Hall saw him stumble at the threshold of the court house, and heard his rifle fall.

Hall ran to the corridor, where he found the butcher supporting Major Cottrell, who was standing with a hand braced against the wall, his head drooping, making a determined struggle to keep on his feet. The old man grappled weakly to support himself against Hall’s shoulder, lifting his head for a moment, mortal agony in his appealing eyes.

They carried Major Cottrell into his disordered office, where the pile of records which he would have given his life to defend stood in the middle of the floor. He was unconscious when they laid him on the floor, Hall’s coat under his head. His gaunt white face was drawn more in an expression of sadness than suffering, as if the thought of yielding the county he had built out of the wilderness, and the town he had fathered in his pride, over to men too base to stand in their defense, had overwhelmed him and broken his heart.

Dr. Hall sent the druggist to his office for his medical case, and the blacksmith to the hotel for blankets and a pillow. He was kneeling beside Major Cottrell, hand over the old man's fluttering heart, Elizabeth opposite, stroking her father's face, calling to him in little coaxing endearments. She implored Dr. Hall with her eyes. He tried to avoid them, for they carried an appeal which he knew no resources of his could meet.

Jim Justice would not trust any hands but his own with his bedclothes, which he came carrying clasped against his round front, encircled by both arms. Jim knew the armful of bedding would be his passport into the room where Major Cottrell lay. His curiosity to know the nature and extent of the old man's visitation was greater than his fear of the Simrall men. Jim was in a state of dishabille common to him at that hour of the day, without coat, collar or vest, his broad red suspenders conspicuous across his white shirt. He almost wedged in the door with his load. Dr. Hall motioned the major's four supporters to come in after Justice, and closed the door.

Elizabeth hurried away at Dr. Hall's suggestion to bring her mother, while the men in the room worked rapidly under the doctor's direction, building a low couch for Major Cottrell out of the county records. They spread these under the window at the farthest point from the door, covering them with blankets. Dr. Hall was engaged with hypodermic needle, attempting to stimulate the old man's weary heart, hoping to tide him over until his wife might see him once more with the spark of life in his body.

They composed Major Cottrell in dignity on his hard couch of books, where he lay apparently lifeless, his face



white as the pillow, his breath so weak there was no perceptible movement.

"They're comin'!" Justice announced, turning from the window, his drowned mustache almost bristling as he suddenly realized his predicament. "They're comin'!" he repeated, standing faced half around from the window, his mouth open, apparently struck immovable in his boots. "God, A'mighty, men! let me out o' here!"

"You've done all you can do for him, gentlemen," Dr. Hall told the others as the door banged after Justice. "There's no use in compromising yourselves by being caught here with guns. Leave them here, and go home."

"We promised we'd stand by him, Dr. Hall," Peters said with quiet dignity. "The records they're coming after are here. They'll not respect his condition—"

"I'll answer to the people of this town and county for their records," Hall replied. "Major Cottrell swore me in deputy recorder and treasurer before he'd allow me to touch a paper, or a dollar of the funds. He tried to tell me something out there in the hall when I went to him; he couldn't speak, but I read it in his eyes. He passed it on to me, gentleman. It was his lone fight up to that minute. Now it's mine."

Hall pushed them gently from the room, denying their protests with stern countenance, stern shaking of the head, as he urged them on their way, but said not another word. Peters was the last to go; he held to his gun until Hall wrenched it out of his hand at the threshold, and closed the door on his reluctant heels.

## CHAPTER XXII

### A BROKEN BOWL

ORA SIMRALL came riding into Damascus at the head of his forces, pretty well filling the seat of his buckboard, bending the slatted platform of it under his weight. From a big man in the beginning, he had grown through inactivity and indulgence into a very tun of a man, his chin lying in rings against his collar-bone. He had a little streak of black mustache, thin as a mandarin's, which ran out to almost a single hair at the points, ridiculous adornment in his vast red countenance.

Dr. Hall, watching the invaders from the window of Major Cottrell's office, saw the suspicion with which they marked the quietude and passivity of Damascus. Merchants had removed the hurried barriers out of their windows and opened their doors; people were passing about their business, or pretense of business, with no more apparent concern than if the visitors had come to do peaceful trading, with money in their hands instead of guns. It was the biggest surprise for Simrall that could have been devised.

All this indifference, this outward show of innocence, was only a blind covering a trap of some kind, the leader of the raiders believed, as shown by his cautious movements, his hurried posting of mounted men around the square, his conference with lieutenants before the court house steps. A wagon was drawn up before the main

door, guarded by four men with repeating rifles; a squad of half a dozen or so, led by Simrall, marched up the steps.

Dr. Hall knew Simrall had picked his most determined men for that charge to the very seat of their objective. They came into the corridor noisily, brave fellows, Hall credited them, not knowing when a burst of shots from one of the numerous doors might cut them down. They stopped at the county recorder's office, trying the door. Finding it locked, one beat on it with something harder than a human fist.

"Cottrell, open this door!" came the peremptory demand.

Dr. Hall crossed to the door softly, opened it, to be confronted by Simrall, pistol in his fist. Hall was coatless, his shirt sleeves were tucked up. He held a hypodermic syringe in his hand, poised carefully, as if he had been disturbed in applying it to his patient. He kept one hand on the door, opening it only partly, but enough to give them a sight of Major Cottrell on his bed under the window.

"Open her up!" Simrall ordered, making a gesture with his gun.

"What's all this about?" Hall inquired, simulating surprise, but holding the door as it was.

"You know damn well, and none of your stallin'!" Simrall replied. "We're after the county books."

"Gentlemen," Hall said softly, "I've got a mighty sick man in here—I'm Dr. Hall, the railroad physician. Major Cottrell's been struck by an internal hemorrhage. He's a dying man."

"He can do all the dyin' he damn pleases after we take

them books," Simrall said. "It's a bluff you fellers're tryin' to put over on us—I thought there was something suspicious in the looks of this town."

Simrall gave the door a sudden push, throwing it wide open. Hall stepped quickly in front of him as he started to enter, his men crowding behind.

"Gentlemen, I'm a deputy in this office for the time being, and I can't permit you to come in," Hall said firmly, stretching his arms across the door to bar Simrall's way. "You're on the wrong scent, there's nothing here you want. We heard you were coming before you left Simrall. We removed every dollar, every scrap of paper, to a safe place. You can see for yourselves there's nothing here."

"I'll see for myself, all right," Simrall replied. He swung his gun to brush Hall aside, pushing his big body, which fairly filled the door, into the room.

Hall plunged the hypodermic needle against Simrall's paunch.

"Drop that gun!" he ordered, his quick words sharp with warning.

Simrall was caught between doubt and fear, plainly expressed in his hesitant manner, the surprised look of cheapness in his face. The point of the needle was biting through his shirt, cold tooth that carried what venom he did not know. He tried to squirm away from it. Hall grabbed his open vest, one stout suspender with it, jerking him suddenly forward until the needle gouged him to the quick. Simrall dropped the gun.

"There's enough strychnine in this needle to kill you in thirty seconds," Hall declared. "If any man out there lifts a gun I'll jab it to your gizzard! Send them out of

here. As soon as Mrs. Cottrell and her daughter come, I'll meet you out in front. I'm responsible for the county books; I'll answer to you for them."

Mrs. Cottrell and Elizabeth were in the corridor that moment, their way blocked by Simrall's men. The presence of the two women, their distracted appearance, the panting eagerness of the elder one to reach the room, her piteous entreaties to let her pass, convinced the men that Dr. Hall was not playing a part in a trick to deceive them. They cleared a way for the women to pass. Hall, still pressing the needle to Simrall's stomach, backed him into the corridor, kicked his gun into the room and closed the door.

That done, Dr. Hall put the bright little instrument in its case, stuck it in his pocket, motioned Simrall to the outer door.

"Go on; I'll talk to you outside."

Simrall went as far as the front door, where his followers had stopped, a certain respect, if not much sympathy, in them for Major Cottrell's wife and daughter. Simrall snatched a gun from one of them, and jammed it against Hall's ribs.

"I'll make you swaller that damn squirtgun!" he threatened. "Are them books in that office?"

Dr. Hall looked at Simrall with an expression of amused tolerance, as if to say he considered him quite harmless and quite comical, but not impressive in his threatening attitude. He stretched himself with a high superiority of ease, seeming to grow two inches or more, while Simrall and the others, not accustomed to this sort of silent expression of gratification, thought he was gathering himself to throw some sort of trick. Three rifles

were thrown down on him while he still balanced on his toes; Simrall screwed the gun against his short ribs as if to bore him to the gall.

"Are the books in there?" Simrall asked again.

"I told you everything was taken out of that office, Mr. Simrall."

"Where are they?"

"In a safe place," Hall replied calmly.

"You'll stick around with us till we search this build-in'," Simrall announced. "If we don't find the books, we'll see if there ain't some way to make you tell the truth. We'll start at the recorder's office."

The search didn't go very well in that quarter. Simrall and the two men who started with him in such full-feathered assurance came back with a good deal more speed than they went, ducking and dodging, running doubled as if they had touched off a blast which they expected to shower them with rocks before they could get to cover.

"Them two hellions!" Simrall puffed, safe around the angle of the wall.

"Guns enough in there to start an army," said a cowboy-looking little old chap with a grizzled tuft of whiskers.

"I ain't a fightin' women, nohow!" another one of the bunch declared, in that renunciatory tone of a man who has picked up something too hot to hold.

At this declaration the youngest man in the crowd winked, grinning broadly, directing his pleasantries to Hall, in which quarter he rightly calculated they would be most appreciated. Hall was standing with his back against the wall, a look of unconcern on his face that he

did not entirely feel, raising himself to his toes: up and down, up and down, with the gusto of a man who had eaten a good dinner and felt at peace with everybody, especially himself.

Simrall looked on these gymnastics with ill-favoring eye.

"Yes, by hell! I'll give you stretchin' enough if we don't find them books!" he said.

Simrall sent a man to the tower, to see if they had hauled the books up there; he led the expedition from room to room of the building himself, even to the basement, Hall meantime in custody of the winking young man, outside on the front steps.

"We've been hearin' about you over in Simrall, Doc," the guard said.

"I'd like to believe it was something good, but I don't," Hall replied.

Hall was roaming his eyes around the square, glad to see the placidity that seemed to rest on the town in spite of this burglarious invasion of its rights. The Simrall men were stretched out in a long line covering Custer Street and the front of the court house, suspicious and alert, even a little anxious. There was not a ripple of excitement, scarcely of interest, in the town.

The barber was lounging in his door, smoking a cigar, shoulder against the jamb; the butcher could be seen moving around behind his counter, his white cap with red letters—it was a soda advertisement—quite plain. From Peters' hardware store a tinny sound of hammering issued, like a chant of some hard-legged insect among the bushes. A few boys were standing near the corner of the saloon, ready to scoot at the first shot. Pink Fergus

was putting her false-fronted head out of the door and drawing it back, like a hen in a coop.

"Yeh. We heard how you bluffed the crowd that was after Gus Sandiver with a sponge soaked full of water," the young man said, grinning widely, showing short, worn teeth and red gums, as if he had been gnawing his subsistence out of hard things since very early in life. "Yeh, and I'm bettin' that was a bluff you run on Simrall, too. I'm bettin' I could swaller all the strickenine you had in that gun and never gag."

"You'd lose," Hall told him, confidently, taking the little case from his vest pocket. "If you've got any doubt, just stick out your arm."

The young man shuffled back, presenting his rifle threateningly.

"You stand right there, pardner! you stand right there!" he said.

"Just as you feel about it," Hall replied indifferently, as if he had offered something that the young man had been the loser by refusing.

Dr. Hall looked at his watch with the bored air of a man kept waiting in an appointment that was of little consequence to him. A train whistled faintly, far to the west. Dr. Hall drew out his watch again, although he had slipped it into his pocket only a second before, in the railroad habit of looking at the watch to identify by time everything that goes on wheels. He stood that way, watch in his palm, head turned to listen for the whistle again, and at that minute, full of interest and speculation for the young man with the rifle, Ora Simrall and his searching crew came out of the court house basement.



Simrall beckoned for the guard to bring Hall down.

Simrall's humor had not improved with the prospect of his expedition turning out a failure. The prisoners in jail had geyed them as they went poking into the empty cells, not willing to take the deputy sheriff's word that no records had been hidden there. This deputy was a loyal Damascus man. When Simrall had tried to make him tell what he knew about the removal of the records, he had hinted darkly that they had been shipped out of the county on Number Six that afternoon.

"Dr. Hall, you've got a name of bein' a purty shrewd kind of a man," Simrall addressed him, puffing and mopping his hot face. "Throwin' a bluff seems to be your long suit, but I want to tell yon now you're goin' past the limit of this game. We've got one more place to look for the record books of this county, and if we don't find them there you and me we'll have a little session off to the side between ourselves. We're not goin' back without them records. If they've been shipped out of this county, you'll answer for it."

"They haven't been sent out of the county; I can assure you on that point," Hall replied.

"You'll have to tell us what you've done with them, Hall. You can't stall around this way any longer. But we'll take a look in your office as we go by."

Simrall appeared to be in earnest, but it was hard to tell how far he would go to get what he wanted out of Hall, for he was not a convincing sort of man. Hall did not feel himself in any danger, although Simrall added two men on horseback, who carried ropes on their saddles, to his picked gang of six as they started down Custer Street toward the railroad. There were trees along the

river. Between them and the ropes, there seemed to be some sort of hint of Simrall's intention delicately suggested, Hall believed.

Hall did not like the notion of parading the street as a prisoner. More than that, he was troubled deeply over the final outcome of this affair, for he knew he could not go on stalling them off from their final search of Cottrell's office, which they were sure to make when all other sources failed. No matter what he might tell them under stress, it would not be where the books were. That was his solemn decision as he went along the dusty street, the young man's rifle close to his shoulder-blade.

And Elizabeth and her mother would fight. There was no doubt about that. With the guns left by Peters and the others in the room they could stand the raiders off a while, but no longer than the ammunition in the magazines lasted. It would be a deplorable finale to this unfortunate day.

As he walked among his armed escort down Custer Street, Hall thought nobody in town appeared to be greatly interested in what was going to happen to him. While he did not hope for any attempt to rescue him, he did feel a little hurt, in a foolish, prideful way, that nobody even came to the door to see him pass.

The worktrain was coming down to the switch head, loafing along to give the brakeman time to run ahead and throw the switch, as they arrived with Hall in front of his office. Mrs. Charles and her daughters were interested, and anxious, spectators of this proceeding.

They were grouped in the kitchen door, Mrs. Charles carrying a big yellow bowl which she wiped vigorously by spells with a cloth, running her hand round and round

its wide mouth. She would stop this wiping abruptly, to turn and say something to one of the girls, or lean out a little to try and catch what was being said by the men with guns who were marching Dr. Hall among them. Then she would wipe again, furiously, as if she had to engender fire in the yellow bowl to heat up the jerries' supper.

The worktrain was worming down the siding, where it would come to a stand presently between Mrs. Charles' kitchen and Dr. Hall's boxcar office. The engine was not more than five or six rails' length away when Mrs. Charles saw a large fat man come out of Dr. Hall's office, red and wrathful, and shove a gun in the doctor's face. With each jab of the weapon the fat man shoved it a little nearer, Dr. Hall backing away from him. It was a very insulting, extremely humiliating, proceeding, Mrs. Charles thought, for a man of Dr. Hall's dignity to bear.

A similar thought was passing through Dr. Hall's mind at the same moment. It was trying on a man's patience, a test of his self-control. Simrall had no call to make that insulting play, and he, Andrew Hall, had no business to stand and take it.

As his cogitations rose to a sudden hot head with this conclusion, Dr. Hall hauled off and hit Simrall somewhere in the several folds of chin that hung like heavy dewlaps in front of his red neck. It was a good punch, and well directed, with all the force of outraged dignity and over-taxed forbearance in it. Simrall flopped back into the open door as Mrs. Charles shrilled encouraging applause.

Being started, Andrew Hall was not an easy man to stop. He at once landed a good solid kick on the young man who had been detailed as his personal guard, putting

it in the place where he carried his provisions; swung round and planted his big bruiser in the whiskered cowboy's countenance as that person clapped his elbow against his ribs and pulled a quick shot.

The shot went wild under Hall's punch, smashing the yellow bowl that Mrs. Charles held on her hip.

"They're killin' Herself!" an old jerry yelled, as the engine of the worktrain came between Mrs. Charles and the fight.

"They're murtherin' the dochter!" Mickey Sweat shouted, grabbing a tamping-bar and leaping from the flatcar.

Dr. Hall was having a busy moment just then. They had him hemmed against his office, Simrall kicking his heels in the door like a floundered cow, pressing him so close none of them would risk another shot for fear of hitting a friend. Some were pegging him with their fists, some trying to land a crack over his head with reversed guns, others prancing around the edge of the disturbance dodging and squinting to get in a shot, like men looking for a rabbit through a fence.

That was the situation when the jerries began to pour off the worktrain with their pick-handles, shovels and tamping-bars. The Simrall men were too busy to notice them until the pick-handles began to fall.

Mrs. Charles, far from killed, hot as a hornet over the loss of her bowl, threw a leg to the top of a flatcar and was across the track in a wink. She grabbed a shovel as she came, landed with it lifted, rushing into the fight with a whoop. There was a shot or two, futile, foolish little pops in that hurricane of Irish wrath, before the Simrall men broke and ran for the square.

Simrall was the last to get under way; he was just getting up off his haunches in Dr. Hall's door as Mrs. Charles arrived. He caught a crack from her shovel that put him down again, nothing left stirring inside him to bring him up.

The jerries went whooping up Custer Street after Dr. Hall's assailants, Micky Sweat leading them on his long legs, his tamping-bar carried like a gun with a bayonet at the end of it. Close after him, second in pursuit, Dr. Hall himself ran, going a bit foggily on account of a bunged eye, but careless of appearances, dignity, and everything else but vengeance, the pick-handle some kind jerry had given him ready for the first head he might reach.

At the square there was consternation among the Simrall ranks. Those left to guard against an uprising in town were terrified at sight of this tremendous, sudden charge from an unexpected quarter. From their distance the jerries' bars looked like guns. There was a break for the wagons; somebody got Simrall's buckboard. It led the retreat at a gallop, carrying three men.

Up Custer Street the railroaders came, roaring like a tornado, Mrs. Charles in the midst of them, her hair flying, her sharp voice rising high. One by one the jerries overtook the men who had come to search Hall's office, a cottonwood tree on the river bank their ultimate objective; as fast as they were overhauled they fell, were submerged, thumped and kicked, nobody but the two on horseback getting away unmarked.

To make matters worse for the Simrall men who were whipping their teams to escape this irresistible charge of railroaders, somebody began shooting at them from the

court house steps. It was a woman, somebody said. Well, they hadn't come there to fight women—not on your life! That was a good and valiant excuse for going, and going faster with every turn of the wheels.

When the railroaders arrived at the square there was nothing but a cloud of dust to speak for the Simrall raiders. A girl was sitting on the court house steps, a rifle beside her, head bent to her knee, face hidden in her arm, crying and crying, as if she, too, had held a golden bowl and seen it shattered by some relentless hand.

Major Cottrell lay dead on his couch of books, sacrificed in the county seat feud, squabble so unworthy to exact such consequential toll. Mrs. Charles sat on the court house steps beside Elizabeth, the yellow bowl forgotten, the jerries' cooling supper a thousand miles out of her mind. She put her arm around the weeping girl and drew her head to her bosom, where she soothed her with those tender Irish endearments which no other tongue can equal in all the sympathetic vocabulary of human-kind.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### PRIDE GETS A JOLT

ORA SIMRALL and five of his men were in jail at Damascus when the county attorney, Judge Waters and a marshal from the state supreme court arrived two days after Major Cottrell's funeral.

They were a badly battered outfit, several broken bones among them, one of them lying inert with a cracked skull. There was no spirit alive in their town to attempt a rescue. Even the sheriff had returned to Damascus when he found himself on the losing side, and was now one of the loudest of its partisans.

The county attorney had obtained a restraining order from the high court, which the official accompanying him had come to serve on Simrall and thirty others of the opposing faction. To make Simrall's knockout complete, Dine Fergus sought the county attorney within an hour after his return, urged to that virtuous course by his mother, who had an eye to the future and did not want to give up her growing business. Dine made a bargain for immunity, confessed his part in selling his electoral services to Simrall, and named the other nine.

Whether the county attorney who, as has been said, was not an incorruptible man, tipped it off to the bunch with a fraternal warning, people could only surmise. However it was, Larrimore and a bunch of petty gamblers were missing from their accustomed places next

day. Fergus was accorded the promised immunity from prosecution as a reward for his betrayal. Some said he was obliged to split the five hundred dollars he got for his vote with the county attorney.

Dine appeared to consider himself a public benefactor. No taint had stuck to him in the transaction, as far as his rather dulled scent could discover, no disgrace whatever, according to his conscience, which was a very miniature affair, altogether. He strutted around town grinning and well satisfied; he held down his corner of Jim Justice's porch with equanimity and sang froid.

Damascus accepted his great public service in its notably jocular way, neither lifting nor lowering Fergus in the place that was his. They joked him about the money, and his designs for the outlay of it, making a very comfortable diversion out of the episode all around.

The wrecked invaders of Damascus' sanctuaries were under the ministrations of Old Doc Ross. Misfortune does not always make men honest; a drubbing seldom has acted as an agent of reform. This bunch from the rival town was sorer and wiser than when they came, but very likely in no particular a hair's breadth better. Old Doc Ross declared he never had set bones for such a doubly damned set of rakings from the settlings of horse-thievery as these.

Ora Simrall admitted his town was out of the contest for the county seat. Let him out of jail, he proposed, forget the trifling incident of bribery in the election, and he would lie down. The accommodating county attorney agreed, seeing a fertile field for votes when he should come out for circuit judge. The county attorney took



great credit to himself for compounding the county's difficulties that way, leaving Simrall unsmirched. The talk of calling a grand jury to indict him for his crimes died down; Simrall and his men were taken home.

Damascus was not without gratitude for Dr. Hall, cynical as it was, and worldly superior to the weakness of human sympathy. He had protected and secured the county records at the hazard of his life. The scoffers, such as Charley Burnett, Kraus, and others who had composed the mob that clamored for Gus Sandiver's neck, said fool's luck, rather than courage and resourcefulness, had carried him through. They pointed to the fact that somebody always stepped up at the critical moment in Hall's adventures and saved him from extinction.

No matter for this scoffing faction, which embraced some of the corner posts of Damascus society, Judge Waters and others were of the opinion that Hall's services to the town ought to be recognized by some public expression. There was a division on whether this concrete token should take the form of a gold-headed cane or a loving-cup, one being about as useful as the other to a man in the country west of Dodge.

This question still was being debated a week after the invasion and defeat of the Simrall raiders. It was a very spring in the desert to the humorists who gathered on Justice's porch, affording them great opportunities for the display of their native wit. While Larrimore's sardonic comment was missed, there was no lack of aspirants to fill his place at this round table of mud-slinging knights. Humorists hatch like maggots in places like Damascus. They are a hard breed to suppress, patient

of their opportunity, watchful of their chance, eager to slip out into the sun. For every humorist, as well as every dog, must have his day.

Dr. Hall did not feel himself bound up any closer with the affairs of town and county, although each succeeding bit of trouble he put his foot into there appeared to involve him deeper. Viewing himself from an impersonal standpoint, he looked a little way off to be a man inextricably wound up in the web of that county's destiny. He had come to the habit of stepping aside and looking at himself in this connection, marveling at times how so much could have happened to him against his intention and desire to stand aloof from the affairs of that place.

Hot days had come to that high, treeless country west of Dodge; anxiety was growing into almost terror among the settlers in the wild country that had lured them by false, transitory promises of early spring. The corn they had planted was shriveling in the long ribbons of sod, the hot winds poured through the cracks of their little box houses, whistling around the rough board-ends of their eaves with melancholy note. It was said there would be no corn, which was equal to saying there would be nothing at all.

Men were coming from these homesteads every day, applying for work on the railroad, already harrassed by the fear of hardships which lay ahead. There was no use expending labor on their puny crops; they were leaving it all to a chance rain and the women and children to do what could be done. There was no place on the construction gang for these men, raw farmers unused to that kind of work. Bill Chambers was not a man with any great reputation for kindness or sympathy, but his

face began to wear a shadow of sadness as he turned these gaunt applicants away day after day.

Dr. Hall's popularity had increased, his fame had spread among these courageous pioneers who had come to this last frontier of Kansas to make homes and establish an industry where success seemed not a chance in a thousand. Hardly a day passed without a call to some distant homestead, where too often the mother of the family had been overtaken by accident or disease.

These were not the type of pioneers Major Cottrell had supposed them to be. Those hardy, self-doctoring, self-burying frontiersmen which he had in mind belonged to a generation past. These were more the products of civilization and interdependence. They were even subject to appendicitis, ailment unknown among the tough sod-breakers who subdued the central Kansas plains a generation before these more modern people came into the country west of Dodge.

They appeared to consider Dr. Hall a sort of public institution, as has been said, something like a county surveyor or recorder of deeds, except that no fee ever figured in any of their dealings with him. They called him without hesitation or restraint of delicacy, to set their bones and cure their fevers, service which he never accepted until the possibility of Old Doc Ross had been eliminated by that notable's blank refusal.

It had become such a common thing to be called into the country on these charitable missions that Dr. Hall had bought a horse, which he boarded in Kraus' barn. But as he had not purchased the horse from Kraus, the liveryman looked on the creature with scorn only a degree tempered from the contempt in which he held its owner.

In these rides about the country tributary to Damascus, Hall often met the young settler Holbrook, who had come into that virgin land to grow the seed of kafir corn.

Holbrook was working as a sort of agrarian evangelist, trying to induce his neighbors to plant a few acres each of the grain then almost unknown to Kansas, since become so popular as the dependable drouth crop. He was offering the seed on the condition of repayment in kind, three bushels for one. Many were accepting, yet doubtfully, with little faith in a grain that could be planted in June and brought to maturity with little rain, as its sponsor claimed. Little patches of green were to be seen here and there, where the kafir had come up, undeterred by the hot wind, hearty and heartening in that place of failing hope.

Dr. Hall was returning from one of these distant calls on a Sunday evening something more than a week after the raid, bent toward melancholy by the scene he had left, the father of a large family down with typhoid, and in a bad way. The poor fellow was driving his team in his delirium, heedless of the pathetic assurance of his worn, sunken-eyed wife that the horses were turned out, and he was lying in bed, and everything was all right. It was such an unreasonable assurance that Hall did not wonder at its failure to quiet the sufferer's unrest.

The doctor was speculating, as he rode slowly toward town, on what would be the fate of this family if the man should die, and he was a strong, rough-modeled fellow, such as commonly fall to that insidious disease. He was thinking of this, and the great hunger that must urge a man away from the chances of employment with a certain reward, even though scant, into this life of hazard

and hardship. A home, a piece of land with a fence around it, recorded at the county seat as his own. A social importance and dignity that freedom from wage-earning servitude gives, the higher, nobler satisfaction of having a piece of this wide earth's ground that he could call his own.

It must be that, thought the doctor. It must be this great urge which has turned the faces of peoples westward, ever westward, in the world-old migrations of mankind. A home; a place to set a fence around and view with the satisfaction of something won.

Let it be barren, storm-swept, wind-plagued, sun-stricken, such as this; let it be raw and unruly, heart-breaking to subdue, unfenced, ungraced by the green leaf of even the stunted sumach of the more eastern prairie gulches. A place to set one's foot, and sit down after the toil of day; a place to stand in the midst of, and draw the breath of freedom with expansive pride. Home.

That was the answer to the world-old roaming, the world-old quest. That was the answer to this unequal contest against the unfriendly elements, this hard, unresponsive, rough-hummocked, wild, gray land. Home. That was the answer to it all.

Somebody on his way to Damascus, whose haste was greater than Dr. Hall's, came galloping up behind, breaking this meditative train. Hall glanced back to see if it was anybody he knew, concluding after a little study of the rider that it was not, although there seemed something familiar about the figure, whose long legs dangled far down below the body of his horse. Hall drew aside to give the rider an open road.

In a few moments the horseman was alongside, where he checked his gait to fall in with Hall. The doctor's thoughts had gone wandering from his present situation after the broken ends of his previous meditation. He drew up suddenly on his reins, looking sharply around to see who this was that wanted to visit with him along the way.

"Hello, Doc," the rider hailed, in slow, rather sad-sounding voice. "I saw you from the top of a hill three mile back."

Dr. Hall was looking at the man keenly, surprised more by hearing him speak than by seeing him, for the traveler was no less notable person than Gus Sandiver, silent patient of a well remembered night.

Gus had not changed in appearance, for better or worse, since his lone-handed attempt to step on the necks of his enemies in the county seat. He was still wearing the boots with collapsed and wrinkled tops, which appeared so short on his uncommon stretch of leg; the same shirt, apparently, and unquestionably the same hat. Of course, Dr. Hall admitted, a man could not be expected to undergo a great change in a few weeks' time, especially in the matter of boots and hat. The one great surprise about Gus was his voice.

"I didn't know you could talk, Gus," Dr. Hall said, dispensing with salutations, speaking what was forward in his mind.

"The last time you saw me there wasn't much talk in me, Doc," Gus replied, jogging along beside Hall in friendly proximity. "Satan was in me that night. He kep' me so tantalized and undecided between cussin' you

and thankin' you I couldn't get the upper hand of him till you put me on my horse and started me off."

Dr. Hall looked at Gus, queerly puzzled, not understanding whether the dry old salamander meant it for a pleasantry. There was nothing jocular in the man's voice, which was slow and deep, and altogether lugubrious. If voices were to be classified by color, thought Dr. Hall, Gus Sandiver's would be called a faded blue.

"What was your final decision, Gus?" the doctor asked.

"It was the decision of any man with as much insides to him as a garfish," Gus replied. "You saved my neck at the risk of your own. I could see that in them wolf faces pushed up around your door."

"I don't know about that," Hall said, indecisively.

"You know better than I do what you poured on that sponge, Doc. Maybe it was hartshorn, but I didn't get a sniff of it if it was; maybe it was some kind of stuff I never heard of, and maybe it was plain water, as I suspected at the time, and suspect harder the longer I think it over."

"Just so it worked," said Hall, depreciating the trick.

"I went over that night specially hopin' to sling a chunk of lead into you, Doc."

"Well, as long as you didn't do it, I guess we can forget it," Hall proposed, laughing over it a little, although he was not especially easy in his saddle just then.

He noted that Gus was wearing his gun, and that his right hand appeared to be in condition to use it, although it was bound around the wrist with a cloth, over which a broad strap was buckled.

"I was feelin' as mean as a skunk towards you, Doc, in

spite of you stoppin' my bleedin' and dressin' my arm, till I heard you give it to them fellers straight in the ear about my kid brother. That was when the light begun to come back to me."

"I'm glad you understood it, Gus. I don't suppose your brother was any saint or angel, but they didn't give him a square deal that day, and the cowards swore it off on me."

"That was what got me started wrong. I fell for their put-up job. No, the kid wasn't no saint, and I'm afraid he's gittin' a touch of hellfire for his sins, for he died with 'em on him as thick as mud on a hog. But he went clean compared to what I'd 'a' been if I'd 'a' throwed lead into your carcass that night, Doc."

"It's all right; you didn't, so we'll let it drop."

"Yes, I'm a regenerated man," Gus sighed, as if unloading himself of the past. "The light's come back to me; I've been born again."

"You mean you've got religion, Gus?" Hall was farther away from this fellow's drift than ever. He wished there were three miles between them, instead of less than three feet.

"I didn't get it, I guess, Doc, but kind of recovered it, as the feller said. I used to be a righteous man, Doc. I was a preacher before I went to—before I went off wrong."

"You don't tell me!"

"I was," Gus nodded solemnly, "and I was a damn good one, too. I'm goin' back to pasturin' as soon as I practice up a little longer on breakin' off this da—this infernal cussin' habit."

Hall looked at him again in that slantwise, quizzical



way of doubt, expecting to hear Gus cap the matter with a laugh. From all outward appearances the man was sincere. He nodded, slowly, like a horse, looking just about as mean and no-account as ever, in spite of his profession of reform.

"I used to be a 'vangelist," Gus explained, "back in the days before I drifted to that hell-hole of iniquity called Dodge City. That's what ruined me. Back in North Car'lina was where I started. They used to call me the fiddlin' preacher; I could play 'em up to the mourners' bench in droves. I'm goin' back to my callin', I've made up a team with a man in Saint Joe. He's got a tent he moves around from place to place. I can fight the devil better now than I ever could; I know more about his tricks."

"I wish you all kinds of luck, Gus," Hall said, not knowing what he ought to say, or might be expected to say. He felt embarrassed, due to his inability to accept wholly this reformation so solemnly proclaimed. He reached out his hand in earnest of his good wishes.

Gus met the friendly offer heartily, holding to the doctor as if he had designs for dragging him up to the penitential bench while he had him in hand.

"How is your arm?" Hall inquired, noticing it appeared to have plenty of energy in it to swing a gun.

"Just about well, Doc. The doctor thought I was goin' to lose it at first, but he didn't know how I was set on keepin' it. Where would a fiddlin' preacher be at with his right arm off? Tell Old Doc Ross when you see him I said it was all right. Tell him I don't hold nothin' agin him. I know he acted for the best, and I thank him for it."

"I didn't know he attended you," Hall said in surprise. "I never saw you in Damascus, not even the day of the raid."

"You're a funny feller," Gus said, his face a little redder than its ordinary infernal hue. "I wasn't with them fool boys when they went over to raid the court house; I'm not ridin' in lawless by-paths any more. But at the first I sent word over to Old Doc Ross I was comin' to Damascus as soon as I was able to swing a gun and take a shot at him. But tell him it's all off. I ain't out gunnin' any more."

"Take a shot at him?" said Hall, more mystified than before, staring blankly at Sandiver, who was riding along with his head bent pensively, about as hard-looking scraping of a man as the country west of Dodge could produce.

"Yeah. I passed the word along to him."

"Did you know him in Dodge?"

"I heard of him, I didn't know him. I wasn't stayin' around much in society in them days, Doc."

"If I get a chance, I'll tell him what you've said," Hall promised. "I suppose he'll understand?"

"Oh, he'll understand, all right. Tell him I said I felt I owed him a debt, in place of havin' one standin' agin him to collect. Well, both me and you owe him for that shot, I reckon, Doc."

"That shot?" Hall repeated in amazement. "What shot are you talking about, Gus?"

"What other one but that one," Gus replied, sadly, holding up his bandaged arm. "It was the only one he ever took at me."

"It's the first I've heard of it," Hall declared.

"*It is?*" said Gus, astonished in his turn. "Why ain't you heard?"

"Because nobody ever told me. Are you sure it was Ross?"

"Because nobody never told you!" Gus repeated, out of breath in his amazement at such great innocence, or great stupidity. "Everybody in Simrall knows it, and I'd bet money, if I was a sinner, everybody in Damascus knows it but you—if you're givin' it to me straight."

"He's the last person in the world I'd have guessed. What proof have you got it was Ross?"

"A cowboy from one of Simrall's outfits was standin' by the old rooster when he pulled his gun and busted my arm. It was Old Doc Ross, all right, no difference how them fellers have been stringin' you along it was somebody else. He can shoot the eyes out of a crawfish when he's sober, they say."

"I suppose Burnett and that gang know," Hall reflected. "I thought they'd been keeping some trick up their sleeves on me. You see, I don't belong to the town, Gus. I'm an outsider. They think I'm a kind of a joke."

"There ain't ten men in that town that's worth a hall-room in hell, Doc," Gus said, in the mild, dispassionate way of a man stating a well-known truth. "It was Old Doc Ross shot me that night—nobody else. It don't cut no ice what they've been passin' out to you; it was Old Doc Ross."

"I'm glad to get it straight," said Hall, but looking far from jubilant.

Gus was on his way to Dodge, carrying what he possessed behind his saddle in no very imposing roll. He

said he thought it unlikely he ever would come back to that country again, his plans being laid for a visit to his boyhood home at the end of his engagement with the tent evangelist. When they reached the parting of the roads, near Major Cottrell's famous landmark at the edge of Damascus, Gus stopped to shake hands in farewell.

The former horsethief, for that pursuit, Hall was sure, had engaged his talents until a short time ago, just how recently he did not know, went on his way. Dr. Hall continued slowly and thoughtfully toward Kraus' barn to stable his horse.

He was not entirely convinced of either the probity or reformation of Gus. Still, the old reptile had seemed earnest enough when dictating his message of assurance and peace to Old Doc Ross. Hall felt chastened, cheapened, lowered greatly in his egotistical estimation. It was a humiliating situation, having gone prancing around all those weeks in debt to Old Doc Ross for saving his skin a large puncture and never making acknowledgment of it, never paying even one little word of thanks on account. Old Doc Ross must despise him from the bottom of his whisky-pickled heart.

The sod house was closed, curtains drawn down over the long narrow windows. Hall thought, as he rode by, that it appeared to have closed its eyes and died with its builder, never to come to life again. Elizabeth and her mother had gone away with Captain Cottrell to Fort Leavenworth. It was not likely, Hall believed, that gray sad country, with all its memories of contention and tragedy, should ever call them back again.

It was easier for him that Elizabeth was gone, to have this thing about Old Doc Ross come out on him that way.

He had clung to the pleasing conviction that Elizabeth had stood his friend that night, in spite of her ingenuous denial, there being nobody else who fitted pleasantly into his scheme. It hurt to remove her from that warm little nest of gratitude, into which the unruly figure of Old Doc Ross would not fit at all, let him try never so hard and conscientiously to adjust him to the place.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### A DISH OF CROW

DR. HALL was reluctant to go to Old Doc Ross and discharge his debt of gratitude, not because he was afraid of the fiery old scamp, or gave a thought to the material such course would provide the humorists of Damascus. Pride alone restrained him. It was hard matter to dismount from his high horse and eat a dish of crow before Old Doc Ross.

He knew that Burnett and the others who did not like him were saving up the episode to use some day to his discomfort, yet he could not get himself in the proper state of mind to go. Pride always stepped in front of him and barred the way, and pride has made many a valiant man seem a coward in the judgment of the world.

A week passed in that indecisive way, between upbraidings of conscience for his delinquency and weak justifications on the promptings of pride. Sunday afternoon came, and with it a resolution laid hold of Dr. Andrew Hall as he sat in his surgical chair surrounded by the cast leaves of the Kansas City papers. It was as if the plan of action had come flying into the door of the boxcar from its fledging-place somewhere in the unknown.

Dr. Hall opened the closet door where Old Doc Ross' pistol and holster lay, put them in his black surgical bag; got into his black mohair coat and broad-brimmed

Panama hat, and set off for Old Doc Ross' door. The hot wind flapped the pliant brim of his hat and ballooned his thin coat out at the back; heat glimmered up from the hard, dry ground, which was riven in jagged cracks as if ripped by lightning, gaping fissures appealing to the mottled hot sky for the rain that did not come.

There was not a loafer in sight the length of Custer Street. Jim Justice's veranda was swept by hot wind and hotter sun clean of the human rubbish that commonly eddied around its posts. Even Jim's splint-bottomed chair was gone from the place where its legs had worn hollows in the floor, and Jim's head had made a dark spot on the side of the house where he leaned.

Several horses were hitched in front of the saloon and around the square, some with heads thrust under the pole of the hitching-racks for the little line of shadow; others stood in the dejection of misery, stamping fretfully to dislodge the swarms of flies which gnawed their fetlocks and shins. The owners of these beasts were in the saloon, out of which the sound of clashing pool balls came, and the droning of a mouth organ, and a drift of cigar smoke over the latticed doors.

Hall passed on his way with a freedom from publicity that was quite a comfort to his pride, but he might as well have advertised the object of that hot Sunday afternoon walk in the paper, for all the somnolence of the town. Pink Fergus was as persistently active as the southwest wind. She came to her door, nodding her false bangs, grinning her perfectly natural big teeth at Dr. Hall as he tried to swish by on an especially hard gust of wind. She opened the screen to put her head out and watch him; followed the head with her flounced, tight-laced, bustle-

padding body as Hall turned in at Old Doc Ross' little plank office next door.

Ross was sitting at his table-topped desk, as Hall had hoped to find him, reading a paper. He was dressed in his garb of sobriety: a heavy, dark suit, stiff-bosomed white shirt with high collar, and the same light-colored sombrero he had worn when he came to shoot Hall out of town. His vest was buttoned to the top, his long coat draped him almost to the floor. In this garb Ross concealed the tops of his boots under the legs of his trousers, after the Missouri fashion. It appeared to add somewhat to his length of legs.

Ross looked up from his reading as Hall swung into the room without a moment's pause at the door, making a poor pretense of going on with it immediately, paying no heed to the younger man's salutation, which was as friendly and cheerful as Hall's somewhat reluctant tongue could pronounce it. But Ross was not to carry it off in that manner of high disdain. Hall had come on the impulse of that flying resolution, and he was going to have an end of it that day.

There was another straight-backed kitchen chair in the office, such as Ross himself occupied, the pioneer doctor's equipment being very meager. This extra chair was the seat of agony that patients occupied for the extraction of teeth, lancing of boils, stitching of wounds, and all the office ministrations which Ross's broad field covered. Hall took possession of the chair, put his hat on the desk, and his bag on the floor.

He was indecisive about the way to come to the core of this uncomfortable moral obligation; whether to lead up to it with a sort of local anesthetization of pacific pre-



liminaries, or stick the knife into it at one bold stroke.

Ross did not offer any encouragement. The old sinner did the best he could to carry off a pretense of oblivious indifference, holding his newspaper before his whiskers as if absorbed in it entirely, flicking the top of it now and then with pettish little movement to scare away the flies.

"I've been putting this visit off a good while, Doctor—longer than I should have done," Hall began.

There he seemed to run out of words. He stopped, fingering his hat-brim nervously, looking at Old Doc Ross's averted face and three-quarters presented body, as if for help to go ahead.

Old Doc Ross flipped his paper; read on a little way; turned the page with hateful, vindictive suddenness, rustling it more than necessary, jerking it to stretch out the fold.

"You might 'a' put it off a little longer," he growled.

Hall was encouraged by the speech, ungracious as it was. He grinned, beginning to feel easier, to get himself headed right.

"I might have, like any deadbeat that's dodging his debts," he admitted. "I didn't know until a few days ago, Dr. Ross, that I was under obligation to you for your timely interference the night I butted my fool head into other people's troubles and came pretty near getting it shot off for my pains. I've put off coming to you and thanking you for your friendly hand longer than a strictly honest man ought to have put it off. But I guess I'm not a strictly honest man."

"Who in the hell is?" said Old Doc Ross.

He threw his paper down with the question, turning to

confront his visitor with severity, scowling as if he had caught the most notoriously dishonest man in Damascus and had him where he wanted him.

"I didn't know who put in that good shot until I met Gus Sandiver on the road the other day," Hall went on, not trying to answer Ross's general impugment of mankind. "It's a kind of weak acknowledgment for a turn like that, especially when it's been put off this way."

"There's no use singin' a song over it," Ross said, crabbed and ill-favored. "You've got it wrong if you think you owe me anything. You don't. Whatever I did wasn't done on account of an individual, and I don't want to hear any mushy talk about thanks and obligations. I acted for the profession, sir. I've never stood by and seen the profession assailed, and I never will. Individuals are nothing to me, sir; the profession is all."

Old Doc Ross said it with dignity, his red face considerably redder under the pressure of his feelings.

"If you acted for the profession, surely you'll permit me to speak for the profession," Hall returned. "The profession is grateful to a chivalrous gentleman."

The fiery red tide subsided out of Old Doc Ross's face as if Hall had brought him news which swept away completely his fortunes and hopes. He looked out of his door at the rising waves of glimmering, shifting, wavering heat, shaking his head in sad denial.

"I'm not a chivalrous gentleman, Dr. Hall," he said. "I'm not even a common one. I'm nothing but a damned old drunken bum!"

Hall couldn't find anything to say. It requires far more than the assurances of a grateful stranger, or even a sympathetic friend, to palliate the bitterness that rises

from a convicted conscience. No indictment of a grand jury can compare with the arraignment that remorseful guilt pours out against itself.

"I'm sorry there was any misunderstanding of my position and intentions here from the first," Hall said presently.

"I was an old clown," Ross said, contemptuous of himself. "I put on a show for a bunch of single-barreled sports."

"Yes, I figured it that way," Hall replied.

"You've been square with me," Ross said, turning in his chair suddenly, his face so set in its habitual expression of severity it seemed incapable of any change except the rise and fall of color. His attitude and stern look seemed to threaten assault, but it was only the bearing of a man whose habits and deeds made a constant front of belligerence necessary to keep him from sinking under the contemptuous familiarity of the base.

"I tried to explain that I wasn't to be considered a competitor. There's nothing more to be said, that I can see."

Hall tried to pass it lightly, desiring to spare the man any further humiliation. Ross shook his head, appreciative of the courtesy, but refusing to spare himself.

"When a man's played 'em fools for twenty years it rubs the hair off to have 'em turn the trick," he said. "I've come into towns like this and convinced sixty per cent of 'em in two days that they either had fits that minute or was liable to have 'em the next. I've sold communities like this enough potassium iodide and aloes at five dollars a bottle to float the Great Eastern. It wasn't so much because I was a quack as because I was a

natural-born cynic. I liked to play 'em, I liked to slip a ghost under their shirts, I liked to drive along the road and laugh at 'em. I thought everybody was a damn fool but myself. And look at me now! Playin' the clown for a lot of single-barreled sports."

That was an ingenuous confession, Hall thought; that was putting a dignity on quackery he never had heard attempted before, the dignity of a traveling philosopher who roamed around analyzing the follies of mankind. But the five dollars a bottle behind the scheme seemed to weaken the defense.

"Justice told me about it," he said reminiscently. "He said you had them throwing fits all round here for a while."

"I've been thinking I'd move on, if I could get the little bit of money out of this shack and lot I've put into them," Ross disclosed. "This town and the country around it are filling up with the wrong kind of people for me. I guess I've been drifting ahead with the dross so long I'm out of place among respectable people. This is a young man's town, a young man's country. You've got the edge on 'em here, Doctor. Why don't you settle down here? If you'll give me seven hundred dollars for my property, I'll drive out of town to-morrow."

Hall laughed a little over the proposal, shaking his head.

"Maybe it's because I can't see the future of this country they talk about so confidently here. I'm not able to visualize myself in it; I don't seem to fit."

"Since they opened Oklahoma up last spring I've been turnin' my eyes down in that direction," Ross said. "That country's full of grafters and come-on men. It's

the place for an old humbug like me. Think it over, and let me know."

Hall promised to think it over, that being the easiest formula for putting off a real estate man or a sewing machine agent. He felt that the new understanding had reached a point where Ross's gun might be introduced without anybody's pride being hurt very much. Acting on the thought, he took it out of the black bag and laid it on the desk.

"This is yours, I believe, Dr. Ross. It was left at my place on a day both of us would regret if we remembered it any longer. I'm sorry it's been there so long."

Ross sat up stiffly, his face flashing as red as one of Little Jack Ryan's switch lights.

"It's no gun of mine!" he disclaimed hotly. "No man ever took a gun off of me and lived long enough to tell me about it. Take that damn thing out of my presence, sir!"

Hall was stung to the quick by this wrathful repudiation, this reopening of the feud which he had believed so happily closed.

"I'm sorry to be misunderstood," he said, as haughty and distant as Ross at his best.

He threw the gun into the open bag, picked up his hat and started for the door.

"Come back here!" Ross commanded sharply, springing to his feet. "Give me that damn fool gun—of course it's mine. How I came to lose it, and when, we don't remember, as you've said like a gentleman and a scholar, sir."

Hall delivered the weapon to Ross, who weighed it and turned it in his hand, a look of satisfaction in his eyes that told how much he prized it. He put it away in

a drawer of his desk, and solemnly offered Hall his hand.

"The incident is dead," he said.

"And buried," Hall rejoined.

"Will you—step out with me and join me in a little refreshment, Doctor?" Ross proposed, looking at Hall with straight, meaning, invitational glance.

"Why, I"—Hall hesitated a moment—"I'll be honored to do so, Dr. Ross."

Whereon Old Doc Ross settled his hat firmly within an eighth of an inch of his savage eyebrows, took his younger confrère by the elbow with every mark of affection and hospitality, and marched him out into the blazing sun; escorted him in dignity to Pink Fergus' door, opened it with free and easy flourish, followed his new friend and astonished guest within, and ordered ice-cream with as much consequence as if it were champagne across the White Elephant bar.

## CHAPTER XXV

### NEWS FROM THE WIRE

JULY was like a branding-iron fresh from the fire thrust down on the country west of Dodge. It was as Little Jack Ryan had said: what had gone before was only a salubrious tickling of the skin compared with this. Dr. Hall's boxcar office would have baked potatoes at any hour of the day between nine and seven, and steamed a pudding during its coolest and most refreshing interval.

Still the old-timers said it was a pleasant summer, and unusually abundant. Rain had come toward the close of June, perking up the withering corn in the long ribbons of sod out on the homesteaders' claims. There was going to be a crop, a sort of starvation crop, to be sure, but enough to rough the animals through the winter and make meal for the tillers of that unresponsive soil.

Things were looking brighter in Damascus as the result of this promised harvest. The lumberman was selling planks and shingles for additions to houses; other merchants were beginning to hear money tinkling in their tills as the settlers emerged from the shadow of their early fears and began to spend their guarded reserves.

For Dr. Hall, things had gone along in about the same rut. There seemed to be no further adventures in the town's program to involve him in its affairs. The citizens, having been unable to agree on either the walking-stick

with a gold head, or a loving-cup with his name engraved, had let the matter drop without presenting him with either. Old Doc Ross came down to the boxcar office now and then of an evening, to sit in the long shadow and smoke a cigar, at which times he recounted many humorous, and frequently shady, experiences of his life. He hadn't been drunk for more than six weeks, and was an entertaining and companionable man.

Hall felt the pressure of heat and inactivity wearing on him. He was restless to be away. He was somewhat browner than when he came to Damascus; his hard cheek-bones seemed harder, more capable than ever of withstanding the blows of adversity. He had conformed to the exactions of railroad style, his hair cut short, neck duly shaved. His shirt was a soft gray one such as the jerries wore, a shade finer, to be sure, worn open at the throat without the entangling complications of a necktie, which the wind whipped around and made troublesome unless the ends were tucked into the bosom. He was thinner than when he had walked into the West Plains Hotel the evening of his arrival, quicker, if anything, on foot.

His eyes seemed older than the passing of a few weeks could account for, but they were as disquietingly judicial to Jim Justice as before. There were some, and their numbers were not few, who thought them kindly eyes, especially when Dr. Hall drew down his heavy black brows and narrowed them to bright, glittering points. He seemed then to look into a person's troubles, his sickness and pain, with the assurance that it was going to come out all right.

Hall was sitting in front of his office one afternoon in



this mid-July, in that undress array of gray shirt, belted loose trousers and little else, thinking over his situation in that sun-pelted, leafless, unlovely little town. He reviewed how he had come there and stumbled into its affairs; how he had gone on, undesignedly, against any intention or will, knitting himself up with its life and ambitions, thrust forward by some grotesque chance as the chief figure through it all. Now the play was over, the adventures were done. Damascus had achieved its ambition. If there was any virtue in being a county seat, its fortunes were secure.

He had raised up many friends in that unlikely place. Where they had laughed at his way of assurance at the beginning, they came to him now with their sins. That was something; that was considerable, when everything was considered. It made a man swell up a little. Sitting there, his legs stretched wide, he gathered the muscles of his calves, pressed his toes to the ground, trying out the machinery for hoisting himself in his old-time, comfortable way.

Still, he could not see himself in Damascus a year hence, ten years hence, the new generation of prairie-born people growing up around him. A sturdy people they would be; a fast-striding, keen-faced people, with new visions which they would bring to realities, new desires which they would build into the form of utility and live. It would be a great life there among them, sweeping along in the crowding events their fuller lives would bring. Maybe there would be trees in Damascus then, and water works, and lights, and beautiful white houses with green lawns.

But he could not see it so. He could see nothing but

an old sad gray sod house with narrow windows, when he looked far away with that dream-cast in his eyes. There it was standing, weathered and tattered and worn, jagged glass in its broken frames, open doors choked by brown tumble-weed, its footpath guttered to a rivulet by rain, as the old buffalo trails were guttered, the feet that traced it far away, as they were far away to-day.

Elizabeth would not come back.

Nance came out of his office into the blue-hot sun, in his oversleeves and green eyeshade, bareheaded, indecisive, looking up and down the track as if he had lost a train. Still looking around in his shadow-pursued way, he advanced toward Dr. Hall, as he commonly came when he had prize-fight news, or something equally important that he had caught from the wire.

“Say, Doc,” said Nance, cautiously, like a man feeling ahead with his foot in the dark, “say, have you heard the news?”

“No, I haven’t got my finger on the pulse of the world like you. What news is that?”

“Burnett,” said Nance, spying around with his timid, distrustful look.

“Burnett?”

“Skipped,” said Nance.

“The devil you say!”

“It’s been goin’ over the wire for an hour, shootin’ it out to sheriffs and police all over the country to grab him.”

“Is that so? What’s he done?”

“The tip’s comin’ from Kansas City—they say to hold him for fraud. That’s what the tip to the sheriffs is. I got in on a press wire a little while ago and copped some

of it. He's put over the biggest swindle that ever was worked, it said. Got away with a million or two, cleaned up and skipped, leavin' them Kansas City bankers holdin' the sack."

"Well, it's not so astonishing, after all," Hall said. "I always thought the man was a crook. How did he work it?"

"That's all I got, Doc. A man can't cut in on them press wires too long, you know. If I grab off anything else I'll let you know."

"Thanks, old feller. I guess it's going to jolt them here in Damascus."

"Won't it?" said Nance.

Mrs. Charles appeared in the kitchen door, wagging her head in friendly greeting. She waved her apron vigorously at the flies as she held the screen door open to talk across the track.

"Who won the fight?" she wanted to know, in a pitch unnecessarily loud, considering that her voice had to carry only about forty feet.

"What fight?" Nance countered, in voice equally strong.

"I don't know. Wasn't there no fight? You look like you had prize-fightin' news."

"Better than that," Nance assured her, at the same time piquing her curiosity.

"What's happened?"

"It's on the q.t.," Nance shouted. "I'll come over and put it in your ear, but on the strict q.t. between railroaders, you understand?"

Mrs. Charles nodded her full understanding, and Nance knew she was an old-timer, to be trusted with the

state secrets of roadmasters and resident engineers. He went across the rails, glad of the chance to spread his amazing news.

No man ever planted a seed that bore such immediate and alarming fruit as Nance's news brought forth in the kitchen of the boarding-train. Mrs. Charles lifted her arms and yelled. It was not a scream, such as might, and perhaps should, issue from the feminine throat in time of overwhelming stress, but a full-chested, hair-raising, masculine yell. Nance was so amazed by the result of his disclosure that he backed off, hooking his heel on the rail, almost hitting the grit in a posture most undignified for a man of his consequence.

"Oh, m' Ga-hd!" said Mrs. Charles, bursting through the screen doors, standing half way down the steps in her wild perturbation. "I'll kill him! I'll cut his heart out! Oh, my money! Oh, m' Ga-hd!"

"Easy, easy," Nance counseled, standing off a safe distance in the middle of the track. "I didn't know you had any money on him, or dang if I'd 'a' told you."

"Oh, my money, my money!" Mrs. Charles groaned, descending from high pitch to low, a look of utmost misery in her white face and staring eyes.

Hall was surprised to hear this disclosure of her relations with Burnett. He had supposed her caution, together with his advice, had restrained her from putting her money into the fellow's scheme.

"Oh, my girls! Oh, my money!" Mrs. Charles moaned, her voice very low, repeating the words over and over, very disturbing and pathetic to hear.

Annie and Mary were taking the little spell of ease that fell to them in the middle of the afternoon, very

likely stretched out on the floor of the commissary car, Hall knew, refreshing themselves with a nap. Mrs. Charles dashed up the steps, moved by a sudden onrush of despair, silent and grim, striding like a man, her hair flying in forty ways.

“Well, what do you think of that?” Nance said, crossing back to where Hall stood looking at the empty kitchen door.

“It looks like he roped her in after all,” Hall replied.

“I didn’t know the old dame had anything up on him, or I wouldn’t ’a’ tipped it off to her. I told her it was on the q.t. too, and listen at her—just listen at her!”

It didn’t require any great concentration to hear Mrs. Charles. She was raging around in the train, plainly in a wrathful mood now, railing and accusing and berating, the object of her reproach no matter of speculation for Hall. Mary was catching it, Annie standing between, as the girl’s soothing, pacific voice attested, low and pleading, like the note of a violin in a boisterous storm of brass.

Nance heard his instrument sounding his call, insistently, imperiously, as a way-station call always sounds when a despatcher does not get an immediate response. He dashed up the platform to answer it, Mrs. Charles’ clamor pursuing him, the first note of denunciation and bitter reproach the laws of Burnett’s rascality set sounding not only in Damascus, but through three states of the middle country east of Dodge.

Hall was not moved by any great depth of sympathy or pity for Mrs. Charles, for it is against human vanity to raise up either for one who has disregarded one’s wise counsel and disinterested advice. Let her howl it out,

he thought. Burnett had worked on Mary's dissatisfaction with his flattery, reaching the painfully accumulated savings in that ancient, but effective way. He reserved a humanitarian hope that some portion of the five thousand dollars had been withheld, yet doubted it, from the increasing volume of the widow's lamentations.

It was not his affair; he had done all he could to prevent the loss. Secretly Burnett had wormed into the hoardings, and with equal secrecy Mrs. Charles had yielded to Mary's importunities. Let her howl. Maybe it would do her good. He returned to his book, but was unable to fasten his mind on the theme, Mrs. Charles' sobs and wild outbursts shattering the tranquillity of the heat-burdened day.

Annie came running over presently, woe in her face, imploring the doctor to do something for her mother, who was going crazy over her loss, she said. While Hall knew time was the only doctor that could do Mrs. Charles any good, he took his case and went with Annie.

Mrs. Charles had reached a resolution to start out after Burnett, deaf to the pleas of Mary and the more sensible argument of Annie that she did not know where he was, that nobody knew. When Hall entered the kitchen Mrs. Charles was standing in the middle of the floor, weaving from side to side, restrained by Mary in her preparations for pursuit. She had put her hat on over her disordered hair, and was holding her shoes in one hand, her corsets in the other. She was reduced by that time to a sort of dumb determination to go and find Burnett and cut his heart in strings. She had laid out the biggest butcher knife in her kitchen, ready to snatch it up and rush away on her terrible mission of vengeance, which

would not have been all sound and fury, indeed, if Burnett had been available to her hand.

Dr. Hall gave her something in a glass that was black and bitter, bad-tasting enough to make her think it had a rectifying effect upon disordered senses whether it possessed that virtue in any degree at all. He influenced her to lie down, but that was such an unusual posture for her by daylight she could not endure it. She was up within an hour, pushing preparations for the evening meal, knowing very well that railroaders must be fed, let fortunes rise and fall as they may.

When the jerries came in for supper Mrs. Charles was calmer. She was going about her business with a wet towel around her head, her eyes red, her face swollen from much weeping. That was a very assuring state, Dr. Hall believed. The tear ducts are the safety valves of the burdened soul. The copious weeper is the one who easiest forgets.

Before that hour the news of Burnett's blow-up had gone over town. The county attorney had been asked to issue a warrant for him by representatives of Kansas City banks. Burnett had not been seen in Damascus for a week or more, nothing unusual in his active life. By the time the warrant was put in the sheriff's hands the spectacular cattleman had a start that was hopeless to overcome.

Gloom was heavy over the boarding-train that evening. Jerries sat along the shady side smoking after-supper pipes, talking in low tones, rolling sympathetic eyes toward the kitchen, nodding grave heads. Herself was in the deep waters of trouble; the jerries' hearts went out to her like life-buoys thrown from a wave-

washed deck. But it was also as if these friendly-cast buoys were anchored by lines too short to reach their object, Herself being overboard in a sea so troubled that silent sympathy and spoken cheer alike were ineffectual to lift her head above the waves.

Herself had been robbed, duped, stripped of her hard years' earnings by the most despicable scoundrel that ever operated on earth since the days of the serpent in the garden who wheedled the first frail lady of them all out of man's birthright of ease. Herself had traded off her good gould money for less than the trivial fruit the first woman to attempt barter received. Herself had not come out of the transaction with as much as a prune.

It was nothing to the jerries that Burnett had gone off with a million and a half of dollars borrowed through fraud from Kansas City bankers; with Jim Justice's hard scrapings through a long, close-dealing life; with a bit here, a little there, out of many a poor man's pocket in Damascus; with Little Jack Ryan's savings, and all he could gather by a bold front and alluring representations from everybody that ever called him friend.

All that larger and equally heartless robbery did not move the jerries. They would have passed it lightly, with maybe a laugh at Little Jack Ryan, who was not considered a regular railroad man, but rather a hanger-on at the heels of trainmen and station agent, and other weaklings who never had felt the feel of a shovel in their fists.

They would have admired Burnett a little for his shrewdness, perhaps, if his sly planning and gathering for this big day of defalcation had not involved Herself, bringing her to such misery, such weeping and wailing,



and rushing about with hands in her hair as if she would leap out of her door in a frenzy of despair and fling her life away under a train.

Burnett's plan had been so simply dishonest in its intention as to make its success all the more astonishing. He had made a big front, with his cowboy band and handful of diamonds, before the bankers, who are about as gullible as anybody else, it often appears, if played with the right sort of bait. These sharp fellows, who would have given a cold eye to an honest grocer unless he could have piled up convertible securities to twice the amount of the loan desired, had lent money freely on Burnett's herds.

These herds it was now revealed, were neither as numerous nor as large as had been represented. By quick shifts of cattle from range to range, Burnett had placed as many as three mortgages on a single herd.

All this came out when the young men sent to the range by the bankers, whose suspicions had been roused at last, no man knew how, got together and compared paper and looked at the security. It was the biggest fraud ever put through in the history of the livestock business on the western range. It had been so simply crooked from the very start that the duped bankers connived in the fraud as accomplices after the fact to the extent of trying to smother the news and choke off further revelations, fearing public confidence might weaken and bring them down to ruin.

It was said the bankers knew where Burnett had gone, but were the last people on earth to want him back. They would rather absorb their loss than have their simplicity revealed in the story Burnett could tell.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE BIGGEST JOKE OF ALL

DAMASCUS was hit between the eyes by Burnett's big flop. He had been a sort of institution, a notable property in the town's assets. The town and the man now would be linked in the public thought like handcuffed prisoners, both equally disgraced, no matter for the entire innocence of one. The monetary loss was incidental, but their pride suffered a terrible jolt.

Several small banks in the range country which held Burnett's paper went out like popped peanut bags. In the midst of these financial funerals Judge Waters, president of the Damascus bank, walked about in his gander-like dignity, his lean figure and flabby vest not distended the thickness of a hair, for all the satisfaction that was in him and the public praise that attended his steps. Burnett never had been able to borrow a dollar at the Damascus bank; his paper found no market inside Judge Waters' door.

Out of regard for the disordered state of her soul, Dr. Hall avoided Mrs. Charles' table for his evening meal the day the big news broke. He was sorry for Mary, although the bold-tongued creature was undeserving of any sympathy, he knew. It would seem rather ungallant, he considered, to appear in the elation of justification before Mary, remembering her sharp words on the day he advised against the investment.

Hall took his medical case along to give the desertion a color of excuse, went to Pink Fergus' many-sided place of business and dined satisfactorily on fried chicken, which Pink cooked after the Indiana style, not surpassed in the culinary prescriptions of the earth.

Pink was full of gossip about the town's tragedy. She had not been caught, but Old Doc Ross had lost five hundred dollars. He had changed to his drinking clothes. When he was on a bender he didn't eat, she said. He had gone two weeks at a time and never shown his face inside her door for as much as a cup of coffee.

Pink reported Jim Justice rippin' and snortin', parading around with his old cap and ball gun buckled on, telling what he would do if Burnett ever showed his face above the rim of the earth again. Kraus had lost something, and was morose and glum; the lumberman had been pinched, and served him right, in Pink's opinion. She catalogued all the losers, with the amounts set opposite their names, with comment that would not have been a very soothing salve to the victims' pride if they had been by to hear. Pink had not been comforted by much charity in her life as she had gone her rocky way; she was giving as she had received.

She was sorry for the woman and two little children Burnett had left behind, as only a woman who has suffered humiliation and pain and shame at the hands of a man can feel for another left alone and unfended, shuddering naked in her misery before a sneering world. Hall never had seen Mrs. Burnett, not having been called in when the latest heir to this paternal disgrace arrived. Pink said she was a scared, pale, little woman, all eyes, with an old way about her, although she was very young.

Burnett had finished the house he had left her in but a few weeks before. It was a conventional cattleman's house, with a cupola and turned posts in the porch, the date of its construction and the owner's name painted in white against the green roof, where it could be read from passing trains.

Hall did not have any more sympathy for the losers in general than Pink Fergus, sheltered under her bob-tailed iron-gray hair, with her row of artificial bangs, somewhat younger, pinned on in front. He was aloof from the turmoil and concern, an outsider who had come hopefully looking for his chance in that country west of Dodge, and had not found it. He was about confirmed in the belief that there was no chance for a man there, as the old-timers had said, except it might be a rogue's chance, such as Burnett had played.

Next morning the Kansas City papers arrived, giving the story of Burnett's downward plunge from his high importance. The amount he had managed to get away with was only speculative, the bankers having shut up tighter than canned beans. Detectives had followed the fugitive to Mexico, where he was insolent and defiant, there being no treaty between the two nations in those days covering his offense.

That same morning Pete Farley's car was set in on the siding at Damascus. Out of it a company of engineers descended and began surveying the site for a roundhouse and the long-promised shops. Compensation came to Damascus that way, close on the heels of its disaster.

Before the day was over other cars were set in: a steam shovel and a piledriver, with men to manipulate them.

Justice had his hotel full of these new workmen, of a class strange to that town. The importance of Damascus had more than doubled overnight. It was equal to a rain and cool wind to the despondent spirits bent down by the plundering they had suffered at a respected citizen's hands.

Little Jack Ryan stopped at Hall's office that afternoon, carrying two switch lanterns in each hand, his corncob pipe in the slit nature had provided for that purpose. His big chin was blue with close-cut stubble, as it always appeared the first few hours after shaving. By the next day it would be darker; after that, quite black. Dr. Hall could tell within five hours of Jack's last shave by the color of his chin.

Jack put the lanterns down, sighing in his way of weary oppression, wiping his forehead as if he had been relieved of responsibility for at least that division of the railroad for a little while. There was a satisfied twinkle in his sorrowful eyes, a cheerful look in his face for a man who lately had stood a loss so heavy.

That was the first visit Jack had made to Dr. Hall's door since the news of Burnett's plundering had reached Damascus. Jack had dodged meeting the doctor, skulking around as if ashamed of his simplicity in being so easily misled. Whatever his feelings had been, he appeared to have overcome them. He was his confident, well-satisfied self again, proud of the oily job he had, although ready to disparage it and chant of its hardships at every chance.

"Well," said Jack, "the caark blowed out of 'er."

"Pretty much of an explosion, they say, Jack. But you don't look very sad for a ruined man."

"I guess I can pocket me loss and be wiser. It's not so hard on me as some of these poor fellys that has nothing, not the *big-innin'* of hardship compared to the loss Herself has to bear. The poor soul, puttin' her all into the blarneyin' felly's pot, and him savin' it up for the day he had planned to roon off with it like a dog with a bone. I have a praperty any day I'm ready to give up me job and go to it."

"Lucky man, Jack! Has somebody left you a farm?"

"Me woman, you know, she's Injen. She has land over in the Nation. It's good land, it has ile innunther it, the whole of it the gover'mint has set aside for them Creeks has ile innunther it. One of these days, when ile takes a stir and comes to be wort' money in place of bein' an ixpinse to dhrill it out as it is now, we'll go down and take our land."

"No wonder you're not worrying, you old millionaire!"

Jack was pleased at the compliment, as a poor person invariably is flattered by being rated above his means. There is something peculiarly pleasant to the average mind in these misapplications of financial ratings and designations of consequence. There are laymen who distend and grow warm around the gills when somebody mistakenly calls them doctor. A gas-meter reader has been known to set his hat at a different angle all the rest of his life after having been mistaken for a newspaper reporter.

"It was a knock that took me wind for a while," Jack confessed. "I've been a careful man, I've never put me arnins on the gamin' table. So along comes this man with the gift of gab on his tongue, pourin' his handful

of glitterin' glass—I can't belave, for me soul, they were diamints any more—and careful old Jack's money is charmed out of his hand like a bird flyin' to a whussle. Well, a hoondred days is a hoondred dollars, as the old jerry said. I can make it up if I live long enough, barrin' the ile farm I'll retrate to when I'm old and stiff."

"Some of the lads in town are hard losers," Hall said. "Kraus is as blue as a mackerel, and Old Doc Ross has gone on a tear to pickle his sorrow."

"There was some n'ise comin' out of the boardin'-train, too," Jack said, without much sympathy for those who scoffed at his oily job. "She sounded like the keeners I used to hear when I was a b'y in Ireland, howlin' over the dead."

"She lost five thousand dollars, all her savings for years," Hall said, rebuking Jack for his unfeeling words.

"Sure," said Jack cheerfully; "sure she did. I got the accoutremints of it down to the other ind of the yaard. Of course, a woman would tear on about it where a man would hide his head in the ile-house out of shame for bein' so aisy. I'll own to you, Dochter, I was groanin' in me soul till the joke of it struck me. Then I put out me chist and laughed. I've been laughin' ever since the p'int of the blarneyin' felly's joke struck me brain."

"This town is notable for its jokers," Hall said, greatly interested in this view of Burnett's roguery, "but I'll bet a brass dollar you've got it over the funniest man in town if you can see the joke in that."

Jack filled his pipe with a viscid, black, repellent mess of tobacco that he took out of a paper pouch, cramming it down with his oily thumb, winking his eye knowingly,

his head tilted a little, a grin on him in the relish of his own shrewdness and the p'int of the joke he was hiding, to be revealed in his own comfortable way.

"Ye'll remimber," said Jack, puffing hard to get her going, taking her up a link, as the railroaders say, after a little, proceeding at ease; "ye'll remimber the promise Burnett made to us, the thing that caught us be the tails and puhllled us in. That was, on the oath and honor of him, he'd turn every dollar we invisted along of him into two, come Christmas or before."

"I remember."

"Sure you do. He's done it; he's made good on his word. But little good it'll do me and the rest of them."

"How do you mean he's made good on his promise to double your money, Jack? I don't get the joke."

"No," said Jack, easily. "I've not come to it. You saw in the papers the man's gone to Mexico?"

"That's what they say."

"So he's made good on his promise to turn every dollar into two," Jack declared. "In Mexico every American dollar is wort' two of the kind they have in that place. So, you see, Burnett had it in mind all the time to do it. That was the joke the sly felly had up his sleeve to shake out on us like a mouse."

With the appreciation of a true humorist, Jack did not weaken his joke by enlargement or further comment. He gathered up his lanterns and went on his business, his rolling, comfortable waddle indicative of a mind at ease.

Hall looked after him with a respect and admiration he never had felt for the oily philosopher before. That was a heavy loss for Ryan, let him cover the hurt of it as he would under his prospect of coming into a kingdom of



oil by and by. Ten years of hard savings, at least, were contributed to the making of Burnett's joke by the oily hand of Little Jack Ryan. If an appreciation of humor could save a man's spirits and prop up his courage in a crisis like that, then appreciation of humor ought to be made a course in every college in the land.

There was something more than humor behind Little Jack Ryan's twinkling eyes and sly grin. It was the result of a life out on the edge of things that the man had lived so long; a life where all things come hard, its tragedies sudden and appalling, its rewards so scant as to be in the main despised. Life itself was its own reward to a man who had spent so many of his years on the bare edges of the world. If he came through the day with that, rounded out the year with nothing more, he counted himself a winner, and was glad.

Ryan's interpretation of Burnett's big joke had gone out through some chink, and spread over town like a cupful of the lamp-tender's oil by evening. It was such a rare joke, in the opinion of Damascus, that the town appeared to take it as full compensation for the loss and humiliation it had felt so harshly before.

Jim Justice stopped at Hall's office to tell it, as something springing out of his own deep well of humor; the lumberman stopped him on his way to the livery barn, to give his version of it, and pass it along as a bit of sardonic comedy that had sprouted between the crevices of his close-planked business mind.

Kraus was looking brighter than Hall ever had seen him. He came weaving up in his bearish gait while Hall was saddling his horse to give it a little exercising jaunt, pulling his long yellow face apart in a grin. He repeated

the joke in his way, with his unavoidable vulgarisms, taking credit for it as originating out of his own cogitations and profound horse sense.

As Hall rode through town, heading into the sunset, groups of lesser humorists whose standing in the community was not sufficient to give them any credence for originality, were smoking their after-supper pipes and having their laugh over this funniest thing that ever happened in that famously funny town. These waved friendly greetings as Hall trotted by. The women and children had caught the point of the tremendous joke; trills of laughter sounded from groups of them as they stood talking over fences, many of them looking up to flip little greetings as the railroad doctor rode by, his horse's feet plopping up little spurts of dust.

Hall rode on, passing the gray sod house with its blinded windows, a gust of sadness, a pang of loneliness, bending down his spirits like snow upon a bough. He stopped at the crest of a hill, miles beyond Damascus, when dusk was deepening. The sun had gone down in clouds; there was a range of them, standing across the background of that shadowy, gray land, the rosy after-glow on their summits, cold, deep canyons on their nearer side, where lightning leaped, so far away across the sweep of unobstructed plain their thunder was not even a murmur in the silence of sinking day.

Back there the town lights were twinkling from the windows. There were so many more of them, he reflected, than when he came to the country west of Dodge only a little while ago. It seemed as if the seed of light must have been blown up by the southwest wind, and sown on the naked prairie. Those people had been

building in their confidence of the town's future since the county seat was made secure. A framework would rise one day, a family would be sheltered there the next.

They were laughing away their losses down there in town this evening, an excellent way to adjust them if people had the heart. It had something admirable about it; they must have heroic qualities which he had not seen beneath their commonplace. He had not given them credit for so much originality, or such a peculiar courage.

It had seemed more comfortable to him passing through town that evening than ever before. In the past he had gone about with a certain degree of constraint, self-consciousness, in spite of his sublime egotism. He always had been attended by the feeling that they were laughing at him, holding him to be a kind of exclusive fool. Had he been wrong? Or had they come down to this public confession that they were just about as big fools as anybody, and admitted him unreservedly to their fellowship by the act? It was inexplicable, but he had felt a friendliness surrounding him, following him, that evening that had made him feel at home for the first time in Damascus.

Strange, he reflected, as he rode slowly back to town, a cool wind from the mountain-range of clouds attending him like one of his new-found friends. Could it be that he had made his place there, that his chance was opening before him in the country west of Dodge?

## CHAPTER XXVII

### A MAN'S CHANCE

**GOLDEN-ROD** was blooming when Elizabeth came back. Its plumes along the roadside were dusty and its stature stunted, yet it stood there fringing the gray highway in friendly proximity to passing wheels, being a companionable herb, always crowding closely after man in his trodden ways.

Elizabeth had written frequently while away, post-cards, with pictures of distant places on them, sent off in haste as she lighted now and then like a migrating bird. The last of these had come from Montreal, and there had been no answering it, as in the case with many of the rest. Dr. Hall had written a few letters, in leisurely, lightsome, gossipy stride, for which he had been thanked briefly, yet warmly enough for the public eye, in scrappy little scrawls.

In that way Elizabeth had kept up with home news pretty well, but it was an astonishing revelation to her when she and her mother came home that autumn morning when the golden-rod was blooming by the calm Arkansas. There was not much water in the river at that season, it is true, but it was bigger even at that low stage than the Bendemeer, and far more worthy a song.

The roundhouse was finished; it was stabling several road engines that day, grimy young men grooming them with large bunches of greasy waste. Close beside it the

new shops were taking form, and up and down Custer Street steam rollers were at work smoothing the first asphalt pavement laid down in the country west of Dodge. Damascus was making the road straight and smooth for Prosperity. It did not want her to stumble on her way to the court house square.

But these were only minor wonders compared with the greater civic and moral improvement that had taken place. Owing to a disagreement on the ethics of bribery with the proprietor of the White Elephant, the county attorney had closed the joint. Its bar was out, its sign obliterated, its swinging doors removed. An active young Jew was putting what he called a racket store in the place. It was neither a music nor hardware store, as the name might imply, but a place where everything for household comfort and feminine adornment was offered at red-letter prices.

The single-barreled sports and ten-cents-ante gamblers were gone, for they belong to a genus that dries up like frogs in a drouth where there is no smell of sour beer-kegs at the side-door entrance. Jim Justice had painted the West Plains Hotel and was building a wing to it, in a fair way to recoup the fortune the arch-joker of Damascus had pilfered from him through that incomparable jest.

Hall met the ladies at the train, flanked by Kraus, who had come over with a rig to take them home. Mrs. Charles, from her kitchen door, espied the group as the long passenger train cleared the station. She waved her hand in the high-sign of railroad free-masonry, supplementing it with a hearty hail. Elizabeth, remembering her sustaining kindness in her tragic hour, darted across

the rails, up the kitchen steps, embraced and kissed her with a warmth that moved an envious pang in the railroad doctor's breast.

Mrs. Cottrell stood marveling at the change a few weeks had made in her bare and uninteresting town, glowing with the pleasure of justified faith.

"They're leaving to-day!" Elizabeth announced, dashing back again to the station. There was something near to consternation for a personal loss in her disappointed tone. "Isn't it a shame, just when the town's taking a start!"

"Who's leaving, Lizzie?" Mrs. Cottrell asked, mildly astonished at this display of feeling.

"Mrs. Charles and the jerries," Elizabeth replied, regretfully.

"Oh," said Mrs. Cottrell, a bit loftily.

She had not been able to overcome her original prejudice against railroaders, lady railroaders who lived on wheels in particular. In her eyes Mrs. Charles had broken caste in putting her arms around Elizabeth on the court house steps that day. It had been a well-meant, but unwelcome, intrusion across that military line of social superiority which an officer's wife holds as sacred as an altar in a holy place.

"I'm going to run down to say good-by to her and the girls," Elizabeth announced, "just as soon as I help you up with this stuff."

Kraus was standing by, ill-favored, slouch-shouldered, insolently impatient of the delay, the stuff mentioned lying around him knee-deep in the form of bags and bundles.

"Let's be getting on then," Mrs. Cottrell suggested.

"Mr. Kraus is about out of patience with our dallying. Shall we see you again, Dr. Hall? or are you going on with these—are you moving, too?"

"Yes, I'm moving," Hall replied, not very warmly, as if confirming heavy news.

"Going to quit us, now we've got a start?" Elizabeth challenged him sharply, as if she questioned his courage, after all. "Why, it's your town, you saved it, you made it what it is. It never would have amounted to a whoop if they'd got hold of the records that day."

"You give me entirely too much credit, Elizabeth," he replied, flushing under her praise. "I'm moving, but I'm not going on with the train. I have other plans."

"We'll always have a deep interest in you, Dr. Hall, for your great loyalty and help to us in our most trying hours," Mrs. Cottrell said. "I wish you to remember that, wherever you go. If it were possible we'd have you up to dinner this evening, and hear your plans for the future. But"—a gesture of disparagement—"there'll be dust a foot deep all over the house!"

"I couldn't think of straining your hospitality to that point," Hall returned. "You'll have enough to do without being burdened by a voracious guest. I'll be pretty busy myself to-day—just grab a bite on the run."

Kraus had put the luggage in the dusty phaëton. He was climbing to his seat now as if he intended driving off without his passengers, apparently groveling in his soul with the humiliation he felt in serving them at all. There are people such as Kraus to be found everywhere in this land of the free and home of the knave, who have no other means of showing their equality save by insolence.

"But where are you going?" Elizabeth inquired, help-

less emptiness in her voice. It was as if she had put out her foot to step on a familiar stone and found it gone.

"Maybe I'll see you when you come down to say good-by to Mrs. Charles?" he suggested. "They'll be pulling out in an hour or so. She's going to serve dinner on the new switch."

"I'll lope right back, then," she promised.

"Do," he urged her. "But you'd better hop in, or Kraus will drive off and leave you."

"You'll tell me what your plans are then?" she pressed, lingering a moment on the edge of the platform.

"I'll tell you everything I know," he assured her, with the easy extravagance of one whose treasures did not amount to much.

Elizabeth came hurrying down Custer Street as the work-train engine was coupling to the boarding-cars to pull them out to the switch Bill Chambers had laid to receive them several miles beyond Simrall. Hall was over at the kitchen door, having his parting words with the ladies on wheels. Elizabeth made a spurt of it for the finish, running like a schoolgirl, her knees knocking her skirts, her light feet flung high.

She arrived red and panting from her run, broad-brimmed sombrero in her hand, her hair flying, but triumphant as a winner in a race. She had changed her dress, Hall noticed, for one better designed for walking—a short serge skirt with white waist, which made her look very airy and independent. She had time for only a word with Mrs. Charles and the girls, and a handshake reached up and down from the kitchen door.

Elizabeth and Dr. Hall stood looking after the boarding-train as it pulled away from the town whose pros-



perity it had nurtured in the days when business was young and uncertain there. Mrs. Charles and her daughters waved from the kitchen door until the train whipped out upon the main line, shutting them from sight.

"Well, they're gone," she said.

"Yes, they're gone."

They started back across the track to the boxcar office, going slowly.

"You'll have nothing to stay for now, of course," she said, not conclusively, but with a tinge of upbraiding to her words.

"Oh, I don't know," he returned flippantly, looking at her with a side-long grin. "What are your designs on the future, if you'll let me ask? Judge Waters tells me the county wants to buy the site where your house stands, to build a union high school."

"Yes. Mother thinks it's the best monument father could have—they'll call it the Cottrell High School—and I agree to it. Is Old Doc Ross gone? I noticed they've moved his office a hundred feet or so from where it used to stand, and are digging a foundation for a building or something there."

"Yes, Ross has gone to Oklahoma. He had his eye on it for some time, he told me. We got to be pretty close friends, after all our bad start."

"You *did*?"

"Nice old chap when you got to know him—that is, kind of nice in some ways. He hitched up to his fits wagon one evening and drove away. I was rather sorry to see him go."

"Has another doctor taken his place? I didn't see any name on his office."

"Yes, another doctor bought him out."

"Who?"

"I don't think he amounts to much," he replied evasively.

"But who is he? What's his name?"

"I wish I had a chair to offer you," he said, as they drew up under the canvas awning that Little Jack Ryan had stretched, "but I haven't. The one I had was borrowed from Mrs. Charles."

"I'm only going to stay a minute—it doesn't matter. So somebody bought Old Doc Ross out? I've always hoped it would be you. Have you met him?"

"Why, no; no, I can't say that I ever *have* met him."

"I always hoped you'd see your chance here—it was coming all the time. I saw it a long way off. Didn't I tell you?"

"Yes, Elizabeth, you told me. You said I'd have to go out after it with a gun, and I told you that wasn't my style."

"You'd better have done that than let it get away," she reproved him. "Who grabbed it? What's the new doctor's name?"

"Fellow by the name of Hall," he replied, looking slyly at her across his nose.

"Good boy! good boy!" Elizabeth applauded, swung off her feet by the unexpected news.

She held out her hand to congratulate him on his bare-handed capture of a man's chance, fleet game that galloped so swiftly across that changing country west of Dodge.

Dr. Hall held her eager warm hand a moment, smiling down on her in paternal, indulgent kindness. He was

pretty well satisfied with himself just then, as he had not counted on the pleasure of making a revelation to Elizabeth. Kraus would have told them on the way out, he had thought, putting some tag of disparagement to the news in his cross-grained, intolerant way.

But it was news to Elizabeth; pure, first-hand news. He swelled in his satisfaction of that fact, rather than his accomplishment that made it possible, bending his flexible, silent soles, wrinkling his nicely polished shoes as he hoisted himself like one of those monstrous freaks who go up in jerks and lower their stature in jolts, sometimes seen in a circus side-show.

"And you're just moving up-town, you're not going away, you're not the railroad doctor any more?"

"Yes, I'm still the railroad doctor, but that's only incidental to being the Damascus doctor. That hole you saw them scraping out in the square is for the foundation of my hospital. It's going to have thirty beds."

"Fine business!" said Elizabeth, glowing like a sunflower.

"I'm to take care of all the railroad business on the division west of Dodge. I'm going to make a little green park around the building, and plant some cottonwood trees.

"I couldn't see you leaving," she said gently.

"And I tried to make myself believe, perversely, you'd never come back. You'll be building when you sell your house?"

"We've been planning quite a while on a site near Judge Waters' place."

"I remembered your earnestness when you said this was home, but there seemed so little, at times, for any-

body to come back to here. I said you never would come; but I planned in the expectation that you would."

"You know what it is now that takes hold of you and twists around you and ties your heart here, like that little yellow weed the children call love-vine. It was born in me, but it gets everybody worth having that stays around in this country a while."

"There may be some subtle, romantic thing like that, Elizabeth, but I think what got me in the end was nothing but a laugh."

"Don't be foolish," said Elizabeth, lifting her eyes in mild correction of what she thought untimely levity.

"Not at all," he denied. "They laughed at me when I first came here, and kept it up the deeper this love-vine business of yours wound round me and tied me up in the town's troubles. Town's troubles! They weren't the town's troubles after I mixed in them. They stuck to me like tar and feathers, they became solely and peculiarly mine. I didn't like that side-stepping of responsibility in the first case. It struck me like a fish thrown in my face, but when they turned around in the end and laughed longer and louder at themselves than they'd ever laughed at me, I began to thaw out and grin with them. That was a spirit I hadn't given them credit for; it was a nerve I could admire.

"You mean the Burnett joke that started with Little Jack Ryan? Well, you can search me! I couldn't see anything funny in that."

"Of course not, being away. I couldn't convey the subtle humor of the situation in a letter. You had to be on the spot to get the flavor of that joke."

"And a grin's got to be greater than a gun in this

country west of Dodge," Elizabeth said. "Well, I don't care how you won out or were won, I'm glad you're going to stay. I wish I were a doctor, or a nurse, so I could help you with the hospital."

"There's a place for you, Elizabeth," he said, his stature growing two full inches, his chest distended by a long inspiration as he balanced on his toes a moment, straining as if to see over the white-blotched hills across the Arkansas, where his wise, kindly eyes were fixed. "There is a perfect place for you, Elizabeth. That was included in the plan before I began to build; that was the very foundation of it all."

**THE END**

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