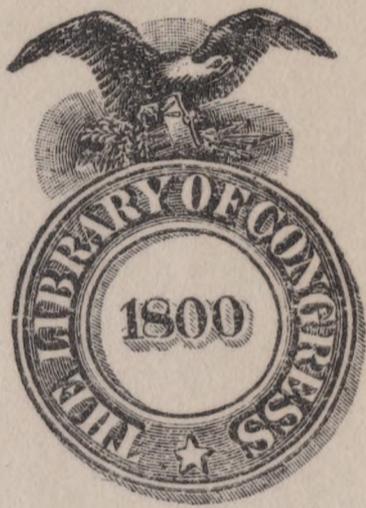




THE
UPPER
TRAIL

Mary A. MacIvor

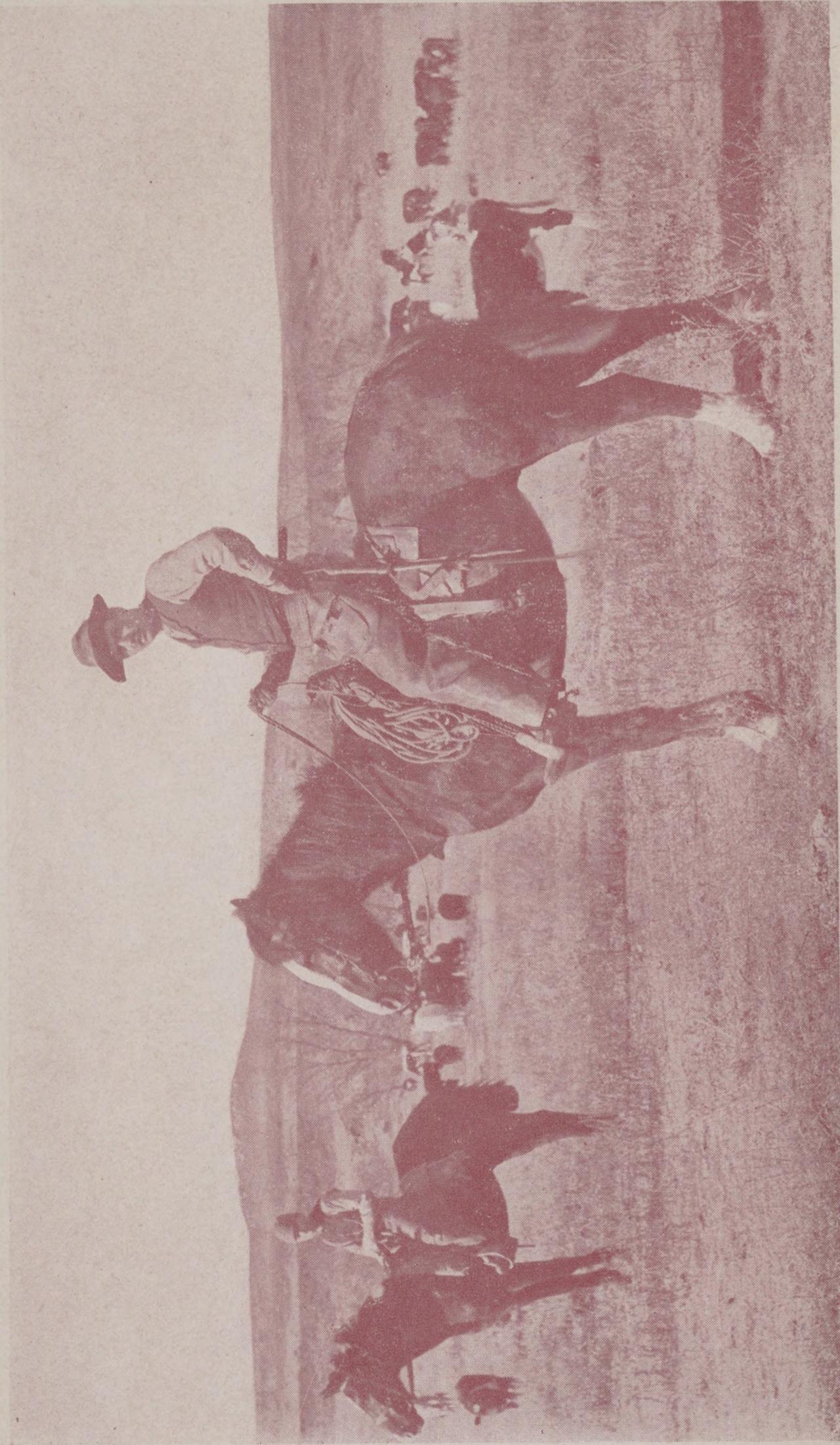


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On Herd Duty at Morton's Ranch.—Page 58.

== THE ==
UPPER TRAIL

BY

MARY A. MACIVOR



BOSTON

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CHAPTER I.

TRAILING THE THIEVES.

There was only one light in Red River Station; therefore, I dismounted in front of the building from which it shone, dropped the bridle reins over my horse's head, and entered. It was a saloon. In reaching this conclusion my sense of smell was supported by the sight of a number of kegs at one end of the room and a rude bar at the other—there was nothing else whatever to suggest that this was a place where men were wont to quench their thirst. Behind the bar was a negro, asleep on his feet, his head rolled forward on the counter like a pumpkin on a vine; and nearer to me, but dim in the shadow of the bar, was a fat man astride a chair, asleep like the negro. The fat man filled the chair and hung over its edges, like over-light bread over its tin; his face was puffy, and his hands, hanging limp from his great trunk, were padded with fat. But now a sound reached me—a sort of squeak of delight, and as this increased to a laugh, I turned and saw through a doorway beyond, and a number of men seated at tables, laughing and playing cards. One of them might be the man I wanted. But I did not go in to see. In fact, I should not have known my man had I met him face to face. Besides, something else engaged my mind. I had ridden far; my breakfast was as though it had never been, and my dinner had been jolted past any remembering. I crossed to

the door of the hall, with the intention of making inquiry relating to food and lodging. The men at the tables were cowboys, ranchers, and two or three others, who did not lend themselves readily to any classification. Their play absorbed them. At the moment of my entrance the room was in complete silence; at the close of the hand it was in an uproar of laughter and good-natured curses. As they laughed they glanced at me, and—looked away. Then the dealing began again. Three tables there were, with several men at each, and near one table a man was standing watching the game. To this man my eye came back after a general survey of the room, drawn there by what we will have to call magnetic attraction, until science can fathom and name that force which makes for friendship, admiration and love, before any trait of character or personal perfection can be known. For as I looked at the man standing there, all unconscious of the perfect picture he made, I felt the first thrill of what was to be more than the commonplace between him and me.

He was unlike the others, and yet unlike in a way hard to define. His dress was that of the other cowboys; broad, white hat, knotted bandanna at neck, a shirt of heavy flannel, a cartridge belt and revolver, and fringed, leathern chaps. He stood, as I said, watching the game, with his hat pushed back from a foretop of red hair, his arms folded, and a smile, half curious, half sarcastic, upon his handsome, boyish face. As I looked at him he spoke, and the gentle cadence of his Southern accent reached me with no word to spoil its music. And I gazed amazed—could a man, so big, so strong, so full of the very essence and power of manhood speak thus?

And I decided that not this bleak prairie, nor this wild life had bred that voice. It was the South! and yet more than the South —it was aristocracy speaking for generations of culture. And an extraneous thought crept in: if the men of this land sing thus, what must the voice of its women be? And I smiled over this vagrant thought that had harked after me from far shores of civilization.

And then into my complacency broke the knowledge that a cowboy at the table nearest me was giving me his whole attention. I turned and spoke hurriedly to this man. What I intended saying was: "Where will I find food and lodging?" This is what I did say: "Who is the young man standing?"

The cowboy gave one swift glance, then raised half-closed eyes to mine, stuck a long nose forward and said:

"That yonder is a Texas wind-splitter, sir. He can tame a broncho by the word of his mouth; he can ride anything covered with hair; he can go through an entire round-up without cussin', and can sing a herd of stampeded cattle to sleep. He is a gentleman every day in the week, just as good in town as he is on the range, and big-feelin' without the need of whiskey."

"Well!" I exclaimed in admiration of this cowboy's volubility. And then, as he continued to look at me and I felt the need of further remark, I said: "I should like to know him."

"So would I, stranger."

"Oh!" I was surprised. "I thought from your high compliment that he was a friend of yours," I said, smiling.

"I reckon he is a friend o' mine, all right. But I

don't happen to be on to the workin's of his mind as easy as I get on to yourn."

"Indeed!" I felt affronted, but continued amicably, "You would be rather dangerous company for a man with secrets."

He looked at me, still from between those narrowed lids. "Want bed and supper?" he asked.

"Say!" My surprise had grown to wonderment. "Maybe now you can tell me my name?" I said, trying to put sarcasm in my tone.

He gave a shrug. "A man's name's nothin'—he can change that. I've changed mine five times——"

But here a player at this table interrupted with:
"You'll play cards, Sleepy, or leave this bunch."

The words were of ugly accent, and I, looking at the speaker, found him of no fair front. He sat humped over, and looked up without raising his head, an act that seamed his forehead with deep furrows, and brought the line of his hair almost to his eyes. And this hair held my attention. I would have pronounced it false, but that no sane person would buy false hair so unlike the natural. It grew so thick, and each hair so persistently stood erect, and its color was so peculiar—the nameless shade of old hay—that I could recall nothing that it resembled. And his skin, his eyes, his teeth, even, were of that same nameless hue, as was his chest, bare and hairy, beneath an open shirt. As he looked at his cards, he drew his scalp lower, jerked it toward one ear and then toward the other, adding a hideous grotesqueness to his natural ugliness. Of my inspection he took no notice. No more of Sleepy's prompt retort, "Losin' don't sweeten your temper none, Chad." And I saw now that this

"Sleepy" had quite a pile of coin in front of him.

In another minute he had won again, and I became interested in the way his long fingers mingled with the cards, as he shuffled the deck. From this amusement I looked up, fairly into the eyes of the red-haired young man. He had crossed the room and was standing but a few feet from me. I seemed to feel a prickling sensation of my flesh as his gaze traveled from my face to my boot and back again to my face. But whatever of assurance or distrust this inspection netted him he made no sign; his glance went on to the players, and he spoke to them in his gentle Southern voice. "How are yu, Sleepy?" "Evenin', Chad."

And now Chad became animated. Interest lit up his dull eyes. The furrows went out of his face, leaving only lines of a lighter dinginess. Something approximate to a smile hovered around a corner of his mouth. But he spoke casually, "Just get in, Red?"

"Just got in."

"Any luck?"

"No luck."

The smile widened, lifting a lip and showing the dull teeth for an instant before he said:

"The other fellers didn't care to face the crowd, eh?"

"They ain't back yet, I reckon."

"Yu all divided, then?"

"Yes, divided."

"They ought to be back to-night, game or no game."

"I figured they would."

Chad yawned and picked up the hand Sleepy had

dealt to him. "I'm too damned sleepy to play," he remarked, the heavy scowl returning to his face.

"Been stayin' out late o' nights?" Red asked, behind him.

Chad laid down his cards and turned, an ugly gleam in his eyes. Red did not seem to notice. He followed his question:

"I been losin' sleep myself," he stated casually. "I'd have been poundin' my eah this half hour if I hadn't 'lowed them fellers would get in to-night."

"Morton's expectin' them, too," said Sleepy, his long nose in his cards.

"Ya-ah," said Red. "I seen him as I come in."

"Sleep, wasn't he?"

"Sleepin' and wheezin'."

"A right easy way he has o' helpin' hunt down cattle thieves."

"Too easy."

And at once it seemed that all interest in cards was at an end. Sleepy laid down his hand and raked in his winnings with his long, bony fingers as he arose. The other tables were likewise deserted. The players came forward, anticipation written on every face. All watched Red and Sleepy, as they tiptoed lightly to the door and cautiously peeped into the barroom. I had not an idea what it was all about. But I had gathered this much: Cattle had been stolen and a posse had gone in search of them and the thieves. They were expected back at any moment. These men were waiting up for them and their news. But what was going to happen now?

Excitement pervaded the atmosphere of the hall. I breathed it in at every breath. An amused interest stirred within me as I stood, in company with the

others, intently watching Red and Sleepy as they whispered together at the doorway.

"What's up?" I finally asked of the man beside me. "What are they going to do?"

He frowned at my words and did not reply.

Red passed noiselessly into the other room, and Sleepy chuckled with delight as he watched the stealthy movements of his confederate. In a moment Red returned and triumphantly laid some object on the table. We all crowded forward to look at it. It was a purse and fat with bills or papers. Had Red taken it from the fat man's pocket? Evidently he had done just that! Were we in a city we should all be in a police court in the morning. But we were not in a city, and I was, consequently, at a loss to know what would happen. My amusement gave place to astonishment and my interests was keen indeed.

Red and Sleepy were again whispering together. At some final word from Red, Sleepy gave a joyful, if subdued yelp, and bounded through a rear door. Men pushed forward and gathered around Red. I heard their question, "What is it going to be?" But the answer I did not hear. It was whispered cautiously, and upon receiving it each man looked at me. A shiver ran through my interest. I would have been glad, just then, to have seen the blue coat of a policeman. I decided to have no part in this affair, and my hunger urged itself as an excuse for departure. I addressed a rancher standing near, asking, "Is there any place in this town where a man can get something to eat?"

A smile crossed his face; he tried to wipe it off with the back of his hand and succeeded only par-

tially,—he had been up and heard the whisper. But he answered me so politely that my uneasiness was checked.

“The town’s about ett out, seh,—so many hangin’ around these days,” he said.

“I understand,” I hastened to say. “Some cattle have been stolen?”

“Yes, sah, yearlings from Joe Darling’s herd, seh.”

“Ah, a bad business.” I was glad for the warmth of words after my chill, and I asked: “Do you have much trouble of that kind here?”

“Right smart—at times. It kind comes steady by jerks, like a frog a-walkin’.”

“I see,” I replied, wholly warmed by his wit. “They commit a crime and then lay low for a time, letting vigilance subside.”

But the rancher turned his back suddenly upon me. And while I was wondering at such conduct in so kindly a man, I felt the grip of strong hands. Before I could speak, before I could move, even, a handkerchief was clapped over my mouth and my arms pinned down and bound with ropes.

Thus bound and gagged, I was hustled out at the rear door and around to the front. I cannot tell you of the picture I presented, but if my appearance was in keeping with the state of my mind, it was terrible. And this I know—the way I acted, and the sounds I emitted from behind my mask, were so un-human, that my horse took fright and ran off, delaying further movement until he was caught and tied. Then I was thrust forward into the saloon, amid much cursing and occasional cries of “Thief!”

The tumult awoke Morton. He rolled out of his chair, upsetting it in his haste, and stood blinking at

me like a great owl at the sun. The men now began to walk around and inspect me, as if I were someone whom they had scarcely seen. During this process they cursed me roundly, and an occasional one shook his fist in my face and denounced me as a robber.

“Wha—wha—cha—wha——” blabbed Morton, still blinking.

Sleepy now took his turn—how I would have enjoyed a free hand just then to have knocked him down! The others made way for him, and he danced up and down as he menaced me, saying:

“Yu thief! Yu coward of a thief! Yu sneak! To come in here and rob an innocent man that was sleepin’ and dreamin’ of heaven!” Then he turned to the crowd to add, “I say he ought to be hung!”

“Ya-ah! Yep! Yip!” they yelled angrily.

“Who’s—who’d he rob?” gasped Morton, beginning to grasp the situation.

“Look through your pockets and see, seh,” said Red.

And I turned cold and then hot, and then both cold and hot at once. I no longer longed for a free hand—I used my free feet. But they grabbed me and held me, and through the haze of my terror I saw Morton grow frantic in his search for his purse. I saw his face grow purple and then gray. I saw him coming for me, and saw the rage in his eye. Bound and helpless, I seemed turning to stone, when suddenly my feet shot from under me and I was whirled across the room amid cries of: “Hold him thar! Hold him, fellers!” I began to doubt my own senses.

And now Morton faced about and charged again.

Once more my wits were stock still and my muscles as limp as withered reeds. And once more I shot forward in time to escape his maddened rush. There could be no doubt about it—the crowd was keeping me out of his way. And glancing about I discovered two or three of them in dark corners all doubled up with laughing. I was too much astonished to be angry.

After another rush or two Morton seemed to have spent himself. His fury left him weak and childish. He began to beg and implore the men to get his money for him. As he toddled from one to another, holding a red handkerchief by one corner and dragging it after him, and, as one after another in the crowd exploded with mirth, it all suddenly dawned upon me. And I made a noise from behind my gag which sounded to my ears like the bray of a mule. Morton heard it and stared around, producing a silence heavy enough to be felt.

“We—we all caught him just as he was slipping out,” hazarded a cow-puncher.

And they backed him up.

“Red seen him first.”

“Sleepy knocked him as senseless as a loaf of bread.”

“Then Red grabbed your money bag.”

And the red-haired young man, with face as serious as any judge, produced the wallet in proof of that statement.

Morton stood and stared. But when his fingers touched his purse his wits returned.

“Whiskey!” he bawled in the voice of a giant. “Set out your best here!—you black-faced comedie! The best you got—hear me!” Then he waved

a hand hospitably to the crowd: "Step up, gentlemen. Step up!"

They stepped up, nudging each other and whispering behind Morton's back. I was left alone. I could have escaped easily. But I had no desire to go. Instead I sank down on the floor and made again that sound of a mule separated from its side-partner. Morton, completely worked up and buying whiskey for his tormentors, and his "black-faced com-me-die" was too much for my gravity, although I was bound and gagged.

But Morton did not hear me this time. These men had captured a thief and brought his money back to him! They should not want for whiskey this night. He begged them help themselves, and they were not backward. Then Sleepy gave a detailed account of my capture which so pleased both audience and host that more whiskey was called for. As the liquor warmed Morton, his appreciation grew and grew. He strutted about the flanks of the crowd, slapping shoulders and giving praise as freely as he gave whiskey.

"I think yu must have made some sound, seh," said Red, who knew his man. "I thought I heard a groan."

"Like as not I did groan out," Morton agreed. "I don't sleep sound no time."

"Maybe now he gave yu some dope, Morton."

Morton's eyes bulged. He took a long breath and passed a hand over his huge stomach, but shook his head.

"If yu had waked up just as he was bendin' ovah yu——" said Red, pausing at the right word.

"Huh!" Morton exploded at the idea. "You all would have seen a fight then—a fight, b' gin!"

"One worth money to see," agreed the complimentary Sleepy.

"Huh!" Morton went again. "I'd have made him think he was slugged." And he glared at me as if he had a mind to try it yet. Red and Sleepy stepped between us. I appreciated their thoughtfulness.

"Morton used to be a great fighter. Ever heard how he and Reynolds fit oncet?" asked Sleepy of the crowd.

"Morton laid Reynolds out, did he?"

"Oh, cold as death!" declared Sleepy.

"So Morton's the man as put that scar over Jack Reynolds' eye, is he?"

"Sure! Hadn't yu alls heard?"

They had heard.

But Morton went "Huh!" And I knew at once that they had had enough whiskey and were coddling him now. And they laid it on heavy. Morton kept his temper for a while, but his patience gave out at last. Only his sense of gratitude toward them made him hold in as long as he did. I give the conversation to you in part:

"But yu ought to have seen Morton when he was young!"

"High stepper, was he?"

"Oh, dandy!"

"Cut up with wimmen, did he?"

"Lord, no! The girls didn't like him."

"Shoo!"

"Yu alls have heard about that po-etry he writ? No? It's a lot of sweet stuff—I've seen it, and it ain't fit for one of my age to read none—about Chaw-rels and his Mandy, but the Major made it rhyme somehow."

"Shoo! Then the Major's baby name was Chaw-rels?"

"Ya-ah."

"How did he get the title o' Major?"

"Earned it."

"Git out! Morton ain't been in no war."

"He earned the name of Major."

"How'd he earn it, then?"

"Skinnin' hawgs in Arkansaw."

Morton was able to add his "Ha! ha!" to the laughter of the others this time, but it was growing weak.

"And the po-etry didn't do him no good?"

"No—the girls all made heads at him."

"Must have been idjits."

"Plumb idjoots. And him searchin' all Texas fer a wife."

"He come to Texas young, yu say?"

"Young? He allus lived here. He was Texas' first resident white man—like Adam was in Genesis."

"Yu don't say!"

"Ya-ah, he sure enough was. Why, Morton was here roundin' up mauvericks before Alamo."

"Yu don't say!"

"Straight goods I'm givin' yu. Every steer that came over the lines Morton clapped his brand onto. And nobody was here to dispute his right nor his range. But he wasn't happy."

"Shoo! Somethin' eatin' on him, was there?"

"Eatin'? Yu bet! Why, he couldn't sleep o' night fer dreamin', and mornin', noon and evenin' was bad for him, he was wantin' a mate that bad. He tried for every white woman within two hundred miles."

"Old ones wouldn't take him neither?"

"None. Then he tried the Spaniards. And then the Injuns."

"Squaws turned him down, yu say?"

"Sure enough."

But it was at this point that Morton's anger mastered him. He began to prance. "Never did court no squaw," he snapped in shrill heat. "What do you take me for? I'd as soon marry a nigger as an Injun."

But Sleepy went on, with face of unchanging gravity and a vast amount of assurance.

"After tryin' for a squaw the Major was about crazy until he heard of the Catholics."

"Catholics?"

"Ya-ah,—over at Santa F-e-e. They have convents, yu know, and they put girl babies into them, and keep 'em there till they are grown up wimmen, never lettin' 'em so much as see a man."

"Yu don't say! And Morton, he went there?"

"Yu bet! And he stol'd one out!"

"That's a lie!" bawled Morton, thoroughly hot now, "a black lie, hatched in your infernal heathen head!—an' you better not repeat it. Hear me, now?"

"Ya-ah," responded the complacent Sleepy. "I hear yu, Major. And I will say yu didn't steal her bodily. Yu just hung around—Morton he did, yu know," he added to the crowd, "till one day she that's Mrs. Morton now, she got to see his purty face."

"B' gin, you're fishin' for trouble, young man," roared Morton. "Hear me?—for trouble!"

But Sleepy continued with his talk as amicably as if there had been no interruption.

"She seen that mug o' his a few times, and then she climbed over the wall and jumped down outside. Pity it was, too, for all them priests and critters left there, for she was the star musician of that convent."

"Shoo, was she now? But the Major was there to catch her when she dropped."

"None,—he was hid somewhere. But when he seen she was safe out, he made up to her, and they scurried away into the forests for all the world like a hawg and a hare. Nobody told the priests they'd seen 'em, and so Morton he brought her here. She's been here ever since. He never married her, and she never sees anybody to complain to. The way she knows how many years it's been since she left the convent is by countin' the kids."

Here Sleepy dodged Morton's fist, backed away and dodged again, and laughed with his long nose right in the Major's face. This performance continued amid laughter and shouts, seasoned with snorts and curses from Morton until the crowd wearied of the sport. Then someone whispered to me to slip out. I did so, and at once there was a great shout, "Stop thief! Stop thief!" I looked back and saw Morton leap from the door while the crowd yelled, stamped and howled as they watched him go.

I easily outstripped my pursuer, doubled around a building, and returned to the saloon. There all was quiet. With wonderful celerity they removed my incumbrances, and then reassembled themselves at the card tables. Breathless from excitement and the running, I seated myself on a convenient keg. The negro behind the bar, after several unsuccessful at-

tempts, succeeded in shaping his face to something like repose. Then Morton came in.

He was warm and panting. He called for help; he demanded of the men that they come and help him catch the thief. But he received no response. The men were intent on their game. One or two glanced up casually; the others might not have heard him so complete was their absorption. Of they that did hear, one said:

“Morton’s waked up.”

The Major’s face was a study. Surprise, wonder, doubt, anxiety and anger blended themselves in that tallow-cushioned countenance. He looked at me, at the negro, at the crowd in the room beyond. And then the sum total of the outrage that had been perpetrated upon him broke into his intelligence with an instantaneous smash. The blood rushed to his face and to his eyes. He tried to speak, but for a moment anger choked down all utterance. Then when the words did come, they came with the rush of a flood. “Liars,” he called them and other opprobrious epithets, singling out one after another to apply some special term to him.

Some few of the players looked about in well-simulated surprise as he raved. And Sleepy turned in his chair to say in a tone of gentle solicitude:

“Yu all have had nightmare, Morton.”

But Morton roared back at him. He was not to be fooled any more. The past hour had impressed him too deeply for any dream. And now he turned loose on Red and Sleepy by turns, until the air seemed blue with oaths. To each he applied a flood of epithets, no one the same as to his confederate. I wondered how long he could curse and not repeat

himself. But I did not ask. I was glad to be out of this. When he had exhausted himself, he went to the bar and asked for the bill. And Sleepy sagely remarked:

“He’s gettin’ real nightmare now.”

I lingered a while, sitting on my keg. The card games went on without interruption. Since the whiskey, the betting was without the check of reason. I heard such phrases as, “Damn yu, I raise yu twenty,” and “Yu son of a gun, show better’n fifty.” Honest cards they played—games of chance. But the few were winning, and the many were losing to them. And losing without murmur or complaint the hard-earned wages of months of monotonous, endless toil.

So this was Texas! I reviewed the evening’s adventure and many things puzzled me. It would have been a mistake to have believed all of Sleepy’s tirade on Morton; my resolve to believe none of it was quite as erroneous. Cowboys’ yarns are fiction, but fiction founded on fact. But the personal side! In this obscure wilderness was nothing hidden? Here where there was no law, was punishment dealt with only a difference as to methods? And I smiled over my wish for a policeman. Had it been granted, a jail had been full by now, and the morning papers had been in a like condition. But here in this virgin wilderness neither police nor newspapers had come. So the affair was ended, and, no doubt, forgotten by all save myself, and perhaps Morton.

I glanced at his chair and there he sat again, sleeping, his head toppled forward and his arms suspended inert; his coat hanging from either shoulder—a drape at the sides of a bulging expanse of shirt

front; and his wallet safe inside his pocket. His wheezing came to me, and at once I was almost overpowered with drowsiness. I must find a place to sleep.

I got down stiffly from my perch on the keg. My muscles were weary and sore, my hunger completely forgotten in the overwhelming call of my nerves for rest. Seeing the negro busy behind the bar, I approached him with the question foremost in my mind, "Where can I find a place to sleep?"

"Dun-no, boss," he said, turning very large eyes with rims of ivory toward me. "I dun-no, 'less yu can get in with Ed's mothah."

Now to "get in with Ed's mother" was to me altogether vague. Additional information was needed. I inquired:

"What is Ed's name? And where does his mother live?"

"Ed's name is Ed, sah," the darky replied, curiosity beginning to shine in his dark eye. "Thar ain't no more to his name as I knows of. Like as not there is more to it, but he has no ide-e what it is, sah. 'Pears——"

"Well," I demanded impatiently, "what is his mother's name—Mrs.—who?"

"Well, now, I 'spects yu all will hev to ask her that, sah. She's done livin' in the end house, on the right-hand side of your right han', and on the left-hand side of your left han', on t'other side of Gingahbread Duncan's barn, about half way 'tween hyah an' the Lowah Trail, sah."

This was a long speech for the darky, and he was plainly proud of its making, as was shown by the wise roll he gave to his eyes as he finished. Had I

have been in a normal condition I should have roared with laughter. But I was not normal; I was tired past any previous experience; I was sleepy and I felt ill-used. Therefore, I turned away with a sniff of ill humor. As I did so I beheld Sleepy regarding me curiously from the doorway.

"Can you direct me to Ed's mother's place?" I asked in a tone much louder than was necessary.

"I reckon I can oblige yu," said Sleepy politely.

I gathered up my belongings. As I did so Red put his head in at the door to say, "I'll put your hawss out, if yu like, seh."

I thanked him, adding, "I was wondering what I could do for him."

"I'll see to him, seh," said Red.

So here they were, these two, anxious to do kindness to me in recompense, I thought, for their fun earlier in the night. Sleepy walked with me to the very door of the house I sought. As he went I questioned him about many things, the cow-puncher called Red among the number. His answers were the shortest possible. "Ya-ah," he said, and "No," and "Sure enough." But I gathered from our conversation that the red-haired young man was a peculiar sort of cowboy, in that he did not play cards or drink whiskey, but that the frolic which he had planned on Morton was quite in his line.

But we were at the door of the house. Very small it seemed to me, barely two rooms—not space for many lodgers—and I feared it was full. I turned to say something of this, but Sleepy was bidding me good night, very solemnly. Then he added:

"I hope yu will find enjoyment, sir."

The nature of this polite wish puzzled me. But

on the reflection of a moment I decided it was the Texas way of saying, "Pleasant dreams," and I called after the retreating cow-puncher a tardy response:

"Oh, yes. Same to you."

"None," he replied, "this mawnin'."

Again I was puzzled. What did the fellow mean? But my cogitations were cut short by the opening of the door of the house. I glanced up and gasped. There stood a wide woman in her night cloths! Our brief conversation I need not repeat. But only this—When I turned away from that house I had more of murder in my heart than I had ever had before or since.

On the saloon floor an hour later I was feeling fairly comfortable, stretched out with my coat under my head and my face to the wall. Morton was sleeping soundly not three feet from me. His wheezy breathing was the only sound. In the room beyond the tables were deserted, save one, where the winners now played each other. The stakes were high, and they played silently. I slept fairly soon. But awoke shortly, to find myself raised on an elbow, listening intently to strange sounds without. The thud of hoofs, I heard, and the low voices of men. I stared around in a daze. Morton slept on peacefully—the negro I could not see. But now, through the door, came a tall, dark man, and at his heels his opposite, a short, fair man, each showing great pride in himself—the former in glittering eye and lowering brow, the latter in a smile, broad and contagious. After these two came the words:

"That's right! Step right in there. Yu all's know the Greyhound all right! I'll bet on that there."

The posse returned! A pulse of their triumph shot through me as I sprang up. For now men trooped in, bearing with them two bound men in cowboy trappings, who sank to the floor at once and leaned against the wall in attitude of complete exhaustion.

And now the saloon filled as if by magic. The cowboys, the card players, the citizens of the town, all appeared. Talk, and laughter, and curses and whiskey—these were all about me. The man who had lost the yearlings was there. I heard his name again, Joe Darling. He had not been with the posse—they were assuring him that his steers would be in shortly, every hoof! And they inquired after his wife's health. She was better. Darling wore a smile and a sandy beard. Words could not express his delight in the assured recovery of his property, nor his pride in the men who had done the work. In his happiness he cursed those men roundly and implored them to drink more whiskey. I saw the man with the scar—Reynolds, and I knew at once that Morton had not given it to him. He was a tall man, powerfully built, with the face of a bulldog; a born fighter, and, I knew at a glance, proud of his scar. Ed I saw, and recognized before I heard him addressed. I was sorry for him. Anyone with a heart would be sorry for Ed. Born unwelcome, he had lived in the same state, carrying his weak forehead and weaker chin through life, he looked what he was—a fatherless offspring disgraced in the possession of a mother!

Yes, I was sorry for Ed. But his was not the nature to appreciate sympathy. He was a fool, big in his own conceit, and wise. That sort which men

find a joke for an idle hour, and a thing of contempt in business; the sort which mothers use as an opposite to inspire their sons to greater efforts in books. But Ed was important to-night. He had been with the posse, and I heard his thin voice and his rasping laugh as he mingled with the crowd, full of big talk about the capture of the thieves. And so I forgot him, and looked for my companions of the saloon. They were there; Chad smiling sinisterly over a cup of whiskey, Sleepy wedged in beside Morton in the jam before the bar, and Red close beside him. He held no cup or bottle. His face wore an expression of incredulity, amounting almost to alarm. He was looking at the prisoners and crowding his way to them. The tall, dark man, towering above the others at the bar, saw Red.

"Hey, there!" he called over his cup. "Yu git no credit for this haul, Red."

"I'm not askin' for any, Mr. Hawkins, seh," said Red, in a prompt and positive tone that seemed to nettle Hawkins.

"Yu ain't, eh? Well, I wouldn't like to be the feller that quit—that's all." And Hawkins drained his cup.

Quit? Had Red quit the hunt for the thieves? I looked at him—at the determined cut of his chin, the strong neck and erect, powerful back, the plump, muscular thigh, which filled this chap as an apple its peel. He quit? Not if there was anything to accomplish in going on! And I watched him in admiration, as he quietly took stock of the prisoners. His look of alarm gave place to a puzzled frown.

"Do yu know how soon the yearlings will get in?" he asked of one.

The prisoner addressed turned his head. "Nope," he replied. Then, in a friendlier tone, added "You're out of the whiskey, like us, are you?"

"Don't take it," said Red, indifferently. "What's your side of this case?"

"There ain't but one side of this case, and that's facts. Them yearlings strayed down in the Beaver valley, and us fellers was drivin' them back to the herd. Them sons-of-guns couldn't spot a single steer—my pal here heard them say just that. Now that's straight! Is this man Darling honest?"

"As honest as the day is long," said Red, with conviction. "If them yearlings ain't his'n, he will say so."

"Well, then, by crackey, Sam," the prisoner said to his pal, "we're out of it, all right! Let him see the stuff and speak the truth."

But here someone at the bar shouted at Red.

"Hey, there! Don't yu be pollutin' them prisoners! If yu wanted to make the acquaintance of them jays, yu ought to have stayed by the gang."

It was Reynolds that spoke, and the whiskey had made his scar as crimson as new wound. His words produced a momentary hush.

"What's that? Eh, what's that?" Morton wriggled his way out of the jam. "Wasn't Red with you? What's this, Red?"

"Oh, Red don't like to talk about it," put in Hawkins sourly. "He ain't proud of hisself this evenin', Red ain't."

"He ain't, eh?" said Morton. "What's he done?"

"No,—he quit us, that's what!—the second day out. Couldn't miss the hop at the Belknap schoolhouse, could yu, Red?"

Red turned his head. There was nothing but surprise in his face.

"Well, b' gin!" Morton muttered, as he wriggled his way back to the bar. "I'll have some more whiskey, Joe."

"Who said anything about a schoolhouse?" a cowboy asked then. "Where is it, and what's it fur?"

"Fur? It's fur to edicate the sons and daughters of Major Morton. Didn't yu know he had offspring?"

"Jus' for Morton's kids, is it?"

"Lord, no! Hawkins has got 'em, and Reynolds—Where do yu graze anyhow?"

"Not near to no schoolhouse—the sight of one gives me chills."

"Yu won't chill at sight of this one on the Belknap—a schoolma'am is goin' to stay in it."

"Git out!"

"That's sure enough so. Ain't it, Morton? Ain't it, Hawkins?"

Both men agreed that it was so. And Morton added, "She has come, too, with her folks—from My-soorie."

And they began to question Red. "Had he seen her? Was she at the hop? Why wasn't they invited?" He gave no heed to these last questions, but they continued with them until the short, friendly man stepped out and silenced them by saying, "Red was not there, boys, nor do I reckon the schoolma'am was."

The cowboys only half believed him. They addressed him as Dock, and vowed he wanted the schoolma'am for himself. But he only laughed at them. He was a very friendly man, this Dock.

Were he living where such things existed, he had been a Sabbath school superintendent, I thought. But here he was a rancher, and a bachelor, and a friend to who seemed to need his care. Such was my estimate of him, and it was not far wrong.

The confusion in the room went on without interruption. Captured cattle thieves and a young school teacher come to the neighborhood were not ordinary events in the Red River country. The young men talked of the latter, the older ones discussed the former; both were loud of speech, both gesticulated, both cursed, and the result in that little room was bedlam. But now, Dock approached, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, as if for important utterance. He addressed Red. His voice was low. But his words surprised me more than any shout. They conveyed the information that Red had quit the posse, and, more than that, he had quit for no apparent reason. Dock said:

“Come now, Red, square yourself. ’Fess up! You had some sound reason for quitting us,—nobody need tell me you didn’t. I know you, Red! And—what if you was wrong? Lots of times a man gets wrong ideas. But tell ’em what your notion was. You got to do it, boy, to square yourself with Hawkins and Reynolds—they’re sore.”

“I’ll have to stay outside of their good opinion, then,” said Red, “for I have nothin’ to say this evenin’.”

“But you didn’t come back for no damned hop, Red,” urged Dock. “Deny that, anyhow.”

“There ain’t no call to deny that, I reckon,” said Red.

“But they say——” Dock lowered his tone to a

whisper. They were very good friends, these two. His words brought some color to Red's face. I heard his reply.

"Mistah Hawkins has daughters of his own. I reckon he won't say nothin' that will compromise their teacher."

This evidently was not the answer that Dock wanted and expected. He urged again: "Now see here, Red, you take my advice about this thing. You're a young feller, and you're queer!—yes, you are, you're damned queer!—at times you are. And if folks get to thinkin'—you know what I mean. This little thing may injure you for all your life."

"I thank yu, Dock," Red replied. "Yu mean kind, I know. But I cayn't explain nothin' now; it's neither the time nor the place." He glanced from Dock to the prisoners. "It ain't neither the time nor the place," he repeated significantly.

"Dead men tell no tales," said Dock.

"Them fellers' time to be hung ain't come yet," said Red. And then, after a pause, "Thank yu the same, seh. I will go now and look aftah yu alls' hawsses."

Red went out and Dock returned to the bar. He had not been unobserved in his conversation, for Reynolds said:

"Red's gone, has he? Didn't know no way to square himself, eh?"

Dock shook his head, more in mystery than assent. "Gone to look after the horses," he replied.

And now attention was given to the owner of the stolen yearlings. He asked, "When will the cattle get in?" Everybody wanted to know that, so everybody listened.

"They oughtent to be more than a couple of hours behind us," said a member of the posse.

"They will be here soon now," said another. And Reynolds made his way to the prisoners.

"Want some whiskey to brace up on, kids?" he asked.

"No, by thunder, not on me, Jack—not on me!" cried Darling. "I don't treat the cowards that stol'd my cattle."

Many agreed with him. But Reynolds said: "On me, this is. Unrope them a little, there, Hawkins. We'll give 'em a bracer."

Reynolds was feeling good, I thought. To have men in his power was meat and drink to him. Besides, he had a plan in mind. It was shown in his next words, spoken as soon as the liquor had warmed his prisoners, and was of ugly aspect.

"This thing is bound to be over by daylight, kids. As soon as the yearlings get here and are sworn to by Darling. Then you fellers swing! Unless yu want to tell us where your home roost is. Want to do it? We all know that yu two striplings ain't the whole gang of thieves. We know yu ain't near the leaders of the gang. So if yu want to give information——"

"We told you the truth," said one, the whiskey having loosened a tongue that had been obstinately silent since the hour of capture. "And that feller you call Red, he said you are honest men. If you are, we will be free by sunrise."

Reynolds laughed. His plan had not worked very well, but the failure had not dampened his spirits. He ordered his captives roped up again. Then he filled his pipe and lit it. And finally, bidding all to

"Hev cheers," he sprawled down upon the floor. Many followed his example. I found a keg, and others were made of service, as was the bar itself; thus was the place changed into quite an amphitheatre. Red came in and found floor space. All were bent upon getting something out of the prisoners—enjoyment or information. Reynolds led off, making, this time, an oblique start.

"Business rushin' with yu all's gang this season?"

No answer.

"Must be mighty rushin' when two cooks like yu all are sent out on a job like this here."

And that, with the laughter it provoked, brought hot retort.

"That's all right," said he of the loosened tongue. "We know enough to tend to our own business, and that is more than you nigger-suckers knows how, or ever will have sense."

"Hear that, now," said Reynolds, in a big voice. "Mamma's boy used to recite Dan'l Webster before he jined the James gang—as cook."

More laughter.

"Which of you is Frank James?" Ed asked, and snorted out laughing at his imagined wit. But the men did not join him. Reynolds grew reminiscently boastful.

"Well, b' Jack, did yu ever hear of anything like this thing, fellers?" he asked, and looked around. "A pair of Oklahoma cattle thieves captured red-handed with the goods, and all done without noise enough to wake the birds?"

"Did yu fellers do it that-a-way?" asked Darling, agape.

"Sure! But I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it done," said Hawkins.

"Not a gun out," said Dock.

They seemed to let this soak in. Then Reynolds said:

"Ed, there, kept yellin', 'Git his pistol! Git his pistol!' Was yu afraid of an accidental discharge, Ed?"

"Ya-ah," said Ed, coloring under the laugh. Then spying Red, and anxious to divert attention from himself, he said, "Don't you wish you had staid with us, Red?—till we got 'em?"

Red gave no heed to this question—no more to a gruff laugh which Hawkins let out. This Red had, I discerned, a cool way of ignoring things. Dock took his place.

"Red's been doing something, I'll bet," he said, with confidence.

"Huh," said Hawkins. "If I had the pickin' of a trade for him I'd say, 'Be a preacher,'—they have a lawful right to flee from a fight. I used to think Red had sand."

"He has," said a cow-puncher. "He's been makin' up to the schoolma'am, ain't yu, Red?—and that takes sand, yu bet!"

And now that thing which Dock had whispered to Red came out. He colored again under it. But he did not deny the part attributed to him. It was an improbable tale, epic in character, in which Red, as a dashing highwayman, met, wooed and ruined a young woman, the schoolma'am. It was, doubtless, highly entertaining in the spontaneity of first utterance, and had greatly lessened the weariness of trailing the stolen yearlings. But had served its purpose, and should never have been repeated. Red calmly ignored it as being any affair of his, and Hawkins was forced to come to the defense of the lady.

"Our schoolma'am ain't that kind," he said. "She is to live with her folks,—they are recommended as a high-up fambly."

"So yu all got a sure enough schoolhouse?" said Dock.

"Ya-ah, hadn't you heard? You'd ought to have kids—they make life worth livin'."

"——, he has! Ain't yu, Dock?" Reynolds exclaimed, unable to be quiet long. "Didn't yu alls hear about Dock's signin' of a paper for a school for octoroons down at—at Mo-bill? He made a season down there—down there oncet," he added to the crowd between the dodging of Dock's blows.

"Go to ——," said Dock, and began to whistle a lullaby, but broke off to ask the loan of a pipe of tobacco from his tormentor.

"Sure, yes, take the sack, old feller," said Reynolds. "Smoke up and forget the smell of your sin."

Plainly Reynolds was bent on putting in a night of rare good humor. His attention was drawn now to the captives. One began cursing because the rope was cutting into his wrist. Reynolds loosened it. In his easy conquest he could afford to be humane, but not, it seemed, kind.

"You're mighty tender, b' cracky," he said.

"It's because they're so green," said Ed, peering from behind a neighbor.

"You shut your rank mouth," said the prisoner.

"Well, I like that," said Ed. "If yu all ain't green, why did you drive them yearlings right along the trail, where we could track 'em every foot? Why, a nigger thief knows enough to keep on the grass." And Ed received several nods of approval as he

glanced importantly around. The thief answered, hotly:

"What the —— did we care about the tracks, or you follerin' them? We drove those cattle where it was natural and easiest to drive them—where anybody would drive cattle. What we wanted was to get them yearling back on their right range."

"Shoo!" Reynolds held a gleam of cunning in his eye. "How'd yu say your boss's herd got scattered?"

"Stampeded—by lightning."

"Lightenin' scared 'em bad, eh?"

"Yes; we found some up in Panhandle, some in Arkansaw, and the boss heard of these down on the Beaver."

"Shoo!—some 'em scar-it clean into Arkansaw! skated across the river, I reckon?"

"Never asked them," said the captive. "We drove them around to head waters fetchin' them back."

"Yu two the ones as found 'em all?"

"No, but we found them. And the boss sent us down on the Beaver after them we was drivin' up."

"What did yu say your boss's name is?"

"None of your business."

"Thought yu said up yonder on the trail that his name's McGee?"

"Then it is."

"Got a fine, big ranch, has he?"

"You betcher-neck! He handles cattle, he does! You fellers down here just run dairy herds."

"You're right, sonny," said Hawkins, breaking in, "but we let the calves do the milkin'."

"Guess that's right, too, if that yonder does it," and the captive looked at Ed.

This brought a great laugh, and a general refilling

of pipes. Ed tried to square himself, but the captives, now that the tables were turned, were too much for him. He could only add his weak laugh to the genuine mirth of the men. And the general verdict of the crowd was that though the captives had proven themselves "mighty pore" thieves, they were "hell-damned" good liars.

The company broke up now. Some went to the card tables, the remainder separated into groups of two or three and talked. Their conversation was no secret. I heard much of it. But it did not interest me, being, for the most part, a reiteration of what had already been told. The prisoners lay prone on the floor. Chad I missed from the crowd—minutes passed and he did not return. Evidently the coming of the cattle was nothing to him. He had said he was dead tired. And I thought of the wicked gleam that came to his eye at those words of Red's. Did losing sleep in this country reflect upon a man's character?

And then—did I or did I not hear the bawl of a cow-brute? Litsening very intently, the sound came again, long drawn out this time, as of a critter running and bawling as it ran. A hush fell on the room; then, with one accord, we rushed to the door. The yearlings were coming up the street. The cow-punchers driving them yelled lustily. On they came. I could hear the tread of their feet; I could see the yellow-green glare of their wild eyes; I could smell the grassy odor of their breath. But they would come no further. The punchers on their flanks and rear yelled and cursed, all to no effect. The herd was too small to manage well. Twice they broke away and dashed back the road they had come; twice

the riders brought them up to a circle of gleaming eyes, of tramping hoofs and puffing, grassy breath. Darling went out and returned, shaking his head. He could not see. A lantern was brought—the frightened steers dashed away in a panic. Then every cowboy that could be mustered went out to help. The lantern was hung on a pole outside the door, and lamps were placed in the windows. We were all ordered inside. Darling placed himself in the doorway. And a yelling, such as I had never heard before, commenced. Finally, the terrified brutes were forced into the illuminated area. There was a breathless moment, silent as the firmament above. Then Darling called out:

“These ain’t my cattle! Not a darned hoof of ’em’s mine!”

“Good God!” said Reynolds and Hawkins in a breath. It was the sentiment of us all. Then——

“Yu must be off, Joe,—yu said two duns, a roan or so, and the rest straight color,” exclaimed Reynolds. “Yu don’t see! Man alive, yu don’t see!”

Morton bolted in between them. His eyes were big. He was breathing hard.

“Darling knows his own cattle, boys. I know his herd, too, like a book, fellers. Them yearlings ain’t his’n! Hear me? Them yearlings ain’t Darling’s.”

Morton hurried in to the captives and fumbled over the ropes that bound them. And then straightening himself, said in a tone of command:

“Undo these boys! Them ain’t Darling’s cattle!” And he hurried out again, almost upsetting himself in a collision with Darling at the door.

The cowboys bore him in again with them, still talking, still insisting that the captives be unbound.

But nobody gave attention to his command—every one had words of his own to listen to. But finally, when every man had had his say, the captives were unbound, and given whiskey. Then Morton took them to a place to sleep.

Their going was the signal for the scattering of the crowd. Everyone was anxious to get a snatch of sleep before the dawn, which was not far distant. The cowboys went to their blankets, the ranchers went to such beds as they could find, and I stretched myself out again on the hard floor of the saloon, and slept.

CHAPTER II.

A HORSE TRACK IN THE DUST.

“Good morning, Jack. How are yu, Ed.”

It was Hawkins that spoke. He had just entered the saloon after seeing his erstwhile prisoners off with their yearlings. He had paid for their breakfast, and had provided each with a pint of whiskey, with which to refresh himself during the day. He felt that he had done all that could be expected of him, and he did not keep that feeling to himself. Personally, he thought that Morton should have furnished the whiskey. But he did not venture to remind his neighbor of his lapse. It would not have been kindly received had he done so; for it was not difficult to see that Hawkins and Morton were agreed on but one thing in this world—that being that Texas is the greatest State in the Union. Probably they were agreed on this because both were, in several senses, wrong.

Morton stood with his back against the bar—the personification of a great owl at sunrise. He had lost sleep, and he had been drinking whiskey. Consequently, he had a grouch against things in general, and Hawkins in particular.

“You’re a mighty observing man,” he growled, as he blinked at his adversary, “mighty observin’.”

“I heard yu say it,” Hawkins replied, testily.

“Well, b’ gin,” Morton roared back, “a man with one eye could have told that them was not Darling’s cattle. You’ve seen his herd a hundred times, if you have seen it oncet!—and here you try to put a lot of wild giraffes off on to him. Why, Darling, never did have such lookin’ stuff on his ranch,—never, b’ gin! His cattle are stocky beef-stuff, like mine. And you didn’t know—when you have seen ’em a thousand times—a thousand times, b’ gin!”

Hawkins did not reply to this outburst, and Morton, after blinking around for a moment, resumed:

“Now the thieves have escaped again—just as they have been doing for three years. If I could ride! If I could ride!”

“Don’t you ever ride none?” Ed questioned.

“Naw,” Hawkins sneered. “It jolts his guts.”

“Well, b’ gin!” Morton began angrily. But just then Darling appeared in the doorway, causing fortunate interruption. To Darling all spoke in tones subdued and mournful. His disappointment was greater than theirs.

Behind the robber’s victim came Red. His hour’s sleep had refreshed him wonderfully. By his face he was ready for the day, and any and all things it might bring forth. His cheery, “Mawnin’, genl’-men,” was like a breath from the clean out-of-doors,

which was his home. Dock and Hawkins started forward with—

“Well, Red, yu was right, after all. Pity we didn’t all turn back.”

So here was Red exalted as hero of the expedition. I expected him to expand and pose as one. But he modestly sought a retired seat. And his response surprised me and surprised the men.

“Nobody can reckon to tell Darling’s cattle from anybody else’s by the tracks they make in the dirt,” said he.

“Shoo now! Course not,” said Reynolds. And the three dethroned heroes looked at Morton and Darling, with a “hear-that-now” expression.

“Well,” said Darling, with some heat, “if Red had staid with you, them antelope yearlings never’d have been trailed back here. He’d a-knowed I never had such stuff in my herd. Never, sir! Never!”

“The trailin’ of them yearlings down here ain’t nothin’,” said Red then. “The lettin’ of the thieves escape—that’s what counts.”

“Just what I was tellin’ ’em! Just what I was tellin’ ’em,” Morton put in with an expression of great wisdom.

“Yes, that’s what counts, all right,” said Reynolds. “But we done our duty as we seen it. We thought we was trailin’ ’em,—and, as yu say, Red, nobody could tell by the tracks whose cattle they was.”

“There was one thing yu could tell by the tracks, though,” said Red.

Dock took a step forward, eagerness shining in his eye. But he said nothing.

“And that there was,” Red continued, “that who-

someever was driving of them was expecting to be follered—and wanted to make the job easy.”

Reynolds came forward. Dock looked at the others, as much as to say, “I told yu so.” Reynolds asked:

“How do yu figure that, Red?”

“Well, it don’t need much figurin’,” said Red, his attitude lazy. “But when I see some fello’ puttin’ himself out to make a job easy for me, I don’t take the job. When them fellers began makin’ the trail easy to foller, the answer was plain enough—they wasn’t the cattle we wanted. The cattle we wanted had been switched off and gone some other way.”

“Well, b’ gin!” said Morton, with all the scandalized expression of a fat gobbler that sees a red rag. “B’ gin! b’ gin!”

“Then yu say them yearlings we got hold of was drove down this way—was put on the trail for a blind?”

“A blind? Yes, seh. They was driven down to these parts for that identical purpose, seh.”

Hawkins leaped for his hat. “We all ought to have held them fellers,” he cried. “We can git ’em yet! Ed, yu——”

“Oh, ease your mind, Hawkins,” said Dock. “They didn’t have our cattle. They’d never seen ’em. We can’t do a thing with them.”

“Damn ’em, we can make them tell who has got our cattle. I say——”

“It’s my opinion,” came Red’s quiet voice in interruption, “it’s my opinion that them two are just a couple of punchers, and their business goes no further than to do as they’re told and spend their wages.”

"Yes," said Dock, "Red's got the calibre of them fellers all right." And Reynolds agreed with him.

"Maybe I have, and maybe I haven't," said Red. "But when we struck Whiskey Creek, and found the trail, as plain, through all that brush and bluestem, where it would have been easier than not to have doubled and cross trailed,—as plain, I say, through all that, as the nose on a man's face——"

"Hold on now, will you, sir," said Darling, hope reviving in the patch of face above the sandy beard. "Hold right quiet, sir, till I catch up with you. I've never been able to get hair or head of this thing yet. These fellers was too happy to talk last night, and this morning they're too sore. Act like they was mad because I wouldn't lay claim to them wild giraffes—they do."

"It wa'n't right neighborly in you to disown 'em," said Ed. "By gimminy snakes, it wa'n't."

Darling gave no attention to Ed's words. In the interval of silence Morton stared around, the scandalized expression still lurking in his great owlish eyes. Red changed his seat from an empty box to a full keg. All watched his movements, and waited his pleasure to resume. While they waited, Ed spoke again.

"Be careful there, Red. You might 'sorb some of that liquor through the wood." And he snorted out, laughing. It is a sure mark of a fool that when he says one foolish thing he will follow it with another. But Red, like Darling, ignored his words.

"Well," said Red, when he was fully ready, "yu know that we tracked 'em easy to the Rivah, for they had gone on the run and had cut up sod. And we found where they'd gone in and come out, easy

enough. Then, when we left the bottoms, for about ten miles up the raise, we had to keep close to the ground all the time. Around Rabbit Creek we needed a dog bad,—they had us skunked a score of times. We didn't make a mile an hour until we got out of the high grass. Then——”

“Don't you mind, Red, when I found the trail by that slip of dung?” Ed asked. “If it hadn't of been for me that time, we'd have lost——”

“Oh, shut up, Ed,” said Dock. “You did good work, but——”

“You bet I did! And that other time when——”

“Shut up!” roared Morton.

“Then across the flats we had it pretty easy. They had doubled back a few times, but the ground was loose and sandy, and the trail was too easy to miss, till we struck timbah at the Beavah. There we chopped around some, but soon found a trail that led due west to the old Wichita trail. That trail, seh, crossed the Branch at the old Indian Ford, and followed the Wichita as close as a dog. Right then was when I made up my mind we was off. Right there was where these yearlings, as was in here last night, was waitin'. Right there was where we all left the true trail and followed the false—just as them robbers expected us to foller it.”

“Well, b' gin!” Morton swelled up to laugh, “Ha-a-a-haw! Pretty good, Red! Pretty good!”

But Darling was shouting: “Why didn't you tell 'em, Red? Why in God's name didn't you tell 'em?”

“He did,” said Dock. “Lord, man, he told us! But we wouldn't listen. We had the trail right at our feet. We couldn't see nothin' nor think nothin' but them tracks! We never thought of a blind—I didn't——”

"I didn't think of it's bein' all for a blind, either, —not at that time, I didn't," said Red.

"But yu was mighty dead the rest of the day, I remember," said Reynolds.

"Yu was hot, wa'n't you, Red?" Ed asked.

"No," said Red quick at this. "No, but yu all took what I said as so on-reasonable, that I knowed it was no use tryin' to convince yu. And aftah the Injun Ford I knowed it was no use goin' on. So I left yu all. When I got back to the Beavah, I poked around until I found where the true trail led east and crossed——"

"Yu did? Where?" they cried in chorus. While Morton haw-hawed away shaking his great paunch, while he declared that Red was the smoothest liar in Texas — "smoothest in the hull State, b' gin!" But Red, after an inquiring glance at the Major, continued:

"Yaah, I found where they'd crossed, and I follered them up to the Little Beavah meadows—Say, there is grass for yu! Bluestem to sweep a haws's belly."

"I'd think you could have follered them easy through high grass—there ain't been no rain nor wind," said Darling, and Reynolds nodded approval of the words.

"Couldn't though," said Red, and stopped.

Dock laughed. "Come, Red," he said genially, "yu can't play off on us again. Spit it out, boy. Was there other cattle there?"

Red moved uneasily. "No," he said. "Injuns,—the place was swarmin' with Chickasaws."

"Shoo!" said Reynolds explosively. "And the damned redskins had just wallered in the grass?"

Red nodded seriously. Dock and Darling observed him narrowly, while Hawkins and Morton indulged in big talk about Indians.

"I'd rather try to get information from a herd of buffalo," said Hawkins finally, "because they can't tell yu nothin' and yu know they can't. But the infernal Injuns will gabble and point, and make a man think they're human, until he hopes to get something out of them. But he won't ever,—he'll only lose time."

And then Morton laid his "Haw-a-a-haw" like a heavy weight on whatever hope Red's story had inspired. He was much pleased. The Indians had blotted out the trail, and he haw-hawed some more, making preparations to depart, as were the others—all save Dock. As Morton toddled out past Red, he laughed again. "Ha-a-a-haw! A mighty clever lie, boy!—and a fine endin', b' gin! We'll all git for home now."

They went out with Morton, leaving the saloon to me. The corral, where they went for their horses, was not far, and I could hear their voices, often their words, as I stood alone in the doorway. I saw Morton drive away in a buckboard. And heard a voice call after him:

"I'll repawt for work in the mawning', seh."

That was Red's voice. So he was employed by Morton. After the Major, a horsebackman dashed at full gallop. I heard voices bidding the rider "So-long." That was Hawkins, and I recalled that he, too, lived near the Belknap schoolhouse. Ed went toward his mother's house. Then Dock and Reynolds and Red came toward the saloon, leading their horses. I looked at Red's horse—a dun-roan,

low, slim of legs and rich in main and tail. Evidently he was bred on the free hills, and had known but one man, and that man was his master. But there was something majestic in his subjection. Dock was talking:

“And I’m riding out to look at them this morning.”

Red spoke to me. “Yu’ll find your hawss yondah in the corral, seh.”

I thanked him, and had the temerity to add: “I hope we will meet again.”

They asked me about myself. Their questions showed their absolute lack of interest; but the man of the South is always polite. I answered their questions, fabricating where the truth could not be told. Yes, I was going to stay in Texas. No, but I wanted a job. And they told me solemnly that town offered nothing in that line—there was nothing for a man to do in daytime there, but to pick his teeth; at night he might pick up something at cards. I had better look around the ranches—no killing time on them. But they, individually, had been killing a lot of time lately—they must be about their business now.

This brought the conversation back to the cattle stealing, and, at a favorable opening, I made bold to ask, “Has Morton had any cattle stolen—lately?”

“No,” they said, “not lately.” And they looked at each other. Then Reynolds added: “Not ever, as I have heard of. Never did lose any, did he?”

They agreed solemnly that he never had.

I glanced away. But I knew that Red was looking at me; that he was inspecting me again, as he had done in that first hour in the saloon. I could

feel again the prickling sensation of the flesh, as his piercing gaze traveled over me. Then, drawn by a force I could not resist, I turned my head. Our eyes met. His were gray, and their piercing sharpness did not vanish at once. I felt an awkwardness, and to relieve it, said:

“Are there many Indians about here?”

“Some,” Red replied. “Them I spoke of was in the Territory.”

And I answered: “Oh, yes,” and felt foolish until Reynolds spoke.

“I thought yu could talk Injun, Red?” he said.

“Can—some,” said Red, and swung forward. His natural walk was a kind of swinging glide, such as actors effect on the stage; but with this young Apollo, it was but the playing of muscles under no development or training except natural grace. I gazed after him in admiration until he seated himself on the doorstep.

Dock, too, looked after him. “But you don’t know no Chickasaw,” he said, and made the saying a question.

“Picked up a little—’tain’t so different from Pawnee.”

I said, “I suppose not.” Then saw Dock dart at Red, with a laugh and knock the young man’s hat off.

“Blast you, Red,” he said heartily, “that wasn’t no lie you was tellin’ in here.”

“I don’t reckon it was, seh,” said Red, stretching his length after his hat. I noticed that he smoothed his red hair carefully before he replaced the hat.

“So yu talked some with them Injuns yu seen?”

“Didn’t reckon I run from ’em, did yu?”

"No, you deep-constituted son-of-a-gun, I didn't," said Dock affectionately. And he seated himself beside Red on the step, his friendly face a study in anticipation. After a glance or two into the young man's sober face, he put his question:

"Well, what did they say, Red? Had they seen the yearlings?"

Red shook his head. "No, seh, they hadn't seen 'em, seh."

"Lyin' devils!" exclaimed Reynolds, and moved over on an empty keg he had rolled forward, to make room beside him for Darling, who had come across from the store.

Dock's expression changed to anxiety as he studied Red's face. "Hadn't they seen 'em, true?" he asked, pleadingly.

Red again shook his head, but a peculiar smile played about his lips which seemed to puzzle the genial bachelor.

Darling, who had heard just enough to recall the whole thing, sighed audibly, and bowed his head upon his hands. His wife was recovering, but his yearlings were irretrievably lost—he forgot the blessing in the misfortune.

"It's funny if them Injuns hadn't seen 'em," said Reynolds, speaking after a sympathetic glance at Darling.

"Not at all, seh," said Red, as if in defense of the Indians. "They had just come down, seh."

"Oh, they had just come down!" exclaimed Dock. "What had they come down for?"

That seemed a very foolish question to ask, and I could see that Dock expected either a sneer or a laugh from Reynolds, and he got the sneer. But

when he saw that peculiar smile come back to Red's face he followed up the idea, asking again:

"What did they come down for, Red? Who sent 'em down?"

"That is just what I would like to know myself, seh."

"But somebody sent 'em," cried Dock, in a tone that raised Darling's head. "Yu know that somebody sent 'em."

"Well, maybe not *sent 'em*, but told 'em that that particular meadow was alive with chickens."

"And was it?" cried Dock.

"I didn't ride on to so much as one old hen."

Dock's gaze rested on Reynolds and Darling, with all the joy of one who has found what he was looking for.

"And the feller that told them about the chickens," he asked joyfully. "What did they say he looked like?"

"I didn't get much about his looks," said Red.

"What did you get then?"

"Nothin', seh. Nothin' of consequence."

"You deep-runnin' son-of-a-gun!" cried Dock in a tone of exasperation, while laughter spread in ripples over his face. "I know what you want to do. You want to salt this here down—hide it away in that head of yours, where you have got all sorts of id-ees salted away right now. I know your game! But you can't work it this time—we've got you this time"

Red grinned and dodged a hand which Dock thrust out to knock his hat. Reynolds rose up from his keg, very serious of countenance.

"This here is a matter of pub-lick importance,"

said he; "and if yu know anything that might lead to the capture of them thieves, it's your dooty—*your dooty* to——"

"I understand all about that, seh," said Red, "and if I had anything that was the least bit certain, I'd throw my job at Morton's and foller it up. But I'm just like I was that time at the Beavah—I've a sight of thoughts and idees, but nothin' positive enough to inconvenience anybody ovah."

"Tell 'em! Tell 'em!" commanded Reynolds, "and let us judge what they're worth."

"Well," said Red with a frown of reluctancy, "it's nothin', as I said. But them Injuns—them Chickasaws I met, they made it known to me that their man rode a hawss that left a track in the dust so." And he outlined in the air a hoof with a chip off one side. "This on the left hoof, hind. So I goes on back up country, till I found the trail of such a hawss. I follered that track up around Signal Mt., back down Wichita Trail to——"

"He was coming this way, Red?—this way?" Reynolds was fairly champing with excitement.

"Yes, seh, this way. I follered him to the rivah—I couldn't find no tracks this side."

"Thunder! Well, who in ——." And like exclamations burst from the men. Then they looked at me.

The meaning of that look was not far to seek. Twice since crossing the bounds of the State, I felt myself in danger of being hanged—that was going some! But though the real danger was greater this morning than it had been last night, I was less fearful. Any condemnation must come from Red, and I knew already that he would not lie. He spoke now, answering their unvoiced accusation.

"This gent'lman ain't the man, nor his hawss ain't the hawss,—I examined both of them last night. There ain't no split off his hawss' hoof, left hind or front. There ain't no trail dust on this here man, none in his hair or on his hat; there ain't none in his saddle-blanket—there wasn't any last night."

And I had thought he was looking after my horse in recompense for his fun with me. I laughed. "You have a right searching way with you," I said in admiration.

"I hev," he replied. "Sometimes it pays to be thorough—pays both parties."

"It does, indeed!" I responded. "And I thank you again for looking after my horse."

He smiled up at me as he waved a hand in depreciation of his services. His smile held more of friendship than any I had had for many lonely hours. I said:

"I shall come to believe that you down here have powers beyond us Northerners. Your friend Sleepy did some mind reading for me last night."

Red narrowed his lids in exact imitation of his friend. "Sleepy," he said, in a comical drawl, "sees a sight of things in the dawk that are not there in the mawnin'."

"That sort of seeing don't amount to much," I replied, and hoped that the conversation might be prolonged.

But the others were excitedly discussing the tracks. They appealed to Red now, asking how far up and down the river bed he had searched, and when. And he answered them.

"Not fah,—it come dusk soon, and there was dangah of blottin' out just what I wanted left plain,

so I come on to town. Then yu all came in with your prisoners, and——”

“Go back and look in good light,” cried Darling, all in a fluster. “Go and search the ground good! Search it thorough!”

“I ’lowed to spend to-day lookin’ around,” said Red, calmly.

“To-day? Nothin’!” Reynolds broke forth. “Yu want a week!—two weeks!”

“Well, seh,” said Red, pushing his hat back from his red foretop, “as I said a while back, I’d like to run this thing down first-class. But Mistah Morton has let me off for this hunt I’ve been on—and with the beef round-up right onto him——”

Red paused. The men looked at each other. Reynolds spoke.

“In an important matter like this, I’d take it that Morton ought to let yu off,” said he.

“Will yu undertake to convince the Major of his dooty, Reynolds?” Dock asked.

Reynolds cursed.

“He’s dependin’ on me,” said Red. “I reckon my time’s his’n aftah to-day.”

“He can easy pick up a puncher in your place,” said Reynolds.

“You might hire a substitute,” said Dock.

And Darling grasped the idea. He said:

“You go after them thieves, Red, and I’ll send one of my boys to help Morton till you get back. What do you say?”

“If yu will, I’ll take it kind of yu, seh.”

“Then yu’ll do it?” they chorused.

“Sure enough.”

They crowded around him, offering suggestions

and giving advice. He stood by his horse, listening, and, I surmised, discarding it all.

"No word of this, fellers," he said, as he got into his saddle.

They touched their hats, and looked at me.

"I'm mum," I said. And added, "But Morton will have his suspicions aroused when the new man comes."

"Morton's suspicions don't amount to shucks," Reynolds declared. "He's with us, anyway."

But Darling declared he would "post" his man. The rest of us were cautioned to "know nothing."

That was quite my proper role. And thus I parted with the cowboy, Red. And watched him disappear in a cloud of dust that moved toward the north.

CHAPTER III.

DEEP INTO TEXAS

Red River Station had its existence in that time—1870—when Texas, in common with the entire West, was making history by leaps and bounds; when a wilderness became a field, and the field a wilderness; when houses sprang up as from the earth and crumbled to dust; when a town, filled with a busy throng, was and was not, and all in the memory of a man whose hair was unstreaked with gray. Texas was my first step into the land of the ephemeral; Red River Station was my first of these diurnal towns. Perhaps, had I have known that its stay was to be brief, I had looked upon it with more of pity and less of disgust that morning as I stood in front of the Greyhound Saloon. My companions

of the night had gone. Dawn had scattered the cowboys, and life had gone out of the place they left. More forlorn it was than a last year's bird nest; more silent than a house when all save you are away from home. I took in its dimensions without stirring from my tracks—thirteen buildings and a corral for bronchos. My spirits sank. How was I ever to accomplish anything in a place like this? I was sixty miles from any railroad, with Indian Territory and Indians to the north and cattle to the west and south. I had not expected much but the little I had expected was not here—only a jumble of houses, set at all angles and any pitch, as if dropped there by a cyclone. And all were of the same box-like pattern, low, unpainted, forlorn; inhabited or not, I knew only by the smoke from an occasional chimney. Each householder claimed but the ground sheltered by the roof of his house—the rest was a weed-patch, a refuse dump, a path, a trail. And these paths and trails, I now discovered, led, as do the spokes of a wheel to its hub, to the spot where I stood—the saloon! It was the business block, the centre, the Station. About it were gathered the other business buildings—the store, the feed-stable, offering, beside the usual provender, meal and molasses; an eating house and a bunk-house. Someone most certainly, owned and operated these, but this was not their busy day. Looking in at the store, I saw only an old cat and her kittens; the eating house man had left his skillet and griddle, and the odor of scorching steak and burning fat had blown far away; no one hung about the bunk-house; my horse was alone in the corral, as I was alone in the street. And this on Monday morning at eight o'clock!

And yet, for all its stillness and deadness, Red River Station did not offer the one thing I sought—seclusion. My acts here, in this forlorn husk of civilization, would attract more attention than if performed on the steps of a Fifth avenue hotel. All this, because in a large place, people do not care enough about your business to listen while you tell it; in a small place everyone must know all about your affairs, whether you will tell it or not. And here at this Station the people of the country came in and went out; here they made their news, and from this point they diffused it. I had witnessed them at the task, and the paths and trails bore witness that such gatherings were not infrequent. Therefore, the sure way for me to get before the eye of the Red River public was to remain at the Station, doing and saying nothing. But the nature of my work demanded that I attract as little attention as possible—that I lose myself for a time, in the people; that I learn their present and their past; their deeds and their misdeeds. I had hoped to do this by securing employment in town. But Dock was right,—there was nothing to do in town but pick your teeth. Mine were sufficiently picked—the last particle of tough steak was extracted from my molars. True enough, the town offered nothing more.

From the desolation of the street I now departed, following one of the trails. I passed houses as I walked, so near that I almost brushed their corners, and their blank, uncurtained windows stared at me bleak and blear. And then, all at once, I was in the open plain. It began at the very door of the last house, and stretched away into the Infinite—a sea

of dull gray and duller yellow, seamed with darker lines, lit with flecks of white, rolling, swelling, ever receding, fading in the distance, mingling unstably with the air at last, sparkling, quivering, straining the eyes, until lost in the blue curtain that fell unevenly across its breast. Into that distance went wondering my trail, like a slack string on a table. I did not follow it far. I walked slantwise up a ridge and took a look around. I saw nothing new. That is one thing about a prairie—you get a change of scenery, but never a variety. I have heard people traveling on trains ask, after sleep, why they had been side-tracked. I walked on. The sun, so powerful, so bright, so near, beat down on the land it had desolated; the sage-grass, curled to the hard ground, crunched under foot like excelsior on a floor; a white dust covered my boots and rose, with the heat, to my nostrils; the bear-grass, standing in clumps here and there, was shriveled and curled; and the cactus were withered, and shrunken, and whitish with dust; where had been a creek was now a gorge of baked clay; now and then deep fissures in the ground dumbly voiced its thirst; and above this scorched plain rose a canopy of feathery, white clouds, magnificent, matchless,—fairy ships of the sky, that passed, one by one, followed by their earth-bound shadows.

I followed along the ridge in idle aimlessness, sometimes stopping to examine a lone cactus tree and to speculate upon how it subsisted in the rock-like soil, or to try a broom-weed, or to poke my head in among the green, lace-like foliage of a scrub mesquite, in search of its pods, which I tasted and rejected, tasted again and rejected; tasted a third

time and pronounced good, and so they have satisfied my hunger many a time since.

The ridge flattened gradually, imperceptibly, until I found myself finally at the ragged edge of the prairie. Like a frayed sheet, it lay, split and cut by foot-deep brick-red gullies, which mingled and widened until lost in an expanse of salmon-colored sand. Out of this sand struggled up an irregular line of willows and scrub cottonwoods, clinging two or three to a root, all bent and burdened by heaps of drift from the Spring flood. These stunted, flood-scarred trees marked the last hold of soil. Beyond there was no tuft of grass, no water-plant, or lily, or moss—just sand, salmon-red sand, and then the water of the Red River, more sand and more water, and then the dim shore of the Territory.

I followed the river's course for some distance, seeing no change in the monotony of red sand, until finally the river widened. A stream flowed into it from the south, barring my way, while opposite its mouth lay an irregular line of dull green—an island. It lay, wrapped in the blue haze of distance, serene and beautiful. I experienced a childlike desire to go across to it. The day was already hot. I was wet with perspiration—a dip in that lazy current winding its way over a bed of sand could be nothing but luxury. But, after a few steps taken in the sand that lay between me and my bath, I turned back discouraged. Had I gone on, this story would have a different beginning or—none at all.

When I came up from the river bed, I found myself north and east of the Station—I had all but skirted it. But I did not continue the circuit. I sought the shade of a cottonwood and stretched out

on the sand. Pale hills were in the distance, at their base an arm of the sky reached down, cutting them off, as the sea sweeps round a peninsula. I had all the feeling of a child rocked in its mother's arms; the sand was of comfortable coolness; a soft breeze fanned my hot brow; a cricket sang in the pile of drift beside my tree. Chap, with his dark scowl; Sleepy, with his droll speech; Red, with his voice of melted music and wealth of reluctant plans; Morton, the posse, and their aborted triumph,—all these passed through my mind as I lay in the calm of the great out-of-doors. Before I knew it I had slept, and awoke, and hunger was reminding me of noon.

I walked back to town. No one had come in while I had been out. The saloon was empty; the negro again slept, as he had the night before when I looked my first upon him. At the eating-house a thin column of smoke arose, straight as a whip—the sight of it somehow squelched my hunger. And then the friendly Dock—he of the donation to the Mobile school—overtook and greeted me.

“Lookin’ around?” he asked, his eyes putting the question the same time as his lips.

“Yes, looking around,” I replied. “Not much to see, though.”

“Not much here—but south! There is where you’ll find scenery, natural parks, lakes, cotton fields—ever seen any? And then West—the mesquite woods—only scrubs around here—and the Staked Plain—Llano Estacado, if you savvy Spanish—cactus grow there in rows like fence posts. There is where you’ll find cattle!—all the big ranches are there.” He paused to look me over. We were taking steps toward the eating-house. “Ever been on a ranch?” he asked.

I told him no.

"Just the place for a young man," he said, with all the confidence of a college professor discussing electrical engineering. "It gives brawn and muscle, strength and endurance,—something to back up the ideas you got in your head. See?"

I did see. And I saw, too, that he had looked through my clothing and found that I had no more muscle than a week-old pigeon,—for the first time in my life I was ashamed of my own body. And then it seemed that the problem of the morning had solved itself. I would take a job on some ranch. I said:

"I quite agree with you, and I hope that Texas will prove the right place for me. Do you happen to know of a ranch needing a hand?"

He looked me over again. In his hesitation I wondered if he would not even score by sending me to his worst enemy. But his words were free from guile.

"Why, now I—why, man, why don't you try that ranch job with the Newcomers?"

"Oh," I replied blankly. I had never heard of the Newcomers,—that seemed reason enough why I had not taken the job. But I asked, "Who shall I see?"

"Morton. Yes, see Morton; he brought news in. He's gone home, but it won't take you long to jog out there. Take the Upper Trail and follow your nose."

In less than an hour I was doing as he told me—riding out on the Upper Trail. It was nothing more or less than the path I had set out on earlier in the day, and it led, as certainly as does time itself, to the

din shores of eternity. And that shore ever lifted as I pursued it, but the trail led on and on. It was well that I had not sought its terminus on foot, for, as miles lay behind me, and miles stretched before me, I almost came to regard my ride as a rainbow chase—its end always just beyond. Looking back the way I had come I saw the Station, a mere dot in the distance; looking ahead, the earth rose and fell in ceaseless swells, like a congealed sea. And over its bosom capered a breeze, making no sound as it came fresh from the fans of heaven and laden with the very essence of life. About an hour before sundown, a building came in view, set atop a hill. Between me and it a stream ran, with willows, cattle rubbed and shiny, along its narrow bed. When I came up from the stream, I saw other buildings, on a barren slope, and clinging to it at all angles, as if fearful of tobogganing into the water. In all this level country why should a man build a home on a slope, I wondered. And as I drew nearer, I marveled that a man should patch instead of erecting his buildnigs.

Morton met me in the barnyard. Indeed, it seemed all barnyard—all sheds, and corrals, with mound after mound of "chips" piled up between. I saw scampering chickens, and scampering children, with a frightened yellow pup at their heels. They went in somewhere, but there seemed to be no house—no building fit for human habitation. The "crack musician of the convent" had her human calendar all right, but her piano——?

Morton met me as I said, in the yard. My errand pleased him. He made himself very friendly and very officious, even telling me the hour I should rise

and retire, the while, rolling his owl-like eyes and shaking his heavy paunch with laughing. He asked me to spend the night with him, and when I would not, he wrote a letter to the Newcomers, whose name it seemed, was not Newcomers at all, but Halloway, at once introducing me and stating my desire. He read it to me, and then explained its contents minutely. I received it with varied emotions and turned my horse around. But he called out excitedly, "Here! Here!" And when he reached my side, said, as if imparting a secret of state, "You tell Mr. Halloway that Morton sent you over. Say this: 'Morton knowed you'd be needin' help.'"

I agreed smilingly, but with some mental reservation as to grammar. And just then a girl appeared—a girl slim and long, and as bare of legs as a Spring chicken. She came out from a shed, and at sight of me, seemed undecided whether to bolt or advance. She attempted the latter, and, after a few efforts, found voice sufficient to ask if they might have ham for supper.

Morton stormed an answer. "No!" he shouted. And again, "No! What is your mother thinking of?"

The girl retreated like a scolded canine. I was glad I had refused the invitation to remain over night. They must be very poor. Such was my thought as I thanked Morton a second time and started my horse.

But again he stopped me. "You know how to go, now?—just foller the trail down the Creek—the builders made it comin' and goin' to the schoolhouse. You'll have to cross the creek after a bit, but the ford is good—it's the Little Wichita—runs the year

around and there ain't no treachery about it—there ain't another river around here that can beat it. Why, the Red gets so low this time of year that cattle can't get to water for the sand!—that's right! But the Little Wichita——” He took a wide turn, flinging out an arm—“the Wichita runs the whole length of my holdings—I can water my stock every day in the year out of that creek. And I've got good stock, too,—Red will tell you that—he works for me—a mighty good cow-puncher, too; no foolishness in workin' hours, about him. Blast his hide, I like him. You're a friend of his'n? That's right! I like to see a young man strike out for himself. I did. And b' gin, if one of my boys is hangin' around the home roost at eighteen, I'll flog him!—no idlers around Morton! The neighbors will tell you the same. But Levering, below here—You know him? No? Well, you'll see his place if you keep an eye peeled to the west, just as you turn down to the river. Leverin's got a good place—a fine place!—I ought to have had it!—I'll get it, too, some day, mark me now! Levering ain't no rustler!” Morton said this in a half whisper, and added: “He lives too well!—that's it! Eats everything up, b' gin! You'll say so, too, if you go there. Sunday dinner every day, and Christmas dinner every Sunday—that's the way they live—it's an outrage. And Levering can't keep up long under such extravagance—there ain't no income from what you put into your stummick—remember that, young man! At Levering's it's waste, waste—wimmen folks throwin' money into the slop bucket—niggers eatin' off'n him—that's it! He'll go down. Well, then, there's Reynolds,—he lives doo south of the place Halloway's got—doo

south, and he's got a fine place. Halloway lives west of the schoolhouse—it's on the Boggy—a Spring stream, it is, and flows into the Wichita; you'll have to cross it, but the trail is plain—you can't miss it, for it's plain. His girl is goin' to teach the school, a fine girl, what I've seen of her, fine! She'll do right by the school—I'm bettin' on her. It takes money, but children have got to have eddication—mine have. History, I want 'em to know—the fightin' that was done right here in Texas. I had cousins in that war—two of 'em, and both of them Mortons, and not a cowardly hair in their heads. I've got an interest in this State, purchased by family blood! That's the kind of a Texan I am! I tell Hawkins—you saw Hawkins in town? There's the biggest fool atop the grass!—I'd say it to him as soon as I would to you. But he gets along, blast me, he does. I don't see how he does it, either. I wouldn't wonder—well, Hawkins lives east of me—he and Darling is neighbors. And I've nothing to say agin Darling, either—he's slow, and he prays over his grub, but every man has his peculiarities.”

“But Reynolds is a rustler. Don't you go to gettin' no job with Jack,—take old Morton's pointer on that! He works his men to death and takes their wages right out of their pockets—God's truth!—he does that as sure as I am a livin' man! He has 'em bettin' who can do the most work, who can brand the most calves, who can set in the saddle longest, who can go the longest without grub—and they work like slaves all day! And then, of nights and Sundays, he sets and plays cards with 'em, and wins back all he's paid to 'em!—that's Reynolds—and he's gettin' rich. Oh, he's a devil! Him and me had a

fight oncet,—You heard about it? He's the only man in these parts as can say he whipped Morton,—of course, I don't fight none now." He laughed, shaking his great hams, even, over the memory of that fight. Then he added, "Well, you better be gettin' on."

I agreed with him. I had been waiting to go the half hour, but he gave me no chance. But I had enjoyed the talk; Morton's egotism was so unthoughted as to be almost humor. But it would tire soon, and I was anxious to get on my way to Halloway's. I had no idea how far it was. Dock had spoken, offhand, of jogging out to Morton's, and it took me all afternoon to ride there, so I did not conjecture what time I would reach Halloway's. My getting a job when I got there was problematic also. But I had a vague hope now, founded upon the unreliable basis of having known some people by the same name who were kind to me as a boy. I recalled them as I rode—the sweet, friendly lady, and a little girl with eyes like a saucy bird. They were from Gawgia—yes, that was the way the lady spoke it, "Gawgia," but it was music on her lips, and she loved it so dearly! I remembered how she talked to me and soothed my boyish hurts, effecting cures without the need of candy and cakes, though she gave them as an afterthought. I told my mother that I had rather listen to Mrs. Halloway talk than to her sing. It was a foolish speech, and betrayed alike my ungallant and untutored mind. Mothers are as jealous as sweethearts, and mine never afterward regarded by sweet-voiced lady kindly. Mother called the little girl Black-Eyed-Susan, but that was not her name—it evaded me, for it was unusual. I

searched the remote prairie for it, but it was not written there, and so I crossed the Wichita without keeping my eye "peeled to the west," and did not catch the promised glimpse of Levering's, where was a Sunday dinner every day — peace to my appetite!

After the ford I was again riding my prairie sea. The sun set ahead of me like something rolling slowly from the far side of a table; the sky, which had paled, began now to deepen and darken; the horizon drew nearer and nearer; and then it was night, and darkness and silence ruled the universe. Yet it was not an intense darkness; the stars shone brightly, but high and far; my eyes seemed to pierce the gloom to considerable distance, but I saw nothing, for there was nothing to see. The prairie, now a circle of gray, fell behind me, always level, always unmarked by river, or hill, or tree, or building, until I came to liken myself to a beetle on a revolving cylinder, which, traveling always with might and main, succeeds only in keeping on top. Now that the sun had set, I had no idea of direction, and I trusted wholly to my horse to keep the trail. He did not. I will not give you a full account of my wanderings alone upon that great prairie that night, only this:

After hours of what appeared to be useless cantering, I slowed my horse to a walk, and began to debate the advisability of trying for sleep on the prairie. I knew it was the proper thing to do, but still I procrastinated, and rode on and on. If any man ever did a more foolish thing I should like to hear his tale. I recalled a familiar story of a small boy, who visited at the old home after a year in a

city flat. When taken upstairs to bed, he cried and cried, and his mother, after hours of patient lullabies, returned to the drawing room to say that he thought the room "too big," and would not sleep. I was that boy, and in this night on the prairie, the child I had been woke up in me, and stared with sleepless eyes at this other room, which he found too big to sleep in.

When dawn came I suspected, and rightly, that I was too far south. The sun, as is its wont under such circumstances, rose in a totally absurd point of the compass. But I held my right shoulder resolutely to his rays, and probably saved my life by the act. For I was traveling an unfeatured wilderness of grass. The day was hotter, even, than the previous one had been, and by the time the sun was three hours high the earth on which I rode seemed but an island swimming in a sea of liquid sky. There was no path through the dry, curled grass, which was unmarked by the hoof of any living thing. But there were skulls here and there, and bleached bones, showing that at another season this was a favorite pasture for cattle. I had grown feverish with thirst and exhaustion, and my horse no longer responded to my urging, when a wide, plain trail suddenly lay at my feet. It ran, as it seemed, to the very edge of my island, and there ended. But upon arriving at that point, I beheld below me a green valley, with buildings and fields. It seemed but a short distance away. But I knew better than to leave the trail.

Numerous paths, some old and deep, some new and dim, made up this prairie thoroughfare, which was none other than the Upper Trail, which I had taken out of Red River Station. In the valley I

found water and a road—yes, it was a road, for there were wheel marks on it—leading toward that inviting home. Quite up to my expectations of a Southern mansion was this place, all so vast, so old, so homelike. I approached it through a shady lane, all grassy and green, and yet so well traveled that my horse followed it without so much as a touch on the reins. A flock of blackbirds—more than four and twenty—twittered in a bordering corn field, and there were teasing glimpses of an orchard, and of white walls between the trees that bordered the lane. A stately procession of geese passed me without a break in their ranks, and there was a great fluttering of pigeons overhead. At the end of the lane was a gate, wide open, itself a welcome, and in the driveway beyond, a friendly dog barked, and wagged his tail at the same time, to show that all noise is not to alarm. There were flower beds bordering a walk, all gorgeous with color, and of the flowers we love most to see. And then the house, all white and cool, with its vines, its windows and porches, all open-armed to receive.

After the glare and heat of the great prairie, this home was like a dream, and I rubbed my eyes to make sure that I was not having some misleading vision. And in another moment I rubbed them again. For drawn up by the flower-bordered walk was an old family coach, and ladies were in the act of dismounting from it. One, an elderly woman, whom I recognized at once as the sweet lady of my youth, Mrs. Halloway. The second was a slender, beautiful girl, with an exquisite ivory-like complexion and a wealth of brown hair, with just a tinge of bronze on the topmost crest of its waves.

Her eyes were like black diamonds. But that comparison tells you little of their beauty. She gave me a glance as I sat on my horse, and it was like the steady, cold gleam of a diamond under the light; but just then the old darky, who had been assisting the party to alight, seeing me for the first time, ran forward and bowed so low over his apologies, as to almost upset himself, and thereupon the goddess gave me a second glance, that was so full of fire and mirth that it bewildered and fascinated.

This was the little Black-Eyed Susan grown to womanhood—eyes do not change with the years. And I knew her name as I gazed upon her—"Birch"—for it seemed a part of her. And how sweet it was on the lips of her adoring mother. Birch—but it is useless for me to try to spell that sweetness out to you. I can only give you the five letters, and let you fit them, if you can, to the lovely young woman, herself the incarnation of light and life, of gentleness and love, slender as the willow, and as perfect in grace, yet, like the willow, strong.

Talking with Mrs. Halloway was a young woman of clear, olive skin, almost dark when compared to Birch. And she spoke in such well-measured accents, she walked with so proud a step, and held herself with such a haughty air, that one might easily have mistaken her for some royal personage, did the American continent hold any such. I surmised, and rightly, that she was the daughter of the house. But whose house was it?—to which the Halloways had come as guests, and I as a confused wanderer?

The old darky, whom I had heard the haughty one address as "Uncle Levi," with great deference now begged me to alight, and I had much to do convinc-

ing him that I was not an appendant to the party of the coach. I asked only that I might remain until the ladies had finished their greetings and arranged their toilets, when I hoped to speak with Mrs. Halloway. It was my good fortune, however, when I approached the house an hour later, to find the young ladies on the veranda, and I made myself known to Miss Birch before requesting an interview with her mother. As was natural, she regarded me a little bit doubtfully until I recalled myself to her by relating a number of incidents of our childhood days, or rather of her childhood days, for I was quite a youth at their happening. As soon as she was wholly convinced, she presented me to the haughty one, speaking her name, Miss Levering.

Levering! Sunday dinners came to my mind with a bound. But I repeated in my best manner, "Miss Levering," and then added, "Although I crossed the line of your State barely forty-eight hours since, I have already heard the fame of the Leverings."

"Indeed," she said with eyebrows arched above a cold smile. "Wheah did yu heah of us?"

"At Red River Station," I responded gallantly.

"Ah! Yu met my brothah, perhaps." And the smile froze itself out of sight.

"Your brother? No, I did not have that honor," I replied, nor had a thought that Sleepy, Red, or even Chad might have had the name of Levering for anything I knew.

To that remark, which I can see no fault in to this day, Miss Levering replied with a scarcely perceptible nod of her stately head, while she pierced me with a glance of cold disapproval. Then she presented her back to me—not an unwelcome change

after that frosty glance—while she arranged a vine on a trellis. Her hands were very pretty, white and small. I wondered if she was employing herself to show them to me—yielding to my pique I would not look. Whether Miss Birch understood this little comedy or not I cannot say, but when our eyes met hers were full of mischief. She murmured something about going in search of her mother, and left me alone with the enemy.

In calling Miss Levering the enemy I do her no wrong. She was one of those who meet you in combat, if they meet you at all. And there is no dodging the fight with such a one—it is on. You choose your weapons, she does the same. And I knew what Miss Levering's weapon was—a cold, haughty, uncompromising sanctity, and there is nothing harder to pierce than that, be it the armor of man or woman. I was sorry for the girl who so proudly held up this cumbersome shield, and lived in its cold shadow. What could induce her to lay it down? Or would she ever? I had heard of fire burning upon ice; but the thought brought a chill. I watched her, still busy with the vines. She was dressed in steel gray, and I thought that no other color would have suited her so exactly. There was no trace of girlishness in form or figure, yet I knew instinctively that she was not many years Miss Birch's senior. But they looked upon life at totally different angles; it was Miss Birch's way to give sweet sympathy to all ailing humanity, whether the sickness was disease or sin; it was Miss Levering's way to preach the doctrine of sure damnation to the sin-sick and to repulse with cold hands all who would not be reformed. And yet, I knew that her

love for the Master was greater than was Birch's love, and that her desire to serve Him was stronger far than her pride. I felt a wish to take her shield and smash it!

Mrs. Halloway, when she came down, greeted me with a warmth of friendliness that I scarcely expected. "Now I shall have someone with whom I can talk," she exclaimed. "My husband and daughter will not think or speak of anything but Texas—I'm tiahed of the subject," she explained, "heartily tiahed of it," and she ended with the delightful little Oo-o-o of a laugh which I remembered so well in this pleasant lady. I assured her that it would be a great pleasure to talk with her when and on whatever subject she should wish, and concluded with these words: "We shall make them jealous."

"Oo-o-o," she laughed. "Yu ah my same bad boy." And she patted me with her motherly hand, and added that I needed this Texas air,—I must go home with her, and live with her, she commanded it.

No other words could have pleased me more. But to show her at the onset to what extent she had committed herself, I began to whistle "Marching Through Georgia," a tune she abhorred. Whereupon she flew at me and gave me a "sound trouncing," as she called it, and I promised never to offend again.

After so genuine a welcome had been accorded me by their guests the Leverings could not do otherwise than accept me into their home. I met Col. Levering, a fine old man, with hair snow white and a face as young almost as my own. Tall he was, and thin, and as erect as an oak. Hospitality was written all over him; kindness shone from his

eye, and generosity was the very fibre of his being—it was not he that Miss Levering resembled. Mrs. Levering was her prototype. But in the latter, I soon discovered, the intolerant spirit had been arrested by an early marriage, and arrogance had been eclipsed by love. But I knew, without being told, that torture could not wring from either mother or daughter an admission that she ever thought of so gross a thing as money, or needing it found it scarce. I had a conversation with Mrs. Levering. After it I was held worthy to be presented to her youngest daughter, Miss Eunice, a girl of sixteen, or thereabouts, who had her father's broad forehead and hearty, cheery manner—she warmed where her sister chilled.

Now that we are all properly introduced, I will give to you that conversation I had with Mrs. Levering, which was to prepare me for the meeting with her daughter Eunice. Would the lady have schooled me thus for the meeting with Miss Levering, had she had opportunity? I answered no; she was woman of the world enough to know that no man would become enthusiastic over an icicle. Said the lady:

“Texas is a veyah rough place, socially, veyah rough. We have resided heyah eight years, and these ar' ouah first guests from the neighborhood—ouah veyah first.”

I said, “Ah!” It expressed nothing. I felt nothing, unless it were surprise.

“Men come hyah, of course,” she continued in her gentle, cooing voice, “and they dine with us frequently, quite frequently. But I nevah allow my family to associate with them,—I do not permit my daughters to meet them.”

"Ah," said I again. I was thinking of Morton—he would not refuse to partake of the feast he despised. But I checked my thought and added, "You must find it very lonely."

"Lonely?" The tears came with the word. "I cannot tell yu how lonely we all ah, and I—I think I feel my children's loneliness greater than my own."

I was touched. When I feel so, I rarely, if ever, commit myself to speech. She continued:

"Yu cannot understand,—no man can," and now she smiled, mother-like, through her tears, "the love of a mothah! Your sex does not feel it, or know it. A mothah will shield her children at any cost to herself. The young ah so easily influenced—they pick up the manners and expressions of their associates so readily. I know it to my sorrow. But I have my daughters. I can keep their minds puah and their ideals high." The tears were in her eyes again, and she leaned nearer to me to add in a whisper: "What would my daughters become were I to permit them to associate with these cowboys, these ranchers, the uncooth boors of these prairies? Such low cha-actahs!"

"Perhaps," I began, but there I seemed to stick. What could I say in the face of her eight years of experience? Nothing. And yet I could not accept her view. The cowboys I had met were not low. I could testify, not to my pleasure exactly, that they had cunning and were full of frolic; but their cunning was not vile, and their frolic was not vice,—I had not found it so. The ranchers I had encountered were not polished gentlemen in any sense of the term, but they were not fossils—there is such a thing as polishing and petrifying. But I did not

give this brilliant idea to my hostess, which was well. Instead, I spoke of my friends, and Miss Birch's projected school teaching. I was curious to know how my hostess regarded the spirit of independence in young women.

"Miss Birch," cooed the lady, all herself again, "such a deah, sweet girl!—it will be a shame to spoil her, will it not? Yu don't mind me saying so?—no. I said as much to her mothah, but she assures me that it is quite useless to object—*her fathah upholds her in it!* And Miss Birch is a veyah ambitious girl—she has talent, yu know. And the fortunes of the family ah low—veyah low,—so the mothah told me, in confidence, yu understand."

So this was the reason for the Halloways' coming to Texas? I recalled vague words of big speculations on the part of Mr. Halloway. And I understood perfectly the candor of the lady in telling this to her hostess; Mrs. Halloway needed no claim to wealth to make her the social equal of the Leverings—and she knew this as well as anybody—the sweet, gentle refinement of her nature would have passed her into the best circle anywhere, had she been in calico—she would never be in rags.

Mrs. Levering resumed, speaking of Miss Birch, because, I fear, I exhibited more interest in that topic than any upon which we had touched. She said:

"She is so-o full of life, isn't she? Yu knew her as a child? Oh, yes. See now, her hands and feet must be still, so her eyes ah dancing! Did yu evah? Ouah younger daughter is like her—a little."

It was at this juncture that she beckoned to Miss Eunice and presented me.

I felt quite on my good behavior, after the conversation above related, and spread my coat-tails, professor-like, as I sat down. I was sure, were I to let slip a grammatical error, or make use of a word of slang, in the hearing of this daintily nurtured creature I should be universally condemned. Therefore, I did not launch into voluble conversation. But the girl, to my surprise, seemed quite at her ease, and talked with a free and natural grace that was altogether charming. And but for the watchful eye and (I felt) listening ear of the elder sister, we had been good-fellows in five minutes. As it was, I confined myself to book topics—always, so etiquette has it, good form. But this was the very thing that brought trouble—perhaps trouble was inevitable. Miss Levering joined us, and at once appropriated the conversation. Eunice assumed a pout.

“Yu interrupt, sistah,” she complained. “We were discussing Shakespeare.”

“Yu ah too young to understand drama,” said Miss Levering coldly.

“How am I ever to understand it if I cannot put in——”

“‘Put in’? Eunice, wheyah did yu get that expression?” And Miss Levering gave me a severe glance.

Eunice blushed. “I am reading Shakespeare this summah,” she pleaded.

“Theyah!” Miss Levering put out a white hand. “We do not always talk about the latest thing we read, sistah.”

“Some of we poor mortals are thankful if we can recall even that,” I hastened to say.

"In this wilderness,—yes." Miss Levering sat down.

"I do not think the weakness confined to Texas," said I, and gave Eunice a look of sympathy.

"I will agree," Miss Levering replied with spirit, "the real Texan does not read at all."

"Yu ah too hard on ouah State, sistah," said Eunice, and the look she gave me as she turned away told me that, although she was being brought up (it almost seemed) as in a convent, wordless conversation was not alien to her understanding.

"Ouah State!" Miss Levering tried to smile. "Eunice delights to tease me. But do yu not find these Texans rude and uncouth?"

I disclaimed a right to judge and added, "Literature is a late arrival in any country—pioneer settlements always depend on oral communication first,—they have traditional tales——"

"Oh, yes, in times past. But these people have no right to live as they do,—no right at all. That they live as we see them indicates their taste and preference."

"They are taking the first step of progress," said I, repressing a yawn, for I had lost much sleep. "The rising generation, under Miss Birch's training, will——"

"But can nothing be done for those who have passed school age?" she interrupted, "these vulgah cowboys! Ah yu content to do nothing foah them? Must they go on in their dreadful state of sin to corrupt othahs?—to bring up families of their own?"

"We learn much through association. Children often teach their parents." That was the best I could do.

"The few among many are always lost. My brothah——" She paused and sat pensive. Was I going to see a trace of womanliness in her? But no. "We recall Lot's family," she said in a tone that was almost strident.

"But Lot was sordid always," I replied. "His selfish choice proves that. Such a result is not inevitable."

"I think it is," she said, with a bitterness that astonished me, as I was ignorant of its cause. I replied:

"You discourage me, Miss Levering. I had thought to enlist as a cowboy,—I had hoped to—to benefit those with whom I came in contact," I finished lamely, for in truth I had entertained no such hope until her remark opened the idea to my mind.

"Then let me dissuade yu," she said, with a coldness that disproved any personal interest in the premises. "Believe me, yu will fail, and not alone fail, but go down to degradation with othahs—othahs who have made the same mistake."

"You are no flatterer," said I, feeling a twinge of injury. "I am no young boy,—my ideals are as fixed as the stars."

She lifted her eyebrows. "I beg yuah pardon," she said ungraciously, "but yu must know that a family that has lost a son through drunkenness would close all the grog shops."

She arose and left me at once. But the picture of a young man—her brother!—the only son of this proud family, remained as she had suggested it to my imagination—a veritable degenerate, debauched, his aristocratic frame tortured almost out of human

shape; his work to curse and deride; his recreation drinking and gambling. I was glad that I had not met him at Red River Station,—glad that there were none there like him.

For several minutes I sat looking upon this picture which a sister suggested for me. Then someone called:

“Joseph!”

Miss Levering responded by quitting the room. Joseph! How well the name suited her. And no one would think of abbreviating it. Fancy anyone addressing that paragon as Joe! Eunice, I was willing to wager, never had done it,—she would not feel that she was addressing her sister. But now the young girl returned to me. As she crossed the room, something in her walk and something in her frank manner and bright smile, as she seated herself opposite me, reminded me of someone—yes, someone that I had met in Texas. But I could not fix the elusive likeness, which so engrossed me that I sat silent, until she spoke. With mature subtlety she said:

“I think we may resume now,—Towser’s gone. Yu were telling me that Robert Shallow was drawn from a real man—Sir somebody. I am eager to know moah.”

I expressed my delight at her interest, and we were soon deep in the fascinations of drama. While across the room Miss Birch and Col. Levering were, it appeared, as deeply engrossed. This delighted company remained undisturbed until dinner was announced.

The dining room was spacious and the table most inviting. We assembled around it, a happy, chat-

tering company, until Miss Levering entered, when conversation dwindled, like a run-down music box, and finally ceased. I was conscious of the awkward silence, conscious of negroes standing with bowed heads back of me. I looked at them, and at my companions, and then——

“Ouah great and powerful Judge——”

Miss Levering was saying grace. I bowed my head, and was conscious of a third thing—that a deep flush was upon my face for my unseemly conduct. She made her “thanks” long, and did not forget the cowboys. She reminded the Father that He was their righteous and unrelenting judge, but she made herself his attorney, and informed in this preface that they had no “case”—they were damned already. The effect was saddening on us all. And when the meal began our gayety did not return; the music box had, of a truth, stopped, and Miss Levering put the key in cold storage—probably in her pocket.

The meal ended, I took my leave. I learned at table that Mrs. Holloway and her daughter were not returning home that day, so there was nothing for me but to go on without them. I was given detailed directions as to route, and a negro was sent along to remember what I should forget. I accepted it all gratefully. I had learned that one can lose himself as easily in an unfeatured prairie as he can in a timbered wilderness.

At dusk I reached the new home of the Hallows. The Colonel made me welcome, and assured me that he could provide all the employment I wanted. I went to bed, and to sleep, thinking Texas a land of promises fulfilled. But my dreams were

disturbed by the wild racing and horrible cursing of a drunken cowboy.

CHAPTER IV.

BIRCH HALLOWAY.

The Halloway home was not new in the sense of having just been established. The buildings had been erected for several years, and the fields were in a good state of cultivation. There were shade trees, an orchard and shrubs in the garden, but things did not yet bear the stamp of a plantation home such as was seen at Levering's. Col. Halloway, however, meant that they should soon. Already he had brought several negroes with families up from the South, and that was a long step toward the desired end.

My work was varied and altogether delightful. I always had a fancy for horses, and was given the care of several fine ones. That was my only regular work. But there were walks and fences to be put in repair, besides the house to turn inside out. Each housewife, it seems, must make over every abode as she moves into it. Mrs. Halloway was no exception to the general rule. I tore shelves out and put shelves in; likewise, I pulled nails out and drove nails in. It came to be a joke between Miss Birch and myself to ask each other for a nail every time we met.

So I was hustled about until my clumsy efforts were no longer needed indoors. Then I was at liberty to go about the estate, which I did usually with a darky at my heels, and we made new fences or

repaired the old, as seemed necessary. Each day I covertly felt my biceps,—I had not forgotten that I “needed a body to back up my ideas.” And I was going to have ideas to back up soon. I was sure of that.

I talked always with the negro who accompanied me—the darky of the South was a new and interesting variety to me—and I often got a good deal of amusement out of my man, once, when I little expected it.

“Tighten that top wire a little more,” I commanded. “Tighten it! Why, Gabe, can’t you get down and pull?”

To my surprise Gabe—his name was Gabriel and had “lig-us snifikans”—got down prone upon the earth, and, of course, slid back bodily as he tugged at the wire. His outraged expression as he got to his feet was high comedy.

Another day I inquired of this same Gabe, “Do you know Uncle Levi over at Levering’s?”

“No, sah,” he replied promptly. “He’s from Kentucky.”

“Does that prevent you from knowing him?”

“It do-an me none,” he responded cheerfully, “but them darkeys as come from Kentuck thinks themselves the *selected*.”

I wish I could tell you just how great was my enjoyment of these things, and how the novelty of my work made it only recreation; and just how sweet was my sleep at night, and how the clean, pure air of the mornings was like a tonic taken at every breath, until I seemed to feel my blood growing thicker and brighter crimson. I had rather run, those days, than walk; rather shout than not. Miss

Birch was in a similar state of exuberant spirits, and we romped together like two children. We were never so happy as when one had consummated some joke on the other. One day this playful spirit almost brought disaster. I was exercising a stallion in the yard, when Miss Birch, coming around a corner, saw me and the horse, and at once spread her skirts to a ridiculous figure and uttered a shriek. The horse gave one bound, was over me and gone. I scrambled up, and quite dumb from a blow on the head, turned toward the girl. I had many things to say to her just then, but my lips were dumb. Birch put out her hand, and in a voice that trembled a little, said:

“Have yu a nail?”

All voiceless still, I drew one from my pocket and handed it to her.

“Thank yu,” she said, her lip quivering a little. “I shall always keep it.”

“Why?” I blurted.

“It will remind me, I hope, that there is a time and place for all things.” And now there were tears.

“Nonsense, girl! I’m not hurt.”

“It is no fault of mine that yu ah not,” she said sadly. “I shall keep the nail.”

I was glad that the blow on my head had been sufficient to keep me silent. The dear girl felt the hurt more than I did. She would never need a reminder to loving kindness. But she kept the nail. Years afterward, at a meeting full of joy to us both, she brought out a little box of treasures and showed me the nail among them. We may scoff at this treasuring habit in women, but we love them for it.

As soon as my head stopped buzzing, I called Gabe and went into the field. I was a bit shaken still, and so lounged on the grass while he worked. Our talk, this time, was of Red River Station. Gabe had been there once, "fo-ah a momph." To him it was a great and wonderful place, where murder and theft were committed as regularly as night should come. In one of his incredible narratives, he mentioned the Upper Trail. Naturally the name brought an unfortunate adventure to my mind, and I asked about that trail—where did it go?

"No-whar, as I knows of."

I smiled; he had, undoubtedly, been sold on that. I altered my question, "Where do the people go that travel it?" I asked.

He seemed perturbed, then said:

"I've seen dem cowboys go and go, on that Uppah Trail, and they went out of sight, and come in sight, and got littler and littler, till finally they was gone!—clean done gone into the sky, looked like!"

"Did any of them ever come back?" I asked tragically.

Gabe's eyes rolled, but he answered positively, "Ye-as, sah. They all done come back from dat Uppah Trail, sah. But them as went on the Lowah Trail—I never seen none of them come back."

I asked about this Lower Trail. Gabe was eager to inform me.

"The Lower Trail follows the Rivah down, and no honest man don't dare to travel it, sah. Bad men travels that trail, they does, bad white men, no niggahs; I'se done sartin suah of dat, sah."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Why, yu know, sah, dat trail follows the rivah,

and it keeps in low, dark places, sah,—in draws and timber—and thar's dead men layin' alongside of it—dead men—that never was pot in the ground—no funeral—just dead thar and—and dead, with bullet holes in 'em and with their heads mashed in, and——”

I laughed at him. Gabe was scaring himself with his weird tale. I got him to work again, and then spoke once more of the Upper Trail. “It keeps on the high divide,” I said.

“Ye-as, sah, but it goes across a brack prairie.” Gabe's eyes rolled again, but he added convincedly, “That ain't nothin' but a prairie like this here is, but the grass is most black, kase it grows so quick out of soil that's rich. A prairie won't git nobody.”

“Did once,” said I, to tease, “a long time ago the hills fell upon the wicked.”

Gabe worked on composedly. Things that happened a long time ago seemed to hold no terrors for him. But I knew that Gabe had a half-fear of the prairie, when all buildings had vanished. For I had related to him my experience of spending a night alone and lost, and he had regarded me with a kind of awe for several days. After a while I asked again: “What town is at the south end of that Upper Trail, Gabe?”

Gabe stopped his work. “Why, now, thar sure enough is a town down thar—Herrington—a town worf somethin'. They have steam key-ahs and a ho-tel, down thar.”

“It must be quite a place,” said I, sarcastic without intention.

“Sure enough!—quality lives thar—folks big as Leverings.”

I lay still on the grass. A light breeze was stirring and heart-shaped shadows of the leaves of a young cottonwood danced over my clothing. I watched them and mused:

It must be nice to be regarded as "the best." And the Leverings hold this reputation without effort—merely by living up to a high standard of elegance. . . . Up North we struggle and fret and attain in the end some sort of a commercial standing—too often at the sacrifice of all that is personal. . . . This Southern way is better. It is self-culture. . . . But if the two could be mixed. . . . If Miss Joseph could put some human with her divine—some warmth with her cold. . . . I like variety in a woman . . . mystery. . . . Her hands are pretty. . . . Joseph . . .

And then I was fast asleep.

I awoke with a wild start. The earth was trembling under me. A shriek of maddened fear smote my ears like a blow, and I staggered up. Was this some nightmare, or was there a horse there? Was Gabe rolling down the hill? Was that a cowboy on that horse? Yes, for now he spoke.

"I'd a mind to draw my gun and scare yu right," he said, grinning.

"It wasn't necessary," I replied unsteadily. "I thought I had nightmare."

"I've seen horses fly like birds" he declared.

Then he drew a package from his pocket and gravely held it out to me. "I brought out your mail," he said.

I gasped. Who was this man? What right had he to call for my mail? How did he know my name to ask? I was dumbfounded! The cow-puncher spoke again, giving a little—just a little, light.

"Red he sent me around with it,—he bein' too busy to come. He wrote some word to yu—he said he did. I'll be goin' now."

I got myself together sufficiently to thank him, but I was altogether dazed. Gabe spoke at my elbow.

"I dun thought them hills was sure enough fall-in'," he said, his teeth chattering still.

"I thought so my——" But here was writing penciled on an envelope.

"'Yu oughtn't to leave no such as these layin' around no one-horse Texas postoffice. I hoped to get them to you sooner.'"

Plainly it was Red who wrote the words, but that did not lessen my surprise and amazement. How came he to know the importance of my mail? On another envelope was written more hurriedly:

"I don't know where you are, but I will chance this boy finding you, and it will be fun for him. He gets enjoyment nosing people out like a pointer dog, and he is as good intentioned as one. Come to town some day."

I read these writings over a second time, and my amazement increased. I was not unmindful of the kindness he had shown me, but I was too near stupefied by the doing to have a rational thought. Had I have known that even as I read the words traced by his hand, death was stalking at his elbow, I would have been even more bewildered.

I opened a letter. It required an immediate answer and had already lain five days at the Station. I went to the house at once, and having made known my intentions to Col. Halloway, mounted my horse and started for Herrington—that town beyond the Black

Prairie, where were "steam key-ahs" and opportunity to send a telegram.

CHAPTER V.

THE BLACK PRAIRIE.

The sun was about an hour up when I reached Herrington. The depot was not far to seek, and I sent my telegram. That done, I went in search of the "ho-tel." It was there and true to label. I ate a breakfast that would have satisfied anyone with an appetite, for it was true Southern cooking. But the surroundings were not so delectable. While I ate, a man in the room was handcuffed and taken out by officers. There was law here, and grave need, too, I thought. More of crime this place certainly saw than did Red River Station,—more in a day than did the latter in a month. I had never eaten in a room before where were so many vicious-looking characters, men and women,—I might have been in the dining room of some prison. But there were gentlemen, too, and ladies, fine, cultured people, who ate at tables in the far end of the room, and held themselves haughtily aloof from the common herd. On the street it was the same—the very low and the very high; thugs, negroes and aristocrats; no middle class at all. But all at once I saw one ahead of me. His step was quick and elastic—he walked as if he had something to do.

I felt akin to this man and desired to overtake him. I did so, and almost shouted for joy when I saw his face.

"Red!" I exclaimed. "How are you? Shake!"

He stopped as if I had dealt him a blow. His face went pale and his gaze pierced my very soul.

I was taken aback by his manner, but was too glad to see him to be fastidious. I said:

“Yu can’t look into my stumach, my friend,—don’t try. I will tell you what I had for breakfast—pone and——”

“Is—did yu put your hawss in the barn?” he asked, hoarsely.

“He is in a barn,” said I, naming the place. “And I guess he is as glad for his rations as I was for mine,—I rode him all night.”

His brow contracted. We stood in front of a restaurant. He opened the door. “Come in here,” he said.

He spoke gently, but the words were a command. I obeyed, glad to be with him. At a table he gave his order, “Aigs, soft, and battah cakes.” Then he folded his arms in front of him and his chin dropped on his chest. When his food came, he lifted his tired gaze to my face and said:

“I had a right hard night myself.”

If I could have guessed how hard! But I suspected nothing, and we talked of many things, or rather, I did the talking and he ate, muttering between bites, “Ya-ah” and “Sure enough.” I thanked him for sending out my mail, and mentioned sending the telegram. I told him of my midnight ride across the Black Prairie, and of what I thought of the town. I informed him of a desire to purchase a revolver while there, and asked his advice on this. He gave it briefly, “Colt—44.” He spoke these words gently and lightly. When the meal was finished he arose quite himself again.

"I'll be right busy foah an houah,—I'll see yu then," he said.

And I told him gratefully, "I'll wait—I'll hang around here."

Red's hour lengthened to one and one-half, and then to two. I wandered about, smoking cigar after cigar. This was the best part of the town, evidently, for I was among aristocrats, yet alone. They did not ignore me, these gentlemen—always tall, always pale, always with a long silken mustache with a Spanish curl at the ends—they merely did not see me. I followed one into a saloon. He was well dressed, and there was an air of nobility about him for all he looked weary, and jaded and gaunt, and had that nameless expression of countenance worn by a man when his stomach at last refuses whiskey. He carried a cane, and I noticed the hand on its golden head—a pigeon foot, red, tapering, and claw-like. He paused wishfully beside the bar. I called for beer and looked him over as I waited. Then my gaze traversed the room. I noticed a broken chair, a few scattered cards on the floor, a table, and a man half-reclining upon it. His position was peculiar, showing absolute relaxation of attitude, and yet a peculiar rigidity of muscles. I seemed to feel a fascination and moved to his side.

"Why, this man is dead!" I exclaimed, at a glance.

The bartender gave me a look and went on with his corkscrew.

"He is——" I began.

But the man who had entered with me touched my sleeve. I beheld in the dead man the counterpart of this one—the same nobility, the same nameless expression of countenance, the same claw-like

hand. And this man spoke to me, with the gentle, Southern drawl.

"I reckon his bein' dayad is none of your business," he said, without rancor.

"No," I gasped in horror, "but has he no friends? Someone should notfy his relatives, or have him removed to——"

The live man—I almost said *live corpse*—smiled. "I am his closest relative," he said, slowly. "I reckon I was duly notified that my bullet struck his hyart, since none came to mine, seh."

I gasped out some sort of apology, saying, I believe, that it was not my intention to meddle, but that I naturally thought it strange for a man to be sitting dead at a card table—a gentleman at least.

Again this cadaverous individual smiled, lifting a colorless lip from dead white teeth. "He hasn't been a gentleman foah thirty years," he said calmly. "He stole my sweethyart away from me thirty years ago this day."

I looked hard at the man to see if he was serious. He was. I turned and left him beside his dead. As I crossed the room the bartender held out my glass of beer. I shook my head, but paid him for it. The air of the street refreshed me more.

At the corner I met Red. He had lost much of his preoccupied air, and made me feel at once that he was as glad for my company as I for his. We purchased some articles for our noonday lunch, and were almost immediately on our way. We rode side by side, and I was struck by the untarnished youth and proud strength of my companion. The picture of the dead man and his cousin came to my mind. Had they been like this splendid youth, before

alcohol stole reason from their heads and flesh from their bones? I broached the subject to Red, saying:

“Hate lives long in your country.”

“Hate?” He gave me a glance, then added lazily: “So yu was in there? I heard about it. Yes, hate lives long. But when I get ready to kill a man, I reckon I won’t wait thirty years. How did yu know that I’m from Kentucky?”

“I was putting both you and the cousins in Texas,” I replied. But I was thinking, even as I spoke, of Birch Halloway. If that man’s sweetheart had been like Birch—somehow, I felt less hard toward the man back there guarding his dead. If his cousin had stolen her away with lies—but no, the time to have settled it was right then, as Red had said, not thirty years later. Might Red ever—but he was looking at me.

“There nevah was a murderer in ouah family,” he said, with a trace of pride, “and I reckon I’ll nevah kill nobody. If my sweetheart likes some othah fello’ bettah than she does me, she can take him. That ain’t sayin’ that a thief oughtn’t to be shot, but yu cayn’t steal love—I’m old enough to know that.”

“You are pretty old, then,” said I, “older than he back in town will ever get.”

He looked at me again intently, then asked abruptly, “What did yu go in there foah?”

“In the saloon?—oh, I didn’t know, of course, and I thought that a glass of beer would take up five minutes of my wait.”

He still observed me. “A glass of beer took up five minutes of your time,” he stated. “How much of your time would a drink of whiskey have took?”

I smiled, but his face remained serious. "Pound your problem to a man that takes whiskey," said I.

"Yu don't?" He put the question sharp and quick.

"I do not, my friend," I replied, as serious now as he. "And I have never seen you take a drink."

"I do some things that don't please my folks," he stated casually. "I dance, and I play cards, when there ain't no money up, and I punch cows. I swear undah propah provocation, and a few times I've drew my gun on a fello' man. And I ain't to say proud of none of them accomplishments. But if I took whiskey, and knowed I couldn't stop takin' whiskey, I'd shoot somebody nearer of kin to me than a cousin."

"It makes a wreck of a man," said I.

"A wreck?" And now he drew his horse down to a walk. "I've seen men that drank whiskey all their lives and seemed no worse for it, and I've seen men go down to ruin undah a year of whiskey. I've seen smart men that drank—had drank all their lives——"

"But," I interrupted, "they would have been smarter if——"

"Wait," he commanded, and began where I had broken in. "And I've seen men that was fools that never touched a drop of whiskey, nor their parents before them. I've known men that was princes when sobah, to beat their wives when drunk, and I've known men to mistreat women and nevah touch no liquor. So I ain't one of them kind that lays everything to whiskey. Big things are bo'n into a man, and whiskey or no othah kind of foolishness

will kill it completely, be the thing good or bad. But I say if a man has got a little meanness bo'n into him, whiskey will strengthen it. And if he has got a little smartness bo'n in him, whiskey will weaken that. I say these things, and I know them to be as true as that sun yondah. And then I turn around and look at myself, and I say, 'Red, yu freckled-face son-of-a-gun, yu ain't bo'n with no big thing inside of yu! Yu was bo'n with a little natural meanness, and a little natural smartness—that meanness has got to be kept down, and that smartness has got to be kept in a growin' state. Yu don't need no whiskey.' I don't reckon I'll evah need none."

He had reduced the whole question to facts as plain as two and two, and applied the sum to himself—I had never heard a philosopher do it better. I tried the experiment.

"Well," said I after a moment, "if you put it that way, I will never need any, either."

Grave as a judge he looked at me for full a minute. And again, as those times at the Greyhound, I seemed to feel his gaze as it traveled over me. He was making his estimate—it hardly was flattering, for he said:

"I don't reckon yu evah will."

I laughed out. "Red," said I, "your penetration does you credit. No," and I became suddenly serious, "whiskey would destroy what little smartness there is in me—there isn't much."

He did not look at me as he replied unconcernedly, "I reckon I don't know how much. But I wouldn't swap with yu to-day,—and ten yeahs from now——" His eyes were lifted toward the

sky, they were bright with hope, fierce with determination. I gazed at him in surprise. I was beginning—just beginning—to understand something about this cowboy, Red.

“What is your ambition?” I asked. “What, above all else, do you desire to be?”

“A man!” he said, short and crisp. “That’s all—and that’s everything! A man physically——” He looked admiringly at his strong limbs. I looked at mine, noted the contrast, and felt my color come. “A man physically,” he repeated, “and a man socially,—that means, have education and money; a man morally,—that means, have nothin’ taggin’ at my heels like a black cat, sayin’, ‘I’ll tell this on yu; I’ll tell that on yu.’ I don’t want to break none of God’s commandments.”

“A difficult path you have marked for yourself, my friend,” said I, half amused at his ideal in this wild country. “Are you going to live in Texas?”

He smiled up at me. “Texas,” said he, “is big enough for the biggest kind of a man.”

“It is—yes. But suppose now—from behind that bush”—we were approaching the River Brazos, across which a long bridge stretched in diminishing arches—“a man should step out and say, ‘Red, you have been too active in this cattle stealing business,’ and draw his gun—What about the sixth commandment? Would you let him kill you?”

He looked sharply at me from the first word. His answer was far from expected. “Yu get me dead in this—What are yu here foah?”

I started, but forced a laugh. Then put my hand upon my chest and passed it to my thigh. “The physical me,” said I, “it needed——”

"Yu got that idea aftah yu got here," he interrupted. "When I saw yu that first time, yu hadn't the decency to be propah ashamed of them naked bones."

I continued my laugh, but with some effort. "No, because I did not realize then how naked they were." Then, noticing that he waited expectantly, I resumed, "I read that Texas was one of the good places for a young man to get his start. I thought——"

I spoke lamely, for I knew that I was not convincing him. I was glad when he interrupted again with:

"I know this about yu—yu ain't done nothin' that yu are ashamed of. Yu didn't come down here, like lots, because yu had to get somewhere where law and justice couldn't find you out. When I seen that in yu, I said yu was my friend."

"And I thank you," I cried warmly. "I hope that we may always be friends."

"Yes," he said, his gaze steadily on the bridge ahead, "I hope that, too. But I've found yu out in anothah thing—yu don't break down no doors."

I did not understand. His manner, as well as his words, puzzled me. He seemed to be looking for someone,—expecting something. One hand was on his revolver. I noticed this, as I repeated blankly, "Break down doors?" We were on the bridge now. Near its further end timber grew close up, and the road beyond was lost to view. When we reached that point, Red stopped his horse and sat still a moment, lisenin and peering into the timber. Then he swung himeslf off, and picked up several empty cartridges from the dust. He

examined these carefully, then looked long down the river. It was swollen a little—evidently there had been a rain up in the foothills—and was moving in a swift, muddy whirl. Red turned about abruptly, and handed one of the cartridges to me, saying:

“Some time yu will know why I give that to yu.”

I looked it over. “Thank you,” said I, lightly, “for what I am to know.”

He nodded after he got on his horse, and then said: “I told yu that yu don’t break down no doors. Things are always ready for yu——” He flung out a hand. “Your life is like a long hall in a big building, and all the doors along that hall are open to yu. Yu went in at one, and it was a school. Yu went into another, and it was a college, with instruments for instruction—all that yu needed. And the next door ahead was open, and the next—always open. All yu had to do was to go in, and opportunity was there waitin’ foah yu—one chance aftah another there, watiin’ like stalks in a row of corn. Somebody has a job foah yu—somebody wants to help yu all the time. Somebody is doin’ your work all the time—always has been, always will be,—and yu get the credit. I’d like to have been bo’n like yu.”

“You—you——” I was angry, but had the sense to try to conceal it. “Things have come my way some,” I blurted finally. “But no one does my work for me,” I finished hotly.

He dismissed my anger with a motion of his hand. “Look at me,” he said. “Every door is shut to me,—shut and locked I have got to break them

down or stay out. School doors was locked to me, but I got in now and then. College doors is locked. And I look ahead and see doors and doors,—behind them are things I want, opportunities I'd like to have—but them doors are locked, every one of them. And they always will be locked, unless I go back to that first door I skipped,—that college door, and break it in. And after that take them as they come and break them down. See, how different things are with me? Why should yu, with all your chances, get mad because I can see how things are?"

"I should not," I acknowledged, for my anger had vanished. "But nobody does my work for me," I stoutly maintained.

He gave me a slow smile. "Yu don't tell me why yu came here," he said, looking again at a cartridge he had picked up, "and I respect your silence more than I would your confidence, likely. But I thought oncet—well, as I said, doors are always shut for me; foah yu they are always open. The creator of this here rivah, and this here Black Prairie, made things as they be—I ain't so on-Christian as to quarrel with His doin's."

And now his countenance and his manner changed completely. He slipped the empty cartridges into his pocket. His face beamed with the joy of living; he was care-free, happy, almost boyish. As we emerged from the timber, he lifted his white hat from his head, gave it a wide sweep, and, with a wild whoop of greeting to the level prairie, dashed ahead of me, his red hair rising on his head, his arms flung out, his horse at a dead run.

I soon overtook him, for he did not continue in

his wild race long. As I rode alongside, he apologized for his action.

"This here pony," said he, "belonged last to a Spaniard. It takes a yell and a prod of the spur to wake him up propah."

I observed the horse. "This isn't the one you were riding that day at the Station," I said, just to be talking.

But as his gaze came slowly to my face, I saw that he was deeply touched. The curtain of his soul was, for an instant, drawn, and I had one glimpse of his inner nature, as one sees a house between trees from a moving train. But when he spoke his tone was careless.

"He's dead," he said softly.

"Oh," I replied, surprised. "He was a fiery little animal."

"Ya-ah,—I roped him on the range, and gentled him myself." He drew the empty cartridges from his pocket and held them in the palm of his hand. "One of these did foah him—or maybe it's the one yu got."

I was astonished. I found my cartridge, and at once it was repulsive to me. I would have tossed it away had he not been watching.

"Last night it was." He spoke softly yet. "Back there at the rivah. He was a good hawss. This here one—But he rides easy, and knows how to hold on to the trail,—that's somethin'."

I was busy constructing a mental picture. "He broke a leg, I suppose, and you had to shoot him," said I, making facts to fit my picture.

"No, he nevah broke no laig," said Red, drawling his words more than usual. "Them cartridges wouldn't fit in my revolver."

I gasped. "Somebody shot him?—shot him under you, Red? Oh, I wish I had been there!"

He smiled at my excitement, or was it at my assurance.

"If yu had have been there," he said calmly, "w'ed have both been shot. Three men in a fight is one too many. It's like playin' tennis—your pardner gets in the way, and the othah fello' gets the game. I like to do my own playin'."

"Tennis—yes. But last night, what——"

"I got to playin' tennis down at Waco," he said with provoking slowness. "It was there that I broke down the door to a schoolhouse and got in for a part of term. If I hadn't I'd talk faster and maybe bettah, for I wouldn't know that what I was sayin' wasn't accordin' to pronouns and adverbs. I learned correct—I know correct, yet when I try, but I reckon I'll nevah do anything in this world without knowin' the why of it."

"But last night?" I burst out. "Have you no idea who it was that shot your horse?"

He gave me that slow smile again. He would not tell me until he was fully ready—I could see that. And I half suspected that he was not going to tell me at all. But in this I was mistaken. After we had gone a mile or more, he began speaking of his own accord.

"Last night was a different night from most," said he, never taking his gaze from the winding trail ahead. "It was a night like that one Poe wrote about in his poetry of the raven—shadders got to be birds and beasts and things. And this here Black Prairie"—he swept his arm wide out—"is kind of lonesome-like at night. The stars are away

up yondah, and when yu look at them, why they seem to draw back like they was afraid. And there ain't no cow a-bawlin', and no dawg a-barkin'; there ain't no owl a-hootin' and no coyote a-yelp-in'. There is just the creak of your saddle, and the thump, thump of your hawse's hoofs, regular and all the time—all the rest is just sky and stars, and horizon, round as hoop; and clumps of bear-grass, and thistles, with their shadders turned into men and beasts and guns and Injuns. Maybe yu didn't see any of them things when yu came along here last night?"

I assured him that I saw all of them. I did not tell him that I had felt myself too much a man to mention it, but he seemed to read the thought.

"I ain't been a coward since I got big enough to know that the devil ain't no real person, and there ain't no giants in Texas," he said, sitting lazily in his saddle. "But last night—well, braver men than me might have seen things last night on this here prairie. The last man I seen, looked at me hostile. He wasn't pleased with me, and the sun went down on his hate—that there argues bad for a peaceful night. He hadn't no out and out kick, though, as I knowed, and for all the shadders and frightened stars, I said to myself there wasn't no real dangah. But shoo!—well, a daid hawss oughen't to count much against a man. But I'd like mighty well to know who fired that shot, seh, I shorely would."

"You don't know, then?"

He looked at me, and his glance was sharp, but he resumed lazily: "Seven days ago I thought I knowed something—two days ago I knowed I knew something—now, I don't know any of them things.

Can you figure that out with your college education?"

"You refer to the cattle stealing and the horse tracks?"

"I mean them things," he affirmed. "Three weeks ago I left yu all at the Greyhound. I spent that day close to the rivah. I found the tracks made by the hawss with a chip off his hoof. I found where he went into the watah, and where he came out of the watah—on the same side of the rivah! Yu say, why the man on the hawss guided him that a-way?"

"Because he thought that someone might follow his trail, and he wanted to throw them off."

His glance was full of disappointment. "I thought that myself," he said.

I smiled. "Why did he do it, then?" I asked, and was surprised at the very boyishness of his answer. He said:

"I haven't asked him—yet."

"Aftah that hawss left the watah," he resumed, after a pause, "he kept in the brush and on the grass. He shied at an open spot, like a wolf at a trap—smooth dirt didn't look right to him, which ain't the natural way of a hawss. One time his ridah got down and moved a drift log, to keep that hawss from steppin' in dust—I ain't sayin' why he did that. Five miles—about that—he kept on the velvut, and the way he turned and doubled to do it was mighty confusin' at times to figure out. But finally he plunged, headlong, into the watah again. And he didn't come out—not on the Territory side, nor neither on the Texas side."

"He didn't!" I exclaimed. "Why, then——"

He smiled again at my excitement. "Don't you know, seh, that the Red Rivah is big enough to suppoah't an island?"

"Yes," I replied, "I saw the island. It is about seven miles below the Station. Did he go there?"

"Yu're no good judge of distance," said he. "It's ten,—and the ridah went there. There ain't nothin' convincin' about that,—Skunk Island is inhabited."

"Yes," said I, unguardedly, "so I have heard,—that is, I heard—I mean, intimations have——" I paused. I did not wish to tell him what I had heard, and I had, in truth, heard nothing. Red sat regarding me intently. He spoke no word to help me on. At my pause he resumed:

"The ridah and the hawss went to that island; I seen them—I saw them both. I know the man right well, and I ain't unacquainted with the hawss—he's sixteen hands high, long in the laig, and slender at the hock; he's bay and dark, star, with tail to nose, double-eyed, and has lungs like a pipe-organ. I had that hawss explained to me, and how I kept my face solemn while I told my lies, is one of the things I'll nevah know. Chris explained that hawss—him and me have chummed some. He ain't a bad sort. I nevah liked his business, and he always liked my girl, but we get on right well togethah. So I just called on him friendly. We walked around and looked at things. Then went down to the corral, where we had this talk, Chris leadin' off:

"'There's a hawss foah you, Red, that bay.'

"'Ya-ah, but a little thin, ain't he?' I says.

"'Thin? No, just in good travelin' condition. A hawss cayn't keep his wind in a long run if he's fat.'

“‘That’s correct,’ I says, solemn, ‘but he looks gaunt. Ain’t got no wolf-teeth, has he?’

“Well, seh, yu ought to have heard Chris snort at that. He was plum mad!—and while he was lettin’ off cuss words, I edged around until I could see the bay’s left hind—*there was a chip off it!* It kind of scared me, seein’ it that a-way, but Chris was too hot to notice. He let out something like this:

“‘I allus ’lowed yu knowed something about hawses. But gosh a-mighty! Talkin’ about wolf-teeth in that thoroughbred!—he’s gaunt from hard ridin’, that’s all.’

“‘Thoroughbred is he?’ I said sociable then. ‘I didn’t know yu all went in foah fine stock.’

“Chris took a hitch on his caution. ‘Oh, we all are as liable to pick up a good hawss as anybody,’ he says.

“‘Sure!’ I says, ‘and he’s a fine one, all right,—look at the length of that neck! and just squint your eye along the taper of them laigs.’

“Chris done expanded some under that, and give me the measurements of that hawss, and some of his pedigree. But I hadn’t allowed to stay all day, and so I shut him off with this:

“‘Wheyah did yu buy him, Chris?’ And I put considerable amount of envy into them words.

“Chris grinned, he was that pleased. ‘He ain’t mine,’ he said, plum regretful. ‘He belongs to Chad, and he won’t so much as let one of us fello’s swim the rivah with him.’

“Well, seh, when he said them words, I had to take out my knife and set to whittlin’ right smart to conceal my expression. I knowed my face

showed my astonishment through like a window light. Here I had three facts: That there was the identical hawss that come down Wichita Trail the day aftah the cattle stealin',—Chad Harris was ridin' him, because nobody else evah did,—so, then, Chad Harris sent them Injuns down to blot out the true trail of the stolen cattle."

I was delighted at his success. I told him so. And naturally the fact that guilt rested on this man or that man had little effect on me. My pleasure was largely in Red's achievement. But my mind went back and picked up the name, Chad Harris.

"Chad Harris," I said aloud. "I have heard something about him, haven't I?"

Red's expression was peculiar as he turned toward me. "I reckon yu have," he said. "He is right well known around here."

"Yes," I repeated vaguely. "Oh, doesn't he buy corn?"

Red's gaze held steadily to my face. "I have heard of his buyin' some corn," he said.

I laughed. The laugh was at a memory of my first day in Texas. I explained it to Red.

"I noticed some corn about the Station that first day, and I asked your friend Dock what was done with it, there being no means of export. He said the ranchers fed part and sold part of what they raised. But what does the man do with it who buys, I insisted. And Dock said, he reckoned that was that man's own business. Afterward I learned that it was Chad who bought the corn. Is he the man who was playing cards at the table with Sleepy that night at the Greyhound?"

Red nodded. "He was there."

"Yes," said I quickly, "and he did not relish what you said to him—I mean about losing sleep."

Red eyed me. "Yu noticed that, then?"

"Yes,—but I did not think you did. Had you any suspicions then?"

Red's gaze had returned to the trail. My question was never answered. When he spoke it was of our former subject, the corn.

"One time," he began lazily, "one time a fello' came here from the North and made himself interested in what Chad Harris did with the corn he bought. He inquired some——" I saw, now, that Red was watching me, though I kept my face steadily front. He repeated: "He inquired some around, and then one day, he left the Station and went across to the island to see for himself what was bein' done with the corn. He nevah came back to the Station."

A shiver ran along my spine in spite of the heat of the day. "Killed him, did they?" I asked, and made my voice calm.

"That's on-certain," said Red, lazy again, and intent upon the trail. "A little while afterwards that fello's relatives came down here, armed with suspicions, a detective or two, and three or four guns to the man. But Morton quieted them."

"Morton? Why?"

"He's a friend of theirs."

"A friend of the Skunk Island people?"

"Yes, of they all's gang."

"What was Morton's story?" I asked eagerly.

"Story?" Red smiled up quick at me. But he spoke in all seriousness. "His story was that he

met that man as he was coming back from the island, and drove him to his house, where he spent the night. He eulogized them all's departed clean up to the firmament, and said he was that taken with his good qualities that he drove him south to the rail-road himself,—he proved that, too, by one of his hands—Ed, it happened to be.”

“Convenient,” said I.

“Yes, and there this about provin' a thing by a fool—if he tells different later on, nobody knows which to believe.”

“But Ed never did?”

“Ya-ah, Morton fired him a while back, and he told that Morton hadn't been to the railroad in three years.”

This conversation meant much to me, and I should have liked to have asked Red many questions. But to have done so would have made known to him the nature of my business in Texas, which could not yet be told. So I strove to keep the conversation going, saying quite aimlessly:

“I suspected that Morton's deeds were not always done in the open. His is a peculiar personality—he is huge, irritable, irrational, childish, and yet a force not to be ignored.”

Red turned in his saddle. My blind stroke had fallen on the keynote of his thoughts.

“Ignored!—no! But I am playing against him now. But for him I would have done different. Yu see my position?—When I came back to Texas aftah I visited at the Island and seen all them things I told yu, my plain dooty was to go to Darling and tell him what I knowed. Why didn't I? Because

of Morton—that's why! Morton knows where I've been. No day has passed without him seein' Darling—nobody don't need to bring me that information. And he's waitin' hourly foah my repowt! I know him. And he has got the whole story out of Darling before this—Darling cayn't keep things—fambly matters slip out on him—so the baby wasn't no surprise. I say a married man ought to have at least one private subject. And any man, I say, that has no idees of his own, ought to be careful whose he takes in. But Darling unloads his mind to Morton,—and Morton fills the vacancy up with what he thinks Darling ought to have in his head. So, then, Morton is Darling, and Darling is Morton, and I have just one man to deal with—Morton."

"But Morton—who's he? Well, I know some-things inside of me that wasn't never in no book or newspaper, neither was them things ever shaped into words and said from any man's mouth. But I know them, the same way, maybe, that yu knowed something that you couldn't say, back yondah. But this much has come to the surface, though everybody ain't seen it—*Chad Harris owns Morton!* I don't begrudge him his possession—I'd rather have a beef critter myself. But he owns Morton—that there little incident about the corn proves that, if it needed provin'. So if I had repowted to Darling, then I had repowted to Morton, and if to Morton, why, then, to Chad himself!—I'd have saved time and horse flesh by goin' right back to the island and tellin' all I knowed. Yu bein' a strangah, might have made just that mistake. But me—I reckon I knowed bettah."

"And then there was anotheah thing I might have

done—I might have taken my information to the Station. There's a gang there waitin' for it—Hawkins and Reynolds, and men with less sense than either of them two. What would have happened if I had?—murder, seh. Would I do that, then? Would I go huntin' and slip up on a flock of ducks swimmin' in a pond and talkin' all their duck-talk about the frogs, the moss and the fish, and pour shot into them? No, seh, I raise up, and when they see me, I let go at them, and take my chance right along with theirs. Do I up-wind a deer when he's day-dreamin' of next season's joys, and pierce his heart with cold lead? I reckon I'd quit huntin' if I' evah done such a trick. Did I evah shoot a rabbit a-sittin' or an antelope asleep? I reckon I nevah did, seh. And wouldn't I give a man the chancet that I would a bird or a beast? That's why I believe in law and civilization, and trial by jury—it gives both sides a chancet to prove his case. So I didn't go to Darling, and I didn't go to the Station. I went to Herrington and told the sheriff there. He said he had some business needin' attention, but he'd be ready to start in an houah."

"You did just right," I said, heartily, "the very right thing."

"Thank yu," he said simply.

"The sheriff will have something of a fight on his hands, won't he?" I asked.

Red gave no attention to my words. We were at the very highest point of the divide, and his gaze was on the trail as it lay ahead of us, forever like a slack twine across a table. He seemed alert now, in every nerve and muscle, and I noticed a scowl beneath the sweat on his brow. His words, too, when he spoke, came quick.

"I'd like to clear up one thing in this fight, and that's the shootin' of my horse last night. That there's personal. If I only knew who did that thing."

"It was one of those Islanders," said I.

"There is one," said he to this. "Logan his name is, Zant Logan, though it ought to be 'Slant,' for his forehead dodges back right sudden from his eyebrows. Him and me have had some trouble ovah at the Station, but nevah nothin' serious. And we've had trouble at dances, here and there, but nothin' serious again. He always drinks and he always fights. I have saved his life several times, and several times I have taken my own right off the end of his revolver. He's afraid of me now," he added, with no trace of pride.

I wondered what this young cow-puncher would call serious trouble. I said, "It's a little trick to shoot a man's horse. No one but a coward would do it."

To this he made no immediate response. Again his gaze was steady on the trail. Was he thinking again of his lonely ride? Truly it had impressed him more deeply than it had me. His nature received and gave deeper impress than mine did. What had produced awe in me had produced awe in him, but also a thought deeper than awe. He must know why he felt as he did, and what the result of the feeling might be. Nothing was of no importance to him, not even his own feelings, sensations and thoughts; while many things, including these three, were of little moment to me. So I found that I had come, on this ride, to envy him his knowledge, while he envied me my education.

“That man at the rivah last night, spoke to me,” said Red, breaking the silence at last. “He spoke, and I didn’t know his voice. If it had been Chad, I’d have known his voice. It wasn’t him. But Logan—Zant Logan has a voice for occasions. When he is drunk, he is chesty and base of voice; when he is natural, he’s squeaky and raspy on the nerves; when he is scar-it——”

There he paused, sitting idly in his saddle, yet seeming as tense in every muscle as a tiger ready to spring. I was left to guess, if I could, how Logan talked when frightened. For when Red spoke again his thoughts had traveled back to the Brazos, and it was night. I could not have been far behind him, for he described things thus:

“The prairie broke up all of a sudden, and long, black arms of the valley reached out toward me. The shadders that had been follerin’ me all night, raced ahead and disappeared into a world that was all shadders. Sounds came up from the blackness—the or-chestra of frogs and toads and insects, struck up on the last tune of the night. Somewhere, a long ways off, a rooster crowed. I was glad for all of them sounds, and especially that there rooster,—I felt, when I heard him, like I’d been on a long journey and was gettin’ back to the land of my own kind. And so I was—it proves a truth, too. All night I’d been ridin’ in a strange world, peopled with unfamiliar things, but none of them had hurt me none. Now I came back to man’s dominion and got shot at! See there!—Man’s worst enemy is man.”

I nodded, and he resumed:

“Well, the roostah crowed and I passed into the

blackness, ridin' on a walk, but a lively one, foah a prairie hawss don't like timber much of night time. I seen the rivah—just a ripple of light there was on it from the stars. The great or-chestra blazed out in a grand fina-lee, and hung up their harps, leavin' my ears ringin'. Then was when my hawss stopped. And when I spoke to him he did not go on. In another second a man's voice said, kind of insultin' like:

“ ‘Goin' to Herrington?’

“ ‘Yes, seh,’ I said, ‘to Herrington.’

“ ‘Well,’ said he, and his tone was more insultin' than his words, ‘I'm bound the othah way. Yu left the road, I reckon?’

“ ‘I left the trail, seh,’ I said again, to the blackness.

“ ‘What yu all goin' to Herrington foah so early in the mawnin'?’ he asked then.

“That made me kind of hot, but I took pains to speak polite. ‘I'm down on business, seh,’ I says.

“ ‘Oh, well, yu needn't to get hot about it,’ he fired out. ‘I don't care a cuss what you're down foah.’

“ ‘Your pawden, seh,’ I said, and started my hawss. But he wasn't done talkin', and stopped me.

“ ‘Well, then, as yu can be half civil,’ he says, ‘I'll tell yu that the bridge is on-safe—I got that information in town, so swum my hawss. I thought yu all might miss the signal, it's so dark in the timbah.’

“I was surprised plumb out of my wits, I reckon, for I believed his lie, and thanked him for it. Then I rode down to the bank and urged my hawss into

the watah. As he forged out, and, losing his feet, swung down stream in the current, I heard a thundah of hoofs on the bridge ovahhead—then a bullet spat in the watah beside me and a revolver report sounded.

“I understood then!—the trick, the damnable trick, to get me into the rivah, where I’d be an easy mark on the surface of the watah, and where my body would float far from the place of the crime. Ya-ah, I understood, and I dropped off my hawss, lettin’ my body into the watah and keepin’ tight against his side. Bullet aftah bullet fell, droppin’ into the rivah with a little hiss, and too close foah comfort. I held my revolver clear of the wet, but it was no use to shoot, for the coward had chosen his position well—the dark of the timbah hid him better than a house. Then suddenly, my horse reared and plunged. He pawed the watah frantically, and then sank—he was hit vital, and I was busy keepin’ out of his way. But I realized that I was an easy mark then, so I dived, came up, and dived again, comin’ up neah the bank. I dived a third time, and then had to crawl to shore, for I was as weak as a kitten. I looked foah that man in town. But I reckon he knowed bettah than to risk that. I was plum surprised when I met yu.”

“Oh,” I said, and forced a weak laugh. And then I said a very foolish thing: “Of course, you know, Red, that I didn’t shoot your horse.”

“Suppose,” he said, quick and sharp, and then stopped himself to add leisurely, “Justice is handicapped in two ways—it cayn’t take what a man knows as evidence, unless he can say he seen it, or heard it. And it cayn’t distinguish between a lie

and the truth when both are sworn to on a Bible. And civilization—what yu call society—is just like justice. If yu had of been in my place, and had found me in town with a tired hawss and no excuse foah bein' there but a telegraph wire, yu would have had me arrested foah shootin' at yu. Civilization blunts a man's sensibilities—he gets so he don't know things *inside* himself. I don't want to get too civilized evah."

I could not deny the assertion. I sat, smiling at him, glad in truth that he was not too civilized. He sat supinely in his saddle, under the sweltering heat of the noonday sun, while I, watching him, became more and more amazed at the experience through which he had just passed. It had not ruffled his composure—then surely nothing could. He certainly was accustomed to such things from birth—such was my mental verdict.

Our horses jogged on and on. Red seemed to have forgotten me. His gaze was steadily ahead, and his hat was drawn down to his very brows. His expression was set and expectant—I have seen a cat sit so for hours, watching the hole of a gopher. But I could see nothing on which Red could fix his gaze—there was only the yellow glare of the sun on the endless winding trail until it was lost at last in waves of liquid heat, where were mingled heaven and earth in bays, and lakes, and rivers of sky.

I mopped by brow. The perspiration, which had been trickling down my face in streams, had at last found its way into my eyes. There was no breeze to dry it off. My horse was reeking wet and odorous, and growing white at flank and brisket. I

mopped my brow again, and the movement attracted Red's attention.

"This here heat," he said, "will likely bring a storm."

"I wish it would hurry, then," I said. "When a man has been up all night, like I was—and you, too,—heat like this is a strong argument for sleep."

"And if yu had taken whiskey," said Red, his gaze gone back to the distant horizon, "yu likely could not set your hawss about now. And if your work was done, and your mind, aftah a lot of excitement, had nothing of consequence in it,—that would be big argument foah sleep."

"It would, indeed," I replied, wonderingly. "You have had enough excite——"

But he had stopped his horse, and now demanded that I stay there. As he started forward, I saw, in the distance, a speck of black, like something washed ashore by the running waves of heat. What was it—a horse? Yes, but there was no one on it. What was the matter with Red, anyway? When he was some distance ahead, I started my horse and slowly followed him.

True to the instinct of the plainsman, Red left the trail and riding around, approached the horse from the opposite direction. I halted again, but was now near enough to discern a dark object in the shadow of the horse,—a man, undoubtedly. Red approached slowly and cautiously, but his strategy seemed useless, for neither horses nor man saw or heeded his presence.

Seeing no disturbance, I went nearer and took in the significance of the scene at a glance: The horse stood, dead tired, on his feet, and merely

lifted his eyelids; the man lay in heavy bluestem, his face flushed and bloated, breathing heavily. A whiskey flask, evidently propped with some pains against a tuft of grass, as a child might place a toy at night, was right in range with the last glance of the man's sleep-laden eyes.

These things told the story—all there was to tell. The man had not slept; all night he had sat in his saddle, straining every nerve, alert in every fibre of his being, watching every couve ahead, fearful of every shadow behind, until the tension of his mind and body was like that of the strings of a tuned instrument. Then, his task ended, he had retraced his steps. And the sun had done its work; the whiskey flask came out, the weary pony lagged more and more in his gait, and at last the man yielded to the drugging power of sleep. He had made a fight; for weary miles he fought off the inevitable,—I knew this, and Red knew it. And but for the whiskey, he had won. With it—well, there he lay.

Red motioned me to stop. He got down, and cautiously adjusted knots and a noose in his rope, then stealthily approached the sleeper. I watched him, fascinated. Was this his man? He certainly thought so. He arranged his rope about the sleeper with infinite pains, and then darted a quick hand for his revolver. At the first touch the man was awake and on his feet. But Red had the revolver out of its holster—he flung it aside in the grass, and at the same instant drew up the rope, pinning the man by the feet with a swiftness that sent him sprawling on his face. But it was not so easy. With the agility of a cat the man was

turned over, a knife was out, and the rope severed as with a razor. The two faced each other, not five paces apart, each pale, each realizing that a false move meant death—the one armed with a revolver, the other with a knife. A moment passed.

“So it’s yu, yu cur,” the man panted.

Red did not reply. His revolver was aimed at the fellow’s temple.

“A bullet cayn’t pierce your leather hide, eh?” the man sneered. “So now I’ll try this knife—I’ll make hash out of yu, yu red-headed son-of-a——”

“Don’t say that word unless yu want to die now, seh,” said Red steadily.

“I say I’ll make hash out of your heart!” The words hissed as they issued from his lips. Red’s reply came cold and clear, like the ring of pure steel:

“Drop that knife! Drop it!” Red’s gaze flashed along the barrel of his revolver straight into the eye of his foe. “A bullet can travel faster than yu can, seh. Drop that knife—One—two—Drop it, seh!”

“I’ll make—I’ll make—hash—I——” But the unfaltering gaze of the eye behind the gun was too much. His fingers relaxed—the knife fell and slipped from sight in the bluestem.

“Now take four steps to the right—four. Ready—one—step! One—two—That’s right, seh! Now just take up that rope and loop it ovah your hand for a bracelet—that’s good!—Now, I’ll just fix the othah hand foah yu.”

Red adjusted the rope with amazing celerity. And at once his hands were fast, the man began to struggle and roar.

“Coward! You’re a coward!” he raged. “Creep up on a sleepin’ man, like a snake.”

Red answered him.

"That reminds me," he said, busy with his rope. "I enjoyed my bath right well this mawnin', Logan."

Logan's face purpled with rage. "Curse your leather hide!" he roared. "Curse your Kentucky nigger breed!"

Red did not reply to the insulting words.

"Half-bloods!—every man of yu!" Logan continued, knowing well that his words cut deep.

Red led Logan's horse around. "Now yu just mount your hawss," he said.

Logan flatly refused. "Never, if I rot here!"

Red leveled his revolver again, and made threats. He counted, but all to no purpose. Logan did not heed his threats—he would not look at him. He divined something of the chivalrous nature of his captor, and knew that he would not be shot down when bound any more than he had been slain while asleep. So he stood stoical as a martyr and steadily refused to move. I got down, hoping to be of assistance to Red. He seemed not to be aware of my presence, but laid his gun down, and in a tone of resignation spoke to his prisoner.

"All right, then, seh. I'll just loop a pair of bracelets on your laigs and leave yu here. The sheriff of this here country will be along in a couple of hours—yu can wait here foah him. I reckon you'd rathah travel in the official train."

Logan started as if struck. "The sheriff!" he gasped. "You don't mean—oh, you damned cur! The sheriff—good God!—oh, your black heart!"

"Now don't go and heat yourself up cussin' of me, seh," said Red amicably. "It's a hot day, yu know, and your whiskey is gettin' low on yu."

"To blazes with the whiskey!"

"Yes, seh. But now you've got your choice—rathah wait here, seh?"

Logan moved at once to his horse. He permitted Red to assist him to mount, and to lash him to the saddle. Red passed the rope through the bridle bit and then made it fast to the pommel of his own saddle. And having mounted, he turned in his seat and shading his eyes with a hand, looked long and intently south.

"I don't see nothin' of the sheriff and his party," said he to me, "but he cayn't be far back."

"No, not very far," said I positively.

Our words had the desired effect on Logan, for when we urged our horses to a gallop, Logan kept his up with us, and we made good time for an hour or more. But toward evening my horse became pitifully tired, and Logan's, for all his urging, lagged heavily on the rope. Red's mount, having made but the one trip, was in good condition, and he could have pushed on all night. But with Logan, a stop was imperative, and I urged Red to make across to Halloway's for the night. He consented reluctantly and considered one advantage only—that it was off the trail, and a place where we were in little danger of an attack by Logan's friends. In my inexperience I had not thought of that possibility.

It was nearly midnight when we reached the Halloway home, as we traveled the greater distance at a walk. I called Gabe to feed the horses, and as our hunger was forgotten in weariness, I took both Red and his prisoner to my room for the night.

CHAPTER VI.

A FAIR SPECIMEN.

"Birch!" I called. "Oh, Birch!"

"Hyah!" she answered, in a suppressed voice. "What is it?"

I laughed at her eagerness. "What made you think it anything important?" I asked, wondering if she had heard.

"I knew by the way yu called. Tell me—quick!"

I whispered a word and watched her eyes shine.

"Sure enough?"

"A sure enough cowboy," I stated.

"Whyah?" She peeped apprehensively over my shoulder.

"He came in last night—with me."

"Is he—does he look very dreadful?"

I assured her that he did, and that he was more dreadful even than he looked. In truth I was very anxious to bring about a meeting between my two young friends, and yet I was a little jealous of her certain delight in him—you may understand my feeling in the matter better than I can explain it to you. Miss Birch had never seen a cowboy. At least she had never seen anything resembling the written, pictured, or described cowboy. But those things are so misleading generally, that she had likely seen and never recognized the real flesh and blood article. Red would not approach Birch's preconceived idea of a Texas cowboy by anything, but

what he lacked of the desperado he made up in handsomeness—I told the girl that it was a charming specimen that I had brought in for her inspection. I told her, too, of his prisoner, and of the capture. Her eyes were very round.

“If yu don’t let me see him, I will scold yu foah fouah days,” she declared, that being her favorite punishment for me.

“I will bring him right up here,” I declared.

“Oo-oo!” She drew back. “Whyah had I bettah go—to the top of the house?”

“Is your vision clearer in a rare atmosphere?” I asked sarcastically.

“No-o, but—why, he must not know I am looking at him. I can see him nicely from the attic window. I will run——”

She started, but I stopped her. “Do you suppose I am going to put a rope on him and lead him up here as if he were a horse?” I asked. “He will naturally do as he pleases and go where he wants to go. He will have his prisoner——”

“I will not stay hyah,” she declared. “I do not want to see him, anyway,—I hate him.”

I was amazed, and yet secretly pleased. But I became sarcastic again.

“You are afraid of him,” I declared.

“I am not, eithah. I expect to see a great numbah of cowboys when my school begins,—they are not all like this one.”

“Indeed, they are not all like this one,” I declared warmly. “You will never meet a more gentlemanly cowboy in Texas.”

Her eyes shone. “Then why—yu just said that he lassoed a man he met on the trail,” she stated with spirit.

"Yes, but the man is a thief—a cattle thief—Red thinks he is."

"Oh! And he captured him without wounding him at all? How brave he must be. Is he big—tall, I mean? Whyah were yu?"

"I was there," said I, realizing for the first time that I had played a decidedly minor part in the affair, and one that she was not apt to appreciate. "I was there—on my horse."

She gave me a glance. "And yu let him do it all alone? I am wild to see him. I will wait hyah—or on the porch, hadn't I bettah?"

I said, "Yes, on the porch, I think. I will go now, or he will have had breakfast, and escape us both. You do not want to meet him, do you?"

"Meet him?"

"Yes,—an introduction."

"I?—the idea!" Her eyes flashed.

"I'll wager you do when you see him," I declared.

And then I left her to go in search of Red, and to bring him, if possible, to where Miss Birch could see him, and not be seen. I found him saddling up. I assisted him.

"Whose house did yu say this is?" he asked without interest. "Who is livin' here?"

"Don't you know?" I asked joyfully.

"Reckon I don't."

"It is Halloway's."

He shook his head.

"Halloway," I repeated, "the new-comer."

"Sure enough?" Interest shone in his eye. "And the schoolma'am, sure enough now?"

His gaze swept the premises in one rapid, com-

prehensive glance, until it rested on the upper story of the house, visible above intervening shrubbery, where it stopped and staid.

"She—Miss Hollaway is a friend of mine," I said. "I mean they are all old friends. I did not know it until I got here."

"And yu are workin'—stayin'—livin' here?" There was mild surprise in his tone.

"All three," I responded.

"Yu are in luck," he said, and his tone was crisp.

"I am, indeed," I replied, and then added, "You understand, Red, how I—well, you know, I don't like to think of how you—you fellows at the Greyhound——"

"Best nevah let your mind dwell on what yu happen to heah at the Greyhound," he replied, busy with a cinch, and then straightening up. "But there won't be any new material added, if that is what yu are gettin' at."

That was what I was getting at, and I thanked him. He resumed his work, and I thought that he had lost interest, and I was busy trying to devise some plan, when he abruptly stepped close to me, and in a low tone asked:

"Is she—was Morton stringin' us on her looks?" His eye was eager.

"I did not hear Morton's words, but Miss Hallaway is quite beyond his descriptive powers," I said loyally. "If you——"

But he did not let me finish. "Reckon I'll get a look foah myself this mawnin'?" he asked, with a boyish grin. "Reckon she'll be nosin' out this early?"

"She would if she knew what a dashing sight awaited her," I declared.

He walked at once to his prisoner and began a careful rearrangement of the rope. I wondered if my compliment had offended him. If I had—but surely not. I stood watching him, and when he had finished he came with swift strides to my side.

“Yu just guide my faulterin’ feetsteps,” he said, grinning, and gazing at the house.

I stood perplexed. If I only could think of some pretext—of something to show to him.

He stood waiting, and in the interval hitched up his chaps and felt of the knot in the handkerchief at his throat. I looked at him and laughed.

“Red,” said I, “you are a kid.”

“I’m man size, seh,” he answered soberly; “hat seven and a quartah and boot eight and a half.”

“But you don’t look a bit like she is expecting you to look,” I replied unguardedly.

“I—is she——”

“No, no! But she has never seen one.”

He regarded me calmly. “Yu make me a-most bashful,” he drawled. Then added: “So she’s got exaggerated notions about us wild cowboys? Well, now, if I had of knowed—but,” with a sly nod toward his prisoner, “the two of us will make a fair specimint, eh?”

I laughed and he moved to his horse and mounted with a boyish bound.

“Let’s move out where we can get fair aim,” said he.

I shook my head. Then I had a thought—almost an inspiration.

“You will want to see the Colonel,” I cried. “You will want to thank Col. Halloway before you go.”

“Yu are dead right,” he replied gravely. “I was

right near to forgettin' my raisin'. His niggers has treated me white, all right."

"Come on, then," I cried joyfully, and led the way to the front gate. I left Red and his captive there, while I went in search of the Colonel. Birch was standing just inside the door. Her eyes, when they met mine, were black diamonds.

"He is handsome!—how could yu tell em that he was dreadful?" She caught my arm and held it in her excitement.

"A man does not——" I began, but she bounded ahead of me, stopping both my steps and my words. Col. Halloway had entered the hall, and she led him to the door.

"Look, fathah,—out thyah! A cowboy! See? Isn't he handsome? Oo-oo, he has spuahs!"

Col. Halloway looked at Red, then at his prisoner. He cleared his throat and regarded his daughter with keen eye.

"He—the young man wishes to thank you, Colonel," I said quickly, "for your hospitality."

"Ah! The Colonel reached for his hat. "I scarcely expected—yes." He went out.

"I am going with fathah," said Birch, with both hands busy adjusting hairpins. "I may—it will be all right. I must see—I mean—are yu coming?"

"We will go out on the porch, then." I was so surprised at her manner that I was near remonstrating with her for doing what I wished her to do.

"The porch?—yes." She tied a scarf of silvery gauze over her hair, for what purpose I know not—she ordinarily went about with nothing at all on her head. But the scarf, over her dark hair, blazed in unison with her eyes, and made her look like

some Oriental princess in whom coquetry vied with imperial dignity.

At the steps leading down from the porch we paused. I saw Red lift his eyes, and felt a thrill go over the girl, whose arm I had taken to arrest her steps.

She gave me a glance—it was like a sudden flash from a fierce hot furnace. She drew her arm free.

“The porch will not do,” she said, in an excited undertone. “I must go closer. I want to see—to see—I want to see his prisoner.”

Poor Birch, she was almost beside herself in her desire to see “the prisoner.” I let her go—I well knew that I could do nothing else. And she descended the steps and walked, with all the grace of royalty, to her father’s side.

I followed, and saw a pulse of triumph shoot across Red’s face, and leave in its wake a flush of deep crimson. I saw his chest heave as he drew breath, but he did not take his gaze from the girl—he seemed to ravish in her beauty and sweetness; while she, half-concealed by her father’s form, looked at the cow-puncher, dropped her gaze, clasped her hands, and bravely looked again.

Red sat in his saddle, holding himself as rigid as a statue. I never saw him look more irresistibly handsome; he had added no makeshift, as the girl had for the occasion, but the power of his untarnished manhood was around him like a halo. His words to the Colonel were few now, and tardy, and his eyes held to the girl’s face as though his gaze was eternally fixed by a sculptor. Therefore, to help him out, I gave my attention to Col. Halloway, and made known to him a sudden desire to accom-

pany Red to the Station, who, I informed the Colonel, had similarly befriended me on the trip up from Herrington. He assented readily, asserting that it was "Just the thing to do, boy; just the thing."

I passed delighted word to Red, and ran and fetched my horse. When I rejoined Red, the Colonel had gone into the house and his daughter had gone with him. Of what was said during my absence I learned very little—that little was spoken by Red when we were about an hour on our way to the Station. He broke the silence that had held us, abruptly with these words:

"I spoke to her—and she answered me back."

"I could not introduce you," said I, making unnecessary excuse. "I do not know your name."

"Red is good enough foah me," he stated positively. "If folks don't like me as Red they'd nevah as Mistah Somebody."

"I think," I ventured slyly, "that 'they' liked you without even the 'Red.'"

He grinned at me. "I've seen girls here and there—some of them purty and some not; some of them fair, and some like—no, none like——"

He drew a deep breath as he paused, and raised his face full to the bright morning sun. When he resumed speaking it was upon another subject.

"I told yu yesterday that I have done things I ain't proud of, and that's straight. And then again, I have done some things I ain't ashamed of by a mile. But my folks—if they knowed I had been to Halloway's this a-way"—he looked down at his gun, chaps and spurs—"dressed like this, they'd be plumb ashamed of me. They don't like the way I

dress, or the way I act; the way I talk don't suit them, or the things I say. They commenced takin' exceptions to me as soon as I got big enough to comb my own hair, and them exceptions kept increasin' until they got so numerous around ouah house that I was just naturally crowded out of it." He paused and looked at me speculatively. "Maybe your mothah and sistah took them exceptions to you oncet—likely they didn't. Maybe you love your mothah moah to-day than I do, but I reckon yu don't."

"Possibly not," I said. "The love of a child for a mother—it takes a calamity to make us know the depth of it."

"That's correct." He made a wide motion with a hand. "I love my mothah more than anything—why, I'd give up all my hopes if it would do heah any good foah me to. But foah listening all day to a string of corrections—foah readin' all evenin' of the things dead men did and tryin' to look like my grandfathah's picture,—well, I ain't that kind."

"This life I am leadin' of ain't makin' a polished gentleman out of me—I know that," he resumed after a pause, during which he took a hitch in Logan's rope. "But folks about here will tell yu that I am a good cowboy, and I have got the qualifications to back up that statement. I ain't pretendin' to be something I ain't. I ain't beginnin' on a wornout foundation. No, seh. I'm beginnin' down on solid rock, and I'm goin' up."

There was another pause—a long one, during which our horses shuffled on, stirring the dust till it hung like a thick fog about our boots. The rope on Logan's horse grew tighter and tighter, dragging

back on Red's saddle. "Spur up a bit, Zant," he called back, and then immediately resumed his talk.

"I go home now and then," he said unconcernedly, "and every time I go I get them corrections. I get told how low, vulgah and contemptible I am, and how all my friends are villains, cut-throats and worse savages. I get told how I have disgraced and humiliated my family, until—well, I don't go very often," he finished sadly.

The horses shuffled on, the dust began to stick to our sweaty faces, and the rope on Logan's horse was taut as a fiddle string. This time Red turned in his saddle and spoke sharply to his prisoner. "Cayn't yu spur up there? What's the use of laggin' back?"

"Maybe I don't see things right. Maybe I ain't old enough yet to get the right perspective on life. But take the case of a boy I knowed oncet. He had a good home—a fine home. He had a sistah oldah than him—three years oldah. She was trainin' up to be a mothah, playin' with dolls and doin' things about the house. He was trainin' up to be a man, doin' things outside, buildin' things with whatever material he could pick up. Well, what he made was trash and was used for kindlin'—what she made was cute and purty, and was showed to callers. Was that right? She had young friends come to see her, and she entertained them in the parlor with cakes and candy; boys came to see him, too, but he had to take the 'young ruffians' to the baahn, with nevah a cooky. What about that? And, as the fambly grew, he was crowded into the attic to sleep, and all his 'trash' was heaved up there aftah him,—nobody made his bed. She was given

the best room in the house. Nothin' he did was right; everything she did was lovely. He was given the poorest piece of the roast at table—if anything ran out, he missed his helpin'. He was scolded if he did not come in early of evenin's; if he did come early he was nagged at and finally sent to bed in disgrace." Red paused and smiled at me. "Maybe yu don't see what I'm gettin' at. But see here—humanity craves liberty and equality. Look at this great country of ouahs! What is denied a child is what that child craves, and will have, unless his mind is put on something else. When I was told not to say 'knowed' foah 'knew,' I tried hard to remembah not to say it wrong. But when it was harped into my ears constantly that I always said 'knowed,' then I did say it, and I say it yet. My language fits my calling—I'm a cowboy, and I talk like one. Some day I will be a gentleman, and then, I hope, I will speak like a gentleman. But this is what I want to tell yu now. If evah I have the bringin' up of a son, he will have what he needs and *have it right in my house*. Nothin' in there will be too good foah him—his ways won't be too rough foah me."

"You have the right idea," I said. "I have noticed cases like——"

Red gave me a glance. His eyes were blazing. I noticed that Logan was lagging heavily on the rope. Red rode around behind him. "Yu'll go ahead now," he said, and drove Logan's horse up the trail.

"Yu can take the dust, then," said Logan, with a sneer.

"I will, seh."

Thus we rode on to the Station, under a baking sun. Sometimes we talked of our boyhood days, more often we were silent. It was a hard day for all. Our horses were tired and the heat and dust almost intolerable. But at dusk we were near enough to the Station to see the light shining from the door of the Greyhound. As we neared the place Red said:

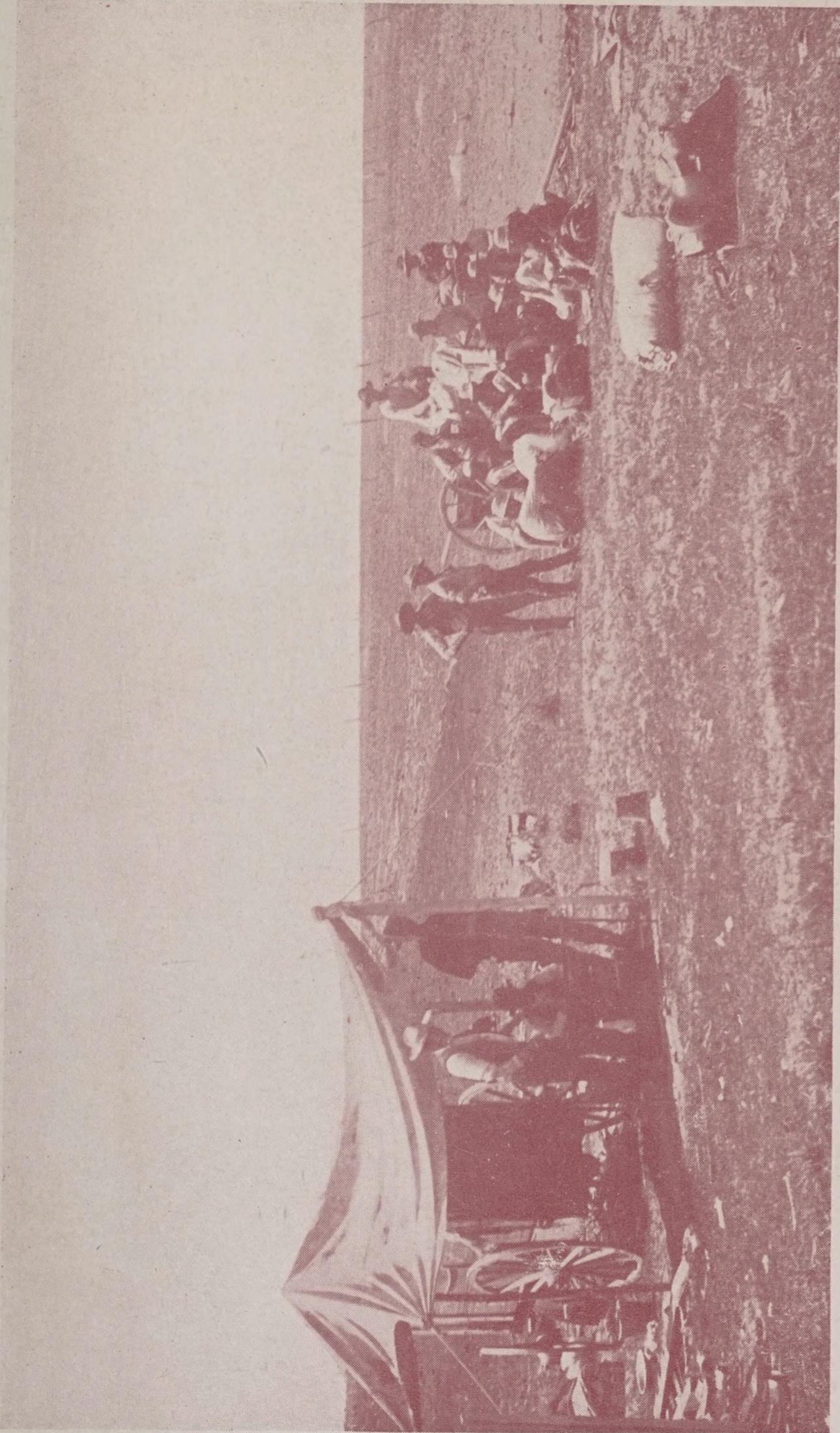
“One funny thing I’ll tell yu now—I wouldn’t have my mothah a bit different than she is. She hates all this—guns, cattle and the killin’ of men—she hates it all! And so do I. But it ain’t what I like that is foah me—never has been. It’s what I can to make some money. And so to-night——”

He took his revolver and examined it carefully, then placed it in the front of his shirt. Likewise, he inspected the weapon which he had taken from Logan, and placed it in the holster at his belt. Then, riding close to Logan, he struck his horse a sharp cut of the whip, and bending low in our saddles we passed like fleeing shadows into town.

CHAPTER VII.

AT THE GREYHOUND.

Inside of the Greyhound saloon hilarity reigned. Hawkins was there, round, friendly Dock, Reynolds and Darling, but I looked in vain for Morton. There were more cowboys in than had been at my former visit, and they seemed of a different class—more on the desperado order. I learned that they were from the Llano Estacado—mostly from a



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ranch where the proprietor thoughtfully paid his men in advance, so they could have the use of their money—*they might not be there at the end of the month!*

“The ownah of R2 is that just a man that he won’t be owin’ no dead man money,” said my informant.

“Yes, but a man might go and hire, and then pull out,” said I, thinking I was showing great penetration.

“He might,” said the man knowingly, “but he nevah would feel right safe again in the State of Texas.”

So I pu R2 down in my mind as one of the really bad places, and went on into the card room. It was filled to its utmost capacity with cowboys, and sprinkled among them were Spaniards from the border country and from the Llano Estacado. They were not playing cards. Already a whisper had passed around that a cowboy had come in with a man bound in ropes. They wanted to see this cowboy and to hear his story of the fight and capture; they bore me with them back to the bar-room. As I went I heard Red’s voice.

He was telling his story—telling it to Dock. And he was proud in the telling. He had said to me that he was a good cowboy, and at this new evidence of worth, his voice rang with conscious pride. Ashamed he might be of the wild life he led, and well aware that he was not training himself in the way to grace a lady’s bower. But of his success he was not ashamed. And as his audience increased, which it did rapidly, he raised his voice, that all might hear of his achievement. As he told of his

search for the true trail of the cattle, his questioning of the Indians, his stealthy uncovering of the tracks along the river, and his final discovery of Chad's horse on the island, his face glowed and his body swayed as if he lived the scenes over again; his tone swelled, or was subdued almost to a whisper. No trained actor could have told the story better than did this untutored boy of the plains tell it to his audience of cowboys, ranchers and Spaniards. He swayed me, he stirred my blood, he had me breathless while he hunted; he held me fascinated with his victory—I could scarcely control my enthusiasm. But in the others he stirred no blood. They listened unconcernedly and let him finish without question.

I was surprised. The recital was eloquent enough, even if it had been fiction, to have aroused to action these fiery Texans, I thought. That they could listen to it and remain as stoically silent as so many Indian braves was revelation to me. But this is a truth which I unearthed that night, and I give it to you as an unpolished gem. It is the over-civilized that are excitable of temper and indiscreet of act; the man of the frontier is deliberate, cautious, viewing all sides before he moves. Perhaps Red knew this. Perhaps he preferred that they ask for what they cared to know further. At any rate, he stopped short at the finding of the horse. And I, fearing that their lack of appreciation of his work had hurt him into silence, thought to enlighten the crowd. But he stopped me with a look. And again, after a few remarks about the weather, feed, and the lack of rain had been passed, I started out to tell of the capture of Logan, but

was silenced by a quick glance from Red, and a half turn of the head. I gave up and held my peace. While I was holding it, Morton came in.

The news of the capture of Logan was told him before he entered, for he was very red of face and all of a fluster when I saw him. He took no notice of Red, and spoke no open word at once, but called man after man aside and told him, in a lot of breath and many gestures, that it was all a mistake—a big, rotten mistake. Red was in his employ, when this fool notion took him, but the young fool had not said a word about it—not a word!—he hadn't seen the red-headed idiot, in fact. Of course, there wasn't a thing to it!—not a thing, b' gin! And now you call some of the boys aside and tell 'em I told you so, and we'll end this little show right here!—we'll stop it right to-night!

And so Morton went his rounds. Each listened respectfully to him until he came to Hawkins. They clashed at once. Hawkins took his stand "for the sake of argument, Major," at first. But later, and most oratorically put, "for the sake of law and right, and the rising generation."

Morton, suave and tactful for a time, held his temper. "That's all right, Hawkins," he made a deep courtesy, "that's all right, my dear sir. You think just as you please about the rising generation. But this is my business—*my business*, mark you! This young jackass is in my employ. See? He is my cowboy—my man—supposed to be acting under my orders. See? But did he? Did he, Hawkins? You know that he didn't. And now I repudiate—yes, repudiate is the word, Mr. Hawkins,—I repudiate everything he's done. Every word he says!"

"No, you don't repudiate anything!" roared Hawkins, drawing back from Morton. "You can't. It ain't your affair. It's the affair of this neighborhood. It's mine. It's Darling's. It's everybody's. And what does everybody say about it? What does everybody want done?"

"Everybody?" Morton roared his disgust. "Why, b' gin, Hawkins, this ain't anybody's business but mine. It's my affair, man. One of my hands started out and did a lot of dirt to friends of mine. Shouldn't I make it right? I should, and I do! Nobody else has got a thing to say about it, either."

Hawkins leaned forward and stretched his long neck outward and downward until his nose was quite into Morton's face. He said:

"I've got something to say, Major. I've got something to say. I lost twenty head of steers three months ago. I haven't forgotten, Major. I've got something to say."

Morton stepped back, purple with rage, his whole huge being moving as he breathed. Hawkins looked him over, as if he were some loathsome object beneath his contempt, and then turned and walked up and down the clear space in the room, still with his neck craned outward and downward, still with a look of peering insolence in his eyes. To my surprise, no one spoke to him, or to Morton. Whether anything affecting final judgment in the matter in hand was being determined by the struggle going on on the floor or not, I cannot say. Certainly the crowd did not show by word or act which side it championed. Reynolds stood, half-leaning against the bar, a faint smile twitching at the corner of his

mouth, as his gaze traveled from Hawkins to Morton, and back again to Hawkins. Dock was beside Reynolds. Ed was near them, and all open-mouthed at the prospect of a fight. The others looked on with more or less unconcern. While, apparently oblivious to them all, Red stood near the door, whittling idly, and glancing, every now and then, outside to where the horses were, and where now and again a late arrival rode in with loud "Whoas!" and much tramping of hoofs. Hawkins paused in his walk and gazed on the crowd. Then, stepping close to Morton again, he said sneeringly:

"Yu can track a wolf right up to the dung pile at the door of his den, and yu can say that he don't live there—that a gopher lives there, or a rabbit. But I can say that Mr. Wolf does live there, and—Ain't I right, men? Ain't I right?"

There was no response to this appeal beyond a few nods, and they expressed nothing. Whatever was needed to move this throng of impassive humanity was not yet apparent. But it came soon enough—quite soon enough for me.

Morton glared at Hawkins for a moment, and then exploded. "B' gin, Hawkins, you and me are old friends, but b' gin, you go too far! I can 'tend to my own business, I can, and I do, gentlemen." He arose on his toes, gesticulated comically with one fat arm. "I can 'tend to my own business, gentlemen." And he gazed around as he began to fumble blindly into the pocket of his bag-like trousers.

Hawkins gave a shrug of contempt as he watched Morton in his search. Reynolds came forward,

and Dock crossed the room, taking a position near Red, to whom he spoke a low word. The cow-puncher's expression did not change.

Morton, after more fumbling and much emptying of pockets, now produced a gold piece. Holding it in his palm for all to see, he crossed the room to Red, treading heavily, importantly.

"Here!" He tapped Red's shoulder, although the cow-puncher was looking straight at him. "Here, how much do I owe you, young man?"

"Yu owe me foah thirteen days' work—seventeen dollahs and fifty cents, seh."

Morton drew a deep breath and swelled out his cheeks, as he fumbled in his pockets again. "Humum-hum," he counted the change. "Here, ten—fifteen—seventeen, and fifty cents. And you are discharged! You hear me, discharged!"

"Yes, seh," said Red, pocketing the money. Then calmly presenting his back to Morton, he gazed out at the door.

"Well, release this man! Take your rope off Logan, here."

Red turned slowly round. "I'm not takin' awders from yu now, seh. I am no longah in your employ, seh."

A chuckle passed over the crowd, followed by a murmur of talk. There was a movement among the cowboys from the Llano Estacado—a crowding nearer and craning of necks to see Red.

Morton's face purpled with rage. "Why, b'——" He raised himself on his toes and settled back ineffectually, raised himself again, and again settled back, seeming unable to utter more than that "Well, b'——."

Dock put a steadying hand on his neighbor's shoulder. "Calm yourself, Morton," he said kindly, "or by jinks, you'll bust!"

At once the chuckle swelled into a laugh. Everybody laughed uproariously, but stopped short—Morton had recovered his voice.

"Well, b' gin, you will turn him loose," he roared at Red, "or I'll cut your damned rope—I'll cut—cut——"

Red's revolver was out and his piercing eye looked straight along the barrel to Morton's temple.

"Don't yu touch that man, seh!—or that rope, seh!"

Morton settled back blinking, a hand on either side of his heaving chest. There was a sound in the room—a letting out of much suspended breath. Then a big cow-puncher—one from the Llano Estacado—edged his way out of the crowd, and crossed the room, with much scraping of spurs, to Red's side. His hand was laid suggestively on his revolver.

Dock's face was beaming, as he turned and touched Red's arm. "Put up your gun, Red," he said. "We are all with you, you see, so put up your gun, boy."

Red lowered his revolver. Someone took Morton out in the air. He was the subject of the talk of those remaining. But above their words and laughter I could hear Red speaking to Dock and Reynolds. Soon all were listening.

"I've told yu of the tracks I follo'ed, and of the things I seen on Skunk Island,—and I have told that same to the sheriff of this here country. He will be here soon. And him, and yu alls, can do as

the law directs about the stealin' of cattle and about the makin' of whiskey—I gave in all I know about both of them offences, and I ain't no more interested in the outcome than any man here. But this fello'—this Logan, him and me have got a little mattah to settle between ouahselves."

A deep hush had fallen. It was broken by Dock, who tugged at Red's sleeve and asked:

"What—what is it, Red? What has he done to you?"

Red started to speak, but his words were drowned.

"The sheriff! He has called the sheriff!"

Hawkins, towering above the others, emitted these words, as an over-full tea kettle spouts out jets of water as it boils.

"My God! Do us fellers need a sheriff?" Hawkins asked. "Can't we all hang a cattle thief as well as a sheriff? Do yu hear this, Reynolds? We know who the thief is, boys. We know where he sleep o' nights. Do we need a sheriff to catch him for us? I say, Reynolds, do we all need a sheriff?"

Hawkins had the floor again, and as he strode up and down, motioning with a long arm above men's heads, his gaunt body seemed fairly to writhe in the disgrace he felt—the imputed weakness of his manhood—that the sheriff need be called to redress his wrongs. His voice, husky at first, and hoarse as the growl of a beast, rose clear and sharp-edged as he resumed:

"No, b' thunder, we don't need no sheriff. We are a lot of easy-goin' farmers, but we don't need no sheriff. We know how to tie a noose—I say, some of us knows how—some of us, boys."

Hawkins paused to let those words sink in. Then facing about, with a movement sudden and determined, he beat a palm with a fist and continued:

“We can take care of our own cattle thieves—we are men enough to do it. We know, now, who it is that’s been skulkin’ around our herds, seein’ how many fat yearlings we had, and where they was bedded at night. We know now who has been a-smilin’ in our faces, and eatin’ at our tables—yes, eatin’ at our tables, by thunder!—eatin’ at our tables, and layin’ plans as they chewed our grub, to rob us the same night. We know who has been dancin’ with our wives, and a-smilin’ over their shoulders at us easy dupes—a-smilin’ and a-dancin’ and a-eatin’ our grub, and all the time with their fingers into our wallets—in our wallets, by thunder! And we know them now, we know who they are now, boys. Do we need any sheriff?”

He had answer this time—a chorus of curses. Men crowded to get near him. They began to mutter and talk. Red took in the significance of this at a glance, and a look of alarm crossed his face. He had been playing for time all along—I understood that now, and understood, too, why he had kept back a part of his story—he did not want to inflame the coals of hate which he knew were smouldering in the breast of each man there. But he had miscalculated the effect of the news of the sheriff’s coming—its effect on Hawkins, at least. For Hawkins would not stop now until he had stirred the men up to the point of murder, and Red knew it. Therefore he stepped out and began, imperatively, to speak.

“There is two sides to every case,” he said. “Yu

fellers here knows that, so then there is two sides to this here thing. I found them tracks, and I found the hawss that made them. I found that that hawss belongs to the boss of the Skunk Island gang—belongs to Chad——”

“Oh, God!” These words came like a groan from the floor. Logan had sunk down in a heap, and seemed trying to hide his face under his arm, since he could not cover it with his hand. “Chad is done for,” he moaned, “he is done for!—and all because I bungled my job!—all because I didn’t do my work thorough. Chad always was cussin’ me because I didn’t do my work thorough—oh, God!—God a’mighty——”

He ran on, but the exclamations of the crowd drowned his words. “What does he say?” they asked. “What job did he bungle? Chad cussed him, he said. Well——”

Red bent over Logan. He spoke a word to him. I heard it—a low, commanding “Shut up!” Then, stepping in front of his prisoner, he raised a hand for silence, and resumed speaking.

“Yu see, now, fello’s, that what I found ain’t direct evidence, no, it ain’t. If I had found Chad Harris red-handed, with the goods—that there would have been direct evidence—we could go with Mr. Hawkins then, and hang the gang to the cottonwoods. But, men, I didn’t. I just found tracks—hawss tracks—Chad Harris’s hawss tracks. And though it looks bad, and sounds bad to tell, it don’t prove that he stol’d the cattle—no, fello’s, it don’t prove it. So that is why I took the thing to the sheriff, for now it can be worked up according to law. Them fello’s will have a chancet to prove

they ain't guilty, and we will have a chancet to prove they are; if we can't prove it, then we'll be glad we didn't hang innocent men."

The crowd began to grind before he ceased speaking. Excitement, now that it had gained supremacy, burned at fever heat. Every man was anxious to hear what every other man was saying—he was anxious himself to talk.

"The boy is right. He ain't got direct evidence! Go to bed! He's got it plain as day. Did you hear what Logan said? That cooked me. What did Chad ride in the water for—tell me that? And them was redskins. But, man, Logan said he bungled his job! What job? We don't need no sheriff! The boy knows more than he's told. I say that, too! Red? He's afeared he'll be hanted!—Haunted—git! That evidence is enough to hang fifty men! Sh-s!—I say—sh!"

"Let me talk, fellers! Let me talk!" cried Logan, stumbling, half-falling in their midst, his face ashen gray under the light, and streaked with sweat. "It's all my fault, I tell you. I bungled my job. Chad ain't done a thing that wasn't square by you all. He rode up to Signal Mountain to unload some whiskey on the Chickasaws. That's straight! I ain't lyin'—I ain't got no time to lie! I've got to save Chad and the boys! You fellers are all off about Chad—he thought it was the whiskey business that brought Red to the island. We knowed he had jumped his job with Morton and was spyin' on us. Chad figured that some cutter had employed him. And he sent me out after him—after Red—told me that if he crossed the Black Prairie to do for him!—but I bungled my job! That's the whole

trouble. I bungled my job—and Chad trusted me! But see! I am telling you all the truth! Chad ain't done nothin'—nothin' but make whiskey, and you knowed he did that. He was North sellin'—that's all. I'm tellin' everything—everything I know——”

“Chris told me that Chad had been through the settlements looking for corn,” said Red, unable to resist the temptation to expose this falsehood.

“He—Chris didn't—oh, you——” And bound and hobbled as he was, Logan made a dash at Red.

But a dozen men were on him. They bore him to the floor, while they shouted curses and threats which merged finally into that voiced by Reynolds:

“We'll string you up! By Jack, we will string you up if you don't confess the whole thing!—and we'll do it right now! There! Hands off of him now. Let him talk, boys.”

“I—I—fellers, give me a chance. I've told you all God's truth. I tried to do for Red. I told him that the bridge was on-safe. And so he rode into the river—the ripple out there showed him plain for all the night was dark as hell. And I took good aim—I thought I was steady—that I took good aim—I thought I did for him. See! I don't deny nothin'. You fellers do what you want to for me. But Chad and the boys—you are off about——”

“Oh, stop your rubbish! Give us the truth!” Reynolds growled like a bulldog in Logan's ear. “Give us the truth now, quick!—the cattle stealing quick! or out you go!”

Logan seemed to collapse then. His voice was weak and husky as he said, “You all can string me up as soon as you please. I've told all I know.”

“All right! Here, Red, he's your meat—you can slip the noose. Here—somebody——”

Reynolds was eager to the point of frenzy. But everybody had not heard what Logan had said—they wanted to hear. They got their hands on him, they boosted him up and commanded him to talk. Others bore him down again. Hawkins clamored to get hold of his throat—he could shake the truth out of the cowardly cur! Dock was howling that he had shot at Red—had followed him—waylaid him—fired at him, and confessed the crime.

“Hang him!” he shouted. “Hang him! To the timber with him! Hang him, boys! Let him make his confession in hell!”

It was a wild scene—the wildest I ever witnessed, and the vision of it is before me as I write, so if I tell too much of what was said and done that night, you must skip it as you read. I must give just a little more: The ranchers and cowboys now crowded to the center of the room. They surged in and out, now shouting, now growling like a pack of wolves in a fight, while in their midst appeared and reappeared the white face of Logan. Red stood apart from it all, gazing on the struggle, yet always listening for the sound of hoofs without. Ed, still open-mouthed, had gone behind the bar, where he stood beside the bartender, who guffawed and motioned at regular intervals, like some huge automatic toy. And beyond all, drooping and helpless, laboring for breath, was Morton, staring owl-like from a gloom-shrouded corner.

Then, all at once, silence fell, like the sudden closing of the door of an engine room. So unexpected was it that all held their breath. What had happened? I craned my neck, and saw only Red. But he was at the center of the crowd now. He

laid a steadying hand on Logan. His voice was gentle when he spoke.

"Take ca-ah, fello's—let go, there, Mr. Hawkins. This here prisoner is in my ca-ah till the sheriff gets here, I reckon."

Several stepped back. Amazement bereft all of the power of speech. Others retained their hold on Logan.

"Stand back, fello's," said Red again. "I managed him alone on the prairie—I can here. I will take charge of him now."

"Take him to the timber, then," snarled Reynolds, stepping aside.

Red did not respond to this. He had freed his man, and now he put himself before him. Before they could grasp his meaning, he had him safe at the wall. Then Reynolds, divining his purpose, rushed forward. But Red's gun was out. Again his eye glared along the barrel straight into the eye of his adversary.

"Stop where yu are, Reynolds," he said.

"What! Why, don't you draw your gun on me!—No man can do—why——" roared Reynolds, and then stopped.

"This here is all foolishness," said Hawkins, pushing to the front. "He has confessed enough to hang ten men. This boy can't—why——"

But Hawkins stopped also. Something in Red's attitude—something in the steady glare of his eye checked him. And something in both caused him when he spoke to say:

"Why, man, he shot at yu!—yu know he did!—he says he did. What more do yu want? What more?"

"Yes, Red," said Dock, breaking in, "he shot at you! He tried his darndest to kill you!"

"That ain't no reason foah me to be killin' of him now," said Red. "He ain't armed now. He is bound hand and foot,—I ain't in no dangah now."

"Black heifers! What rot! What rot!" bawled Hawkins. "What are yu goin' to do, then? Lead him around all his days like he was a gentle, milk-givin' cow? Yu know that if he ever gets firearms again, he will kill yu. Want to be plugged? Want to feel hot lead under your hide? Or what the devil do yu want?"

"There is a law coverin' such a case as our'n, I reckon," said Red calmly.

"Law, hell! Well, the law will hang him, then! Where's the difference? I say the safest and quickest way. Come on, boys! One rush and we've got him! Red, yu can have his hide to stuff, if yu think so much of havin' a cattle thief around yu. Now—everybody co-o——"

He stopped, and the hand he had lifted to urge on the men fell to his side. There wasn't a sound in the room. Only Red's words, like the steady, slow-sounding of the gong of death:

"I don't want to hurt yu, Hawkins."

The men stood and stared at the one who could stand in the face of the master of the pack, and calmly utter these words—and do it for the life of a man who had tricked him, as he hoped, to his death. Then they looked at each other—some made a motion as though putting the thing away. Red spoke again:

"I don't want to hurt nobody," he said. "But I tell yu all that this here man won't hang to-night! —not to-night, fello's!"

"Well, of all the pig-headed, impudent—da———" Reynolds began, but Hawkins silenced him with:

"Logan ain't the only one, boys! There are others just his stripe, and we know who they are. We know they are just like he is. Yu have heard what he has confessed to—lyin', shootin', stealin'—all that a man can lay game to he's done. And the others are the same, boys—they are all one gang!"

Hawkins snatched up his hat as he spoke. His face was bloated with rage. Insatiate vengeance and a thirst for blood seemed to have possessed him wholly.

"To the island!" he cried, flinging out a long arm. "To Skunk Island, boys! There is enough of us to do the job. To the Skunk!"

Red lowered his gun. He had played his last card—made his last move in the game of delay, and the sheriff was not yet come. He glanced out at the door to where the late moon was casting long beams of light between struggling shadows. Then his gaze came back sorrowfully to Reynolds, to Dock, to Hawkins.

"I hoped yu all would wait till the sheriff got here," he said in a tone of deep disappointment, and to no one in particular. But they all heard him. Hawkins paused to sneer:

"Where's your sheriff?"

"Yes, chorused a dozen others. "Where's your sheriff? Where is he?"

"I've been expectin' him foah a right smart while," said Red, a deep flush of annoyance covering his face and neck.

"Yes," they sneered, "for the last three hours you have been telling us that he'd be here in a few minutes,—now, where is he?"

"He said he'd start in about an houah aftah me, seh. He'd ought to have been here ahead of me—I was detained some."

"Maybe he tried to cross on that on-safe bridge, Red," said Ed, making himself heard for the first time.

Hawkins swung around, and settled his hat preparatory to going out.

"The sheriff ain't coming," he said. "He ain't here—he has had plenty of time to get here—so he ain't coming. No use to wait for him any longer."

"He said he'd start in an houah, seh," said Red, doggedly, yet with a note of pleading in his voice.

"He said he would, but he didn't fellers," said Hawkins, business-like. "So we can't depend on him to come at all. Come on! To the Skunk, boys! The Skunk!"

Hawkins strode out, followed by the crowd. The big cow-puncher, who had championed Red earlier in the evening, now paused beside him.

"You had better chuck your prisoner and come along," he said. "If you say the word, I'll hang back for you."

"I'm right obliged," said Red, brightening. "I'd like right well to go ovah with the fello's—I might prevent things."

"Well, the bartender here will keep your man—not much ginger left in him, I reckon."

Red took a step forward, but the bartender had heard and was already expressing his willingness. Red spoke a word to him, and hurried out.

CHAPTER VIII.

SKUNK ISLAND.

The river ran silent and black, save for a few patches of silvery brightness, where the moon, low in the sky and in its last quarter, sent its beams between cottonwoods or willows. In one of those patches of light Skunk Island lay, still, dark and dense. The array of ranchers, cowboys and settlers had now resolved itself into a sort of posse, with Hawkins as leader, Reynolds as his right lieutenant, and all the others as majors and colonels, including Morton, who, recovered now from the heat of his anger, was about to succumb to the severe jolting the fast ride had given him, and was coughing and wheezing as he cursed the whole body and enterprise. Red and the cow-puncher had ridden side by side, and now at the water's edge they drew rein a little apart from the others. Red sat silent, gazing at the rippling water surrounding the island.

"You have been over there right often, I take it," said the cow-puncher.

"Twice, seh," said Red, without turning his head.

"But you know the best place to land—farthest from the shacks, and all that?"

"Yes, seh."

"Ain't you goin' to tell them?—or do they know?"

Red glanced at Hawkins and his aids, all gathered in whispered consultation in the shadow of cottonwoods.

"I reckon they all think they do, seh."

"Well," responded the cow-puncher, with a shrug of nasty meaning, "it would be easy business pickin' men off in that moon light, yonder."

"I was just figuring on that there same ide-e. I had some experience in moonlight on the watah, seh, that is right fresh in my mind."

"You dived, they said."

"Yes, seh, dived,—it's a thing a fello'ed rathah have to tell about than to anticipate." And Red rode forward to the edge of the posse.

"We've got to ride further down, boys," Hawkins was saying, in a loud whisper, "and then swim our horses around to the right—so as to land in the shadow. See?"

"But unless I've been lied to, their shacks are at that end," said a settler.

"Yu have probably been lied to," said Hawkins readily, but for all his glibness he was plainly at loss how to proceed.

"We ain't makin' much better time than the sheriff," said Ed, with a smothered giggle.

"Shut up, can't you!" said Reynolds, in an impatient undertone. And Hawkins took it up.

"Yes, keep still! What did yu come along for—anyhow?"

"Oh, let's quietly swim right up to this end of the island," said one of the colonels. "We can go still,—they won't be watchin' at this hour of the night."

"They will be watchin', too," said Reynolds. "Chad had his suspicions aroused, or he'd never have sent Logan out. And Logan's not back yet—you bet they'll be watchin'."

"I think yu are right, seh," said Red.

"What! Yu here?" Hawkins growled, but was unable, even with gruffness, to conceal his pleasure.

"Yes, seh,—and if yu will listen to me, seh, I'll tell yu that the sand bar at this end is the only safe landin' on the island, seh."

"Oh, thunder! I can land my horse anywhere."

"Yes, seh, I reckon yu can do as yu say, seh. But yu'd likely make considerable noise doin' it,—a flounderin' hawss ain't over-careful of the splash he makes."

Hawkins cursed for a full minute. Reynolds gave attention to Red. He tried to jolly him, saying:

"See here, Red, you can't talk us out of this thing, and you just as well shut up!" And in the silence this produced he said in an eager whisper: "Come on, boys, we're off!—we're off!—headed for this end of the old Skunk!"

"Don't do it, seh," cried Red, as the men began to move. "Don't go, fello's! It's death, that's all."

"What do you know about it?" growled a colonel.

"I know that yu all will land right in the midst of a score of desperate men—and with your guns wet——"

"Guns wet?"

"Yes, seh, your guns will be wet. Your hawsses ain't used to watah, and they'll duck every man of yu about twiced goin' ovah—mine did. And a wet gun is an oncommon poor weapon."

"Well," growled Reynolds, and everybody rode back to the cottonwoods. There was a long minute of silence. Then someone called out:

"Somebody say what to do."

Nobody replied. Ed was heard yawning. "I'm gettin' sleepy standin' here," he said.

And at once every man there was mad. He knew what to do, and he was going right now to do it. It looked like everyone was going forward single-handed and alone, when Red suddenly proposed a plan.

"Listen, fello's. We'll wait till——"

"Wait! Yes, that's all yu can think of," snarled Hawkins.

"We'll wait till that cloud yondah, comes——"

"Oh, hell! We was to wait for the sheriff! Now we're to wait for a cloud."

"Will yu oblige me, seh, and keep your mouth shut, seh," said Red, a strong accent of anger in his tone.

"I'll oblige the crowd by knocking the infernal head off'n yu, yu red-topped son-of——"

At this juncture one of the majors clapped a hand over Hawkins' mouth, effectually stopping his threat. By the time he had done cursing this man, Red held the attention of the others, and was saying:

"In a half-houah—or less time—that cloud will be ovah the moon. Then a couple of ouah best swimmers will cross to the far end of the island, where them fello's keep their freight boats—they'll sneak one. While they are gone, the rest of us will lay ouah plans, tie up the hawsses and get ready. We'll paddle ovah, as still as beavahs, and land,—if they let us—all dry and ready to fight."

"That's it!" cried a man who had opposed everything Red had said till now. "That's the termater! Now we're talkin' something like! Wake up, Ed!"

"Only the infernal cloud is going the other way," Hawkins growled.

"No such stuff," someone answered back. "It's comin' up, and lively, too. I'll bet there's rain in it."

"Well, we're neither sugar nor salt."

"Or nobody's honey," said Ed.

"Oh, the devil's kittens! Let's talk sense, or go home!"

"Sh! We're too loud, fellers!"

"That's right. Say, you bet that cloud's risin'," in a whisper.

"It beats waitin' for the sheriff, anyhow," growled Hawkins, watching the cloud.

"I told the bartender to send him right along, if he was to come," said Red.

"Well—dog my black heifers!" Hawkins exploded.

"Blast you, Red, if I thought you was keepin' us here waitin' for that sheriff, I'd throw you in the river," said Dock.

"He said he'd start in an houah, seh."

"When did I hear that before?"

"The sheriff is abed and asleep," said the big cow-puncher.

"I reckon yu are right, seh," said Red. For to tell the truth, he was more disgusted with the sheriff than any man there.

So the time passed. And these men, all of whom expected soon to be close to death—some of them certainly corpses—whispered, cursed and laughed, careless of the consequences. Then the cloud passed like a heavy blanket over the moon. Two swimmers made off noiselessly. The horses were led away and tied, and one by one the men came back to learn the plan of attack. Hawkins was leader, and

every man was willing to the point of eagerness to do the task assigned to him, even to Morton, who, amid much suppressed laughter, was given the task of testing the whiskey.

But when the boat grated on the sand, all were serious. By the time mid-stream was reached, every man had taken stock of his courage and found it sufficient. Every revolver was cocked. And all were silent, gazing intently on the fringe of trees that bordered the island, listening, breathing quick. The boat touched the sand bar. There was a light splash, then several. Hawkins, followed by his men, sprang ashore, counting wet feet as nothing beside a moment's loss of time. The wind was tossing the taller trees and moaning among their branches, when the men, noiseless as Indians, darted in among them.

The fight, like all where there is no alternative save victory, was short. The watch was found by miracle or inspiration—he was surrounded and captured. But all their hands gripping at his throat were not sufficient to keep back one shrill, broken, "Hell's lo—loose!"

He was given over to those delegated to throttle and bind captives. And then—but who could describe the hand-to-hand conflict that ensued there in the blackness?—a tempest howling!—a darkness rendered yet more dark by occasional burning tongues of lightning!—all in a small world, full of shots, curses, groans and growling thunder!

When it was over, and the men dared to move and speak, it was found that the cowboys did the most of the work. One settler was dead, and one Islander; Hawkins had lost a finger by grasping a

revolver that was being discharged in his face; Dock admitted finally that he had a bullet in his thigh; Ed could not be found.

"My God, fellers, I'm drownding," gasped a captive from the ground. And they realized then that the rain was pouring down in torrents, and that they were standing in water inches deep.

Lanterns were hastily brought from the shack and the captives carried to shelter, one by one. When they carried Chad Harris in, he was raving like a fiend. It was found that he was blinded by powder burns, both arms were shattered by bullets, and one leg was broken.

Yet in his rage he suffered no pain. The men laid him down, looked at each other, and without a word took him up again. A rope was called for and heavy feet splashed in the water outside. In a few minutes the men returned and stood about in the shack. The gaze of every captive was upon them from the floor.

"Chad warn't the feller to die whole," said one, in answer to this wordless inquiry.

"Then yu alls did——" The voice of the captive broke there.

"Ya-ah, had to to save his life."

"No use lettin' him lay and suffer till mornin'."

"No use at all."

There was a long minute of awkward silence, while the rain poured upon the roof in wave-like torrents. Then——

"Sh! Hark! Halt!"

Several sprang to the door with ready revolvers. There was the distinct sound of a step outside.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Ed? Well, come in. You'll get wet," said Reynolds.

And Ed came in, all white and dripping, and sank down in a corner with an audible groan. They mercifully ignored him.

There was another, longer pause. Then, on the heels of a deafening crash of thunder, someone said:

"What a night! What a ~~rain~~! I never seen the like before in Texas."

"The sheriff will hardly come over, will he, Red?" Reynolds asked.

Red looked up. His face was weary and his eyes red with loss of sleep. But he spoke hopefully. "I hope so, seh." They all smiled.

"It is a hell of a night, all right," said another man. "But I have seen as bad. Why, oncet in——"

And so the restraint wore off. Everyone had a storm-story to tell, till finally the rain ceased as abruptly as it began, and only the dripping of the eaves remained. Hawkins sneezed.

"This wetting is sure to give me a deuce of a cold," he growled, blowing his nose as if it were a trumpet.

"We all ought to have some whiskey," said a colonel.

"That's right! Let's look around and find some."

Several departed toward the still, slipping in the mud and swearing good-humoredly as they followed a man with a lantern. They came back in a few minutes, with long faces and much doleful shaking of heads. They had found nothing, and consequently were quite consumed with a desire for whiskey.

"There is sure to be some around here," said one, pretending to shiver.

"Where is the whiskey, Chris?" another asked of that prostrate moonshiner.

"Yes, Chris, you tell us where it is, and we'll give you a drink. You ought to have it, too. We'll give all of you fellers a drink."

This man fairly beamed with his happy idea.

But Chris only growled in answer to the generous offer.

"Well, suit yourself," said Reynolds. "We'll find it, anyway—as soon as daylight comes."

"Sure," said everyone.

"Yu as well give us the location of it now, and get a pull at it yourself—all of yu."

Another chorus of "Sure!" and "Just as well, Chris!"

"I'll take you to it," said Chris.

"No, yu won't, either," said Hawkins, and shook his head sagely. "No, none of that game, boys."

"Course not,—he just as well tell."

"Come, Chris, tell us what direction it is. In a cave, is it?"

But Chris remained sullenly silent. The men's thirst increased rapidly, and a feeling of chilliness caused general alarm; one felt a twinge of rheumatism, another had a neuralgia pain. They tried the other captives, one by one, but failing to get even a word, came back again to Chris.

"Is there any year-old here?" one inquired.

"About a barrel," said Chris.

"Think of that, fellers!—a barrel, he says, and us too dry to spit."

"And another barrel of two-year-old," said Chris.

"Two-year-old Bourbon! Chris says there is two-year-old Bourbon, boys,—a barrel of it."

One man audibly smacked his lips. "The cutters will get it, Chris, if you all don't let us have it."

"I'll take you to it," he repeated.

The men looked at Hawkins. "Why not? He can't get away."

"We-ell, just his legs, boys, just free his feet. And—lash his hands to his sides. Yes, all right."

They boosted Chris up.

"There! No-ow, will your legs hold you, Chris? All right. Come on, boys."

They went out, all of them except Red, and Ed, whom the talk of whiskey had revived sufficiently for him to leave his corner, but not yet enough that he dared venture in the dark. Red went to the door. Ed clutched his sleeve.

"Did they hang Chad?" he asked, in an awed whisper. "Is he hangin' out there, all wet and—and dead?"

"I reckon so, Ed."

"Crickey!" said Ed, his teeth beginning to chatter. Then bravely, "I hope they get that whiskey—I feel a chill comin' on."

Red looked steadily at him. "Yu oughtn't to have come, Ed," he said kindly.

A faint tinge of color came into Ed's white face. "I don't know what Maw'd say if she knowed I was here," he said.

Red's gaze dropped, and a flush covered his own face. He avoided Ed's wild eyes, and ran a hand across his forehead, as if to brush from his mind some disturbing thought. "If the sheriff had done as he promised——" he began, and then stopped.

"What did you say, Red?"

Red took the boy's arm. "Come and sit down, Ed; yu can wait bettah," he said, and led him to a seat.

Ed had not long to wait. The crowd came back joyfully bearing a wooden bucket full of whiskey. The men had had a drink around as the liquor was poured from the barrel—the hot burn of it was still on their tongues and in their throats, but they were anxious to make the burn hotter. The man with the bucket was at the centre of the group; the one with the can raced gleefully ahead. They came in like a bunch of schoolboys.

“We found it!” one shouted. “Sure, we got it! Why didn’t you come along, Red?”

Then they all talked.

“Say, it’s the hot stuff all right! We opened the two-year-old!—Where’s that can?—I’m first!—No, he was first last time!—Well, he drinks like a fish. Say, look at him, won’t yu? Yu can hear the whiskey drop right from his gullet to the bottom of his stummick!—I’m next!”

And so the talk went on until all were served. Then, as the last man was wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, someone sang out:

“Prisoners next! Chris! Here, Chris!” They all stared about. “Why—where is Chris?”

“Where?—Who was watchin’ him? Wasn’t anybody watchin’ him? He’s gone! Has he gone, fellers?”

They bumped into each other as they crowded through the door. And then scattered in every direction, running, slipping in the mud, knocking against trees, listening, calling out, “Who’s this?—Halt!—Listen!—Come on!”

The island was scoured. Occasionally one came back to the shack and questioned Ed, who, with Morton, now snoring comfortably, remained behind.

"Ain't he been found yet? Why, he can't get off the island! He wouldn't dare go in the water with his hands bound." And swearing, this man disappeared again in the darkness, more determined than ever to find the fugitive.

Finally, the dawn came, and the search was systematic and thorough. Every foot of the island was covered, every pile of drift lifted, every fallen log moved. And still they would not give up, until each man had himself inspected the land. The sun rose, red and radiant, but after a full-faced look at the dark, wet earth, with its trouble and crime, it drew the clouds over its face and remained hidden. By this time the men were forced to accept the inevitable—Chris had gone into the water

He was drowned, of course! If not, they could easily track him in all this mud—sure, they could! They'd catch him easy. He'd land on the Territory side—he'd never try to hide in the State—no use lookin' for him there! So they would search the north bank, get his trail, and have him back and ready for the buzzards by noon. And then the talk became more direct. "Somebody get ready to go—Who's going to hunt for Chris?—It won't take all of us to finish the job here. Now, three or four of you young bloods get ready and go fetch Chris in."

It was Hawkins mostly who urged them on, but the others were eager. They had no doubt about catching Chris. Their chief concern in the matter was that they had allowed him to escape. It was galling to their pride—the Southern, distinctively Texan pride—that their grand coup had been spoiled by the escape of this one man. They would get him back—get his body back—but that would

not change the fact that he had escaped them—escaped men like Hawkins, like Reynolds, like Dock and Darling, and the whole bunch of cowboys from the Llano Estacado—outwitted the whole bunch! Wasn't it enough to make a man sick? Sure, it was! They blamed Chris, too. He had shown himself a fool, going into the water. They failed to see that death alone in the rushing river was quite as much to be desired as death suspended from the limb of a cottonwood tree. To them, it was cowardly to try to escape; cowardly to plunge into the river, swollen and maddened by the storm, and with bound hands, try for life. A settler spoke of the act as brave, but the others sneered him to silence. It was only fear bravery—reckless chance! Chad Harris was the brave one—he didn't run, or scheme some little trick—he fought!—fought and cursed right up to the last. Chad had the making of a man in him—a pity someone had not taken him in hand in his young days and fetched the kinks out of him. A pretty young woman could have done the trick. Or maybe it was some pretty young female that destroyed his belief in the rewards of the righteous. No telling.

“Well, who went for Chris?”

“Why, Dock went, and Hawkins, one of them cowboys, and Red—Say, did Red go?”

“Ya-ah, Red went.”

“Well, they'll get Chris all right.”

“Sure, they'll fetch him in. Red was kind of hot at us fellers, don't you think? He had a right to be, I say, after all he'd done. And the sheriff goin' back on his word—that hurt Red, too, I reckon.”

“You bet it did! But it was luck he didn't come, I say. You can't trust a case like this to stat-u books.”

"That's right. Why, oncet I seen a case where a woman got scott free from killin' a man when they had a dozen witnesses against her."

"Yes. They call it stat-u limitations, don't they?"

"They do use that term, but I think they cleared her on an albino, or albinie,—something like that."

"Shoo! Well, I have no use for law or lawyers."

"Not when I want to see justice done."

"That's right,—and these fellers are guilty."

"None of 'em 'fessed up, have they?"

"Oh, no, nor will they—unless it be that Chris."

"He's a coward. Well, we got work to do, fellers, work before breakfast, this mawnin'."

"Let's take another pull at the Bourbon."

"Nerves workin' on yu?"

"No,—oh, no!"

"Well, let's get at it, boys—fine morning for the job."

"Oh, couldn't be beat."

They moved toward the shack in a body. Someone asked:

"Has Morton been seen?"

"Ya-ah, he's at the shack. Got a belly ache, he says."

"Has he come over?"

"Come over?—oh, yes, partly. But he's red hot at Red."

"Hot at Red? I say the boy did good work."

"You couldn't beat it. Hope he lands Chris—that's all I ask of him this mawnin'."

"Yes, but why did Morton take the gang's side in this?—it beats me."

"Oh, he's got to beef about somethin'."

"Well, Red got pay for his time—seventeen-fifty he charged Morton."

"Yu heard that? Say I—a spade? Yes, I saw one down at the still. Want it?"

"Yes, after a bit. We'll need to dig some holes."

So they talked, right up to the door of the shack, trying to appear indifferent—trying to convince each other that death was nothing to shrink from—that the still form of Chap Harris lying white and wet, beneath a wagon-sheet under the trees, was far from their thoughts. Trying each to convince himself that he was anxious, nay eager, to do for the other moonshiners, who lay, without murmur or question, in the shack, awaiting their turn to follow their leader. Perhaps the need of this self-prodding was that Hawkins was not with them. But they would never have admitted it. They did not need anyone to push them into their duty. No, they'd do the thing up! They looked up into dark foliage supported by dark boughs. Here was a good, strong limb—high and easy to get into—maybe they'd use it. Say—oh, well, no use—there were plenty of limbs. Then they looked beyond the dark foliage,—strange no birds were singing. How low the clouds looked, and as black as cats. Well, it was an ideal day for the job—it was dark work, all right. But a man couldn't have his yearlings drove off regular, and his best filly always to disappear. No, a man couldn't. And there was no use trustin' to law officers, not a bit. My, what a blasted wet, dark dump this island was! No white man would live on it, unless there was reasons compelling him to. Probably them fellers was a lot of devils before they came West—they sure must have been. And look at that hole of a shack that they all lived in. Look—why, that canvas couldn't have moved! Sure not!

Chap was dead all right. Well—why, that—that smells like bacon. Who?—Ain't that coffee?

“Breakfast, boys,” said Morton, appearing in the doorway.

They crowded to the table. They talked, and laughed, and ate. They magnanimously unbound the hands of the captives and helped them to food. Lord, it was good! That was what they needed, all right—something warm inside. Pass that coffee pot!—Yu bet, I'll take more bacon. Let me take a turn at them flapjacks,—I've baked a carload in my time. Say, what's the matter with Morton, fellers? Ain't he a regular dandy, now? Pass the coffee pot. Say, didn't bacon make no grease?—well, I'll have some of that on my flapjacks, yu all don't need so much on the griddle. What?—batter's all? Well, I'm comfortable, ain't you, pard?

The fellow addressed as “pard” was comfortable, so he said. And so were the captives, for although they had gone to the table sullenly, the demands of a healthy body on a chill, wet morning were not to be ignored. They ate, and when the whiskey was passed they drank. Then all smoked for a while. Later, some dozed, and others listened to Morton, who had formulated a plan to operate the still. A stock company was his idea of the proper caper, to consist of himself, Reynolds, Dock,—and Hawkins, “if he'd keep his rank mouth shut.”

The plan met with enthusiastic support—partly because all felt kindly disposed toward Morton, and partly because it delayed, for a time, the grewsome work at hand. So they talked the idea up, and soon had the still running at full capacity, under the skillful direction of some “old hand” at such business.

They turned out whiskey that rivaled even the Kentucky product—just as well make it good. They declared a round dividend to the investors, and built a branch road north to the Station, and were deep in a plot to eliminate all danger from cutters when a man near the door gave an exclamation that sent the dream away on wings.

“Here’s Red and Hawkins with—no, it ain’t.”

“It’s soldiers, by crick——”

“No, it’s the sheriff!”

“Well, by the jumpin’ polecats!”

They looked at each other. Several picked up broken twigs and began to whittle.

“Seems to me I recollect one time in history when a general waited till mawnin’——”

They gave each other sly side glances.

“If Hawkins had of been here,” said one, bolder than the rest, “that there sheriff wouldn’t have been in time for the funeral.”

“That’s right,” said Reynolds, stepping out. “We have time enough yet to do the job before they can get here. What do you all say?”

But no one said anything. Every man was comically busy with his whittling, or intent on the clouds overhead, or interested in the movements of the men on the opposite bank.

“Sun’s goin’ to come out after a little,” said one of the gazers. “Them clouds are beginnin’ to break up a bit.”

“Shoo!” said another, “some of us ought to motion them fellers where to cross.”

“Sure!” And a man stepped forward, waved his hat and shouted: “The far end, pards!—the fa-ar end! Ya-ah!”

“Say, but won’t Hawkins roar.” This was spoken in a whisper by a man at the back of the bunch, and it was passed forward with many sly glances and comical winks. But it did not reach Reynolds—all knew that it was not best to push him.

“Say, what’s up with them fellers across yonder?” someone asked.

“Act like they seen somethin, I say.”

“They’re scarit, I reckon.”

“Well, us fellers have nothin’ to be ashamed of. We bagged our game, all right. That gang yonder couldn’t have beat us none.”

“Not on your life! And we had a hard gang to deal with, too. Them fellers was hard nuts—it took the right sort to land them!”

“Yu bet! Say, we fought some, didn’t we?”

“I’m tellin’ yu that there was a right smart of powder in the air for a while.”

“Wasn’t there, fellers? I don’t believe there ever was another such a fight in the State of Texas.”

“Well, now, there was a right smart of a fight at the Station that time when——”

“Not in the dark!—not against an organized gang like this was! I tell you, men, you can’t beat it!”

“And how it did rain!—by Jack, it just poured.”

“Say, didn’t it! And a blacker night I never seen—blacker’n a stack of black cats!”

“And when old Lucifer spit—say, did you all notice how the revolvers would crack?—I learned that it was my move every time it lighteninged.”

“That’s right—a bullet was moral sure to come to that spot.”

“Lord, it was the dandiest kind of a fight!”

“We did well to get out of it alive—any of us.”

"'Tain't all could have done the thing up as easy as we all did."

"The sheriff would have bungled the job."

"Course he would! Course he would!—his heart wouldn't have been in it, like ourn was."

"That's right, and you can't do good work if your heart ain't in it."

"Yu bet yu can't! Say, them fellers sure do see something."

"Maybe it's the boys—our fellers——"

"Crickey! That's just it! It's the fellers with Chris! Somebody go——"

But everybody went. Everybody, except Morton, went to the far end of the island, where they saw, on the opposite bank, the men who had gone in search of Chris. At sight of them, the crowd began to shout, to dance, to howl. But those on the opposite bank did not respond. They stood as if debating. Then the boat was pushed out, while one, left on shore, spurred his horse into the water. As he drew near they recognized this man as Hawkins.

"Hurrah!" they shouted. "Got him, did you, Hawkins? Got him easy, eh?"

Hawkins spurred his horse, and landed amid a shower of spray. He was in a towering rage—that was evident at a glance. The men looked apprehensively at each other. A brave one asked:

"What's up, Hawkins? Anyone hurt?"

"Son-of-a——" roared Hawkins. "B' thunder, I never did see such a fool!"

"Who?—why, did Chris show fight?—did he, Hawkins?"

"Chris!—no, how could he?—But that darned Red!—if I—We'd never had any trouble but for

him! We found Chris easy enough, several miles, though we tracked him, but we gave him all the walk he wanted comin' back. Dock and me put ropes to his hands, we fastened them to our saddles and let him run along between us—he got all the run away he wanted! When we got to the river here, I said, 'Let him swim back now, to his roost,' and I'd have made him do it, but for Red's put in. Red said Chris was too tired, he'd drown and a lot of rot—he thinks he's the whole thing in his affair!—that's what's the matter with him! And when I told him to shut his mouth, b' thunder, he drew his gun on me! Well, Chris'll swing the moment he lands. Get a ro——"

"No, he'll not," said Red calmly from the boat, where he was supporting the exhausted form of Chris. "He'll be turned over to the sheriff."

"Here is the sheriff now," said one of the party.

And there he was, with his score or more of deputies, just coming up on the sand bar.

Hawkins fell back a step, so complete was his surprise. He looked around at the crowd and the truth seemed to burst in upon him.

"Yu have hung the others!" he yelled, springing at the man nearest to him. "Tell me that yu have hung every one of them!"

The man he grasped was too much surprised to answer, and no one else spoke, save to the sheriff, a few quiet "Good mornings."

Hawkins released his man and faced his recreant troop, his hand on his gun. For a breathless moment no one was sure that he would not shoot. Then curses began to boil from his mouth—a bubbling, trembling flood and hot as fire. And then,

before anyone realized his intention, he was on his horse and in the water.

They watched him go, then at a sound faced about. There was Morton, with the prisoners marching three abreast before him. He turned them over to the sheriff, and then passed noiselessly among the men.

"Keep mum about the still," he said. "Keep mum."

"But Red told him. He knows—Red told him."

"He ain't seen it. Keep mum as horses. I'll fix it."

They did. Departure was soon made from the island, and as the men separated at the Station, it was observed that the sheriff and his party took the road to Morton's. But the Major reckoned without his host that day.

CHAPTER IX.

"YU CAN SAY RED TO ME."

The schoolhouse sat squat upon the meadow of the Belknap. Back of it were low hills, and then the endless prairie; before it the stream wound its way, screened by willows, all trimmed and polished by the rough, itching sides of wondering cattle, leaving only a tuft of leaves at the tip, where a flock of blackbirds sat to rock and chirp.

Birch Halloway sat on the stoop before the door, listlessly watching the birds. It was Monday, and the noon intermission. The pupils, whose bobbing heads were visible here and there, were playing in

scattered groups. Presently the birds arose in a chattering flock, and from the willows issued a tall, sleek, yellow-red steer. He stood, for a moment, head up, gazing at the building, which, though three months built, was yet undimmed by rain, and stood in all the glory of new lumber, bright, broad, unusual. The steer gazed and tossed his head, armed with white, spreading horns, tipped with black. Birch sat in mute admiration of his splendid lines and kingly bearing. While she gazed another steer issued forth, further down, and at once the air seemed to vibrate—a sound came as of a score of men in distress. The little teacher felt a sweep of alarm; she pressed her hands to her breast; she thought of fire. But this was not a city, and there was no fire company beyond that wall of willows to shriek and shout,—if a fire should come across this wild prairie!

But now the sound increased to a sullen roar, the shouts grew louder, the earth trembled. Beside the leader-steer several appeared at once, pushing him on. As he felt the touch of comrades at his sides he came forward, straight toward the schoolhouse, while behind him was a level of heads and horns. Miss Halloway gave a shriek—it was cattle—a great herd!

The shriek brought the groups of children clamoring up. The little girls ran to their teacher, the boys stood and stared at the cattle. None of them shared Miss Halloway's fright—cattle were no new thing to them. But she was entirely numb with fear; her powers seemed to forsake her utterly; she could not move, she could only scream. She did not know what she said, but it was effectual. The boys came

running in, all save one small one, who stood still, fascination seeming to have stopped his ears.

The cattle came with a rush, the earth quivered, dust and the sickening odor of grass filled the air. The great leader, with head lowered ominously, swung aside from his course, and still with his comrades touching his sides, still with that great moving body of heads and horns and hoofs thundering behind him, strode like death toward the child.

Miss Halloway's voice was hushed. For a fleeting instant night fell on her eyes and all her faculties. Then she sprang from the stoop, her very being palpitating with terror for the boy. Self was eclipsed—what were the cattle, the horns, the roar! She must save little Tommy! She must! "Oh!"

The last was a shriek. She was on the ground, running toward the helpless child, when all at once a rush of air fairly swept her back, a dark object loomed before her eyes, and her feet, and hands and body seemed wrapped and bound in something that burned and stung. She sank down. The children gathered around her, some laughing, others crying. She felt their hands and saw their faces above her, but she seemed swimming away out of the world. Then she heard a child's scream—it brought her back; she struggled to her feet. And at once before her eyes appeared again that dark object. She recoiled a step, and saw, where she had stood, a coil of rope lying like a discarded skirt.

"Here is the boy, ma'am—er—Miss. I hope yu ain't no more hurt than him."

It was a man's voice, strong, kind and respectful. Miss Halloway heard it, and her nerves steadied a little. She found herself holding little Tommy, and

laughing and crying as she hugged him. He was not hurt—he was not even frightened. And now the man spoke again.

“I hope my rope didn’t trip yu, Miss. I had to stop yu quick, yu know. One steer, or a dozen, would have run away from yu, but two or three hundred cayn’t.”

She let the boy go—put him away from her. She saw the cattle, a retreating circle of backs and tails, and saw that the black object before her was a horse, and that it was puffing and reeking wet with sweat. She saw the man, that he was a cowboy; she beheld his spurs, his revolver, his coarse garb, his dark, tanned skin. Her gaze dropped. Self came back with a rush and a new fear possessed her—she was alone with a cowboy! What might he say or do? Where were the children? But he spoke again kindly.

“I hope yu are not hurt, Miss.”

Hurt?—was she? No, she was not hurt. His voice was respectful, he even seemed eager to know that she was unharmed. She raised her eyes to his.

“Oh, it is yu—yu!”

The flood of emotion now burst over the will that had held it. She sprang forward, she grasped his saddle, she clung to his knee.

“It is yu!” And now her voice was a strained whisper. “Yu who saved little Tommy—yu who saved me—oh, thank yu! Thank yu, Mr. Red, thank yu!”

Red’s pulses bounded. To have her so near to him—this goddess! The very sight of her standing inside of her father’s gate had set him burning to the core. Her presence had haunted him day and

night since, making his hopes to soar and his ambitions to double. And now!—Now she was touching him, clinging to him! There were tears in those heavenly eyes—it seemed that he must say something, must do something. But intuition told him not. She would count it an impertinence as soon as she recovered herself. She was overwrought now, and unstrung, and being in that condition had given him a glimpse into her inmost mind. He knew now that she had thought of him often, until he seemed no stranger, though they had met but the once. This was enough for him to learn this time. So he controlled himself, and when he spoke he gravely said:

“I don’t need thanks, Miss, but since yu offer them I’ll accept. We never should have driven them cattle in here to frighten yu all like this. We should have known that the schoolhouse was here, and gone below.”

She stood still and sighed heavily. “It was not your fault,—or the fault of any one. There are cattle about here all the time—three or four, or ten,—but they always run away when I shoo them with my apron.”

Bless her heart! Red swallowed hard twice, and dared not then to trust himself to speak.

“I am not afraid of cattle,” she continued. “When I am on a horse I like to drive them,—the Morton children and I ride out among the cattle sometimes. Yu must not think——”

She paused. Red dared not yet to speak, so she decided that he did “think” something, and she tried to remove it from his mind.

“I am not so foolish as a rule. But to-day—oh,

yu will not understand," and she gave him a pathetic little smile, "but I did not get to go home last Friday—the wind blew so hard—and it seems a long time since I had anything to—I mean since I saw anyone, and I am so—so hungry!"

"Yu are stayin' at Morton's?"

"Yes." Their eyes met in deep understanding over this fact.

Red resolutely looked away. Poor little girl! She was hungry, and so tantalizingly sad and sweet. He permitted himself to look at her again—to smile down upon her.

She took courage at his smile to say, in a low voice, while her full white throat was lifted before him:

"We do not have food at Morton's—we have provendah."

"Yes, ma'am."

Red's heart was pounding like an engine. He could not stand this any longer. He gathered up the reins to start. She stepped back hurriedly, but said:

"Thank yu again—thank yu so much for what yu did."

"Yes-sum. And thank yu, too, Miss, for rememberin' me."

Remembering him! Why—here came an abrupt memory that she had seen the young man but once before!—that he had never been presented to her! And now she hurriedly rehearsed the adventure from the beginning and found one or two further disquieting circumstances—how she had clung to his knees, for instance, and her tears. She could not be certain just what she said at first, either, for she had been very much unstrung. She wondered what he

must think of her, and, so wondering, rang the bell. At afternoon recess she took the trouble to assure herself that she did not care what he thought. A very effectual precaution, as anyone of us could bear witness.

Red, too, reviewed the adventure, as he rode on after the cattle. In a few miles he had become serious and stern with himself. "I have no time foah love now," he said. "Aftah a while——" But here his mind trailed off on what was come to be an old subject with him—a review of Birch's charms. There was no end to this—he had never found an end in all the days and nights that he had dreamed of her since that first meeting. And to-day!—now that she had touched him, and he had seen her close—close. But just then a young willow grouse flew up from the wake of the cattle. His revolver spoke and the bird tumbled headless into the grass. He dressed it, and wrapped it neatly in paper. After that he whistled and sang.

And since all this had happened, it was not strange that when Miss Birch arose next morning, she found at the door of her room a package ascribed in a fair hand to "Miss Halloway." She opened it in wonder—then flew to the kitchen. She told me afterward that "it saved my veah life, that bird."

"Morton's are very poor," I said, and told her about the girl asking the Major if they might have ham for supper on the occasion of my visit.

Birch said nothing. But she became suddenly very schoolma'amish and severe around the mouth, and the glance she gave me was full of things unspeakable.

Afterward I ate at Morton's. And after that, I learned that the Major was commonly regarded as one of the wealthiest men in the Red River country. Then I understood the thing which Red had read at a glance.

Birch always spoke of going to her school as "going to her fast." But she took care, after her two weeks' experience, to carry with her cakes, nuts and like things from home, and her larder continued at intervals to be supplied, in the small hours of the night, with grouse, quail, and even hunks of venison. Birch grew plump and rosy, and looked every inch a princess. I told her so, and told her that I hoped that Red would see her soon and verify the statement.

He did. I do not know how he contrived it, or how far he rode; for he was cow-punching that fall for Dock, and the cattle were ranging west. But one day he rode up to the door of the schoolhouse. He planned to reach there at four o'clock, but the sun was hidden, and, like many another young man a-wooing bent, he was early. School was in session. Birch answered the mild rap he gave.

She was surprised to find it was he, and gave a delightful little "O-oo!" at sight of him. Then, as a token of her pleasure, she extended her hand.

He lifted his hat as he took it, standing a spurred, cartridge-belted giant on the step at the door.

"How is Tawmmy?" he gravely inquired.

"Tommy is well—thank yu," said Birch, a little flurried by his ardent glance.

"Yu are lookin' well, too, Miss."

There was no mistaking the admiration that accompanied these words, and Birch blushed, as she

should have done, and thereby rendered herself altogether adorable in his eyes. Then, in her best schoolma'am manner, she asked him in.

"Not to-day, I thank yu, Miss. I'll just wait outside here."

She looked at him. She was a little puzzled by his words. Her eyes shone with an unusual brilliancy.

He turned his hat in his hands nervously. "I thought I'd just stop. Will yu come a-ridin' aftah school, Miss?"

"Why——" Birch became nervous in her turn. "I should like to, but——"

"It's the prettiest kind of an evenin'—and yu haven't had a bird for a right smart while, Miss."

"O-oo! Would we—could I go with yu to kill—to get one?"

"Yes, ma'am. I thought yu might like that." His face was very eager.

"Indeed, I should like it, and if Jimmy Morton——" Then remembering suddenly, she broke off to thank him for the game he had brought to her.

"It ain't worth mentionin'," he protested.

"But it is—yu have saved my life twice—several times—I really was famished. Am I always to be indebted to yu?"

He looked at her and his hands moved slowly round his hat brim. "I hope so, ma'am," he said.

She laughed softly. "But yu must let me do something for yu in return—there must be something yu need done—mending, buttons?—I can darn splendidly."

"Yes, ma'am, but I can't have yu doin' them

things foah me, ma'am." Then, noticing her disappointment, he added hastily, "Yu see, I am a-bunkin' a right smart ways from here."

"Are yu? How far?"

"Several houahs' ride," said he, evasively.

"Several houahs' ride—dear me, how explicit," said Birch, coquettishly. "Several means four or five usually, and—how many miles do yu ride an houah?"

"Yu will nevah get at it that a-way," said Red, coloring. "And it's no matter at all,—only if I was nearer I could bring yu a bird oftener."

"But yu must not ride for 'several houahs' just to bring me a bird—think of your poor horse."

"I do, most times, Miss."

His meaning was clear to the girl—that in this he thought only of her. She could not restrain a flash of pleasure—it shone in her eyes, she knew it did. She spoke hurriedly.

"But yu really must not do it any more, Mistah—Mistah Red," she said, with an air of positiveness.

Red looked reproachfully at her. "I thought yu wanted to do something foah me, Miss," he said.

"I do, indeed I do," said Birch, falling readily into this trap.

"Then let me go on bringin' yu birds—when I can."

A little laugh rippled from the girl's lips. "Yu are very clevah," she said archly. "I acknowledge my defeat."

"Then I may?"

"Yu may, Mistah Red."

"And yu will go with me this time?"

"This evening?" Birch puckered her brow—she

had long since determined to go with him, but she assumed an air of reflection. "Well, since yu have come so far, I will go with yu," she said finally.

Red's eyes shone. "Thank yu, Miss," he said. "I will be a-goin' or I will delay your classes. I will bring your hawss ovah here to yu, Miss."

"Oh,—why so yu can! Only—well, all right." And she disappeared indoors.

Red vaulted into his saddle. He was happy enough to have leaped over the schoolhouse itself. His horse knew his mood and darted away at top speed. Birch, on the stoop, screamed after him, but he did not hear; he was dashing up the trail toward Morton's.

Birch hurried her classes. Now that she had committed herself to go with Red, she was troubled a little in conscience. It was not at all proper. But—well, she was so lonely and the evenings were so long. There was no one to talk to at Morton's, and—this would be such fun! If—but here she called the primer class.

"He is a gentleman, and he certainly is handsome," she told herself between the first primer class and the second one, "and I will find out on this ride just who and what he is. If he is at all intellectual I can help him to—to make something of himself. I need not go with him again if—what *would* he be like in a parlor?"

Birch sat at her desk smiling. The second primer class was over and she was thinking. "He said he thought of his horse 'most times.' When he said that he looked—what is it, Tommy?" Her thoughts were interrupted, for Tommy, seeing his teacher's mood reflected pleasantly in her face, suddenly dis-

covered that he was very thirsty. He received gracious permission to get a drink.

Wise Tommy! Foolish Birch! While Tommy's heavy shoes thumped noisily over the rough floor, Birch resolved to be very nice to the cowboy Red—since he was so gentlemanly—and to treat him as she would a young boy, to instruct him, correct him and set him good example, the while she enjoyed his cheery manner, his soft, musical voice, his unusual speech and manly strength. And she thought, "I will keep all the dignity of the schoolma'am between us. Jimmy shall go with us—Red should have waited until I told him so."

So it was with a very serene air that Miss Halloway bade her pupils good night and prepared to go for a ride with her cowboy friend. When she found him waiting, with her horse, standing ready for mounting at the stoop, she gave a little gasp of surprise.

"O-oo! So yu brought a horse for Jimmy? I came back to tell yu to do so, but yu had started."

"I ask pardon, ma'am. Yu mentioned it before."

"Did I? Then I forgot, I guess. Come on, Jimmy."

They rode down the creek, following no trail, her horse keeping beside Red's as they passed through the green meadow grass. Then they rode in among the willows. The stream was wider here, and the horses splashed into the clear water. Birch's would stop to drink. The girl looked at the cowboy and found him regarding her gravely.

"I am so glad we came," she said.

"Thank yu, ma'am—er, Miss."

"Now yu are not to call me 'ma'am' or 'Miss,'

either," said Birch, beginning at once on her pre-arranged programme. "It sounds like—like I was old."

"Yes, ma'am."

Birch laughed, and the sound was as joyful as the song of a free bird. The constraint of the school-room was wholly off her now. The Morton boy had appropriately fallen behind, and she could expand and luxuriate in soft air of the autumn evening. She drank in deep breaths and her bosom rose and fell; the pink in her cheeks deepened to scarlet, her lips parted and her eyes shone. She turned in her saddle with a little impulsive movement that displayed every charm of her being.

"Call me Miss Holloway," she said.

This time Red did not answer. In fact there were many times during that first ride with her when Red was so rapt with admiration that he was speechless.

"Yu must address me as Miss Holloway," she repeated with an air that was maddening to him, "and I shall call yu Mistah—what shall I say?"

"Yu can say Red to me."

"But I don't like it," she temporized.

He smiled at her, then said respectfully: "If yu want to now, we'll take a turn around in this brush and I'll get yu that bird."

Birch agreed readily. They found the bird and he dressed it and made it ready for her, as he had done the others. Then he showed her how to hold his revolver, and she fired it several times. He was very thoughtful of her pleasure—she had never been out with a more gentlemanly escort. But she did not forget that he had refused to tell her his name. The act surprised and puzzled her. But she did not

let it mar her pleasure in this one—she told herself there could be no other—ride with him. Nor did she give up hope of learning his identity until she had employed every artifice known to the feminine mind to trick the information from him. At last, when they were on the return trail, she put it very bluntly to him:

“I have enjoyed this ride more than anything since—since my school began, and—and I have permitted yu to make it long because it is to be the last.”

In his complete dismay he stopped his horse. “I hoped I had pleased yu, ma’am,” he said wishfully. “I tried to, harder than I ever tried befoah, I reckon.”

“Yu have succeeded admirably,” she told him, with a little air of loftiness. “But I cannot go riding with a man whose name I do not know.”

“Now then yu are comin’ to the point in all this,” he said seriously, yet with an air of evident relief. “My name—I might give yu anybody’s and yu’d not know the difference. But the man—yu know the man yu are ridin’ with. And every time yu see that man yu will know him bettah. Ain’t that nearer the point than me tellin’ you that my name is Brown, or Smith?”

“Oh, yes,—but knowing a man’s family is——”

“Yes, my folks. I knowed—I knew that yu was wantin’ to know that. Yu want to judge me by my fambly. I don’t want to be judged that a-way. I want to be judged by what I am—by what I make of myself. It’s a Western notion, I know, but—don’t yu feel it in yu? When yu teach that school and get your money, don’t yu feel like yu had sort of taken root out in the clearin’, and was growin’

into a big tree that can stand alone through sun and storm? And don't yu feel independent and strong, knowin' that yu are no longer a branch of something, but are the whole thing yourself?"

"Oh, I do!" cried Birch enthusiastically. "And I want to be—to go——"

She stopped. He had not told her what his ambition was—he had merely let her know that he had one. So she paused an instant to curb her enthusiasm, and then said:

"Of course I feel as yu say, and I feel it more and more each day. I am more certain each day that I can be whatever I will. But that does not cause me to feel ashamed of my—to wish to conceal my identify. I know that it is because of what my parents are that I can hope to be anything of consequence."

"Yes,—but cayn't yu see how it is with me?" There was a note of pleading in his voice, and he looked at her direct as he put the words to her that he once had put to me: "If yu cayn't like me as Red, how could yu like me as Mister somebody?"

Birch was as serious over this as he. "I do like yu as Red," she said simply.

"Thank yu, ma'am."

The words were direct and positive. She had given him something—something that he wanted very much, and he thanked her for her gift. His assurance startled the girl. She led hastily out of this serious vein, saying lightly:

"Am I to have no reward? I spoke in the hope that yu would reward my candor with like coin."

Red looked at her. "Yes, ma'am, I will do that," he replied. "I like yu bettah than I like anything else in the world."

Birch laughed; she blushed furiously, and bit her lip. "Yu know—yu must have known that I did not mean—I—yu are—I must be getting back."

She urged her horse to a canter, then to a gallop. He kept close to her side, but words were almost impossible, so great was their speed. Finally, on an up-grade, he said:

"Would yu really feel bettah about this, Miss, if I was to tell yu now that I am——"

"I do not wish to know anything about yu," she replied haughtily, but slackened her speed.

"Morton knows me—yu need only to ask him——"

"I will not do that," she flashed. "If yu will not tell me, I shall drop the subject from my mind."

He looked at her and his heart swelled with pride of her. "You're a gentleman!" he exclaimed.

She drew breath for a quick retort, but the words died at her lips. He was a gentleman—always had been with her. Was she behaving like a gentlewoman, going off in a huff this way? She did not know just what she ought to do—she nervously flickered the reins.

"Yu would not know my folks, I reckon, if I was to tell yu ouah name," said he, so quietly that she turned to him, wondering if it might be that his people were dead.

"I—know the people of the neighborhood," she replied, her tone quiet like his. "We have visited at the ranches—at Reynolds' and Hawkins', at Levering's and at Darling's, and I know a great many by—by reputation."

"Yes, ma'am. So yu all have visited at Levering's?"

"Yes,—why, did yu think——" she flashed, and then checked herself. "Oh, well, no mattah what yu thought. I am not going to quarrel with yu again," and she sighed.

"Thank yu. But I did not think what yu had in mind," said Red, and smiled shyly at her.

"No?" She laughed. "Well, then, we are quite friends—the two families are. And I love the girls, Joseph and Eunice. And I love the house, and the dog, and Uncle Levi—I believe I love everything at Levering's."

"I am goin' there," said Red, pointedly.

"Then I shall have to make one exception," said Birch saucily. Then added: "I went down there two weeks ago for the week's end. Mother sent an escort. I am going again, soon."

"Do yu know when, Miss?—foah then your mothah would not need to send an escort."

She looked at him. Did he mean that he would accompany her to Levering's? How it would shock Joseph to see them come riding up the lane, she and this cowboy! Birch wished that it might be so—she did not attempt to deceive herself into thinking that she did not. But, of course, it could not be.

"No-o, I do not know just when I shall go," she said guardedly. And then, with well-measured mockery, "If yu had told me your name I could send yu word."

"Send it to 'Red,'—nobody in the State of Texas could claim it exceptin' me, Miss," he stated eagerly.

She laughed at him, and told him that she "would do no such thing." Then bade him good evening at the corral corner. He rode away in the dusk toward that vast plain of which she knew so little. She

vowed, as she watched him go, that she would think no more of him. But when a month passed and she did not see him, she gave a dainty missive to the Morton children, with directions that they send it to the Station to post. On it was the one word, "Red."

He replied to it in person. But over that meeting between the cowboy and the schoolma'am, and several others which followed it in rapid succession—they were holding Dock's herd nearer to the Belknap now—the curtain of secrecy is drawn. Certain results are known, however. Birch came home one week and was as gay and full of witchery as a siren; the next week she was irritable and preoccupied. She was, however, hungry each time she came, and, as I pointed out to Mrs. Halloway, when that lady spoke of entertaining concern for her daughter's health, there could be nothing serious so long as her appetite was unaffected.

One week she brought us news of a dance at Morton's. She had, perforce, attended it. It was awful, she said, and then assured me that she had never enjoyed anything so much. She seemed delightfully unaware of the incongruity of the two statements. But I learned more about this dance when at Red River Station. I rode in for my mail, and looked in on a game of cards while my horse ate his grain. Sleepy was there, and his was the only familiar face. With his long fingers he was hopefully and profitably manipulating the cards. But he took time to tell me that he had been "among 'em" at Morton's "hop," he called it. He had "seen the schoolma'am," and he informed me with perfect gravity, that it "took time for a man to get to dancin'

with her—he had to construct an approach first—Red had his'n built, so got all the dances—him and fambly men like Hawkins and them." Morton had served whiskey at his dance, so Sleepy said, and it was liquor which he had taken from the island. But he—Sleepy—had no kick coming, for he got all he wanted and rolled up in his blankets till dawn woke him. Some did kick, though, and kick hard, against Morton, for when he brought the whiskey in, the schoolma'am "recollected that she had to go to her room and change her mind, or somethin' else, and she never came out no more."

I did not repeat the above to Mrs. Halloway, for fear of causing her unnecessary uneasiness. But when Birch came home, I began, in a bantering way, to question her about the dance. To my surprise, she would tell me nothing. And when I pressed her, she left me abruptly and went into the house. A few minutes later, her mother informed me that Birch was crying, and "seemed not to know the cause of her grief." She dispatched a servant in search of Col. Halloway. What means he employed to allay his wife's fear and assuage his daughter's grief, I do not know, but the feat was accomplished, and we assembled at dinner a happy, conciliated family. But when, in the middle of the week, intelligence reached us that Miss Birch would spend Saturday and Sabbath at Levering's, and that no escort need be sent to attend her, Mrs. Halloway became really alarmed for her daughter's safety, and dispatched me post haste to accompany her to Levering's.

I suspected the true state of affairs, and when I found them—Red and Birch—cantering along, side

by side, on the Upper Trail, I greeted both warmly, and rode on ahead. They followed slowly. Often I was a mile ahead. But when I reached the lane, I waited for them to come up. Like Birch, I supposed that the cowboy Red would venture no nearer than this to the aristocratic precincts of the Leverings.

At precisely that moment, back on the trail, an interesting little scene was being enacted.

"Tell me now that yu are goin' to love me, Miss Halloway," Red pleaded, his hand on the reins of her horse. "If I could make yu know how much I want yu to tell me now—befoah we get there."

"Perhaps I am never going to tell yu such a thing," said Birch, but never lifted her eyes from studying the back of his hand.

"Yes, yu are. Yu cannot look at me now, and tell me that—darling."

"I told yu that yu must not call me that," said Birch, properly severe.

"I know, but—Birch!"

He took one of her small hands in his—he compelled her to look at him. She could not stand his eyes an instant.

"Don't! Oh, Red, yu——"

"Do I frighten yu, dear?—it is because my love is so strong. Birch, tell me now—befoah we get——"

"Yes,—'before we get to the bend'—'before we get to the corner,'" Birch mimicked.

"But this is not like them times—this is last time. Darling, tell me now, that yu love me, Birch!"

His appeal would have moved a stone image. Upon the schoolma'am, Birch, however, it had no effect. Or rather, I had better say, whatever effect

it had, she contrived not to display. She sat silent, looking ahead.

His love drove him. It gave him no rest. Never in his life had he wanted anything as he wanted a little "Yes" from this girl now. He must have it now. A few minutes more and half of the sweetness of it would be gone—lost to him forever.

"Birch!" he cried, and laid a hand in an agony of appeal upon her shoulder.

The agony in his voice and the sudden touch startled the girl. She turned toward him, her horse stumbled, she lost her balance and fell backward toward him.

He caught her, held her. He murmured words of assurance. "Yu are not hurt—yu are not goin' to fall. See!—now your foot is free. There, now I have yu—and yu are all right, sweetheart."

I saw that they had stopped, and that one horse was riderless, so hurried back to see what had happened. Red stood holding Birch, who leaned against him, while he poured a torrent of love in her ears. He blamed himself for the accident. He had been a selfish, senseless brute. He would not pester her any more. And then he began all over again with his torrent of love, and his beseeching that she love him—that she love him now.

Birch appeared oblivious to everything. Her hat was on the ground and her head on Red's breast. I asked if she were hurt—she did not answer. But the expression of her side face was not that of pain.

"She will be all right again in a minute," I said to Red. And began to straighten the saddle and tighten the girth on her horse. As I worked, I heard a little, delighted word:

"Red!"

"Tell me now," he whispered.

There was no other sound. When I looked they were standing apart, but were gazing into each other's eyes, as rapt as though gazing into heaven itself. His head was bent—hers was lifted, their lips were very close. She put a hand up and softly touched his cheek. But she did not speak the word he longed for, and he did not kiss her.

We left the broad, beaten trail and rode into the tree-bordered, leaf-strewn lane. Pigeons flew about over our heads, and song birds, new-arrived from Northern groves, piped an evening serenade from every nook and branch. Further on we overtook and passed the stately procession of geese. Birch shooed vigorously at the proud gander, but that composed general paid not the slightest attention to this childish outbursts in the little school teacher. She turned to us, her eyes dancing.

"Joseph has been teaching him a creed—all, all is vanity," she said, with a gay laugh.

Red gave me a glance as mischievous as a boy. "There is right smart of similarity between the two of them," he said to the girl.

"Do yu know Joseph?" Birch asked. And she and I, thinking that Red surely would go no further, stopped our horses.

He rode on, however, and with feelings of mingled pleasure and dismay we followed.

"These here old plantation homes has a charm about them that a fello' cayn't quite put into words," said he, as he lifted his hat and carefully smoothed his red hair. "When I come along here, I a-most wish that I had lived a thousand years ago, and had a-been a knight or a prince."

We were at the gate when he ceased speaking. It was invitingly open. Inside the watchdog barked a clamorous call to the household. Obedient to it, Uncle Levi shambled forward, his hat in his hand, and almost immediately Mrs. Levering and her daughters appeared on the veranda. Birch began cooing her delight at everything. Then there was a cry, and a sudden rush of skirts. I beheld Mrs. Levering in Red's arms!

"My son! My son!" she cried.

"Mothah."

Red patted her shoulder lovingly, and laid his hand reverently on her snow-white hair. Eunice ran to him, and he released his mother to catch his sister in his arms, and then to swing her on his shoulder as if she were a mere infant. Looking for Joseph, I saw her returning to the house. But Red apparently did not notice her absence. He turned from Eunice to the friendly dog, and the two had a great romp. Birch touched my arm, and looking into her face, I found it aglow with joy, though her eyes were full of tears.

Red appeared beside the girl. "I ask pardon," he said humbly. "I haven't been home befoah in a right smart while. Will yu get down now, Miss?"

"I—I am so glad that yu came—with me," said Birch tremulously, as he lifted her from the saddle.

"But yu would not say the word I wanted," he said, his face suddenly grave.

"Some things," she murmured, her face lifted to him, "some things do not need to be put into words, Red."

A pulse of joy shot across his face, but he restrained himself like a Spartan. When she had

turned from him, he wheeled away from the company, and lifting his hat, raised his glowing face to heaven.

“Red,” thought I, as I looked at him standing there, his every lineament one of grace, beauty and power, “you need not long to have been a prince of a past age—you are one of the present.” I would gladly have taken his place and his chance in life that day!

CHAPTER X.

THE PARABLE OF THE TUMBLE WEED.

“Dear Sir and Friend (thus in due time Red wrote me), I will keep my word and tell you about the trial. It is over, and the Skunk Island gang is in the pen. All except Logan; he got away. That sheriff is—but then you know already what I think of him. The still, and such as was left on the island, has been burned. I reckon you know more about that than I do. And I guess you know about how Morton took it. He said more than he ought. Him and me don’t speak none yet. I’m watching him these days. But I don’t think you ever saw through Morton. Logan will show up there when he comes back to Texas. He will come back, all right. Him and me will meet again. I ain’t dreading it none.

“I am still punchin’ for Dock. He has increased his herd, and we are doin’ something like. He has been to Mobile again. We devil him a lot about his fambly there. He is a blame sight cleaner than some that won’t sleep none with a nigger.

“My folks is well, as are all. My sister Joseph

speaks of you. I am a plumb disapintment to her. I don't see the Halloways or Miss Birch as much as I would like. I am the head of the gang here, and don't get off very often—cows eat Sundays and Mondays the same. She is wearing my ring. I want you back when that day comes.”

Here this letter ended, and I was for many days hungry for the sight of Texas. I eased my longing as best I could by writing a long letter to Red. In it I frankly admitted a fact, which he had known, it seemed, almost from the start, and which you have no doubt guessed—that my business in Texas concerned bootlegging, which had gone on for years. The worst feature of the case was the traffic with Indians, and the whiskey always came from the South—this was about as much as the Department officers knew about it. But with the raiding of the Skunk Island gang, the traffic ceased, and I, being on the ground, got the credit. And when, after several months, the trade was opened up, I was duly notified. Almost the next post after the letter from the Department, one came from Red. It was quite correct in composition beside the other, showing plainly that its author had been improving his mental equipment. It ran thus:

“Dear Friend:—You had better come back here. Things need looking after some. This time I can give you information, and I am the only man that can. I am cow-punching on the R2 rancho. It is a fine ranch, and the Llano Estacado is sure enough interesting country, and fine for cows. But I will be home in two weeks. If you can come then, I can see you at the Station. Do not bring no pills and such

stuff down here. Doctoring ain't what you need. I know a better cure than them. The matter I referred to needs immediate attention. I hope to see you soon."

His hope was mine. I wired the Department that I had an important clue, and started at once for Texas. I found Red River Station as I had left it. Its population was about the same, and there was an increased number of negroes. There was now a saloon for them. The outer rim of refuse had also increased.

True to his word, Red Levering met me there. There was a change in him—I felt rather than saw the thing. The red of his hair was the same, but his nose seemed longer, and his person had widened, though he had lost some bulk. But strength was written all over him in the same bold print. His personality had deepened also, and there was a new note of power in his voice. There was a new look in his eyes, too, one of sadness, and new lines of sternness about the mouth. Only his smile was the same, and when laughter took him, sternness and sadness were eclipsed by whole-hearted mirthfulness seldom seen in a man. And I said to him:

"No one would call you a boy now, Red."

"It has been a right smart while since I was called that," he replied. "Even my folks have dropped the idea."

We were walking across the Greyhound to my room. I asked about his sisters and mother, and he answered me. Then there was an interval of silence between us. I waited for him to speak. As he did not, I said:

"So you broke down another schoolhouse door?"

He stopped in his tracks. "Who told yu that?"

"Your letter," I responded, enjoying his surprise.

"My lettah?—I don't recollect——" And then he smiled at me. "I didn't know that it made that much difference," he said, pleased. "I sure must have been bad before."

"I am glad for you," I replied heartily. "And I am glad to see that school did not spoil your natural simplicity and directness. I was afraid it might—college probably would."

He took a chair and sat looking directly at me, but I could see that my words had set his mind on another subject than school. After a long minute of silence he spoke out on that subject, beginning abruptly:

"I wrote to you to come down here, and I am glad I did it. And glad I did it right when I did, or it would nevah have been done. I have been home a week——" He paused and looked hard at the floor. "It has only been a week," resumed sadly, "just one week, but things are changed now. I've had trouble before—I thought I had, and disappointments a-plenty. It is like I said." And now he spoke with that power and force new in him. "Everything is shut to me! I must fight my way to everything! And I am willing to do that—I have done it! Two years of school I've had, and earned every dollar, besides helped—I've kept myself clean and decent while I did it. But I had to have money, didn't I? Didn't I have to have money?"

It was half a minute before I realized that he was waiting for an answer. I had been listening to him as one in an audience listens to a speaker, and is carried away by him, their senses delighted or ap-

palled at his will. If he asks a question he expects no answer from his audience; his answer is on his own lips. But Red expected response from me. I gathered my soaring faculties and framed one.

"It takes money to get an education where one has to leave home for schooling," I said, conscious that my voice sounded tame and weak with his eloquence throbbing on the still air. "Of course you had to have money, Red."

"I had to have money!" He fairly snatched the words from me. "And I had to earn it, didn't I? Nobody was around sayin', 'Here is the money for your expenses at school,' no rich uncle, or fairy god-fathah was sayin' that to me. And yu cayn't earn money without work, can yu?—work of some kind? And yu cayn't work at something yu don't know a thing about. I couldn't go down to Waco, or to Red Rock and do bookkeepin' or telegraphin' when I don't know a thing about such work, could I? Such work is clean and gentlemanly—clerkin', teachin', preachin' and sellin' goods—all of them are gentlemanly employments. But how could I do them when I didn't know decimals from a yeller steer, or grammar from a dun-roan cow?—tell me that! Plowin' a field is low, they say, and punchin' cows is plumb degradin'—neither of them is a gentleman's work." He had come down by easy stages from his fierce eloquence, and his tone once more was soft and drawling. "No gentleman will punch cows," he continued. "If one does, the gentleman part of him dies and falls off, and the critters he is mindin' trample on it and grind it into the dung. He becomes a beast—a mauverick, for his own sistah won't own him as a brothah, and no decent white woman won't marry him."

“Has——” I burst out, but stopped the question there.

He regarded me with grave eyes. “Ya-ah,” he said, and the word was sadder than tears, for there was no bitterness in it, no resentment, no bid for sympathy. “Ya-ah, she couldn’t make distinctions, Miss Birch couldn’t. She could see that I needed education—she knew that I could nevah stand up and ask God and man to let me take her as a wife, and she to be ashamed of me and my language befoah the congratulations was ovah—she knew that! But she thought I should work my way through school—earn my board and books by odd jobs around some fine house, or carryin’ messages for the big bloods. Maybe, if I had been brought up in Missouri, I could have done that. But bein’ brought up in Texas, seh—well, when I get where gentlemen are, I like to be as good as they are. If I cayn’t be, then I go where I can be as good as the best. And then, there was ouah home—Miss Birch knowed—knew that I had to have money to start out as we’d like, and she knew my fathah’s condition—I told her more, maybe, than I should. But I wanted her to understand—I wanted so much foah her to see—but she couldn’t. No, seh, she couldn’t. And I ain’t blamin’ her—I am tryin’ not to. I cayn’t see things sometimes, that afterwards are as plain as day. But I don’t reckon she’ll see evah. I have given her lots of chance. I talked to her, seh.” Here he lifted his eyes to mine, and I could not endure the anguish that shone out from the depth of his soul. “I talked to her,” he continued, “as long as she would let me talk. All that she could see was that I ought to do a gentleman’s work—I should earn money like a

gentleman. I should begin right off, and work my way up in something respectable. I told her that I couldn't wait—that it would take too long. I'd be an old man befoah I'd have enough ahead to come and claim her. But she said she'd go somewhere to study, and would wait, knowin' that I was tryin' to be decent for her sake. And she seemed to think that a star'd fall, or there'd come a diamond shower—I don't know what. But she was sure enough sweet in all her foolishness. I'd have hated it less if she had seemed the fool she talked. Pooah little girl!—her folks have gone back North—Pooah little Birch! I—we had planned to be togethah a lot—we even talked about ouah home,—and how——”

He broke off and went to the window, where he stood looking out. His hands were clenched as they hung at his sides, and for several minutes I could hear every breath he drew. Then, after a time, he seemed to relax.

“That's ovah,” he said, as he faced me. And then, after surveying me from head to foot, he said lazily, “Yu ain't ovah weighted right now.”

I smiled. Flesh did not find affinity with my bones, and doctors disagreed as to the cause. So I had taken to smiling as they did over it—the professional smile being about all I ever got for my money. Red and I now walked out, and as we went I told him of a wish I had long entertained of spending a year on the Texas plains and living wholly out-of-doors. And I asked him, “Could I punch cows?”

He took the question as seriously as I meant it, and gazed at me, seeming to search for something beyond my face, yet within my head.

"Yu could punch cows," he said finally, "but yu couldn't command salary."

"Not board and lodging?" I asked, dismayed.

"Ya-ah, yu could get that—but who wants—I mean, seh, yu'd nevah get much more, seh."

I laughed and told him that board and lodging would suit me fine, that I had my pile, and I named the amount and the bank. He rewarded my confidence with his.

"I am gettin' seventy-five now, and sixty-five of that goes into the bank every month—I can keep decent on ten. It's countin' up some, but not fast enough. If I had begun five years ago——"

I did not press him to finish. We reached the corral and went in for our horses. Several cowboys were about, and I saw Hawkins. This recalled many things to my mind, and I began asking questions: "Is Reynolds the same?" and "Where is Ed?" "I would like to see Dock right now! Is he prospering?"

Red answered these questions patiently as we saddled up. Reynolds was the same—had had another fight and got another scar. Ed was married!—Red had passed his house the other morning, but everyone seemed right busy and he did not stop. And I fell into this trap. "What doing?" I asked. "Celebratin'," he replied, with grave countenance. "Then I certainly would have stopped," I asserted. "It was just a fambly celebration," he said from under his horse's belly. "But there was a right smart number of guests. Ed's mothah, and right on to all of his wife's folks was there. I allowed it would take a right big birthday cake to go around." I said, "Oh, then it was a birthday celebration—"

Ed's?" "No," and there was a gleam of laughter in the eye that appeared above the saddle. "It was the baby's—first."

I struck at him, but he dodged away, laughing. "I have been in the city too long,—I have grown dense," I said.

"Yu sure enough have," he replied. And I was glad to hear his laugh again, and glad to hear the music of his voice.

Then he told me about Dock. "He brought a woman—an octoroon—up from Mobile, and two girls—quite young women, and almost white. They are livin' at his ranch—have fixed things up a lot and put flowers out. His cattle are doin' well, but there is talk, and Dock don't go about as much as formerly. He was at Hawkins' place at meal time oncet, and they did not ask him to eat. Ain't it strange how a man——"

But here I interrupted with a question that leaped from my brain to my lips. "Logan? Has he ever been heard of?"

Red did not answer. He mounted his horse and I got on mine. We started out on the Upper Trail. After we had ridden far enough to be clear of any possible overhearing, I repeated my question.

"Have you heard anything of Logan?"

"Zant Logan," said Red, without taking his eyes from the trail, "Zant Logan is dead."

"Oh," I exclaimed in surprise. And then, because of some inflection or expression of his, I asked, "Is he dead, truly?"

He made no answer to this, and we rode a mile or better in silence, our horses at a gallop. Then, at a swale, he slowed his horse.

"It's funny how things do," he said idly, pointing his whip. "Look at that weed now—that tumble weed. It's a-growin' there, and we say it is alive. After a bit, fall will come. It will unjoint then, down close to the ground—we will see it lodged against a bank somewhere, and will say it is dead. Next year, if we ride along here, we will see a tumble weed growin' right in this same place. Is it the same weed?"

"I should say it was," I said disinterestedly, "the same weed with a new top—a new tumble."

"That's a right clevah notion," said Red.

"Not at all," I hastened to assure him. "The root lives, therefore it is the same weed, just as a tree is the same tree, year after year, for all it annually sheds its leaves—only in the case of the weed, the visible part disappears wholly. We are much the same—the visible part of us dies, and goes, like the weed, to enrich the soil which has sustained it—the invisible spark of life lives on endlessly. But where does it live?—that is the question that puzzles every thinking man. The weed lives there in the ground; the tree lives, brown and bare, in the sight of all, until it blossoms forth in the newness of life. But think of all the people that have lived—countless thousands."

"Millions," said Red, "and all recorded by name in the Lamb's Book of Life!—what a thunderin' big book it is! And there must be some erasures."

"Erasures," I repeated, puzzled. "Why?—oh, girls that marry?—widows that remarry?—it must complicate the bookkeeping some."

"Ya-ah, but that could be fixed easy—in the book for females there must be extra rulin's to give more

space, since the end is known from the beginnin' that would not be hard to look after. Besides Mary would be Mary clean through, and Jane would be Jane."

"Why erasures, then?"

But again he did not reply. I observed that he sat like a statue,—a statue representing care, or one of responsibility. But I knew that though those things had possessed him wholly, it was of others, and not of himself, that he was thinking. Was he grieving for his folks? What did he mean by erasures? I was sure that he meant something, and I was pondering over it when he spoke out abruptly, putting all my half-formed theories to flight. He said:

"I wrote yu to come down here, and said I could give yu information. I cayn't. Things have happened. As I said in town, it has only been a week since I came home, but big things can happen in a week. When things begin happenin' oncet, it seems that they cayn't let up. And so I cayn't tell yu the things I had planned to, and I cayn't help yu do your work like I wanted. But yu—yu can hang around the Station or punch cows with me ovah at R2, as yu like. The thing is plain to be seen. Only nobody has seen it—nobody but me. I cayn't tell yu no more—any more. We will go to my fathah's now. Yu will be right welcome by my folks."

CHAPTER XI.

LOVE CHANGES A WOMAN.

It has happened to you, has it not, at some sudden change in surroundings, to feel on awakening that you have been aroused out of reality into a dream? Thus I came to life the next morning in my room at Levering's. I wish I could make you see the quaint, old homestead lit with the glory of a bright Spring morning. The sun, far off, lifted itself above a horizon of shell-pink and orange, and looked into a sky of crystal clearness, while it lit the dew-wet earth with myriad diamond lights, which were set in every brown bough, on each bursting bud, on every blade of grass, on each new-opened crocus, and purple iris leaf. And out of this came sounds of life and joy!—a chorus of song from birds, the busy clamor of fowls, the shrill call of a gander, and the answering squawk of a goose; the lowing of a cow for her calf came up from a nearby pasture, while over her, disturbed by her wondering search, a flock of wild duck floated, black specks against the pastel sky. And near at hand, the song of a negro—one of melody rather than words—rose with all the sacred joy of an anthem. I looked and listened, and in my breast the ice of the North melted away, and its place was filled with a warmth and love that passes description.

My toilet hastily contrived, I moved to the window, and saw, scattered about the lawn, those who

fitted properly into the scene—the Levering family. Eunice, fairer than pictures, knelt at a flower bed, and, trowel in hand, gazed up at her mother, who, with fleecy shawl about her shoulders, and the sun's rays touching with radiance her snowy hair, stood beside her daughter directing her work. A little apart from these two was Red, and his father. Red was dressed as I had never seen him before—in a suit of homespun, tailor-made and faultless. I have never seen the man who would not have gladly equaled him in appearance. The words of the two men were low, and their expression was that of deep concern; but to it all, with countenance of keen interest, the watchdog listened absorbedly. I changed my position in the hope of seeing Joseph, and was rewarded. She stood quite under my window, all in black, with her gaze on the distant heavens and a psalm book in her hand.

Miss Levering had no part in the brightness of the new-born day. She was off on the cold peak of piety, giving thanks to the maker of ice and snow; for the maker of warmth and flowers she had no thanks. In her plain, black garb, she was rebuke to the busy, budding life about her; she was a rebuke to my foolishly happy mood. But the rebuke did not abide with me. And, though I regret to say it, I found more to the glory of God in the song of the negro than I did in the pious demeanor of the daughter of the house.

Later in the day, Red and I went hunting. The duck season, as I have intimated, was on in Texas, though it was still Winter in our world, February, to be exact. But luck was with the duck—at least it was not with us, and noon found our game-bags

empty. Finally, we came upon a flock of teal. They were just beyond us in a bend of the river, fifty or more of them, and as busy as ants. I crept forward cautiously, intending to take a pot shot and fill my bag. Red followed stealthily—in fact, we made a great part of the distance like worms, on our stomachs. But as we paused behind the last cover, he touched my arm. I looked into his eyes and saw that all the enthusiasm of the hunter had gone out of them.

“If I could rise up now and shoot them ducks a-settin’ like they are,” he said, “I could turn round and give yu that information I promised in my lettah. I reckon I cayn’t do either.” And he let down the hammer of his gun.

“I did not know—I mean I would have shot and never thought of their side of the case,” I said, trying to jutsify myself in his eyes.

We were completely hidden and the duck had no wind of us. I heard their quacking and then a shrill, sharp note—the mating call. I had never heard it before, but I knew it. Red spoke again:

“Yes, yu could have done that a-way, but me—things a-matin’ in the Spring—ducks, I mean, and antelope; cows gettin’ calves, men in love with women, and women in love with men, and all creation buildin’ happy homes, just for two—maybe yu don’t feel like I do about them things.”

“I don’t know—I guess I never thought much about it,” I confessed.

He stretched out on the green grass, and looking up at the sky began making excuses for me. “Yu have lived always among boards, hard walks and stone walls—spring don’t affect such things like it

does trees and grass and animals, like I have had around me. Maybe men and women that live your kind of a life nevah feel like we do who live among all this."

"Likely not." And now I seated myself beside him and spoke of that world, telling him of its crime, its vanity, its goodness, and its grief,—things which he had not seen, but of which, invariably, he had read. His interest was intense. But he said finally, "I wouldn't like it—only for a time, to make money."

I agreed with him. I was enraptured with the beauty and warmth of Texas. From where we lay, a little vista opened, of green, rounded slopes in front of low, branching trees, and just a glimpse of water.

"This is fine," I said, expanding my lungs and filling them to the utmost with exhilarating air. "Fine! Now if I could have a little home right out there——"

He laughed. "Yu're gettin' it," he said, and turned over on his stomach. "Come and punch cows on old R2 for a year and yu won't be a brass kettle no more."

"Am I a brass kettle now?" I asked, amused.

"Well, yu got a right smart of polish, yu are right resistin', yu are cold-hearted and unfeelin', and yu are the same yesterday, to-day and to-morro'—yes, yu resemble a brass kettle right smart."

We laughed over this. I think I had never enjoyed a day so much—I mean the *day!*—the air, the sunshine, the earth—all that made up the day. I lay stretched out like Red, on the grass, with the hot sun burning along my spine, until nature's own

pulse was throbbing in my veins, and I was filled with the newness of life. I told Red that I was ready to go with him and punch cows. He promised me a job under him at R2—that ranch where the proprietor thoughtfully paid his men in advance lest they be killed before the month's end.

"It is not so bad now," said Red, when I mentioned this fact to him. "There ain't been any trouble at R2 for most three months."

I expressed a wish that peace might continue. And then lay in the sun and dreamed of a day when I should gallop over the prairie as strong as a savage. From this dream Red recalled me with an abrupt question:

"Do yu think my fathah has aged?"

I answered evasively. Col. Levering had changed much. So had Joseph, and I spoke of this.

"Love," he said, "changes a woman."

I sat up. The earth under me seemed suddenly to have become cold and hard. I arose to my feet, and brushed my clothes with much needless care. As we neared home, we saw a man on horseback leaving the place.

"It's Morton," said Red, in response to my curiosity about this.

"Has he—do you suppose he was there to dinner?" I asked, and then followed my question with a recital of what Morton had told me about their having Sunday dinners every day at his home.

"He gets a meal off of my folks every quartah," said Red, "and it does him for three months. Miss Birch told me oncet that Mortons did not have food—they ate provendah." He smiled over this jest of the lady who had jilted him, then added sorrow-

fully: "Fathah has had to renew the mortgage to-day—Morton says it's the last renewal he'll make on ouah home."

That evening I had a long talk with Joseph—it was one of the few I had had with her. She was very gracious, and I found myself doing my best to please her, with what regard you may judge by this:

After I had discoursed at some length about myself and my hopes—with all the best to the fore, you may be sure—she suddenly clasped her hands and exhibited the first emotion I had seen in her. Joy shone in face and eyes, and even radiated from her hands, as she said softly:

"God has been very good to me—He has given me opportunity to save a soul—the soul of a cowboy!"

I looked the question, "Not Red's?"

"No," she replied with a cold flash. "No, I have given him up. We all have. When the love of a puah, sweet girl like Birch Halloway cannot save a man, he is indeed lost," she said in a hard voice. Then added softly, "All men are not so wilful and perverse as my brothah."

And these words, with the look that had come to her when she was moved by feeling, and the smooth ivory of her brow, the slim beauty of her hands, and the essential purity of her, I took to my bed. With them I struggled for half the night, and in the morning was sure of two things: one of them—If the man Joseph had set herself to save was as sure of heaven already as was her brother, her reward would not be what she was expecting. But alas! could she have saved the soul upon which she had

fastened her hope, her reward would have been great—greater even than was her golden dream!

Next day, when I, with Red, departed for R2 rancho, Joseph gave to my hand a letter daintily wrapped.

“Yu will find him where yu are going,” she said, as I bowed low over her extended hand.

I did. And to this day I marvel at the strange pranks fate plays with womankind!

CHAPTER XII.

THE LLANO ESTACADO.

That section called the Llano Estacado comprises the western half of Texas. It is a plain, but not a rolling plain like the Black Prairie, where all descents are gradual slopes, and the hills lie like inverted soup plates on a table. The Llano Estacado is perfectly flat where it is flat, and abruptly broken where it is not flat. Descents are down steps, where the earth seems to have cracked, and one edge settled a foot or more. Such a step may run a great distance, and its front is of bare yellow clay. After another flat surface, there will occur another step, and then another at regular intervals, until, between two such brakes in the prairie, will be found a stream, lying like a yellow ribbon, without a ripple or murmur, its water lingering on its clay bottom as if uncertain which way to flow. And so its course continues for miles in Spring and Winter—in Summer it is not, neither is there any indication that it ever was or will be. In other

localities there are steep bluffs. The prairie runs flat and unbroken, to the very edge of these, and there breaks off, like the sudden end of the earth. These bluffs are quite extensive, and are full of menace to stampeded cattle. Below the break the prairie begins again, flat and untimbered, though near the bluff there may be a single hackberry, or a clump of cottonwood. The chief vegetation of the plain is giant cacti, standing like posts several feet high, which grow in patches, and about them grows low grass and a sage-like weed, much liked by cattle. Between the patches there is often the naked earth.

Red and I, riding up from the Red River country, crossed the divide, between the Red and the Brazos, about noon. The long ride was made in silence for the most part. Once, when perhaps ten miles on our way, I observed that Red was not beside me. Looking back I saw him, with hat off and a hand shading his eyes, sitting motionless and gazing back into the low country. I imitated him, but could see nothing except acres and miles of prairie stretching away, ever falling as it receded. But when I took up my glass I detected at the very edge of the horizon, a white speck. And I understood. It was the schoolhouse, far below on the Belknap. Here, no doubt, in former days, the lover had been wont to pause and take a last, lingering look at the place of his beloved. But it was not from habit that he paused to-day. His eyes, when he finally rode up to me, were full of the love that was still burning in his heart.

"I cayn't realize yet that it is all ovah," he said slowly. "When I do——" He broke off and shook his head.

"When you do you will go on just as you always have," I said, to show my faith.

"I reckon so," he said, but shook his head again.

Then I suffered a little pang of remorse. I should have gone to see Birch Halloway before leaving the Red River, and I said:

"I should have called upon Miss Birch. Is she at Morton's?"

"Ya-ah, at Morton's. And she cayn't go home now for Sunday."

That the Halloways should have sold their Texas property and returned to Missouri leaving their daughter, was something of a puzzle to me. But for Miss Birch's loneliness and hardship I felt scant sympathy.

"Birch knew what she would have to put up with when she took the school," I said, ungraciously.

"A part, she knew."

I smiled and ventured a little raillery. "I will bet that you would be taking her a chicken every week this Winter, if the distance was not so great."

"I would, seh."

"I suppose I have never loved," I continued brutally, "for when a girl turns me down I always get mad about it."

"Mad?" Red looked at me, and for once I wished that he would not. Our horses jogged on, but still his hungry eyes held to mine. "Mad?" he repeated. "I reckon I'd be better if I could get mad. They say a bone is stronger foah bein' broke. But me—there ain't no fight left in me. If it wasn't foah that mortgage on ouah home——"

What would he do? I dared not even conjecture. His was the nature to do the unusual, and I under-

stood something of how deep his hurt was. But the mortgage was there, and I was glad it was—a more omnipotent taskmaster than a mortgage I never knew. Red had his work left and there was hope for him.

We must have gone two miles before he spoke again. “Yu probably don’t admire the way I act in this?” It was a question, but he did not wait for an answer. “Birch made me do this thing myself. She left it for me to say. She made me knife my own heart.”

“Well, when there was nothing else for it——”

“There was her way.”

“But if you couldn’t do her way——”

“Her way!—I have seen men a-plenty that do their wife’s way in everything. They are good men—good citizens—good fillers in. I don’t want to be that kind of a man. Did I go back on Birch?—She says I did.”

“That is the woman of it. You did not. She asked the impossible and you refused. So this is the Staked Plain we are coming to?”

“Ya-ah, them are the first stakes. Did yu notice how Joseph treated me? She always does that. She poisoned Birch against me. I didn’t think she could do it. I thought love was strongah than pride.”

“It is. If Miss Birch truly loves you, she will come around in a short time. Never fear about that.”

I saw him wince, and was sorry for my words. I spoke hastily of the plain spread out from horizon to horizon, with tall stakes set in patches like the ruins of a stockade. And over all the dim blue of the sky. I felt myself growing bigger and better,

because of the bigness of the universe. Not so Red. As the miles lengthened between him and his beloved, his mood grew more and more dejected.

"Yu say yu nevah loved, and I think from the things yu say that's true of yu." I knew he meant my unfortunate words, and I waited in trepidation, but he had no censure for me. "Birch and me suited each othah down to the ground. We liked to talk about the same things—and there were times when we neither wanted to talk—just wanted to feel the othah near. We liked the same things to eat—no sugah in ouah tea, and all that. And Birch liked foah me to have big thoughts and to hope foah big things. Was that because she wants to be a big man's wife—wants to be rich and make a spread ovah othah women? And because she thought I nevah could put her in that place, does she want to get somebody that can?—or put herself there?"

"It isn't like her," I protested.

"No. But there was something she nevah told me. I heard it from Eunice."

"That she has a gift? Yes, she has been teaching that she might study in New York. So you think that was an influence against you?"

"She nevah mentioned it to me. She kept her dearest confidence from me."

"Listen," I said. "Suppose she had told you, and had asked you to wait until she finished her course and entered upon her career—would you have waited?"

"No, seh."

"Then what did you want?" I asked. "What do you want?"

He did not answer me—but I had not answered

him. I tried to. "Haven't you had hopes so dear, and yet so far away—seemingly so impossible of attainment that you could not have spoken of them to any living person? Perhaps it was——"

But he could not see this, and interrupted. "She told othahs. It wasn't as if she had told no one. I think she figured all along that she would break off with me."

"Red," I said, "you are mixing things—I never heard you mix things before. And Birch was not making a fool of you."

He looked at me. "What was she doin', then?"

"Possibly she was trying herself—learning which was strongest within her, the instincts of the woman, or longings of the artist."

"Yes. Well, love was the weaker feelin'—I lost out."

I still tried it saying, "Yes, you lost out—this time. But she may find that she misjudged herself. When the long, lonely days come and go, she will——"

He stopped me with an imperative motion. "I don't want that sort of love in wife of mine. I want a love that out-weighs everything else, one that compels, and drives and breaks down all that comes in its way; I don't want no lonesome sort of love. I don't give that kind of love—I won't take that kind in return. And I won't be Mrs. Birch Levering's husband!"

He said this positively. I thought I had given him the help he needed. But I soon saw my mistake in this. His mood was not to be shaken off. Miss Birch had given him a choice—be her kind of a man or do without her. He had chosen; and then learned,

or thought he had learned, her true motive. It wounded him in a way that could not heal soon. "She did not love me enough; I haven't got it in me to make her love me enough." And nothing I could say in the long miles of our ride could take his mind from this. He worked around the circle again to self-accusation. "It was me that failed; I couldn't make her love me enough."

I was feeling too sorry for him now to speak. Presently he resumed:

"A man has no business bein' like I am. He ought to be like a hawss, and have no hopes, no mind, no memory. Or he ought to be able oncet in a while to get what he goes aftah. I fail and fail! And that is not all, though that hurts me awful—there is the memory, and the sting, and the fear—there has come to be a *fear* now, that I will fail this time because I failed last time. And now I have nothin' to try foah—nobody to try foah!"

He gave a dry sob. It was so unexpected in him that before I knew it I had reined my horse up beside his and put my arm around his shoulders. I had no sooner touched him than he was utterly overcome. "She had come to be the sunshine of my life," he said.

I understood how it was. In his lonely life on this vast plain his thoughts were his constant companions; if they were bright and full of hope then his life was bright, even though he was drenched to the skin, or lashed and beaten by a hot, raging wind; but if his thoughts were of failure, then his days were dark, and the great voiceless plain became the valley of desolation. He dreaded going back to his work; he dreaded being alone with only cattle; he

dreaded even the evening banter of the cowboys at the bunk house; he dreaded all things, now that his heart was sore—his love refused. Time would accustom him to the new condition and fill his mind with wholesome, if not so glowing, hopes. But I had the sense not to try to make him see this now. I kept silent, and presently he shook my hand, not looking at me as he did so. Then he made a new beginning of talk between us, speaking of the Plain. "That south that looks like a cloud is Buzzard Peak, and Kiowa Peak is closet to it—we will see them good later. We will camp to-night on Squaw Fork, and to-morro' we'll cross Salt Fork of the Brazos. Yu can see Canon Reseata most any day."

So we talked of things seen until we reached Squaw Fork and made the promised camp. There was a high bluff to the north of us, several rods from the water, and a huge hackberry spread its green limbs in its shelter. "Prairie fires miss 'em there," was Red's explanation of there being no timber elsewhere. He cooked our supper there in the open, and later spread our blankets beside the ashes. But not without protest from me. I favored the protection of the bluff and the shelter of the hackberry.

Red shook his head. "This here will be more comfortable when dark comes," he said.

We were in our blankets at dusk, and I slept immediately. A few hours later I found myself bolt up in bed. On the air, up from the earth, out of the very blankets that covered me, came the hideous howl of wolves, a hundred or more of them, I judged, and so I spoke to Red, that he might wake and hear the unusual concert.

"I reckon there's two," he said, "but one of them is a mile below here."

Crestfallen I lay down. A little later, while in a dream of the city and its dark dungeons of crime, I heard a scream of fright and agony—a woman's shriek. I leaped from the covers and snatched my gun. I realized, the moment my feet touched the grass, that the wild prairie surrounded me, that the clear sky was above my head and the young moon looking down from between boughs of the hackberry. But that woman's scream was not a part of any dream; it was pulsating on the air I breathed, the agony, the despair, the heart-appeal of it was tugging at every fibre of my being. I saw Red's hand move to his gun.

"Lay down," he said, in a tone of command. "She won't hurt yu if yu keep still."

"You heard that cry?" I asked.

"Ya-ah,—she is in the hackberry yondah, I reckon. But if she'd have been hankerin' very much foah our livers, she wouldn't have waked us up yellin'."

"Our livers? You are not awake, are you?"

"They always act that-a-way this time of year. Yu'd bettah lay down, seh."

I stood still while into my intelligence sank the knowledge that it was the cry of a mountain cat that had aroused me. Then I obeyed Red. I crept noiselessly between my blankets, and drew them over my ears, seeking security as does a child afraid of the dark. My wide-awake eyes, peering from this protection, stared up at the hackberry, and saw the long, lithe body of the animal silhouetted on the sky; then it glided away in the shadows. For an hour I lay

bathed in cold sweat, hearing stealthy steps all around me; hearing unmistakable sniffs, and catching a strange odor. These things I charged to fancy, aided by fear, and finally slept. But in the morning I found tracks near our beds that measured quite six inches across. I showed these to Red.

"I reckon she did sniff around some," he admitted indifferently.

"But what was to hinder her springing upon one of us?" I cried, feeling the muscles of my scalp contract at the thought.

"Nothin'—only yu notice that she didn't."

"Maybe the next one will."

"Ya-ah. But they have got sense, yu'll find—sense that we ain't got. That one last night was plumb curious about us, that's all. And the way she walked around and around, and looked, and sniffed, and wondered, all the while keepin' time with the tip end of her tail, was plumb funny to wasn't much sleep around, and yu took what there was."

I expressed my surprise. And then, rather shamefacedly, I told him how I had covered up my head, and how I lay and sweat, thinking him asleep.

watch."

"You were watchin' her, then?"

"Ya-ah. I'd nothin' else to do last night. There

"There was no occasion for alarm," he said. "But if yu had a-shot at her, likely this here would have been a different lookin' camp this mawnin'. They are hard to kill—wounds that would lay any other animal out just seem to put life and fight into them. When yu get ready to kill one, yu take good daylight for it, and be sure of your aim. Any time yu

haven't them two points of advantage, yu let pussy alone."

I accepted his advice in silence, and many times have I had occasion to use it, which is more than I can say of the most of advice I have had. But I was glad, when evening came around again, that we were nearing R 2 rancho.

CHAPTER XIII.

DOES LOVE CHANGE A MAN?

R 2 Rancho, as far as lines or natural boundary was concerned, had no beginning and no end. The buildings belonging to it sat like dark warts on the level prairie that once was Spain; they had been there so long that they had taken on the tone of their surroundings, weeds were growing in the soil that made their roofs, and trails, deep-worn, led to them from every direction, like the spokes of a wheel to its hub; who built them or why they were built, would have been wildest conjecture from the oldest inhabitant of Texas. But Red explained their modern use—the cook shack where they ate, the bunk house where they slept in fair weather—in bad weather they remained with the cattle on the range. And apart from these, he showed to me the "guest chambah"—which from its forbidding aspect might have been a jail—where the owners of the rancho slept when there, and where buyers and like guests were made comfortable.

Several of the ranch hands were already in when we dismounted at the corral. They passed a genial



Cowboys at R2 Ranch. — Page 214.

word to their foreman, and assured him that "things had gone on" during his absence. I recognized Sleepy Smith among them, and he passed a quiet "howdy" to me. I observed that he watched me as I stood looking over my surroundings.

"Lookin' for the graveyard?" he asked, as he came near and squinted half-closed eyes into my face.

I smiled and nodded. "Yes, where is it?"

"There ain't none—and the hull country's one."

"Time has sharpened your wit," I observed.

"It has sharpened some of your points."

I gave him a smile—the one I bought of the doctors. Was I never to get away from my thinness? Then I made an inquiry, and presently handed the letter, which Joseph had entrusted to my care, to a man who looked as little deserving of the dainty missive as a pig of fine linen.

He opened it before us all, and laboriously, with moving lips, read it through and grunted. He was a tall man, dressed as were the other cowboys, but his flannel shirt was unbuttoned over a hairy chest, his coarse trowsers sagged dangerously at the waist and hung in worn folds about his feet, and over the whole man there was a grime—a filth, that was not of a day or of a week. He did not look a fit candidate for heaven, I thought, and no church would take him, even on probation. Yet a woman would try, out of such material, to make a man and save his soul!

This was Hooven—Jim Hooven. When I lifted my eyes from my inspection of him, I found Red's gaze fixed on me, sober and calm. He knew that I had brought the letter. I felt that he should have kicked me. I wanted to kick myself.

Hooven smiled, after his grunt, and looked at me inquiringly.

"I came from there," I replied, in answer to his look, and purposely left out all names.

At that Hoover smiled again, and pushed his hat back. His hair lay in damp, sorrel strings on a forehead that sloped back like a toboggan slide; the same sorrel strings of hair were visible below large, red ears. The looks of the man and his acts filled me with a sickening sense of disgust. I heard Red clear his throat, but no word came from him. Others of the ranch outfit rode up and dismounted. I looked them over and found them clean under the dust. Hearty, frank men, young and middle-aged, to whom I would have given a full measure of good feeling on the spot. But they greeted me restrainedly, while they swore with surprising gusto at each other. Hooven seemed to wait for them.

"Where did you say you just come from?" he asked in an auspicious moment. All stopped their talk.

"I?—why, I came up from the Station," I said. And added, "It's a long ride."

Hooven drew his letter out, holding it so all could see. "How did you come by this, then?" he asked, and his gaze went past me to Red.

I was nettled. The man was playing me, the new arrival, for some grudge he held against his foreman. The thing was plain. But I answered calmly: "It was handed to me. I hope I have not been the bearer of bad news."

He smiled, and now his smile was frankly sinister, and it, like his gaze, went past me to Red. In a tone of mingled joy and malice he said:

"No, no bad news—nothin' on-welcome. I just was wonderin' how it was that Miss Levering sent my letter by a stranger—when there was another way." And he looked around over the listening cow-punchers.

I experienced a sensation of internal boiling. I saw his plot—to reveal his association with Red's sister, to brag over his conquest and at the same time to use me, her brother's friend, as an instrument for his humiliation before his men. And it was all cunningly done. The insult was not in the words, but in the coarse ugliness of the man. And one may not hit a man for being ugly—if one could, life would be taken up with the giving and receiving of blows. I myself would be a worthy target. So I sat and boiled.

The cow-punchers turned and sauntered off by two's and three's. To them the show was over; to me it had just begun. I looked for Red. He was at the corral. Hooven, nearing the cook shack, burst lustily into song:

"On Sunday night I'll hold her tight,
And she'll sit on my knee;
On Sunday night I'll kiss her right,
And she'll kiss me—e—e."

I walked across to the corral and viciously kicked a post—it did not even shiver! I wrenched at it with my hands, and kicked it again. Red came back, carrying his saddle. He slapped my shoulder and said ironically, "We set them solid here."

"Posts,—yes!" I snorted. "But for a thing like that Hooven to even mention Miss Joseph is an insult."

"She gave him the right."

"I want to kill him."

"I've had that feelin' myself," he admitted.

"I can't stay here with him," I declared.

"He is leavin' us soon."

"For what?—Not that!" I cried.

"No,—not yet, I reckon."

"What is he going to do?"

Red was silent for a full minute, but his words came with a sharp abruptness, "He ain't told me."

I dug my hands into my pockets. The prairie stretched away to a dim, gray horizon, round as a hoop; a few stars twinkled mockingly. I felt little, incapable, contemptible, helpless. Red slapped my shoulder again.

"Suppah will be on about now," he said.

We went up to the shack. The table was full, but they made room for me. The food was clean and abundant. I was hungry and enjoyed myself in the eating. The cowboys still made a stranger of me, but they did not allow my presence to make them strange with each other. Jokes rattled around the table like billiard balls, and now and then one was followed by a substantial hot biscuit. I was the audience to all their fun. They did not know yet whether I was there as a guest of the foreman, a buyer, or a job-hunter. They found out later, and thereafter I got my share of everything. With the dawn I was assigned my duties. They were done under the eye of Hooven. He corrected my blunders without telling me why they were blunders, and maintained toward me an air of direct insult, such as he had shown on the evening of my arrival. I complained of this to Red.

"Yu are to fill his place," he said.

I thought him unjust in his devotion to duty. That he had a purpose—shall I say hope?—in thrusting the society of Hooven on me, I failed to divine.

Then one day Red joined us, coming unexpectedly from a ravine. There had been a storm the night before, and the beef stuff, separated from the cow-herd during the calving season, had been widely scattered. Hooven and I scoured our end of the range pretty thoroughly and rounded up quite a number of steers. We had just returned from driving these back to their rightful range when Red came.

He gave some directions about cows with newborn calves. "A cow will drop her calf where she can protect it from coyotes—every time she will do that a-way," he said. "She'll kind of have the thing planned out beforehand in a way that we can't see, and she'll take care of it. But if a some fool man goes and moves that critter to some other place—one that looks good to him—nine times out of ten that cow will lose her head if attacked and her calf will be ett up. I say, let them stay where yu find them, or corral them."

"Rot," said Hooven. "The worst rot I ever heard. Why, I have seen cows——"

But just then a nearby critter bawled with its mouth full of grass, grazed a moment and bawled again, head up and uneasy. I noticed this—it caused me to miss whatever it was that Hooven had seen cows do. But I thought nothing of the incident until he rode out into the herd and inspected that critter closely.

"This here is a steer," he announced in an important voice, "and there is no brand on him."

"Maybe there are more steers here, then," said Red, and for a time we rode in and out among the grazing cattle. We found none and so came back to the steer.

"It's no stray, I told you," said Hooven in response to some word of Red's. "That there is a mauverick."

Red gazed back over the herd. "Well," he said, "if there are more steers here, yu all will drop onto them during the day. Cut that fello' out, Hooven, and chase him up the ravine."

"How do you know he belongs up?" said Hooven, making no move to obey. "Maybe he belongs down."

Red gave him a sharp glance. "The steer herd is up," he said in a voice too slow to be natural. "Because this here one missed gettin' his brand on him, he ain't at liberty to run with the cows."

"Maybe R 2 ain't the ones as missed puttin' a brand on him," said Hooven.

"Maybe we all didn't."

"Maybe he don't belong to none of the Llano ranches."

"Might be that a-way."

"Maybe now he is one of Morton's—he don't brand."

"Makes it mighty handy for them as want to claim what don't belong to them." And this time Red's words came with a sting like the tip end of a whip lash.

Hooven did not respond immediately, and Red rode around the steer and began working him toward the edge of the herd. Hooven followed. His

face was dark, and deep lines of hate furrowed it across.

"A mauverick belong to the man that finds him," he said doggedly.

Red gave him another glance—a long one. But he answered nothing, and I asked:

"What is a mauverick?"

Red explained this to me, more in detail than was necessary I thought. Therefore, at the first opportunity, I sought to end it by saying:

"I see—a mauverick is any homeless, nameless critter. When he gets a brand he gets a name,—he is R2, D4, or IXL. When he is sold he gets a new master and a new name—the old one hairs over and is forgotten."

Red observed me narrowly. "I oncet knowed a man like that," he said.

The words had no effect on me. But on Hooven they had, and that effect was instantaneous. He jerked his horse to a stop directly in Red's path.

"Yes!" And the word fell with a hiss. "Well, what have you got to say about him?"

Red guided his horse around Hooven. "The way we all handle mauvericks is about the only practical way," he said, ignoring Hooven by giving his whole attention to me. "At the round-up last Fall there were four mauvericks—one apiece for the pool. Fall before last there wasn't but one unbranded critter, and the big guns drew lots for it."

"Maybe there won't be none this Fall," said Hooven in a voice that was far from steady.

Again Red made no reply. He gave his attention to the steer. He had the critter near the edge of the herd now, and so quietly had he manoeuvred

that not one of the cows had been disturbed, and even the steer did not suspect that anything was up. Hooven, however, was disturbed and suspicious.

"This mauverick as well stay on here," he said in a tone of threat. "He won't hurt the cows none."

Red stopped his horse. His expression told that he had done with ignoring and evading.

"My awders to yu was to chase this steer up the ravine, seh. Yu did not obey. I shall do the work myself."

Hooven forced an insulting smile. "Suppose I rope him now," he said with slow insolence. "He is mine, then, and I can do as I please with him."

Red fixed him with a glance that was sterner than any word. Hooven's eyes met his steadily. I could hear both men breathe.

Then Hooven's glance wavered. His hand went to his rope. "I could rope him easy," he said to me. "But I say, what is the use of frightening the critter? I found him. I am near enough to rope him. I have you for a witness—both of you for witnesses. The steer is mine!"

"He cayn't run in this herd," said Red, in ominously even tones.

Hooven raised himself in his saddle like a mad tarantula. "You said it was a good law! Why, in hell——"

"Have yu got a herd, Hooven?"

"Of course not! If I had, by—but I found this critter, and——"

"If yu ain't got no herd, Hooven, how could yu have missed the brandin' of this steer?"

"That ain't a thing to do with it," Hooven snorted. "I know a man that built up a herd out of just mauvericks."

"I reckon I know the same man."

"He is rich now——"

"Rich and respected."

"He staid by his friends, too."

"Staid right by the gang to the last fight."

"One was killed in that fight," said Hooven tensely.

"One is dead, seh."

What lay beneath all of this? It was acting—both men were acting and I was the audience—a very attentive, not to say alarmed, audience. But they were not playing for the audience—they were playing for each other. They were doing it perfectly. I had seen actors—the best that played on any stage. But this! It would not be acting soon. They paused in their useless talk, and in the interval of silence each fixed himself to meet the end. But it was an internal fixing, nothing of it was shown on the surface. Red sat toying with the reins. Both were breathing short.

"If you were not her brother I would shoot you now," said Hooven thickly.

"Don't let that stop yu," said Red.

Hooven lifted his face—it was as gray as ashes and entirely wet with sweat. He gave one swift, hurried glance around,—it took in the prairie, the cattle, the sky and me—but I knew, as I watched, that he had seen none of these things. It was but the staring about of a man in delirium. His hand groped unsteadily for his gun.

"The fello's on that gang set a lot by their leader," said Red, still toying with the reins. "I reckon he was a fascinatin' sort of a man. And when a fello' got undah his influence, he kind of did as he was told without givin' much thought to——"

Hooven moved in his saddle. "You can't talk agin Chad to——" He looked at me and wet his lips.

I understood, and my hand moved to my gun. Red saw me and shook his head. I obeyed him mechanically.

"Them fello's all, was like soldiers undah the command of Chad," he said, "and they did as Chad said for them to do without oncet consultin' their own ideas. If Chad said for one to go do a thing, he went; if Chad——"

"Is it—is it any of your damned business if he did?" Hooven asked, while his chest heaved and his whole form shook.

"One night," Red continued, "one night a man of that gang shot my hawss, in the rivah close to Herrington. But that fello' didn't do it because he had anything against me, or against my hawss—he hadn't a thing. Left all to hissself he wouldn't have thought of killin' me, even if he had of known that the sheriff was comin'. He'd have thought of savin' hissself and his pals, of course. But killin' wouldn't have occurred to him, except in self-defense."

Hooven's head sank upon his chest. Tears fell on his hands and splashed on his revolver; his whole form shook and trembled. I had seen such a sight once—a man given up to grief at the bedside of his dying wife—but only that once before. He tried to control himself and finally blurted out what sounded like an appeal:

"He wa'n't no coward!"

"No," said Red. "No! Chad never'd a-had him on the gang if he had been. Neither would that man have shot at a defenseless man in the watah, except as I said, he was a soldier undah command of a higher officer."

"You had a chance to kill him," said Hooven, raising his red eyes to Red.

"I've had several."

"Why don't you do it, then?"

"Why?" Red's form relaxed. He put up a hand and pushed his hat back with a slow motion. "Well, I'll tell yu, Hooven. I've figured it all along like this I've been tellin' yu. I figured that yu—that he was an enlisted thief—now wait——" As Hooven stiffened—"Wait, and I'll change that. I'll say he was an enlisted man, and his commander awdered him wrong—*awdered* him wrong, yu see, and he had to obey awders—he thought he did. We all punished his commander. I reckon that settled it."

A sob broke from Hooven. "Chad is dead!—my God, he is dead! I can't find him! I won't ever see him again!" He flung out a clenched fist toward heaven, and then gave up and bawled.

I glanced from him to Red, and back again to the grief-stricken man. I understood it all. This was Logan! And Red could know him in his disguise, and give him a job; he could take all his insults, endure all his affronts, and lay his very crimes on his commander. He could let him live on in security to court and marry Joseph—all because he had been ordered wrong.

I regarded Red with a kind of awe for the moment. I think I had not been surprised to see a halo around his head. And I thought: If he can endure and condone all this, shall I interfere? If Hooven is penitent—if this tumble weed that has come again after a Winter's absence, this mauverick that has found a new name, is penitent, and anxious to reform—if he is willing to be a man now, and have

his soul saved, is it my part to deprive him of his chance? But, is he willing? Hooven himself answered my thought. He lifted his head and spoke to Red.

"I ain't askin' for your forgiveness," he said, after a struggle with his voice. "I don't need your friendship."

"That's all right about my friendship," said Red, "and I ain't tryin' to thrust it on to yu. But as for forgiveness—yu're not owin' any to me. Yu wasn't the fello' that shot at me. Chad Harris was the fello' that did——"

"But Chad—why, darn it, Red, Chad was at home that night!"

"But—why, cayn't you see the point?" Red smiled indulgently. "His man was out!—the killin' was to be his'n."

Hooven straightened himself. "You have a queer way of figurin' things," he said, and blew his nose. "A mighty queer way."

Yes, it was a queer way—queer to we earth-bound mortals.

We started our horses. We cast about for the steer, then, looked questioningly at each other. Just then we heard a faint, unsteady bawl, and glancing up the ravine, saw the steer going at a trot.

"He's got scent of kin of his'n," said Red.

"Likely," I replied.

We separated. Red went to duties elsewhere. Hooven, to show that he did not desire my company, spurred his horse to a run, and rode to the far side of the herd, where I saw him dismount and fling himself prone on the earth. I was left to think it all over, which was never a good thing with me. At the bunk house that evening I sought Red.

"What do you make out about Logan now?" were my first words upon the subject which now engaged my whole attention.

"Call him Hooven," said Red, short.

"Well, Hooven, then. He is not penitent."

"He is sorry, though."

Sorry! I was surprised. Could Red have been misled by this man? There had not been exhibited one spark of regret for the wrong he had done! Only grief for his dead leader—his outlaw boss. And that had not been all grief. Hidden beneath it and smouldering under it, was a desire for revenge. Yes, for blood. And now I spoke out my mind.

"You are wrong, Red. I have studied men. This Hooven is bad to——"

"Wait!"

Footsteps came near, passed, and the sound died away.

But Red still waited. Our light was a dim lantern. I could not see his face distinctly. I took the lantern up, shook it, and tried turning the wick up and down. It was no use.

"The globe needs cleanin'," said Red lazily.

"Needs it bad." And then I became sarcastic. "Some other things around here need polishing up," I said.

"Yu mean my intellect? That's true enough."

He spoke sharply. I had thought him indifferent. I realized my mistake. In fear that I had angered him I strove to make my point clearer.

"This Hooven is so bad——" I began. But he stopped me with a question.

"Do you believe that babies are born good?—all of them?"

"I do not. Wicked parents beget vicious offspring. The sins of the father——"

"I know." His tone was still sharp. "Yu got the Bible back of yu, and that is a mighty comfortable support. I'll allow that yu are right, and we'll drop that point, not knowin' whether his parents were good, bad or indifferent; likely they were indifferent—most are. But him—we have seen how a man he loved could influence him; could make him lie, and steal, and kill! We have seen how he could love a man and be led wrong by him. A man don't often love another man like Hooven loved Chad Harris. Yu don't see it often."

I confessed that I had never before seen such an exhibition of affection in one man for another, as I had that day witnessed in Hooven.

"Well, then," said Red, with the inflection of finality.

"Well then what?" I asked.

"Why, don't yu see, seh?—if he could love a bad man and be influenced to the bad by him, cayn't he love a good woman and be influenced to the good by her? I say that the influence will be stronger and more enduring by the woman than by the man, seh."

I gazed at him agape. Like Hooven, my thought was: "You have a damned queer way of reasoning." Then my blood began to boil.

"You are a fool," I said, springing up. "Your idea is to experiment—with your own sister in the balance! It may turn out as you say, and it may not. The chances are against it—everything since the time of Adam is against it! I—You know that the man is a villain—a villain to the core!"

I was too angry to talk. I hoped I had angered

him also. But I had not. He spoke with his customary calmness.

"Maybe yu are right, seh. But it pays, don't it, to be a philosopher? I have done a right smart of herdin' of cattle. Some days it rains, and I get wet to the hide,—I ain't nearly so comfortable as I am when it is dry and the sun shines. But I think how the grass will green up, and how the cattle won't trail so much; how fine the air will be, and how all nature's goin' to smile; and how good suppah will taste! It helps a lot while I am ridin' around in my wet clothes with my hawss a-slippin' and a-slidin' undah me. If I was to get mad, and think all the time of my discomforts, it would be a sight harder to bear,—seein' as the rain goes on the same, whatever my mental attitood is."

"But you can stop this!" I burst out.

"Yu would oblige me by givin' particulars."

"You and your folks can——"

"That ground has been covered right thoroughly."

"Well then, him!—make threats——"

"I wouldn't threaten a dog, and not make good."

"Enforce the threats, then," I blazed.

"That means a killin'. I ain't his judge."

"You are Joseph's brother," I blazed again.

He looked at me dumb. My face grew hot to the roots of my hair. I asked his pardon.

"Oh, shoot your tongue off at me," he said. "Yu won't do harm then."

"Well, then, only this, Red,—I am going to do something."

"That there is your privilege, seh."

"You won't help me?"

"I cayn't go against my own sistah, seh."

"My God, man, I am asking you to do something for her."

"As yu see it, yu are."

"There is no other way for a sane man to see it," I blazed. "I shall prevent this marriage at the cost of a life."

"That there is your privilege," he stated again.

"Then I'll exercise it. I'll do the thing without your help."

"Yu will, if yu do it at all, seh."

"I shall," I said. And then after a pause: "And I would hate—I would despise to be the brother of a girl, and let her marry a villain—a villain, who, by all the laws of right and justice, I had a right to kill!"

"It does place a fello' in a right mean position," he said so sincerely, and so absurdly unruffled, that I laughed.

"Nothing enviable about it, surely," I said, my laughter turning to a sneer.

He got up then and stood in front of me, the light of the lantern fell full on his face. To my surprise he was pale; his face was drawn with suffering.

"I want to make my sistah happy," he said simply. "I want to do, and to have her do, what will make her happy for all her life. If for me to kill Hooven would do that, I'd shoot him to-night. But a woman will love a dead bad man a heap sight longah than she will a live bad man. And Joseph is that deep constituted that once she loves, she'll love always. She is some like me."

I put a hand on his arm. "Red," I begged, "forgive me. I do not see your way—I can't! Besides,"—and I leaped at this thought—"Joseph does not—"

she cannot love this Hooven with all the intensity of her being."

His face beamed. "That there is just my hope," he said.

"Then," I said joyfully, "we will separate them now, and end it."

"That there is just what own't end it," he said, the light dying from his eyes. "He'd be a martyr to my temper, or to your law. Joseph loves a martyr. That would cinch the thing."

He sat down again, and covered his face with his hands. In a moment he let them fall limply at his sides.

"Life—what is it without love?—aftah you've once had it in your heart? Look at me! Three weeks ago I was happy—all but for this thing we have talked about. I wrote to yu—said I'd give yu information. I thought I'd let the law take him out of my way. I didn't know then. But when I lost her—Miss Birch, I mean—why, then I knew what it was that I'd laid out to do to my sistah. Death—why, that's ovah in a minute! Poverty—why, yu can work! Disgrace—yu can move away. But love! Yu don't want me to take my sistah's heart and hack it all up with a dull knife, just because mine has been torn that a-way?—yu cayn't ask me to do that?"

I looked at him dumbly. He was right. But so absurdly right—right in such an impractical, gospel-like way, that I could not agree with him; I could not yield to his way. Yet I loved him—loved him better than I had ever loved him before. I longed to see his way, and to do his way, if only to please

him. But I could not. Reason, precedent, law itself, forbade. And I understood now how it had been with Birch Holloway. He had been like this with her—so calm and determined, so kind and so resolute, so right in his own mind and yet so wrong to her.

Poor Red! I heard him muttering and tossing in his bunk all the night through. But he slept. For me, and for Hooven (I knew by his restless turning) there was no sleep.

In a few days Hooven left us to go to work "fit for a gentleman," he took pains to say. And as he rode away, in a great burst of speed and exuberance, the wind brought back the words of that song I loathed:

"On Sunday night I'll hold her tight,
And she'll sit on my knee;
On Sunday night I'll kiss her right,
And she'll kiss me—e—e!"

With his going the place was no longer poison to me. The vast prairie, bathed in warm sunshine, caressed by a soft breeze, voiceless and silent like brooding dove, now took me as her own. For days I lay on her breast, listening to the cows browsing near; for days I watched mated birds build nests; and for days I dreamed, as I had never felt desire to dream before. The enchantments of nature swept into my being. I loved, and scarce knew who or what I loved—a something it was, little more than a thought, a little less than a presence—a something which my being demanded, found and adored. And to this waif of loneliness and nature, I came to talk,

as the days went by, aloud, and I named her Joseph, as naturally as I named myself by name. And I tried to justify myself in this with the thought that there were many Josephs in this South land.

But love again was the serpent in Eden. Plans began to formulate, and before I knew it, even before I could wish to leave the ranch, all my placid calm was gone; the soft breeze no longer soothed but irritated; the peaceful prairie became intolerable. My blood cried aloud for action. Red gave me my time without question, and I rode east to the Upper Trail.

Thus does Spring perform her mission with a man as with a plant—by creating in his mind that which is to grow and bear fruit.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MESSAGE IS WRITTEN.

Spring did her work, too, in the Red River country. The bear-grass stood in clumps of emerald green; the mesquite twined and intertwined its branches with their hanging of lace-like leaves; the cactus opened its wide, lotus-like blossoms and the deep fragrance floated on the still air. Hillside and meadow were an uninterrupted field of green spread with flowers, and these found their way, by handful and hatful, to the desk of the teacher of the Belknap school. She treasured them and tried to shut her heart to the longing they inspired. But one day, when the children brought to her long, bloom-laden ipomoea branches, she put them to her face in an agony of remembrance.

"No," she murmured, "sweet ipomoeas, no! He was wrong—wrong—wrong!" She dropped the flowers and wrung her hands.

But when the children were at their desks and the room was silent; when the birds sang outside, and a bee droned from a window to her flowers, she sighed softly, drew her paper to her and wrote, desultory and slow at first, but with quickening energy and growing purpose, that left her cheeks flushed and her nerves atremble when she finished.

Coming back to duty with a start, she hurriedly called a class. She was flurried over her letter and surprised at the time she had consumed in the writing of it. The lesson dragged, a heavy weight on her tense nerves, until a heavy knock at the outer door startled her to calmness. At the step she found a cowboy sitting stooped and slovenly on a tired horse. His voice and eyes were heavy, like his knock. Without preliminary greeting of any kind, he asked:

"Is the Major at home?—Morton?"

She answered, "He is, I think."

"I thought I just ask here, and save myself the ride up there if he wasn't home."

"He was there this morning, and I heard nothing." And here Miss Birch ventured additional information. "But if you—he does not want any more men, if you are looking——"

"No, ma'am, I have my job."

Birch's breath quickened in a little gasp. "Perhaps you are from R 2?" she said, and felt smothered by the rush of blood to her face.

"Yes, ma'am,—that is, I——"

"I wanted to know——" Birch interrupted, all

nervous strain again, "I mean I want to send a lettah over. I will get it."

He started to speak again, but she hurried away from him. Her mind held but one thing—the letter! She had written similar ones before, and always destroyed them. But this was providential—this cowboy stopping. She would send this letter now, at once. She would! She would! Her steps seemed to echo her purpose as she crossed and recrossed the bare floor.

She reached the step, and handed the letter, properly addressed and stamped, to the cow-puncher. Once more he started to speak, and once more she forestalled him. His voice was like a rasp on her sensitive nerves—she could not bear to hear him speak.

"If yu can deliver the lettah personally for me," she gave him a rosy smile with the words, "it will be a great favor—a very great favor."

He looked long and hard at the address, and she saw his expression change. She thought that now he would try to say something knowing and familiar to her. She spoke quickly and with the inflection of dismissal.

"I hope yu find Major Morton at home. Good day."

"Yes, ma'am."

She saw him put the letter in an inside pocket of his coat, and with heart almost bursting she turned away. It had passed beyond her control now, and pride rose up and condemned her. But for the childishness of such a thing, she had asked him to give the letter back. She let him go, and with spirit more perturbed than before went on with her

classes. Recess, however, brought temporary calm. She sat and mused, her thoughts in the future. The vista that lay before her mental eye was full of promise; no loneliness was there, no regret, no aching heart; for love was there, and an understanding mind, and fellowship and love.

A song welled up in her throat,—a sweet, old Georgia plantation song, which her mother had sung over her cradle. Without thinking, she gave it voice, and at once was lifted above doubts and fears to the realm of hope and love. The children, hearing at their play, trooped in and gathered around her. She sang the song through to the end, and then sat still, soothed and comforted.

“It’s been a long time since you sang any for us, teacher,” piped little Tommy.

Birch looked at the child, and into her eyes came a soft moisture. She knew now why she had not sung—her heart had been too heavy! She gave the intrepid Tommy a hug, and then, standing in the midst of her pupils, she lifted her head and raised her chest; she practiced her scales for the first time in months, and her flexible voice bent and rose and soared, until sweet music rose to the ceiling, ran caressing fingers along the rude rafters, and slipped out at last to find mate among the notes of birds.

While she sang, the cow-puncher rode back down the trail from Morton’s, and passed out of sight by the Station road. Birch did not see him, and for her there remained a suffering deeper than any she had yet known; for when a woman humbles her pride to ask, and love does not respond, then does the sword of bitterness pierce her heart and prick her gall!

But before all this befell, I passed that way (the thing wrought by Spring giving promise of much fruit) and stopped at the Belknap to pass a word with old friends.

It was Sunday and no school day, so Miss Birch was at home and in her room at Morton's; she danced out to meet me with quite her former girlish manner. I asked after her health, and that of her parents, and how prospered her school. I tried hard to be natural and kind with her, but was conscious of something that pricked and irritated. I told her I was leaving Texas, and had come to bid her goodbye.

She looked up at me and seemed to wait for something more. I had never seen her eyes more bright, her cheeks more pink, yet her color was not the glow of health, but rather a flush as of wine or fever. I was sorry for her, and yet I found myself growing severe in word and tone.

"I hope you join your parents soon," I said.

Her eyelids quivered as leaves stirred by a rough wind.

"My school closes in six weeks."

And again her gaze rested on my face, glassy and persistent. It entered my understanding that in some way I was torturing the girl. How, or in what way, I could not imagine. Morton stood near—his presence was a bar to anything unconventional from me. But not so the girl. She had waited long enough. She stepped forward and laid a trembling hand upon my chap.

"Yu come from R 2, do yu not?" she asked.

"Yes," said I, "direct from there."

"Then why don't yu tell me—give me his——"

She paused, her full throat stretched up, her eyes burning into mine. "He is there, isn't he?—R—Mr. Levering is there?"

"Yes, he is at R 2, and—quite well. He would be pleased to know that you asked after his health."

I would have forgone this thrust had I have known how deeply the girl was suffering. But perhaps it was as well that I did not, for the words recalled her to herself. She retreated a step.

"I am glad to know that he is well. His family are anxious. They have not seen him, or even heard from him, for a long time."

She spoke these words calmly, and with the measured accent of a machine. But the color died out of her face, and she looked weary and worn. Her gaze did not again meet mine, and I was compelled shortly, by her chilly demeanor, to take my leave.

So the star of Birch's hope, which had been long near the horizon, set that day. The cyst of her gall was pricked, and all things in earth and sky were tinged with bitterness. The remaining weeks of her school were long ones of grim endurance. She did not hear of Red again, and she would not permit herself to visit at his home for fear of meeting him. She waited in a despair that was almost a stupor, for the day when she could go back to the old home in Missouri, to whose highly civilized precincts she supposed I had preceded her.

My plans were otherwise: Across the Red River and into the Arkansas wilderness I traced my man. Following the trails of beasts, which led inland from the water always, and leading my horse, I passed through what appeared to be impregnable

walls of gum and hickory trees, hung with stout vines of grape, and crowded for standing room by thickets of barbed wild plum, and found my way up the slope of the Black Hills, rendered burr-like with a living and dead growth of scrub hickory and jack oak. There, where tiny rivulets united in valleys of luscious grasses, were formed the head waters of the Saline, the Ouachita, Little River, Fouch la Fave Creek, and like highways of commerce for the first wilderness producer.

In this wilderness, and at one with the animals that made the winding paths through the forests and over the hills, I made my home, until I knew my way about as well as they—until the intricate wilderness, intersected by myriad winding paths that begun in one another and likewise ended, became as familiar to me as a web to the maker-spider.

When this was accomplished, I left the primeval forest and traveled to Herrington, where, by reason of my asking, two Department men were to join and assist me in the capture of a band of moonshiners who were flooding the country with "raw" whiskey, and doing it in violation of that duty which is "for revenue only."

CHAPTER XV.

A MAN'S FIRST DUTY.

What about this:

If I make up a drink that kills a man at once, I am a murderer. If I make a drink that so diseases a man's mind that he becomes a murderer, I am a manufacturer. If I collect money from men who are making murderers, I am a Government—or, am I an accomplice in crime?

The above reflections occurred to me as I stood on the depot platform at Herrington waiting for the train which was to bring in my assistants in the capture of a band of outlaws—outlaws, not because they were engaged in making a drink that was to rob men of their reason, their usefulness, and the usefulness of their children after them, and their children's children, and so on *ad infinitum*, but outlaws because they were not paying their hush money "for revenue only" to the Government.

My men came. And behind them on the step I saw one whom I was yet more glad to see—Red. He gave me a quiet nod of recognition, and, when he spoke, his tone seemed to indicate that he was expecting to see me there—even that he had made the trip for the identical purpose of meeting me. My own feelings, as I have said, were not so forelaid. I was frankly glad to see him, and told him so. Moreover, I was proud of my success as a wilderness sleuth, and wanted to tell somebody. Here was my chance.

I dismissed my men to a hotel, and walked across the tracks down to the business blocks with Red. His first words, when we were entirely alone, told why he had expected to find me waiting at the depot. He said:

"Them friends of yourn talk too much."

I jumped. "Did——?" The whole of what such talk might mean shot through me. "My God, did anyone——"

"I didn't see nobody,—but yu cayn't tell, seh, on a train. I found out all I wanted to know. Yu move quick—that's all."

"Quick?—Yes, but look at the distance!" And I told him something of what I had done.

"One hawss can travel as fast as anothah," he remarked dryly.

I shook my head. My heart was in my boots. He began telling me of his trip East. He had been to Chicago with a shipment of calves. He struck a good market—veal top-notch prices. Now, he had to see the "Company" here in town. After that he'd have some time.

I glanced at him and a hope flamed up quick, and as suddenly died.

"I wish you were going with me," I said dolefully.

He did not reply to this. We were passing the Boar's Head saloon. He pushed the door open and looked in.

"If any Red River men or cowboys was in town, they'd be there," he said, as we resumed our walk. "It's a great place foah them all to hold out. Have yu seen anybody?"

I told him no. And he said, "I ain't, either,—not

foah a long time. I'd ought to go home this trip and see my folks."

"Yes," I said. "And I guess you don't write to them very often, either."

"No, I'm plumb ashamed."

We had reached an open square. Herrington was trying to make a city of itself, and here was its first attempt at a park. I smiled at the slender trees, anchored to posts, and the scattered, nomadic patches of green grass. At a fountain Red stopped, took off his hat and, ignoring the chained cup, drank from the flowing stream. Then he began to speak in his sweet Southern voice:

"I have thought a heap about this thing—Is a man's first duty to his country? Patrick Henry said so, and maybe Dan'l Webster seconded it all, but—has times changed? I mean, nowadays no war we could have would be likely to land my folks into slavery, even if this nation was to get whipped. Ought I, then, to stay at home with my mothah, because I knowed she'd cry if I was to go away to fight? No nation likely to whip us in this day would try to make us forsake our notions of religion and worship idols. Is my duty, then, to God, before it is to my country? Ought I sit still in my pew and let my country get licked in a war rather than to spill the blood of my brothah man?"

"Maybe yu have reasoned this thing all out, and think that religion or life, or love is first and befoah your country. But me—I get in right alongside of them New England orators—my country first! Then God, then fambly. It's puttin' love away down the line, that way of reasonin' is. Some of a man's folks might die while he was away—a

mothah or sistah—someone that would not have died if he hadn't gone to war—that there is a hard knot to reason ovah. Then again, a man might lose an arm or a laig, and because of that them dependent on him have to live in poverty and nevah have the education they would have had if he hadn't have put his country before them all. It don't seem kind of right to forsake them as are near and dear to yu to run off fightin' against something that maybe never'll happen. But what would a man do with his folks if he had no country to keep them in? And what would be your chance of heaven, or mine, if we nevar heard it mentioned again to the day of ouah death?"

"It would be a mighty slim chance with the most of us, I think."

"And the laws of ouah country — they *are* ouah country!" he interrupted. "Yu figure it that-a-way?"

"I do," I responded, agreeing with him, but seeing no point in all this.

"Well, then it is my duty to uphold the laws of my country—my folks, my friends, my religion, all of them comes aftah a while. And when I fight for law, I fight to preserve this here nation; when I kill in defense of law, I kill in defense of Government, just as much as if I was fightin' at Bunkah Hill. If the law is faulty, that don't excuse me for not upholdin' it,—neither does it excuse yu or any othah man. Ouah laws are the best the men who made them could make—times and circumstances bein' what they was. Aftah a while a new generation of law-makers will go in and correct the faults in ouah laws. But how are we goin' to hope to

enforce the good law when we get it, if we let the poor law go foah nothin'? A law is a law, I say, be it good or poor!—and I'll fight foah it, and kill foah it, if I need to, and I won't fight or kill any othah way—unless I'm compelled to do it."

I looked at him standing there, so earnest and eloquent in what he said, and somehow felt chastened. It was as if, amid the noise and confusion of the incoming train, he had caught my plaint, and was answering it. I stated my point again:

"This Government receives thousands annually as internal revenue on alcoholic liquors and tobacco, but it is blood money."

"It receives thousands from them things, and it pays out thousands, because of the crimes committed because of them things, and where's the gain? There ain't none. I expect a man with time at his command could figure the balance the othah way. But—Look at that boy there. He has had measles likely, and his parents are glad he has had it and is done. But is he done? Maybe his lungs has a weak spot in them because of his sickness, and he will grow up to get consumption and die young. Nobody but the doctors will see the connection between his early death and that measles he had when a kid. And it is so with whiskey. A government is needin' money, and a concern is makin' whiskey. The government sees its chance and levies a tax; it gets its money and is glad,—but there is a weak spot it don't see. The liquor goes ovah this land and is consumed. One day there is a big robbery in a post office, or a town is burned by a lunatic, or a big strike costs Uncle Sam a million, and again,

only them as has thought and studied up these things knows that it was all caused by that weak spot way back yondah. But when people do get to seein' that point, then we'll have the law changed."

"Why, yes," I said, "of course." His oratory and the music of his voice was compelling me, as it had that day at the Station. I watched him as he straightened himself and settled his hat preparatory to moving on. As we started he drawled:

"I have told yu all this, not because I thought yu needed to be convinced, but because I wanted to see if I believed it when it was said out loud. I do. So now if yu need me in this thing, yu——"

"Red," I cried, "will you?—But Logan—Hooven is in the gang. He——"

"We just got done workin' on his side of the case," he said. Then with a slow smile added: "Yu don't want me to go ovah all that again, do yu?"

I stared a moment. Logan?—law?—love? Why, of course! I gripped his arm.

"I'll be ready in an houah," he said briefly, and wrung my hand.

I had not intended leaving town until morning. But now, like him, I saw the need of haste, and at the stroke of the clock I had my outfit and men ready.

CHAPTER XVI.

MOONSHINERS' GULCH.

When the last landmark, a dead hickory, came in sight, the success of the venture seemed assured. Save the time spent at Herrington, I had been trailing my man for nine uninterrupted weeks. The gulch where the cabin and still of the moonshiners was located was in the Black Hills, itself encompassed by the growth of oak and brush covering deep pitfalls. It fronted an open space of considerable width, thus enabling the outlaws to sight an enemy at considerable distance, while they remained concealed. Unless approach was made over the mountain, which was almost impossible. A few rods below the gulch flowed Fouch la Fave Creek, a growth of timber concealing its banks.

A well-chosen position, surely. Yet, after those weeks of careful, cautious trailing, their cabin seemed absurdly easy of access. Once I made my way in sight of the still by swinging squirrel-like from tree to tree of the Fouch la Fave, and leaving no trail. Often the moonshiners passed so near to me, as I lay concealed in the brush, that I could hear their words and smell their tobacco. I knew every man of them by name, every man of them by voice, every man of them almost, like a dog, by scent. For in all those days I had no thought but to know them in every act and feature; I had no desire but to outwit and capture them. Until, as I

lay day after day, in some sequestered lair, watching and listening, or as I skulked, alert and silent, along some narrow pathway, choosing from many intersecting lines the ones that led direct to my goal, an exultation possessed me that ached in my throat and prickled along my spine. I had no wish for human companionship; bear, wild boar, little scampering rabbits, and skunks, almost without number, that sometimes did not scamper away quickly enough,—these were sufficient. The world was forgotten. And beyond the capture, I had no plans. A long rest, perhaps at R 2, or—but I had no plans. And now my work was completed, almost. This was the last day, and already the shadows were falling toward the east. To-morrow, I pictured myself with my captives trailing our way south to Herrington. There would be a short, preliminary trial, and then I should be free. And Joseph—she, too, would be free. But I did not permit myself to think of that—not yet.

We were among the edge-trees of a deep primeval wood. The paths that brought us to this point had been low and narrow, so that each man had walked and led his horse, which in every case, excepting that of Red, was a mule. But at the dead hickory the path became plain and open, and led in a devious, but unobstructed route to the gulch. We arrived at the tree, considerably torn and altogether weary. It had been hard work getting the mules along the path, and my men had frequently declared their belief that we were hopelessly lost; their lusty, but highly civilized cursing kept Red and me chuckling with laughter. But at the hickory, serious business began.

It was Hooven we feared. But for him Red would have taken charge, and I would have counted the thing as done. But Hooven would certainly recognize Red under any disguise that we could muster. There was danger, also, of his recognizing me; but nature in those nine weeks had done much, and I was able to aid and abet nature—the result was a complete change of face and figure. When I was ready, Red said that he would not know me from a “crazy Injun,” and with that I had to be content. My men were of no use in planning the attack, utterly helpless in following a trail ten rods; they were alike ignorant of appearing anything but what they really were—a couple of bulldogs, trained to grapple and control, to fight men armed or unarmed, and conquer thrice their strength of unskilled men. A chance was all they needed, and Red and I were playing our lives to give them the chance.

As we moved out of the wood, all preparations were completed. I was a prospector, poor and hollow-eyed, clad scantily in rags and filthy skins. I rode the horse, and the mules, laden with packs, followed. These packs contained my fighting force, armed and ready,—the two Department men balancing each other on one mule, and our grub stake and a quantity of ore acting as balance for Red on another. The sun was directly on the trail as I came into it, and I knew that I was seen. My gaze, seeking the gulch, still dim blue in the distance, plainly detected a thin column of smoke rising mushroom-like above it. That marked the end, but by my devious way, it was three miles.

These miles I finished in due time by urging my

horse. The gulch, lost to view for an interval, came out again, no longer dimly blue, but dark and cavernous, with horses moving around dark hummocks. And then, of a sudden, my horse neighed. I felt his muscles move under me, and was aware, as the sound died away on the air, that a cold chill had passed over me. The way was broad here, cleared for the moving of wares, but there was not yet any tell-tale tracks, for the trail was strewn with vines and sticks. My horse quickened his pace, for he scented his kind, perhaps, for aught I knew, an old friend. But precisely as he became anxious, a curious shrinking of the flesh came over me. The black hummocks all too quickly resolved themselves into cabins. The horses gathered together and stood watching me as I came down into the gulch. I wanted to see no men, but shuddered because none were in sight. Had they been warned? Were they lying in wait now, with rifles ready to shoot me on sight?

In the undertaking, which had intoxicated me till now, I suddenly beheld a reckless, abhorrent danger that chilled and stifled me. I strove to steady my trembling nerves. And then the door of the cabin opened and men came out and stood among the horses, watching me arrive. By the time I reached the corral more were there. I began naming them off, trying to regain my former confidence,—it was suicidal to enter that corral as unnerved as I was. I strove to give the men a greeting that should sound easy. I told them I saw they had a good camp there, and hoped they were taking out pay dirt, so had some bacon to barter with a brother prospector. Some of them answered this last, but

none of them returned my greeting. And, as I gazed fearfully into their strangely impenetrable faces, I suddenly missed Hooven, and my courage rose.

"Yo-all seem kind o' leary o' me," I drawled. "Maybe yo air afeared I am lookin' to porspect on your reserves. Ease on that—my lead lays south yondah." And I hooked my thumb in that direction.

They received this in sullen silence. But presently one stepped forward and began methodically to inspect me and my outfit. I watched him narrowly, and as he approached my pack animals. I drew my gun.

"None o' that!" I warned.

"So your rock is in there, old mossback, eh?" he snarled.

Every gun in the gang was leveled on me, but every eye behind them held a faint suspicion of a smile.

"By gum, ya-as," said I, and drawing a twist of tobacco from my pocket I took a chew. Then added: "It's got color, too!—I bet yo'all can't show better dirt from your leads heaw."

"Color?" The inspector, whom I knew by the more specific term of Budd, laughed sneeringly. "What do you figure you'll get for your color?" he asked.

"Huh! Take me fer a tarnal fool, eh? If I was to tell yo-alls the amount of wealth I've got in them packs, yo'd end me! I don't know nothin', eh?"

This brought a general laugh. Inspector Budd rejoined his companions. The motion he gave to

his hand conveyed his contempt for me, but—might I have pay ore?

Sunset was near now and the gulch already was in deep shadow.

“Gents,” said I, after a glance up the mountain, “I don’t want no man snoopin’ around my dirt, and I don’t go snoopin’ around no man’s. But yo can see how I am fixed fer goin’ on to-night. I’d take it kind in yo-all’s if yo’d let me camp about heaw.”

It was a natural request. Th forest could not have been passed in the dark. They looked at each other and kicked the sod. Finally Budd said gutturally, “He might as well.”

That was what I wanted, and I chose to say nothing more. Budd led the way to an open space, where was grass and water. He told me significantly that “twenty feet was my range,” and left immediately. I murmured to my men:

“Alone and safe enough.”

They were silent.

I repeated a third time (according to agreement), and they groaned and swore.

I made busy right away, unsaddled my horse and unroped the mules, putting my men in good positions to act when the time should come. Then I built my fire.

But my hands lagged at the task. What was going on yonder in the gulch? Were they, now that they had time to think it all over, talking themselves thirsty for my blood? It would be an easy matter to shoot me down as I stood in the light of my fire. I heard a crackle in the brush and my breath stopped.

It was Budd. He joined me at my fire. His

cupidity had been aroused by my big talk of gold, and he came to take up my offer to barter dust for bacon. This part of the plan of capture had been suggested by Red; he knew that the heart of every moonshiner lay, not in whiskey but in gold. I took Budd's offer—a hatful of dust for a slab of bacon.

I filled his hat part full of dirt from one bag, then paused to ask if he wanted some dirt from both my leads. He did. So into the hat of copper-colored earth I poured some dust plentifully sprinkled with free gold.

“I ain't got so much o' this heaw,” I casually informed him. “It is from a new lead—one I just sot in on.”

Budd received the hat from me in very evident excitement. I accompanied him on his return to bring back the bacon. At the gulch I found what I had taken to be a corral to be a stockade of tall, barked poles, which were well set and extended around to the natural barrier of rocks, thus making their position doubly impregnable. Two men met us at the gate.

“You can't come in,” one said to me. “He can't come inside, can he, Budd?”

“No, I'll fetch his meat.”

I kept talk going until Budd returned, then took my meat and went back to my camp. It was evident from the movements and talk inside the stockade that a gang had just come in and were unsaddling. I knew that the freighters of the last shipment were due about this time. I knew that Hooven had gone out with that gang. Therefore, the fight had come to where I had wanted it all along—an issue between him and me. Another

day and he or I would know a master. I lashed my faltering courage with thoughts of victory; I warmed, as best I could, the chill that ran in my blood, and laid instructions, strong as steel, on my men. Then I made out to eat some supper, for I might be watched. This done, I lay down and talked a while with Red.

A part of the gang would be out soon to see the dust I had in my packs—this was Red's idea of the situation, and it was mine. If I had enough of the rich dust with me to make it worth while, I would be shot without notice,—that would be the plan. If I had only a little, then steps would be taken to get the location of the lead out of me by fair means or foul. If we understood human nature all this would come to pass.

I had not long to wait. Whispered words, and the cracking of twigs in the direction of the gulch soon reached my listening ear. I rose up to greet my visitors, and was surprised to find my brain clear and my nerves steady. I even hoped for Hooven, but a glance showed that he had not come.

We talked a while of Arkansas, of hunts and of game. I told a story of a tussle I had with a wild sow, whose litter I unwittingly disturbed. It was a tall story, and one I had not had opportunity before of telling, owing to its recent happening. But the point hung on the fact that I did not dare use my gun, or these men themselves would hear the shot. Consequently I was obliged to change the climax, and so ended rather lamely to the disgust of my audience—a disgust they made manifest in appropriating the story-telling to themselves.

I found it hard to give attention. Their wit was

not extreme, and my mind ran always to the thought, "What next? What next? How will the first move be made, and when? What is in the minds of these big ruffians sitting around my fire? Assuredly it was not all of gold they were thinking. They had not forgotten their still. Were they, like me, playing for a favorable chance? And so watching their faces and listening for something under their words, I soon detected the current we had anticipated.

"Ever do any prospectin', Budd?" inquired one of the big fellows beside him.

Budd gave him a look.

"I mean any in any State but Arkansas?"

"Been prospectin' ever since I was haired-out,—fer a wife."

"Want a woman that is pure gold, do yo?" I asked. But another spoke up.

"Shucks take a copper one, Budd!"

They laughed uproariously, ending this lead, which had not taken the desired turn. Budd leaned forward, nursing his knee, and sang hoarsely, "I'd hate to hev a half-breed call me dad." It brought another laugh and much coarse wit. I sat still, amazed at my own feeling. Fear had gone—I was surprised to find that no sensation had taken its place. I was numb; my hands, lying in my lap, were like small boulders; I strove to move one, and, in its lightness, it flew up and struck my face. Was my body going to go to sleep, and leave my mind alert to look on while I was dismembered? I shifted my position, but without effect.

"I did some prospectin' oncet, in Colora-ado," said the man beside Budd. "There is a right smart

of difference between the minerals of that State and this,—in the looks, I mean.”

“Injuns is good prospectors,” I said, and found my tongue unwieldy.

“Nothin’ of the kind,” said Budd.

“My friend, you don’t know your red brother,” I said with decision. “My best strike down yondah was made with an Injun guide.”

“Huh!” Bud sneered while the others scowled upon him, “You don’t show your great wealth in your way of dressin’, do you? We could smell you all as soon as you came out of the timber.”

I gave him a hurt look. I had struck the keynote of all their thought, and I gripped my mind to hold to it. “Maybe yo-alls don’t think that an Injun can find gold easy,” I said, “but let me tell yo that he can. Nuggets—that is what he goes aftah, and that is what he gets. Dust don’t interest him none, nor silver, nor iron, but gold! Take a buck that is in love, and has got to win the girl by a gift better than any other buck can get for her—what does he do? Why, if it is a real sure enough case of love, he goes to the medicine man; he gives the medicine man ponies, skins, arrows,—anything, mebbe everything he has got. And the medicine man—what does he give the buck? Any of yo-alls know what he gives to him?”

They shook their heads and waited expectantly. I put another stick on the fire—we might be needing a good light any time now—and resumed:

“The medicine man gives him a wand, or a stick,—that’s all it is, just a forked stick. And the buck goes out into the mountains with it. He walks and walks, and carries that stick all the time balanced

on his hand. Weeks it takes him, mebbe months, but some day he comes, lean and hungry and hollow-eyed, to a place—a pocket likely between two boulders—he has seen a hundred such places since he started out—but here his stick dips!—he balances it, and it dips again!—he pokes around some in the loose dirt, but don't find any gold. Trembling with hope and fear, he balances the stick again, and the third time it dips! Then he flings himself on the earth; he wrenches at stones with his iron strength; he pulls out tough roots; he claws the dirt up like a dog, till finally, in among the roots and stones, he finds little, glistening particles of gold. He digs faster, his hands bleedin' as he claws at rocks, and roots like wire, till he finds what he wants—nuggets of pure gold! He gathers up a few—a dozen, mebbe,—for he must give some to the girl's paw, and the old chief of the tribe, he will have to be fixed with one or two. Then he starts back, love leadin' him on a long, swingin' trot. He hunts now, and feeds himself, and as he travels, he rubs the largest nugget he's got with flint rock,—rubs it till it shines like a star in his hand. Yo bet he gets the girl, all right! Didn't yo-all's ever hear about that thing?"

Some of the number expressed themselves as having heard of something of the kind. One asked, had I ever seen a buck do the thing. I said:

"Why, ya-as. I told yo that was how I found my best lead."

They did not even wink as they watched and listened. One said:

"Your new lead, you say?"

"Ya-as, the new one,—the one I ain't worked

much. I am goin' back there when I get my grub stake—I'm goin' to file on that claim and work it right and safe."

"You say you was just taggin' a fool Injun around when you found it?"

"I was sure with a buck—one that had passed all that he had over to the medicine man for a stick that would dip for gold. Yo-alls see there was another buck as wanted his girl, and that buck had more——"

"And he just took a few nuggets, and left you there with the hull thing to yourself?"

"Ya-as. Yo see the gold was nothin' to him. It was the girl he wanted. And if he was gone too long, she might——"

"But he took the stick away with him, I reckon?"

"No, he throwed it down there—it was no more use to him. The medicine man he makes them whenever there is enough ponies or skins to make it worth his while. It's queer how them Injuns——"

"You didn't see where he throwed that stick, I reckon?"

"Why, yes, he throwed it right down there when he began diggin', and he never picked it up no more. That feller told me, in his queer Injun jabberin'—I couldn't make him out for some days, not bein' up on Cherokee—that a buck will go out like he'd done, and wander over the mountains till he drops dead of thirst or starvation,—I've seen their bones, but I never thought much about how they came to be there. I reckon yo-alls have seen them, too, when yo been prospectin'. Them bucks can't carry no firearms with them, yo know, and they are that love-crazy that they won't waste time to snare, so if luck is agin——"

"Why can't they carry no firearms?"

"Why, metal, yo know, affects the stick. It won't dip if yo got so much as a pocket knife onto yo. So one of the fellers will just keep goin' day after day, until——"

"Maybe that there stick won't work none for a white man?"

"Oh, white or red, it's all one to the stick! But say, ain't it strange how love will get a holt on a man? Injuns and niggers seem to go crazier under it than a white man will—it drives one of them on and on till he is dead. Why, that buck I was with nearly run me to death, for all I did my best to put sense in him, and made him eat and rest some. But the minute it was light enough for him to see that stick, he'd start on his long, swing trot, hills and rocks, up or down, it was all one to him. And I'd just have——"

"You say it will point to stuff a long ways off?"

"Ya-as, quite a smart ways it will. But when yo get into the mountains it's confusin' some, yo bet. The tarnal stick will vere a little, and when yo turn that way, it will swing back; yo try it over, and it will be the same. Then other times yo think yo got a point and yo come to a boulder or a clump of brush that yo must walk around, and yo loose your pint, and never can pick it up. And so yo go on. It's enough to make a sane man crazy."

"Why didn't yo bring the damned hocus-pocus of a stick along with you?"

"I've got it safe, yo kin bet! But I've got as good as kin ask located down yondah, and yo-all have got a good strike in heaw, so we don't need no Injun helps."

They looked at each other, but spoke no word—interest was too great for any by-play. One said:

“I’d give a dollar to see that stick.”

“I could make that dollar easy—it’s yondah in my pack,” I said, alert for a move.

It came. They sprang up as one man, and rushed for my packs, which lay half-concealed by a boulder. I stopped them with an angry shout.

“Stop thar! Don’t yo touch a hand to my dirt!”

They stopped, every one. I was in a great temper at this attempted liberty. They strove to propitiate me.

“Oh, come, Mossback,” said Budd. “We don’t care a hang about the dirt you’ve got—it’s good, of course, but the stick—can’t we see the stick?”

“Course, we don’t mean to swipe none of your gold,” said another. “We have got hills of it here—ain’t we, boys? We didn’t mean nothin’.”

I cooled down then and we were seated. In fact, I found it quite necessary to sit, for my limbs were shaking under me in a manner altogether new to them. To show the gang that my amicability was partly restored, I said:

“I’d bring the stick out for yo-all, only I’d have to unrope a lot.”

“I’ll help,” one volunteered. “Come on! I’ll help!—we’ll all help!”

I shook my head. “It wouldn’t work nohow—with all of us with our guns on.”

They sat silent and crestfallen, staring off into the night. Right then would have been a good time to act, but I waited for a better.

“Do you mean to say now, that if there was any gold about here, that stick would turn of itself and pint to it?” Budd asked, deeply earnest.

"Sure it will!—why, I have had it to turn me plumb around! If yo-alls are so curious about that stick that it's apt to spoil your sleep, I'll unrope—only, it wouldn't work, as I told yo."

They whispered together. Three walked away in the brush to talk it over, a fourth followed them. While they were away I picked up some brush and started to replenish my fire. A moonshiner stopped me—it "wa'n't safe," he said. I desisted with apologies, and stirred the coals out as if to hasten the extinguishment of the blaze. I had another lighting scheme.

The four came back.

"Will you lay off your belt and gun first? If you will, then we will lay ours off and see the stick point," said one.

I agreed readily. "Sartin!—it is nothin' to me, as yo-alls know. I am only one to all of yo, and a weak one at that—yo could do as yo please with me, armed or unarmed, but I trust a brother prospector every time." And off came my gun.

I laid my gun and belt on a rock near the fire, and beside them, after much deliberate search, I put my money and my knife. They followed my lead, and did it without hesitation until the last man.

"Hanged if I like this," he said, pausing in the act of unbuckling his belt. "I ain't been without a gun or a knife, or something, since I was big enough to hold to 'em. By goll, boys, you all can——"

"It is all right," I said easily, but feeling the sweat start from every pore. "It is all right."

"By cracky, it may be all right, but tarn my mangy hide, fellers——"

I turned sharply, and there was a stir among the hot coals.

"It is all right!"

And it was all right. This was the signal agreed upon, and before the words had fairly left my lips, my men were springing over the rocks. A red blaze shot up from where the coals had stirred, lighting the place as with a searchlight, and bringing into view distant trees and rocks. I saw men beside me fall as if from a thunderbolt; I saw Red leap on the pile of guns, while he held two men at the point of his revolver. Then—for me the light was extinguished, and the fight ended. I lay on the ground in a dead swoon of utter exhaustion.

They worked with me, when they had time, using cold water and brandy. But those moonshiners who had remained at the cabin inside the stockade were captured and bound before I opened my eyes to returning consciousness. I saw Red standing looking down at me. My lips formed the word, "Hooven."

He shook his head.

I struggled up to an elbow. "Logan!" I panted. "You have got him, Red?"

"No," he said, calmly. "No. Yu lay down now, and I'll tell yu——"

"It was you," I cried out in my despair, "you that let him escape! And I trusted you! I trusted you!"

I sank back on the blankets they had spread down. To me all was in vain—nothing had been accomplished.

"He was not ovah there," said Red, as he crowded the blankets up for a pillow.

“Not there?—not at the cabin?—did you search the gulch?”

Red nodded his head. “He didn’t come in with them othahs yu spoke of.”

“He didn’t come? Who warned him, then?” I asked, in a voice that sounded far and faint to my ears. And the words were followed by an echo that awoke from every bush and rock and hill; faint, too, it was, yet sharp, and it said: “Red warned him.” And hearing it I dropped off again to insensibility.

We started on the way south at sunup. My men destroyed the property of the gulch, except such as was necessary to keep as evidence against the captives. I left everything to them and to Red. Ambition, hope, thought even, had gone out of me. I did what I was told to do, if I could, nor cared a farthing what it was. So we came, at length, to Herrington, and malaria, finding little flesh on me to quake, was rattling my bones.

In the days that followed, while I lay at the hospital, that question forever ran through my fevered head: “Did Red warn Hooven?” Sleeping or waking, it was there, tormenting me. But when the fever was broken, and health began to warm the current of my blood, I answered it once and for all.

And so, I hope, you, too, have answered it, dear reader. For you know Red now, as well as I know him,—I hope you do. I have tried to show him to you in the innermost parts of him—his love, his devotion to duty, his aversion to wrong, as he held each sacred to himself. And having done this, I leave the answer to you.

At the hospital, some weeks later, Red visited me. I touched once on my suspicions, but he turned this off, saying lightly, "A sick man is queer." And he began at once to tell me the news of the ranch.

Since the shipment, the gang had been busy branding and cutting calves. Grass was good—had cured with the sugar in the blade. The steer herd was full of antics. One broke a leg and the gang was feeding on roast ace high and as good as possum. Sleepy had sent me some word, and Red chuckled over this. It was: Arkansas skunks have upset the feedin' quailties of better men than you. Quit bearin' witness to where you've been or you'll queer your friends. When the smell gets off your hide a little more, you can come back here."

The other boys had sent me like messages. They were like a fresh breeze from the plains, these tales Red told to me. And I began to feel the first stirring of desire to be up and doing again. But Red had yet more stirring things to relate, and this he saved back, author-like to the last.

"Ed's with us again," he began, after we had talked of many things; "came in some days ago, bareback on a plug pony. His wife has gone home to her folks and Ed is adrift again. She took everything he had—which was little enough, I reckon—everything, that is, but his saddle. That she left to him when she took the last hawss from undah it. Ed traded the saddle for the plug pony, and so got across to us. But the boys chipped in for him, and Ed is ridin' like a white man again. He is a fool yet. Marryin' didn't affect him none—only gave him more ways of showin' off his foolishness. The boys have figured it out that she kept him wound

up tight all the time, like a clock that won't run, so now that he has got started talkin' he'll have to go on till he gets run down—which has been double eight days already.”

“When did it happen?—the separation?” I asked.

“A couple of months back. Ed says that they separated once before, but she came back that time. He has been punchin' off and on for Morton.”

Morton? How long had it been since I had thought of that great, fat, waddling man? My mind slipped back to bygone days. To me Morton and Ed belonged to that past when Texas was a vast domain of surprises, rank with whiskey and poor food, wherein dwelt Chad Harris and a score of figures already grown dim in the background of memory. Red brought me back. Speaking in quiet unconcern of the import of his words, he said:

“Ed brought a great tale to us. Said Hooven came to Morton's one night—stopped there on his way up from seein' my—my folks—and told Morton he'd come for money owin' to him. Morton laughed at him, but Hooven was hot from the start, and Morton's big talk made him hotter, right along. He claimed there was a big wad of cash due to him from Morton. Ed says Hooven said this: 'Gimme my share of that last shipment.' The Major said: 'That last shipment was all my own stuff, boy.'”

“Hooven said: 'When did the stars take to rainin' down yearling steers?’”

“‘The Major said: 'B' gin! Them steers was every hoof dropt on this ranch! They had the marks on 'em of them dun bulls I put into my herd

a year ago last Fall. I can show you the cows that mothered 'em.'

"Hooven said: 'You'd suck a cow into milk-givin' rather than pay an honest debt.'

"Morton told him to go to the hot place.

"Hooven told Morton that he needn't to think, because Chad was dead, that he could swindle the gang. Hooven said that he had friends and he had money, and he'd make the Major do the right thing.

"Morton laughed and said: 'You can collect that money, Zant, when you are ready to face a court.'

"Then Hooven swore he'd kill Morton inside a year. And that was all Ed heard, for the moon came out and he got afraid he'd be caught listenin'."

I asked Red many questions about this, but he shook his head to all of them. "I have knowed that Morton wasn't straight," he said, and that was the last word that I could get from him.

When he had gone I lay and thought. One evident fact held me. When we raided the moonshiner's gulch, Hooven was with Joseph Levering. It added a bitterness to my defeat, and I believe retarded my recovery. But when Red came again, I was ready to accompany him to R 2 Rancho, where my convalescence went on rapidly. But it was Autumn and Winter before I saw town again. Of the many things, peculiar, startling and commonplace, that befell us in that time, I will mention only one, for it concerns Red, and concerns him most mightily. It must form the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER XVII.

ABOVE SWEETWATER CROSSING.

A warm drizzle of rain set in with a southeast wind, and lasted for three days. The cattle stood about in dark groups on the prairie burred by the gentle rain. The great levels around them stretched away in soft mists, cooled and freed from dust by the wet, and full of sweet scents. Our horses slipped and slid under us as we rode out at intervals to see if the herd was moving. All was quiet. Nothing stirred save the invisible wind, and the warm rain which it drove against a cheek was like the perfumed breath of love.

These rides out in the calm and the wet left me steeped in reverie. I thought, and my thoughts were nothing; I planned, and knew as I did so that the sun would show them as mists of the storm. At the bunk house the boys played cards, and smoked and swore. As one came in or went out, a breath from the cool, wet world reached me gratefully. And then, after a third night with the rain beating evenly above my head, and the eaves dripping like a steady pulse-throb, I awoke to find the sun shining out of a sky as high and clear as creation's first morning. Even as I dressed, the odor of green grass came to me, and outside I found flowers opened upon sod that the day before was barren soil. And how warm it was! Such a heavy, moist, stifling warm!

At the cook shack the boys were at breakfast. They had been up since dawn, and declared they could hear the grass growing out on the range. Red and Sleepy returned, as I came in, from rounding up the beef herd.

"We'll start them for the railroad to-day," Red said, as he seated himself. "My awders was for the 15th, and this is the 5th, but them steers will run themselves raw-boned in five days with this green grass. So, Ed, yu——"

Here followed minute instructions from the foreman to his men—those who were to accompany him and those who were to conduct the ranch during his absence. Ed was sent to town to notify the company of the start of the herd, and to get the cars in. Then, at the last, Red spoke to me.

"I kind of run this thing ovah in my head as I came up, and figured on yu goin' with us. But if the trip don't strike yu——"

He waited for my answer. I was a kind of star boarder at the rancho. Receiving no wages, I came and went as fancy dictated, or my health seemed to require. I had taken on some flesh during the last few weeks—more than I had carried for ten years—and I was at a loss to determine whether work put it there or might take it off. But the trip struck me.

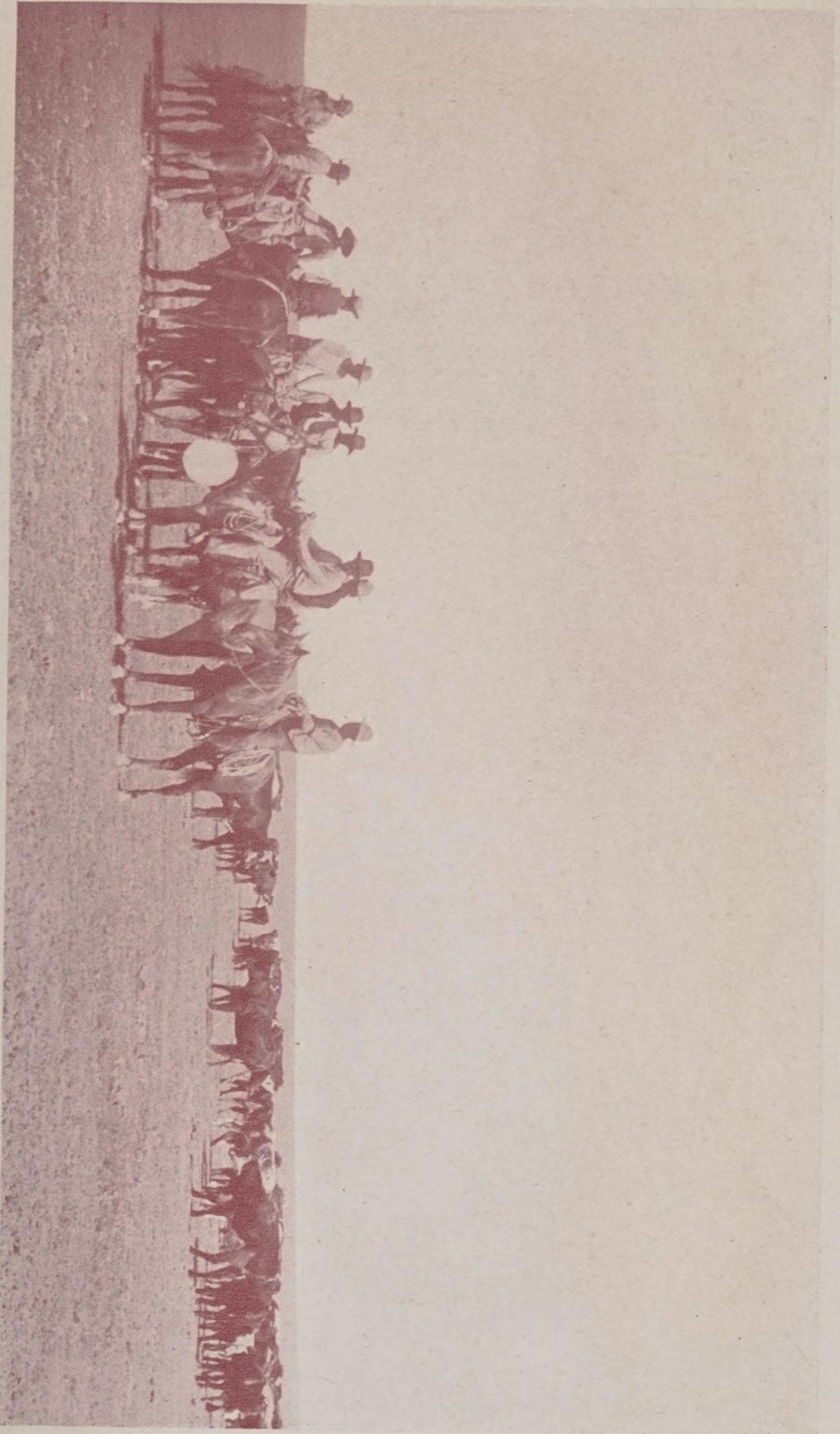
"I'll go," I said.

Red was giving directions about fitting up the chuck wagon that was to accompany us on our slow trip to Herrington, but he looked at me, as he talked, and nodded satisfaction that I was to go along. His mind was full of business. This was the last shipment of beef stuff; these steers had

been held on the range until all the corn-fed stuff of the North had gone in, and the market was strong again after its slump.

The aforesaid market had been an important thing with all of us for several weeks; its ups and downs were the ups and downs of the rancho. And I was surprised, at times even amazed, to observe with what care and solicitude for their welfare even the meanest of the ranch force minded those huge beef steers. Their fatness was the especial pride of each of us. Their antics, the fights they had, the runs they took, even the way one happened to cock his tail or bawl, was sufficient to be related, amid great attention, at table. And, while none of the boys, I think, did this to hold his job, it was a well-known fact that Red would fire a man quicker for inattention to the beef herd than for any other thing. Each man had to hold those steers as dear as if they were his individual property—and that from the birth of the calf to the shipment of the steer. Perhaps that was why Red had held the foremanship of R 2 rancho for three years, with a steady increase of salary. And certainly it was with no fear of censure from his employers that he now moved this same beef stuff to market ten days in advance of orders. He had proven that their interests were his.

I was thinking of all this when I arose from the breakfast table. The room was hot and filled with the smoke of baking cakes, no air was coming in to blow it out. I moved hastily, for I had some preparations to make for the trip. But just as I reached the opening, the heavy door swung to with a bang. I pushed it open, and an icy wind struck me a sur-



With the Beef Herd.—Page 268.

prised blow in the face; the sun, which a few minutes before had appeared a great, glowing ball, was now a small, pale oval, almost obscured by a haze, through which it swam like a swimmer frightened by sharks. I heard exclamations behind me. The boys arose as one man and rushed out.

Their faces whitened. "A norther!" I heard them say in hushed tones. And they ran to the bunk house for coats and gloves.

Red shouted commands: "The beef men!" I heard, and "Side-wind them all yu can!—Keep them east, boys!—Say!—" But the wind was blowing his words down his throat.

I ran to the bunk house and did as the others did. I put on my chaps and heaviest coat, and then my slicker on top of all. My ears already were tingling, and I dragged out a cap. The wind was howling when I went out, and tossing loose objects about like a maddened bull. Already on the driving blast there were sharp barbs of ice that stung when they struck the flesh.

No man was in sight when I mounted my horse. I noticed, as I galloped with the wind for this first mile, that the sun was entirely obscured, and the world made narrow by the driving barbs of sleet. The little flowers, which a half hour ago had lifted up their sweet, delicate faces so trustingly to the warm light, now were bent and blackened.

The beef herd had been bedded in the valley of Double Mountain Fork. But when I suddenly found my horse leaping the narrow stream, I saw no cattle, and listening, heard no shouts from lusty cow-punchers. However, at a little distance, I found the wet sod entirely chopped by the flying

hoofs of the heavy steers, and almost immediately this rough trail began to veer a little east. I knew then that the boys had struck their lead here, and were doing their foreman's bidding well. But likely it was Red himself who galloped beside the foremost steer in the mad run of those huge, lunging, pounding bodies.

All day I rode, my left side coated with an inch of ice, my eyes stinging, my side face torturing me. The trail led on. Once I came upon a fine, fat steer, prone on the earth, dead and coated with ice; his tongue was lolled out, his eyes bulging—he had suffocated, being too fat to run. I rode on. The prairie fell behind, and was replaced by brakes and bluffs. Vegetation changed, and I forced my horse across gullies and down slippery hills, then through tangled depths of grass standing in water in which were long slivers of ice. And still on, to where the hills were higher, and their sides a sticky, slipping clay, but dotted here and there with clumps of scrag pine. I had hopes that the boys had stopped the herd among these brakes and hills, and would hold them for the night. But when darkness fell I had found nothing but empty, water-soaked desolation. And, realizing that I should only lose time by attempting to go further, I drew rein beside a sheltering cliff, dismounted and made ready to spend the night as best I could.

The storm had spent itself. Already, through the drifting clouds, the stars peeped down like fearful children from the windows of home. But the wind was still icy cold, and my horse and I drew near to the bluff. I gathered some brush, and tramped the ice off the green branches for a bed. I had nothing

to eat, and with everything wet, a fire was out of the question. So I lay down, determined to make the best of things as they were. My bones ached with the torturing saddle-pain, and my whole weary body hailed even this chance of repose. But after the first flush of warmth and comfort, I found myself growing wider and wider awake. I turned several times nervously, and brought fresh dampness against my warm body. My uneasiness was senseless. I had nothing to worry over. The boys had the steers bedded long before this. I could do nothing alone in the darkness—was, in fact, making the best possible progress keeping still. I forced myself to lie quiet until warmth again pervaded my bed; but again, it was no use. My eyes stared up at the stars, which had come wholly out now; my ears listened attentively, and heard nothing, for the wind had fallen off, and wild animals were all in their lairs. Perhaps an hour passed, and then to my listening ears there came the far away, yet distinct crow of a cock. Disgusted with myself I turned again.

Then suddenly I found myself bolt upright in my bed of boughs. I must have dozed for an instant, but what had disturbed me? As I sat there it seemed that something was calling me. And my horse was moving restlessly, stepping his feet and tossing his head.

“Hello!” I shouted.

There was no sound. My horse became quiet again. I lay down. And then a sudden thought struck me—the camp was near! And Red and the boys were searching for me. I sprang up instantly, and clambered, amid much dislodged earth, to the top of the cliff.

"Hello! Hello-o!" I shouted lustily.

I heard a faint answer, and then it seemed that several answered that. I shouted again, and waited. Then took a paper from my pocket, jammed it tightly among the twigs of a branch, and lighted it. Three distinct shouts answered this. And, almost immediately, a horse dashed at full speed to me, plowing up earth and gravel in his sudden stop. The face of Sleepy peered at me from the horse's back.

"Here I am!" I said joyfully. But his look struck me chill.

"Where's Red?" he asked.

"Where?" I gasped. "Haven't you seen him? Isn't he with the herd?"

He did not answer me. He put his hands to his mouth, and there went out from his lungs a sound like a siren blast. It said, "Come here." Then swinging out from his saddle he snatched the burning torch from my hand, and standing on his feet in his saddle he lifted it high. When he heard the answering yelps of the boys, he spoke to me.

"Red is hurt!—killed!—we don't know what! He was the first man to the steers. He guided the lead and slowed them down to a trot almost right away. We had them comin' our way all day. But at the top of the raise back yonder, Red let them swing south for these hills for night. It was down grade, and the wind fallin' off let the ice melt, and the cold water was tricklin' down in their hair. They broke away from us, and came down at a run, kickin' up their heels and bawlin' as they bucked. Us fellers alongside tried to hold the herd down to the lead, but they just ducked their heads down

and their heels up, and broke ranks for shelter. It wasn't no particular harm, so we just jogged with them until they left us behind, and then we rode along slow in their trail. They are gathered under the brakes just east of here, and are as quiet as lambs. But Red is gone! It wa'n't no stampede like a man couldn't get out of the way of, and Red wouldn't try to run opposition to them steers, no way you can think it. The thing is—*his horse might have fell*. But then, why don't we find him?—or the horse? We have been over the ground enough to have run onto them if they was both dead. It's mighty queer!—tarnal queer!"

I told him that I had come along the trail all the way and not heard anything, or seen any sign of man or beast.

And now the others came up. The disappointment that it was me, and not Red, whom Sleepy had found, was plainly told in each face. I was sorry myself. But I would add one to the search party, and we had to be content with that.

We searched that wild wet slope for hours, riding abreast and close enough to scan every foot of ground we covered. A cliff or gulch, over which Red might have gone in his ride before that oncoming herd, we searched on foot, hoping, yet fearing to find him there. I never knew a search to be conducted under less favorable circumstances. The starlight was just sufficient to distort the vision; the clay slope so slippery that our horses with difficulty kept their feet under us; and sometimes a sheltered crust of ice crushed under foot like the cracking of human bones, and sent a shiver of horror along the spine; often an impassable barrier

opened in front of us, and when we had gone around it, our course was lost, and was, with difficulty recovered; until when near dawn, it seemed that the earth must have opened and swallowed our beloved friend, horse and all. As we counceled together, loth to give up, a sudden thought struck me, and I called to Sleepy.

"I didn't give credence to the thing at the time," I said, my teeth chattering with cold, "but as I lay down there under the bluff, trying to make myself sleep, I thought I heard a rooster crow. I thought I heard it twice."

"Well," said Sleepy, irritable in his worry, "what if—God a-mighty, boys, somebody has seen Red and picked him up!"

All excitement over this possibility, we went back to my bluff. If a rooster had crowed when the clouds passed in the night, so that I heard him there, that same rooster would crow again when dawn broke. We sat waiting and listening. The dawn came. Daylight tinged the eastern sky, and the stars went out. But no cock's challenge greeted the new-born day.

"Maybe the infernal rooster, bein' disturbed that a-way in the night, is sleepin' late this mornin'," said a cow-puncher, when we were all convinced that it was a phantom rooster that I had heard.

"Red would have said just that," said Sleepy, and we were silent again.

Just then, on the stillness, it came! Our hands dropped. Our mouths opened. We stared around. Then it came again, from high up across the valley. Sleepy gave a joyful yelp and sprang toward his horse.

"I know where he is! I can go as straight to that old cock as if a line was drawn for me to follow. But it'll take an hour. So yu all go to the steers—hold them in the brakes as long as yu can. They will be up and movin' by now, so git you!—quick! Him——" with a jerk of a thumb toward me, "and me will find Red and bring you news."

Never did I attempt to follow a man more determined to make his way over every obstacle than was Sleepy Smith that Spring morning; and never did anxiety goad me to greater efforts. Nevertheless, when we reached the spot which Sleepy had marked with his unerring eye, the sun was an hour high.

But we had come true. A little beyond the landmark we beheld a building, half rock, half logs, in front of which, surrounded by hens, busily scratched the rooster whose voice had been our guide. And beyond that on the same level, we saw a cabin, with smoke rising from its chimney. How it ever happened I cannot say, but I reached the door ahead of Sleepy. And there, when it opened, stood a thin woman, in a wrapper of faded blue—I shall never forget it—which buttoned plain across her spare breast. At my anxious query, she said:

"Yes, he is here—a hurt man is here."

She held the door in a tight, nervous grasp as she spoke. She was frankly afraid of us. I gave Sleepy a look, but that tall cow-puncher, with his slouch hat, spurs and revolver, and mustache bristling fierce as a porcupine, without more formality, strode past me and past the woman into the house.

It was a small cabin, and spotlessly clean. You

saw these things first, because there was nothing else to see. The woman had pretty eyes, large and brown, and she turned them in questioning fear from the big Sleepy to me. But at my nod of assurance, she followed the cow-puncher, and we came to a bed, on the white sheets and coverlid of which was the blood of our Red.

He did not know us. He lay with his strong face, pale under the tan, and his red hair trowseled on the pillow. Sleepy touched his hand and lifted an eyelid, talking all the while, a lot of loving sympathy for his friend, that brought tears to my eyes, and drove all fear of him forever from the woman.

"His collar-bone is broken, and——" She lifted a wet pad from his temple, showing an ugly wound there.

"A stone's done that," said Sleepy, "when he fell. I knowed his horse stumbled."

"We saw him," the woman continued, "that is, we saw something across there on the slope after the cattle had passed. And my brother—he has gone for a doctor now—he and I went over to see what it was. We found him lying just as he fell, and his horse right there beside him. The poor thing!—it was trembling and lame, but it just got down as low as it could to let us put that big man up on its back. He talked some as we were bringing him up, but it was all about steers and calves, and birch trees,—I guess he didn't know what he was saying."

Sleepy shook his head. He had examined Red pretty thoroughly. "He is beyond my skill," he said, as he straightened up. "Yu say there is a doctor comin'?"

"Yes." She meekly folded her hands. "I expect them about noon."

"Noon?" Sleepy let his gaze travel over the cabin. "Not much room," he said aloud, and then noticing—"a thousand pardons to yu, ma'am, but one of us has got to stay with him. He will get ob-streperous, yu see, ma'am, before noon. It is barely 8, and fever is on him now."

The woman nodded, and hurried away for cold water and fresh cloths for Red's wounds. In her absence Sleepy looked sorrowfully on Red while he spoke low to me.

"If he could talk to us now, he'd say, 'Sleepy, yu go with them steers—don't yu leave them nor touch a drop of liquor till they are sold in Chicago. Yu explain how things are to the Company—tell them I'm laid up.' He would tell me that if he could, right now. So it's Sleepy for the steers. You'll have to stay here. Yu ought to be something of a nurse by now, yu've had so much sickness yourself."

I told him that nothing would please me more than to stay and do what I could for Red. And it was arranged between us that if the doctor came, and at dark Red was better, I should build a fire outside on a shelving ledge of rock. If Red was not better at dark, and the doctor said he was going in to die, I was to light no fire, and Sleepy and the other boys would come up to be with their comrade in his last hour. But——

"If he comes to all right, as I'm hopin' he will," said Sleepy, "mind he don't get a square look at that as dresses like a woman here, or he'll think he's dead and gone to hell."

I promised, and with no word after this scarcely to be called kind remark, Sleepy left me and rode away down the mountain side. I took my vigil beside the sick. I do not know what that frail woman would have done alone with Red that day, while his fever raged and his delirium prompted him to every trick and cunning device to make his escape from the bed and us. Neither do I know what I should have done without the woman. At times he obeyed me like a child; at other times he resisted me like a tyrant. At times she calmed him with a song, or with the gentle stroke of her hand on his hot brow. But in one song he stopped her with a rough word:

"Shet up!" he said, with a clearness that startled me. "I ain't dead yet."

And then his voice sank to a whisper. "She left me to go and sing for the crowd," he said sadly. And I knew that Birch's secretiveness was still rankling in the old wound. And then soon again: "A woman has to give up everything for her man—it wasn't in me to make her care enough——"

His voice trailed off into a mumble, and almost immediately he was roping and branding calves. And with such close attention to detail did he go through all the acts that I fancied I could smell burning flesh, and I noticed the woman move back from him with a little shiver of horror. Then suddenly he dropped all of this. He addressed ladies, and his voice was sweeter than music and no trace of the slang of the ranch pervaded his talk. He was living a life with her, I perceived, for he spoke her name frequently—"Birch" and "honey."

"To-morro'," he said, and all the pride of the

man was in the word, "To-morro' I shall be with Birch!" It made my heart ache to hear him. But the woman across the bed, unknowing, saw only the vegetable in all this. With eyes shining into mine, she whispered:

"He must have been brought up among the birches—like me."

Her delight in this idea was so evident, that I felt mean to enlighten her, but I said:

"No, the 'Birch' he speaks of was—is a woman—a teacher, and a—his——"

I paused, undecided whether to tell the truth or evade. By my indecision I lost. The woman spoke a quick little "Oh!" which forestalled me. Then Red, as if to help me to the evasion, broke out again.

"I can say grammar correct when I try, because I learned correct at my mothah's knee." He mumbled his words then, but resumed clearly, "Miss Birch, yu'll have to teach me the 'why' of all these things. And some day I'll teach yu——"

But here he opened his eyes and stared at me. He moved his wounded head. Pain cleared his mind a little and he saw the woman.

"I knowed yu was here," he said, looking at her and speaking in his tenderest tone, "I knowed the first time your hands touched me. If it wasn't for yu here carin' for me like this I couldn't bear the pain."

She blushed furiously, and murmured incoherent words of self-depreciation. But she might have spared herself her confusion, for Red dropped off at once in a restless sleep. I was left undecided whether or not he had had a flash of rationality.

But later events convinced me that his delirium was playing him a trick, cruel in its utter absurdity.

While the patient slept, the woman and I talked softly—that is, I talked, and she answered me with yes and no, whenever it was possible to do so. But I came to know that her name was Marks,—Hope Marks — and that her brother, Acy, was a consumptive. They came there, were living in that outrageous spot, for his health. And now she told me,—with one of those sudden flashes of life which I had come to observe in her, when, with the stirring of some emotion, her eyes would shine with a brightness which was the very glow of soul-fire,—that she was glad to-day, for the first time, that they had come there, for she felt that she might save the life of this cowboy. And her brother's health was improving slowly,—she told me this repeatedly, trying to convince me that she believed what she said. I let her think that she had done so.

It was past noon and the doctor had not come. Miss Marks excused the delay with the rough, wet trail, and I, recalling our climb, wondered if he would get there at all. Red was tossing again, and we gave attention to him. As Miss Marks bent over the bed he spoke to her in a voice pitifully weak, but tender as a lover's. He said:

“Put your hand heyah, honey,—it aches so.”

She put her hand on his throbbing temple, and he dropped off again in sleep. I was very uneasy for his condition. The doctor's delay caused me more alarm than I cared to confess. So when Miss Marks went to prepare dinner, I examined Red, as best I could without moving or hurting him. He watched me without comment of any kind until I

had wholly finished. Then, in a tone of command, he said:

“Yu can call Miss Birch now, seh.”

“Birch? Why, Red, listen. This is not——”

I stopped. Bright spots burning on his cheeks checked my words. Why disturb him? The very best thing for him now would be for his love to come back to him. And if he believed she had come, why, then, to him, she had! I rearranged the covers over him, and had just straightened up when Miss Marks entered. He spoke at once to her.

“Birch,” he said, and the word was the music of love, “yu can pay Mistah Morton what I owe him, and tell him, honey, that we don’t need him any more.”

Miss Marks paused and looked at me, for I snickered out. She as Birch Halloway, and I as Major Morton!—could anything be more ridiculous? I snickered again, smothered it down, and in the end gave up and frankly laughed. For, into our direct opposites, had Red’s fevered imagination tortured the two of us. I tried to explain something of the cause of my mirth to Miss Marks,—something, but not all. I did not explain all; that was my mistake.

The doctor arrived at sunset, and at dark I was able, not without misgivings, to build my fire. He said it would be very long—he expected no change for forty-eight hours, or even ninety-six hours. In the meantime we could only do our best to hold the fever in check. He praised Miss Marks’ cleanliness and her cold water treatment. He said the

young man owed his life to these two things. Then he mixed some medicine, bathed Red's wounds and went to bed. The brother, Acy Marks, coughed incessantly, and complained, between coughs, that the ride in the damp air had made him worse. He was as selfish, peevish, and irrational as a child with a stone bruise. I was glad when he, too, went to bed.

Miss Marks and I maintained our vigil together until 12. And then, after much persuading, she consented to take some rest. But she took rest, I soon perceived, as she took everything else, on the jump. For instance, she would drop into a chair as if her limbs had suddenly failed her, and the next moment would rise again, as if some hidden spring had lifted her bodily and shot her up. And it was just so with bed,—she was up and down, up and down. If Red moved or murmured, if there was the slightest sound or sigh, she was up and beside him, her eager hands soothing his brow. Whenever he called for Birch, this ugly phantom of his love was there, drinking in the music of his voice, basking in the ardor of his fevered glances. And it was so both day and night through all his illness. Miss Hope Marks seemed made of steel; her ears were sensitized beyond those of any other living thing; her feet were winged for him. At length I gave the job of nursing over to her altogether, and only helped with the heavier duties. But to Red, lying bandaged there in the snowy bed, I was always Morton, and Miss Marks was always Birch.

One day, as I came in from taking the air, I found Miss Marks kneeling beside him, weeping. I rushed to the bed.

“What is it? Has anything happened?” I asked in a fever of alarm.

“He—he has not spoken to me all day,” she sobbed.

I touched Red’s forehead with a hand. It had a wholesome feeling, better than usual, I thought, and I hastened to reassure Miss Marks.

“There is no occasion for alarm in that,” I said hopefully. “As the fever abates, and he begins to assume a normal condition, he will, naturally, leave off his delirious rambling. I think it a good sign.”

She looked up at me, and her eyes shone with such a lustre that she seemed transformed. “I like for him to talk to me. I hate to think that he will leave off talking when—when he is well.” She arose and stood looking at him, the picture of dejection. “Oh, I am lonesome to-day,” she said, with a wan smile, “and tired, too, I guess.”

I spoke such words of sympathy as occurred to me. I was sorry if I had failed in any way as an assistant. She was a cultured woman, and had undoubtedly been quite a beauty when young. I enjoyed the talks we had together—when the light was dim. I do not mean it unkindly, but a dearth of light was necessary to my enjoyment. Her voice was pleasant, her words well chosen, and her point of view always novel, and when her lean, leathery visage, and her dress-front, buttoned sagging and wrinkled, over a totally flat bust, was concealed, I enjoyed myself with her fully and frankly.

Perhaps I am too fastidious for you, reader. But total flatness of form in a woman is my pet aversion. If I were a woman, and nature had failed to make me, or keep me—well, round, I would—

but then you know already what I would do. And I expect, when I marry my Aphrodite, I shall find her rotundity to be all wire and ruffles. And you will be glad and say, "It serves him right!" Well, say it! I had rather love wire and ruffles than to give my life trying to love vacancy.

But to return to my subject. I was sorry for Miss Marks; sorry that she led so lonely a life; sorry that her brother repaid her sacrifice with ceaseless complaint; sorry that my rational words did not interest her like the rambling of a delirious man. Yes, I am sorry for all this, not so much because of its reflection upon myself and others, as because it indicated something moving in the withered breast of Miss Marks. And it was with this complication in mind that I sat down, with book under paper on my knee, to write to Mrs. Halloway. Why, I didn't just know. But when a man sees a love affair growing on his hands, he always appeals to some woman. While thus engaged I heard Red's voice—his natural voice!

"Where are the steers?"

I sprang up, scattering my papers, and ran in to him. His delirium had dropped from him at a stroke, and he was sitting propped with his well arm, all himself.

"The steers—where are they?"

"The steers are in Chicago by now, Red," I said. "You lie down and I will tell you all about everything."

He lay back obediently, and I arranged the pillows to rest his injured head. His gaze wandered around.

"This ain't Morton's—I thought I was there," he said.

"No," I replied, smiling. "Your horse fell with you down near Sweetwater Crossing."

"Ya-ah, I know all that—I have known all of that right along. But some things have puzzled me a lot. How did?—well, I reckon I started in dreamin' right off when I fell. This——" He put a hand to his head—"a steer did that—his hoof cut in and I felt the blood run. I reckon reason was plumb knocked out of me for my dreams wasn't near right—nothin' was right. I knowed that right along, only I couldn't seem to make them right."

I smiled at him. "You have been rather mixed up," I said. "You thought I was Morton, and——"

"Did I?" He laughed about this himself. And then became suddenly anxious again about the steers. "So Sleepy went on this mawnin' with the steers? I hoped he had."

"Yes," I said, seeing plainly how mixed he was, but anxious not to excite him. "Yes, Sleepy went with the steers to the station."

He looked at me and a puzzled expression crossed his face. "Maybe it has been a day or two since I got hurt?"

"Several days, Red. But you must not talk now. You have been very sick."

He lay silent, but a hand moved, touching his bandaged shoulder and then his bandaged head.

"Sleepy fixed these things," he said, "befoah he went?"

I did not answer, although he had made his words a question. I was so glad to see him himself again, so happy to find his mind so clear, that I was content to sit and beam at him, until, in an unguarded moment, I spoke my delight.

"Red, I am so all-fired glad to see you wake up like this. I——"

I remembered and checked my impetuous speech. But he understood and pressed my hand. I squeezed back, and then holding his hand I looked away—he must not see the tears that gathered to my eyes. He did not, for when I looked back I found him inspecting the place with that close scrutiny so common with him. Presently he turned his eyes to me and drawled:

"Where are the rabbits yu scared out of this place?"

Rabbits? Well, it wasn't much bigger than a burrough.

"They are around—their name is Marks, Hope and a brother Acy."

"Hope?" And now his gaze became compelling. I felt his fingers tighten in their grip on mine.

"You must not talk, dear friend," I implored.

"No,—only this—has she—has this Hope Marks dark eyes like—like—do they shine?"

"Yes," I responded, "she has. But she—she isn't——"

"I know," he said, and there was resignation, nothing else, in his tone. "I know—she looks like something that had died last month—all but its eyes."

I tried hard not to laugh. But my delight at his recovery, and his words—my will was inadequate. I emitted a little squeak. It brought his gaze upon me, deep and sorrowful.

"Nobody cayn't help how they look," he said.

"I know. I am ashamed of myself. She has been very kind to you—to both of us. I am ashamed."

"I reckon yu have been fed right well. Your collar looks tighter than it did when I noticed last time."

I twisted my neck in the tight band, and blushed. I was, in truth, adding flesh to flesh. But now I became suddenly firm with him.

"Red, you must not talk any more. I am as silly as a girl to let you exert yourself like this. Go to sleep now. You must, Red."

"Ya-ah, aftah this question," he said, with his usual provoking persistency. "Is there something around here that keeps chuggin' and chuggin', like a machine?"

"No-o." I was puzzled; then had an idea. "Perhaps it is Acy Marks' coughing that you have heard. He is a lunger."

"That's it,—it was like a cough, some. Well, now," and he gave me his rare sweet smile, "I reckon I am well enough acquainted to sleep here."

Dear Red, suffering could not make him petulant. I could not help thinking, as I looked on him, lying swathed in irksome bandages, that if Acy Marks were like him, how much more pleasant would be the lot of his patient sister. But such a thing would never be. Red slept almost immediately, and I left him to go and inform the sister and brother of his happy return to consciousness. They received it differently: Acy with an interest that spoke plainly his pleasure in soon being rid of the two of us; his sister with a little gasp that might have meant either pleasure or dismay. She did not give me time to speculate, for she went in at once and began preparations for supper. But she did not sit down with us at table. Instead, she

went to where Red lay, and stood motionless, watching him in his deep, restoring sleep. When he awoke an hour later, she refused my offer of assistance, and carried his supper to him herself.

He sat propped up with pillows. And he tried—I could see that he tried hard,—to act natural and at ease with Miss Marks.

“I reckon I’d have died if I hadn’t had so good a nurse,” he said.

She understood that this was the beginning of his thanks to her, and it flurried her so that she slopped the tea on the coverlid; and that flurried her still more, and I had to go to her rescue. She fled in confusion, and I saw no more of her that evening, nor did Red.

In the morning, however, she was on duty again. When I came in from the care of our horses, I found Red washed and enjoying breakfast. Whatever more of thanks he gave Miss Marks I never knew. But this I could see—understanding had come between them. Her eyes were red and wet and she trembled all day. But her confusion was gone, and no more tea was spilled on the coverlid.

Red’s recovery was rapid. In a few days he had his clothes on and was sitting up. To while time away I discussed plans for when we should leave this mountain cabin. I preferred a week or two at home for him, but he was determined to return at once to the rancho. Miss Marks, hearing our conversation, rose from some sewing in the midst of it, and with an abruptness that could not escape notice. I saw a troubled look settle on Red’s face, and he sat and stared at the chair she vacated. But I went blithely on with my plans,

"She saved my life—she sure enough did," said Red, solemn as a funeral, and right in the midst, too, of a thrilling description I was giving of a duck hunt we should have on the Red River. So I dropped my subject and took up his.

"You might put it that way," I said, "but it is likely that the boys would have got you to a doctor about as quick, and——"

He looked at me, and the deep sorrow in his eyes stopped me.

"She don't have half a chance," he said, his gaze back on the chair. "She nevah did have—she's some like me."

"I grant it," I said as lightly as I could, "but so long as we—you and me—have not robbed her of her chance, we are not called upon to concern ourselves, as I see."

I put it to him flatly, if good humoredly. In fact, Red's gentleness toward this woman, together with the worried look he wore almost constantly, was not at all to my liking. I did not think Miss Marks designing, but that she was a sentimental old sophist I hadn't a doubt. I had been sorry to see her love for him spring up and grow, but for Red's feeling for her I hadn't a shade of toleration. He answered me abruptly:

"But ain't we?" he asked, turning to me a face of deep concern. "I mean, ain't I robbin' her of a chance?" Then as I did not answer his absurd query, he settled back in his chair and added reflectively, "She'd be happy at the Rancho—happy as a setter dog."

I snorted. "Good heavens, Red! You don't think of that!—of taking her there!"

"Why not?"

"Why for?" I demanded hotly. "Surely not because you want her there—or her brother wants her there—or the boys want her there—or your folks—or I, if I may mention myself—I don't want her there! Besides, you will not always live on the Rancho—what would you do with her then?"

"Yes,—But what makes yu leave her side out always? Is she an animal, to be taken if she is needed, and left if she is not? Her brother thinks she is—her folks all think so,—she has always been led or driven to where she was needed as a convenience to somebody. Cayn't yu see how it is with her?"

"Her?" I permitted myself an oath, not of her but for him. "What the devil is she to you, Red? She has nursed you, to be sure, and tended you, and fed you, and done it all well. And so have women, infinitely more lovely, nursed and tended me. When they were done, I paid them their wages, and went away and forgot them. You should do the same."

"Maybe none of your nurses evah loved yu."

"Perhaps no one of them did—I surely never took the trouble to find out," I stated vindictively.

"It would be like yu to do that a-way."

"I am glad to say that it is, just like me!—and like any man not lost in a fog sentiment. Red, shake yourself loose from this idea. It's preposterous. Miss Marks is old enough to be your mother!"

"She is only thirty-eight."

I snorted again. "Thirty-eight!—she looks fifty!—and is fifty, Red. Why, I'll bet she is past child-bearing right now."

"Don't! Yu cayn't say no mean thing about her to me," he said, his words clinking as they fell like the links of a steel chain.

"I withdraw them, then," I said, fearing that anger would do him hurt. And then I made excuse. "A man contemplating marriage should consider those things. I have heard you say——"

He stopped me with a motion. "Yu don't seem to understand things," he said, all his sweetness returned.

But this very sweetness irritated me now. I arose and left him. I went out for a walk, hoping to forget this disagreeable subject. But fortune did not favor me. I came suddenly upon the other party to the affair, alone and sobbing. She saw me, and wiped her eyes. There seemed no way out of it, so I approached her and inquired the cause of her grief.

"My—my brother!" she sobbed.

"Why, he is all right," I assured her with all the patience I could command just then. "I encountered him as I sat out, and he was as usual."

"I know, but he—he says I cannot marry Mr. Levering."

Marry Mr.— So then he had already—But I left off this line of thought to call down blessings on brother Acy. I commended him to the saints; I placed him in the especial care of the Great Physician, and craved for him a long life. In another moment I would have convinced myself that I loved him; but Miss Marks spoke.

"Acy says that I have to stay here with him as long as he lives, and I can't! I can't! He says that he will die if I leave him, from neglect. And that his—his blood will be upon my head!"

"A dreadful thing to have on one's conscience surely," I said, and denounced myself as a brute before the words had left my lips. But I did not retract. Instead I hastened to cinch the thing.

"I do not wish to interfere, Miss Marks"—I lied in my best manner—"but your brother needs you badly. Your first duty is to him, as I see it—to your flesh and blood, you know."

"I have never been anything but a nurse to him," she sighed, with big tears hanging to her wan cheeks.

"Yes," I said, "and it would be like taking daylight away from him to lose you now."

She ceased crying a moment to look me full in the face. I wondered vaguely what was passing in her mind. She did not leave me long in doubt.

"You do not like me," she stated.

The words struck me like a blow. "I—why, Miss Marks, I do not deserve that! I like you very well. I appreciate all that you have done for me—for your brother and all of us. I meant to speak for your good."

She said nothing for a moment. Her gaze was fixed on the opposite slope—that hillside where she had found Red. Then——

"You do not like me," she stated again. "You do not wish Mr. Levering to marry me. You think I am too old—too ugly—too simple—too——"

She stopped. I think I made some exclamation. The thought flashed through me—*she has heard our talk!* But I scouted the idea. No, the thing was so obvious that she had seen it herself. And I presume I did wrong, and that you will say it was heartless, but I threw pity and all kindred emotions to the winds and answered her direct.

“Miss Marks, you will pardon me, I hope, but what you have stated is true. Listen! My thinking you are old cannot add years to your life—they are there, and all your crying and denying cannot take them away. You are too old to marry Red. His life is just beginning—his career is just opening before him—he will make a splendid man. He needs a wife that is lively, accomplished, *fair!* He needs a young wife, full of hope and faith, that will push him on to his best—one that will hold his love to the very hour of her death. You are a sensible woman—you can see this yourself. You say that your life has been a bitter one of sacrifice to your brother. Do you want to make Red’s life a bitter one of sacrifice to you? Will that make for your happiness? Could you enjoy marriage knowing that your brother had gone to his grave cursing you?—and that your—your husband had lost the best there was for him, because of his sacrifice to you? Don’t cry! You are a good cook, a splendid housekeeper. You have made the best of your chance, and that is more than the most of us can say of life. But so has Red made the best of his chance up till now, and—would you hinder him now? If he were like most—if he were going to remain a cowboy, a ranch foreman, all his days, it would not be so bad. But he is not. He has marked his place high. He is of good family. His mother——”

“So!” she said, with an edge in her words that cut. “So am I of good family, sir!”

“Do not misunderstand me, Miss Marks,” said I, as nervous as a fool, now that I had taken the leap. “I know you to be the soul of hospitality, and breed-

ing and virtue. I speak as I do for the happiness of my friend,—for your own happiness.”

“My happiness!” She flung the word back into my face. “My happiness, when you stand there and tell me to do that which I cannot—that which no woman should be asked to do by—by anyone. And then, not satisfied with that, you sprinkle a poison into that which would have been bliss. I could have been happy with him, but you have spoiled it!—you have! Oh, you have!”

She began to sob aloud and wildly. It seemed to me, standing there, that far off Herrington, nay, all Texas, must be hearing that heartrending crying. She begged me to kill her; she implored the rocks to fall and crush out her miserable existence; she let her limbs writhe in torture while she tore herself with that wild, incessant sobbing. Finding words useless, I turned and left her. I was almost choked with misery. I had heard young calves bawl under the branding iron; I had heard negroes cry under the lash; I had heard a mother shriek when her child was killed before her eyes; and a wife moan when her husband swung from the hangman’s block. And all these, abhorrent as they were, and sickening to the soul, I would hear again, if need were. But let me never again hear the sobs of a woman, stricken through her love!

As I hurried over rocks and swung myself boldly over precipices by hold on a slender reed or shrub, I had no thought save to escape that grief which I had let loose like a flood of anguish on the air. And I tell you now, not in the hope of justifying myself in any way, but merely to state a fact, that while those sobs were in my ears, I would have sworn

that I loved Miss Marks could that have stopped them; I would have declared her beautiful; I would have married her! I would have done anything, except, of course, kill her—I would have killed myself to have stopped those cries! But what I had done I knew I was powerless to undo. And I hastened along over rocks and among pines, until at length the sobbing no longer reached me.

But I still felt it throbbing on my brain. And I knew, all at once, that Red had heard that sound—not from Miss Marks, though I was positive that some scene had been between them—but what he had heard and suffered for days and nights together, was the crying of his own heart—litanies of woe loosened in his own being. And, like me, he wanted never to hear it again!

A great sadness came over me. I saw Red's position clearly now, and felt compassion for him. Surely his problems were not easily solved. I hastened toward the cabin, anxious now to see him and explain my conduct before Miss Marks could tell him anything. But as I entered the doorway I heard low voices, and looking inside, I saw Miss Marks, her head buried in Red's lap, her thin legs, with their scant covering of skirts, sprawled on the floor. His arms were around her and his face was close to hers. She was shaking with sobs which no longer rose to her lips, and talking when she could. I knew that she would tell him all, and I felt that he would despise me. I went out and saddled my horse. I took leave of the brother, and, leaving what clothing of mine was in the house for a bonfire for their righteous hate, I rode away to sleep that night on the green velvet of the prairie.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MORTON FORECLOSES.

In the measureless realm of time has a man who makes money dishonestly ever left off at the accumulation of a comfortable sum? I think not, and I leave it to the psychological student to tell you why not. The still netted Hooven a comfortable sum—I knew that from evidence brought out at the trial. He could have married Joseph and made a creditable showing as a householder; he could have bought cattle and established himself as a rancher equal to Hawkins or Reynolds; he could have paid the mortgage on the Levering home and enjoyed the benediction of a dying father. But he did none of these things, and again I leave the explanation to psychology.

In the Territory of Oklahoma was the ruins of the old McGee ranch. A tall stockade of smooth, barkless poles stood an unscalable wall around stables, corral and house inside. The house was low, rambling and old; the windows were deep-set and sleepy looking, and there was a broad porch fronting the stables. Back of this house, in the corner of the stockade, was a dark, deep pit, with a slab standing aslant of its edge, from which still floated the shreds of a warning rag. There were no trees growing near, no vines on the porch, no grass in the yard. The soil was beaten hard by the tramp of many hoofs, and although no one had lived there

for two years, scarcely a weed had struggled through the hard earth. Outside the stockade a growth of timber stretched down toward the place, like a long black arm from the Wichita Hills, and Signal Mountain was visible to the discerning eye. To the west lay a flat, unbroken plain, rich in luscious grasses.

In McGee's time this plain had swarmed with cattle, and, in the stables inside the stockade, fine stallions and beautiful fillies, all gathered from unknown sources, were wont to caper, or chafe in the stall. In the corral, with red eyes gleaming from tangles of mane, wild mustangs were broken to saddle and to bit, and gentle pasture stuff was toughened to endure long, hard runs. And often, too, the stables were darkened and locked, and the stallions muzzled, and at the loopholes men stood with rifles ready, day and night. The pit had many a layer of human bones. For it was a saying of old McGee's that whenever he brought a good horse in from the States, its owner always sent him a horse or two more to keep it company. It was not an idle boast.

It requires money to start thieving on a big scale—any successful thief will tell you that. And what successful thief is not a big thief? Hooven had dreams of doing things on a big scale. Why not begin now? And here? The place suited him exactly. He had the money to stock it and could begin big, and run big. He even had hopes, I heard, of bringing Joseph to preside over the old house, and look with innocent wonder into the yawning pit. This I learned from that lady herself, for I visited at the Levering home on my way up from Sweet-water Crossing.

"Mr. Hooven is making ouah home ready for me now," she told me in a low voice. "It is in the Territory, and is a long way from any settlement. But I do not care for people—just people, yu know. I shall take my servants with me. I shall not be very lonely with Jim there, do yu think so?"

I led her to describe the place, and recognized it instantly. For I spent a night there in a former search for Hooven. And even made so bold, in the gray dawn of my departure, to place on that leaning slab above the pit the words, "*In pace requiescat,*" as an epitaph for the bones mouldering below.

"I—I try not to flaunt my happiness in the face of fathah and mothah," the girl continued, exhibiting an emotion rare in her. "Mr. Hooven will keep a large gang of cowboys. Don't yu think my opportunity excellent to—to show them how they should live? We—Jim and I—will have them singing hymns every evening," she said, her small hands clasped wishfully under her chin and her dark eyes shining into mine.

"Better hold your song service out at the pit," I suggested, too miserable to care for consequences.

"The pit?" She was only mildly curious. "Jim did not tell me about a pit. What is it like?—but yu do not know. Jim has a fine tenor voice—did yu evah hear him sing?"

"Yes," said I. "I have heard him." And I recalled the words of his song. How they stung me then! But they stung me doubly now. I arose in bitterness and abruptly left her. But I was not to escape so easily. At another time she found me, when outside in the garden, with the sunset gilding the place with a halo of golden light. The fragrance of Summer was on the still air.

"It is beautiful here," I said, vaguely hopeful that she would not torture me this time with any allusion to her lover. I wanted to have her with me just this once, with nothing hateful between us, that I might mellow and glow in restful peace like the dying day. I confess to wish to sit there with her beside me, and go out into eternity with the fading of the light. "Beautiful—sweet!" I said, looking at her and moving over to make room for her beside me.

She took the proffered seat and this amazed me. I had not hoped for so much. But she was not so haughty now as in former days. Often, it seemed to me, that she sought my company, for I avoided her. Her presence now did not bring me the peace I hoped for—it brought me pain instead, for I knew that I could never hope to win her. And her innocent purity going to so vile a slaughter!—it inspired me anew with the ardor of the man-hunt—an ardor I was trying to kill, since it was not in the province of my duties now to dog Hooven over the earth. He was not dealing in contraband goods. To be sure, there remained an unexculpated crime, but it would be my word against his now, with no goods taken on him, and no witnesses to prove his guilt. While he could have twenty, unless he chose to have more, who would swear their souls away for him. So it was no use. I had been telling myself as I sat there alone, that I would go away and let them be happy together, if they could be—there was no happiness for me, anyway. Such was the gloomy tenure of my thought until she came and sat beside me, and the last beams of the day kissed the raven blackness of her hair, touched with radiance the old ivory of her brow, and told me the fragrance of her gown.

"This is a beautiful old place," she said, looking out across the meadow—"beautiful. But it is not ouahs any more—did yu know?"

"Not that! So Morton has dared to——"

"Yu know, then?" Her eyes were reading my face. "Yes, he foreclosed two months ago. My brothah had nearly enough money saved to take up the note, but Morton would have all or nothing. Fathah tried hard to raise the balance, but failed. He takes no interest in anything now."

"So I have noticed. It is too bad!—too awful bad! I wish I had known."

She drew herself up, her old pride asserting itself. But in another moment her shoulders drooped pitifully and her lip quivered.

"I, too, wish yu had have known," she said tremulously.

"Joseph!" I turned to her with a movement eloquent with meaning, but which I could not resist any more than I could repress the speaking of her name.

She regarded me with round eyes, and her lips were parted, showing the tiny pearls that lay in line beneath the red; a soft glow suffused the ivory of her cheek. She was unqualifiedly surprised.

"No," she said sharply, and rising, stepped out into the walk. I thought that she was leaving me in anger, but she paused there and I stood humbly behind her.

"No," she said again, turning to me, her voice soft this time and low. "But—oh, dear friend,—no, what am I saying?—But listen, something has happened to me,—I do not know what! Something has; my pride is all gone. Fathah used to say I

was all pride, so I know that I am little, indeed, now without it. And when the—when fathah knew that we must lose ouah home, he came at once and told me. He feared the effect on me—he and mothah both. But now, when I see his suffering, day aftah day, and see the lines deepening in mothah's face, I know that they suffah most."

She paused and I nodded. I felt the sorrow of this family deeply. She continued:

"At first I thought it must be my hope in my new hope that bore me up undah the reverses of ouah family. But now I know it is not that. I do not want to go—I mean—I—oh, what am I saying? Yu know, that I mean this—I want to do something foah my own people—I want to earn some money."

I said, while my heart pounded so that I could scarcely control my voice, "I always knew that you were of the right metal, Joseph."

"Did yu?" Her laugh had a little frightened note in it. "Then yu knew me bettah than I knew myself." Then hurriedly, "My brothah loves yu—does he make yu his confident? Did yu know that he was saving all that money?"

I replied: "I knew that he hoped to meet the mortgage. I am grieved for him that he failed."

She hung her head. "Yes, we are all sorry. But it isn't like he had not tried, yu know."

I did know, and I knew, too, that her eyes were shining up at me through tears. Moved by an impulse I could not control, I touched her hand, then took it firmly between both of mine. For an instant she let it rest there.

"Oh—oh, please," she said the next instant, and made a little nervous move that had the effect of

pushing my hands from hers rather than the withdrawing of hers from mine. "Yu must be kind. I am not myself to-night—I mean, any more. But—I believe I am bettah! Sometimes I feel that this calamity has been visited upon us to make me see the good in man—in all the earthly and the worldly. Yu said once that all the world was good, being His. I have thought of that frequently of late. The change began when I resolved to save Jim. And this—to live on Morton's land,—in Morton's house,—to be mere tenants of his! And to know that my fathah struggled and planned to shield me—that my brothah worked and saved foah us all—why, I—how ungrateful I have been!"

She paused an instant to control her voice, and then resumed:

"I used to—that old me—used to long for the time when I could go to Jim and begin my work of saving the cowboys—and of saving him. I thought that would be all—all that could be asked of me—that the sacrifice would be enough to—but now, I have decided that my wedding must wait. I owe a duty here at home—and duty is stronger—stronger than anything else with a Levering. I am going to Herrington and get work. I can teach private pupils or——"

"Joseph," I begged, "do not! Promise me, dear girl, that you will not. Oh, Joseph, if only I could tell you!"

"If yu could tell me?" she repeated. We were at the house now, and she paused on a step. I found that the hand I had given to assist her was gripping her arm like a vise. I asked pardon. I do not think she heard me. She stood above me, looking down.

Her voice when she spoke again was low and eager.

"Yu—yu can tell me anything, except—except what would be disloyal to Jim."

"I know," I said, bowing my head, "so, then, I can tell you nothing."

She drew away from me. But before I released her arm, I felt a thrill pass under my hand.

"I will have to tell yu good night now, and—goodbye," she said from the shadow.

"Promise me at least that you will remain at home until I come again," I implored. "It will not be long."

"I can promise yu nothing," she said in a voice that quivered. "Good night."

I sat down on the step where she had stood. The day had wholly gone, and there was no moon, but to me the world seemed brighter than it had for many days. Duty was stronger than love with a Levering, was it? Well, I knew better than to try to change the Levering—I had tried that once with disastrous results. So the thing for me to do was to change the duty. That was no easy task. For now I must get evidence against Hooven, not only to convince a jury but to convince Joseph. I must bring him before her stripped of all cloaks—clad only in his crimes. And let her see him and know him as he was. And when this was done, then——

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MAN HUNT.

The trail I followed led straight to Herrington. And its rain-washed soil was tracked by the hoof-print of a single horse. It was thus for miles and miles. Signal Mountain faded from sight at the left, and then other tracks came in on the trail. But I followed it still; for so well did I know every line and mark of that particular horse, that I could and had tracked him through a corral. I had trailed that horse, and his certain rider, from the McGee ranch to the Red River; from the Red River to the Panhandle; from the Panhandle to the Llano Estacado, and back again to the ranch; then north, and east, and west, to points not then on maps. And always, where that horse went, others followed stealthily, and there was thieving of horse, cattle or calves. I had followed that trail and slept beside it, for countless nights, and days that knew not the week's beginning or end. I had lived thus, until when chance presented itself to eat, whether the repast was of broiled game, or dry biscuit, I brought to it the same good appetite. And my fat gave way to muscle, and my lungs expanded and grew, full of free, pure air; my nerves became steady and my eye keen. And now, as the trail led to Herrington, I pushed down the strong spring of my trap with a certain power, and watched the game hourly leading into it.

I knew where to set my trap and what to bait it with, for all trails now led to Herrington. All northern and western Texas would be there tomorrow, for it was election day. And Texas was rent and torn because of this election. Breaths of its fury had penetrated even to the cactus and mesquite wilds, and reached me as I rode among them on my man-hunt; and every passing stranger had paused to tell the latest news of the campaign. For a strong man was out for Governor against a weak tool, and from that office down effort was being made for pure government and active laws. Thieves, and the hirelings of thieves, had ruled for years; now the decent element was struggling for supremacy—it meant a long and bitter fight.

But the party of right was finding support in unexpected quarters. The ranchers of the north and west, together with their cowboys, were worn out with the struggle against thieves. Not only were they worn out, but they were growing poor; they were beginning to suspect each other and to doubt their own help—a change was imperative, and they were ready to vote for better things. But the saloon element, always on the side with laxity and wrong, and the vote of thieves was large. The methods employed on both sides in the contest were such as would have put an Eastern State under military rule; almost every conversation ended in a fight; political meetings ended in riot; speakers everywhere were hooted from the rostrum; and the eve of election came with the result as much in the air as it had been when the caucuses were held.

I was barely an hour behind my man, and as I said, the trail led straight. Only once did I lose

sight of the tracks I followed, and then I spent no time in search. I knew that their destination was the Boar's Head saloon, and it mattered little whether I arrived there before or after Hooven.

At the Boar's Head the political pot boiled fast and furious. The place was more than full; men crowded the doors front and rear, and bulged out at windows; hot words came over their heads and the odor of malt. I forced my way inside, and found old friends beside the dripping bar—Hawkins, Reynolds, Dock and Darling—it lacked only Morton to complete the group. But it came over me, as I saw them there, that they would always lack that one. I stood apart from them, and they looked my way, but no spark of recognition came to a face among them. Hawkins talked loud and forceful. He took the curiously illogical view that everything needed regulating and controlling except the saloon. He could see that men should be prohibited from stealing calves—he could not see that they should be prohibited from selling whiskey—the latter affected someone else, the first affected him—that was the difference. But now a calm voice spoke, its depths drowning the guttural of Hawkins.

“Could yu make a law, seh, making it a crime to steal a hawss, and then set another law alongside of it making it right to steal a hawg?”

They crowded forward to shake hands with Red. They praised his growth, his looks, his record. They scolded him for neglecting old friends; they showed their pride in him in their words and in their faces. But they did not spare him; they teased him about his schoolma'am, and about a horse trade in which, so Reynolds had it, Red got a good horse for a no-

account mare, by assuring the man that she would always bear stud colts—her mother always did! I laughed over this fool joke until I ached. But the ranchers went on with their fun. They twitted Red about Morton getting the best of him, and insinuated, with all becoming seriousness, that the Major had the schoolma'am promised for a second Mrs. Morton. They rallied him about Miss Marks, and said they had heard she threw him down, being afraid he was too young and tender for her. I did not see how they dared to be so personal—he would have resented such words from me. But he took these men as they meant, and they had their fun. At the end of it Hawkins asked Red to drink with him, and was hurt at his refusal.

"I thought yu'd have sense by now," he said.

"I have, seh," said Red. "Yu all say that I have had success—well, it's been done without stimulant. Where is your success, Hawkins? Has some saloon-keeper got it?"

"One has got a big slice of mine, Red," said Dock readily, as in the old days. But the proprietor standing behind the bar laughed, and his laugh had an ugly sound. It was echoed by a man near the door—I could not see him.

Red glanced at the saloonkeeper, and the sight of that huge besotted being seemed to stir the cow-puncher's latent blood.

"We take care of ouah poor here in Texas; we build asylums for ouah insane; we reform ouah bad boys; and we house the lame, the halt and the blind," he said, in a voice which, though neither raised or loud, penetrated every nook and corner of the saloon. "It costs money to do all of that—hundreds

and thousands of dollars we pay in taxes to keep all of those things goin'. But we leave the cause—the great cause of pauperism, of insanity, of deformed and weak-minded children—the cause, I say, of all them things, we leave untouched. Is that good business?"

Nobody answered this, and Red, looking his audience over with critical eye, let his gaze rest on me. It was only for a fraction of a second, but it was long enough for recognition to flash from his eye to mine. Without further sign he resumed his talk.

"Whiskey is the great cause of all of them misfortunes I mentioned. It is the cause of crime—it changes a sane man into a fool in the time it takes to tell of it; it makes a good citizen a murderer; it——"

"Pish! Rot!" the proprietor interrupted with a leer at Red.

"I killed a man, and I wasn't drunk, neither, when I did it," said Hawkins, pointedly.

The crowd became denser—this promised of gore. Red repeated Hawkins' statement so that all could hear.

"Yu say that yu killed a man and was sobah when yu did it. Where was yu grazin' them days?"

"Where?—I was in Nevada. Hot times we had them days, washin' gold up from Wallup. I met that son-of-a-gun I shot one night in a saloon. We was playin' cards for dust. He——"

"Hold on, Mr. Hawkins. Yu say yu was playin' cards in a saloon at Wallup with the man yu shot?"

"I was, b' thunder! Next difference him and me had was up at the sluice. I was washing my diggin's and he knocked my pan!—I ought to have shot him

then. I remember it as well as if it was yesterday. I had been down for a drink to wash down my hard tack, and him and me walked back up together, and we had some words comin' up about that card game I spoke of. Then he knocked my pan."

"The next trouble yu had with him, then, was when yu was comin' up from a saloon?"

"That's straight. And the next time—the last time—I was layin' down restin' when he began pickin' on me. We had been washin' side by side all mornin', and at noon he left his dust, as several others did, with me while he went down to get a drink. I didn't go—mind that! I didn't go, nor did I have a drop up with me. But when he got back, the dust in his pan did not look so big to him as it did when he started. He said I'd took some of it, and I shot him—shot him right where he stood!"

"The last trouble," Red repeated significantly, "was when the man came up from a saloon, and in his drunken mind his gold looked short. He accused Mr. Hawkins of takin' his dust and got shot foah his words. That trouble began when both men were drunk; it grew to a second quarrel when both men were drunk; the shootin' was done when one man was drunk—I leave it to this crowd if whiskey wasn't the cause of that shootin'."

The crowd, thus appealed to, could only laugh.

"He was low-down and weak in the head," said Hawkins, in an attempt to justify his act. "If I hadn't have shot him, someone else would have had to do it. Or he'd have been in one of them State institutions Red talks about. I saved a lot of taxes by——"

Red interrupted with a straight question: "Mr. Hawkins, would yu give a boy of yours whiskey, until he wasn't himself, and then punish him foah beatin' a hawss?"

"Course not! No, sir! I never let a boy of mine have a drop of liquor. I don't believe in it, and never did. A young boy has no business with whiskey—he don't know no more than to tank up on it, like a hawg."

"It is your duty, then, as a strong, knowin' man, to keep harmful things away from him?"

"It is," said Hawkins, importantly, "and nobody can say I have failed in that duty."

"Nobody can say that yu have, seh. But why did yu kill an on-responsible man, because of what he said when drunk?"

Red turned from the livid Hawkins to the crowd. "Gentlemen, your votes to-morrow should make the State a fathah to them as need the care of one."

The men moved about—there was manifest that relaxation which we all feel when the sermon is over. And those who did not agree with what Red had said now spoke that diverse opinion; but they did it in whispers and behind careful hands. They wanted no further words from Red—they were afraid of him, that was plain. When they moved again, I found him close to me.

"I am right glad to see yu again," he said, so easily and naturally that the Marks cabin seemed a dream.

I thanked him—not so easily. "I am more than glad to see you—and to hear you," I said. "This seems like old times."

"Ya-ah." Then in a cautious tone, "When are yu goin' to shave?"

“Not until to-morrow.”

“Then I’ll not be knowin’ yu too well this evenin’. To-morrow I’ll look yu——”

But he did not finish. There was a mad scramble from the door, followed by a crash of glass and the crackling of boards, and, with wild, exultant shriek from a strained throat, Sleepy, driven wholly wild with whiskey, and sitting on a rearing, lunging, foam-dashed pony, rode into the room.

Red sprang forward, spoke a low, commanding word to Sleepy, which checked his shouts, took the pony by the bit and started to lead him out. But as the horse turned, there was a broad curse, followed by an excited shout. I turned to see the proprietor, already enraged by Red’s prohibition talk, spring over the bar, revolver in hand. Men were upon him instantly, dragging at his rigid arm, but before they could pull it down, he got clear aim and fired, striking the horse in the hip. The poor animal uttered that heart-stilling cry of the wounded equine, and maddened with pain and fear, lunged and reared, jarring lamps in their brackets and bottles from shelves. The proprietor’s revolver clicked for another shot, but quick as a flash, Red’s gun was out and aimed at the man’s head. One glance into the steel gray eye that held to his and he wilted and dropped his gun.

“Why,” Red demanded in a voice of thunder, “should yu become so enraged at a man for riding into your saloon when yu sold him the stuff that made him do it?”

“Gentlemen,” he said, speaking again to the crowd, “this here is the strongest argument I can give yu against free whiskey. This man works

undah me at R 2 rancho. And I can trust him day or night with cattle, with men, with money, with anything but whiskey. Three years he has worked there, and drawn his salary regular, and it has come here—the big part of it has come in here. The first drink this man has given him free each month, and the rest was just like robbin' a child. Will yu stand here and see a man robbed?—and stand still and see the robber shoot him? Will yu do that, gentlemen?—I won't! I'll vote to make things like this impossible in the State of Texas."

The crowd cheered lustily. Men who had differed from Red in his previous talk, now warmly seconded his words. Red gave the applause no heed. He led the horse out, and gave directions for the care of Sleepy, who had been dragged from under his horse in the melee, and had now succumbed into a helpless mass that shamed the human form. A man beside me now spoke his thoughts out:

"If we only could get that red-headed orator to make us a speech to-night at the square—if only we could."

"Do you lack for good talkers?" I asked.

"Do we?—did you ever know a cause that didn't? There are plenty of us who can talk to two or three, but a man who can talk to a crowd and convince them is a rarity. We need that fellow bad."

"I will call him over," I said, for I saw him come in.

"You know him, then?"

"As well as any man ever will." And then, at my nod, Red came across to us. I left the two to talk in their own way, and in a few minutes saw them quit the saloon together.

A moment of quiet followed their exit. The crowd had thinned considerably. Looking toward the door, I saw two of my men—Hooven was near. Reynolds and Hawkins were again in politics, oath-deep. They wanted a sheriff elected that could catch a cattle thief and hold him until they could get there and hang him. They shouted this want out, and repeated it.

“A kitten can kill a mouse after it’s caught,” I said, and saw the hot blood surge into Reynolds’ scar. Hawkins bent over me to say:

“Yu show me the thief, yu little duffer, and I’ll kill him without askin’ any favors of yu.”

“I’ll show him to you before long,” I said. “Keep around here and you’ll see him.”

They stared at me, each man laid a hand significantly on a hip. Just then a familiar sound reached my ear—it came from the rear of the building:

“On Sunday night I’ll ho-hold her ti-ti-tight,
And she’ll sit on my kne-e-e-e!
On Sunday night I’ll kiss her—Whee-e!”

Hooven staggered through the crowd to the bar. He made an unsteady motion with a hand, and, addressing everybody, said:

“Come—come up, fellers, and drink on me—me and my bride! Come on—whiskey for everybody—on me, it is, and the girl that’s goin’ to bear my kids! Whee! Have some! She’s swell, too, you bet!—blue blood and all that guff—fellers, here’s to M—Miss L——”

He held a cup of whiskey above his head as he talked. He slopped it and the liquor dripped from

his hair and ran down his face. He did not mind—he was drunk to all save this one thing—that he was going to marry Joseph. His whiskey was going out to the crowd to celebrate that event. I could not endure it. I had laid my plans otherwise. But I could not let him speak her name before those ruffians. I laid a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Zant Logan, alias Jim Hooven,” I said, “I arrest you for cattle stealing on seven counts; for horse stealing on five counts; for a murder done on the Canadian; for defrauding the Government of the United States by operating a still in——”

He sprang back, his face turned full on me, had all the marks of that fear which dethrones reason. He was the color of ashes and he shook like a leaf. But I saw his move to his gun, and I leveled my own—the muzzle was close to his face. For a long moment he looked into the chamber of death.

Then I felt strong hands on me, pulling me down from behind. As my hand swerved from my aim, I saw Hooven swing about under the hands of my men. They had him—But who was holding me?

I shouted commands. I wriggled and struggled to turn around. I felt my clothing give away, and then my revolver was discharged in my hand—I saw where the bullet burrowed its way through the floor. And still those strong hands held me and I could not see whose hands they were. There were two persons. Why did not the bystanders take them off? Was I to be—but now I went down suddenly flat on my back. My revolver was wrenched from my hand and fired above my head. The flash of the discharge seemed to burn into my eyes—my ears were stopped with sound.

I sprang to my feet. Through the smoke I saw Hooven sliding inert from the hands of my men.

"Who shot that man?" I demanded, standing dazed and disheveled.

"I did," said a voice behind me, and turning I beheld two of the Morton boys, staring at the dead with all their mother's fearful eyes.

"Why?" I demanded hotly.

"He killed my father," said the elder. "Six hours ago he shot dad. I seen him do it!—me and Jim both seen him!—and we follered him here."

I turned to the gaping crowd. "In the name of the Government," I said, showing my badge of authority, "I demand this body for criminal burial."

No opposition was offered to this, and my men took Hooven up and carried him out. We found a place in a vacant building to lay the body. I left my men on guard there and went out.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WRONG IS RIGHTED.

The night air pressed like a cool hand on my hot brow as I walked down town. From every group of men I passed I heard politics, and I hurried on, for I wanted to escape it. I wanted to think, to plan, to dream of the future. But this politics pursued me. At the town park, where I hoped to find seclusion, I found a jam of men, and at the centre, where were flaming torches, I saw a figure that talked and gesticulated. It was Red—the crowd was permitting him to speak! It was a great victory for

him. But I did not go to hear what he said to them. I pressed on, and in a dark side street found the quiet I sought. But my mind was chaos and I could not think. I walked aimlessly on, and finally there appeared before me, more of the flaming torches. They marked a kind of amphitheatre, and here, too, was a large concourse of people—women and men.

"We are between two necessities," said a fellow-stroller, overtaking me, "that is—between politics and religion."

He was a citizen of Herrington, and he expanded over the town's first Chautauqua Assembly. It showed the new spirit abroad in Texas, he said, and in Herrington especially. They had the best speakers, and a vocalist from the East. And as he talked the voice of that vocalist reached us in a sweet song. We quickened our steps.

The place was full. We found seats with difficulty. The speaker had concluded his usual discourse, and now, after the solo, he was giving a wholesome talk on good citizenship. The crowd was willing to listen, and he made it long. At length the little vocalist arose, slipped from her place on the rostrum and hurried down an aisle. At the entrance I accosted her.

"Birch!" I said. "How are you?"

She caught her breath in a little gasp, and stepped back.

"It is these whiskers—you never saw them before, for they are a late crop. Listen—*Have you a nail?*"

Her pent-up breath went out in a sigh of relief. "How dreadful yu look!" she said.

"I am sorry. I don't believe the barbers are working to-night," I explained, with a smile.

"Oh, don't smile," she cried in dismay. "It looks like you were hiding behind those whiskers, making faces at me!"

"Like I was speaking out of a bush," I suggested.

"Yes, and if they were red it would be—Ooo-o, I forget my piety." She ended with that delightful little cooing laugh which I had loved in her mother.

"Yes, since you are a Chautauqua singer," I warned. "Birch, I congratulate you. I always admired your voice. You know, I——"

"Oh, don't!" She stopped me with a touch on my arm. "I am tired of it already!—not the singing, but the life."

"Surely not!" I exclaimed in amazement. "I only wish I had——"

I was going on to say I wished I had known and had brought Red down with me, but I thought of that Marks woman in time to check myself, and I finished, "I had gotten these whiskers shaved off before I went in, then perhaps you had been half as glad to see me as I am to see you."

"Indeed, I am glad to see yu, Misto Badger!" she said gaily, "and I want to have a long, long talk with yu,—but not to-night. Not until yu can meet me face to face." And she gave another delightful little laugh.

"I have great news about—about your friend, Morton. But—I had better save it with the rest until to-morrow, hadn't I?"

"No," she said, "tell me now. That poor little woman!—what a life she led with that old—old hog!"

"If you are sorry for her on that score you may cease——"

"She is not——"

"No, he is."

Again she sighed in relief. "I am not sorry—she can have a piano now. But what did he—No, do not tell me to-night. I am veah tired. It seemed to me that I could not wait to sing my last song. I want to be alone and think!—get ready for——" She paused, then said: "Excuse this rambling, but I am truly veah tired. To-morrow yu shall tell me everything. I shall not spare yu. I shall be free all day, so come—but not too early."

We were at the door of her lodging. I promised to spend every moment of the next day with her. But at my leaving she called again: "If you come early I shall scold you for foah days! Remembah!"

At eight o'clock on election day, the town was quiet. The boisterous element of the night were sleeping off their drunk; those who had just come in were not yet livened up. I made a careful toilet not three feet from Red's head and left him sleeping soundly—I prided myself on the feat. Breakfast done, I recalled Birch's care lest I come too early, so I went around to see how my men were making it. They gave to me the letters and papers belonging to the dead man. Then I sent in a message to the Department. Returning to my room, I found Red up and gone. Arriving at Miss Halloway's lodging, I found her also gone. "To Squirrel Cave," I was informed, "with a friend."

Accordingly I ordered my horse and rode out on the broad, sun-baked thoroughfare that led to the cave. I left my horse, with two others, at the base of the incline, and made my way up the path on foot. When yet some distance from the cave, I saw

Birch standing on a high rock above the entrance. Beside her stood a man, and, as I did not recognize the man, I stopped there. To pass time away, I took out the letters and papers belonging to Hooven and glanced them through. A curious feeling of revulsion came over me, and something like a sting of guilt, as I examined the contents of another man's pockets—those things of all things the most private—his letters! And I found myself at once looking for and dreading to find among them a letter from Joseph. There was none. The dear girl had not written lately, for here was one a month old, and here——

I stopped. It seemed minutes before I thought to breathe again, and then my chest heaved with the labor like that of an exhausted runner. I sprang to my feet and hurried up the path. Coming to the last steep incline, I went slowly, and above the pounding of my heart I heard Red's voice. He was saying:

"I have knocked around a lot since I saw yu last time. But not wild like I used to do. Yu did me a lot of good."

"It is very kind of yu to say so," said Birch, in a well-schooled society voice. "I must be going now, or——"

"I hope I may see yu again," Red interrupted, his tone betraying his deep yearning for her.

"Oh, why, yes. I probably will be in Texas again some time. My work takes me everywhere. I had hoped to—to visit at your home, but the drive would tire me too much. Goodby."

She ran quite against me, for she had been walking as she talked, and so did not observe my hurried

approach. When she saw my face she turned entirely pale.

“What—what is it?” she cried.

I pushed past her. “Wait here,” I said. “I must have a word with Red first. I will join you in a moment.”

Red changed color, too, when I had stopped him. I suppose I did betray my excitement. I know I was bursting with the great news I held.

“Tell me,” said I, gripping his arm, “are you going to—to marry that Marks woman?—have you given that up?”

“Yes, didn’t yu hear the fello’s sayin’ she’d—yu know it was all foah her brothah. I’m plumb sorry foah that——”

“Then here is a letter.” I thrust my find into his nerveless hand. “It is a little late, but——”

My voice failed me. He looked at the soiled envelope. It was badly worn, but had never been opened. Across its face was traced in even characters his name, as Birch had written it that Spring noonday long ago.

“How did yu——” His own voice broke. His fingers trembled so that he could scarce break the seal.

“It was found on Hooven’s—Logan’s body,” I blundered. And turned around at a touch on my arm.

“Is it my lettah?” Birch asked, as cold as ice. “If it is, then I forbid Mr. Levering to rea——”

In my surprise and dismay at this unexpected development, I caught her in my arms and bore her bodily away. As I went I told her how I had come by the letter—tried to make her understand that

Red knew nothing of it. Then put her down on a rock. "Now, Miss Birch, will you be good?" I asked, still keeping my hold on her.

"No," she flashed, "and yu will be sorry for your impudence if he dares——"

But Red had followed us and now handed the letter to her.

"It's enough foah me just to know that yu wrote it," he said, in a tone so sad and gentle that it brought her gaze to his face and arrested the quick move she had made to tear the letter to shreds.

"If yu was kind to me in that," he continued, "it would be sweet foah me to read—if yu scolded me it would still be sweet—anything yu could write would be the sweetest thing that evah come to me. And if I had got it then—when you wrote it to me——" He drew a deep breath as if the thought were intoxicating to him. "If I had got it then, I reckon that no hawss could have traveled fast enough foah me to take yu an answer to it."

His eyes rested on me as he concluded, and I bowed my head under the heart-hungry gaze. He went on:

"I was numb, them days, numb with pain. I reckon if I hadn't have been I nevah could have lived. Foah with all the numbness I was scarcely able to keep myself a-goin' day aftah day. I seemed to have no limbs left to walk on, and no mind to move them, and yet I walked around, and talked, and pretended I was alive. Foah all the time there was a little spark of hope that burned and would not go out—I kept hopin' and hopin', and every hope, when it died, left me moah pain to bear. I reckon yu thought——"

"Oh, don't!" said Birch, in a voice that quivered. "Please do not."

"No," he answered, "it's no use livin' ovah that time. But I wished yu to know, Miss Halloway, that I wanted the lettah. I wanted it worse than I wanted life—here or hereaftah."

"And I—I wanted yu to come," Birch sobbed, sinking down on the rock. "I counted the days after I gave my letter to that ugly man—five!—and they passed and yu did not come. I thought that something must have delayed the lettah. And I waited—and waited—and waited—waited——"

Her voice sank to a whisper on that last word. But then it rose to a cry. "And yu did not come! Oh, yu did not come!—yu did not!"

He bent over her. I could see that all his powers were employed in self-restraint. He did not touch her. He said:

"Sweetheart, my soul almost left my body, I wanted to come that bad."

She looked at him, calm, direct. Then she sighed and glanced down at the letter, lying half torn in twain in her lap. She turned it over, once, twice. "Why, Red did not get my lettah," she said, as if speaking to the air. "That ugly man kept it—why——"

She sprang at Red like a tigress, and gripped his arms. "Oh, tell me that yu did not know!" she cried, in a frenzy. "Tell me that yu did not know!—that yu would have walked—crawled to——"

"My darling! My sweetheart!" He folded her in his arms. "Yes, darling, I would have crawled to yu if I had known—if I had even thought—there—did I hurt yu, darling? My heart is bursting! I

am mad with joy! Sweetheart, your lips—No?—
Just one——”

But Birch only clung to him, and sobbed, and begged him make her know that he wanted to come to her—always wanted to come. Red pleaded with her, he poured his love over her like a flood, but she seemed deaf to his words—blind to all save this one thing—he must make her know that he wanted to come. Finally, at an appealing look from Red, I put in a mild word of rebuke. At that she released her lover and turned to me.

“Yu heyah?” she asked, with a childish pout. “Go away,—don’t yu know enough to go away?”

“Well,” said I, hurt, “if I am a dummy, you are another. So there, Mistress Halloway!” And I went away.

At the hotel I awaited their coming. It was evening and all the expectancy of an uncounted election vote was in the air. The town, drunk dry, since noon, was in a quiet but incessant turmoil. The lower floor and verandas of the hotel were crowded and jammed with men,—and every man of them had a grouch, and he talked about it. I waited in the parlor upstairs. At times I was fearful that Red would not attempt to bring Birch through the crowd. And then, just as I had given up hope, I saw his happy face at the partly-opened door. It swung back and Birch ran across to me.

“Yu deah old peacemaker!” she cried ecstatically, patting my head the while, as if I were some pet canine, which pleased me mightily. But I answered sourly:

“Yes, I would!—after calling your old friend a dummy.”

“Oh, did I? But yu know that I did not know

what I was saying. I was so happy, just then, that if I had not done something a little mite mean, I would have been transformed."

She stood with her shoulder just touching my breast; her head was turned and lifted, exposing her milk-white throat; her eyes were ablaze with the warmth and fire of love. Was there ever so glorious a woman? Only one other, thought I, and answered:

"No, anything rather than that you be transformed, Miss Birch. So—it is all right."

"No-o, it is not all right yet," she said archly, "but I am going to do something foah yu that will make it all right. I am going to be your good fairy—Now yu stand still, and—watch!"

She ran back to the door. Puzzled, I stood still watching and listening. I heard entreating whispers. Then Miss Levering stepped in, looking bashful and compelled.

"Joseph!" I cried, possessing myself of both her hands. "You here?"

"Why, yes. I have been here several weeks. Miss Birch told me last evening that yu were in town."

"Then you did not—you could not do as I wished?"

"No-o," her color came; "but please do not scold me—I am so homesick!"

Poor girl! Of course she was homesick! I longed to take her in my arms and comfort her—I tried to accomplish my desire. But she stepped back from me. I told her that she was free, and she shuddered, "I know, thank yu—it would have been a—a living hell." But she repulsed me still.

The others came in. Birch's happiness was contagious; Red's was intoxicating. I felt like shouting

for joy. Even Joseph's pale face glowed as Birch chattered about her, saying:

"And Joseph talks about that thirty dollars she has earned as if it were a rare piece of bric-a-brac, suitable only to be wrapped in cotton and laid in a box."

"We will do just that with it," I declared. "It was too hard earned to spend."

I was taking a great deal for granted, as you well know, when I spoke that "we." But Joseph seconded me.

"No," she said with decision. "We will do nothing of the kind. I shall give that money to fathah."

"As you wish, dearest," I whispered, and watched her face burn as with answering love.

Then we all talked at once, for we had much to say and could not yet believe that we had a whole lifetime to say it in. Red made frequent trips to the balcony to listen to the shouting on the street and so learn when the vote was counted. Returning, he hung restlessly near Birch's chair. Finally I thought of something.

"Red," I said happily, "I was talking with the Morton boys this morning, and I believe we can buy the old place back now, without trouble. You would like that, Joseph?"

She did not answer, but her hands sought each other in a tight clasp. Red paused in his way to the balcony.

"We can do it! Of course we can. The boys are square."

I smiled. From the street there arose a great shout of victory for law, victory for saloon control, victory for Texas! A thousand throats voiced it. And Red, with Birch beside him, was out there drinking it in.

Joseph arose from her chair. And while I sat wondering if she was going to join her brother on the balcony, she suddenly put out her hands to me.

"I want yu to take me back to the old home, and keep me there always—will yu?"

I need not tell you what I said or did.

The next morning we rode out and crossed the bridge over the Brazos. Ed, who had joined our party, on his way to Red River Station, said:

"We all can go by the Lower Trail now; it's all open and clear, and a lot shorter."

I hesitated, waiting for the girls to express a preference. But Red spoke up:

"The Uppah Trail is the one we take, Birch honey," he said.

We rode on until nearly home. Then Red stopped his horse and shading his eyes, looked west.

"What do yu see?" Birch asked.

"My land—will yu like to live down there, honey?"

I did not hear her reply, but it must have been entirely satisfactory, for he leaned over in his saddle and kissed her.

But the sacrifice of living on a lonely cattle ranch was spared Birch. The R2 Company gave Red a place as buyer at its headquarters in Herrington, and from that position he has risen to that of one of the foremost citizens of the State he helped to make. And, to-day, when anyone speaks to him of his remarkable success in life, and suggests, as many do, the stock markets of New York, as a fitting climax to his career, he answers in that proud phrase he once spoke to me:

"Texas, seh, is big enough for the biggest kind of a man."

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