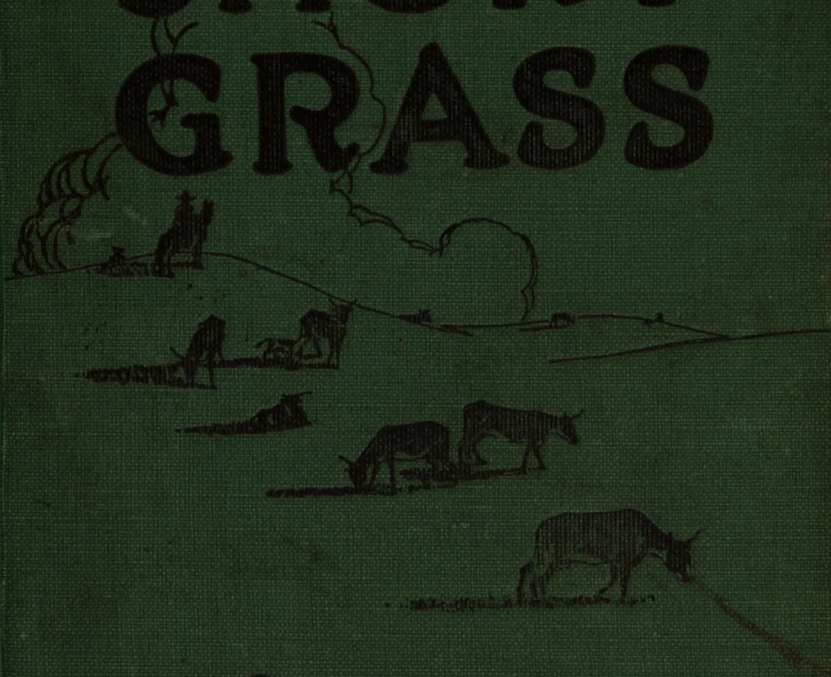


# SHORT GRASS



*By*

GEORGE W.  
OGDEN



**P**AWNEEBEND, in the days when Texas trail herds still came up to Kansas loading pens, was a community of unpainted board shacks, saloons, and lawlessness. To this town came Bill Dunham, age twenty-four, late of a peaceful farming section of Kansas, seeking his fortune. His quiet demeanor deceives a cowboy in a saloon and when the latter essays to make the granger dance, Bill takes the cowboy's gun and neatly shoots off both his boot heels.

So begins this story of the western ranges where a killer Marshal ruled as law, judge, and hangman; a story of great trail herds and fighting men; and above all a story of Bill Dunham who in spite of his quiet manners and lawful ways became the most dreaded man of the region.

Here is a tale in which suspense and racing thrill keep pace with a genuine poignance of human drama staged against a real background of the West.



# SHORT GRASS



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By

GEORGE W. OGDEN

*Author of "The Cow Jerry," "West of Dodge," etc.*



UNIVERSITY OF  
CALIFORNIA

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## CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	ROMANCE CALLS . . . . .	I
II	WHAT A MAN DRINKS . . . . .	14
III	BURNT LEATHER . . . . .	26
IV	INNERCENT AND CUTE . . . . .	39
V	MARCHING ORDERS . . . . .	50
VI	THE GIRL NAMED ZORA . . . . .	59
VII	A MAN WITHOUT A GUN . . . . .	68
VIII	PEOPLE OF CONSEQUENCE . . . . .	84
IX	HARD TO BREAK INTO . . . . .	95
X	WITHIN THE LAW . . . . .	104
XI	HONORS ARE DECLINED . . . . .	117
XII	A DOMESTIC INTERLUDE . . . . .	130
XIII	IF HE EVER GETS MEAN . . . . .	145
XIV	TO THE ENEMY'S CAMP . . . . .	157
XV	A CROOK OR A FOOL . . . . .	170
XVI	BILL PICKS A SHINING MARK . . . . .	180
XVII	TEXAS CATTLE . . . . .	189
XVIII	OUTLAWED ON THE RANGE . . . . .	199
XIX	MALLON SHAKES A LEMONADE . . . . .	213
XX	A NEW GUN IS TESTED . . . . .	225
XXI	PAWNEE BEND SNARLS . . . . .	236
XXII	GOOD-BY TO DAYLIGHT . . . . .	249
XXIII	A MISTAKE IN THE DATE . . . . .	262
XXIV	THE BROODING OF VENGEANCE . . . . .	271
XXV	TIN CAN LAND . . . . .	282
XXVI	CATTLEMEN'S CHOICE . . . . .	291

v

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## CHAPTER I

### ROMANCE CALLS

WHEN that railroad was put through the job was done hastily, the builders being in a hurry to get in on the business of handling the vast droves of livestock which cattlemen herded up from Texas and the Cherokee Nation, where they leased grazing land from the Indians. It was the second line to stretch across Kansas from east to west and, being from a hundred to a hundred and fifty miles south of the original road, it offered a big saving to stockmen in the matter of wear and tear and incidental expenses. It reached into the cattle country with the inexorable arm of competition, cutting off at one stroke its rival's business in that field.

But it was a mushy, squashy railroad after a rain, or when the spring thaws came, the ties being laid on the earth roadbed just as the graders' slushers had left it; tamped with earth, the centers filled with earth, which is poor material to hold track in line when the frost breaks and the rains come, as any section boss will testify.

Now, after some years of this mud-spattering, the tarriers were on the job, resurfacing the track with rock ballast, straightening a curve here, reducing a grade there, replacing the light, clattering, strap-jointed iron with heavy steel, making a real railroad

of it, at once the pride of its builders and the state toward whose development it had contributed so much.

Texas cattle were still coming on the hoof in those days for Kansas railroads to carry the rest of the way to market, and there were Kansas cattle by hundreds of thousands, hundreds of thousands more in the Cherokee Nation, for which this road was the most convenient outlet.

For a long distance it ran parallel to the Cherokee Strip, as it was called, not a great way from it as distances were considered in those robust days of driven herds. Hundreds of men were employed along this railroad in big gangs; hundreds rode after cattle on the range. All these nomads—for they were transients, blowing like cottonwood seeds before the winds of chance—sought their highly seasoned diversions in the towns along the line.

Far-scattered towns these were, great stretches of bleak high prairie-lands lying between them. To these the rovers came, bringing their hard-earned wages to blow in on one go-easy spree. There was plenty of business in these towns, set so far apart that competition was not felt in any cutting degree, and one of the liveliest, one of the most lurid, profane and altogether outside both statutory and moral law in its day, was Pawnee Bend, the place toward which we have been heading since the very first word.

Things had been put down hastily at Pawnee Bend, its merchants and others who profited on that unstable trade being in a manner camp-followers. They pushed along as the cattle frontier contracted into the dimin-

ishing west; as railroad activities centered here and there. The two sources of revenue combined by this natural process of retreat on one hand, development on the other, kept things in such towns as Pawnee Bend on the bound until the scene shifted and the rough customers took down their tents and traveled on.

While the day of this highly colored prosperity was brief, the marvel was that few towns vanished away and were forgotten. Agriculture, that foundation of all lasting prosperity, pushed close on the stride of railroad development, giving Pawnee Bend and similar places a solid reason for being. Some fell back into colorless wayside villages when the flare burned out; others rose to towns and cities of consequence. Perhaps Pawnee Bend was one of these. Who knows?

On that early June day, languid sunlight over the gray-green, melancholy hills, there was not much promise of future consequence in Pawnee Bend. It seemed thrown down there without a purpose in that huge rough plan of nature, as boxes which might have jolted out of a wagon, except for the geometrical exactness of the streets, such as there were houses enough along to trace. It had been done regularly, for town-site promoters always were first on the scene of these railroad towns of western Kansas. The town was bounded on the south by the railroad, unbounded on the north by prairie spaciousness that would have contained all the cities that ever came to be built in that marvelous great state. Between this limit on one side, this vastitude on the other, probably three hundred

people were housed, attendants in one capacity or another upon the prosperity of the place.

Pawnee Bend was built to the pattern of all those prairie towns: of more board and batten than plaster and stone. On the face of it the builders expressed their caution. Nobody wanted to be caught with a house on his hands that could not be disjoined readily and loaded on a flatcar when the day for moving came.

Along the broad principal street the blunt-nosed business houses stood shoulder to shoulder, some large, many of them small, all of design so exactly alike that the little ones might have been the brood of the big ones, to grow up presently all of a size, like a flock of ducks. There was a diversity of business along there, not of any wide range to be sure, for these merchants and panderers and parasites were serving men whose primitive desires could be fully expressed in three words.

Beer kegs impeded the narrow board sidewalks of this main thoroughfare; blue smoke of continual frying came out of the many restaurants, generally more stylishly designated cafés. There was so much grease afloat that regular inhabitants had no need of oil for their hair.

There never was a young man who felt so much like an opened oyster as Bill Dunham when he saw the train that had carried him to Pawnee Bend diminishing to a rapidly contracting point in the direction of Colorado. Pawnee Bend was surrounded by more country than he ever had taken in at a single gulp; such naked, raw, unfenced and useless-looking country

that the sight of it gave him a sinking feeling in that particular of his anatomy he always thought of as his craw.

He stood on the station platform, his matting suitcase with imitation leather corners between his feet, feeling as if the shell had been taken off and left him exposed, nothing to hide his greenness, his insufficiency, from the sneering scrutiny of that bold land. If there was a hand-hold for a man in that stripped-off, bald-headed country it would take shrewder eyes than his to find it, he was sadly and downheartedly sure.

Bill had come out to that roof of his native state, the very apex of the earth, it seemed to him, following the beguiling lure of romance and the advice of Dutch Gus, who was not a Dutchman, but a Swede. While everybody knew that Dutch Gus was a Swede, nobody ever would take this country for a part of Kansas. It was a deceit that no amount of explanation could cover, it appeared to Bill. It certainly must have got on the map through misrepresentations.

Back in Johnson County, where Bill was born, it wasn't that kind of a country. A man could see a natural tree back there. Trees had been Bill's principal business in life for a good many years, accounting for his first thought in comparison of advantages between the place he had left and the land in which he had arrived.

For eight years Bill had been actively engaged with trees in Schoonover's nursery, enlarging his education, which could stand a good deal of it without trespassing on anybody, by putting in three months at a business

college at Lawrence for three winters, coming home to spend Saturdays and Sundays grafting and budding little seedling trees in Schoonover's sand-floored dug-outs.

Bill had grafted trees enough to qualify him for a Bachelor of Grafters' degree; he had pulled trees enough out of the long rows, following the curved plow that ran under them and cut the deep roots, to plant a border around the state of Kansas.

His big hands were ridged with callouses from this uplifting work; the muscles of his long back were as hard as dried beef. Yet Bill was a timid man. He had clung to this job in the nursery so long that people who had looked upon him confidently when he began to attend business college shook their heads doubtfully and said Bill Dunham was a long time starting out; that they didn't reckon he ever would start out, just stick to that job till he took root in a row and one of the hands pulled him up and shipped him off for a tree.

It was a sort of traditional requirement of a young man in that part of Kansas, where people had a good many New England ideas about them still, that he must start out when he reached the age of twenty-one. Even if he didn't go very far he ought to start out. He ought to get married, rent a farm, begin to raise corn and hogs and voters to maintain the glorious traditions of the state. Bill Dunham had passed that broad chalk-mark in his years, long since, and he had not moved a foot on the prescribed career.

Bill was overeducated, they said; that was the



trouble with Bill. He knew too much about things of no use to any man. When you sifted him down, he was nothing but an educated fool. There were some who didn't even grace the designation with that qualifying word, using another, less charitable, more expressive of their indignation and contempt. For a man in his walk of life Bill Dunham was stuffed with too damn much trash.

This was a reputation undeserved by Bill, as the fame of community celebrities commonly is magnified either in derision or pride. Bill had the name of being a profoundly read man, although he owned but three books exclusive of those he had used in his preparation for a commercial career: a volume of Shakespeare's plays, which he had bought from the horse doctor for seventy-five cents, that worthy having acquired it on a debt; a copy of Tennyson's poems, won in a spelling match; a queer, fat, chunky little leather-bound Bible, left after her when his grandmother completed her earthly business and started out on the supreme adventure that lies at the end of every Kansan's career.

Now, this is the place where you grunt, and say: "Oh, hell! another one of those Shakespeare-Bible fellows. They belong in the class with the Alger boys; they simply were not there." But if you had lived back in those lean days of books in Kansas you would know better than to sniff at the Shakespeare-Bible boys. They were there; their name was legion. The reading of those two books by that generation resulted in a race of spellbinders, and orators, word-slingers

and verbal sign-painters that was the wonder of the world. Jerry Simpson was one of them, and perhaps John Brown before him. There is no doubt at all about Carry Nation—and her name was Carry, *not* Carrie—although her bones do not repose in Kansas soil.

So much for that. Bill Dunham had his three books, and read them well. He could have cited speech and passage, verse, chapter and line in any of them if anybody had asked him to do so, which nobody ever did. Nobody in that neighborhood ever had read Shakespeare's plays. Some declared it was a mark of Bill Dunham's natural perversion; others smiled at it as an unmanly weakness. Reading the Bible, outside of strictly theological purposes, was sternly reprov'd as a sacrilege. And it was well known that Bill Dunham was not theologically inclined. It was said that he prized the Song of Solomon above the Psalms of David.

In spite of Bill's training in the business school, which was believed by most people with whom he had contact to be almost as sinful as the state university, he might have married and rented a farm in due course if he hadn't subscribed for a Kansas City paper and taken to reading the news. That was about the windup of the gun-throwing days in Dodge City; there were tales, and true ones, to quicken the blood of the most unromantic of men—of whom Bill Dunham was not one, in spite of his size and strength—in the regular run of news in that Kansas City paper every day.

Out at Dodge they would shoot a man for the af-

fronts which men basely swallowed in silence in Lawrence or Kansas City. Boot Hill was full of the graves of upstarts who had died for stepping on gentlemen's toes. Bill Dunham quickened and expanded when he read of those sanguinary doings out at Dodge, and romance blossomed in his heart.

For Bill was a sore man over impositions. His place had been rather a lowly one, socially, social position in that community, as in wider ones elsewhere, grading according to financial rating. Bill's family had been miserably poor; well-fed, better-clothed boys had rolled him and pummeled him and mocked his patches with derisive cruelty. A place where a man might yank out his gun and take blazing vengeance for such wrongs appealed to Bill.

Those who had stepped on him and slurred him when he was ten, had pretty much passed out of his life by the time he was twenty-four. They had gone off to Kansas City to run street cars and drive delivery wagons, or scattered on rented or inherited farms in the established routine of starting out and never getting anywhere. Bill carried the old hurts in his heart, for he was a slow man at forgetting, long after he knew that all hope of adjustment had been outlawed by time. Now, reading the paper about the men of Dodge and Hays City, and the places whose names were romance in themselves, the feeling grew on Bill that he wanted to enlarge out of Peter Schoonover's nursery, and go out in the world and fling his feet.

Dutch Gus said the best place for a man to throw his feet in of any place in the world was Pawnee Bend.

If he wasn't a married man and tied down by his wife and kids he'd hit the breeze for Pawnee Bend on the first freight he could find a side-door open. He knew a feller that went to Pawnee Bend and opened a joint—so they termed illicit saloons in prohibition Kansas in those days—and made money so fast he couldn't count it. Just had to let track of it go, it came in so fast. His name was Mooney; he used to run a section on the U.P.

So, together with the growing call of romance and the advice of Dutch Gus, Bill had cashed in at the nursery and taken a ticket straight to Pawnee Bend. He was not adventurer enough for an open side-door in a freight car. Now he was there, in Pawnee Bend, and romance seemed to have fled away out of it, leaving the town so small and bleak, the country so raw and rude, big and lonesome that it hurt the bare edges of a man just to stand there that way wondering where to go. But there was sure room for a feller to throw his feet! Dutch Gus was right about that part of it, and that was a cinch.

Bill felt pretty much as a man feels when he tries to swim a wide piece of water the first time: sorry he had attempted it, but his reputation being staked on the venture he will not turn and go back. He looked across the track at the flat, unadorned little town, knowing he had to make his beginning in it by finding a place to leave his suitcase and a bed to take his repose. The bare, heartless, unfriendly look of it depressed him more than the empty vastness of the land in which it lay. It looked like a lair of mystery; every

roof in it, he believed, concealed designing beings who were only waiting his coming to spraddle all over him and rob him of his wad. It looked as sinister as a cyclone cloud; it looked like knockout drops.

Bill had all the fear of knockout drops common to his kind. He had heard woeful tales of the potency of that insidious draught, and of the harpies who beguile a man to sip it, sitting on his knee with an arm around his neck. It made him sweat to realize his proximity to that pitiless peril. He felt for his wad—some three hundred dollars, the savings of his eight years—and breathed in relief to find it still there.

It was a quiet scene to rouse so much panic in a stout young man of Bill Dunham's build. There was little activity along the wide main street, only a few men moving lazily about or lounging along the hitching-rack where numerous saddled horses, a wagon or buggy here and there, stood waiting their owners' business. There were no boisterous noises; Bill had listened, but he had not heard a gun.

The sound of children calling shrilly as they raced at play reached Bill from a part of the town he could not see. It was assuring. Children made that noise only when they played at school; there was a sort of school refinement, school repression, in the sound that Bill knew very well. It gave him a pang for something that he had touched and passed on, but it put him a little more at ease. It couldn't be such a bad place if there were children and a school.

A long string of boarding cars stood on a sidetrack back of the depot. Bill looked that way, indecisive

of the next step. Everybody else who came on the train had gone his way; only he and a barrel of kerosene remained on the platform. Smoke was rising from a car in the boarding train, the cook car, Bill knew. An invisible woman in it began to sing, and this was her song:

O-o-o, sweet buds may with-er-r-r,  
And fond hearts be bro-o-o-ken,  
Still I love you my dar-r-r-ling Daisy Dean.

Bill was further relieved by the song. He liked to think the singer was young and pretty, although he had his doubts.

For a town no bigger than Pawnee Bend there were a great many hotels, it appeared to Bill. True, some of them were not much bigger than tents, but all of them made free with the sign HOTEL & ROOMS. There was one near the track, only the broad dusty space representing the railroad right-of-way and the public road lying between, that appeared to be the biggest in town. It had a square front like a grocery, that much of it having been painted blue, the rest of its walls remaining as the planks had come from the mill.

While Bill's prejudice rose against this hotel on account of its painted face, which gave it the appearance of being a very Jezebel among hotels, he was assured in some measure by the sign FAMILY HOTEL which this false front presented. It was making a bid for respectable trade, although the sign might cover any amount of deceit. Bill had seen

FAMILY ENTRANCE painted on side doors of saloons in Kansas City, through which he was morally certain no families ever entered. But he was out in the world to throw his feet; he was going to meet it as it came at him, and learn as he went along. He picked up his rush matting suitcase and headed for the hotel, unnoticed and unknown.

But perhaps it is better to go away a hero than to arrive one. Incoming heroes, even the best of them, lose their luster after a while if they stay in one place too long.

## CHAPTER II

### WHAT A MAN DRINKS

ROSS MACKINNON, proprietor of the Family Hotel to whose shelter Bill Dunham was about to entrust his body and his belongings, was spreading his elbows on the showcase reading a Kansas City paper when the guest arranged himself before the register. MacKinnon relinquished his reading reluctantly, a finger on the print to mark the point of interruption, turning abstractedly to see who was bungling across his grazing. He had given up the thought of any business from the west-bound train, which was twenty miles along its way by that time, Bill had stood so long on the edge of the station platform trying to adjust himself to the stunning perspective of the town.

The host saw a tall, but not exceedingly broad, young man, neatly dressed in a well-fitting blue serge suit, squaring off with a sort of apologetic expectancy before the counter. MacKinnon quickened to his business, seeing that it was business, giving the stranger an affable greeting, hastening along the counter to the register on its merry-go-round arrangement bordered by advertising cards of local concerns. He had a quick eye for men, and the possibilities of them; he would not have been wanting the right word if an ambassador had appeared as unexpectedly as Bill Dunham had come, the glittering adornments



of his high station on the breast of his padded coat.

This was no grandee that stood waiting before his desk, to be sure: only a lank-limbed young fellow with a round black hat sitting rather soberly on his closely cut brown hair, one big hand holding the pen with a ready facility that betrayed more than a passing acquaintance with its use. The hat was dented all around the top of its crown, in the decorative style approved for such hats in that day, which was longer ago than yesterday, indeed.

No grandee, but a bold sketch that needed only the proper shading in and filling to make an acceptable man. Which was more to the liking of Ross MacKinnon than any number of ambassadors the courts of the earth could produce.

Plainly an unsophisticated young man who would not ask for a bath; a young man who had broken from his anchorage only a little while ago to sail out on the untried waters. MacKinnon knew the type well, so many of them came in that same manner of half-questioning trepidation seeking the romance of life in the short-grass country. It broke the spirit of many, and sent them back whence they came cowed, and heartless to venture forth again; and some it drew into its insidious wiles and debauched them, giving them draggled eyes. Only a few held a straight way to the thing they had come seeking in that country.

This lad looked like he might turn out one of the straight-going ones, MacKinnon thought, taking stock of him with shrewdly appraising eye.

A narrow-faced young man, with long head and dark eyes; a big nose with a hard backbone, lean cheeks that needed a shave; a mouth that had not taken much sweet pudding out of little spoons, from the stretch of it and its look of having the latch down, the string pulled inside.

"Passing through?" MacKinnon inquired, Bill waiting with poised pen to spread his college hand on the register.

"Well, no; not exac'ly passin' through," Bill replied, with a sort of horsetrader confidence that seemed to tell much while disclosing no fact upon which a future action might be based. "Not what you could exac'ly call passin' through."

"I inquired on a point of information," MacKinnon explained, "not from curiosity or any wish to pry into your business. When a man steps off of the train in this town his past goes on with it, as far as we know or give a damn. He starts here with nothing behind him but his conscience, if he ever had one, and nothing ahead of him but the future. If you're goin' to be one of us for a few days you're qualified to sign our petition. We count a man a citizen if he's here a day, and an old-timer if he stays a week."

"Yes, sir," said Bill, not seeing any wordhold for a more sensible comment on the host's statement of facts relating to citizenship in the town of Pawnee Bend.

"Right here," MacKinnon directed, flipping over a section of the register to a place marked by a blotter between the leaves. "Just your name, and not where you're from. We're gettin' up a petition to organize

our county and take it out of the jurisdiction of a set of robbers and thieves in the county north of us. Thanks. When we get the number of signers the law requires we'll send the petition to the secretary of state and have a little county all our own, Pawnee Bend the county seat."

"I ain't much of a citizen, but I guess there's no harm in it," said Bill, looking doubtfully at his name, written in good college Spencerian on the sheet of ruled foolscap inserted between the pages of a book.

"No, we're puttin' this thing through on the square, Mr. Dunham—might be of Scotch extraction, eh?"

"My double-great gran'dad was a Scotchman, they tell me. I didn't know him"—apologetically;—"that was before my time."

"He was a worthy man," MacKinnon declared, decisively as if they had come over on the same ship. "No, sir, no crooked work about this petition of ours. Every one of our signers is a bona fide citizen—you noticed I was particular on that before I had you sign? Look here: I have the floaters sign the register regular, as the law requires me to do, and the citizens sign the petition, in the way you've put your name to it, Mr. Dunham. Glad to welcome you, and hope you'll prosper as you deserve. MacKinnon is my name."

MacKinnon offered his hand, fraternity and equality in his ruddy face. There was even something friendly in the grinding sound of his voice to Bill. It reminded him of the cog-wheels in the cider-mill at home.

"How many names have you got on your petition?"

Bill inquired, desiring to show a citizenly interest, not altogether superficial, at that. He felt that putting his name on the paper to go to the secretary of state at Topeka had made him one of the brotherhood, in fact.

“I don’t know how we stand to-day, but we’re close, we’re close. We’ve got sheets in some of the dumps that go by the name of hotels in this town, as well as some of the stores. We collect ’em when they’re full, and paste them in a string. We’ve got a roll as thick as your wrist.”

Bill Dunham made his reappearance in the hotel office, and on the stage of activities in Pawnee Bend, in about an hour, after putting the razor to his face and changing his shirt. It was one of Bill’s leading principles to face a new situation with a clean chin and a clean shirt. If he hadn’t learned much else of high value in business college, he had learned that.

Appearances Are Everything: that was his college motto. It was not done in Latin, old Roman lettering, over the door, but in the large, flourishing, long-tailed handwriting of the president of the institution as a copy for the business aspirants training under his régime. Appearances Are Everything. Bill Dunham had written it five thousand times.

Now he came down to the hotel office feeling pretty comfortable, like a fellow who has joined a lodge and taken the first degree. It wasn’t as bad as he thought it was going to be; Pawnee Bend was not such a forbidding place as he had judged it from the station platform. Here they had the same homely human

aspirations as elsewhere in Kansas, the hearty ambition to get ahead for themselves and hoe their own row. It might be said of Pawnee Bend that it was just starting out on its own account, like himself.

This thought drew him closer to the brotherhood he had joined when he put his name on the petition. It made him feel so fine he came swinging down the stairs whistling a business-college tune.

Three men were lined up at the desk in close conference with MacKinnon, so engrossed in their business, which appeared to be some sort of accounting from the way they jumped their pencils along the paper as if adding figures, that they did not notice the town's newest citizen until he was about to pass them on his way to the door.

"Hey, Dunham!" MacKinnon hailed him.

The other three threw up their heads like startled horses at the sound of Dunham's name. Bill turned back at MacKinnon's excited signal, wondering if he was to be taken up for affixing his name to the petition under false pretense.

"This is the man, gentlemen!" MacKinnon said, speaking as if he had come to his climax. He seemed to offer Bill as an exhibit, with a wave of the hand.

Bill was assured at once, for there was satisfaction, even triumph and pride, in MacKinnon's way of presenting him. He felt that he had made a hit, in some way to be revealed, perhaps through his ability to write what the president of the school board back home used to call an ineligible hand.

One of the three men before the desk stepped for-

ward briskly, hand out like a candidate for office. He was a shrewd appearing little man, his dry narrow face full of humorous wrinkles as he came smiling to meet Bill. He wore a large, cream-colored, cattleman's hat, the crown of it jauntily creased, tilted cockily to one side, which gave him an adventurous, trouble-hunting appearance quite out of keeping with his mildness and his size.

"Simmons—Major Philo Simmons, president of the Capitol Bank of Pawnee Bend," he announced himself, disarming of questionable intent as any high-pressure go-fetcher of the present commercial age. "I greet you, Mr. Dunham, as the six-hundredth citizen of this county. Gentlemen, allow me to present the six-hundredth citizen."

Bill was beginning to get a bit suspicious of some sort of a come-on. He didn't get that talk about the six-hundredth citizen. It was beyond him to understand, as it might have been to a shrewder man in his place, why the six-hundredth citizen was of any more importance than the first, but he gave himself over to the trust of Major Simmons, whose position in the community should have been sufficient to quiet all suspicion, even if it did not do so entirely.

"Mr. Henry Bergen, Mr. Marsh Puckett, of Bergen and Puckett," Major Simmons presented his companions in turn. "Mr. Bergen is our county treasurer, Mr. Puckett our recorder and clerk, or at least they will be under our new county government."

Bill shook hands with them and said he was glad to meet them, although he was not, for he didn't like the

look of either Bergen or Puckett, reserving the thought to himself that he would think it over a good while before he would trust his money to the treasureship of the first or the accounting of the second.

"We owe the existence of Pawnee Bend to Bergen and Puckett," Major Simmons explained. "They are the original owners and platters of the townsite; their vision put this beautiful little city of ours on the map."

Bergen was a large bony man with a beard. He was arrayed in judicial-looking garments, his long black coat striking to his knees, the one sporty splash in his dignified appearance being his vest, which seemed to proclaim the rest of his somber garb a pretense and fraud. This vest was of red plush with white dots, a garment fit for a beau of the range. He was a voluble, ingratiating man, past fifty, one would judge, his black-gray beard, nicely trimmed to the contour of his jaw, giving a stern aspect to his face, which was extraordinarily broad between the high, round cheekbones.

Puckett was more self-contained than his partner. He had a fleshy figure, a smooth, impassible face, a foreshortened lump of nose, a little fold of double chin. His round-cornered shoulders, which never had hardened under any burden, were slightly stooped, as if he had spent much time slouching over gambling tables. He was a type of that atmosphere; one could visualize him cutting and shuffling a little stack of chips in the gambler's one-handed trick, his faculties concentrated on the turn of the card, the fall of the marble in the wheel.

One sees the traits of men as flashes of interiors are seen through revolving doors. It would have taken Bill Dunham an hour to put his impressions of Bergen and Puckett down with a pen, but his shrewd eye sized them up for an opinion in two seconds. That opinion was one that impelled Bill's hand to his hip pocket to feel for his wallet.

"Gentlemen," Bergen proposed after the formalities of introduction, "what do you say to a little drink?"

MacKinnon came from behind the counter with alacrity, his ready disposition apparently an expression of the inclination of all to the proposal. Major Simmons and Puckett led the way, Bill following between MacKinnon and Bergen, who kept his hand on the six-hundredth citizen's shoulder as if he meant to take no chance on his getting away and leaving the big thing—what it was Bill had no more notion than a rabbit—flat and a fizzle on their hands.

"You can mark this day with red ink in your book of life, Mr. Dunham," Bergen said, stepping high as they bore along the plank sidewalk toward the sign THE CASINO that projected toward the street from the front of a large, loose-jointed, barn-looking building a little way ahead.

"I don't git you," Bill confessed. "What in the dickens are you makin' all this fuss about?"

"My dear sir," with a slap, slap, on Bill's back, "you are our six-hundredth citizen!"

"I heard you say so before, but you can search me," Bill said.

"Under the state law, Mr. Dunham, a county is re-



quired to have six hundred legal residents before it can be organized. You were the last signer on our petition, and yours was the six-hundredth name. You see the honor of your position and fully understand your importance in our community.”

“I git you now,” said Bill.

“Here we are”—Bergen swept his arm around the wide horizon—“the only city or settlement in a territory of twenty-four hundred square miles! Consider the possibilities of our situation, sir; think of what this city will be as the county seat of this fertile domain, no competition within our boundaries. We are, Mr. Dunham, what might be called the fathers of our county. Every man whose name appears on that petition is, in a sense, a father of his county. You are not insensible of the honor, I know.”

“I should hope not!” Bill replied, touched up a little by a genuine warmth of pride.

It was something to be the daddy of four square miles of territory, which would be his proportionate share of parental responsibility, figuring that there were six hundred legal residents in the county, which he doubted mightily.

They headed in at the Casino, Mel Poteet, proprietor, as the window sign further announced, lining up in good order at the bar. There were several customers in the place, although it was the slack hour of the day. But there had been a railroad payday a little while before, the proceeds of which were not yet quite spent; and there was a big herd of cattle from the Nation being loaded at the pens, several more waiting

their turn out on the range close by with only men enough in attendance to keep them in hand, the rest being free to taste the delights of town.

Several of these cow guardians were in Poteet's place, and half a dozen or so railroaders, putting dimes in the Swiss music-box, and quarters in the device that sometimes gave up quarters in exchange, running them down to a little pan through a troubled row of brass pegs. Uniformly they were putting strong liquor inside themselves, all quite orderly, and grouped according to their calling, there being no common ground between railroaders and men of the range.

Major Simmons tilted his hat a little more toward his left ear as the bartender came down the long bar to the end they occupied.

"Charley," he said, "I want you to meet our six-hundredth citizen. Mr. Dunham, shake hands with Mr. Mallon. This is a great day for Pawnee Bend!"

"Pleased to know you," Charley Mallon recited perfunctorily, his eye up and down the bar to see that nobody sneaked a drink. "What's yours, Mr. Dunham?"

"Lemon pop," said Bill.

Charley Mallon was about as cheerful-looking as a totem pole, and almost as tall. He was so thin his flesh was blue, so morose and downcast of countenance that he might have been assigned to barkeeping as a penance for his sins in some happier and more honorable station. Not that he had been, for he was a bartender by choice, a drinking bartender of the old frontier school. The look he gave Bill when he placed that

innocuous order would have curdled sour wine in a jug.

"I guess you're in the wrong joint, pardner," he said, turning away in injured dignity.

Bill's hearty companions looked hard at their glasses, fixing them with such intent eyes, indeed, as if they watched for some transformation in their contents which must be seized at the right moment or its good effects lost.

There was a sort of startled look among the cowboys ranged at the bar a little distance along. They turned to each other with incredulous faces, drinks poised, as if they had heard something they must verify by appealing one to the other. But there was a good deal of acting in it; under the play of astonishment there was a repressed uprising of hilarity that waited only a word to touch it off. Bill Dunham, in the simplicity of his green soul, supplied it.

"Make it sassaferiller," he said.

## CHAPTER III

### BURNT LEATHER

BILL was more indignant than confused, although he was as red as Henry Bergen's vest. The cowboys slapped themselves on the thighs with their big hats, driving out the dust like somebody beating a carpet; they looked across at Charley Mallon, upon whom they appeared to think the joke centered, and whooped in shrill derision. Bill's companions tilted their heads in unison and put their liquor where it would do nobody any harm but themselves, still keeping their eyes on the bar when they put their glasses down.

Bill was ashamed for the embarrassment he had brought them, but not ashamed for himself. It was not through any moral objection that he had not taken whisky along with the rest of them. If he'd liked it he would have taken his shot as big as the biggest. He had tried it out a good many times when the boys brought bottles out from Kansas City, but never had come to the belief that it was made to drink. He was turning to Major Simmons to explain that it was not a moral question with him, but purely gustatory, when one of the cowboys detached himself from his group of laughing comrades and approached Bill with insolent simulation of curiosity.

He was a rather smart-appearing young man,

dressed in tight-fitting trousers and fancy boots which must have cost him a month's wages at the least. He wore a red-and-black plaid shirt, loose-fitting in body and sleeves, with a blue silk kerchief around his neck. His hat was bigger by broad odds than any other in the house, a new one of the standard cream-white so much in vogue on the range from Texas to Montana in that day.

Bill's companions were filling their glasses again. Major Simmons turned a quick eye to him, in as plain an appeal as Bill ever read, to uphold the honor of the county of which he was a father. Bill was wondering if he could do it without making his case worse than it stood at present, when the cowboy laid hold of him and whirled him around from the bar.

"Look a-here, Buttermilk!" he said, "if you can't stand up and take a man's drink when you're out among men, I'll make you roll your hoop to hell out o' here. Put 'er down your neck, Buttermilk!"

The rest of them, railroaders and all, came crowding near to see the fun.

"Make it sassaferiller!" said a cowboy in high, piping voice meant to mimic innocence and simplicity, which all right-minded cow-chasers were supposed to despise.

"Now, boys, now, boys," Major Simmons said in a manner of go-easy and let-him-alone.

If Bill had made any progress toward a decision in the matter of taking a drink, the cowboy's order set him back at once to a firm determination that he wouldn't. He flung the fellow's hand from his shoul-

der, opened a way through those who pressed up to see the show like a breast-stroke swimmer making a mighty pull for the finish, and started for the door.

The cowboy wasn't going to have it that way. He hopped nimbly in front of Bill, slung out his gun and ordered him to go back and throw it down his neck.

Bill stopped at sight of the bare gun, the heat that had been over him so intense that it made his vision watery giving away to a sudden coldness, out of which everything stood as sharply and separately as if light had been brought to him in a dark place. He hadn't come to Pawnee Bend to submit to insult and public scorn; the days of his oppression were gone with the days of his poverty; gone with his sense of cowed inferiority among the boys from whose fathers his dad used to buy corn-meal and bacon on credit to carry them through the winter, the family to work the debt out next summer like horses. He hadn't come to Pawnee Bend to let anybody straddle his chest and wallow his hair in the mud.

"This ain't my day to drink, pardner," he said, his voice calm and steady, even though it was a little way down in his throat. "I guess you've heard of the horse any fool can lead to water. I'm not that kind of a horse."

"I don't like your shoes!" the cowboy said, with such expression of loathing his soul seemed to be in revolt at the sight.

"I reckon I could change 'em if it would save your feelin's," Bill said good-naturedly.

"I don't like your damn face!" the cowboy sneered,

scowling as he pushed his own forward to grit his teeth not so very far from Bill's ear.

"I don't see how I can help you on that," Bill told him, watching him as closely as he would have watched a rattlesnake coiled in the road.

"You got to rag, you one-eared granger!" the cowboy announced, suddenly as if the thought had just taken him. "Rag, you one-eared granger, rag!"

Bill had heard stories, a good while back, from men who had been in Santa Fé and Raton, of greenhorns getting their toes shot off for refusing to dance before a crowd. But that was a number belonging so far back on the program Bill had concluded it was not being done any longer. At least he had not read about it being pulled on anybody in Dodge in the past four or five years.

There the fool fellow stood, gun lifted, wrist limbered, ready to pull off the time-worn trick; and there stood Bill facing him, feet too close together for comfort, hoping the bartender would interfere to save his floor. But Mallon made no move; nobody raised a hand.

The cowboy waited a few seconds, as long as his dignity would permit, Bill feeling a sensation creeping down him from neck to legs as if he had melted and was turning cold, but determined to die before he'd crack a heel for the edification of that crowd. His prompter jerked his gun on the hinge of his limber wrist, in a movement like a player makes when throwing a knife in a game of mumble peg.

The bullet came very close to Bill's left toe, and

Bill gave a leap as if it had nipped him, to the great edification of all concerned. The whoop they raised at sight of this antic chopped off short, just as if somebody had opened the door on revelry and slammed it instantly, when Bill's big foot swung high in the most prodigious kick they ever had seen measured by a human leg, made contact somewhere above the band of those tight-legged trousers and queered the show a whole lot quicker than it takes to tell how it was done.

There was confusion and flying legs for an instant, Bill Dunham rising out of it with the gun in his own proper hand. The cowboy was throwing his legs in his effort to retrieve a dignified position, like one of the trained steers they use in the Hollywood rodeos, a good deal of feet in the air. Bill pegged a shot with a sort of nonchalant hand, taking one of the fellow's high heels off as slick as it could have been done with a hatchet.

As if to prove this wasn't a greenhorn's luck, Bill threw another shot with a funny little jerk of the wrist, just as the cowboy was scrambling up, cutting the other heel from under him as if it were made of sand.

There was no need for Bill to request them to give him room. He had more of it than any one man could use inside of three seconds. The dehorned cowboy, feeling himself flat on the floor that way, no doubt believing he had lost part of his legs, lurched for the door in ludicrous gait. He made a plunge at the swinging leaves as if to take a dive, hitting the sidewalk as the people of Pawnee Bend were accustomed



to seeing men emerge from Poteet's Casino when the night bouncer was on the job.

The impetus of his rush against the swinging half-doors carried the cowboy into the dusty street. Bill Dunham was right there on the edge of the planks, with a little fatherly advice, given in a low but portentous tone. By the time the rest of them, including Charley Mallon, had taken in breath enough to carry them to the door, the cowboy was astraddle of his horse, heading for parts known only to himself. Bill Dunham turned a couple of shots loose after him to give him the key, and let him go.

When Mallon divided the latticed doors cautiously and thrust out a questioning phiz, he saw a streak of dust with a humped-over cowboy at the farther end of it, and the heads of a few citizens sticking out of doors and windows to see what it was about.

Mallon was back in his place behind the bar by the time Bill got inside, mashing half a lemon with his wooden pestle in a tall glass. The range-riders went out to think things over and get their bearings, not knowing just where the rest of them were going to get off. The few railroaders had come back to the bar, laughing and well pleased with the quick overturn the granger had made among the fresh young fellows who were not always careful where they stood their hot jokes around.

Major Simmons was nearest Bill on his progress to the bar, the captured gun in his big fist.

"Mr. Dunham," Major Simmons flung out a congratulatory hand, his dry face crinkled in humorous

appreciation of the event, "that was done like a gentleman and a scholar!"

"I always did hate a fuss," said Bill, beginning to feel as if he had made a show of himself, and maybe gone a little too far.

MacKinnon was standing off a little way, looking at Bill with a gleeful grin on his broad red face. Bergen slapped Bill's back in his paternal fashion, and got hold of his hand, talking between pumps and thumps.

"Worthy six-hundredth citizen!" he said, heartily enough, although Bill felt there was something of patronage, even mockery, in his leering hard eyes and whiskery grin.

Charley Mallon was shaking his mixture with a two-arm movement, this side and that, a long loop down the center, jiggle by the right ear, jiggle by the left; his eye on Bill as if he worked to propitiate him and feared his efforts might fail. He took the copper shaker off the glass, spooned out a cherry to brighten it, and set it before Bill with a friendly nod.

"Try that, Mr. Dunham," he requested respectfully. "It's on the house. An-ny time you want a limonade, step in."

"The six-hundredth man," said Puckett, offering his hand with a sinuous, slip-along movement as if sneaking a card, his gambler's face unchanged by any gleam of friendship or sincerity. "It looks like it's going to be a lucky number for you, Dunham."

"I hope so," said Bill. "Mr. Mallon, will you hand this gun to that feller if he comes back?"

Mallon was willing, although he said the man was a stranger to him.

"Maybe some of them punchers knows him," he said. "They come and go, here today, gone tomorrow. It ain't likely he'll ever come back, losin' his heels that way. You'd as well stick it in your scabbard and keep it, Mr. Dunham."

"I've got a gun," said Bill.

"You're not railroadin'?" Mallon leaned confidentially, ingratiatingly friendly, keen as an old woman talking across the fence.

"Well, no; not exac'ly what you could call railroadin'," Bill replied.

"You don't look like one of them light-headed cowboys," Mallon speculated, feeling around in his mind for some place to put this surprising fellow. "Are you out of the army, Mr. Dunham?"

"N-o-o, not exac'ly what you could call the army," Bill replied, with that horsetrader way of his that was neither yes nor no, yet so friendly and apparently confidential that Mallon felt he was learning a great deal, and coming down to the bottom of it right along.

The four citizens were laying their heads together while Mallon and Bill carried on this little aside. Bill gathered from their talk they were discussing who should carry the petition to Topeka and present it to the secretary of state, and the advisability of a public collection to defray the delegate's expense. Major Simmons waved that detail aside from consideration. He had an annual pass on the railroad, and he was patriot enough, he hoped, to pay his own expenses in

such an important civic matter. So he was spotted to go.

Bill Dunham, as the six-hundredth citizen, didn't appear to count for much any longer. He chatted along in a friendly way with Mallon, disclosing nothing at all of his past, cautious of any claim of intention on the future. He was so taken with what Mallon had to tell him about the country, on which the bartender was well and widely informed, that he switched his attention from the fathers of the county to this lanky son of it, who had come there railroading with the first string of steel that was laid.

Some of the cowboys returned, bringing two or three recruits with them to take a squint from a respectful distance at the man who talked like a greenhorn but acted like something else. They ranged along to the farther end of the bar, which was an ample one, fully forty feet long, where Mallon shifted himself to attend them.

The banker and his two adjutants, as Bergen and Puckett appeared to be, shook hands with Bill again. MacKinnon suggested a cigar, which Bill agreed to without moral or physical qualm. As they puffed along back toward the hotel, MacKinnon made inquiry on Bill's future designs.

"Thinkin' of goin' railroadin', Mr. Dunham?"

"Well, not exac'ly what you could call railroadin'," Bill replied.

"If you were, I could put you next to Jim Cunningham, boss of the surfacin' gang, that works around two hundred Eytalian dago fellers. You might land as

timekeeper to Jim; he's lettin' out the man he's got, I hear. That lad's learnt their lingo enough to do a little graftin' off of 'em, but he made the mistake of forgettin' to whack up with Jim. He's been chargin' the simple ignorant dagoes a dollar a head by the month for holdin' their jobs for 'em, he made 'em believe."

"Purty slick business," Bill said.

"Yes, and he could 'a' carried it on to no end if he'd been honest and square and split with Jim like a gentleman. Jim'll take the graft over to himself now; you couldn't hope to get a whack out of that. But a handy man could think up something else to turn an honest dollar on the side."

"He might," Bill allowed, "but I've been thinkin' of hittin' the range."

"Railroadin' pays better, and it's easier, take it all weather through," MacKinnon advised. "But of course, if a young feller went to the range and rode straight, lettin' the red booze alone like you do, puttin' his money in yearlin's and pickin' up calves here and there the way they do, there's no end of opportunity for him to make big in ten years, or maybe less if he's got a speculatin' eye. It's a gamble, though, the biggest gamblin' game, spread on the widest table, men ever set in and bucked."

"That's what makes it appeal to me," Bill confessed. "I'm out here to take a chance."

"It's a game without a limit," MacKinnon sighed, as if he had learned something by experience with it. "You can go sky high if luck's with you, but you can

hit the rocks quicker than you can in any other business on earth. I've followed the range as cattlemen pushed it out here, from the time Custer cleared the Indians off of it and the Union Pacific was put through.

"Yes, I've seen fortunes made at the cattle business, and I've seen 'em lost. Men that could 'a' bought me up with their vest-pocket change one day were hittin' me for money to buy a cowpuncher's outfit the next. Market slumps and Texas fever, and winter storms and summer drouths. Yes, and the heat of gamin' that gets in a cattleman's blood, buckin' the big chance year in and year out. I've known 'em to be cleaned out in a poker game in a night, stakin' and losin' everything, down to the last horse.

"It's a great business, but I'll stick to my hotel. A man can dwindle down gradual at my business, die slow and easy. So, you're thinkin' of the range?"

"I've been thinkin' of it a good while," Bill owned, with more directness than he had answered a question since coming to Pawnee Bend.

"You could hold your own with them," MacKinnon nodded; "your own, and something more. "Well, Will-ium—" turning a shrewd eye to see how the familiarity was received, assured by Bill's slow friendly grin—"Will-ium—"

"They pronounce it Bill where they know me."

"Bill, if you take up that life let the red booze alone, and always leave it to the other man to make the break for his gun, the way you left that poor simpleton to make his play a while ago."

“I’d ruther eat than fight, any time,” Bill said. “I always did hate a fuss.”

Bill inquired about a likely ranch to get a job. MacKinnon named many cattlemen, but advised against striking out to ride into a job, as that might turn out a very wasteful adventure of time. The cowboy method, he said, was to hang around town and interview the cattlemen, range bosses and cowboys who came in on business or pleasure. A man could pick up a job that way almost any day.

MacKinnon had some further information to give about the requirements of horses and equipment, of which he found Bill almost entirely ignorant. They furnished a man nothing but his chuck on the range, Bill learned; every cowboy must supply his own horses, of which three was about the minimum with which a man could get along. But they were cheap. Good horses could be bought for thirty dollars. A cowboy frequently paid more for a pair of boots or a hat than he paid for a horse.

“But I’d advise railroadin’,” MacKinnon said. “It’s more a man’s work, and it’s here to stay. Range cattle will pass away in a few years, the cowboys will go with them, their occupation cut from under their feet like you cut the heels from under that lad in the saloon. There’ll be nothing for them but railroadin’ or farmin’ then, and the old cow hands are good for neither—no, nor nothing else on earth but handlin’ cattle on the range. It’s a good thing to stay out of while you’re young.”

"I expect you're right, but I think I'll take a crack at it for a while if I can land a job."

"The best of them that come here do," MacKinnon said, shaking his head as for the things he had seen happen to them. "The life has a strong call to a young man; it lures the best of them away. Well, if I was makin' my start maybe I'd ride away with you, Bill. I expect it's altogether likely I'd take my blanket-roll and go."



## CHAPTER IV

### INNERCENT AND CUTE

THE way of Bill Dunham's facility with a gun was this: When he had begun to get romance in the grooves of his commonplace life through reading of the doings in Dodge City and other towns of its notorious class, he had bought a twenty-two caliber pistol, intent on being ready for the company he would be called on to keep when the day came for him to face toward the short-grass country. While the current of time and circumstance was not to carry him to Dodge, or into the short-grass country until the lights of Dodge were dim and low, indeed, it had drifted him to a place where a handy man with a gun was just as highly esteemed.

Bill came of a pioneer stock. His forefathers had come foraging from Connecticut into Pennsylvania; from there down the Ohio as generations increased them; on to break the dark forests of Indiana and fight battles with the Indians there, and on again when things became too cramped, always keeping to the edge as long as there was an edge. In Bill's father the pioneering spirit had flickered down to a very weak urge, indeed, but he was the best squirrel hunter the Kaw valley ever had known.

So Bill had the eye and the hand for work with a gun of any kind whatever. He began his practice

with the little twenty-two by making a target of a cornstalk stripped down to the white, brittle core. That is a narrow streak when it comes to shooting at it with a pistol, great or small. Bill's way of doing it was to start rather close, backing off as he fired, cutting the crisp pulp as true as it could have been done with a knife.

Over and over he practiced this marksmanship in the frosty fields, backing off and shooting, running forward and shooting, hopping and wheeling and shooting, lying down and springing up as from sleep and shooting, becoming so apt at the business in time that the ordinary tricks of the gunman offered him no difficulty at all.

Birds on the wing, rabbits on the run, Bill pegged with the easy confidence of his inherited deftness which incessant practice had perfected into an art. After a due time Bill bought another gun, a whopping big one, as it had looked to him at that time, a very moderately sized one as compared to that he had wrenched from the foolish cowboy in Poteet's saloon. The new one was a thirty-eight, a handsome blued-steel weapon with long barrel, self-everything but self-loading. Bill always felt he'd have time to attend to that as needed, anyhow.

It was this gun Bill had brought with him to Pawnee Bend. It was safe in his suitcase at the hotel when he encountered the cowboy who had made the mistake that better and worse men before his day had made—of judging a man by his drinks. Bill never had carried a gun around with him; he never had figured on doing so until it should become necessary to the busi-

ness of his life. It appeared to him now that this time had come; that he'd better get himself a set of harness and strap the thirty-eight around his tank.

Still, he felt that he might be crowding matters a little when he came down to supper with the gun on, the new leather of his belt and holster stiff and creaking. He hid the gun as well as he could by keeping his coat buttoned, but the coat was short and the gun was long. It would assert its presence by a bulge, and a protrusion below the skirt of his coat.

He didn't want anybody to think he was out to pick a fuss, but he believed the time had come to wear a gun. That cowboy might come back looking for him, with a bunch of friends. The wise thing was to have a gun handy, even if he didn't use it. *Appearances Are Everything.*

With this thought standing out in his mind to excuse the unfamiliar weight of cartridge belt and gun, Dunham went out to look the town over after dark. It was a question to him where the business to maintain the place came from, situated as it was in the midst of a land believed to be far beyond the limit of agricultural possibility. Dunham had seen a few weak attempts at farming in the river valley as he approached Pawnee Bend, wide-scattered poor homesteads, looking more like temporary camps than homes.

In fact there was not much to give business stability in Pawnee Bend at that time. The custom that came to its doors was of the sort, mainly, that gets its money today, spends it tonight, and tomorrow goes off in considerable dejection to gather up another wad.

There were flush times and slack times in Pawnee Bend, as in towns where the current of business ran a bit more honestly on the whole than it rippled there.

The railroaders did not count for a great deal among the parasites who spread their snares in that town, for the Italians were not spenders, and the old-time tarriers turned everything loose in one grand burn-up right after payday, leaving nothing to dribble along until the next. It was from the men spread wide over the range in charge of its countless cattle, and those who rode in daily with herds to load, that the profit came.

If they couldn't get a man's money one way in Pawnee Bend they got it another. Knockout drops were no rural fiction in that town, and a knockout without drops by some limber-wristed bartender was one established method of hastening the parting of a fool and his money.

Pawnee Bend was an incorporated town of the most inconsequential class provided for under the laws of that state. It had its mayor and town council, and a marshal to represent the law. This marshal was a notable man, whose name was known from the Arkansas to the Pecos.

Ford Kellogg had progressed westward from Abilene, where he made his start, marking his way with slain men. He was a professional city marshal, a calling which, in the days of these frontier Kansas towns, was widely different from the somnolent occupation it came to be long afterwards, when the butt of a billiard cue would do instead of two guns. Kellogg killed with

justification, mainly, shadowy justification at times, but he invariably killed. There were no cripples along his sanguinary road.

Kellogg was a man of no great stature, a compact, muscular man, who appeared rather compact and bunched around the shoulders, probably from his habit of wearing a coat in all weather, let it blow as hot as Tophet in the summer days. He dressed invariably in dark blue, police-looking cloth, which he had tailored to him nicely, making by far the trimmest appearance to be encountered in town. He was a dark man, with a hint of Mexican about him, his small mustache a reddish brown, his eyes light and mottled in that peculiar breaking up of color common to people who stand on the line between a white race and a dark.

Marshal Kellogg usually woke to activity with the town after dark, his days being dedicated to sleep in the back room of the calaboose, which seldom contained a prisoner. Kellogg had the old-time officer's prejudice against prisoners; they were such troublesome people to have around. A coroner's inquest was soon over and out of the way, but a prisoner had to be fed and watered like a horse.

Kellogg was strolling past the Family Hotel, prying beeksteak out of his teeth with a goose-quill in the most genteel fashion, when Dunham started out to take his first look at Pawnee Bend by what the pioneers used to call arly candlelight. He gave Dunham a curious look, seeing him with his coat all buttoned around a gun that way, and passed on. He looked back every few steps as he sauntered in the luxurious

gait of a man full of beefsteak, as if not quite decided whether he ought to allow such an unusual-looking chap to roam around unquestioned.

Bill went on about his business, which was the business of seeing all that was to be seen without spending any money, marveling at the number of people, mainly men, abroad on the street. These men had an indoors softness about them, like worms out of nuts. Bill knew them well enough for what they were, having seen many like them along gamblers' row on West Ninth Street, Kansas City, where the gambling houses were palaces, indeed, compared to the open-jointed shacks of Pawnee Bend.

Many range men had come in and hitched their horses along the racks which lined the street, many were arriving momentarily, their increasing numbers promising a lively night. A crowd of these cow hands, heading for the Casino, which Marshal Kellogg had entered for his after-supper nip, encountered Bill Dunham.

These young men had taken a few jiggers of booze and were feeling quick and devilish, as their kind generally felt at the beginning of proceedings in that town. Next day was reserved for gloom, and the evil of each each day was plenty sufficient in itself, according to their philosophy.

One of them pretended to shy at the sight of Bill's gun, dodging behind his comrades in comical simulation of alarm. They all stopped, closing in around Bill with peering curiosity, taking him for something a little bit greener, maybe, than he was.

"Well, look at this granger with a gun hangin' on him!" said one. "Where do you think"—kindly patronizing—"you're goin' to, son?"

"Just amblin' around," Bill replied.

"Where's your ma?" the humorist of the bunch inquired, keeping up his pretense of benevolent interest.

Nobody laughed, every buck of them holding a face as sober and kindly concerned as he could pull, just as if they had found some little four-year-old wandering around on the prairie miles from anywhere. Bill's appearance, in comparison with their own, was fair warrant for their comical pretense, and without doubt as ridiculous as any get-up they were able to conceive.

Dunham's blue serge suit was neat, well-made and well-fitted; his round black hat of a pattern not unknown to Pawnee Bend, or even in legislative halls, a sort of senatorial, narrow-brimmed soft felt with a narrow tape around the crown where a ribbon usually is worn. But there was something unmistakably pertaining to business with the soil about him which appeared to make the gun under his coat a rare piece of burlesque.

Bill had seen hundreds—it might be said thousands, and still be well within the facts—of cow valets such as these pass the nursery on top of cattle trains in the many years he had labored beside the railroad there. Their wide-brimmed hats with high crowns, blue woolen, gray woolen, gay plaid woolen and dirty drab woolen shirts were as familiar to his eyes as print. He knew their accouterments from spur to wrist-strap; he could have outfitted himself to fit the new scene with

perfect harmony, and might have done so if he had been a little more foolish than he looked. Other young men from the farm country had made that mistake when they invaded the range. They never deceived anybody, and sometimes experienced a good deal of grief for their pretense.

Bill stood among them, half a dozen or more in the crowd, uncomfortable and somewhat uneasy, trying to grin and pass it off for the joke the best natured among them intended it to be. But there always is a more or less well developed bully among half a dozen boys who gang together, and these prairie rangers were not much above the average twelve-year-old lad in mental development. There was a bully among them; he came to the front now, a tall, shanky fellow with calves so long his boots reached only halfway to his knees. He had been shaved and clipped but a few minutes before, the scraped portion of his face clean in contrast to the rest of his unwashed surface apparent to the eye, and he smelled violently of barbarous perfume. This fellow now asserted himself as director of the entertainment.

There were no street lights in Pawnee Bend in those days, the sidewalks being illuminated by the lights of store fronts, the general custom being to place a lamp with tin reflector in the window, on the principle, perhaps, that light attracted night-roaming creatures, rather than through any design of making passage through the streets more comfortable.

Everything kept open late at night in that town, with the possible exception of the lumber yard. Bill



Dunham, and the committee of humorists who had blocked his tour of exploration, stood in front of the hardware store, where a special effort was made to light up the display of arms and ammunition in the window. Bill felt himself as prominent as a lightning-bug under a glass.

The long-legged cowboy, who was somewhat mature for that designation, being nearer forty than twenty, by long odds, took a judicial stand before Dunham, hat pulled down to his eyebrows to make himself look meaner than nature had designed him, although it had done a job that should have satisfied any reasonable man.

"Have you got a license to pack a gun, little feller?" he inquired, leering at Bill sharply out of the shadow of his hat.

"You fellers go on where you're headin' for, and I'll do the same," Bill returned, well enough humored in tone and appearance, but a little vexed under the skin. He resented the disposition of everybody to pick on him the minute he showed his head outside the door in that town.

"No, you're not goin' on till you perduce your license," this rough joker declared. "I'm takin' up all guns that ain't licensted. Show me your paper, or hand over that little lady gun you've got under your coat."

"Oh, quit your coddin'," said Bill.

"He ain't got no license!" somebody declared in voice of shocked conviction.

"They hang 'em down at Dodge for packin' guns without papers, but I expect they'll let you off with a

spankin' here in Pawnee Bend, you're so innercent and cute. Hand me over that gun!"

Lanky made the demand sternly, reaching out his hand to receive the gun. Bill didn't know what to do, or how far they would go with it, that being a situation entirely new to him. He knew it was a joke, but he wasn't able to figure a way to get out of it and keep in their good graces. As he had told MacKinnon, he hated a fuss.

Bill stood with downcast eyes, his upward limit of vision being the cowboy's extended arm and the low-swinging holster on his thigh. Bill's resentment was rising, not alone against these foolish men and their stupid joke, but against what seemed to be a foreordained conspiracy against him among all men.

Why was he always picked as the victim? What was there about him that gave people the deceptive belief that here comes a soft-shelled weakling whom we can have our fun with, expend our combative desires upon, rob and roll and mistreat generally, with perfect safety to ourselves? Why was it so? Why was he to be called on always to defend his person from indignities, when so many despicable people walked through life in serenity?

It seemed to Bill Dunham, standing there those few seconds reviewing the past humiliations and impositions of his life, in those moments of pause before his decision, that his prearranged program had him cast for a fighting man, when there was nothing in the world so precious to him as peace.

Many a good man has been turned into a bad one

by this general misreading of outward signs, by taxing a truly generous soul with impositions, by mistaking for cowardice a man's respect for order and his love for peace. This cool, deep current, once lashed to fury by cumulative wrongs, sweeps everything aside in striking for the justice which the mean oppression of cowards has denied.

That pause was the turning point in Bill Dunham's life. There sternness replaced ingenuous simplicity, and righteous resentment rose in him like a flood. He swung a jolt to the pestering cowboy's jaw that piled him off the narrow sidewalk, down among the horses lined up at the hitching-rack.

There was a commotion among the horses, a rising of dust from their trampling. The lean cowboy came scrambling out of it, clawing for his gun. His friends scattered to give him room, leaving Bill Dunham in the bright light of the window lamp alone.

Dunham ripped the row of coat buttons open with one quick pass of the left hand, baring the butt of his gun to the right. He stood with his knees crooked a little, like a man waiting an explosion, or a brakeman on top of a car, making no defensive move until the cowboy had snaked his gun from the scabbard. The fellow was throwing it down on him when Dunham slung his gun and snapped a single shot.

The cowboy's bullet struck the store window, some little distance to Dunham's left, his intention unaltered but his aim ruined by the surprising celerity of the fellow he had taken for an innocent who had been permitted to live only to make laughter for the elect.

## CHAPTER V

### MARCHING ORDERS

PEOPLE in Pawnee Bend were discreet: when they heard shooting, they went the other way. Innocent bystanders were unknown among the sophisticated inhabitants of Pawnee Bend. Dunham had the scene to himself, with that sprawled figure lying face downward in the dust at the sidewalk edge.

Dunham felt as if the world had receded far away from him, leaving him desolate among strange things. He felt suddenly very old, and very lonely. What he had come there to do seemed to have been placed beyond the possibility of accomplishment by this tragedy that had descended upon him; the thread of his guidance seemed to be broken, leaving him groping. Everything was changed with the crack of a gun; everything was undone.

He did not feel any compassion for the fallen man nor any regret for the deed which necessity of his own defense had forced upon him. But that strange sense of loneliness pressed down so poignantly he felt himself as one bereaved.

Marshal Kellogg came hurrying from the Casino, and in his wake others trailed, making a clatter on the sidewalk planks. As quickly as Dunham had felt the recession of the world, he found himself surrounded

by a pressing crowd. He put up his gun, expecting the marshal to arrest him.

The marshal walked over to the place where the victim of that lame-going joke lay, his badge flashing in the lamplight as he stooped. He seemed to be satisfied that it was a complete job, such as turned out by his own workmanly hand. He turned to Dunham.

"Are you the feller that done this shootin'?" he asked, his voice singularly small and nasal, an indescribable sneer in it that seemed to challenge Dunham's manhood as it belittled the deed.

"I'm sorry to say I am," Dunham replied, his voice husky, and strange in his own ears.

"There's no case against that man, Kellogg," somebody spoke from the door of the hardware store. "We saw the whole business, from start to finish."

"Who started it?" the marshal demanded, so ungraciously it amounted to a challenge of the speaker's veracity.

"They did. There was a whole bunch of them pickin' on him," a different voice replied, a girlish voice that vibrated with excitement. She was so near him Dunham fancied he could hear her breathe.

Dunham turned to see who his defenders were, providentially raised up, it seemed to him, out of his naked world. One was the proprietor of the store, evidently, an elderly short man in shirt sleeves, wearing a canvas apron such as carpenters use for carrying nails. The other was a girl in a riding habit of brown cloth edged with red. She wore leather cuffs and a sombrero; there was a gun swinging at her waist, a stubby quirt looped

around her wrist. Her face was in shadow; Dunham could see her features only sketchily, but she was young, and his gratitude for her defense was guaranty to him that she was lovely.

"Look at my winder!" the merchant appealed. "Who in the hell's goin' to pay for that?"

"Well, I ain't, if you mean me," the city marshal replied.

This rejoinder won a laugh, more the tribute of sycophants than the expression of mirth, for Kellogg was a mighty man in his place.

"Who in the hell was hintin' at you?" the irascible hardware man wanted to know. "But if you'd 'a' been attendin' to your duty instead of guzzlin' booze it wouldn't 'a' happened."

It was nothing to the hardware man that a human life had been cut off before his door, at least very little in comparison with the value of his window pane.

"It was only a joke," one of the unfortunate man's companions said, in tone of complaining injury. "That ain't no way to rair up and shoot a man over a joke."

"That man had his gun out before this gentleman ever made a move to pull his," the girl said indignantly.

Dunham was certain she was beautiful, indeed, above all her kind.

"He ort to swing for it!" the cowboy insisted.

"There's no case against him, I tell you, Kellogg," the merchant said with authoritative emphasis, seeing the marshal indecisive in his course. "Let this man go."

"You don't need to git up on your high horse about

it, even if you are the mare," Kellogg replied, drawing another laugh.

Bill Dunham thought it was questionable humor in the presence of a lady, that rustic play on the chief officer of an incorporated town, a position mainly without dignity and with precious little power. Here was an exception; here spoke a mayor who had force behind his orders. It was lucky for him, Bill thought gloomily, they had picked the front of the hardware store to play their joke.

"This is the second break you've made with a gun today," the marshal said, snarling around at Dunham. "One more will be your last. You've got one hour to show your heels to this town. If you're here after that, you and I'll mix."

"He'll clear out," the mayor said, giving it as a positive guaranty, as if to remove the impression that he was perversely opposing the marshal's authority. "We've got gun-slingers enough around here without callin' in any outsiders."

"He ort to swing!" the complaining cowboy insisted. "Shootin' up a feller's pardner over a innercent little joke that a-way."

"They ain't doin' that any more in this man's town, kid," the marshal corrected him, a sneer in his nose voice that was plainly a challenge to all assembled to try to revive that once popular Kansas outdoor sport and see how far they'd get along with it.

There was no undertaker in Pawnee Bend in those early days, the clearing off of human wreckage falling to the hands of the furniture dealer, a German named

Schubert, who made coffins according to specifications as occasion called. Marshal Kellogg sauntered off to summon Schubert to this little job, and the main portion of the crowd dispersed to the business or pleasure of the night, a few of the unlucky cowboy's companions remaining, a silent and melancholy guard.

These men appeared stunned by the unexpected turn of their rough-handed pleasantry. It was against all range precedent for a joke, no matter how cruel or humiliating to the victim, to end that way. They looked at Dunham with accusing reproach, unable to understand why he couldn't have stood like a good little granger and let them take his gun. But they respected him as a mystery beyond them.

Dunham stood near the mayor, into whose protection he had unconsciously edged, his faculties clouded by a numb oppression. He was in that foolish state that a man sometimes experiences when in strange surroundings, a participant in something so foreign to his inclination that he cannot believe it true. He feels that it is a dream, or a waking fancy, that reason will soon dispel. Dunham could not believe anything like the reality had happened: that a man lay dead at the edge of the footworn plank sidewalk, killed by a bullet from the friendly pistol that was as companionable to him as a dog.

The mayor jerked his head to signal him inside, and Dunham moved his feet to comply, expecting every moment to walk over the edge and wake out of it with a comfortable sigh. The girl had returned to the store ahead of them; she was busy with some small pur-



chases, stowing them away in a leather pouch slung across her shoulder.

To the mayor's direct and apparently unfriendly questioning, Dunham laid bare his plain and simple tale: how he had come to Pawnee Bend, his design in making the venture, and the facts leading up to the tragedy before the merchant's door. The mayor-store-keeper already had heard of Dunham's affair in Poteet's saloon.

"It looks like they picked you for the goat," he said.

"Yes, sir," said Bill, waking up completely to himself with a sigh, but far from a comfortable sigh, facing the past and present all bunched together in the mayor's brief summing up of his case. "Yes, sir, they always do; I guess they always will."

The girl turned from the counter, looking around with a quick movement of the shoulders, a sort of flinging motion of alert interest. Her hair was dark-red; that sort of hat was not becoming, and she rode astride, Bill knew from the cut of her skirt. But she had a friendly chin, a nice chin, that would feel soft and velvety in a man's hand, like a horse's chin.

That was his thought, a foolish one, he knew, but there it was, like some inexcusable blunder that no contrition would undo.

The mayor looked at his watch.

"You'll have to hit the road out of here before nine o'clock," he said, gruff in his way, but under it roughly kind. "Kellogg will shoot you on sight if you stay around here a second after the hour. You're quick

with a gun, I know, but he's a professional, and he's jealous of his reputation. It's been six weeks or two months since Ford killed a man. He begins to get mean when it runs that long between killin's."

Dunham was not moved by this simple description of the city marshal's fretful state that called for a human sacrifice to quiet. He knew the mayor was not trying to frighten him. Kellogg's cold eyes, the sneering insult of his voice, his sauntering slow gait, the expressive cruelty of his very outlines, all proclaimed his nature. He was repellent as a snake. But Dunham was not afraid of him.

He stood considering his situation. Not the Bill Dunham of a few minutes ago, but a Bill Dunham suddenly become grimly decisive, gravely mature.

"There's no train through till nine-twenty," the mayor said, looking at his watch again, according to the habit of railroad men, and railroad village dwellers when speaking of a train. "That would be too late for you. There might be a stock train through, but they don't stop, unless to take water. You could swing onto one of them about a mile east of town; the grade slows 'em down there—the boys hop 'em right along."

"Thanks," said Dunham, speaking out of his abstraction, not even lifting his head, the word perfunctory on his tongue.

"Kellogg's a man of his word, he'll not crowd you before your hour's up," the mayor said. "Have you got money enough to buy a horse?"

"I guess I could make it."

“Zora,” the mayor turned to the girl, who stood with back to the counter, leaning a little in a lounging, interested pose, “couldn’t you folks take him on over at the ranch?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, in a cautious, noncommittal way, as if she did know very well, but didn’t want to bind herself. “The association is taking on some men for the quarantine guard—pa’s coming in on the nine-twenty from Kansas City; he’ll know.”

“Yes, and a hell of a lot of good it’ll do this man if he’s comin’ at two minutes past nine! He can’t hang around here and wait for that train.”

“He might walk on down the road toward our place and we could pick him up,” the girl suggested.

“There was a cowboy in here this afternoon lookin’ for a buyer for his horse and saddle,” the mayor said, thoughtfully, as if contriving a way to piece out the problem of getting Bill Dunham out of town before nine o’clock. “I think he left the horse with the liveryman to sell—you might go over and find out. He was askin’ forty-five dollars for the outfit. I expect the saddle cost him more than that.”

“Thanks. It sounds cheap enough,” Bill said.

“If you can’t ride a horse you didn’t have any business comin’ to this country,” the mayor said sharply, regarding Dunham with disfavoring eyes. “Don’t hang around expectin’ me to step in and save your skin this time. If you do you’ll be layin’ on a board by the side of that feller they’re pickin’ up out there.”

Dunham made no reply. The girl had turned her

back to the activities over which Schubert was presiding in the street. The wagon drew away in a moment, and the mayor began to talk again.

“Don’t make the mistake of thinkin’ you can hide out somewhere in town and dodge Kellogg, or stand around and bluff it through. If you can’t ride, walk—I’m not goin’ to interfere. It’s not more than nine or ten miles out to your place, is it, Zora?”

“Between eight and nine,” the girl replied indifferently, Dunham thought.

“Thanks,” said Dunham.

The word appeared to nettle the mayor. He turned on Dunham savagely, his brows gathered in threatening scowl.

“You’ll have to make up your mind purty damn sudden what you’re goin’ to do, young feller!”

“Thanks,” said Dunham, in that same perfunctory, exasperating way. “I made it up some time ago.”

“Well, git to hell out o’ here, then!” the mayor said, at the end of his forbearance with such a dumb clod of a man.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE GIRL NAMED ZORA

MACKINNON was in the door when Dunham reached the hotel, as strained and nervous as if he, and not his guest, stood under conditional sentence of death.

"Oh, here you come!" he said, greatly relieved, bustling inside with the evident intention of speeding his guest's departure. "I was wonderin' when you'd be along—you ain't got any too much time."

Dunham lounged up to the showcase, looking over the brands of cigars as if he considered a purchase. The symptoms of business were not observed by MacKinnon in his anxiety or, if noted, passed unimproved. He was waiting at the foot of the stairs, his attitude betraying his eagerness to be rid of this man, who was not in half the sweat to be on his way that the host was to have him go.

"I thought when I saw you go out with that gun on you it'd get you into trouble," MacKinnon said, feelingly deprecatative of the affair.

"I had as much right to pack a gun as anybody else, didn't I?" Dunham asked, turning slowly from his study of the cigars.

"Sure; sure you did, Bill. I'm not sayin'—"

"Because I look green it don't give anybody else the right to take it away from me, does it?"

"You was right, Bill; you acted in the law and the rights of a man. But your luck was bad when you got Kellogg jealous of you. He won't stand for anybody in this town, or any other town where he's marshal, that's got a reputation for quick action equal to his own."

"Bad luck's my old side-pardner," Bill said, sadly reminiscent, looking at the floor as if he saw the pattern of his life drawn there, with precious little in it to give him hope.

"It's too damn bad it happened, Bill!" MacKinnon said, impulsively generous. "I hoped you'd stay here and be one of us. It's too damn bad you've got to leave this way!"

"Which way?" Bill inquired, looking up in what appeared almost startled surprise.

"Under orders."

MacKinnon shook his head sadly, but he stood with a foot on the stairs, expecting the word that would send him tearing up after the guest's belongings. When the word was not forthcoming at once, he leaped off without it, leaving his comment on the manner of going unanswered.

MacKinnon was back in three jumps. He put the suitcase down at Dunham's toes, his face as red as if he had rushed into fire to bring it down.

"I've got that confidence in you I'll lend you a horse, if you want it," MacKinnon offered. "Or I'll sell you one, dirt cheap," he amended, not too eager to have his generosity placed under any great or sudden strain.

"What did you bring that down for?" Dunham in-

quired, giving MacKinnon a cold look. "Ain't my money good?"

"Better than any man's that's crossed my door in many a day. It was to save you a step and help you on your way, lad. You've only got thirty-five minutes left."

"If you'll let me leave it here till the nine-thirty train comes in I'll relieve you of my unwelcome presence," Dunham proposed, very high and cold about it. "I want to see a man that's comin' on that train."

"But—but—I understood, Bill—they were tellin' me, Bill—your hour will be up at nine."

"Nobody but the man that pays me for my time sets my hours for comin' and goin'," Dunham said. "I'm not hired out to anybody in this town. I'll go and come when it suits me."

MacKinnon's hearty countenance slowly lost its ruddy tint as he stood looking at Dunham in stunned amazement.

"You mean you're not goin' when that hour's up?"

"I don't know of anybody that's authorized to set my clock."

"He'll kill you!" MacKinnon whispered. He looked around fearfully, as if he expected to suffer for connivance in this man's defiance. "You've got no more chance than my old woman would have against that man with a gun in her hand. It'll be murder—you'll be throwin' your life away!"

"There's a girl named Zora up at the hardware store," Dunham said, calmly irrelevant, it seemed to MacKinnon. "Do you know the rest of her name?"

"She's John Moore's girl," MacKinnon replied, impatient with the interposition of such a trivial thing as a girl in a serious business like this.

"She said her father might give me a job. I'm goin' to strike him for one when the train pulls in. After I see him I'll take my carcass to some other hotel, if my room's worth more than my money to you."

"If you're alive after the nine-twenty goes you can have my house and lot!"

"The same room I had will be enough," Dunham replied.

"It's lookin' like rain," MacKinnon said, sniffing at the door as if he smelled it, uneasy over his presence there, Dunham knew. "It'll be a bad night for shoot-in', at the best. By nine o'clock you'll not be able to see a man twenty feet away unless you catch him passin' a light. You wasn't intendin' to wait here for him to come, Bill?"

"No, I'll not wait here," Dunham assured him.

He had lapsed again into that cloud of gloomy introspection that had caused the hardware-mayor to set him down for a dunce. He did not lift his eyes when he answered MacKinnon, standing with back to the showcase, thumbs hooked in his belt, head drooping, thinking not so much of the man whom he was to meet in battle for his life as the one they had picked up lately out of the street and carried away on a board.

He regretted the deed poignantly, but he was not sorry for the man. He might have compromised with his self-respect, grinned weakly and stood their devil-



ment like a coward, or snarled and twisted impotently like the under dog he used to be when he hadn't it in his power to snap. The same situation confronted him with Kellogg, only that it was far more important, so important, indeed, that his entire future hinged on his actions in the next few minutes.

He might walk away into the dark and save his life, leaving his honor behind; walk away and admit that he was a natural-born under dog, and go on living the life of an under dog for evermore. It wasn't to be done that way. He had come to that country to lift up his face and be a man. If people would persist in picking him for the goat, they must learn to their own grief that they were trifling with a red-eyed bull.

Dark as the night might deepen, precarious as his chance against that confident, sneering, blood-hungry man might be, the biggest business of his life lay in staying there to meet him and prove himself a man who was not to be shoved with impunity out of anybody's way. Even if he must die in proving it, no doubt must be left standing to cloud his title.

"No, I'll not wait here," he said again, drawing a deep breath and letting it out with a sigh, as a man does when he has settled some question that he has balanced on in doubt and fear.

MacKinnon put the suitcase behind the counter with a sort of bustling air of finality, as if to say there the matter of Dunham's entertainment in that house was terminated for the present, and wouldn't he be going on about his dangerous affair and lift the peril from

that door? Dunham looked at his watch. He still had twenty minutes.

"If anybody comes here lookin' for me"—turning to MacKinnon, watch in his hand—"I'll be out there in the middle of the road between here and the depot."

"I'll tell him," MacKinnon promised, throwing that suspicious, scared look around again. Then cautiously: "When you see him step out of here and start over that way, plug him while you've got him in the light!"

"I'll meet him on the square, man to man," Dunham replied, fixing MacKinnon with a reproofing stern look. "Tell him that when he comes."

It was not as dark out in the road as MacKinnon had thought it would be. The moon was in the waxing half, paring the clouds like a scimitar as they slid before it, showing in bright transitory gleams as it seemed to gain little victories over the racing hosts of fleecy vapors; now smothered completely and obscured, now dim and befogged. It was an uncertain light at the brightest for seeing a man's movements with a gun, and shaping one's own actions by them to keep within self-justification and, as Dunham thought, the law.

Dunham stationed himself in the middle of the town's business street, at the point where the road which came in from places unknown to him joined it and merged dust with dust like the sandy rivers of that land in summer-time. The railroad was a little way behind him, and across that, the station, its long plank platform, step-high to passenger coaches, lying dark before it.

He could see the night operator sitting in the bay window before his chattering instruments, a shade over his eyes. The semaphore signal was white, showing a clear line. Dunham wondered if the nine-twenty was going to be late.

From his post of waiting Dunham had the same view of the street that he had studied from the platform on his arrival. That seemed long ago, as the case always is when one measures by events instead of time, and the street appeared little more assuring than by day, although noise and activity revealed now much of what had been mysteriously silent then. People cut across the blocks of light lying before store windows, in some spots only their legs revealed, in others shoulders and heads, depending on the depth of the window and the position of the lamp.

There was the sound of horses coming and going. Now and then a troop or pair of riders, seldom one alone, swept past Dunham on the turn from the dusty highroad into the dusty street. There was no shrilling of children in the night; not a slip of childish figure flitted from beam to beam along the clattering sidewalks.

From Poteet's Casino the whine of a fiddle sounded, the running jounce of a hard-mailed piano in tight pursuit of its melody, and the rude rhythm of dancing feet. Dunham recalled the bartender's information, given with pride, that Poteet's was the only place in town where ladies were in attendance at night, ready to move a foot with any gentleman who desired to shake a shirt-tail in a dance. Charley Mallon had ex-

pressed it in those words, pressing Dunham cordially to come in when it got lively and walt the planks.

Few people came up as far as MacKinnon's hotel, as it was on the outer boundary of activities, the first house one came to on arriving, the last one he sought when his load got too heavy to carry around. It would be hours before unsteady feet began to thread the wavering planks toward MacKinnon's door. But one man would come there presently, Dunham knew, sauntering insolently, to learn if his order had been obeyed.

Dunham was not greatly disturbed over the issue of the adventure before him; he did not march up and down in feverish anticipation, nor fret himself with unpleasant conjectures. He was engaged chiefly with thought of the impositions they had attempted to put on him in that town, bitterly resentful of the persistent, mocking misunderstanding that seemed to follow him. It was as if the shadow of his past days of poverty and oppression had taken wing like a swift bird and arrived at Pawnee Bend with him.

He was too wise, he knew too much about a gun and the chances of unexpected variation, to lay any plans for action ahead of the moment Ford Kellogg should confront him. By a moongleam he read his watch. Seven minutes to nine; and the girl called Zora was coming out of MacKinnon's door.

Strange that he hadn't seen her go in. She must have come while he was on his way to that spot, and now she was heading in that direction, going to the depot to wait for her father's train. He walked to the other side of the broad street, to avoid startling her in case

the moon flared suddenly and revealed him in his grim appointment.

Across there was the livery stable, where the forty-five-dollar horse and saddle waited a buyer. Dunham stood looking at the dim light in the dusty webbed windows of the office, thinking it might pay him to look that horse over in the morning. The moon jumped a crevasse between two snowbanks of cloud, lighting up the white road with sudden gleam.

Dunham turned at the soft sound of footsteps in the dust. The girl called Zora was cutting hurriedly across the road: in the intermittent beam and dark of the sidewalk, Ford Kellogg was sauntering toward MacKinnon's door.

## CHAPTER VII

### A MAN WITHOUT A GUN

"Oh, here's where you are!" said Zora Moore, coming up to Dunham quickly the very moment the moon missed its landing and plunged ears-over into the cloud across the gap. "I was looking for you at MacKinnon's. Is that right about you wanting a job?"

"I intended to see Mr. Moore when he came in and strike him for a job," Dunham replied.

"You didn't say when Mr. Ruddy was talking to you whether you'd take a job, but if you're out for one, we can use you. My father told me to be on the lookout for a few good men, and pick them up if I ran across any. You're hired; your time begins right now. Here—hang this thing on you—I'm tired packin' it around."

Dunham admired her direct way of doing business, although he wasn't ready to take on the job that minute. He took the leather pouch, the strap of which she had put in his hand as she spoke, and stood hesitantly, his eyes on the hotel door.

"I've got an appointment with a man in a few minutes, if you'll excuse me from startin' right in, Miss Moore," he said. "I'll just lay this down here and fetch it along to you later. Where—"

"No," she cut him off decisively, "I don't want it

throwin' around. What did you say about an appointment with a man?"

"I'm due to meet a man in a few minutes," he replied, hoping she could be got rid of before Kellogg came out of that door.

"Well then, carry this thing over to the depot for me—it's got ammunition in it for my kid brothers, they shoot away an awful lot. I'll wait for the train, and you can come back and keep your engagement, if it's a very important one."

Dunham thought that would be a good way to clear the ground of her hampering presence. He calculated he'd have time to deposit her and the heavy sack in the depot and get back before the hour was up. He glanced back at the hotel as she led the way toward the depot, wondering if MacKinnon was trying to argue Kellogg out of it, resentful of any interference that might cast a doubt on his courage. Zora Moore, hurrying on ahead, stumbled with a scrambling noise on the loose shoulder of ballast at the ends of the railroad ties, and fell.

Dunham picked her up with deprecatory exclamation. She leaned on him heavily, with suppressed groans, bending as if she'd taken a serious bump.

"Are you hurt much?" Bill inquired anxiously.

She stood half doubled over, making that whistling sound expressive of acute suffering common to lads when they have outgrown the crying age.

"Gee! I think I busted something," she said.

"I'm sorry," said Bill, with no more consoling effect than that expression generally has on people with

bumps and bruises and broken bones. "I had a right to look out for that dang railroad!"

"Oh-h-h! Fee-u-u-u! I think my stifle's out!" she said.

Bill was supporting her with one hand, carrying the pouch in the other, hoping she hadn't broken anything, but more anxious to get her off his hands at once than alarmed over her demonstration. At the worst, he thought, she couldn't have done much more than skin her knee.

"Let me help you up to the platform," he proposed, thinking anxiously of Kellogg and the last speeding minutes of his hour, twisting his neck to watch the hotel door. "You sit down in the waitin'-room and you'll be all right in a minute."

"No, I don't want to go there, I don't want to go there," she said, panting as if the pain of her hurt was hard to bear. "Take me to the wagon—the wagon, the wagon—oh-h-h! the wagon!"

"Where's it at?" Bill inquired, feeling panicky and alarmed. She must be hurt, she must be hurt badly, to take on in that tragic way.

"Back of the hotel—right down this road," she groaned. "He-elp me to the wagon!"

She leaned on him and grabbed his coat as if about to collapse, and Bill, certain now that she was going to faint, was in a sweat of alarm. He slung the troublesome pouch over his shoulder and squared off for action.

"I'll carry you over to MacKinnon's and tell him to get a doctor," he said.



"No, I want to go to the wagon," she insisted. "I'll hold to you and hobble along. Shad Brassfield, our teamster, he's down there—he'll know what to do. Fe-e-e-u-u-u! my *leg!*

"Dang it for lettin' you slip on that ballast!" said Bill.

She appeared to start off pretty well for a cripple, but Dunham didn't notice that. He was watching MacKinnon's door, the light of it still unbroken by the marshal's exit. He noted as well the general desertion of that part of town, taking it as an indication of public indifference of the event set for nine o'clock. He did not know that it was the kind of a show the gun-wise people who lived in and frequented Pawnee Bend avoided. They were quite content to view results.

Dunham construed this lack of interest as a sort of public expression of contempt for him, perhaps magnifying his own importance in that town a little. It had gone around that Kellogg had given him an hour to get out of town, and people had taken it for granted that he had gone. Even Kellogg appeared to believe he had dusted it, or else MacKinnon, in friendly desire to avert the meeting, had not told him the truth.

So Dunham thought, heading off down the road past the side of MacKinnon's hotel with Zora Moore on his arm, a rather lightly tripping crippled person, too, he began to realize. He wanted to take a squint at his watch, but the moon remained persistently covered. It didn't matter; it wasn't over yet. He'd leave her at the wagon and throw a surprise into Kellogg by facing him at the hotel.

They were considerably past the hotel, with nothing apparent in the landscape but the string of bunk cars on one hand, a few small scattered houses on the other. There was no wagon to be seen.

Dunham stopped, looking around in suspicious perplexity, which was not a little intensified by the girl removing her hand, which had for some minutes lain lightly on his arm. He had a flashing thought of deceit and treachery and knockout drops, his wad as the objective.

"There's no wagon anywhere around here," he said, his tone severe and accusing.

"No, it isn't here," she agreed, entirely easy and over her whimpering. There was even a little note of mockery in her voice, Bill Dunham believed.

"I don't believe you're hurt a bit," he accused her; seeing her stand unsupported on her own proper legs as well as any sound young lady in Kansas.

"Not a bit," she assured him cheerfully.

"I might 'a' known you was stringin' me when you put up that talk about your stifle bein' out. A girl ain't got no stifle joint."

"How do *you* know?" she asked, flippantly, boldly, Bill thought.

"Nobody but a four-legged animal's got a stifle joint, and you know it as well as I do," Bill told her, indignant over this anatomical deceit.

"Never mind, Mr. Dunham," she said gently, as serious in a moment as he would have her. She touched his arm with placative hand. "I had to string you along someway till I could get your gun."

Bill clapped hand to his scabbard, to find it as empty as when he bought it. The discovery started him with a nervous jump; a hot wave chased a cold one up his backbone and seemed to run out of his nose.

"What're you up to, sneakin' my gun that way?" he demanded, so suspicious of treachery now his hair began to crawl at the roots as if it was full of ants.

"I told Mr. MacKinnon I'd get it if I could," she said. "We didn't want to see you killed."

"You've made a fool out of me between you, and that's worse!" Dunham blurted, in full support of his own hot declaration.

"Not half as bad," she corrected him gently. "You can be a fool every day of the week and live happy, but you could only fight Ford Kellogg once."

"What did you do with it?"

"Dropped it in the weeds back there somewhere. You couldn't find it before morning."

"He'll think I'm afraid of him, he'll think he's put over his bluff!"

"Let him," she said calmly.

"MacKinnon put you up to it!"

"No, he didn't. He said it couldn't be done. Don't be sore, Mr. Dunham; you'll thank me for it when you understand what you've missed."

"Maybe I will," he replied, sulky and ungracious. "You've put me in a h—a dickens of a fix! How'm I goin' back to face that man without a gun?"

"You've got about as good a chance without it as with it," she replied, a note of asperity in her smooth low voice. "You don't know Kellogg. No man ever

has touched him with a bullet; there's not a man alive that can do it. If you go back there tonight he'll kill you, gun or no gun."

"He didn't have any right to order me around that way," Dunham argued. "A man's not an outlaw because he defends his life."

"Mr. Ruddy, the man you were talking to—the mayor, you know—says Kellogg had a perfect right to order you to leave town if he thought you might create a public disturbance or cause trouble by staying there. If you had fought him and killed him you'd have been arrested and tried for murder. That's what Mr. MacKinnon said."

She was so earnest Dunham could not doubt any longer the honesty of her intention or the disinterestedness of her interference with his foolish plan of defiance.

"I—Mr. MacKinnon and I thought it was a pity to see you killed off for no reason at all," she said, with such simple sincerity it made Dunham feel very small and cheap.

"I guess you're right," he admitted contritely, breaking into a sweat at realization of the peril his misguided independence had led him so near. "But I guess it won't be any harm if I go back and kick around in the weeds to see if I can find my gun."

"Forget your gun!" she said severely. "You're a whole lot better off tonight without it."

"It's a good old gun; I hate to lose it," he pleaded.

"Well, you're not goin' back. And that's a cinch!"

"All right, Miss Moore," he yielded, as tame and

humble as if she had a rope on him, thrown and hog-hobbled and conquered past all hope.

"You certainly can pull a gun in a hurry, kid," she said. "You must 'a' had a whole lot of practice in your time. But you mustn't get the big notion you're too darned good at it," she hastened to amend.

"I don't suppose it takes any special amount of brains to pull a gun fast," he allowed. "Well, I guess I might as well walk on till I come to the next place where a train stops, and pull my freight out of this country."

"Why, don't you want the job?"

"Which job?"

"The one I hired you for a little while ago."

"I thought you was just stringin' me along," he said foolishly. "Well, I'm green, but I'm willin'. What kind of a job is it?"

"We'll walk on down the road and I'll tell you. I told Mr. MacKinnon we'd walk on toward the ranch if I could get your gun away from you. Pa and Shad Brassfield will pick us up when they come along."

The cattlemen of southwestern Kansas, she told him, had formed an alliance for the purpose of making a concerted stand that summer against trail herds from Texas being driven across the range to the railroad loading-points. Last summer Kansas cattlemen had suffered heavy losses from Texas fever, many of them being practically ruined. Nobody could explain it, but there was some kind of infection carried by cattle from south of a certain line in Texas, to which they themselves were immune, which seemed to blow

on the wind and poison the very dust of the earth. Northern cattle grazing the range crossed by these Texas herds, or coming within several miles of their trail, contracted this devastating fever and perished.\*

No cure was known for it; no preventive except freezing weather. Local cattle could graze with safety the polluted ranges after a winter had passed. The situation had grown so desperate, Texas cattle coming in such vastly increasing numbers year after year, that the livestock industry on the Kansas range was threatened with ruination.

Something had to be done to stop this indiscriminate invasion, this sowing of plague over the free grazing lands. There was neither state nor federal law to regulate the entry of these southern herds, it being a hard matter to convince legislators that cattle apparently entirely healthy could be carriers of this most fatal malady.

For the lack of any law to help them, the Kansas stockmen were driven to the expedient of banding together and establishing, for mutual protection, a quarantine against Texas trail herds. This quarantine line they had fixed at the southern boundary of the state, where they proposed to apply their regulation by force of arms if necessary.

Guards were already patrolling the southern border to watch for the coming of the first Texas herds and summon sufficient force to stop them at the line. It was as a recruit to this force that Zora Moore had engaged Dunham, subject to the approval of her

\* The tick was not then known as the carrier of Texas fever.

father, who was president of the Kansas cattlemen's organization.

These guards must be trustworthy men of the highest integrity, cool men in the face of danger, inflexible men in their duty. They were having trouble finding men, as few were unemployed on the range at that time of the year, those few out of jobs generally being undesirable for the stern duty of quarantine patrol.

"Mr. MacKinnon recommended you," she said.

"He don't know any more about me than you do," Dunham told her.

"I know you're a man that will stand up for his rights, and you were willing to fight Ford Kellogg. That's recommendation enough for me, and I know it will be for my father."

"I don't know that it always pays a man to stand up too strict for his rights," he said gloomily, the question of his justification in the affair of the cowboy rising up to accuse him.

"When a man goes after his gun you've got to do something," she said, surprising him by her ready interpretation of his thoughts. "I wouldn't worry about that man. He'd 'a' got you if you hadn't beat him to it."

"Maybe," Bill granted, considerably comforted and relieved.

She was a wise one, he thought; she was as wise as they made them. And he was ready to bet his last dollar she was as straight as a plumbline.

They walked on out of town, which took no great stretching of the legs to accomplish, giving the road

occasionally to riders who passed on in silence, no doubt taking them for strolling lovers. Half a mile or so beyond the edge of town the road bent southward, crossing the railroad, striking out into a land that appeared as empty of man's activities as the sky over it.

From the top of a swell in the treeless land they watched the train that Zora had come in to meet wind its way across the prairie, its two little red eyes winking out of sight at last. Its going seemed to leave the world more melancholy to Dunham, as if some last thread between him and his untroubled days had been broken, leaving him estranged and alone.

He regretted that hasty deed, that blow, given on what seemed to him now such trifling provocation, that had provoked vindictive retaliation; he was sorry for the man who had fallen in that sprawled, collapsed, flattened-out, repellent posture, his face in the dust, his wild bullet through the mayor's window pane.

He would have been glad to go back and live over again the hard years which he had surmounted to come to that tragic hour if such penance could clear his conscience of the burden that oppressed it so grievously. The farther he went from the scene, the heavier his regret weighed, like a load that had seemed light enough in the excitement of the start, but which promised to gall him and wear him down before the journey's end.

That was the outcome of all his vindictive years, his sweltering under the sting of early wrongs. A noble soul would have outlived them, he said, and hidden them in the expansive maturity of his heart, as a tree



envelops old wounds, fold on fold, in its inexorable dignity.

They must have been on the road an hour; the moon had pared away the last shred of cloud, leaving its course untroubled and clear down to the very horizon's edge, when the wagon overtook them. It came with little noise along the dusty road, the glow of a cigar in the back seat showing where the cattleman rode.

John Moore did not appear to think it remarkable, or even unusual, to come across his daughter walking the public road with a stranger at night. There was no uneasiness in his manner, no displeasure. Dunham had looked forward to this meeting with apprehension, doubtful whether Moore would countenance his daughter's activity in the affairs of a stranger whose follies made him contemptible even to himself.

Moore greeted his daughter with boisterous, loud-voiced affection, leaning over the side to give her a popping kiss. He shook hands with Dunham when Zora introduced him, no reservation of inequality or suspicion in his way. There was a strong vapor of whisky on his breath, and he was a voluble, loud-spoken, rough-edged unlettered man.

Dunham mounted the front seat beside the driver; the journey was resumed, Moore talking with loud impartiality for the benefit of all about his journey, which had extended as far east as Chicago, and the successful outcome of his business, whatever that had been. He said nothing of Dunham's rescue from self-appointed extinction at Ford Kellogg's hands.

The driver, apparently a man of length from his

way of doubling forward in the seat, was shaded by a large hat which, together with the canvas top of the wagon—of the kind called a hack in Texas—put him in such gloom Dunham could not make anything out of his face. He could see the end of what appeared to be an unlit cigar sticking out of it, and hear the clucking that issued from that region whenever the horses slackened their brisk trot.

Dunham did not attempt any conversation with the driver, who held his tongue in that somber fashion while they proceeded four or five miles. The conversation in the back seat gradually fell to a lower, more intimate, pitch, little of it reaching Dunham's ears distinctly. He tried not to hear, feeling himself and his doings in Pawnee Bend the subject of this confidential talk.

They pitched suddenly over the brow of a long swell, beginning a quick descent into what appeared to be a broad valley: A river serpented through it, the course marked in the moonlight by the dark border of trees at its brink. The Arkansas, Dunham knew it to be, river of erratic flood-waters and engulfing sands. The suddenly accelerated gait of the horses, and a light twinkling among the trees, was warrant that they were approaching the end of the drive.

It was at this stage of the journey that the driver found his speech. He precluded it with a chuckle, as if it started deep and sent out bubbles.

"They've got a good joke on you over at Pawnee Bend," he said, still doubled forward, elbows on his thighs, as if he addressed his team.

Dunham started. He was not sure the man had spoken, although he heard the words distinctly; and almost positive they could not have been addressed to him.

"Yeah, they got a *dang* good joke on you!" the driver repeated, the bubbles coming after the words this time, as if they had been pulled up by the roots out of the mud.

"I beg your pardon?" Dunham said.

"Oh, that's all right; don't mention it," the driver said with cordial magnanimity.

"What did you say about a joke, Shad?" Zora inquired, leaning forward, her voice close to Dunham's neck.

Shad took out the cork and let another little spurt of bubbles rise and drift off on the deliberate current of his humor.

"You know that feller this kid killed out in front of Ruddy's?" he said.

"Well, what about it?" Zora demanded impatiently.

"Dang good joke!" said Shad.

He lapsed off there, as if that ended the story. Dunham heard Moore snorting as if he had caught the point of the untold joke. Zora poked the driver in the back.

"What's it about, you old fool?"

"You know, when they took him to Schubert's back room and stripped him," Shad twisted his neck to talk around to Zora, although he could have been heard a quarter of a mile if he had talked straight in front,

“they couldn’t find a mark of a bullet on that feller from top to toe.”

“No-o-o!” said Zora, incredulously.

“That’s the joke!” said Shad.

“I think it’s a pretty bum sort of a joke,” she said, her displeasure evident, an opinion in which Dunham fully concurred.

“They felt him over, and turned him and poked him,” Shad related, “but they couldn’t find a shadder of a bullet nowheres. Schubert was kind of put out about it. He don’t like to keep ’em around, you know. He says: ‘Vell, I guess I’ll haf to let him lay around two or three days to see if he’s deadt.’ That feller he kind of rose up and grunted. ‘Who in the hell said I was dead?’ he says. ‘Who in the hell said I was dead?’ ”

Shad roared, and Moore roared. Dunham was pretty certain that Zora did some roaring of her own. But there was no mirth in Bill Dunham’s breast; he didn’t see where the joke came in. All he was conscious of was a vast lifting of relief, a peaceful, delicious clearing of his troubled conscience. His hands were clean: there was no blood of a man upon his hands.

“He’s a fittified man,” Shad explained. “I used to know him down in the Nation. He tuck a fit the wink you throwed down on him, and you missed him as clean as a drum. Dang good joke on you, kid!”

“Ain’t it?” said Bill, his heart as light as a feather. “But I guess I can live it down.”

So what he had thought an adventurous and tragic day had ended in an explosion of comedy, leaving him

nothing to his credit but a pair of heels. Yet Bill Dunham's heart was so light that moment, his happiness so extreme, that he would have replaced the cowboy's lost underpinning with silver heels if he had met him in the road.

## CHAPTER VIII

### PEOPLE OF CONSEQUENCE

JOHN MOORE was one of the barons of the Arkansas. He owned several thousand acres of land, which in all did not represent a great outlay of money in that time, much of it good for nothing but grazing, good for nothing else to this day. In the valley of the Arkansas, where his house stood on a little lift that brought it above flood-water, his possessions embraced much land that could have been turned to agricultural use if its owner had been a farming man.

But such would have been a contemptuous use of the land to John Moore, who did not so much as cultivate a garden to give his family summer greens. He was a cattleman of the old type; cattle was all he knew, or wanted to know. His value of the valley lands was not based on their productive potentiality under the plow, but on the amount of herbage grown there during the summer months for the use of his herds when the upland ranges were covered with snow.

At such times the cattle were worked down into the valley, where they found tall grass that had been carefully guarded against trespass all summer, fairly succulent still, and life-sustaining; and shelter against the cruel sharp blasts of winter storms under the shallow banks of the river, among the willows and cottonwood

trees, and in the deep washes which carried the summer torrents from the sod-roofed hills into the stream. The one use that John Moore saw for the land was to take off of it with his cattle what nature had put on it for no other purpose under the clouds, according to his understanding and belief.

Cattlemen along the Arkansas were enjoying prosperous days. Moore had been one of the first with the courage to risk his capital on the belief that cattle could live off the range and withstand the winters of that bleak, unsheltered land. He hadn't much to risk in the beginning, to be sure, and he always played a lone game. He had been twenty years on the Arkansas, and now he was in the middle fifties, a man with a reputation for sagacity and good judgment, whose word was as good as money paid.

Moore had married late, going back to Missouri, his native state, for a woman of his own kind. She had become a typical range wife; his children were range born. His house was a rangeman's conception of distinction and comfort, a hideous gabled thing with a tower—an architect from Wichita had designed it, after the current cattle baron style—built of lumber, painted a bilious green, with staring white trimming around cornice, windows and doors. A veranda with spindling columns filled its front and curved around the tower, suggesting leisure, elegance and ease, three things as completely strange to the habits and desires of John Moore as a feather bed to a horse.

A few cottonwood and soft-maple trees had been planted around the house, but otherwise the situation

was unadorned, and bare as trampling hoofs could beat it. The house stood on the north bank of the river, beside what once had been the Santa Fé Trail. The notches in the river bank where the old trail crossed were still there, the road still between them, although romance was a stranger to it now, and its adventurous days were gone.

Behind the house were corrals, fenced in untidy patchwork of barbed wire, planks and poles; and a long low shed-like structure for housing cattle hands and stores. There was no other dwelling nearer than Pawnee Bend, which seemed very close by, indeed, to John Moore and his hardy family.

It was in this bunk house behind the bilious villa that Bill Dunham woke next morning at the lusty call of Shad Brassfield. It was only faintly dawn, paling stars were still to be seen, but no earlier than Dunham had been accustomed to piling out of bed ever since reaching what preachers used to be fond of calling the age of accountability. Bill was aware of the responsibility, but he never could be quite convinced of the sense. He didn't stop to question it now any more than he had done back in his grafting days, when Schoonover used to get him out before he could even smell the dawn.

There appeared to be nobody else in the bunk house, no noise of movement, no rummaging around for boots. Dunham arrayed himself in his blue serge, uncertain of what waited him that day, or what kind of clothes the job, if there was to be a job, might demand.

His belt was hanging just inside the door, but he



was dubious of the propriety of putting it on, even if he had a gun to grace it. He thought he'd put it out of sight in the suitcase, which MacKinnon had sent in the wagon, and leave it there until he had lawful need of it in a business where he might shoot without regret if he must shoot at all.

He was greatly surprised to find his gun in the holster. So, that girl Zora hadn't thrown it away at all; she'd had it stuck around her somewhere all the time. She had given it to that old Shad fellow, and he had sneaked it back.

Bill was glad to have the old gun back again, although there seemed to be something of belittlement in the act of restoration. It was as if his unsophistication had been brought up with derision before his face. Stringing him along that way, with his gun stuck around her all the time!

She had treated him like a boy, going on the presumption that he was too green to suspect her, and too timid to take her by the neck and make her give it back. He grew hot under the collar at the unavoidable admission that both her conclusions were true.

He was green, and he was soft. But he would ripen and grow hard, hard as they made them, so hard they could cut their eyeteeth on him if they tried to bite through his rind. He felt resentful and injured, where he knew he should have been humble and grateful.

That redheaded girl had saved his life, and he wasn't man enough to admit it without a grudge; she had given his gun back that way to save his feelings, and he was

too low-down and onery to be grateful for her delicacy. This self-arraignment braced him up like a good friendly kick. He grinned as he rubbed his hand over the long blue gun, and looked toward the house, wondering if she was up, and whether he was to have breakfast with her, and how the day was going to start.

He had liked that girl from the very first sight, he recalled. Even before the first sight, when her well-modulated, soft voice had spoken in his defense at the hardware merchant's door. The farther they walked together last night the higher his opinion had mounted. She was the right kind of a girl, and it would be a comfort to any man to hold her pretty soft chin in the cup of his hand.

But there would not be much chance of further intimacy, judging from the evidence of wealth around the place. Bill looked at the house, which he approved in all particulars, and considered very fine. There was nothing lacking in its environment to him, any more than there was to its owner. There are that kind of people everywhere, not alone in the cattle lands, to whom a house is the same as a diamond. What is the difference where you wear it, as long as people can see you've got it?

It was a very fine house indeed, a house after his own desire. The Moores were people of consequence, plainly. It would take a footless man like him a long time to get up to the level where he might hope to enter that house on terms of equality and hold Zora Moore's nice little friendly hand.

There was a smell of coffee in the cool air, and a

quick broadening of day. Shad Brassfield came along with a saddle on his shoulder, looking somewhat trifling and mean, Dunham thought, hatchet-faced and half-whiskered that he was; lean and gangling in the legs, spare in the body as a snake.

"Oh, you got up, did you?" Shad said, in a voice somewhat between derision and surprise.

"I made a stagger at it," said Bill, wide awake and alert, according to his habit, for he was a chap who left sleep on the pillow when he rose up, be it early or late.

"I got to go and chase up some horses," Shad informed him. "If you want to make a hit around this ranch grab that milk-bucket offen that bainch over there by the kitchen door and pump them two cows in the lot yonder. It'll save me the job when I git back, and I may have to go to hell-an'-gone after them damn horses."

The two cows got up when they saw Dunham coming with the pail, stretching their backs with the incredulous curves cows can put into that section of their anatomy when framing themselves up for the day's business. Brassfield hung around to see how the stranger would go about relieving the animals of their milk, his very attitude one of sardonic expectation, for the belief that Dunham was a railroader had got mixed up somehow in Shad's small and not too active brain. A railroader's ignorance of the workings of a cow was one of the standard jokes of the range.

Shad was more disappointed than pleased to see Dunham go about the operation from the proper side, sitting on the little tack of a one-legged stool that was

Shad's special pride, owing to the difficulty of maintaining a balance if the cow began to shift. Shad heard two streams hitting the pail at a clip that beat his own, and went on, with backward looks, and hopeful. He had much simple faith in the stool.

Brassfield didn't have to go very far afield after the horses; he was back shortly after Dunham had finished the milking, peering into the pail to see if his substitute had drained as much out of the unprolific cows as his own refined efforts produced. He seemed to be satisfied, and said he reckoned breakfast was ready and they'd better go. They could strain the milk or leave it stand till the cream rose, for all he give a damn.

Brassfield and his wife inhabited one end of the long bunk house, where Dunham was introduced to the lady and breakfast at the same time. Mrs. Brassfield was moving about with a sort of philosophic deliberation, smoking a little gray clay pipe with cane stem. She was tall, flat and flaccid, brown as the tobacco which she smoked out of the "hand," a loquacious, friendly soul, unfeigned in her hospitality.

She appeared to be about fifty, but probably was not more than thirty-eight, the business of wife to Shad Brassfield being a wearing one, full of hardships and privations, as Dunham was soon to hear. She put her pipe away on a little shelf behind the stove, exclaiming and wondering over Dunham as if her husband had brought a rare curiosity to the house. But there was such sincerity in her manner, and unfeigned welcome, that Dunham felt more at ease than he had since wak-

ing up to discover the evidences of opulence around him.

Mrs. Brassfield had everything ready, which is to say the bacon and canned hominy, and sorgum to be dipped out of a yellow bowl with a spoon, with a crock of batter on the back of the stove and a smoking griddle waiting to fry the corn cakes. She placed Dunham at the table, which was big enough to seat twelve or fourteen men, with great solicitation for his comfort, as she might have treated a boy one-third his years, and turned her attention to the griddle, greasing it with a distressing dark rag which she dipped in a can.

They held out their plates to receive the first batch of cakes, which Mrs. Brassfield did not stir from the stove to deliver, flipping them deftly from her cake-turner, never missing a word or a shot. It was a very interesting procedure to Dunham, lending a certain gambling element to the meal as well as establishing a feeling of fellowship between them that could not have been reached by more conventional means of delivering corn cakes to a plate.

Mrs. Brassfield inquired into Dunham's sources of origin and his reasons for coming to that country, exclaiming in depreciation of his misguided ambition when he explained that he had been moved by a desire to throw his feet.

"Lord love you, Mr. Dunham," she said, feelingly and affectionately, her sharp brown face not a tint livelier for all the close operation above her griddle, "I've been throwin' my feet for nineteen years I've

been married to Brassfield, traipsin' around lookin' for a better place than the one I was at. I don't see why a young man like you wants to leave a country where you can grown roastin' years and snap beans to come out here and rummage your livin' out of tin cans."

"Corn and beans'd grow here, right here in this valley, if anybody had sense enough, and git-up enough, to plant 'em," Brassfield said.

"If they wait on you to do it they'll never see it done," she said placidly, not a shade of accusation or mockery in her tone.

"If I had the land I'd show 'em," Brassfield declared. "But a pore man's got about as much show of gittin' him a piece of land in this valley as he has of findin' him a gold-mind. These rich cattlemen they've spraddled all over the country, grabbin' and stealin' till a pore man ain't got—"

"Lord love you, Mr. Dunham, it don't pay to roam around," Mrs. Brassfield broke in, serenely indifferent to her husband's effort to excuse his own trifling habits in the indictment of more enterprising men, a human weakness so general and so mean that it deserved squelching, just as Mrs. Brassfield squelched Shad, by passing over him as if he was not there.

There was so little of Brassfield above the ears with his hat off that Dunham would have been slow to accept him as an authority without Mrs. Brassfield's calm demonstration of how a cipher should be placed in the sum of human consequence. Brassfield had his hair cut short all over his head, which came to a point at the top as if it had been tied in a pudding-cloth and

carried around before it set. His hair had a mean sandy tint, about the color of a Duroc hog.

“We’ve traipsed up and down between Kansas and Texas five times the last eight or nine years,” Mrs. Brassfield went on with her argument against roving, “Shad always lookin’ for some place where he could git along with less work than he could in the last one. I buried all of my children, one after another, on that long road between this state and Texas. I feel sometimes like I’ve left a grave ever’ hundred miles between here and Waco, Mr. Dunham.”

“It wasn’t movin’ that was to blame, Mollie,” Brassfield said, a note of gentleness and kindness in his tone that lifted him considerably in Dunham’s regard. “You know they tuck the aiger in Arkansas—it’s the worst place for aiger in the world—I wouldn’t live in that state if they ’lected me gov’ner and crowned me with a solid gold crown.”

Out of Brassfield’s shingled baldness his big eyebrows stood on his face with a surprising, almost startling, effect. He worked them when he talked, especially when he denounced, his pale eyes weak and purposeless, his half-whiskers giving a sternness to the lower part of his features which there was nothing in his gizzard to sustain.

“If I had me forty acres of this river land,” he said, “and a couple of good teams, I’d show these stockmen corn and oats’ll grow here as good as they’ll grow anywhere. I’m goin’ to get the gover’ment after—”

“If I had five acres back in Henry County, Missouri, and a cow and some hens, I’d be happy, and you could

have the rest of the world to do whatever the notion struck you to do," Mrs. Brassfield said.

She said it with a sigh, so hopeless and sad that Dunham knew at once she had no vision of a better day. She brought her stack of corn cakes, which she had accumulated on a sort of percentage basis, adding one to her own pile out of the three she cooked on the griddle at each round, to the table and sat down to her breakfast.

Brassfield pushed back, his barrel full. Dunham rose with him. The sun was yellow on the kitchen wall, and the clatter of a horse on the gallop sounded down the road from the south.



## CHAPTER IX

### HARD TO BREAK INTO

THIS rider was a messenger from the border, bringing disturbing news. He reported a big herd of Texas cattle not more than three days' drive from the line, the owner pushing along on forced marches, evidently with the design of getting across before the quarantine guard could be reënforced sufficiently to stop him. He had a big gang of men, and was driving the largest herd that had come over the Texas trails in many a day.

Moore was up on edge at this news, for the first cattle over the Texas trails were not expected quite so soon. He prepared to set off at once to collect his forces and hold up the herd at the line. His two boys, the elder about twelve, the other a year or two younger, came out of the house with molasses around their gills, clamoring to go with their father on the expedition against the Texas drover.

The cattleman was very proud of their desire to begin mixing in the affairs of that rough life at an early age, but told them it was strictly men's business, and to run along and hunt coyotes of another kind. Moore was a rough specimen, and the boys were a true pattern. A tall man, broad in the shoulders and flat, one of those enduring kind that defies wind and weather, let the elements pelt as they may. He was a big-boned fellow, uncouth in his movements, set with that

questionable adornment so greatly favored by cattlemen and sheriffs of that period, a heavy, long mustache, which he had a habit of roaching up from his mouth with a backward rubbing of the hand, until it stood away from his lips, giving his mouth the appearance of being cleared for action with either words or teeth, as the occasion might require.

Dunham approached him after he had turned the messenger over to the boys to be regaled at his own table, and asked him about the job. Moore looked him over with humorous eye, and grinned.

"You heard what I told the kids," he said. "This is men's business; we don't want any boys along. Kid, it's all over the range by this morning the way you shot that feller up at Pawnee Bend last night. You'd hear 'em yellin', 'Who in the hell said I was dead!' from here to Nation if you was to take a little sashay around to-day."

Dunham felt that sense of insufficiency, that impression of being a speck in the vastness, that had made his resolution falter when he first looked at that country from the station platform at Pawnee Bend. He had no argument to make for his case; he realized he'd only make it worse by saying he was glad the poor cuss wasn't dead, or that it was not an unprecedented thing for a good shot to miss a man at eight feet, sometimes when he needed to hit his mark above all things in the world.

An old Texas ranger had told him once how he had missed a man five times, starting at not more than a rod away, closing up to six feet, finally picking up a

rock and knocking him foolish and taking him along to jail with a whole rind. It wouldn't do a bit of good to argue like that with a man in the cynical, patronizing manner Moore had assumed toward him. Dunham was as green to the range as they ever came, but he was wise enough to see that.

"No-o-o, they'd laugh you off of the range, kid," Moore told him, that intolerable gleam of laughter in his eyes, "they'd make it so hot for you you'd swivel up in your hide. I'll tell Brassfield to drive you over to town this morning, and you can take a train back home. I'll tell him to have Ruddy speak to Kellogg and keep him off of you—if he still feels like he wants to pick a fuss with a innocent misguided stray like you. 'Who in the hell said I was dead!'"

Moore quoted with simulation of indignant repudiation that was evidence of considerable rehearsal. Dunham knew no fertile places would be left unsown in Moore's travels for many a day. The thought made him feel so much like fighting that his face must have betrayed his desire, for Moore looked at him quite soberly, shaking his head.

"You couldn't fight it down, kid. Hell! you'd have to fight the whole country. The best thing a feller in your fix can do is to travel on till he gits to where they either know him well and pass over his cracks, or never heard of him. Brassfield'll take you to town after a while."

Brassfield was engaged just then in saddling a horse for his employer, listening with all his ears, although no great effort was required to hear Moore when he

talked in the open. Dunham knew the teamster hadn't lost a word. Moore went into the house and Brassfield went dawdling off about some business of his own, both of them quitting Dunham as a trivial person worthy of no further notice.

Dunham returned to the bunk house where he had slept, turbulent with resentment of this treatment. He scorned the hospitality of a man who was so blatant and coarse. Maybe he knew his business, but he didn't know anything else. It was humiliating, degrading, to be under obligation to such a boor. Bill buckled on his gun, picked up his suitcase and started away.

He was hot to the backbone over the treatment he had received there, mocked and derided by this loud-mouthed ruffian because good fortune had made his aim poor and saved the life of a man. If he had killed the afflicted simpleton Moore would have been talking softly out of the other side of his mouth.

"Lord love you, Mr. Dunham! you're not goin' to walk, are you?"

It was Mollie Brassfield shouting after him. She was standing in the door with her little pipe, which was stronger for its size than any pipe Dunham ever had met. She came hurrying after him when he lifted his hat and waved his hand in farewell without a word. There was one little piece of sincerity and courtesy around that place, he thought, with a sympathetic feeling for the poor soul whose long wanderings were marked with her children's graves.

"You wait till after dinner and Shad he'll haul you over," she begged, rather than invited, her manner was

so pleading and earnest. She appeared shocked to see him starting out on foot, as if her hospitality were being shamed.

"I like to walk, thank you," Dunham said, wondering whether he ought to offer her something for his breakfast. He felt that he might, since she was plainly very poor.

"I didn't intend to run away without payin' for my breakfast," he said, "but I guess I'd 'a' done it if you hadn't come out."

She drew back at his offer of half a dollar, looking more sad than insulted.

"I'd break my last hunk of cornbread with you and be happy of the company," she said. "But this grub ain't mine: I'm only cookin' for the men when any of them come in off of the range. It's Mr. Moore's grub, and he'd be so mortified he couldn't speak if he knew you offered to pay."

"Then do me the favor to give it to him, ma'am," Dunham requested earnestly. "If I can mortify that man for fifty cents I'll consider it the biggest bargain for the money a man ever got."

She looked at the vehement young man shrewdly, her head a little to one side, a sharp light of understanding in her wise black eyes.

"I'll give it to him, Mr. Dunham, if I and my old man gits chased off of the place for it," she declared. "And I wish you well wherever you may go."

Dunham struck off up the road, eager to get around the first bend and out of sight before Moore came out with any more of his humorous cracks or de-

risive allusions. He hoped Zora would not see him, feeling a bit sneaking at leaving without a word of gratitude to her, for he knew she had acted with a kind and generous impulse to get him out of his perilous situation last night. There had been nothing behind that deed but a generous desire to save the life of a foolish young man who had an old-fashioned notion about rights and dignities that seemed to be out of place in and around Pawnee Bend.

No doubt Moore was in the house that minute telling the cowboy messenger about the dead man rising up from Schubert's board and demanding to be told who had slandered him. The whole family would be there, laughing over this joke that would not lose its savor for many a day and year.

Yes, he believed even Zora would be there, passing biscuits to that turnip-faced cowboy who was so bow-legged he interfered. She would be as loud as any of them in her enjoyment of this rare piece of humor in which the granger who wore a gun was the chief comedian. All the respect he had won in her eyes by his quick draw and apparently effective shot had been lost in the ridiculous anticlimax. A man must kill when he pulled out and took a crack at another to be respected in that country, it appeared.

As he trudged along the road Dunham considered what his next move should be. He disliked to give up his romance, begun so far back, all built around the short-grass country; it was against his principles to retreat from anything begun because it turned out a bigger and harder job than he had estimated. But it

was going to be a difficult matter to live down that joke. Moore was right; he couldn't fight the whole country.

It might be the wiser thing to travel on to the next town and start over, but it was a long way between towns in the short-grass country, and his suitcase weighed around forty pounds. Tramping it was not to be considered. On the other hand, his appearance in Pawnee Bend would be equal to the arrival of a circus. Everybody would cut loose at him with their humorous jibes. He'd hear that fool cowboy's indignant question fired at him from every door as he passed.

Kellogg's attitude was to be considered, also. Kellogg would take it that he had left town once on his command. Going back would appear to be an open defiance and a bid for trouble. There wouldn't be a shadow of lawful defense on his side in such case, Dunham feared. It was a hard country to break into; it looked as if they had the door locked against him, for a fact.

Dunham left the road after two or three miles, shy of meeting anybody coming from town, oppressed by the dread that is at least as painful to sensitive innocence as any recriminations of conscious guilt. He wanted to sit down in a hollow, somewhere out of sight, and think out the answer to his problem.

There was plenty of room for solitary meditation in that country, even close as it was to the railroad and town, neither of which was in sight. He drew away from the road a safe distance, shaping his course with a sort of subconscious intention toward the railroad track. Here the country was unpastured; the gray-

green short grass, growing in little bunches, the unkind gray soil showing bare between, was uncropped and plentiful. Dunham put down his heavy suitcase in a little swale where a different grass grew thick and promising, nurtured by the down-wash of the richest soil. Here were some rose-brambles, matted in impenetrable clumps, and stunted bushes, of which the higher ground was uniformly bare.

As Dunham sat there in a mood of dejection, the feeling of being an outcast heavy upon him, the sun growing warm on his shoulders, it occurred to him that *Appearances Are Everything*. It illuminated his gloomy mind, it lifted his spirit with new hope. Foolish of him to have lost sight of that business-college maxim, which was not nearly so platitudinous to him as it doubtless seems to you. There was where he had bungled it, thought Bill. *Appearances Are Everything*, and he had put in the wrong kind of appearance at Pawnee Bend.

A gun, for example, didn't go along with that kind of clothes, at least a gun dangling in leather undisguised to the eyes of men. It was a combination so incongruous as to amount to a flaunting of custom; it had made him conspicuous and rushed him into the very thing he had hoped to avoid. Now, if he should go back to Pawnee Bend in overalls and boots, a woolen shirt and wide-brimmed hat, as most of the cowboys were dressed, he'd seem out of place without a gun.

The best thing to do, Bill concluded at last, was to go on west to the next town, get the proper outfit and make the proper appearance. To avoid making it look as if



he had come back hunting trouble, he would wait until dark to enter Pawnee Bend, get the necessary information from the agent, and take the nine-twenty to a new and, he hoped, happier field of adventure.

It was a hard country to break into, but he was bound to get in if he had to take the hinges off the door.

## CHAPTER X

### WITHIN THE LAW

WHILE it is possible for a healthy young man to live many days without eating, the average specimen of that genus begins to feel dissolution approaching with intolerable pangs if he must go unfed between breakfast and supper, especially when breakfast is early and supper promises to be late. Bill Dunham had a pretty good grinder inside him, and the grist he had put into it at Shad Brassfield's table that morning before sunrise was gone to the last grain before noon. He felt that he never would have the strength to lug his suitcase to Pawnee Bend if he put off starting until evening.

So it was under the lash of hunger, which has defeated armies and ruined nations, to say nothing of the tragedies it has brought into the lives of individual men, that Bill Dunham arrived at the string of cars, where the railroaders boarded and bunked, on the sidetrack at Pawnee Bend about three o'clock in the afternoon. He had put off the arrival as long as he could, mincing along from tie to tie when his normal stride was fully three feet, trying conscientiously to kill a little time.

But there he was at the edge of town in the middle of the afternoon of a bright sunny day, his great longing for a beefsteak pushing him forward harder than his desire for peace and quiet held him back.

He had heeled it off fairly lively the last mile or so, inspired by a notion at sight of the railroaders' cars. He might be able to get a meal at the boarding-car; more than likely it would not be necessary to cross the track at all or put foot in the street of Pawnee Bend. He recalled the quietude of the place when he had arrived the day before, hoping he might find it equally sleepy today. He didn't want to see MacKinnon, friendly and apparently honest as he had been, nor anybody else.

There was neither charity nor business in the boarding-car door. No, she wasn't runnin' a eatin'-house, the red-armed, large-girthed lady said. That was a boardin' train for railroaders, and she didn't have anything to give or sell to bums. No, she wouldn't slice anything off for him and hand it out, but a mean-eyed man with draggled hair who appeared in the door behind her said he'd slice something off if Dunham didn't get to hell out of there. So Dunham got, running head-end into MacKinnon as he was turning in at the waiting-room door of the station.

"I thought you got to hell out o' here last night," said MacKinnon, for that was a stock phrase in Pawnee Bend, as it is elsewhere among people of quick passions and little delicacy. One might conclude that such people believe their situation the center of paradise, and all the rest of the world dedicated to the damned.

"Well, I'm back here now, anyhow," Dunham replied, thinking if he was in for it, let it begin as soon as it might.

He was ill-humored and ready for a row, the rebuff

at the boarding-train having started him recounting his bill of charges against the charity and hospitality of that town. He was there for peace, but if they wanted a fuss they could have it.

“What became of the job Moore was goin’ to give you? After that girl usin’ her head to get you out of the pocket you put yourself in with Kellogg last night I thought they’d adopt you. What happened? Did you walk back?”

“You see me,” Dunham replied, not wanting to be short or uncivil with MacKinnon, but resentful of his presence in a place where he wasn’t expected to be met. “I’m goin’ over to get something to eat,” Bill explained. “I’ll see you later.”

“You made a mistake comin’ back to this town,” MacKinnon told him with deep earnestness. “Kellogg was blazin’ sore last night when that girl tricked him and got you away. He was all set for a killin’, he was ready to take a shot at me for stringin’ him along to believe you were in your room. I wouldn’t permit him to go up seekin’ you, and he was proper sore, I’m tellin’ you, lad.”

“Thank you, Mr. MacKinnon. I know you’re a friend of mine.”

Dunham made the admission reluctantly, for he came of an undemonstrative line. He was sensible of MacKinnon’s unselfish desire to see him keep a water-tight skin; he could account now for the delay Kellogg made in the hotel which allowed Zora Moore to work her friendly deception on him and toll him down the road like a calf. She had meant well; he gave her due

gratitude for the honesty of her purpose. But it would have been better if they had let things work out to the appointed end last night.

What is plotted in the life scheme of a man will take place, Dunham believed with the deep conviction of a fatalistic heritage. "What is to be will be." He had heard his grandmother say it, in the wisdom of her accumulated experience, times without number.

Safeguards and precautions, and the friendly interference of men, or even young ladies with lovely soft chins and nice red hair, cannot divert the predestined perils in the days of a man. They had done their best, and here he was back in Pawnee Bend, as impotent against the stream of circumstance as he would have been against the ocean's tide.

MacKinnon advised him to duck behind the string of boarding-cars, and hide out in a ravine until he heard a train coming. A reasonable expectation of a long life was worth more than a meal. No, Bill said; that wasn't his day to hide out. What was to be would be, and he was going over to a restaurant.

Well, in that case, let him take the suitcase to the hotel, MacKinnon proposed. Somebody would carry it off if he left it at the station. And where did he want it sent, and whom did he want notified, in case things came to a bad ending for him before he got out of town.

"I'll be along for it in a little while," Dunham replied to his portentous questioning. "I'll take it over myself, Mr. MacKinnon—I couldn't *begin* to let you go carryin' my old traps around."

As they crossed the track Dunham looked along to the place where Zora Moore had made her pretense of falling, wondering how much he had sunk in her regard when she learned that the man whom he was thought to have killed had only thrown a fit. He must have suffered a heavy come-down; no doubt she had discussed him fully with her father after arriving home, and the verdict had disqualified him for the job she had expressed her confidence of his ability to fill. He supposed he'd never see her again, and felt saddened by the reflection. She had him down wrong, and there would be no way for him ever to correct the record.

MacKinnon threw him a curious glance every few steps as they walked across the dusty road, as if he could not understand such unreasonable marching into the outspread arms of trouble when it could be so easily avoided by going the other way. He did not mention the man who rose up from his cooling-board to deny that he was dead.

Dunham parted with MacKinnon at the hotel door, from where he laid a diagonal course across the wide street toward the San Angelo café, which was the first in line from the railroad, and so called with a design on Texas trade. Several wagons were scattered along before the stores, with a number of saddled horses at the racks, which appeared to indicate unusual daylight business for that town. As he struck the sidewalk in front of the café, Dunham encountered Marsh Puckett, who had just stepped out of the barber shop next door.

There were few people moving about; up to that moment Dunham had not seen anybody, near nor far,

whom he recognized. He would have dodged Puckett if he could have done so, for at the sight of him a shadow of trouble seemed to flit across the road. Puckett hurried along to cross Dunham, stopped as if struck helpless by astonishment squarely in front of the restaurant door, his dissolute face pulled in an expression of mocking surprise.

"We-ll-ll, who in the hell said I was dead?" he said, trying to carry it off as if Dunham had come out of the undertaker's to throw that scare into him.

Puckett grinned derisively, as a coward taunts a better man who is restrained by some sufficient reason from knocking him down.

"It's old six hundred come back to town!" he said, Dunham ignoring him and passing on. As the screen door slapped at Dunham's heels, Puckett put his ugly face to the wire and drawled after him: "Who in the hell said I was dead!"

This last sally of wit Puckett delivered with provocative derision that would have justified a shot. Dunham passed the nagging of this trouble-hunter by, as he had determined to ignore the taunts of others who might spring this on him, unless they accompanied it by some sufficient fighting reason.

A bony young woman in black sateen, with white collar and apron, confronted him as he sat down. She stood grinning familiarly, his identification complete in her eyes by the introduction Puckett had whined through the door. Dunham knew that everybody in town soon would be fixing their mouths to shoot that taunting fool thing at him.

No, he couldn't fight them all, as Moore had said. That being the case, he wouldn't fight any of them, no matter if the joke followed him around the globe. They seemed to think the joke was on him, as if he, and not the poor fool of a fittified man, had said it. Damn fools!

This thought, this denunciation, was in his mind when he looked up into the worldly eyes of the waiting lady. She grinned in another style, the placative, trade-winning style, rubbing what might have been her wedding ring with her apron, as if to call his attention to the fact that she was a perfectly honest woman, and neutral on all public questions as the sun.

"Make it steak and p'taters," Bill said.

There was only one other customer in the place, a muscular brown man whose freshly barbered hair and beard were pretty well salted with gray. He was a decorous grave man, who had not even turned his head at Puckett's taunt. He was dressed as men who rode the range commonly went about in summer weather, trousers in his boots, gray woolen shirt unbuttoned at his throat. His belt and pistol hung on the back of his chair, his sombrero on the wall. Dunham had taken inventory of him as he passed on to the table where he sat, reaching the instant conclusion that this man was nobody's hired hand.

This customer was also waiting to be served, evidently having come in only a little ahead of Dunham. He was still eating when Bill went out, in a deliberately dignified way which Bill thought was the kind of table conduct one expected of a man of his years, but did not



always see. Plainly a man of substance, Bill surmised, with silver things on his table at home.

Bill was feeling pretty tight around the belly-band, and comfortable all over, after his liberal meal. Perhaps his heavy feeding had dulled his sense of premonition, or maybe replenishment had lifted his courage to the height that belittled danger, but he had no concern for Marshal Kellogg, or when he might appear, or what he might do.

He had the whimsical thought that it would have been a real hardship to have to die as hungry as he was half an hour ago. He could not account for that light contempt for danger that had come over him, and he did not trouble to try. He was there: if anybody wanted to crowd him, let him come on.

Dunham's immediate planning concerned a cigar, to the exclusion of activities on the street which might have engaged his attention otherwise. He was not aware of this change in the moping aspect of the street until he set foot on the sidewalk in front of MacKinnon's hotel.

Almost every club-nosed front along the street appeared to have shaken out four or five people, like dice thrown by many players lined up at a long bar. They were all craning and looking in the general direction of the depot, although Dunham had all the evidence he needed to convince him no extraordinary event was expected there.

Ford Kellogg was sauntering down the street toward MacKinnon's, as he had come sauntering last night to keep the grim tryst in which he had been disappointed.

Something was expected of Kellogg by the people who stood in front of their doors, customers grouped around them. He was approaching with the nonchalant, unhurried manner feigned by a man who moves strategically to corner a suspicious horse. If the man moves too quickly, the horse will bolt. There doubtless was no such reasoning in Kellogg's method. It was his way of doing that kind of a thing; a way of building through suspense to a crashing climax.

Dunham felt that crawling ripple of cold run over him that had braced him like a nip of something strong when the cowboy had reached for his gun last night. But he didn't wait for Kellogg to come up, there being a distance of perhaps thirty yards between them. He went on into the hotel and picked out his cigar. Kellogg came sauntering up to the door in his idling, weaving, aimless-appearing way as Dunham tossed away the match.

Kellogg stopped just outside the door, looking at Dunham not so much in malevolence as sneering, goading insult. The whites of his mottled eyes were yellowish; he constricted the lids as if he looked against the sun.

"What're you doin' back in this town?" he inquired, his words as mean as if he loathed them himself, and turned them out as ugly as they could be made.

Dunham didn't reply at once. He stood in his way of meditative consideration that he always assumed when confronted suddenly with a question, head bent a little, eyes downcast, blowing smoke deliberately. MacKinnon, behind the desk, was nervous. He moved

the register, moved the bottle of ink, cleared his throat, as if he could not stand out against the suspended reply much longer, and must speak.

"I don't know that it's a matter for official *inquiry*," said Dunham, looking up with startling suddenness, disconcerting frankness, his eyes as steady as if he spoke of buying and selling, and not on a question weighing life and death. "But if you've got to know my business, mister, I'm here to take a train."

"You'll have to hit the road. You can't hang around this town."

"Now, look here, Kellogg," MacKinnon said, "I think you're stretchin' your authority when you come to my house orderin' a law-abiding guest out of town."

"This town ain't no place for a gun-flashin' granger," Kellogg replied, surly and vindictive.

"He's done nothing but defend himself and his rights," MacKinnon insisted. "What's happened in this town has been crowded on him."

"If you keep on crossin' me, MacKinnon, you'd better be reachin' for your own gun," Kellogg said with provoking insolence.

"I might even do that," MacKinnon told him soberly. "You're hired here to keep the peace, not provoke quarrels, or come around orderin' law-abiding guests out of my door."

"I'd hate like smoke to be the cause of any hard feelin's between you two gentlemen," Dunham assured MacKinnon, as cool and undisturbed to all outward appearance as a disinterested person possibly could have been. If there was some turmoil inside

him, some galloping thoughts racing through his head, he covered it all by a calm exterior.

Kellogg jerked his head in a grim order for Dunham to come out. He began to back into the street, holding Dunham with his taunting, mocking, insolent eyes, unbuttoning his coat as he went.

Dunham reached up with his left hand, removed the cigar from his mouth with slow, certain movement, and with the same even, unhurried motion carried it to his side and dropped it. He straightened from his leaning posture in which his right arm had rested on the counter, and stood as if balancing for a leap, left hand out from his side a little, its bent fingers apart, just as he had dropped the cigar; his right elbow forming an angle as true as if it rested in a square.

He stood that way a moment, life intensified in him to the utmost fiber, endowed with the wary craft that had come down to him from a line of men who had fought Indians for a hundred years. He began to move toward the door, walking on his toes as if he feared the intrusion of the faintest noise might give Kellogg an advantage, or precipitate the fight before he was ready. There was nothing in his world that moment but Kellogg and himself. The rest of his surroundings was out of focus, a blur.

Bill Dunham had one thought as he went out of the door, setting his feet down as softly as if he retreated from the chamber of a child he had walked to sleep: that he must remember the law, and keep within his rights. It was Kellogg's fight; he must make the first break for a gun.

Dunham designed to put as much space between himself and Kellogg as he could before the thing broke loose, thirty feet or so if he could stretch it that far, from no reason that he could have explained. He just wanted to edge off, and edge off, and get over there by the corner of the building before it started, if he could. Kellogg seemed to be willing to give him all the rope he wanted, and Bill worked on craftily, as he thought, watching Kellogg with such unbroken intensity that his eyeballs burned.

There was a hitching-rack about twenty feet long in front of the hotel, back about four feet from the edge of the sidewalk, merely a horizontal pole bolted to upright posts. Kellogg had backed around until he was standing behind this rack, which was too low to offer either obstacle or protection. Dunham reached the corner of the hotel, where he stopped.

That simple act appeared to constitute defiance in Kellogg's eyes, and give him the slender justification which he perhaps felt his easy-going constituency would demand. Dunham stood there, set and watchful, his left hand thrown out in the exact manner he had held it when he dropped his cigar, his right arm in that rigid angle that seemed hopeless of any chance to those who watched him. He stood that way until Kellogg, his hand darting like a beam from a mirror, moved to sling his gun.

Kellogg sagged at the knees as his gun cleared the leather. He threw out his right hand, blindly, to catch the hitching-rack, his head lopping sickly, chin on his breast. He clung there a second and sank to the

ground, the bullet that he had notched for Bill Dunham still in the chamber of his gun.

There was not a chance of Ford Kellogg ever rising up from his cooling-board to ask a question that would turn the laugh against the man who had given him the bulge and beaten him at the game he knew so well.

## CHAPTER XI

### HONORS ARE DECLINED

THAT was not a chance shot nor a lucky one, as the qualified judges of such encounters in Pawnee Bend very well knew. Bill Dunham was no longer a man to be laughed at, but one to be given the road if he wanted it, and spoken to with respect. Marsh Puckett, lately so free with his derisive pleasantries, was not among those who came to stand around the fallen city marshal in astonished silence, waiting for Schubert to come with the broad board that had served as stretcher for better men and worse before that day.

Bill Dunham turned back to the hotel door, where MacKinnon waited him with friendly hand.

“That was beautiful, Will-ium—beautiful!” MacKinnon said.

He drew Bill inside, kicking the discarded cigar out of the way, hurrying behind the counter in an unprecedented rush of generosity, offering to replace the lost smoke out of the highest-priced brand in his case. Dunham shook his head glumly in refusal, for he was feeling far more depressed than jubilant over the outcome of the fight. He turned his back to the door, where curious people were beginning to string by for a look at him. He wanted to go off somewhere to himself and think over the new turn this tragedy had given his affairs.

There was one thing certain now: he had broken into that country, or at least he had one foot inside the door. Should he go ahead on that ground, take the nine-twenty westward as he had intended, or leave it all and return to less romantic and more peaceful fields?

As for this romance that beckoned with such seductive smile from afar, there wasn't so much to it when a man got up so close he had to use his gun. Maybe there was a gentler brand of romance in the short-grass country—his heart quickened at the thought of Zora Moore—that would compensate a man for the brutal things he had to do to hold his own.

But there was no use standing around on one leg thinking about Zora Moore. Because of one wild shot, for which Dunham now was doubly glad, she had turned on him with the rest of them. He knew as well as he knew rain on a roof without seeing it that she was in the kitchen that morning when he left the ranch, pointing him out to that beaver-toothed cowboy as the granger who had illusions about a gun.

She had been taking a large wreath of credit for saving his life about that time, he was sure. Let her have it; maybe it was coming to her. If he had met Kellogg in the night it might have had a different ending. Let her have credit, with gratitude added to it, for what she had done. She was a smart girl to think of working him that way, and she had a lovely chin. But she was out of it as far as he was concerned.

Schubert arrived with his board under his arm—it was said in Pawnee Bend that he grabbed it every time he heard a shot—and the unimpressive remains of Ford



Kellogg were carried away. Some followed, more stopping in front of the hotel to edge up a little nearer the door for a look at Dunham, and hang around there in the hope of hearing him say something.

It would have been counted a great distinction to have such a notable hand with a gun to speak to a man. There were plenty of sycophants waiting around who would have broken a leg to do this suddenly made hero a favor.

Dunham was uncomfortable under this sudden notoriety. MacKinnon did the best he could to put him at ease by inquiring into his future plans, whether he still intended to go on west or stay there and pick up a job. Dunham confessed that this latest development had confused his plans. He wanted a little time to get them straight again.

Anyway, there was no need for leaving Pawnee Bend now unless he felt that he could better himself elsewhere, MacKinnon said.

How about being arrested and tried for that unfortunate affair with Kellogg? Dunham wanted to know. Not that anybody ever heard of, MacKinnon said. There must have been a hundred witnesses to the fact that Kellogg had forced him to defend his life, and that without the faintest color of legal excuse. Trust him, old foxy MacKinnon, to lay the groundwork for proper defense if anybody raised the question. Hadn't Dunham heard his protest against law-abiding guests being driven from his house? That was all there ever would be to that case. It had opened and it had closed. MacKinnon confessed that he hadn't enter-

tained a ghost of a hope that Bill would survive that meeting, but he had laid the groundwork in case it might flip around the other way.

Men would walk easy when they went by him now; he would be considered by not a few, MacKinnon himself among the number, a public benefactor, for, to tell the truth about it, Kellogg had been more feared than respected in that town. They were becoming weary of his killings, his growing disposition to take the whole works into his own hands.

It always was that way with one of those killing city marshals, MacKinnon said. They got so vicious and snarly the men who hired them were often afraid to fire them. He had seen it happen before: in MacPherson, and Dodge City, and other places where he had conducted family hotels.

And so on, to a great length, MacKinnon doing all the talking, for which he was very well qualified, without a doubt. Bill didn't want to go to the expense of hiring a room for his meditations, and there was no place in MacKinnon's little lobby that was out of the eyes of men. So he stood there and took it, when his soul ached for silence, with that curious crowd outside the door, not one of them with the courage to come in and speak to him man to man.

Into this phase of Bill Dunham's perplexity, not half an hour after his bullet had cut the thread of Ford Kellogg's altogether vile and worthless life, there walked Mayor Ruddy, the hardware merchant, and Henry Bergen, townsite promoter, with his long coat, red vest, big lodge emblem and all the outward embellishments

upon which his consequence depended. Those outside felt they might slip in safely under the shadow of these important men, and in a moment the little office was full.

Mayor Ruddy advanced, looking so glum and severe Dunham thought they had come to arrest him. His mission was pacific, as his extended hand proved, greatly to Dunham's relief. The mayor said nothing at once, just stood there shaking hands with Bill, pumping slowly and solemnly, Bergen standing by, his large grabber out, ready to take over the now notable six-hundredth citizen when the mayor was through.

"It's a pleasure to meet you again under these circumstances, Dunham," the mayor said.

"Thanks," said Bill.

"Congratulations," said Bergen, looking at Bill knowingly as he worked his arm in the come-on handshake of which he was master. He seemed to say in that shrewdly confidential look that they were two of a kind; they understood each other from backbone to buttons. He got hold of Bill's elbow with his left hand while he gripped him with the right. "Congratulations," he repeated, his eye as knowing as if he had just discovered Bill to be a brother in the lodge whose emblem clanked against his vest buttons as he shook.

"Thanks," said Bill again, but not very heartily. He was not up to their game; he viewed them with suspicion.

"Dunham," said the mayor, as stern as if he was about to lay an accusation of homicide, "I don't know how you'll take it, but we'd like to put you in as city

marshal. We want an officer of the law, not an oppressor. The salary is sixty dollars a month."

He came to it the way Bill would have expected a business proposal from him. No wasting of words or making rabbit trails by that man. Bill was as grateful for the offer as he was surprised by it and relieved of all doubt on his standing.

"I'm afraid I'm not cut out for that kind of a job, Mr. Ruddy," Bill replied, without even taking time to meditate over it and turn it around in his mind.

"The city council has held an informal meeting to consider filling the vacated office," the mayor continued. "The salary is sixty dollars a month."

"I'm complimented—"

"Not at all, not at all," Bergen interposed, lifting his hand to check the conventional words on Bill's tongue, as well as the refusal that they seemed determined not to entertain. "Consider the opportunities of this city, situated as it is in this empire of cattle, with its rapid development, its untouched resources, its tremendous future!"

Bergen waved his arms, he declaimed, not so much to convince Dunham that he would throw away the main chance of his young career by refusing that job, as to impress his true importance on the rest of them in the room. It was his opportunity of calling their attention to what they had missed in passing him on the street that way.

"Yes, I think it'll be a good country when they start farmin' it," Dunham agreed.

"The salary," Mayor Ruddy repeated, looking

sharply at Dunham as if to fix his attention on a point not duly considered, "is sixty dollars a month."

"It's purty good for these times," Bill admitted, but he was not moved.

"The va-a-a-st resources of this fer-tile plain," said Bergen, making a grand sweep with his arms, "the ad-van-tages of our climate, which I'll not call Italian, for there's nothing in Europe to compare to it—"

"Haw, haw!" laughed a grizzled old cowpuncher who had ridden that fertile plain under temperatures ranging from one hundred and five in the shade to twenty below zero.

"Well, I never was in Italy," said MacKinnon, "but if they've got anything that beats this country along the middle of January they can keep it. I don't want any of it in mine."

This derogatory comment did not turn Bergen from the trend of his argument, irrelevant to the case as it seemed to be. He spread his hands as if to put his benediction on the country he invested with such purely imaginary qualities.

"When we see the temple of justice rising in our square," he said, fixing Dunham with stern and lowering eye, as if he had caught an infidel and was determined to save his soul before the matter went any farther, "and the spires of our churches pointing—"

"You can't sell any lots to this crowd, Henry," the mayor cut him off calmly. And to Dunham: "You can be sworn in at once and go on duty right now. Sixty dollars a month."

"It's a big compliment to a stranger like me to have

you gentlemen come with this offer and express your confidence this way," Dunham said, surprising Bergen so greatly by his easy use of words not suspected of him that he gave up and let him have the floor. "I don't think I'd do either this town or myself justice if I took this job. I need work, but I'm not lookin' for a lazy man's job. I'm not cut out for that kind."

"Sorry you won't take it, Dunham, but no harm done, I guess?" Mayor Ruddy offered his hand with the hopeful expression, which was as near an apology as they ever came to it in Pawnee Bend.

"None in the world," Bill assured him heartily. "You've favored me by the offer. If it was my kind of a job I'd jump at it, but I'm a feller that's always been used to work."

Bergen got hold of Bill's hand for a parting pump, and held it like one of those lodge pests who belong to everything. He gave it a pump and a pause, a jerk and a stop; slid his free hand along to Bill's elbow and nailed him as if determined he should take the full dose this time. He went on with his shake and pause; knowing look, pause and shake; until Bill was as red and uncomfortable as if he had been caught sneaking cigars out of MacKinnon's case.

"Whatever line engages your talents, young man—and you are a young man blessed with uncommon talents—plant your dollars in Pawnee Bend soil and watch them grow. Watch 'em grow. That's the best tip I can give you, or any young man, and I give it to you straight. Plant your dollars in Pawnee Bend dirt and watch 'em grow!"

"Yes, sir," said Bill, feeling almost as culpable as if he had been holding out dollars a long time on the deserving soil of Pawnee Bend. And he thought he was in for a hell of a time now, for there were others sidling up waiting for Bergen to finish with him, ready to grab him and multiply the misery of one of the most miserable days he ever had lived.

It was the whiskered man with the table manners, whom Bill had seen in the San Angelo café, who saved him from the uncomfortable situation of a public hero receiving the curious admiration of the crowd. This man had come in unnoticed by Dunham. He stepped into the opening the moment Bergen stopped pumping and dropped the handle.

"I heard you say you wanted a job," the stranger said, direct as Bill had put him down as being. "If you care to tackle the job I've got to offer, I guess I can take you on."

"We might step outside and talk it over," Dunham suggested, feeling that Pawnee Bend knew enough about his business as it was.

Outside, the stranger introduced himself as Garland. They shook hands on the exchange of names, very solemnly, as men of serious character usually do, as if about to begin a truce without daggers in their cuffs, according to the ancient assurance.

Garland looked at Dunham queerly as they faced each other, a puzzled expression in his eyes.

"I was standin' over there when you shot it out with Kellogg a little while ago," he said. "I felt for you, kid, but I couldn't reach you. Hell! I guess I sweat

a quart in ten seconds. They told me in that chuck-joint you was a green granger boy, but I guess they got you wrong."

"They got me dead right," Bill confessed in humility that amounted almost to self-contempt. "I'm so green the cows'd bite me if they caught me outside of the fence."

"But you can handle a gun—great smoke, kid! how you can handle a gun! Where did you get that trick?"

"I guess I come by it natural."

"Yes, like hell!" Garland chuckled. "That old stripper in the hash house told me about you missin' Ira Ingram last night. Thought you'd killed him when he'd only trowed one of his fits. Hell, yes; I know him. I asked her what that feller meant yellin' in after you. She told me about it."

"They sure had the laugh on me," Dunham said. "But I'm glad I missed him. I wouldn't want to hurt any afflicted man like him."

"He's mean," Garland said; "he's got a streak of Cherokee in him. But a man that can throw a gun like you don't have to worry about his kind. You didn't know anything about Kellogg's name with a gun when you went out there to shoot it out with him, I guess?"

"Yes," said Bill reflectively, "Mr. MacKinnon and—others, told me."

"Well, I've fooled myself into thinkin' I was kind of handy with a gun sometimes, but I wouldn't 'a' walked out there to face Ford Kellogg any sooner than I'd stand in front of the fastest train on this railroad. I'm



scoutin' around lookin' for your kind of men, but I'm here to tell you they're plenty scarce. I don't suppose you've heard anything about the quarantine guard we're puttin' on to keep Texas cattle out of this state?"

Dunham admitted he had heard about it, but kept to himself his late experience and ignominious rejection by Moore. He had a secret exultation in the thought of getting on that exclusive force, although he wasn't going to jump at anything again in that country. He wasn't sure yet whether it was his kind of a job.

Garland went on to tell him what Dunham had known since early that morning: that the Texas cattle were coming through earlier than expected, due, he supposed, to the uncommonly forward spring they'd had down in that country and the plentiful forage along the way.

The Texas cattlemen were in a rush to throw their beef on the market, there being a scarcity of animals fit for the butcher's block at that time, Kansas cattle not yet finished off sufficiently. They ought to have three or four weeks longer on the grass, Garland said, talking so much on that phase of it that Dunham began to suspect the fear of Texas fever was not the only motive behind this concentrated movement to stop the southern herds at the border.

Garland disclosed the fact that he was a cattleman himself, no great news to Dunham. His ranch was in the valley of the Arkansas River, but he ranged his herds to the Cherokee Nation line. He said Dunham could get a lot of experience riding the quarantine line that summer which would be useful to him if he wanted

to take a job with some outfit on the range later on.

Dunham admitted ambitions in that direction, Garland proposing at once that he take a job of quarantine guard, or trail-rider, with the assurance that he, himself, would give him a place when frost came and the guards would be needed no longer. The pay was fifty dollars a month, ten dollars more than cow hands were being paid on the range that summer, provisions, arms and ammunition supplied.

Garland said Bill would have to talk fast, for he was due to leave for the border in a few minutes. He had spent the day scouting for men, but had not found any he was willing to invest with the responsibility until he met Dunham.

A man need not be experienced with cattle for that job, Garland said. Cow hands in plenty could be hired, for they were anxious to jump their jobs on account of the adventure trail-riding promised, as well as for the better pay, but cow hands were needed on the range that time of the year, where they could do their country a whole lot more good, benefits to themselves out of consideration.

All right, said Dunham; he was willing to try it on. If they didn't like him they could fire him, and if it didn't suit him he'd feel free to quit. That was fair, Garland said, and a bargain was made.

So it came that Bill Dunham, late of Schoonover's nursery, with a fast-growing fame as a gunman without peer, took horse for the southern border of Kansas before the sun went down on his eventful day. He was

riding the forty-five-dollar horse recommended to him the night before by the mayor, heading away into far greater possibilities for trouble than he ever had dreamed of in all his romantic imaginings.

## CHAPTER XII

### A DOMESTIC INTERLUDE

DUNHAM's employer had given him instructions on the point of rendezvous, appointed for the following day, and turned him loose to go his way alone. This gathering-place of the border defenders was at a certain crossing of the Cimarron River, which flowed toward the east for a matter of fifty miles so nearly on the line that Texas cattlemen used it as a marker to know when they were out of the Indian country. At places it formed the line between the two political divisions, and the point where the Kansas stockmen were gathering was one of these spots. There the old Texas cattle trail crossed.

Garland said he had to go home on his way down, which would increase the distance several miles and throw him late the next day in arriving at the meeting-place, an unnecessary detour which Dunham need not put his horse to the labor of merely for the sake of company. The most direct way to the border, he said, was to follow the old Santa Fé Trail to the crossing of the Arkansas, where it was cut by the cattle trail from Texas. It was as plain as daylight from there on, and Dunham no doubt would be joined by others heading down that way.

So it was that Dunham found himself riding the road

that he had tramped with Zora Moore the night before, over ground almost sacred to him out of its romantic traditions of the past. Here that hardy red-bearded uncle of his had journeyed back and forth between Independence and Santa Fé as wagon boss in the old freighting days. Many an adventurous tale Bill Dunham treasured away in his memory from the tongue of that bold-spirited man, whose eyes had looked upon these very scenes when perils shadowed every mile.

They were gone long ago, those times, thought Bill, and there was no more romance left in the world, in spite of the belief that had deluded him into venturing there. It was a sordid and depressing business when such a man as Kellogg pushed a quarrel and crowded a man until he had to slay in self-defense. A man could find romance of that kind in Kansas City, where there was shooting enough going on every day.

There was no aureate tint around the edges of that kind of stuff; it was not the romance Bill Dunham had taken it to be, this thing that pulled youth out of his heart as a greedy despoiler grabs flower, plant and all, leaving him with that old and lonely feeling pressing him down like a clod on a hill of corn.

It was a matter of fifty miles from Pawnee Bend to the line, Garland had told him, leaving it to his own contriving to get there next day without wearing his horse out, a thing of which he had not spoken. Bill, accustomed to the more civilized, furrow-plodding horses of lower altitudes, did not know what endurance was in the little brown bony creature that he straddled. It would have eaten up fifty miles without a stop and

been fresher at the end of the journey than the horses he was familiar with would have been at the end of twenty.

In his ignorance of his mount's capabilities, Bill figured on taking it easy until nine or ten o'clock that night, then bunking down on the soft side of a hollow. He could hit the road again at daybreak, and make it to the line about noon.

Not the same Bill Dunham in appearance as the one who had struck the he-woman of the railroaders' kitchen for a handout not more than three hours before, but a Bill Dunham who looked like any other range-roving cow hand, except for the uniform newness of his rig. Bill had preferred to keep his ignorance of usages and requirements from Garland, going to MacKinnon, instead, for advice.

He had bought boots and broad-brimmed hat, and blue-drilling overalls, wide in the leg, gray woolen shirt and a silk handkerchief as big as a tablecloth, it seemed to him, for his neck. Spurs he had passed up, fearing uncomfortable complications for both himself and horse if he should try them out. He had two blankets and a slicker back of his saddle, with some grub in the raw to hold him until he reached the camp, and a skillet to cook it, with a little pot for his coffee.

MacKinnon said he guessed the thirty-eight would do until he had another gun issued to him by the cattlemen. It didn't make so much difference what the size of the bullet was as the direction it went, when you came to figure it out, MacKinnon allowed. Bill said he guessed that was so, and they parted with mutual

respect, MacKinnon offering to take care of Bill's suitcase and granger clothes until good luck might bring him back to Pawnee Bend.

Bill hoped he could get past Moore's place without being seen, although he doubted if Zora would recognize him in that outfit and riding a horse, which he could do well enough to get by with it. If he could make it along there about dusk it would suit him better. To further the desired condition he loitered along, stopping now and then to turn his eyes around the country, which looked better to him, now that he had a foot within the door, than it did when he was tramping back to Pawnee Bend with his heavy suitcase earlier in the afternoon.

The bigger the country and the fewer people it contained, the greater a man's chances in it, Bill thought, which was not an original observation, to be sure. His pioneer ancestors had been urged along to the unoccupied places by the same business reasoning for the past hundred years or so. A man who likes arm-room has that comfortable feeling when he stands alone. Liberty is the big chance to such a man. He plants it in the solitudes and nurtures it to vigorous fruition.

There would be a farmhouse on every section of that land one of these days, said Bill; as soon as they learned what to plant there and how to make it yield, the farmers would drop down on that big, empty country like blackbirds out of a tree. Then there would be demand for trees such as nurseryman never confronted before, it was so bare and unfriendly in its nakedness.

Down in the broad flat valley of the Arkansas a nurseryman could plant his apple seeds and set out his evergreens in long straight rows, laying the foundation for certain prosperity. It was a pleasant thought; it took away some of the bitterness of regret and sense of loneliness that came of having a man's blood on his hands.

Bill drew rein where the land fell away in long slope into the valley, the point from which he had seen the first glint of Moore's lights last night. The sun had been down half an hour, but the shank of the day was getting long, and there was no sense in killing any more time. He would kick up a little speed, go by on a lope, and trust to luck for passing unrecognized.

He was ashamed for Zora, and her part in the inhospitable treatment he had received under her roof, or in the shadow of it, to be more exact. She had done him a good and friendly turn, and he didn't want to humiliate her by meeting her now, after their letting him walk away from there that morning like a tramp. Even though she had laughed at him with the bow-legged cowboy she was a good girl at heart, and she sure did have a pretty chin.

Somebody was coming along behind him; he'd kick up a little dust and go on. A little way along Zora Moore came tearing up at a clip a good deal faster than his own. She was riding a blaze-faced roan that carried its neck stretched and its ears back like it was out of humor, although Bill couldn't see the point of its displeasure. Zora was riding straddle, the wind pressing her hat-brim back, and she was so handsome and



light in the saddle any horse ought have been in gay good humor to have the pleasure of carrying her.

That was Bill's thought as he gave her a sidling look, only for which she would have passed him for a stranger in the road. She jerked her ill-favored horse up sharply.

"Why, Mr. Dunham!" she said, full of what Dunham could see was very respectful surprise.

Bill was embarrassed, together with the discovery that she was altogether prettier than he had thought and his desire to spare her. He didn't know where to begin, so he let it go with a solemn nod that was half a bow.

She fell in beside him, pulling her horse down to a walk.

"Mr. MacKinnon told me Hal Garland had hired you," she explained, talking fast, a little breathless, as if she had run to overtake him, "and you'd gone on south, but I thought you'd be miles ahead of me. I didn't know you in your new clothes. You sure do look fine!"

"If I look like I feel in this blame hat," said Bill, "my head's about as big as a hick'ry nut."

He wasn't sure she meant it, although she sounded sincere. He'd take it in small doses from that time onward; he'd aged a whole lot since last night.

"I'm glad Garland took you on," she said.

"Mr. Moore may fire me in the morning," he speculated.

"Not on your life he won't fire you!" she protested vehemently. "If I'd been around this morning he

wouldn't 'a' done it, either. I raised the roof when I got up and found you'd left. You don't know how cheap I feel, Mr. Dunham, over the way they treated you at our house this morning. I could crawl in a gimlet hole and pull it in after me."

"I wouldn't do that if I was you," Bill advised, with a gentle protestation that made her laugh.

"I guess he'll see now that my judgment of a man is as good as his own," she said with meaning emphasis, but looking straight ahead as she spoke. "When I hire a man I intend for him to stay hired, and I let him know it, good and plenty."

Bill appreciated her delicacy in referring to his late unpleasant meeting with Kellogg that way, sparing him the confusion, even the pain, of going at it untactfully with an effusion of words. She had a lot of sense as well as a lot of good looks; the way she held her chin when she spoke of hiring and firing was enough to prove to anybody she wasn't a scrub.

"I've got to go down there tomorrow," she announced, casually as if she spoke of riding to Pawnee Bend. "You might as well stay here tonight and go along with me."

"I'd be proud to," Bill said, "but I told Mr. Garland I'd bust right on through as fast as this old crowbait'd take me."

"He's not so bad," she said, running an impartial glance over the horse. "But it wouldn't hurt him any to lay over here till morning and put some hay in his hide. You'd miss 'em if you was to go on down to-

night—unless you've been in that country and know where the crossing is?"

"I never have seen the Cimarron River, much less the crossin' where they're goin' to meet, Miss Moore."

"You wouldn't know it was a river most of the time unless somebody told you, but this time of the year it's got some water in it along here. I've been over every inch of that country; I used to help pa out summers while he was gettin' his start. But I was only a kid then," she explained, as if to account for something that might be permitted then with propriety which would be out of ladylike bounds now.

"You could; I know by the way you ride that horse you could hold your own with any of them," Bill said, so serious and grave, nodding his head in his judicial habit, that the compliment was multiplied by five, at least.

"I've got a telegram for pa," Zora explained, pleased with this respectful sincerity where she was accustomed to either dumb monosyllabic embarrassment or shallow flippancy. "He gets a good many important ones about markets and business—I nearly always take 'em to him when he's out on the range. I have to chase him two or three days from camp to camp sometimes."

"I'd be proud if I could save you the trip," Bill said. "If you'll trust it to me I'll deliver it to Mr. Moore in the morning."

"You could," she said, gratefully.

Bill held out his hand for the telegram, but she didn't give it to him.

"You could start early in the morning and make it

there by noon. It's only forty-odd miles from here."

"I think maybe I'd better rack along to-night," he said, the memory of his departure from that spindle-columned mansion making him seem unfriendly and unforgiving.

They had come to the gate. Zora looked disappointed and hurt as she rested her hand on the lever to swing it open.

"That's saying you don't feel you're welcome here," she said, facing him squarely, a plea in her eyes to make amends. Bill felt like a kicked dog when she turned her head and said, a tremor in her voice as if she was going to cry: "You don't need to rub it in on me that way, Mr. Dunham."

"Miss Moore, it never crossed my mind!" Bill denied fervently, even though it was not entirely true.

"Then please stay. I'll go a piece with you in the morning and start you on the right road. If you don't stay I'll not let you take the telegram—I'll go myself, but I'll take another road."

"Any man," said Bill decisively, swinging to the ground, "would be a blame horse-thief to let you go."

Zora turned to him again with a smile, which was chiefly in her eyes, a friendly and feeling smile that made a man welcome beyond words. She flung out of the saddle to the dusty driveway leading past the bunk house to the corral, saying she would run in and send the kids out to unsaddle the horses, and for Bill to make himself ready for supper, which must be waiting.

Bill took a pretty keen look over his horse, "for leaks," he said to himself, pleased to see it had come

that far without anything springing. He thought maybe he'd made a very fair buy. In her end of the long bunk house Mollie Brassfield began to sing, the tune and words giving Bill a start. She sang dolefully, in an easy pitch which carried far:

Old man, old man, I'll never give you rest,  
Till you fetch me the feathers from a skeeter's nest.  
Call home your hogs, John Long, John Long,  
Call home your hogs, John Long.

Bill breathed easier. He was relieved to learn there were words to that song which a lady could sing, having heard another version that would have stood liberal expurgation before Mollie Brassfield could have given note to it in that public manner. She trailed on:

Old man, old man, you'd better go to bed,  
And h'ist up the kivers round your old bal' head,  
Call home your hogs, John Long.  
Call home your hogs, John Long, John Long,  
Call home your hogs, John Long.

The two lads came running from the house, greeting Dunham with respectful eagerness, in wide contrast with their behavior that morning, when they, taking their example from their father's loud-mouthed ridicule, had made derogatory remarks in no very careful aside. Dunham took his roll from the cantle thongs and carried it into that part of the bunk house he had occupied the night before. Mollie Brassfield, pipe in her jaw, came out to see who had arrived. She squinted from her door at Dunham, sharply, not recognizing him until he spoke to her.

“Lord love you, Mr. Dunham! you’re back ag’in, ain’t you?” she said in her loud fashion of cordiality. “I’m sure glad to see you lookin’ so hearty and pert”—one would have thought he had been gone at least a year—“after luggin’ that heavy gripsack over to Pawnee Bend. Where are you bound for now?”

He made a short cut to the heart of the matter, at which she expressed her satisfaction.

“And I bet you must be as holler as a gourd, too,” she said, sympathetically. “You come right in, Mr. Dunham, and set down at the table. I’ve got the nicest mess of greens I’ve picked this spring—they’re powerful scarce in this country, I had to skirmish along the river a mile, I reckon, to gether a apurnful, but I got ’em.”

Dunham thanked her, saying he thought he was supposed to eat with Zora and the boys. Mrs. Brassfield said she was sorry to miss his company, and she’d take him over a dish of greens if he wanted her to. Bill said they might take it as a reflection on their table, to which she agreed, saying some folks *was* techy about them things.

“I wouldn’t want ’em to think I was bemeanin’ their grub,” she said quite seriously, “for you don’t find two such good-hearted souls as Mizz Moore and Zora every day. That girl she hitched up to the buggy this morning and racked out after you as soon as she found you was gone, but I knowed she wouldn’t overhaul you, ’cause I seen you cuttin’ acrost when you went over the hill.”

Bill inquired after Shad, to learn that he had been

ordered to take a chuck-wagon and supplies down to the Cimarron crossing by Moore, who had come home in a sweat and a stew about noon.

"There's goin' to be trouble down there, Mr. Dunham," she said, twisting her head to give her words gravity. "Them Texas fellers ain't the kind of men to be stopped after drivin' their cows all that ways. They'll fight. Somebody's goin' to git hurt, sure as shootin'."

"I wouldn't doubt it, ma'am," Bill agreed, thinking it looked like a pretty good line-up for trouble himself.

"Well, I can count on one that ain't a goin' to be hurt," she said with contemptuous confidence, "and that's my old man. He can smell powder funder 'n any man that ever was born. I'll bet that man can git in a crack you couldn't shove a caseknife through when bullets begin to hum, but to hear him talk and blow you'd think he was a big man from Bitter Crick. You take what he says in at one year and out at the other, Mr. Dunham, when he goes to tellin' you what he has done and's goin' to do. He's a powerful onery man."

Dunham was glad to have this confirmation from headquarters of his own private conclusions on Shad Brassfield's character. He took it for granted that the elastic word onery covered the trickery that was plain in Shad's shallow blue eyes, which were as shifty as botflies.

The boys came after Bill when they had put the horses away, so deferential in their manner that Mrs. Brassfield eyed them with suspicion. Dunham was

more saddened than swelled with pride by this respectful adulation, knowing, as Mrs. Brassfield did not know, the reason of his growth to heroic stature in their eyes since morning. Zora had told them of the shooting affair in town. This altered attitude of respect and admiration was only the sad proof of his own glum conclusion last night: that the difference between heroism and obscurity in that country was the difference between a hit and a miss.

Mrs. Moore was an unaffected, friendly woman, somewhat loud and effusive, like her husband. It was easy to see where Zora got her good looks. Mrs. Moore was still fresh, youthful and slim, some evidence of refinement about her such as school teachers who marry farmers retain a long time against the wear and tear of life's hardships in that situation.

Zora and her mother proved entirely worthy of Mollie Brassfield's high commendation. They took Dunham into the parlor after supper, where Zora played the organ and the boys wanted to get him into a game of seven-up. When their mother reprimanded them for their forwardness they changed around from chair to chair, gazing at Bill with great admiration and deep respect from different angles, as if trying to get hold of his method of putting notable gunmen on the shelf by observing his movements down to the slightest degree.

The parlor was a large room flaming with bright-flowered wallpaper, so congested by furniture one had to move about with care. The chairs were adorned by cotton-twine doilies, the handiwork of Mrs. Moore,



so fashionable in that day in homes of that sort. An ingrain carpet, flowered with giant roses, showed worn paths between the larger pieces of furniture, like rabbit trails around shocks of fodder in a field. There was an enlargement in black crayon of Mrs. Moore and her husband, in wedding garments, hanging over the organ.

It was an inharmonious array of decorations and furnishings such as delights simple rustic people, quite in keeping with the outward design and color of the house, but altogether rich and grand in Bill Dunham's eyes. He was not at ease in the midst of so much splendor and evidence of wealth, for all the kindly questioning by Mrs. Moore on his past life and future intentions. He gave her his uneventful history up to the time of his arrival in Pawnee Bend, grateful from the well of his simple heart that none of them spoke of his encounter with Kellogg, or even hinted at it remotely.

It was impossible that they hadn't heard of it, he knew. Zora had seen MacKinnon, who would have told her the story with trimmings of his own. They kept silent on it, Dunham believed, because they felt instinctively that he would feel the indelicacy of such intrusion.

After a pleasant hour that seemed like a benediction on the straining adventures of his day, Dunham returned to the bunk house to take up, as it appeared to him, the troubles he had put down for this happy interlude. He stretched on the bunk he had occupied last night, to fall into a long train of thought and speculation that dispersed repose like a turmoil before his door.

He could not believe himself clear of that trouble with Kellogg, or understand the town's cool and unconcerned acceptation of the outcome. He thought of a coroner's inquest, of a summons and questioning; of a grand jury and a court. Then he remembered that Pawnee Bend was in territory beyond the jurisdiction of organized law. It seemed to be the rule there that if a man stood on the defensive and won, that ended the case. They simply carried the unfortunate party away and the victor went about his business unchallenged in the public regard.

But it was not so easy for Bill Dunham to obliterate a finished problem of that gravity from the slate and go ahead as before. It had seared him deeply, it bore on him like a galled place, bending his spirits down, troubling him to the core.

When he slept at last it was to fight over again the battle with Kellogg; to slip out of MacKinnon's door on tiptoe, edge along the wall to the corner and try to draw his gun against some cloying influence that bound his hand at his side. Or, weapon out, only to see a futile dribble from its muzzle, and the mocking insult of Kellogg's eyes as he threw down his gun to fire.

So it went, sweating, groaning, tossing; starting from his harassed sleep to wonder where he was, confused for a moment, staring out of the open door. Then to sigh, lie down and try it again, and wear the night out wearily at last, to rise dispirited, and so burdened by remorse that he would have leaped for joy if Shad Brassfield had arrived with the news that Kellogg had risen up from his cooling-board with a sardonic grin.

## CHAPTER XIII

### IF HE EVER GETS MEAN

It was well past noon when Dunham arrived at the cattlemen's camp on the Cimarron. Zora had been as good as her word about giving him a start. She had accompanied him ten miles or more, posting him on the landmarks which would assure him he was following the trail, although there was little chance of straying from it.

Texas cattlemen had opened that trail a good many years ago on their drives to Fort Hays, and later to Dodge City. Cattle by hundreds of thousands had walked that unhappy road leading to the stockyards and slaughter; it was worn in the tough sod like a brand. The tracks of Shad Brassfield's wagon were in the dust; Dunham knew he only had to follow them to come to the place he sought.

The cattlemen had gathered under the cottonwoods on bank of the river, which had water enough in it to give it a fair right to that designation, although Dunham thought it would pass more respectably as a creek. There were several horses standing around, and a dozen or more men in sight, three of them sitting on the tongue of the chuck-wagon, which was propped up to a comfortable level by the neckyoke. It looked more like a casual meeting of travelers, who were passing a

pleasant pause in friendly chat, than a gathering of men on a grim and serious business.

Dunham approached at the hand-gallop his horse had held for miles, casting around for sight of Moore, thinking of the telegram he carried in the buttoned pocket of his shirt. Zora had enclosed it in a thick envelope, along with what written information he did not know. He spotted Moore as one of the trio roosting on the wagon tongue, although Moore did not recognize him in his new outfit until he pulled up in front of him.

Moore jumped up after giving the supposed cowboy a surprised squint, opened his mouth in uncouth expression of astonishment, which was as much real as pretended, lifting his big bunchy gray eyebrows until they moved his hat.

“Well, who in the hell said I was dead!” said Moore, with the feigned seriousness which, to be master of, was held one of the highest cowboy accomplishments. “This is him, gentlemen—this is the kid that killed Ira Ingram. Git down off your high horse, kid; let ’em take a squint at you in your new togs.”

Bill grinned, trying to make the best of it, swung down a little stiffly, for that was the longest ride by many miles he ever had made in his life, and stood before his critics in all the rawness of unsullied hat and unbroken boots. It had jolted him to have Moore open up on him that way, with that derisive, belittling whang in his voice. It was, as he had thought before, as if he had said that fool thing himself, and must stand to account for it all the rest of his life.

He felt a sick disappointment, a heavy dread of what was to come. He was thrown into such discord by this unexpected greeting, although why he had not expected ~~it~~ he could not tell, that all thought of the telegram and its accompanying note, which might have made things look a little different to Moore and put a bit on his loud tongue, went completely out of his head.

The gentlemen addressed by Moore turned from their talking and card-playing to gather around Bill, whom Moore drew away from his horse a little distance and turned with grave and silent demeanor, presenting him from all sides to the company. Bill couldn't hide the red of embarrassment, and something more, that he felt burning in his face, but he covered any other outward indication of what was going on inside. He hoped they'd let the thing drop if he took his initiation like a sport.

"This is the little gun he done it with, gentlemen," said Moore, lifting Bill's holster, out of which he had cut the end to give his extra-long barrel room.

The others exclaimed, and looked at each other with feigned surprise and incredulity, a thing which men of the range could do as well as actors on stages not so expansive as their own.

"Where did you think you was wanderin' off to, kid?" one inquired with gentle solicitation.

"Is Mr. Garland here?" Bill asked Moore, hoping to put an end to the uncomfortable experience before it grew any harder to bear, the telegram as completely forgotten in the roiling of his emotions as if it never had been.

"No, Garland ain't arrived yet, son. What was you wantin' Garland for?"

"He sent me down here. I met him in Pawnee Bend yesterday and he gave me a job ridin' the quarantine line."

Moore looked at Bill with comical expression of melting pity. He did it so well the effect was all he could have asked. Some of the crowd writhed and shrilled in high-keyed mirth, although each struggled manfully to hold back something for the real big laugh which everybody knew this was leading up to. The thought of being unmannerly or inhumane never entered their one-door minds. It was lawful entertainment to them to badger a greenhorn, as it was delightful diversion to the savage Indians to burn strange specimens of the genus who fell into their hands.

"Hired you for the quarantine, huh? Kid, them Texas fellers they'd twist you up and fry you in grease. I told you yesterday morning we didn't have any use for boys down here, and I thought you had a *little* bit of sense when you went back to town." Moore looked at him with glowering face, his humorous vein diverted in contemplation of this raw piece of effrontery. "I thought you was goin' to take a train out of this country?"

"So did I," Bill admitted, looking down in his abashed, nonplussed appearing habit, which didn't do him a bit of good before such a crowd as that.

"Garland's hirin' ain't final, it's only a beginnin'," Moore said hotly, taking it out on Bill. "I've got to put my OK on every man that goes out to ride that

line, and if I ever put my OK on such a green-gourd specimen as you it'd be with a redhot wagon-rod! You'd better git to hell out o' here before I lose my temper and knock what little sense you've got in you so damn fur you'll never be able to find it!"

Here a young man came swaggering forward, thumb hooked in his belt, scowling in apparently great displeasure. He posted himself squarely in front of Dunham, looking at him savagely, legs spread, mouth slewed in ugly expression, his whole carriage one of insolent challenge. He was two or three years younger than himself, Dunham thought, not a bad-looking chap in spite of his malicious expression, real or assumed. He was evidently a cowboy, not one of the important men of the gathering, of the type born to the trade.

"No, he's not goin' to leave this camp till he settles with me!" this young man declared. "No man can't go around shootin' up my old pardner Arry Ingram just when he's throwin' a fit without comin' to grunts with me."

Moore waved his hand in gesture of delivery, while winks, grins and nudges ran round the expectant crowd.

"It's between you and him," Moore said, resigning all claim and authority over Dunham's future movements. "Step it off and shoot it out, for all I give a damn."

"Back off there, feller, and claw for your little gun!" the cowboy ordered, stepping back, hand thrown to his gun as if he meant it.

"I'm in on this!" another one said, coming in like a late creditor, all in a sweat. "I ain't around 'lowin'

no man to kill off a feller that owes me money before he's got a chance to pay me."

The older men moved aside a little to give them a clear field for their operations, well pleased with the show these young humorists were getting up to enliven the day. Bill Dunham felt like he was in a hot whirlpool. There was trouble spinning him around and nothing on the bank to grab. It was their notion of a joke, he knew, at the same time realizing how little it would take to make it serious. This time he must keep his temper, let them go as far as they would. He would stand almost anything short of trying to make him give up his gun.

His disappointment over losing that job again was very great, and he was sore and vindictive against Moore, whose arrogance he would willingly have brought low, but he didn't want to have trouble with the rest of them. He stood his ground, wondering how far they'd go with it, telling himself over and over again with feverish repetition of anxiety, that he must not pull his gun. No matter how far they crowded him, he must not pull his gun.

The two cowboys were glaring at each other as if this clash over avenging Ira Ingram's most diverting death had set them at odds.

"Don't crosshackle me, boy!" the second, and older, of them warned. "He's mine. He'll either hand me that ten dollars old Arry owed me or I'll spang 'im in the abdomen."

"You pusillanimous old ape!" the first one said, with fine scorn, "I've already promised them boots to Arry's



little brother. Don't you snake out any gun on my meat, feller!"

"New boots!" said the first comedian, very much like the boys at school used to say the same thing when one of their number appeared so arrayed, all crowding up to trample and spit on the unsullied leather and humble the pride of the wearer.

"New boots!" the other one squeaked, in voice of delight that was meant to asperse the feminine character of the owner.

With these words he flipped out his gun and threw a shot close enough to Bill's left foot to splash sand over the offending boot. The other fellow came in with a whoop, pitching lead considerably nearer Bill's other foot than he would have chosen for the tranquillity of his nerves.

Bill stood still, thinking he ought to be getting used to that sort of thing, and it wouldn't do to lose his temper over it this time and go after his gun. Whatever happened, so long as they didn't plug him through the foot, he must not go after his gun.

It was pretty hard to stand there, blinking at each chuck of lead in the sand, some of the bullets so near he could feel the dirt creep under him, and keep his hand away from his gun. It was the old imposition increased and aggravated. They had picked him again for the under dog.

Bill knew he could turn their festival into mourning by one swift pass for his gun, and the temptation was so strong it made him quiver; he could make them throw dirt as high as the trees hunting cover, but it

wouldn't do to take the risk of having it turn out something else. He must keep his hand away from that gun—keep his hand away from that gun!

Shad Brassfield, who had been asleep in the wagon making up what he had lost in the night drive, popped his head out of the front end, boozy with sleep. When he saw the camp had not been assailed by the Texans he hustled over the dashboard and hopped to the ground. He hit it as the last chamber was emptied at Dunham's feet, recognizing the victim of the torment as he struck.

"Well, who—in—the—hell said I was dead!" Shad drawled, with such obfuscated drollery that Dunham himself would have laughed if the joke had been on somebody else.

In the roar that resulted from Shad's ludicrous appearance and rusty, amazed exclamation, which could not have been funnier from the original source, Bill turned to his horse. He stopped a moment before mounting, to turn a look on the two young men who had picked him for easy money. His face was as white as if he had risen from the amputation of a leg without ether, and there was a cold fury in his eyes that made the younger of them catch his breath and start back, his empty gun in his hand.

The older one scowled, sore that their show had fallen so flat. He was cramming cartridges into his gun; he mumbled some malediction under his breath, but there was no blood in his lips, and there was a tremor in his hand.

Moore was braying like a mule in the turmoil of

laughter which the combination of gunnery and Brassfield had thrown him into. He stood with hands on his sides, bending and straightening, bending and straightening, as if he had a colic, all the time letting out a bray that would have done credit to any hybrid on the range.

Dunham's arm rustled the letter in his shirt pocket as he took up his reins. He paused, reaching to unbutton the pocket and deliver his charge. Moore looked up at that moment, strangled and purple, reared back and let out a louder howl than any before it.

"Who in the — yaw-haw-haw — hell — aw-aw-haw-haw—" he said, and gave it up, to double upon himself and let out a stream of laughter that was as truly obscene in Bill Dunham's ears as any sound ever issuing from the mouth of man. Bill left the letter where it was and rode away, slowly, heading down the river, which ran along there for a little way in a general direction toward the east.

A little way on he stopped, thinking he ought to go back and give Moore the letter with its enclosure, which might be of the first importance to him. There was where Moore caught his breath. He shot the hateful taunt after Dunham, who heard the crowd go off again in another roar. To clinch his determination to let Moore whistle for his telegram, somebody sent a bullet over Bill's head. It was high, but Bill heard it go over him with a noise similar to that he often had heard running ahead of him through solid ice—a sharp, diminishing sigh—when skating on a cold still day.

Garland rode into camp at sundown. His first word to Moore was:

"I picked up a good man in Pawnee Bend yesterday. Did he get here?"

"If you mean a kid by the name of Dunham, he got here, all right. But went on ag'in, like the Irish section boss's train."

Moore had to have a laugh at his own wit and the recollection of Dunham's reception in that camp.

"Why? What happened to him?" Garland inquired, looking around queerly.

"Oh, some of the boys took exceptions to his new boots and splashed dirt on 'em," Moore explained, in the casual, careless way of a man who discusses a trifle.

Garland asked for particulars, that queer puzzled look in his face that made the situation all the funnier to Moore. It was as if Garland had trusted a stranger with his pocketbook and couldn't quite get it through him when he came back and found the fellow had hopped. Moore supplied details with zest; he related with loud mirth the comical incident in Bill Dunham's history that had set the range laughing.

"Yes, I heard about that," Garland said, unmoved.

"The damn fool was layin' for Ford Kellogg that night, just before my train got in. My girl Zora got him out of that and saved his fool hide by tellin' him I'd give him a job ridin' trail. She had to do something; she hated to see the fool boy killed. But I told him—hell—I told him he wouldn't no more do for a quarantine-line guard than he would for president of the Santa Fé railroad. Him layin' for Ford Kellogg with that blame little toy gun he's packin' around!"

"Well, he got him yesterday afternoon," Garland told them, quietly.

"Got him what? A drink, or a new necktie?" Moore scoffed, certain of himself and his wisdom in keeping clear of a sell.

"Got him through the heart at sixty feet, with that same little old toy gun," Garland replied in his quiet way, but with a stress of exultation over Moore.

"He got him from behind if he done it!" Moore declared, resenting the news. "He never got Ford Kellogg in a fair and open fight!"

The others were crowding around to listen, for the name of Ford Kellogg was a familiar one from the Arkansas to the Rio Grande.

"No, it wasn't a fair fight," Garland admitted. "The kid gave him every advantage a man could ask for in a sure thing. He let Kellogg get to his gun before he ever made a start for his own. I was across the street, and saw it all. Dunham's the quickest man with a gun, and the surest, I ever saw in my life, and I've seen some purty damn speedy ones, I'm here to tell you."

"I told you!" an old cowman said, nodding sagely around at his comrades. "I could see that boy was holdin' himself in like his arm was in a bear trap. I told you!"

"Where did he go?" Garland inquired.

"Off down the river," somebody replied.

Moore was standing by the wagon, gripping the tire with one big hand, looking like a man who had heard bad news from home. The ready words were frost-bitten on his forward tongue; his gizzard felt cold.

“If that boy ever gets mean and takes a notion to clean up on some of you fellers that thought you was havin’ a hell of a time with a granger, I’d hate to be in your boots,” Garland said.

## CHAPTER XIV

### TO THE ENEMY'S CAMP

To the camp of the enemy; but it was not his enemy.

That was Bill Dunham's thought as he crossed the river and headed south, keeping to the old cattle trail. There was no loyalty owing to those behind him, not even as citizens of his native state. They were to him as strangers in a strange land, and he had contemptuous doubt on the loyalty of any one of them to anything in the soil of Kansas but the grass. They were exploiters, out to profit on a range they did not own, lease or pay tribute for the use of to the extent of one lone dime.

They had insulted him, put affronts on him, and hurt him as cruelly as he ever had been injured in his life. It was worse that he had the means within the reach of his hand to salt their hides, but had restrained his passions out of respect to himself and consideration for his own internal peace. He didn't want to kill anybody else. It was better to bear insult and injustice than to face the agony and self-crimination, and the sweat of remorse in the night.

He had a grudge to pay those Kansas cowmen, and the shortest cut to it was to ride down until he met the Texas drover, offer his services, pay or no pay, in helping get his cattle to Pawnee Bend. He knew there was

no law to sustain the action of the Kansas cattlemen, while he felt that justice and fair-dealing made a strong plea for the Texas drover who had herded his cattle more than a thousand miles to come to a market outlet.

It was base injustice to turn him back. If one man's arm and gun could be of any use to the Texan, Dunham was in the proper frame of mind to serve.

Dunham encountered the Texas cattle much nearer the line than he had expected. From the lolling, unconcerned, unprepared attitude of the men who had gathered at the line to repel them, he had thought the Texans at least a day or two away. They were not more than five miles south of the river, where they apparently had ended that day's march. The cattle, to the number of many thousand, it appeared to Dunham, were spread out grazing, cowboys on the edges of the herd holding them in compact formation, which the luxuriant grass of that section permitted.

Bill headed for the nearest of these herdsmen, who faced his horse around to watch his approach with suspicious attention. This young man returned a civil reply to Bill's friendly greeting, although he was bristling with hostile suspicion. On Dunham's inquiry for the boss, he pointed out a man riding toward the chuck-wagon, which was anchored on a knoll a quarter-mile or so to the south of the trail.

This man also squared around in the same suspicious fashion when he saw Dunham making a line for him. He passed greetings reservedly, a look of stern inquiry in his direct gray eyes.

Dunham introduced himself, to be told by the boss



of the outfit that his name was Hughes. There was a carriage of authority, a careworn wariness, about the man that made it unnecessary to inquire whether he was owner of the herd or boss of the outfit. Like Garland, he was the type of man whose actions were not determined by somebody else.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Dunham?" he inquired, civilly enough, but coldly, as the leader of one hostile force addressing the emissary from another.

"I don't hardly know how *to* get at it, Mr. Hughes," Bill confessed, bending his head cogitatively, to look up presently with a timid grin. "But I guess I might as well tell you first as last that one man hired me in Pawnee Bend yesterday to ride this quarantine line of theirs along here, and when I got down here to-day another one fired me. I'm out scoutin' for a job."

Hughes looked him over silently, but with no offense in his grave measurement, his exact weighing, as it appeared to be. He was a man well past fifty, broad in the shoulders, straight, hard-muscled, brown. He wore a mustache clipped close to his lip, which added to the naturally stern lines of his features.

Not an unkindly man in appearance; unmistakably a firm one. His coat was unbuttoned, showing his pistol carried in shoulder holster; a weather-beaten, broad-brimmed hat that once had been white, was settled firmly down to his ears. The crown of it was pushed up to its full height, every wrinkle and dent smoothed out of it with meticulous care, it seemed.

"If they've sent you over here to find out how many men I've got, bud, I'll tell you, and you can trot on

back," he said. "I've got thirty besides the cook. That's not a big force to handle a herd of four thousand cattle on the trail, but we've handled 'em, and we expect to go right on handlin' 'em up to Pawnee Bend. You can go on back and tell your folks that."

Hughes spoke kindly, without inflection of sarcasm or hostility. He made a gesture toward his grazing cattle as if to say "there they are; count them for yourself."

"Blamed if I know how to get at it!" said Bill, in genuine perplexity. "I'm not one of that crowd; I owe 'em a grudge I'd travel a thousand miles to pay, but danged if I know how I'm to get at it to convince you I'm straight."

"Maybe the best way to do it would be to tell a straight story," Hughes suggested, his careworn features relieved by a smile.

Bill told him a straight story, leaving nothing to his discredit, or what might set him up for ridicule, out of it, down to the shooting at his new boots and Moore's contemptuous refusal to allow him to go to work. He said nothing about his fight with Kellogg, fearing it might sound like a boast.

"How long have you been in this part of the country?" Hughes inquired.

"I've been here—I've been here—why, only three days!" Bill replied, amazed that calculation proved it to be no longer, so much had piled up on him in that time.

Hughes looked at him kindly, appearing to understand and sympathize.

"Go over to the wagon and turn your horse out," he directed. "You'll find an old Mexican feller there; he'll give you something to eat if you're hungry. I'll be along direc'ly and we'll talk it over."

"I don't care anything about pay—I'll help you drive your cattle to Pawnee Bend without a damn cent of pay!" Bill declared passionately. "There's something between me and that man Moore wider than the Cimarron."

"We'll talk it over later on," Hughes replied.

He rode away, leaving Bill to go to the wagon as directed, or to any other place that might suit his inclination better.

Bill spent the rest of the afternoon at the wagon, making indifferent headway with the Mexican cook, whose English vocabulary was not wide, such as he was master of being altogether too emphatic and passionate for a man of Bill Dunham's disposition. Hughes did not come to the wagon until nearly sundown, after the cook had sounded a long blast on a conch-shell. He was accompanied by a young man of about Dunham's age, whom he introduced as his son.

Young Hughes was an alert, lithe man, fresh and boyish in appearance. He was shingled and shaved in striking contrast with the other men of the outfit who began to ride in for supper. He shook hands with Dunham, but with something of reserve in his manner, in the expression of his eyes, not in keeping with the ingenuous frankness that Dunham believed naturally was his. They had discussed the presence of this stranger in their camp, Bill knew. Suspicion attached

to him in their eyes. Dunham rightly divined they considered him a spy who wished to attach himself to their force for some dishonest purpose.

They did not appear to think it necessary to introduce Dunham any farther to the company, although the cowboys addressed him civilly as they sat around with their well-filled tin plates, including him in the conversation as if he belonged. But there was an air of restraint over them, the elder Hughes being especially silent and thoughtful, as if the troubles which lay ahead of him at the Kansas line wore on him wearily.

Dunham had the appetite of a clear conscience, in spite of the cloud he knew himself to be under. He contrasted the courtesy they extended him in this camp, suspected of no honest purpose that he was, with the treatment he had met at the hands of the Kansas cattlemen and their employees. If there was anything ridiculous in his appearance or behavior, these strangers were gentlemanly enough to keep it to themselves. There was not even a covert grin or a sly wink passed, as far as Dunham saw, and his observation was more than passing keen.

As they finished supper some of the cowboys rode off to relieve their comrades who were drawing the herd together preparatory to bedding down for the night, the elder Hughes issuing brief orders. A few remained in camp, these stretching out to relax their saddle-wearied limbs, smoking and passing the usual chaff that goes among a crowd of young fellows, even when they stand with one foot on the brink of trouble, as these were

situated that placid evening on the south shore of the Cimarron.

"You've changed your appearance since I saw you in Pawnee Bend yesterday evenin'," young Hughes remarked, quite affably, offering Dunham his tobacco as he spoke.

"Yes, I got this set of harness to suit a job I thought I had," Dunham explained, easy of conscience and free of embarrassment, quite an illumination falling upon his affairs.

"I couldn't see why you didn't grab that job they offered you in town," young Hughes, whom the others addressed as Bob, seemed to wonder. "Nothin' to do but loaf around, with free drinks as long as a man could stand up under 'em, I guess, and everything his own way. City marshal is another name for king in a little town like Pawnee Bend."

"I guess I was born common," Dunham laughed, but with indifferent success, trying to appear easy when he was beginning to squirm in the discomfort that is the plague of true modesty. "Well, I wasn't cut out for a lazy man's job, anyhow."

"You didn't say anything to me about killin' Ford Kellogg up in Pawnee Bend yesterday," Hughes said. "Maybe that was such a triflin' occurrence in your daily life you forgot it."

Hughes was a little sarcastic about it. At the mention of Ford Kellogg, and the part Dunham had borne in bringing his notorious career to a close, the cowboys rolled over to lean on their elbows and stare, some of them sitting up with startled suddenness to look at

this unassuming stranger who had accomplished a feat so incredible. Ford Kellogg was as well known to them, in his far-reaching notoriety for putting men out of the world, as Jesse James.

"I didn't want you to think I was travelin' around to advertise it," Dunham replied, looking down in the habit that had made more than one person take him for a thick-headed slow fellow before that day.

"How does it come Moore and them fellers let a slick gun-slinger like you leave 'em?" Hughes asked, accusation of duplicity and low designing in his words.

"You've got me wrong," Dunham protested almost indignantly, looking frankly into Hughes's eyes. "I never slung a gun on but one other man before in my life."

"I don't see why a man that could beat Ford Kellogg to his gun would stand still and let a bunch of cowboys shoot dirt all over him, or why they'd have the nerve to try it if they knew how handy he was with his iron."

"They didn't know it, Mr. Hughes," Dunham assured him gravely. "The man that hired me—you must have heard him offer me a job if you were at the hotel with the crowd?" Dunham appealed suddenly to Bob Hughes.

"Yes, I heard him say he could give you a job and saw you walk away with him," Bob honestly admitted.

"He was to meet me down here—his name's Hal Garland—but I arrived ahead of him. The news of my—of that—business with Kellogg hadn't got down that far. I could 'a' stopped them boys peggin' at my

boots"—the cowboys grinned when he mentioned them, all eyes on the offending tight leather—"and I'm here to tell you, Mr. Hughes, it's a whole lot harder to keep *from* shootin' than it is to shoot, sometimes."

"You said something, kid!" a gray-haired cow-puncher said, nodding in friendly endorsement through the smoke of his cigarette.

"And I'm goin' to tell you why I didn't pull my gun and stop their fun," Dunham said.

The cowboys leaned to hear him, some of them moving nearer. The Mexican cook, who had appeared to have such an indifferent ear for Dunham's conversation earlier in the day, stopped rattling his pans to come up behind the group and hear the tale this stranger, who seemed about to turn out somebody after all, was to tell.

Bill Dunham gave them the true story of the death and miraculous resurrection of Ira Ingram, described by Shad Brassfield as the fittified man. He told how Moore had laughed down his aspirations to a job with the revived Ira's demand to be told who had numbered him with the dead, and how he had been met with the sally at the camp across the river. They heard him through with straight faces, although it cost them a mighty effort to make it, as Dunham could see.

"They throwed it up to me like I was the one that said the damn fool thing!" Bill complained.

There they let go and laughed, the younger ones rolling on the ground, even sedate, troubled Hughes shaking under the violent irruption of his mirth. Dunham felt so relieved to have it out of his craw, and so

warm and friendly toward them all for their respectful restraint, that he laughed with them, more comfortable and at home among them than he had felt anywhere since coming to the land of short grass.

"I was so blame glad," he resumed when the gale of laughter passed, "to hear that dang fittified man wasn't dead, I made up my mind right there I'd never lose my temper and hit the first lick over anything like that again. That's why I let 'em go to the end of their string."

This frank recital of his adventures appeared to put Dunham on better standing with Hughes, who asked him how many men were gathered on the other side of the river. Twenty-five or thirty, Dunham said, but more were coming. It was their intention to assemble a hundred men, Garland had told him. Let 'em come, Hughes said; he was bound to go on to Pawnee Bend and load his cattle even if they assembled the whole male population of the state to stop him. Bob had been to Pawnee Bend to order the cars, which were to be on the siding, with engines to pull them, five days from that day.

He had to get his cattle to Pawnee Bend by that time, Hughes said, or lose heavily in demurrage on the cars and head tax to the Indians if he kept his cattle in the Cherokee Nation. Under the arrangement by which cattle were allowed to pass through these Indian lands the herd must move toward its destination at least ten miles a day. Hughes had only one more move; his time would be up to be clear of the Indian country the day after tomorrow morning.



It would mean bankruptcy to him if he was forced to turn back. He could not drive eastward to the railroad that crossed the Indian Territory; there would be no course open to him but to return to Texas. He had a herd of young beef cattle, especially bought up on a speculative venture for the drive. If he could hit the market within ten days it meant five or six dollars, or maybe ten dollars, a head more to him than his beef would bring three weeks later, when Kansas stock would begin to pour into the yards.

Hughes was bitter against the Kansas cattlemen, whose action in establishing a quarantine line at the border of their state had been spread far down the Texas trails. He could not believe that healthy Texas cattle spread disease; he denied that such a thing ever had been proved. Any plague that had carried off Kansas cattle was purely local, he contended, and he would appeal to the federal court for relief if he felt that he could get action in time to do him any good, which was a hope without foundation. So he had to get through to the railroad on his own resources, and he was bound to do it.

He wasn't going to recognize their authority by seeking a parley with them, Hughes said. Up to that hour they had not sent him any word of their intentions; as far as he was concerned he had no official information, if it could be dignified by such a name coming from a band of ruffians, that any quarantine had been established against Texas cattle. His intention was to drive to the river in the morning and start across. If it had to be a fight, he'd give them the best he had.

Texas men had made that trail, Hughes said; it belonged to them. He had driven over it twenty years ago, delivering cattle to Custer at Fort Hays, before ever a Kansas man thought of putting a herd on the range. It was too perilous for them in those days; they had to wait till Texas men made the country safe, and now they showed their gratitude, as well as their valor, by coming down to the line in overwhelming force to deny honest men their rights. If they wanted a fight they could have it, and he'd give them the best he had.

He repeated that declaration pointedly, as if to drive it into Dunham's understanding. Bill knew he was talking in the expectation that he would sneak away during the night and carry all this back to the Kansas guards.

This evidence of distrust made Dunham uncomfortable, although he was not troubled by any upbraiding of conscience for his act in crossing the river and offering his services on the Texan's side. There was something between him and John Moore far wider than the Cimarron, indeed. Youth is generous in its forgiveness of injuries, injustices and slights, but ridicule will fire its resentment so fiercely that all the placative oil in the cruse of hypocrisy will not ease the brand.

The cattleman wound up his frank presentation of the situation with a sigh. It pressed upon him heavily, as it touched with a troubled shadow even the lightest mind in the company. The stars were out above the herd, which had settled down to the night's repose. All was quiet down there, where vigilant riders circled the satisfied cattle. Hughes stood looking down at

the dark blotch the big herd made on its bedding-ground, dim through the night.

"So, if you're on the square, Dunham," he said by way of finality, "and want to prove it, figure out some way to get that herd across the river and on the trail to Pawnee Bend."

Hughes said this in a grim jesting way, as if proposing what he knew to be at once beyond the inclination and limitations of the man addressed. Dunham felt it as a taunt and a mockery, as if Hughes had said: "You're crooked, and I know it, but we are gentlemen. We scorn you, and let you go your way."

But that proposal, mockingly made, set the wheel of Dunham's thoughts turning. He got out his new blankets and stretched himself on a cowboy's bed for the first time in his life, to lie for hours looking at the stars, planning and plotting, scheming and devising, not toward any undertaking that might add to his own fame or profit, but to some bold stratagem or shrewd maneuver that would humble the loud arrogance of John Moore and make his name a jest on the tongues of men.

## CHAPTER XV

### A CROOK OR A FOOL

EARLY next morning the herd was on the march toward the crossing of the Cimarron. Hughes appeared considerably mollified in his bearing toward Dunham, who rode with him and Bob at the head of the long line of cattle, so thoroughly trail-broken after their months of this daily routine they filed along like soldiers.

Hughes said the Cimarron was treacherous, like all those western Kansas rivers, full of quicksands in which cattle would mire down, causing endless trouble and delay to pull them out. There always was more or less panic in a herd when one of those quagmires was struck, with attendant loss and suffocation.

To avoid such a calamity as this, Hughes was going to ford the river at the old crossing, instead of trying to get over at some other place not so strongly guarded, where the river ran entirely inside the Indian country. The law was on his side, as far as any law went in that country, and he would proceed under the assumption that he had a law-abiding citizen's right to follow a public road. He had not been informed, officially, of anybody's objection.

So Hughes talked as he rode at the head of his herd, as if trying to assure himself, or build up an argument that would stand him in good service when needed. He

was strained to the highest pitch of anxiety, and in spite of his apparently calm determination to proceed Dunham could see that he realized the gravity of his situation and the hopelessness of trying to fight his way into Kansas against such heavy odds. Ruin was waiting at the old trail crossing of the Cimarron.

The Texans were not to be left long without official notification of the quarantine against their cattle. While they were still two miles from the river a delegation of Kansans made their appearance under the leadership of John Moore, whom Dunham recognized some distance off.

Dunham said he believed he'd drop back a piece, as he wasn't looking for trouble right then, and thought it would be for the good of all concerned if he passed unrecognized.

"I guess you've got your own reasons," Hughes said, his opinion of Dunham's valor appearing to take a slump.

"I'd rather they didn't know I'm with you yet a while," Dunham said, putting it in the form of a request.

Bob Hughes flushed, something hot on his tongue, which his father stopped by lifting his hand.

"Let him go," he said. "Maybe he's got better reasons than we can see right now. I never judge a man before he's tried."

Dunham thanked him, and rode back at a canter as if he had been sent on some detached duty. The head of the long string of cattle came to a halt when Hughes pulled up to wait the arrival of the Kansas delegation.

All down the winding column the cattle stopped as if at command, the cowboys who rode along the flanks leaning to look forward anxiously, aware that they had come to the big obstacle in that long trail at last.

Dunham rode back a safe distance, where he drew in beside the cattle, which were already beginning to break ranks and browse on the tempting dewy grass. One of the herders rode up, inquiring anxiously if the big fight was coming off. Dunham said he expected it was about to pop. They watched the conference, which was soon over. The Kansas men, having force behind them, were not pushed to the use of many words.

Hughes and his son sat looking after the Kansas men as they galloped back to the river, making no move to proceed. The cattle spread wider and wider, unchecked by the disheartened cowboys, who realized gloomily that they had come to the end of that drive. Dunham rode forward.

Father and son still sat in that crushed, hopeless attitude, drooping in their saddles, watching the band of riders kicking dust for the forbidden line. As Dunham came up, Hughes turned to his son, throwing out his hand in a despairing gesture that seemed to say it was all over.

“Well, Dunham, your friends say we can’t take this herd into Kansas on any kind of terms,” Hughes said.

“He knows damn well what they said without hearin’ ’em!” Bob charged hotly. “You don’t need to tell him.”

“Yes, I knew about what they’d say,” Dunham ad-

mitted with the calm frankness of a clear conscience.

But he was nettled by their meanness in throwing their suspicions in his face that way, although he reasoned they hardly could be blamed. What they expected he was to gain by attaching himself to them that way passed his understanding.

"We're prohibited from even waterin' in the Cimarron," Hughes said bitterly. "They're afraid the river'll carry our poison, but I reckon you know all about that."

Bill flushed under the repeated nagging and harping on that fool note of his treason and treachery. He was getting tired of it. His long solemn face was as earnest as honesty could pull it when he pinned Hughes with a look so hard it was almost like an icicle thrust against his hide. The two little bony processes in the bridge of Bill's big nose, uncommonly prominent in that structure, grew white as he drew his long face a bit longer, and sat there drilling his sentiments into the Texas cowman's understanding without the assistance of words.

Hughes had ridden the trails a long time, and met all manner of men. He knew pretty well he had hold of one now who had taken about all he would carry without bucking off the load.

"I didn't mean any offense, Dunham," he said.

"You come purty damn close to givin' it," Dunham replied.

Bob Hughes gave his horse a little prod with the spurs, not that he had to charge to get up to Dunham, but to take some of his rising spleen out on something,

it seemed. The animal jumped, and reared against the hard rein the young man pulled to restrain it.

"You may be a big gunman where you come from," Bob said, fury in his face, hand on his pistol, "but you don't look big enough to throw a scare into me!"

The elder Hughes stopped this foolish bid for trouble by lifting his hand in the commanding gesture of silence that seemed so potent between father and son. The young fellow subsided, but sat there scowling, hand on his gun, a good deal more bluff than earnest in the whole demonstration, for a man in hotter pickle of passion than he could have seen that Dunham had no intention of taking up any quarrel between them.

"I've heard a good deal of talk about fightin' your way through," Dunham said, addressing the elder man, maybe just a tinge of slight and depreciation in his tone. "When are you goin' to start?"

"If we didn't have anything but ourselves to take across that river we'd go," Hughes replied, his look fixed on the cottonwoods which marked the stream.

"Nobody would object in that case," Dunham reminded him. "That would be easy enough. But it happens you've got a million or so cows—"

"Four thousand," Hughes corrected the extravagant estimate.

"They look like at least a million to me," said Bill. "The next thing is, what are you goin' to do about it?"

"Men can't put up a fight against three or four to one, and it would be that if I could fetch all of mine up to the front, and ford a herd of cattle across a tricky river at the same time," Hughes replied to this not very



well hidden taunt. "They've got us, and they know it."

"Um-m-m," Dunham grunted, his eyes on the ground, his mind so completely concentrated on something of his own that he seemed miles away from the Cimarron and the troubles lined up at its crossing that bright morning hour.

"To be honest with you, Dunham, I thought they'd put up a bluff that a bigger one would meet and we might strike a compromise between them. But it ain't a bluff. All I can see to be done is hold my herd here till I go to Wichita and get a lawyer to head some of Uncle Sam's men down this way. I guess the United States marshal might be able to argue with them fellers to a better effect than I can."

"It might take a week or two to get action that way," Dunham seemed to reflect, as if he studied his own problem. "You'd either have to countermand your order for cars, or pay demurrage on what you've ordered, with no tellin' how much charge for the train crews that are to be there to pull you to Kansas City. That'll eat you holler in no time."

"Well, if you've got something better to offer, Dunham, spit it out," Hughes invited, hard in the scorn that only a hopeless man can give his words.

"Hell!" Bob sneered.

He gave his horse another rake with his big spurs. It sidled and pranced, writhing in the smart of it, furious against the restraint it could not understand.

"I don't mind tellin' you, Mr. Hughes," Dunham spoke evenly, learning rapidly and well the advantage of a calm man over a passionate one, "that I'm not so

much interested in helpin' you get your cattle to Pawnee Bend on your account as I am on my own."

"I'm willin' to make it worth while to you, Dunham." Hughes turned to him slowly, taking his eyes reluctantly from the straggling line of stumpy cottonwoods, a light of understanding appearing to break in them suddenly. "If this is part of the hold-up, if this is you fellers' way—"

"I'm not biddin' for money—I'd see you in hell before I'd take a dime!" Dunham cut in, almost losing the rein over his temper there. He grabbed it again, frantically, feeling himself cooling from the nose downward, in that easing relief that comes over a man when he has rushed to save something and found it safe.

"How in the hell do we know what you're out for?" said Bob, resenting this vehement protestation.

"There's a man on the other side of that river I want to ride till he slobbers like a clovered horse," Dunham said, ignoring Bob, looking in his turn at the sentinel cottonwoods along the weak little river which was a barrier that day between so many men and their desires. "I want to ride that man till his head hangs so low his tongue'll lop the road when he walks! I want to soak him so hard he'll walk knock-kneed all the rest of his life. If I can bust that man I'll bust him, and that's what I'm over here to try."

Hughes looked at him with the slow-waking expression of a man who is beginning to see things in their proper shape. Dunham didn't wait for yea, nay nor maybeso, but pushed on with his bill of intentions.

"Your dang cattle may be clean and they may be

lousy for all I know, but I hope they're so full of p'ison they'll drip it along the road. If I can help you put 'em through I'm here to do it, but I want you to understand I'm not goin' to tackle the job because I want to help a set of Texas fellers out of a hole. I don't give a damn whether any more Texas cattle ever make it across the Kansas line if I can put these over. I'll not be doin' it for you, but for myself. If I can bust that man, I'll bust him!"

"They're clean cattle," Hughes said, not vehemently as a man might be expected to speak in a matter of such heated controversy, but with the disheartened weariness of utter futility. "What have you got in mind, Dunham?"

The cattleman spoke with growing respect, more as man to man. Even Bob sneaked his hand away from his gun, still surly and sour, but no longer feeling as if he must fight somebody, the handiest man preferred.

"It's a wild scheme, maybe it's impossible," Dunham replied, lapsing into his inscrutable, self-communing silence, which he kept for some moments, his gaze on the trampled road. "It's not likely you'd think much of it, Mr. Hughes"—looking up suddenly—"so I guess I'd better keep it under my hat. I'm gittin' damn tired of bein' laughed at in this country, anyhow."

"If you can overlook what's been said, Dunham, we'll cross it out and start over," Hughes proposed, offering his hand.

Dunham shook hands with him solemnly, taking the initiative himself with Bob, whom he knew how to forgive better than one who had not misjudged and

been misjudged would have known. They all felt easier for the truce. They drew breath with a lighter and freer feeling, as people always do when the mists of prejudice and suspicion have been blown away.

Bill turned and looked back as if estimating the job he had laid out for himself. There were more cattle waiting to cross the river than Dunham ever had seen together at one time outside the stockyards at Kansas City. Four thousand in the open looked more impressive to him than twenty thousand in the stockyards pens.

The anxious cowboys were looking ahead for some signal, making little effort to hold the cattle in marching order. As the minutes passed the animals spread to graze, inaction during working hours being strange to the program of their lives. They had been bred on a range where constant foraging was necessary to existence. This luxurious pasture presented allurements which even a strong-minded Texas white-face could not resist.

"That's a lot of cows," Bill said, speaking mainly to himself. He turned to Hughes again, briskly. "They used to say I was a damn fool where I was raised, and I don't blame you if the same thing's passin' in your mind. I'm used to it. It does look kind of foolish for a greenhorn to tell a cattleman like you what to do with his herd, but you'll have to act on my suggestion if you want to be ready to take advantage of my scheme."

"Shoot," said Hughes.

Bob fidgeted in his saddle, not impressed by Dun-

ham's preface, plainly wanting faith in his scheme, whatever it might turn out to be.

"Work your herd up to the river, takin' it easy and slow," Dunham directed. "I wouldn't let 'em down to the water if I was you—there's no use crowdin' trouble. You be around the ford where you can spot me, ready to start 'em over. If I come back, I'll be all set to lead the way; if I don't come—I wish you luck."

Dunham headed toward the river, not a good-by nor a good-luck going after him. Bob Hughes snorted his impatient contempt for such palpable duplicity.

"If he thinks he can toll us on into a trap that way they named him right where he was raised," he said.

"I don't know," Hughes pondered, far from clear in his own mind, "but I don't see what there'd be in it for them to try to trick us. They don't want us in Kansas; they'd rather have us down here than along the river. Whatever his scheme is, I think it's all his own."

"What're you goin' to do?"

"Go on to the river. That boy's green; it's plain he's give us the straight of that, but I don't believe he's anybody's fool, and I'm goin' to gamble on it that he's straight."

"Then here's where you lose," said Bob.

## CHAPTER XVI

### BILL PICKS A SHINING MARK

THE cattlemen who had carried the warning across the river to Hughes were still sitting on their dripping horses when Dunham rode into the ford. Others had been waiting to hear how the Texans took the news, evidently, for there was a group of men, on foot and mounted, numbering about twenty, collected around Moore and the other delegates, one of whom Dunham recognized as Garland, the man who had hired him for Moore to discharge so contemptuously.

Moore was lolling slouchily with one thigh across his saddle, pretty well pleased with something, it seemed, for his loud laugh came clacking like the voice of a crow as Dunham struck the shallows of the ford and headed across. Somebody called attention to his approach. Moore threw a startled look around and slid into his saddle like a turtle going across a log, the ripple of Dunham's identity running through the crowd.

John Moore was neither a coward nor a gunman. He was a fellow who would bull up against any kind of bare-handed encounter with a roar, and claw, hammer and bite his way through. He had the fist-fighter's contempt for weapons, never carrying a gun except on extraordinary occasions such as this. From the way he turned white around the gills now it was plain he

thought Dunham had come back for a settlement, and he knew he never could get his gun out in time to do him a bit of good. He let it hang where it was.

Dunham lifted his right hand to indicate his peaceful disposition, legs doubled against his horse's sides to keep the water from overflowing his boot-tops. The current ripped along there in a narrow channel with great rapidity and force, although the water was only a little more than belly-deep to a horse. As Bill cleared the ford and lowered his feet, Moore rode down a little way to meet him.

"Hello, Bill," Moore greeted, his voice hearty but his grin sort of weak and flickering, "where you been keepin' yourself all this time?"

Dunham returned the greeting without going into particulars of his last night's lodging-place; spoke to Garland cordially, and gave the others a blanket greeting in a "Good-morning, gentlemen," although he was certain he had stretched the noun until it cracked.

Taking them as they ran, they were about the toughest-looking collection he ever had faced. He wondered if Moore and Garland had sifted the range and picked the scoundrels, or if the crowd was a fair representation of the human stock that frequented the Kansas range.

Garland looked at him questioningly, as if to ask him if he had been associating with those outcasts from south of the fever line.

"Everything all right with you, Dunham?" he asked, more to fill an awkward chink in the openly embarrassing situation than to elicit information.

"Why," said Dunham, bending his head as if a hard question had been propounded and he must go into it carefully, "I can't exac'ly say anything's wrong."

"I'm damned sorry for the reception you got down here yesterday, Dunham," Garland said with frank sincerity.

"Oh, he knows how to take a joke," Moore said, with ingratiating assurance.

"I'm learnin' right along," Dunham agreed, looking at Moore so coldly the cowman's gizzard sagged, "but it's a hard matter for a green man like me to know where the joke stops and the insult begins."

"Them damn-fool boys ain't accountable, Bill," Moore said, apparently full of regret for the incident. "A man like you can afford to pass a little thing like that by."

"I don't hold the boys accountable, but I took you for a full-grown man," Bill told him, with more indifference than censure. "But that don't matter; I didn't come over here to take that up with you."

"You came over to ask me what in the hell I mean when I tell a man he's hired, I guess," Garland said. "I mean what I say, when I say it that way. If you want to go to work, you're still hired."

"No, I didn't exac'ly come to take that up with you, either, Mr. Garland. Mr. Moore shot off a lot of talk yesterday about the kind of men he needed down here to keep Texas cattle out of Kansas. I'm here to show him what kind of a man it takes to bring them in."

"What do you mean, Dunham?"

Garland was all on edge in a moment, and if the



others could have raised their ears there would have been a general pointing in Bill Dunham's direction. Since these erectile muscles had fallen into disuse in Kansas at that time, although a breed of politicians developed later in that state that could waggle their ears like any ass, the movement among the cattlemen was that of feet. They swayed a little nearer, braced for what was coming next.

"I've got a herd of four thousand cattle over there that I'm goin' to take up to Pawnee Bend."

"Do you mean you own that herd? Do you mean to tell me you hired out to me for a quarantine guard and you owner of that herd all the time?"

Garland was so outraged by what he took to be Dunham's underhanded treason that he clapped his hand to his gun.

"No, I don't own a hair of 'em," Dunham replied calmly, unmoved by the demonstration, but watching for the next foolish move. "I've assumed responsibility for their delivery to the pens at Pawnee Bend. They stand under my orders; that's what I mean."

"If you've taken the contract to drive that herd to Pawnee Bend you'll need a whole lot of help, young feller," Moore said, assured again, and full of words, since Dunham had not come gunning for him.

But there were others in that camp who did not feel this pleasant freedom to draw a long breath and look away for a minute as the news of Bill Dunham's arrival ran like a wind through tall grass. It reached Shad Brassfield where he was hobbling his horses to turn them out for the day, giving him such a palsy he

couldn't pull a knot. Two young cowpunchers lolling under the trees near their horses, swapping boastful yarns of their latest conquests among the dance-hall ladies of Pawnee Bend, stopped breathing a moment to look a startled question into each other's eyes. It took them only about three seconds to reach an undivided opinion that their urgent business was not on the shore of the Cimarron that day, but at some undetermined point toward the north.

"Hughes didn't tell us he'd turned things over to you," Garland said. "If this is a joke, kid, it looks to me like you're showin' kind of poor judgment in pickin' your day to put it over."

"I leave jokin' to you people; it's more in your line than mine. Hughes didn't say anything about me because I hadn't taken the job then."

"Do you expect us to stand here hands-down and let you pass?" an elderly, bearded, Scottish-looking man inquired, bending over his saddle-horn to glare at Dunham wrathfully.

"This is a public road," Dunham replied. "You gentlemen have taken one end of the law in your own hands; I'll take the other in mine. I'm as good a Jayhawker as any of you—better, I expect, for I was born in this state—and I know the laws of my state as well as any of you do. There's no law that gives you authority to close the public roads against the peaceable citizens of another state. What I'm here for is to tell you to either step out of the way when you see that herd comin', or be treated the same as any other band of outlaws if you try to stop us."

"Dunham, I thought you had more sense than that. Don't you know you can't run a bluff on this crowd of men that have got everything they own up on this throw?"

Garland spoke with patronizing friendliness, as if he had an honest interest in seeing Dunham spared the humiliation of attempting a thing so preposterously impossible. Others were not so friendly. There was derisive laughter, which rounded out in daring challenges, and damnation enough uttered to make Dunham limp under curses all the rest of his life if there had been half efficacy in the weakest of them.

"You don't stand to lose any more, individually, than Hughes," Dunham argued. "When a man loses all he's got he's cleaned, if it's much or little. Where's he to go with his cattle if he can't go on to Pawnee Bend and ship?"

"That's for him to settle," the Scotsman said.

"I'm here to make a fair proposal to you, gentlemen," Dunham continued. "We'll keep to the trail if you don't molest us, grazin' no further on each side than is reasonable and necessary. You can easily keep your cattle away from where we've passed. There are a lot of Texas cattle headed up the trail; you can't keep them all out without more fightin' than you've contracted for, not to mention damage suits that'll clean you out quicker than any fever, and keep you cleaned. You might as well step out of the way first as last."

"That herd can't come into this state—not along here, anyhow," Moore declared. "If you try to bring

them rotten cattle in here, we'll be right here to stop you."

"We'll come," Dunham said, ominously calm, "and we'll give you the best thirty men with pump-guns can deliver. Unless you back up and stay backed, there's goin' to be more than one funeral tomorrow, gentlemen. We're comin' over here not only ready to fight, but all set to stampede that herd over this range if we can't get it in any other way."

"You'll find one man that won't back up," the hairy Scotsman said.

And that was a stern fact, others averred, in various tints of individual expression, none of them subdued. Only Garland seemed to be thinking about the serious complications which could very well develop out of a fight, even though the Texans were strongly outnumbered. They had not expected it to come to a fight, when all was said, their reliance being in numbers to make their prohibition good.

The threat of a stampede was another thing to fix the thought of reasonable men like Garland. Even Moore had jumped when Dunham spoke of it. Such a stampede could be started by a few men; the turmoil of a fight would accelerate it, and all the men gathered there would be no more than a handful of chaff in the faces of those four thousand animals once they were beyond human restraint. They would run until they fell of exhaustion, fifteen miles, twenty-five miles, sowing their dreaded, mysterious plague far and wide.

Another thing to be considered was that Texas range-

men were shooting men, while Kansas cattlemen, as a general rule, were not. Many of the Kansans had been farmers in the eastern states before taking up range life. Moore was a fair example of the class. There would be more than one funeral, for a fact, and it was no pleasant thought for any life-loving Kansas cowman that one of such funerals might be his. A man could much better stand the loss of half his cattle through Texas fever than the loss of his own life through conjunction with a Texas bullet.

Dunham could see that he had set the ferment of doubt and caution working; that the resolution of some of them, at least, was shaken. But Moore was still confident in the array of numbers to bluff Dunham and the Texans back.

“You’ll hit the hottest water you ever put your foot in, Dunham, if you try to bring that herd across this river,” Moore warned. “I don’t care whose funeral comes off tomorrow; you can’t bring them cattle into Kansas.”

“You’d better call it off, Dunham, as far as you’re concerned,” Garland advised. “Whatever you’re gettin’ out of it won’t be enough to make it worth while to have everybody in this country down on you. There’s not a chance to break through, but if you lead them fellers on to try it you’ll be in just as bad with us as if you’d made it. I know you’re sore, I don’t blame you for bein’ sore, but you’re a fool if you think you can square accounts this way.”

“I don’t hold any animosity against you, Mr. Garland,” Dunham said with grave courtesy. “But there

is a man here that I do hold animosity against for insults and injuries, and if that man stands in my way when I come over here with that herd, I'm goin' after him. If one shot's fired, I'll hold that man responsible for it with his life, and I'll get him if I have to chase him to his own doorstep!"

Dunham turned his horse and rode into the river, looking as straight and as steadily ahead as if he drew a furrow to a mark. He did not even lift his feet to bring his new boots above the water, riding through the little stream as though it were not there. He rode up the pebbly strand and into the dusty trail, worn deep into the sod by traffic that had begun to stream up it from the Texas ranges before he was born; and up the gentle slope to the hilltop, eyes as inflexibly ahead as the eyes of a statue.

If any man behind him drew a gun, Dunham did not know it; if there was a movement to ride after him in force and overwhelm him, it was checked by the council of Garland and the others who had sense enough to think, without a ripple of it ever reaching his ears.

On the Kansas shore they looked after Dunham as he disappeared over the little hill. They were nearer the water's edge than Dunham had left them, and Garland had his horse turned like a barrier across the road. He looked at Moore, accusingly, heaping the blame for the situation on his shoulders.

"There's such a thing as carryin' a joke too *damn* far, as I guess you're about due to learn," he said. "You sure did play hell when you rubbed that kid the wrong way!"

## CHAPTER XVII

### TEXAS CATTLE

It was more like a funeral than a triumphal entry when Bill Dunham came leading the Texas herd into Kansas. Not even the belligerent Scotsman stood at the crossing to bar the way; not a voice was raised in protest, not a gun was fired. Somebody's counsel had prevailed.

The herd came down to the water slowly, the leaders stopping at knee-deep to sup a bit, then go on a little way and sup again, merely by way of sampling what they had come to, it seemed, for they were not thirsty, having been feeding on the dew-drenched grass since dawn. Dunham was across before the first of the cattle had set foot in the stream, Hughes and his son, with about half their force, coming along with the vanguard of the herd, everybody expecting a fight, and ready for it.

Dunham rode over to the Kansas shore, where he stopped, looking around as if waiting for anybody who felt disposed to dispute the way with him to make his appearance and get to work. The Kansas men had backed off from the ford, as Dunham had warned them to back. They were collected at the side of the trail a hundred yards or more beyond the ford, bunched up in what appeared to be a council.

Some of these men, of whom there must have been

at least eighty, Dunham roughly computed, were watching the approaching herd with hostile front, and others appeared to be arguing vociferously, with emphasis of flourishing arms, but nobody came out in the road to challenge Dunham when he went on at the lead of the big herd which came rolling over the low hilltop, urged on by the anxious, silent cowboys, some of whom would have welcomed a little row as a fitting climax to their long drive.

They were all looking ahead at Bill Dunham, riding thirty yards in advance of the leaders, full of admiration for his single-handed challenge to seventy-five or eighty men. What powerful argument had this unknown young man used to change the attitude of the Kansas cowmen so completely and suddenly? Was his reputation as a gunman so great and fearful in his own country that his announced intention of doing something was sufficient to throw the bars down to his uncontested passage?

It appeared so, for a fact, and the marvel of it increased as they rode after him, urging the cattle across the ford and up the sloping bank. They were quivering with the daring of the enterprise, and swelling with the exultation that would be theirs as they rode by that bunch of Kansas men who had stood ready only a little while ago to enforce their rule of ruinous tyranny.

Hughes was no less struck with the marvel of this easy passage of what he lately had thought an insuperable barrier, for Dunham had not gone to the trouble of making any explanation when he returned from laying down the law at the ford. He simply had



come riding down the trail, to pull up short within two hundred yards, wave his hat for them to come on, and turned to lead the way which he was keeping with such admirable poise.

How this unassuming young man, who was so green in spots the bark hadn't set, could push aside an organized opposition of such strength passed the cattlemen's conjecture. He hoped Dunham had not gone too strong on the force he had back of him, which soon must be revealed to the Kansans, who outnumbered them almost three to one.

If Hughes advanced into Kansas with more than a little trepidation he could not be blamed. It seemed unreasonable to a man who had been denied the passage of that road less than an hour before, that the program was to go on without sudden and serious hitch. He had come over there expecting to fight; the grim set of his face, his stern and watchful eyes, showed him ready to stand for his rights, now he had made the beginning to claim them. But he was an uneasy man; there was a strain on him as if each nerve of his body suspended a thousand pounds. Trouble was due to break when Dunham passed that crowd. Hughes felt it to be as certain as thunder after lightning.

Moore was not in the road, nor anywhere to the front, as Dunham approached the surly Kansas cowmen; he didn't step out to accept the challenge Dunham had given in his parting words. Dunham saw him among the others, and he had a look of thunder in his face, but he stayed where he was as Bill rode by and passed on, eyes straight ahead.

There was not a sound but the clatter and click of split hoofs on the hard road as Dunham went on his way; not a whoop out of a cowboy, not a word from the Kansas drovers. The silence was more dramatic than the noise of a fight.

This portentous stillness had the opposite of a calming effect on the cattle. They were conscious of the unusual conditions surrounding them on the march, where the racket of their human guardians hitherto had been their constant assurance that all was well. They crowded forward in little starts of panic, little rushes that massed them and disorganized the orderly formation.

The cowboys riding alertly on the flanks of the long line were quick to press forward and subdue these incipient stampedes, with many an anxious look back to see if the rear had cleared the ford. The cattle were so nervous a blowing leaf might have set them off on a blind rush away from that indefinable terror of silence.

The Kansas cowmen who watched this dark column of beef hurrying by were fully conscious of the flighty condition. That impending threat of a stampede was a greater restraint over their passions than the counsel of the older and wiser heads. Any man could see where a stampede would put them, with some of their own herds not five miles away.

Bill Dunham rode on without a glance behind. His business was in Pawnee Bend; it looked as if he intended to go right on without a stop.

Dunham did not know whether the Kansas cattlemen

would allow this invasion to proceed without some attempt to do damage. He had sensed the sullen temper of the crowd in passing as plainly as he ever felt the heat of a brushwood fire beside the road. What the final outcome of it was to be, he could not guess.

He did not care particularly, now he had brought the herd into Kansas against this strong force. He had proved to Moore and the rest of them, but especially to Moore, that a man need not be raised on the range, nurtured on rawhide and schooled in the commonplace tricks of that simple trade, to be able to confound them at their own devices and defeat them at their own game.

Bill had no notion of how fast beef cattle ought to travel, or how far in a day; he had no thought of wearing off the profit by keeping up that scrambling, pushing, crowding start for Pawnee Bend, more than fifty miles away. He did have some recollection of Hughes saying it would take at least four days to drive that last stage of his long journey, but his main thought was to get the cattle as far as possible up the trail before trouble broke. Every mile along would add to the wariness of the Kansas cowmen, and the herd's security.

Dunham jogged on ahead of the nervous herd, wondering just where he was going to get off. Hughes had not hired him; he had refused indignantly the proffer of reward for his services, and he was still a man out of a job. How far should he go with his self-appointed guardianship of Hughes' cattle?

It looked to him as if he had fulfilled his obligation,

both to himself and Hughes. It would be time for him to ride aside after escorting the herd a few miles, and turn his talents to finding a job that would hold still long enough for him to get a rope on its nose.

Curiously enough, he began to have a qualm of conscience over the trick he had turned against his fellow citizens. Loyalty was expected of a man in Kansas. It began to look like a kind of mean trick for no larger or nobler reason than the gratification of personal revenge.

How could he go riding by Moore's pea-green house with its turned columns and fancy gables, and tower where Zora might be watching like another Elaine for a Lancelot to come riding out of the south? Not that he could be the knight in her romance. She hadn't as much as a collar button of his to sit by the window and polish, or a slight thought of him that would draw her gaze down the road she had ridden with him when he went away to do this treason against her kin and kind.

It made Bill sweat to think of it as a treasonable act. Zora had expected something better of him than that. And she had trusted him to deliver that telegram, until this moment forgotten in the heat of his anger and the hungry gnawing of his vengeful passion. There it was in his shirt pocket, all crumpled from sleeping on it, and no telling now when he'd have a chance of handing it to Moore.

From the look of things at that moment, Dunham concluded he'd better turn Hughes loose to make his own way to Pawnee Bend and pull his freight out of

that country. The cattlemen would be down on him; it would be a lucky chance if some of them didn't go gunning for him, Garland especially. Zora would have no further use for him; it was more than likely the best people in Pawnee Bend would turn the cold side of their faces to him when he went back there. Nobody but the saloon keepers got much out of the Texas cattlemen and their gangs, he knew, while present prosperity and future consequence depended on the increase of the cattle industry at the town's doors.

And there he was, Bill Dunham, a Kansan born and bred, leading in a herd of Texas cattle that might be dripping the seeds of plague which would clean the range down to bones. He felt so mean and worthless he could have sneaked off and disappeared if there had been any place to go.

There was no place to go. A man was mighty conspicuous in that country, where there wasn't a bush ahead of him as far as he could see big enough to hide a rabbit. He'd have to stick to it till night, then tell Hughes his future was in his own hands, return to Pawnee Bend, sell his horse and go on to New Mexico, where he could use the wisdom of his experience to guide him to a better start.

First he must contrive to get that letter of Zora's enclosing the telegram to Moore. The message might be important; maybe Moore had suffered damage already through the delay. Bill pulled up for a squint back to see how things were shaping, surprised to find himself at least a quarter of a mile ahead of the cattle. He must have struck a lope when he began to think

about Zora, and lay the charge of treason to himself.

The Kansas cattlemen were still bunched by the side of the road, their horses headed in toward a common point as if they were discussing the next move in their completely upset plan of establishing a quarantine without sanction of law. Some of them, at least, had been sensible enough of the thing they had undertaken.

He was not seriously concerned over the case any longer, let it be as it might. Hughes was across the line, the last of the cattle were clear of the river. He was able, without a doubt, to take care of himself the rest of the way. Dunham joined him where he rode, and told him about the letter for Moore.

Hughes called a cowboy and started him back to deliver the letter to Moore.

"There's a whole lot of bad feelin' against you back there, Dunham," Hughes said, looking worried and all on edge.

"You couldn't expect them to feel very friendly," Dunham replied.

"I don't know what they're figurin' on startin', but it's something," Hughes speculated. "I could feel trouble scratchin' me like a mesquit' when I passed them fellers. If they took it in their heads to make me stick to the trail and shut me off from grazin', I'd be in a hell of a hole."

"No worse off than where you were, that I can see. Your cattle wouldn't starve to death between here and Pawnee Bend."

"No, but they'd be as flat as boards by the time I

got 'em there. My profits'd go up in smoke. If they want to be mean about it, they've got me."

"It ain't likely they'd start a fuss that'd stampede your herd to hell and gone over the prairie," Dunham said.

"Well, you got me in here, Dunham, and I believe I'm purty near big enough to hold 'em."

"That's what I was thinkin' a little while ago."

"You mean you're goin' to cut loose from me now?"

"I don't see how I can do you any good, and I might do you a lot of harm. They're not half as sore at you as they are at me."

"It will be a kind of unfriendly place for you after this, Dunham. I was wonderin' what your plans might be. Wouldn't you like to help me to Kansas City with the cattle, and go back to Texas with us?"

"No, I don't exac'ly figure on goin' to Texas."

"Whatever you plan to do, Dunham, I want to show my appreciation for the way you've helped me through. I don't know how you worked it on 'em, but I know I didn't breathe for about ten minutes when you rode over here and stopped. I looked for hell to pop."

"Maybe it takes a fool for luck, the way the old folks say," Dunham replied to this respectful bid for enlightenment on his methods of breaking quarantine. He seemed to shut the door on that lead, and Hughes was wise enough to take the hint.

"You refused my offer to pay you, Dunham, but I want to do something to acknowledge the debt I'm under to you before we part."

“The best way you can do it, Mr. Hughes, will be to tell Moore and Garland and the rest of them that Bill Dunham said it wasn’t a money consideration with him. Tell them he said he lost more, maybe, than you gained, and you never paid him a damn cent. Tell them that, and make it strong.”

“Trust me to make it strong,” Hughes said, bearing down hard on his words, turning to Dunham with a mystified look, yet a look of respectful admiration.

They rode on in silence, too much in the thoughts of each for many words. There was no sound but the clicking of the cattles’ hoofs as they marched on in that uneasy, jogging way of starts and flurries.

“I’ll stop to let ’em feed about two o’clock,” Hughes said after a while. “If that crowd keeps hands off we ought to make nine or ten miles by then.”

“I’ll stay with you till evening,” Dunham said, not for any assurance there might be in the promise, for he seemed to be speaking apart from his thoughts, his eyes far ahead where heat was beginning to waver like oil in water over the trail, “and then I’ll go my way.”



## CHAPTER XVIII

### OUTLAWED ON THE RANGE

THERE was not much romance for Bill Dunham in making his bed on a blanket out under the stars, for even the bones of tired youth will find the inequalities of the sod, every stick and small stone, before daylight breaks. Bill Dunham wondered if men ever grew so hardened to the earth's unpadded surface for a mattress that they could stretch out, lie still and sleep serenely. It was a matter open to the most substantial doubt.

His second night on a cowboy's bed was not as successful as his first, for he was a grain between the millstones of conscience and the lumpy surface of buffalo-grass sod. He tossed and groaned, thinking what a dunce he had been to leave the land of feather beds to come out there pursuing the enchantment of distance, where romance materialized as trouble and the selfishness of men stood out raw-boned on the gray-green prairie without a bush to hide its vulpine ugliness.

Dunham was troubled over what he had done. While he knew very well his act had been within the law, he didn't like to think of the possible devastation Texas fever might work in the herds of men quite innocent of any affront to him. He had been moved by a flare of hate against Moore, which had cooled now and

left a taste like the nausea of a debauch in his mouth.

While his resentment had not been without justification, he admitted now that it had not been sufficient to warrant him in setting out maliciously to ruin Moore by a means which might break a hundred men whom he never had met. He might as well have gone on and forgotten it, as he had gone on and forgotten many a threat to knock his head off before. Moore had been testy that day. He was a man full of troubles, and it no doubt seemed to him that Dunham was a sort of pestiferous insect that couldn't be fanned away.

Bill saw it all in a wiser and cooler mind as he lay gazing wide-eyed at the stars, for that is a very good situation for a man to get hold of himself, measuring his stature against the universe that way, and finding out how very little he actually weighs.

A worse feature of the business was the certain alienation of Zora Moore. She would pass him as a stranger from that day; she would scorn him as a traitor to the interests of his native state, by which a man was required to stand and put up a good fight, after the heroic traditions of Old John Brown. And he had been thinking of arriving at that happy pass with her when he might hold her soft white chin in the cup of his hand, as he used to hold the chins of little girls—cold little chins, and wind-rough—when they fell and bumped them on the ice, long, long ago.

Bill had parted company with Hughes after the cattle were bedded down for the night, pickets thrown around them to guard against dispersion by panic or wanton design. Dunham had gone on north ten or

twelve miles, withdrawn from the trail, hobbled his horse and stretched out for needed repose. The strain of the day had been heavy; he was weary, and sore from unaccustomed travel in the saddle.

There was a smell of summer in the night wind, a sound of summer in the zirr of insects, which seemed far away, distant revellers in what bowers of green he could not guess. He was lonesome; he longed for the scent of a black, moist furrow, the melon-sweet odor of blooming corn.

It didn't appeal to him as much of a life, riding by day, and day after day, in the unvarying dumb routine of guarding plodding cattle on the trail, or watching over them on the range, to bunk down on the ground at night like a hog. Romance had glamored over the mind-cramping routine and the hardships, as romance always gilds its trumpery, after the fashion of sin.

As soon as it was light enough to find his horse, which had wandered far in the freedom of a too-humane hobble, Bill mixed up a mess of biscuit dough, which turned out a distressing failure of burnt crust and clammy interior, and leaded himself down like a diver. He thought if he felt as heavy to the horse as he did to himself with that mess inside him, he'd wear the poor old devil out before he reached the Arkansas. The sun was well up when he took the trail again, with a look toward the south, where he expected to see the dust of Hughes' herd on the march.

There was no sign of the herd. Bill speculated on how things were with Hughes by that time: whether the Kansas cattlemen had forced him to go back, or

were permitting him to advance under guard. He rode on northward in a leisurely canter, with the feeling of a man whose time was all his own, and not so very valuable at that.

Dunham soldiered along, making little side excursions now and then to inspect the varying nature of the soil, with more the interest of agriculturist than stockman, delaying purposely to bring himself past the Moore ranch about noon. He believed he would have a better chance of slipping by unseen at that hour, when the family would be feeding in the heavy-going, earnest range fashion.

All was quiet there when he passed, the sun hot on his shoulders, hot in the dust-white road. A few horses were dozing, neck over neck, in the corral; they lifted their heads and set their ears in a listless interest when they heard him. A few hens lolling in dust-wallows beside the road cut for the fence, expressing chicken resentment over the disturbance, which is a weak kind of protest at the best. Dunham felt a crawling thrill of apprehension in his scalp at the cackling. He feared one of the boys would pop out to see who was going by, and shout the news to Zora.

It would be an awkward thing to explain to Zora that he was the kind of a man who couldn't stay hired, in spite of her confident assurance that he'd stick this time. One explanation would involve another, and Zora would be the girl who could say things to make a man squirm. So Bill breathed easier when he had passed the house and rounded the little point of cottonwoods at the bend of the road.

He probably never should see Zora again, for he felt that his way led wide from that land. It gave him a sinking pang to think of that, for Zora was a girl that a man could easily like too well for his own peace. It made him lonesome and hollow-feeling to think of the entrancing allurements of her round white chin.

Bill rode along with his head bent, his heart as heavy as the sour biscuit dough he had mixed that morning. His road was drawing out between him and Zora; she would soon be far behind him, for his path would not lead back that way again, the one precious reality among the false figures and fancies which romance had set to deceive his eagerly credulous eyes.

How could he have been so stupid as to think of humbling Moore's arrogance and bringing his fortunes low without including Zora in the disaster? She would suffer as keenly as her father in any humiliation or loss that might fall on him. It was strange, but he had not thought of Zora as John Moore's daughter while his rage drove him on against the cattleman. It was hard, even in sober sanity and half-acknowledged regret, to think of Zora in that relation. She was no more like her father than an egg is like a hen.

A nice girl, a generous girl, where her father was overbearing, full of loud egotism, and profanely coarse. Perhaps Zora would grow to a fleshy redness in that atmosphere of cattle after a while, when she had married some cavalier of the range with a big mustache under his snout. Bill sighed over the thought. He wished better fortune for Zora, but there did not appear to be any plan in his horoscope for helping her

out. He was on his way; where it might lead he did not know.

Bill sighed again, turning a quick glance over his shoulder to see if anybody had come out of the house. All was quiet there; even the horses had lapsed into their sunny somnolence. From the hilltop where Shad Brassfield had told of the fittified man's revival, Bill took one last look at the house and said good-by. It was a shame that such a nice girl as Zora didn't have a father worthy of her.

From there Dunham swung on a little more briskly, thinking of the explanation he'd have to give MacKinnon, and of selling his horse and getting his ticket to Santa Fé, Zora Moore persisting in the background of his thoughts like prism spots before the eyes after one has looked too openly at the sun. At a turn of the trail he met her, the very substance of the shadow that could not be excluded from his mind.

Zora pulled up with a startled look; Bill hauled in so suddenly he skidded his horse through the dust, raising considerable commotion, for he had been pounding along at a pretty lively clip. Zora looked at him coldly. Bill's heart swung low at sight of her pale face and unfriendly eyes. The news of his exploit with the Texas herd had beaten him to Pawnee Bend.

"I see they let you live!" Zora said contemptuously.

"They didn't exac'ly kill me," Bill admitted, but with weak embarrassment, as if he apologised for being undeservedly alive.

"You bluffed it through, but you wouldn't 'a' done it if I'd been there!"

"No, Miss Zora," Bill replied, his voice steady and frank, "I wouldn't even 'a' tried it."

"You made it on the bluff you threw in my father's face, singlin' him out that way from the rest of them," she charged, hot blood rising in her pale face. "You knew darned well he wasn't a fightin' man—not that kind of a fightin' man."

"When you get the straight of it some day, and stand off and look at it calm and cool," Bill said, beginning to feel his contrition dissolving fast away as the incidents of his reception at Moore's camp flashed up like a flare revealing his just grievance, "you'll be a little easier on me, maybe."

"You made a quick deal, sellin' out on the fame you got by killin' Ford Kellogg," she sneered. "Your big name's worth money to you now, but wait and see where you'll land."

Bill turned his horse and drew up beside her, heading the way he had come. He put out his hand with a dignified slow motion, as if to fix her attention on some object down the road.

"I could say a whole lot on my side of this thing, but I know it wouldn't do a bit of good," he said. "I bid you good-by when I passed your house, so I guess I'll be rackin' on."

"Good-by?" She looked at him queerly, her eyes stretching, her mouth half open. "You must be crazy! I wasn't there."

"No, but I thought you were."

"Oh, Mr. Dunham! what made you do it, what made you do it!" she said, her contemptuous hard manner

changed suddenly to injured lamentation. "What made you want to turn on us this way and ruin us all?"

Bill looked at the road, his long face as solemn as if his last hope lay in the dust at his horse's feet. He sat that way in his meditative posture a little while, her beseeching, sorrowfully regretful words echoing in his ears.

"I stood there and sweat blood to keep my hand off of my gun"—looking up with disconcerting suddenness—"I took what he—what they said with my teeth shut on my tongue, and I rode away with a bullet singin' over my head. I let 'em cuss me and belittle me, and tell me what kind of big men they needed to keep Texas cattle out of here, and then I headed over that river swearin' I'd show him—show them if I wasn't man enough to help keep 'em out I was man enough to bring 'em in. I didn't so much consider the consequences then, for I was sore—I was sore to the bone."

He turned his earnest face away, to look off toward the south as if for the evidence that would prove to her he had made good on his intention. But the herd was many miles away; its dust was not rising high enough, if rising at all, to be seen at that great distance.

"Maybe I was wrong," he said, "but I was tired of bein' the under dog. I had to bear that long enough when I was a starved, cowed boy, picked on and kicked around by the bigger and richer fellers when I wasn't able to help myself. I put them days behind me when I came out here— Excuse me, Miss Zora."

He cooled off suddenly, as if he had become alarmed at showing that corner of his heart. The red embers



of anger faded out of his lean cheeks, the fire of resentment out of his eyes.

"I always did talk too much," he said slowly, his voice low as if he lay the charge to his own conscience, and not for the ears of anybody at all.

Zora reached out with quick impulse, leaning, and touched his shoulder.

"Did you give pa that letter?"

"I didn't think of it that minute, I was so rattled. They started on me as soon as I rode into camp. I sent it to him after I came back across the river yesterday morning."

"It might have made a big difference in the way he talked to you if you'd handed him the letter first," she said regretfully. "You saw what a difference it made in all of them after they'd heard about Kellogg. If it hadn't been for that you'd never 'a' got that herd through, Bill."

"I wasn't any better man after that than before."

"They thought you were, anyhow. If that herd brings in the fever it'll clean us out. Oh, Bill! why didn't you think of me—me and mother and the boys? We tried to treat you right when you were here."

"Hughes, the man that owns them, says they're clean cattle."

"They all say that, but they don't know. Their cattle never show it."

"Yes, you folks treated me white," Bill said, going back to the question which he was too honest to dodge.

"Hal Garland came by last night and told us about you bringin' the herd in. Everybody's gettin' their

cattle away from the trail—they're going to let this herd come on and load, now the damage is done. The news is all over the range to-day, and everybody's sore at you. Where are you going now?"

"Up to Pawnee Bend to sell my horse."

"Leavin'?"

Bill nodded, heavy with remorse for having brought this shadow of disaster to Zora's door. She was still friendly, in spite of the way she had come at him, and ready to be more than friendly, as he never had hoped she would be, only indulging the alluring speculation as another mirage of romance that he never could approach.

"I hoped you'd stay," she confessed wistfully, as for something gone. But I don't see how you can stay now."

"I didn't think there was anything to stay for," Bill said miserably.

"Whatever there was you spoiled it."

"I'm sorry," Bill said, his contrition far deeper than the waters of the Cimarron.

"Where are you going when you sell your horse, Bill?"

"I was thinkin' of New Mexico, but I may make it California; I don't know."

"Oh, what made you do it! what made you do it!"

There was a shake in her voice; it broke at the end in a sob. She turned her face away, to hide her tears, Bill knew. If he had suspected himself of treason to her before, he stood convicted of it now.

"I *was* a damn fool!" he said in abject bitterness.

Zora put her handkerchief to her nose. Bill saw her round white chin quiver as she gulped her tears.

"You—sure—was!" she said. "But maybe"—hopefully, turning to him with a quick light in her tearful eyes—"if it *is* a clean herd you can come back."

"And if it ain't," Bill leaned yearningly, his hand put out in expressive gesture of appeal, "if it ain't, Zora, maybe you can come to me?"

She shook her head and turned away, handkerchief pressed hard to her teeth.

"You'll be outlawed on this range, even mother will be against you. What made you do it, Bill—what made you do it!"

Bill couldn't answer that question even to his own satisfaction now. A reason for a man's acts might appear entirely valid when he hadn't a friend on earth; quite different when he had just one friend like Zora Moore. He felt so abject and mean he couldn't say a word.

"I know how you felt about it, Bill; I don't blame you like the rest of them do. Garland said he told them they'd made a mistake treatin' you that way, but he don't excuse you for endangerin' everybody to play even with a few. Nobody will, or not many, anyhow. It would have been better if you'd pulled your gun and cleaned up on 'em, but the way it stands I don't see what there is for you to do but go."

"Nobody's goin' to lose any cattle, Zora," he said. "Hughes has got a lot of Herefords, as fine and healthy lookin' cattle as any on this range—better than any

I've seen on it so far. I'd bet my life on it they never had anything wrong with 'em in their lives."

"That's what you've done," Zora said, nodding her head sadly. "No matter how it turns out, you've bet your life. They may not be expecting you to come on ahead of the herd—maybe you've got a chance if you work fast. But if you can't sell your horse don't hang around Pawnee Bend for that. Leave it there; I'll take care of sellin' it and send you the money if you'll write. They'll be down on me for it, but I don't give a darn. They might 'a' given you a little more decent deal than they did—pa and all the rest of them."

"You're the best friend I ever had, Zora. Nobody ever offered to risk as much as a dog-bite for me before in my life."

"They'll be after you as soon as they find you've left the Texas herd and come to town. It'd be safer if you didn't wait at all, but put your horse in the stable and take the first train. You can write to me when you get where you're going. I don't suppose there'll be much harm in that."

"I hate a fuss," Bill said cogitatively, looking hard at the ground, "but I don't like to be crowded when I'm goin' someplace. I never was run out of anywhere yet, Zora, and if they come at me that way they'll find me kind of hard to scare. I didn't break any law when I brought that Texas herd over the river."

"No, it would have been different if you'd broken the law. They don't go after a man down here near the line half as hard for breakin' the law as they do for hurtin' their feelings. You've hurt their pride, even if

they come through without losing any cattle, and that's going to be hard to square."

"Yes, I guess it runs in the human breed that way."

"You intended to leave the country, Bill," she said, as if reminding him of a good intention in the way of being disregarded.

"Of my own free will; not with somebody tellin' me I had to go. I don't mind dancin', either, but I object to somebody tryin' to make me do it by shootin' at my feet."

"But you were going, Bill—you were going!" Zora spoke almost frantically, as if everything in her life depended on his pursuit and faithful performance of his original intention.

"Yes, but I didn't have anything to stay for then," Bill replied serenely.

Zora pressed him farther, urging him, for her sake at last, to go. But the best she could get out of him when all was said was maybe. Maybe he'd go, maybe he wouldn't. He'd let her know.

There was no reservation in Bill's mind when they parted. He was not going to leave that country; that was a cinch. Not when he had found there the most precious thing that ever had entered his lean and lonely life. He didn't want to set up in business as a professional fighting man, but there was a whole lot of comfort in the thought that if they went to throwing lead he was a pretty handy man that way himself.

He looked around the broad open country, untrammelled by a fence, unmarked by the habitation of man as far as the eye could sweep, enlarging with a pleasant

home-feeling as he drew his breath deeply and felt his happiness increase. That country, lately so bare and unfriendly to his gaze, had become the most beautiful, the one to be desired above all the lands of earth.

More than that: it was Kansas, his Kansas. It was home. He'd like to see the color of any man's hair that was going to make him dig his toes in the road to leave it, now that he had more to stay for than flocks and herds, or suzerainty over unfenced plains.

## CHAPTER XIX

### MALLON SHAKES A LEMONADE

ZORA was right about it: Bill Dunham was an outlaw under the moral code of the range, which moral code was purely a business one, to be sure, a code of mine and thine, with far the greater stress on *mine*. They'd get him, MacKinnon said. He advised Bill to hit the road at once, not waiting to sell his horse. Ride it, MacKinnon said; go on to the Panhandle or somewhere, and get a job. Go anywhere, but get out of southwestern Kansas as fast as he could hop.

No, said Bill. He was beginning to like that country; he'd continue to stick around awhile. He changed his thirty-eight gun for one that would make more noise, as well as a bigger hole in the anatomy of the species, opened a dicker for a rifle and scabbard that some Texas cowboy up with a trail herd had left with MacKinnon on an unpaid bill. Dunham got this for twelve dollars in the end, and hung it on his saddle, his horse hitched in front of the hotel as if he intended to go somewhere in a hurry, when there was nothing farther from his mind.

MacKinnon said a man might think Dunham had discovered a gold mine from the way he was determined to stay there. Bill pulled one of his rare, slow-coming, hard-going grins, and replied that a gold mine was cheap stuff compared to what he had discovered.

So that day passed, uneventfully, Dunham's horse at the rack in front of the hotel, except for the time it was putting away a stiff feed of oats in the livery barn. And then Dunham sat around waiting while the animal made its leisurely, luxurious meal. He chatted with the liveryman, who was distant, but respectful.

The story of Dunham's exploit had gone not only to the utmost sod hut in Pawnee Bend by that time, but to the far places of the range as well. He had brought the Texas herd across in the face of seventy-five or eighty men without pulling a gun. It was something to command respect, if no especial admiration. When a man came among them in Pawnee Bend who never pulled his gun except to use it, they walked humbly in his presence. He was a pretty good sort of man to leave alone.

Dunham kept his horse hitched in front of the hotel until after dark, the scuffed and worn scabbard, with its battered rifle-stock showing, hung on the saddle-horn. Nothing happened to disturb the serenity of the town, which appeared to be getting along very well without a marshal. It was nearly nine o'clock when he took the horse to the livery barn to leave it for the night. That done, he took a stroll around town, making himself as inconspicuous as possible, hoping to avoid the windy Bergen in case he might be abroad.

Few men were in town that night, probably due to the fact that everybody available had been called to the border or put under orders to stand ready to be called. Dunham thought it would be only a neighborly act to drop in and see Charley Mallon, who had treated him



decently enough on a certain day. He wanted to get a line on public feeling regarding the Texas cattle, not quite convinced that the town stood a unit against him as MacKinnon had said.

Business was slack in the Casino, where Charley Mallon stood in white shirt and apron behind the bar, sleeves rolled up on his long stringy arms, ready for a rush, and in a cynical and surly humor because it did not come. A first-class bartender would not be able to maintain his social position unless things began to pick up pretty soon.

Mallon greeted Dunham like a prodigal come to spend. Here was one man who was doing something for his country, anyhow, let the rest of them in Pawnee Bend sleep on. Mallon said as much, although in different words. He was shining with admiration for Dunham's feat in conducting the Texans across the border. He suggested champagne.

When Dunham declined the drink which cattlemen regularly ordered with their catfish when out to impress the civilized centers, such as Wichita and Kansas City, with their sophistication and wealth, Mallon insisted on shaking one of his notable lemonades, to which he added an egg as a special mark of his esteem.

"You've done more for this town by openin' the trail to them Texas cowboys than any man ever done for it, Mr. Dunham," Mallon declared, or rather announced, his voice lifted for the benefit of his customers.

Bill put down the glass, which he had drained at one long pull, like the burgomaster of Rothenburg. He wiped the mucilage of raw egg from his chin, and stood

thoughtfully studying the grain of the mahogany bar, which was entirely honest mahogany, no matter what other substitutes one might find in Poteet's Casino.

"I hope it won't do anybody harm," he said.

"Business in this town would have to shut up without the Texas trade, Mr. Dunham," Mallon said, hands on the bar, eyes roving up and down and across to the tables where a few gamblers tempted fortune with their slender earnings. Here was a notable guest at his bar; the news of his presence would stimulate a forward movement, quickly spread to the outside and draw trade. Curiosity could not excuse itself in a frontier saloon. To enter was equivalent to an order.

Some of the cowboys at the games looked around at the loud, rolling, Irish pronunciation of Dunham's name. Others, who were trifling with the ladies of the establishment along the bar or at card tables, quickened and began to talk between their lips.

"Name yours, gentlemen," said Mallon, in a sort of general challenge to set some money moving in his direction or heels knocking toward the door. One of the ladies got busy with the piano, a high-backed old jingle-box with the ivory coating gone from several keys, making it look as if it had lost some of its teeth. They played the piano *fortissimo* in Pawnee Bend those days.

Gentlemen named theirs, and ladies carried it to them on trays, partaking thereof with ingenuous cordiality. The little flurry of business made Mallon feel better. He came along to where Dunham lounged against the bar, wiping in the entirely useless and mechanical

way bartenders used to do, with a circular movement as if he wound himself up.

“Pawnee Bend would dry up and blow away if it wasn’t for the Texas trade,” Mallon said. “There wouldn’t be a decent place left runnin’ in this town in six months if these Kansas cattlemen shut up the trails and kep’ them Texas cowboys out like they want to. It would come down to a class of joints no decent man’d put his face in. Gentlemen, what’s yours?”

The gentlemen who were targets of this pertinent shot had come lounging up to the bar in a bow-legged cowboy shamble from one of the tables. Theirs was whisky, of which each took as big a slug as the law allowed, scorning the chaser that Mallon stood out with each glass.

Some of the cowboys were attempting to follow the speedy, though somewhat erratic, course of the waltz the pianist was offering, encouraged and aided in this pursuit by the ladies of the house, who were familiar with the rapids and shallows of that tune. These ladies went to it with purely business alacrity and, like a coyote family, it was surprising what amount of noise a party so small could raise.

They rollicked and raced around, up and down the long room, cowboy enthusiasm and pleasure expressed in one of the two ways their limited resources could command. As the decorum of the occasion, as well as the safety of the ladies, did not permit shooting, they yipped.

Yipping is now a lost accomplishment; it passed with the old-time cowboy. Feeble echoes of it may be heard

at times on the ranges of to-day, and at the big stockyards when cattle are being unloaded into the pens, but to one who has memories of those wide-flaring days on the Kansas frontier, the sound is a sham and theatrical imitation. There was a wild note in the yip of the old cowboy. When one hears it in these days of Hollywood vaqueros he knows the yipper is one who follows his herd in a Ford.

Not that art is much poorer, or that morality has suffered a setback in the passing of the old-time cowboy and his wild, high-pitched, tremulous howl. It was a sound to raise the hair on the head of a listener whose years did not permit his participation in such scenes as were enacted nightly in Poteet's Casino in the roaring little city of Pawnee Bend. There is something in police sirens reminiscent of that high-voiced revelry.

That sort of thing was new to Bill Dunham, but he had a good face for masking interest, curiosity or surprise. He stood like a man absorbed in some deep problem of his own while the dancers swirled around him with a more or less rhythmic scraping on the rough-boarded floor. He was singularly interested in the two men who stood at the bar a few feet from him, waiting a little while between shots, talking in close-mouthed confidences between themselves.

One of these was a tall narrow man, bony, inflamed, morose; the other a hand shorter, of good proportions, younger and quite handsome in a purely animal way. The larger one was a spiny-featured man who seemed to disregard his appearances, probably in the full knowledge that no amount of adornment would do him

any good. Nature had made him so lean and mean, so long-necked and gobbler-eyed, that scraping his hide would only reveal his imperfections that much plainer to the eye. His black hair was tipped with gray.

The other was a pinkish-white man, his hair fair, his lazy eyes light. He looked like he might be an overbearing fellow, give him a chance, Dunham thought, one to make a pretext for a quarrel out of very little if he had the strength of numbers and size on his side.

These two appeared to be alone, their attention strictly on their affairs. As they drank their several rounds, deliberately, giving each drink time to soak up before putting another on top of it, they talked in close-mouthed way, never turning an eye, except casually, in Dunham's direction. His fame did not appear to move their curiosity. Old-timers on the trails, Dunham thought them to be.

Others were coming in; Mallon was up to the elbows in business, taking his drinks when invited in, which he generally was, with the systematic motion of a man pouring something into a jug. He didn't get a bit livelier for these frequent jolts of raw liquor, or a shade redder. He was as pale as a fish, with lean jaws and melancholy, reproachful dark eyes, which gave him the appearance of an ascetic rather than a repository for quarts of strong liquor every week of his life.

Dunham would have gone his way when this tide of activity began to set in against the bar, only that Mallon kept up an over-shoulder conversation with him as he ranged up and down the bar. His dexterity was admirable to watch; Dunham found diversion in it,

greatly as he would have been pleased to go. He did not want to be discourteous, yet the publicity which Mallon was bent on giving him made him feel that he was playing a braggart's part.

He told Mallon at last that he'd have to be traveling, and they shook hands across the bar, Charley giving him a loud invitation to make his headquarters there when in town, taking up the lemonade glass, which he had left standing, the curl of lemon peel in it proclaiming what it had contained.

That was an advertisement Charley was too shrewd to put away out of sight while it had a drop of virtue in it. This was Bill Dunham, the empty glass had said, the lemonade-drinking gunman, the fear of whom was so great in the breasts of men that he could drive a herd of Texas cattle across the line without ever throwing hand to his gun.

Dunham felt their eyes on him as he went to the door, a lull falling in the noisy diversions of the place as they forgot their pleasures to watch this slow-speaking, bashful young man go his way. A precarious way, and a doubtful one, as the way of all killers, no knowing who might be waiting for him outside to take a shot at him from the dark.

No thought like this crossed Dunham's mind as he stepped out of the door. He had only a feeling of relief at getting out of there; the fresh air was welcome to his nostrils after the fumes of Charley Mallon's hospitable presence. He walked briskly up the street in direction opposite the hotel, thinking he would stretch

his legs a little while along the road before going to bed.

Things had come to him so fast in the three days since leaving Pawnee Bend for the border that his encounter with Kellogg seemed a remote incident of the past. Not so regrettable, either, as to cause him any further uneasiness. Strangely, the laughable incident of the fittified man was much fresher in his thoughts.

When Dunham returned to the Family Hotel he found MacKinnon behind the desk, smoking reflectively, the register at his elbow. There was nobody lounging in the office, although the sound of movement overhead indicated that guests had arrived. MacKinnon nodded, his behavior distant and uneasy.

"I thought maybe you'd changed your mind and gone," he said.

"Where to?" Dunham inquired, pretending surprise.

"Panhandle, as I told you. First thing you know, kid, you'll hang around this man's town a little bit too long."

"I didn't run into anybody that acted very sore," Dunham said. He turned the register as if looking for a familiar name among the late arrivals. "If I can't hook up to a job around here I guess I'll have to move."

"You can railroad, if that'd suit your tastes, like I told you before."

"No, I don't think I'm cut out for a railroader."

"Well, I tell you now, Bill, if you've got a quarter the sense I gave you credit for you'll straddle your horse and leave here to-night. You're a man that's standin' between two fires right now, either one of

them likely to spring up and singe you before you can jump—unless you take an old fool's advice and get out of the way while there's time and a clear road."

"You mean the cattlemen on one hand, and—who?"

"The solid business interests of this town, if you've got to have it straight between the eyes, Bill. Texas cattle were all right in their day, but this country ain't buildin' its future on them: it's the ones on the range around us that mean life or death for Pawnee Bend. This will be the last year Texas cattle will come up the trails, if they don't close the state to 'em tight after this herd you brought in. My opinion is it will be the last herd of Texas cattle ever to come on foot to a Kansas town.

"Personally, I don't blame you for bringin' in that herd. I might go on to say it will be to my profit to have them southern cowboys here, and it would be more to my profit to have the country wide open to all comers from down that way. But my profit might be loss to my neighbors, you see. I built on the future when I put this buildin' up; I had my last movable, collapsible cardboard hotel in Caldwell. This one I built up from the ground to remain and stay. A man gets weary of roamin' and rovin', Will-ium."

"He sure does," Bill agreed emphatically, as if he, as a wanderer, had come to the end of the rope himself.

"You made friends here, and you might 'a' kep' them but for this unfortunate step, well-intended as it was, no doubt."

"Not a bit of it," Bill denied, just as emphatically as he had endorsed the preceding sentiment. "I didn't



help Hughes out of any good wishes for him. I did it because I wanted to sock one man. I wanted to sock it to him so hard he'd stagger all the rest of his life."

"Vengeance is a thing that turns out sometimes to be sweet in the mouth and bitter in the belly, as the Book says, Will-ium."

"I'm beginnin' to think so myself," Bill confessed frankly, giving MacKinnon a square and honest look. "It's something like the cracker of my own whip had quirked back and cut me across the face."

MacKinnon nodded, and nodded again, to express his opinion that it was very well put in those words.

"The cowmen they'll be after you—I've got it straight they'll be after you, strong—and there's a crowd of men, some of them representin' the solid business interests in this town, swearin' to-night you'll dance on air if you're here after breakfast in the mornin'. There you have it, Will-ium. You see the reason for my anxiety, as a friend and well-wisher, to see you on your way to-night."

There was no use trying to explain to MacKinnon that he didn't care a damn for the sentiments of the solid business interests of Pawnee Bend, and less than that for the attitude of the cattlemen. That would only open inquiries into something that could not be spoken of to any man.

"I can't exac'ly leave to-night," Dunham said slowly, pondering it in his deep, meditative way, "and I expect, more than likely, I'll be around here to-morrow. But I don't want to cause you any trouble, or make any muss around your *ho*-tel, Mr. MacKinnon. If

my presence in your house is goin' to embarrass you, I'll take my grip and move."

"No guest of mine was ever taken out of my door to be hung!" MacKinnon said, drawing himself up in dignity and pride for the clean record of his hospitality. "No guest of mine ever shall be taken out of my door to be hung as long as I can handle a gun. You can rest on that."

Dunham said that was all the assurance any reasonable guest could ask to quiet his apprehensions, no matter how deep his guilt. As for himself, he did not stand in need of anybody's protection to insure a sound repose. The thought of a bed was a luxurious anticipation after two nights on the soft side of lumpy earth. He said good-night, and climbed the stairs, which came down steeply into the well of the office, arranged that way so MacKinnon could catch headstrong or careless guests and shake them down for the bill.

## CHAPTER XX

### A NEW GUN IS TESTED

**DURING** the night Dunham's attitude toward his situation changed. Perhaps it was a subconscious adjustment, at work within him while he slept, or it may have been only the assertion of his common sense over the stubborn spirit of defiance. He woke in the conviction that he had made a mistake by remaining in Pawnee Bend, and that he would complicate it if he stopped there to tempt the rope some solid citizen might be knotting for his neck even then.

There was no chance of getting anything under his feet in that town but air, a foundation altogether too uncertain for a young man of ambitions and matrimonial designs. Nobody would give him a job; by staying there he would only be inviting disaster. They were accustomed to handling wilder men than he in that country, and it was as true that morning as when John Moore had put it bluntly some days back in Bill's adventurous career, that he could not fight them all.

It was unpleasant to think of a mob composed of the solid business interests of Pawnee Bend—of Puckett, Bergen, and the grumpy hardware man who had cursed because there was nobody to pay for the window broken by the fittified man. It would be better to slip away quietly, cowardly as it would seem to go,

than to exasperate them to some desperate action by the continued challenge of his presence.

There was no question but he stood outlawed on that range. Nobody would give him a job, unless it might be on the railroad gang, which did not appeal to him. His money would waste away if he continued in Pawnee Bend, where there would be constant danger of embroilment with riders of the range who would be seeking a pretext for taking his life. After breakfast he would get his horse and depart quietly, heading for the next westward town, where he could sell the animal and continue on to Santa Fé by train.

He could not hope to see Zora before going; it would be an affront to Moore, after all that had passed, to visit his place. He would write to her, post the letter in Pawnee Bend, and she would be happily relieved to know that he had taken her advice. He would go on in the expectation of a happy reunion when he should find his place and get something more substantial under his feet than a prospect of unlimited Kansas air.

MacKinnon had not said whether the time for his departure had been arbitrarily fixed by the solid interests. Dunham believed MacKinnon had named the hour in his own friendly desire to make it safe. Early morning was a dead hour in Pawnee Bend; few people but railroaders got up in time for the ordinary farmer's breakfast. Even the stores opened late, with the exception of the butcher shop, which supplied the breakfast steaks, and the saloons, which furnished the appetizers necessary to create a yearning for the butcher's beef. And the saloons, of course, never closed.

The breakfast steak and the before-breakfast dram were the established formula in Pawnee Bend. Gentlemen who went out for the early nip ambled on to the butcher's and brought home the breakfast steak. When the wives of Pawnee Bend put the skillets on in the morning, the atmosphere of the town was blue with the smoke of beef that had been care-free steer the night before.

Dunham felt like a sluggard when he went down stairs, for the sun was high. All his years he had been accustomed to a generous handicap in his daily race with the sun. MacKinnon was on duty, ready to collect from guests as they came clumping on high boot-heels down his resounding stairs. He eyed Dunham's overstuffed suitcase with approval.

MacKinnon said he was glad reason had prevailed against the stubborn spirit of youth. The more territory a man left behind him in life's travels the farther he could see ahead. He was greatly relieved that Will-ium had taken an old fool's advice—he was not a day over fifty—and decided to journey on. Yes, he would keep the suitcase there, and send it along when Bill supplied the address.

After putting away the liberal portion of breakfast steak they cut for a man in Pawnee Bend in those days, Dunham settled with MacKinnon and said good-bye. MacKinnon asked no questions on his destination or intentions, but seemed under a nervous anxiety to have him gone.

It was then about seven o'clock, which seemed to Dunham a very late hour for making a start. He

dropped the note he had written to Zora in the post office, and went angling across the street toward the livery stable to get his horse.

As Dunham crossed the street he saw the two men who had attracted his attention in the Casino the night before, standing in front of the San Angelo café. They were for the road also, he thought, wondering what their business could be that called for so much close conference. They were standing there in the sun picking their teeth, talking in the same oblivious manner to outside interference as last night when they leaned on Poteet's bar. They hadn't the appearance of very much consequence. Cowboys on the move from one job to another, he judged, dismissing them with the thought.

When Dunham came leading his horse out of the livery stable he found the two strangers standing near the door, looking about aimlessly, as if they had the day before them and didn't know what to do with it. He was adjusting a stirrup strap, when the elder of the pair, the tall one with the dusty stubble of beard, exclaimed to his companion and pointed to the horse.

Dunham nodded across the saddle as they came sauntering up, in the wide-legged, ungainly gait of men who lived in the saddle, thinking they wanted to talk. They ignored the salutation with severe aloofness, looking at the horse, then at Dunham, then again at the horse, a hard look of accusation in their eyes.

"Where in the hell're you goin' to with that horse, feller?" the lanky man asked. He took hold of the bridle and stood glowering over the horse's head, Dunham with a foot in the stirrup ready to mount.

"Well, I don't know as that's exac'ly any of your business, friend," Dunham replied, outwardly unruffled, but feeling in that area which he defined as his craw a sinking and dragging, which told him as well as any barometer of human passions that ever might be devised, that trouble was standing in the road.

"I make it my business when I find a man ridin' off on my horse," the slab-sided fellow said. "I've been trailin' that horse, and I'm here to take him."

"You'll have to prove your ownership—I'm not goin' to take your word for that, pardner," Dunham replied, getting a little hot around the sweatband. "I bought this outfit from the man that owns this stable, and I've got his bill of sale."

"I ain't carin' a cuss about the man that had him; I'm talkin' to the man that's got him. Back up there, feller, and give me this horse!"

Dunham didn't believe the man ever saw the horse before. He raised his hand in a cautioning gesture, turned to the door and called the liveryman, whom he had left in his dusty little office smelling of neat's foot oil only a minute before.

The liveryman had disappeared. He didn't answer to the hail that Dunham sent roaring through the empty barn, but an open door at the back told which way he had gone. Whether he had dusted it out of caution, or because there was something crooked about the ownership of the horse, Dunham did not try to guess.

It came to Dunham suddenly, through that subtle sense that pricks its ears when a man confronts a situation bulging with danger, and strains every faculty to

escape its threat, that this was merely a trick to involve him in an altercation upon which an excuse for killing him could be hung. He believed these two had been sent there by the cattlemen to put an end to what they considered his pernicious activity. He was a stranger who might have influential relatives. There must be a color of justification for the deed, and these rascals had been inspired by sight of his horse.

"Now, look here, pardner," Dunham said, argumentatively cool, his foot withdrawn from the stirrup, hands free of the saddle, but the rein still in his left hand, "if this is your horse, what is his brand?"

The brand, the letters SJ, was on the left shoulder, opposite the claimant, and out of his sight.

"I don't have to prove the brand on anything I own," the spokesman of the pair said—the other had not opened his mouth to let out a word—with a significant motion toward his gun.

This confirmed Dunham in the belief that the man was not honestly trying to regain possession of a stolen horse, but working to frame a situation that would provoke Dunham to go after his gun. They were confident of getting him, being doubled on him that way, working to a plan they no doubt had perfected well in advance.

Dunham did some of the quickest thinking of his life in the next few seconds. Their intention could not be altered by further words. If he mounted and started out of town, they would kill him on the pretext that he was escaping with a horse they believed had been stolen from them. Even if it should be plain to every-



body their claim was only a pretense, it would be enough to clear them in the code of that lawless land.

"You never saw that horse before!" Dunham said, a cold bristling feeling sweeping over him. The alertness of his body and mind was intensified by the exigency. He jerked the bridle, breaking the hooked-fingerhold the man had on the bit ring, whirled the animal, gave it a sharp slap, and turned it back into the stable with a jump and a grunt. The man who had been holding the bridle had to jump lively to keep from being trampled as the horse whirled.

"He'll stay there till the liveryman comes back, then he'll do the explainin,' if there's any comin' to you fellers," Dunham said.

He had maneuvered the horse into the livery barn without turning his back for a second, and at the same time put a little distance between himself and the two men. He was standing not more than ten feet from the door, the man who had done the talking on his left, the other almost directly facing him.

These two now began to spread apart, edging along watchfully, their aim being to divide Dunham's attention and get him off guard. It was easier to watch two men in one place than two men separated. When they had him right, they'd get him with little risk to themselves. That was the theory of it, as Dunham could see.

At the same time Dunham began to back off, as he had backed away from Ford Kellogg in that same street, not two hundred feet from where he stood playing his part in the prologue to this new tragedy. The

craft that was the most subtle force of his fighting heritage told him the farther he withdrew from them the harder it would be for them to coördinate action with intention.

Few people were on the street to witness the formation of this fighting triangle. Such as were abroad stopped in their tracks when they saw the hostile maneuvering, the wise ones dodging into the most convenient doors. The butcher, informed by a breathless customer of what was shaping up in the street, came to the door with his cleaver in his hand.

Across the street MacKinnon sat in his office reading a Kansas City paper brought over by the night operator when he went off duty, unconscious of Fate's busy writing before his very door what might turn out to be the last paragraph in Bill Dunham's brief, adventurous tale.

Nothing more was said by the weedy lank scoundrel who had pushed the unfounded quarrel to this ominous pass; not a word was uttered on either side. The argument in the case was finished; nothing was wanting but the decision, which must come in a hot streak very soon.

Dunham was prickling all over with a cold nervous thrill that maybe was nothing more noble than a savage exultation in the fight. There was no thought of danger in him, nothing but the clear, sharp calculation of chances, the keen watch for opportunity.

Give him the bulge, he kept telling himself, his main concern with the thinner man. He was the dangerous one, he was the surer one, but keep within the law; give him the bulge.

This man was sidling along into the street, scuffing his feet in the quick dragging movement of a boy who plays off base toward goal in some game of wits and speed, something in his movement of plain intent to deceive. His companion had backed up against the front of the barn, where he stood surly and watchful as if held at bay. His hand was near his gun, but not on it. They, also, were making a pretense of keeping within the law.

Dunham had been edging toward the barn door as he backed warily off, with a thought of dodging inside. That would put him out of sight of the man against the wall, and give him an even break. The opening was wide and high, cut to admit a wagon loaded with hay; the tall flimsy doors were folded back against the outside wall, one propped with a neckyoke, the other anchored against the wind by an old wagon wheel. A dash of six or eight feet would put Dunham inside.

How to make it was the question. He knew he would be throwing his life down if he turned his back an instant, and if he tried to crawfish that lanky man would let him have it where he lived. The fellow was watching to grab the slightest excuse for jerking out his gun, and this apparent desire to escape would give him all the grounds he needed to make a case. Sending his horse in ahead would look like part of a crafty ruse. The thought stopped Dunham in his tracks.

All this maneuvering had taken place in a very few seconds, so quickly, indeed, that the dust raised by Dunham's horse when it scurried into the barn still hung in the door. When Dunham stopped, the long

man stopped. The three of them stood waiting for the next move.

Who was to make it? That was the big question in Dunham's mind. They were not there to let him get away; he might as well force them to show their hands soon as late. With this intention he made a feint of breaking for the door. The pale man with his back to the wall jerked out a quick:

"Look out!"

There was not more than five yards between Dunham and either man, and about an equal distance separating the partners in this double-cinched scheme to have his life. Dunham saw both of them go after their guns at that signal, as he knew it to be. He was standing with right foot thrown back toward the door, desperately alert, hand ready to drop to his gun, a gun, as he remembered with a terrible surge of apprehension, that he never had fired.

This realization gave Dunham a tremendous jolt. It made him feel as if his last hope was gone, that he had bungled the start of that desperate race and never could regain his chance. The long man was throwing down on him when Dunham jerked his gun and fired.

The other man had put his confidence in his partner's hitherto infallible hand, a misguided trust, as he realized too late. When Dunham fired, the lanky man's gun-hand jerked up, the shot going wide and wild. Dunham had heard a chicken make the same sharp little gasping cluck when its head was whipped off quickly with an ax as the tall flat man made in his throat when that bullet cut through his heart.

Without turning on his heel, Dunham flipped his gun and caught the fair-skinned man through the hand while his pistol-barrel was scraping the mouth of his scabbard. The shot that the flinching jerk of the fellow's stung fingers fired tore down his leg in a bloody furrow. He dropped his gun, his right hand cut across back of the knuckles as if he had been chopped with an ax. He never would sling a gun with that hand again. His partner lay on his face in the road, his long arms flung wide, like a pilgrim at Mecca embracing the ground the prophet's feet have pressed.

## CHAPTER XXI

### PAWNEE BEND SNARLS

DUNHAM rammed his gun against the wounded man's ribs, but there was no further thought of fight in him. He stood nursing his crippled hand in his sound one, looking at the damage with that rueful expression one sees in the face of a woman when she picks up the fragments of a valued cup. There was a splotch of blood on the scoundrel's thigh which showed he had tapped himself deeper than the skin.

The shooting had brought such of the town's inhabitants as were out of bed into the street, and many who were late sleepers by reason of nocturnal habits to the windows in their slumber garments. A general, but somewhat cautious, movement set in toward the livery barn, which became almost a rush when MacKinnon came tearing over, consternation in his face.

"You've been workin' that gun again, Bill!" he said, viewing the result of the combat with expression so sorrowful it might have been thought some of his friends had fallen. "I hoped to God I could get you out of here before you could work that gun again!"

"Now, give me the straight of this thing!" Dunham demanded, shoving the wounded man against the barn, gun against his tank. "Did that man have any claim on my horse, or was this a put-up job?"

The surly fellow glowered, but kept his mouth shut.

Blood was streaming from his shattered hand, blood was creeping over his boot out of the fold of his trouser-leg at the knee. Men came running up with beefsteak gravy and egg on their chins, some of them chewing the bite they had put into their mouths the moment before starting. They pushed up, silent, staring, to look at this desperate Bill Dunham who was loose again with his fateful gun.

"They said I stole their horse, they crowded it on me," Dunham turned to MacKinnon to explain.

"It's a terrible job you've done among 'em, William!" MacKinnon said, shuddering at the sight.

"Did your pardner ever own that horse?" Dunham pressed the question, twisting his gun-barrel into the bleeding rascal's bowels.

"He said he did; that's all I know about it," the man replied.

"Everybody in this town knows I bought that horse from the liveryman," Dunham said, glowering around on the crowd that seemed to side with this chipped scoundrel. He kicked the fellow's gun out of the way, and slipped his own into the scabbard. "Somebody take this man to a doctor before he bleeds to death," he said, shoving him roughly toward the crowd.

The doctor was on hand, ready for such business as the wreckage might yield, as well as Schubert, who was craning his neck to see, stroking his whiskers with eager hand. When Schubert saw that it was an even split between him and the doctor, he went off to fetch his board.

Dunham drew MacKinnon into the barn, where he

told him briefly how the two strange men had accosted him, and charged him with having stolen property belonging to the one who had paid for the false claim with his life.

“I believe it was a framed-up job. He couldn’t tell me the brand on that horse. Do you know either of them?”

“No, they’re strangers to me. But it’s dreadful, William, the way you’ve got to go on killin’ and slayin’. I wish to God—”

“So do I, but that don’t help me any now. I tell you, MacKinnon, those two men were sent here to get me.”

“I don’t doubt it. And what are you goin’ to do now?”

“I’m goin’ on my way if nobody else shoves in to stop me. I wonder where that damn horse went?”

Plainly it had gone through the barn and out the door left open by the liveryman in his hurry to escape being drawn into the quarrel. Dunham expected to find the animal in the corral back of the building, wondering why the liveryman had shown such panic over the fuss, when no blame could attach to him. He had acted as agent for the cowboy who left the horse there to be sold. His bill of sale stated as much, in the cautious custom of those days, when the discrimination of ownership was not so very finely drawn by certain gentry who rode horses round about the land.

There were no horses in the corral, the gate of which swung open, and Dunham’s horse was nowhere in sight. There was plenty of territory for a horse to throw its feet in behind the scene of Pawnee Bend’s principal



street, and Bill Dunham's horse must have stepped lively. There wasn't a clump of bushes big enough to hide a horse within the limit of human vision; not a ravine, not a hill. The land spread away there toward the east as level as if the sea which once covered it had drained off only a little while ago, such a little while, indeed, that the grass had not got much of a start.

Nearly every building along the street had its shanty stable in the back, for that was a country where a man's legs were very short in the vast spaces between spots on the map. Dunham was unable to account for the rapid disappearance of the horse. Only a few minutes had passed since he turned the animal into the barn. It could not have gone far, perhaps across the railroad, where it might be picking around behind the string of boarding cars.

But it was not there. The same red-armed, manly woman who had refused to feed him a few days before, and the bleary, hairy, ashy consort who had ordered him to make tracks for the favored point of consignment in Pawnee Bend, answered his inquiries graciously, even eagerly. They came down out of the car in their desire to show friendly coöperation, for Dunham was known to everybody on both sides of the tracks by that time, by name and fame, if not by sight. He was a man to be propitiated. They would have set a special table for him in the boarding train that morning if he had asked for a meal.

No, they hadn't seen a horse with saddle and bridle on roaming around over there. Toward the south the

land began to rise in the swells that became broken country near the river, but it was considerable distance to the first rise big enough to hide a horse. The animal had not come that way, Dunham was certain, but where it had gone was a puzzle.

Dunham was not thinking very clearly just then, his faculties being in a state of readjustment after the pulling strain of the fight. He was hazy and dizzy, a heavy numbness blunting his reasoning powers, which lumbered around like a clumsy driver trying to back a wagon into a barn door. He went back to the barn to see if the horse might have dodged into a stall and passed his notice, a throbbing in his temples, a sinking dull feeling of melancholy bearing down on him like a sodden load.

It was a terrible thing to have to kill a man, even a vicious, mean-grained villain who was out to have your life. It pulled down on a man's heart; it saddened him, it made the sun smoky and the day obscure.

After another fruitless search of the barn, Bill ranged along the back shanties, thinking the fool creature might have run into an open door somewhere. No sign of him there, nothing standing open to invite a vagrant horse. Bill went up one side of town and down the other, his trouble increasing at every step. He skirmished among the outlying scattered small houses, inquiring of frowsled women who appeared in the doors, or of sluggardly men who hoed and weeded in anemic small gardens, or stripped lean cows in dooryard lots.

Nobody had seen a horse, but they all picked up with lively interest when they recognized the notorious Bill

Dunham with his infallible pistol hanging on his hip. Some of the men trailed along with him, eager to do a service to such a notable character; women lingered in doors to look after him, dumbly awed by the passing of a man whose name was so terrible, as they simply and confidently believed, in the ears of cattlemen that he could walk through a hundred of them without ever throwing hand to his gun.

Dunham must have put in nearly an hour tearing around looking for that blamed horse. The fool thing had disappeared as completely as if a seam had split in the prairie and enveloped it. Bill came poling out on the railroad fully convinced that the horse had not accomplished such a complete disappearance unaided.

Somebody had grabbed that horse when it left the corral, and either ridden it off or hidden it in some shed. But that belief hardly would warrant him in going around demanding stable owners to show him what horses they were harboring that morning. Trouble would attend such a proceeding, and he was a man who had trouble enough on his hands for one day.

He headed back to the livery barn to see if the owner had returned, thinking he'd be in a hell of a fix if he couldn't find that horse. His new slicker, his coat, his blankets, grub, rifle and ammunition were on the horse, which was at once his ticket and his conveyance to a point far distant from the troubled atmosphere of Pawnee Bend.

Bill stood on the station platform, almost where he had stood on the day of his first arrival in Pawnee Bend, looking up the street, thinking resentfully of the

trick somebody had turned on him, vaguely conscious of the strange quietude of the town. The street was deserted; there was not a boot-heel thumping the board sidewalks its entire length. The hitching-racks were empty, but that was to be expected so early in the day. A woman was coming out of the butcher shop, turning toward the railroad, the sole person abroad in the length of that sunny street.

It looked like a trifling, unsubstantial place, Bill thought, spread out like a spatter of something dropped in a dusty road. A mean looking town, as ugly as botch carpenters could build it and hot sun could warp it out of shape; a place a man ought to be happier for leaving than living in, not one thing about it that even success could endear.

The woman was coming over that way, her dress blowing in the wind that always set in about eight o'clock. The sun flashed on a ring she wore on the hand that held her package of meat, and she came along nimbly, bending a little to shield her eyes from the sun. The agent's wife, he recognized her, a young, comely woman whom he had seen helping her husband at the telegraph keys.

She looked pale and agitated, Dunham thought, as she hurried across the rails, coming to the platform where it sloped wedge-like to the ground, a few yards from where he stood. Her eyes were big and frightened as she came up to him, and Dunham turned away, feeling a debasing sweep of shame for the notoriety of his name that made a woman afraid to pass him by.

Dunham heard her stop, and her voice, almost a whisper:

“Mr. Dunham! Mr. Dunham!”

He turned in surprise. She was standing near, one hand at her throat as if fright or emotion oppressed her, panting through her open lips. Whatever had given her that turn, Dunham saw at once, it was not the sight of him.

“They’re after you!” she whispered, pointing up the street where all seemed so placidly empty. “You must go—quick, quick!”

“After me?” he said incredulously, forgetting MacKinnon’s warning in his astonishment.

“In the livery barn—a crowd of them with guns! Get out of town, quick!”

She flitted past him, out of sight in a moment around the corner of the depot, her friendly fear for his safety no greater than her concern that somebody had seen her warning him, and would lay up a grudge that would make life unendurable for her and her husband in that town.

Dunham understood now why the street was empty. They expected him to pass along there from his horse-hunt, his movements having been spied on all the time. Nobody wanted to be seen speaking to him, even to the exchange of the slightest word, for fear of the taint of treason that might attach.

He was angrily contemptuous of the crowd that had collected to give him a rough handling—how rough he plainly understood—waylaying him in the barn, to which they expected him to return when he had failed

to find his horse, as they knew quite well he should do. Taking his horse was part of the scheme to cut off his legs, so to speak, and trap him in that miserable hole.

There was no use attempting to follow the woman's advice and go, for an attempt to get away now would bring the bunch of them whanging bullets at his heels. It was a long way to the next water-tank where trains stopped, a matter of sixty miles, too much of an undertaking in cowboy boots. The only thing to do was let the horse go—no, he'd be damned if he'd let that horse go!

But how was he going to compel them to hand over the horse? They'd stick together, nothing could be done. The better course would be to carry along the pretense that he believed the horse had run away, tell the liveryman to turn it over to MacKinnon if it was taken up and returned. When a train came along going his way, he'd ride out of town, but no bunch of tin-horn gamblers and four-flushers was going to tell him when to leave.

What was there about him that led people to believe he was easy to ride? There must be a flaw in his face that his partial eyes never had discovered. Did he carry the unmistakable brand of meekness, the mark of the under dog? That was where people made their mistake. He had turned the position of under dog. His teeth were grown, his eye-teeth were cut, his wisdom-teeth were an inch long.

That was where they made their mistake, taking him for the under dog, thinking him an easy man to roll. Invariably they brought it on themselves. Those two

men had persisted in making the same fool blunder a little while ago and brought it on themselves. Now these fellows over in the barn, whoever they were, seemed determined to repeat the mistake. It was his business to show them he wasn't that kind of a man.

There he stood in plain sight of all the street, making these foolish cogitations, when he no doubt should have been burning up the road getting away from there. If he had realized his danger fully he probably would have attempted to make a quiet exit, but he was so scornful of that gang he couldn't reason straight.

He'd go over there and let them know he was wise to the fact they'd made away with his horse, and tell them he would take his own time about leaving that town. With this thought all ready in words behind his teeth he stepped off the platform, considering, as his foot struck the track, that he'd better ask the agent when the next train west was due. It wouldn't do to fiddle around over there and miss it.

Bill turned to go back and consult the agent and, turning, felt something slap his left shoulder like the flip of a bough when one rides through the woods. There was the quick, sharp sound of a rifle in the quiet of the morning, and Bill Dunham stumbled and caught himself from a fall by throwing out his hands to the platform boards.

Dunham was up in an instant, and facing the livery barn, gun in his hand. Nobody was in sight there; nothing to tell where the shot that got him in the shoulder came from but a little drift of blue smoke outside the opening in the gable for hoisting baled hay.

He threw two quick shots in there, stepped to the platform and dodged over to the corner of the building, ducking for shelter as fast as he could go, a burst of shooting behind him, bullets splintering the planks at his heels.

His left arm felt numb, but there was no pain; blood was pouring out of the wound down his sleeve. Thinking of getting the agent to help him, not knowing how serious his wound might be or how long he could keep going, Bill headed for the telegraph office. He was about to enter when the agent, white and scared to the rims of his eyeballs, slammed the door and locked it.

“Don’t come in here!” he yelled through the door, his high-keyed unmanly voice quavering. “For God’s sake, don’t come in here!”

It was more a supplication than a command. Dunham saw the woman’s piteous face at the window, her eyes pleading forgiveness for this inhospitable barring of refuge to a forsaken man. He turned away, thinking what next.

He thought of MacKinnon and the hotel, of fighting his way over there, win or lose, but doubted, when he came to the decision, whether he would be any more welcome there than in the railroad office. His conscience was so entirely unclouded that he found it hard to realize himself an outlawed man.

They had got him pretty well up in the left shoulder, above the lung he believed, as there was no blood rising in his throat. Maybe it was only a slight wound, but it began to feel as if it might be serious. He must cut for some shelter where he could stand them off while he



examined it, and tried to do something to dam up that waste of blood that was soaking his shirt and running down into his boot.

There was a car of baled hay on a siding about forty feet from the station platform, a little way below the depot, which the liveryman had begun to unload that morning. The door was open, showing tumbled bales of hay. Dunham headed for it, watching back as he ran. The wound was beginning to burn like a hot rod driven through him; blood squashed in his boot when he stepped.

As he swung into the car Dunham heard the pelting of feet on the platform. Somebody yelled, "We've got him! Come on!" Bullets thumped the bales of hay as he rolled out of the door to shelter behind them.

Dunham's pursuers stopped where they could take shelter behind the depot, from the corners of which they shot into the side and open door of the car. Dunham quickly arranged bales of hay, making his situation safe for the time. He couldn't see the shooters from where he lay, and didn't like to bang loose blindly for fear of hitting the agent or his wife.

His silence led them to think they must have got him. They came around the corners and peered cautiously, Dunham arranging his bales to make a slit through which he saw their movements. When some of the more adventurous had come far enough to clear the depot, Dunham threw a shot close to their feet to show them he was still in business and able to account for himself if they should attempt a rush.

There was a scramble for cover; they put the depot

between him and themselves again. There they lurked, somebody cracking away at him every time he moved a bale of hay.

Dunham felt the numbness going out of his arm, which began to tingle to the ends of his fingers with the increasing pain of his wound. He reloaded his gun and worked fast to make himself secure while his strength lasted, arranging hay bales to give him command of both doors, only one of which was open.

Examination of his wound disclosed that the bullet had passed cleanly through his shoulder about opposite his armpit. From the burn of it inside him he believed it must have nipped the lung. It was bleeding scandalously, he thought, for such a little wound, and it was in such an awkward place there didn't appear to be a thing he could do to help. But with teeth and sound hand he tied the blue handkerchief that he wore around his neck as tightly as he could draw it, under his arm and over the wound, hoping the compression might assist nature to some degree in shutting off the blood.

That was all he could do, and he realized it was not much. Having done it, he sat on a bale of hay, well protected behind his bulwark, to try to figure out, as he put it to himself, exac'ly where he was at.

## CHAPTER XXII

### GOOD-BY TO DAYLIGHT

IT was Dunham's conclusion that he had made a mistake in taking refuge in that car. They knew he was wounded, for they had seen him stagger when the shot from that high-powered rifle got him. Any desperate chance that he might have taken looks better than his choice to a man when he realizes its worthlessness. Dunham now thought he should have gone to the barn and had it out with them, win or lose.

A number of possibilities which seemed shut off to him now, presented in that lost chance. He might have found his horse, he might have been able to get to the doctor, who would have stood them off if he was half the man he looked. Anything would have been better than the course he had taken. They had him now; all they had to do was wait. Unless he could open the opposite door and slip out on the other side of the car.

The thought revived him with hope. He began to move the hay to come at the door. About one load had been taken out of the car, he calculated as he worked; just about one load. He cleared the closed door presently and tried to push it back. The pin was in the hasp outside; it wouldn't move.

It was a question on both sides of what to do next. Dunham had little choice of any course except to lie there and wait in the hope that MacKinnon and some

of the better citizens would come to his assistance. He could not believe that the solid interests of the town, as MacKinnon had described them, were in the crowd; it was impossible to conceive such a quick shift of public sentiment against him. Only three days ago they had asked him to take the office of city marshal, grateful to him then, it seemed, for ridding them of a man-destroying oppressor whom they feared.

Kellogg had not been a friendless man, however. There were certain shady characters who found a safe harbor in Pawnee Bend under his protection, who had followed him in his shifting from town to town. Some of these were thieves and sharpers of the vilest type, who now found themselves standing out naked, as it might be said, before an unfriendly world.

These men could not entrench behind the law any longer; there was no other frontier open to their trade. Horse-thieves and bank-robbers, these men were, cattle-rustlers and the gentry who plied blackjacks on the heads of drunken cowboys at night.

There were a few crooked gamblers and pimps among them, outlawed and despised even in that free-going society. Wolfish people, who clung together in a slinking pack, an under-current of the town of which Dunham knew nothing. These were vicious in their desire to avenge the death of their protector and friend, and Bill Dunham was the last man they wanted to see in his place.

It does not matter what the beginning of such a crowd may be, there always are plenty of men, respectable enough in their ordinary lives, ready to rush in and take

a hand. There is no sport so exciting as hunting down a man, no entertainment quite as thrilling as a hanging. Men go mob-drunk when one of their kind is being worried down to death. The fact that he is a fugitive condemns him, without any other evidence in the case.

So there were not wanting fathers of families and men with beards on their faces in the mob that sought Bill Dunham's life that day. The hardware merchant was not among them, nor Bergen, nor the dough-shouldered Puckett, but the liveryman was there, a sharp-faced, pale stooping lank scoundrel who had stolen enough horses in his time to remount the Seventh Cavalry. He was the cavalier who fired the shot from the hayloft when Dunham turned his back.

The solid interests of the town could not be said to be present and bearing a hand, but they were keeping circumspectly within their own doors, making no effort to stem or turn the tide of disfavor against Bill Dunham and save his life.

Fifty or sixty men, with the half-grown boys of the town pushing and nosing on the edge of the crowd like excited pups, quickly gathered on the lee side of the depot, eager to drag Bill Dunham from the freight car and hang him to the railroad bridge half a mile east of town.

Some of them never had seen Dunham; some of them had talked with him in staring awe only a little while before, when he had passed their sod hovels and plank shanties looking for his horse. The more notable the man in the case, the more glory in being able to say they bore a hand in hanging him.

Bill Dunham, lying bleeding in the freight car, his hasty bulwarks of hay protecting him front and flank, a solid pile of it roof-high behind him, felt himself in a pretty tight hole. It was so tight, and apparently so hopeless, that he believed his time had come to say good-by to daylight. Romance had led him into this pass, and there was no romance in such an end.

His wound was a streak of fire; the torture of sudden thirst that flares up from the drain of such a hurt was in his throat. Such a torment, growing as he knew his would increase as the sun mounted and beat down on the thin roof, might drive a man to face even the rope. He knew nothing, could know nothing, of the character of the mob, except there was no valor in it.

And a man could not make a compromise with cowards who held the advantage. He knew of old from the maulings, taunts and humiliations he had suffered at bullying hands, that no compromise could be made with cowards. He must lie there and suffer, and save his precious ammunition, wait for night and the chance it might bring him to escape or fight it out.

He could feel the crowd growing, even though he could not see it, for they were keeping carefully behind the depot, although he knew he was watched closely. He had only the ammunition in his belt and gun. He ran his thumb around the belt, thinking how few cartridges there were for so many scoundrels in that town who ought to be shot, wondering what the end would be.

His honest soul protested against the unfair deal they were giving him in that town, rising up that way against him because he had defended his rights. The cattlemen

might have sent the two ruffians who had provoked a quarrel to plead an excuse for killing him, but the cattlemen were not in on this. There was not even a cowboy in town, except those who might be lying in the stupor of whisky in some brothel, or stretched on the floor of a saloon.

They began shooting into the car again, probably to find out if he was still alive, or to provoke him to useless waste of his ammunition. He did not reply, lying still behind the bales of hay, eye to the crack he had made commanding the depot.

Presently he heard them at the end of the car, behind him, talking about smoking him out. There was stiff objection to this procedure in the voice of the liveryman, to whom the hay belonged. Then a sly movement along the side, somebody sneaking up with what design he did not know.

The door moved, grating noisily on its rusty bearings. They were planning to shut him in, the purpose of the maneuver not plain to Dunham, as he could not understand how they expected to get him any sooner by that. He threw a shot through the door as it slid forward, to let them know he was still up and coming, then tumbled a bale of hay in position to block the closing of his precious airhole. The activity outside stopped suddenly, and the genius of that enterprise made a hurried retreat.

Dunham's throat was as dry as if he had been eating the rough brittle forage that formed his defense. If they shut him in, the torture of his situation would soon become past human fortitude to endure. Perhaps

that had been their thought. The door was still about half open; he was determined to keep it that way, ready to drop out of when his time came to leave.

He believed they might cool off a little if he could hold them on the watch until evening. At least some of them would get tired of the game and leave, and the more sensible ones might see the unfairness of their enterprise and quit even before then. He wasn't going to keep their anger hot by provoking them. He wouldn't take a crack at anybody unless he had to do it to drive them out of the car. They couldn't rush him without somebody getting hurt, and they were not out for that. There was no fun in hanging a man if somebody had to be killed to do it.

It was something past eight o'clock when Dunham settled down, back to a bale of hay, to fight his fierce thirst and wear out the long day in defiance of the mob. Night was his only chance now, he knew. There would be a moon, but luck might cloud it up. Shooting even at close range was uncertain in the night; there would be as many chances for as against him then.

Wait until dark, which would not be until nearly nine o'clock in those lengthening days, twelve hours, and more than twelve hours, to stick it out. He did not believe he would bleed to death, for no artery appeared to be cut, although he might be weakened by the drain. He began to rehearse how he would do it when night came.

It was always darker in railroad yards than anywhere else, happily for his chance. He would slip noiselessly out of the door, let them have it good and



strong if they were hanging around, throw himself under the car and scramble through to the other side.

From where his car stood it was only a little way to the kitchen of the boarding-train. He would make a dash for that, fight his way in if he had to, and get a drink of water. Already the anticipation of that drink, twelve hours away, intensified the fire of his thirst. Then he would drop out on the other side of the boarding-train, where the world lay open to his feet. Getting away in the dark would not be hard; they would be careful how they crowded him in the dark.

Once clear of them, he would lay a line for Moore's ranch and ask Zora to help him. It would be a cheap thing to do, a despicable resort to the charity of a man whom he had tried to ruin, but it would be his one chance to come out of that scrape alive.

That was the program; he sat there rehearsing it over and over, the presence of the mob a shadow in the background of his thoughts. It was as if he had withdrawn from them a long distance, or to some inaccessible altitude, but that the way of escape would bring him back in peril of them again. Just now he was safe, but there was no way around; to escape he must pass again dangerously near. Down to the last detail of every conceivable exigency he rehearsed that plan. Over and over, with Zora and refuge at the far-away end of it, so far and so uncertain as to seem the fortune for which a man strives under long and cruel stress to see only in a dream.

Outside the sun blazed and the hot wind blew. Dunham's eyes were fevered and blood-lined; his head

throbbed with a quickening beat like the desire that increased in him to perfect that plan for night. His wound was painful; his tongue felt like dry sand.

Strange how that little wound in his shoulder kept on bleeding. Time and again he shifted when he found himself sitting in a puddle of blood. It kept running down, and running down, in a way to provoke a stout fellow like Bill Dunham. That burning in his pleural cavity was still there, evidence of a slow leak internally. It was a pain so hot and terrific as to seem the pure flame of pain. Alcohol poured into his chest could not have set up a torture more acute, he thought, wondering how a man's blood out of its proper place could bring him so much agony.

When he looked out, peering cautiously around the corner of his barrier, things wavered as if the heat glimmered between him and what he could see, twisting them out of shape. They seemed to be keeping pretty quiet out there; he wondered if they had given it up and gone away. He moved a bale of hay; it toppled and fell, tumbling through the door to the ground. They began to shoot, thinking he was coming out.

No, they had not given it up. They were there, viciously and persistently there, dogging him without a quarrel to back them, laying for him in pure meanness without an excuse that would turn an ant. If he ever got clear of there and out where he could throw his feet, there would be a reckoning with that gang, especially the man that shot him in the back, shot him in the back—the back—shot him in the back.

He shook his head, trying to clear it, vexed at that

repetition which went on like a mechanical thing without a voice in the back of his head. He had a feeling of dizzy sickness, as he had felt once when a little boy in a swing. What was the sense of a man feeling that way over a little hole through his shoulder? There wasn't a damn bit of sense!

He leaned on his hands against a bale of hay, and shook his head, and shook it, like one in a horrible nausea of useless retching. It would not clear. It whirled, and seemed to sink and rise, sink and rise, like something on water, something detached from him, not belonging to him at all. A troublesome head, a foolish, pain-shot head, with that hammer-beat in the temples, that dancing glare, as if he looked at things beyond a fire, in his eyes.

Bill sat down again, his back against the wall of hay, feeling weak and miserable. The pain he could bear, and that floating detached feeling of his head he could endure, but thirst was growing into a hideous torment that he could not bear much longer. He tried to get away from the longing for water, running over his hundred-times repeated plan for getting out of there after dark.

He would go cautiously to the door, lying flat, and look out and listen. If they moved a foot he would hear them, if they breathed within a rod of him he would know. Then out, a quick stoop, a silent dive under the car, taking care of the rods, which came low in the center across the beam, and out on the other side, making a dash for the boarding-car and water.

At each rehearsal of it now he hurried over the pre-

liminaries, making the cut shorter to the boarding-car and a drink of water. After a little he could see nothing but himself before the water pail, the dipper in his hand, pouring the delightful draught down his burning throat. He could hear the click of his palate as the big cool swigs went down, feel the blissful satisfaction of a torment assuaged. There the scheme began, do what he might to make it begin where it should; there it ended; at the bucket in the boarding-car.

A train came in, a passenger train, Bill knew by the way the bell was ringing, something gallant and dashing about it that did not sound in a freight engine bell. The brazen clangor of it, the palpitating, imperious, impatient clamor, seemed to come to him in rings of sound; spreading, expanding, wide-circling rings of hard, bright sound. There was a clanking of metal spout, chains and weights at the water-tank, then a gushing burst of downpouring water, a cool plashing overflow of water, a liquid, gurgling, rushing of cool water, that tried the strength of a man to hear.

Dunham started up, urged by desire to tempt destruction if he might die with water on his tongue. He was in the door, his blood-veined hot eyes on the wavering water-tank; his foot was feeling for the edge of the door, his eyes on that gushing, wasteful, white-rushing torrent down into the black tank of the panting engine. A shot splintered the timber not a foot from his head; he dropped back behind the bales of hay.

He heard the clank of the pipe as the fireman shut off the water and released it for the weights to lift, and the last dribbling of that wasted stream. He could not go;

it was not time to go. They were still there, hatefully, maliciously alert, waiting for thirst to strangle him, or that draining ebb of blood to weaken him until he could no longer hold his gun. Then they'd come. They'd come when he fell insensible, and shoot his old hide full of holes.

More than half delirious from the pain of that pleural effusion, Dunham had no thought of how long he had been in the car. Only that it was not night, it wasn't time to go. He began rehearsing the plan for getting out of there again, which took him with impetuous rush to the boarding-car and the bucket.

He got to thinking of Charley Mallon after that, how he shook the lemonade with the chipped ice in it, and put it down heaped with creamy foam, rich and cool with the soothing mucilage of raw egg. And then he thought of water in the springs he knew back home, and of water in creeks and the swift clear river, and water over ice at the time of spring thaws, when the smell of sap was in the maple trees. Water, any kind of water: water in the ruts of the road, water in horse tracks in the road, water in scum-green ponds, fetid water where vile creatures tracked the slime, but all of it blessed water that he would have flung himself down and drunk until he had drowned the fearful fire of his thirst.

And then of Charley Mallon again, his hot eyes bulging from his head, it seemed, with the pressure of pain behind them that crowded his brain so full of agony it was puffing in horrible enlargement, like a kernel of corn in the fire. Charley Mallon and the copper

shaker, and the half of lemon in the tall flaring glass.

He thought of it with such intense longing, such fiery, tortured longing, that Charley Mallon and the cool barroom seemed only a step away. What kind of a man was he to lie there and suffer when Charley Mallon was only a step away, waiting to shake him a lemonade?

What did it matter who was out there, or what they wanted, or how many stood in the way? What a fool he had been not to think of old Charley Mallon before! He scrambled up dizzily, the floor of the car rocking under him as if somebody had hitched it to a train.

A frenzy of insane rage was on him. He jerked out his gun, kicked the bale of hay out of the door, and slid out after it, staggering weakly as he struck the ground. But he struck shooting, and the mob that had swarmed around the depot at the report that he was breaking away scattered like leaves in the wind.

Look at them go! Look at them go! They were flickering and flitting like butterflies in his sick fevered vision, dim and wavering, dancing and floating and waving their long skinny arms, like nothing in the world but butterflies over cabbage plants on a hot, white day.

Dunham went on toward the depot platform, walking slowly, shooting as he advanced, heedless of any danger, unconscious of any peril, driven by the rage of thirst and the delirium of pain. Five or six men made a dash for the door of the freight-room, and from that shelter they began to shoot.

Dunham's gun was empty, but he went on, ploddingly, heavily, sickly on. The agent's wife, with heroic

desire to save a brave man's life, ran out of the office and stood in front of the freight-room door, stretching out her arms as if to gather the shots to her own breast. The scoundrels stopped shooting, but one of them slipped by, threw down his gun and let Dunham have it as he was trying weakly to heave himself to the platform by his knee.

It was a frustrated quick shot, and wild, but it got Dunham in the thigh and tumbled him between the rails of the sidetrack which ran along the rear of the station. He fell so close to the platform, which was about three feet high, that he was sheltered from the storm of bullets that broke over him. They had him, they yelled exultingly across the street and from their scattered places of hiding, and they came pelting to put a curtain to the long-drawn tragedy.

It was then about noon. Dunham had been in the car four hours. A long time until night, indeed, but it looked as if it had come Bill Dunham's time to say good-by to daylight for the last time in his life.

The mob was in a more vicious mood than it had been at the beginning, due to there being two pieces of human wreckage lying on the station platform for Schubert to carry away. And a third man was running wildly, holding his hand to the side of his head, where Dunham's last shot had nipped his ear off as clean as shears. For a man in a tipping, rocking, film-obscured world, Bill Dunham had done some pretty fair shooting, indeed.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### A MISTAKE IN THE DATE

ZORA MOORE heard the shooting as she rode into Pawnee Bend, but there was so much of it she did not connect it with a fight. The racket coming from the direction of the railroad station was in itself assuring. She attributed it to a gang of cowboys celebrating the loading of a cattle train, or giving one of their comrades who was about to embark on new adventures a send-off. Perhaps somebody had married.

She rode to MacKinnon's hitching-rack undisturbed by the occurrence, quiet having fallen over the town again. There was some excitement around the depot, and a general movement of the town's inhabitants in that direction, but nothing unusual for a charivari such as the boys were likely to pull off wherever they might overtake a newly wedded pair.

MacKinnon was not in the office; there appeared to be nobody at all around the place. Zora stopped a boy who was pelting breathlessly toward the depot and inquired what the excitement was about.

"They've got Bill Dunham!" he panted, eager to give the news. "He's been standin' off the whole town!"

"Bill Dunham!" she repeated blankly, staring at the boy, a feeling in her as if the whole world had dropped



away from around her feet, leaving her alone on a crumbling fragment.

“He killed two more men—they’ve got him!” the boy said, thrilling with pride in being able to give the important news. Then he tore along to get a look at the fallen hero.

Zora ran after him, her heart heavy with the bitterness of regret that she had not come sooner. She had heard the first burst of shooting, which she knew now must have been Dunham’s last desperate effort to break through, when about a quarter of a mile away. If she had been five minutes sooner she might have saved his life. By that little margin everything that was precious to her had gone down in the general ruin of the world.

It looked like the whole town had arrived at the depot ahead of her. All interest pressed to a common point, where she knew Bill Dunham had fallen, against what odds, in what heroic defense, she could only surmise. She crowded among them—men and boys they were mainly, a woman here and there—with little exclamations of appeal, so stricken of face, so white and piteous, that they yielded her the precedence which seemed to be her right.

The station agent’s wife, Mrs. Hoy, was holding up Dunham’s head, trying to give him water out of a tin cup. He seemed limp and lifeless. There was blood on his lips; his shirt was soaked with blood. His head moved on the compassionate woman’s arm, but his eyes were closed, and the pallor of death was on his face.

“I got him, damn him!” a man was boasting as Zora broke through the press and came to the edge of the

platform. "I throwed it into him just as he was steppin' on the platform, his damn gun in his hand."

Zora looked at the boaster, a surge of hate rising so hot in her it was like a misty veil before her eyes. She did not know anything about the merits of Bill Dunham's case, nor even give it a thought; only that he was dead or dying, and this braggart stood there on the edge of the track, not five feet from Dunham's head, blowing that he had brought him down. She jerked her gun with a choking exclamation and slung it in his face.

Somebody struck her arm as she fired, the shot going safely over the fellow's head. They grappled with her, the man who had escaped his dues by a hand's breadth backing off, whiter around the gills than Bill Dunham, even in his extremity, was.

"Take that gun away from that hellion!" he said, clawing and backing to open a lane of retreat through the crowd.

Somebody had hold of her wrist; she couldn't lift the gun for another shot at him, hard as she struggled to break loose. They held her tight and took her gun away.

"You ought to know better than to go shootin' around in a crowd that way, lady," the man who held her arm said. He was a whiskered, fatherly man; he looked at her with a sort of injured reproach.

"Give me that gun!" she stormed, struggling, striking, kicking, even trying to bite the hard raspy hand that held her as fast as if her arm was set in a stone wall.

“Ca’m yourself, sister,” the whiskered man soothed her. He passed her gun to somebody behind him, and it disappeared.

Zora tore loose in a white fury, only to be hemmed in by the men who pressed around her and pushed her back from the edge of the platform.

“This ain’t no place for women,” somebody said.

The harsher their restraint the more furious her passion rose. She cleared a way and struggled to the edge again, vengeance now out of mind as it was out of the possibility. She only thought of Dunham, stretched bloody and limp as if the last ember of life had turned to ash.

“Is he dead?” she asked, kneeling to help Mrs. Hoy in her merciful ministrations.

“He’s breathing faintly,” Mrs. Hoy replied. “Here—take the cup—see if you can get some water in his mouth. He was hours and hours over there without a drop, standing them all off, the cowards!”

Zora moistened his lips with her fingers, washing away the blood that welled on his breath from his congested lung, Mrs. Hoy supporting his head on her arm. The crowd pushed around, hemming them in a blazing pit of noonday sun.

“If he ain’t dead he damn soon will be!” somebody said.

At the touch of water on his tongue Dunham gulped and swallowed. Palpitating in a fearful suspense, Zora pressed the cup to his lips and tilted a little stream into his mouth. Patiently, scarcely breathing, the two women worked and watched, the shuffling feet around

them crowding closer, until there was only a slit in the throng the length of Dunham's body.

Blood was running along the railroad tie beneath Dunham's wounded leg, creeping sluggishly between the liveryman's feet. This fellow stood craning his long neck to watch the result of the women's compassionate labor. When Dunham began to gulp the water presently, his chest heaving between swallows, the liveryman turned to somebody behind him with an exclamation of satisfaction. There was a renewed stirring in the crowd, a surging forward to see.

Dunham opened his eyes when the cup was drained, and struggled to lift himself, shaking his head weakly to clear the obscuration of defeated death out of his vision. He felt as if he reposed on something luxuriously soft and lulling. There was a sensation of floating, an undulating, easy, restful motion of being carried along on water. He was so far over the border he had no recollection of the events which had brought him to that dusty bed where his blood was wasting away between the rails.

Zora spoke to him, bending over him, her hand on his forehead, her pleading eyes looking into his, where the image of friend and foe stood inseparable and alike. He felt that blissful sweep of water, that soft undulating motion of water, as a swimmer feels the lift of gentle surges when he lies on his back in lazy relaxation. He tried to smile, a glimmer in the dusty drawn lines of his grimy face.

"You run for the doctor, honey," Mrs. Hoy said. "I'll do what I can till he comes."

"We're the doctors in this man's case," the liveryman announced. "You done fine, sisters, you done fine!" He spread his arms to clear the crowd back, and stooped to look into Dunham's hazy eyes. "You done fine!" he repeated. "We'll take charge of this funeral now."

Zora started up with horrible apprehension. She looked around for help where there was no help, and back again in mute appeal to the agent's wife, who still knelt beside Dunham, her arm under his head.

"You'll have to step out of this now, ladies," the liveryman said.

"You'll not lay a hand on him!" Zora defied him. She looked at Dunham's belt, thinking of his gun, but it was not there. "You'll not lay a hand on him!" she stormed again, but knowing in her hopeless heart that she was powerless to stop them.

The liveryman jerked his head in signal to somebody behind Zora. They laid hold of her roughly and pulled her away, her struggles and tearful pleading unheeded.

Mrs. Hoy put Dunham's head down gently, and stood beside him, alarmed by this sudden turn against a man whom she believed to be beyond the vengeance of his most craven enemy.

"Why," she said, looking around in dismay, "why—why, gentlemen, you surely wouldn't lay hands on a dying man?"

"We'll be careful of him, ma'am," the liveryman said. "You just run along and tend to your biscuits before they burn."

They pushed her away, gently enough for men with

such a base design before them, for she had won their respect, if not much sympathy, by her intervention in Dunham's behalf when they were shooting at him from the door.

They picked Dunham up roughly and slung him like a sack to the platform. With the sudden change in position, the rough breaking of his blissful half-conscious dream of floating at ease without a care, the pain stabbed him in the chest with such excruciating dart his awakening senses fled. He fell insensible to the boards, his head striking cruelly. This lapse of sense concerned the liveryman. There was no fun in hanging an unconscious man. They'd might as well hang a sack of bran.

He told his fellow-lynchers as much, with ironical stress and obscene profanity. He sent somebody after a bucket of water. When it came he stood sloshing dipperfuls of it over Dunham's face and chest, watching closely for symptoms of revival.

While this was going on Zora was fighting like a wildcat to break away from her rough captors, who hustled her along the platform to the corner of the telegraph office and headed her toward the street. Get to hell out of there, little hellion that she was! they said. Few of them knew who she was, fewer cared a curse. All women looked alike to them.

John Moore had left camp forty miles from Pawnee Bend that morning to send some telegrams to his agents in Kansas City. On his way he had fallen in with Hughes, the Texas cattleman, whose herd was then two days' drive from the loading pens. They had ridden

along in good fellowship, the difficulties of their situation having been amicably adjusted.

As they approached town Moore noted the unusual activity around the depot, remarking on it to Hughes. They quickened their pace out of curiosity to find what it was about.

"Looks like a riot," said Hughes.

"Um-m-m," said Moore, tight-lipped and straight-backed, lifting himself in his stirrups to see.

"They's draggin' a woman along there," said Hughes, spurring his horse to a gallop.

"By God! that's my girl!" said Moore, and they rode abreast at a thundering pace up the white stretch of road, hands on their weapons, leaning in their saddles, their faces set for a fight.

They whirled at MacKinnon's hotel and dashed to the depot, galloping up the sloping platform and into the crowd, the ruffians who were manhandling Zora scuttling for their lives. Moore flung out of the saddle beside her, gun in hand, and gathered her into the protection of his arm.

"What're you up to here, you skimmin's of hell!" he bellowed, gun raised to spot the hide of the first man to make a break.

Zora clung to him, panting, dishevelled from her fight, her face scratched, hair tumbling over her shoulders, her hat gone, the throat of her shirt torn open. She pointed down the platform where a knot of men stood around Dunham, undecided on whether to stand or scatter. She was so agitated and breathless she couldn't find her words.

“What’s the matter, honey? What have they been doin’ to my girl?” Moore inquired, glaring around for somebody to plug with his big gun, which he held high and ready, a weapon of such deadly menace that the crowd thinned away like snowflakes on a hot stove.

“Bill Dunham!” she panted, pointing wildly. “They shot him—they’re goin’ to hang him! Don’t let them! don’t let them!”

“Bill Dunham?” said Hughes, bending down to hear her repeat the name, as if the sound of it astonished him beyond belief.

“Down there—the liveryman and that gang!”

Hughes started his horse with a bound, and bore down on the lynchers like the California Limited. He had his gun out, held shoulder-high, ready for as deadly business as any of that crowd ever had faced.

The liveryman was holding the bucket and dipper, Dunham’s drenched form on the planks before him, half a dozen others, who did not sense the meaning of this quick turn in time to clear out, or stood with a thought of making a fight to carry their infernal program to its end, stood around him with their various weapons. The rest of the crowd had scattered.

Hughes pulled up so close to the lanky liveryman he could have knocked him stiff with his gun. Moore left his horse standing and came running, Zora a good stride in the lead.

“You’ve made a mistake in your date, gentlemen,” Hughes said. “This ain’t Bill Dunham’s day to hang.”



## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE BROODING OF VENGEANCE

It was an uphill pull for Bill Dunham, lying in MacKinnon's hotel with fever in his wounds. A little puff of an adverse wind, and out the flickering blue flame would go, the doctor said. When it seemed at its lowest, like the failing light of an empty lamp, nature turned up the wick and lighted Bill Dunham over the grade.

Hughes had gone on to market with his herd, but he had left funds with MacKinnon to insure Dunham having the best of everything that money could provide in a bleak and comfortless place like Pawnee Bend, where men lived roughly and died with the bits in their mouths. A surgeon was brought from Wichita to operate for the complication that followed the leakage of blood into that tight compartment where blood never should be permitted to go sloshing around that way. A nurse was brought from the same center of culture and progress; she was as much of a sight as a zebra loose on the street in Pawnee Bend would have been when she walked out for a little airing in her white dress and cap.

John Moore was also taking a friendly interest in the wounded man. Moore was proud of the distinction he had come into through Dunham's singling him out for his particular mark at the ford that day. He talked

about it a good deal when he came to town in those days of Dunham's slow recovery, laughing and roaring in his loud way. He appeared to get a lot of pleasure out of telling how Dunham had bluffed his way through with the Texas herd by threatening to fill his hide full of lead.

"Yes, and he'd 'a' done it, too—he'd 'a' done it!" he always wound the story up, seriously, full of glowing pride.

Under Moore's thick skin there was a layer of generosity and a fair sense of justice, but the humor of Dunham's big bluff, and the distinction that had come to him through it, hardly would have sufficed to square the account for him with Moore. The telegram that Dunham had brought down to the border and carried around until it was stale, was the key to that situation.

The attorney-general of Kansas had sent the telegram to Moore, as head of the organized movement to quarantine against Texas cattle. He warned against closing the public highways against commerce from any point, and especially Texas. It could not be done in the capacity of individuals without certain liability of damages. The Texas Cattlemen's Association had given warning through attorneys that damage suits would be filed immediately upon the enforcement of this unlawful quarantine.

If the Kansas cattlemen wanted to stop Texas cattle spreading fever, they must have the legislature enact a quarantine law. At present there was no such law, nor any law which would uphold their contemplated action. Damage suits would lie against every man who stood at

the border to stop Texas cattle, or lent his name to such an effort. On that point the attorney-general was explicit and strong.

Dunham had told them the same thing, but they hadn't thought as much of his word that day as they came to think of it later. It was only after the Texas cattle were well inside the state that this official confirmation of what Dunham had said was put into their hands, and then some of them were ungenerous enough to say he had read the telegram before making his move. Moore at once, and always afterwards, emphatically denied this.

At any rate, the most stubborn of them saw reason in the light of the attorney-general's advice. Dunham was right; there was no sense in rairing up and going out gunning for him.

"He had more sense than any of us," Moore said. "He saved us damages in the millions by bringin' that herd over, for we'd 'a' stopped Hughes, and we'd 'a' stopped the rest of 'em that was close behind him, if it hadn't 'a' been for Bill."

Trail-riders were still on the border, directing Texas cattle to keep to designated routes. Others accompanied the herds when they entered the state to see that these restrictions were respected, all of which was near enough within the law that nobody was disposed to raise the question. This was working considerable hardship on the Texas drovers, as the grass soon was exhausted along these trails. They swore they were cured of any more adventuring with their herds along the old-time trails. That year saw the end of Texas trail-herds.

The Kansas legislature enacted a quarantine law that was as good as a barbed wire fence along the border, and the railroads got the Texas business after that.

The Kansas cattlemen were indignant in their denial of complicity in the attempt on Dunham's life. It was the general opinion that the two strangers who had started the trouble had been moved by a desire to add to their own fame by laying out a man so notable as Bill Dunham. Frontier gunmen always were under that shadow of peril at the hands of obscure and sneaking creatures who hoped to grow big by putting an end to somebody greater and more courageous than themselves. They were moved by the desire that actuates a savage to waylay and slay a valorous enemy, cut out and eat his heart.

The two scoundrels who had laid claim to Dunham's horse were unknown to everybody in Pawnee Bend but the liveryman, who harbored the wounded one until he was able to go his way, which was long before Dunham was on his feet again.

When it became known that Dunham would recover, and be ready in a month or so to square accounts, there were some uneasy heads in Pawnee Bend. The solid business interests, of which MacKinnon had spoken so impressively, were represented in the gang that tried to mob Dunham by the liveryman and one blacksmith, the rest of them being low ruffians and light-headed gentry of the kind always eager to run in and take a kick at a man when he is down. They are found in all layers of society, little less vicious in the grain pit of Chicago than in the dusty, sun-stricken street of Pawnee Bend.

Zora came to see Dunham every day, even when he lay fevered and delirious, unable to recognize friend from foe, under the impression, indeed, that all the world was his enemy. She never came alone. Either her mother or one of the boys, or Shad Brassfield's wife, accompanied her and went with her to the room where Dunham lay. Pawnee Bend was censorious in matters of feminine decorum; it set straight lines, and its expressions were as obscene as its thoughts. Zora would have borne all the agonies of suspense rather than defy the conventions of the peculiar social code she had grown up to respect as the Covenanter his gloomy theology.

It was on one of these visits, after Dunham had begun to crawl like a sea-bruised wrecked mariner back to the solid shore of life, that MacKinnon took Zora and Mrs. Moore into his troubled confidence. The news that Dunham would recover had gone around town. There was a murmuring among the heads that were marked for vengeance in the day when Dunham should walk abroad with his gun. There was dark talk, and darker plotting, MacKinnon said.

He was afraid it would go beyond that some night; he shook in his boots with the fear that they would rush him and murder Dunham while he lay helpless in his bed. Such a fear was not groundless, the women knew. Not a year before that a wounded gambler had been taken from his room at night and hung to an upended wagon tongue in the middle of the street. The safer it was to undertake a vengeance so base made its probability the greater.

MacKinnon didn't know what to do. He hesitated to run the risk of throwing Dunham into a relapse through worry and watchfulness by telling him, putting a gun on the bed by his side, and giving him to understand that he might be called on any night to fight for the remnant of life that was in his veins.

But there didn't appear to be anything else to do. He would lay down his own life, MacKinnon said modestly, yet with such sincerity there could be no question of his valor, to protect his guest, but they wouldn't stop at one more life to have their evil way.

There was feeling against MacKinnon among the lawless element that had burrowed there under Kellogg's protection, the outgrowth of his efforts to argue the mob out of its design the day Dunham was cooped in the freight car. He had escaped with his life that day only by pulling out and leaving them to have their way, and he didn't want to go through anything like that again. The worry of it was wasting the heart of him in his busum like a cup of spirits left standin' in the sun, MacKinnon said. His face showed the strain of his worries. It was lined and sad, and his gray hairs had multiplied.

Mrs. Moore resolved the tangle of MacKinnon's troubles by proposing to take Dunham to the pea-green mansion on the bank of the Arkansas, nurse and all. They brought the doctor into the friendly plot to help argue down Dunham's scruples, for he was against going. It would give them too much trouble, he said, although there was another and deeper reason that re-

strained him. After all he had plotted against Moore, he could not become a burden on his hospitality.

They did not mention the true reason for wanting to take him from MacKinnon's friendly care. He must get out of the hot confinement of that room, the doctor said; down by the river, where it was cooler, the prospect more cheering, and the water better than the hard, gypsum liquid they got out of the wells at Pawnee Bend. Nobody but the women and children and livestock drank it, the doctor said. It was the worst possible stuff a sick man could put down his throat.

But he wasn't a sick man, Dunham protested; at least not sick in a natural sense. He was only a shot-up man, who was getting better so fast he could feel himself grow. He didn't know anything about Moore's change of attitude toward him, or the peculiar pleasure the cattleman got out of the distinction of having been picked as a mark for Dunham's gun.

Zora's pleas were more effective in the end than all the arguments. Dunham yielded; they carried him down the back stairs and through the kitchen, put him in the spring wagon and rolled down the canvas to screen him from the dust and sun, they said.

It was a little while before noon, the best possible hour for anybody who didn't want his actions to become widely public to get out of Pawnee Bend. Nobody but those directly concerned, and MacKinnon's kitchen help, knew of Dunham's removal, and those not in the plan were ignorant of his destination.

The nurse refused to go to the fresh air of the range. She welcomed the excuse for breaking with her charge,

for she was longing for the refined atmosphere of Wichita, where there was a piano in every home.

Dunham's progress justified the change, his safety not considered. There was chicken broth and grape jelly, with more substantial fare as he got a little higher up the ladder. Better still, there was the service of friendship, if nothing more than friendship, which is better than any amount of paid nursing, skillful as it may be.

There was the presence of youth, and smiles, and the sound of singing in the house, and the activity of cowboys coming riding in from the range. Mrs. Brassfield could be heard at times singing that long ditty about the old man, which always made Dunham grab the edge of the bed or the arm of the chair and hold on as tight as if he feared he might take a tumble over the edge of something. It was the most risky song he ever had heard a lady lay her tongue to.

Moore often came in from the cow camps, boisterous as a March wind, curiously respectful of the young man who had used him as a pawn in the biggest single-handed game anybody ever had played on that range. He told Dunham how his defiance had worked around to the cattlemen's profit, and said the slate was clean. Nobody on the range had a grudge against him for bringing in the Texas herd.

Moore never attempted any apology for his conduct toward Dunham when he came down to the border under the belief that he had been hired to ride trail. He seemed to take it that Dunham had squared accounts for himself, and all was satisfactory. Time and



again Dunham saw Moore looking at him in a queer, puzzled way, as if there was something about the whole business that he could not understand.

Perhaps it was that Moore was trying to figure out how he had come to make the mistake of misjudging a man so wildly. It amounted to about the same thing as reading a brand wrong, and getting himself into a situation hard to explain.

Bill Dunham was a happy man the day he was able to go downstairs and sit under the cottonwood trees. He was as weak as that childhood concoction which he remembered as cambric tea, and just about as pale. The boys hung around him in worshipful awe, proud of the distinction of having a man who had shot so many worthless people, and had been shot all to pieces himself in a big fight, as a guest. The family had made a place for him which he fitted so naturally and comfortably that he wondered how he was to order his life without them when it came his day to leave.

Especially Zora. With the thought of an existence in which Zora did not figure, Bill was moved by a feeling of bleakness and desolation. When he confronted that situation, drawing nearer and nearer as his strength increased, it seemed to him as if the bottom had fallen out of the world, leaving him alone on the edge of an abyss which even his imagination could not bridge.

There was not anything original in his thoughts, speculations, longings, about Zora, to be sure. That is an unvarying tune on the lyre of youth, although every young man believes his own case unique and unparalleled in all the long history of human attachment. The

wooing male is the singer, the sigher, of all species. It is the female that is endowed with the wisdom of the ages. She has a demure presence, but a wise and calculative eye. Very likely Zora knew exactly how it would end from the day Bill Dunham's recovery was assured.

Bill began to grow restless as his strength increased. He was ashamed of burdening their hospitality, and said so with downcast look and humble voice. He wanted to go and find out what had become of his horse; he wanted to be stirring around looking for a job. He wanted anything, it seemed on the surface, but that luxurious inactivity which sure was going to ruin him, it would make him so lazy and trifling, he said.

To break these restless fits Zora would take him and the boys on short expeditions along the river to gather wild grapes, which were ripening, and search for blackberries, of which there never was one to be found. He could not go to Pawnee Bend yet, Zora said. And then Bill would begin to fret about his horse, and wonder who had it, and if he'd ever get it back. The bill for its keep would amount to its value if he didn't go out and find who had taken it up.

What was a horse more or less in a country full of horses? Zora wanted to be told. He could have the pick of the horses on their place, and he must be hard to please if he couldn't find one to suit him. Then she fanned him, and pushed his shaggy brown hair back from his forehead, treating him as if he was a very weak little boy.

No, he wasn't going to Pawnee Bend, and maybe

run into another fight, until he was good and able to hold his own, she said. He must get over that notion of going to town and cleaning up on that gang. Bill protested he wasn't thinking of it, but she knew he was. Wait a little while, she counseled. The day was coming when they'd get theirs, and get it good and plenty.

Zora always was hot and strong when she came to that assurance, which was more like a threat, indeed. She shut him off with that, invariably, and left him wondering what she meant. He wondered if he had blabbed in his delirium of the vengeance he had laid up against that gang? Or had she read his intention in his sober face, underlying, as it was, every thought of his future activities?

For the thought of a mighty cleaning-up in Pawnee Bend had been with him from his first conscious gleam. It was a deep and solemn determination, as somber over his young soul as the shadow of a rising storm.

## CHAPTER XXV

### TIN CAN LAND

THEY were making preparations for a big celebration at Pawnee Bend to rejoice over the completion of the county's organization. This had been delayed somewhat on account of a question of the petition's validity when it was filed with the secretary of state. Several shady deals had been put through by dishonest promoters in the organization of counties in southern and southwestern Kansas, in which innocent people were left holding a large and entirely empty sack. It was time to begin a close scrutiny of petitions, and this one was put under the glass.

It stood the test at length, and the organization was sanctioned. The day was set for the new county officers to take over the local government; the judge of that circuit was coming to Pawnee Bend to swear them in. At the same time the site of the court house was to be dedicated in judicial oratory and baptized in congressional speech. The congressman of the district—it was bigger than three New England states—was going to be there with his fireworks, and there would be barbecued meat, roasted on the spot. Everything would be freer than salvation, for there would be no collection.

Dunham had been hearing a great deal about this big day. They were all worked up at Moore's place

over it, Mrs. Moore and Zora baking pies and cakes for two days before the event. They had put Bill off on the matter of his departure about his indefinite business until that day of days. It would be a double celebration for him then, they said, marking the restoration of his health and a new order of things in Pawnee Bend.

There was no question about his complete restoration. Dunham knew he had been well for at least two weeks, but he allowed himself to prance in the restraint of Zora and her mother, which was enforced now and then by Moore's heavy advice to take it easy and be careful he didn't bust something by striking out too soon.

He had known many a man, Moore said, who had undone himself by starting out too soon after being laid low with a bullet through his lights. That kind of a wound was treacherous; it left a tender spot that was liable to bust on the least exertion, especially under the stress of excitement. Keep still, and keep cool. They were all going to Pawnee Bend for the blowout; that would be time enough for Bill to make his reappearance there.

It was while the ladies were engaged with the pies and cakes that Bill had his first opportunity to talk with Shad Brassfield. Shad had been here and there around the range, at home only for a brief look-in now and then, shy of Dunham on account of his questionable standing, but assured in some degree when he saw Bill going around without a gun.

Shad was mending harness that afternoon, it being

the day before the doings. He was surrounded by tugs and collars, sitting in the midst of the confusion on a low bench in the center of the kitchen floor. Mollie sat off to one side, smoking her pipe with the placid enjoyment of a hen in a dust bath beside the road. There was radiant kindness in her hollow, homely face; she nodded as Dunham darkened the door.

“Lord love you, Mr. Dunham, you ain’t been around to see a body in a coon’s age,” she chided him. “Come in out of the hot sun and set down and rest your hands and face.”

“Pickin’ up, ain’t you?” Shad remarked, putting out a feeler, not certain how he was going to square himself for his humorous break at the border camp that day.

“If I pick up any more I’ll be so fat I’ll waddle like a goose,” Bill replied.

This eased the situation for Shad. He saw he wasn’t going to be hauled over the coals for that mistaken piece of pleasantry. The cramped feeling went out of his legs; he breathed freely, and took a chew. He mumbled around the plug with a nosey sound, so full of gab he couldn’t waste a second, trying to talk as he twisted off the big hunk of tobacco and worked it back against his jaw.

“Um-m-m-m, plenty goin’ on while you’ve been laid up, Bill.”

“Yes, I’ve got over the notion things’d stop if I was to die.”

“Some folks thinks the grease’ll burn offen the

griddle if they turn their backs," Mrs. Brassfield said.

She didn't look at Shad, but she aimed the observation at him as directly as if she drew a bead on a squirrel. Shad was preparing to rivet a broken tug, which he had stretched on the bench between his bony legs. Her irony passed over him without making him blink.

"I was over in Pawnee yisterday, first time in a month, I guess. Lot of changes goin' on over there. Munroe, he's gone."

"Munroe? Who in the dickens is Munroe?"

"The feller that had the livery."

"Munroe, was it? I didn't know his name."

"One of his names; he changed it every time he stole a horse. Yes, Munroe he's gone. He sold out when he heard you was goin' to git well. He's the feller that shot you in the back—I reckon you know."

"No, I didn't know," Bill admitted. He looked at the floor in his deep-thinking way, as if the news had started a train of somber reflection.

"He made his blow around town he done it. He thought then you'd peg out. And Vic Gilroy, he's dusted it, too."

"I didn't know him," Dunham said, shaking his gloomy head.

"He's the feller that put up the brag he got you in the leg when you made that break out of the boxcar—the feller Zora pulled out and took a shot at. Yes, and she'd 'a' got him, too, if Randall hadn't 'a' jiggered her arm."

"Zora?" Bill looked up, such startled surprise in his

eyes that it was almost fright. "I didn't know she took a shot at anybody. She never said a word to me about it. Are you sure you've got it right?"

"Right? Hell! everybody knows it."

"Some folks that gabs without lief or license is apt to git their foot in it," Mrs. Brassfield said. "I reckon Zora she'd 'a' told Mr. Dunham herself if she'd wanted him to know."

"I ain't a carin' a damn," Shad said, recklessly. "Everybody knows she took a shot at him. I ain't a carin' a cuss what she wants to keep still."

"I didn't know," Bill said helplessly, sweat standing on his forehead at the thought of the danger Zora must have faced for him that day.

"Yes, and Randall he's gone, too. Well, *he* lit out as soon as he got over the maulin' Moore give him—and he give him plenty, I'm here to say, men!"

"I never heard of Randall," Dunham said, his confusion growing at this repetition of an old story that was news to him.

"He was a blacksmith, he had a bunch of whiskers growin' on him up to his years. I never did see how in the hell a man with that many whiskers on him kep' 'em out of the fire when he was stirrin' it up around a horse-shoe, no, nor kep' the sparks from touchin' 'em off when he hammered a redhot aarn. He was the feller that was draggin' Zora away from you when Moore and that Texas feller come a bustin' up. 'You heard about them two fellers comin' in the nick of time to save your neck, didn't you, Bill?"



"Yes, I heard about that, but that big stiff draggin' Zora—you say he's gone?"

"Yeah, Bill; he's gone. No need of gittin' your bris'les up over that feller. Moore give him all any one man wants to pack, I'm here to tell you, men!"

"I'm sure glad he piled it on!" said Bill, wiping sweat from his eyes.

"Funny the way Moore went after that feller," Shad chuckled. He was fitting copper rivets—he called them ribets—in the holes he had punched through the tug, taking his time about it, calculating to make it last a good while, that being the kind of a job he liked. "You know Randall he ducked, along with most of the gang, when Moore and Hughes come tearin' up the platform, but Moore he tore out after him as soon as they carried you over to the hotel and got the doctor."

"I'll bet you!" said Bill, all excitement, throwing it in as applause of that long-past reckoning.

"He went after him hot-heels and hell-bent. Randall he was in his shop, tinkerin' around actin' inner-cent as hell, and Moore he bust in on him and says, 'What in the hell do you mean layin' your thievin' claws on my gal?' he says. Randall backed off and said what in the hell did he mean, and begun clawin' for his gun. Moore he ain't no specially speedy hand at gittin' at his gun, but he beat Randall to it and throwed down on him."

"Sa-a-y!" said Bill.

"They said Moore stood there a little while borin' that feller in the guts with his gun, dressin' him down to a fare-you-well. But Moore, you know, he ain't no

gun man like me and you, Bill; that ain't his way of fightin'. The longer he cussed that feller the madder he got, till he got so *damn* mad he jammed that old gun in the scabber and lit into Randall with his fists."

Bill was on his feet, his own fists doubled hard, the two little white spots showing on the bridge of his long nose, breathing like a horse.

"Good boy!" he cheered. "Good boy!"

"Moore took that feller a clip under the chin that nearly lifted him through the roof, and he laid him out so cold he never got no more chance to use that gun 'n a angel. And he was holdin' it in his fist all the time! Well, sir, gentlemen, when Moore got done with that man they had to borrow Schubert's plank to carry him home on, and when he got able to sneak, he snunk. I guess you won't find nobody much *to* shoot up when you go back to Pawnee Bend tomorrow, Bill."

"Maybe it's just as well," Bill reflected, sitting down again soberly.

"It's better," Mrs. Brassfield said, decisively.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Shad argued. "A man's got a right to clean up on a gang that tries to murder him off. I know if it was me I'd foller 'em to the aidge of nowheres but I'd git 'em."

Mollie made no comment on this vengeful and relentless declaration, which appeared about as far from the nature of her lean old caterpillar husband as opposites could be extended. She tilted her chin and pulled down the corners of her flexible thin mouth, expressing disdain far more effectively by her silence than any words she could have commanded.

"I reckon you'll be pullin' out and leavin' this country, Mr. Dunham," she said. "They ain't treated you very nice, always pesterin' and pickin' on you and drivin' you to shootin'."

"He ain't got no kick comin' as I can see," Shad interposed before Dunham had time to reply. "He's give 'em as good as they passed out to him, and some over, the way it looks to me."

"I hate a fuss," Bill said, disparaging the past, in which he could not see the faintest gleam of glory.

"Roastin' years'll be ready back where they grow," Mollie said longingly. "I don't have hopes I'll ever wedge one between my jaws any more, let alone settin' down with my apurn full of shell beans to make a pot of suckertash."

"Some people wouldn't be sadisfied if they had a rope on the moon," Shad complained. "When we move you say you're tired of movin', and when we set still you beef around about goin' on. I've wore out six wagons tryin' to find a country that'd suit you."

"You was always mighty careful you didn't let me do the drivin'," she reminded him, looking so sad and road-weary that Dunham pitied her as never before.

"You got chickens and eggs," Shad reminded her, with upbraiding for her ingratitude.

"And canned beets, and canned corn, and canned ter-maters," she added to his list of luxuries. "I've et so much canned truck in the last five years, Mr. Dunham, I'm lined with tin. They never could open me without a ax. They call this the short-grass country, but I call it tin can land."

"You wouldn't be sadisfied in heaven," said Shad.

"Maybe not," she sighed.

Mollie got up and began stirring the supper pots, for the sun was low. As she moved about her work she pitched her thin high voice in the song she favored most, and sung with a peculiar note of lamentation as unfitting to its frivolous theme as a glove to a foot:

Old man, old man, I'll never give you rest,  
Till you fetch me the feathers from a skeeter's nest.

Shad looked at Dunham, nodding with an air of finality, like a lawyer submitting his incontrovertible evidence.

"Yes, and if a feller was to fetch 'em to her," he complained, "she'd say she wanted a hummin' bird's wishbone."

## CHAPTER XXVI

### CATTLEMEN'S CHOICE

It looked as if the short-grass country was emptying itself into Pawnee Bend for the celebration that day. Bill Dunham heard the beat of hoofs in the road before daylight as the first skirmishers, who must have left distant cow camps at midnight, passed. These were the cowboys who had leave for the day, determined to make it a long one, hastening in to prime their appetites and lay the foundation for a proper state of hilarity fitting to the big event.

By sunrise traffic began to thicken until there scarcely was a time when somebody was not in the road, a condition of marvelous activity in that vast lonely land. Later the spring wagons and buggies came rolling along, wheeling up such a dust as never was seen on that old trail except when a Texas herd went by on the end of its long slow march.

It was such an animating sight that the Moore family were constantly rushing out with things in their hands to see, and hail distant friends, and whoop far-carrying conversations, which the travelers never paused to engage in, with satisfaction and good cheer to all concerned.

Moore was at his best in those loud-shouted hails and questions after the welfare of families and general conditions on far corners of the range. He could

keep it up until the travelers were around the first bend, often shouting his last pleasantries in tremendous crescendo after they were clean out of sight over the hill. He was so red and happy in his boisterous loud style that one might have thought him the manager of the big show, his fortunes secured by the generous outpouring.

The Moore family fell in with the procession duly, Bill Dunham riding with Zora and the two older people in the spring wagon, the boys romping along on their horses. Brassfield and his wife had gone on ahead hours earlier, both in high hope of picking up with some old cronies of their past rambling life.

Bill Dunham had not known of any public square in Pawnee Bend, any more than a casual visitor from anywhere, let him be never so keen, would have been aware of its space or confines. It was an area surrounded by short-grass plains, lying entirely beyond the uttermost growth of the town. The promoters of Pawnee Bend, Bergen and Puckett, had planned grandly and the town had not overtaken their expectations, to say nothing of building around them to the formation of a hollow square.

But the square was there, duly set aside and designated, a distance of two good city blocks beyond the last business house at the end of the principal street. With the county organization now complete, the county seat assured to Pawnee Bend, there was good reason to believe the street would stretch in time until its buildings enveloped the square. There the court house would lift its cupola above brick walls, with cottonwood

trees around it in due course. There is a lot of compensation in a cottonwood tree for that arid short-grass land.

Exactly in the center of this square, where the very holy of holies of the court house would be, a plank platform had been built for the ceremonies of that historic day. There was a railing around it, where flags draped over, and a table with a pitcher of water cooled by a large lump of ice. Kansas orators are great fellows for drawing on the pitcher of water. Many a bright idea has been irrigated in the pause of pouring and drinking, to spring into flowery speech as marvelously as the juggler's rose in the pot of sand.

Here on this platform the judge of the circuit sat, with the congressman and other notables, among them the officers of the new county waiting for the oath that would harness them completely to their new dignities.

Bergen was there in his impressive coat, a white vest in place of the red one of ordinary wear. Red was a good color for a business vest, but in politics a man must show a symbol of virtue, let him live up to it as he would after getting the office.

Puckett was there, his slumping, useless shoulders drooping a little more than usual, it seemed, on account of his public exposure in an elevated place without a table to put his elbows on; and Major Simmons, hat tipped saucily over his left ear; and Ruddy, the mayor-hardware man, looking as ill-favored as if he never had got over the loss of his window pane broken by the fittified man.

Schubert was on the platform, calculatively solemn,

perhaps thinking of boards of another kind than the fresh pine ones under his large, wedge-shaped feet.

Bill Dunham was bewildered by this gathering of people in a land that had the appearance of being so unproductive of the species, but cheered by the sight of so many children. He always had felt, since his very first hour in Pawnee Bend, that people came to the short-grass country full grown, served their time, died and passed out of review, to be replaced by mature ones from the reservoirs of that indefinite region spoken of as the East. It might be Dodge City, or Wichita, or Kansas City, or Illinois.

While he knew there were children somewhere in Pawnee City, having heard them at a distance when he stood on the station platform on his first arrival, the sight of them now in such hearty abundance made him glad. He felt patriarchal and benign. He could have blessed them all.

MacKinnon and Garland, with a number of cattlemen Dunham never had seen before, pressed around the wagon as Moore drove into the square. They were so friendly and eager to shake hands with him that Dunham's quickly raised apprehension of trouble cleared away at once. Major Simmons came down from the platform to add his hearty greetings and congratulations on Dunham's recovery.

Moore was one of the big lights of the occasion, due to his financial standing and general prominence in public affairs. He was to sit on the platform with the rest of the county's leading citizens.

"Gentlemen, we'd better take our places," Major



Simmons said. "The hour is at hand for the exercises to begin. As the county's six-hundredth citizen, Mr. Dunham, we have reserved a place of honor for you."

Bill was so taken back by this public distinction that he began to fumble around mentally and look for a hole. Major Simmons had hold of his arm; he couldn't get away without rudeness, which was not his nature.

"I don't exac'ly know that I ought to set up there with you gentlemen," he said, red and uncomfortable, his collar feeling suddenly very tight. He looked appealingly at Zora, who was sitting in the wagon radiant and sparkling with what Bill very well knew was mischievous delight.

Zora nodded vehemently, drawing her brows in a pretty frown of warning, as if cautioning him to walk straight and not break the conventions. Garland slapped his back and laughed, and several other big cowmen pelted him with friendly encouragement. They pushed him along, laughing as if they had the joke on him that day, and were going to play even with him for bringing in the Texas herd.

Seats for the people had been contrived out of lumber-yard planks in front of the stand, all lying out in the blazing sun perforce, for there was not a tree nearer than the river. These benches were filling, people of experience preferring sitting in the sun to standing and shifting from leg to leg. They knew when a congressman got loose there was no telling how far he would go.

Wagons and buggies were drawn up on the sides of this seating area, their occupants comfortably sheltered

from the sun. At the right of the speakers' platform there was a space which marshals of the day were keeping clear. As Dunham and the others took their seats, men on horseback began filling this reserved ground. They came riding up from town, evidently by pre-arrangement, ranging compactly in a certain rude order, the foremost of them with their horses' noses at the railing.

Dunham had a new qualm at this sight. It looked as if these men were there for some purpose aside from spectators. He wondered if they were expecting trouble to break about something, and he wondered if they had it in for him. They were cowboys and cattlemen, every one of them armed. More than that, the cattlemen were plainly in charge of that day's business. They had pushed the townspeople aside and were doing it their own way.

Bill began to sweat from another reason than the eleven-o'clock sun. He had a deep, troubled feeling that something was going to happen to him. There he was, surrounded by cattlemen, flanked by cattlemen, as helpless in their hands as a calf.

He looked around at Zora, caught her eye, and tried his hardest to ask her silently what it meant. She shook her head in that quick, warning way mothers do to stop a child about to tear the leaves out of the hymnal in church, drawing her nice eyebrows in admonitory frown. Bill read it as meaning: "Behave yourself, Bill Dunham! Sit still, and don't make any foolish breaks."

They let the congressman expand himself in oratory

first, and he spread out over considerable territory before he finally took wing back to Pawnee Bend and settled down on the roost. The judge then had his turn at them, which he made short, and gained friends by it. He then began swearing in the county officers, beginning with the three commissioners, who were MacKinnon, Major Simmons and Ruddy, of the lost window pane.

The judge took the others as he came to them, laying an especially heavy oath on Bergen, it seemed to those who heard it. Bergen was to handle the county funds. Puckett came under the judicial scrutiny next, and took the oath with downcast eyes and a slanting stoop to his sloping shoulders, as if he was determined to let as much of it as possible glance off.

With Puckett out of the way the judge looked around and called for the sheriff, at which Hal Garland stepped forward in a sudden hush of interest, everybody leaning in a new eagerness. Garland told the judge that the original selection for sheriff, whose name was on the petition filed with the secretary of state, had withdrawn and left the county. His place had been filled by a better man, no less notable citizen than he whose name had rounded out the required number of petitioners and made the county organization possible and complete.

With that announcement Garland clapped Bill Dunham on the shoulder in the greatest wind-storm of applause that ever had swept over the short-grass country.

Bill was so completely and supremely surprised he couldn't move. He felt the thrill of hot chasing the

ripple of cold up his backbone and out of his long nose, and a rising of high pride in him at this sudden realization that he had made his place in the short-grass country and stood among them a sufficient and acceptable man.

He was sensible of the honor the county was offering him, for there was an honor in the shrievalty in those immense new counties on the Kansas frontier—some of them have been split into four since then—that scarcely dignifies the office now. Much was expected of a sheriff there, and much was accomplished beyond the strict confines of his statute obligations. He was the biggest man in the community, overtopping lawyers and judges, among whom the notable sheriffs of those days stood like giants.

Still, Dunham didn't know what to do about it. He sat there feeling a tingling exaltation, the hot and cold running around and around his nervous system, up his backbone and out at the end of his nose. He didn't want to refuse, he didn't want to throw that honorable distinction slap in the faces of the hundreds of unknown friends who were conferring it, but he couldn't budge a muscle to draw himself up and take the oath.

Garland settled the matter for him by pulling him upright the way a sheriff ought to stand.

"We've drafted you because we need you, Bill. You can't go back on us now," Garland said.

Dunham managed to lift his right hand and bow his head in solemn affirmation when the judge bound him to uphold the constitution of the United States and the state of Kansas. The judge shook hands with him

when he had said the final word, a distinction he had not conferred on any of the others.

Then Garland took over the program again. He produced a gold badge of office, and another cowman, unknown to Dunham, came forward with a costly belt and pistol. Garland said he would call on one of the fair daughters of the fairest land that lay under the heavens to come forward and invest the new sheriff with his arms and badge of authority, like a knight of olden days, among whom, said Garland with a true Kansas oratorical bound, there was none more valiant than this knight of the Arkansas, the county's six-hundredth citizen, and its first.

That was cowmen's day, and Dunham was their choice. Zora Moore was the fair daughter who stepped in front of Bill and grinned provokingly as she pinned on the badge, and went on grinning still more provokingly, as if to say she had known all the time this was going to come off, while she buckled the new belt around him. Bill, red and tingling, stood lifting his hands as a man does when a tailor takes his girth, or when he surrenders, as Bill surrendered then and there, without a condition to his name.

The judge handed Bill his commission, already signed by the governor, for the cattlemen had left nothing undone to make their big day complete, down to the very end.

"Sheriff Dunham," Garland said, turning Bill to face the riders whose gathering had given rise to unpleasant speculations and apprehensive emotions in him, "here are your deputies if you need them. The cattlemen

look to you to enforce the law to the limit, and they know you'll do it. They stand behind you to a man."

The new county attorney was sitting close by, a young man of ingratiating presence with plenty of barber's perfumed grease on his sleek black hair. He looked a little resentful, and colored up as if he considered a retort that would put the cattlemen right in their presumption that all the executive power of that county lay in the sheriff's hands. He held his tongue, but placed no restraint over his tricky eye, which he winked at Puckett in mocking discount of this innocent aggrandizement of power. The county attorney had a dark and sensuous eye with a slow, fat lid, suggestive of bribery and intrigue.

They gave Bill another cheer, the yipping of the cowboys like a red border on the uproar that spread wide over the townsite of Pawnee Bend. These vociferous young men kept their guns in the leather, having been warned beforehand of the peril voters' heads would be in from the indiscriminate dropping of lead around the landscape.

Yipping was only a sort of half expression for a cowboy of that day, who felt that he had something inside him unsaid unless he had shot off his gun in the climax of his exuberance. They must have something to make their happiness complete, and nothing but a speech from Sheriff Bill Dunham would seem to fill the void.

It seemed to Bill Dunham, standing before his expectant supporters, who appeared to be just one immense, good-natured, half-challenging grin, that his

past was a great way behind him, indeed. He felt mature and seasoned, as a man confident of himself and his destiny should feel; he had accomplished what he had dreamed of doing back in the days when he read of those free-handed shooting men of Dodge. The world was not sitting on his chest any longer, pinning his arms to the ground with its knees. He had flopped the bully; the dust of the under dog was no longer on his back.

He stood before them tall and big-jointed, hat in his hand, the hot wind moving his shaggy brown hair, which had grown long in the weeks of his sequestration at Moore's ranch, the new belt around his gaunt middle, the new gun hanging down long on his thigh. The surprise of his new fortune was still over him, but above its confusion his pride rose high.

There was a creaking of saddle leather as the men on horseback adjusted themselves to hear the new sheriff's speech, a craning forward in intense expectation among the crowd on the benches and the vehicles gathered around. Bill stood a little while, which seemed a long time to him, head bent as if collecting his thoughts and marshaling his words, but they were the most elusive thoughts, the most unruly words, he ever had tried to corner in his life.

All his reading and accumulation of odds and ends of knowledge were of little use to Bill Dunham then. That was a gathering of practical people; they didn't want quotations from something said by other men. They wanted to hear something original, for that was a country where originality was respected. It had more of a chance in the short-grass country than in the

crowded centers; it stood out there like a white picket in a brown fence.

Bill Dunham considered all that, and put the thought of books out of his mind. He looked up with his slow-stretching, whimsical grin, put his hat on the chair he had occupied before his exaltation, and began to talk in a way that was as easy and natural as water running over a rock.

He didn't attempt anything sentimental; he didn't say a word about being grateful for his unexpected elevation to that position of power and trust. He just told them about his feelings that day of his arrival in Pawnee Bend, and how he had thought the country the barest, bleakest, loneliest spot a mistaken wayfarer ever wandered into. He said he felt that day as if he had climbed to the very top of Kansas and found it bald-headed, and that he was the doctor who had been called in to make its hair grow. It was such a hopeless undertaking it had made him weak in the knees.

They rocked in their saddles and bounced up and down on the springy planks when Bill told them that part of his story, to grow grave as he turned it deftly to give them a picture of the same place transformed into a fruitful land of promise by the thousand blooms of friendship that had sprung along his way.

Those who knew him best were the greatest surprised and delighted by the revelation of a quality quite unsuspected in such a modest, quiet-tongued young man. It was as if an unpromising guest had taken up the fiddle and played them an entrancing tune.



Dunham didn't hint at any great overturn of conditions, now that the law had come to Pawnee Bend. He made no promise of faithful performance in his office, said no word that would make the most iniquitous move uneasily in their seats. But there was something under his modest, subtly humorous way that confirmed them in the wisdom of their choice.

He didn't abuse his opportunity; he had heard enough congressmen to know when to stop. He cut it off with unexpected suddenness, while their appreciation was keenest.

"I never did make a speech," he said, reaching out and grabbing his hat like he had been struck with sudden stage fright and was going to bolt, "and I'm not goin' to try to do it now. But if anybody knows the man that stole my horse, I wish they'd point him out."

"Congressional timber there," said the judge, nodding wisely to Major Simmons as the applause rose and spread, and the crowd of potential deputy sheriffs put their horses in movement for a grand rush into town.

But they were not thinking of congressional timber. They'd better take on a little refreshment and improve the shining hours: that was their thought. That dry-humored Bill Dunham was going to close the joints. He hadn't said a word about it, but they knew, to the simplest man among them, that the law had arrived in Pawnee Bend and the letter of it was going to be enforced. They would drink while they could, and if Bill Dunham called on them they'd be right there with the same rush to help him put padlocks on the doors of every joint in town.

It was dusk that evening when the new sheriff hired a horse at the livery barn and set off in the direction of John Moore's ranch. There had been a good deal to do in the way of consultations and establishing the county officers in temporary quarters pending the building of the court house. Zora had only slipped Bill a little handshake along with several hundred other handshakes, and gone her way without giving him a chance for a word. Now Dunham was riding in such desperation toward the pea-green mansion that people who met him on the road thought he must have got word of the man who stole his horse.

"I don't suppose it'll do a dang bit of good," said he, with a hopeless sinking inside him, but an unshaken determination that urged him on.

He stopped at the top of the hill from which he first had seen the lights of the Moore homestead. It was dark now, and the lights were twinkling through the cottonwood leaves. He thought of Zora, the kind stranger of that night, and of Zora, the kinder friend. In past days he had built up his hopes of a dearer relationship, but they had been so utterly without a foundation of such substance a man must have to come wooing a cattle baron's daughter that his mouth turned dry and his tongue got thick. He never could say the words.

Why, in those days he didn't even have a job. Things were different now. He had come into his own.

"But I don't think it'll do a darn bit of good," he sighed, sitting there looking down at the lights.

He rode on, holding his horse down to a walk, his

courage stretched out in rather a tenuous line along the road behind him.

“Well, I don't know,” he said, plodding along slowly, head bent, trying to think out that problem in meditative concentration as he had figured out many a one before that day. “By all rights a sheriff ought to be a married man”—a tremendous sigh, looking ahead at the lights—“but danged if I know!”

**THE END**





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