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The crack of a shot echoed through the still air

[Page 228]

Moran of Saddle Butte

By

Lynn Gunnison

Ames, Joseph B. Bushnell



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Published November, 1924

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MORAN OF SADDLE BUTTE

TO
F. E. BLACKWELL

MORAN OF SADDLE BUTTE

CHAPTER I

THE SOUND IN THE NIGHT

ROUSED suddenly from deep slumber, the girl sat upright in her bunk, staring wide-eyed into the thick, shrouding darkness of the cabin room. Her heart was beating wildly, her muscles tense and rigid as she strove to fix that unwonted sound, the echoes of which seemed to linger tantalizingly just beyond the range of her waking consciousness.

Listening with straining ears and bated breath for a repetition, she could hear nothing; yet somehow the intense stillness failed to reassure her. She tried to tell herself that what had startled her from profound slumber was merely one of the ordinary night sounds of the wilderness, which were sometimes eerie enough when one was alone. But for all that her pulse continued to pound and she found it quite impossible to quiet her tingling nerves.

At length, summoning courage, she thrust back the covers and slipping out of bed fumbled in the darkness for the dressing gown she had left beside the bunk. It took her a few moments to find it and the slippers, which seemed to evade her with the

impish malice of inanimate things. But at last she had them on, and creeping softly across the tiny room, she drew the door slowly and silently open.

In the opposite wall of this larger room, which served at once as kitchen, living room and her father's sleeping quarters, the outlines of an unshuttered window loomed indistinctly in the gray light of approaching dawn. That was one of the chief causes of the girl's terror—had been so from the first. Not only had she failed to draw the heavy wooden shutter when she went to bed, but she had left the rough sash partly raised. In the mellow lamplight with a cheerful fire crackling on the wide hearth it had seemed safe enough. But now, shivering with cold and nervousness, she wished fervently that she had not let her love of fresh air outweigh her sense of prudence.

But no girl can live the life which Shirley Rives had lived for the past two years without possessing, among other qualities, both resource and courage. After all, she reflected, her gaze set intently on the blurred gray outline of the window, if an intruder chanced to be prowling about the cabin, he had evidently failed as yet to find this point of weakness. She had merely to cross the room, softly close and bolt the shutter, and her negligence of last night would be repaired.

Drawing the folds of her gown about her, she slipped through the doorway and started across the

room on tiptoe. She had almost reached the window when all at once a sudden muffled thud from the other side of the outer door halted her abruptly.

Unmistakably the stamp of an impatient horse, the sound drained every particle of color from the girl's face. For an instant she stood motionless, lips parted slightly, eyes fixed on the heavy planking that covered the opening in the log wall. Then stepping swiftly forward, she bent down cautiously and thrusting one arm through the open window, grasped the edge of the shutter and drew it slowly toward her.

The hinges did not creak and with a sigh of thankfulness she pushed the bolt into its socket with fingers that shook a little. Then her slim figure straightened and faced the door, invisible now in the darkness. As she did so the horse stamped again.

Shirley's lips tightened and one hand fumbled nervously with the cord of her woolen gown as she fought determinedly against the choking apprehension that rose up within her. What was a strange horse doing here at this hour? Who was its rider? And where? That it must have a rider she was certain, for horses did not roam at large through this remote mountain wilderness, and their own two cayuses were accounted for. Her father had ridden off early that afternoon on Robin, and she herself had carefully fastened her own roan into the corral at dusk.

As she stood there thinking, her ears strained to catch the slightest sound, the character of that unknown prowler took on in her keyed-up mind sinister, terrifying qualities. He might, of course, be some chance passerby, though these were rare enough at any time. But somehow the hour precluded that, and if he were honest or on some simple errand, wouldn't he naturally come straight to the door and knock? As for neighbors, the nearest dwelling was nearly a score of miles away, and that——

A little chilling tremor went over her as she thought of all that she had heard of that crowd over at Saddle Butte. So far they had kept away from the isolated mountain cabin. Save at a distance, Shirley had never even seen the men who made up that agglomeration known as the Gridiron outfit, the ostensible character of which was but a flimsy shield for all sorts of outlawry. She had been riding with her father at the time and the look on his face no less than the manner in which he had snatched her bridle and dragged her horse into an adjacent cañon was more eloquent, even, than his subsequent emphatic words of caution.

The bare possibility that one of these men might be lurking about the cabin at first terrorized Shirley and then abruptly roused in her the courage of desperation. She tried to think where she had left her six-shooter and cartridge belt, but could not quite remember. Either it was on the shelf over by the

fireplace or in her bedroom. In any case she must have a light, so without further delay she felt her way into the smaller room and fumbling about in the darkness found a candle and some matches.

The wavering yellow flame revealed the weapon lying on a rough pine table which served Shirley as a bureau. Swiftly she reached for it. Then, moved by a second thought, she slipped off her gown and dressed with utmost haste. With that same swift movement—somehow she dared not pause too long for fear her nerves would get the better of her—she buckled on the cartridge belt and holster and went back to the other room, carrying the lighted candle.

Here for the first time the unpleasant realization was forced upon her that there was nothing left her now save to stand and wait. She set down the candle on a big table in the middle of the room and though she felt it a quite unnecessary precaution, took out her six-shooter to make sure that it was loaded. When she had dropped the weapon back into its holster, her eyes sought the door and suddenly she began to wonder whether by any chance she might not be working herself up unnecessarily. So far she had neither seen nor heard the faintest sign of a human being. It was the presence of the horse alone that had so startled and disturbed her.

“I suppose he *could* have broken away from his owner and found his way here,” she reflected. “I

don't see what would bring a strange horse here, but——”

A sudden horrifying possibility seared through her brain and turned her face chalk-white. Her father! What if he had met with some accident? Suppose the horse outside was Robin, returned as he naturally would if set free of a rider's directing hand?

A little, quavering gasp came from between her clenched teeth and she caught the edge of the table back of her with one hand. And then, before she had time to pull herself together, a thing happened which served merely to confirm her horrified suspicion. Under her startled gaze she saw the door latch — move!

Slowly it rose and fell. She heard a little click and saw the narrow strip of metal quiver as if some one was striving in vain to lift it the second time. There followed swiftly a sound as of something brushing across the door, a thud and finally a muffled groan.

Heart beating wildly, the girl flung herself at the door, thrust back the heavy bolt and dragged it open. Outside in the cold gray dawn a horse confronted her with pricked-up ears — a white-faced sorrel that bore no resemblance at all to Robin.

Shirley scarcely saw him. After that first brief, sweeping glance, her eyes flashed downward to where, huddled on the doorstep, was the limp figure of a man. Long, lean, grizzle-haired he was, his lined, unshaven face drawn and gray as if from pain and

weakness, his eyes half closed. It was the face of a man in dire extremity, but to the girl's certain knowledge she had never set eyes on him until this moment.

CHAPTER II

TRAGEDY

SHIRLEY'S first emotion was of intense thankfulness that it was not her father. Then a wave of pity and concern swept over her. Whoever he might be, the stranger was either badly hurt or desperately ill, and a spasm of self-reproach came over the girl at the remembrance that her nervous tremors had been the cause of his remaining so long untended. Impulsively she dropped on her knees beside him and as she did so his lids slowly lifted.

"Yuh — ain't here — alone, miss?" he whispered with an effort.

After an instant's hesitation, Shirley nodded. There was something about the drawn, lined face and in the dark, searching eyes which made her feel, somehow, that he was to be trusted.

"My father's gone over to Elk Ford and won't be back until tonight," she explained. "There's no one else here."

The man gave a stifled groan and one of his hands clenched spasmodically. Shirley bent forward swiftly.

"I'm so sorry," she said hastily. "You must let me help you. I'm afraid you're — badly hurt."

The stranger's lips twitched. "Yo're right there, ma'am," he muttered, speaking with evident effort.

“The gang—got me—over by the Needles.
. . . . But I—held onto the saddle an’—
fooled ’em. They——”

His voice trailed away into silence and his lids drooped again. Alarmed, Shirley sprang up and hastily crossing to a cupboard beside the fireplace, found a bottle of spirits from which she poured a generous portion into a tin cup. Returning swiftly she bent over and set the edge of the cup against the man’s lips.

“Drink this,” she urged gently. “It’ll make you stronger, and then I’ll try and get you onto the bed.”

Again his lids lifted with that slow, painful movement which made it seem as if even that slight effort were difficult. For a moment their glances met, and Shirley, looking into the dark, dilated, tortured eyes knew as well as if the man had spoken that he was debating whether the increased strength and prolonged consciousness would be worth the added pain. The realization of his extremity shocked the girl and made it difficult to control her voice.

“Please!” she begged a little unsteadily.

Obediently he drank and in a little space a faint color crept into his face.

“Much obliged,” he murmured. “I’m afraid it’s no use, though, ma’am. I’m all in, an’ I don’t reckon I could even crawl across the room.”

The man’s voice was stronger and underneath the Western blur Shirley detected a note of gentle depre-

cation as if his chief regret in the situation was the trouble and annoyance it might bring to her. A faint rose color was beginning to tinge the dawn and in the stronger light she could see his face clearly. A strong face it was, lined, weatherbeaten, with firm yet sensitive lips. As well as she could judge in a country which sets its mark early on its manhood she guessed that he was in the neighborhood of fifty. All this she gathered in a fleeting instant and then was overwhelmed by the stamp of finality, ethereal yet only too terribly unmistakable, that lay upon his ashen face. The man was dying and he knew it; and the realization shocked and horrified the girl and wrung her heart. For a moment she was quite incapable of speech, but with an effort she managed to pull herself together.

“You — you must let me help,” she said in a voice that shook a little. “I’m very strong — much stronger than I look. If we could only get you on your feet I’m sure I could manage.”

For a moment or two he lay against the door jamb breathing heavily. Then suddenly the girl, watching him intently, saw a dull spark flash into his eyes and a tremor pass over his limp body.

“I clean forgot about — *them!*” he said hoarsely. “They’ll follow, an’ they’ll get — what they’re after unless — Gimme another drop o’ liquor.”

She obeyed instantly. For a little space he lay motionless. Then he glanced up at her again.

“If yo’re ready, ma’am —” he murmured.

Bracing her feet, she bent over and taking a firm hold of his body just below the arm pits, exerted all her strength to lift him upright. In this he aided her to the best of his ability, and what that effort meant she could tell by the streaming sweat and twisting muscles of his lined face. Somehow she got one shoulder underneath his right arm and in this way, step by step with painful slowness, she helped him across the threshold and over to her father’s bunk in the corner. He kept up until she had lowered him gently to the mattress. Then his head fell back on the pillow and his long, lean body sagged limply.

Swiftly Shirley brought water in a basin and sprinkled it on his face. Across his flannel shirt was a dark, glistening stain the sight of which brought her lips together and sent her flying into the other room to return with strips of clean cotton torn from a petticoat. She had a ghastly feeling that whatever she might do would be quite fruitless, yet her capable slim fingers never ceased their swift, deft movements.

With infinite gentleness she bared the wound in his chest and cleansed it as best she could. She was striving to staunch the flow of blood with pads of cotton, when a slight movement made her glance up to meet the stranger’s gaze.

“Yo’re — mighty good, ma’am,” he murmured;

“but it ain’t a mite o’ use. I got somethin’—to tell yuh, an’ I gotta do it—quick.”

One hand still pressing down the pads, she sat back staring at him.

“I’ll make it brief—I gotta,” he said, speaking with evident effort. “My name’s Blake—John Blake. I been prospectin’ in the mountains north o’ here—more’n two years. Four days ago I found—the lost Squaw Mine.”

He paused to moisten his lips. At the mention of this object of her own father’s persistent search—a search which from the first she had felt as utterly futile and hopeless as the pursuit of some fleeting mirage, Shirley’s eyes widened and she stared at him incredulously.

“It’s true,” he told her briefly. “Feel in my pocket—the left hand one.”

In a daze she obeyed and drew forth a small canvas bag, soiled and stained and very heavy. A buckskin thong secured the mouth, and when the girl, still following Blake’s directions, untied it and looked inside, she caught her breath sharply.

A little dust was there, but mostly the bag was full of nuggets, smooth, waterworn, ranging in size from a pea to a pigeon’s egg. They gave off a lustrous, golden sheen which was unmistakable, and through Shirley’s bewildered mind there flashed a vivid memory of the legend of the lost mine which she had heard again and again from her father, and

which, indeed, was famous throughout this section of the West.

Thin to emaciation, delirious with fever, a Sioux squaw had tottered into a settler's cabin west of Wind River twenty odd years ago babbling of twin mountain peaks and a dried up water course the bottom paved with gold. She died without giving further information, but hidden in her garments was found a knotted rag containing a score of nuggets, smooth, waterworn, varying in size as these did, and of the purest gold.

When the news leaked out, as it did after a failure or two, the excitement was intense. Party after party went forth into the mountain wilderness searching for the twin peaks guarding the watercourse of gold. Some returned disappointed, disillusioned; others left their bones bleaching in some remote cañon. None was successful. As years went on the story became a legend, but every now and then someone, like Colonel Rives, for instance, dominated by a belief in his own ability, or by a greater faith in fortune, took up anew the endless quest.

“Get a pencil an' paper.”

Blake's voice, weak and labored, broke in upon the girl's thoughts and brought her swiftly to her feet. Almost without conscious volition she snatched a pencil from the table and with it a tattered novel she had been reading the night before. Somehow the whole experience seemed like a waking dream, fan-

tastic, incredible. Mechanically she opened the book at the blank flyleaf, and at the dying man's behest she jotted down his labored, broken utterances.

"Follow Wind River to source. . . .
 Three cañons. . . . Take left hand one. Follow
 to end. . . . Climb to mesa. Cross to where
 cone shaped peak rises from granite cliff—about
 seven miles. Follow base of cliff westward three
 miles to cañon running northeast. Half a mile on left
 is a thick clump of mesquite. Behind it narrow—
 opening into blind gulch—old river bed—where
 gold is. The squaw—was 'dotty. There ain't but
 —one peak. That's what—fooled 'em all.
 Yuh—yuh—got—that?"

"Yes."

"Tear it outa the book—an' hide it." The man's voice had grown steadily weaker and more feeble. Each word seemed a tremendous effort and Shirley, crouching on the floor beside the bunk, had to bend over him to hear. "Hide the gold, too. It's—all yores. . . . But look out for—Mogridge. . . . I run into him—an' a bunch from Saddle Butte—last night. . . . There was a scrimmage. . . . Some loose nuggets—fell outa my pocket. . . . They—shot me, but I—got on Tawny an'—an'—beat it—in the dark. . . . They'll follow, though. . . . They'll guess from the nuggets what—I found. . . . Mogridge is—one 'devil, girl.

. . . . Don't ever—let 'em know I—been here or they'll raise— I'm plumb sorry—to give yuh all this—trouble, but— Take care of Tawny. . . . He's—he's a good—hoss. Yore father——”

His voice, which had weakened to the merest breath, merged imperceptibly into silence. Through a mist of tears Shirley gazed piteously for an instant at his gaunt, still face. Then, with a stifled sob, she reached out, caught one of the limp hands between her firm, warm palms and held it tight.

The man's lids flickered and half lifted, and his lips curved faintly. Shirley heard him give a little sigh which made her think poignantly of a tired child relapsing into sleep, and impulsively she bent forward and set her quivering lips against his grizzled cheek. . . .

Outside, the sorrel stood motionless, ears pricked forward as if listening. Through the open door a slanting ray of brilliant sunshine swept into the shadowy room and played about the bent, bronzed head of the girl and on her slender, heaving shoulders. The silence was broken only by her stifled sobs.

CHAPTER III

THE LEGACY OF FEAR

DAZED, grief-stricken and overwhelmed, Shirley Rives stood in the open doorway staring at the lovely panorama spread out before her. In the face of the tragedy which had so suddenly and unexpectedly engulfed her it seemed incredible, unnatural that the sun should gleam so brilliantly from such a cloudless sky. Just as on any other morning the faint mist rising from the valley tinged the line of willows with a delicate and tender green; the jagged line of mountains were etched against the blue with all that sense of gigantic power and boldness which yesterday, and for countless other mornings had so fascinated her. The cool, mysterious green of that dark sweep of pines, the piled up, chaotic rocks, the sense of infinite space, of crystal clarity, of brooding quiet, were quite unchanged, yet Shirley was conscious of a sudden, bitter hatred of it all, a momentary weariness of even life itself.

Then, chancing to meet the watchful, curiously intelligent gaze of the sorrel, her face softened.

“I wonder if you know?” she murmured. “Poor thing! At least I’m sure you’re hungry.”

Stepping from the threshold, she slowly approached the horse, which first backed nervously away and then halted, head thrust slightly forward.

Shirley knew enough of western horses to realize how unusual it was for one to allow a woman to come close to it on foot. Had this one been a pet, she wondered, as she caught the trailing reins and led him toward the corral which, with a rough log shed, stood behind the cabin. Somehow the possibility deepened the note of tragedy.

As she led him through the corral gate Shirley gave the sorrel's rough coat a little pat and then with expert fingers began to remove the saddle. She had it off and lying on the ground beside her when suddenly, for no apparent reason, she straightened and turned pale.

From the moment when John Blake had breathed his last her mind had dwelt exclusively on the tragedy of his sudden taking off — the violence, the brutality, the intolerable manner of his end. Her heart had been wrung by the thought of such a man cut off in his prime, dying alone, almost, with no loved one near save only the horse he cared for. Of the gold, of that astonishing story of the lost mine and the evil consequences it might bring, she had not given another thought. But now, standing motionless beside the sorrel, the full realization of what those consequences might be swept overwhelmingly upon her and turned her cold.

For an instant she stood stricken, her glance apprehensively searching the westward trail. Then hastily tying the sorrel's bridle to the rail, she slipped out

of the corral and ran toward the house. And as she fled the calm, still beauty of the morning seemed to have turned into something cold and threatening. She saw nothing unusual, heard no alien sound, yet her startled imagination peopled the willows with a score of hostile, prying eyes and set a sinister figure behind each upthrust boulder.

In the cabin the open bag of gold lay where it had slipped unheeded from her lap; the book, with that page of hurried pencilling for which men would risk their lives or remorselessly take the lives of others, sprawled open on the floor. As Shirley snatched them up a passionate hatred of the yellow metal swept over her. It was like some evil pestilence, leaving a trail of death and destruction in its wake. For an instant she was tempted to burn the writing and fling away the nuggets. It was the remembrance of John Blake's final admonition; the thought of what he had paid and what had been in his mind at the last, set her to looking for a hiding place.

The wide hearth piled thick with wood ashes caught her eye. Scraping a hole in one corner, she dropped the bag into it and covered it carefully. The writing she tore from the book and after a moment's thought rolled it into a slim quill and thrust that down the barrel of a rifle standing in the corner. That much done she turned and with pulses still drumming and color high, critically surveyed the cabin.

Already she had covered that still figure in the bunk with a blanket. The basin and the stained pads and torn strips of cotton were easily disposed of. Hiding the latter, and flinging out the water, she took a broom and carefully effaced the few footprints left by horse and man in the hard soil. There remained now only the horse and saddle.

Given time, Shirley felt she would have had no difficulty in concealing the sorrel. She knew of plenty of obscure gullies and little cañons in the mountains where even a horse might lie hidden indefinitely. But these were all at a considerable distance and she dared not leave the cabin, with its perilous secret, too long out of her sight. As a result she was forced to take a chance. Back of the log shed was a little hollow covered with thick underbrush into which she led the animal. Having tied him to a stout mesquite she brought a generous armful of hay from their small store to keep him from growing restless. The saddle she dragged off in another direction and hid it in the bushes.

Her every movement was made at high tension and with the expectation of seeing at any moment a line of riders sweep over the little rise in the trail toward which she so often turned her troubled gaze. Indeed, when she had gained the cabin again it seemed incredible that those pursuers could have delayed so long until, glancing at the watch she had left on the table, she discovered to her amazement that

barely an hour had passed since she had first flung open the door to find the dying stranger on her threshold.

“It doesn’t seem possible,” she murmured, slipping the watch strap about her wrist and fastening the clasp. “Of course that accounts for their not coming. If he lost them in the dark it would naturally take them a little while to pick up his trail and follow it this far. If I could only hope they’d never find it!”

Unfortunately, from what she had heard of the Saddle Butte gang that solace was denied her. Their leader especially had a reputation for diabolical cleverness and an entire absence of any moral scruples. With his cupidity aroused by the sight of the nuggets Blake had let fall, he would leave no stone unturned to discover their source.

After a moment’s hesitation Shirley went into the bedroom to fasten up her hair, which still fell about her shoulders in luxuriant, coppery waves. Returning, she kindled a small fire and set a pot of coffee on to boil. She had just turned away from the hearth when the sound came which she had dreaded—the rapid pound of hoofs beating along the trail.

With color ebbing from her face and slender fingers tightly interlaced, the girl was for an instant stricken motionless. They had come! What was she to do?

Her glance swept the room swiftly, pausing for a fleeting moment on the bunk. At any cost they must

not enter here. Half consciously her right hand slid down to rest on the holster hanging at her side. There was a slight measure of reassurance in the touch, but only too well she realized how little she could count on meeting such men as these with a show of force. That must come only as a last resort when every other means had failed. A moment later she was standing in the open doorway, her intent, appraising glance sweeping over the string of horsemen rapidly approaching.

CHAPTER IV

AT BAY

THERE were seven of them, as widely diverse in manner and appearance as any seven men could be. One quality alone they held in common — an absolutely perfect skill in horsemanship. They sat their mounts with a careless ease, an unconscious grace and jauntiness which was the poetry of motion. Indeed, for a fleeting instant the extraordinary picturesqueness of that line of swiftly moving men sweeping over the mountain trail stirred Shirley's imagination in spite of the desperate nature of her plight. Then, as she began to perceive details of bearing and expression, the realization of the quality of the men she had to deal with abruptly banished every other thought.

Hard, callous, reckless faces they were, stamped with the spice of daring — some of them with more than a touch of cold brutality. There were seamed and grizzled faces, scarred, weatherbeaten, etched with sinister lines. One or two were younger, but even less attractive with their loose lips and hard, calculating eyes. To Shirley the most disquieting of all was the face of their leader and that, in a bold, full-blooded way, was handsome.

A trifle over weight, yet carrying it well, this man could not be mistaken as he rode slightly in advance

of the other six. Superbly mounted, dressed and caparisoned with a bewildering glitter of silver mountings and elaborately stamped leather, of spotless linen and crimson silk about his muscular brown throat, he reminded the girl more of a stage cowboy than of any of the workaday men she had met in her varied experiences in the West. Save for a slight heaviness of jaw and chin, his features were shapely enough; but his lips were significantly full and red, and in the bold, black eyes set appraisingly on the girl, was a surprise and growing admiration which made her unaccountably shiver.

Without slowing down his mount he left the trail. Followed by the others, he dashed up almost to the doorstep where he jerked the spirited black to an abrupt, spectacular halt and swept off his huge sombrero with a slightly exaggerated gesture of greeting.

"Mornin', ma'am," he drawled, his eyes sweeping her up and down in a manner that brought the hot color into Shirley's pale face. "This shore is one surprise. I understood Rives was livin' here alone."

Shirley set her teeth and her slim figure straightened. Prudence compelled her to try and suppress the loathing she felt for this Spike Mogridge, whose evil doings had made his name a byword throughout the country, but she found it difficult.

"Colonel Rives is my father," she returned

briefly. "I've been with him ever since he settled here nearly a year ago."

Mogridge replaced his hat at a jaunty angle; his full red lips parted in a grin. "Yuh don't say! Funny none o' the boys seen yuh—though we ain't often ridin' this way. He musta kept yuh mighty close. Kinda selfish I'll say. Yuh musta found it all-fired dull."

Shirley made no answer. Her eyes, leaving Mogridge for an instant, flashed about the circle of men sitting their horses just behind him. One or two of them looked amused; the others, she thought, slightly impatient. For a moment her glance rested on a face she had not noticed before—a young, clean-cut face with straight, rather hard lips and cool, slightly narrowed gray eyes which held an odd, enigmatic expression. A second later her glance returned to Mogridge.

"No dances, no comp'ny—nothin'," continued the latter, white teeth still showing. "That ain't the life for a girl like you. Why, if I'd known— There was a dance over to Clayton only night before last, an'——"

"Why'n't yuh get down to business, Spike?" interrupted a curt voice back of Mogridge. "This ain't no social call. We're wastin' time."

It was the man with the gray eyes who spoke Shirley guessed it intuitively, and a swift side glance confirmed her hazard. Mogridge's lips closed

abruptly and an angry glint flashed into his eyes.

"Is that so?" he retorted sharply. "Who's bossin' this outfit, Moran?"

"You are," returned the gray-eyed fellow composedly. "But we all got a plenty interest in it, an' if we fool around here much longer we might as well turn around an' head for home."

"Dan's right," growled one of the older men before Mogridge had time to retort. "Get to it, Spike. Ask the lady if she seen anybody passin' this way last night or this mawnin'."

Rage flared into the leader's face a crimson flood — intolerant rage; and then abruptly a curious, cold calculating expression that Shirley could not analyze, yet which affected her more than the man's crude fury. It was as if some sinister thought or possibility had come swiftly to still his anger. It might have been merely a belated remembrance of their errand and all that this involved, but somehow Shirley had a feeling that this was not quite all. At any rate the glimpse of that veiled expression lurking in his eyes started her heart to thumping and set every nerve tingling.

"Did yuh?" Mogridge drawled, his slightly narrowed eyes watching her intently.

Shirley braced herself mentally, and in changing her position edged backward a few inches.

"You mean — did I see someone pass along the trail?" she questioned, with a tremendous effort to

make her voice sound casual.

“Shore. An oldish man with grizzled hair, ridin’ a chunky sorrel. We — a — caught him rustlin’ some stock an’ chased him down through the Needles. Might ‘a’ been wounded some. I’d ‘a’ sworn I plowed him one, anyhow.”

Without shifting her glance, Shirley was conscious of a battery of eyes trained on her, yet she did not hesitate or falter. She knew she must not — that if she roused the least suspicion in the minds of one of them she would be as good as lost.

“No one passed that I know of,” she returned equably. “I’ve been up and about for over an hour, and I’d certainly have seen anyone riding on the trail.”

“Yuh didn’t hear nobody in the night? There wasn’t anybody stopped here?”

Her glance, cool, innocent, level-eyed, met his unflinchingly and she shook her head.

“No,” she lied calmly.

Her color did not change; not a muscle rippled on the smooth, shapely oval of her face. It was the perfection of acting, but it produced one effect Shirley had not counted on. The strain and the supreme effort she was making for self control brought a sparkle to her eyes and deepened the wild-rose flush that glowed so becomingly beneath her clear, golden tan. Poised there in the doorway, lithe, graceful, the sun striking notes of copper from her luxuriant

hair, she was a perfect embodiment of fresh, fragrant, vivid beauty which was piquant and infinitely alluring to a man of Mogridge's stamp. His eyes glowed with keen admiration tinged with sudden passion; one gloved hand clenched slightly; the other unconsciously tightened its grip on the bridle.

"Funny," he drawled calculatingly. "I could 'a' sworn he took this trail. O' course he mighta passed while yuh was asleep — Wasn't yore dad here?"

"No," she answered, knowing how futile it would be to try and deceive him. "He went to Elk Ford yesterday for supplies."

"An' left yuh here all alone?" There was something more than banter in his voice and in the expression of the bold black eyes. "Now that don't strike me as very consid'rate for a ——"

He broke off and in a flash was out of the saddle. But Shirley, warned by the expression on his face, was ready for such a move. Flinging herself back into the cabin, she slammed the door and shot the bolt just as the impact of his body crashed against the boards.

"You vixen!" His voice came to her, throaty and somewhat muffled by the heavy barrier. "Lemme in. All I want is a drink o' water."

Shirley's clenched hand rested against her throbbing throat. "You can get that at the spring," she panted. "I'm — not going to let you in."

The latch rattled and then came the sound of

several men talking at once. Shirley could not make out what they were saying, but from their tones she guessed they were arguing with Mogridge — perhaps urging him to abandon his attempt to gain entrance to the cabin.

Fervently she prayed that this might be so. Only too well she realized how helpless she would be against any real effort to break into the building. Her sole hope lay in the cupidity of the outlaws, and their belief that Blake had passed by the cabin.

Clutching the edge of the table, she waited breathlessly. Had they been deceived? Would they go away without further investigations? The thought of the sorrel hidden among the undergrowth suddenly assailed her with fresh terror. If only he kept silent there was little risk of discovery; but what assurance was there that at this crucial moment he would not lift up his voice in a ringing neigh to the horses of whose presence he must by this time be aware.

At last the voices ceased and Shirley's heart leaped at the muffled, receding tramp of hoofs. These grew rapidly fainter and presently silence fell; but still she stood motionless, waiting, listening, wondering if it really was the end or just a clever subterfuge to lure her forth. She dared not open the door, but after a little space she stole over to the eastern window and with trembling fingers slowly pushed up the sash and unbolted the shutter. Thrusting this gently outward

she peered through the crack, her glance searching the crooked, twisting trail which ribboned over rocks and through gullies to disappear at length in the fringe of pinos straggling down to cover the lower reaches of the valley.

The distant beat of hoofs came to her now through the still, clear air and presently a string of riders came out of a gully, moving slowly away from her toward the forest. Carefully she counted. There were seven, and with a stifled cry of thankfulness she dropped down beside the window, her face falling forward on her hands which rested on the sill.

For a space she crouched there, completely exhausted by the strain, with room in her heart for nothing save an overflowing gratitude at her escape. Then swiftly in her mind a canker reared its mushroom growth, poisoning her new-found peace with its hateful possibilities, its fatal sense of certainty.

Vividly she saw again that sensual, dark, handsome face, the bold eyes fixed on her with a glance as insolent as a physical caress. In a flash she was on her feet, face pale, eyes wide with terror and dismay. So far as the incident of John Blake was concerned it was quite possible that she had sent the outlaws away deceived and hoodwinked to pursue their fruitless search for a man already dead. Nevertheless, she was only too horribly certain that sooner or later one, at least, of them would return!

CHAPTER V

THE YELLOW LURE

ACROSS the bare table, just cleared of supper dishes, Colonel Rives thoughtfully regarded his daughter. He had an oddly arresting face—lean, wrinkled, deeply tanned, in which a subtle trace of Kentucky breeding and distinction had surprisingly survived the wear and tear of ten years' struggle against the crude, raw forces of man and nature in this remote and difficult mountain wilderness. The nose was straight and generous in size; the mouth kindly, though at times a little hard. The eyes——

It was in his eyes that Ellis Rives chiefly betrayed his character. Dark, liquid brown, set well apart, slumberous for the most part, yet they turned almost black and glowed with a consuming inner fire in moments when he was aroused.

Such moments Shirley had come to dread. She had seen that glow when, a little girl of nine, her father told her that their comfortable competence was lost, their home gone, that she must go to live with her Aunt Emmeline while he went forth into the world to make a living for them both.

To her it had been a moment of supreme tragedy. She passionately loved the rambling, mellow red brick house set on a gentle slope above the murmuring river where she had been born and where her forebears

had lived out their lives for generations. The thought of leaving it for Aunt Emmeline—prim, precise, narrow, domineering—was hateful. And yet her father's manner as he broke the news was of one who, after toilsome years of slavery, at last wins freedom.

It was not until years afterward that she understood, if indeed she ever did fully understand. In Ellis Rives the spirit of the old Forty-Niners lived again. In a way he was dominated by the lust for gold, but, curiously, the means and not the end seemed paramount. It was the chance, the risk, the lure, the seeking, which fascinated. He had left Kentucky for the West where for years he wandered through the mountains, always seeking, rarely finding, never discouraged. Now and again he would pan out from the sands of some remote stream enough dust to keep him going, though Shirley guessed that for the most part the small annuity he had inherited was all that stood between him and starvation.

The death of her aunt when the girl was seventeen had sent her to him. She took the step of her own accord, fearful of opposition, determined that at least they would be together, hopeful that in some way she might soften the hardships of the life he was leading.

The arrangement had been unexpectedly successful. Shirley was adaptable, and when she had accustomed herself to the strangeness and crudity of their life, she found herself surprisingly happy. The first year

had been divided between two locations in the northern part of the state. Then they journeyed south, drawn by the alluring legend of the lost Squaw Mine, which stirred the colonel's enthusiasm to a white heat. With that ominous fanatical light in his eyes, he had assured his daughter that at last success was certain. He passed lightly over the failures of a generation. None of those other searchers had been men of mental ability, able to reason and deduce. All that was needed was a proper application of intelligence to the problem and it would be solved—or so he said.

Though Shirley was more than dubious, she made no protest. Long ago she had learned the futility of trying to influence her father in this particular regard. After some weeks of traveling they found and took possession of an abandoned cabin on the mountainside northwest of Elk Ford, which became habitable, and, gradually, even comfortable; and here a new phase of her life began.

It was not as lonely as might have been supposed, considering the remoteness of the situation and total lack of neighbors. Shirley busied herself about the house, took long rides, occasionally with her father, and interested herself in adding little improvements and conveniences to the place. Perfectly at home in the saddle, she had become an expert shot with both rifle and revolver. Indeed, most of the game that graced their table was due to her skill.

But there were moments of discouragement, almost of depression, in which she wondered to what it was all leading. Was she to be forever doomed to this restless, nomadic life, without friends of her own age and class, or any of the innocent normal pleasures of young girlhood? Even supposing—and of this she never had much real hope—her father succeeded in making a big strike, would he be content to settle down quietly and sanely and enjoy the product of his toil? She feared not, and as the time passed her naturally sweet nature developed a slight occasional bitterness, and there grew up within her a vehement hatred for that luring golden phantom which bade fair to be the ruin of them both.

At no time had that hatred been as keen and implacable as at this moment. Sunk wearily in her chair, chin resting on cupped palms, her lovely eyes ringed with shadows of strain and toil and rending emotion, she watched her father with an apprehension that was almost fear. His eyes glowed, his lined face flushed with excitement; the long fingers of one out-thrust hand trembled slightly.

“We must get rid of that horse, my dear,” he said abruptly.

Shirley stared. “The—the sorrel?”

“Yes. They’ve seen it. They know it. If it should be found in our possession——”

“But there are other sorrels,” she interrupted hastily. “He has no special mark. Besides, they

only got a glimpse of him in the dusk.”

Colonel Rives drummed the table with nervous fingers. “Nevertheless, it isn’t safe,” he told her firmly. “There’s too much at stake. How do we know they don’t already suspect us? The horse would be convincing proof that Blake was here.”

Shirley’s thoughts swept for an instant to that lonely grave hastily dug beneath the willows and then to the handsome head and speaking eyes of the sorrel, whom she had fed and watered less than an hour before. How still he had been, how amazingly, incredibly silent at a moment when the slightest sound from him would have betrayed her. Somehow she felt he must know and understand, and she loved him for it and for his gentle, friendly ways.

“I don’t see how—” she began, her forehead crinkling and then perceived her father’s glance resting on the rifle standing in a corner. “No!” she cried vehemently. “I won’t have it! He—he loved the horse, Dad, and asked me to be kind to it. It’s little enough, isn’t it, considering—everything?”

Colonel Rives regarded her with surprise, tintured with disapproval. “You mustn’t allow sentiment to blind your commonsense, my dear,” he observed firmly. “I don’t believe you quite appreciate the character of this Saddle Butte gang. They’re clever, persistent and entirely unscrupulous. Human life is nothing to them. If you could know some of the things I’ve heard— They know that Blake had

gold in his possession and must have made a rich strike. They want that gold, and even more they want to find out where it came from. If they knew that he so much as stopped here and talked with you we should be under suspicion. The discovery that he died in your very arms would make them certain he passed his knowledge on to you, and would bring about a situation I shudder to contemplate.”

“Dad!” begged Shirley, her face flushed and eyes suddenly soft and tender. “Why couldn’t we escape the danger and those — hateful men by going away. Let’s leave this place at once — tomorrow! There’d be time. And we could go back to — to ——”

She faltered and grew silent under the look of shocked amazement her father bent upon her.

“I’m astonished you should suggest such a thing!” he told her sternly. “Can you seriously believe that now, after a lifetime of searching, on the very threshold of success, I’d consider — There’s really no danger — or very little — if you’ll only listen to reason. Blake is buried, the gold hidden, the paper beyond the reach of anyone. Tomorrow I shall burn the saddle. No trace will then remain of the entire incident except the horse. With that out of the way we can rest comfortable and assured.”

Shirley sank back in her chair, the glow and sparkle fading from her face. She might have known how utterly futile her suggestion was, but she had been moved to make it by a sudden wave of such

wild, almost frantic longing to escape the coils which seemed, somehow, to be tightening about her, that it seemed as if he must feel it and give way.

“Very well,” she agreed listlessly. “Only I won’t have him shot. There’s a place I know of back in the mountains — a little hidden cañon with grass and water where no one can ever find him. I’ll tie him up there tomorrow and every day I’ll go and see him and change the rope.”

The colonel was extremely dubious as to the practicability of such a scheme and argued against it. But Shirley remained firm, and in the end he was forced to give in. At least if the horse did manage to break away later and was discovered by the outlaws, they need not necessarily connect him with the Rives cabin.

CHAPTER VI

FOLLOWED

IN THE morning Colonel Rives saw to it that his daughter lost no time in setting forth. He himself had been up since before dawn making preparations for that momentous trip to the source of Wind River and beyond, and his manner as he said farewell was a mingling of preoccupation and veiled excitement.

“I may be off before you’re back,” he told Shirley as he placed the sorrel’s halter in her hand. “Take good care of yourself while I’m away. It’s possible I’ll be gone a week or even longer.”

The girl’s eyes darkened with sudden anxiety. “Do be careful, Dad!” she begged. “It seems such a risk going alone into that wilderness for so long. Suppose you had an accident, or — I — I wish I might go with you.”

“That wouldn’t be possible, of course. But you mustn’t worry. I’m used to this sort of thing, you know. And when I get back I’ve every hope that — that the dreams of years will have come true.”

His voice shook with emotion; his eyes glowed like live coals in his lined and weatherbeaten face. When Shirley had bent out of the saddle to kiss him, she straightened with a little sigh and touched the roan with her heel.

“Good-bye!” she called over one shoulder, when the horse had taken a dozen strides. “Don’t be too long.”

There was no answer. Turning in the saddle she saw her father hurrying away toward the shed where the pack horse stood, partially loaded. Already he was oblivious to her presence. She bit her lips and swallowed hard. Then with an effort she regained her composure.

“After all, it isn’t his fault, poor dear,” she murmured loyally. “He can’t help feeling as he does; it’s like a sort of fever, I expect. I know he truly loves me, and down in his heart he probably thinks all the time he’s working and slaving for me alone.”

Reaching the trail she turned her horse westward and urged him forward. The sunshine was warm and caressing; the brilliant sky filled with fluffy, idly drifting clouds, the distant peaks stood out sharply distinct in the crystal air. There was warmth and color everywhere; even the dark sweep of pines seemed to hold a deeper, richer green than usual.

But at the moment Shirley was too absorbed to notice and appreciate such details. As she sped along the narrow trail her glance swept keenly from one side to the other. Once she jerked the roan to a sudden halt and stared suspiciously at an odd shaped mass of rocks ahead. When she realized that it was only a shadow that had startled her she gave a little sigh of relief and loosed the reins again.

At a point about half a mile from the cabin she turned abruptly to the right into a narrow, shallow gulch which seemed at first sight merely a scratch in the rugged mountainside. But as she pushed her horse steadily forward the walls gradually widened and heightened until at length the girl was riding through a fair sized cañon well out of sight of any portion of the trail.

From now on Shirley's manner grew more assured and she ceased to cast those troubled, anxious glances from side to side. After all, what cause had she to fear that she would be spied upon? Saddle Butte was a good twenty miles away and to cover that distance in time to catch her, a man would have to start long before dawn. Besides, since yesterday morning she had seen no sign of Mogridge and his gang, who had evidently returned by some other route.

"If they suspected I was hiding something they'd have come back long ago," she decided. "When they found no trace of Blake along the trail they may have decided to give up the search. After all, if he hadn't been so desperately wounded he could easily have got safely away."

With rising spirits she steadily followed the intricacies of the way. Presently the cañon merged into one running nearly at right angles, which in turn led by a gradual but steady grade over a shoulder of the pine-covered slope and down into another

gulch on the other side. At last a final turn took her into a rock-bound nook which glowed like a brilliant emerald in its somber granite setting.

Fed by a sparkling spring that bubbled up at the upper end of the little hidden valley, a tiny brooklet meandered along its entire length to disappear into a curious cavity in the rocks just below the entrance. A score or more of willows lined its banks and beneath them the ground was carpeted with a rich luxuriance of green.

Both horses at once made for the water, and while they were drinking Shirley dismounted, and still holding the sorrel by its bridle, glanced about for a suitable place in which to tether him. She decided on one of the willows near at hand. The rope was long enough to give him considerable range over the rich grass and multitude of small bushes, while at no time could he possibly lack water. With deft fingers she uncoiled the rope, and, fastening one end to the willow trunk, attached the other to the sorrel's halter.

"It's a pity you have to be tied at all," she murmured, stroking the animal's neck with her gloved hand. "I'm afraid, though, if I didn't you'd get lonely and wander away."

The sorrel raised his dripping nozzle and regarded her with soft, curiously intelligent eyes. From the first he had shown a gentleness and tractability far beyond the girl's experience with western horses. It convinced her that Blake must have made a pet, even

a companion, of the animal, as in his lonely wanderings he was quite likely to do, and the realization seemed somehow to emphasize the tragedy.

"You darling!" she said huskily, a little catch in her voice. Impulsively she lifted one hand to stroke his crinkly mane and laid her cheek against his smooth neck. "It's awfully hard, I know, but there's no other way," she whispered. "You must be patient and I'll try to make up by coming every single day to see you."

The sorrel rubbed his velvet nose against her shoulder, and then, with horrible suddenness, the peaceful stillness of the glade was broken as by a bombshell.

"Good mornin', ma'am," drawled a cool, slightly amused masculine voice. "Ain't you wastin' an awful lot of affection on a hawss?"

An icy chill swept over Shirley, paralyzing her muscles, making it impossible for an instant for her to even stir. Then, shoulder pressing against the neck of the sorrel, fingers tangled spasmodically in his mane, she slowly turned her head.

Not more than twenty feet away stood a cream-colored horse, superb in build, almost startlingly beautiful of line. Lounging negligently in the saddle with lithe, unconscious grace, was a man of twenty-three or four, slim of flank, wide of shoulder, with clean-cut features deeply tanned and a pair of cool, level gray eyes that seemed to be regarding her with

sardonic amusement.

As she recognized those eyes, the jauntily tilted hat, the whole air of careless competence and perfect self-assurance, the girl was smitten with a sudden sick sensation and her face blanched.

It was the man in that Saddle Butte gang they had called Moran!

CHAPTER VII

THE LOSING BATTLE

“SO YOU followed me,” she said slowly, voicing almost without realization the thought which had flashed into her mind.

Her voice was low and rather husky, with a faint, scarcely perceptible tremor in it. Moran nodded coolly, his lips parting briefly over a row of perfect teeth.

“Shore,” he returned equably. “When I saw yuh leadin’ that hawss, I got kinda curious. Yuh see, he looks powerful like that cayuse of Blake’s.”

Her pounding heart drove the blood back into the girl’s face a crimson flood. A wave of despair swept over her mingled, incongruously, with a spasm of hot anger that this man should have followed and spied upon her and discovered, as she was only too unhappily convinced, the secret. It was the anger which chiefly stung her, rousing to life the valiant fighting spirit of her forebears who, in their several days, had more than once given battle against overwhelming odds. Though the situation seemed almost hopeless she did not mean to give in without a struggle.

“Does he, indeed?” she countered, pulling herself together with a sheer effort of will.

“He shore does,” drawled the outlaw. “Might almost be his twin brother——”

He broke off with a shrug. Shirley's chin went up and her eyes narrowed. "Or the horse himself, I suppose you mean," she finished calmly. "Of course you ought to know better than I. You've seen this — er — Blake's horse, I believe."

Moran's eyes crinkled at the corners. His face wore an expression which made Shirley long to smite him.

"Meanin' that you haven't?" he inquired lazily. "This sorrel belongs to you, then?"

"I didn't say that. On the contrary, if it did, I'd hardly be tying him up so far from home as this."

The man straightened slightly, a look of interest flashing into his gray eyes. "It would be kind of a long spell to go for grazin'," he admitted. "O' course if yor're lookin' to hide the hawss——"

"Perhaps I am. I've been in the West long enough to know that the possession of a strange horse, even if one should find him running loose, is apt to lead to difficulties. He's such a friendly beast that I've taken a liking to him. If I knew the owner I'd — try to buy him, but since I don't——"

Mainly to avoid the probing scrutiny of his gray eyes, she turned and patted the sorrel's neck.

"You mean yuh found him runnin' loose — without a saddle?" he questioned searchingly. "Kinda funny what became of that. If Blake keeled over from them shots, it ain't at all likely he'd take it off."

Shirley gave a slight shrug and stepping over to

the roan, picked up the bridle. "Probably not. The animal might have wandered away while he was making camp, though. You see, he has a halter on."

Conscious that Moran was still watching her closely, she swung lightly into the saddle, gathered up the reins and then hesitated. What to do? Should she take the sorrel back or leave him here. Evidently the outlaw divined something of her difficulty.

"Gonna leave him?" he inquired.

With an effort she met his glance squarely. "I meant to," she said quietly. "I thought he'd be safe and if the owner ever turned up I could show him this place. But now it doesn't seem much use."

"Now? Oh, I get yuh." His eyes crinkled. "Meanin' now that I'm wise, eh? That shore does make a difference, don't it? Still an' all, I wouldn't fret none about my runnin' off with the cayuse. I got a perfectly good string o' my own."

That possibility had not been in Shirley's mind, and she knew he knew it. The feeling that he was deliberately playing with her roused the girl, in spite of the trouble and anxiety she was suffering, to a fresh irritation. Setting her lips, she touched the roan with her heel and rode toward the valley entrance without a backward glance.

Though she kept her eyes set straight ahead, she was aware that the outlaw had turned and was following her. And all the way back to the trail, though neither of them spoke a word, she knew that he kept

close behind her. If only she had the least notion of what was in his mind! Had he been deceived, she wondered desperately—with once or twice a little stab of disgust and self-contempt at the falsehoods she had uttered—or was he still suspicious? What was going to happen when they reached the trail?

The latter question was at length answered. Through the narrow, winding defiles, where it was difficult, often impossible, to ride in any way save single file, Moran made no attempt to come closer. As they emerged onto the trail, however, he ranged his beautiful, cream-colored horse alongside the girl.

“I got a powerful thirst, ma’am,” he commented in a curiously impersonal tone. “If yo’re goin’ home, I’ll come along an’ sample that spring.”

Briefly she acquiesced. There was little else to do, and after all, she reflected, there was nothing suspicious now about the cabin for prying eyes to find. But as they left the trail and rode up to the log building the girl’s heart sank at the sight of the still smouldering heap of blackened ashes over by the corral. That was where her father had started to burn the saddle. Suppose he had gone away—as would be quite likely in his haste to make a start—and left some little incriminating buckle or scrap of unburnt leather to betray them?

Apparently Moran’s suspicions were not yet aroused. Indeed, he scarcely glanced at the smould-

ering heap, which unfortunately lay a little to one side of the path leading from the cabin to the spring. Shirley's first impulse was to supply the man's wants from the water keg in the house. Then she remembered that this was empty. In her haste that morning she had brought in only enough for coffee and the dishes.

There was nothing left but to take a chance—nothing, that is, save a final pitiful effort to distract the outlaw's attention as best she could. As she dismounted Shirley glanced up at him.

“The spring's over yonder,” she told him with assumed carelessness. “If you'll come in I'll give you a cup.”

Though she feared and hated him, it was a very different quality of emotion from the terror and loathing which Spike Mogridge inspired in her. Without pausing to analyze it, she had a feeling that in certain ways at least he could be trusted.

A flash of surprise leaped into his eyes and was gone. Without comment he swung out of the saddle and followed her into the cabin. As she brought out the cup she was conscious of his searching, curious glance sweeping the room, but she pretended not to see.

With a word of thanks he took the cup and walking over to the spring, knelt and drank deeply. Through the crack of the door she watched him rinse the tin vessel and, rising, stroll slowly back

across the uneven ground.

Suddenly her heart leaped and the color left her face. He had paused and was staring at the pile of ashes from which a thin wisp of smoke rose straight upward. Almost strangled by the rapid thudding of her heart, the girl stood motionless, one hand gripping the edge of the heavy door. Aghast she saw him walk over to where the fire had been and stir the ashes with one foot. Suddenly he bent and picked up something from the ground, and as Shirley recognized it as a blackened cinch ring a wave of utter despair swept over her.

The man regarded it closely for a moment, a sardonic smile curving his thin lips. Then he dropped it into the ashes and strode on toward the house.

"I'm obliged to yuh, ma'am," he said slowly, handing back the cup. He hesitated an instant, his gaze fixed steadily on her face. "Yore father get back?"

"Y-y-yes," she stammered. "He — went off again this morning, though. "I don't know just when — he's coming back."

For a moment or two he stood looking at her, a curious, enigmatic expression in his gray eyes. Utterly undone, Shirley stared back with something of the frightened fascination a bird has for a snake. She would have given the world to be able to pull herself together and show some spirit, but she felt weak, nerveless, as if both brain and muscles had

been suddenly stricken powerless. If only he would speak and not stand staring at her in that strange way.

“Well, good-bye, ma’am.” At last his voice broke the strained silence. “I’ll likely see yuh again.”

She made shift to answer in some fashion; afterward she could not remember what she said. When he had disappeared, and even after the thud of his horse’s hoofs had died away along the trail, she stood where he had left her, leaning against the table limp and despairing.

Her fight had been quite useless. Those lies — for she felt them as much lies as if she had spoken deliberate untruths instead of making mere evasions — had been of no avail. He *knew*; and he was going straight back to Saddle Butte to tell!

CHAPTER VIII

DAN MORAN

SPEEDING westward along the trail, his lithe, long-limbed body swaying slightly to the easy, rhythmic motion of the cream-colored horse, Dan Moran's expression had lost something of its cool inscrutability. His eyes sparkled; under the clear tan of his lean, hard face glowed a slightly deeper note of color than usual. Once or twice the thin, firm lips parted briefly over two rows of white teeth as if he were thinking of something that pleased or amused him.

"That's Blake's sorrel," he muttered presently, reaching absently for tobacco sack and papers. "There ain't a doubt of it."

Deftly rolling a cigarette, he replaced the bag in the pocket of his flannel shirt and flicked the end of a match into flame with his thumb-nail.

"That was his saddle they burned there, too," he went on reflectively, between deep inhalations on the cigarette. "Folks don't go burnin' up saddles without they got somethin' to hide. If they're wore out an' useless they jest pitch 'em into the brush."

Suddenly his eyes crinkled at the corners. "Some looker, all right," he commented, "but not much good with the fancy spiels." He gave a chuckle. "Wonder if she thought she fooled me with that yarn?"

She knew it was Blake's horse all along, an' she didn't find him wanderin' loose with no saddle on, neither."

Into his mind there flashed a sudden, vivid memory of that slim, girlish figure leaning against the sorrel's shoulder, her dusky, glowing cheek pressed against his neck. That, at least, had not been acting, for one doesn't act without an audience, and at that moment she had been quite unconscious of his presence. Abruptly he frowned.

"Shucks!" he grunted, banishing the picture with a deliberate effort. "That don't cut no figger. Blake's hawss an' saddle," he ruminated; "an' Blake last seen back there by the Needles headin' this way. Plugged, too, or so Spike says. He'd have time to make that cabin well ahead of the bunch. I wonder, now? There was another room——"

But that possibility was soon abandoned. If the girl and her father had harbored the wounded miner they were scarcely likely to both go away leaving the cabin unlocked and unguarded. The remembrance of their visit yesterday came to him and he mentally contrasted the desperate fight the girl had made to exclude Mogridge, with her willingness this morning to admit Moran.

"O' course it might 'a' been the way Spike carried on," he conceded, his lips curling disgustedly. "Spike always is a fool with wimmin. On the other hand——"

On the other hand, she might have had an even

more vital reason for wishing to keep them out. Blake might have been there then.

“But if he was, an’ ain’t there now, where’s he gone to leavin’ hawss an’ saddle behind?” cogitated Moran. “He might of borrowed or bought a hawss, but there wouldn’t be no sense takin’ a different saddle even if the old man had a spare one, which ain’t likely. An’ why burn the saddle when it could be hid in the brush. If he made a big strike like it looks, Blake wouldn’t be stayin’ away from these parts for good. Sooner or later he’d be back to work his claim, an’ then the saddle would be as much use to him as ever.”

Turning the matter thus over in his mind, Moran swiftly reached the conclusion that the reason the saddle had been destroyed was that Blake would never need it, or any other, again. He had not been present at the encounter two nights before over the other side of the Needles. But when he ran into the gang unexpectedly about an hour later on his way back from Clayton, Spike assured him that the miner had been shot through the body and could hardly sit his horse. Evidently he had managed to get as far as the cabin, and there——

The outlaw shrugged his shoulders indifferently. To him it was merely a passing incident of no great moment. His chief emotion was chagrin at the realization that in all probability the man they sought had lain dying or already dead within a few feet of

them while a mere girl held them off with specious evasions and finally sent them away on a wild-goose chase. What loomed biggest and most important in his mind was the conviction that at some time or other before he cashed in, Blake must have revealed his secret.

Everything pointed toward that conclusion. The burning of the saddle, the hiding of the horse, the girl's evident terror as he parted from her — she had, he presumed, been watching his investigation of the ashes and guessed that the game was up — above all, the hurried departure of old Rives, supported this theory. The girl and her father *knew*, and Mogridge, in sending him over that morning to spy about, hadn't been so entirely off the trail as Dan supposed.

Curiously enough, after the first thrill of triumph, Moran's enthusiasm swiftly cooled. It was one thing to feel sure that this girl had been the recipient of the miner's deathbed revelations, and quite another to extract that information from her. She did not seem like a person who would yield readily to persuasion or even force. If she were a man, now!

Moran's lips straightened. He had never had much to do with women, but all his life he had been accustomed to dealing decisively with men. Indeed, ever since that bitter time nine years or more ago when the stupid, uncalled-for violence of a bigoted, intolerant sheriff had sent him forth into the wilds

to nurse an ever-growing hatred for all humanity and civilization, he had been increasingly noted for his cold, callous, utterly unfeeling treatment of his own sex, especially as represented by the forces of law and order. But a girl——

“Hell!” he growled, angry at himself for the unaccustomed feeling that stirred him. “Spike’ll do the trick. He’s got a way with wimmin.”

But somehow that didn’t quite satisfy him or ease his mind, either. He was only too familiar with Mogridge’s “way with women,” which, along with certain other of the leader’s traits did not agree with Moran’s own rough, peculiar but very definite code of ethics. He might extract the desired information from the girl, or——he might not. In either case the process involved, as pictured in Moran’s mind, did not please him.

The remainder of his ride back to Saddle Butte did not pass agreeably. Moran followed the trail through the Needles without his usual appreciative glance at the wild, exotic beauty of those massive, towering, yet curiously delicate rocky spires. The wide spreading view opening up beyond—a far-reaching sweep of rugged, rock-bound country, softened here and there by the spreading pines or narrow splashes made by verdant valleys, moved him not at all. He merely gave a searching, oddly speculative glance at Saddle Butte, its dark square massive bulk sharply outlined against the blue six miles or so

away. Then, tilting his hat sidewise against the sun, he mechanically rolled and lit another cigarette.

An hour later as he neared the low, sprawling ranch house surrounded by innumerable small log buildings and corrals that nestled under the sheer, towering precipice of the butte, his manner was much as usual. Hat tilted jauntily, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, long, lithe figure swaying in such perfect unison with the movement of the big horse, so that they two seemed one, he made an arresting picture. There was something about him, too, in spite of the hardness of his lean face, the coldness of his eyes, the slight, sneering curve of firm lips, which had a subtly suggestive charm—the charm, perhaps, of youth and strength and buoyant health, of quiet, perfect self-assurance. One felt him to be the dominating, decisive type, able to take care of himself under any sort of stressful circumstances, and to handle with ease and resource the most difficult of situations.

Usually he was all that and more. In the present instance, however, he was unwontedly at sea, and that curious inner uncertainty and lack of decision annoyed and irritated him beyond measure. Generally so swift and sure and definite, his mind for the past two hours had been aggravatingly swinging back and forth like a pendulum. At one moment it seemed a matter of course that he should at once unfold to Mogridge's eager ears the knowledge he had gained.

At another he hesitated. And what chiefly made him so furious with himself was the realization that his reasons for that hesitation were the vaguest and most illusive.

Outwardly serene and carelessly confident of manner; inwardly still debating as to what he meant to do, Moran rode slowly past the outflung corrals and on toward a group of men gathered at one end of the ranch house. He picked out Mogridge's tall figure before the leader was aware of his approach, and wondered absently how he had managed to get back so soon from driving that bunch of rustled steers through the Gap to the shipping pens at Silver-town. But all the while his mind was engaged in that aggravating seesawing. To tell, or not to tell! Did he mean to open his mind or to keep silent. And then abruptly he saw that Mogridge had turned and was watching his leisurely approach.

Though Spike's impatience for news was evident even at this distance, Dan made no attempt to gratify it. That serene, cool independence was one of the ways in which he kept the leader guessing. Others of the band might, and often did, jump at Mogridge's slightest word to try and curry favor, but Moran's personal allegiance to the chief outlaw had ever been of the slightest. Though he never shirked, he had always sworn that no man should own him, and while Spike found that attitude irritating at times, it unconsciously added to the respect he gave this youngster,

whose amazing skill with the six-gun had earned him years before the sobriquet of "Lightning."

At the present moment, though he swore luridly at Moran's dawdling, his impatience drove him forward to meet the younger man and they came together in the open twenty feet or more from the lounging group.

"Well?" snapped out Spike, as Dan halted the cream-colored horse with a slight movement of his hand. "Did yuh see the girl? What'd yuh find out?"

He was sweaty, dust-streaked and travel stained. In the somewhat bloodshot eyes was a gleam of passion. The full red lips, parted a little, were slightly moist. For a fraction of a second Moran surveyed him with cool appraisal. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothin'," he answered calmly.

CHAPTER IX

THE LIE

WHAT moved him to the lie, he still could not quite tell. It might have been the fleeting memory of another pair of eyes lifted to his — clear, warmly brown, shadowed by a wavy mass of dully copper hair — in which stark terror mingled with a touch of veiled, unconscious pleading. At any rate, having uttered the untruth, Moran was conscious of a feeling of elation and relief — an odd realization that he could not possibly have taken any other stand.

“Nothin’!” snarled Mogridge, his face flaming. “Hell! What d’yuh mean by that? Didn’t yuh see the girl?”

“Shore. Met her out ridin’. Talked to her a bit an’ then went back with her to take a look at the cabin. It was as empty as that corral.”

Mogridge’s eyes narrowed. “Yuh mean she let yuh in?”

Moran nodded, his white teeth showing briefly. He was beginning to enjoy the situation.

“She done more than that. Asked me in an’ gimme the loan of a cup to get a drink outa the spring. Naturally I used my eyes. There wasn’t a sign of any stranger havin’ been there. No hawss anywhere around but that roan she rides, an’ no saddle in sight but her own. I looked into the shed to make shore.”

“That’s powerful funny,” growled Mogridge, frowning. “I was shore there was somthin’ queer about that business. We trailed his horse pretty near up to the cabin, but beyond it there wasn’t even a smell of a track, even in the soft ground along the creek.”

“He might ‘a’ crossed above or below further’n we looked,” commented Moran equably.

“Huh! Mebbe. There’s a whole lot of other things he might ‘a’ done, too,” grunted the outlaw. “I was a fool not to have searched the place yesterday.” He paused, eyeing Moran sharply. “I’m wonderin’ if that girl got around yuh some way.”

Moran returned the glance steadily, a subtle hardness freezing into his lean face. “I wouldn’t, if I was you, Spike,” he said coldly. “I ain’t got yore way with females. The lady had mighty little to say,” he continued, his manner relaxing a trifle. “She didn’t like me or my bein’ there for a cent, but she didn’t try no vampin’ stuff. My notion is she hates the whole Saddle Butte crowd, an’ mebbe’s some scart of us, but she don’t appear to have anythin’ to hide.”

Spike’s scowl relaxed but his face still showed signs of perplexity. “Yuh may be right,” he admitted grudgingly. “Alla same, I wisht I’d gone over there myself this mornin’ instead of takin’ them cattle to Silvertown. One way or another I’d ‘a’ made her talk.” His eyes glowed momentarily and he mois-

tened his lips. "It don't look to me like yuh understood what a big thing we've run up against," he went on quickly. "Yuh saw them two nuggets. I had the bag in my hands before he grabbed it back an' there wasn't nothin' else but nuggets in it—no dust to speak of, I mean. When a guy don't stop to pan out dust, it means somethin', believe me. I wouldn't be surprised none if this here Blake had stumbled on somethin' yuh don't find the like of more'n once in a lifetime." He paused, and then his face lit up with a sudden recollection. "What about old Rives? Didn't yuh see him? He musta got back yesterday."

Moran nodded. "He did, an' was off again this mornin'."

"Prospectin', the ol' fool!" sneered Mogriddle. "That's what he's been up to ever since he landed here. He's loco. I've kep' my eyes on him an' he don't know no more about——"

He broke off suddenly, his jaw sagging and for an appreciable instant stared at Moran, the light of a new and startling possibility gleaming in his eyes. Accurately Dan followed his train of thought—read, too, in the abrupt veiling of expression, his intention of keeping it to himself.

"Which— which way did he go this time?" inquired Spike carelessly. He had taken out tobacco and papers and his attention seemed centered on the careful fashioning of a cigarette.

“Yuh got me. I didn’t see him go. The girl told me.”

Mogridge’s drooping lids quivered faintly and his heavy jaw hardened. “Musta got quite chummy,” he sneered. “Well! Didn’t she tell yuh where he went?”

“Nope. Jest said he’d gone. Yuh didn’t say nothin’ about wantin’ Rives followed up.”

Lines of passion rippled swiftly over Mogridge’s heavy face and a dull red crept up to the roots of his coarse black hair. Alert and watchful, Moran fully expected him to burst out in a furious tirade; when none came his vigilance was redoubled.

“Mebbe not,” grunted Mogridge, his voice a little husky from the unusual effort he was making for self-control. “Well, I’ll look after it from now on. Comin’ in? I’m gonna wash up an’ get me a drink. That’s a filthy ride through the Gap.”

Moran answered in the affirmative and headed his horse toward the corral nearest the house. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Mogridge stride rapidly toward the rear door, his whole bearing eloquent of purpose. As he stripped the saddle off the cream-colored horse, Dan’s face was thoughtful.

“He’s up to somethin’, Bobby, as shore as yo’re a heathen,” he muttered, giving the animal a playful slap as he turned him loose.

Picking up the saddle, which, like all of his belongings and apparel, was of costly make and superfine

quality, he carried it into the nearby shed and hung it carefully on a peg. When he came out he stood for a moment staring absently at the ground.

“I’d like to know jest what’s millin’ around in his mind,” he reflected. “Will he tackle the girl again, or is he aimin’ to follow the old man?”

CHAPTER X

MORAN TAKES A HAND

THOUGH a direct answer to the question did not at once present itself, Moran was soon made aware that whatever Mogridge's plans might be, he himself was not to have a part in their execution. Whether Spike still harbored a suspicion of his loyalty, or whether his feeling was merely one of jealousy toward the man who had met with more consideration than himself from the girl on whom he had set his mind, Dan could not tell. At first amused, then slightly irritated that Mogridge should think him so easily gulled, he listened that night with outward calm to the leader's rambling discussion of their future plans, which contained no reference at all to the matter which he knew was uppermost in the chief's mind.

There was some branding to be done, the sort of branding with a hot, curved iron through a wet blanket, which was the variety most common nowadays at Saddle Butte. A bunch of steers kept in a remote and hidden coulee ought to be inspected to see if their cleverly altered brands had healed sufficiently to permit shipment. Also Mogridge was anxious about a certain check which ought by this time to have arrived at the post office at Clayton.

Moran was not surprised to find himself delegated

for this latter duty, nor did he make the least objection. Spike would manage to get his way somehow, and there was no use rousing his suspicions by fruitless opposition. Nevertheless, Dan had inwardly determined that the leader wasn't going to have his own way this time—not entirely. He would take great pleasure in butting in if only to pay up for Mogridge's insultingly low estimate of his subordinate's intelligence.

With this determination, Moran set off early next morning for Clayton, Spike's genial admonition to take his time and not to hurry back ringing in his ears. The very obviousness of the remark irritated him and brought a sneering twist to his lips the moment his back was turned.

“Fool!” he muttered under his breath. “Must think I'm as thick as he is!”

Mounted on a rangy bay, long-limbed and speedy like all the other horses in his string, Moran ate up the miles steadily, reaching the sleepy little cow-town well before noon. Here the activities of the Saddle Butte crowd, though well known, were amiably winked at. Mogridge had been wise enough to leave the inhabitants of the place severely alone so far as his speculations were concerned, and some of them were even occasional sharers in the spoil. Thus was insured a generally friendly attitude, and what was more important a reliable source of information and warning.

Like all the other men, Moran had many friends here and as he rode along the single wide street he was hard put to escape the constant urgent invitations to dismount and partake of liquid refreshment. On the plea of haste he managed to avoid most of them, yielding only to the seduction of a pocket flask proffered by one of the loungers in front of the general store and post office. Finding, with no great emotion of surprise, that there was no mail, he bought some crackers and a can of potted ham and headed back along the trail.

For a space he told himself that his actions were governed solely by an impish, impersonal desire to thwart Mogridge. He'd show Spike what a fool he was to try and pull wool over his eyes in such a stupid manner. But little by little as he rode, other considerations began insensibly to tinge his thoughts. He pictured the girl alone there in the cabin and Mogridge suddenly appearing, unrestrained by the presence of others, even of his own gang. He remembered certain episodes of the past in which Spike had figured and his face grew hot. By the time he had reached the fork in the trail his lean face was like a cold, hard mask in which the steely eyes glittered under narrowed lids.

Without slackening speed, he turned the bay into the right hand trail—that trail which, curving around through the long valley, joined at length the other leading past the cabin. Two days before they

had taken this route back to Saddle Butte, but somehow this afternoon the distance seemed twice as long in spite of the greater speed Moran was making.

Emerging at length from the pine woods, he rode down to the creek where he pulled up and allowed the bay to drink sparingly. From the summit of the next rise he knew he would be within sight of the cabin, and as he urged the horse forward his mind grew tumultuously active.

What met his eager gaze was a scene of placid, commonplace serenity. Bathed in the mellow, golden glow of the afternoon sun, the cabin and its surroundings presented a picture of tranquil peace and security. The visible windows were unshuttered, the door ajar. And there in the open, one hand holding the bridle of her horse, the soft breeze caressing her wavy, coppery hair, stood the girl, alone!

The let-down was almost like a physical shock, and Moran was conscious of a queer mingling of relief and chagrin. There had been no need, then, for all that disturbing mental agitation. His hurried dash with all its accompanying discomfort had been useless. He might better have taken his ease at Clayton.

With a fleeting, whimsical grin twisting his lips, Moran loosened the bridle and the horse moved slowly forward. Only then it was that he noticed a slight yet definite note of tension in the girl's bearing. She stood with her back toward him, staring intently along the trail to the westward, her slim,

graceful figure motionless, almost rigid. Presently the soft curve of her cheek came into view and Dan saw that her lips were closely pressed together — saw, also, that she was gripping the roan's bridle with a force that brought out a row of white dots across the knuckles of her firm brown hand. Then suddenly his own horse stepped on a loose stone and like a flash she whirled and saw him.

Surprise, fear, horror flashed into her startled eyes and rippled across her tense white face. Then, as recognition dawned, a look of unutterable relief and thankfulness—a look the man found bewildering and oddly disconcerting—flamed up for an instant before it, too, was swept away by what was evidently a determined effort of will.

“Oh!” she gasped. “I thought——”

Abruptly she broke off, and as Moran came toward her he was conscious of her steady, searching, questioning regard. Lifting his hat gravely, he drew rein beside her and swung out of the saddle.

“Yes?” he questioned quietly. “You thought ——?”

For an instant she did not answer. Her eyes were still fixed intently on his face. Her free hand clenched spasmodically.

“I thought — he — had come back,” she told him in a low, unsteady voice.

Moran's eyes narrowed. “He? Who 'do yuh mean? Has Mogridge been here?”

Silently she nodded, her lips quivering a little. A rush of color surged into Moran's lean, hard face; his gray eyes flamed.

"You mean—" he grated savagely. "He——"

"He didn't see me," she broke in swiftly. "I'd been back in the hills to see Tawny and coming along the trail I caught sight of his horse in time. He was inside the house then, so I managed to get back into the gully and hid. I waited a long time and finally tied my horse and crept back toward the trail. He was still there, hanging around. He only left an hour ago, and so, when I heard your horse, I was afraid——"

Suddenly the hurried flow of words—the impulsive outpouring, Dan guessed, of a mind torn, harried, distracted almost to the point of breakdown—ceased. An expression of wonder, almost of bewilderment came into the girl's face and she drew herself up stiffly.

"I don't know why—why I'm telling *you* all this," she said coldly, after a momentary pause.

CHAPTER XI

“A MAN LIKE YOU”

MORAN quite ignored her change of tone. “I’m glad yuh did,” he returned curtly. “I had an idea he might try somethin’ like that, an’ I ought to have warned yuh. Did he— Did yuh notice whether he went off on the jump, or did he ride away slow?”

Shirley did not answer for a second. She was staring at him with widening eyes which held an odd expression in their warm, brown depths. When she finally spoke her voice was throaty with suppressed emotion.

“He rode slowly; looking about, I suppose, for me. I remember because it seemed as if he’d never get out of sight. It was a long time before I was certain he’d really gone.”

Moran kicked a pebble and then stared absently at the toe of one dusty boot. So that was it! Failing to find the girl, Mogrudge had turned his attention to trailing the father. How far he would be successful in this depended altogether on circumstances, but at least he would be able to get some idea of the general direction taken by Colonel Rives.

Dan frowned his annoyance and was then aware that the girl had taken a sudden step toward him.

“So — you never told!” she said impulsively.

Her voice was low and not altogether steady, and as Moran's glance flashed up to meet hers the color deepened under his tan.

"What makes yuh think that?" he drawled, lips curving a little at the corners.

"I don't think; I know! Why, yesterday, after you'd gone, I had a feeling somehow that you wouldn't. And so when—when he came today, it seemed so much more hateful——"

She broke off, eyes veiled suddenly by drooping lids.

For an instant the man stood looking at her in silence, the smile wiped from his lips.

"How—hateful?" he asked presently. "Or perhaps you'd rather not tell me."

"I don't know why I shouldn't." Her chin went up and she met his glance steadily. "It seemed to me hateful, horrible that a man like you could do a thing like that."

Silence fell—a strange encompassing, palpitating silence. "A man like you!" Moran's hard, lean face had frozen, and through his brain there raced madly a series of grotesque, fragmentary memories—pictures, or bits of pictures, of events and happenings of the past ten years. His lids drooped, then lifted defiantly, and the girl, staring, aghast and fascinated into his smoldering eyes felt for an instant as if she were looking at a naked soul—writhing.

"How do yuh know what kind of a man I am?"

he demanded harshly, a dull color creeping to the roots of his crisp, thick hair.

"I don't, really," she faltered. "It was just a feeling I had. You—you may have done things— But I've a feeling that you're not like those others."

In a flash he had recovered himself and his face, though still hard and immobile, was no longer betraying. He even forced a smile to his thin lips.

"Lemme tell yuh somethin', ma'am," he said quietly. "In this country yuh don't want to be placin' too much trust on yore feelin's. Yo're right about my not tellin' 'em what I found out yesterday. That particular kind of meanness jest happened to stick in my crop, that's all. But I threw in with the Saddle Butte crowd with my eyes open, an' before that there were others aplenty."

For a moment she stood looking at him in silence, her eyes a little wistful. "I—I think perhaps there was a reason," she said quietly at length.

His mouth hardened and the muscles about his jaw twitched. "There most always is a reason, ain't there?" he said in a hard, bitter voice. "When I was fourteen a crooked sheriff shot my father down in cold blood. Ever since then I've been gettin' square with sheriffs an' rangers an' the law generally. But we're wastin' time, ma'am, I've gotta be hittin' the trail. Is there any place yuh could go while yore father's away?"

She shook her head. "I don't know anybody.

There's really nobody at all nearer than Clayton, and there — Besides, I — I couldn't leave. I must wait for him here."

"Uh-huh. Yuh got any notion how long he'll be gone?"

"N-o." She hesitated for an instant. "He said it might be a week, or even longer."

"I get yuh. Well, listen here. If I find out Mogridge is plannin' to sneak over here again, I'll do my best to head him off, or put yuh wise beforehand."

Some of the girl's bright color faded. "You — you think he will?"

"I shouldn't wonder. Yuh see, he's got the idea yuh know more about this John Blake than yuh made out, an' he's the kind that sticks. So keep yore eyes peeled an' don't count on me altogether, though I'm gonna do my best."

"I — I know you will. It's awfully good of you to help me. I've tried to be brave and self-reliant, but here alone —" Impulsively she reached out and for an instant her slim, shapely fingers closed over his muscular brown hand. "You'll never know how grateful I am —"

"Shucks," he interrupted gruffly. "Yuh don't need to be." He swung lightly into the saddle and gathered up the reins. "When yore father comes back it wouldn't be a bad idea for yuh an' him to take a little trip somewheres 'till this blows over. Well, *adios!*"

He touched the bay with his spur and rode away, her friendly low-voiced words of farewell lingering in his brain. At the top of a rise a hundred yards or so beyond, he turned in his saddle and glanced back.

She was standing as he had left her beside the roan and as she saw him she flung up one arm in a graceful, boyish gesture of farewell. Moran answered with a grin and a wave of his hat but as the bay scrambled down into the gully, his lips straightened abruptly; his face darkened, his eyes grew somber — brooding.

CHAPTER XII

TRICKED

RELEASED, the angry yearling scrambled to its feet, bellowed, lunged tentatively at Greer's pony and then, taking fright at the advance of Greer and Mogridge, lumbered across the pen and through the gate leading to a small corral in which a number of other sore, bewildered steers were huddled.

Squatting on his haunches, Moran thrust the curved iron into the heart of a small fire beside him and swept one draggled sleeve across his moist forehead.

He was frankly puzzled. It was early afternoon of the second day since his parting with Shirley Rives, and in that time Mogridge had scarcely been out of his sight for fifteen minutes running save when he lay snoring in his bunk in the same room.

Not a word had escaped him, either, concerning the Blake episode. To every outward seeming he had put it out of his mind for good and all. Yesterday he and Moran had inspected the cattle in the hidden coulee and found them ready to ship. The latter fully expected to be given the job and was ready to decline it on small pretext or none at all, but to his surprise the leader picked on Brodey, one of the older men and his special crony, to take charge.

The bunch departed early the afternoon before and had not yet returned, a fact on which Spike commented more than once during a morning devoted to the pleasing occupation of "brand blotting."

Yet in spite of all this, and of Mogridge's bluff geniality, Moran was perfectly certain that he was up to some game. He did not believe for an instant that Spike had given up his determination to discover somehow the source of John Blake's gold, much less his pursuit of Shirley Rives. For some reason he was biding his time to act, awaiting, perhaps, the moment when Moran, whom it was evident he now strongly distrusted, should be lulled into fancied security.

"Lemme take a hand with that iron," suddenly suggested Bill Scully, when another steer had been roped and thrown. "You hold him, Lightnin'. I wanta see what kind of a job I can do."

Glad of a change, Moran acquiesced readily enough and took the other's place. Greer dismounted to assist with the wet blanket, while Mogridge after surveying the operation for an instant, turned his horse toward the entrance of the pen.

"I'm goin' up to the house to see if that lazy hound Brodey's turned up yet," he said over one shoulder. "He ought to of been here three hours ago easy. Back in a minute."

The branding pen and small adjoining corral were placed in a rugged little gulch at the foot of the steep butte, out of sight — for prudential reasons mainly —

of the house and the main approach to the ranch, but to a certain extent within hearing distance. Thoughtfully Moran watched Mogridge disappear around the outflung ledge of rock. Then the sudden, violent struggles of the steer took up his attention.

“Let up on it, yuh dumbell!” he exclaimed, pitting weight and muscle against the steer’s frantic efforts to escape. “What the devil yuh tryin’ to do, burn right through his hide? No wonder he’s on the prod.”

Scully lifted the iron and gawped at a large hole freshly burned in the blanket.

“I musta pressed a mite too hard,” he grunted. “Shift her, Squint, an’ I’ll have another try.”

“Lemme take it,” urged Moran impatiently. “No sense spendin’ the whole afternoon on this yearling.”

But Scully persisted, and short of letting the steer loose Moran was helpless. Inwardly fuming, he watched Scully’s slow, bungling movements until a sudden thought flashed over him, bringing a glitter to his eyes.

“Yuh get some speed on,” he stated curtly, “or I’ll let him loose.”

Scully whiningly protested that he was doing the best he could, but a quick movement on the part of Moran brought the operation to a surprisingly swift conclusion. When the two men had mounted, Dan let go his hold on the animal and moved quickly toward the gate.

“Where yuh goin’?” inquired Scully, pulling his horse up abruptly.

“Up to the house,” returned Dan without pausing. “I want to get some tobacco.”

“Take mine,” proffered the cow man with unwonted generosity.

“Rather smoke my own,” stated Moran briefly.

He was convinced by this time that it was a deliberate plot to hold him here and he was coldly furious. As he reached his cow-pony fastened just outside the gate, he noticed that Greer had turned his horse and was looking back, while Scully was riding toward the gate.

It looked a little as if they meant to attempt to hold him there, and his lips twitched in a grim smile. If only they would try! But at that moment the steer, escaping from Greer’s inattentive guidance dashed back forcing Scully to whirl around and swing his rope. By the time they had turned the animal, Moran was out of sight.

Approaching the house Dan noticed Spike’s mount standing beside the kitchen door and gained a momentary satisfaction at the sight of Mogridge’s favorite black among the other horses in the corral. The trail leading away from the ranch was empty but that proved little, for a few hundred yards beyond the lower gate it ducked into a cañon and was not again visible.

As Moran dismounted at the kitchen door, Bloss

the cook stuck his head out.

"Where's Spike?" demanded the puncher.

Bloss scratched his head. "I dunno exactly," he drawled. "Some'ers inside, I reckon. He come through the kitchen a while ago."

Without further comment Moran entered and walked swiftly through the various rooms of the rambling ranch house. He was not surprised to find them empty. What did surprise him and brought a black scowl to his forehead was the discovery, around a little used hitching rack at the far end of the house, of ample evidence that a horse had recently been tied there for some time. The ground was well trampled, the wooden rail freshly chewed, and leading away from the spot were marks of hoofs heading straight for the trail.

Moran did not follow them. The thing was plain to him now. Mogridge's suspicions of him had somehow become certainties. Had he been anyone else save Lightning Moran his life would doubtless have paid the penalty for interfering in the outlaw leader's plans. As it was, unwilling to use force, Spike had taken refuge in strategy. At some time during the morning one of the men must have roped and saddled another horse for Mogridge and tied him here where no one ever came. Dan suspected it to be the powerful, speedy bay called Red Devil, who had been turned out with the remuda for nearly a week. When Spike left them so casually, he must have ridden

straight to the kitchen door, hustled through the house, mounted the other horse and departed. For the first hundred yards or so he had probably ridden slowly to prevent any sounds reaching the workers in the branding pen. After that——

Cursing furiously as he recalled the amazing speed and endurance of the great bay, Dan left the house and sped over to the corral. Catching up the cream-colored horse, Bob, he swiftly shifted his saddle, mounted, and took the trail, black rage and fury in his heart.

The lower gate was open, and as he dashed through a bullet whined past his face to bury itself in the post. The sharp crack of a revolver ringing in his ears, Moran twisted sidewise and observed Scully standing on a slight rise in front of the butte, his six-shooter steadied in the crotch of a stunted oak.

“Shoot, dam’ yuh!” he grated, his lips curling. “Yuh never could hit the broadside of a barn.”

Nevertheless, the second bullet came unpleasantly close, while a third plowed a ridge through the high crown of Moran’s Stetson. Dan did not look back again even when a spatter of lead seared across his cheek just as he was dipping into the cañon. His face, though hard and set, had lost its cloud of gloom; his eyes glowed with a fierce light.

“Yo’re pilin’ up trouble, Scull, every time yuh pull that trigger,” he muttered grimly. “Lay to it, Bobby, ol’ hawss. Yuh gotta do some travelin’ today.”

CHAPTER XIII

TO SAVE A GIRL

THE cream was a splendid, willing beast, fresh after a day's rest, and the trail as far as the Needles comparatively smooth and easy. Knowing what lay beyond, Moran gave the horse full rein and passed between the towering monuments of rock less than three-quarters of an hour after leaving Saddle Butte.

A steep climb confronted him, rough, uncertain, and scattered with boulders and loose rocks, among which the trail wound tortuously. It was only the beginning of a series of difficult ascents and declivities, and Moran forced the ever-willing animal to take it slowly, pausing briefly at the summit just within the shadow of a straggling grove of pines to let him get his breath.

As he sat there his roving glance suddenly caught a movement down in the hollow. Swiftly he drew the horse farther back into the shelter of the trees and pulling his hat brim lower, he stared intently at the string of horsemen emerging from a draw that cut into the mountains to the northwest.

There were five of them riding in single file — five and a laden pack horse. They were not more than a quarter of a mile away and almost at once Moran recognized the foremost as Brodey and his brows

puckered. Monk Henger followed and behind him ——

Moran's eyes narrowed and he bent forward in the saddle. Tall, lean, with shoulders sagging, there was something familiar about that figure in spite of the fact that Dan had seen the man only once before and that at a little distance.

His lips curled in a mirthless grin. So that was it! Knowing Mogridge he might have guessed that Brodey's alleged errand to Silvertown was a blind — that he and the others had never been near the hidden coulee. There was every appearance, too, that Spike had been more successful than he supposed in trailing his man two days before.

“Looks as if yuh were the goat again,” he apostrophized under his breath. “Wonder if he'd found what he was looking for when they took him? Wonder if he blabbed?”

On second thought neither possibility seemed likely. Knowing Brodey's nature, Moran thought it highly probable that if he had succeeded in worming out of Rives the secret of John Blake's strike — of which by this time Dan was confident both the colonel and his daughter were aware — he would never have troubled to bring him captive to Saddle Butte.

“Mebbe the ol' man's game,” he muttered. “I shore hope so. Well, he can wait.”

By this time the riders had reached the trail and were passing into the dark splotch of shadow lying

between the Needles. Moran waited no longer, but turned his horse and urged him forward.

From now on he did not spare the beast. His riding, though superb and helpful to the horse at every moment, was mechanical. His thoughts were racing forward faster than the wind—far faster than the lagging miles that crept so slowly under the cream's thudding hoofs. His whole being burned with impatience and presently with fear!

At last the broad, somber stretch of pine, sweeping down along the mountainside, loomed clear and distinct ahead. A half mile more and he would reach them. Another mile and the racking suspense would end.

Suddenly his quick ear caught the beat of hoofs. Indistinct at first, they grew swiftly louder and more insistent. Without slackening speed, Moran's hand crept instinctively toward his right thigh. His lean face had sharpened; his brilliant, searching eyes were like twin sparks.

All at once over the rise ahead swept a riderless horse, head up, reins loose, stirrups flopping. It was a roan—her roan! Moran's teeth grated as he gave him room. The cream felt the sharp, unaccustomed stab of a spur, and after a startled leap, responded nobly.

Over the rise they swept, down into a hollow, across a narrow space of level ground. Up again—up, up. Reckless of rolling stones, or jutting but-

tresses, panting foam-flecked, the splendid horse sped on without a pause toward the somber pines which seemed to rush to meet them. . . .

The summit gained at last! At one side of the trail, which skirted the pine wood, another horse stood motionless. Red Devil! Moran recognized him with a snarl. Then, back in the shadows of the trees he glimpsed two figures struggling. A cry seared through him — faint, piteous, swiftly stifled — that turned him into a raging madman.

Face white and passion-twisted, he spurred the horse straight into the wood. As through a crimson haze he saw them swaying back and forth. Shirley was in his arms, but still fighting bravely.

His rapid footfalls deadened by the soft needles, the cream leaped forward, guided by the slight, sure movement of his rider's iron wrist. Bending low in the saddle, Moran fixed his savage gaze upon Mogridge's broad back. The thought of man-made weapons had vanished from his mind. He wanted only his two bare hands.

Too late the muffled thud of hoof beats penetrated Mogridge's inflamed senses. He straightened, flung the girl roughly from him, and swung around, one hand sweeping to his hip. But he had barely gripped the butt of his six-shooter when Moran, leaping from the saddle, gripped him with the ferocity of a wild beast, and flung him backward, his spreading fingers digging into the flesh of the outlaw's throat.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PLAN

SOME time later the girl's frightened voice, tremulous, insistent, pleading, penetrated Moran's inflamed brain.

"Don't—oh, don't!" she cried beseechingly. "You mustn't! You're—killing him!"

Swiftly the red mist cleared. Moran looked down at the purple, distorted face beneath him and then up into Shirley Rives' wide, horrified eyes.

"That's what I aim to do."

She caught one of his arms frantically with both hands. "O, please—please let go of him!" she begged frantically. "He's choking to death! It's too horrible! I—I can't bear it!"

A slow wonder crept into Moran's cold eyes. Loosening his hold on Mogridge's throat, he sat back on his heels.

"You want me to let him go?" he ask incredulously.

"Oh, I don't know!" she cried hysterically.

"He's beastly loathsome! I suppose he deserves anything. But I can't bear to have you——"

She broke off with a little sob and caught her lip between her teeth to still its trembling. Her hat was gone; her dull, coppery hair hung about her shoulders in disordered masses. Dusky hollows shadowed

her lids and in the dilated eyes were traces of the strain and terror she had suffered. To Moran her fresh, young beauty seemed stamped with an unwonted touch of fragility and wistfulness which sent a wave of tenderness and pity surging over him and brought him swiftly to his feet.

"I'll do anythin' yuh say, ma'am," he told her quietly.

Her eyes lit up briefly; her lips moved as if she meant to thank him but could not find the words. Then she swayed and put out one hand blindly, and as he caught her swiftly in his arms, her head fell forward against his shoulder and she began to sob brokenly.

For a space the man stood holding her, his lowered gaze resting on the masses of coppery hair, thrilling to the touch of the hand which gripped his shirt, poignantly alive to every detail of her sweet young womanhood. But for all that he scarcely moved a muscle. Only too well he realized that this was merely the inevitable reaction from a situation which had tried her almost to the breaking point. Upheld through the worst by the courage of despair, when that need failed, she clung to Moran just as she would have clung to anyone saving her from such a fate. There was nothing in the least personal about it. With a momentary wave of bitterness he told himself there could not be.

At length her sobbing ceased and 'drawing away

from him a little she wiped her eyes.

“I’m such a fool!” she murmured tremulously. “But it was all so horribly sudden and unexpected. I was out on Billy and when I first saw him in the distance, I—I thought it was you. And then I tried to get away, but poor Billy stumbled and fell and pitched me off. I scrambled up and ran into the woods, but——”

She broke off, her lips trembling.

“Yuh don’t want to talk about it, ma’am,” Moran said hastily. “It’s all over, an’ yuh mustn’t think no more about it. I’m plumb sorry I didn’t keep my promise. Trouble was, he suspected me and slipped one over. That’s why I was late gettin’ here.”

“But you came!” she told him swiftly. “I shan’t ever be able to thank you as long as I live. If you—hadn’t——”

“Aw, don’t!” he begged. “I’d of given the world to get here ten minutes sooner, but— Well, I didn’t, an’ that’s the end of it. There’s somethin’ we got to decide on mighty sudden,” he went on in a different tone. “What do yuh want done with *him*? An’ what are yuh goin’ to do yoreself—afterward?”

“Afterward? You mean— Oh! I hadn’t thought of that. There’s been no time to——”

“Just wait a minute,” he interrupted.

A slight movement on the part of Mogridge had attracted his attention and reminded him of having neglected a very necessary precaution. Stepping over

to the prostrate figure, he removed the Colt from Spike's holster and reaching inside the man's vest drew another weapon from beneath his armpit. Mogridge's heavy face had resumed something of its usual coloring, and in his eyes was the venomous glow of returning consciousness. Moran regarded him coldly.

"You lay there without movin', Spike," he told the leader definitely. "It's my turn now."

The only answer was a glare of vicious hate which brought a sardonic grin to Moran's lips. Returning to the girl, he drew her out of earshot, taking care to place himself so that he could keep an eye on his prisoner.

"You can't stay here, that's plain," he said briefly. "No matter what happens to this fellah, the rest of the gang is shore goin' to kick up ructions. Trouble is, they think yuh know somethin'. That yarn about Blake bein' a rustler was all bunk. He was after gold an' it looks like he struck it rich. From the way he was plugged, an'—other things, they got an idea he never left yore cabin alive, an' they're makin' shore that before he cashed in he musta passed along what he knew about——"

"He did," she interrupted swiftly.

And almost before Moran realized it, she was pouring out the story in all its minute details. Twice he tried to stop her, having a curious feeling that she ought not tell him what she knew. But she persisted,

and when she had finished his face was serious and a little troubled. The magnitude of the thing surpassed his wildest imaginings, but it also increased the danger and difficulty of the present situation.

“Up beyond the source of Wind River,” he said meditatively. “I know somethin’ about that country. . . . An’ yore father set off to follow them directions.”

Inwardly he was ‘debating whether he should tell her of what he had seen back there by the Needles. He very quickly decided not to. It would only harrow her unnecessarily, without doing any good. Besides, a plan was forming swiftly in his mind.

“It’s a whole lot too big a job for him to tackle — at least from here,” he said rapidly. “I don’t reckon he’s got any idea how far away it is. You’ve trusted me, ma’am, an’ I shore appreciate it. Mebbe you’ll take my advice an’ pull up stakes an’ get outa here right away. Unless I’m dead wrong, and I don’t think I am, you can get into that country a whole lot easier by goin’ through the pass northeast o’ here to a little town called Hatchet, an’ then west an’ south into the mountains. What’s more, every minute yuh stay here is increasin’ the danger from that bunch over to Saddle Butte.”

She stared at him, the momentary brightness of her eyes fading to perplexity. The thought of staying in this place had grown intolerable and she would have welcomed any means of escape. But ——

"You mean we ought to go soon?" she questioned.

"Shore. Tomorrow, anyhow. Tonight would be better, but I s'pose that can't be managed."

"But father! I can't go without him. And I haven't the least idea where he is now or how long he'll stay away."

"I was comin' to that," he told her hurriedly. "I got a pretty good notion how he'd start from here for the head of Wind River. The minute I leave here I'm gonna chase after him an' bring him back."

"But he's been gone three days! How could you possibly——"

"There's a short cut I know of," he evaded hastily. "Don't yuh fret about that. Just try an' believe I know what I'm talkin' about. An' if I shouldn't happen to locate him by tomorrow, I'll come back an' we'll dope out some way of fixin' things safe 'till he shows up. Now about Mogridge. I reckon yuh wouldn't want him left here 'till I come back, even if he was tied up good an' tight."

"No — Oh, no!" Terror flashed into her eyes and her lips trembled. "I — I couldn't——"

"I thought not. Well, I'll take him with me an' dump him off in some safe place a long ways from here. Now, listen. Soon's I'm gone yuh better pack up what yuh want to take with yuh so's we won't waste no time tomorrow. Anythin' small yuh 'specially value, an' some food an' blankets yuh better tote into that gulch off'n the trail aways. Yuh don't

mind sleepin' out this once, do yuh?"

"Of course not. I couldn't stay in the cabin now."

"Fine. O' course the chances are slim of anybody moochin' around tonight, but better be safe. If yuh have time it wouldn't be a bad idea to go an' get that sorrel. Likely you'll want to take him — Thunder! I forgot yore hawss ——"

"He's back," she interrupted quickly. "I saw him trotting along the trail a few minutes ago."

"Good business! I'll catch him up before I go. Now if yuh don't mind stepping out as far's the trail, I'll hogtie this here jasper."

Mogridge was sitting sullenly on the ground and as Moran took down the rope from his saddle and began uncoiling it, he burst forth into a stream of bitter, virulent profanity.

"Filter that, yuh hound!" Dan told him fiercely. "Yuh don't seem to know when yore well off. If I'd had my way yuh'd be food for buzzards long before now. Lay down on yore stummack."

Reluctantly Spike obeyed, still seething with an almost uncontrolled fury. When his hands were firmly secured behind his back and the rope looped and tied about his ankles with just enough play to allow him to hobble, Moran jerked him to his feet and departed to catch up Shirley's roan.

Fortunately — for he had no other rope — the girl herself had already managed to approach the animal near enough to snatch the trailing bridle reins, and

when Moran came up there was nothing left but to say farewell.

“Yuh’ll stay in the gulch, won’t yuh, until we come?” he reminded her, tingling a little from the clasp of her firm, brown fingers. For an instant he hesitated, unwilling to alarm her, yet conscious that there was yet one more thing which must be said. He did not mean to fail, but as often as not fate elects to stage a tragedy. In case neither he nor Colonel Rives returned, it was necessary to provide for the girl’s safety. “O’ course,” he said, “there ain’t one chance in a hundred, hardly, of my not showin’ up some time tomorrow. But if I shouldn’t happen to, you’d best pack up an’ ride to Hatchet first thing the next mornin’. Yuh can leave a note for yore father——”

“You mean there’s danger?” she broke in anxiously.

His teeth flashed in a reassuring grin. “Why, no,” he drawled. “Not a mite. It’s only that things happen unexpected sometimes. I might get lost, or miss yore dad. Yuh can’t tell. An’ I’d feel a lot easier knowin’ yuh were safe. You’ll do that little thing, ma’am, won’t yuh?”

For an instant she stood silent, regarding him with a strangely serious, oddly searching expression in her troubled, wistful eyes. It almost seemed as if she guessed what was passing in his mind. At last her lips parted.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “I—will.”

CHAPTER XV

“LIGHTNING” STRIKES

KEEPING close to the wall of the ranch house, Moran crept silently through the darkness toward the mellow, lighted square ahead. Through the open window came the murmur of voices and now and then a laugh or a coarse oath floated out into the night, showing that Mogridge's henchmen were apparently untroubled by their leader's prolonged absence. Grimly, Moran wondered whether the general lack of interest was not due more than anything else to callous indifference. After all, the ties which bind such men as these together are usually of the frailest, and always there are eager hands stretched out to snatch at a ruler's falling scepter. Reaching the window he paused to listen.

“What about Spike? Ain't yuh gonna wait 'till he shows up before yuh start?”

It was Greer who spoke. Brodey answered with a harsh laugh.

“Him be damned! He's enjoyin' himself well enough. Leave him stay away if he wants to.”

There was a general chorus of guffaws. Out in the cool darkness Moran's lips curved in a grim smile as he remembered the particularly rocky hollow about a mile away in which he had deposited Mogridge, helpless, gagged, fairly bursting with apoplectic fury.

"How do we know he is?" put in Scully. "If yuh'd seen Lightnin' fannin' the wind outa here——"

"I don't know," cut in Brodey curtly. "An' to tell the truth, I don't give a cuss. If them two plugs each other in the gizzard— Waal, so much more for the rest of us. Now, ol' timer, let's have the dope. No more stallin'. Yuh better shell out while the shellin's good, I'm tellin' yuh."

A brief silence followed, broken suddenly by Brodey.

"Come on! Come on! Tell us all about Blake an' where yuh was goin' when we roped yuh."

"I suttinly shall not, suh," said an unfamiliar voice. "You may shoot me down if you like, but I shall tell you nothing."

"Shoot yuh! Hell! I'm likely to, ain't I? No, there ain't gonna be no shootin', but lemme tell yuh this: If yuh keep on bein' stubborn, yore likely to wish mighty passionate for a slug o' lead. Stand him up, Squint. We'll see if we can't find some way of openin' his mouth."

At that moment Moran, convinced that the general attention would be directed away from the window, ventured to peer cautiously around the casing.

The room was long and low-ceiled, cluttered, untidy, filled with a haze of tobacco smoke. Most of the illumination came from a lamp standing on the still uncleared supper table, but another burned smokily on a shelf near the door into the kitchen. Gath-

ered about in various lounging attitudes was the entire ranch force including Bloss, the cook. Moran's glance swept swiftly around making sure that none of them had left the room since he peered in half an hour before. It rested for an instant with a slight narrowing of the keen eyes on Brodey's bulky person sprawling in a chair, and then leaped to the tall, slightly bowed figure of Colonel Rives, who had evidently just been jerked to his feet by Greer, who stood beside him.

His iron gray hair, worn rather long, was mussed and tousled. Over his long, thin face the parchment skin turned a slightly grayish hue, seemed stretched a trifle tighter than when Dan had last seen it. But his lips and hands were steady, and in the dark eyes there glowed a defiant light.

"Yuh won't tell, will yuh?" snarled Brodey.

"I will not, suh," retorted the colonel steadily.

"Hold his other arm, Monk," ordered Brodey. "Bloss, fetch that iron I told yuh to heat up."

The cook disappeared through the kitchen door, and in the silence that followed Moran's right hand slid down to the holster at his side, his left stealing up inside his vest. When Bloss appeared with a running iron glowing dully at the end, Colonel Rives bit his lip but otherwise he did not stir.

"Give it to Bill," directed Brodey, his bulky figure straightening a little. "Bill's a good hand at branding, so I hear. Plows 'em deep! Ha! Ha! The

right cheek first, Bill. Make it nice an' prominent. All ready? Yo're not changin' yore mind, Colonel?"

The older man's face was chalky; a spot of blood stood out against the gray pallor of his lips. Knowing the reputation of these men he must have realized as Moran did, that this was no mere idle threat, but one they were perfectly capable of carrying out. Perhaps he could not trust himself to speak, but his vehement headshake was plain enough.

"Go to it!" snarled Brodey. "Give it to him good."

Scully thrust the branding iron forward, but it never reached within six inches of the colonel's face. From the window came a sharp crack and with a howl of pain, Scully dropped the hot iron and grabbed his shattered hand.

"Stick 'em up!" At Moran's cold, incisive utterance a sudden stillness descended on the smoke-laden room. "*Up*, I said, Monk. Both of 'em."

"Lightning, by Gawd!" gasped Bloss, after a swift side glance toward the window.

"C'rect," Moran's lips twisted in a mirthless grin. "There's a sayin' it don't strike twice in the same place, but that's a lie."

His pistol spat again and with a shriek Scully rolled over on the floor and lay there moaning.

"Yuh took four or five pot shots at me this mornin', Bill," pursued Moran relentlessly. "But I'm lettin' yuh off easy. Worst is yuh'll never be a two-

gun man no more. I got yuh jaspers covered," he continued meaningly, "an I ain't gonna plug no more hands. Colonel, will yuh kindly pick up that iron an' toss it out the window? It's scorchin' the floor an' making a mite too much of a smoke screen."

Dazedly Colonel Rives bent and picking up the running iron, carried it over and flung it out of the window. His hands shook a little, and there was a bewildered expression on his face as stared at this rescuer he had never seen before and of whose intentions toward himself he was even now not quite certain.

"Now s'pose yuh collect the hardware," directed Moran, his alert glance continuing to sweep the room. "No use chancin' accidents with a nervous bunch like this. There's a rope hangin' over there on the wall yuh can string 'em on. An' don't forget the two-gun men."

As Colonel Rives, gained strength and assurance with every step, went about the room removing six-guns and stringing them methodically on the rope he had taken from the wall, more than one lifted hand quivered, while the baleful looks and muttered lurid comments showed the strain under which the outlaws suffered. But no one risked a threatening move. They knew Moran and his reputation too well to take chances.

The operation took some time and was not a little facilitated by Dan's intimate knowledge of various

individual notions as to the proper place to carry a second weapon. When it was over the colonel returned to the window, and at Moran's direction scrambled through and stood beside him. The jangling mass of revolvers made a heavy load which he set down on the ground.

"Over by the corral," said Moran in a low tone, drawing back a trifle from the window but still keeping the crowd accurately covered. "Three horses. A bay, a buckskin an' a big cream with yore pack on. Mount the buckskin an' lead the others this way. The minute I hit the saddle be ready to start a-boilin'."

Colonel Rives nodded and disappeared into the darkness. Moran, whose glance had never ceased raking the crowd inside, redoubled his vigilance. Experience with human nature told him that this was almost the most hazardous moment of all. The furious bottled rage of these men was likely to boil over at any instant against all sense and reason, and it was too much to expect that the colonel had not missed one or two weapons at least. Moran had a feeling somewhat akin to smoking a cigarette over an open keg of gunpowder, and when the horses loomed up in the darkness he breathed a faint sigh of relief.

Silently slipping one revolver into the hidden holster beneath his arm pit, he reached down and felt for the loop of rope supporting the ravished weapons.

He took another step backward.

“Well, good night, gents,” he said coolly, as he swiftly holstered the second six-gun. “Happy dreams!”

With a leap he was in the saddle and speeding down the trail, Colonel Rives beside him. The lead rope of the cream was fastened to his saddle horn and he had seen to it—during those moments of swift yet careful preparation—that it was long enough to keep the horses from interfering. The moment they were through the gate he swung the heavy dangling load of weapons into the brush beside the trail and glanced over one shoulder.

Roars of fury issued from the ranch house. Lights flared and twinkled; doors burst open and moving figures were silhouetted against the glare. Finally as the fugitives neared the cañon came shots, wide and scattered, but persistent.

“Winchesters,” commented Moran, his eyes brilliant in the starlight. “They were in the bunk house. Much good they’ll do ’em, though, when I turned the horses loose and cut every cinch and stirrup leather in the place.”

The colonel made no immediate comment. His eyes were turned toward Moran and his face was an odd mingling of curiosity and admiration.

“Suh,” he said abruptly, after a little pause, “I ’don’t know your name or anything about you, but by God, suh, you suttinly are a *man!*”

CHAPTER XVI

FLIGHT

BY THE time they reached the entrance to the gulch where Shirley had promised to hide herself, Colonel Rives had become acquainted with the events leading up to the present crisis. Though a man of few words, his gratitude was apparent, and yet Moran had a vague intuition that he wasn't altogether pleased at his daughter's action in confiding so freely the important details of John Blake's discovery.

He was courteous enough — a little too courteous, Moran felt, and wondered with a touch of bitterness whether the old man was afraid he was going to butt in and become troublesome by virtue of the services he had performed. This, at any rate, was Dan's impression and it made him draw into his shell, so that the latter part of the journey was rather silent.

At the entrance to the gulch he drew back a little and let the colonel go ahead. Finally he halted and, sitting motionless in the saddle, he listened to the colonel's loud halloo, heard the girl's swift, glad response and was presently aware of fervent embraces and the hurried rush of question and answer that followed.

The latter seemed prolonged, and as he listened to the murmuring rise and fall of the two voices, his

face grew mask-like in its expression of unpenetrable reserve.

On an impulse that afternoon he had mentioned his knowledge of the country around the lost Squaw Mine, and, by inference at least, offered his services to guide them thither. In spite of vague yearnings in his heart, he did not mean to mention it again, nor to take advantage of mere gratitude. He had too much pride for that. They must ask him definitely, and ask as if they meant it. Suddenly the girl's voice came to him, clear, distinct, eager.

"But where is he?"

"Close by, my dear. He was just behind me. Moran!"

Dan answered briefly, and then, seeing her slim figure approaching through the luminous darkness, he slipped out of the saddle and stood waiting. She came straight to him and caught one of his hands impulsively in hers.

"I can never thank you," she said in a low, husky tone that showed how great was her emotion. "I felt there was — something back of it all, but I never guessed the truth. Dad says you were simply wonderful."

Moran held himself in with a deliberate effort. As once before, he told himself that she was merely worked up by the intensity of her relief and thankfulness.

"We were lucky to have everythin' come off so

smooth," he answered quietly. "I reckon we oughtn't to waste any time gettin' off, though. That bunch is shore on the warpath, an' they ain't goin' to let the thing drop. Are yuh all ready to hit the trail?"

She let his hand fall and stepped back a pace. "Why—why, yes," she answered, a subtle undercurrent of disappointment in her voice. "Everything's packed. All we have to do is to load up the sorrel."

"Fine. We'd better get to it, then. We oughta be well away from here by daybreak."

The following half hour was an extremely busy one. Shirley's roan was already saddled and she had brought down the sorrel from his secret hiding place. He would make an excellent pack horse to take the place of the cream, to which Moran meant to shift his saddle. Though the bay and the buckskin were both fine animals, if things developed as he began to think they might, he did not wish to be hampered by a spare mount.

At the cabin the exchange was effected and the loads readjusted. It was impossible to take many of their belongings, but Shirley abandoned the rest without a qualm. The place and everything about it had grown hateful to her and she hoped never to set eyes on it again. When the last knot was finally tied and they mounted and set off along the eastward trail, she breathed a little sigh of sheer relief.

Moran took the lead and made no attempt to hide

their tracks in the soft ooze along the creek. Three miles further on, however, where the trails forked, he took the branch leading to Clayton and kept to it until they came to a wide out-cropping of rock several hundred yards beyond.

Here he left the track and keeping to the rock, cut back on their course, emerging into the main trail leading to the pass a good half mile beyond the fork.

It was slow going, but toward the end the slowly lifting darkness began to make progress easier. Dawn was approaching, and as the horses scrambled up the steep ascent leading to the narrow gap between two peaks, the shadows gradually gave place to a cold gray light that seemed to gain added warmth and color with every passing moment. As yet neither the colonel nor his daughter had made any reference to the future.

The instant there was light enough for his purpose, Moran twisted the reins about his saddle horn and drawing from his pocket a crumpled piece of paper, began to make a rough map to which he added here and there terse written directions. He was aware of the girl's occasional curious regard, but he made no comment or explanation until at length, having passed through the gap, they came out on a wide shoulder of the mountain, where he drew rein.

The sky was tinged with rose color, shading to a deeper brilliancy in the east. The shadows had completely fled, and spread out below them lay a vast

stretch of wild, rough country.

Not quite a wilderness, however. Far below along the bottom of a wide valley a river of some size, winding its tortuous way through cañons and between forest-covered slopes, lay like a twisted silver ribbon. To the northeast a dozen miles or so it took a sweeping turn and at the bend there stood a little settlement. Though at that distance they looked like toys in that still, clear air, the houses stood out sharply distinct in every detail.

“There’s Hatchet,” explained Moran with a wave of one hand. “You can’t miss the way; the trail leads straight to it without any forks.” His eyes fell to the paper in his hand. “I’ve made a sort of map a showin’ the way I spoke about of gettin’ to the head o’ Wind River. It ain’t a work of art, but I reckon yuh can make it out all right.”

He handed the paper to the girl, but she made no attempt to take it. There was a puzzled, hurt, surprised look in her eyes.

“But—but I thought that you were coming with us,” she said.

“That ain’t no ways necessary, ma’am,” Dan told her. “It’s straight goin’ to Hatchet, an’ once there all yuh gotta do is to follow this map.”

“But you? Where——”

He forced a smile to his lips; a very creditable smile it was, too.

“Me? Why, I reckon I’ll be headin’ south,

ma'am. This country won't be very healthy for me for some while, so I thought I'd give Arizona or New Mexico the once over. Always heard the climate 'down there was great."

A hurt, bewildered expression came into her eyes and her lips quivered momentarily.

"But we thought—we wanted— We hoped you'd come with us, and in case we found gold, you'd be a sort of partner."

He stared at her incredulously. "Yuh—yuh can't mean that?" he said, his voice a little hoarse.

"Of course I do. We talked it over last night, 'didn't we, Dad?"

The colonel nodded. "We decided if you'd be willing to—er—throw in with us, suh, to offer you a third share in anything we found."

Moran caught his breath. "A third! Great Godfrey, man! Yuh don't know what yore sayin'. All my life I've heard stories about the Lost Squaw Mine. If that's really what Blake found, why—why, it'll be one of the biggest things——"

He broke off, astonished, bewildered, more than half incredulous of their meaning. This was an invitation far beyond his dreams. Shirley's eyes, wide and bright, were fixed intently on his face.

"Not half so big as what you did for us," she told him swiftly. "Besides, Dad can't undertake the thing alone. We—we need you."

A slow flush crept into his tanned face. The

muscular brown fingers of one hand gripped the saddle horn.

“You — you say that knowin’ what I’ve been?” he asked in a low voice.

The troubled expression had quite vanished from her eyes.

“Of course!” she told him quickly. “What you’ve been doesn’t in the least matter. It’s what you are — that counts.”

CHAPTER XVII

HATCHET

THE little town of Hatchet, hugging the wide bend of the Snake River, drowsed in the heat of a cloudless midsummer morning. Few people were in sight along the wide, slightly curving main street which paralleled the river bank and for this Dan Moran was distinctly thankful. His acquaintance here was fairly general and there were one or two persons he was particularly anxious to avoid. Indeed, save for the necessity of buying certain supplies essential to their enterprise he would have been inclined to keep the settlement at a respectful distance, even at the cost of some rough and exceedingly toilsome riding.

Sitting her small, well-made roan beside him, Shirley Rives was oppressed by no such doubts or anxieties. The day was perfect; they had escaped from a situation of great difficulty and hazard and were leaving behind forever conditions which had weighed down her spirits for very many days. Moreover, though she scarcely admitted it even to herself, she found a distinct pleasure in the presence of this big, handsome, competent young man in spite of whose more than questionable record she trusted so entirely. Taken all in all, despite a sleepless, troubled night, she was in the best of spirits. Her

eyes sparkled; under the golden tan of her shapely oval face a becoming touch of color glowed. Even this straggling line of log and rough timber structures, crude and unlovely as they were, seemed to please her.

“Why, it’s a metropolis!” she exclaimed, lips parting in a whimsical smile. “It’s perfect ages since I’ve seen anything like this. Makes me think of those red-letter days when I used to go in to Louisville to shop. Aren’t you thrilled, Dad? Or are you afraid I’ll run wild and spend all our money in the —department stores?”

Colonel Rives chuckled. “Not very. I’ve been here only once before, but as I remember the one general store specializes more on hardware and groceries and cow-boy rigging than anything that would tempt you beyond endurance. That’s right, isn’t it, Moran?”

From under drooping lashes, Dan swiftly raked the open door of the saloon they were passing and then glanced sidewise.

“C’rect,” he agreed laconically. “It’s mostly a man’s town, though I reckon you might find a few necessities —if you ain’t too particular.”

The girl sighed in mock disappointment. “What a shame! And I’d counted on having a gorgeous splurge after all these self-denying months. You mean to say there’s only *one* store? What are all those other places then?”

“Saloons, mostly, 'n' a couple dance halls. There's a blacksmith shop down the road aways, an' that joint with the false front an' tumbledown porch is a fourth rate eatin' house. The rest are mostly jest houses.”

“But where is everybody? I've haven't seen more than six people at the very most, and one of them—that man asleep on the eating house porch—looks more like a sack of meal with a whiskered pumpkin sitting on top than anything I can think of.”

Moran grinned as he pictured Jed Zeek's rage could he have heard this unflattering description. Already he was aware that the proprietor of the Elite was not asleep at all, but for some moments had been regarding them stealthily from under his dragged-down hat brim. Of this, however, Dan gave no sign. After all he could scarcely have hoped to pass through Hatchet without attracting the observation of this gossipy, inquisitive person whose whole life seemed devoted to prying into the affairs of others. They must make the best of the situation and trust to luck to escape the attention of that other, much more dangerous individual he had in mind.

“Hatchet don't really wake up 'till sundown,” he answered the girl, pulling up before a narrow, squat building wedged in between the eating house and a long, two-story frame affair which had a more pretentious air than any of the others. “Then's when the boys drift in, an' some nights yuh might almost

think yuh were on the gay, white way. This is the store."

As he swung out of the saddle and came around to help Miss Rives dismount, he was struck anew with a keen appreciation of her fresh young beauty. In spite of a sleepless night and of all the poignant fears and worries which must have tormented her through the dark hours, her lovely face showed scarcely a trace even of fatigue. Her eyes sparkled; her rippling bronze hair was carefully arranged; even the simple blouse looked crisp and fresh. How she had managed it, Moran, conscious suddenly of the two-days' stubble disfiguring his chin, could not imagine.

For an instant he found it in his heart to wish that she did not present a figure so daintily feminine and alluring, so completely, almost startingly out of keeping against this drab and sordid background. It was going to vastly increase their difficulties and, too late, he wished he had left the other two outside the town and come in alone to make his purchases. Even at the cost of a long and difficult detour it would have been well worth while.

Moran, however, was not the sort to waste time lamenting his mistakes. A swift, searching glance at the long building to the right of Timmons' store encouraged him. There was no one to be seen either through the open door or at any of the windows. With no appearance of hurry, yet without wasting any time, he tied the horses to the hitching rack and

followed the girl and her father into the store.

Awakening from a drowse, Bill Timmons scrambled out of a chair and stumbled forward, his sleep-dulled eyes widening at the sight of the radiant vision confronting him. Being a susceptible person, he fairly fell over himself in his eagerness to attend to Miss Rives' wants, leaving her two male companions to poke about through his cluttered stock.

Moran was just as well pleased. The nature of the implements and some of the supplies they needed made it evident that they intended to do some placer mining. Of course it would be necessary for Timmons to look them over while footing up the bill, but Dan had a feeling that, mixed in with other purchases, they wouldn't be quite so noticeable as if each one had to be hunted out separately by the proprietor.

He went about his work with expedition and by the time Shirley had finished with her purchases he had assembled the bulk of what they needed in a heap on the floor. To this Timmons added some provisions and one or two other things Dan had not been able to find, and with much scratching of the head set about totalling up the amount. When he finally announced it Moran was smitten by a sudden disagreeable conviction.

"Lemme foot it up, will yuh?" he requested briefly. "Seems like quite a lot more 'n I expected."

But though he did find two errors in addition, the reduction was so slight as to make little material

difference. After a momentary hesitation he drew Colonel Rives to one side.

“Yuh didn’t happen to overlook any coin when we pooled our cash this mornin’, did yuh, Colonel?” he inquired.

“No, suh,” returned the Kentuckian in some surprise. “You have every dollah I possess.”

“I was afraid so,” commented Moran. “As it turns out it ain’t enough to pay for this junk by around twenty plunks, an’ yet I don’t see how we’re gonna get along with less.”

“There’s the — a — gold,” suggested Colonel Rives after a momentary pause. “I presume he would accept some of that as payment.”

“He shore would, but that’s jest what I’m aimin’ to avoid. We can get away with that prospector yarn without attractin’ no attention; plenty o’ men drift off into the mountains every season. But if any of the crowd here get the notion we’ve already made a strike ——”

He broke off with an eloquent shrug, observed Timmons again in conversation with Miss Rives, and went on in a lower tone:

“Reckon we’ll have to chance it, though. We’ve got to have this stuff, an’ after all we don’t need to use any o’ them big nuggets. Better slip it out while he ain’t lookin’.”

The older man nodded, shifted his position slightly and delving into a capacious pocket drew

forth a medium sized canvas bag, grimy from much handling and firmly tied about the mouth with rawhide. The colonel's long, thin fingers plucked the knot loose and with his back to the absorbed Timmons, he drew out half a dozen smooth, irregular fragments of yellow metal.

"Will that be enough?" he whispered.

Moran took them. "A plenty," he nodded, appraising them with a practised eye. "Yuh might start loadin' up while I settle with him. It's gonna be some job gettin' everythin' on them hawses, but I reckon we can do it."

Shirley turned as he came up and, catching her eye, Dan telegraphed a silent request that she would continue to devote herself to Timmons. Whether or not she understood his reason she seemed to catch his meaning and with scarcely a pause went on with her light, airy chatter, to which Timmons, on the other side of the rough counter, listened eagerly, apparently oblivious to everything else. Mechanically he weighed the bits of gold, counted over the worn bills and silver and made change, his slightly bulging blue eyes returning, fascinated, every other minute to Miss Rives' charming face.

"You may as well stay here outa the sun while we pack up," Moran told her, concealing his satisfaction under a casual manner. "We won't be more'n ten or fifteen minutes."

Without comment she nodded carelessly, but

Moran caught a momentary intelligent flash of her eyes as he bent to gather up a load. As he passed out into the street her voice followed him.

“But, how wonderful, Mr. Timmons! I had no idea it was so gay here. Do tell me——”

“Some girl!” reflected Dan grimly. “She’s got his number all right. Now if we can only slip away without running into Asher——”

As he worked rapidly with the colonel, fastening up their purchases and lashing them on the backs of the already fairly well laden spare horses, his spirits began to rise. Zeek had given up all pretense at slumber and sat tilted back against the wall, a tattered newspaper spread on his fat knees. Not a move escaped him, but on the other side of the store, Ormsby Asher’s dance hall, saloon and gambling place, drowsed in the morning sun still empty of any sign of life.

“Another five minutes and we’ll be on our way,” muttered Moran, tying the last knot expertly.

Straightening up he turned and walked swiftly into the store. He had expected Shirley to be ready to depart at once, but apparently she had just spied some gauntlets and was engaged in trying on a pair. Dan could scarcely drag her away from this occupation, nor would it be wise to betray the impatience he felt at even this brief delay. He was thankful enough, however, when he had paid for the gloves and Shirley, with a friendly farewell to the stricken Timmons,

walked with him toward the door.

“Everything’s ready for us to start,” he explained, “so I reckon we’d better not waste any time gettin’ off. I don’t know how long——”

He paused abruptly, eyes narrowing slightly, muscles about his jaw tightening at the sight of the figure standing composedly beside the hitching rack. Tall and lean he was, with a narrow, wrinkled, hawk-like face dominated by a pair of coldly brilliant eyes. And somehow to Dan the mere sight of that gaunt shape clad in a black frock coat, the narrow string tie showing above a shirt front of immaculate whiteness, seemed to bring an actual chill note into the sunlit, summer picture.

CHAPTER XVIII

ORMSBY ASHER

MORAN'S instinctive halt was only momentary; the outward sign of his disquiet no more than a flash of light across his hastily composed face.

"Hello, Asher," he drawled, moving toward the older man with every appearance of pleasure at the encounter. "I was jest goin' to look yuh up. How's tricks?"

Ormsby Asher's gaze, which had been fixed on Shirley Rives, shifted to Moran's face. "About as usual," he returned slowly. "Haven't seen you around Hatchet in some time, have I?"

Moran lowered one eyelid significantly. His brain was working swiftly and already he had decided on the one possible line to take with Asher.

"Been pretty busy over at Saddle Butte," he returned easily.

"Ah!" Asher stroked his long, black mustache with a lean, attenuated, blue-veined hand on one finger of which sparkled a diamond of unusual size and fire. His slightly narrowed eyes flashed momentarily to the girl and back again. "Introduce me to your friends," he suggested smoothly.

Though disliking the necessity, Dan complied readily enough. "Colonel, meet Ormsby Asher, the king pin of Hatchet! Miss Rives — Mr. Asher."

Asher shook hands with the Southerner and, turning to the girl, removed his wide-brimmed black hat revealing a smooth, glistening expanse of dark hair liberally sprinkled with gray. This time his clasp was more prolonged and Moran, watching Shirley, noticed that she stiffened a little, the color deepening in her face.

"Delighted, ma'am," said Asher in a smooth, purring voice. "This is an unexpected pleasure. I hope you're going to spend a little time in town."

Shirley hesitated, and Moran made haste to answer.

"Not jest now. We're on our way to Thunder Creek, but I reckon we'll be back an' forth considerable in the next month or so."

The immobility of Asher's long, thin face scarcely altered, but the searching, speculative glance he bent on Moran was tinged with veiled suspicion. Dan returned it steadily, his expression ingenuous and open.

"I see," murmured the older man. Appraisingly he glanced sidewise at the laden pack horses. "Sorry we can't entertain you, ma'am," he went on to Shirley who had stepped over to her horse. "We'll have to make up for that later. Allow me."

The girl had already turned her stirrup, but before she could do more Asher was at her side, assisting her into the saddle. As she gathered up the reins he turned to Moran.

"I'll have a word with you before you go," he said briefly.

Dan made no objection, and the two walked over to a patch of shade cast by the projecting front of Timmons' store. Timmons himself stood in the doorway regarding them curiously, but Asher's voice was pitched too low to carry even that short distance.

"Well?" he questioned briefly. "What's the game?"

Moran did not pretend to misunderstand him. He smiled slightly and shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, I had a little run in with Spike an' decided to hit the trail," he explained.

"H'm! But who are these people? Where'd you meet up with 'em? Where you going and what for?"

Moran had been expecting the question and was ready with his answer. He knew Asher, and he had not missed that flashing sidelong glance at the loads carried by the two pack horses, the nature of which was only too readily apparent.

"They're from the South, I understand," he returned with an air of ready frankness. "He's out here for his health. They been livin' the other side of the range between here an' Clayton. The ol' man's been playin' around prospectin', mostly to pass the time, I expect, but so far he ain't met up with anythin' riotous. When I run into 'em a couple days ago he got to askin' me about likely places an' all

that. One thing led to another, an' finally he made me an offer to take 'em through the Thunder Creek country an' stick with 'em a spell." Dan paused to glance over his shoulder and then gave a chuckle. "Seein' as I was headin' in that direction I didn't mind bein' paid for it," he concluded, straddling his legs and hooking both thumbs into his chap belt.

Asher caressed his mustache meditatively, his steady glance fixed intently on Moran's face.

"He's got money, then?" he mused aloud.

"Must have some. He forked out a month's pay, which was all the time I agreed to give him. I'm dead sick of brandin' an' drivin' steers to Silvertown, an' takin' Spike Mogridge's back talk. It'll be a nice rest."

The pause which followed was so prolonged that Dan found it difficult to retain his bland and careless expression under the other's searching stare. What was passing, he wondered uneasily, behind those hard, brilliant, calculating eyes? Would Asher accept his explanation, or would he probe deeper? He was not afraid of the man himself in spite of the gambler's unsavory reputation. But if Asher ever found out where they really were heading for, and why, his influence with the distinctly hard crowd that made Hatchet their headquarters would make him an even greater menace to their plans than the Saddle Butte outlaws.

Suddenly Asher's tall, gaunt frame relaxed and he

raised one shaggy eyebrow in a characteristic manner. "You'll be ridin' in soon," he said in a confidential undertone. "Thunder Creek ain't so far off. Find out a little more about the old buck and how well heeled he is. Then come and see me."

Without waiting for a reply he turned and walked back toward the hitching rack, thus missing a sudden hard glint which flashed irresistibly into Moran's gray eyes. Dan banished it with a deliberate effort, but as he followed the gambler a faint touch of color tinged the clear bronze of his clean-cut face.

"Like hell, I will!" he told himself angrily. "I shore would admire to put yuh wise to jest what's passin' through my mind, yuh sneakin' polecat!"

But the realization that he had apparently gained his point and dulled the gambler's suspicions caused Moran's irritation to ebb quickly. After all, to have beaten Ormsby Asher at his own game of deceit was much more satisfying than giving way to mere purposeless temper. And the thought of Asher's rage when, after a week or two of silence, he investigated the neighborhood of Thunder Creek to find no trace whatever of the little party, warmed the cockles of Dan's heart.

The farewells were brief — no longer, indeed, than it took Moran to untie the horses and swing into the saddle. Shirley seemed particularly eager to be off, though Dan noticed that she replied pleasantly enough to Asher's soft-voiced remarks. But as she

rode down the street between the two men, her cheeks were tinged with unwonted color, her lips set firmly.

Standing motionless beside the hitching rack, Asher's inscrutable glance followed the trio for a moment or two. Then he took a cigar from his vest pocket and biting off the end thrust it between his lips. As he was feeling for a match his glance encountered that of Bill Timmons, whose pale blue eyes expressed unusual interest and alertness.

"Some dame, I'll tell the world!" stated the storekeeper emphatically.

Asher made no comment. When his cigar was well alight, he crossed the strip of hard-packed earth and paused beside the open door.

"What'd they buy, Bill?" he inquired succinctly.

Timmons stared. "Who? Them? Why — er —" He scratched his head and looked a trifle foolish. "Why, it was some canned goods an' shells, an' a coupla coils o' rope, an'——"

"Didn't I see a shovel and a pick in that pack?" interrupted Asher.

"Why, shore! I clean forgot them. They got a coupla pans, too. Reckon they must be gonna prospect some'ers. Wonder where Moran picked 'em up? Thought he was over to——"

He paused, struck by a curious expression on Asher's face, and mechanically followed the direction of the gambler's fixed gaze. For a moment he could not see what there was inside the store to attract the

older man's attention. Then he discovered that instead of putting away the money Moran had given him, he had left it lying on the rough counter within plain sight of the door.

"Gosh darn it!" he grunted, turning abruptly back into the store. "I thought I put that in the drawer."

On a ragged scrap of paper to one side of the bills and loose silver lay the six smooth bits of gold scarcely larger than grains of rice. Timmons' conscience smote him as he realized how easily a gust of wind might have scattered them and was reaching out hastily when Asher's fingers closed about his wrist.

"Where'd you get that?"

"What? The gold? Why, Moran give it to me in part payment for the stuff he bought. . . . Hell's bells! Yuh don't mean to say it—it ain't—the real thing?"

Asher, who had taken up one of the pieces and was examining it closely, returned it to the paper.

"Looks all right to me," he said curtly, a look of thoughtful speculation in his cold eyes. "Did Moran have it in his clothes or did he get it from the old man?"

Timmons looked blank. "Yuh got me, Orms. Moran handed it over with the rest o' the coin. I dunno how he come by it. How would I?"

Asher gave a disgusted snort. "You don't know much, and that's a fact," he said acidly. "Truth

is, you were so busy gawping at that girl it's a wonder to me you could make change. I'll bet they didn't pay for half the junk they took away."

Leaving Timmons to consider this unpleasant possibility at leisure, he left the store and walking rapidly down the street, entered the gambling hall. The room, which was long and low with a bar across one end and a number of tables set around the sides, was unoccupied save for a blonde young man in his shirt sleeves, who sat with his feet on a table reading a tattered magazine.

"Where's Foss?" demanded Asher, pausing in front of him.

As "Blondy" Jessup looked up, something in his employer's eyes wiped the expression of boredom from his fresh, pink face.

"Out back, I reckon," he answered hastily. "Anythin' wrong? Want me to holler for him?"

"No," returned Asher curtly. "I'll go myself."

Pushing through a swinging door at one side of the bar, he traversed a short narrow hallway and passed into the open at the rear of the building.

A barn and several smaller sheds stood there, and beside them a well-made corral containing half a dozen horses. Squatting in the shade of the range of buildings deftly plying a harness needle to the ripped skirt of a saddle propped in front of him, was a man of twenty-eight or so, slight, though full of chest, wiry, with a skin tanned to leather and muscular,

capable brown hands. As Asher appeared he raised his eyes without lifting his head and followed the gambler's approach across the yard.

"How soon can you hit the trail?" inquired Asher without preamble, as he paused in front of the other.

"Five minutes," returned Foss McCoy with equal brevity.

"Good. You know Moran from Saddle Butte?"

McCoy nodded.

"Well, he's just left here heading west with an old party named Rives, his daughter and two pack horses. Says he's going to Thunder Creek to prospect. I want to know if he's telling me the truth."

McCoy stabbed the needle into the leather and rose to his feet with a lithe movement of the hips. Erect he looked taller and more lank. A curious ridged scar slanting downward from one corner of his mouth gave his face an unpleasant, almost sinister cast.

"I get yuh!" he said tersely, pulling his hat forward over a mop of sandy hair. "You'll have to come acrost, Orms. I'm stoney."

Without comment Asher drew out a roll of bills, peeled off several, and handed them to his henchman.

"Don't let him know you're trailing him," he cautioned. "And don't come back 'till you've got something to tell. If they settle down at Thunder Creek,

all right. If not, I want to know where they're going and what they're after. And, Foss, remember they call that feller Lightning."

McCoy's lips twisted in a crooked smile, and he hitched up his cartridge belt. "Don't worry none," he shrugged. "I ain't so slow m'self. Well, I'll saddle up an' cut stick."

Asher nodded and moved slowly toward the house. At the door he paused to knock the ash from his cigar and glanced toward the corral. For a moment he stood watching the swift, efficient movements of his henchman. Then his lids narrowed and his lips curled briefly in a smile of satisfaction. Re-entering the big room he paused at the corner of the bar and consulted his watch.

"Nell Driscoll been in this morning?" he inquired.

Blondy Jessup, polishing sufficiently clean glass, shrugged his shoulders. "Haven't seen her."

"H'm! She was to be here before noon. After dinner you better straddle a cayuse and slide out there. Tell her I've got to see her today sometime, about her father's estate."

Blondy's blue eyes widened. "Estate! What 'do yuh mean by that, Orms? Ol' Rafe Driscoll didn't leave nothin' but debts. He went an' 'drank up every cent he had right alongside this here bar. Yuh got a mortgage on the house an' contents, ain't yuh?"

For a long moment Asher stood regarding him in silence. Then he took the cigar from his mouth and daintily flicked away the ash.

“You can start right after dinner and be back in about an hour,” he commented gently.

Jessup flushed and his lids fluttered uneasily under that steady, penetrating stare. “Aw’ right, aw’ right,” he muttered. “I—I’ll tell her.”

Asher quirked one eyebrow and stepping behind the bar poured himself a small drink, delicately adding a dash of water.

“I thought you would,” he murmured.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FACE IN THE WINDOW

NONE of the three spoke until they were well clear of the last house. Then Shirley turned suddenly to Moran, her face still faintly flushed.

“What a perfectly hateful man!” she declared emphatically. “There’s something about him that gives me the shivers.”

“I’m mighty glad yuh didn’t show it,” said Moran approvingly. “Yuh shore backed up my hand to the queen’s taste. For a coupla minutes I sorta had cold feet wonderin’ if yuh’d catch on.”

“About the man in the store, you mean? I guessed, of course, that you wanted me to keep his attention occupied. Wasn’t he silly?” She giggled at the recollection and then her face grew serious. “But, Asher— There was no premeditation about that, I assure you. I treated him as decently as I could’ because— Well, he—he frightened me, somehow.”

“He’s mean all through, an’ dangerous,” declared Moran. “He practically owns Hatchet, an’ he’s the head of a gang that’s got the Saddle Butte crowd beat a mile.”

He paused, flushing at the sudden recollection of his own recent connection with that very gang, and shot a swift sidelong glance at the girl’s face. What

he saw there seemed to restore his self-confidence.

“I reckon they’re worse jest because they ain’t so raw,” he went on thoughtfully. “Asher’s got a grip on all the town officials an’ they say even the sheriff’s in with the bunch, sort of. They get away with murder under cover of the law an’ at a pinch they ain’t none too particular about stickin’ to even that.”

“I see,” commented Colonel Rives. “That was why you were so friendly with the gentleman.”

“You said it! I made a big mistake bringin’ you two into town at all. I’d oughta have known better; but goin’ around would have meant an extra two days of mighty hard travelin’, so I took a chance of slippin’ through without his seein’ us. Trouble was this happened to be one of his days for gettin’ up early.”

“But what does it really matter if he did see us?” demanded Shirley. “Surely people just passing through the town aren’t in any danger from him.”

Moran met her glance steadily, a little whimsical twinkle in his clear, gray eyes.

“To begin with people like you don’t pass through Hatchet very often,” he told her quietly. “Beside which, he’s known me before as one of the bunch from Saddle Butte. The combination right away set him thinkin’. He decided I was up to some crooked work on my own, an’ expected I’d try an’ hide it from him. He couldn’t help see some of the stuff we’d packed—those picks an’ shovels give us away right

off—so I had to make up a yarn that would fit the facts without lettin' slip anythin' that was really important. I told him a good yarn an' I think he bit,' he concluded, "though it's mighty hard to tell jest what's goin' on back of Orms Asher's cast-iron face. O' course we ain't goin' within forty miles of Thunder Creek; that's away off to the northeast. He may get suspicious later, but if he only lays off us twenty-four hours I'll gamble we'll be so well lost back in the Rattlesnake Hills he'll need an airplane to find us."

"If that's the case I should say we'd be tol'ably safe from the attentions of this gentleman," observed Colonel Rives. "I was watching him rather closely, and he didn't look to me like a man whose suspicions were aroused."

"He wouldn't," commented Dan grimly. "Like I said, he ain't showin' his hand—any. Still, no use losin' sleep over it. I wouldn't fret none at all if yuh an' me was on our own."

"In other words, you wish I wasn't along," put in Shirley quickly.

"Well, n-o; I wouldn't go so far's to say quite that," drawled Moran, his eyes twinkling.

"Perhaps not, but I dare say you're thinking it. Dad! Speak up and take my part. Tell this doubtful person how used I am to roughing it, how well I can cook and all the rest of it. You've said so to me often enough. Why, I even seem to remember an occasion when you called me a bright ray of sunshine

around the house — though it was only a cabin.”

“Quite so, my dear; I admit all of that,” returned her father drily. “The trouble is that where we’re heading for there isn’t any cabin or anything even approaching a shelter. Of course I’m not suggesting that you leave us; there’s no place for you to go. Moran and I can put up with anything, but you——”

“Nonsense!” cut in the girl emphatically. “One might think I was a delicate, hothouse flower. It’s summer and it doesn’t take long to put up a shelter. Besides, I can stand as much as you any day, Dad, so there! Almost anything, in fact,” she added pointedly, “except being starved to death.”

“I know,” sympathized Moran, on whom she had cast a meaning glance. “I’m hollow to the heels myself. If yuh can hold out for another mile, we’ll stop at Rafe Driscoll’s place an’ get him to rustle us some chuck. We could open a couple of cans right here, but I thought it wouldn’t be a bad idea to drop in on Rafe an’ let slip the news we’re headin’ for Thunder Creek. It’ll get back to Asher quick enough. Rafe spends his spare time — which is consid’able — loafin’ around the saloons in Hatchet, an’ after a few drinks he’s liable to spill out everything that’s on his mind.”

“Perhaps he won’t be home.”

“It ain’t likely he’s started the rounds this early. Anyhow, if he’s away Nell’ll treat us right.”

Miss Rives raised her eyebrows. “Nell?”

“His daughter. She’s a nice kid—a whole lot too good for that rummy. You can see the house now—jest beyond that bunch o’ cottonwoods.”

They had just rounded a sharp bend in the trail, which followed the curve of the river and now lay ahead of them for a considerable distance in an almost straight line. Following the direction Moran indicated, Shirley had no difficulty in picking out the low, log structure nestling against a background of green. It seemed an attractive site for a home, she thought, facing the placid river with its marching growth of red willows and cottonwoods. Behind it lay sun-drenched meadows which reached to the base of the rugged, pine-clad hills three miles or more away, that formed the western boundary of this wide fertile basin of which Hatchet was the center.

As they drew nearer Shirley regarded the cabin with interest, speculating as to the character of its occupants. Remembering what Moran had said of Rafe Driscoll, she was not surprised to note the tumbledown condition of the house and smaller outbuildings. There was a general air of shiftlessness about the whole place which was mitigated only by a well-tended flower bed across the front and a mass of sturdy morning-glories, covered with brilliant blue and pink blossoms, clambering over one window.

“The girl, of course,” thought Shirley as she followed Moran’s example and dismounted. “Poor thing! What a life she must lead. Is it a ranch?”

she inquired aloud.

“Used to be. They tell me Rafe had a good payin’ proposition when he first started, but it’s pretty much gone to pot. Last time I was here he had only three, four horses an’ a few head o’ cattle left.”

He rapped briskly on the closed door, and to Shirley the sound seemed to reverberate through the house with a curious hollow emptiness. Both windows, she noticed, were tightly closed.

“It looks as if there wasn’t anybody home,” she commented, when a minute or two had passed in silence.

Dan nodded, but rapped again. An instant later Shirley, happening to glance toward the window above which the morning-glories clustered, was aware of a face staring at her through the small-paned, wavering glass. A rather thin, oval face it was, shadowed by a wide hat brim; but before Shirley had time to notice any further details it vanished.

“Why!” she cried out in surprise. “There is someone——”

Abruptly she broke off as the door swung slowly open and a girl stood on the threshold. A very pretty girl indeed, Shirley decided at once, in spite of the dusky shadows under her blue eyes and a curious, unnatural pallor which seemed to bring out certain sharp lines—one might have thought them hard, even tense—about her shapely mouth and chin.

“Howdy,” Moran greeted her pleasantly. “I

thought — We wondered — Say! Yo're jest goin' out, ain't yuh?"

"I was."

The girl's voice was low and husky. As she spoke her gaze shifted for an instant from Moran to Shirley Rives. It was the briefest possible glance, yet it was enough to make Shirley catch her breath, so strained and hunted was the expression she read in those blue depths.

"We won't bother yuh, then," said Moran hesitatingly. "I jest thought mebbe we could get a bite to eat, but — I s'pose yore father ain't home?"

The girl's eyes widened and her pallor vanished before a flood of crimson which surged to the very roots of her striking hair; hair so exquisitely fair that it had passed the golden state and shone with a pale, silvery luster. For an instant she stood stricken, staring at Moran with startled surprise and incredulity.

"My father!" she repeated at length in a strange tone. Again she hesitated briefly and bit her lip. "Why, he — he's been dead a month."

CHAPTER XX

THE EVIL SHADOW

IT WAS Shirley who broke the momentary shocked silence which followed the announcement.

“Oh!” she cried impulsively. “Oh my *dear!*”

Dan’s jaw dropped and the color deepened under his tan. “I shore am sorry, Nell,” he told the girl awkwardly. “I—I hadn’t heard a word about it. Haven’t been near Hatchet in three, four months, yuh know.”

She took his proffered hand. “It had to come, I s’pose,” she said, a touch of bitterness in her voice. “You know the way he—he——”

“Uh-huh,” nodded Moran as she paused. “It shore is a rotten shame. Well, we won’t bother yuh none, Nell. We can easy camp out along the road.”

He was turning away when the girl suddenly halted him.

“You’ll do no such thing,” she said quickly. “I’m not in such a rush I can’t stop and cook a bite o’ dinner. You come right in—all of you. Or mebbe you’d better put the horses in the corral first.”

Watching her, Shirley was bewildered at the surprising transformation. She spoke firmly and decisively. The pallor had vanished from her face, which glowed with a delicate wild rose pink. Her eyes had quite lost that strained hunted look; there was relief,

yes, actual relief, in their clear depths.

“Are you quite certain—” protested Miss Rives.

“Of course I am. It won’t be a mite o’ trouble. Though I’m not sure—” her color deepened a trifle “there’s—there’s very much in the house just now.”

“If that’s all, we can help out easily,” said Shirley suddenly making up her mind. “We’ve plenty of canned things and bacon and— Dad! Get some canned corn and bacon and coffee out of the pack, will you, before you take the horses around.”

Colonel Rives complied, and with her arms full, Shirley followed Nell Driscoll, who had gone ahead, she said, to start a fire. But as Shirley stepped into the kitchen, a few minutes later, Nell was just coming out of another room the door of which she closed sharply behind her.

Wondering a little, Shirley set down her bundles and the two at once kindled a fire in the range and started to prepare the meal. It was very quickly evident that even in this short interval Nell Driscoll’s attitude had changed again. She talked spasmodically, asking no questions of the other girl, showing little curiosity in her presence here or ultimate destination, seeming, indeed, absorbed in her own thoughts. But every movement was almost feverishly swift as if, Shirley thought, amidst the careless chatter with which she strove to fill the awkward pauses, the girl was after all frantically anxious for the meal to be over so that she could get away.

Puzzled and a little troubled, Shirley did her best to hurry things and between them the cooking was finished with uncommon dispatch. As soon as the other dishes were on the table, she left Nell to remove the bacon from the skillet, and turned toward the back door to summon the two men, who were outside talking. She had scarcely taken three steps when a stifled gasp made her turn swiftly.

Close to one end of the stove, a window overlooked the long straight stretch of trail leading back to Hatchet. Out of this window Nell was staring, face pallid, eyes dilated and full of terror.

“Oh!” she moaned. “O—h!”

Shirley flew across the room. “What is it?” she cried, peering over the girl’s rigid shoulder.

A man was loping toward the cabin along the sunlit trail—young, handsome and very blonde. He looked harmless enough and Shirley, getting no answer to her question, repeated it. Nell turned and looked into her face.

“I’m afraid,” she whispered in a stricken voice.

“Afraid! Of him? What do you mean? What can he— Why, Dan’s here, and dad. Surely you don’t think they’d stand still and let anyone——”

Nell moistened her lips. “You don’t understand. He’s Blondy Jessup, one of—Asher’s men.”

In spite of her assurance a little chill crept over Shirley’s spine. Asher! Vividly she recalled a certain expression in those coldly brilliant eyes as they

had looked her up and down that morning, and some of her bright color faded.

“But—but what’s he want?” she asked.

Nell turned and looked at her steadily. “Jessup? Nothing. He’s been sent, that’s all, to get me to—come down—to Hatchet. . . . I know.”

Shirley’s hands clenched and her lips tightened. “But—but how— A place like this! Surely there are people who would prevent——”

“You don’t know Ormsby Asher,” the girl told her bitterly. “He owns the town, and always, some way or other, he gets what he wants. That’s what makes me so afraid. That’s why—” She hesitated an instant and then went on recklessly. “I may as well say it. When you came I had my horse saddled and was all ready to run away. If only I’d gone——”

She broke off with a half sob. Shirley, her eyes fixed on the approaching Jessup, was thinking rapidly.

“Couldn’t you put him off?” she asked presently. “Say you’ll ride in after dinner, and then— Or if you couldn’t get rid of him that way, Moran and dad could hold him up and—and leave him tied up here while we— Perhaps that’s the best way, after all. I’ll call them, and——”

As she turned Nell caught her arm. “Wait,” she urged in a firmer voice. “I’ve got an idea. I just remembered. You dish up the bacon an’ let me talk to him.”

Already Jessup had reached the front of the cabin and was leisurely dismounting. As Shirley mechanically forked the bacon out of the skillet, marveling a little at Nell's sudden courage, she anxiously watched the girl step toward the door. A moment later Blondy stood on the threshold, his bold eyes sweeping the room in evident surprise.

"Hello, Nell!" he said, though his glance was fixed approvingly on Shirley Rives. "Ain't yuh had dinner yet?"

"I've got company an' we're a little late," returned the girl evenly. She stood close to the door so that it was impossible, without crowding around her, for Jessup to step into the room. "Anything special you wanted?"

The man gave a slightly irritated laugh. "Well, yes, there is," he returned shortly. "Seems like yuh might ask a fellah to come in an' set down after ridin' all the way out here, though."

"I didn't know you needed asking," retorted the girl, with a very realistic imitation of a smile. "Come in, of course, if you want to. Moran's out back waitin' for dinner. I was just goin' to call him in."

Shirley, fussing at the table, saw the man give a little start, swiftly suppressed and straighten slightly.

"Moran?" he repeated. "Yuh mean—Dan Moran?"

"Sure," nodded Nell, a touch almost of malice in

her sweet voice. "Come on in an' have dinner with us."

Instead of acquiescing, Blondy took a quick step backward. "'Fraid I can't — today," he said hastily. "I was jest kiddin' when I said that. I've et already an' I gotta get back to tend bar. Asher wanted I should ask yuh to come in an' — an' see him this afternoon. He wants yuh 'special about yore dad's estate."

"Oh!" Nell's hands, hanging at her sides, clenched spasmodically, but her voice did not falter. "I was coming this mornin', but I got held up. Tell him I'll be in as soon as I get things washed up. By three o'clock, anyhow."

"Aw right," Blondy was already swinging into the saddle. "You'll shorely come?" he added, gathering up the reins. "He says it's important."

The girl swallowed hard and caught the edge of the door jamb with one hand. "Oh, yes," she called after him. "I'll surely come."

With a thud of hoofs Jessup flashed past the window. Nell turned a white face on Shirley.

"You see," she whispered. "I knew it was something like that. "He's——"

She broke off as Moran darted into the room and crossed swiftly to the end window.

"Who was that?" he demanded. "Huh! Blondy Jessup!" he exclaimed before Nell could answer. He turned a puzzled face toward the girl. "What in

thunder was that four-flusher doin' here?"

Nell's color deepened slightly, but without faltering she told him what had happened.

"I remembered hearing the last time you were here you an' he had a run in, an' he got the worst of it," she concluded. "That's why I told him you were outside. But for that he'd have stayed an' made sure I rode in to Hatchet. Asher—" She paused, biting her lips. "He's been pestering me ever since—I'm afraid of him and when you came I was all ready to run away."

"Away? From here? Yuh mean yuh'd leave yore home an' everythin' an' beat it because of him?"

Nell laughed mirthlessly. "It isn't my home. Dad had it mortgaged up to the hilt, an' Asher owns everything. But even if it wasn't that way, I—I'd go."

Moran's eyes narrowed. "Where to?" he asked briefly.

"I don't know exactly. I thought I'd go first to the Bar S. Mrs. Haight's been a good friend to me the few times we've met, and she hates Asher. She'd take me in, I'm sure, 'till I could think what to do."

"The Bar S! Why, that's over on the edge of the Rattlesnake Hills. We're headin' in that direction. You could come along with us——"

He paused, flashing an inquiring glance at Shirley, who nodded ready acquiescence.

"Of course," she agreed. "That's the very thing.

But hadn't we better eat our dinner before it's quite cold?"

"We had," smiled Moran. "An' we don't want to lose any time tuckin' it away, either. Blondy's a poor prune, but he ain't quite ready for the bug house. He'll spill out everythin' he's seen the minute he gets back to town, an' yuh can't tell what notions that'll put into Asher's head. Sooner we fan the breeze from here the better."

CHAPTER XXI

RESENTMENT

NO TIME was lost following his suggestion. They did not even wait to clean up, but the moment dinner was finished Nell fetched from the next room a bundle containing the few personal belongings she had already packed up. Her horse stood in the corral saddled, and when this was fastened back of the cante, they mounted and were off.

About three miles beyond the cabin the trail forked. One branch continued westward while the other turned abruptly to the right, following the curve of the river. The latter branch led toward Thunder Creek and Moran followed it for nearly two miles to a point where a spine of exposed rock cut across it. Here, under his direction the whole party left the trail and pushed through the brush in a southwesterly direction which would bring them out at length into the rougher, mountainous tract leading toward the Bar S and the Rattlesnake Hills.

It was hard going and they made slow progress. Indeed, Colonel Rives mildly questioned the necessity of wasting so much time and effort to hide their trail. But Moran had his own reasons for acting in this fashion.

As a matter of fact that pleasant sense of having pulled the wool over Ormsby Asher's eyes had been

of short duration. Instinct, coupled with a past knowledge of the man, told him that the brains of that band of sleek crooks and criminals which dominated Hatchet was not to be so easily deceived, and the appearance of Blondy Jessup served merely to strengthen his doubts. He could not quite believe that Asher's henchman had come all this way merely to bring that message to Nell Driscoll, though of course it might be barely possible. At all events it put him even more on his guard, made him remember that there were others beside Jessup ready and eager at all times to obey Asher's behest, caused him at every favorable elevation or other point of vantage to keep a close though unobtrusive lookout toward the rear.

But even his keen eyes detected nothing in the least suspicious. If they were being followed, the unknown individual was using extraordinary skill and cleverness to remain unseen. Dan would very much have liked to take reassurance from this apparent proof that he was wrong, but somehow it gave him little real comfort.

It was nearly four o'clock when they gained the other trail and set their faces toward the rugged hills and bold rocky slopes, most of them covered by a heavy forest growth, which loomed up to the westward.

Through this increasingly rough wilderness the narrow tract twisted its sinuous way. Unlike the

lower trail it was not a thoroughfare, leading only to the Bar S and one or two even smaller outfits beyond. And since the owners of these ranches preferred to ship their cattle from Fanning, a flourishing railroad town in the next county, beyond the sphere of Ormsby Asher's influence, it was little used.

The sun had slid down behind the jagged skyline, when the little party halted on the rim of a long and very narrow valley which spread its attenuated length of verdure between two irregular lines of rocky hills which were almost mountains. To the southward especially the jagged outlines of piled granite, some of them gaunt and bare, others clothed with a heavy growth of spruce and pine and cedar, rose tier on tier in intricate confusion. Here and there an isolated peak gilded fantastically by the dying sun, was etched boldly against the skyline. Moran's eyes sparkled as he realized that somewhere in that chaotic wilderness lay the source of the Moon River and with it that rich treasure they had come to seek.

The descent into the Bar S valley was slow and tedious, but the worst was over when they gained the level. It was not quite dark when they pulled up before a comfortable and commodious log ranch house which, with its accompanying sheds and bunk house and other outbuildings, nestled close to the foot of the Rattlesnake Hills. From the rear door a bristling terrier rushed out, yelping hysterically. He was closely followed by a tall, broad-shouldered per-

son in boots and overalls wearing a wide brimmed felt hat. Until she spoke Shirley and her father quite failed to realize that it was Mrs. Haight.

“Howdy,” she greeted them in a deep, mellow voice, peering through the dusk. “Pat! Quit that racket!” She made a threatening sweep of her hand at the dog. “Climb down, strangers, an’ — Why, land sake! If it ain’t Nell Driscoll.”

Nell slid out of her saddle and approached the older woman. For a few minutes she spoke rapidly in a low tone, her explanations punctuated at intervals by an angry rumble from Mrs. Haight.

“Why, shore yuh can!” exclaimed the latter at length. “Stay as long as yuh like; I’ll be plumb glad to have yore comp’ny. Yuh needn’t be scared o’ that snake Asher, neither. I shore would admire to have him come snoopin’ around the Bar S. He’d get his come uppins, believe me. What about yore friends? Ain’t they comin’ in?”

Shirley, who was the nearest, met her glance with a smile. “We’d be awfully glad to,” she said promptly. They had discussed the question along the way and decided that they might bespeak Mrs. Haight’s hospitality for the night at least. “If you could put us up over night without too much trouble——”

“Shucks! No trouble at all. Yo’re welcome. It ain’t of’en anybody drops in, an’ I’m mighty glad to have yuh. Come right in an’ we’ll start supper while

yore men look after the nags.”

She turned toward the open door, the others following. On the threshold she halted, her strong, wholesome, weatherbeaten face clearly outlined in the mellow glow streaming from the lighted room.

“The corral’s jest a step down the slope this side o’ the bunk house,” she exclaimed, glancing toward the two men. “If yuh need any help or want anythin’, get one o’ the boys——”

Abruptly she broke off, her narrowing gaze fixed intently on Moran, whose face was for the first time really visible.

“Why——why——you——” she said in puzzled surprise. Suddenly recognition flashed into her snapping eyes and her face hardened. “Yo’re Moran from Saddle Butte,” she accused harshly.

“You’ve hit the li’le black bullseye, ma’am,” drawled Dan quietly, though he felt the blood rising into his face. “*From* is right.”

“But what——” Mrs. Haight paused, her keen suspicious glance flashing from one face to another. It came to rest on Shirley, who had dismounted, and lingering there a space softened somewhat. “Waal, you’d better put the horses up,” she ended curtly, and turning, thumped into the kitchen.

In silence Moran took the bridle of Shirley’s roan and rode off toward the corral, Colonel Rives following with the two other horses. By this time it was so dark that a lantern was necessary, and the curious

looks and chilly manner of the men in the bunk house, whither Dan went to get one, did not tend to restore his good humor. He was sensible enough to realize that the behavior of Mrs. Haight and her punchers was no more than natural. They had known him only as a member of a gang of outlaws and cattle thieves who were a scourge to the neighboring country—as an ally if not a friend of Ormsby Asher, with whom the whole outfit was continually at odds. How could he expect to be treated otherwise than with cold suspicion?

But for all that he felt sore and disgruntled as he and Colonel Rives unsaddled, fed and watered the horses almost in silence. Had he not genuinely given up the old life and turned against his former associates totally and completely—even to the extent of raising up a dozen or more bitter enemies any one of whom would undoubtedly shoot him on sight? What more could he do? And where was the justice in treating him still as if he were an outcast, not fit for association with decent people? Into the colonel's abstraction he read a new reserve if not suspicion and as the two walked back to the ranch house, Dan's mind was full of bitterness and sharp resentment.

CHAPTER XXII

SEPARATION

WHAT he found there did not tend to soothe his troubled spirit. Mrs. Haight stood over the stove, lips compressed and eyes determined. Nell's pretty, tanned face was uneasy and uncertain. Shirley, flushed and rebellious, stood beside the neatly spread table. As the men entered she flashed a swift glance at Moran, but looked away before he could read the expression in her brown eyes.

"Talkin' me over," thought Dan, his lips curling slightly. "Well, they're shore welcome to."

The sense of restraint, so plainly evidenced, lasted throughout the meal, which was presently served. There was little conversation, and it was spasmodic and palpably forced. Moran made no effort to ease the situation. His sore resentment gained strength and force, and by the time the table was cleared and the dishes cleaned up, he was ready at the slightest provocation to fling up the whole business on which they were embarked. For a moment he thought that provocation was coming as Mrs. Haight clattered the last dish onto a shelf beside the stove and turned toward them, her square, weather-beaten face resolute and determined.

"The girls have been tellin' me what yo're plannin' for," she said, eyeing Moran squarely. "I ain't got

nothin' to say about you two men goin' off into the mountains prospectin', no matter how much of a fool business I may think it is. But this I will say: It ain't fit for a young girl to trapse off into the wilds with two men even if one of 'em *is* her father. She'd much better stay right here an' keep Nell an' me comp'ny."

So that was it! He wasn't to be trusted with the girl! Moran bit his lips and with an effort refrained from giving voice to what was in his mind. Colonel Rives stared at his hostess in surprise and swiftly growing approval.

"You mean you'd be willing to have her stay here with you?" he asked doubtfully. "It might be weeks or even months before——"

"That's nothing to me," cut in Mrs Haight, subsiding heavily into a stout chair. "There's plenty o' room an' I'll be right glad to have her. She may find it dull——" with a significant glance at Shirley—— "but it'd be a great sight better for her than campin' out in that rough, wild——"

"It isn't that, Mrs. Haight," broke in Shirley, turning a flushed, troubled face toward the older woman. "It would be lovely here and I know I shouldn't have a dull minute. I'm awfully grateful to you, too, for thinking of taking me in this way. But I'm used to roughing it, and I'm sure I could be of help to father and——er——Mr. Moran by cooking and—— Well, lots of ways. Dad's all I've got, and

we haven't been separated for——”

“But my dear,” interrupted Colonel Rives, “don't you see how much better an arrangement this would be? All along we've worried a good deal at the thought of the hardships you'd have to go through. I'd miss you, of course—miss you a great deal. But my mind would be much easier knowing that you were safe and comfortable here with Mrs. Haight.”

“Jest what I been sayin',” declared the older woman with satisfaction. “I'm glad to see yuh got that much sense, Colonel. Well, that's settled, praise be! Now we can set down comfortable an' enjoy the evenin'. There ain't been anybody drop in for weeks, an' I'm sorta parched for news. What's been goin' on in Hatchet, Nell? How's Mis' Stebbins, an' what come o' that sister o' hers who was on from Clayton for a visit?”

Shirley's lips parted impulsively, but as she took in the solid, competent, determined air of her hostess, her protest remained unuttered. With a helpless little movement of her shoulders, she glanced swiftly toward Moran, only to find his gaze fixed sullenly on the floor.

For an instant she stood hesitating, a faint flush creeping up into her face. Then abruptly, heedless of Mrs. Haight's open disapproval and of Nell Driscoll's scantily veiled curiosity, she swiftly crossed the room and paused before him. Unerringly she seemed

to sense the cause of his discontent.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a low tone. “I told her that you had left Saddle Butte for good, but—she——”

“She’s certain shore, I’m out to skin yuh an’ yore dad, I’ll bet,” put in Dan, a touch of hardness in his voice. “I expect she’s told yuh I was jest lyin’ so to get the best of you two. Ain’t that right?”

Shirley’s lids dropped under the direct gaze of those cool, slightly accusing gray eyes, but lifted swiftly again.

“But why do you care?” she countered swiftly. “You know, and I know, and Dad, too, that it isn’t true. What difference does it make what she thinks? Besides, she’s bound to find out the truth soon.”

Moran’s gaze softened and a faint smile momentarily quirked the corners of his lips. “Mebbe yore right,” he admitted. “I expect I’m a fool to let it bother me. I s’pose I oughta be thankful her havin’ it in for me made her want yuh to stop here on the Bar S.”

“Oh!” reproachfully. “Why, you’re as bad as Dad, wanting to get rid of me.”

There was a pause in which he stood looking at her in a way that brought the color into the girl’s face.

“No,” he returned slowly, “it ain’t that. I reckon yuh know it ain’t. I’d like a heap to have yuh with us, but yuh see, I know that country. The old lady’s

right when she says it ain't any place for a woman."

"But you'll be gone ever so long," she said dismally.

"Not likely. If things are like I think, we oughta make a quick clean-up. If they ain't— Well, that'll bring us back all the sooner. Say! How much did yuh tell Mrs. Haight? Yuh didn't let on——"

"Oh, no." Instinctively they both pitched their voices low so that only an indistinct murmur reached the three people on the other side of the room. "I only repeated what you told Nell. Neither of them have the least idea we've a special, definite clue to follow. That's why Mrs. Haight thinks it'll be nothing but a wild goose chase."

"Good. Let her think so, though I reckon she's safe enough. Well, I better say good night, I think. I want to go out an' look over the outfit so there won't be any time wasted in the mornin'. We oughta start as soon as we can see to ride."

"You mean you still think someone might be following?"

"I don't know, but there's no sense takin' chances. We'll be off by daybreak, an' if there ain't anybody to fool, so much the better. So it'll be good-bye, too, for a while, I reckon. No use yore gettin' up that early."

"But I will! How could you think I'd not at least be up to see you off."

And so she was. Though Nell Driscoll still slept

the sleep of worn out nerves relaxed at last, Shirley rose long before daybreak, helped Mrs. Haight prepare breakfast and sat down with the two men while they ate it. Afterward she walked with them as far as the beginning of the trail leading back into the mountains. And long after the hard gray shadows had swallowed up her slim, graceful figure, there lingered in Moran's mind a vivid memory of her brown eyes, raised to his; he still thrilled at the recollection of the decided grip of her firm, cool fingers.

CHAPTER XXIII

SPIKE MOGRIDGE

LEANING back in his special chair, Ormsby Asher fixed his lieutenant with a chilling glance.

"Eleven days—twelve, including today—it's taken you to find out *this!*" he rapped out contemptuously. "It's a wonder to me you didn't finish up the two weeks and call it a vacation."

Foss McCoy squirmed uneasily under his employer's scornful regard. "Yuh might think I'd been loafin'," he retorted sullenly. "Ain't I told yuh my hoss was wore down to a whisper navigatin' them doggone mountains, an' as for me, I lost ten good pounds an' like to starved to death before I met up with that fellah, Mosby. I ain't never claimed to be no wonder, but——"

"You said a mouthful!" put in Asher cuttingly. "Blondy's plumb solid from the neck up, but I'll gamble even he'd have dug up something."

"Huh! He would, would he?" flung back the exasperated McCoy. "I'd shore admire to see him. What 'ud yuh have me do, anyhow? Here I trace the hull blasted bunch to the Bar S, for all they tried to throw me off'n the track by startin' out on the Thunder Creek trail. They gets there at dusk, an' next mornin' at sunup Moran an' the ol' codger is both flitted, an' I ain't seen hide or hair of 'em since."

“Did you try the Fanning trail?” inquired Asher curtly.

“Shore I did. That’s what I done first off, but the tracks there was all old. Looks like they musta struck back into the mountains, so I circled around the lower end o’ Bar S valley, an’ I been combin’ the hills ever since. I dunno what more I could of done, short o’ payin’ a call on Ma Haight an’ askin’ her perlite which way her friends went.”

“You might have done worse,” averred Asher, feeling in his pocket for a cigar. “It ain’t hard to fake up an excuse that’ll fool a woman.”

“Oh, ain’t it? Yuh talk like Ma Haight was some kind of a greenhorn. An’ how about Cass Burton an’ Jerry White? After that business last spring, they’d either of ’em pull down on me on sight. I shore would like to know what yuh expect of me, anyhow, Orms.”

“Results,” stated Asher with cold succinctness.

Scratching a match on the underside of the chair, he held it to his cigar. When this was drawing well, he rose and moving over to the window, stood staring out, hands linked loosely beneath his long coattails.

“Results!” he repeated harshly. “That’s what I want, and what I aim to get from anyone I hire. You don’t find me kickin’ about costs, or time spent or anything else, do you, so long as you produce results?” Shaggy eyebrows contracted, he shot a hard glance at McCoy. “Looks like we’d have to have

another deal all around," he went on significantly. "Here's you fallin' down hard, an' Jessup makin' even more of a boggy ford with that business of Rafe Driscoll's girl."

McCoy moistened his lips. His blustering air had subsided with the abrupt completeness of a pricked balloon.

"She's stayin' there at the Bar S, along with the other one," he muttered, in a hurried effort to distract Asher's attention from his own failings. "I dunno how the devil they come together. Moran never paid no attention to Nell when he was here before."

For a space Asher made no comment. Still staring absently out of the window, his coldly brilliant eyes narrowed the least trifle and the slight movement of his hands beneath the coattails ceased.

"You saw 'em together?" he asked at length.

"Shore. On my way back I stopped to give the ranch the once-over again. They was ridin' along the upper end o' the valley. I had my glasses with me, an' got a good look at 'em."

"H'm! Was Mrs. Haight with 'em, or any of the Bar S men?"

"Nope. They was alone not far from where the trail goes down from the rim. While I was lookin' at 'em the other gal got off'n her hoss to tighten up the cinch, or somethin'. I thinks to myself at the time that——"

He paused, suddenly aware that Asher was no longer attending. His narrowed eyes were fixed intently on something in the street outside, and across his hawklike face there rippled momentarily an expression of intense irritation. Through the open window came the thud of hoofs, the creak of saddle leather, the clear jingle of a spur.

"It's Spike Mogridge," said Asher, turning sharply on McCoy. "Not a peep out of you about this to him or any of the fellahs he's got with him. Remember that."

"I get yuh," replied Foss hastily. "Yuh needn't fret none about my babblin', Orms. I know how to keep a still tongue."

His palpable relief at this opportune interruption drew a sour smile from Asher.

"You better," he stated meaningly as he moved toward the door. "Slip out the back way, an' keep outa sight 'till I send for you. We'll go over this again—later."

The barroom, hazy with tobacco smoke and resounding with rough talk and laughter, was well filled with patrons, a goodly proportion of whom crowded about the bar at one end. It was characteristic of Ormsby Asher's movements that no one seemed to see him enter.

At one moment he was absent; at the next he might be seen leaning carelessly against the bar listening indifferently to the garrulous remarks of

Jed Zeek, who appeared to have been drinking over much. Even Blondy Jessup, who, in spite of a rather insipid regularity of feature, missed very little that went on within range of his long-lashed violet eyes, was not immediately aware of his employer's presence.

It was curious that Jessup, after a single, searching glance at his apparently absorbed patron, should glance swiftly toward the outer door. When there entered presently a tall, broad-shouldered man of thirty odd, handsome in a bold, full-blooded fashion despite divers freshly healed abrasions and faint, greenish-yellow shadows beneath his slightly puffed eyes, Blondy's somewhat ingenuous countenance was immediately wiped of all expression. Hastily sliding bottle and glass toward a clamorous patron, he reached for a towel and began to mop the bar top with meticulous precision. But all the while, from under those curling lashes, he closely followed the movements of the newcomer and the two men who had entered at his heels.

For a moment or two the former stood just inside the door staring around the crowded, smoke-filled room. Then, catching sight of Asher, his eyes brightened and he made his way directly toward the proprietor.

"Hello, ol' timer!" he said, bringing one hand down on the sloping, broadcloth-covered shoulder nearest him. "How's tricks?"

Asher's surprise was not overdone. He turned negligently, and as his glance rested on the tall man's face, one eyebrow quirked characteristically.

"Well, Spike," he drawled, quite as if he had not been fully aware of the other's every movement. "When'd you hit town?"

"About two minutes ago," responded Mogridge. "I got a mouth like a wad o' cottonwool," he added pointedly.

Asher summoned Blondy with a movement of his eyebrows. "Name your pizen," he suggested, including Mogridge's two companions in the invitation.

The three lost no time in lining up against the bar. When a couple of man-sized drinks had been swallowed, Mogridge set down his glass and glanced at Asher.

"I'm after that polecat, Dan Moran," he stated belligerently. "The cow-faced lump o' slumgullion went on the prod over to Saddle Butte ten days or so ago an' shot up the joint. Plugged Bill Scully in the arm an' raised a helluva time before he left, a-boilin'. Me an' Monk an' Squint tracked him part way to Clayton an' then lost his trail. I'm wonderin' if he mighta doubled back an' cut down through the Gap."

Asher raised his eyebrows. "Moran!" he commented in surprise, an emotion not entirely assumed, for he was learning things. "Well! What got his 'dander up? I thought you were all nice an' friendly together."

“Friendly—hell!” Mogridge flushed darkly. “He’s yaller, he is, the lousy pup! I’ve suspicioned it some while, an’ was jest about ready to tie the can to him when he lit out. Yuh mean to say he ain’t been here?”

For an instant Asher hesitated, wondering how far he could play this big, blustering individual, whom, though he found useful and at times, perhaps, a little dangerous, he held in secret contempt. But before he had time to utter his swiftly formed reply, his hand was forced.

“Shore he was—a week ago Friday.” It was the voice of Jed Zeek, a trifle thick but distinct enough for all that. In his eagerness he swayed forward from where he had been hugging the bar directly back of Asher. “Him an’ a gal an’ an old geezer with a black mustache. They pulled up in front o’ Timmons’ store at twenty-past eight, an’ all three of ’em went in—an’—an’——”

Under a swift, sidelong, scorching glance from Asher, Zeek’s voice faltered, quavered and died away. Save for the stimulation of a glass or two beyond the ordinary it is quite unlikely that even his love of gossip would have tempted him to break in so rashly upon a conversation in which Ormsby Asher, as he now realized only too poignantly, had such evident concern. As the older man’s venomous glare stabbed him, the hotel keeper’s jaw sagged and he stumbled back against the supporting bulk of the bar.

“Well?” snapped Mogridge, his eyes glowing with sudden triumph and excitement. “What’d they do? Where’d they go? What’s the matter with yuh, Zeek? Ain’t yuh got no tongue?”

Suddenly he turned and stared suspiciously at Asher. “Why’n’t yuh tell me first off he was here?” he demanded harshly.

“You didn’t give me time,” rejoined Asher smoothly. “I saw him and talked to him, but how was I to know he’d busted things up the way you say. He told me you and he had split, but——”

He paused, his keen glance sweeping the faces of the men near him, several of whom were showing a distinct interest in the conversation.

“Suppose we step into my room,” he suggested significantly. “We’ll be more comfortable there.”

Still scowling, Mogridge hesitated an instant and then shrugged his shoulders. “Aw right,” he acquiesced shortly. “Yuh fellahs stick around,” he added to Greer and Henger. “I’ll be out before long.”

He evidently knew the way, for he strode past Asher toward the door in the corner, thus missing a brief but potent glance the proprietor cast at Jed Zeek. It was merely a passing stare, but so full of venom and distinct, unpleasing promise that the stout hotel keeper turned a mottled gray, and when he was able to pull himself together, he staggered through the crowd and vanished into the gathering dusk.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SPIDER SPINS A WEB

HAVING closed the door of his private room, Asher lit the lamp on the center table, closed the window, produced bottle and glasses, and motioned Mogridge to a comfortable chair. It was worthy of remark that while his guest faced the uncompromising glare of the powerful oil burner, Asher's own features were more or less shadowed. He had managed the position of the chairs so casually, however, that Spike seemed quite unsuspecting of any intention in the matter.

"Waal, spit it out," he growled when he had poured himself a drink, his coarsely handsome face still sullen and suspicious. "Zeek says there was a gal an' an old man with him. Is that so?"

Asher nodded. "They stopped in front of Timmons' store about half-past eight and all three of 'em went in. The girl wasn't bad looking. The old man——"

"Bad lookin'!" interjected Mogridge. "I'll say she ain't! Great Godfrey! An' I thought you was a judge of wimmin. She's——" Abruptly his lips clamped shut. "Waal, what next?" he went on more quietly. "They went in to Timmons', yuh say. What was *you* 'doin' all the time?"

"Watching them from this window," returned

Asher composedly. "When Moran and the old fellow came out with a lot of stuff, I strolled around through the bar and later out into the street. I was just in time to be introduced. The lady's name is — er — Rives; the old man seems to be her father."

Spike drew a long breath. "I guessed that much," he said curtly. "So the skunk's wormed in there, has he?" His eyes glowed with anger and he emptied his tumbler at a gulp. "What kind of a story 'did he tell? Or didn't yuh ask him?" he added with a sneer.

Under the lash of his contemptuous tongue, Asher's expression did not alter. Perhaps there was the faintest tightening of the thin lips, a touch of added hardness in the cold eyes, though the shadow lying across his face made it difficult to be certain. But if Mogridge could have guessed what was passing behind that hawklike, immobile mask, even he would have given pause.

"Naturally," purred Asher smoothly. "I took him to one side and we had quite a talk. He told me you an' he had split, and he was headin' west." Resting one elbow on the table, he shaded his eyes with a long, thin hand. "In some way he fell in with this man Rives," he went on with slow deliberation, "who, it seems, is interested in hunting — gold."

He paused, acutely aware of Mogridge's slight start and the sudden avaricious light which gleamed momentarily in the man's black eyes.

“Gold? Huh!” grunted Spike, controlling himself with an evident effort. “Waal, go on. What’s Moran got to do with it?”

“He said he’d hired himself out to Rives, who don’t know much about prospecting, to show him some likely places,” rejoined Asher smoothly. “Told me they were going to take a look through the Thunder Creek country.”

Mogridge’s jaw sagged as an expression of utter blankness overspread his face. “Thunder Creek!” he ejaculated. “What the devil— Why, that ain’t— Hells bells! It’s a blind, o’ course. He wasn’t goin’ that way a-tall. An’ yuh let him ride off without liftin’ a finger, I s’pose. Gawd, but some folks are thick!”

A faint touch of color crept slowly into Asher’s pallid, wrinkled face. “Not quite as bad as that, Spike,” he retorted quietly. “His story was all right, in some ways, and at the time I hadn’t any reason for suspicions. Still, I was a little curious to see if he really was heading for Thunder Creek, and if so what he might find there. So I— er— sent McCoy after them.”

“Ah! Well?”

“Unfortunately he boggled it to some extent. He got back only this afternoon. I’d just finished giving him a piece of my mind when you showed up.”

As he slowly narrated the steps McCoy had taken, his keen, cold eyes, almost invisible under indolently

'drooping lids, noted the slightest, most delicate shade of expression rippling across Spike's face. Deliberately, with not a little inward scorn, he played upon the man's emotions, finding some slight retaliatory satisfaction in lifting Mogridge's hopes only to dash them callously again. And then, having eased his mind of some small portion of its venom, he set himself to finding out just what it was Spike was holding back.

Not his infatuation for Shirley Rives; that became only too swiftly and plainly evident. No; it was something else, something having to do, apparently, with the objective of the three wanderers. Though Spike proved uncommonly stubborn when it came to giving out definite information, Asher presently reached the conclusion that the movements of Moran and Colonel Rives were not in the least aimless, but directed toward a very definite end. Instead of starting forth on a general prospecting trip, they were—or Spike thoroughly believed them to be—heading for a location that had already panned out. A rich one, too, if Asher could judge from Mogridge's almost feverish eagerness to locate the vanished men.

"We gotta down that skunk if it takes six months," Spike finally declared emphatically. "He knows too much, Orms. Why, if he wanted to he could raise a stink that might even run us outa the county."

"*You*, perhaps," corrected Asher drily. "Person-

ally, I'm not worryin' a whole lot about myself."

"Alla same, he could make things mighty unpleasant," persisted Spike with a fine show of energy. "I reckon it's up to me an' Monk an' Squint to start off tomorrow an' comb them mountains 'till we find him."

He reached forward and poured himself another drink. The diamond on Asher's finger sparkled as his hand dropped gently to the table top.

"I can tell you a better way than that," he remarked quietly.

"What?"

"Get him through the girl."

"The girl? How in — What 'd'yuh mean?"

Asher leaned forward slightly. "Suppose she — a — disappeared," he said in a lowered voice. "The minute word was brought to 'em, wouldn't Moran an' old Rives come hot-footin' back to find out what's happened to her?"

Mogridge hesitated an instant. "Likely they would," he admitted slowly. "But how — Who's gonna send word to 'em?"

"Mrs. Haight. She must know where they've gone. There's nothing hard about the thing. Foss says the two girls ride around alone together. All we'd have to do would be to keep a close watch on the valley and nab 'em when we get a chance. There's an old abandoned line camp on my ranch —"

"*We!*" cut in Spike sharply. "What's the idea

o' yore hornin' in, Orms? I thought yuh wasn't worryin' none about Moran."

"I'm not. You can have him and welcome—likewise this—er—Rives girl. I'm interested—" Asher smiled a slow, feline smile—"in Nell Driscoll. I had her about where I wanted her when she up an' cut away."

"O—h!" An expression of understanding and relief overspread Mogriddle's heavy countenance. "So that's how it is, is it? Hanged if there ain't somethin' in that bean o' yores, after all!" He laughed boisterously and took a long drink. "We'll start in the mornin'—huh? What's yore idea? Yuh comin' with us?"

"I wasn't planning to," returned Asher. "I've got some things to see to here. I'll send McCoy and a couple of other men who'll be under your orders. When you've turned the trick you can send me word. That line camp o' mine 'll make a fine place to keep the women—retired, you know, an' yet not too far out of the way."

Again that expression of relief rippled across Mogriddle's flushed face. Asher, accurately reading the other's mind, smiled inwardly.

Ten minutes later, as he stood alone facing the closed door, the smile materialized into a vivid, wicked sneer that curled the corners of his lips and glinted evilly in his hard eyes. Reviewing swiftly the details of the interview, his satisfaction grew.

Brainless clod that he was, Mogridge would undoubtedly pull the chestnuts out of the fire for Asher to enjoy. To be sure there was bound to be a bitter awakening later for Spike, but Asher had already coldly planned for that.

“Now for a little talk with Foss to give him his instructions,” he reflected. “I can see Callahan at the ranch tomorrow. A bunch of men strung along the hills at likely points south of Bar S can’t help but spot those two when they come out and trace back to where they started from.”

His face grew keen and thoughtful and he drummed absently on the bare table with long, thin fingers.

“I wonder what sort of a strike they’ve made back there in the hills?” he pondered. “Spike wonders, too.” He laughed softly; it was not a pleasant sound. “I must take care to remember that.”

CHAPTER XXV

LOST SQUAW MINE

TUCKED snugly amidst a wilderness of rugged cliffs, of forest-covered slopes, slit bewilderingly by endless cañons, draws and deep, bare gorges, a narrow, treeless gulch blazed in the stifling heat of early afternoon. Insignificant it was in every way, and so hemmed in by natural bulwarks that the desert wanderer might easily pass within a hundred yards and still have no suspicion of its existence.

At one time a stream had evidently flowed along the bottom of the gulch—a stream which, in the thawing spring especially, must have boiled and bubbled over its course with unusual force and volume. There were holes and pockets at intervals and beds of fine, pounded sand, and throughout the entire length of that scanty two-mile stretch the rocks and pebbles were worn smooth by ages of persistent friction.

That, however, was long ago—how long only a skilled geologist could tell. At some remote period nature had stirred, flinging up solid barriers of rock at both ends of the little gulch, turning the stream to other courses, raising, at the same time, no doubt, that curiously regular, cone-shaped peak which towered like a sentinel above the northern extremity.

It was that peak alone which had preserved this

insignificant scratch on nature's bosom. Doubled by the delirium of the lost Sioux squaw, who, twenty odd years ago had plucked from the sands of that dead river a scant handful of golden nuggets, it had become a byword through the country.

Mine it was not, in any ordinary meaning of the word. The gold, washed down from some distant, unknown source, had lodged in holes and pockets along the two-mile course, exposed for the most part to the light of day. Nor was there here a tithe of the fabulous wealth with which rumor had clothed the legend. Moran and Colonel Rives had already discovered this to their sorrow.

For over three weeks the two had toiled and sweated in this stifling, shut-in place with pick and shovel and pan and primitive rocker, and already its possibilities were beginning to be exhausted. To be sure during the first week the takings had been enormous. By simply following the bed of the old stream and poking about in holes and pockets, they had gathered in nuggets of varying sizes that weighed upwards of fifteen hundred ounces. Laborious panning of the sand, with water carried from a distance, added nearly another five hundred to the hoard. But each day the findings had been less—very much less indeed after the likely places had been exhausted.

“Looks like in a coupla days more we'd jest about be pannin' out our keep,” remarked Moran, sitting back on his heels and drawing a shirt sleeve across

his dripping forehead.

The colonel nodded wearily. "I'm afraid so. Very little seems to have lodged in the sand. I suppose the force of the stream carried off the dust and small gold flakes, and only the heavier pieces stuck in rocky pockets. Is the water all used up?"

"Yeah. I s'pose I better pack another load." With a grunt, Moran heaved to his feet, but could not seem to bring himself to start at once on that toilsome trip back to the spring. "Unless," he added hopefully, "yuh want to call it a day."

Colonel Rives' sunken eyes brightened for an instant. Then his long, thin, almost haggard looking face took on a conscience-stricken expression.

"I—I suppose we ought to keep at it," he said dubiously. "I must confess I should enjoy a rest, but——"

"Why not take it, then? Gawd knows we've earned a whole flock of 'em. An' when yuh get down to cases, I ain't so shore but what we're wastin' our time stickin' here any longer. We ain't panned out three ounces since sunup. That shore ain't worth wearin' ourselves down to a whisper for."

The colonel stood up slowly, with a wince or two that told of stiffened muscles and general bodily weariness. He was thinner, gaunter than ever and there were hollows in his wrinkled cheeks that brought a look of swift, veiled solicitude into Moran's eyes.

He himself had, as he expressed it, thinned down considerably during these three weeks of drudgery under the intolerably blazing sun, and he knew how much less fitted the older man was to cope with such hard labor. To be sure he had done his best to spare the colonel in every way possible, but the latter was a difficult person to coddle. Watching him now, Dan had an uneasy suspicion that he was very nearly at the end of his rope.

"Perhaps not," returned the colonel, wiping his forehead. "But how do we know that at any moment we may dig into something rich?"

"We haven't so far," Dan pointed out. "Like I said this mornin', ever since we skimmed the cream that first coupla weeks the dust's been steadily peterin' out. It would take us a year or more to pan all the sand like we're doin' an' in the end we might be a coupla hundred ounces to the good. In my opinion it ain't worth it. However, we don't have to make up our minds right off. Let's go back to camp an' when we're rested up we can chin over this some more."

Without waiting for the colonel's acquiescence, Moran picked up the two buckets and climbed the slope to where a tethered buckskin stood under the scanty shade of a twisted shrub cedar.

"Hot, boy?" he muttered, slinging the buckets, which were tied together by a length of rope, across the horse's back. "An' thirsty? I'll tell a man!

Well, mebbe we'll drag it soon back to where they's plenty grass an' water an'—people. You'll like that, eh? So'll I."

Leading the horse, he rejoined the colonel, and together they walked slowly along the bottom of the gulch toward its single outlet, a narrow opening masked on the farther side by a thick clump of mesquite. Both of the men were too hot to talk, but more than once Dan glanced solicitously at his exhausted companion and cursed himself for not having forced the situation sooner. Three weeks of close relationship had brought about a much better understanding of this courtly, intrepid, slightly erratic product of the South. Even had he not possessed the distinction of being Shirley's father, Moran felt that he would have liked him. He foresaw difficulties in bending the colonel to his will, but he meant to do it somehow.

Pushing through the mesquite they emerged into a narrow cañon hedged in by high, sheer cliffs. It lay approximately northeast, and about a quarter of a mile to the eastward a small tent pitched in the shade of some jack pines. A small spring bubbled up in the rocks not far to one side, the twisting course of its overflow outlined within a thin penciling of green. Farther along the cañon two hobbled horses, a big, rangy bay and a shapely cream, grazed on the scanty herbage.

Both men made straight for the spring and drank

long and deep. The buckskin also lost no time plunging his nozzle into the clear water. When he had finished, Dan hobbled him and joined the colonel, who was sitting in the shade of the jack pines fanning himself with a disreputable hat. For a time neither of them spoke. Then the older man drew from his pocket a limp buckskin bag, grimy with much handling, which contained the day's meager takings.

"I reckon we'd better put it with the rest," he remarked.

Dan nodded, and taking it from him, made his way over to the foot of the cliffs where fallen stones and rubble were piled in chaotic heaps. Pausing at a certain spot, he lifted a heavy slab and disclosed a hidden hollow underneath containing two bulging canvas bags stoutly made of double thickness. Setting aside the slabs, he squatted on his heels and opening the nearest sack, emptied into it the contents of the little bag. A shadow falling across the hole made him glance up swiftly to find the colonel standing beside him.

"After all, it's a very tidy bit," mused the older man.

"I'll say so!" agreed Moran. "There's over two thousand ounces in them two bags."

"Thirty thousand dollars and more," commented the colonel thoughtfully. "I'm afraid I must seem very greedy," he went on in an apologetic tone. "It isn't altogether that, though. There's a sort of fas-

ination about it that rather gets into the blood. One never knows when——”

“I get yuh,” nodded Moran as he paused. “I’ve felt that way myself, of’en, ’specially the first coupla weeks. When a turn o’ the shovel may open up three, four hundred dollars at a clip, a fellah jest can’t leave off. But I’m afraid that sorta thing’s over for us now.”

Colonel Rives nodded. “I expect you’re right, Dan. I’ve been thinking it over and it seems to me we ought to put what we’ve got into a safe place without any more delay. I don’t suppose there’s much chance of anyone stumbling in here, but one never knows. Afterward we could come back, of course, if it seemed worth while. Another thing, there’s— Shirley. Likely enough she’ll begin to fret and worry if we stay away too long.”

Moran’s eyes brightened. “Yo’re willin’ for us to drag it, then?” he questioned eagerly. “Great stuff!” He tied the mouth of the canvas sack with a jerk and replaced the flat stone. “We can get ready tonight an’ start first thing in the mornin’. Oughta hit the Bar S by dinnertime, anyhow.”

Fatigue and heat forgotten, he at once set about briskly preparing for departure. He, too, had been thinking about Shirley. As a matter of fact her image was rarely absent from his mind. At night, particularly, when the day’s grubbing was over and he had spread his long length on the sloping bed of

pine needles, he could almost see her face looking at him through the starlit shadows, or across the glow of the blazing campfire.

Always that mental picture was lovely in contour and expression. The sweet, sensitive mouth was always half smiling the warm, vivid eyes regarded him with the level, straightforward gaze of perfect friendliness. Now and then his longing read wistfully into that glance a touch of something deeper, but as the fire died and he came back to stern reality, the conviction usually stole over him that it was his imagination alone that had placed it there.

Tonight as he lay wide-eyed and restless, his mind keenly active in spite of bodily weariness, the old, troubled questioning reiterated through his brain with more than usual persistency. Did she really care a little? Was it possible that she could? Tomorrow he would see her face to face. What if he took his courage in both hands and put the question? Sometimes anything seemed preferable to this harassing doubt. And yet again, as long as he remained uncertain he could at least hope. Still undecided, he fell asleep at last to dream that he was holding her in his arms. So vivid was the vision that he could feel the caress of her crisp hair across his face, the warm touch of her responsive lips, the flutter of her heart against his own. When he awoke to find the stars paling before the creeping gray of dawn, his hesitation had vanished.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE AMBUSH

RISING above the jagged eastern skyline the sun saw Moran and his companion crossing a wide mesa close to the base of sheer, frowning granite cliffs. Back of them the cone-shaped peak, bathed in the rosy glow of dawn, stood out against the darker background like a mass of pale pink onyx. It did not look ten miles away, but they had made such an excellent start that it was all of that and more. Indeed, only a few hundred yards ahead loomed the mouth of the narrow, winding gorge through which they had descended from the southern side of the Rattlesnake range.

A night's rest, coupled with the knowledge that the toilsome labor of the past three weeks was over, had done wonders for Colonel Rives. No doubt, also, the thought of their success contributed not a little to his excellent spirits. After years of grubbing a bare living from the earth, the pleasing weight of a thousand precious ounces distributed about one's clothes and saddle would be enough to bring sunshine to the heart of the most confirmed pessimist; and the colonel, though somewhat seriously inclined, was far from that.

He was riding Bob, Moran's shapely cream, who was the steadiest and most dependable of the three

horses. Dan bestrode the rangy bay and led the buckskin, on whose unwilling back their belongings were packed. Apparently the animal had made up his mind that he had been a pack-horse quite long enough, and his behavior from the very beginning had been the one flaw in an otherwise auspicious start. But even that could not greatly affect Dan's exuberant spirits.

"You Ranger hawss!" he admonished, after a sharp and heated struggle to force the animal to enter the gorge. "One more o' them brainstorms, an' I'm likely to get real peevish with yuh. At that, I dunno's yuh can blame him a whole lot," he added. "All his young life he's carried nothin' but a saddle before."

"I suppose I should have ridden him instead of Bob," remarked the colonel. "If he has these tantrums often he's going to hold us up considerably."

"He won't," declared Moran firmly. "Bob's done more'n his share o' the dirty work, an' it's time he laid off it. Come on, yuh wall-eyed old horntoad, an' quit yore foolishness."

Range "came on," though grudgingly, with much laying back of the ears and a display of general cussedness. Reluctant to enter the gorge, he seemed equally against quitting it, and when he was finally dragged out onto the wide ledge that thrust forth from the side of the mountain, Moran halted to mop his face and addressed the stubborn animal in forceful

terms of withering contempt.

The ledge curved around the broad base of an outthrust spur and from one point, through a gap in the lower hills, was presented a sweeping view over low flats and rough, rock-strewn plains amidst which a glint of twisting silver showed the winding course of the Moon River. Somewhere in that wide, chaotic wilderness, bounded on the farther side by the hazy blue of distant mountains, lay Saddle Butte, the headquarters of Spike Mogridge and his band of cattle thieves and outlaws. Moran gave it no more than a casual glance. That part of his life, he told himself with a feeling of extreme satisfaction, was as dead as last year's tumbleweeds—so dead, indeed, that he could look upon the scene of more than one questionable exploit without even a touch of heightening color.

A period of deceptive docility on the part of the buckskin enabled them to push on along the ledge with fair rapidity. They had even made fair progress along the twisting intricacies of the mountain way before the horse began to act up again. From that time on, however, his outbursts of stubborn protest were so frequent and so prolonged that Moran completely lost his temper and at intervals seriously considered dropping the lead rope and letting the beast work out his own salvation.

That move, however, could scarcely be seriously entertained. The loss of their belongings, though

annoying, would be a matter of no great moment, but considering the rough, often hazardous nature of their route, the presence of a spare mount was of vital importance. The gold had been equally divided between the two men, and if either the bay or the cream should be disabled they would be in an exceedingly difficult plight.

So Moran was obliged to make the best of the situation and by dint of alternating persuasion and force he managed to keep the obstreperous animal moving. But the effect on his temper was not improving, and when at length — very much delayed — they reached the level floor of a shallow cañon not more than two miles from the head of the slope leading down into Bar S valley, he gave a deep sigh of fervent relief.

The sides of the cañon, which was no more than a scant half mile in length, were grown up in spruce. With the colonel in the lead they had made about half that distance when without the slightest provocation the buckskin planted his forefeet stubbornly and dragged back on the lead rope.

“Yuh big hunk o’ misery!” flamed Moran passionately, twisting in the saddle. “Hells bells! If I don’t——”

Crack! Cra — ack! Two sharp reports shattered the placid noonday stillness of the cañon. A bullet whined past Moran’s head so close that it seemed actually to stir the hair that crisped above his ear.

He saw the colonel reel in his saddle and at the same instant noted the curling wisps of smoke eddy out of the spruce on the slope to his left.

Like a flash he dropped the lead rope, 'dug spurs into the bay and, jerking out his gun, began pumping lead into the trees that masked the ambush.

"Keep a-boilin'!" he yelled to the colonel, bending low over the bay's neck. "Get around that rock ahead an' under cover."

Two more bits of lead pinged across his bent back. He answered them with the last shot in his Colt, and jabbing this back into the holster, whirled around a massive, outthrust buttress and swept alongside Colonel Rives.

"Keep goin' if yuh can!" he urged. "Where yuh hit?"

The colonel's left arm hung limply; already a spreading blot of crimson stained his shirt. His face was ashen, but his lips pressed firmly together.

"Shoulder," he answered briefly.

"Can yuh stick it out a while longer?"

The older man nodded. "It's not much farther, is it?" he asked. "I seem to remember——"

"Not more'n two miles at most," encouraged Dan. "We'll make it all right an' beat the scoundrels."

For perhaps ten minutes they clattered on in silence, Moran keeping an anxious eye on the tall, lean figure at his side, while he slipped fresh shells

into his six shooter. Presently the cañon twisted into a wide gulch that sloped down at a considerable angle. If only they could reach the end of this in safety, decided Dan, they would be reasonably secure.

The thought had scarcely passed through his brain when from behind came the sound he had been waiting for — the thud of hoofs. His lips tightened and he glanced swiftly at the man beside him.

“Could—” he began, but wasted no further words.

The colonel had let fall his reins and was gripping the saddle horn with a force that brought out a row of white dots across his bony knuckles. Beads of sweat stood out on his white forehead; his thin body swayed perilously with every movement of the cream. Swiftly Dan forced the bay closer and was just in time to catch his friend as he slid sidewise.

For a scant second he held the other upright with a firm grip about the body. Then, with a heave of powerful shoulders, he dragged the helpless man across the saddle in front of him, supporting him with his left arm.

“I— I’m— sorry—” muttered the colonel faintly. “I— My head——”

“Don’t yuh worry none,” cut in Moran reassuringly. “We’ll make it all right.”

But as he urged the bay forward, he wondered. Already the clatter of hoofs behind them sounded perilously close. At any moment the bunch of riders

were likely to swing into the gulch, and hampered as he was, Dan fully realized how helpless he would be against them. As his glance swept ahead, gauging the length of that level, open slope, his eyes darkened and the muscles of his jaw and chin hardened.

Then suddenly the remembrance of the gold packed into the colonel's saddle pockets brought his head around swiftly. The sight of the riderless cream trotting close at his heels brought a momentary grim smile to Moran's set lips.

"Good old Bobby!" he muttered. "Lucky I didn't trust to that longhorn buckskin." He rowelled the bay gently. "Go to it, boy — yuh gotta. We'll beat 'em yet, ol' hawss."

CHAPTER XXVII

TRAPPED

SHIRLEY RIVES gave a low, rippling laugh and tucked back a flying strand of crisp brown hair.

“Oh, but he *is!*” she stated positively. “If you could see him look at you! It’s a case, if ever there was one.”

Nell Driscoll flushed becomingly and striving in vain to hide her embarrassment under a casual manner, shrugged her slender shoulders.

“I don’t see how you can say that,” she protested. “I never saw him before we came here, and that was only three weeks ago Monday.”

“All the more credit to your charms, ‘dear,” smiled Shirley. “It isn’t every girl that can have a man— How is it the boys say it? Oh, yes; feeding out of your hand, in three weeks.”

“You’re talking nonsense,” retorted Nell, her flush deepening. “He hangs around, of course, but that’s because— What about Windy Bogert?” she countered in sudden triumph. “I never saw anybody quite so far gone in all my life.”

“Oh—Windy! Goodness!” Shirley giggled. “Isn’t he funny the way he sits on the edge of his chair and makes sheep’s eyes, and hardly ever says a word? Did you hear Mrs. Haight go for him on the porch yesterday? ‘Yuh Windy! Do you think I’m

runnin' one o' these here rest cures for invalids? My land o' love! About forty things hollerin' to be done an' yuh set there like yuh'd took root. Have I gotta take yuh by the ear an' lead yuh to a job o' work?' "

Her imitation of their hostess' deep, throaty voice and forceful manner was excellent, and both girls went off into peals of laughter. Then Shirley was smitten with compunction.

"I expect I'm rather horrid," she said contritely. "After all he's awfully decent, even if he isn't very thrilling. I only wish he'd live up to his name and have a little more to say. I get worn out trying to carry on a conversation. Last night— What are you stopping for?"

Nell, who had reined in her horse beside a clump of pines, gave a slight shrug.

"It's so rough and rocky farther on," she returned, with a jerk of her head toward the narrowing end of Bar S valley. "I suppose we might as well turn back."

Shirley straightened her hat slightly. "I wish there was some other place to ride," she commented. "I believe we've worn a regular rut up and down the valley and it's getting monotonous." Her glance swept past the pines toward the foot of the little-used trail leading out of the valley and thence toward Hatchet and her eyes brightened. "Why shouldn't we explore a little up there?" she suggested.

Her companion looked dubious. "Do you think

it would be—safe? Mrs. Haight told us not to leave the valley.”

“I know, and of course we shouldn’t go far. But we’ve been here for nearly a month. Surely if anyone had followed us from Hatchet we’d have known of it by this time, don’t you think?”

“I suppose so,” returned Nell slowly, her expression still doubtful. “Still, of course, we can’t really be sure, and I——”

She paused, and bending sidewise in her saddle stared back in the direction of the ranch house. Shirley, whose horse faced the other way, caught the expression of sudden interest in her friend’s eyes.

“Who is it?” she asked, turning in her saddle. “Oh! One of the boys. I wonder which?”

Nell did not answer at once and the two girls, withdrawing still farther into the shelter of the pines, peered through the interlacing branches at the solitary rider, still a long ways off, who loped toward them. Suddenly Nell gave a subdued little scream of mirth.

“It’s Windy!” she giggled. “I know him from that yellow horse he rides.”

“Goodness!” ejaculated Shirley, glancing hastily around. “He’ll ride back with us and we’ll have to make talk the entire way. There isn’t a place to hide, unless——” Her lips straightened firmly. “I’m going up the trail,” she went on hurriedly, touching her horse with one heel. “Only a little way,” she

added over her shoulder. "The woods are thick up there, and he'll never guess we've left the valley."

Nell hesitated an instant and then pushed after her. As they mounted the rough, sloping track the pine grove hid them from the approaching rider, and the moment they had surmounted the rim, a heavy growth of timber on both sides of the trail continued the concealment. Shirley rode on a few hundred yards and then glanced back at her companion.

"You don't suppose he'd come this far?" she asked.

"Not unless he saw us," returned Nell. "Or unless — Gracious! I never thought of that. Perhaps he's going to Hatchet."

The possibility threw both girls into a mild, partly amused sort of panic, and finding a spot where the woods were open enough, they turned the horses off the trail and rode in among the trees.

"It's too ridiculous!" whispered Shirley, when at last they came to a halt in a tiny clearing behind which a mass of boulders rose among the pines. "I do hope he passes on. We'd feel so silly to have him find us running away from him and hiding like two kids."

Nell nodded, and in silence the two girls sat there listening intently. Presently, and much sooner than either had expected, they heard the beat of hoofs out on the trail and exchanged swift glances. When the sharp clatter changed abruptly to a deadened thud,

Shirley realized that they were caught and made a wry face.

“Darn!” she breathed vexatiously. “Well, we can’t help it. I’m not going to run any farther. We’ll have to make believe we came up here just for a lark.”

Nell acquiesced, and both prepared to meet with bland innocence and surprise the appearance of the pertinacious Windy. Already through the trees they could make out a slight sense of movement, but owing to the heavy, drooping branches of the pines that clustered round their retreat it was impossible to see more than a few yards with any degree of definiteness.

Swiftly the thud of hoofs drew nearer. To Shirley they seemed curiously multiplied, and she wondered a little at Bogert’s recklessness in dashing through the woods at such a speed. Nevertheless her tranquillity was undisturbed as she sat composedly waiting, lips parted in a little preparatory smile of surprise, brows realistically arched.

Abruptly the pine boughs were thrust aside and a mounted horse plunged into the little glade, to halt with a jerk and a slithering of hoofs on the slippery pine needles.

The smile frozen on her lips, Shirley stared at the newcomer in dumb horror. For the horse was not a yellow buckskin at all. The rider was not Bogert, but—Spike Mogridge! And peering over his shoulder she recognized the face of Monk Henger.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CARRIED AWAY

SHIRLEY never knew how long she sat there petrified—just staring in frozen horror at the creature she feared and hated more than anyone on earth, and whom she had hoped and believed never to see again. For a brief space, indeed, it seemed as if this thing simply couldn't be true, as if she were in the grip of some ghastly nightmare and *must* presently awake. Then Mogridge smiled, a slow, hateful, triumphant smile, and in a flash the girl came to herself, dug spurs into her horse's flanks and lashed him with her quirt.

The sudden unexpectedness of the move took Mogridge by surprise, and for an instant it almost seemed as if the girl's mad effort to escape would be successful. But as the startled roan leaped forward, his hoofs slipped on the treacherous pine needles, and in spite of Shirley's frantic sawing on the bit, he swerved close enough for the outlaw to reach out and grasp the reins. Wild with terror, the girl flung herself out of the saddle and ran.

Blindly she plunged through the sweeping pine branches, pursued by oaths and sharp, furious commands which only spurred her on. Wildly she flew down the gentle slope toward the trail, the thought of the derided Windy Bogert looming large in her

distraught mind. By this time he must have climbed to the rim of the valley. If only she could reach the open.

Back of her the thud of hoofs told of swift pursuit, but still she sped on determinedly. Slipping, sliding, her face tingling from the sharp buffets of the pine boughs, she ran as she had never run before—save only once! The memory of that other mad dash sent a rush of deep crimson into her pale face and made her, perhaps, a little heedless of what lay ahead. She saw only that the trees were thinning, and though she was well to one side of the opening by which they had entered the wood, she felt that the trail must be close at hand. A moment or two later she ducked under a sweeping branch and plunged breathlessly out onto the trail, almost into the arms of one of three strangers, who, with their horses, completely blocked the narrow way.

Instantly the nearest fellow laid hold of her. “Why the rush, kiddo?” he drawled. “Yuh’ll wear yoreself all out chasin’ around like this. Better wait up a coupla minutes an’ get yore breath.”

His face was lean and narrow and shadowed by a thatch of brick-red hair. A long scar, slanting downward from one corner of his mouth, lent to it a sinister expression which turned Shirley’s heart to lead. Nevertheless she strove desperately to tear herself from his grasp.

“Let me go!” she panted. “How dare you——”

Abruptly she broke off as her glance, sweeping over the man's horse, fell upon the head of a yellow horse just coming into sight around a sharp bend in the trail a hundred yards or so away.

"Windy!" she screamed instantly. "Oh, Windy! Help——"

A hand roughly clapped against her mouth smothered the frantic appeal. But over the edge of the man's palm, calloused and none too clean, her eyes grew round with helpless horror. As if rowelled with a spur, the yellow horse leaped forward bringing Bogert abruptly into view, his hastily drawn six-gun rising swiftly from its holster. But he was not quite quick enough.

One of the trio had already drawn, and an instant before the cowman's gun spit fire, a spurt of flame burst from the outlaw's Colt.

Shirley heard the whine of a bullet overhead, saw Windy reel, fling up one arm and topple forward across the horse's neck. What she missed was the sorrel's swift, clattering turn and galloping retreat. For at this final, culminating horror something seemed to snap inside her brain, and with a smothered little moan she sagged limply back against the man who held her.

She came to herself to find her head resting in Nell's lap with the reassuring touch of Nell's hands chafing her limp fingers. Mogridge and Henger had joined the group. Shirley could hear the former

haranguing someone in a harsh, angry voice, but she did not try to understand what he was saying. With a shiver her glance sought her friend's pale face and her eyes filled with sudden tears.

"Oh, Nell!" she whispered brokenly. "Windy. . . . They shot him! He——"

She broke off, biting her lips. Nell's own mouth quivered and her fingers closed tightly over Shirley's for an instant, but she did not speak. A moment later Mogridge moved forward and stood looking down on them.

"Comin' around, eh?" he commented. "About time, I'll say. We gotta drag it outa here pronto. Gimme yore hand."

But Shirley did nothing of the sort. Ignoring his outstretched hand, she managed with Nell's help to scramble to her feet. Save for a slight buzzing in her ears and a vast, encompassing lassitude, she felt little the worse for her fainting spell. For an instant she stood motionless, hat gone, hair waving in disorder about her pale, accusing face. The glance she bent on Mogridge was full of utter loathing.

"You *beast!*" she said, in a low penetrating voice that quivered a little with the emotion that was rending her. "I don't know why such men as you are allowed to live! If I had only let him—kill you!"

For an instant she thought that she had penetrated his supreme and callous self-conceit. His brow darkened, and into the bold, black eyes there flashed the

momentary shadow of a look which in another man she might have thought was pain! But it vanished before she could make quite sure, and his full lips curled in an irritating grin.

“Yeah?” he drawled. “Feelin’ kinda ribbed up, ain’t yuh? I allus did like a gal with pep. Waal, get aboard yore hawss, unless—” he added, noting the rebellion in her eyes—“yuh’d rather I’d carry yuh in front o’ me.”

Without a word Shirley snatched her hat from Nell and put it on with hands that shook a little. Her roan stood near, the bridle held by one of the other outlaws. Lips tightly compressed, Shirley walked quickly over to him, turned the stirrup and swung herself into the saddle.

“Nice an’ doc-ile, all of a sudden, ain’t she?” remarked Mogridge with a wink at the red-haired man. “Little speed,” he added to Nell. “We ain’t got all day.”

Nell took a step or two toward her mount and then turned a strained, white face on Mogridge.

“Where are you taking us?” she demanded unsteadily. “What—what are you going to do——”

“Yuh’ll know soon enough. Climb onto that hawss pronto unless yuh want to be throwed on.”

With a shiver Nell obeyed; the men mounted and set off at once down the trail. Spurring up beside the roan, Mogridge took Shirley’s bridle from the

dour-faced outlaw and proceeded to enliven the way with rough jokes and repeated attempts to draw the girl into conversation.

His efforts were quite unsuccessful. Shirley kept her eyes set straight ahead and stubbornly refused to open her lips. She was governed partly by her intense loathing of the man, but chiefly because her mind was such a wild turmoil of conflicting emotions that she couldn't trust herself to speak.

The thought of Windy Bogert brought hot tears into her eyes and bitter self-reproach to her heart. She had called him to his death — she, who that little while before had been making fun of him! What a beast she was! And there was Nell, whose protests against leaving the valley she had so calmly overridden. She was responsible for the whole awful business, she told herself bitterly, and there were moments when she wished she could have died before this horror came upon them.

Such moments grew more frequent as she rode on, heedless of the passing way, shutting her ears against that hateful voice beside her — drowned in misery. For hope, though proverbially hard to kill, was dying swiftly in her breast.

The thought of her father and of Dan made her eyelids sting and turned her fairly sick with longing. Once Moran had come to her rescue in such a pass as this, but she knew only too well how utterly futile it was to even hope for such help now. Far back in

the mountains, beyond the reach of any call, he was doubtless at this very moment hard at work in blissful ignorance of her plight. He might not return to the Bar S for weeks, and by the time he came——

Shirley's long lashes dropped to hide the swift, hot tears. When at length she had winked them away she was suddenly aware that they were passing the deserted Driscoll house.

The discovery made her tingle. It couldn't be possible that they were going into Hatchet. Reckless as he was, Mogridge would scarcely dare that much! She only hoped he would, for surely even in a place like that there must be some people decent enough to rise up against the perpetration of such a brazen, bare-faced outrage.

Her crushed spirits insensibly reviving, Shirley began to think and plan. She would wait until they were well within the limits of the town. She remembered Dan's saying that it was often crowded in the afternoon. Well and good. At the first sight of a group of men or women, even two or three would do, she would cry out to them for help. They might not at once escape from Mogridge's clutches, but any situation would, she felt, be better than the present.

Unfortunately her disillusionment was swift. Less than two miles beyond the Driscoll house Mogridge came to a sudden halt. Across the trail, which curved sharply a little way below and disappeared among the willows that grew thick along the stream,

lay a broad seam of rock. It was very like the one they had made use of in quitting the Thunder Creek trail, save that off to the right it spread out and took substance, becoming in no great distance a noticeable ridge. This ridge curved southward toward the mountains, forming the western boundary of a broad expanse of rolling country, dotted here and there with outcroppings of rock or clumps of straggly trees, but for the most part fairly fertile. Shirley's inquiring glance, sweeping over this more or less open land, had just detected moving objects which seemed to her like cattle, when she became aware that Mogridge was addressing the man with the scar.

"Yuh know what to tell him, Foss. We'll be at the shack in less'n an hour. He may wanta to come out tonight."

The fellow nodded and gathered up his reins. "Likely he will," he grunted as he spurred off along the trail.

Mogridge watched him disappear around the bend and then, with Shirley's reins still twisted around his hand, he turned his horse to the right and rode slowly along the rocky spur, the others following in single file.

For a moment or two Shirley's disappointment was so acute that she could think of nothing else. Then suddenly her mind flew back to Mrs. Haight and the Bar S cowmen. It was odd she hadn't considered them before. Certainly they were not the sort to

sit still and do nothing at such a pass. Quite the contrary. When she and Nell failed to appear for dinner there would be a search. They would come upon Windy. Shirley gulped, her heart torn, her remorse reviving at the thought of his supreme sacrifice. His horse, returning riderless, was more than likely to start the men out sooner. To their practised eyes the outlaws' tracks would be easy to follow — up to now.

She noted the extreme care with which Mogridge was picking his way and glancing down, observed as she had expected, that the horses' hoofs left no mark on the hard granite. How to leave a sign that they had left the trail? She thought for an instant of dragging the roan suddenly to one side, causing him to leave a scratch on the rock. But that, besides being certain to be noticed by the outlaws, might not be clear enough. Then suddenly she remembered the quirt dangling from her wrist. If only she could let it drop without their seeing her.

From under drooping lashes she shot a swift, side glance at Mogridge. At the moment his face was turned away from her, his attention apparently absorbed in the careful guiding of his horse. Heart fluttering, Shirley gently loosed her grasp on the saddle horn and let her hand hang straight at her side. She felt the loop of the quirt slide down over her cuff, and compressing her hand a trifle, she gave it a scarcely perceptible shake. An instant later the dangling

length of braided leather thongs slipped over her hand and was gone.

For a second or two Shirley enjoyed her triumph. Then abruptly a rough voice in the rear dashed her hopes utterly and completely.

“Hey! Wait a minute, Spike. The lady’s dropped her quirt.”

Mogridge turned sharply. “Huh? Her quirt?” he said, and the girl, though she kept her gaze set straight ahead, was aware of his steady, penetrating scrutiny. “All right, Monk; bring it along.”

Presently Henger rode forward and handed the quirt to Spike, who passed it over to Shirley, riding on his left. In taking it from him she was forced to lift her eyes. She knew that her face was crimson, and was not surprised at the mocking glance with which the man regarded her.

“Yuh don’t wanta be so careless,” he told her meaningly. “Next time there mightn’t be anybody to pick it up.”

Shirley made no answer. But as she slipped the leather loop over her wrist with shaking fingers, she bit her lips, and over her lovely face there swept again that dull, hopeless, tragic expression which made it almost haggard.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE FANGS OF THE SPIDER

IT WAS toward the middle of the afternoon when the two girls dismounted wearily before a small log building showing unmistakable signs of desertion and decay. A small window covered by a crazy shutter pierced one of the end walls. The entrance, protected by a sagging door of rough planks, was the only opening in the longer eastern side. Back of the cabin were the remains of a shed or two and a disreputable corral. The outfit was set down in a sort of hollow grown up in spruce about half a mile below the ridge, and to Shirley it seemed as desolate a spot as she had ever seen.

A man with a straggly brown beard greeted Mogridge heartily, and at Spike's direction opened the door for the girls to enter. Shirley obeyed without protest. She felt limp and dragged out, and even the discovery that the interior had been freshly swept and was moderately clean failed to arouse her interest. She was only thankful when the door closed behind them and they were left alone.

Silently the girls clutched each other. Both wept a little, but somehow the situation seemed beyond the solace of even tears.

"There's only one thing to be thankful for," said Shirley at length, wiping her eyes. "You —

They've made you come along just because you were with me. There's no other reason."

She paused. Nell hesitated an instant, her face white and strained. "I don't know," she said slowly. "Foss McCoy, the man who left us — You heard what Mogridge said — that *he* might want to come out tonight. McCoy is Asher's man!"

Shirley's eyes widened. "Oh!" she cried despairingly. "It — it can't be that! He must have meant something else. Surely——"

She broke off at the sound of horses' hoofs and with one accord both girls darted over to the window. Monk Henger was loping away from the cabin toward the ridge. In silence they watched him mount the gentle slope and disappear among the straggling spruce. Then their glances met and dwelt together. It seemed such a little way to the edge of those dense thickets. Impulsively Shirley took another step forward and thrust her head cautiously out of the open window. She met the amused glance of the bearded man who leaned against the corner of the building, his fingers busy fashioning a cigarette.

"Fine day, ma'am," he drawled, "though mebber a mite warm."

Shirley swiftly drew back her head and flashed a tragic glance at Nell. Save the door and a rude stone fireplace at the farther end, there was no other break in the monotonous log walls.

"We might have known they'd watch the window,"

she said despairingly. "There's nothing left to do but——"

She broke off, and both turned swiftly toward the door which opened to reveal Mogridge standing on the threshold. For a moment he hesitated. Then he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. As he approached them, Shirley shrank closer to her friend.

"I'd like a word with yuh," the outlaw said briefly, as he stood in front of them.

For a moment Shirley returned his glance shrinkingly. Then something of the old spirit flamed into her troubled eyes.

"I can't prevent your saying it," she told him coldly. "I've got to listen—unless I stop my ears."

Mogridge looked meaningfully at Nell. "I want to talk to her alone," he said curtly.

Shirley clutched her friend's wrist. "No!" she cried. "Oh, no!"

But Nell, sensible of a subtle change in the man, aware that nothing could be gained by angering him, gently disengaged her fingers.

"I'd better, dear," she urged in a low tone. "I'll just go over by the fireplace."

Heart fluttering, Shirley watched her cross the room. Then, purposely avoiding Mogridge's gaze, she turned her head and stared miserably at the stretch of sun-drenched green, topped by a sweep of brilliant sky that was visible through the small

window. Suddenly a hand caught her chin and twisted her face around.

“Yo’re scart—plumb sick,” said Mogridge, his rough voice curiously softened. “Can’t say I blame yuh much at that, with all yuh musta been thinkin’.” His hand fell to his side and he hesitated, a dull flush creeping into his tanned face. “I jest wanted to ease yore mind a bit,” he finished awkwardly.

Shirley looked at him in bewildered amaze. This was a side of his nature she had not only never seen, but which a moment ago she would have believed impossible.

“I—I don’t understand,” she faltered.

His flush deepened and one of his big hands clenched over the butt of his Colt. “I—I can’t get on without yuh,” he said, with an odd mingling of harshness and simplicity. “Ever since I first seen yuh that mornin’ when yuh slammed the door in my face, I’ve thought of yuh—’most all the time. I made a mistake once. I’d oughta have known yuh weren’t that kind. This time I’m gonna marry yuh.”

Shirley took a step backward, her outstretched hands pressed against the rough bark of the logs behind her. She could not speak. She could only look at him horrorstricken, her whole tortured soul staring from her frightened eyes.

“Yuh ain’t wild about the idea, I reckon,” pursued Mogridge. “Waal, mebbe not right now. But lemme tell yuh, yuh might do a whole lot worse. I

got a pretty decent bunch o' kale soaked away. I'm willin' to cut Saddle Butte an' all that, an' go off some'rs an' start fresh. It wouldn't take long to get used to me as——"

"Oh, no—no!" wailed Shirley, her self-control vanishing before the ghastly mental picture that flashed through her mind. To *marry* this brute—this murderer! To turn those sweet, shy, secret girl-ish visions into a lifelong nightmare of pure horror! "I—couldn't! I'd rather die."

Mogridge's mood changed swiftly. "Yuh couldn't, eh?" he snapped, his face darkening. "That shows all yuh know. Yo're *gonna* do it, y'understand? Monk's gone to fetch the justice o' the peace, so yuh got jest about three hours to get used to the notion."

"But you can't! No justice—nobody can force a person to—to——"

"Yuh don't know Judge Cawley," cut in Mogridge. "He'll do anythin' I or Orms Asher tell him, an' that's whatever." He turned abruptly on his heel. "Think it over," he flung back over one shoulder. "Remember, I might change my mind again!"

As the door clattered shut behind him, Shirley slowly turned and stared hopelessly across the room at Nell.

Something more than two hours later the two stood close together at the little window watching, with that same dull despair, the shadows creeping

across the shallow basin. As these lengthened swiftly, blotting out alike the jutting rocks and little hollows, turning the scraggly spruce trees into queer, distorted shapes, Shirley had a horrible feeling that just as swiftly the coils were tightening inexorably about them. Less than another hour would bring Judge Cawley, whom Nell had told her was one of Asher's closest intimates and utterly unscrupulous. Asher himself might appear at any moment. And then——

She gave a little shiver and her hand clenched over the window ledge. Throughout the dragging hours of waiting not a few heartbreaking thoughts and longings had swept through her mind, but always she had thrust *that* consideration from her. Yet ever it loomed just at the edge of consciousness like some grisly specter which must ultimately be faced.

The sound of footfalls outside made both girls start and turn nervously toward the door. It was Mogridge who entered, and as he crossed in silence to the table and lit the lamp standing there, their glances followed him in tense speculation. Still without speaking he came over to the window and drawing in the shutter, made fast the catch.

At his approach, Shirley shrank back a little. It was an instinctive movement, but now that he was close to her she noticed with a sudden sinking of the heart that his face was flushed and his eyes inflamed as if he had been drinking.

“Waal?” he said roughly, after a long, appraising stare that made her shiver. “Time’s passin’. Gettin’ any more used to the idea of matrimony?”

She did not answer; she could not, somehow. Only her eyes — great, liquid pools in the haggard whiteness of her face — were eloquent. Too eloquent, perhaps. With a sudden snarl Mogridge reached out and, grasping her wrist, dragged her closer.

“Ain’t yuh got no tongue?” he demanded harshly. “Mebbe yuh think I didn’t mean what I told yuh? Or is it I ain’t good enough for yore high-an’-mightiness? I’ll show yuh.”

Like a flash his arms went about her, crushing her irresistibly against his breast. With a smothered cry she tried to thrust him back. Failing that, she managed to free one hand and, half mad with terror and disgust, struck him in the face with her clenched fist again and again.

For a second or two he only gripped her closer. Then suddenly, as if one of her blows had found a tender spot, he gave an oath and flung her from him with such roughness that she stumbled across the uneven flooring, tripped, and fell against the log wall with a force that wrenched a cry of pain from her set lips.

“Yuh — vixen!” he snarled furiously. “Try that on me, will yuh? I’ll learn yuh a thing or two. I’ll——”

Abruptly he broke off and whirled to face the door.

Huddled against the wall, Shirley got a fleeting glimpse of Ormsby Asher standing on the threshold, tall, gaunt, an expression in his hawklike face that turned her cold. She saw him close the door and take a single step forward into the room. Then, without the faintest preliminary movement, his right arm flashed up and from his cuff there seemed to spurt a penciling of yellow flame.

As the sound of the shot reverberated through the room, Mogridge reeled back with a guttural cry, spun half around and sagging at the knees, sprawled face downward on the floor. Frozen with horror, unable to move a muscle, Shirley saw Asher leap forward, jerk the outlaw's gun from his holster, and drop it close beside Mogridge's outflung hand. When the door was opened an instant later he was standing just inside it, cold, erect, emotionless, the faintly smoking derringer in his hand.

"He pulled down on me," he said in a cool, passionless tone. "Lucky I carry a derringer up my sleeve. What's the matter with him, anyhow? He must have got loco drinkin' red-eye, or something."

For a brief space none of the men crowding the doorway spoke. Most of their faces were strange to Shirley, who found herself, even in that tense moment, wondering if Asher had brought them with him. Squint Greer, one of the Saddle Butte gang, did indeed glance suspiciously at the tall, somber, dominating figure, but swiftly dropped his eyes. The man

with the black beard gave a grunt.

“Mebbe that’s it,” he commented. “He was lushin’ it—sort of.”

“I thought so,” shrugged Asher. “Well, better carry him out and see if you can do anything to bring him ’round. I had to shoot quick, but I didn’t aim to kill.”

But Spike Mogridge was far beyond the reach of human ministrations. Shirley sensed it from the manner of the men as they lifted up the sprawling body and carried it out into the darkness. What was worse she *knew* that Asher had slain him purposely with a calm, cold, callous deliberation so infinitely more appalling than a deed of hot anger. As she stumbled to her feet, Nell flew over to her, and clinging together the two girls met the glance of those coldly brilliant eyes with the shrinking, fascinated terror the charmed bird has for the snake.

“Sorry to have given you ladies a shock, but it was unavoidable,” purred Asher, a touch of irony in his tone. “From what I saw, however, I gather that I spared Miss Rives some slight unpleasantness.”

As he stroked his mustache meditatively, the diamond on his little finger flashed and sparkled in the lamplight like some evil thing alive.

“I only just arrived,” Asher went on presently. “But one of my men tells me that—er—our friend sent for Judge Cawley to perform a—marriage ceremony.”

He paused invitingly, but neither of the girls spoke. Nell seemed on the point of collapse. Shirley, sick with horror and foreboding, suddenly began to shake as if with cold. For Asher's glance, heavy-lidded, appraising, with a subtle, half-hidden expression, brought the color flaming into her face. Even before he spoke she knew that it was not Nell he wanted.

"It would be a pity to bring the judge all this way for nothing," Asher mused softly. "My friends often tell me that the life of a bachelor is a poor thing. Sometimes I wonder if they're right."

He ceased, and for a brief space tense silence lay over the room. It was broken presently by the thud of hoofs passing the window. The sound seemed to beat upon Shirley's brain like the dread inexorable march of fate. She straightened, her slim body stiffening, and one clenched hand flew to her lips. Over it her eyes stared — great wells of purplish-black sunk in the dead pallor of her face.

Asher had turned with catlike swiftness and faced the door, alert and listening. Presently the horse stopped; there was a jingle of the bit, the creak of saddle leather. Then a rough voice spoke:

"That yuh, Jedge? . . . Oh, Spike? Waal — yuh see — Orms Asher's inside. He'll tell yuh all about it."

Asher's tall, gaunt frame relaxed, and glancing over his shoulder his lips parted in a feline smile.

An instant later the latch clicked.

CHAPTER XXX

DAN RIDES

SNORTING, sweat-lathered, sides heaving, the gallant bay carrying his double burden, swept around the corner of the ranch house and narrowly missed colliding with a bunch of five hard-eyed, determined cowmen just ready to mount. Moran reined him to an abrupt halt and then met the hard, chilly gaze of Mrs. Haight, who stood a few feet away. Hat gone, iron gray hair ruffled by the breeze, her tanned face was set in hard, bitter lines, lips clamped, chin thrust forward, eyes glinting with a dangerous light.

“Well?” she snapped harshly, as Cass Barton and another man ran forward to support the limp body of Colonel Rives. “Whatsa matter? Is he dead?”

Dan wiped away a trickle of blood oozing from a cut in his cheek where one of the later bullets had clipped him.

“No,” he returned laconically. “Only fainted. He’s plugged in the shoulder an’ lost a lot o’ blood.”

Mrs. Haight’s expression did not soften. “Lift him easy, Cass,” she directed. “Take him into my room an’ fix a bandage. I’ll be there in a minute.” Her glance shifted to Moran. “Who done it?” she demanded.

Dan swung down from his saddle, shaking the

stiffness out of his legs. He was a little puzzled at her manner, but accounted for it by the evident dislike she had taken to him from the first. Without wasting words, he told her about the attack in the cañon and their subsequent flight and escape.

As Mrs. Haight listened, her glance fixed sharply on the man's face, a faintly puzzled expression crept into her hard, black eyes. When he had finished she glanced swiftly at the cream standing nearby with torn, tattered bridle reins trailing, and then back to Dan.

"Yuh mean to say yuh got enough 'dust in that time for somebody to hold yuh up for it?" she demanded.

Moran nodded. "Though how anybody got wise to it beats me. There's over a thousand ounces on each one o' these hawses," he added in a lower tone. "Only for the cream we'd have lost half of it." His eyes swept the front of the ranch house. "Ain't the—the girls around?" he asked with apparent inconsequence.

Her eyes glittered. "Around?" she snapped. "I'll tell yuh where they are. They're gone! Stole by that friend o' yores—Spike Mogridge!"

A flood of crimson surged into Moran's clean-cut face, which suddenly seemed to freeze.

"What was that yuh said?" he asked her quietly.

"They been carried off by that beast Mogridge, an' his gang," repeated the lady harshly.

Moran took a swift step toward her. His gray eyes had dilated to a deep purple; there was a dead-white streak around his mouth.

“Tell me!” he urged in that same low, compelling tone. “Quick! When did it happen? Where——”

There was something in his face which awed even Mrs. Haight’s sturdy nature and loosed her tongue in spite of herself. Had she been wrong, after all, she wondered. As she poured forth her narrative she watched Moran closely.

“An hour before dinner. They went off for a ride up the valley this mornin’. When they didn’t show up by one, Cass an’ Slim Wichert started out to hunt ’em up. At the foot o’ the trail they found Windy Bogert—shot! I’d sent him to Hatchet for some wagon bolts. He’d fell off’n his horse an’ the reins twisted around his wrist held the sorrel there. They brung him back, an’ when he come to, he told us he’d rid into Squint Greer an’ two o’ Asher’s men up over the rim who had hold o’ Shirley. She yelled at him and he fired but they got him first. His sorrel ran an’ he managed to hold on ’till he was jolted off at the bottom o’ the trail. That’s all he knew. Of course it mighta been Orms Asher, but Greer bein’ there, an’ from what Shirley told me about Mogridge, I suspicioned— Where yuh goin’?”

Dan had turned swiftly and swung into the saddle. “Another hawss,” he flung back as he spurred toward the corral.

Mrs. Haight watched him disappear and then turned a thoughtful face toward the three punchers.

"I wonder if I could of got him wrong?" she pondered aloud. "Some way he don't act like he was playin' a part."

"If yuh ask me," commented Buck Stover, the straw boss, "I'd say he was plumb in earnest. There's some things a man can't fake good."

"Yeah," nodded Slim Wickert. "Yuh gotta remember, too, he never was quite as rotten as most o' that bunch o' polecats over to Saddle Butte. I wouldn't wonder if he did quit 'em cold jest like Shirley's been tellin' us all along."

"H'm!" grunted Mrs. Haight. There was no doubt in her mind that Shirley did trust this man completely, and a month's close intercourse with the girl had given the older woman a favorable opinion of her judgment. "Yuh fellahs may's well wait up for him," she went on, as Cass and Pink Darrell came out of the house. "He'll shore be a mighty helpful addition if it comes to a show-down. There's something about them eyes o' his, an' the set of his chin that——"

She broke off at the sound of thudding hoofs and turned to see Moran, mounted on a splendid black thoroughbred, her own special, jealously guarded mount—whirl around the corner of the house.

"Mighta known he'd pick the best in the place," she thought grimly. "Waal, after all——"

Dan pulled up with a jerk and dismounting swiftly, dragged out of his saddle pockets two heavy canvas bags, which he dropped at Mrs. Haight's feet.

"Take care of 'em, will yuh?" he asked, with a meaning look. "They belong to Rives, yuh know. There's as much more on the cream. Yuh ain't gonna be here alone, are yuh? Where's the rest of the boys?"

"They took some three-year olds to Fanning yesterday an' oughta show up any time now. Yuh needn't fret none," she added, reading his thoughts accurately. "Besides m' six-guns I got a sawed-off shot gun in the house that I'll load pronto an' keep handy for any callers!"

Moran nodded and swung back into the saddle. The others had already mounted and without further delay they set off down the valley at a lope. Immediately Dan ranged alongside Cass Barton, and in a few minutes was acquainted with all the Bar S foreman knew about the affair.

This was not much. Apparently Mrs. Haight had gleaned all the important facts. It was possible, of course, to speculate as to how the thing had come about, where the outlaws were heading for, and a dozen other details. But nothing could be definitely decided until they reached the spot where the outrage had taken place.

Fortunately at this point the surface of the trail was not too hard to seize and hold illuminating im-

pressions. Two nights before there had been a heavy shower which blotted out the old tracks and held the impress of later ones with quite sufficient distinctness. In less than ten minutes the pursuers had gathered all there was to see and were spurring their mounts along the trail toward Hatchet.

By this time it was after four. Little over an hour later they pulled up in front of the deserted Driscoll house where only a glance was needed at the smooth, untrodden sweep of bare ground leading in from the road to send them on again.

Two miles farther on they clattered across a ridge of rock and were speeding on toward a sharp bend that paralleled the river, when Moran jerked the black to a halt and bent sidewise in his saddle.

“Hold up, fellahs,” he said quickly. “That bunch never passed here.”

He slipped to the ground and one or two of the others followed his example. Though a number of hoof marks pointed the other way, only two sets—and these were very fresh indeed—headed toward Hatchet.

“They’ve turned off some’ers between here an’ Driscoll’s,” decided Cass.

He glanced questioningly toward Moran, who was staring back along the trail.

“That seam we just passed would be a likely place,” Dan remarked thoughtfully. “Let’s go back an’ look it over.”

At first they found no encouragement. Toward the river the granite soon gave place to sand and that in turn to soft ooze, both innocent of any tracks. In the other direction, even for a considerable direction from the trail, the bare rock showed not the slightest mark or scratch. Then all at once Moran noticed the broken stem of a sturdy little plant growing in a crevice and his eyes brightened. Presently Cass pointed out a bruised bit of juniper, and later on another.

“Looks like we’re on the right track,” he declared jubilantly. “They’re followin’ the curve o’ the ridge, an’ keepin’ out o’ sight on the north side.”

Moran nodded. He had ridden up to the crest of the ridge and was staring thoughtfully at the rolling, dappled open country to the south.

“Asher’s outfit, ain’t it?” he asked, glancing down at the others.

“Shore,” nodded Stover. “The buildings are back o’ that round hill about eight miles to the south.”

For a space they rode on in silence, following the trail with increasing ease as the men ahead grew more careless. When the straggling clumps of spruce began to thicken into a more or less continuous growth sweeping over both sides of the ridge, the thing became child’s play.

“Ain’t there an old line camp up this end o’ the ranch some’ers?” asked Dan suddenly. “Seems to me I remember——”

“Why, shore there is,” cut in Slim Wichert. “A log shack set down in a kind of basin with a bunch o’ spruce around it. Don’t guess they use it much.”

Moran and Barton exchanged glances and urged their horses to a greater speed. With only an occasional brief comment they pushed on through the spruce growth. About half an hour later the trail they were following turned abruptly to the eastward, cutting almost directly across the summit of the ridge.

At Dan’s suggestion they all dismounted and leading their horses, went in cautiously. His vague recollection of the line camp — in which he was confirmed by Wichert — was that it lay rather close to the foot of the ridge, so that he was not surprised after some ten minutes of walking to glimpse through the thinning branches at the low, squat building set down in a shallow hollow not more than half a mile below them.

The distance, the gathering dusk and interfering foliage made it impossible from where they stood to study the place with any satisfaction. A little distance to the right, however, a bare rocky shelf jutted out from the ridge. Making their way thither four of the men remained under cover while Barton and Moran crawled out through the undergrowth. Stretched flat on the ledge, Moran took the field glasses Cass handed him and hurriedly focused them on the hollow.

The details, though much clearer, were still consid-

erably obscured by the rapidly falling dusk. Dan saw enough, however, to wring an oath from between his clenched teeth. The corral seemed full of horses he did not even try to count them. Outside the bars a fire was just being kindled and standing or lounging around it were a dozen or fifteen men. Who they were or where they had come from he had no idea. Nor could he locate Mogridge himself. With a feeling of baffled, impotent fury, he passed the glasses to his companion.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE SLIM EDGE OF HAZARD

“SOME o’ Asher’s punchers from the Three Circles,” Cass whispered after a brief scrutiny. “I can make out Cliff Trexler the foreman an’ two, three others. The girls must be in the cabin, huh? Hell’s bells!” He lowered the glass and stared at Moran. “We’ll shore have one dandy time gettin’ ’em away from that bunch.”

“It’s gotta be done, though,” declared Dan. “An’ there ain’t a thing to be gained by puttin’ it off. Let’s drag it.”

He slid back through the bushes, Barton close behind him. It took but a few words to explain the situation to the waiting punchers, none of whom made any comment. Their faces were mostly invisible in the shadow, but Dan noted with pleasure a general hitching up of cartridge belts and shifting of holsters. Evidently there was no thought of backing down.

“We better lead the cayuses down through the scrub as far as we can an’ tether ’em there,” he said in a low tone. “They won’t be seen in the dark, an’ we’ll want to have ’em as close to the cabin as we can. Mebbe we can sneak right up to — What’s that?”

In the silence that followed there was wafted to them on the still night air the thud of hoofs, the

swishing of branches, even the indistinct mumble of voices. The sounds came from the farther side of the ridge. Evidently two persons at least were approaching along the same general course they themselves had taken. Almost as one man Moran and the Bar S punchers left their horses standing and sped swiftly and noiselessly back through the trees.

Guided by the sounds and particularly by one exceedingly strident voice which was presently discovered to be uttering one continuous stream of curses, they spread out along what seemed likely to be the course the unknown pair would take.

“— — the — — trees!” snarled the profane one furiously. “I like to have my eye gouged out jest then, by Gawd!”

As he recognized the familiar accents of Monk Henger, Moran’s heart leaped savagely and he gripped Cass Barton’s arm. “I’ll take the first one an’ yuh grab the other,” he breathed. “Tell Slim an Pink to get the horses. No noise, o’ course.”

A moment later the bulking forms of two riders advancing in single file loomed through the shadows. Crouching beside a tree trunk Moran waited, muscles tensed, fingers spread out like clutching claws until the first horse was nearly abreast of him. Out of the corner of his eye he noted Barton’s position a little to the right. An instant longer he held himself in and then he leaped.

Hands accurately circling Henger’s throat, he

dragged the man swiftly from the saddle and flung him to the ground. There was a momentary furious struggle, but Henger was no match for this man in whom the frenzied passion to kill was held in leash by the most tenuous thread. Someone grabbed the bridles of the startled horses. Their stamping and a stifled, frightened squawk from the second man was all that ruffled the still serenity of the night. With Stover's assistance Dan bound and gagged the half-choked Henger and then stepped back to where Cass squatted beside a prone and bulky figure.

"Who is it?" he asked in a low tone.

"Cawley, justice of the peace in Hatchet. Him an' Asher are thick as thieves, an' jest as crooked."

"Huh! What do yuh s'pose he's doin' here?"

"Got me," shrugged Barton. "We might ask him. Take yore hand off'n his mouth, Bill."

The puncher obeyed, and Moran, bethinking himself of a small pocket flash he carried, produced it and turned the thin but sufficiently powerful beam on the prisoner. He was a tall man with broad shoulders and what had once been an excellent figure. But sloth and good living had long since clothed his frame in a too, too solid mass of fat. A prominent paunch mounded the odd brown linen dust coat he wore—a paunch which quivered like jelly with every fear-some tremor that shook his ample person. Barton perceptibly increased these tremors by drawing his gun and poking the barrel against the judge's stomach.

“No tricks, yuh ol’ terrapin,” he admonished. “Yuh let one holler outa yuh, an’ ——.”

His thrusting emphasis brought a little moan from the fat man’s pendulous lips. “Lord A’mighty!” he gasped. “I ain’t goin’ to holler. I wouldn’t think of it. Gawsake! Take away that gun, won’t you? You got it cocked.”

“Shore I have, an’ my finger’s draggin’ on the trigger. Set up!”

With a heave and a quiver, the judge struggled to a sitting posture, his bulging eyes shifting from side to side, his weak mouth agape. His hair, grown long on one side and habitually combed carefully across a prominent bald spot, had become disarranged and hung down like a curtain over one ear. Barton’s lips twitched in a momentary grim smile.

“Now spit it out!” he commanded. “What are yuh up to, yuh slimy ol’ he-buzzard? What’s brought yuh here?”

“I was—s-s-sent for,” palpitated Cawley hurriedly. “Mogridge sent for me to come out—right away to—to Orms’ old line camp an—an’ marry him.”

A dead silence, broken only by a noticeable stir among the men standing around, followed this announcement.

Barton’s eyes, shifting sidewise, noted the hard, bitter, frozen look on Moran’s face, curiously contradicted by the blazing passion in his gray eyes,

and looked hastily away again. The stillness was so prolonged, however, that Cass finally glanced back again to find with some surprise that Dan's rage had been succeeded by an expression of keen, alert speculation.

"Get up!" Moran ordered abruptly, his eyes on Cawley.

Pallid and shaking the judge staggered to his feet and stood there swaying. "Wa — what you goin' — to do?" he gurgled. "Lord A'mighty! I——"

Moran silenced him with a fierce gesture.

"About my height, ain't he?" he said, glancing at Barton. "About the same size around the shoulders, too, I'd say."

"Jest about," nodded the puzzled Barton.

"O' course," pursued Dan meditatively, "he weighs a good thirty pounds more, but on a hawss in the dark the paunch wouldn't be missed under that long coat o' his. With his black hat pulled down——"

"Hell's bells!" cut in Cass. "Yuh ain't thinkin' o' dressin' up in his clothes an' goin' down there — alone?"

Moran's lips tightened. "Somethin' like that's gotta be done. Lissen. Them two girls are in the cabin. Likely enough Mogridge or somebody else he can trust is watchin' 'em close. If we bust down there hell bent, what would yuh give for their chances o' gettin' out alive? Man, I know that devil. If he

saw the girl was gonna slip through his fingers he'd shoot her cold. If I can pull this trick at least I can get inside an' down him first. It's full dark by now, an' the fire's some ways off from the door. Yuh fellahs can sneak up pretty close an' be ready to pile in the minute I settle Mogridge. How about it? If yuh can think of a better way, I'm willin' to try anything — only we gotta act quick."

"Not me," returned Barton promptly. "I ain't got no brains a-tall when it comes to thinkin' out this sorta thing. At that, it might work, an' if yore willin' to try it, Gawd knows we'll back yuh up. Slide outa that coat, Cawley," he added sharply. "Where's his hat? An' don't forget that handkerchief he allus wears 'round his fat neck to keep the dust out."

While Moran hastily donned the borrowed garments, the judge was firmly bound and gagged in spite of his quavering promises not to stir until they gave him leave. Henger's fastenings were also examined and tightened, and then, taking the two extra horses with them, all six started off down the slope.

Before reaching the edge of the hollow they paused at the sound of hoof beats rapidly approaching from the east. These came on and passed, going in the direction of the cabin. Barton suggested that the unseen riders must be more of the Three Circle men — perhaps Asher himself — coming direct from the ranch house. But after all, with the odds against them two or three more made little or no difference.

Much more disturbing was the muffled pistol shot that halted them at the edge of the clearing. It seemed to come from inside the cabin and was followed by a stir and bustle and considerable running to and fro by the men gathered about the fire over by the corral. But it was not repeated, and presently when the excitement had quieted down, Moran, who had held himself in by sheer will power, abruptly announced that he was going on.

“Yuh fellahs sneak up as close as yuh dare, but don’t take any chances. When yuh hear another shot, that’ll be time enough to get on the jump.”

Without further speech, he touched the judge’s horse with his spur and trotted off into the darkness. He had already taken his weapon from the holster and dropped it into the side pocket of Cawley’s duster. Presently, as the dark bulk of the cabin loomed ahead, he slid his right hand down and gripped the butt.

Walking his horse around the corner of the cabin he thought for an instant that he might reach the door unnoticed by the men who seemed to be all gathered around the fire. But as he slid out of the saddle, hat brim pulled over his eyes and shoulders slightly hunched, a man stepped suddenly out of the shadows.

“That yuh, Jedge?” he asked, peering at Moran.

“Yes,” returned Dan promptly, in an excellent imitation of Cawley’s throaty tones. “Where’s Mogridge?”

“Oh—Spike?” queried the other hesitatingly. “Waal—yuh see—Orms Asher’s inside. He’ll tell yuh all about it.”

Puzzled, wary, conscious alike of the need for haste and the danger of betraying himself to the Three Circle man—who had fortunately come up on the other side of his horse—Moran stepped over to the door and felt for the latch. Drawing his gun, he concealed it in the folds of the voluminous duster. Then with a swift, agile movement, he pushed the door open, stepped through and closed it behind him.

Asher faced the door about ten feet distant, his tall, lean figure outlined prominently in the mellow lamplight. He presented an almost perfect target, but to Dan’s dismay Shirley and Nell Driscoll were standing close behind him directly in the line of fire.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE BLACK CARRIES DOUBLE

AS THE latch clicked a desperate determination swept over Shirley Rives to resist this horror by every effort in her power. Surely this judge, no matter how corrupt, would not dare to perform that mockery of a ceremony in the face of her passionate and pleading protest. Slim figure straightening determinedly, she took a step to one side so that she could see the doorway around Asher's intervening shoulder.

The man who entered was tall, with sagging shoulders and a big frame covered rather grotesquely by a long, wrinkled dust coat. A red handkerchief was knotted about his throat, and the wide-brimmed black felt hat was dragged so low that his face was quite invisible. His appearance was neither inviting nor reassuring, and though Shirley had not expected much, she gave a disappointed sigh.

And then — a miracle! For a fleeting instant, between the lowered hat brim and the knotted handkerchief, her eyes — sharpened by love and terror — perceived the outline of a square, cleft chin. It was the merest flash of an impression, but it was enough. She *knew!* Against all probability and even reason, he had come to her, and her heart leaped chokingly.

All in the same instant — her wits were sharpened,

too, by love, and fear, for him—she realized his peril. She saw that he could not fire at Asher because of her position; only too well was she aware of their captor's deadly swiftness. And so, without an instant's hesitation, she leaped forward and catching Asher's right wrist with both her hands, clung to it desperately.

She was just in time. Under her gripping fingers she felt the hard, compact bulk of the derringer, operated by some contrivance of strong elastic bands. Even as Moran leaped forward, Asher's furious upward jerk of the arm swung the girl fairly off her feet, but still failed to loose her hold.

It was all over in a second. With a dull sickening thud Moran's heavy Colt crushed through the high crowned black felt hat. Asher reeled, staggered, and crumpled to the floor, his fall eased by the swift hold of the man who had laid him low, making no noticeable noise. Hat gone, eyes blazing, crisp blond hair rising in a crest above his clean-cut face, Moran caught Shirley as she swayed toward him.

"Oh, Dan—Dan!" she sobbed hysterically. "You came! It's been so horrible!"

For a second he crushed her to him, eloquent gray eyes devouring her haggard face. "I know," he whispered soothingly. "But it's over now—or almost. We've got to get outa here quick. I saw a window——"

"Of course." Swiftly she pulled herself together

and with flushed face and brilliant eyes, glanced toward the closed opening. "There's been a man watching it all afternoon."

"He ain't there now," reassured Dan. With a jerk he shed the encumbering dust coat, ripped the handkerchief from his neck and softly unhooked the shutter. "Cass an' some o' the Bar S boys are waitin' for us straight back o' the cabin. Yuh an' Nell beat it to them as quick as yuh can, an' I'll follow. Sabe?"

She nodded. "You—you won't delay?" she whispered.

His eyes caressed her gently. "Not me," he drawled. "Ready, Nell? All right. Let's go."

Without a sound the shutter swung open, and lifting Shirley bodily in his arms, Moran swung her through the opening. Nell was helped through as quickly. Then, just as Dan had flung one long leg across the sill, the sound of steps came from outside the door.

Swinging through the opening, he closed the shutter and ran, the echoes of a brisk rap at the door bringing a grim smile to his lips.

"Knock away," he muttered, racing over the uneven ground. "Yo're jest about sixty seconds too late."

As he caught up with the girls, a muffled, surprised yell issued from the cabin. Several voices answered it and from the direction of the campfire came the thud of scurrying feet. But before the throng of

Three Circle men could have much more than reached the cabin, Moran, a girl clinging to each arm, plunged into the little bunch of waiting Bar S punchers.

Eager hands hoisted Nell to the back of Monk Henger's horse. Moran hastily mounted the black and lifted Shirley to a place in front of him. Barton and the others flung themselves into their saddles, and with a swerving turn, a swift drumming of hoofs, they swept around and sped away into the darkness.

"Straight along this side o' the ridge," shouted Barton. "It's longer, but we won't get messed up in those trees."

Back of them the darkness was riven by a little tongue of flame and the crack of the shot echoed through the still night air. Another followed and another still, and then a regular fusillade of snapping shots. But Asher's men were firing blindly and their bullets all went wild. Before saddles could be flung onto hastily roped horses, the rescue party had secured an almost hopeless lead.

Aided by the brilliant starlight, which was bright enough for their purpose, but of no help to their pursuers, they swept on across the rolling, open country, the horses responding gallantly to every urge. Far behind, the thud of pursuing hoofs was barely audible. But by the time they reached the trail and were headed westward toward the Bar S, these had died away. Evidently, lacking Asher's guiding hand, his men had given up the pursuit as hopeless.

Until this moment there had been little or no opportunity for speech. Indeed, Shirley, in the blissful reaction from those interminable hours of strain and mental suffering, was perfectly content to lie there silent. Wedged in between the saddle horn and Moran's body, jolted every now and then by the inevitable stumbling of the doubly-laden black, her position might have seemed one of acute discomfort.

But it was not—at least to her. Dan's left arm was around her shoulders. Her right hand slipped down along his side found a steadying hold on his broad leather belt. Under the rough flannel of his shirt against which her face was pressed, she could hear the strong, rhythmic beating of his heart. It all meant safety, security—and something even more, and when at length he began to talk in low tones, telling her of the happenings of the past few hours, she listened dreamily, her mind not more than half on what he was saying.

Only the knowledge that Windy Bogert had not been slain but was in a good way to recovery, stirred her to fervent gratitude. She was troubled, of course, to learn about her father, but as his wound—this Moran had from Barton—was far from dangerous, her worry over him was not long enduring. Of the treasure they had found she scarcely gave a thought.

At length, when all was told, Moran fell silent for a space. Strung out in single file, the horses were

slowly mounting a steep part of the narrow trail, the black bringing up the lead.

“What made yuh grab Asher’s arm?” asked Dan suddenly in a low tone. “Yuh know — that saved my life. He always carries a derringer up his sleeve, an’ he’s quick as lightnin’ with it.”

“I — know,” said Shirley with a momentary shudder. “I saw him use it!”

“But my face was covered by the hatbrim — at least it must have been, or he’d have plugged me.”

“I — I saw — your chin,” she told him slowly.

“My — chin!” puzzled. “Why, what’s there about my chin that’s different from anybody else’s?”

She did not answer at once. Instead her head dropped back a little against his shoulder and she raised her eyes to his.

“It’s — just — *yours*,” she murmured softly.

For an instant Moran sat rigid, gray eyes searching her shy, flushed, lovely face. Loosened by the cool night breeze a wavy strand of brown hair gently caressed his cheek. It was a moment in which they two seemed suddenly alone — shut out entirely from the whole wide world. . . . Abruptly his arm tightened about her; his head bent swiftly.

CHAPTER XXXIII

GONE

MRS. HAIGHT stood in the doorway of the Bar S living room, arms folded, an expression of regret on her square, capable tanned face.

"I shore will miss yuh," she remarked, in her strong, hearty voice. "Though I s'posed you'd be off as soon as the kunnel was well enough to back a hoss. I dunno when I've had such a pleasant time, barrin' that muss-up a coupla weeks ago, which turned out all right, in the end, praise be! It gets powerful lonesome here, believe me, with nothin' but men around day in an' day out."

"You'll still have Nell, won't you?" reminded Shirley Rives, glancing sidewise at the girl sitting beside her on the lumpy old sofa.

The ranchwoman's eyes brightened and she slapped her thigh with one calloused hand. "My soul!" she exclaimed. "I clean forgot she didn't have to be hittin' the trail jest because she come here along with you folks. How about it, Nellie? Think yuh can put up with me an' the Bar S for a while longer?"

The soft pink deepened in Nell Driscoll's face and she dropped her lids. "I—I'd like very much to stay—if you want me," she murmured.

"I shore do!" Mrs. Haight's bright black eyes

twinkled suddenly. "So does another party not a thousand miles from here. I dunno what Cass Barton would have to say to me if I went an' let yuh go," she continued, undeterred by any false delicacy. "Well! That perks me up considerable, though I'd ruther the whole crowd of yuh was gonna stay. Yuh shore that shoulder's well enough for yuh to fan the trail, kunnel?"

Colonel Rives turned a little stiffly in his chair. His long, thin face was pale and hollow-cheeked, and around his neck there still dangled the ample handkerchief which had done duty as a sling. But his left arm rested free on the table beside him and as he spoke he moved it experimentally.

"Quite, thank you, ma'am," he returned in his soft, courteous southern drawl. "To tell the truth, even if it wasn't, I should rather chance some — er — slight discomfort than risk lingering here any longer. It isn't that we've not enjoyed your hospitality. You've been more than kind, and I really have no idea what we should have done without you. But I don't believe I'll have a moment's real peace until the — er —"

"I get yuh," Mrs. Haight agreed crisply, as he paused. "I dunno's I blame yuh a mite, neither. Orms Asher ain't one to take a beatin' without lashin' back. I got as much nerve as most, I expect, but I'd as soon poke up a full grown rattler as cross him like yuh done. He won't forget — ever; an' he's gonna

do his level to get square. What's yore plans? Yuh ain't got an awful easy job ahead of yuh, I'd say."

Her glance sought the face of Dan Moran leaning against the rough stone chimney-piece. Somehow, she found a comfortable sense of dependency in the expression of those steady, clear gray eyes.

"We'll beat it for Fanning," he answered readily, "an' take a train there for the nearest town where there's a proper bank. Like the colonel, I won't be real easy in my mind until that gold's stowed away in a good, strong vault."

"Yo're right," agreed Mrs. Haight emphatically. "This ain't no kind of a country to ride around with a mess of gold like that in yore saddle bags. Some weight it is, too, believe me! I had all I could do to drag it in here. You'll have to spread it around consid'able."

Moran nodded. "Divided among the three of us there'll be about fifty pounds apiece. The cayuses'll take that all right."

"A hundred and fifty pounds!" murmured Mrs. Haight. She appeared to make a rapid calculation. "Thirty thousand dollars, an' more! My land o' love!" There was no envy in her square, honest face, merely a look of awed amazement. "An' what will yuh be doin' after that?" she went on, a gleam of very human curiosity in her bright eyes. "Come back an' see if yuh can dig up some more?"

Moran did not reply at once. His glance, and that

of Shirley, shifted simultaneously to the face of Colonel Rives. It was the latter who made swift answer.

“No!” he stated emphatically. “I think I’ve had enough. There was a time,” he confessed, “when I didn’t suppose I’d ever tire of the lure and fascination of prospecting. But now — Well, I dare say I’m getting old, and ——”

“Old!” cut in Mrs. Haight briskly. “My soul! Why, yo’re only in the prime of life. All the same, I think yo’re right. It’s a hard business, an’ risky, as yo’ve jest found out. Yo’ve made yore pile an’ now yuh can settle down an’ enjoy it. Yo’ll not be goin’ back East I hope?”

“Scarcely. We’ve been away too long; there are almost no ties left. Of course if you, my dear ——”

He glanced questioningly at Shirley, who shook her head.

“I haven’t the least desire to go back, Dad,” she answered promptly. “I like the West — too well.” Her glance dwelt for an instant on Moran’s face and she flushed slightly. “I think it would be nice to buy a ranch and settle down in some quiet place, I mean where there’s some sort of law and order. It’s lovely right here,” she added, glancing at Mrs. Haight; “but it’s a little too near Hatchet.”

The older woman’s wholesome face darkened. “Well may yuh say it!” she ejaculated hotly; “though in my opinion it’s Orms Asher who’s to

blame for all the dirty, underhand work that goes on over there. There he sits like an ugly spider in his web, spinnin' his plots, corruptin' people right an' left, gettin' graft from everythin', an' not stoppin' at any sort of crime. Before he come the place was as decent an' lawabidin' as the average, but now those that ain't with him are afraid to be against him. Some day, though, he'll get what's comin' to him, an' I only hope I'll be there to see it."

She paused, face flushed and eyes snapping. Then abruptly her pugnacious jaw relaxed and a wintry smile curved her straight lips.

"Ain't I the limit to get ribbed up this way?" she commented. "Jest thinkin' about the reptile allus did make me mad, though, an' —" She paused and turned her head listening. "I thought I heard Pat scratchin' at the door," she explained a moment later. "Funny he ain't been around all day. Last I seen him was late yesterday afternoon."

"He was playin' around with Art Gessner over by the harness room after supper," commented Moran, flicking his cigarette butt into the empty fireplace.

Mrs. Haight looked puzzled. "Art! Never knowed the dog to take to him before. Wonder if he could have followed him to Fanning this mornin'. But, shucks! It ain't likely he'd set out to go all that way. He sticks around pretty close except when he scents a rabbit. He'll show up when he's hungry,

all right. If yo're planning' to start off tomorrow, I expect you'd want to get out the stuff now an' pack it up convenient."

"Wouldn't be a bad idea," agreed Moran. "It's in four bags an' we'll want it in six—two for each hoss. I might 'a' done it when yuh had the hole open day before yesterday, but we hadn't quite decided then."

"Now's as good a time as you'll have," affirmed Mrs. Haight, leaving her place in the doorway. "The boys 'll be in for supper right soon, but they're allus too hungry to come mouchin' up here 'till after they've ate. Not that I'm afraid to trust 'em, but what a fella don't know, he can't let slip—as the best of 'em might do with a coupla hookers under their belt. Cass Barton's the only one who's wise to where it's hid."

The two girls had risen from the sofa, and Mrs. Haight and Moran together moved it out from against the wall. Underneath, the rough floor boards, laid here as elsewhere with an occasional short length, showed not the least sign of having been disturbed. Indeed, so well contrived was this hidden place where Mrs. Haight was accustomed to keep her few papers and little hoard of savings, that though Dan had been present at its opening two days before, he was actually at a loss until the woman pointed out the proper board.

"I allus said my late husband did a good job," she

chuckled, dropping down on the floor; "though the Lord knows he never expected it would hold the fortune that's in it now. Pick out them two nails at yore end an' then lemme take yore knife."

The nails at each end of the board, whose rusted heads looked as if they were firmly embedded in the wood, came away easily once the thin steel was thrust under them. Then Mrs. Haight inserted the knife blade carefully into a narrow crack and raised one edge of the plank, which was lifted out and laid to one side, revealing a cavity some five feet long, about ten inches wide and very nearly as deep.

Automatically Moran thrust forward one hand, but his fingers had barely touched the edge of the opening when the movement ceased abruptly. At the same instant Mrs. Haight's fresh, wholesome face seemed to freeze. Swiftly she bent forward, staring into the hole with wide, startled, unbelieving eyes. Then catching her breath, she settled back on her heels and looked at Moran in a sort of dazed and stony horror.

"What is it?" cried Shirley, her eyes fixed on Dan's face, which had suddenly hardened into a cold, grim mask. "What's happened?"

Slowly he turned and looked up at her. His long-lashed gray eyes had turned almost black and there was an ominous white line around his mouth.

"It's gone!" he told her harshly.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE VANISHED WATCHER

SHIRLEY caught her breath. "Gone!" she gasped. "You don't mean the — the gold!"

Unable to credit even his silent confirming nod, she stepped swiftly forward and bent over the long, narrow cavity in the floor. Some loose papers lay at the bottom of it, a cigar box tied with string, a small parcel, but that was all. Of the four bulging canvas bags she had seen there not forty-eight hours before there was no trace.

Dazed, bewildered, sick at heart, the girl straightened to find her father standing close beside her. The sight of his face haggard, despairing, aged a dozen years in as many seconds stabbed through her like a knife. Reaching out swiftly, she caught one of his thin hands in both of hers and held it tight.

"But where's it gone?" she cried, still scarcely able to believe the evidence of her senses. "I — I — don't understand. Who is there that could ——"

"That's what I wanta know!" exploded Mrs. Haight, her harsh, hard voice, freighted with growing fury, breaking ruthlessly into Shirley's speech.

She stood up suddenly, face flushed, eyes glittering, callous, work-worn hands tightly clenched.

"That's what I wanta know!" she repeated harshly. "Who is there that could of done it? Ex-

ceptin' us five, who is there that even knew it was here?"

For a moment no one spoke. Moran had risen and pulling out tobacco sack and papers, was swiftly and expertly rolling a cigarette. His face was calm, almost expressionless, but Shirley knew him well enough to realize that the still, cold mask covered a seething volcano of emotions.

"Most of the boys were around when I brought it down from the mountains," he said quietly, flicking a match into flame with his thumb nail. "It was a fool thing to do — droppin' it down in front of everybody that way, but — Well, I wan't thinkin' about gold or anythin' else jest that minute."

"No more was any of us," supported Mrs. Haight. "But even so, seein' it lay there on the ground is a long ways from knowin' where it was hid. I'll bet my last cent there ain't a man on the ranch knows about this place except — except ——"

Her strong voice trailed off into silence that seemed drawn-out and prolonged somehow to the point of significance. Frowning, she glanced at Moran to find his gaze fixed on the face of the girl he loved, who returned it with steadfast, wholly trusting eyes. It was Nell Driscoll who, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, broke the silence.

"Mrs. Haight!" she gasped tremulously, delicate face flushed crimson, slim fingers tightly interlaced. "You don't — you can't believe that Cass ——"

Mrs. Haight turned toward her. "Lawks, child!" she ejaculated somewhat curtly. "I ain't said anythin' against him, have I?"

"No, but you're thinking— You said he—knew about this hiding place, that he was the only one." Her eyes, usually so softly placid, flashed fire and her hands clenched. "It isn't so!" she cried passionately. "I know it! Cass would never in the world do anything mean or underhand. It's cruel of you even to think that he——"

At the sound of the kitchen door closing she broke off with a little choke and one hand flew to her lips. A moment later, as a tall young fellow with level brown eyes and crisply curling hair, appeared in the open doorway, the girl flew across the room and flung herself on him, sobbing.

"Oh, Cass—Cass! I know it— isn't true."

One gray clad arm slid around her swiftly, while the other hand gently patted her shoulder. "There now, kid, don't take on like that," soothed Barton. "O' course it ain't true if yuh say so." Over the edge of a blue muslin frill his puzzled eyes regarded the motionless group around the open hole, and suddenly they hardened. "I shore dunno what it's all about," he went on swiftly, a sudden bewilderment showing in his eyes, "but if anybody's been sayin' or doin' anythin' to upset yuh——"

"We're wastin' time," cut in Mrs. Haight ruthlessly. With her strong, capable face and strong,

wide-shouldered, stocky figure, she seemed to dominate the room. "There ain't a mite o' reason for yore takin' on like this, child. Nobody's said a word against him, an' nobody's gonna. Yo're too quick to rare up, though I shore admire yore spunk. The trouble's this, Cass: Somebody's been at this hidin' place o' mine an' stole the kunnel's gold."

The brown eyes widened, then narrowed. The brown hand tightened for an instant on the girl's shoulder. A puzzled wrinkle dodged into Barton's smooth, tanned forehead to vanish swiftly as his pleasant, candid face took on the hard consistency of bronze.

"Meanin'," he drawled gently, "that yuh think I——"

"Meanin' nothin' whatever," interrupted Mrs. Haight, a touch of color in her voice. "My soul! I never see such a touchy pair. Mebbe I'm hasty spoken. Considerin' everythin', I guess I got a right to be. A while back before we took out the plank I happened to mention that yuh was the only one in the outfit beside myself that knew about it. I ain't suspectin' yuh no more than anybody else in this room. We're all in the same boat, yuh might say. That gold was here day before yesterday at three in the afternoon. It's gone now. There's been somebody around the house the whole blessed time—mostly two or three. Why, Pat sleeps on this same identical sofa every night of his life, almost. If any-

body can tell me how ——”

“What about last night?” cut in Moran suddenly. “You said he hadn’t been around here since yesterday afternoon.”

She glanced at him, her eyes narrowing. “That’s true.” She nodded thoughtfully. “He *wasn’t* here last night. I wonder — Yuh haven’t seen him, Cass?”

Nell had straightened and was dabbing her eyes with a crumpled handkerchief. Barton, giving her shoulder a final reassuring pat, came slowly forward.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Haight,” he said gently. “It’s what I came to tell yuh about. I found him jest now in that coulee up behind the blacksmith shop.”

Mrs. Haight stared at him, hands clenched, teeth gritting together.

“Dead?” she ripped out harshly.

Barton nodded. “Had been for some while.”

“Shot?”

“No. From his looks I’d say he’d been poisoned. There was froth on his lips, an ——”

He paused as the woman turned suddenly on Moran. Her firm lips were quivering, but she stilled the tremor with a quick, impatient clutch of firm white teeth. The grief and fury in her eyes was dominated by a swiftly growing conviction.

“Gessner!” she exclaimed. “You saw him with the dog last night. I thought it was funny at the time. He hasn’t ever —” Her glance swept back

o Barton. "Has he come back yet?"

"Who? Art? Hasn't shown up that I know of."

"He won't!" she stated with conviction. "My Lord! I must be losin' my grip, swallowin' that yarn about a toothache, an' his havin' to go to Fanning to get it fixed. An' all the time the dirty beast was——"

"What d'yuh mean, Fanning?" interrupted Barton, his expression suddenly alert and keen. "He went to Hatchet. Pink met him down at the east end of the valley, an' Art said he was goin' to Hatchet to get some braces yuh wanted for the chuck wagon."

CHAPTER XXXV

SUSPICION

FOR the first time words seemed to fail the sturdy owner of Bar S. Her lips parted and closed again; her glance swept past the other faces to rest with a curious momentary helpless questioning on Dan Moran's.

"Now we're gettin' down to something," remarked the latter slowly. "I had an idea Hatchet would pop up before we'd gone far."

Mrs. Haight stared. "What! Yuh mean to say yuh don't think Gessner stole it?"

"I wouldn't say that, but I'm awful shore he didn't get away with it alone. He couldn't tote half that weight or bulk without showin' it. When Pink saw him did he have a bundle, or his war sack, or anything like that, Cass?"

"Yuh got me," returned Barton. "I'd say not, though, or Pink would of noticed it. There ain't much gets away from him. How heavy was it?"

"Around a hundred an' fifty pounds."

"Whew! Why, that roan couldn't carry the half of it, an' Art, too, without showin' it."

Moran nodded. "That's what I thought. We'll get hold o' Pink later an' make shore." He glanced at Mrs. Haight. "What about this fellah, ma'am? Any reason to think he's friendly with Orms Asher?"

“I shore haven’t, or he wouldn’t ’a’ set foot on the Bar S. He come from the Box Cross about four months ago — or so he said. I had a mind to write Griffith about him, but he turned out such a first class cow wrastler it didn’t seem worth while. How about it, Cass? Come to think, yuh never did get real pleased with him personally. That’s where yuh showed yore good sense!” She ended with a faint growl.

Barton shrugged his shoulders. “I dunno’s I got anythin’ special against him,” he returned. “He’s pleasant enough an’ all that, only every now an’ then he pulls somethin’ that makes me feel he ain’t to be trusted. Likely enough I jest don’t happen to fancy him.”

“Huh. It’s the little tumbleweed shows how the wind blows,” opined Mrs. Haight. “What’s yore idea, Dan? Yuh think Asher put him up to it?”

“Somethin’ o’ that sort. Asher knows well enough what we was doin’ back there in the hills, an’ if he was a friend o’ Gessner, likely the fella told him about the load I brought in. It wouldn’t need much persuadin’ to get him to poison the dog, an’ without Pat to raise a rumpus anybody could sneak in here at nighttime when yuh was all asleep an’ turn the trick. He was promised a rakeoff, o’ course ——”

“But how’d he know anythin’ about the loose board?” cut in Mrs. Haight. “He ain’t hardly set foot in this room since he hit the ranch.”

Moran glanced at her. "Where was he when we opened it up day before yesterday?" he asked quietly.

Mrs. Haight stared. "Why, out in the west pasture with the rest of 'em, pickin' out three-year-olds for that shipment I'm gonna make. I made shore they was all outa the way before——"

"Not him, ma'am," cut in Barton swiftly. "All mornin' he was bellyachin' around about that ulcerated tooth o' his, an' when we went back after dinner I left him groanin' in his bunk."

Mrs. Haight's emotions were violently churned. "My—Lord!" she gasped. Her keen glance raked the three unshuttered windows ranged along one side of the living room, and her jaw sagged. "The spyin', two-faced polecat!" she raged. "Takin' it all in through one o' them winders, an' not a soul around outside to bother him. An' when he sneaks in here at night to snatch the gold, I'm sleepin' like a log. I ain't fit to be trusted with a two-bit piece."

She ended with a short, hard sob of mingled anger and distress and her eyes filled suddenly. Shirley reached out and caught her hand.

"Don't, please!" she begged. "You're not to blame. How could you guess—how could any of us—that it wasn't as safe here as in the bank. It's all that beastly Asher."

"You've said it!" agreed Moran emphatically. "It's my opinion he planned the whole dirty business. More'n likely he an' some o' his gang were waitin'

outside for the stuff to be handed through the window. I'll bet my last cent he's got it stowed away in his safe this very minute. I'm so almighty shore of it I'm gonna fan it down to Hatchet an' do some scoutin' 'round that burg."

For an instant no one spoke. Mrs. Haight looked surprised; the colonel dubious. Shirley tried in vain to suppress the terror which leaped suddenly into her wide eyes.

"Oh, Dan!" she protested unsteadily. "That man — The whole town's with him. You——"

Moran looked at her steadily, a little whimsical twinkle in his eyes was somewhat belied by the firm, hard line of jaw and chin.

"Yuh wouldn't like to have me sit back an' let him put across a deal like this, would yuh?" he asked gently.

Shirley flushed. "N — o, perhaps not. But alone! Why, you wouldn't have a chance with all those——"

"He ain't goin' alone," suddenly put in Cass Barton. "I'm stringin' my chips with his — if he wants me, that is."

Moran's face brightened and he cast an appreciative glance at the sturdy young cow man.

"I shore do," he returned promptly. "Yo're jest the fellah I'd a pickèd out for a jaunt like this. Listen, folks," His tone was general, but his eyes were all for Shirley. "I ain't expectin' to ride into

Hatchet with my guns out an' hold the gang up for what they stole. Asher's a whole lot too slick for that. An' after all, though I'm pretty darn sure, we haven't got any real proof he's mixed up in it. We'll slip into town by the back way without any fuss an' feathers an' welcomin' bands' an' see what we can find out. It might be we could dig up enough evidence to convince the colonel over at Fort Ashton that it's a case for federal interference."

"It would have to be *some* evidence to get him on the jump," remarked Mrs. Haight pessimistically, though her face had brightened considerably at the prospect of some action being taken. "He's so tangled up with red tape it would take a tornado or earthquake, or some other act o' Providence to tear him loose."

Moran grinned at her. "Mebbe, but yuh can never tell. Anyhow that's what I got in mind—to snoop around an' find out all we can about the lay of the land. If Gessner's hangin' around Asher's place we'll know he's one o' the bunch, like we think, an' there's a lot of other facts we may root up. Then we can mosey back here an' decide what sort of action we're gonna take."

CHAPTER XXXVI

IN THE DARK

HALF an hour later, after considerable bustling around caused by hasty saddling and the snatching of a hurried bite of supper, the two men rode away from the ranch house toward the eastern rail leading out of Bar S Valley. It had been decided that no mention should be made to the remaining punchers of the robbery or of their errand. So the farewells, which were brief, had taken place indoors and there were no last wavings of hands or fluttering handkerchiefs to draw the gaze back to that trim, comfortable homey building which sprawled under the shelter of the high cliffs behind it.

"Say, fellah," inquired Barton suddenly. "D'yuh really mean that?"

Moran jerked his mind back from a delicious memory of slim arms tightening about his neck, a soft cheek pressed against his own, a low, tense voice that murmured cautions — and other things.

"Huh?" he grunted. "What's that? Mean what?"

Barton grinned. He, too, had certain memories.

"Why what yuh said about our jest gonna scout around an' see what we can find out, without takin' any action?"

Dan's eyes twinkled. "Why, shore," he drawled.

“Yuh don’t think I’d deceive a parcel o’ wimmin, do yuh, Cass? O’ course,” he added reflectively, “if a chance come up of gettin’ square easylike with Ashe or Gessner, or havin’ that gold sorta poked at us, yuh might say, I dunno’s I’d turn it down. But naturally I ain’t settin’ out to run no risks.”

Barton’s grin widened. “Oh, no; o’ course not!” he chuckled. “You wouldn’t, naturally. Waal, seein’ as how we want to make Hatchet before the whole population hits the hay, we better kick some more speed out o’ these here bone-racks we’re straddlin’, huh?”

Moran was riding his big bay, while Barton had picked out a roan of equally inconspicuous color, but with plenty of speed and endurance. Both horses were fresh and when they had climbed out of the valley they swung along the twisting Hatchet trail at a steady, regular pace which ate up the miles with agreeable rapidity.

Keeping a sharp lookout ahead, the two men talked spasmodically, planning, speculating, now and then falling into thoughtful silences. Though they both treated the venture with surface lightness, they were fully aware of the extreme risk and hazard of venturing within reach of Ormsby Asher, whose adherents they had so lately set by the ears, and whose attitude toward them was one of a cold, deadly rage and bitter hatred. They would have to use the greatest caution, for both were well known in Hatchet and

a single glimpse of their faces would be enough, as Barton succinctly put it, "to start hell a-boilin'."

Back of them the sun dropped below the jagged western skyline, gilding for a space the peaks and forest-covered slopes with crimson glow. Slowly this paled and faded before the creeping shadows of the coming dusk. One by one the stars shone forth gathering strength and brilliancy as the daylight waned, until at last the trail was illumined only by their soft radiance.

Hatchet hugged a bend of the Snake River, its wide main street more or less paralleling the curve of the placid stream. Strung along this thoroughfare in a straggling line of log and rough timber structures, with here and there a more pretentious false front of boards or corrugated iron, divers saloons, a dance hall, hotel, general store and several other public buildings rubbed elbows with the residences of the permanent inhabitants. Like many another hopeful settlement side streets had been laid out and euphoni-ously christened, but these had not proved popular for residential purposes. There was a distinct preference for locating in the midst of things where a glance out of a front window would at once reveal the cause of any sudden turmoil which might — and often did — shatter the placidity of the town. Thus, the space in the rear of the various buildings was given up to corrals, barns and sheds. Beyond these lay an encompassing circle of tin cans, broken bottles

and other rubbish which reached to the margin of the partly cleared forest straggling down from the hills. Fully aware of these conditions, Moran and Barton left the trail about a mile from the outskirts of the town and made a wide circle which ended in a grove of young tamaracks somewhere in the rear of Ormsby Asher's combined dance hall, saloon and gambling place.

The latter was evidently in full operation. A row of lights, partly obscured by the dark bulk of some intervening sheds, twinkled through the gloom, and the tiny, tinkling notes of an ancient piano were wafted to them through the still night air.

"Blondy ticklin' the ivories," commented Barton as they dismounted and tied their horses. "That boy's fingers are shore some agile."

"Uh-huh." Moran walked out to the edge of the trees and peered around. "We wanta take particular notice where we've left these here cayuses in case we want 'em in a hurry. That's Asher's barn, ain't it, straight ahead?"

"Looks like it. We can make sure when we get over there."

Picking their way carefully across the belt of tin cans and other rubbish, the two approached the dark bulk of a building looming up out of the shadows. As Moran had expected, it proved to be the well-built, moderately commodious barn standing in the rear of Asher's dance hall, and attached to it on one

side was a stout corral containing several horses.

Unwilling to risk startling the animals by climbing the bars and crossing the corral, the two men turned in the other direction and circling the barn, cautiously crossed the open space beyond to halt in the shelter of a wagon standing about ten feet from one of the lighted windows.

For a minute or two they remained motionless watching the heads which bobbed past the open window. Then Dan, giving his companion's arm a gentle pinch, fumbled for the wagon step and drew himself noiselessly up on the seat.

Crouching here he had an excellent view of the long, smoke-filled room which as usual on such occasions was well filled. Perhaps a dozen couples were dancing to the rhythmic air which Blondy Jessup coaxed from the ancient discolored ivory keys of the old square piano, but the bulk of the crowd was gathered around the bar at one end. Amongst them Moran recognized Jed Zeek, Timmons, who kept the store, Cliff Trexler, Asher's foreman, and several of his men. His lips curled grimly as he noted the plump, pendulous face of Judge Cawley, whom he had last seen, bound and gagged and apoplectically helpless, on that wooded ridge back of Asher's deserted line camp. Of Asher himself there was no sign nor, at first, did he observe Art Gessner. Indeed, until the latter moved suddenly into his line of vision, Dan had a notion that the two might be con-

ferring in private regarding the disposition of the stolen gold. As he studied the clean-cut tanned face, brown eyes set wide apart, lips parted in an infectious grin, Moran's own face hardened. In his brief intercourse with the Bar S cow man he had sized the fellow up as a decent, all-around good sport, inclined at times, indeed, to be more than ordinarily agreeable.

"Which shows how easy it is to bark up the wrong tree," he reflected grimly. "After this, I'm likely to be suspicious of these awful pleasant guys. I wonder if Orms is in his private room?"

The silent question had barely passed through his mind when of a sudden he heard the sound of a door opening. No broad shaft of light streamed out into the back premises, but without an instant's hesitation Dan slid noiselessly into the bottom of the wagon and with infinite caution stretched his long length across the boards. At the same moment he was aware of Barton's head silently disappearing from beside him.

The door closed gently with a barely audible click of the latch, and soft footsteps moved gently across the yard. Moran dared not lift his head over the side of the wagon body, but there was really no need of that. His hearing was acute enough to tell him that two persons had emerged from the door leading out of the narrow back hall of Asher's building and that they were heading directly toward the wagon.

CHAPTER XXXVII

EAVESDROPPERS

DAN had barely time to drag his hat down over his face when two vague shadows loomed out of the gloom and the wagon body quivered slightly as one of the men leaned against it.

“Well?” questioned a voice with a slightly peevish undercurrent. “What’s up now? You ain’t drug me outa that game jest to look at the pretty stars, I expect. I thought that run o’ luck I was havin’ was too good to last.”

It was Foss McCoy who spoke. There was no immediate reply, but Moran felt a sudden chill flickering on his spine as he observed from under the dragged-down hatbrim the second figure moving rapidly around the wagon. His muscles tensed, his right hand slid noiselessly down along his thigh as he awaited breathlessly the fireworks which would herald the discovery of Barton. But nothing happened. The vague shape completed its circuit of the wagon without pause, and Moran, realizing—as he told himself he should have done before—that Cass had naturally slipped beneath the vehicle, relaxed in a gentle dew of perspiration.

“That feller’s got to be taken care of,” stated Asher abruptly, his chill, low voice cutting the silence distinctly. “He’s getting troublesome.”

“Who? Gessner, yuh mean?”

“Who else would I mean?” impatiently. “He wants half of it—*half*, you understand. And he’d like to have it handed out tomorrow mornin’.”

“Half? Huh! He don’t want much, an’ that’s a fact, the fish-faced ape. Still an’ all, yuh should worry. He can’t get it outa yore safe without—Hell’s bells! What d’yuh think my arm’s made of—cast iron?”

“No, but your head sure is. What d’you mean blattin’ around like that with the windows all open. Didja think I came all the way out here to get the air, or listen to an oration.”

“Shucks!” grunted McCoy. “Nobody in there can hear us. They’re all too busy——”

“Cut it,” advised Asher in a low, chilly tone. “You’ve been absorbin’ too many slugs of redeye. From now on I’ll do the talkin’, an’ just remember I ain’t askin’ for suggestion or advice—I’m tellin’ you. Get that?”

“Aw right; aw right,” growled McCoy sullenly. “Go ahead an’ shoot.”

“I want him got rid of,” explained Asher in a low, curt tone. “If he’d been content with a regular share like the rest, it would have been all right. He was useful in a small way nosin’ out where they’d hid it an’ passin’ it out to us. But nobody’s goin’ to run a blazer like this on me an’ get away with it.”

“O—h! Yuh want me to bump him off?”

McCoy's manner suddenly became keen and intent, and eminently sober. Under his lowered hatbrim Moran saw him glance abruptly at his companion. "I didn't know that was yore idea."

"It's the best and easiest way. I ain't sayin' he can do us any real harm, but you never know. Wantin' to hog it like he does, he'll be growlin' an' grouchin' around like a bear with a sore ear no matter what he got, an' I ain't goin' to stand for it—not any! Besides, with him out of the runnin', there'll be that much more for the rest of us."

"Uh-huh," McCoy murmured absently. "How do you want me to pull it off?"

"That's up to you," returned Asher coolly. "Get him playin' draw poker an' make out he's dealin' himself cards from the bottom of the pack. Pretend you're stewed, an' pick a fuss. There's lots o' ways. Only don't pull anythin' too raw, though of course Cawley or Lindstrom won't touch you. All I want is to get rid of him by tomorrow noon, say."

"If I work it good do I get his share too?" inquired McCoy.

Asher snorted. "I guess likely! I guess you will—not! It'll be divided up like the rest. . . . Don't forget, now; by noon tomorrow. If he comes yammerin' around again, I'll put him off 'till after dinner. Better wait here about five minutes an' come in by the front way."

McCoy mumbled a curt acquiescence, and without

further comment Asher moved swiftly away through the darkness. Presently a latch clicked, a door closed gently, and a moment or so later a light sprang up in one of the windows to the left of the back hall—a window in Asher's private office.

"Divided!" sneered McCoy in a bitter, venomous whisper. "Like the rest! Yes, he said a mouthful. He gloms nine parts an' lets us divvy one. By Gawd! One o' these days——"

The whisper ceased and presently the man moved slowly away from the wagon toward the farther corner of the dance hall. Raising his head cautiously, Moran watched the blurred shape melt into the gloom and disappear. After waiting several minutes longer, he slid along the body of the wagon and swung himself lightly over the tail-board.

"County's clear, Cass," he whispered.

Barton crawled out and joined him, and the two at once retired to denser shadows that bulked around the barn.

"I like to choke to death shuttin' off a sneeze," Barton commented in a guarded tone, "but it shore was worth it. Asher's got that bunch o' his trained fine, ain't he? Makes 'em do all the dirty work while he sits back nice an' easy an' safe. You'd think sooner or later one of 'em would go on the prod an' crown him."

"Trust him to look out for that," shrugged Moran. "Most o' those fellahs he's got just where

he wants 'em, an' he owns the county. If one of 'em rubbed him out you'd see Lindstrom an' Russell an' Judge Cawley doin' handsprings to catch the guilty man. Also, yuh gotta remember, kid, that while Orms uses that bunch to pull his hot chestnuts outa the fire, it's him that shows 'em where said chestnuts are an' tells 'em how to do the trick without more'n scorchin' their fingers. O' course ninety per cent does seem a mite raw, but yuh gotta allow for Foss exaggeratin' some; he always does when he's ribbed up. So little Artie's gonna be canned. Well, I can't say I'll shed any tears over that."

"Me, neither, the polecat! I only wisht — Say, where yuh goin' now?"

"I wanta take a little peek into Asher's boodoir," returned Moran in the same cautious undertone. "Looks to me like that window shade had a tear at the bottom. It won't hurt to give the place the once-over."

The lighted window was in a one-story wing which thrust out from the main building in the direction of Bill Timmons' store, leaving barely room enough for a narrow, dark passageway between the two. Though the chances were slight for anyone making use of this passage at such a time, Moran knew it wasn't impossible and took the precaution of making a brief investigation before proceeding on to their goal.

On reaching the window of Asher's office they

found, as Dan had guessed, that though the shade was drawn and the sash down, there was a slit some six inches long in the bottom of the former. It was a narrow crack through which only a limited section of the room could be seen — a table on which stood the lighted lamp, two chairs, and standing against the further wall a fair-sized combination safe, the door of which was closed. Asher himself, cigar tucked in one corner of his mouth, was seated at the table writing.

For a moment or two Moran studied the cold, narrow, hatchet face, immobile and expressionless even when the man must feel himself unobserved. Then his glance shifted to the safe and rested there for a rather longer period. Finally he gave place to Barton, and when Cass presently drew aside, he peered intently through the torn shade again. At last he straightened and moved cautiously away, a troubled, baffled expression in his eyes.

“I’m afraid there ain’t a chance in the world of that,” he commented absently, when they had returned to the neighborhood of the barn again.

“Chance o’ what? Openin’ the safe, yuh mean?” asked Barton.

“Of makin’ Asher open it. While I was peekin’ in there the idea came to me that if we could get Asher alone an’ stick a gun to his head, we might — But I expect it ain’t practical.”

“Hardly,” agreed Barton. “To begin with we’d

have to get him alone, which would be some job. Orms is too foxy to take many chances. What's more, if I've sized him up right, he's so thunderin' hard an' stubborn that I don't believe even a loaded six-gun poked against his innerds would make him give up the combination."

"Yeah," nodded Moran. "That's what I thought, too. He ain't the kind yuh can throw a scare into. Well——"

His voice trailed off into silence and for a space he leaned against the barn staring blankly off into the darkness. After a while he took out tobacco sack and papers and absently rolled himself a cigarette. He had a match in his hand and was on the point of striking it, when he seemed to realize what he was doing and with a grunt thrust it back into his pocket. Presently his roving glance fastened on a window in the rear of Timmons' store through which a faint light had just become visible.

"Bill must be takin' a last look around before lockin' up," he commented.

Still he continued to stare thoughtfully at that dingy, yellow square until suddenly his shoulders straightened.

"Great snakes!" he breathed. Abruptly he turned on his companion. "Say, Cass," he went on in a low, eager whisper, "what d'yuh know about dynamite?"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

FOOTSTEPS

BARTON stared. "Dynamite?" he repeated. "What d'yuh mean?"

"Do yuh know how to handle it?"

"Shore. I worked with a couple o' miners one season four, five years ago over back o' Thunder Creek. Yuh gotta have a detonator an' fuse, o' course, an'— Blue blazes! Yuh ain't thinkin' o' blowin' open that safe?"

"That was in my mind. Think it could be done?"

Barton hesitated for a moment. "It might," he returned slowly. "It would be a whole lot different from blowin' up a mess o' rock, but still— Where'd we get the dynamite an' all, though."

Moran jerked his head toward the dimly lighted window of the general store. "Timmons," he returned. "He must keep a stock of it for prospectors, don't yuh guess?"

"Shore he does," stated Barton, struck by a sudden recollection. "I don't know why I didn't think of it right off. It's in that little shed at the back of his lot, along with the blastin' powder. I reckon we can pry the lock off the door all right, 'cause o' course we'd have to snatch it."

Moran nodded. "Yeah. It won't do to show ourselves to anybody in this burg tonight. Still an'

all, we could leave money to pay for it in the shed so's they won't have anythin' on us afterward. It may seem a crazy idea, but it's about the only chance we got that I see," he went on. "Yuh know as well as I do that we might as well expect to grow wings an' fly over this barn as to hope to do anythin' through the law. Asher's got the county sewed up tight, an' as Mrs. Haight says, that fellah over at the fort wouldn't put his oar in on a thing like this. Whatever's done, we gotta do ourselves, an' we gotta do it quick. We know that gold's in the safe tonight, but any time Orms may take it into his head to shift it some'rs else. He must have a bank or two some place where he soaks away his profits."

"Shore," agreed Barton. "Well, I'm willin' to take a chance if you are. Only trouble is the amount o' the stuff we may have to use to do any good is likely to blow the whole room apart."

"So's it opens the safe, we should worry. I wouldn't mind givin' that bunch a good shake-up; mebbe they wouldn't be so quick, then, to take after us. We can bring the cayuses up closer so we won't lose any time gettin' off. O' course we'll have to wait till two or three o'clock when everybody's asleep."

Squatting on their heels with backs against the barn, they continued for some time to discuss the project from every angle. Very shortly the light in Timmons' store went out, and soon afterward the window of Asher's office was abruptly darkened.

Now and again the clatter of hoofs sounded out on the main street, increased to a pattering drum as some cow-puncher set out for a distant ranch, and died finally away in the distance. Occasionally the muffled murmur of voices drifted back to where they sat; once or twice they heard the slam of a house door.

But it was a long time before the intermittent tinkle of the piano ceased, the hum of voices in the dance hall lessened, lights grew dim, windows were slammed down and darkness finally enfolded the building. Retiring to the back of the barn where he could get a light without risk of being seen, Moran discovered that it was a little after twelve.

For another hour the two waited. Then, after a brief consultation, they made their way cautiously over to Timmons' lot, crept through the wire fence and approached the small log structure which was set well back from the store and clear of any other buildings.

This was square in shape and with no other opening save a stout door of planks. Not daring to risk using his pocket flashlight, Dan felt over the surface and discovered that it was fastened by a heavy hasp and ponderous padlock. Further investigation disclosed the hinges screwed on the outside.

"A cinch," he whispered, fumbling in his pocket. "I got a screw driver in my knife. Funny, ain't it, how folks'll lock up a door with a padlock yuh

couldn't hardly break with a sledge hammer, an' yet have the kind of hinges a fellah can take off with five minutes' easy work."

In less time than that, indeed, the screws were out and the door dragged open sufficiently to admit them into the storehouse. When the opening had been carefully closed behind them, Moran flashed his light around the small interior.

Neither of them had ever been inside the place before, and it took some time to locate what they were after. It was an even longer space before Cass had combined the sticks of dynamite, fuse, and detonator caps into what promised to be an extremely effective bomb.

"Trouble is," he confessed, when the work was finished to his satisfaction. "I ain't none too sure jest how powerful the darn thing's gonna be. It may lift the roof off, so we don't wanta hang around too close after the fuse is lit."

Moran grinned. "Don't worry. Me, personal, I ain't ready for an ascension yet a-while. We'll stick off with the hosses 'till the air settles, an' then jump in an' grab what we can before the bunch comes a-runnin'."

With extreme caution the explosive was carried out and deposited in a dark corner back of the store, just across the alley from Asher's office. It was now nearly two, and the deep, slumberous silence which lay over the town was broken only by the intermittent,

querulous barking of a dog from far out along the eastward trail leading to the Gap. After a brief, whispered consultation, the two men decided that it was time to fetch the horses.

To lead these across that encompassing circle of rubbish was a slow and difficult business. More than once the touch of a hoof against a tin can produced a clatter which seemed to the somewhat tense nerves of both men enough to wake the soundest sleeper. But apparently no one was disturbed, and at length the animals were tied to a rail of the corral and Moran and his companion softly crossed the open space toward the house.

To Dan the realization that the crucial moment of their venture was at hand brought relief and thankfulness. The tedious, uneasy hours of waiting, of which he was heartily weary, were nearly over and very soon they would know the worst. At no time had the thought of personal risk entered into his doubts and fears. As a matter of fact he would have rather welcomed a clash with the detested Asher or Art Gessner. What worried him was the feeling that they were risking in a single throw the colonel's hard-won treasure. Considering Barton's somewhat sketchy knowledge of explosives, it was more than possible that he had used too much dynamite, or too little, and either extreme would be fatal to their plans. For an insufficient charge would rouse the town as quickly as a large one, and what would it

avail them to have the safe so shattered that the gold bags would be burst asunder and their contents scattered far and wide? Knowing Asher, he was too well assured that if they failed now they would never have another chance. It was small wonder, therefore, that his outward composure hid keyed-up nerves and a suppressed but passionate desire to have it over — swiftly.

The explosive was first removed from the rear of Timmons' store and placed against the wall of Asher's house about ten feet from the window. The latter reached to within about three feet of the ground, and when Dan mounted on Barton's back to investigate, he discovered that it was fastened by the most ordinary of catches. Green lumber combined with careless workmanship had resulted in a gap between the two sashes of at least a quarter of an inch which made the thrusting back of the catch with Moran's knife blade a matter of extreme simplicity. It was so easy, indeed, that as he stepped to the ground again Dan wondered caustically why Asher ever took the trouble to lock the thing at all.

Barton straightened up, and Moran, pocketing his knife, lifted one hand to raise the lower sash. Evidently it had not been opened lately, for it seemed to resist a little his cautious pressure. Remembering this afterward, Dan was struck with wonder at the slight, tenuous nature of the thing which had such a tremendous influence on their fortunes. If that win-

dow had yielded readily, rising with a slight natural creak or scrape which might have been heard by a wakeful person twenty feet or so away, the whole subsequent sequence of events would have been changed. As it was, it stuck, and Moran's muscles were tensing for a stronger effort—yet one which would not send the sash up with a bang—when suddenly Barton gripped his arm and held it forcibly motionless.

An instant later there came faintly to him the sound of cautious footfalls approaching from the right.

CHAPTER XXXIX

LUCK AND MISCHANCE

THERE was no time to slip around the corner — scarcely enough, in fact, for them to flatten themselves against the wall to the left of the window. The footsteps came on steadily, with that same quiet stealthiness which had made their first impression even on Barton's sharp ears the merest piece of luck. Who could it be? And what was he doing here at such an hour?

Listening with bated breath, eyes striving to penetrate the shadows, Moran waited motionless, every nerve and muscle tense. From the sounds he judged that the unknown was headed almost directly toward them. He wondered how far off they could be seen and then, suddenly, a possibility at once grotesque and hair-raising stabbed through him. Suppose this night-prowler should stumble over the dynamite!

Though Dan had heard of men taking extraordinary chances with this particular explosive and escaping unscathed, he was nevertheless instantly aware of an icy shiver on his spine, coupled with a sudden sinking in his stomach. Moisture broke out on his forehead as he thought of the impact which can be imparted by the smart kick of a heavy boot. Then all at once the faint crunch of footsteps ceased and out of the gloom there loomed a vague, dark shape

which paused directly opposite the rear door leading into the back passage that ran between the dance hall and Asher's office.

How long the man stood there motionless Dan had no notion. Holding his breath until he was almost strangled, the time seemed endless before the shadow slid noiselessly forward to merge into the blackness of the doorway. Followed presently the faintest click, a scarcely audible creak of ill-fitting hinges, and then silence.

Simultaneously both men drew breath with the same sort of labored caution, though otherwise they did not stir. But though he did not move a muscle, Dan's mind was violently, feverishly active. Though as yet he had no notion as to who the unknown might be, he had guessed, in a single illuminating second, the fellow's purpose. What other explanation was there for this secret, silent, stealthy entrance? What other motive could bring a man to Ormsby Asher's house in such a manner and at such an hour?

Carefully turning his body, Moran thrust one foot forward. He took another cautious step, and, steadying himself against the window-ledge, peered through the slit in the bottom of the drawn shade.

For a space he saw nothing. The room within was plunged in an impenetrable gloom. He waited, still straining his eyes, but not the faintest spark of light came to relieve the blackness. Presently he began to

grow impatient, to wonder if he could possibly be mistaken. Back of him toward the corral a horse moved restlessly, bringing a quick frown to his alert, tense face. Far out along the eastern trail the dog, which for a long time had been silent, suddenly gave tongue in that shrill, staccato fashion dogs have when they wake suddenly to some fancied danger of the darkness. At the unexpected sound Moran's shoulders twitched. Then all at once he froze, his whole being instantly concentrated on that narrow crevice at the bottom of the window blind.

Within the room a little glow of light had suddenly sprung up, so carefully shaded and concentrated that not even a reflection of it could penetrate beyond the drawn blinds of Asher's office. But from his point of vantage Moran easily made out the play of that yellow circle on the front of the safe, the shadowy bulk of the man crouching in front of it, the hand which reached out of the gloom to lay hold of the combination knob.

It was a muscular hand, yet with long, vibrant, sensitive fingers. Something about it, coupled with the vague familiarity of the shadowed outline of the man himself, tightened Dan's lips and made his eyes blaze suddenly.

Watching with the fierce intentness of a hawk that has sighted its prey, Moran saw the slim fingers twirl the knob with a curious, unexpected expertness. Back and forth it moved, sometimes rapidly, more often

with infinite deliberation, the fellow's head bent close to the heavy steel door. Once or twice he gave the knob a rapid spin as if he were beginning all over again, and swiftly Dan became convinced with a feeling of dazed surprise that it was by no means the first safe the man had opened. In spite of his preoccupation he found time to wonder briefly what could possibly have brought such a character into this remote wilderness. Certainly one doesn't as a rule find safe-crackers developing into expert cowmen.

At all events it was soon made evident that the hand had not lost its cunning. The fingers were moving slowly now, turning the knob space by space with infinite care. Presently even that crawling movement ceased for an instant. Then the knob was delicately thrust forward a space or two further.

No sound penetrated through the closed window, but Moran knew as well as if he had heard it that at this final thrust the combination clicked. Thrilling with exultation and excitement, he saw the hand shift to the heavy nickel handle and draw the safe door open. The beam of light now shifted, playing around the interior of the safe. Dan glimpsed papers stacked in orderly array, a couple of account books, and then at the sight of the top of a plump canvas bag tied around the mouth with buckskin, the blood rushed into his face a crimson flood. Hastily turning from the window he felt through the darkness for Barton. His fingers touched a muscular shoulder

and tightening his grip he drew Cass toward him until his lips rested lightly against his friend's ear.

"It's Gessner," he breathed. "He's opened the safe! Y'understand? It's open now. We won't have to use that dynamite at all. In two shakes he'll be out with two o' them bags. He can't carry more'n that at once, an' mebbe that's all he means to take, though I doubt it. Anyhow, we'll stand one on each side o' the door an' bean him as he comes out. I'll take the first crack an' if I miss, yuh go to it. Get me?"

"I shore do," came back in a low whisper. "Go to it."

Swiftly, yet taking pains to make no noise, they slipped over to the door and took up their positions on either side of it, close against the house wall. Moran, standing to the left, drew his six-gun and grasping it by the barrel, held it ready in front of him. He was filled with triumph, and a keen, fierce exultation at the thought of how completely Art Gessner was going to pay for his sneaking crookedness and treachery.

It was the very intensity of this emotion which came near to proving their undoing. For when the door presently opened noiselessly and the shadowy figure stepped forth, Dan smote with a swift, savage eagerness which neglected to take count of the six-inch step on which the fellow stood. Instead of striking his head as he intended, the heavy weapon

crashed down on Gessner's shoulder and flung him violently against the farther door post.

A hoarse cry of pain and surprise shattered the brooding stillness of the night. There was a thud of something heavy falling, and swift upon the heels of that another very different sounding thud. At Barton's well-aimed blow, Gessner sagged at the knees and without a sound fell face downward to lie at their feet a motionless, huddled heap.

Furious at his own carelessness, Moran yet wasted not an instant in self-recriminations.

"Grab the bags," he told Barton swiftly holstering his weapon. "He's dropped 'em. Get over to the hosses an' untie 'em. I'm going in for the other two."

Without waiting for a reply he dashed into the hallway, pulling out his pocket flashlight as he went. Whirling swiftly to the left, he darted through the door of Asher's office and over to the safe which was still open. It took but a moment to snatch up the two remaining bags of gold and depart. But as he flung out of the door and sped toward the corral, hampered not a little by the weight he carried, there came to him unmistakable sounds and signs which betokened the complete awakening of Asher's establishment.

Lights flared up in several windows; voices, hoarse or shrill, profanely demanded the reason for the disturbance. Men appeared in one or two of the upper

rooms. As Moran reached the corral to find Barton mounted and holding the bay's bridle, a sudden angry shout came from the direction of the house, followed swiftly by a shot.

"Quick!" urged Barton, as the bullet whined past them to bury itself in a post. "The whole bunch'll cut down on us in a minute."

Moran made no answer. He had been carrying a heavy bag of nuggets in each hand. Now, hurriedly thrusting one under his left arm, he found the stirrup and with a heave and a grunt flung himself into the saddle. He had barely time to snatch the reins before the snorting bay shot forward with a jerk which would have unseated any less practiced rider. But Dan, clinging with his thighs, managed to find the other stirrup and followed Barton around the corner of the dance hall into a lane which lay between it and Jed Zeek's hotel.

They were pursued by a rattling fire of pistol shots, all of which — though some came perilously close — failed to take effect. As they swung into the main street and headed westward, Moran — urged by the pressing need of easing his cramped arm — managed to slide the gold bags down to rest on the saddle in front of him. Though he was still obliged to hold them in place, the relief was great and there was no time now to secure them more permanently. Already the noisy turmoil at Asher's was rousing the town and at any moment they might expect to be fired at from

the houses past which they galloped. As a matter of fact they were unmolested save for a pot-shot taken at them from an upper window of the next to the last house in the row. It missed Barton by a good foot, but it served as a warning—if any such were needed—that they would do well to place a large space of territory between themselves and Hatchet in the shortest possible time.

CHAPTER XL

PURSUED

A FEW hundred yards beyond the last house the trail turned sharply, passing between a heavy growth of willows that lined the river, and on the other side tall, spreading cottonwoods with here and there a great Douglas fir which had escaped the leveling ax of earlier settlers. It was a spot of singular beauty, especially in the daytime when the sunlight, shining through the interlacing branches, dappled the placid stream with streaks and splashes of glinting gold. Now, in spite of the black shadows made by the great trees, one got a curious impression of peaceful isolation—a sense that all that fierce turmoil of shouts and shots, which by this time had died away behind them, must almost have been a figment of imagination. Though both men were perfectly aware that the respite would at best be only temporary, they found the transformation soothing and for five minutes or so galloped on in silence. Then Moran glanced sidewise at his companion.

“When we get back to the valley, Cass,” he remarked, “I wish yuh’d give me a few swift kicks.”

“Huh? Oh!” Barton grinned. “Yuh mean about yore not hittin’ him square.”

“Shore! Of all the blasted idjits makin’ a fool play like that!” Dan’s voice was deeply freighted

with disgust. "I was so Gawd awful wild to crack him good, I clean forgot about that step he was standin' on."

"Was that it? Nemmine. Yuh shore gave me one joyful minute, I'll tell the world! I reckon we're square with Artie all right. I'd hate to be in his boots when Asher tackles him. Say! hadn't yuh better pull up an' settle them bags better? They're turrible heavy to be luggin' that away. Likewise we don't want to chance one bein' jolted off when we ain't got time to stop an' pick it up. Unless I'm a whole lot wrong, we ain't seen the last of Asher an' his bunch — not by a long shot."

"I reckon not," agreed Moran, pulling his horse down to a walk. "Orms is a sticker, all right. Still an' all, we got a pretty fair lead."

"Yuh don't wanta forget these here cayuses have already traveled consid'able tonight," Barton reminded him, "an' likewise each one is totin' about seventy-five pounds extra weight. I don't wanta be no killjoy, but that's gonna make a difference."

There was no denying the truth of his observation and Dan wasted no time stowing the gold into his saddlebags. He had scarcely finished the operation when from behind the pattering drum of hoofs was borne to them on the still night air.

Gone instantly was that soothing sense of peaceful isolation. As he loosened the reins, Moran's thoughts swept back to the main street of the town

behind them and in imagination he could see a bunch of wild-eyed ponies pouring out of the alleyway between Asher's place and the hotel, and rocketing down the trail like jackrabbits. Asher himself, mounted on that splendid black stallion of his, would be in the lead. Dan wondered if the man's stony impassive face would at this juncture be showing any outward sign of the passion which must be consuming him. The clever, cold, unscrupulous boss of Hatchet was quite unaccustomed to being thwarted. It seemed as if it would be difficult for even him to remain unmoved under this daring raid, coming especially almost on the heels of that even greater humiliation of a few weeks before. Moran's lips curved grimly as he pictured Asher's feelings when he discovered Gessner's unconscious body and realized how completely he had been outwitted by the man he so calmly and callously planned to put out of the way. Then abruptly Moran's face fell.

"Thunder!" he muttered under his breath. "Like enough he'll never know it was Gessner who opened the safe so slick. That fellah's too gosh-darned smart not to lay it onto us, an' make out, probably, that he got crowned tryin' to stop us. I hadn't thought of that."

But after all neither Gessner's fate nor Asher's feelings were of any special moment now. The vital thing was to save the treasure they had so fortuitously gained possession of, and this could only be accom-

plished by beating their pursuers to the security of the Bar S valley.

To this end Moran was quickly bending every thought and effort. It wasn't going to be any cinch, he knew. The way was long and in places the going hard. And as Barton had reminded him their horses were none too fresh. Especially on the steep slopes beyond the old Driscoll place that dead weight in the saddle-bags was going to prove no small handicap. But the thing must be done somehow, for not only was the happily recovered gold at stake, but their very lives hung in the balance.

The shadowy depths of the willows and giant cottonwoods left behind, they sped on along the curving trail which for several miles paralleled the river bank. The going here was excellent; a comparatively level grade with underfoot a firm loam, not too soft, crossed occasionally by an outcropping of rock. Knowing how much worse traveling lay ahead, Moran gave his horse rein, pulling up only at rare intervals for a momentary breathing spell. At each of these brief halts it seemed to him that the drumming thud of hoofs behind was just a little louder and more distinct than it had been the time before. Wondering if this might possibly be due to a too active imagination, he presently put the question to his companion.

"No, they're gainin'," Barton responded briefly. "Not much, but some. With the load we're totin, it would be funny if they didn't. I'm wonderin'——"

He hesitated. Dan glanced at him questioningly.

“Yeah?”

“What if we left the trail an’ ducked into the woods, say just beyond the branch that turns off toward Thunder Creek. Wouldn’t that mebbe throw ’em off the track? They couldn’t tell but what we’d taken that branch, an’ even if they did divide up an’ some of ’em keep on toward the valley, they wouldn’t know whereabouts we’d dropped out, or where to begin huntin’ us along the way.”

“Mebbe not,” agreed Moran. “But s’pose Asher should stick around the entrance to the valley like he did once before? He’s one Gawd awful stubborn cuss, an’ this particular piece o’ country is about the worst I know of to get out of except by the trail. On a hoss it ain’t possible to get through them mountains that back up on either side, an’ if we should leave the cayuses we’d have one swell chance o’ luggin’ that weight o’ gold forty or fifty miles through the wilderness.”

“That’s true enough. It’s sorta like the neck of a bottle, come to think. We can’t go sideways, an’ we can’t go back without passin’ through Hatchet or strikin’ into the wilderness across the river.”

“Yuh said it! O’ course the two of us could hide out where they wouldn’t find us in a month o’ Sundays. But meantime we’d have to eat, an’ I got an idea we’d starve to death before Asher’d give up an’ take his bunch home. Looks to me like our best chance was

to stick to the trail an' beat 'em to it."

Barton nodded. "I expect yo're right, fellah. That bein' the case, we better keep these here cayuses movin' rapid—anyway until we're past that mile-long stretch o' straight trail this side o' Driscoll's place. It's beginnin' to get light a-ready, an' some o' that bunch behind is shore to be packin' Winchesters."

Moran agreed briefly but made no other comment. For some little time he had been aware of the slowly 'dimming stars and the faint, gradual lightening of the blue-black arch above them which told of the coming dawn. But so far the horses had shown no noticeable signs of fatigue, and with the dangerous open stretch less than three miles ahead, he felt confident they could pass it safely before the light would be strong enough for accurate shooting.

His confidence proved well-founded. As they thudded past the empty house, its gaunt, ghostly outlines were just emerging from the thinning shadows that faded slowly before the cold gray of approaching dawn. Though the clatter of pursuing hoofs was clear enough, a backward glance showed no sign of movement on the visible portion of the straight, level trail stretching out behind them.

Swerving around a clump of cedars, the two pushed on toward the fork, and presently reaching it, took the left hand branch. A little further on this left the lowlands about the river and began its toilsome, tortuous upward climb toward the rocky

pass lying between the mountains.

It was hereabouts that Barton's horse began to show the strain. Before they had gone a mile he was breathing hard and his sides were heaving painfully. Moran's powerful bay held out longer, but in the end he, too, began to lag. Dan would have given much to be able to rest the gallant beasts, but the sounds of pursuit, which grew clearer and more distinct with every passing mile, told him that a halt of even five minutes would be fatal.

One thing only was in their favor — the tortuous, twisting nature of the trail. Constantly curving and turning as it followed the erratic course of the mountain pass, it rarely kept to a straight course for more than a couple of hundred feet at a stretch. Unable to make any great speed, Asher's gang was likewise prevented from using rifles or six-shooters with any effect.

Nevertheless, it seemed to Moran that the chase could have but one ultimate ending. There was a bare chance, he felt, if their horses held out that far, of their reaching the rim of the valley ahead of their pursuers, but that was his most sanguine hope. Remembering the precipitous descent into Bar S territory, the distance of the ranch house from that end of the valley and the entire unpreparedness of its inmates to come to their assistance, Dan groaned inwardly and cursed himself for not having prepared for this emergency.

Asher would make no more of following them onto Mrs. Haight's property than he had of chasing them thus far from Hatchet. In his present state of mind the only bar to his thwarted fury would be force—the force of determined men ready and willing to use their weapons. The Bar S crowd was strong enough to at least temporarily beat back the gang Asher had with him, but unfortunately long before the sound of shots could bring them thither from the ranch house, all need for their aid was likely to be over. And yet——

Moran's eyes narrowed and his hand slid down to grip his six-shooter. Ten minutes—at the most, fifteen—was all they needed. Provided with an even half way decent sort of shelter might not he and Cass manage to hold back the crowd for that short time?

At least it was worth trying. Indeed, it seemed to be their only hope, and in swift, terse phrases he outlined his plan to Barton.

“There's nothin' above the rim they couldn't rush in two shakes,” returned the puncher quickly—“nothin', that is, that we could get to without bein' 'downed. Only place I can think of is that big pile o' rocks with cedars growin' alongside 'em down in the valley at the foot o' the slope, an' there ain't a chance in a hundred of our reachin' that ahead of a bullet.”

Dan's lips straightened grimly. “We gotta, that's all, fellah,” he stated crisply. “I ain't ready to cash

yet, an' I shore don't mean to give Orms Asher the satisfaction of gettin' back that gold. It ain't a half mile, hardly. Can't yuh get a mite more speed outa yore cayuse?"

"Not a smidgin'. The poor critter's all in now. If I spur him, chances are he'll drop under me."

"Well, do the best yuh can, an' if I'm 'downed don't yuh stop on no account. Remember what's in yore saddle bags an' beat it under cover. Likely enough yuh can hold 'em off 'till the boys come."

Barton's expression was far from acquiescent, but he made no comment, and silence fell, broken only by the labored breathing of the exhausted horses, the uneven clatter of their hoofs, the ominous steady thud of those other hoofs so perilously close behind.

The shadows had long since vanished and the cold gray sky was tinged now with a delicate soft rose. Through the narrow cleft between the towering mountains swept streamers of deeper color touched with gold, brightening the somber green of ragged pines, softening the harsh outlines of piled rocks and boulders. From somewhere in the forest depths the soft, liquid notes of a thrush soared suddenly, so sweet and clear and penetrating, so wholly unexpected and incongruous, that Dan's face hardened and his hand clenched. An instant later the placid, smiling green of Bar S valley lay spread out before him.

Barton was a trifle ahead for Moran had purposely held back his somewhat fresher mount to give Cass precedence on the narrow downward track. Laying back on the bridle, he put the roan over the rim and clattered down the slope, the exhausted animal stumbling, swaying, held up to a great extent by the rider's sheer strength. Not daring to delay — he felt that at any moment the foremost of their pursuers would dash around the final turn and sight them — Dan followed hastily and the two plunged downward with not more than twenty feet between them.

Not far from the foot of the slope loomed up that mass of piled rock and scrubby cedars which promised refuge and temporary safety. Dan flashed a single glance thither, wondering with a curious sort of cold composure whether or not they would ever reach it. Barton was half way down by this time, the roan still on his feet though staggering.

Now he had covered two-thirds of the distance. Another sixty seconds would bring him safely to the bottom.

He reached it in less time than that with Moran close behind. The latter was still clattering over the final few feet of declivity when from above there came abruptly the sharp crack of a rifle. A bullet whined past Dan's face so close that its passing seemed to stir his hair. A second later came the sound of another shot. It struck Barton's horse which crashed down with such force and abruptness

that the puncher was hurled bodily out of his saddle. Aghast, Moran saw him land against a boulder to lie there motionless, a crumpled heap, within a dozen feet of safety.

CHAPTER XLI

CHECK

THERE was no time for thought or conscious planning. Sheer instinct made Moran swing his horse around the sprawling body of the roan and drag him to a halt. Out of the saddle before his horse had ceased to move, he bent over Barton and with a heave of splendid arm and shoulder muscles caught up the unconscious puncher and flung him across the bay. A bullet struck his hat and carried it away; another plowed the ground beside him, but they passed almost unheeded. Reins in one hand, the other supporting the limp body of his friend, he plunged between two cedars, dragged the horse around an outthrust buttress and halted abruptly, eyes glittering, lips tightly pressed together.

With swift gentleness he lifted Cass from the horse and laid him down in a sheltered corner. There was a cut on his head from which the blood oozed slowly, but apparently he was otherwise uninjured.

“Stunned, that’s all,” Dan said aloud, in a tone of relief. “He’ll be around soon.” He straightened and glanced for an instant at the lathered bay, which faced him with trembling legs spread wide apart and red nostrils dilated. “Good boy, Pete,” he muttered. “Yo’re some li’l hoss, believe me. Nothin’s too good for you after this.”

Then turned abruptly, he climbed into a crevice among the piled rocks, stepped thence to the smooth, slanting side of a great, cleft boulder, and dropping on hands and knees, snaked his way swiftly toward the summit.

The feathery branches of a cedar growing up beyond the massive boulder effectively screened him from the sight of those above, yet enabled him to get a fairly comprehensive view of the trail leading into the valley and a portion of the rim. Instead of looking that way, however, his eager glance first sought the base of this rocky shelter.

The roan lay where it had fallen, evidently quite dead. Apparently the force of its fall had loosened the saddle bag, which lay almost clear of the horse's body, the edge of one of the soiled, bulging canvas bags showing through a ripped seam in the leather.

Moran's eyes glistened as he gauged its nearness to the base of the jumble of rocks on which he crouched. A person lying behind that low, outflung boulder below, flanked by two ragged cedars, could almost reach out and touch it. He wondered if it would be possible, by slipping through a crevice, masked by thick bushes over to his right, to gain that boulder unperceived. Then suddenly the clatter of a stone and a sense of movement on the sloping trail drew his glance swiftly thither. At the sight of the horsemen moving slowly and warily down the narrow track, his face hardened, and pulling his Colt from its

holster, he slid the barrel over the edge of the rock across which his eyes were peering.

Finger resting on the trigger, he waited for them to get within range. Asher's tall, lank figure was not among them. Evidently the astute leader was holding back while his henchmen, as usual, did the dirty work. Up along the rim Dan glimpsed a number of figures scattered through the rocks and guessed accurately that these, armed with rifles, had been posted there to cover the advance. The moment he fired, there would be instant response. And so, when presently the foremost of the descending party was within range, he took careful aim, pulled the trigger, and then dropped swiftly behind his shelter.

From the rim came an instantaneous crash of shots almost drowning the sharp cry of the wounded man, the thud of his fall, the sudden clatter of the frightened horse. The bullets pattered against the rock just over Moran's head, clipping off sprays of cedar, and sending a little shower of sharp granite fragments flying over him. One of these seared across his cheek and drew blood, but Dan was heedless of the sting.

"Cass was right about some of 'em packin' Winchesters," he muttered, as he slid agilely across the sloping rock to find another point of vantage. "Well, if that racket don't start Buck an' the rest a-boilin', I miss my guess."

Face flushed and eyes shining with the joy of con-

flict, he reached a slight declivity some twelve feet to the left, from which he managed to get in another hasty shot at the men on the trail before driven back by the concentrated rifle fire. It took effect, as Dan intended, on the fellow's thigh. Disabling a man was just as good as killing him, and after all he felt no murderous animosity against these men who were merely forced to carry out their leader's orders. If it were Asher himself, or the treacherous Gessner or even Foss McCoy, the situation would be different.

Once more he repeated the maneuver and this time the attacking party broke and fled back to the shelter of the rim. It was while waiting for the next move that Dan noticed Barton sitting up and staring bewilderedly around. He signaled Cass to stay where he was, and not many minutes later the thud of hoofs and the sight of a bunch of riders streaming toward them from the ranch house brought him scrambling hastily to the level.

Some vigorous signaling caused them to swerve slightly in their course so that they approached under cover of the rocky shelter. Mrs. Haight was one of the first to dismount. As soon as she had been acquainted with the situation she was all for making a determined sally to recover the other saddlebag, but Moran pointed out the unnecessary hazard of such a move.

"They've got the place well covered an' somebody's shore to be downed," he said. "I got a better

idea." Briefly he outlined his plan.

"The fellahs can string along the top o' the rocks an' keep their attention occupied while I slide down through that crack an' snitch it," he concluded. "It's about the best way I can see, an' we oughta act quick, 'cause mighty soon they'll be sneakin' along the rim to try an' get us from behind."

"Fly at it," said Mrs. Haight tersely. "You seem to know what yo're about. Only don't go takin' no foolish chances. All the gold in the world ain't wuth gettin' rubbed out for." Her big, calloused, capable hand rested for an instant on Moran's shoulder. "I had a job o' work, believe me, keepin' a certain party from comin' out with us," she told him in a lowered tone. "If I should come back an' tell her——"

Dan grinned and hitched up his cartridge belt. "Don't worry," he assured her. "You won't have to."

He meant it. When the Bar S men had posted themselves along the top of the long, irregular ridge of rock and Moran crept into the crevice he had noted and began to worm and wriggle his way through it, the image of Shirley Rives was in his mind and it was the thought of her and of that wonderful future which was to be theirs together that tempered somewhat his natural recklessness and daring. With that to live for and look forward to the lust of life was strong within him. He had not the least intention of being cut off prematurely by a bullet. And besides

there was the keen delight and satisfaction of thwarting Ormsby Asher. For the first time in his life Moran was almost cautious.

At its outer edge the crevice 'dipped sharply. Edging slowly through it, Moran slid down the final abrupt descent to the shelter of a little thicket of undergrowth eked out by the trunks of two or three scrub cedars. The boulder beyond which lay the 'dead horse and that precious saddlebag was not more than ten feet away. About it spread the tufts of a few low bushes, but in between lay an open space, three or four feet wide, which gave Dan pause.

In passing that he would present an excellent target to the outlaws gathered on the rim. He might, of course, bridge the gap by a swift leap which would take them by surprise, but this would concentrate their fire on the low boulder and make his return next to impossible.

Without stirring the bushes it was impossible to see what Asher's men were up to or guess the reason for this prolonged lull in hostilities. Some of them might very well be making their way along the rocky rim of the valley to gain a point of vantage in the rear, but Dan was quite certain that enough remained at the head of the trail to make taking chances a matter of extreme hazard.

A bit of sage brush tickling his ear gave him at this juncture a sudden thought. His shirt was dark and so were the trousers tucked into the tops of high-

heeled boots. If he moved slowly only his face would be visible against the shadowy background. He might have covered it with his hat, but this was gone, and so without delay he broke off a few of the green stalks and thrusting the ends down his collar, he lay flat on the ground and began to edge forward inch by inch.

Though it seemed much longer, he could really have been scarcely more than a minute crossing that dangerous open space. Long legs tucked under him, wide shoulders cramped, he crouched behind the low boulder, eyes fixed on the saddlebag, which lay there in the sunlight almost within reach of an outthrust hand. It was no light thing to be whisked back by a single, daring jerk. To reach it he would have to expose not only an arm and shoulder, but his head as well. Yet somehow the thing must be done, and without too much delay.

Dan changed his position to a somewhat easier one and his right hand began to slip slowly forward when suddenly a scattering fire of shots broke the placid morning stillness. Moran halted abruptly and instinctively ducked, only to realize a second later that the shots were directed toward the upper portion of the rocky shelter, whence they were promptly and vigorously returned by the Bar S men. To Dan there seemed a spiritless quality about the firing as if its purpose was to distract attention from some other move of the besiegers.

"They're sneakin' around to the back jest like I thought," he reflected, noting the faint smoky haze eddying down from above. "You'll never get a better chance, son. Here goes."

Drawing a long breath, he bent suddenly sidewise, thrust forth a long arm and gripped one corner of the saddlebag. For an instant it seemed to resist his effort and a cold sweat broke out on his forehead as he wondered whether it was still held fast by the saddle. But a stronger jerk brought it slowly toward him and a few seconds later he had dragged it behind the rock and was wiping the moisture from his forehead.

"Oh, boy!" he muttered, grinning fatuously with mingled relief and triumph. "The bunch o' dubs!"

And yet after all were they such dubs? The intermittent, seemingly purposeless shooting continued languidly, stirring Moran to a swift recurrence of his previous suspicion. If Asher's men, who far outnumbered the Bar S crowd, did succeed in gaining a position from which they could command the rear of this rocky shelter the game would most decidedly be up.

With cautious haste Dan started on the return trip, dragging the saddle bag after him. Again he crossed the open gap in safety and hoisting the gold up into the crevice climbed after it. Hauling that heavy weight through the narrow crack was slow work, but he finally gained the other side without

incident, to be greeted by a chorus of congratulations.

"We ain't outa the woods yet, ma'am," he said, ruthlessly breaking in on Mrs. Haight's rhapsodies. "They ain't shootin' to hit, but to cover up somethin'. I'm wonderin' if some of 'em ain't snakin' around the rim to try an' cut down on us from this side."

Mrs. Haight's glance raked the steep, precipitous northern wall of the valley. "I thought o' that," she admitted, "an' we been keepin' close watch. So far there ain't been a sign o' anybody——"

"It won't do to wait for that," cut in Moran. "We got to beat it outa range before they do show up. Yuh take care o' these?" He flung the saddlebags across Mrs. Haight's horse and grinned briefly at Barton. "You'll have to ride somebody else's nag, fellah," he said, "an' let them that hasn't had a clip on the dome run 'longside. Let's pull our freight."

His manner was infectious. Without further words Mrs. Haight swung into her saddle and gathered up the reins. The punchers, who had left their places at the summit of the rock when Dan appeared, made for the bunch of horses, Buck Stover forcing Barton to mount his dun cayuse while he held onto the stirrup leather. As Moran flung a leg across the rested bay, he caught a glint of steel among the rocks up along the northern rim and gave a warning shout.

"Duck, fellahs!" he cried, touching the bay with a spur. "Beat it over close to the wall, an' they can't touch us."

As the bay leaped forward a bullet spattered into the sod beside him. Another pinged past Dan's ear with a sound like the vibration of a taunt steel wire. Flashes of fire and little spurts of 'smoke burst from the jagged top of that somber gray cliff, followed swiftly by the sharp crack of the shots.

Bending over the neck of the horse, which lay along the ground in great leaps, it seemed to Moran as if the leaden slugs were striking all about him. He guessed the fire was being concentrated on himself, and with an odd, dispassionate curiosity found himself wondering just where he was going to be hit and what it would feel like. Then abruptly, though the firing continued with uninterrupted volume, the thudding patter of the bullets ceased, and with a thrill of triumph he realized that he had passed into the shelter of the high cliff and out of range of the rifles posted along its summit.

Glancing around he found that the others had been equally fortunate. Apparently no one had been so much as creased. Even Stover, clinging fast to Barton's stirrup and covering the ground in great protesting leaps, had made the swift dash in safety. Turning jubilantly to Mrs. Haight, Dan found that lady's face purpling with pure, unadulterated fury.

"My soul!" she raged aloud. "Shot at on my own land! If I don't make Orms Asher pay for this through the nose, I——"

"Nemmine that now, ma'am," urged Moran.

“Time enough later. I dunno’s even he’d have the nerve to chase us any further, but me, personal, I’d as leave get behind some solid log walls for a spell. I’m jest about fed up right now with this here open country.”

The woman fumed and sputtered but seemed to perceive his point.

“Alla same,” she stated belligerently, as she roweled her horse with a spur, “he’s gonna pay for this if I have to take the case right up to the governor himself.”

CHAPTER XLII

TIGHTENING COILS

DAN MORAN was not so sure. With every desire in the world to make Ormsby Asher pay well for his high-handed work of the past twenty-four hours, he knew that astute, cold-blooded person too well to feel any real confidence in their ability to put him in a hole. Indeed, when they had gained the house unpursued, eaten a hearty meal and snatched some sleep, an exceedingly unpleasant possibility came to him which he made haste to lay before the others.

At first Mrs. Haight flatly refused to believe that any such danger could exist even in what she sourly termed, "this corrupt, an' Gawforsaken county."

"Yo're talkin' wild, man," she told Moran, standing before the empty fireplace with feet spread well apart and arms folded. "'Asher's a crook four-ways, an' there ain't a dirty trick in the calendar I wouldn't put past him to try. But when it comes to appealin' to the law an' making out it was *his* gold you stole outa that safe — why, that's too plumb raw for even him to put across."

"I ain't so shore o' that, ma'am," returned Moran quietly. "He's a mighty slick piece o' work, an' he's got some o' the county men sewed up pretty tight."

"That fat Jake Cawley!" sniffed Mrs. Haight scornfully. "An' mebbe Jordan an' Jim Coyle. But

this here would be a job for the sheriff, an' I ain't never heard Ed Plummer was crooked."

"Not crooked, mebbe, but jest a little bent," put in Barton, who had just entered the room. "Yuh gotta admit he's a sort of weak sister, an' I've heard more'n once he was in pretty deep with Asher. When yuh owe a man money it ain't human nature not to be a mite biased."

"But such a thing would be ridiculous," protested Colonel Rives, a spot of indignant color glowing in each wrinkled cheek. "The gold was ours — stolen from this very room in the most bare-faced manner. For Asher or anyone else to make a claim on it would be the height of absurdity. I don't believe even a crooked official would dare touch such a case."

"How many people could get up in court an' swear to that?" Dan asked quietly. "I mean, that the gold was our property and was hidden in this room? How many people actually saw it?"

"Why — why, everybody, pretty near," sputtered Mrs. Haight. "When yuh brought the colonel in that day an' dumped the gold down outside 'most every man on the ranch was there. They couldn't help seein' it."

"They saw the bags," corrected Moran with a shrug. "They mighta guessed what was in 'em, but not one of 'em really knew. What's more, except the colonel an' me, I'm thinkin' there ain't a soul who's ever had a peek inside 'em. An' both of us is what

the law calls interested parties.”

Silence followed his pregnant words. Colonel Rives was plainly taken aback. Mrs. Haight looked angry and not entirely convinced. Into Shirley's flushed, pretty face there came a worried expression, and she glanced up at Moran, who sat on the arm of her chair, with a troubled question in her lovely eyes.

“Likely yuh folks think I'm makin' a whole lot outa nothin',” Dan went on slowly. “But yuh see I know Orms Asher.” His arm lay along the back of the chair, and as he spoke his brown hand stole forward and rested on her shoulder. “In the old days I usta see a lot of him; to tell the truth we had more'n one dealin' together.” A slow flush crept into his face but his glance held steadfast and his voice did not falter. “It's those old days that's gonna hit me hard now. When a fellah slips into a place after dark an' snitches somethin' from a safe, it ain't gonna help him none with the law to have been one o' the Saddle Butte gang.”

Shirley's slim hand flashed up and caught his brown, muscular fingers. An indignant, impatient growl issued from Mrs. Haight's throat.

“But my land o' love!” she cried. “Yuh quit that long ago, didn't yuh? An' it was Gessner opened the safe, an' ——”

“Shore,” returned Moran with a fleeting grin. “But if he hadn't, why Cass an' me would of blown the thing up an' likely the house along with it. We

had them sticks o' dynamite capped an' ready, as somebody's likely discovered by now. Don't think I'm ashamed of it. I'm jest tellin' yuh how the business stacks up to me, an' how Asher can work up a pretty plausible story with his oily tongue. It's my opinion we're still up against it hard, an' the best thing we can do is to take the gold an' beat it while the goin's still good."

"It ain't what you'd call awful good right now," drawled Barton before anyone else could speak. "Asher's bunch ain't left by a long shot. They're still hangin' around the upper trail, Buck says, an' Windy Keeler who jest come in from ridin' fence at the other end of the valley saw a bunch of 'em blockin' the way out there."

Mrs. Haight's eyes snapped. "Tryin' to pen us in 'till the sheriff comes, eh?" she said harshly. "I ain't wishful to push yuh folks none," she added, her determined glance sweeping the circle, "but if yo're bound to go I reckon we can get together a bunch that'll push a way through that lot o' riffraff."

Moran gave her an appreciative glance. "I don't doubt it, ma'am," he said, "but I expect it wouldn't hardly do. What with the crowd he's got from Hatchet, an' the bunch he's had time to pull off his ranch, the odds would be about three to one against us. Some o' the fellahs would be downed shore. I had a notion he might try somethin' like this, an' I'm wonderin' if we couldn't slip off back through the

hills like we did once before. There's a way I know that would bring us out the other side o' Wind River clean beyond the Saddle Butte country. Comes out near Smithtown, Mrs. Haight."

"I know. A one-horse burg, but safe enough. The railroad's only twenty miles beyond. It would take yuh two — three days goin' through them mountains, though."

"Shore. But it ain't a hard trip, an' even if it was, it would be worth all kinds o' trouble to get that gold banked safe." Moran grinned a trifle shamefacedly. "Mebbe I got a case o' nerves, but I tell yuh folks right here an' now I feel a whole lot more uncertain than when Cass an' me was playin' with them sticks o' dynamite last night."

"Exactly, suh," agreed Colonel Rives emphatically, the color still burning in his long thin face. "There's no telling what that scoundrel may do, and I don't believe any of us will have a minute's peace until — Would Barton go?"

"Shore would," grinned Cass. "I ain't wild to be left behind an' grabbed up by Orms Asher as a safe-cracker, which is what he'd certainly do if only outa spite for bein' stung. O' course mebbe yuh don't want me, but ——"

"Of course we do," cut in the colonel. "Dan will need a full-sized man to help him, and I'm afraid I'm not more than half a one if that, though perhaps I can do a little something. Shirley will be safe here

with Mrs. Haight, and afterward she can join us.”

“No!” exclaimed the girl sharply. “I won’t be left behind, Dad.”

The colonel regarded her with dismayed surprise. “But my dear child!” he protested. “I don’t see how you can——”

“Not again,” she interrupted, her shapely chin determined. “You remember the last time. Why, Dad, I can stand as much as you and more, and anyway, I simply won’t be separated again from——from either of you. Dan! You see, don’t you?”

Biting her lips she let her head fall back against her lover’s arm and looked up at him with eyes that were misted with sudden, troubled tears. Moran’s grasp tightened on her shoulder, but for a little space he did not speak. He understood well enough, but he was trying to decide honestly and without bias which was the better way.

“I don’t know why she shouldn’t come, Colonel,” he said at length. “Like I said, it’s not a hard trip, an’ I’m shore we’d both be a lot more comfortable not leavin’ her behind. I wouldn’t wonder if she stood it as well as we did.”

“O’ course she will,” put in Mrs. Haight impatiently. Her views on woman’s general superiority to man were pronounced and often aired. “Well, now you’ve decided,” she went on with a touch of irony, “suppose we go an’ find out if they’d sent a bunch around to block that way like they have the others.”

CHAPTER XLIII

THE MOUNTAIN TRAIL

BACK of the blacksmith shop and other clustering sheds behind the ranch house lay the beginning of a narrow, tortuous track which led up through the foothills into that spreading maze of mountain wilderness known as the Rattlesnake Hills.

It was rarely used, for the vast, little-known territory through which it passed was entirely unsettled and some of it, especially to the westward, even unexplored. It was, however, a safe and not impassable short cut between the neighborhood of Hatchet and the Wind River basin, and Moran's acquaintance with it dated from his first connection with the old Saddle Butte gang of rustlers and outlaws.

The possibility that this, too, might be guarded by Asher's men stirred Moran to swift uneasiness and instant action. Leaving the ranch house he and Barton saddled up and set off at once to investigate. Proceeding with slow caution, they made their way as far as the cañon where Moran and the colonel had been ambushed, without seeing any signs of the outlaws. It was nearly six o'clock before they were back at the ranch house, where a consultation was held as to when they had best make a start.

The colonel was in a pronounced state of nerves and wanted to leave at once, and Dan was inclined to

agree with him. If they delayed till dawn they might find their way cut off, or Asher, rooting out the sheriff sooner than now seemed likely, might appear boldly before the ranch house backed by the full force of the law. By going now there would be a full two hours of daylight in which to penetrate into the mountains well beyond the danger point.

The decision made, no time was lost in putting it into execution. After a hurried supper fresh horses were saddled, another packed with food and a pair of blankets for Shirley, and the gold divided evenly among the four. The farewells were brief, almost casual. Nell Driscoll wept a little on Barton's shoulder, but pulled herself together quickly, for Cass had promised to return within the week, or failing that to send for her. Mrs. Haight was bluff and matter of fact, and the assembled punchers, waving their good-byes, seemed chiefly entertained with gleeful comments on this agreeable thwarting of Orms Asher. Cass Barton brought up the rear of the little party and as they passed around a bend which would take them finally out of sight of the group gathered below, he turned and shouted back a laughing reply to one of Buck Stover's jocular remarks.

"Give Orms my love, an' tell him I never thought to see him make such a mess of anything. I expect he's gettin' old an' losin' his grip."

Astride of Bob, his favorite cream, Dan listened, and puzzled inwardly at his own lack of response to

the joshing give and take. It wasn't at all his habit to take life seriously; their plans seemed to be working out without a hitch, and just behind him rode the girl whose mere presence was usually enough to make him oblivious to everything save her. And yet in spite of all this he found himself troubled by a vague oppression that was almost impossible to shake off.

It certainly wasn't fear, nor could it be termed exactly a presentiment of evil. He finally came to the conclusion that the very responsibility of Shirley's being with them was working subconsciously on his nerves, and with a determined effort he forced it into the background of his mind. Nevertheless he could not quite obliterate it. The feeling made him impatient of even slight delays and drove him on along the rough, narrow, tortuous track until it had grown almost too dark for prudence. When they made camp in a little sheltered coulee by the way, he recovered something of his wonted spirits. But he slept poorly and was wide awake long before there was light enough for them to start.

The morning seemed, somehow, to reflect his mood. The sun rose in a welter of crimson flame, so garishly brilliant that no painter would have dared transform those gaudy colors to his canvas. But scarcely had the red sphere crept up above that line of saw-toothed mountains to the east, than a gauzy curtain seemed to be drawn across it. It wasn't haze nor clouds, but rather a curious atmospheric condi-

tion which in effect was oddly deadening and intangibly unpleasant. The gentle breeze which had stirred through the mountain cañons before dawn had died away completely, leaving a sort of breathless calm, freighted by a growing and oppressive heat.

“Judas!” growled Barton, pushing back his hat and running his fingers through a moist, matted tangle of crisp hair. “I hope we ain’t in for a storm. That would be about the extreme limit.”

“Looks as if we were due for something,” shrugged Moran, “an’ they’re generally humdingers in these mountains. I wouldn’t mind, though, if it wasn’t for Shirley an’ colonel. A good hard deluge might sorta discourage Asher’s crowd from followin’ us, an’ ——”

“I wish you wouldn’t talk that way, Dan, right at the very beginning, too,” cut in Shirley emphatically. “You’ll make me feel as if I was going to be a beastly drag and handicap, and that’s hateful.”

Dan smiled briefly. “You could never be that,” he told her quickly. “Only, as I remember this trail there’s no decent sort of shelter, and if we should have one of those regular cloudbursts I’ve seen up here ——”

“I’d get wet like the rest of you,” finished the girl briskly. “Do please remember, Dan, that I’m not one of these delicate hothouse flowers. I’m used to roughing it, and I’ve been caught out in the rain and drenched through more times than I can remember.

If a storm is likely to bother that hateful Asher person, let's hope it comes quickly. Do you really think he'll follow us into these mountains?"

The trail had broadened so that they could ride abreast. Dan hesitated an instant, glancing sidewise at the girl.

"I don't believe there's much doubt about it," he returned. "You know I've told you he's the stubborn kind that sticks. When he finds out we've left the ranch he's not gonna lose any time gettin' after us."

"But how will he know which way we've gone? Mrs. Haight and the boys won't ever tell him."

"They won't have to. With both ends of the valley blocked this is the only way we could get out. What he can't guess, though, is that we're plannin' to switch off through the mountains toward Smithtown. If we can only get well away from this trail before they come along, we'll be able to take the rest of the trip easy."

"Whereabouts do we turn off, Dan?" asked Barton from behind.

"Through a little gulch that shoots off to the right of the trail about six or seven miles ahead," Moran answered. "There's a number of 'em strung along in a row, an' the right one ain't so awful easy to pick in a hurry. That's why I want to get there before anything happens to hold us up."

He glanced toward the east and frowned a little. The haze had deepened and through it the sun glowed

dully, a great, saffron-colored sphere. Rolling up from the horizon were heavy masses of black clouds from which long, dark streamers reached out like the tentacles of an octopus clutching at the sun. Moving with extraordinary speed, they swept up into the heavens dragging the storm clouds after them. As they spread across the sun the black edges glowed momentarily with a lurid, blood-red color; shafts of angry crimson streaked out above them like the reflection of some immense conflagration. Then swiftly these faded, died, and a sudden, ominous shadow spread over the earth.

“We’re in for it,” said Barton curtly. “How about a mite more speed, kid?”

Though the roughness of the trail made fast riding hazardous, Moran had already touched the cream lightly with a spur and drew ahead of Shirley, who was mounted on her favorite sorrel. Colonel Rives came next, while Barton brought up the rear leading the laden packhorse.

From this moment conversation languished. Strung along in single file, attention centered chiefly on guiding their horses, they clattered on in silence through the gorges and defiles. At times the way was fairly clear; more often they were forced to slow down for difficult descents or steep, boulder-cluttered rises. Above their heads the black storm clouds rushed on swallowing up the blue with surprising velocity, like some shapeless, insensate ravening monster. On

either hand, out of draws and gulches and the opening of narrow cañons, the shadows crept stealthily, blotting contours, blurring the rough, jagged edges of the cliffs, leveling crevices and concavities into smooth, opaque surfaces.

As mile after mile passed with tantalizing slowness, it became increasingly difficult to see ahead for any distance. It was as if veil after veil of dull, dark gauze was being drawn across the mountain landscape constantly limiting the depth of vision. And yet in spite of this and of the tumbling, billowing clouds rushing across the heavens, not a breath stirred down below. The air was hot, lifeless, stifling; the clatter of the horses' hoofs, echoing and reechoing from the cliffs on either side, sounded through that tense, unnatural stillness with a volume that was almost deafening.

To Dan it seemed as if Nature was holding her breath preparatory to a sudden, concerted loosening of all her forces. He had lost all track of time, and the sameness of the rock-bound defiles through which they fled, blurred as these were by the swiftly falling darkness, made it difficult or impossible to tell how near they were to the spot where they must leave the trail. Down in his heart he was beginning to despair of their gaining that refuge before the storm broke, but still he kept on, clinging stubbornly to the skirts of hope. Indeed, he was really forced to, for the steep cliffs on either hand rose sheer and unbroken

now, holding not even the faintest promise of a shelter.

At length — his mind divided between quieting his snorting, frightened mount and peering continually through the gathering gloom — Moran's eyes brightened as the shadowy opening of a gully loomed up on the right. It wasn't the one he sought, but the gaunt, dead pine towering up just within the entrance was familiar. The one they ought to take was just beyond, not more than a few hundred yards, he thought. For a second, hand tightening on the reins, glance flashing critically upward, he hesitated, wondering whether to risk it or turn in here and wait. Then, deciding to take a chance, he flung back a word or two of explanation to the others and urged the cream onward.

Not more than two hundred yards beyond the last faint flicker of light vanished before that crushing pall of darkness. The blurred outlines of the flanking cliffs faded into a thin, tenuous, barely perceptible line; ahead the trail was visible, and that but dimly, for no more than a score of feet. Of its own accord the cream slowed down to an uncertain walk.

Dan drew one hand across his moist forehead and cursed under his breath. What a fool he had been to persist like this. Why hadn't he taken the shelter chance had offered? For an instant he was minded to turn back. Then his jaw stiffened and he urged the horse onward. The shelter he sought was almost

within reach. He knew it. He felt, too, that it would take longer to go back than forward.

Then it was — or a few moments later — that the unpleasant realization flashed over him that through this smothering darkness it would be quite impossible to distinguish one opening or another. The cliffs were lower than they had been and by straining his eyes he could barely make out the rough, uneven line that marked their summit. Only too well he knew that this line, vague and shadowy at best, would fail to show the break caused by the opening of an insignificant gulch. Again his hand tightened on the reins and as it did a murmur reached him, faint at first but growing swiftly louder and more ominous.

The wind! There was nothing now but to make the best of the scant shelter of the eastern wall. Turning swiftly he grasped the bridle of Shirley's sorrel.

"We're caught," he cried. "I'm sorry. I hoped ——"

Abruptly he broke off as a jagged streak of flame blazed out across the velvet pall and swift upon its heels the thunder crashed and rolled and seemed to shake the earth. Shirley caught her breath and the packhorse squealed shrilly. But Dan was thrilled suddenly with a new hope. For the momentary white glare of the lightning flash had shown him not a dozen feet away a narrow gash in the western line of cliffs, the entrance, he felt assured, of that very gulch he had just now despaired of finding.

“This way!” he shouted, above the roaring of the wind. Turning the cream abruptly, he spurred him forward. “Hustle!” he yelled back.

Still gripping the bridle of Shirley's horse, he whirled into the gulch, the others close behind. Barton, delayed a little by the actions of the panic-stricken pack horse, had just made it when with a shrieking roar the wind caught him. The force of it seemed to propel both horses irresistibly forward. Bewildered, half-blinded, Cass cursed mechanically as he felt his hat torn from his head and whirled off into the darkness. Then suddenly another dazzling flash lit up the whole short length of the gulch ahead of him, revealing Colonel Rives, bent forward over his horse's neck, just disappearing around a sharp bend about twenty yards ahead.

Blindly Barton followed him, feeling dazedly as if an inferno had been let loose about him. A sudden spurt of rain stung against his neck; all about him it was beating down with a hissing spatter. Some instinct must have guided the frightened horse around the turn, for when another blaze of light lit up the darkness for an instant, it revealed to Barton his companions dismounted and huddled with their horses beneath a narrow rocky overhang just ahead.

With a gasp of relief he spurred forward, swung swiftly out of the saddle and dragging both horses after him, felt his way forward into this inadequate but welcome shelter.

CHAPTER XLIV

LOST

HOW long it was before the first tremendous force of the tempest had spent itself, Moran had no idea. Shirley stood behind him close against the rock, and he did his best to shield her from the lashing rain which drove in under the scanty overhang and quickly drenched him to the skin. The howling of the wind and almost continuous crash of thunder made it impossible to talk. Moreover, Dan had his hands full with the two horses, which alternately cowered, trembling, and tried to break away from his hold.

But all things have an end, and little by little the lightning flashes grew further apart and the pauses between them and the rolling thunder lengthened. Gradually the force of the wind weakened, the darkness slowly lightened and at last they looked out through a curtain of steadily falling rain onto a narrow sweep of gray, desolate, drenched rocks with here and there a scanty mass of hardy vegetation, torn and beaten down by the force of the tempest.

Dan swept a lock of dripping hair from his eyes and turned to look at Shirley. Her face was a little pale and her hair and lashes dewed with moisture, but she smiled back at him with gay courage.

“What a deluge!” she exclaimed. “Do you

really think it's over?"

"The worst of it, anyhow, though it'll probably keep on rainin' for a while. Are you — very wet?"

She gave a sudden infectious chuckle. "No, darling, not at all. I know you tried to shield me, and it was very sweet of you," she went on, mopping her face with a small, moist handkerchief. "But it seemed to beat in on every side. To tell the truth, I'm soaked. How are you, Dad?"

Colonel Rives blew the moisture from his 'draggléd' mustache. "Soggy, my dear," he returned laconically. "I feel rather like a drowned rat."

"You look it, too," rejoined his daughter frankly. "And so do the rest of us." She glanced out at the rain which had lessened to a steady but persistent 'drizzle. "Wouldn't it be just as well to start moving, Dan? We can't get any wetter, and I've a feeling that if I stand still much longer I'll be chilled to the bone."

"Not a bad idea," agreed Moran. "As I remember, a couple of miles further in there's some pines growing along one side of the gulch. We might be able to find a few dry sticks and make a fire."

Shirley expressed her pleasure at the thought, but was privately of the opinion that nothing within a radius of miles would be dry enough to burn for days. It was decided for a while at least to walk, and so, leading their horses they set off briskly along the gulch.

For a space this led southwest, deepening gradually as it penetrated into the mountains. Then came another abrupt turn and the gulch merged into a cañon whose sheer, rocky sides, bare of any sort of vegetation, continually increased in height as they went forward.

Presently Moran's attention which for a time had been occupied with Shirley, began to wander and as he glanced from side to side a puzzled wrinkle dodged into his forehead. Though he had traveled this route to Smithtown only once and that two years ago, his surroundings struck him with a growing sense of complete strangeness. Not only did he miss the pines, which he remembered clearly, but there were other variations that impressed themselves on his subconscious mind. Of course these mountain gorges and defiles all presented a certain sameness, but surely they ought somewhere to have come upon at least one familiar feature. It seemed scarcely possible that he could have taken the wrong turning, and yet, remembering the darkness and the number of gulches and draws which opened off the main trail so close together, Dan began to grow doubtful.

For a space, however, he kept his own counsel. The cañon curved into another, at the end of which a long, steep, rubble-strewn slope led to an odd sort of flat mesa ringed round with mountains. Long before this, having walked themselves into a pleasant glow, the party had mounted, and as his horse clambered

up the last few feet of the slope and halted to breathe on the edge of that curious flat expanse, Moran's last doubts fled before convincing certainty.

"What's the matter, Dan?" asked Shirley suddenly. For some minutes she had been watching his face closely. "Have we by any chance taken the wrong trail?"

Moran glanced at her with a whimsical, wry smile. "I don't know how you guessed it, but I'm afraid we have," he answered. "At first I wasn't shore, but now — Well, I'm mighty certain I never saw this flat place before."

The others had come up and for a moment or two they sat their horses in a little silent group. The rain had ceased, and the sun was struggling to break through the ragged clouds.

"It sounds like a fool thing to do," resumed Moran presently, "but I've never taken that trail to Smihtown but once and that was over two years ago. I did know the entrance, though, perfectly. It was the first opening beyond the one with that tall, dead pine. I expect what's happened is that I passed by the right one in the dark, and when the lightning showed up the one leadin' in here so plain, I took it for the other. They're strung along pretty close for a spell."

"Where do you suppose this goes to?" asked Shirley, presently breaking a brief silence.

"No tellin' a-tall," returned Moran with a shrug.

"It may cut through the mountains to the west or south, or mebbe jest wriggles around a bit an' ends up in nothin' like a lot of these mountain ways. There's a heap o' country in the Rattlesnake Hills nobody knows much about."

"I never heard tell of but one trail through to the Smithtown basin," put in Barton thoughtfully.

"Nor me. Looks like we might do the Columbus stunt, though, an' put another on the map—unless yuh folks wanta take a chance an' go back."

"Not me!" retorted Cass emphatically. "We're too darn likely to bump into Asher's crowd. I move we go ahead. We got plenty o' grub, an' if we keep goin' long enough we're shore to come out some place. We haven't run up against any snags yet. To tell the truth I was jest thinkin' what a straightaway, easy road it was. Most o' these mountain trails are mighty hard to keep on, what with cañons branchin' off an' draws an' gullies dividin' up into twos an' threes. So far, you'll notice, we haven't had to pick an' choose at all."

"That's just it," agreed Shirley. "We couldn't have turned off if we'd wanted to. I believe it's a regular trail after all. Perhaps it isn't used much, or hasn't been lately, but I'm sure it leads to some special place."

Knowing how easy it is for the inexperienced to mistake the natural winding ways that criss-cross bewilderingly through the mountains, Moran smiled a

little at her naïve enthusiasm and confidence. He never dreamed how accurately her random shaft had pierced the bull's eye, much less the nature of the goal toward which they were unconsciously moving.

"Well, let's drag it, then," he suggested, stirring the cream with one heel. "Whereabouts didja lose yore hat, Cass?"

"Jest inside the gulch," growled Barton. The sun had finally broken through the clouds and poured down on them with increasing warmth, and he was beginning to wonder how he could replace that useful headgear. "The wind lifted it off while I was wrastlin' with this dawg-goned ol' bone-rack of a pack hoss. I expect it's roostin' some'ers up on the cliffs."

"You'll have to tie your handkerchief around your head if it gets much hotter," said Shirley. "My! Doesn't it feel good, though, to begin to get rid of that horrid soggy feeling?"

They crossed the level plateau more or less at random and were forced to skirt the farther cliffs for some little time before they came upon a break which opened into a shallow gulch. Here at last were trees, and a halt was promptly made and the horses unsaddled. With some difficulty Barton and Moran built a fire from more or less damp wood and while Shirley and the colonel finished drying out before it, they opened the pack — fortunately protected by an oilskin tarp — and prepared a meal.

It was long after mid-day when they set out again,

and before an hour had passed Moran was frankly puzzled. The way turned and twisted and curved about through cañons, draws and gorges, or up over rocky ridges with all the tortuous intricacies he had expected in this mountain wilderness. There was not the slightest evidence of recent use, and yet two things were forcibly impressed upon his mind. In spite of its constant twisting variations, the route they followed kept steadily to the same general direction and at no time was there any place where they could have turned aside without a deliberate attempt to abandon the straight-forward natural course.

The latter was at once an advantage, and a source of occasional slight uneasiness to Dan. There was no time wasted in pausing to decide which of two turnings they had better take. On the other hand any possible pursuit would be proportionally quickened. Not that Moran had any real reason for thinking that Asher would have any motive for turning aside from the trail to Saddle Butte, but once or twice he could not help thinking of Barton's lost hat and picturing to himself what a truly excellent clue it would make if it had chanced to lodge inside the gulch within sight of the main trail.

"But, shucks!" he finally told himself reassuringly. "There ain't a chance in a hundred o' that happenin'."

Nightfall found them in a shallow cañon high up in the wildest, least frequented section of the Rattle-

snake Hills. Dan had never approached this part of the wilderness before. Indeed, it was not a country to attract any safe random prospectors, or an occasional outlaw flying from justice. He and Cass tried to figure out what lay ahead of them and about how long it would be before they might hope to strike through to the western slopes of the range but without any marked success. It seemed incredible that this curiously regular course should continue straight through the mountains without encountering obstacles. Both agreed that sooner or later they were due to run into difficulties, and until these appeared it would be useless to indulge in any predictions.

They camped comfortably and were off again soon after sunrise. About an hour later they entered a narrow defile hemmed in on both sides by steep high walls and heading apparently straight into a towering barrier which appeared to block off completely its further end.

Barton and Moran exchanged pointed glances and then the latter's gaze raked the great cliff critically. Even from this distance it was plainly unscalable, but before many minutes he had noted a darker line paralleling the base which seemed to give some promise of a cross cañon through which they might hope to escape this obstacle.

"I only hope you're right," said Shirley, when Dan had drawn her attention to the possibility. "I should hate to be stuck long here." She laughed a little but

there was not much mirth in her tone. "I don't usually have impressions, but don't you think there's something awfully gloomy and depressing about this place?"

Even Moran, used as he was to such conditions and decidedly matter of fact, had to admit that she was right. The walls of the narrow cañon were of a dark rock, almost black, and rose so sheer and straight that the sunlight touched only the upper portion of the western rim. The gigantic barrier flung across the farther end was of the same dead, somber hue. Even where the sun touched it, it gave forth no life or sparkle, and the towering summit seemed to reach out and overhang its base in a manner which gave one an odd, unpleasant sense of insecurity.

Dan's attention, however, was chiefly centered on the base of this great cliff and that dark line which seemed to promise a way out. Gradually as they neared it this widened, the margin growing more distinct, until suddenly an unpleasant possibility flashed into Moran's mind. But it was not until they had almost reached the abrupt ending of the little cañon that he fully realized the nature of the obstacle that barred their way.

The dark line, widened now to a ribbon of somber shadow, marked the opening of an impassable gulf. Far back in the remote past, some tremendous convulsion of nature had torn the mountain asunder, flinging back both sides and further dividing them by

this strange, straight gash. Clean-cut, sheer, smooth as if from the slicing of a gigantic knife, the sides of this impenetrable abyss dropped straight down to an unimagined depth. Right and left it stretched far beyond the line of vision, and though its width was barely fifty feet, it presented as complete a barrier as though it had been a thousand.

CHAPTER XLV

THE DEAD CITY

ANNOYED, disgusted and not a little troubled, Moran suddenly felt Shirley pluck his sleeve.

“Dan!” she cried. “What is that thing up there? It looks like a — a bit of stone wall, and yet I don’t see how ——”

She paused, and Moran, turning his head swiftly, stared with growing surprise at the spot she indicated. Close to the edge of the abyss the left hand wall of the cañon terminated in a tier of roughly laid stones rising to a height of some eight or nine feet. Due somewhat to the projection of a flat slab about three feet below the summit, it had much the appearance of one side of an entrance or a gateway, the other section of which had crumbled away or fallen into the depths of that bottomless gorge. Raised about ten feet above the cañon floor it was approached by a narrow, rough, exceedingly steep slope littered with stones and rubbish.

“Gosh!” exclaimed Dan, surveying this surprising structure perplexedly. “It shore does look as if somebody’d been doin’ a bit o’ mason work. I wonder what in thunder’s up there?”

Turning his horse, he rode over to the foot of the slope and swung out of the saddle. Stirred by keen curiosity, he lost no time clambering up over the

rough surface which he now saw was composed mainly of rudely squared stones and rubble fallen from the masonry above. But mingled with that curiosity was a growing hope that this might prove to be the way out they so ardently sought. He wondered if the horses could make it. The slope was steep, to be sure, and the footing difficult, but with help and encouragement he thought they might manage it. The instant he gained the summit, however, such practical questions vanished promptly before his wondering, bewildered amazement at the strange sight which lay before him.

A shelf, narrow at first, but widening abruptly to a depth of several hundred feet, lay along the edge of that deep slit. Dan could not make out its full extent, partly because it curved away from his line of vision and partly on account of the shadow cast by the immense rocky overhang which swept out and over this wide ledge, sheltering the structures which crowded it almost to the very edge from the winds and rains and slow, ceaseless erosion of unknown centuries.

For houses they were, crudely but solidly built of stone. Tier upon tier they rose like the receding steps of a pyramid, the uppermost merging imperceptibly into the gloom that lay under that great natural shelter. Roofless, most of them, with gaping, crumbling window-holes, and here and there a completely shattered wall, their ruinous condition spoke eloquently of the countless years that had passed since

that far-distant day when this desolate still place resounded with the talk and chatter, the constant lively, busy hum of a populous village filled with living, breathing people.

What sort of people these had been Moran, staring spellbound at the aged relics of their dwellings, had small notion. He had seen some of the Hopi pueblos in Arizona, and among the mountains farther north had several times come upon shattered bits of ancient masonry tucked away in remote corners. But none of them had approached in size or elaboration the ruins which lay before him. It was difficult to believe that the builders had been mere Indians.

Roused from his abstraction by a slightly tart inquiry from Barton, Moran turned and looked down at the trio gazing up at him expectantly.

"It's one of these here cliff dweller towns," he explained quickly. "The biggest thing I ever saw, an' tucked away right snug under a big overhang. Come on up. The horses'll stand all right."

Shirley was the first to dismount and as Moran helped her up the slope, followed by Barton and Colonel Rives, she gave a cry of astonishment.

"I never dreamed of anything like this!" she exclaimed. "Isn't it strange and weird looking? I told you that trail was leading somewhere, Dan," she added triumphantly.

"Yuh shore made a good guess," he answered smiling. "What I wanta know, though, is whether

there's a way out at the other end of this ledge, or is the whole place jest a sort of pocket." Her remark made him realize afresh that where they had gone others might follow as easily. "It's a mighty interestin' place, but we don't wanta stop here too long. What do yuh think, Cass? If we can get the cayuses up this slope, it looks like it would be easy enough to walk 'em along that strip between the fronts o' the houses an' the edge of that drop."

Barton glanced in the direction he indicated and nodded. "That part's all right," he said. "A good eight feet wide, I'd say, an' there's a wall along the edge most o' the way." He turned and surveyed the slope critically. "Reckon we can get 'em up here, too. Question is, like yuh say, is the other end blocked or open? This here musta been a gate once. Lookit the way they laid their stone right up against the native rock. I expect they used a ladder to get in an' out with. Some safe joint, I'll tell the world, if the other end's laid out anythin' like this."

"Why don't you go and see," suggested Colonel Rives. "I'll stay with the horses."

"We better both stay," amended Barton. "Yuh an' Shirley can chase along an' look things over. Don't waste no more time than you can help, though. This shore would be a mean place to be caught in."

Colonel Rives turned on him swiftly. "What do you mean?" he asked quickly. "You don't think that Asher——"

“Lord, no! Like enough he’s well along toward Saddle Butte by now, only yuh can’t even be downright shore in a case like this. Mussin’ with this dawg-gone bandanna brought my hat to mind, I expect, an’ set me to wonderin’ what would happen if it had landed down in the bottom o’ the gulch instead of up on the cliffs.”

“Hardly likely,” said Moran hastily, noting the troubled expression which had flashed into the colonel’s face. “Well, we’ll be back in two shakes. All ready, Shirley?”

The girl had already started and together they moved briskly forward along the narrow way which lay between the fronts of the crowded line of houses and a crumbling wall that ran along the edge of the abyss. Seen at close range the structures roused anew Dan’s wonder and admiration. He had never troubled to find out anything about the old cliff dwellers, but he supposed them to be merely old-time prototypes of the present day Indian tribes, and as such possessed of an even scantier equipment of tools and implements. How it had been possible, with nothing more than crude flint knives and chisels, to smooth and shape these stones and fit them together so accurately, passed his comprehension. A circular squat tower, rising prominently amidst the other flat-roofed structures, particularly aroused his admiration. Windowless, doorless—the entrance must have been from above or at the rear—its smooth outer surface

showed a perfect curve, while between the stones, laid dry without a vestige of mortar, one could scarcely have thrust a knife blade.

Shirley was also greatly interested and impressed and wanted to look into every opening they passed. They did indeed pause for a few seconds to peer into one of the ruined structures and saw merely a small, square room empty of everything save the debris of the fallen roof.

A little way beyond the round tower the ledge curved slightly, revealing the extremity of the shelf not more than four hundred feet beyond. At this further end it narrowed considerably, though not quite to the scant width of the entrance, nor did there appear to be any gateway or similar defenses. The more or less level pathway on which they walked seemed to continue straight on beyond the overhanging rock to turn sharply around a sunlit shoulder of the mountain a short distance beyond.

The sight of that gleam of sunlight in cheerful contrast to encompassing gloom flamed Moran's hope into a bright flame and sent him hurrying to investigate. Shirley kept close to him and presently, passing the last house, they approached a spot where the shelving overhang had dwindled to a mere shadowed niche in the rocky wall.

Suddenly Dan stopped short, his right hand dropping to his thigh. Something stood there in that niche—a shadowy motionless figure which bore a

momentary, ominous likeness to a human shape.

“Oh!” cried Shirley the next instant. “Dan! That—that thing there! What——”

Moran relaxed with a sudden laugh. “Does give yuh a shock for a minute, don’t it?” he chuckled. “I reckon he’s harmless, though. Let’s take a look. It’s nothin’ but a stone image,” he added reassuringly as the girl still hung back a little.

Together they went forward to examine more closely this strange piece of prehistoric sculpture, which was crude enough in a way yet curiously impressive. It represented the figure of a man slightly more than life size, seated on a roughly squared pedestal. The knees were pressed together, the arms laid horizontally across the breast with the hands turned upward in a peculiar manner. The stone was worn and pitted with age and erosion and, except for its rarity as a curiosity, the image would have created no marked attention save for the touch of genius which some long dead sculptor had left upon that impassive face.

For none save a genius could have perpetrated with those few and simple lines the impression of cold, malignant cruelty which stamped that square-jawed visage. Cruelty was in the curve of lip and flare of nostril; cruelty and power marked the heavy, indomitable chin. And in the drooping, heavy-lidded eyes there seemed to lurk the sinister, concentrated evil of ages.

Though Dan had never seen one, he had heard vaguely of hideous stone idols down in Mexico before which the ancient Aztecs had been wont to pour out the blood of human sacrifices. The memory of the legend flashed over him now and instinctively his glance swept downward as if he half expected to find the knees and feet of this sinister relic of a forgotten people splashed with an ineradicable dark stain.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE MENACING WHISPER

“**W**HAT a perfectly beastly creature!” exclaimed Shirley, shrinking back a little from the idol. “Do you suppose anyone can ever have worshiped a thing like that? I expect they must have, though. I can’t imagine its being put there for any other purpose.”

“Me, neither,” agreed Moran absently. “Does it seem to you as if the ugly devil was lookin’ down at that slab there, or is my imagination workin’ overtime?”

Shirley’s glance shifted swiftly from the face of the image to a flat square slab at its foot, and back again.

“Why, it is,” she returned quickly. “At least it looks as if — Oh, Dan! Don’t step on it,” she cried in sudden alarm as Moran moved forward. “How do you know it’s safe?”

“I don’t,” he answered, smiling over one shoulder. “That’s what I wanta find out. We’ve got to step on it to get across — at least the horses have.”

Unaccountably troubled, she watched him bend down and examine the slab closely. It was a single smooth section of hard stone about six feet square set into the ledge with such careful accuracy that from a little distance it looked like part of the native rock.

It reached from the base of the idol to the edge of the abyss, which here was unprotected by any wall, and was so placed in reference to a projection of the inner cliff that there was no possible way of getting around it. To gain the continuation of the path one had either to walk across it or leap the gap.

"Funny," muttered Moran, in a puzzled tone. "I wonder if it could be a bridge."

He tested it, lightly at first, then kicked it with one booted foot, but the slab remained as unyielding as the ledge itself. Drawing back a pace he dashed suddenly across it at a run, and still it did not even quiver. Returning more slowly he paused beside Shirley.

"Solid as a rock," he commented. "It is a bridge like I thought. Yuh notice the way those outside edges are squared out with a sort of 'dobe stuff? Like enough there was a slit in the ledge here an' this was their way of bridgin' it. Clever work, I'll say. Yuh comin' over?"

"I don't like the way he looks 'down at it," commented Shirley illogically.

Nevertheless she did not hesitate, and together they walked quickly across the slab and hastened on, eager now to see what lay beyond the turn.

What they expected to find was doubtful. Certainly their wildest hopes scarcely reached to this amazing, wide-spread sweep of country lying at their feet. The sunlit ledge on which they stood was like

the apex of a cone or the mouth of a funnel, from which two mountain spurs swept away to right and left recedingly. Between these barriers lay mile after mile of tumbled rocks and forest which merged at length into a wide, open, rolling country flanked on the extreme left by the curving glinting ribbon of a river. Moran's eyes glistened as he took in the familiar features of the placid, sunlit picture.

"Man, oh, man!" he exclaimed. "That's the Moon River. Smithtown lays jest around that northern spur. Once outa the valley down there we'll come at it from the south instead of the north like we would have if we'd taken the trail I had in mind. The layout couldn't be better, I'll say."

Shirley looked downward, her smooth forehead puckering. From where they stood there was a drop of a good thousand feet to the tops of the trees clustering in the valley below.

"But how are we going to get 'down there?'" she asked doubtfully.

"This path. It's an old Indian trail, I reckon. Here! Give us yore hand and take a look. It ain't as steep as it seems."

Obediently she grasped his outstretched hand and stepped forward to the edge of the shelf. The drop was not precipitous, but steeply sloping. The path, which left the ledge to curve upward at first over a sharp ridge to the right, appeared again fifty feet or more below. Back and forth across the surface of

the slope it zigzagged laboriously. Shirley counted a dozen of these loops and then gave over the attempt.

"Slow but sure," commented Moran. "A man could climb straight down in a tenth the time, but with the hosses we'll have to use the trail. Those old fellahs were no slouches, I'll tell the world. Notice how yuh can see pretty near every inch of the path from here. If a hostile crowd came after 'em all they had to do was to roll down a mess o' boulders an' wipe out the whole bunch. Well, let's mosey back an' break the joyful news."

They lost no time in retracing their steps to the other end of the ledge, where their news was welcomed by Barton and the colonel with enthusiasm and relief. It was rather slow work leading the five horses up that steep slope, but once down on the ledge the rest was easy. Barton viewed the ruins as they passed with surprise and curiosity, but the nervous haste of Colonel Rives permitted no stopping until they reached the idol and the stone bridge. Here they dismounted and one by one the animals were led across, Moran with his cream bringing up the rear. As he gained the farther side, Dan glanced back for a last look at the strange idol and glimpsed something which roused his curiosity and made him halt.

"I'm goin' back for jest a second," he told the others. "I won't be two shakes."

Dropping the reins he sped back across the flat

stone and around to the rear of the idol. During that first rather hurried inspection the back of the seated figure had apparently rested against solid rock. Now, due probably to the shifting of the sun, Moran discovered that there was a dark little recess here from which a rude shaft or narrow, natural crevice seemed to pierce straight through the overhang.

Bending forward he caught a glimpse of sunshine and a bit of blue sky not more than thirty feet above. Puzzled as to the character of this curious orifice, he tried to squeeze a little farther into the recess, perceived then the shadowy outline of what appeared to be a heavy, cylindrical rod projecting from the base of the idol, and promptly drew himself up on it to get a better view.

Abruptly there came a scratching, scraping sound. The stone figure quivered slightly under his hand. An instant later Shirley screamed suddenly in a way that chilled his blood.

“The slab!” she cried. “It’s ‘dropping! Oh, Dan——”

Twisting hastily in the crevice, Moran stared over the pitted shoulder of the seated idol and caught his breath. The massive slab which he had supposed as solid and immovable as the surrounding rock, was tilted sharply downward. Pivoted, apparently, at a point about three feet from the base of the stone god, the greater portion had swung forward revealing vague glimpses of abysmal depths below. Close

to the farther margin of that suddenly gaping hole stood Shirley, staring into it with a look of startled horror.

“Go back!” Dan shouted, turning cold at the thought of what would have happened had she been standing a scant two feet nearer him. “For Heaven’s sake go back!”

Turning swiftly, he stepped to the ground and scrambled out of the niche. As his foot left the stone cylinder he felt the idol shake again, heard the same scratching, scraping sound, and emerging into the open, found the slab once more level and apparently secure.

“Judas Priest!” he muttered, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

“What did you do back there?” demanded the colonel, who had rushed forward at his daughter’s cry.

“Stepped on a round stone thing stickin’ outa the back of his nibs,” returned Moran with a shrug. “Yuh people stand back from the edge an’ I’ll show yuh.”

As soon as they had withdrawn to a little distance, he scrambled back into the niche and climbed upon the cylinder, taking care this time to face the other way so that he could see what went on over the shoulder of the seated figure. The instant his full weight pressed upon the cylinder, the slab swung downward as before with an abrupt jerk which would

inevitably hurl anyone who happened to be standing on it into the depths below.

For a moment or two Dan stared fascinated, filled with wonder at the diabolic cleverness of the device. This, then, was how that long-dead people had protected their mountain fastness from attack. No wonder there had been no evidences of defensive walls, when at a touch a void like this could be opened in the rocky floor. Perhaps, too, they had used it as a means of sacrifice, hurling their victims into space instead of dispatching them with knife or hatchet. Circling the idol, Moran regarded it with a new respect, tinctured with no small aversion.

“ . . . principle of delicate balance operated by a simple lever system,” the colonel was saying. “You noticed that the inner end of the slab was much thicker than the outer. When that controlling lever is pressed down, evidently the balance is temporarily destroyed and the slab tilts. I once saw a similar device in Spain, but it’s quite extraordinary to find it worked out in stone by a primitive people such as these must——”

“I knew the hateful creature was looking down at it for some reason,” cut in Shirley. “Let’s get away before anything else happens. Can’t you jump across that slab, Dan, without stepping on it?”

“I reckon it’s safe enough now,” returned Moran, grinning.

Nevertheless he did not dawdle, nor was any time

lost by the party in getting out into the sunshine where they mounted at once and started along the twisting trail in single file.

As this curved upward over the sharp ridge to begin there its long, tortuous descent, Dan's roving glance lighted upon a curiously regular heap of stones standing out distinctly on the bare, sloping surface of the overhang that sheltered the ruined town. From its position he judged that it marked the emergence of that odd shaft back of the idol, and after a swift, appraising glance down the mountainside, he came to a sudden resolution.

"Lead my horse for a bit, will yuh, Colonel?" he asked, sliding out of the saddle. "I wanta take a look at that shaft up there. I can catch up with yuh easy by goin' straight down the side instead of followin' the trail."

The colonel looked somewhat dubious, but agreed. "Don't be too long," he urged. "We don't want to delay getting down into that valley.

"Not me," Moran assured him. "I'll catch up with yuh at that second bend, or the third, anyway."

With a word of explanation to Barton and Shirley, he scrambled up the rocks and presently gained the summit of the rugged, flat-topped spur. The heap of stones he had noticed proved to be the remains of a low wall of masonry placed around the opening of the shaft, whose presence and purpose so puzzled and intrigued him. He saw now that it was a natural

crevice enlarged and shaped to a rough symmetry by the laborious chipping of stone implements, but this did not help him to guess its use. Would it have served as a sort of chimney for some sacrificial fire, he wondered. Had it, by chance, anything to do with the operation of that stone lever, which lay, as well as he could judge, directly underneath?

“Thunder!” he muttered, after a few moments of vain cogitation. “What difference does it make, anyhow?”

But somehow the reflection failed to lessen in the least his interest and curiosity. The truth was that everything connected with this ruined, long forgotten city built by a people whose very name had been lost in the mists of centuries, fascinated him. It might have been the mystery and romance which clothe such relics of an ancient past appealing to one whose life had been concerned chiefly with the matter-of-fact details of modern existence. At all events, though he had kept the feeling carefully to himself, he had been even more eager than Shirley to explore the intricacies of those shattered dwellings. Had there been time, nothing would have pleased him more, and even now he was reluctant to tear himself away.

Hesitating, he glanced along the top of the giant overhang. He supposed he ought to rejoin the others without delaying further, but after all he still had plenty of time to reach them before they were half

way down the slope. In the end, though with a rather guilty feeling, he turned and walked briskly away from the others, his object being to discover whether those ancient builders really had concealed their work as successfully and completely as appeared from below.

His admiration for them increased as from point to point he failed entirely to get a single glimpse of those snugly hidden dwellings. To every outward seeming the foot of man might well have failed ever to tread this somber, desolate-looking mountain wilderness. The only betraying sign of the dead city beneath his feet was that odd shaft and the little ring of stones around its mouth. Again Dan wondered why it was there, and then of a sudden, he stiffened and stood motionless, nerves taut and every sense alert.

From that sheer, dark cliff towering up across the narrow gulf a whisper came to him, blurred, inarticulate, but strangely human. Still as a carven statue, with only the gray eyes of him brilliantly, feverishly alive, he waited, listening. Presently the whispering murmur came again and for an instant he tried to believe that it was some trick of the wind soughing through that narrow gulch or rising from the abyss beneath. But there was no wind stirring; no wind that he had ever heard could reproduce the human voice like that. An echo, then? But of what?

The question had scarcely flashed into his brain

before he knew the answer. The whispering murmur was an echo of voices—the voices of men standing on the ledge before the dead city, flung back to him from the flat surface of that sheer, blank cliff.

He did not need to ask himself what men. Instantly he knew that the possibility he had only vaguely and remotely considered, had suddenly become a menacing reality. Asher and his band of outlaws had trailed them only too successfully, and at this very moment were passing along in front of those ruined, ancient dwellings beneath his very feet.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE STONE SLAB FALLS

FOR a single, petrifying second Moran was rooted to the spot, in his mind a vivid picture of that twisting, turning trail which looped endlessly back and forth in its tortuous descent into the wooded valley. It would take Shirley and the others a good three-quarters of an hour to gain the shelter of that forest, and during every moment of the descent they would be within rifle range of the little shelf commanding the whole steep mountainside. Asher's men might hesitate to use their rifles on a girl, but Dan knew that no compunction would hold them back from shooting Barton and the colonel, or any, or all of the horses.

Lips twitching momentarily, Moran turned and ran back toward the extremity of the spur. His one thought was to gain the margin of the rock above that little shelf ahead of the outlaws. From this point of vantage he could, he felt sure, force them to keep under cover indefinitely, or at least until darkness fell. That he would be placing himself in a position of great difficulty and hazard he realized, but gave it scarcely a second thought. If only the others would go on without him, escape the danger of that exposed trail and carry the treasure and themselves beyond the reach of Asher's gang, he did not

much care what happened to himself.

“Not that I’m gonna fall into their mouths like a ripe plum, not a-tall,” he reflected grimly. “If I can hold ’em up ’till after dark, they’ll have to do some hustlin’ to get their claws on me, they shorely will.”

Panting a little he reached the end of the spur and looking down, saw his friends moving slowly along the narrow trail about two hundred feet below. He dared not shout, but presently catching Barton’s upward glance, he began to signal vigorously with his arms. For a space Cass seemed puzzled. Moran saw him pull up and speak to the others, who looked up quickly. Again Dan waved them imperatively on, pointed to the opening beneath him, and laid one finger on his lips as a sign of caution.

This time Barton seemed to understand his meaning even if he failed to grasp the motive that lay behind it, and loosening his reins started briskly onward. Shirley, who rode between the two men, hung back, but apparently a few earnest words from her father sent her on. She waved one hand vigorously at Dan and as she rode kept looking back.

“Good kid,” Moran muttered. “She don’t want to go, but she will. Now for the fireworks.”

Drawing his Colt he examined it carefully and then dropped it back into the holster. As yet he had heard no further sound of voices, so now, thinking that these might come the sooner up that circular

shaft, he sped back to the opening. As he bent over it Orms Asher's cold, cutting, domineering voice floated up to him with curious distinctness.

"You fools!" he sneered. "Of course it's safe. What do you think it's goin' to do — fall to pieces when you step on it?"

"It might drop down," retorted Trexler, Asher's ranch foreman. "It don't look none too strong to me."

Asher swore luridly. "You got about as much sense as a two-year-old kid," he rasped. "Haven't we followed that cursed Moran an' the rest of 'em right into this joint? Didn't the marks of their horses on the slope show they'd come up it? How do you s'pose they got across here — flew? I'll show you fools. There! I'm standin' plumb on it, ain't I? Maybe you'd like me to jump up an' down to prove it's as solid as the rock there."

Moran caught his breath and a sudden, amazing, rather horrible possibility sent the blood flaming into his face. The topmost stone of the little parapet over which he leaned was loose, and without hesitating he caught hold of it with both hands, shoved it free of the wall and held it directly over the center of the shaft. If some slight compunction smote him, he swiftly strangled it. This was not a moment for compunctions, nor did Orms Asher merit any. An instant later he let go his hold and the heavy, roughly squared stone dropped into the shaft.

A sharp, splintering crack echoed through the enclosed space, followed swiftly by a dull grinding. A slithering scrape, a thud, the sound of several voices crying out simultaneously seemed to follow all at once. Then, rising above and beyond all else a piercing cry vibrated through the narrow shaft; a single, wild despairing shriek which turned Dan's blood cold and brought out little beads of sweat upon his forehead. After that—silence.

With an effort Moran loosened his spasmodic grip on the edge of the stone coping and slowly straightened. His face was white and he was conscious of a sense of physical nausea. Through the shaft the broken murmur of voices came to him merely as vague, inarticulate sounds laden with dazed horror, awe, and apprehension. But presently, drawing one sleeve across his moist forehead, he bent forward again and listened.

"It ain't so awful wide," Foss McCoy was saying. "A fellah could jump acrost, or mebbe climb over on the end o' that slab that sticks up."

"Yeah?" Dan recognized the querulous tones of Sheriff Plummer. "Try it, man, try it, if yo're so dead set on takin' chances. Not for mine, though, don't think it. Gawd! I can hear that screech he let out yet an' see him clawin' an' grabbin' at the edge as he went over."

"An' if yuh did get over, what then?" inquired Cliff Trexler. "Yuh wouldn't get no hoss within

more'n three feet o' that hole without yuh dragged him with a rope. What gets me," he went on in a puzzled tone, "is how that pup Moran done it."

"If yuh asked me I'd say he didn't." The voice sounded like that of Blondy Jessup. "If that damn slab went down with Orms jest jouncin' on it, how the devil could it hold a hoss?"

"But that bunch come up here, 'didn't they?" snapped McCoy. "The marks on that slope was plain enough an' fresh, too."

"Mebbe so, but how 'do we know they 'didn't turn back when they struck this place? How do we know they didn't find some way where they could climb outa that cañon back there, or the gulch further on? They might even have struck acrost the mountains to the old Smithtown trail. If yuh ask me I'd say we was wastin' time."

On the cliff above Moran straightened, his eyes sparkling. Apparently they had not the least suspicion of his presence or the part he had played in bringing about the catastrophe. What was even more important, the slab had evidently not swung back into place again and the hole was still open. Remembering that splintering crack, Dan wondered whether the force of the falling rock might not have broken the stone lever and in this fashion destroyed the entire mechanism.

"Though it don't make much difference how it happened, so long as it did," he reflected. "They'll

never get those hawsses across the gap; I'll bet they won't even try it themselves. I'm gonna take a chance."

Turning, he sped swiftly across the sloping surface of the spur toward the point where the trail curved over the sharp ridge. Reaching it, he saw that his companions were within a few hundred feet of the bottom, and at once he started down the steep descent. Slipping, sliding, now and then taking little runs, again forced to hold back and almost crawl over some especially steep place, he cut across loop after loop of the twisting trail. Every now and then he glanced back, but always that little shelf drowsed placidly empty in the hot glare of the noonday sun. When he finally reached the others he was streaked with grime and sweat, clothes torn, boots scratched and sliced and the feet within them blistered.

"It's all right," he said, as he swung into the saddle of the cream. "The slab's dropped down to stay, an' they can't get their cayuses across the gap."

"Was it Asher's bunch?" asked Barton eagerly, twisting in his saddle.

"Yeah. Keep agoin', fellah. We wanta get under cover. They ain't likely to, but if one of 'em should climb across an' see us down here, it might stir him up to unslingin' his Winchester."

As they rode on he briefly told his story, which came to an end just as they gained the bottom of the slope and pushed on into the shelter of the trees.

“They think we’ve mebbe cut across the mountains toward the old Smithtown trail,” he concluded; “so I reckon we’d better give that burg a wide birth an’ head straight for Allerton an’ the railroad. It’s an open, level trail an’ we can take things easy now.”

“But not too easy,” said Cass quickly. “Orms ain’t one to let no grass grow under his feet, as we know. He’s right smart, too, an’ I wouldn’t wonder if he’d guess where we was headin’ for when he don’t find us in Smithtown.”

“You’re right,” agreed Colonel Rives with nervous abruptness. “I don’t believe that scoundrel would hesitate to follow us straight into Allerton. We mustn’t waste a minute.”

For an instant Moran hesitated, glancing at Shirley who rode beside him. He had deliberately suppressed the details of Asher’s fate, thinking that it might shock and horrify her, unnecessarily. But now he wondered whether there would not be a compensating relief in learning the truth. At least she would have to know it sometime.

“Yuh needn’t fret about him no more, Colonel,” he said slowly. “Yuh see, Orms happened to be standin’ on that slab when I dropped the rock an’ smashed the lever.”

On the edge of a gentle slope backed by ragged tamaracks which sheltered it from the near proximity of Allerton’s thrusting outskirts, a man and a girl

stood close together. Below them the twin rails of a single gauge track stretched away across the flat, rolling country, glinting and glittering in the brilliant morning sunshine. The eyes of both of them were fixed intently on a tiny black object which swayed and rocketted along those rails far to the westward. Presently, as a puff of smoke rose from the distant engine, Shirley gave a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness it's gone," she said, glancing at Moran. "Nothing can happen to it now, surely? It's quite safe?"

"Safe as a church," Moran assured her. "The express people will deliver it to the bank at Windsor where it'll be deposited in yore Dad's name. It'll lie there 'till we've found our ranch and are ready to settle down."

"Poor Dad!" murmured Shirley. "What with the mental strain and his bad shoulder he's completely done up. I hadn't the least trouble persuading him to go to bed in the hotel, which isn't always his way, I can tell you."

"How about yuh?" asked Moran. "Aren't yuh——"

"Tired—just dog tired," she told him as he paused. "But awfully relaxed and thankful, of course, that it's over."

"Let's sit down an' take it easy," he suggested. "We haven't a thing to do 'till dinner."

A little to one side a sloping, lichened boulder lay

invitingly in the shadow of the tamaracks. All about it the sunlight filtered down in dancing, golden splotches; out in the open, masses of wild asters lay across the slope, a great sweeping splash of purple. As they settled down against the boulder, Dan's arm went about the girl and Shirley relaxed against his shoulder with a gentle sigh.

"It's nice to have nothing to do," she murmured, "and nothing to think about except——"

She paused, and taking off her hat dropped it carelessly on the ground beside her.

"Yeah?" questioned Don. "Nothing except——?"

She flashed a swift shy glance at him. "You know what I mean, foolish!"

He grinned and drew her closer to him. "Mebbe I like to hear yuh say it."

Her brown eyes sparkled with an answering light. The faint rose color in her lovely face deepened. Then abruptly her long, thick lashes swept down defendingly.

"Except——just each other," she finished in a low tone. "There! Does that satisfy—— Oh, Dan! You need a shave."

"Do yuh really mind?"

Her soft cheek lay pressed against his rough, bronzed face. She did not try to move away; suddenly she knew she did not want to. With a contented sigh she nestled into the crook of his arm.

"No, darling," she murmured. "I really don't."

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