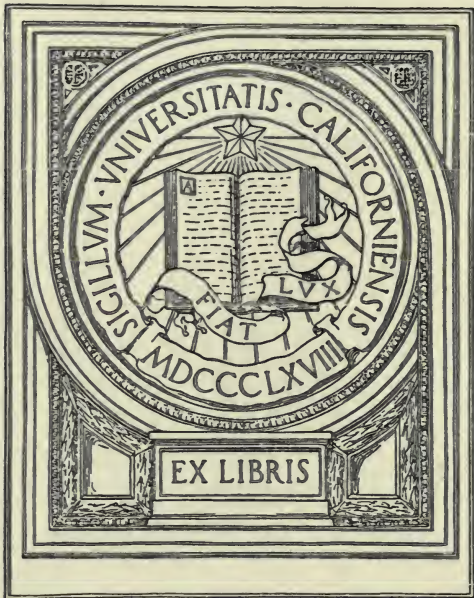


WHISPERING
SAGE



HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGON
JOSEPH NOEL





961
D758
wh



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

WHISPERING SAGE

1900

Whispering Sage

By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO
and JOSEPH NOEL



LIBRARY OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF
MICHIGAN

A. L. BURT COMPANY
Publishers New York

Published by arrangement with The Century Company

Printed in U. S. A.

Copyright, 1922, by

THE CENTURY CO.

Copyright, 1922, by
THE CENTURY Co.

Copyright, 1922, by
THE MUNSEY Co.

NO. 1110
ANNAPOLIS

Printed in U. S. A.

WHISPERING SAGE

WHISPERING SAGE

CHAPTER I

THE scorching rays of the noonday sun beat down upon the Nevada desert. For mile on mile the alkali flats stretched away until the eye wearied of distance.

Across the waste two tiny specks moved. Save for them all life seemed dead. Long before sunrise they had crossed the mighty range to the north, now dwarfed by distance into little, fantastic hills of purple cotton. Both horses and men were gray with dust. The horses snorted from time to time, to blow the biting alkali from their nostrils. The men's throats were bricky dry, too; and yet the taller of the two hummed a song. Ahead of them green trees beckoned. It was the fringe of stunted cedars that had been their sign-post all morning long. They expected to find water and grass in the Timbered Buttes. Beyond that, they had no plans.

Abruptly they began climbing the bench lands. Their circle of vision widened. They topped the crest, and the country of the Little Washoe burst upon them. Paradise Valley spread out in a gigantic horse-shoe. A range, the Santa Rosas, banked three sides

of it, the never-failing willows marking where Rebel Creek came tumbling out of the hills at the apex of the horseshoe, and being deftly turned, swung off to the right, hugging the base of the hills until it met the river that crossed the valley from one end of the horseshoe to the other.

Tired and thirsty as he was, the tall man stopped for a brief second to appraise that wonderful valley.

"Ain't that a sweet country, Shorty?" he murmured to the short, bandy-legged man, hard of face and slow of speech, who rode beside him.

Shorty's answer was a grunt. He glanced with a trace of annoyance at the suave, whimsical Buck; and yet he pulled his horse to a halt. It was significant. In this, as in all things, he followed the other. Bodine had won from him such allegiance as Shorty had little expected to give to any man.

Early yesterday morning, over the Oregon line at Denio, and again last night at the old Ashdown mine they had feasted. Bodine had talked much of Oregon and little of Idaho or Wyoming; but if the truth were told, he had seen almost nothing of Oregon and a great deal of Idaho and Wyoming in the past year. They had been harried sore in their old haunts. They were in a new country. Buck felt that he could afford to smile.

"Yes, sir," he exclaimed. "This country suits me. No railroads, no telegraph, no talk; just a dinky local telephone line. We'll stay here and 'Let the rest of the world go by.'" He hummed the words of that popular song of the day.

The grass was good in the buttes. They camped there. Life grew rosy again. But even such security and ease as was theirs began to pall. For two nights they had watched the twinkling lights which marked the little town of Paradise. The lure was insistent, and on the third evening they rode into the town and to Benavides's bar.

Benavides was a Basque, and most of his customers were of the same blood. Bodine and Shorty found the place filled; freighters, sheep-men, the Basque *gente*, and a sprinkling of Double A boys comprised the crowd.

Buck and Shorty edged to the bar and waited. In all that room no man knew them! Their pleasure in the evening grew accordingly. But still they waited, and now to their displeasure. One-eyed Manuel, the Mexican bartender, was busy elsewhere. The delay irked Bodine. Catching the butt of his glowing cigarette between thumb and forefinger, he shot it straight as a bullet into Manuel's face. The red-hot coal burned into the poor wretch's cheek with the sting of a knife slash. The Mexican slapped it to the floor. Murder flared in his heart, but something metallic in Buck's eyes made him pause.

"Move, you greaser, or I'll bring you to life in a hurry," Bodine warned.

Manuel's hand trembled as he set out the glasses for the two strangers. He smiled evilly. Things were too even now. Wait; time would bring an opportunity when the odds would be all his way, so caution counseled him.

The incident had passed quite unnoticed by the crowd. Wash Taylor, a ragged old mule-skinner, had been one of the very few to observe it. He laughed immoderately. Wash was an unmoral old person, all life being raw to him. When Buck bade him drink, he acquiesced with alacrity.

Shorty had to grin to himself at the adroitness with which Bodine drew from the old skinner the complete history of the valley.

"I 'm sort of lookin' round for a place," Buck was saying. "If I could find a small ranch hereabouts at the right price, I might be interested."

This was news to Shorty. He half suspected that Buck was merely talking, but he spoke with such conviction that the bandy-legged one eyed him curiously.

"You won't find no place for sale round here; that is, with water on it. And water 's gold in this country."

"It's gold, and precious stones, and the whole damn works," Buck asserted. "Without it you and your stock have only got a big thirst."

"Fact is, water or no water, the only place for sale in this hull valley is the old Webster ranch. No water there at all now. Used to be plenty in the old days."

Wash drained his glass.

"Used to be some place then. Hank owned due west from where Rebel Creek forked into the Webster. Maybe you've seen those dead willows stringin' across the valley? They follow the dry wash that used to be

Webster Creek. Wa'n't another ranch below him clear to the river. He had all the water. A cloudburst changed that in one night. Water came rushin' down carryin' ever'thin' before it. When it was all over, Hank found the mouth of the Webster damned up like a mason had done the job. Rebel Creek has been some stream ever since. That was a long time ago."

Wash paused to ponder over that miracle.

"Yep," he went on, "there was the hull valley changed overnight. Hank moaned and cursed. Nothin' doin'! The courts could n't go back on old Mother Nature. Say," he queried, "ain't the lawyers got sumthin' to cover a trick like that? The 'accomplished fact'? Well, it was that, all right. That there 'accomplished fact' made Paradise Valley. Look at those ranches bedded down along the Rebel clear to the Washoe. Pretty near all Basques down there. I ain't so fond of them; but they know how to work. I guess nature knew her business. She most generally does."

"What happened to Hank?" Buck demanded.

"Oh, Hank gave up the ship. He's runnin' a store down in Golconda, accordin' to last reports. He tried to sell his place; but shucks, you could n't give that ranch away."

By the time they left, the sleek Bodine, with his piercing black eyes and jaunty manner, could have retailed the past history of the valley. Old man Webster's passing particularly interested Buck. For a day it worried and then obsessed him.

“Why did he let go without a fight?” he repeatedly asked the puzzled Shorty. “It don’t sound right to me. Somebody wanted to get him out of the way; some *friend!* There ain’t no big cattle outfit here except the Double A. Maybe they wanted to grab it; but ten years is a long time to wait. Nobody seems to have made a move in all that time. I tell you this thing just gets my nanny.”

“Don’t make no difference to us,” Shorty grumbled. “We got other things to worry about.”

“Don’t make no difference?” Buck exclaimed. “Why don’t it? I smell easy money here.”

Shorty and he came down from the hills and camped at the deserted ranch. The obsession grew on Bodine. Shorty, in his dumb way, tried to follow the workings of Bodine’s nimble mind. On the morning of the second day Buck came to a decision. He called Shorty to his side.

“I’m going into Winnemucca and have a look at the county records. If old Webster made a filing on his water rights, I’m going to buy him out. You wait here; I may be back to-morrow. If I go to Golconda to see Webster, I may be gone a week. You wait a week. If I don’t come back by then, you find Gloomy and go over into the Malheur Lake country.”

The filing had been made. The State of Nevada guaranteed to Henry Webster the right to use a minimum of fourteen miner’s inches of water from Webster Creek.

Bodine’s enthusiasm for the deal in hand soared.

Even the State was on record that there were water rights along Webster Creek!

Five days later Bodine returned. Behind him lumbered a freighter, bringing the tools and necessities of life. Shorty shook his head. No need to ask; Bodine had done as he had said he would.

Shorty found his tongue then, and what he said was to the point. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"This *is* the cuckoo," he stated. "You 'll be gettin' married next."

"You watch my smoke," Bodine answered knowingly. "I 'll grow dollars on this little old ranch; before I 'm through you 'll see that creek runnin' full of water. We 're goin' to be so respectable it 'll hurt. But you sit tight and keep still. You 're my hired man from now on. Somebody 's goin' to wake up one of these mornin's to find us sittin' right on his tail."

CHAPTER II

IN a thinly settled country, where every man's movements are marked, news spreads quickly. People talked and wondered about Bodine. Who was he, and what foolish ambition led him to try his luck on such a hopeless place?

Of all those who watched and wondered no one was more interested than Dick Acklin, the Big Boss of the Double A. He had been quite content to see old man Webster go. For ten years the Double A had taken both its own and his share of water from Rebel Creek. Even so, it did not suffice. Acklin's crying need was more water. Many times he had been inclined to buy in the Webster place, but it was so worthless that he had never taken it seriously. Bodine's buying it awakened old misgivings. Acklin knew that the right man could make him a lot of trouble. Webster's water rights might still be made the basis of a long, expensive lawsuit.

He stood it as long as he could; and then, instead of bearding Bodine, he rode to the Rancho Buena Vista to see the Señor Arrascada. The old Basque met him as a friend. José was the most powerful of the Basque *gente*. The patriarchal old man abated not one whit of his dignity in the presence of his powerful neighbor. Acklin, indeed, was a frequent visitor. The Rancho Buena Vista did honor in his

behalf. And, yet, more often, the feudal lord came to do honor to the Señorita Mercedes, its beautiful mistress.

The hacienda was a low, rambling structure, its wings enclosing a patio which, to all practical purposes, made the rear of the house the front.

Acklin surveyed it with a trace of envy. The cool, quiet, half-darkened house was a relief after the noise and glare of the Bull's Head. José led him to the patio, where cool zephyrs seemed eternally playing. With a sigh of relief Acklin sank into the big, comfortable chair his host offered. The old man clapped his hands, and the wrinkled, leathery Mariano, his *mozo*, or house-boy, came on the run. José sent him for refreshments. Almost instantly he was back, bearing tall, tinkling glasses of cool delight.

They sipped their drinks in silence. From where they sat they could hear the crooning waters of Rebel Creek, seventy-five yards away. Acklin's eyes roamed the patio, with its beds of Indian pinks and lupines. A cleverly contrived ditch brought its life-giving waters to the flowers. From the shelter of its grassy banks a frog croaked querulously.

José offered him one of his choice cigars.

"My friend," he asked, "what brings you to the Rancho Buena Vista this time; business, or pleasure?"

"It's always a pleasure to come here, Señor. But business; that's something else. By the way," and Acklin's big, blue eyes contracted until they seemed to shade to gray, "have you seen the fellow who bought the old Webster place?"

“Several times. He’s here to-day, down at the corral. Esteban and the vaqueros are breaking horses.”

“What’s his game?” Acklin snapped.

“Señor, the man is no fool! I sold him a bull two days ago. He haggled over the price to the last penny. I think he will do what he says he will do.”

“Humph! He’s a fool! Where is he going to get his water? A well? That makes me laugh. I would n’t take that ranch as a gift. As a matter of fact, have n’t you warned half a dozen of your people against taking it?”

“That is true, my friend,” José asserted. “You remember how the creek used to lose itself in the quicksands below the house? Webster tried to save that water many times; but everywhere he turned he found quicksand. I am afraid a well there would fill up as soon as it was dug.”

“There you are!” Acklin got to his feet. He was a big man, good to look at and younger than his appearance implied. “Did you tell him about the quicksand?”

“Sí! He said it did n’t worry him—‘none,’ I think he said.”

“Of course not; it’s a game. You mark my words. What’s he going after; sheep or cattle?”

Old Ironsides smiled.

“No more sheep, my friend. Don’t let that worry you. But enough of this man Bodine. How is everything at the Bull’s Head?”

“Oh, so-so. Still losing a lot of calves.”

“My people, I hope, are not suspected?”

“No. We are losing them in the other direction, toward the Owyhee.”

The talk drifted to cattle and the crops. The old Basque had a sense of poise and a choice of words that enabled him to hold his own with the college-bred Acklin.

A little tot of six, unnoticed by them as they talked, had felt his way upon the veranda. His sensitive fingers touched each familiar table and chair, as if they were sign-posts to his unseeing eyes. The murmur of his father's voice told his keen ears where the gray-haired José sat. With uncanny swiftness the boy made his way toward him. Once he almost stumbled, and the sound of his scuffing feet caught the old man's ears. Instantly the father arose, and lifted the little fellow up to him.

“*El hijo mío,*” he said tenderly. “Those bad chairs are always in the way, eh?”

The boy rubbed his bruised leg and laughed as his father petted him. He was a beautiful child. His brown, staring eyes made a mute appeal to friend and foe.

For close to five years, José had been both father and mother to the little blind Basilio. In spite of all his size and strength, it was with the delicate touch of a woman that the old Basque caressed the child.

Acklin stretched out his hands to the boy.

“How is my little buckaroo to-day?” he asked playfully.

"Fine," the child answered timidly, but he made no attempt to go to him.

"It is Señor Acklin, *niño mío*," the old man prompted. "Can't you shake hands with the Señor?"

Basilio did as he was bid. Acklin had often tried to make friends with him; but the boy held aloof as if he sensed—with that faculty the blind possess—an enemy, rather than a friend, in the big cow-man.

His father set the boy down at his feet. From the fence at the end of the patio, a magpie scolded in raucous tones. Basilio knew that particular magpie. In a flash he slid off the steps and ran down the graveled walk of the patio. There were no chairs or tables to trip him there. As he ran he cawed and shrieked, until the patio seemed alive with magpies.

When he had almost reached the fastness of the vine-covered fence, a black head bobbed up beyond it, and calling again, dashed up a side-path of the garden, with the boy in keen pursuit. It was the Señorita Mercedes. Hair flying, her skirts tucked up about her, she fled helter-skelter around the patio until she dropped in a heap. A second later and Basilio was upon her, pulling her hair and showering her with fine spray from the tiny ditch.

This romp was a daily pastime. From the veranda José and Acklin watched. Old Ironsides pretended to be shocked with such conduct in the presence of his distinguished visitor; at the same time he gloried in their fun. Acklin laughed. He had had evidence enough of the tomboy spirit of the beautiful girl.

José would have been surprised if he had known that the mighty Acklin had felt the sharpness of her tongue more than once.

In answer to her father's call she came up the steps truculently, the boy hanging on to the ribbons of her dress.

"*Querida*, you are worse than a boy," the old man scolded. "What kind of play is this, before our guest?"

She laughed mischievously, her black eyes snapping. She flashed them belligerently at Acklin. He had never seen her more beautiful; her gleaming teeth, well rounded shoulders and bust, and warm lips all made her adorable.

"You come to see me, huh?" she asked.

Acklin blushed. It was disconcerting to say the least.

The fact that he might be coming so regularly to the Rancho Buena Vista to see its mistress had begun to dawn on old José some time back. He had proved how astute he was by not saying a word. What an alliance that would be! Mercedes would in reality be the queen of the land then. But now that his daughter had blurted out her tomboy question, he blushed as furiously as Acklin.

The uncomfortable visitor tried to turn her blunt question at her expense.

"Now what else could bring me all the way from the Bull's Head? Why, Miss Mercedes, without you the Rancho Buena Vista would be deserted. You lure all of us here."

"The Señor Bodine he say that, too. '*Sí, Señorita,*' he say, 'you are a little desert rose.' 'The love of Mike,' I say. 'You try to squeeze my hand again, this desert rose stick her thorns in you.'"

"The rogue!" José scolded.

"What hurt that make?" she demanded. "I like very much to have man squeeze my hand—if he is nice man."

José shook his finger at her. Mercedes was thoroughly enjoying herself. Acklin got to his feet. He knew she was watching him.

"When you try that, eh?" she asked saucily.

"Stop *inmediamente!* Enough!" her father cried. "You are a hopeless minx. You 'll not stay for supper, Señor?"

"No, I 'll be getting back, I guess."

The old Basque caught up Basilio and said good-by to his guest, pleading the need of his presence elsewhere. José knew that extreme youth and old age are not handmaidens to love. Acklin watched the stately old man out of sight. Mercedes had caught up a guitar and was strumming it idly.

The shadows began to creep along the veranda, but both she and the tall man leaning against the stone pillar seemed unmindful of them. The hour and the stillness had taken Mercedes to the knee of the beautiful mother who had sat here years ago and sung these same tunes to her.

All of the wild, tomboy side of her dropped away, leaving her the sweet, emotional little chatelaine her

mother had prayed she might be. The lightly held guitar fell to her lap.

Acklin sat down beside her. "Sing some more," he pleaded.

Mercedes shook her head.

"Why you always come see me?" she demanded.

"I 've got something for you," Acklin smiled.

"A present?"

Acklin held up a small package. He waved it in front of her eyes, as one does with a toy for a child. Mercedes clapped her hands joyfully. She started to unwrap it, when she stopped short.

"Why you bring me presents, huh?" she demanded.

"I—er—why—" Acklin was flustered. He had foreseen this moment, but his rehearsed speech failed him. Her eyes dared him to go on with it.

"You'll let me bring you a little present now and then, won't you, *niña*?"

It was a lame effort to turn her question, and she laughed in glee.

"You like me so much, mister?" she pursued.

"You know I do. This little present came all the way from the city."

"City" in that country meant San Francisco.

From the tissue-paper, Mercedes drew forth a tiny vanity-case. Her nimble fingers found the spring that unlocked it. With delight she glimpsed the dainty articles the case contained.

Acklin knew Mercedes was pleased.

"What you call that?" she murmured.

"A vanity-case. Quite the thing in the city."

"Those things to make your lips and cheeks red—that 's vanity, huh?"

She laughed heartily. Acklin was forced to smile at her naïveté. Mercedes tried to release the small compartment that held the powder-puff. Acklin reached out his hand to help her. She felt his fingers pressing her own. In a flash she jerked her hand away.

"You 're foxy, huh, like the Señor Bodine?" she cried.

"Oh, damn Bodine," Acklin rasped out.

"Eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves," a voice answered in unctuous sweetness.

Mercedes and Acklin turned. Bodine lounged against a pillar at the end of the veranda. He had been an interested witness of the present-making. Acklin acknowledged the introduction with a curt nod of his head. Buck grinned. A less hardy man than Bodine would have wilted under the look of contempt with which she swept him from head to foot.

"So, Mr. Fresh! For once you tell the truth, huh?"

"I sure did n't know I was intruding on any party, Señorita. I just came up to say good-by. I broke that bad gray for Esteban. That *caballo* 'll be gentle enough for you to ride now."

Acklin got to his feet.

“Well, I guess I ’ll get my hat and run along,” he said, in that tired way which was common with him.

Bodine waited until the big cow-man was out of ear-shot.

In a voice that held all the intimacy he could put into it, he whispered, “He ’d be a great catch for you, little girl.”

His sedulous eyes appraised her as they had at their first meeting. All women interested Bodine, but not in quite the particular way that she did. It was because of Mercedes that he cultivated her brother, Esteban.

“You think so, eh?” she asked tauntingly. “For why I want to catch him?” She stamped her foot angrily.

Bodine bent over her: “You can trust me, *querida*; I won’t tell.”

“*Trust* you,” she mimicked. “I would n’t trust you that far.” She snapped her fingers to show him.

Buck grinned. There was a charm, a certain air of ease, here at the Rancho Buena Vista that had eluded Bodine all his life; something from which it seemed he had been excluded. It nettled him.

Mercedes caught the thought in his eyes.

“You ’re plumb beautiful when you get het up, Miss Mercedes,” he said insidiously. “I hope to admire you are. I like spirit in a woman, same as I do in a horse.”

“You like to break that spirit, too, huh? You best not try those trick on me. You make me what you call tired.”

Like an angry terrier, she flounced out of her chair, and left Bodine to himself. She slammed the screen door behind her.

“Burn up, you little she-devil,” he muttered under his breath. “I bet I ’ll break you of that before I ’m through.”

Acklin came along then, and they walked to their horses together.

“Which way you going?” Bodine asked.

“Back to the Bull’s Head.”

“I ’ll side you as far as the Webster, if you have no objection.”

“No harm in that,” Acklin answered. “Come along.”

CHAPTER III

ACKLIN was anxious to talk to Bodine. Esteban waved them good-by as they cantered away.

Buck was the first to break the silence.

"Nice little bag of tricks back there."

He laughed. Acklin looked at him, but did not answer.

"Her bosco dad might hold her down to convention," the other went on. "But her mother's white blood might make her listen to reason." He paused until he was sure Acklin followed him. "That is, if the Big Boss used a little reason."

"What are you hinting at?" Acklin demanded peremptorily.

"You don't mean to tell me you are serious with that kid, do you?"

They were walking their horses. Acklin pulled up. He held Bodine's eye.

"Suppose we leave *her* out of this," he said icily.

"It's none of my business, Acklin. I just wondered what your game was."

"What's yours?"

Acklin drove his question home so suddenly that Bodine was stumped for an answer.

"Well," he said at last, "now we *are* getting somewheres."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing; only these foreigners seem to be damned prosperous around here, don't they? From your nest at the Bull's Head, these ranches down here must look pretty sweet. What a place this valley would be to fatten cattle in. And to think that you could have had it for a song."

Bodine clucked his tongue at the pity of it.

"Well?"

Acklin's patience was running out.

"Those Basques have got the water that belongs to me by rights. You know that, Acklin."

"Why don't you go after it, then?"

"I'm going after it. Don't let that worry you. And if you are half as wise as I think you are, Acklin, I'll get it. All I want is a little Double A backing, to put this deal through."

Acklin's eyes contracted. His surmise had been correct.

"You make me smile, Bodine," he said. "The Double A is n't pulling coals out of the fire for others. You'll run bang into the law if you touch that water."

"Law! Say, I've got all the law I need. The county records say I am entitled to fourteen inches. But why talk of law? If you'll back me up, the law will be the last thing to worry about."

"I don't know how you figure to cut me in, Bodine; but you don't think I'd be a party to a deal to do these people out of their water, do you?"

Bodine almost fell off his horse as Acklin uttered his sanctimonious words.

“O hell!” he cried impatiently. “Say, Acklin, do you think I am a fool? Listen to me; I ’m no Basque! Maybe you can get away with that drivel on them. You flew off your handle a little while back when I tried to twit you about that Basque kid. As if I did n’t know you were only playing! Tell me when the Double A ever held out a helping hand to a bosco? Why, if you could grab up these ranches down here for a song, you ’d do it quicker than scat. I know how things have gone along this creek. These Basques have caught you, time after time, taking more than your share of water. You need it! You ought to have twice as much as you ’ve got. You ’d like to get every drop of it; but even with your pull in the courts you ’re afraid to tackle this. It is n’t old Arrascada and his crowd who ’ve held you back. No, sir! It ’s those ranchers along the Little Washoe. This creek is their big *alce*. Without it, that river would be bone-dry by July. That ’s why the sign is up, ‘Hands Off!’” Bodine paused for breath. “Well,” he went on, “now that we understand each other, can we go on with this conversation without any more of that Sunday-school stuff?”

Acklin smiled; but his eyes were gray, instead of their accustomed blue. The smile meant nothing.

“Seeing you’re fully grown,” he said, “I ’ll waive the ‘Sunday-school stuff.’ What have you got up your sleeve?”

“Just this, Acklin. You and I can get every inch of water there is in this creek. And we ’ll make the law help us. I ’ll get the water I need, and you ’ll

get enough to irrigate the entire upper end of the valley. Soon as these Basques find their water is gone, they 'll throw up the sponge. Of course they 'll fight for a while; but in the end you 'll buy up their places for a package of gum. Now, if you 're willing to talk turkey, you come to my place in the morning. Think it over. No need telling you what I 've got on my mind, if you 're not interested. . . . I 'm going to leave you here. . . . *Adios.*''

Acklin rode on. When he reached the Bull's Head he retired to the little room that served him as an office, and smoked many pipefuls as he pondered over the astuteness of Mr. Bodine.

What the fellow had told him did not cause Acklin a moment's worry. He had said nothing but what the merest tyro in Paradise knew of his needs and dreams. But while he dismissed Bodine's talk lightly, he took the man seriously enough.

"He 's a blow-hard," he muttered to himself. "He 's theatrical; he 'll be a bad loser, too. Yes, sir, Bodine, your ego is entirely too large. I think you 'll cheat, but *will* you shoot—and inquire afterwards; or do it in the back, and make the inquiring unnecessary? Well, we 'll see. I should n't wonder but you 're the bird I have been waiting for."

The Webster Creek rancher had touched fire to plans long dormant in Acklin's mind. He smiled at Bodine's patronizing of him. If what Bodine had to tell him was as he expected, he knew the final outcome would be such that a little lording now by that individual was a cheap enough price to pay.

In the clean blue and white morning Acklin rode to Webster Creek. Far off down the valley the white-washed buildings of the Rancho Buena Vista and its distant neighbors glistened in the sun. Lowering skies with their sinister clouds of black would have been more appropriate for this meeting.

“All right, Acklin,” Bodine answered in reply to the other’s question. “I’ll put my cards on the table. Here they are. I’m going to turn that water back into the Webster! I’ve been over the spot where the creeks used to fork a hundred times. Nature changed that water in one night. I’ll do it quicker than that. There is nothing but sand and small rock there. Two days after it is done, no man on earth can prove that old lady Nature did n’t twist it for the second time. These Basques were satisfied to take what she gave them once. By God, they’ll have to be satisfied a second time! I won’t have any cloud-burst to help me out. They can think I turned it; but they won’t be able to prove it; not if I can keep them away for a few days. Remember all the time, too, that the State says I am to have fourteen inches of water here. No one has ever proved that I have n’t the right by law to turn that water back. Only, when I turn it back, I’m going to turn all of it. That’s where you are going to be interested. Webster Creek peters out in that sink two miles below here. Once the water is in this creek it is n’t ‘contiguous water’ to any stream on earth. Between us, we’ll take what we please and let the balance go to the devil. My boys will be here in a day or so, they’ll

do this job. They won't talk either. I'll tip you off the night I intend to do it. You be there, or send your foreman. Just so I'll know I don't stand alone."

Bodine bent over and picked up a stick. With it he drew in the sand at his feet a rough map of the valley.

"It's almost due east from here to the old forks of these creeks. But right here, just as Webster Creek neared the other one, it turned north. For almost half a mile they paralleled each other before they met. Your line follows this creek across the valley, only it keeps straight on right into those foothills. That means that Webster Creek flowed through your property for that half-mile. That's right, ain't it?"

Acklin nodded in assent.

"Well, when the night comes I want you to have your men ride your line. Don't let any one through. Keep your boys there for a few days. Pass the word that some one's runnin' an iron on your stuff. That'll be excuse enough. We'll be safe then."

"But what about the morning after? As soon as the water drops the Basques will come on the run. They won't wait for the law."

"Let 'em come! It means a fortune to us. We've got to expect a fight. There'll be gun-play and hell for fair. I'm willing to risk it. Are you?"

Acklin got to his feet and brushed the dust from his corduroys.

"Bodine," he said, "you underestimate what this

fight will be. Old José will rally his crowd around him for a real war. They can't live without that water. I've been through these affairs before; I know what they mean. There will be reprisals; cattle will be killed or run off. It will take a lot of my men. The whole routine of the place will be scrambled; and that's got to be ironed out before the fall round-up is on. You keep still for a couple days. I'll give you my answer then."

Although by this arrangement the matter rested, neither man waited to act.

Acklin had not even reached home before Bodine had started Shorty on his way to the Malheur Lakes, to find Gloomy and his other men. And once Acklin had reached the Bull's Head, he immediately sent for Morrow, his foreman.

"Cash," he said, "we've been thick-headed. This fellow Bodine has put his finger on the thing we should have seen first shot."

He repeated their conversation to him.

"Don't that beat all!" Cash exclaimed. "With all of the water flowing into the Webster, and petering out in the sink, why, we wouldn't have to give a whoop for those fellows down on the Washoe. Webster Creek and the Little Washoe River don't get within ten miles of each other. It was just a case of whole hog or none. We're getting too refined."

"Well, I'm tempted to risk it, Cash. Suppose we string along for a while. Let him and his men do the actual work. You just drop around about the time they are there—you know, casual-like—if you

ever have to swear to it. In the meantime send some of the boys down to the Benoist water-hole. We are having trouble enough with the calves. Don't tell them anything else is in the wind. Give them the word not to let any one through. Make Skip the straw-boss down there. I rather fancy him. We can go that far without a hitch. If Bodine turns the water, you run a drift fence along our line across the valley. Straight east and west with those dead trees is near enough. We've got the wire and posts. Most of the boys will be back from the north to-morrow. You can get that fence up in a hurry if you have to."

"You leave that to me," Cash cut in. "Soon as the fence is up I'll drive enough stock into the valley to make that fence look on the square. Say, sounds like old times, getting ready for a war like this. How your pa enjoyed it. But honest, I hate to see Old Ironsides get it in the neck. Old José is such a white Basque. But as your pa used to say, 'Business is like marriage. You got to take the bitter with the sweet.'"

Acklin turned back to his desk when Morrow had left. He pursed his lips as he thought of José and Mercedes. If this deal went through—and with his money and political power, it would,—well, she'd be his to a certainty. Paradise Valley would be his. He'd be its feudal lord even as he was the lord now of a domain larger than the Balkans.

The thought brought the perspiration to his brow. He was about to steal from her; but he stole as did

the robber barons of old, from the many, that he might have riches to pour into the lap of his favorite one.

But all his musing carried one reservation; he remained the lord!

CHAPTER IV

TEN days later a stranger crossed the desert from Golconda. He headed due north for the Benoist water-hole. He knew he was entering Paradise Valley by forbidden ways. The hint that he take the south road had reached him a day back.

Rumor said the Double A was losing untold numbers of calves. Therefore crossing Double A country without the official Acklin "O. K." was not being done. Henry Adams and old man Acklin had been monarchs of more than they surveyed, both figuratively and actually, for so long that no one questioned any right the Double A arrogated to itself.

They had learned early in life that though it is well to know the law, it is even better to know the judge. Other cow outfits had disappeared, but the mighty Double A empire had survived, proving that the younger Acklin had learned his lesson well.

It was not the stranger's whim to oppose him. By the merest chance he had taken the north fork at Wyand's. The willows ahead of him, he surmised, marked the water-hole. North, over the rise, he would find the valley.

He sent his horse ahead at a hard gallop. He found that the spring had made a small pool in the willows. He swung to the ground and loosened the cinches, but almost instantly the animal lifted his dripping

muzzle and turned an inquiring eye behind him. The stranger followed suit. In the shadow of the trees two men sat.

The older of the two, a black-visaged fellow, spoke: "Howdy, stranger!"

It was Skip Lavelle, Acklin's straw-boss.

"Howdy!" Kildare responded in the same flat, tell-nothing tone in which he had been accosted. His keen eyes took in the rifles reposing so conveniently in their laps, the soiled cards, and the interrupted game of monte.

The man who had addressed him got to his feet.

"What's your name, stranger?"

"Kildare; Blaze Kildare."

"Yuh ain't aimin' to linger around here, be yuh?"

Blaze eyed him thoughtfully as he drawled his reply: "Why, that all depends, don't it?"

He turned and started to lift the saddle off his horse.

"No use takin' that down, mister; nary nit!"

For answer, Kildare pulled it to the ground.

"Now listen to me, *muchacho*," he purred. "I'm going to breathe my horse, and we're going to drink our bellies full of water before we light out of here. What's all the big excite, anyways. I got a permit to cross this country."

"Let's see it," Skip and the other, Chet Devine, demanded.

"Now what did I do with that permit?"

He took his hat off, and peered into it.

"Oh, yes!" He laughed. "*Here* it is!"

And in his hand Kildare held a derringer that had been strapped in his sombrero.

"Stick 'em up!" he said in velvety tones.

"Well, I 'll be damned!" Skip began.

He stopped short, and instinctively Blaze sensed that some one was back of him; but he dared not turn around. Before Skip could recover his tongue, a voice droned in sweet and dreadful tones in Kildare's ear: "That 's good! That 's awfully good! It 's your turn to elevate, stranger!"

Blaze felt a gun-barrel boring into his neck. He obliged with alacrity. With nimble fingers his guns were taken from him.

This detail attended to, the man at his back continued not unpleasantly:

"Take your hands down, and shake. I 'm Cash Morrow, the foreman of the outfit these innocent little lambs belong to; but I can appreciate art when I see it. Shake!"

The bronzed, lean, sinewy Cash, for all his years, was a fit mate for the big man before him. Kildare grinned at him as Cash handed back his guns.

"Sure 'nough. I didn't know I was giving a show," he said easily, with the familiarity bred of the desert. I 'm mighty sorry I discommoded your boys, Cash. I thought maybe they were some of those Basque sheepmen I hear this valley is loaded up with."

The delicious twinkle, which was one of his happiest mannerisms, came into Kildare's eyes as he uttered this rank falsehood. Chet and Skip were as uncom-

fortable as two bashful schoolboys. A laugh from the direction of the lower end of the willows was little calculated to restore their equanimity.

“Basque sheepmen!” a voice cried mockingly.

A freckled face topped by a shock of red hair appeared above a green mahogany bush. The red-haired one sized up Blaze.

“Say, pardner,” he asked, “who are you ridin’ for?”

There was a noticeable drawl in Kildare’s voice; an ease of expression that made him at home among these buckaroos. Also there was that elision of unnecessary words, and at the same time an indirection of approach to the main subject, which stamped him desert-bred.

“Why,” and although he answered the man with the flaming hair, his eyes followed Cash, “I ’m riding for the Double A, if the foreman gets the right dope. We,” nodding toward his horse, “been getting our eats from the Lonely O up in Monty. Old Ted reckoned I ’d wind up here.”

“Take him on, Cash,” the owner of the freckles urged, coming out of the shelter of the bushes. “Chet and Skip ain’t no darn use, nohow, except to help Chink Charlie in the cook-house. You ’ll save one man’s wages.”

“You lay off the boys, Melody,” Cash cut in. “They ’ll both make hands yet. Although that hat trick is older than I am. It ’ll be forty and cakes until the fall round-up is over, Kildare. Are you on?”

Blaze grinned.

"You 've sure hired a man, mister."

"You 'll double that, if you throw a wise crap," Melody added. "To-day is pay-day, and pay-day aim is poor, or you would n't have got away with the hat trick."

"Skip will tell you what to do," Cash went on. "You better drift down into the valley to-night, Skip. String out along the old Webster wash. Don't let any one through. Here, Kildare, you take my rifle."

"What, Basques?" Blaze questioned.

"Basques will do," Cash nodded. "I 'll be down in the morning."

He mounted his horse and rode off.

"Here 's where the boscos get it," Melody said gloomily as he made coffee for Blaze. Skip and Chet were asleep. "All this talk of losin' stock is bunk. We 're just gettin' ready for another grab. I got eyes, and sense."

"Land?" Blaze queried.

"No. We got all the land in the world. It 's water this time."

As Blaze ate, Melody explained himself, and his surmise was more correct than he knew: "There was n't a thing in the wind until this fellow buys in the old Webster place."

"I heard down in Golconda that Hank had sold it," Blaze smiled. "He's been drunk ever since. Sounds as though he must a met up with somebody from the effete East."

"No, not this *hombre*. He throws a mean leg over

a horse. He 's Western by his talk. Too talky for me, though. Says he 's goin' to ranch it. Can't do that without water. The big boss and he 's been gettin' thick. We 're goin' to have trouble. If you 're done let 's ride up and have a look at the valley."

Melody pointed out the broken edge of dead willows and buckthorn that marked the spot where Rebel Creek had divided its water in the past, and sent part of its precious burden across the heart of the valley.

They sat in their saddles and smoked as the red-haired man talked.

"That 's a big place there in the bend, just before Rebel Creek gets to the river," Blaze drawled. He could see the irrigation-ditches which crisscrossed the land as though they were ribbons of silver that bound it together.

"That 's the Rancho Buena Vista. Wait till you see the girl that lives there—Old Ironsides's daughter. She 's the reason they named this place Paradise. Her daddy is the king-pin of the Basques. He 's all right, is José. Only bosco I ever savvied. He 's got a son, too. Always pullin' on the bit, that boy. Too much fire in him! Then there 's a blind kid—Basilio. No mother either. Pretty tough that, eh? I knew the old lady. Was n't any Basque. Guess that 's how the Señorita gets her spunk. But wait till you see this Mercedes girl. Man, when I look at her I don't miss sugar. She 's sweet. . . . G'wan you ole fool," he growled to his horse. "Let 's go back."

"You go on, Melody. I 'm going down to the

river and let my horse roll around in the water. He needs it if I 'm going to use him to-night."

"Keep your eyes open. I got a hunch some of these Basques ain't dumb to what's goin' to be pulled."

CHAPTER V

THE first cool hint of evening reached Kildare as he picked his way along the Little Washoe. The water gurgled at his feet. Both horse and man became anxious to sport in it. The river narrowed directly ahead of him. It was a likely place for a swim. There were willows on the opposite bank. He pressed his knees into his horse's sides and was about to ford the stream when the animal threw back its ears. It was an unmistakable sign. Some one was coming! Kildare reached for his gun. As he did so, he heard a child crying. He wheeled his horse and sent him along the soft bank about fifty yards to where the river turned. What he beheld caused him to shake with laughter. He put away his gun guiltily.

A burro stood knee-deep in the middle of the river. Marooned on his back was a frightened child, madly clutching a fishing-pole in one hand, while in the other he held a string of small bass. With his tiny heels he beat the burro's sides, and alternately shrieked and cried at him to move. Struggling in the water at the burrow's head was a girl; the most beautiful girl Blaze had ever seen.

She had taken off her shoes and stockings. Bare-legged, her dress held high about her waist, she

yanked and pulled at the bridle-rein as she poured forth in voluble Spanish, and more explicit Americanese, a torrent of words.

It was the Señorita Mercedes and Basilio. Early that morning the lad had begged his sister to go fishing. The sloughs along the river were running full, and he was fisherman enough to know that the bass would be biting. The boy and his sister had been on their way home when the burro had called a halt.

Blaze knew the child was in no danger, so he sat and watched them. He guessed by her coloring that the girl was a Basque; but there was none of that shy, languid manner about her he had so often observed in the women of her race.

The sight of the crying boy, the struggling girl, the fishing-poles, and the pathetic little string of fish warmed something within him. He had turned his back on childhood and the comforts of a sheltered life years and years ago, yet he loved children. How poignantly this fishing-party brought back his own boyhood! How he envied the thoughtless little beggar on the burro! He would have loved to roll up his breeches and wade in and fight the burro with them.

Neither the girl nor the boy had seen him. Suddenly the girl slipped, as she tugged at the rein, and sat down unceremoniously in the water. Blaze laughed outright at that, and then, unmindful of his clothes, jumped in and picked her up.

Mercedes had been quick to hear his laugh, and almost as quick to retort. Now that the stranger held

her in his arms, however, and she could see the twinkle in his friendly eyes, a feeling of awe and embarrassment filled her. Unconsciously she tried to draw her wet dress about her bare legs.

When Blaze had set her on the bank, he smiled despite himself. Mercedes's intuition told her there was only kindness back of that smile. She felt her own mouth relax, and they both laughed.

Fifty yards away he had thought her beautiful; now that she was so near he found her entrancing.

The finely carved nose, her well drawn chin—yes, he looked away and remembered them; but the thing that set his heart beating was not her face or her flashing eyes; it was the unbroken, unsophisticated spirit of her. He had lived in the wilds, and knew its creatures well enough to sense in her a vague similarity to them.

His discovery of her and the ensuing incident had taken only a few seconds, but even so he had half guessed who she was. He saw that the little fellow was blind. It served to bring Melody's words back to him.

"You are not frightened?" he asked.

"Oh, no, Señor," she answered with a smile. "But the baby—see?"

"I'll get him off in a second; then we'll try to persuade the burro."

Blaze waded out to get the boy. As he reached up his hands to lift him, he spoke.

"Here we are, Basilio," he said. "Don't drop those fish now."

Mercedes felt a delicious thrill pass through her as she listened to his voice. She saw her brother wrap his arms about the big man's neck. It came back to her then as a second thought that he had addressed the child by his name. And yet the man was a stranger. She had never seen either him or his horse in the valley before.

Basilio had stopped crying. Something in Blaze's voice reassured him. And then, too, Blaze had emphasized what to the boy was the most imperative need—to save the fish. A second later he set him on his feet beside his sister.

“There we are,” he said with a laugh, “safe and sound, fish and all. Now we'll make Mr. Burro move.”

He drew his six-gun and, holding it back of the animal's ears, pulled the trigger. The burro leaped for shore as if he had been shot out of a cannon.

“Ha, Capitán! *Por Dios*, you move quick enough now,” Mercedes trilled.

Capitán stood on the bank, waving his long ears in Blaze's direction, apparently determined that he would not be taken by surprise a second time. Wet, but laughing and happy, Kildare waded ashore. The girl regarded him with a smile as he stood before her, the water pouring from his clothes in tiny streams. Her eyes caused Blaze to look down at himself. He was a sorry sight.

“Shucks,” he said ruefully; “now I've gone and got my feet all wet.”

Mercedes had pulled on her shoes and stockings,

and now, while one arm was around Basilio, with her free hand she sought to tuck her rebellious hair into place.

“Did the man shoot Capitán?” the child asked timidly.

“What, shoot that good twelve-dollar-and-a-half burro? No, sir!” Blaze asserted. “I just creased his ears for him. When you say *arre* to him, now, he ’ll move.”

“Señor,” Mercedes asked, “how you know the baby’s name?”

Blaze hung his head sheepishly.

“Why, missy,” he stammered, “I just guessed at it. But I reckoned I knew who you were as soon as I saw you. I allowed he was your brother, too.”

“You are a stranger, though, eh?”

“Er . . . yes. I was taking my first look at Paradise when I met you. I guess I better be on my way,” he concluded, hoping to turn the conversation.

Mercedes had no such intention.

“How you know me, then, Señor?” she pursued.

“Well, you see a . . . er . . . a man once told me, that . . .” Blaze knew his feet were stepping on each other in embarrassment . . . “some day I ’d meet a Basque girl here, with beautiful black hair, . . . and black eyes . . . and pearly white teeth. . . . ‘Yes, and when you do,’ he said, ‘you ’ll know why they call this place Paradise.’ ”

Blaze regarded his twitching feet.

“And when I saw you,” he went on with eyes

averted, "I knew he had n't lied. I guess that 's how I knew you were Miss Mercedes."

The girl's long lashes dropped over her eyes.

"*Virgin santa*," she murmured softly. "But you say very nice things, Señor . . .?"

"Blaze."

"Señor Blaze," she said.

Kildare's horse had not moved from the spot where Blaze had dropped the rein. He held his head erect, ears expectant. His master's continued interest on the other side of the little stream seemed to worry him. He pawed the ground, and when that failed to earn him a word, he whinnied.

Blaze whistled so low that Mercedes barely heard it. Instantly the horse came to him and allowed the girl to stroke his head. Blaze lifted Basilio into the empty saddle.

"He 's safe up there," he assured her. "My Man likes children."

"What a strange name for a horse!" Mercedes said.

"We are old pals. Gentle as a girl, is n't he?" Blaze paused for a moment. "Yes," he went on, "a sight gentler than some I used to know."

It was Mercedes's turn to look away.

"You remember them still, eh, Señor?"

Blaze shook his head and smiled. Before he could answer, the hoof-beat of a horse being driven at furious speed interrupted him. Mercedes got to her feet and took Basilio out of the saddle.

"This will be my brother Esteban, or one of our

vaqueros. Maybe some day you will try and find the Rancho Buena Vista, eh?" she added naïvely.

"Some day," Blaze answered. "And I'll try hard enough to find it, too."

Mercedes blushed under her tan.

The oncoming horse splashed through the water, covering them with a mist of silver spray. On his back sat Esteban, a thin, wiry, narrow-hipped youth. He leaped to the ground and, staring inimically at Blaze, launched into a tirade of excitable Spanish. The girl saw that he was upset and tried to restrain him.

"*Callar!*" she cried. "Hush! Have you gone mad?"

Blaze had a fair smattering of Spanish and of the universally understood Mexican idioms which the Basques had adopted, but he was unable to follow the rapid words Esteban continued to shower upon his sister. He did catch the reiterated *el agua* (water), and *'cequia madre* (mother-ditch). It meant only one thing. The Basques did suspect their danger.

But Esteban found himself in quite the same position with Mercedes as did the boy with the horn. He had cried wolf so often that his sister refused to believe that things were as bad as he painted them.

When her brother had finished, she tried to tell him that Blaze was a stranger and to explain how he had helped Basilio and her. Esteban thanked Blaze with some show of gratitude. He swung into his saddle and caught the child up beside him. Mercedes got on

Capitán's back. With Esteban leading the burro, they started off.

"You come to the hacienda some day," Basilio called back. "I know where there's lots of fish."

Mercedes looked at her brother for confirmation of the invitation.

"You will be welcome if you come, Señor," Esteban answered.

With a tightening of the heart Blaze watched the girl go. He tarried to roll a smoke. Swimming had lost its attraction. Melody's talk came back to haunt him. If the freckle-faced man was right, the future was black enough for this girl.

"Basques seem to have a habit of always getting the worst of it," he mused.

It never had mattered to him before. He thought of his own possible future part in this conflict. His mouth straightened into a grim smile as he realized how his being a Double A man would temper her opinion of him when she discovered it. Yet what difference would the little weight that he could throw on either side make? If Acklin was intent on driving out the Basques, he would bring forces enough to win without him.

There was going to be a fight. It was in the air. It meant something to Kildare now. He couldn't go away. Paradise Valley had a claim on him. He had not come there by accident.

My Man reveled in the cool waters of the Washoe as Blaze dreamed on the bank. The shadows deepened. The man's mouth lost its hardness. Old mem-

ories of home and the brother he had raised and lost came to him.

"Gee, kid," he murmured, "you 'd like her, too. I can't see her get a raw deal. I suppose it 's as natural for some men to hog it all as it is for fish to swim, but if anybody steps on her toes I 'm going to get personal. I 'll chalk that down so I won't forget it, either."

My Man stared at him curiously. Blaze laughed half-heartedly.

"Old-timer," he said, "I guess I 've gone crazy. But she was sweet, was n't she?"

He got to his feet and stretched himself.

"What 's the use?" he said deprecatorily. "A rolling stone has n't any business thinking such things."

CHAPTER VI

STRETCHED out around the tiny fire in the willows, heads pillowed on their saddles, the four men waited. The long twilight was over. From the nodding sage came the sad, plaintive cry of the whippoorwill, lonely and foreboding in its three-toned monotony.

Punctual, almost to the minute, the night wind came whispering, sweet with the fragrance of purple sage and clean brown earth. To the eastward the crystalline peaks of the Santa Rosas, fringed with a delicate tracery of stunted cedars, stood outlined, glowing in the witchery of the desert night. The world waited for the wonder they withheld. And then suddenly valley and mesa were bathed in vibrant light. The round, heavy, golden-yellow moon hung low above the mighty range; the cedars no longer trees, but gossamer webs of silver.

Skip yawned and got to his feet.

"Late enough," he sighed. "The moon's up. Let's go!"

In Indian file they left the shelter of the trees. Half an hour later they forded the Little Washoe and held north for the dry wash of the Webster.

The ghost-like willows that lined the old wash rustled and creaked in the wind; but the kindly moon had touched their limbs with its magic.

Skip held up his hand.

“That fringe of dead willows marks the wash, Kildare. Melody, you side him east aways. Better let him stick around Rebel Creek. It’s the least likely place for any one to come through. Chet will trail me. I’ll hang out around the Winnemucca road. If we have any trouble, it’ll be there—freighter or somethin’. I’ll drop Chet about half-way over.”

He turned to Chet.

“You and Melody keep in touch with each other. You can see a long ways in this light. Come on!”

He wheeled his horse and loped off after the receding Chet. Blaze and Melody jogged on. The red haired one was quiet, serious. Kildare had said nothing about meeting Mercedes, but he had thought of little else ever since. A rabbit scurried across the trail ahead of them. Melody came up alert, his hand on his gun. Blaze smiled.

“Even a rabbit scares you to-night, eh?”

Melody shivered. “Just fidgety,” he grumbled.

They rode into a little arroyo. Blaze snapped a match with his thumb.

“Take a squint at this picture, Melody. Is that Bodine?”

Melody shook his head. He took the photograph in his own hands.

“Nope,” he repeated. “Nature didn’t spare *him* any either, did she?” he chuckled. “No! This fellow Bodine is tall and wiry. About the size of the Big Boss.”

The match flared out.

"Say," he asked, "what made you think that was Bodine?"

"Nothing. Just a chance."

They rode on without speaking for a spell.

"You aimin' to meet up with that bird?"

Blaze nodded. "I 'd sure admire to do that."

"Humph! It's a big country."

"I got lots of time."

Ten minutes later they came to Rebel Creek. Melody lay down to drink his fill for the night.

"Here's the source of all evil," he punned. "We own all this valley above the old Webster; every foot of it. And back of those ranges? Say, man, you could ride for a week before you got through seein' Double A steers." Melody threw away his half-burnt cigarette. "Guess I'll fan it back. You meet me every now and anon, in that little arroyo where you flashed the picture."

Blaze got out of his saddle. A rock for a backrest, he sat in the shelter of the willows and smoked. Melody faded away in the distance. My Man munched the tender, green grass, which grew lush in the creek-bottom. Minutes dragged by and no one came. He yawned and nodded. The sound of the browsing horse always prevented him from falling asleep.

Time after time he met Melody in the arroyo. Nothing happened to break the monotony of their vigil. The moon rode high. Blaze knew it was nearing midnight. Innumerable cigarettes had parched his throat. When he reached the creek again he got

down to drink; but the water, which had been so clear and cold, was muddy to the taste. He struck a match. He could see that his tongue had not deceived him. Some one had crossed the stream above him!

Blaze listened. The wind bore him no sound. Quickly and silently he broke open his rifle. The breach slid in and out in its oiled perfection. He snapped it shut. Ten seconds later man and horse picked their way upstream.

It was pitch-black in the willows and brush-filled creek-bottom; but it would have been foolhardy to risk the open. He knew he would be visible at close to three hundred yards in that light.

Blaze figured he had come half a mile or more when My Man stumbled. Any but a Western horse would have been down. He slid to the ground, rifle in hand, and went on, knowing his horse would be waiting there if he returned. Another hundred yards and he stopped. Was it the fallacious breath of the night wind or his own ears that had deceived him into hearing the sound of shod steel grating on rock and gravel? Intently he listened . . . a pause . . . and then, clear and unmistakable, it came again.

Kildare felt his pulse quicken. He edged to the moonlight. Not a hundred yards away loomed the whitened trees which stood beside the old Webster wash. He sensed from the contour of the country that the creek-bottom widened out here. A low mesa rose between him and the dead trees. He correctly reasoned that this barrier had caused that widening, the water swinging around to pass it.

Flat on all fours he crouched as he crawled to the mesa's rim. He was twenty feet above the water. Cautiously he peered over. His breath stopped. Right below him seven men toiled in the water. Rebel Creek was being dammed!

The face of the mesa threw the creek-bottom into shadow. Some one spoke. The voice was familiar. He craned his neck to hear. Too late he knew his mistake. The vagrant night wind eddying on the cañon wall laid heavy hands on his sombrero and sent it sailing down upon the heads of the men below. The weight of the little gun inside the hat made it drop like a shot. A surprised voice retreated from its blow. Kildare knew he was discovered. Cries of rage and anger came up to him. His rifle crawled out beyond the crest, black and ominous to those below.

"Freeze where you are," he cried. With his left hand he drew his six-gun and fired the three shots that would bring Melody and Chet rushing to his side. Below him one sought to steal away.

"Listen to me," he purred in dulcet tones, "I'll bust the first one of you that moves, and I don't care how soon you start running."

In an incredibly short time Melody dashed across the mesa. He saw Kildare with rifle to his shoulder.

"What is it?" he said huskily.

"Come here and see."

"That 's pretty, ain't it?" Melody growled. "Say, who in hell are you fellows?"

There was no mistaking the voice that rolled up

in answer to the red-haired one's question. It was Morrow's. He was thoroughly angry. "Melody," he roared, "who 's that fool up there with the gun?"

Blaze and Melody exchanged glances.

"It 's me, Kildare," the former shot back. "I did n't know I was making you sit so nice and pretty."

"My God!" Cash groaned. "Held up by my own man! What are you doin' here?"

Blaze explained about the water. The laugh was on Morrow. "Well, you get back to the willows and stay there. All this damn fool shootin' is likely to wake up somebody."

The two men rode away together. Melody shook his head. "I had it sized up about right, I guess."

"Did you recognize the others?"

"Sure! Bodine's crowd. The big fellow was Bodine. The *batalla grande* is about to begin."

Blaze stared ahead. "I suppose the Basques will be bumping into us in the early dawn."

"No, they won't know what they 've lost till mornin'. I heard once that they had a ginny hired to measure the water they ought to get."

Blaze smiled half-heartedly.

"Well, he 'll be like the coon in 'Othello'; he 'll find his occupation gone."

The weary-eyed Kildare waited out the hours. No one tried to get past him. It got to be five o'clock and yet the sky held only the murky gray the stars had left as they winked out. It grew cold in the creek-bottom. My Man moved about restlessly. To the east, black clouds sailed low above the range. A drop

of rain splashed against his face. Even before he had produced his tarpaulin from his cached bed-roll, the rain came down in earnest; cold and blood-chilling in a way that only the mountain-desert knows.

Sitting in his saddle, his tarp about him, he warmed enough to smile at this break of fortune for the Double A. Rain in this country was the great eradicator.

And while Kildare smiled so grimly, Acklin, Bodine, and the solemn-eyed Cash laughed aloud. Every drop of rain was as manna from heaven. It was the last touch needed to make their work as flawless as the black art of the devil.

"What a godsend," Bodine cried, without a trace of irony.

"No," Acklin murmured unpleasantly, "it's the luck of the wicked: it's always good."

"Let them prove their case now," Buck sang. "Why, we don't even need that fence."

"Well, it will go up just the same," the sleepy Acklin mumbled.

In the ranch yard, a line of heavy freighting-wagons were lined up, piled high with fence-wire and posts. From the direction of the long barns came the teams, whiffle-tree chains jangling on the flinty ground, and rising above the clatter, the sharp, impatient cursing of a sorely tried teamster.

The foreman closed his watch with a click. "We'll move in twenty minutes. Better get a bite now," he said to Bodine.

It was long after seven when Blaze saw Cash and

Bodine ride into sight. The rain had stopped, but the sky still held sullen and gray. Kildare recognized the man with Morrow. In an indefinable way there was something vaguely familiar about him. Blaze wondered if the other man felt it too, because they scrutinized each other closely before Cash spoke:

“The wagon will be here in a few minutes. Widget will stir up some breakfast. Brent will relieve you. I’ll send Melody and the rest of them back here. When you all have eaten, you can drift home and roll in. Skip will fix you up. Say, it’s a wonder you did n’t bump off somebody last night, Kildare.”

“I was n’t even nervous, Cash. I’m slow on the trigger; but I aim to be pretty efficient when I get started.”

“Your path will be covered with roses if you’ll only remember to keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. It’s my way of judging whether a man is worth his salt or not. I fancy you’ll do to take along.”

The boys rode up at that instant, closely followed by the heaving wagon. Cash jogged over to see it safely across the creek. Bodine offered Blaze a cigarette.

“Cash told me about your part in that little show last night,” he laughed. “You must have given the boys a thrill.”

Bodine’s cordiality grated on Blaze. For a brief second Kildare had thought the big man might be Acklin; but Cash would have made that known instantly. Blaze was tired and sour on the world after

the long stretch; and the sight of this individual's pleasure in the morning, as well as a sudden inbred dislike for the man, led him to fire away at a guess:

"You were there then?"

Bodine stared at him for a while before his jaw relaxed.

"Don't be so positive. I 'm not a Double A man."

"Now that makes my vote unanimous," Blaze drawled. "That little show was strictly a family party. I don't guess Cash would be exactly talkative about it."

The threat and implication were not lost on Bodine; but he chose to ignore them. Quite cleverly he retreated from his position by the means of bluff camaraderie.

"We 'll see quite a lot of each other in the next few weeks," he went on, "so I 'll backwater on my whereabouts. I 'm Buck Bodine. I bought the old Webster place a while back. You can guess where we line up."

Cash joined them, and he and Bodine went on. Blaze ambled over to where Widget was going through the motions that meant breakfast for him. The new hand was looked over by the boys, and, with the freemasonry of the cow-country, was given a nod and a greeting. Right or wrong, these men stuck by their first likes and dislikes. Brother Jones, timeworn but still effective, chewed the ends of his mustache.

"Say, son," he mumbled, "they 's no hell like a cowboy hell, as it would seem you have lived to learn;

but this outfit will add to your education. I am quite won to you by your kindly eye. It's a full month to pay-day. Seek my advice often and with consideration, if you would prosper. In me you see a man bent with age, and penniless, too, because of these young thieves. They draw their pay from the Double A, but they work the double-cross. Oh, yes, they do!"

Cries of "Liar!" and "Amen!" greeted this speech.

"Come and git it," Widget bawled. Brent cut out from the bunch, and the others paced away. Having eaten his fill, Blaze crawled under the wagon to sleep.

The sun was out and riding high by the time the four men headed for home. Half a mile east of the creek they met the fencing gang. There was no lost motion here. No sooner were the holes dug than the cedar posts were in place. Another man tamped down the ground around them. Drums of wire were mounted on a wagon. The teamster would cluck to his horses; the wagon would move ahead, the drums would revolve, and the busy hammers would send the staples home. There was art in its precision.

Noontime brought Blaze to the Bull's Head. No sign of rain lingered. It was hot. Green bottleflies droned in the white, plastered rooms above. Mac-Gregor, the ranch blacksmith, was busy at his forge; but for him the Bull's Head appeared to slumber.

Melody had been silent for an hour, but as they tramped up the stairs, the nearness of a comfortable

bed awakened life within him. In a mournful voice he bawled one of his saddest numbers:

I lost my watch,
I lost my ring,
I lost my wife
And everything;
Oh, I got bad luck.
Oh, I . . .

The agony of his song brought Acklin to the door. He saw his new man. "That you, Kildare?" he asked. "Step in here a minute." The cut of Kildare's fighting jaw, his poise, and his calm, unemotional eyes told Acklin plainer than words that here was a buzz-saw when aroused; a man without excuses, hard-headed, and at his best when unbossed.

"Kildare," he began, "Cash says he fancies you. I've rarely ever found him mistaken. We're going to have trouble in the valley from now on. I want you to know where I stand. I ask no man to do for me what I wouldn't do myself. It's the rule on which this ranch is run. My father once said to me: 'I hate orders and the giving of them, but sometimes they are necessary. And the man who can't take them without asking why is no fit man to have.' I've never found anything but wisdom in those words."

This was a tacit admission on Acklin's part that Blaze knew what had happened at the fork of the Webster. Kildare felt the question behind the words. He knew Acklin was asking him where he stood as plainly as though he had said so. Covertly the Big Boss watched his new man's face and saw a shadow of impatience cross it.

"I guess I understand you, sir," Blaze stated.

The "sir" was his way of showing that he had no liking for the lack of frankness in the Big Boss. He meant it to mark a difference between them, of his making, and not Acklin's.

"I 'm glad you do." Acklin sensed the intent of that "sir." "You get some sleep now. I 'll call you about five. I want you to go into Paradise to-night, just to hear the news. You 're a stranger; you 'll be safe. I want to know what the talk is. I 'll have a message for Bodine, too. No trouble finding the place."

CHAPTER VII

UNDER orders, Kildare took the road that led through the foot-hills to the river. Keeping to the south bank, he followed it until he came to the mouth of the Rebel. The wide shoal of sand the creek had carried there, the round, well-polished boulders, and the deep marks of erosion in granite outcroppings told plainly enough that this had been a turbulent stream in the past. But now he could have stopped with his hands the trickle of water that wound through the dry sand.

Purposely he struck west below the Rancho until he came upon the well-traveled road that led into Paradise. It was the time of day when the ranchers in the valley were in the habit of going into town. More than one passed, giving Blaze a curt nod and a searching glance that was less than friendly. Before he reached the village he had met so many men that there could be no question what was bringing them in.

The town consisted of two general stores, a tiny, white church, a broken-down, third-rate hotel, and three saloons. About half a dozen buildings with store-fronts flanked the others on the main street. They had long since failed to house any profitable

business and were now occupied as dwellings. Fifty or more small frame houses backed up this array.

Three hundred yards north of the town a shallow creek, a tiny branch of the Webster, cut across the road. Except after a heavy rain, or in the early spring when the winter snow was going off, it was dry. Springs alone could account for the rank growth of cottonwoods and poplars that hedged it in. In the lea of these trees the Mexicans, who worked out during the haying, or on the roads at irregular intervals, had their homes.

Blaze reined up in front of Chase's store. The post-office was located there. Seven or eight men lounged on the planked sidewalk in front of it. He gave them a nod and went in to drop his letters. Old man Chase and his sons were busy, so that he passed out unnoticed.

Benavides's place was down the street several doors. A small crowd stood before it. Half an hour ago these Basques, excitable like all Southern races, had been noisy enough. They were glum now and silent only because they had talked themselves out.

The loss of the water had been discovered before noon. Several of them, Esteban included, had ridden up the creek to find the cause. They had not gone far before they ran into the Double A wire. Brother Jones had been waiting on the other side of it. He was hardly hospitable.

When they had sought to crawl under the fence, he had waved his gun with an alarming lack of regard for their safety.

“No, no, *ñada, amigos,*” he had cried. “You want to watch out, *cuidado!* I ’m sorry; but I ain’t foolish.”

They had tried to engage him in further talk but he had told them to go to Acklin, and to several other destinations more remote. As a consequence, the Double A, and not Bodine, had become the object of their hatred. Remembering the past, it was not hard for them to lay this new outrage at Acklin’s door. But like the sheep they owned, they needed a leader before they could strike back. Some of them had been in town all afternoon, drinking and cursing their luck. But whisky, contrary to the rules affecting most people, only seemed to calm them and make them more determined to fight for their rights. In this they showed how greatly they differed from the Mexicans especially, with whom they were often confused.

Blaze found the saloon filled. At a table six men played cards. They were the only ones present who seemed untouched by the general air of disaster.

Blaze bought a drink. He understood very little of the conversation going on about him; but that these men were worked up and only awaited a leader, he did not doubt for a moment.

The card-game ended. Blaze caught the reflection of the players in the fly-specked mirror over the back-bar.

“You boys are too dod-gasted lucky for me,” the smallest of them cackled. “I been going for the case-card every time.”

Benavides had been sitting in. He smiled at the man in the faded clothes. Faded was the correct word. His trousers were baggy; his hat warped out of shape, the band of it raveled and wind-whipped; but one forgot these and remembered only the lack of color in him. Everything he wore seemed to have settled into a sedate greenish-gray; that is, save for his eyes. They still held their hazel hue.

"Joe," the Basque called, as the little man got up, "have a drink on the house before you go. It 's time for a celebration when you lose."

Blaze moved over, and the faded one edged into the bar beside him.

"I 'll call that bluff," he cawed. "I was a child when you set 'em up the last time, you old tightwad."

In the mirror, Blaze could see that he had caught the little man's attention. It was half dark in the saloon, but he sensed the alertness in the other's eyes. Blaze reached for his glass to finish his drink.

"Well, if it ain't old Timberline," the little man exclaimed.

The sound of his old nom de guerre caused Blaze to freeze with his glass in midair. Until that second he would have staked his life that no man north of the Humboldt could have called him by that name.

Blaze set his drink down and turned to scrutinize his neighbor. Recognition came quickly.

"Joe Kent!" he cried. "What are you doing way over here, Tuscarora?"

“Why, I been over this-a-ways some time. What you doin’ here?”

Blaze smiled and winked an eye at him.

“Side me out of town a ways and I’ll let you guess. But lay off that Timberline. It belongs in my wicked past. I’m headed for Webster Creek. That out of your way?”

Benavides waved him good-by as he and Blaze left. Tuscarora was a fixture in the valley. He had won his sobriquet placering over in the Tuscarora Range. His experiences there were only a small part of his education. For forty years he had roamed the desert. It had been his boast that he had missed only one gold rush in twenty years. He knew the old camps like Virginia City and Austin, as well as the more recent ones at Rawhide and Bullfrog.

In his time he had worked at all the odd jobs the desert knows; freighting, running a stage-line, being a government trapper—all these had occupied different periods in his life. He had put in one winter as a station-agent down in Esmeralda County.

Although he lived in town he owned a small ranch on the Little Washoe. But for him the hotel would have closed, Joe being its only regular guest. Old man Pasquale, the proprietor, refused to dispossess him.

“What’s on, son?” he asked, when they had crossed the little bridge north of town. “You acted back there as if I had handed you a jolt.”

“You sure gave me a surprise,” Blaze admitted. “You heard about the Kid, I suppose?”

“Yeh! Too bad! That ain’t bringin’ you over here, is it?”

“It’s taken me a lot of places. I hired out to the Double A yesterday.”

“Yeh?” There was frank disbelief in Kent’s eyes. “What else?”

“Nothing much. Just that and the Kid. I have n’t forgotten him.”

“Now looka here, Blaze!” Joe exclaimed as he pulled up his horse. “You don’t belong in this fuss. And it’s gonna be a fuss. There’ll be killin’ before it’s through. Acklin’s over his head. As long as it don’t mean anythin’ to you, why not get out of it?”

“I’m playing a hunch; that’s all! I’ve got to see it through. Anyway, Joe, I never was much of a hand at running away.”

“Course not. You’ll get killed yet. Why don’t you marry and settle down?”

The telltale twinkle came into Blaze’s eyes.

“Is that what you’ve done?”

“There you are,” Tuscarora scolded. “You never answered a straight question in all your life.”

“They take the loss of the water pretty bad back there, don’t they?” Blaze countered, jabbing in the direction of Paradise.

“How’d you take the loss of your bank-roll and three squares a day? I’m no outsider in this. I’ve got a little place on the river. I know what it’s going to do to me.”

Blaze shook his head thoughtfully.

“I did n’t think these Basques had a chance. Of course if you ’re going to string along with them, you old weasel, they may get somewhere. But remember, I ’m no man’s man but my own when it gets down to scratch. I ’m not going to back out. You ’re the only man in this country that knows me. You forget Timberline and all the rest of it, Tuscarora. I ’m just Blaze Kildare now.”

“You never give up, do yuh?” Kent exclaimed. “I know how you feel, Blaze; but two years is a long time to stick to one idea. It ’s goin’ to be tough to see us lined up against each other; and that ’s what it ’s goin’ to mean. This won’t be any children’s party. Acklin can’t rob us that-a-ways.”

They rode on for a mile or more before Blaze spoke.

“Why don’t you take the thing to court? This is still the United States, is n’t it? You ’ve got the law.”

“Law?” Joe mocked. “The country is smeared with it; but it ’s all made for the other fellow. But don’t you fret. We ’ll get started. I ’ll have every man-jack in the valley down to the Rancho Buena Vista to-morrow night. I ’ll see to it, too, that we don’t make any small-town affair of this row. I been county commissioner twice. I know how Acklin ’s got things tied up around here. He ’s strong enough down in Carson, too. But I ’ll take a lot of beating before I ’m dead. Election ’s coming on soon. Tom Brand is out for district attorney down in Winnemucca. Acklin and the Anaconda Cattle Co. may beat him. Still, he ’s got a following. Folks have

had about enough of your San Francisco millionaires. These big ranches will be broken up some day. Then this State will amount to something. I know this country better than most. You wait! We 'll bring water here all the way from the south fork of the Owyhee when these big holdings have been cut up. If you was a decent law-abiding citizen with four or five kids, you might be interested."

They had almost reached the road where Blaze was to turn to the left. Tuscarora's words brought back to Kildare a picture of Mercedes. The thought of what she faced stiffened him.

The little man caught the click of his friend's jaws.

"Don't shoot!" he mimicked. "I did n't know I was riding you so hard. There 's your road, old-timer."

Joe's jocularly brought the smile back to Blaze's face.

"Anyway," he laughed, "I won't shoot in the back."

"That 's why I wonder how you and Acklin are going to get along. That surprises you, eh? Well, you wait till he gets pressed. I knew his old man; so I would n't put anything past his son."

Tuscarora bit off a piece of his tobacco by way of saying good-by.

"And just so you won't get to thinking that I 'm ready for the junk-pile," he went on, "let me tell you that your friend Bodine is in this deal up to his neck. But he 's only a stool-pigeon for the Double A. The Basques blame it all on Acklin." Joe shook his

head. "Pretty foxy of him to send a dummy out to buy in the place and hold it down until the Double A could turn the water on. I'll bet Acklin's got a deed for that ranch in his safe this minute. If he hain't, this Buck Bodine will wake up some morning to find himself chasing his own tail."

They drew apart. Blaze waved his hand.

"You come see me some time, Blaze," Tuscarora called. "You always got an ace in the hole in me."

CHAPTER VIII

BLAZE jogged on. When he turned a moment later to look back, Tuscarora had become a gray blur on the swaying sage.

“Just the same old bag of bones he used to be,” he murmured wistfully. “Kid always liked him, too.”

Pictures of Laramie, Yellowstone Park, Washakie Needles, the Buffalo Fork of the Snake, and memories of the winning fights they had been through together filled Blaze’s mind and made him oblivious to his surroundings. He came up with a start when My Man’s feet splashed through water.

Webster Creek paralleled the road about three hundred yards to the north. Blaze headed his horse for it.

He found the creek running over its banks. The adjacent soil had become so thoroughly dried out during its ten years’ drought that the rush of water ate into it voraciously, and in some places the banks had crumbled away entirely.

Blaze got back on the road, musing as he went along on the Aladdin-like effect of last night’s work. He continued to see evidences of it time after time. My Man’s hoofs kicked up a spray in at least a dozen places before Blaze sighted the buildings of the Webster ranch.

It was late twilight when he walked his horse into Bodine's yard. Webster Creek cut across it between house and barn. The place being new to him, he stopped momentarily before crossing the stream.

The incongruity of all this water, without sign of living green thing, shrieked aloud. Ahead of him the house bulked dark and silent. From its windows came no ray of lamp or candle. Blaze thought it strange that the place should be deserted at this time of the evening. He sent My Man prancing through the water and was about to cry out to see if he could arouse any one when a short, bandy-legged shadow detached itself from the blackness of the house and dashed madly for the barn.

Instinctively Blaze reached for his gun. It was plain to him that the noise of his horse's feet had surprised the man into his precipitous flight. Kildare had caught only a brief glimpse of him. Recognition was impossible in the light that held. Nevertheless Blaze felt his muscles tense as he tried to recall the figure of the man. He could not forget the shadow's legs. They were too peculiar, and the picture of them remained in his mind as a definite thing. He would have pursued the thought further; but a voice boomed out from the steps of the house asking what he wanted. Blaze recognized it for Bodine's.

"I've got a letter for you," Blaze answered.
"This is Kildare."

"Come ahead! I'll light a lamp."

Blaze grinned. The place was waking up with a vengeance. He saw a match flicker in the kitchen.

Bodine had the lamp lighted by the time Blaze dismounted.

"You did n't come through Paradise?" the rancher asked skeptically.

"I sure did! Left there about an hour ago."

"How are they takin' it?" There was genuine concern in Bodine's voice.

"They 're stunned. They 'll mill around for a day or two until they find a leader; there 'll be trouble then! The word has been passed for a big pow-wow to-morrow night at the Rancho. I would n't be surprised if the old don throws the thing into the courts from the start. From what I hear, he 's got the backing of all the other ranchers."

"Courts—the old fool! Why does n't he fight it out?"

"They would n't have a chance," Blaze said, obviously drawing Bodine on. "The law is the best way, is n't it?"

"Law, hell! It ain't no way! Who wants the law when you can do without it?"

Blaze sat down on the porch while Bodine went inside to read Acklin's letter. He fancied he saw some one staring at him from the blackness of the barn door.

"You tell Acklin my boys are in the Buttes now," Bodine stated when he came out. "I 'll be over to the Bull's Head to-morrow."

Blaze made no effort to leave. By even the shortest way, he knew it would be after ten before he reached the Bull's Head. He had not eaten, except for a

piece of jerky and a bowl of coffee, since morning. The appetizing odors coming from the kitchen were too much for him.

"I guess you won't have any trouble finding your way back home," Bodine insinuated to speed his guest.

"Not on an empty stomach," Blaze said with a sour face. "It 's pretty near time to eat, is n't it?"

Their eyes met, and Bodine laughed.

"Say, pardner," he answered, "you ain't going to miss nothing if asking will get it for you. Come on in."

They went inside. With relish, Blaze eyed the sagehen cooking on the stove, but his curiosity more than his appetite had made him stay.

"You must have been expecting me," he said with a grin. "I see you got the knives and forks set for two. I thought you were alone."

Bodine turned suspiciously and searched Kildare's eyes. What he found in them seemed to reassure him.

"That 's the way I housekeep," he mumbled as he fussed with the stove. "Supper on one side the table; breakfast the other. Wash 'em all up together. Saves time! Let 's eat."

Blaze drew out a chair that would leave him facing the window.

"Sit on the other side," Bodine cut in. "I 'll be handy to the stove here, so I can *hot* up the coffee. I 've got some biscuits in the oven."

The lie seemed to pass muster. Buck kept on wondering why Shorty had taken to his heels. He studied

Kildare's face cautiously. The cow-boy smiled. They ate in silence for a while. Blaze praised Bodine's cooking, not knowing Shorty had been the chef before his mad dash to the barn.

Blaze had been careful to note that the window had been closed when he sat down. Yet as he finished the last of the biscuits he felt the first touch of the cold night wind on the back of his neck. He knew the window was being slowly opened.

Blaze sensed his danger; but no hint of it came into his eyes as they met Bodine's. Quite naturally he turned the talk to the work at hand. The over-intentness with which Bodine heard him convinced Blaze that his imagination was not playing him tricks. And yet he dared not turn around. He knew that if the man at the window was minded to shoot him down in cold blood any movement he made would be sure to bring on the climax. But why was he singled out? He had seen enough to make him realize that something moved under the surface here on Webster Creek, but gun-play was more than he had expected.

The shining biscuit-tin, acting as a mirror, reflected the troubled face of Bodine. Inspiration came to Blaze. Reaching out, he took the pan and stood it on end as if to shake the crumbs from it; then quickly held it before him and caught on the polished surface the picture of a hat and the lower part of a face. With the barrel of a heavy gun the owner of the hat was pushing the window open. In vain Blaze tried to penetrate the shadow which the hat threw over the man's face, and which concealed his identity.

Bodine was quick to grasp the action. With an oath he kicked his chair behind him and made for the window.

"That damned wind comes out of the cañon every night about this time. Cools your victuals off before you 've got time to get them down."

He closed the window with a bang. Had Shorty recognized an enemy in Kildare? When Buck turned he found Blaze was on his feet.

"Going already?" he asked, torn between anger and fear. A break with the Double A now would be a calamity.

"*Adiós*, then." Bodine waved his hand as Kildare got into the saddle. He failed to note the tilt of Kildare's jaw.

Blaze forced My Man close to the porch.

"Years ago, way up in Montana, Bodine," he warned, "I first heard of the Double A. And since then whenever I 've heard cow-men speak of it, there is one thing they have always said: 'The Double A boys stick together.' They have a habit of not forgetting. If one of them turns up missing and is discovered months later lying face down in some lonely little cañon, plugged in the back by a rustler or gunman, they don 't wait for the sheriff. They chased 'Soapy' Smith all the way into Utah; they got him, too." Blaze paused. "That 's just something to think about," he added sullenly and, giving My Man the bit, cantered away.

This talk was plain enough for Bodine. His admiration for Blaze continued to grow.

"You're a wise bird," he murmured to himself.
"There's no flies on you."

Presently from the corner of the house, Shorty inquired *sotto voce*: "Is he gone?"

Bodine turned on him angrily.

"What kind of a fool play was that you made?" he demanded. "Running like a rabbit, and then trying to get him in the back."

"He come up so quiet-like he threw a scare into me," Shorty answered. "Why did n't you tip me off if he was O. K., when I opened the window?"

"How could I? He got you from the start. Held up that tin plate for a mirror. I've told you a dozen times we have nothing to be scared of. Why start the ball rolling by plugging one of these Double A boys? They're with us in this game! You make another play like that and I'm through with you. That goes, and don't you forget it."

Bodine's temper did not alarm Shorty. They had been together too long.

"He did n't remind you of any one, huh?"

Bodine whirled on his pal.

"Who?" he demanded.

"I can't remember. But I've seen that back before, somewhere."

Shorty's vagueness only caused Bodine to break out again.

"You're loco. A lot of help you'll be to me in this fight."

Shorty said nothing but took a lantern and followed Kildare's trail through the brush. It led straight

to the road. Presently he turned back, convinced he had made a mistake.

The Double A man had expected this very thought. In spite of his aroused suspicions, he had kept on, expecting to be trailed.

"I hope you 're satisfied," Bodine snapped at Shorty when he came back. "The man comes on straight business, and rides away as he ought to, even after you tried to spill the beans. You make me sick!"

"Well, I 'm thinkin' you 'll be sorry some day that you did n't let me get him."

And while they continued to quarrel Blaze covered the long miles to the Bull's Head where Acklin was waiting for him.

CHAPTER IX

OLD IRONSIDES arose from his breakfast-table the following morning determined to see Acklin. So far José had met the issue stoically. For that reason perhaps he realized fully his desperate position. The value of every acre he owned was dependent upon the water which had disappeared overnight. Its loss meant the sweeping away of the fruits of a lifetime of saving and unremitting toil. He knew he was too old to begin all over again.

Even when Esteban had told him of the wire barrier the Double A had strung across the valley he refused to believe that Acklin had deliberately set out to steal their water. A cloudburst back in the hills, or a cave-in where the creek came through Martin Cañon, might be responsible. When Webster Creek began to overflow its banks, however, the old Basque had to admit the worst. What puzzled him was Bodine's complicity. The Double A had always played a lone hand.

Basque-like, he took no counsel of his womenfolk in times of stress. Mercedes, however, stepped over this age-old convention. She tried to persuade him against going to the Bull's Head.

"Father," she pleaded in Spanish, "is it safe? Why won't you take your rifle?"

"Nonsense!" José answered, but he bent down

from his horse to pat her head. "What need have I of a gun? I go in broad daylight by the main traveled road. Men know that I do not come to steal."

Tearfully Mercedes watched her father and brother ride away. A great silence hung over the Rancho Buena Vista. Even the tiny Basilio was subdued.

At the end of their fence Esteban pulled up his horse and prepared to turn back.

"Do you think he will see you?" he asked, as his father murmured good-by.

"If he is not guilty he will," José replied sagaciously. "I am as intent on finding out where he stands as I am on seeing the man. I know, therefore, that I will not have my ride for nothing."

Acklin had foreseen this visit. It was certain to be a bad half-hour. Thought of its unpleasantness solely, and not a sense of shame for his duplicity, caused him to arrange hurriedly for an alleged trip to the Owyhee.

"I'll be back to-morrow," he told Cash. "But if any one asks, say you don't know. In the meantime you sit tight. Answer no questions. I doubt if they can get a court order to cross our line. When I've finished at the Bar Circle, I'm going over to the X L. Peter has a 'phone, so you can get me there if you need me in a hurry. If Bodine oversteps himself, you get in touch with me."

Therefore it followed that about the same time José left the Rancho Acklin departed from the Bull's Head.

By word of mouth from his men, the news of the old Basque's coming had been relayed to Cash. He had flashed back to them not to molest the visitor.

The foreman was guilty of staging his reception of Old Ironsides. With an air of preoccupation he sat down at Acklin's desk and began going over some tally-books. When he saw the old man swing into the ranch yard, he gave up his mimic show in disgust. Cash stood ready to do him out of his ranch if he could; but the old man radiated such an air of honesty that the foreman turned his back on anything as petty as the dumb show he had arranged. He knew José to be a speaker of true words. That in itself was sufficient to gain respect from the un-sentimental Cash. Consequently he got out of his chair and walked to the open door.

"*Buenos días, Señor,*" he called, as the dignified old Basque strode up the steps.

José returned the salutation ceremoniously.

"Is the Señor busy?" he inquired.

Cash surmised the effort it cost the man to appear so calm. His looks gave a hint of the strain he was under.

"The boss is n't home," Morrow answered, almost glad that he could speak the truth. "He left for the Owyhee early this morning. Don't expect him back to-day, neither."

José mopped his forehead.

"Anything I can do for you?" Cash suggested.

It was a full minute before the other replied.

"There is hardly a drop of water in Rebel Creek,"

he stated. "You know, of course, that the old wash of the Webster is running over its banks."

The foreman bent over to pick up a sliver of wood.

"Seems though I heard something about it."

"The Señor, he had *heard* of it, too?"

The foreman felt the rebuke for his flippancy.

"I imagine he did. We've been building some fence down there."

"Yes!" José's tones were icy cold. "I came today to ask permission to cross that fence. My neighbors have sought to see beyond it, and they have been driven away. Both you and Acklin know me. I lay no hand on what is not mine. Unless there has been trickery on your part, you cannot refuse me."

Cash hitched up his trousers.

"I ain't got any complaint against your honesty," he stammered. "But you're askin' something I can't allow. I've got orders to let no one through. And for about twenty-five years I been aimin' to see that orders are carried out around here."

"Your answer is what I should have expected," Old Ironsides said, unable to smother his anger. "I wanted Señor Acklin to convict himself before I judged him. I have my answer! I see now, that he runs away; he is a coward, too."

Without another word he mounted his horse and struck off down the valley. Morrow shook his head as he watched him go. Ten minutes later he had forgotten the incident. Life had proved to Cash that sentiment is usually wrong.

Once he had arrived at the Rancho, José retired

to the patio to lay his plans for the meeting that evening. Esteban he sent to Paradise. By noon the result of José's errand had spread throughout the valley.

The rebuff his father had met only increased Esteban's desire for quick revenge on Bodine and the Double A.

This waiting and appealing to the law did not suit the hot-headed boy. What had the law ever won for any of them?

His eloquence soon gave Esteban a following. His crowd had grown in strength until by night Tuscarora and José had become alarmed. The boy's success in town was sure to make him try to run away with the meeting later on.

"You are right, Joe," José said when Tuscarora told him. "Violence would win for us to-night. But we could not hold our gains. We would be outside the law. And I think that is just what Acklin is hoping we will do. We won't start until ten o'clock. That will give everybody a chance to get here before we begin. You come early, my friend."

Esteban, however, did not plan to wait for the meeting. With about half a dozen chosen companions he schemed to ride around the Double A wire and see for himself just what had happened.

He rightly figured that the men on guard would be best caught unawares early in the evening. He therefore planned to have his friends make a demonstration directly north of town; as soon as the twilight faded and while they were engaging the atten-

tion of Acklin's men, he hoped to steal unobserved through the foot-hills below the Chimney.

His father had been honest and considerate of everybody; and too often had he turned the other cheek that peace might continue in the valley. Under his leadership his people had been satisfied with less than their share. This humility, this bending of the knee, might be well enough for Mexicans; but he was no Latin. In his veins was the blood of the gypsying Celt. It gave him vision enough to see that the way of the Basques and these English-speaking people did not lie together.

The rat-tat-tat of firing put an end to his meditation. As he listened, the shooting grew in violence. It was far off. The reports came muffled, and deadened.

From where he waited a short three hundred yards brought him to the road that dipped down into the valley across the Double A line. Once he had gained it, he let his horse out in earnest. It was from the rear that danger threatened. Speed was his safeguard.

He reached the willows in the creek-bottom none too soon. Hardly had he thrown his horse when Cash and his men thundered by. Morrow was determined only upon getting to the scene of action as quickly as possible. He began to wonder as he left the creek behind if this sortie north of town was not a feint. He knew, by the way in which the firing continued, that his men were holding their own over there. He held up his hand until he caught Blaze's eye.

"Hike back to the creek," he ordered. "Watch out. This thing to the west looks crooked to me."

In ten minutes Blaze had retraced his way to within a hundred yards of the spot where Esteban was. So, unaware of each other, stalker and stalked made their way downstream on opposite banks.

Blaze found the going much better on his side of the creek. Once My Man stepped on a broken-down willow that snapped with a bang under his weight. The report reached the boy, now several hundred yards behind. A cold sweat broke out on the young Basque. The horse had passed on to a grassy knoll, and no further sound reached the listener. Esteban dismissed it for a wildcat or coyote.

As he had listened, the murmur of purring, splashing water sang in his ears. He nodded his head silently. Rebel Creek still flowed here as of old! He went on. Unseen branches of friendly willows slapped him in the face as he led his pony along. Less than half an hour from now the moon would be up. He knew he must be below the wire before then.

Blaze had drawn ahead while Esteban waited. He found everything quiet at the confluence of the two creeks. He even stopped to light a cigarette. He surveyed Bodine's work with disgust. Forging the creek, he followed the wire east of the willows for a short distance. Seeing nothing suspicious, he turned and was about to retrace his way to the darkness of the trees when My Man's nostrils quivered. The wind had borne the horse its telltale message.

The rim of the golden-yellow moon crept above the

range at Kildare's back, silhouetting him in its glowing fire. Catlike, he slid from his saddle. Below him a few yards, a rock outcropping lay in shadow. Already the moon was searching out the hillside that fell away to the willows. Dropping the rein over My Man's head, Blaze wriggled on his stomach until he reached the rocky ledge.

No hint of lurking danger came to Esteban as he continued down the stream. Once his pony stopped momentarily. The boy's voice quavered as he forced his horse onward. He had not far to go. The sandy bottom widened; a turning, and he stood where the Rebel poured into the Webster.

Esteban got down on his hands and knees and studied the bank of rock and sand that filled the channel of the creek, all unmindful of the grim figure that lay on the rocks above him.

He slid into the water. It came to his armpits. Breasting the current, he waded to where the cloud-burst had once closed the mouth of the Webster. No such barrier arose now. Unimpeded, the water swept by him. The theft was plain and certain.

Wet and bedraggled, Esteban crawled out on the bank. A glance to the eastward told him he had tarried too long. There was nothing to do but to break for the open and race to the Chimney. The firing below him had died away. With every nerve on edge, he fingered his gun and raked the gray with his spurs.

In a flash he was free of the underbrush. But he had not gone twenty yards before something moved

in front of him. It was My Man, grazing where he had been left. The boy could not turn back. A second brought him abreast of the rocky ledge.

Esteban's keen eyes located his enemy as he crouched, rifle at his shoulder, on the outcropping. Eye and finger acted at the same moment in the young Basque. In wild panic he emptied his gun.

A curse and a low cry of pain said that a bullet had found its mark. He saw the wounded man disappear; but the next instant he heard him running.

From the road across the creek came the cries of men and the patter of rapidly driven horses. With savage energy Esteban drove his spurs home. His mount, the gray Bodine had broken for him, leaped ahead in mile-devouring strides. Once he reached the road, he would be unbeatable.

Blaze felt his arm. It burned as though he had been branded with an iron. He did not recognize Esteban; but when he saw him head for the road he guessed his intention. The way around by the Chimney was the only means of escape. Kildare got into his saddle and lined straight for it. The burning hole in his shoulder made him realize where he stood.

His short cut took him beyond sound of the reinforcements coming to his aid.

He likewise lost track of Esteban; the boy also lost sight of him and began to breathe easier. The gray had left his pursuers far behind.

Blaze reached the Chimney in advance of the Basque by a full minute. He found the road, in front of the wall of rock, in darkness. No ray of moonlight

penetrated there. Slipping from his saddle, he waited. In the distance he could hear the rush of a madly ridden horse. Blaze sent My Man into the brush at his left, and flattened himself against the wall of the Chimney.

The tattoo of the flying hoofs grew louder and louder. Another instant, and the gray was upon him. The fence came almost to the road. The boy on the gray's back pulled him up, and wheeled him to swing down into the valley south of the wire. Blaze jumped for the bridle, and with his uninjured arm jabbed his six-gun into Esteban's ribs.

"Stick up your hands!" he whipped into the boy's very ear.

Esteban's surprise was complete. But instinctively he made a lunge for his gun.

"Another inch," the man at his horse's head warned, "and I'll drop you out of that saddle!"

The gray shied, dragging Blaze into the moonlight. Recognition was simultaneous with both. Blaze brought his gun down with a shudder. The boy would never know how near he had been to death.

Esteban saw the blood-covered arm.

"You?" He questioned, when he could speak. "Well, why don't you shoot?" he dared.

Blaze shook his head. A memory of Mercedes came to him. What was he to do with this young, hot-headed, irresponsible boy?

The pursuing horsemen pounded at their back. Esteban stiffened.

“You fan it out of here!” Blaze growled. “You thank the moon, not me, that you are alive to do it.”

He brought his hand down on the gray's flank. The horse bounded away. Blaze fired his gun to help him along.

Another second and Cash reined up beside Blaze.

“Did you get him?” he roared.

“He got me!” Blaze winced as he lifted his arm.

“Plugged me back there, at the creek.”

CHAPTER X

ONE-EYED MANUEL was lazily polishing and arranging his glasses into a formidable pyramid when Buck Bodine banged open the swinging doors and strode menacingly up to the bar.

He had not known what he would find. Over at the ranch the noise of the guns had sounded like the echoes of a battle. Curiosity and his bravado had brought him to this Basque stronghold. But the wind had sent no murmur of the shooting into town. Tuscarora and the others had left for the meeting some time ago.

Bodine wondered if their absence argued any connection with the fray. It did not seem reasonable that every one had gone to the meeting. He had come to town expecting to find all sorts of excitement. Shorty and Gloomy had tried to dissuade Bodine. He had smiled at them contemptuously. When he wanted a thing, he went after it.

The firing had been sweet music to Bodine's ears. Whatever might be the outcome, he figured it could not be other than to his liking. He *wanted* gun-play. He had spoken the truth when he told Blaze that the law was not his way. He hated the law. Life had done nothing but make him suspicious of it. In his heart he prayed that the Double A had become en-

tangled in a serious shooting affair. It would mean an old-fashioned cow-man's war. Acklin could not back out then. And if it came to a struggle of that kind, his own insignificant forces would be only a drop in the proverbial bucket. The Double A would have to fight both his battle and their own.

The fact that the saloon was almost deserted did not serve to soothe his temper. He had catapulted into the place expecting to be jumped. Therefore when he found he had girded his loins for nothing, he sulked.

Manuel's back was to the door. He caught a flash of his customer in the mirror. He had not forgotten Bodine. The bad blood between the two men had not turned to water. The Mexican's dead eye screwed itself into an ugly wrinkle. His livid scars, left by the knife that had cost him his eye, grew white. That day fifty men had threatened Bodine's life. Had the man heard and come here for revenge?

He kept his back to Bodine, pretending that he had not seen him come in. It was his crude way of attempting to play for time.

Buck took his action for something else. An empty glass stood close to where he leaned against the bar. With an oath he picked it up and smashed it against the floor.

Manuel turned as if shot.

"Where's all the Basque *gente* to-night?" he asked insolently. "Bah!"

He turned without waiting for the Mexican to reply. In fact he expected no answer to his question.

It was only his way of telling Manuel that he came there without regard for any Basque.

Buck walked to the door. Over his shoulder he threw a parting to the cowering Mexican: "You need those pink pills for pale persons, *carísima!*"

With growing anger he strutted about the deserted town, trying to learn what had happened at the fence. His impatience was akin to that with which Juan and Romero Ugarde and young Salvator Rodríguez and their fellow-conspirators waited at the sheep corral north of the Ugarde ranch for the belated Esteban.

They had come off untouched from their brush with the Double A men. But their elation had waned perceptibly as they sat there cooling their heels. The pessimistic Romero voiced the opinion that they should never see Esteban alive. The others were almost ready to agree with him when the boy dashed in among them.

Esteban's regard for himself had altered largely in the five miles he had come from the Chimney. With the cheers of his followers ringing in his ears, he was not inclined to tell them by what fortunate circumstance he was here, safe and sound. Therefore his colorful recital held no mention of Kildare. When he had finished, his position as their leader was secure.

"Now they will listen to us!" Romero asserted. "And if the old graybeards won't fight, we will strike by ourselves."

Cries of approval met this statement.

"You are right, Romero!" Esteban cried, fired by

their enthusiasm. "We 'll put an end, once for all, to this talk of appealing to the law. When I 've told them my story there 'll be plenty to side with us."

What a sweet morsel this bit of logic would have been for Bodine! He had foreseen it from the start.

With a jingle of spur-chains, they headed for the Rancho. Esteban knew he could not change his story. He had sworn to take sides against his father, and these boys would see that he kept his word. The nearer he drew to home the more formidable became his task. He gritted his teeth in contemplation of it. But this mood passed. Then for the first time he wondered why Kildare had let him escape.

This chain of reasoning led him to Mercedes. What would she say when he told her about the man? Immediately he realized that he could not tell her.

In the midst of this self-questioning, they came into sight of the Rancho. Esteban stopped for a consultation. He was against dashing into the meeting hit-or-miss. His entrance, properly timed, was calculated to have a very dramatic effect. He did not intend to be cheated out of it. Accordingly he despatched Romero to reconnoiter the ground for him.

His lieutenant stole up to the hacienda unobserved. Mingling with the crowd, he soon found that the supposed attack on the fence was the sole topic of conversation. For although some of them had left Paradise in ignorance of it, the news had reached them here. Only by inference had they been able to surmise who had taken part in the affair.

Romero waited until the meeting got under way before he stole back to his crowd. The dead silence which had greeted old José's opening speech had impressed young Ugarde. These men were here for business!

Tuscarora followed José. He had finished his appeal for law and order and was about to show them the foolhardiness of resorting to the tactics some of their young men had employed earlier in the evening when the wild clatter of rapidly driven horses forced him to stop.

There was a hardening of faces, a quick look for cover, and a drawing of guns.

Esteban could not have hoped for a more dramatic entrance. He tramped authoritatively to the center of the big room he knew so well. As soon as they recognized him, the meeting resumed some of its orderly appearance. The boy's father got to his feet.

"What kind of play is this?" he demanded, his face purple with anger. José felt that his son's conduct was nothing short of preposterous. The upstart! Had the boy no respect for his elders?

"Do I rightly suppose that you come from this shooting affair?"

"I come from the other side of the Double A wire!" the boy hurled back, determined to give as good as he received.

In an instant the meeting was in an uproar.

Cries of "Tell us what you saw!" and "Now we shall know the truth!" rang out. The ranchers had not come there to listen to talk of peace and the law.

They had been robbed, and they wanted action. At last, it seemed, the meeting was going to get somewhere.

Cesar Ferri, a great hulk of a man from down on the river, got to his feet, and, in a voice to match his weight, shouted for silence. The very size of the man seemed to have a commanding effect.

“Give the boy a chance!” he cried. “Tell us how you got by the fence.”

Esteban told them; and the murmurs of approval that greeted him as he went along gave the boy the courage he needed. José and Tuscarora exchanged glances. The thing they had feared was happening.

“I ran my hands over every inch of that pile of rock and sand. No storm ever put it there! It is full of granite and quartz stringers that are as sharp as the day they were blown out of the solid rock.”

He paused to let this information sink home.

“But they did n’t stop there! The sandbar that stretched across the mouth of Webster Creek is gone. The water came up to my neck. Now,” he cried, “you know the truth! Why did Acklin build that fence to keep us out, if what I say is not so? Are you satisfied to wait for the law in the face of this?”

“*Dios mío*, no!” Cesar yelled. “I fight! What good is that water if we wait three months to get it? In two weeks our crops will be dead! Where will we be next winter then?”

“It is n’t only that we are robbed of our water,” Romero’s father added, “but it is wasted before our eyes. We all know about the sink that swallows every

drop that reaches it; and west of town Webster Creek was running full to its banks to-day."

"Well, ain't it got a right to run there?" The question came over the heads of the crowd like the snap of a whip.

As one man they turned and saw Bodine in the doorway, standing head and shoulders above everybody else in the room, a sardonic smile playing about his mouth.

CHAPTER XI

FOR the second time that night revolvers were snatched from their holsters. A hair-trigger stillness crept into the room. Bodine's mouth lost its grin and went hard. The cords in his neck stood out. Into his eyes came the steely glitter of the killer.

Esteban was the first to move. Trembling with fury that made him almost impotent, he walked towards Bodine and, with his finger at the man's face, shouted: "You stool-pigeon! You traitor! Why do you come here?"

Beside himself with rage, the boy drew his gun, and, leveling it at Bodine, he cried in a voice that shook with emotion: "Get out of here, or I'll blow your head off!"

Bodine expected such a play. He could have beaten Esteban to the draw. But he showed his nerve in choosing not to. If he had made the attempt some one would have got him. He held the boy's eyes now in a hypnotic stare.

Mercedes, attracted by the noise of her brother's attack, had edged close to the storm-center. With marvelous swiftness she reached for Esteban's gun. Bodine looked at her with a sense of relief. He was glad that it had not been she who had attacked him.

The boy tried to fight her off; but José got between them and took the gun. With blazing eyes he confronted his son.

“Would you commit murder in your own home?” he burst out. “This is still my house. I am still its master!”

Father and son glared at each other, but the weight of a score of years of submission was too much for the boy. He turned and slunk away. At the door he called back venomously: “Acklin’s dog! That’s what you are!”

José appeared not to notice his son’s departure, so intently did he watch Bodine. Even Mercedes had slipped out without attracting his attention.

For the first time that night Buck began to grow uneasy. The dignity of the old Basque was unassailable. When all was said and done, it would be from José and his kind, backed up by the law, that the real danger would threaten, and he feared it.

He knew it was time for speech. He tried to address them all, but against his will his gaze reverted to Old Ironsides.

“He’s only a kid!” he repeated. “Just a kid! This is no time for kindergarten cackle. I’m going to talk to men, like a man would. I bought out old Hank Webster in good faith. I never saw Acklin until I met him in this very house. Before I bought that place, I had the records searched. The State says I am entitled to fourteen inches of water out of Webster Creek. And I’m going to get it.”

“The law will decide that, Señor.” It was José’s

first direct statement to Bodine. There was an air of finality about it.

"Fourteen inches?" Tuscarora questioned sarcastically. "You've taken it all."

"You mean," Bodine contradicted, "that I'm getting it all. Well, I don't need it. Suppose we forget for a moment how the water changed its course and consider the facts. I've got the water now! You can't go against that. Suppose we turn it back into the Rebel, do I get my share?"

"If you did, Señor, there would be none left for us," José answered. "I know Webster filed for fourteen inches of water, but if we agree to any such compromise, there won't be an inch of water left to flow into the Washoe. Acklin and you would have it all, and we would be helping you to it. We have all filed, and been granted water rights on either Rebel Creek or the Little Washoe. What about that?"

"My rights have priority over all other water rights in this valley, exceptin' Acklin's!" Buck tried to drop this statement like a bombshell. He gazed about the room to watch its effect.

José shook his head judicially.

"Again I say, the law will decide! If Acklin builds a fence on his own property to keep us out, that is his right. If we destroy it, or trespass on his land, and resort to our guns, then we are outside the law. We want to go into court with clean hands!"

"You bet," Tuscarora chimed in. "In a week we will find out where we're at. We all know Tom

Brand. He 's been on the square with us every time. I 'll run down and see him."

The little man stopped short. His eyes singled out Bodine:

"Now, suppose you beat it out of here, big fellow. The going may be rough if you wait until this meeting breaks up."

"Don't come back, either!" some one yelled.

Bodine's eyebrows flattened out.

"I 'll go," he muttered. "But not because any one here looks bad to me. I came to talk peace; but all I 've heard is a lot of mouthing about the law. I hope you 'll be satisfied with what the law gives you."

"Make the thief go!" a man in the back of the room cried.

The remark made Buck's lips curl in scorn. In silence he started out. He had not gone far when some one tittered: "I hope he takes the right horse."

Bodine's face went scarlet. Ridicule had broken through his armor where everything else had failed. He was thoroughly angry when he reached the door that led to the patio. His offer to compromise had been only a trick to get them on record as recognizing some of his claims. That José had seen through it, made it all the more bitter to his taste. With a curse, he made for his horse.

He had reached the end of the veranda and was about to open the patio gate when he almost stumbled over Basilio.

Mercedes had found the boy awake when she had left the room where the meeting was held, so she had

dressed him, and the two of them had wandered about in the moonlight.

She heard the child cry, and saw Bodine raise his foot and brush him aside. In a second she was up with them, and took the little fellow into her arms.

"You fiend!" she cried. "You brute! There is no part of a man about you. There! Don't cry, *hermanito*," she crooned. "This beast will pay yet!" To Bodine she said: "It is good you run away before the men come."

Basilio ceased crying and Mercedes started him into the patio; but she stood her ground and laughed contemptuously at her enemy.

Bodine's cruel mouth held its diabolical grin as he got into his saddle. Once seated, he wheeled his horse on its hind legs and, reaching down, caught the surprised girl around the waist and lifted her beside him. She bit and scratched him; but he was too strong for her. Bending his head, he kissed her passionately on her unprotected lips. Her finger nails ripped his face as he put her down.

"Laugh now, you little spitfire!" he called back as he used his spurs and waved his hand at her carelessly.

Hot tears came into the girl's eyes. When she gained her room, she scrubbed her lips with soap and water until they burned.

CHAPTER XII

ESTEBAN'S ignominious retreat smarted him to the heart. He sulked and fumed for a long time before he found the courage to face Romero and the caustic Salvator.

While he had been outside, venting his wrath on the desert night, they made plans of their own. Romero had passed the word to those apparently dissatisfied with the way the meeting was going to be at Cesar's place at midnight. They did not importune Esteban to join them. He felt the rebuff, and immediately resolved to go.

Unobserved, he stole to his room, to wait there for his father to retire.

It was his supposed absence that kept José awake. When the meeting had ended he had looked about in vain for the boy. Knowing the ways of his hot-tempered son, he did not believe that Esteban had gone to his room.

Thoughts, gloomy and foreboding, filled the old man's mind as he walked with lowered head among the withered and dying flowers of the once beautiful patio. He felt that he and his son were far apart in this crisis. And he was old enough to want to lean on his boy. José shook his head sadly.

Above him a window was raised. He saw Mer-

cedes gazing down into the patio. José's face relaxed as he caught sight of her. She more than made up for all the trouble and care life had brought him. Knowing she would not close her eyes until she heard him retire, he shook the ashes from his pipe and went indoors.

Esteban heard him, too, and he chafed in his impatience for fifteen minutes before he dared to move. He had brought his reata to his room, and when he had opened his window he quickly noosed the rope over a bed-post and slid noiselessly to the ground.

It took him some time to reach Ferri's house.

"We have our guns with us; Cesar has tools enough to go around," Romero was saying as Esteban arrived. "We'll go up Rebel Creek as far as the wire. We can cut it before we are discovered. Once inside, you can hold off their men while some of us make short work of that bank. A stick of dynamite will blow it into Idaho! We won't wait for any law! Once we get the water turned where it belongs, Acklin and Bodine will never get it back. If you are willing to try it, raise your hands!"

"*Ole' compañeros!*" the massive Cesar shouted. "We will win our battle to-night! Let me see who are the cowards!"

One by one the hands went up, until Romero waved his followers to their horses. At the barn they stopped for shovels and whatever tools Cesar could find. Then with a flourish they fled into the north, twenty strong, Esteban among them.

Talk died away as they rode. An eloquent silence

hung upon them. And as they moved through the velvety night the man whom they hoped to catch off his guard sipped coffee with a dozen of his riders in the dimly lighted dining-room at the Bull's Head. Kildare, his arm bandaged, lounged across the table from Morrow. Somebody yawned. Cash looked at his watch. It was almost two o'clock. Brother Jones called for the coffee-pot.

"What ungodly hours for a man of my years and manners!" he moaned. "When do we move, Cash?"

"Any time now," Morrow grumbled. "I suppose if I take you boys down there for nothing, you'll be biting your false teeth for missing a night's sleep. But if we have a brush, and half of you are shot up, it'll be O. K." He paused. "Somethin' sure to come out of that meetin'. Get that coffee down, and we'll drift."

Melody, Brother Jones, Patterson, and the rest of the men got to their feet and began buckling on their guns. Cash scratched his head unconsciously.

"Wish the Big Boss was here," he said aloud. "Tried to get him over to the X L. Peter said he had n't been there. That's funny, too; said he was going there." The foreman paused. "Boys," he went on slowly, in a tone that said he made his decision as he went along, "we're going into the valley *below* our wire!"

Hands stopped moving. Some one dropped a gun. With one accord they turned and regarded him expectantly. Cash caught the tension.

"The fence is fifty yards inside our line," he went

on. "We built it there so as to be safe without checking up. We 'll go down through the Chimney, and still-hunt from the little coulée that lies half-way to the creek. If we have any trouble we 'll be on our own land. They 'll never expect to find us outside the fence."

Morrow looked his men over. They had finished strapping on their holsters—evidence that they were agreeable to his plan. The foreman's eyes rested on Blaze. He had picked up his gun along with the others.

"You ain't goin', are you, Kildare; not with that arm?" Cash asked, a note of gruff admiration for the man's pluck creeping into his voice.

"My business arm is all right," Blaze grinned. "I 'm aimin' to see this thing through."

Dark screening clouds hid the moon as they made the coulée. Brother Jones started for the creek-bottom. He went a hundred yards when he turned to send them a low cautious whistle.

Cash held up his hand. The little cavalcade moved quietly to where the old man stood.

"They 're coming now," Brother Jones whispered. "About two dozen! They 'll be up to the wire in three or four minutes. I caught 'em jumping 'crost that bare spot round the bend. Now there 'll be hell to pay."

"Wait till they get to the fence," Morrow ordered.

One minute, . . . two minutes, . . . a few seconds, . . . and the creek bottom swarmed with men. Morrow's hand went up. The old battle-cry of the Double

A rang out and, like the fabled demons of the Andes, Acklin's hired warriors crashed into the bewildered Basques.

In consternation and dismay the invaders tried to recover from their surprise. But the unexpectedness of the attack had destroyed whatever morale they possessed.

Esteban and Romero shrieked at their companions to stand their ground. Neither could swing that madly milling crowd. Shovels and picks were dropped in panicky flight. To get away as quickly as possible seemed to be the one ambition of most of the men from the valley.

Little Salvator and four or five others, however, fought their way to Esteban's side and tried to return the fire of Acklin's riders. But every time the Double A guns roared and ripped wide the darkness, some one deserted.

The firing continued. Salvator looked for his companions. Only Esteban, Romero, and he were left. Then, seeing the battle was hopeless, he followed his friends. Romero and Esteban had about enough of it, too. The bank of the creek offered them fair protection. Around the bend the ground flattened out. It meant a wild dash as the Double A men closed in.

Romero rolled the whites of his eyes. No matter what the danger, he was going to chance it. It was death to stay where they were. With a yell to Esteban, he started. The young firebrand was at his heels instantly.

Ten seconds brought them to the flat country where they were an easy target. The Double A guns flashed. One of the boys shrieked and toppled out of his saddle. A second volley followed, but the other Basque was out of sight.

"Who is he?" Cash cried, as Melody and Blaze rode down into the botton.

The boy lay on his face. Melody turned him over.

"Ain't that too bad?" he groaned. Then to Cash: "It 's Old Ironsides's kid!"

Blaze's face was a study.

"Once was not enough for you," he murmured, not unkindly, as he bent to lift Esteban's head.

The boy's face was covered with blood. Blaze pushed the hair back to find the wound. A deep furrow showed where the bullet had torn through the scalp.

Blaze got to his feet. "I don't think he got it deep enough to be serious. Better take him in.

"Sure, take him along," Cash growled. "We can't *eat* him! You take him up, Melody?" Melody nodded. "Take a look around, boys," Cash went on. "Maybe you 'll find another one or two along the creek. We 'll all turn in when you get back. Say," Cash grinned, "those birds thought the hambone o' hell had hit 'em, did n't they? Yes, sir!"

And as they carried Esteban to the Bull's Head, Mercedes wondered why little Basilio sobbed as he tossed in his tiny bed. Long desert-miles stretched between the Rancho Buena Vista and the spot where

Esteban fell. And yet, with an intuition rare even among the blind, the little lad knew that something terrible had happened.

Mercedes awakened her brother and tried to comfort him. "What is the matter?" she implored.

"Esteban!" he cried; "something bad has come, *madrecita*."

The little pet name went unheard. Mercedes only knew her throat was dry with sudden agony. She had had her own misgivings about Esteban. Silently the frightened girl stole to his room and knocked softly. Getting no answer, she tried the knob, but the door was locked. It seemed to confirm her fears. Doors were never locked at the Rancho.

Mercedes returned to Basilio thoroughly upset. She hesitated about calling her father; but as the minutes went by, she felt she must. Hastily throwing on a wrap, she started for José's room. The hallway made a sharp angle as it turned to lead into the wing where he slept. A small window opened on the front yard from the angle.

Without thinking, Mercedes stopped and looked down. Esteban's window was plainly visible; and hanging from it she saw the dangling reata.

"*Madre de Dios!*" she gasped; "the child is right!"

With swift feet, she ran for her father. Through the closed door she told him what she had discovered. José bade her go back to Basilio. He dressed hurriedly and followed her to the little fellow's bedside.

"Come here, *el hijo mío*," he said in wistful tones,

as he took the boy into his arms. "What is wrong?"

"I heard guns—bad guns. And I pointed my finger where I heard them, and it was toward the end of the bed—north! And I saw Esteban! He was hurt!"

José petted and caressed him until his tears stopped. "There, there, don't let those bad dreams upset you, *niño*." In a few minutes the child was asleep.

Then Mercedes and her father tiptoed downstairs. The old Basque pulled the bell-cord for Mariano. When the *mozo* appeared, frightened at being called at this unusual hour, José ordered him to get his horse.

Tears filled Mercedes's eyes as she saw her father take down his rifle and fill his long-unused belt with cartridges. His set face and sparing words did not serve to lessen her dread.

José sighed and sank into a chair. Mercedes came to him and put her arm about his shoulders.

"The vagaries . . . the misunderstandings of youth . . . And still he has been a good boy—a good son. But, *querida*, a boy is only a boy! He forgets that, and I need him now. *Válgame Dios!* I hope I find him."

A hot tear from Mercedes's eyes fell on his cheek. He drew her face down close to his.

"Don't cry, *niña*," he begged. "Tears in your eyes always bring your mother close to me. And, oh, you are so like her, so like her, little one. We'll say a prayer for her before I go."

José's eyes were misty when he got to his feet, and to hide his emotion he stormed at the overdue Mariano.

Mercedes caught her father's hand. She did not want him to go. Rather, she wanted him to go, but fear tugged at her heart and made her afraid of seeing him leave.

José bent down from his saddle to kiss her. Mercedes clung to him.

"I am afraid," she said in tones choked with emotion.

"Afraid?"

"For you, Father. Why not wait until sun-up?" She held his hand to her face. He shook his head. "You will be careful, dear? I'll wait up until you come back."

"Don't do that, *muchacha*," the old man pleaded. "I'll find Morrow, and learn from him if there has been any trouble. I'll be back in two hours. *Adios, querida!*"

When José had crossed the creek he held to the north until he came to the entrance of Smoky Cañon. In happier times he would have used the trail that led through it to the mesa above, whence an old wood-road crossed to the Bull's Head.

He turned his horse into the longer trail that led to the fence and up to the Chimney. As he did so, a gun flashed from the rim-rocks above him. His horse jumped, and José lurched and fell head foremost to the ground. He rolled over on his side in a

brief convulsion and then lay still. No moan or sigh of pain escaped him.

On the rocks high above, a tall figure arose and peered down at his victim. A second and he was gone. The sound of a galloping horse came down the cañon. It rapidly died away.

José's horse stared at his fallen master. He came close and nudged him with his nose. But the wide-open, unseeing eyes of the man who had ridden him so long were glazed in death.

Old Ironsides would never ride the trails again!

CHAPTER XIII

LONG before the first faint hint of dawn had tinged the sky, the Rancho Buena Vista was awake. Mercedes was ashen. First her brother and then her father had ridden away and had failed to return.

Unable to stand inaction any longer, she left the house and walked as far as the creek-bottom where her father had crossed, listening for any sound that might announce his return.

The stillness oppressed her. Thoroughly frightened, she ran back to the hacienda and roused Mariano. Teresa, his wrinkled and superannuated wife, came with her lord.

The tone in which she commanded him to hurry made the old *mozo* move faster than he had been wont to do for some years. Teresa opened her eyes, too.

When Mariano returned with only Henaro, Mercedes's face fell. She had not known that her father had sent the other men to the railroad with sheep. But she lost no time in despatching the vaquero for Kent. Old Mariano was put to service; she sent him to Ugarde's place, because it was nearest.

"Don't come back until you find them," she ordered. "At daylight I will go myself to the Bull's Head. Señor Acklin will talk to me! If my father

or brother return before I leave, you shall be told. And if you have word, take no thought of your horses in getting it to me. Ride!"

The men went out, and Mercedes sent Teresa upstairs to Basilio. The old Indian obeyed, but she wagged her head from side to side as she left, chanting oracularly in a voice that Mercedes could not help but hear: "*Por Dios! Por Dios!* The walls are damp; the ditches smell; last night the sun paled as it went to bed; the dogs ate grass: sorrow, sorrow . . . I could hear the crow's black wings!"

The closing door put an end to her dismal words. Mercedes caught her pinto and saddled him. A pale yellow tinged the sky above the eastern range. The cold yellow became pink; a frigid unreal pink: cool blues and purples followed. And then, tone by tone, fire and warmth and life crept into the sky. It was dawn! So long she sat in her saddle without moving. No sound of hurrying horsemen reached her.

Loping along in the still uncertain light, Mercedes's mind centered on the Bull's Head and what she would find there. Acklin's shadow darkened all of her thoughts. But even so she became aware of the insistence of the coyotes' barking. It was not their short yip-yipping so much as the long-drawn, almost wolfish cry that followed. It told her plainly enough that they had cornered something and were waiting for the kill.

Mercedes sent her horse into a gallop. When she topped a shallow arroyo her heart stopped beating as she caught sight of her father's powerful bay stand-

ing riderless, his head lowered and sweeping from side to side.

Something snapped in the girl. She lashed her pony into a neck-breaking pace. As she drew near, she saw the bay's eyes were rolling. He snorted as she came on, but continued to lace out right and left with his hind legs.

Ringed about him, red tongues sliding out over their wet fangs, crouched the coyote pack. Rabies had spread among them so generally that they were no longer the skulking cowards they had been. Mercedes emptied her gun at them; they slunk away.

She walked her pinto to where the other horse stood swaying. And then—there at his feet, she saw the huddled body of her father. Her flesh quivered; her muscles refused to act.

“Oh! oh! oh! oh!” she moaned; it was a sob of utter grief such as wild animals voice when they are stabbed to the heart. Without knowing how she accomplished it, she slid to the ground. The bay backed off.

Mercedes got to her knees and felt her father's cold hand. She promised herself she would be brave; that she would not give way. Then with sickening heart, she saw the terrible wound. Tenderly her hands caressed his snow-white beard and hair; the cheeks so cold; the fine strong forehead, rugged even in death.

Tears swam in her eyes. She begged him to speak to her. “Come back to me . . . come, come! Father

... Father ... Father ... Don't leave me like this. Don't ... don't ... don't ... oh!"

Then slowly and surely the truth began to creep into her tortured brain. Conviction grew and settled upon her. He was never coming back. Never!

Her tears ceased. Into her face came the stoical hardness of the Basque. In this minute Mercedes left girlhood behind. She thought of her brother. Had he shared a like fate? Dry-eyed she faced that possibility. The depths of her had been sounded at her dead father's side.

Trance-like, she got to her feet and picked up his rifle. She broke it, to find that it had not been discharged. She laid it beside him. The big bay watched her carefully. Mercedes called the horse to her. She stroked his nose. "He 'll never ride you again, Carbajal."

The sun was clear of the mountains. Above her the buzzards began to circle. She scanned the horizon nervously. What was she to do? The threat of the arching sun made the moving of her father's body imperative. The scavenger horde, gathering above, only waited for the girl to leave. Her own puny strength was not equal to the task of lifting her dead to the bay's back.

There came then, down Smoky Cañon, the pitter-patter of a horse. Mercedes caught sight of him as he struck the flat that stretched back into the rocky defile. With a thrill she recognized Kildare.

When Blaze saw who it was ahead of him, his knees

bored into his horse's sides, and My Man raced to where Mercedes stood. The grim figure on the ground, the overwrought girl, and the empty-saddled bay told their own story. The message he brought her would have to wait now. He jumped down, and unconsciously, in his instant sympathy, held out both his hands to her. Without knowing that she did so, her fingers caught and held them.

Blaze shot rapid questions at Mercedes. As she re-told her discovery of her father's body, she cried in spite of her determination not to.

"Don't cry, little woman," Blaze murmured consolingly. "Your father was a good man. You've nothing but fine memories left of him. It's hard to see him go this way; but whoever killed him will pay for it. I promise you that."

He got down beside José and examined the torn chest.

"A long-range gun and a high-power bullet did this," he told her. After he got to his feet he scanned the ragged rim-rocks nervously; and sought for an excuse to get the girl away. "You'd better ride to the hacienda and get a rig; that is, if you think you're able to make it."

"If you will wait, I'll go at once," Mercedes answered.

"I'm only too glad to help you."

Mercedes's eyes showed her appreciation.

"You are very kind, Señor. Some day I may be able to pay you back."

"I 've got all the pay I need right now, Señorita," Blaze mumbled as he helped her into her saddle and stood beside her, hat in hand. "I aim to be your friend, if you 'll let me."

Mercedes's sad eyes searched his face.

"I have great need of a friend, Señor."

Impulsively she placed her hand on his head. In low tones she murmured: "There is a Basque *historia* . . . what you call . . . a . . . a . . . saying: 'La verdad es amarga; quien te la dice te estima.' The truth is bitter; he who speaks like that to thee esteems thee very much." Mercedes paused. The man's eyes held her own. "We will speak the truth to each other, I guess, Señor."

Straight-backed, the little thoroughbred rode off. Blaze watched her until she was out of sight. "God bless you," he murmured aloud. "I 'll keep my word with you."

CHAPTER XIV

THE carefulness with which Kildare examined the death wound, now that he was alone, and the patience with which he set about locating as nearly as possible the spot from which the assailant had fired his bullet, were methodically efficient.

In a dozen ways he pictured the shooting; but always, by the simple means of deduction and common-sense, his answer led him to the point of rocks above him. As his reasoning continued to bring him time after time to the same conclusion, he became obsessed with the desire to examine the ledge.

Blaze eyed the buzzards circling above him; he picked up José's gun and killed three of them. With a wild screeching, the feathered horde rose until it was a mere speck against the sky.

Hurriedly Blaze turned José's face downward and pulled the old man's coat over the head. Quickly then he tore off his own shirt and vest, and draped them over a dead sage-brush. On top of it he placed his hat. The result was a crude scare-crow. Leaping into his saddle, he galloped off before the feathered scavengers should return to discover his deception.

When he had gained the rim-rocks, Blaze crawled on hands and knees to their edge. For twenty yards, he studied the decayed rock. He came to a

flat spot, three yards square. Fine sand filled the pockets in the decomposed granite. In one of them there was the unmistakable imprint of a boot-mark. Blaze threw himself down beside it and stretched his length as he imagined the assassin had done. Opposite the indentions his elbow made as he held a fancied rifle he found the mark of the other's arm. But the man was taller than he. The distance from toe-mark to elbow was a good five inches longer than the impressions his own body made.

Without disturbing the sand, Blaze searched for other signs that might tell him something. In a hollow, about where the waist of the assailant should have come, he discovered the die-clear stamp of a Navajo luck-charm. The outlines were clear and distinct. If lead had been poured into the impression it would have hardened into a crude duplicate of the charm which had made the mold.

Kildare's brow wrinkled as he stared at the cryptic Indian letters. The two crossed and inverted capital L's were used on gun-butts, wristlets, buttons, and all the other cow-boy equipment that was made at Pendleton. The lower tip of the swastika was bent inward.

"Looks as if a watch-charm made that mark," he murmured to himself. "That ought to prove something some day, maybe. Wonder where the empty shell is."

It lay in the roots of a dwarfed sage-brush, two yards away, where the ejector had thrown it.

He was about to leave when, on second thought, he

covered the marks in the sand with rocks so that they would not be effaced.

A moving dust-cloud that hugged the Rebel caught his eye as it grew in the distance. "That 'll be her, poor little devil," he said to himself. A half an hour later he had donned his shirt and hat and awaited the girl's arrival.

Little Basilio sat beside Mercedes as she drew up her team. She had found that the men had not returned to the Rancho. —

Blaze reached up his hands to lift the little fellow to the ground. "Hello, little chief," he murmured, trying to take the droop out of the lad's mouth.

The child recognized the friendly voice. He dug his little fists into his blind eyes in a vain attempt to check his tears.

"Wh—wha—where 's my daddy, Señor Blaze?" he echoed.

Basilio knew his father's features only through the touch of his sensitive fingers. And now, as he knelt beside the still form, he felt for the beloved mouth and nose and cheeks. When his repeated pleadings failed to arouse the old man, he wailed out the agony in his soul.

Dry-eyed, Mercedes watched as Blaze held the little fellow on his knee and petted him. Basilio had been friendly with My Man once before, so Kildare put him on the horse's back now. My Man arched his neck and whinnied as he regarded the boy. The child was reassured immediately.

Then, with Mercedes's help, all that was left of Old

Ironsides was placed in the wagon. While they had been busy at their task, Basilio had continued his friendship with the horse. They were ready to go now, and both Mercedes and Blaze turned inquiring eyes at the boy. He was busily playing with the canteen that hung from the saddle. Mercedes's face grew wistful as she regarded the little fellow. On the heels of this, gratitude for the man's thoughtfulness showed, too.

"I want a drink from your water-bag, Señor Blaze, please," the child begged.

Mercedes looked at Kildare, and as he nodded ready consent, she reached to the horn of the saddle to lift the canteen to the boy's lips. Unconsciously, she turned it over in her hands. There, stenciled on the wet canvas covering, she saw the capital "A A" with which Acklin stamped his property.

"Oh-h-h! Oh-h-h!" she moaned. In that first exclamation there was instant anger and hatred; but the second held only a hurt, and comprehension of shattered faith. Too late, Blaze understood. But before he could speak, Mercedes caught up the canteen, and tiger-like hurled it to the ground. Swinging on her heels she faced him. "You—a Double A man?" She waited for no answer. Her lips curled in contempt: "A Double A spy!"

Blaze felt his face go white. With cruel insistence Mercedes's flaming eyes swept him.

"And I trusted you! Fool that I was! *Siento mucho que Usted se haya molestado*," she cried, breaking into Spanish hysterically as her over-

wrought nerves collapsed. "I rather see my father lie here for those birds in the air than you should have touch him. O Holy Virgin, have you no heart?" she moaned, as the tears choked her. "It is not enough that they kill my father; Señor Acklin must send *you* here to spy and pretend to help me."

"Don't convict me without giving me a chance to defend myself," Kildare pleaded. "I am a Double A man; but I did n't come here to spy. You don't know what you've said. Spy? I'd sure take that word from no man! Why do you say Acklin killed your father?"

"Who else so much wanted him out of the way? He had no enemies. Acklin!" It was an unholy word as she uttered it: "And his greed; they were all my father feared."

"Even so," Blaze countered, "it's not a cow-man's way to shoot in the back or from ambush. I was going to the hacienda when I met you."

There was frank disbelief in the girl's eyes. Blaze knew there was nothing to do now but to tell her the truth.

"We had some shooting at the fence last night. Esteban—"

"Esteban? Is he killed, too?"

"No, he's just wounded. The Big Boss sent me down to get you. That's the business that brought me here. We took the boy in as soon as we found him. He'll be all right in a week or so."

"The Double A covers itself with the blood of my people," she cried.

“Esteban got his fair and square,” Blaze answered with heat. I don’t aim to trail with a crowd that kills old men from cover. That’s not my cut! I’d do anything I could to ease the ache you’ve got in your heart. We are goin’ to go now. We can’t stay here.”

CHAPTER XV

KENT was waiting for them at the Rancho. Henaro had caught him and brought him back as he was about to leave for Winnemucca. José's death affected Tuscarora visibly. He tried his best to console Mercedes.

When they had finished their sad task, the two men went outside.

"I told you there'd be killin'," he murmured.

"I know, but do you believe this fight had anything to do with the old man's death?"

"Do I?" There was no mistaking his tone. "What do you say? I'd sure like to hear any other reason for it."

"Well, just the same, I don't believe the Double A had anything to do with it."

"I don't suppose you do," Tuscarora answered not unkindly. "You know what I *think* about Acklin. The two of you don't belong in the same county. You 'll learn!"

Tuscarora retold the way in which Old Ironsides had stood up for law and order at the meeting.

"That's why they wanted him out of the way," he went on. "José was n't fooled a bit by Acklin or Bodine; so they got him." He paused, his mouth cold and hard. "I suppose they 'll get me next.

Well! That won't be so bad. I've risked my skin times a-plenty for less. But if I live I aim to find out who did the killing."

Blaze was about to voice his own determination to do likewise when Mercedes joined them, ready for the ride to the Bull's Head. A stoical calmness rested upon her, leaving her a beautiful, madonna-like creature.

Tuscarora rode with them for a mile before he turned for town. He had offered to see the undertaker and priest and do those other errands which death makes necessary.

When they rode into the yard at the Bull's Head, Acklin met them. He dismissed Kildare with a curt nod but turned a covetous, ingratiating smile on Mercedes. The whiteness of her face and her tired eyes were not lost on Acklin.

"Even though it's bad business that brings you to the Bull's Head," he said sympathetically, in an attempt to draw her out, "I'm mighty glad to welcome you. This is the first chance you've ever given me to do it, Mercedes."

"I do not come here to make talk, Señor Acklin. Where is my brother?"

"Why, he's upstairs. Melody is looking after him," he went on in an effort to conciliate her. "I'm right sorry the boy was hurt. He should have minded his own business. I was n't here when this fight happened. Anyways, you should n't be so down on me. When this thing has all blown over, you'll find that I'm your friend."

His words fell on deaf ears. The impatience and annoyance which flashed alternately into her eyes were the only signs she gave that she had heard. At that moment, Acklin would have given his soul to have taken her beautiful body into his arms and smothered her red lips with his kisses. Mercedes must have guessed his thought. She looked to where Kildare lounged on the porch with Chet Devine.

"You sent word to me that Esteban is shot," she said icily; "that he is here! I came willingly. If my brother is here, take me to him."

"Oh, what 's the matter, Señorita?" Acklin purred. "Of course he 's here. You can see him right now. Come on!"

Mercedes followed the big ranchman along the porch to where the two riders sat opposite the entrance to the stairway. As they drew near they heard a voice raised in song; a wild, rollicking, not overly proper bunk-house song. Blaze and Chet had evidently been taking it in.

The singer began another verse:

I battered down to old Salt Lake,
And found the prophets just a fake.
Dodgin' wives has soured their lives;
It 's changed their laughs to frowns.
You never see them smile no more in the Mormon towns.
Gid-di-ap, gid-di-ap, who said polygamy?
Oh, I will never settle down,
A bachelor I will be,
I 'll get a . . .

Acklin stopped in the doorway, impeding Mercedes's entrance. "Tell him to stop that noise," he demanded of Chet.

"Hey! Ladies present, Melody!" Chet called. "Cut the song."

Melody stuck his flaming head over the banister above them, and called: "'S'all right! Just made his bed."

To Acklin's chagrin, Mercedes shook hands with Melody.

"Sorry you heard me singin' that-a-way," the red-haired one went on. "But that song's the real McCoy, though. It actually had your brother smilin'."

He led them to where Esteban lay.

The meeting between the wounded boy and his sister was more than the sensitive singer could stand. Not knowing what lay back of the girl's reticence when she failed to answer why their father had not come with her, he turned and went downstairs.

"Come on, Melody," Chet begged. "Finish that song."

But something too deep for words lay on the spirit of the alkali poet. For once he failed to rise to the occasion.

"What's up?" he asked Blaze. "That girl's harder hit than that wound of the kid's should cause her to be. I could n't stand it."

"That explains it!" Melody exclaimed when Blaze finished telling him about the death of Old Ironsides. "She was game to come here, thinkin' all the time that a Double A bullet got her old man. I'd give my shirt to know who did get him."

Acklin came down and went to his office. As soon

as the big man left them, Esteban begged his sister to ask his father to forgive him for his disobedience.

He told of the fight. "Our crowd ran! Only Romero and I stayed to the end. At least, father knows I am not a coward."

Mercedes turned away; her brother's reference to their father filled her eyes with tears.

She glanced hurriedly at Esteban.

"You are going home with me," she asserted. "At once!"

Through the open window she called to Melody and Blaze.

"Will you tell the Señor," she said, "that I am going to take my brother with me now?"

Melody was back in a minute.

"The Big Boss says he can't be taken out," he reported in a crestfallen manner.

Esteban's eyes flashed. Some of Mercedes's old fire came back to her.

"What has he to do with it?" she demanded. "I take him when I want to! I will tell him so!"

She found Acklin in his office. He greeted her, seemingly, in a friendly spirit.

"Well, Mercedes," he remarked, "your brother is cheerful enough. He'll pull through."

"I want to take him home."

Acklin got out of his chair.

"Oh, no, not right away!"

"Yes, right away, Señor!"

A hard look came into the eyes of the feudal lord: "You can't take him! Don't you know that if I

turned him over to the sheriff, he would go to the pen for last night's work?"

Acklin came toward her; but she held her ground.

"He can't leave here until I say so," he exclaimed.

He made a movement to reach for her hand, but something in her eyes held him back.

"I am not afraid!" Her voice was defiant. "If my brother go to jail, you go, too. Not to jail, Señor; to the hangman!"

"What are you getting at?" Acklin cried.

"You know very well what I am getting at, you beast! My father was killed last night; shot dead; while he was riding here!"

Acklin's face blanched.

"Good God! Not dead?"

"You should know, Señor!"

"I had nothing to do with it, do you hear?" His voice rose with a nasty threat. "I don't shoot from ambush."

"You had more to gain by that shooting than any one else! You have been afraid of my father. My father wanted everything kept within the law. That is why he was killed!"

The sound of their loud talking had reached Melody, who had come downstairs on an alleged errand.

Mercedes saw him. "Señor Acklin has changed his mind," she stated. "Will you get my brother ready?"

Melody looked at the Big Boss for confirmation of this order. He nodded his head and, turning to his own quarters, slammed the door behind him.

Blaze was sitting on the edge of Esteban's bed when Melody and Mercedes returned. He was as downcast as the boy. Acklin's treatment of the girl puzzled him. Was it possible that she was the stake the owner of the Double A was playing for? Kildare had noticed the Big Boss's appraisal of Old Ironsides's daughter. Could it be construed into a motive for killing her father?

If Blaze had been free to do as he pleased, he would not have sat idly by. Life was losing its flavor. He tried to throw off this mood. In responding to it, he knew he was being swayed by sentiment. And sentiment would defeat his ends.

Melody's smile had taken its accustomed place. Blaze was quick to notice the change in him.

"The kid 's goin' home all right," the sorrel-topped one informed him.

Esteban, forgetting his nurse's orders, sat up in bed.

"Maybe you could dress him," Melody went on, to Blaze. "I'll go down and see about a rig then."

So while Mercedes went to the window, Blaze got her brother ready for the trip home. He called to her when he had finished. And as Mercedes saw the tender way in which he cared for Esteban, she regretted her unkind words of that morning.

She wanted to show Blaze that she appreciated all he had done. She came over and sat on the bed beside her brother.

Kildare smiled at her. He had drawn up a chair

and was seated alongside of Esteban. Mercedes made a brave attempt to smile back at him. Impulsively she put her hand on his arm.

"I thank you so much for all you have done for me, Señor. You have been very kind to us. I hope you will forgive those hot words of mine."

Blaze felt her hand tremble in his. The blood mounted to his face. "I have n't done anything, Miss Mercedes," he replied with embarrassment. "That is—not as much as I 'd like to. And as for forgivin' you, shucks! there is n't anything to forgive."

Esteban wondered just what the import of this talk was. Had it anything to do with his conduct? Time after time, as he had lain there, he had asked himself why Kildare had spared him. The man's kindness was still as big a mystery as ever.

"I ought to ask your forgiveness, too," he said sincerely.

"You?" Mercedes caught a hint of mystery in her brother's voice. She looked at Blaze. He got to his feet.

"Better forget it," he mumbled. "Don't amount to anything."

The implication was plain now. The girl knew she was being excluded from something.

"What have you done?" she demanded of Esteban.

"He can thank me for the bullet he got in his shoulder. I shot him—last evening!"

"Was he the one that shot you?" Mercedes asked.

"No! I got hit when we came back later."

Blaze stuck his head out of the window, trying to locate Melody, as Esteban told his sister what had happened at the Chimney.

"His gun was against my ribs," he finished; "but when he recognized me, he let me go."

"You tried to kill him! He did not shoot back? *Madre de Dios!*" she cried. "And I called him a spy!"

Blaze came toward her quickly as he heard her little gasp. "What 's the matter?" he asked, looking from one to the other.

"You make me seem ungrateful, Señor," Mercedes said in a whisper, as she dabbed at her eyes with a tiny handkerchief. "A spy! I must have been mad."

Her voice broke with a sob. Mercedes thought she was beyond tears; Blaze touched her hair softly.

"That 's all right, little girl. You folks don't owe me anything. You were pretty excited when I met you this morning—your father and——"

"Father?" Esteban's face went white. Blaze could have cut off his tongue for his slip.

"What 's that about father?" the boy demanded again. "Has he been hurt—killed? Did somebody get him?" His voice rose to a scream as he tried to get to his feet.

With a cry, Mercedes's head dropped to the edge of the bed. In spite of Kildare's pleading, she broke down and wept bitterly. A shadow crossed the boy's face. He understood. This explained everything to him. As Blaze watched the young Basque he seemed to grow mature; to be touched by the hand of time.

“*Pobre de mi padre!*” he cried. His breath seemed to stop. Murder came into his eyes.

Kildare turned to Mercedes. As Blaze did so, Esteban managed to get to his feet by clutching a bed-post. Melody came in just then and caught the boy as he tottered.

Esteban struggled to free himself from Melody’s arms. “Don’t touch me!” he cried. “Damn the Double A!”

They were all on their feet. Blaze tried to get hold of the boy. The young Basque turned on him. “That goes for you, too, Kildare. I don’t want any favors from any man that takes his bread from Acklin.”

Mercedes implored him to stop. “No!” he answered her. “Get me out of here right away. I don’t care if I die on the way; get me out of here!”

The boy was no match for Melody’s strength. Against his will he was forced down to the bed.

“For the love of Pete! What’s the matter?” the happy-go-lucky poet demanded.

“Matter? My father’s been killed! Killed! Some one in this outfit did it, too!”

“You don’t think we would do a rotten thing like that, do you?” Blaze asked sharply.

“I do!” Esteban glared back defiantly. “Cowmen are always right,” he mocked; “and sheepmen are always wrong. Say, I’m sick of that kind of talk. Get me out of here!”

“Well, you can’t go alone,” Kildare answered. “I’ll take you, if you’ll let me.”

"Please," Mercedes begged. "Don't make another scene."

"Anything to get away," replied Esteban.

"Guess I'll have to drive him home," Melody stated.

"How's that?" Blaze asked rather pointedly.

"When I drove up with the rig, Acklin called me in and told me I should go. If you'll give me a hand we'll get started."

Blaze saw them off. When they were gone he tried to sleep, but as tired as he was, sleep would not come.

Overhead the sun hung in the sky, a copper-colored ingot fresh from a furnace. Its heat waves blistered the poplars and crept into the house. McDermot, the filer, was sharpening tools in a shed in the yard. Every time he put steel to the grindstone, the resulting screech sent a shiver through Kildare's body.

Charlie was hammering his supper-call on his anvil when Melody returned. Blaze came downstairs, and they went in to eat together.

"You did n't miss anything by not goin'," Melody began. "The girl's a whiz, as I've always said; but Esteban is a bad *hombre*. His sister stands the gaff better than he does. Things are beginnin' to look awful in the valley. The alfalfa is a sight! The Rancho's just burnt brown."

With an angry clank of spur-chains, Cash strode into the room. "Is this a tea-party?" he bellowed. "Or are you fellows on a vacation? Snap it up! I want you on that fence before the sun goes down."

CHAPTER XVI

THE day of José's funeral dawned bright and clear. Little dust-clouds rose in a hundred places from the desert roads, as the widely scattered people from the Little Washoe country and the valleys north of the Humboldt gathered to do honor to their murdered leader.

As they rode along in the cool of the early morning, something sad, and deeper than the death of the man they had made their leader could account for, sat upon their faces. It was the horror of failure. In all that long ride they saw nothing but burnt-up fields and the unchanging sage. Less than a week had passed since the precious water had been denied, but already the desert was beginning to reclaim its own. Here and there, amid the rattling husks and yellow leaves of the once green corn and alfalfa, a newer, darker green appeared. It marked the places where the insidious grease-wood reared its tenacious head.

The men gritted their teeth; the women stared vacantly. In the mind of each one of them was the same grim question: had their saving, and suffering, and toiling been in vain?

Quite in contrast with them was the tall, thin man hunched over the wheel of an outlandish contraption that he called an automobile. But the alleged auto-

mobile, for all its lack of paint and its unconcealed vitals, was, like its owner, thoroughly efficient. The man was Brand, coming all the way from Winnemucca. He clutched the wheel of the car as he skidded over the soapstone patches in the road.

Brand had left Winnemucca before breakfast. Mealtime, however, meant little in his existence. A cigarette to take the edge off of his nerves was all the nourishment he seemed to need. All his life he had been so busy worrying about other folks that he never had found time to worry about himself. He was in politics; but not of it. There is quite a difference.

The thirsty, restless cattle and the withered crops might cause others to despair, but they only served to stir the fighting blood in Brand. Acklin and he had been potential enemies for so long that he viewed this new move by the Double A with little or no surprise. José's death, however, came as a shock. He wondered about Acklin's possible connection with the killing.

The truth would not down, that the elimination of the old Basque removed the greatest obstacle in the ranchman's path. Was it possible that, somewhere among political wheels the Double A had always controlled, the cogs were slipping? Or did old man Acklin's son begin to hear the rumbling of public opinion, and doubt the security of his position?

The big interests had smiled when Brand and one or two others first attacked them. But the whisper had grown into a mighty roar, sufficient to reach even to the stronghold where Adams and Acklin had held

forth for so many years. All over northern Nevada the cry was being raised: the big ranches must go!

Acklin was proving, at that moment, his keen interest in José's passing. He was in his office, and Morrow and Kildare were with him. The latter's face wore a sullen look.

Acklin was saying: "People in general don't know you, Kildare. That 's why I want you to go. You can drop in at the church, or mix in with the crowd at the cemetery."

Something in Kildare's eyes made the ranchman add: "Not that I want you to do any spying. I just want you to get the temper of that crowd. If they 've had enough gun-play, all right. If not I want to know it."

Blaze nodded his head a little and pulled his hat lower over his eyes. He had been carefully scrutinizing a rifle that stood behind Acklin's desk. He reached over and picked it up and broke it open. It was an almost new automatic. He threw a shell out of the chamber.

"I reckon I 'd better take this," he murmured offhandedly. "The old iron you gave me when I came bucks about every second shot. This is a real rifle; brand new, too."

"Only been fired a couple of times," Acklin answered, rather proudly. "I 'm going after bear with it this fall if I can get away. I don't think you 'd better take it, though."

"No, don't take any gun," Cash drawled. "Ain't you still got that hat trick if anybody jumps you?"

"That's right, Kildare," Acklin went on. "I'm sending you because I particularly don't want a fight. You had better get started."

Blaze had palmed one of the shells from Acklin's gun; and he compared it, as soon as he got away, with the one he had found on the rocks. There was no question of their likeness. It was almost conclusive proof of the man's guilt. In spite of this, however, Kildare tried to find a loophole. But if the Big Boss were not guilty, then who was?

A trail led from the creek toward the little cemetery. A crowd was gathering there already. Dismounting, he led his horse inside, as the procession entered.

The Basques, bareheaded under the blazing sun, murmured age-old Latin prayers for the repose of their leader, as the body was lowered to its last resting-place. Kildare took off his hat and whispered "Amen" in unison with the mourners. It was an unconscious, reverential touch; a response to a tug at his emotions that surprised him.

He saw Mercedes, with Basilio's hand in hers, kneeling beside the grave as the earth was shoveled on the coffin. It fell with a thud that found an echo in his heart. Her unhappiness had become his own. He wanted to take her away, to make her forget her grief. As if in response to his penetrating gaze, she turned and saw him.

Their eyes conveyed to each other an unspoken message. Mercedes seemed to appeal dumbly to him in her misery. Kildare stepped forward, but he

stopped almost immediately as he saw an expression of intense fear creep over the girl's face.

Romero and Salvator had recognized the Double A man.

They drew near, and still Blaze made no move. Kent wondered why he did not draw. It dawned on him then that his friend wore no guns. The three of them saw the little man move toward them, rifle held thigh-high. Romero had his six-gun ready for action.

"Drop that shootin'-iron quick!" Kent commanded.

It was said so quietly that not a whisper reached those beside the grave. But Romero heard and obeyed. Tuscarora was not fooling! Save for Mercedes, no one in the crowd had been conscious of their movements.

She saw Romero put away his gun, and realizing that the crisis had passed bent her head and echoed the final words of the Litany for the Dead.

The boys glared their hatred at Blaze. Tuscarora had not endeared himself to them by his intervention, either. The little man did not appear to mind.

"This ain't no time, and it ain't no place for such goings on," Kent whipped out.

"Why does he come here?" Romero questioned savagely.

"He 's a sneak for the Double A," Salvator choked.

Kildare's blood leaped.

"I 'll take that from no bosco!" he cried.

He used the cow-man's term of contempt for the Basque, with a shade of emphasis that meant deadly

insult. The word burned on his lips until it leaped out to pay in kind for the insult offered by the hot-headed boy. But it stopped midway on its passage. The mourners had heard and were gathering about them. Mercedes, with Basilio clutching at her dress, stood between them.

"A bosco?" Romero questioned mockingly, as he went for his gun.

"Yes, a bosco!" Salvator fumed, "a greaser, only more so, eh?"

Mercedes caught Romero's arm.

"You see how he comes to this holy spot to insult the dead and sneer at the living," Mercedes's uncle cried in his native tongue.

Blaze, understanding only a word, caught the drift of the accusation by the reflection of the contending emotions in the girl's eyes.

"I'm sorry," he told her. Rapidly and convincingly he went on: "I came here to pay what respect I might to your father, and——"

"And yet you call us boscos?"

Mercedes's cheeks were red with shame. If he had branded her with the word "nigger" he could not have hurt her more. Her answer had been so low that only Blaze had heard, yet Tuscarora caught the import of it.

"Kildare was tending his own business," he stated loud enough for all to hear. "These boys butted in on him—tried to jump him. We won't have any rumpus."

"Oh, it does n't matter." Mercedes's voice was

tired. Her head seemed too great a weight for her slender neck to bear. "Our ways lie far apart," she went on, a note of despair creeping into her words that stabbed Kildare. "We *are* boscos. We won't forget again!"

CHAPTER XVII

LONG after the mourners had dispersed, Kildare and Tuscarora sat in their saddles at the gate of the cemetery. The gloom that had settled on Blaze found expression in his taciturnity. He had always come up smiling under the punishment and hardships of the man-world in which he lived. Life had a habit of buffeting and slamming him down, even as the sea does with her chosen ones. But like the sea, life here in the big West was strong and clean. It could whisper little songs to you; it could thrill you; and it always left you ready to face to-morrow. That was the great compensation.

But there was an ache in his heart now that he was helpless to combat; it was something new. His eyes followed Mercedes until she was out of sight.

Kent surmised what was going on in his friend's mind.

"Well, you never can tell about women," he said wisely. "She's only a girl yet; *quien sabe*; who knows? I caught that look in her eyes when she saw you were here." He turned and faced Kildare. "Blaze, I'd like to think you were watching out for her a bit."

The face of the Double A man relaxed. In tones

that hinted that his thoughts were far away he replied: "If anybody hurts her, I 'm going to be pretty well annoyed."

Tuscarora had swung his horse around, and was staring intently at the rise back of the cemetery down which Blaze had come. Kildare saw immediately the cause of the little man's interest. Silhouetted against the sky were six horsemen. As the two of them watched, the riders separated. One went north, and the others dashed away to the east.

Kent whirled on Blaze. "Is that your bunch?" he demanded.

"I came alone," the Double A man shot back, quick to realize the insinuation. "I think I recognize the big fellow ahead!"

"Yeh?"

"Bodine! Let 's find out what they 've got on their mind!"

"You said it, son. I don't fancy this Mr. Bodine even a little bit."

To avoid seeming to trail the mysterious riders, Blaze and Kent chose rather to intercept them by following the road Mercedes had taken. She and Basilio had left with old Peter, the head of the Bengoa clan of Kings River. The gray-haired Basque was an uncle to them by marriage. For all his years, he was still hearty, and he sent his team along at a good clip. So, although Blaze and Kent hurried, they caught no sight of the rig until they saw it top a wide, shallow draw a mile or more ahead of them. They lost sight of the team almost instantly, how-

ever, as Peter sent his horses down-grade into the succeeding draw.

The way to the Rancho branched off in this wide, flat bottom, and the little party quickly drew away from the main road. But even as rapidly as they had traveled, the horsemen Tuscarora had seen were swifter. Rounding a bend in the road old Peter drove right into them. With a distinct sense of alarm, the girl recognized Bodine. The men with him were little calculated to restore her composure. As her uncle quieted his team, the smiling Buck approached the rig.

He spoke to Peter, but the old Basque had a knack of not understanding English when he chose. This was one of the times. He knew Bodine by sight, and he heartily disliked him. Buck was not abashed, however. He transferred his attention to Mercedes.

Hot anger flashed in her brown eyes as he grinned at her.

“Don’t go lookin’ at me that way, Señorita,” he pleaded with a clumsy attempt at being playful. “My friends ’ll think you have the down on me.”

Mercedes grew pale as Bodine’s men eyed her approvingly.

“We’re all goin’ to be neighbors. The boys have taken up those spare quarter-sections beyond my place. No use lettin’ good water go to waste in that sink.”

Mercedes had not spoken, unless the flash of her eyes from man to man might be interpreted as lan-

guage. She scanned the horizon nervously. To the south the desert stretched interminably. Eastward, the Santa Rosa Range lifted its brooding peaks. Far to the northwest the tip of Cleopatra's Needle pierced the sky. Save for the low huddle of buildings to the northeast that marked her home, no sign of human habitation rested the eye.

Uncle Peter had almost enough of Bodine's insolence. All of the men on horseback looked to him as if they had been drinking. The old Basque was apprehensive of staying where there was danger for his nephew and niece. He spoke rapidly to Mercedes in Spanish. She nodded her head in reply.

"My uncle says he has a long way to go. We cannot stay here. If you be so kind, Señor, we drive on."

Bodine had no intention of letting them go. He knew they were frightened, and he reveled in it.

"You 're goin' to be mighty lonesome in that big *casa*—your daddy gone; Esteban all banged up. You 'd better come over and see our lay-out. You 'd never know the old place."

Mercedes stared at Bodine until some of his swagger left him. Basilio, squirming beside his sister, was nervous and anxious to go on.

"I want to go home," he cried. "When are we going to start?"

Bodine reached down to pick him up, but the little fellow divined his intention. He scurried into his sister's arms. Bodine waved his men back. His own

horse was so close to the rig that he had his foot resting on the body of the buckboard. He bent down confidentially.

"I lost my head a bit the last time I was at the *hacienda*. I was as blind as the kid here, I guess. And I 'm sorry for what I said; though I ain't sorry I kissed you!"

He felt, rather than saw, Mercedes wince.

"I learnt somethin' that night, though. I 'm a peaceable man from now on. There 's been trouble enough. I 'm for the law strong. That 's why I want you to come over on the Webster. I aim to keep inside the law, and I want to prove it to you. I got an injunction yesterday morning in Winnemucca that 'll keep anybody from touching that creek for thirty days. Seein' is believin'. I want to show it to you."

Uncle Peter cursed beneath his breath. Mercedes's eyes snapped. She whispered to the old man to start his horses, and with an angry glare she turned on Bodine.

"You waste your time," she said defiantly. "I do not care what you have, or what you say. I know, I do not go with you."

"Oh, yes, you will, *Señorita*," he smiled. "We ain't startin' no argument we can't finish. Now you turn that team around, old graybeard!" he bawled at Uncle Peter.

Peter paid no attention to him, and Bodine sent his mount alongside the team and caught at their bridles. His men hurried to help him. Mercedes

stood up and pulled on the reins. Even if this talk of legal matters was not a ruse to get her to his ranch, she shuddered at the thought of what would happen to her once he had her there and any possible business was finished. Buck's lustful eyes ill concealed his real purpose.

Blaze and Tuscarora crested the rise at that instant and rode rapidly down the draw. They saw the fractious, panicky team with the horsemen trying to turn them; Uncle Peter whirling his whip; Mercedes standing stiff-legged in the tottering wagon, with the child tugging at her. It needed no explanation.

"Something stirring, all right," Kent called to Blaze. "Better take this gun. I got my rifle."

They were within a hundred yards of the rig before Bodine discovered them. He flashed a venomous look at Mercedes.

"You better lie pretty when these *hombres* get up here, or there 'll be hell a-poppin', and don't you forget it."

To add to the confusion of the team, the extended clamor had sent a coyote out of his covert in the greasewood at the roadside. The horses scented him immediately and reared up. As the marauder darted away, Blaze and Kent pulled their mounts to a stop.

Tuscarora saw the coyote and fired at him. Quite by accident—or was it otherwise?—the little man had Bodine and his men covered.

"What 's the big excite?" Blaze demanded in steely tones.

Bodine carried the memory of that question and of

Kildare's look for a good many days. They smelled of death.

Basilio had recognized Kildare. "I want to go home, Mr. Blaze!" he cried.

It snapped the tension.

"It 's home for you, little chief."

Mercedes bit her lip as she saw Kildare lift the blind boy to his horse's back. Why did this man alternately hurt and befriend her? She became conscious of the gradual swing of his horse to a position protecting her from the sinister look of Bodine's companions. Tuscarora's carelessly held rifle did not escape her, nor did it escape the attention of Gloomy.

"Ain't you afraid that there gun might go off, you?"

"My name 's Kent—and it might," the lover of peace drawled. It brought a laugh from Bodine.

"By the way," Joe went on, addressing the rancher, "don't you get to thinkin' we 're licked because old José is gone. I aim to string along for quite some little while yet. I got a date to talk to the law right now."

"You 're slow!" Bodine grinned nastily. "I had my talk with the law yesterday. There won't anybody touch that creek for thirty days at least. I 'll see that my injunction is renewed, too."

Kent concealed his chagrin with a cackling laugh. But Bodine knew he had given his foe a jolt.

"Let 's hit dirt," he shouted to his men. He waved his hand at them airily, as he and his followers pulled away.

Tuscarora shook his head. "He sure put one over on the old man that time," he murmured. "That 's what he wanted to show you, eh—that injunction? Brand is waiting for me down at the hotel. I 'll burn it back to town. You go along to the Rancho."

Basilio hugged Blaze tightly as Kent uttered this dictum. Kildare looked at Mercedes for his answer. Their eyes met momentarily. A low, dull red burned in the girl's cheeks. Something she saw in Kildare's expression made her lips part. For a brief instant Blaze caught sight of her gleaming teeth. The hint of a smile remained as she turned her head away.

"Maybe it is best you come along," she murmured. "If—if the Señor Acklin does not mind your taking care of the poor boscos."

Mercedes thoroughly enjoyed the twinge her cordially enunciated phrase caused Blaze. He wondered if she would ever forget the word he had used.

Tuscarora chuckled to himself as he raced to Paradise. "Gosh!" he said, "don't she say the cutest things?"

Blaze trailed Uncle Peter's buckboard. Several times during the ride, Kildare had tried to inveigle Mercedes into conversation, but she sat unbending, her eyes fixed on the road ahead, when they were not roaming over the desolate fields.

They passed a dead calf just before they drove up to the house. The little fellow had been the first to succumb to the great thirst. Both the man and the girl realized that many more would be left behind by their crazed mothers to share a like fate.

Mercedes shook her head sadly.

"Oh, if we could only prove that shovels and not the storms had robbed us of our water." There was no bitterness in her tone. She seemed to be speaking more to the distant Santa Rosas than to Blaze. "No," she went on, "storms never do this! It is Señor Acklin, and his devil-dog Bodine. They want to drive us away."

In her mind was the memory of Acklin's advances, and the history of many peaceful ranchers and sheepmen who had been driven to poverty and exile by the predatory water-lord, who took the place on the desert of the feudal baron of bygone days.

"'The night the eagle is brought to earth, the eaglet takes wing.' Our people always say that."

She turned to Blaze. He had heard every word.

"I am the eaglet!" There was a convincing evenness to her voice. "Señor Acklin will not drive me away. He will find that a bosco can fight."

Kildare's jaws clinched as she branded herself with the hated term.

"I don't suppose you'll ever forget I used that word," he said spiritedly.

Mercedes answered by asking:

"Does Señor Acklin do no wrong in your eyes?"

Here was the old question again. Blaze felt her insinuation.

"I'm a Double A man, but I don't inherit Acklin's quarrels. What he does, he'll have to answer for. I aim to answer for what I do. That's the law of the country in which I was raised. A man belongs

to the outfit he belongs to, or he 's just a maverick, unbranded."

Peter pulled up his horses at the patio gate. The cow-boy held out his arm to help the girl down. As her fingers closed about Kildare's strong, sun-browned wrist and Mercedes felt the strength of the arm that lowered her as though she was no weight at all, an eager desire to be caressed by it almost overcame the perverse but strangely womanly streak that kept her provokingly antagonistic to the man. Even so, her hands did not relax their grip as she reached the ground and looked up at him.

"You may wear the brand of Señor Acklin; it may please you to do so." Her words carried her father's dignity. There was little of anger and much of regret that what she said should be so, in her tone. Blaze thought he had never seen her so beautiful. "It may please you to help him take from us everything we have work so hard for; to see our stock die for want of a drink, to make our fields wither like that." She drew her hands away and pointed to the brown alfalfa. There was a tear in her eye when she glanced back at Blaze. "But if you do so because it is the law of your country, then it is a very, very bad law."

The desire for speech had never been greater in Kildare than at this moment, but words failed to serve him. Had her voice not implied an acceptance of his friendship in spite of his connection with Acklin? She was gone before he recovered the use of his tongue.

Basilio waved his tiny hand as Blaze walked My

Man down past the corrals. Mariano, the *mozo*, lounged against the barn. He took off his hat to Kildare.

"Bad times, these, for the Buena Vista," Blaze said to him.

"*Madre de Dios*, but yes! Don José dead; Esteban shot; the hot winds on the fields; and the devil-men of the north!" He shook his head hopelessly. "All verree bad for the Señorita."

"The 'devil-men of the north' may come here some night, eh?"

"Maybe, Señor, they come some night."

"Henaro and the other vaqueros are not here any longer; you are all alone on the Rancho, now, eh?"

"Sí, Señor." Mariano wagged his head gravely. "No work for vaqueros any more."

Blaze had guessed as much. Bodine would not fail to take advantage of this, once he learned that only the old servant stood between the girl and himself. "What would you do, if the 'devil-men' came?" Blaze asked apprehensively.

"At night the gate ees shut, Señor. I sleep outside the Señorita's door."

"Good! Here is a little present for you, Mariano." Kildare took the six-gun Tuscarora had lent him from his holster, and handed it to the old man. The servant's dark eyes, fairly glistened. He had long since despaired of ever rising to the dignity of possessing a gun of his own.

"For *me*, Señor?" he asked breathlessly.

“It ’s for you, if you always keep it on you when you sleep outside her door.”

“Santa Maria! It ees a beautiful gun! I will keep heem with me all the time, Señor.”

Unaware of the anxious, wistful face that followed him from the safety of a curtained window, Blaze rode into the north.

CHAPTER XVIII

A BROAD grin spread over the face of the Big Boss when Kildare told him of Bodine's injunction. Kildare wondered just what amused him so much.

Morrow hailed Blaze as he came out. To-morrow was the Fourth of July.

"Suppose you 're goin' down to Golconda with the boys," he grumbled. Cash's tone showed plainly enough his lack of pleasure in the coming day.

Kildare shook his head. A dance, in his present frame of mind, held no lure for him. He sprawled on his bed, smoking many cigarettes, listening to the wit, both near and alleged, being voiced around him; but thoughts of the lonely girl in the deserted hacienda kept intruding and finally drove him outside where he could be alone.

He saw Cash wearing a worried appearance and wondered if the foreman's anxiety was not well founded. If the Basques knew that most of the Double A men were away on the holiday, would n't they be tempted to strike again? Bodine's movements were an even more interesting speculation. There was no doubt in Kildare's mind that the man would try to get possession of the girl.

By supper-time the specter of Bodine had become

so menacing that he decided to ride down to the Rancho. He waited until the boys had left and then silently followed them.

Dawn had found him lying sleepy-eyed on the little mesa that rose back of the hacienda. He had had his vigil for nothing. Since sun-up he had slept; but he was stiff and sore from the lack of a blanket. He had noticed a stirring in the patio from his perch on the mesa. It was after seven when he rode by the hacienda.

He saw a table set with white napery, thin glasses, heavy silver, and delicate, cream-colored porcelain. Daintiness, cleanliness, ancestry all spoke there. The jaunty insouciance of the table on the veranda seemed to relieve the dirge the wind played as it swept across the brown fields and through the dead flowers. It seemed to token a determination to meet misfortune with a smile; to go down with the colors nailed to the mast.

My Man whinnied. Basilio heard him and jumped down from the wide portico.

"I know you be here to-day, Mr. Blaze," he called as he ran towards Kildare. "I tell Mercedes you come this morning."

The cow-boy smiled down at him.

"You did n't tell her I 'd be here for breakfast, did you?"

Mercedes came out of the house at that moment. Blaze greeted her with a cheery "Good morning."

She gave no sign of having heard him. Kildare kept his eyes on her set, uncompromising profile, as

she stared fixedly at the dry stalks that were the remnants of her garden.

"Why you sleep out there all night?" she asked at last, not ungently.

The directness of this unexpected question rather upset him.

"I sleep . . . all night? . . . Where?" he stammered.

Basilio gave him his answer.

"I hear My Man single-foot along the road last night. He stopped by the fence. I told you so, did n't I?"

"Ain't no use lying about it," Blaze said rather shamefacedly. "I figured Bodine might try to pay you a visit. I knew you were all alone here." He stopped momentarily. "Did n't see anything of him, though."

Mariano came out with the coffee. Mercedes turned to him.

"Serve the Señor at once, Mariano," she ordered. "He has a long way to go."

"*Sí, sí.*"

"Won't you sit down?" she coldly urged the Double A man.

"That 's not the way I want you to ask me, Miss Mercedes," Blaze answered without moving.

"A guest may always make requests that become commands!" she quoted.

A new look came into Kildare's eyes. His face was grave. He was about to speak when Mercedes

motioned to the servant. The old *mozo* hastened to her side.

"Señor Kildare thanks you for caring for his revolver," she began. "He wishes you to return it."

"Now look here," Blaze cut in hastily, his cheeks red.

"Give the gun back at once, Mariano."

The old man lifted a mournful face to hers as he pulled the revolver from his pocket. Silently but dramatically he besought her to let him keep it. It had been too good to be true. He darted a glance at Kildare. Why did these gringos always change their minds?

"You may thank the Señor for what the Americans call—the tip."

"It was n't any tip at all," Blaze asserted. "I did n't want you to be unprotected."

"He say he geeve it to me, because I sleep outside your door," Mariano protested. "Now I got to geeve heem back. People geeve, then take away; no wonder old Mariano never got nothing."

He put the gun on the table.

"The next time you talk to strangers about the affairs of the hacienda, I shall send you down to Paradise to work in the wool warehouse."

That possibility held no allurements, judging by the haste with which the *mozo* sped off for Kildare's breakfast.

Basilio had caught the seriousness of the conversation. It kept him silent, though several times he

tugged at his sister's skirts as if to catch her attention. Mercedes was so engrossed she paid no heed to the boy until Acklin rode into the patio.

"I wanted to tell you some one was coming," the sensitive child whispered in the natural lull of surprise, following the appearance of the Big Boss of the Double A.

Mercedes flashed a quick glance from Acklin to Blaze, who held his position near the table. His face was emotionless. Had he known the rancher was coming? Only by the slightest inclination of her head did she acknowledge the cattle-man's greeting.

"Sorry I couldn't get down to your father's funeral," he said.

The lie did not pass Mercedes.

"Your man do very well in your place," she answered.

There was the faintest lifting of the corner of her scornful red lips. The implied accusation touched Kildare.

"You find him a very good *man*, I guess," she continued incisively. "Ready to do what he is told."

Acklin looked from Blaze to her, and back again. The little by-play that her words carried was beyond him. He saw in Blaze only a cow-puncher, a spender, a working man. In the chatelaine of the Rancho Buena Vista he saw—each time he encountered her he saw something different; at all times the feeling came over him that here was an unconquerable thing—something he had to humble.

"Better drift to the Bull's Head," he said to Blaze.

It was lightly purred, but carried with it the dismissal of the man on the veranda.

Acklin followed him to where My Man stood. Kildare's stock had taken a decided drop in his mental ledger.

"What kept you down here?" he asked, when they were out of hearing of the girl on the veranda.

Kildare's imagination was equal to the occasion.

"The boys were seen when they went out," he drawled. "I ran into Bodine and six or seven of his men. He did n't have a good excuse for being where he was, so I hung around to keep my eye on him." Blaze jabbed his thumb in the direction of Mercedes. "I did n't tell her."

Acklin began to readjust his notes again, as far as Kildare was concerned.

"Course I know you 're strong for Bodine," Blaze continued, "but——"

The Big Boss stopped him abruptly.

"The Double A is strong for the Double A," he asserted meaningly. "Bodine will bear watching." He unbent enough to add, "You tell the Chink that I said you were to have breakfast."

Acklin was sipping the coffee that had been set out for his hired hand, as Blaze looked back in answer to Basilio's call. The cow-boy wondered how big a part the humbling of the proud little chatelaine of the Buena Vista played in the Big Boss's determination to go through with his move against the people of the valley. From that to the elimination of Old Ironsides by the long-range automatic that stood in the

office at the Bull's Head was only a step. But it was a conclusive one. Possibly a twinge of jealousy urged him to accept that explanation of José's murder. Still the death of the old man gave Acklin a free hand with the girl.

Why should he care? he asked himself, still smarting from the scornful manner in which she had reproved him for his attempt to protect her. He told himself he had been right that first day he had met her down on the river. Who was he; or what did he have to offer, that would make her ever look with favor on him? He began to hate himself for the fool he had been. Kildare's pride was hurt, and it was a new experience for him.

If Blaze could have been back on the veranda at the Rancho, he would have found some degree of comfort in the reception accorded Acklin.

The complacency with which the Big Boss took possession of the chair at the head of the table sat rather well on his broad person. That it failed to fire Mercedes to a wrathful explosion may be put down to her father's old-fashioned Basque training of her, which forbade a display of temper toward one who broke bread under their roof.

"Sit down, Mercedes," Acklin suggested quietly after he had watched her for a few seconds. "I want to talk to you."

"Those who taste of our salt may have our service on our knees.'"

She repeated this age-old tradition, handed down

from the Mohammedan invasion of the Iberian Peninsula, with a dignity that even Acklin felt.

"Oh, come now," Acklin interrupted. "Stop handing me that old stuff. You're living in America. Sit down and eat."

"What you going to do?" the girl asked without moving.

He studied her before he answered.

"I'm going to sit here and listen to you. I like your voice when you talk, or when you sing."

"I mean what you going to do about the water? Our cattle are dying."

"Now I'm right sorry to hear that," he smiled, his pale gray eyes becoming absolutely colorless.

"I wonder how sorry you be?" she asked.

"How sorry would you want me to be?"

There was a playfulness, clumsy as it might be, in his manner, that put the woman lately born in Mercedes on guard.

"I want you to be sorry enough to make that Señor Bodine turn the water of Rebel Creek back where it belong!"

Acklin's complacency increased. He showed his teeth in a wider smile than ever.

"*Dios!* What a beauty you are, Mercedes, with that fire in your eyes!"

"You *have* help that devil-dog, Señor! You wait and see how he pay you back for your friendship."

"I'm waiting, Señorita; and I don't think he'll keep me in suspense much longer."

The Big Boss leaned toward her, his arms spread across the table.

"But I won't miss his friendship; not if I have yours, *querida*."

Acklin's bantering was slowly but surely wearing her down. She felt as if a hand were at her throat.

"Oh, stop!" she cried in desperation. "You are like a wolf-hound with a bone. You get a thing in your teeth, and you hang on and on and never give up. You think you crush everything before you with your money, your power. Bah!" Mercedes got to her feet. The rancher fell back before the fire in her eyes.

"Your power," she mocked. "You make your men do things you would not dare to do yourself. Like this man you send away now. You make him a spy, a listener, what you call eavesdropper; you try to kill everything that is good in him. And yet he serve you well."

There were tears in her eyes. Acklin no longer held his detached, half-amused attitude.

"Look here, Mercedes, what's that cow-punch got to do with our little tête-à-tête?"

There was too much of Kildare in this conversation to suit him.

"Oh, you buy him! You bribe him! You try to make him so low that even a bosco would hate him."

She used the word with that nice shading of contempt Acklin could appreciate.

"What the devil—," he began, as he got up; but he

did not finish his sentence. He was alone. Mercedes had caught up Basilio and entered the house.

Acklin tried the door. It was locked. He looked around. Mariano sat hunched against a pillar of the veranda.

"Which way did she go?" he demanded angrily.

He got no answer. Crossing the portico he dug his toe into the old man's side. The *mozo* sagged over, his head falling on his breast as he slept. Acklin dropped the hot ashes of his cigar down the man's neck. Mariano jumped with a yell.

"*Huy! Fuego!*" he cried. "*Caramba!*" The old servant slapped at the back of his neck in panic. He had not been so wide awake in years.

"Get my horse!" the Big Boss thundered.

So Acklin followed his hired man back to the Bull's Head. Their departing moods permitted of no choice. The eaglet had scratched them both.

CHAPTER XIX

ACKLIN locked himself in his office on his return from the Rancho. Kildare's concern for Mercedes had annoyed him. But with characteristic decision, he determined to find other and equally profitable employment for Blaze that would make the cowboy's visits to the Rancho a thing of the past.

But the business that had held the big cattle-man in his office until midnight, and which kept him company on Monday morning, was in no way connected with Kildare. The ingenious Mr. Bodine and his injunction were at the bottom of Acklin's cogitation.

Very much as a general does, the Big Boss mentally marshaled his forces for the move he planned. Every political and financial outpost came up for his inspection. And the more he studied and figured, the more certain he became that the time to begin realizing the dream of his life had arrived.

The conviction grew as the hours passed. His smile flamed into a grin that stripped his teeth, as he contemplated the position of the patronizing Buck. Acklin recalled a cartoon of a farmer ready to cut down a limb on the end of which a bob-cat had taken refuge. It fitted the present occasion admirably.

The Big Boss had his saw in hand, and if Bodine could have seen the unholy glee with which the cattle-

man looked forward to dropping him into space, he would have lost some of his offensive swagger.

Morrow rode up to the Bull's Head about three o'clock in a fine frenzy. He slid from his horse and hammered on the office door.

"Somebody 's running an iron on our stuff over in the Buttes!" he burst out. "They 're overbranding us and drivin' 'em out. I was up to the Needle this noon, seein' what we 'd have to do to that old road if we wanted to use it to haul rock. I got a sight of the *hombres* from there. Them steers are hog-fat over in the Buttes: they 're ready for the fall shippin' right now."

"How many men did you see?"

"'Bout four—maybe five. Headin' southwest. They 'd have to go up in the air to get out any other way."

Acklin uncrossed his legs lazily.

"Guess we 'll put a stop to that in a hurry. Better send a couple of the boys over there to dry-camp."

"And Kildare the only sober one in the bunch," the foreman muttered scornfully.

The Big Boss contracted his eyes.

"Send him," he ordered. "He 's been spotted by the Basques by now, Cash. I reckon he won't come back until he 's got his men. Let Melody go along."

Morrow started out, when Acklin called him back.

"About that rock," he began. "We 're going to need it."

The foreman's mouth opened in surprise.

"What?" he cried. "We 're goin' to——"

“Build our dam.”

Cash flopped into a chair in actual physical weakness. For ten years this dam had been held out to him until it had become a huge, elusive, Gargantuan myth. It meant the end of the Double A's water fights; the doing away with that mad hunt for grass in the dry years. Water meant alfalfa, and alfalfa meant hay. With water, grass, and hay in abundance, Cash looked forward to a life of ease. He stared at Acklin for a full minute, dumb with the realization that he was face to face at last with the chimera that had haunted him so long.

“When do we begin?” he finally asked in an awed voice.

“To-day. I 'm going to town to-night to get the stuff started on its way. I 'phoned to Gallagher in Reno to meet me to-morrow morning in Winnemucca and to bring a rigger along. I 'll have the cable and powder and concrete moving by noon to-morrow. You get that road to the Needle fixed up. Tell Mac to get the donkey-engine in shape. Haul her up to Martin Cañon as soon as he 's ready. You know the spot.”

Cash got up to go. A smile had begun to dawn on his lips. He had remembered Bodine. He glanced at Acklin. A grin that held something of the playfulness of the tiger wreathed the face of the Big Boss. Each knew what the other was thinking.

The loud laughter that rang in Melody's ears as that unhappy individual, much the worse from his trip to Golconda, rode by the office, made him wonder if he was n't as drunk as Cash had asserted after all.

“What? Acklin laugh?” he mumbled to himself. “Hell’s fire! They must ‘a’ discovered oil on this damn ranch.”

Half an hour later he was still grumbling as Widget doled out the pots and pans and bacon to Blaze and him. An early supper, and they were on their way.

Kildare was glad of the chance to be on his own. Ranging through the Buttes would give him an opportunity to reconnoiter the mysterious house on Webster Creek without being seen. He had not forgotten his visit there, nor the man who had tried to pot him in the back. Aside from any thought of that person, if danger threatened Mercedes, it would originate at Bodine’s ranch.

Thought of her kept him silent for a while. He could not help but wonder what the future held for the brave girl. His own injured feelings no longer rankled in his breast. She had been right, he told himself, in refusing to accept his ill-advised protection. Blaze consoled himself with the knowledge that Esteban would be up by the following day, and able to look after her.

A glance at Melody showed that weary man swaying from side to side as if he slept. But he managed to keep one eye half open as he rode along.

“Guess a bed would look mighty good to you, right this minute,” Blaze laughed.

“Took you a sight of time to cook up that observation. You’re the most talkative cuss I ever rode with. That is, exceptin’ old Pete. Ever hear of Pete?”

Blaze shook his head. "Not me."

Melody brushed the fiery hair back from his eyes.

"Well, this here Tarantula Pete and Death Valley Sawyer hit into the Panamints to pick up odds and ends in mines and Wells Fargo pouches and things like that. They didn't shy at anything but words. After they were out eleven months and nine days, Pete said, 'I guess this is Christmas.' It was the first time the primeval silence had been fractured thereabouts by word of mouth since stout Cortés with all his men had said, 'Gee whiz, what a long hike to find the Fountain of Youth! We'll be too old to want to be young again before we git a sip, if this thing keeps up.'

"Well, ten days after that remark, Death Valley Sawyer said, casual-like, as if Christmas had waited round for him to make up his mind, 'How in hell do you know it's Christmas?'

"That night Pete took his coffee and his share of the beans, and broke a lifelong friendship. Before leaving he wrote a note to old Death Valley, saying as how he just had to go, as there was too damned much discussion around there to suit him."

"If there's more to it, let's have it," Blaze called sarcastically.

"Humph! You've got it all, *compañero!*"

Blaze rolled his eyes sadly.

"Ain't that story ever had any effect on you, personal?" he asked mournfully.

Melody pulled his sombrero low over his eyes.

"I never missed Christmas yet," he answered wrathfully.

Christmas, even though mentioned in jest, was too poignant a reminder.

"You 've been lucky," Blaze drawled, a note, not all banter, creeping into his voice. It escaped Melody.

"I got a license to be lucky," he chirped blithely. "See that?"

He pulled his Ingersoll, chain and all, from an inside vest-pocket. "That's my *alce*," he asserted, as he held up the charm that dangled from the end of his chain, for Blaze's inspection.

Blaze felt his pulse jump as he caught sight of it. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, it was the charm that had made the impression in the sand on the rim-rocks above Smoky Cañon.

Melody misread the interest with which his friend stared at the cryptic piece.

"Right from old Chi," he exclaimed to forestall any criticism of his belonging. "Sears, Sawhorse & Co.—page 982."

Melody laughed at his own wit.

"No Injun ever sot eyes on that," he added. "I had the real thing once; got it down in Moqui Land."

"Where 'd you get this?" Blaze demanded anxiously.

"I suppose it 's yours?" the other flashed back.

"No; it 's not mine; and I 'll bet a leg it ain't yours either, old-timer. Where 'd you find it?"

"You just guessin'?" Melody asked cautiously.

"I know what I 'm talking about. When did you pick it up?"

"A couple o' days ago, in the sand around the hitchin'-post, outside the door at the Bull's Head."

Kildare turned the silver ornament from one side to the other, as if he were trying to make it give up its secret. Finding it in the ranch yard made the chain of circumstantial evidence against the Big Boss almost complete.

"Anybody seen you wearin' it?" he asked.

"No, sir!" Melody was emphatic. "I 'm beyond wearin' that stuff in public."

Blaze handed back his watch.

"I 'm goin' to keep this, just because." He held the charm in his open palm. The red-haired one had caught something between the lines. Blaze glanced at him. "The man that owns this," he went on, "killed Old Ironsides."

"What?" Melody's eyes bulged. "Now what do you know 'bout that?" He shook his head, thoroughly bewildered. "There 's Injun luck for you," he added.

CHAPTER XX

WITH the slow advance of the freight team driven by the slower moving Wash the destiny of Paradise Valley was indissolubly linked. The old skinner had laughed immoderately at the discomfiture of One-eyed Manuel, in his encounter with Bodine in the Benavides barroom. He laughed even louder now in anticipation of Bodine's discomfiture when the final encounter with Acklin should be of record.

Old Wash had what is known in the vernacular as inside information. The creaking wagon, warped to match the seamed countenance of its owner, carried enough dynamite to blow Cleopatra's Needle into many and various shapes.

That was the intent, too. Cleo's well-advertised and obvious mountain of granite was to be laid low.

Gallagher and his rigger had arrived. The donkey-engine was in place. Cash had the road in shape. Where Martin Cañon narrowed, a cable had been strung from bank to bank. The actual building of the dam only awaited the arrival of Wash and his precious load.

With the advent of the dynamite, it seemed that Cheops had come back to build another pyramid. The upper reaches of the Santa Rosas reëchoed and trembled as the huge blocks of stone were blown out to be

snaked down to the rim of the cañon. Once there, it seemed that they would give as much trouble in getting them into position as the storied one and his myriad slaves had had in getting the material for the great tomb across the Nile. But little Mac and his donkey-engine solved that.

By means of a flume, the creek had been diverted around the dam. So, in complete safety, far from prying eyes, the structure took form. The far-sighted, philanthropic Bodine had made it possible by his adroit recalling of the almost forgotten fact that Webster Creek owed no allegiance to any other stream. The water was his and Acklin's; to divide as they saw fit, he had said. He had been slightly mistaken, as he would soon find out. It was another case of winner take all.

The Big Boss may have smiled as he thought of the unhappy Buck, but that individual had found means of his own that caused him to smile even more broadly whenever he remembered Acklin. The present moment was one of these occasions.

In a bight in the shoulder of one of the Timbered Buttes he and Shorty and Gloomy were busily engaged in a work that was nothing short of art. The good grass in the buttes lured the cattle there. As Cash had said, the steers were ready for the market. This interesting fact had been perceived by the astute Buck some time back. He was now taking advantage of it to his own particular profit.

One of his first acts on taking over the Webster ranch was to register his brand; a circle W, with

arrow. Back of his choosing this particular brand was concentration of a high order, as will be observed.

Running as many cattle as they did, the Double A branding was not always carefully done. Therefore about every fifth steer carried his Double A mark slantwise, or even upside down. Being on their own range, it sufficed. Cattle-rustling had become such a lost art that even the ear-notching had been dispensed with. Bodine became aware of these rudimentary facts without conscious effort.

But stop to contemplate the metamorphosis that took place when one of these upside-down brands was retouched. A circle burnt around the inverted letters

made them look like this  The deft placing of

the arrow in this fashion  left no trace of

Acklin's ownership. Only an expert in a court of law could prove that it was overbranding: and that only by killing the yearling and stripping his hide.

"What a sucker Acklin is," Bodine chuckled, as he burned his points into the snorting steer on which he knelt. There was a light wind blowing that sent the acrid smoke of the singeing hair into his mouth and nostrils and made him splutter and cough.

Shorty and Gloomy loosened their ropes. Buck kicked the steer in the ribs, and it dashed down the arroyo.

"How many is that?" the big fellow asked.

"Twenty," Shorty sang out.

"That 's enough. We 'll shoo 'em out of here in a hurry now."

Gloomy stamped out their little fire and scattered the burnt ends.

Half an hour later a curve of the hills hid them from view.

Three miles to the north of them Disaster Peak raised its rocky head. On its flat surface, a field-glass to his eyes, lay Kildare. For an hour he had not moved. From time to time he had fancied he saw a wisp of smoke rising from the spot where Bodine and his men had used their iron.

For sixteen days Melody and he had roamed the Buttes. Once they had been shot at, but they had yet to catch a glimpse of the men they were after. Twice in the time they had been out they had drifted to within hearing distance of the ranch on Webster Creek. No sight of the bandy-legged Shorty had rewarded Blaze: this, for the simple reason that Shorty was no longer skulking about the house. He had taken to the hills with the others, and it had been his rifle that had flashed at the Double A men.

Camping wherever night found them; without water about half the time; daring a fire only in the very early dawn; they had worn their tempers to a razor's edge. Even their mounts were beginning to show the wear and tear of the chase.

Blaze sighed as he stretched himself.

“Ain’t you ever got sick of this country?” Melody asked as he rolled his Durham.

“Once or twice. A fine way to cure it is to go somewhere else for a spell. You ’ll come back! I been around a little; the Yukon, Old Mex, and Canada; nothing like the West though. It ’ll all be gone pretty soon. There were buffalo back in Wyoming when I was a boy.”

“Antelope, too.”

“Everywhere! Soon as you got out in the open and topped a rise, you ’d see their white rears as they fanned it for a draw or arroyo. Well, the buffalo went; the antelope are gone, too. It won’t be long before the cattle follow suit. Farms and phonographs will be cluttering up these valleys in another ten years.”

“They ’ll work their cattle with a Ford then,” the poet answered sarcastically. “It ’s just the married West against the bachelor West; and a bachelor never got nowheres. We ’ll have to move on.”

“There ’s no moving from here, Melody. This is the last stand. When this country is broken up, the West is gone.”

The singer finished his cigarette in silence. “I ain’t got any use for the three R’s,” he groaned, as he threw his butt away. “Respectability, reclama-tion, and rural free delivery don’t sound good to me. I got to be where I can smell the old sage. You know how it hits you right after a rain, when it ’s wet, and your horse tramps it down; I never smelled nothin’ like it. Thrills me like love does some people.”

He gazed off at the bare, unending expanse to the southwest, where not a tree nor a man nor beast broke the line of vision. Glasses to his eyes, Blaze resumed his sweeping inspection of it.

He again caught a hint of smoke to the south. A second—and it was gone. But as he watched, a tiny black cloud rose into the sky and hung pendant. He handed the glasses to Melody as another patch of smoke went up.

“Somebody stampin’ a fire out down there,” he muttered as he looked.

“I thought I got a trace of smoke there a little while ago,” Blaze replied. “I ’ll bet they ’ve been singeing hair in that dent in the hills.”

“What are you goin’ to do?”

Kildare was putting his saddle on his horse.

“I ’m going after them. Shake a leg!”

“Well, they sure got the jump on us. It ’s over four miles to those coulées. With the start they got, they can hit for a dozen places.”

“I ’ll tell you about that to-morrow,” Blaze flung back as My Man began picking his way gingerly down the steep sides of the peak.

They were well into the valley by the time Shorty and Gloomy had goaded the recalcitrant steers to the sluggish dog-trot that would bring them near evening to the head of Webster Creek. The ashes of Bodine’s fire were still warm when the Double A men found them.

Melody had made a thousand similar fires in his lifetime.

"Rustlers, all right," he asserted.

Blaze looked at the slowly purpling sage that betokened the coming night.

"What did you expect? Missionaries?" he said grimly.

He knew that only the slimmest chance remained that they could catch up with the brand-burners.

The poet sensed his thought. "Well?" he queried.

"They are better than an hour ahead of us. It'll be black night in the cañons in two hours. We got to be in the open before then. It's just a chance; let's pound leather!"

CHAPTER XXI

NO hint of the building of the dam had reached Kildare and Melody. The construction of it had moved forward without a hitch. Acklin took a prideful pleasure in sitting for hours at a time watching the workmen. Gallagher promised that he would be finished in another five days. By a strange but entirely human quirk in his cosmos, the Big Boss often fancied as he sat there that the elder Acklin reached down an approving hand from his heavenly home and patted him on the back for having accomplished this work of stone and cement, which would make the Double A independent even of the weather. He often imagined he felt the ghostly hand of his benignant father tremble as he realized that at last Paradise Valley was going to be a part of the Double A empire.

Owing to Morrow's vigilance and old Wash's fondness for the mighty dollar, no word of the work had passed the Double A frontier. The Basques moved about in sullen hate. Kent and Brand had promised relief, but the long-suffering ranchers were learning anew the exasperating slowness of the law.

Desolation stalked from one end of the valley to the other. Springs and wells were drained dry. The Little Washoe held only a trickle of water. The autumn rains were still weeks away. No wonder the

people of the valley stared with brooding, hopeless eyes at the copper-colored sun that daily swung across the sky.

Owing to Mercedes's care, Esteban was as well as ever. He kept the hacienda supplied with enough water for the bare necessities of life by sinking shallow wells in the bed of the creek; a bucketful or two, and they went dry. Still, it sufficed to keep body and soul together.

He had kept his word with Kent that he would not resort to violence again. But, as he came home day after day from his long rides about the Rancho or from meeting his neighbors, and encountered Mercedes's expectant eyes without being able to give her any word of encouragement, he began to lose faith in the little man.

Mercedes saw the impatience growing in her brother. Her trust in Kent had not wavered, but it was with thankfulness in her heart that she heard Esteban say that Kent would be home the following day.

She carried a gun now and frequently went about the Rancho alone. She often thought of Kildare. Where he had disappeared to was a mystery. Mercedes could not believe that he had gone away without even saying good-by. That she had hurt him she did not doubt. Still if Blaze could have known that on these rides she never topped a rise without hoping to meet him, he would have felt well repaid for the heartache she had caused.

Bodine's injunction, as far as she knew, had had no other effect than to keep her people from inter-

fering with the creeks. Kent had used it as a club to stop his Basque friends from getting beyond the law. That she had seen nothing of Acklin, she put down to his being afraid to venture into the valley.

Her intense hatred of the man prompted this thought. The Big Boss had ridden through Paradise several times in the last ten days. As the dam grew near completion, both Gallagher and he now and then found it necessary to hurry to Winnemucca for some needed tool or equipment.

Mercedes found cause to change her opinion that very day. She had gone to the cemetery and was on her way home when she came upon both Acklin and Gallagher. The contractor rode on as the ranchman turned his horse across the girl's trail. The cold eyes and the stolid expression with which Mercedes regarded him as she ignored his greeting caused the Big Boss to change his tactics.

"Things look pretty bad down here, Mercedes," he said, with a show of sympathy. "I suppose you are pretty well discouraged."

The girl read in his words a thinly veiled hope that she would throw herself upon his mercy. As if she did not know the futility of appealing to him for fair play!

"My people were never easily discouraged in the past, Señor," she answered with pride. "What we had, we made for ourselves."

"There won't be any use in fighting much longer. No, there won't, Mercedes," he repeated, as she smiled scornfully. "The past will have to take care of itself."

I 'm talking about now. Your people may have overcome a lot, but they had water. There 's no water now; and there won't be any. I don't want to see you turned out the way these other folks will be. I been aimin' to come down to see you for three or four days, but I could n't make it."

"You should send your man," Mercedes cut in provokingly.

"Still thinking about him, eh?" Acklin's brows contracted. "I got him over in the buttes where he won't bother you none. That reminds me; you were none too nice to me the last time I was at the hacienda, but that 's all right. I 'm reasonable. You 're dead set against me on account of something, and here I 've been trying to figure out a plan to help you ever since this fight began."

The withering irony of the laughter that greeted this statement brought an angry flush to Acklin's cheeks.

"You help me, huh? Ha, ha, ha! *Sí, sí!* I come now from the grave of one you help, too."

Mercedes's voice cut with its sharpness as she continued:

"You fool him, Señor, with your lies. But you do not fool me! You have never help any one but yourself."

"But I don't want to fight you," Acklin continued in that same low, uncompromising tone. "I 'll buy the Rancho, and give you a good price; twice what I 'd give anybody else."

Sell Buena Vista! The place her father had been a

lifetime building! Mercedes felt as if a divine spirit came to aid her as she shook her head.

"No! No! We may starve; you may even take the Rancho away from us by force. But we will not sell!"

"You 'll change your mind; and I may change mine. You better not wait until I do. You 've got close to a thousand acres. Without water it is n't worth a thing. I 'll——"

She looked at him. He was leading somewhere. She knew that.

"I 'll buy in all I want at my own price," he went on evenly. "But I want to prove that I am your friend. I 'd do a lot for you, Mercedes. Yes, I would. I 'll give you ten dollars an acre for all you own. That 'll give you a good nest-egg. Your father did n't have any debts to speak of."

"Ten dollars, huh?" she quoted sarcastically. "You are too kind, Señor. A month ago my father would have refused a hundred dollars an acre for most of the Rancho. But if you offered me twice ten dollars my answer would be the same; we will not sell!"

"That 's my offer. I 'm ready to pay you good money, for old sake's sake. You can take it, or fight."

Acklin snapped out the last two words.

"Here comes Kent and your brother now. You talk it over with Esteban. I 'll stand by my promise."

"Hello, Miss Mercedes," Tuscarora called out.

The girl felt his cheerfulness was forced. Her brother reflected the little man's mood. The boy ignored Acklin, but Kent gave him a curt nod.

“Did n’t expect to see you down here,” he said.

“The surprise is mutual, Kent.”

Without any preamble Joe jumped on the thing that was on his mind. “Brand and I got to the bot-tom of this fight a little sooner than we expected.” He stopped to regard the Big Boss accusingly. “You play it whole hog or none, don’t you?”

Acklin’s answer was his stock grin:

“This fight goes ’way beyond any question of water,” Tuscarora continued. “We was n’t votin’ to suit you. It did n’t matter as long as your crowd was doing the countin’. But with Brand gettin’ ready to check up each vote and see that it went to the man it was cast for, well, somethin’ had to be done. So you hit upon this scheme to grab every-thing in sight, and starve us out of the county at the same time. It’s been done before.”

“There won’t be any question about your going, I guess.”

Acklin’s voice was defiant.

“We won’t go!” Esteban hurled at him. “Don’t forget that. We can sit tight. We know this Bodine’s only a capper for you. It’s your own private show, Acklin.”

“Is that a question?”

“You don’t have to answer it,” the little man flung back. “I know that you’ve got the skids all greased for us. If we jolt the law again, the sheriff butts in. If he ain’t strong enough your little old governor will get in touch with Washington, and the U. S. A. will trot out a few regulars from Fort Douglas or

the Presidio. Oh, yes! If we start that mill a-grindin' we lose."

The Big Boss pretended to laugh.

"We must get water on our land soon or our claims die," Mercedes stated. "Just before you come, the Señor say that very thing to me."

Tuscarora turned to the girl.

"Well, we 've got to keep within the law if we never get a drop of water. That 's the only way we can fool him."

Kent pulled up his horse as a sign that the conversation was at an end. Mercedes and Esteban trotted off silent and sullen. Kent lingered a second.

"There 's only one thing you did n't fix, Acklin," they heard Tuscarora say. "That 's public opinion. You might get away with this grab in Germany or Russia, or back East in the coal country, with only a lot of bohunks to fight you. But this is America; and we 're Americans. You can't scare us."

After supper that evening Esteban rode into Paradise with Kent. The excitement that greeted the news of Acklin's offer almost cost Tuscarora his leadership. It crystallized the temper of the crowd; and it ended their groping in the dark. The days of suspicion and surmise were past. For the first time, the Double A had come out in the open. Each one of them knew now what he faced.

CHAPTER XXII

KENT sat in his room the following morning with bowed head. No man could have tried harder to find an opening by which he and his friends could get justice. But the temper of the crowd of the night before was evidence enough that he had failed. His words had sounded empty in the face of Acklin's threat. If they must lose anyway, it certainly would be better to go down fighting than to stand idly by, as they had been doing, and see their ranches taken away without a struggle to keep them.

The little man easily understood his friends' philosophy. He knew the Basque make-up well enough to understand that, in spite of all argument, they would never admit they could not drive Acklin back by force until they had tried it.

He came downstairs and walked over to Benavides's place. The nods and greetings he received were in strong contrast to the manner in which he had once been met. The whispering and low-toned conversation, which stopped on his approach, told Kent as plainly as though he had read it in a newspaper that trouble was brewing. When it would come would depend entirely on who was behind the agitation.

As he came out of the saloon and saw Esteban turn into the post-office to avoid meeting him, he had his

answer. He would be surprised if the next twenty-four hours did not see the Basques pouring up the valley of the Rebel.

It was coming sooner than even Kent surmised. Out of the group-fear of hunger, which has dogged the steps of the human race since man took possession of the earth, had come common enlightenment and a cry for concerted action.

Old Ironsides' son moved about the town giving his commands with a new dignity that was subtly reminiscent of his father. Romero was pushed aside; he took his orders from Esteban.

The boy had, in truth, become the leader of his people.

That evening, an hour before sunset, they were to strike.

The appointed time found them pouring along the road to the old meeting-place north of the hacienda, the westering sun blinking on their gun-barrels. Not a man had stayed behind. It was mass action, in deep contrast to the boyish adventure that had failed so miserably.

Picks, shovels, guns, ammunition came from unexpected places. As they gathered a hundred strong, Esteban appraised them. These were not boys. They were grim, determined men bent upon the preservation of their homes.

In orderly precision they moved on the Double A wire. When they were within a mile of it, they spread out fanwise to attack it from the west and south.

Esteban lighted his smoke signal, and the fan converged. From a dozen points the little groups dashed into the bottom-land where he had been wounded weeks ago. Guns were ready, the will to do or die in their hearts; but not a shot was fired.

The fence was unguarded.

A quick use of nippers, and the wire was down. In double file they trailed up the dry bed of the stream, their guns held ready. Twenty minutes brought them within sight of the dead trees that marked the confluence of the Webster and the Rebel. They stopped.

Horses were left behind, here. In Indian fashion they swarmed past the face of the mesa on which Kildare had lain the night the water was diverted. It was a likely spot for an ambush; but even there no hand arose to oppose them.

At their feet ran the water they had come to claim.

Esteban posted his lookouts. Picks and shovels took the place of guns. With muscles primed for their task, and a will to fire them on, they attacked the barrier that had impoverished them.

The very intentness with which they applied themselves kept them from seeing a miracle that was happening even as they worked. Unnoticed, the swift current of the Rebel dropped to sluggishness. No longer did it dash into the mouth of the Webster. The change was slow and gradual; but over at Bodine's ranch it had been appallingly sudden.

Buck, out of his saddle only some ten minutes, had been on the point of sousing a pail into the stream at his feet when the creek that only a minute before

had been full to its banks dwindled to a thin trickle that lapped the stones old Hank Webster had used as a crossing.

And even as he continued to stare speechlessly at the receding water, it died away to nothing. Only momentarily was his profane tongue stilled. He hurled his bucket to the ground with such violence that it broke into kindling. He tore his hair and cried out his wrath in tones that echoed up and down the cañon. He stamped his feet and he swore, and consigned the entire race of Basques to agonies only a devil could have conceived.

"The law!" he wailed. "They 've broken the law! What good is law if people won't live up to it?"

If Buck ever recalled this speech, it must have made him smile. It was not funny to him at the moment. In a voice to wake the dead, he called for his boys. But his own cleverness had sent them out of reach. As soon as they had struck the ranch, he had ordered Shorty and Gloomy and the others to drive the stolen steers to the lower end of the ranch where they would soon mingle with the other stock, the greater part of which had been acquired in quite the same manner as had won this herd of twenty.

Realization of his predicament caused another outburst of anger; it dulled his ears to the approach of two horsemen coming from the north. They rode at a leisurely gait that was little in keeping with their tempers. The two riders were Kildare and Melody.

They had almost reached his barn before Bodine became aware of them. He recognized Kildare. The

disappearance of the water had been so immediate and all-engrossing that he had lost some of his native cunning, or else he would not have overlooked the fact that they came from the same direction from which he and his men had so lately arrived. He would have weighed their intrusion, doubted their explanations, and watched for them to trip themselves on their own words. Instead of which he turned to them to witness the trick that had been played upon him.

"Look at that, Kildare," he cried, pointing to the dry creek-bottom. "Not a pailful left!"

Melody and Blaze exchanged a quick, uneasy glance. What had happened while they had been in the hills? Had there been another fight?

"Goin', goin'," Melody quoted facetiously.

"Goin'?" Buck roared. "You mean gone! But I ain't! I ain't gone! I'll get the cuckoos that did this. You wait."

The clatter of his boots on the wooden steps that led into his kitchen drowned his angry words as he dashed for his rifle.

"Look at the ground," Melody whispered. "It's all pawed up. He got our stuff. Drove right by here."

"Don't say anything," Blaze cautioned. "He'll try it again."

Through the open door they could see Bodine filling his belt with shells. Kildare felt his fingers itching to get hold of one of them. But the more urgent question of their own immediate conduct drove the thought from his mind as he said:

"He 's killing mad right now, Melody. We 'll go with him. If he goes after anybody, get him first."

Bodine was back the next instant.

"Come on," he cried. "We 'll get inside the wire here and hit it up for the forks. They hain't no damn Basque goin' to put this over on me."

CHAPTER XXIII

WITH a rattle of hoofs they thundered across the wooden bridge Bodine had built over the Webster. But even before they were out of sight an echo of the calamity that had befallen Buck had reached the men toiling at the barrier between the two creeks.

“The water ’s going!” some one cried.

Shovels were dropped as they stared open-mouthed at the miracle taking place before them. Cold fear settled on some as old Ortega wailed that it was a heavenly visitation for their sins.

“Visitation nothing!” Esteban shouted. The unguarded fence began to take on a sinister look.

“If it is not so,” the old man flared back, “where has the water gone?”

“Keep your guns handy,” the youthful leader sang out. “It’s a trap. The fence was left unguarded purposely.”

The trees that lined the Webster offered the best cover. Esteban hurried his men behind them. This accomplished, he sent Romero and five or six companions beating through the brush. They were back in fifteen minutes without having seen a sign of an enemy.

By the time they had held a consultation, Bodine

and the two Double A men had drawn into sight. The road they were following led across an open plain for half a mile before it reached the creek.

The Basques were ready. Esteban cautioned them not to shoot. Lying in the heavy underbrush, they were not visible to the oncoming horsemen. The three men were within a hundred yards of the creek before they caught the first hint of ambush.

Bodine went for his rifle, but Esteban stopped him with "Hands up, or we'll shoot to kill!"

The way the rifles began to peek out of the dead brush convinced the three riders that wisdom was the better part of valor.

"Come on," Esteban cried. "We want to talk to you."

When they had ridden up, the boy flashed a surprised look at Blaze.

"You're in fine company, all right. Put your hands down, but don't make a move for your guns."

Bodine trailed his eyes over the determined Basques.

"Ortega, Ugarde, Arrascada—humph! All the social leaders are on hand, I see," he muttered aloud. "Well, why don't you shoot, or do something to celebrate the cute trick you birds played on me."

He watched the crowd for a minute. His eyes narrowed to mere slits through which the soul of the killer peered ominously.

"You mean, that you played on us," Esteban flung at him. "You and your injunction! Take a look at that!"

Bodine's eyes followed his as he pointed to the dry

bed of the Rebel above the place where it joined the Webster. His mouth became just a great sagging gash as comprehension of the fact that the Rebel was as dry as the Webster dawned on him. A guttural throat noise escaped the man. Unconsciously he blinked his eyes, but he had not been deceived by a hallucination. His face grew white as anger writhed for an outlet.

Blaze and Melody exchanged a furtive glance. Kildare's face remained placid. Apparently unconcerned, he watched Bodine. He saw the big fellow's eyes roam over the half-demolished barrier and a deeper pallor come to his cheeks as he sensed that the men before him had not taken the water.

With surprise that equaled his own, the Basques saw the consternation and awe that gripped their enemy. Bodine's lips closed over his wet fangs. The look of horror passed. His cunning rat eyes began to shift from the Double A men to them. But the angry torrent they expected did not follow. A suspicion of the truth was in the look he gave Kildare. His animal intuition was warning him of the trap. Bestial anger enveloped him, but he held his prolifically profane tongue; and the effort left him weak and flabby.

"What have you got to say to that?" Esteban demanded in accents that clicked.

Bewildered, Bodine rolled his head from side to side.

"Acklin," he muttered slowly; "he's fooled us all."

"Acklin?"

A rumbling murmur passed through the crowd as it echoed Esteban's question.

The boy turned on Blaze:

"Is that right, Kildare?"

The crowd shifted its attention to the Double A man. Blaze met their stare calmly.

"We've been up beyond the peak for almost three weeks. We haven't seen a Double A man since we left."

"What you been doin' in the Buttes?" Bodine growled.

"You ought to know," Melody snapped back, too late for Blaze to check him.

"What do you mean, you dirty——"

Bodine's hand was at his holster.

"Go on," Blaze urged. "You'll never live to get that gun out."

He had not moved, but there was a deadly conviction in his voice. Buck stopped where he was.

"That'll keep," he said meaningly. Then to Esteban: "Let's find out if Acklin has tricked this creek."

The boy's crowd answered for him with a cry of assent.

Side by side the two parties moved, slowly at first; but as they found nothing to reward them, their pace quickened until it became a mad scramble, as if each was trying to be the first to find the answer to the mystery.

And then, as they rounded the bend where the creek narrowed as it came dashing out of Martin Cañon, the truth struck them as though they were but one man.

High across the chasm before them bulked the mighty dam, the top of the solid mass of masonry bathed in the last rays of the setting sun.

A heart-rending cry of anguish arose from their lips.

The creek-bottom was already in shadow. There they huddled with blank faces, their eyes staring, riveted to the structure that towered high above them. It was austere, forbidding.

They had crossed frowning seas; broached high hills and leveled them; they had wrested from the desert a grudging foothold, and the fight had been a bitter one. They had faced the loss of their dear ones, wept their tears, and plodded on again. Nothing had daunted them. Now they looked on Acklin's handiwork and their hearts sank. It was the cunning of the devil that confronted them.

Esteban recalled the words the Big Boss had often used to them:

"Possession is nine points of the law."

He had possession now. This gave it to him.

A feeling of fatality grasped his comrades. This thing of rock and concrete crushed and destroyed their spirit. Like the law and the ways of God, Acklin and his dam were not understandable to their primitive minds.

Some of them got to their knees and prayed; others raised their hands to heaven and moaned or blasphemed. But above all sound arose the croaking voice of old Ortega as he repeated his oracular "It is a visitation of God upon us for our sins!"

The astonishment of the Double A men was equal to that of the Basques. To Melody, the dam was only another evidence of Acklin's ability to get what he went after.

In Kildare it awakened strange emotions. For one thing, it revealed the Big Boss as he had seen him; hard, uncompromising, ruthless. But a sense of loss, a feeling of sadness, that quite outweighed any consideration of Acklin, filled him. Over and over he asked himself what *she* was going to do now. A glance at her brother's face brought his question home even more pointedly. What would Mercedes do now?

He had no thought of himself or of Melody. And yet he must have realized how desperate was their plight. Out of all this, however, there came one sustaining thing: the utter collapse of Bodine. He was through, double-crossed, and in the very manner in which Kent had predicted he would be.

Blaze watched him. The man had dismounted and was pacing up and down the dry creek-bed. Every ten or twelve steps he would turn suddenly and, shaking his fist at the giant wall, pour out a string of curses and threats that burned the air. He would have killed Acklin on sight in his present mood. Whenever he recalled that he, the blundering, stupid idiot, had pulled this coal out of the fire for the Double A, he raved like a madman.

Esteban spurred up to the big fellow, the manner in which Bodine had given way filling him with disgust.

"Dry up that noise," he called out. "That kind of talk won't get you anything."

Blaze felt a silent admiration for the young fellow's grit. Bodine also caught the tone of authority in his voice.

"Well, what are we goin' to do?" he demanded.

"You forget that *we* stuff, Bodine," Esteban said hotly. "What my people do, they 'll do without any help from you. We 're not forgetting, you double-crossed stool-pigeon! Acklin has played you for a fool, but you 'd have driven us out if you could."

A guttural chorus approved his words.

"Have it your own way," the big fellow roared. "I 'd 'a' lined up with you; we 'd 'a' give Acklin a taste of his own medicine. He could n't lick us all. You go ahead, and see where you get off. You got two of his pets right here. What you goin' to do with them?"

Bodine was playing to the crowd now. There was a quick movement toward the Double A men. Blaze and Melody backed up against the stone wall. Esteban got in front of them. He faced his own people with his gun raised.

"*Firme amigos!*" he cried to them in their own tongue. "This man let me get away the night I first came around the wire. I had put a bullet through his shoulder; there was no reason this side of hell why he should have let me go, but he did. It is not our way to forget. He and his friend go free."

Esteban turned to Blaze:

"I 'm squaring my score with you right now, Kildare. You beat it! And take this message to Acklin: 'Keep out of Paradise! We 'll shoot to kill after to-night.' That means you, too. Acklin wants war, and he 's going to have it. Get started!"

Melody followed Blaze as the Basques opened up to let them through. The poet had begun to understand many things that had been a closed book to him up to now. His fondness for the man grew. He marveled at the unconcern with which his friend led the way down the little avenue of hostile guns that could have blown them to pieces with a touch of the finger.

Shut-mouthed, silent, Kildare won the respect of all of them. Bodine smiled contemptuously. Esteban surprised the expression in his eyes.

"You heard, Bodine," he muttered ominously. "It goes for you. When crooks fall out, it 's a long drop. You 'd better drop out of sight."

Buck tried to interrupt, but the boy waved him down with a word: "Git!"

A movement in the crowd made it eloquent.

Night was at hand. The whippoorwills were chanting their monotonous dirge as they winged across the whispering sage. Defeated, broken, tired with their struggling, the weary Basques were alone at last in the graying twilight with the fate that confronted them. They had come to the battle strong and determined, but now, as they turned to begin the long trip back to their homes, they moved with bowed heads. They were beaten.

'And high above them, belly-down on the wide top of the dam, lay Morrow and twenty of his men, rifles at their sides, watching the retreat. The vaudeville the Big Boss had arranged for their entertainment and the enlightenment of Mr. Bodine had been a satisfying success.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN the days that followed, Kildare watched Bodine's movements with untiring patience. Acklin had sent Melody and him into the hills again. For hours at a time they would hold a glass on the house on Webster Creek. Life there became as familiar as if they were on the spot. They counted eight men; Buck and seven others. Their features were not recognizable, but the big fellow's size marked him. No one worked. In the heat of midday the Double A riders rarely caught sight of any of them.

Morrow met his men one morning. He had no news. He had heard that one or two of the Basques had packed up their belongings and moved on. Cash made light of it. The fight was over!

He was right, apparently. Blaze had supposed Bodine would kick back once or twice before giving up; but four days had gone by, and he had not stirred from his retreat.

The following morning, however, there were signs of life at the Webster ranch. Shortly after daylight Buck and his men were in the saddle, and by noon they had rounded up their stock, now about three hundred head. An hour later they were in motion, pointed for Winnemucca.

"They 're headin' for the railroad, sure as you 're born," Melody called to Blaze.

"We can see them from here for an hour or more. When they reach the river, I 'm going to hike down there."

"You ain't got no call to do that, have yuh?"

"As far as Acklin goes, no. But I 'm going to keep my eyes on this bunch."

Melody studied his friend's face before he spoke again.

"Every once in a while you pull a mysterious crack like that," he finally said. "What you got up your sleeve?"

Blaze looked at him over the cigarette he was rolling.

"It goes back a long ways, old-timer. Some day maybe you 'll find out." Kildare got to his feet. "But I ain't got any intention of lugging you into trouble. This is my own little affair. I 'll wait here, and you can drift back to the Bull's Head."

"You make me sick," the red-haired one answered savagely.

Kildare's heart warmed to Melody. He understood the other's fit of sullenness.

"I don't want to cheat you out of anythin'," Blaze murmured in his drawling manner. "Come on along, if you feel that way about it."

Their proposed plan received a jolt as they saw Bodine and his men separate at the river. Three of them headed back for the Webster. The distance was so great that Blaze could not tell whether Buck was among those who had gone on or not.

“One of us has got to stay here now, Melody. You wait; I ’ll go.”

By hard riding over a roundabout course, Kildare trailed the moving herd into town. Bodine and the bandy-legged man were not among those present. The steers were loaded the next morning, and the six riders who had brought them in immediately returned to the Webster.

Evening found Blaze and Melody in their old nest above Bodine’s ranch.

“Looks like a get-away to me,” Kildare told the poet. “I ’d stake my reputation two thirds of that herd were Double A steers. We ought to see something doing in the morning.”

The return of Buck’s men from Winnemucca brought things to a head as Kildare had prophesied. Shorty was for leaving at once.

“Let ’s pull our freight,” he argued. “Acklin slipped it over all right. But the laugh ain’t all his. We got about a hundred and fifty of his yearlin’s. That ’s the booby-prize, maybe, but it ’s somethin’.”

Gloomy began to acquiesce.

“They ain’t nothin’ stirrin’ here,” he asserted.

Bodine got to his feet at this. Every argument within his mental limits had been weighed many times. He surveyed his men calculatingly.

“If any of you want to drift, go!” He was still the master. “But I ain’t playin’ this thing for two or three months and kissin’ it good-by for the small change we got from that handful of steers. Not me! I stick! Gloomy is right; there ain’t nothin’ stirrin’.

Well, I aim to get somethin' started. Now who wants to go?"

Only Shorty remained rebellious.

"This has been a bad lay from the start," he growled. "There 's somethin' wrong here. I got it in my bones. When it comes, don't you forget that I told you."

His croaking enraged Buck.

"Give me ten days," he cried, "and I 'll show you where we get off. I 'll have Acklin and these boscos tearin' each other's hearts out."

"My Gawd! We ain't goin' to throw in with these greasers, are we?" Shorty demanded.

"We 'll play 'em against each other. When Acklin begins to find a stray steer plugged in the lungs, he 'll jump at these Basques. We 'll play it so strong he 'll just have to strike back. And when he does we 'll help him. Them birds in the valley will fight in a pinch. We 'll switch about that time. We 're goin' to be with the side that wins. When Acklin's licked, we 'll be out on top."

Little Nez Percé Bill smiled his admiration at Buck's keenness. The half-breed had followed him for years because of this very quality. It impressed the other men.

"You two," Buck went on, addressing Shorty and Gloomy, "are so strong for excitement; suppose you head for town to-night and circle back after it gets dark. Strike into the hills west of here; Morrow may have his eye on us. Bump off a few of Acklin's cattle. Work east to-morrow night. That 'll throw them off

your trail. It 'll look like the Basques had a finger in it. Get to the north before morning. You 'll find a lot of places to hole-up in for a day or two. Once you pass Hog John's, lay out as long as it seems safe; three days if you can make it. Beat it here then, quick as God 'll let you, and pump all the lead you want to as you come."

Blaze and Melody saw them leave. But night fell, and in the darkness they swung back and up by the way of Kings River. In twenty-four hours word of the red trail they had left reached the Bull's Head. Cash and his riders combed the wide valleys and narrow cañons. But Bodine's men were safe in the very heart of Acklin's empire.

A guard was placed against a repetition of the slaughter. Guerrilla warfare was something Cash understood. A talk with Kildare revealed that the foreman blamed the raid on the Basques.

"Let them try it again," he smiled wisely. "We 'll find a way to strike back."

After two nights of quiet, Acklin relaxed. He put the incident down for a sporadic attack, a sort of dying blow. But the next night Gloomy and Shorty dashed down from their hiding-place, leaving a gory track to mark the way by which they had come. Below the peak they turned west, and threaded their way into the valley of the Kings. There they slept and ate. Twelve hours later they were safe on Webster Creek.

Bodine could not repress his elation as he waited for them. He and Nez Percé had defied Esteban's

order and ridden to Paradise. They had heard a great deal. By ten o'clock they were back on the ranch. Bodine could not sleep. He paced up and down the path in front of the house for more than an hour before his two men arrived. He greeted them vociferously.

"Boys, we got 'em! The Basques found a notice nailed on the door of the wool-house in Paradise about eight o'clock this evening. Some of Acklin's men put it there. It says if any more Double A steers are found shot there 'll be reprisals; they 'll hit back. You must 'a' got a bunch of them. The Basques are askin' each other who killed this bunch of Double A critters. Every man-jack of them suspects his neighbor and is tickled silly. Anything to get Acklin. You boys turn in. The rest of us will tend to this job for to-night."

"What 's on now?" Gloomy inquired. "He won't have any cattle left if we keep this up."

"That 's ended." Buck began to smile again. "That warehouse is owned on shares by the Basques. Every one of them is interested in it. Thirty or so have this year's clipping there right now. We 're goin' to touch it off. That 'll hit every one of them in the well-known pocket-book."

Nez Percé laughed. "He 's hoppin' round on one leg now, those Basque. When we get done, he won't have no place to put even heem."

An hour from the time the half-breed had emptied a bottle of kerosene over some refuse and lighted it, the big wooden building was in ruins.

“What did I tell you?” Bodine asked repeatedly, when his men brought him word the following day that the Basques had made a raid on the Double A in retaliation for the burning of the wool-house. He shouted with glee. The success of his plans caused him to take a delight in holding Shorty’s forebodings up to ridicule.

“Hain’t it comin’ out just like I said? Wait till we give their tail another twist.”

The wantonly cruel move Bodine had in mind was dramatic enough to shock a more conservative imagination than his audience possessed. The third morning after the fire he made the attempt.

A spur of the Santa Rosas separated Paradise Valley from the country that sloped to Quinn River. Old man Liotard, an octogenarian, grazed his sheep in its draws and on the flat mesa that skirted the rim of the valley opposite the Timbered Buttes.

Liotard occupied a shack that stood where the mesa came to a neck in front of the granite outcroppings that rose to high peaks.

The mesa and the tiny valleys beyond were only accessible by means of this narrow bit of land. The old man could look across the chasm that separated his aery from the buttes, but the getting there was quite a different matter. It was a sheer fall of eight hundred feet from the eastern rim of the mesa to Bodine’s ranch below. Above the shack there were large pockets in the rocks in which the snow water stored itself. It was a sheep-man’s paradise.

Bodine knew that men like Liotard were looked up

to as the heads of their clans. They were uncle, cousin, or grandfather to countless numbers of the Basques in the valley. Marriage tripled and quadrupled the number. A blow at Liotard would hurt a hundred kinsmen.

Urging their horses cautiously up the tortuous trail that led to the shack, Shorty and he arrived within sight of the place before dawn. There they waited.

Minutes rolled by before the old man came out, a moth-eaten dog at his side. Out of a lean-to built against his shack he led a burro that seemed as old as its master.

Buck smiled as he watched the grotesque turn-out move away on its daily tour of the range. When he judged it safe, Shorty and he rode up to the cabin, where Shorty produced their morning's meal.

About seven o'clock Kildare, from a perch across the cañon where he watched the house on Webster Creek, caught sight of the milling sheep as Liotard drove them from the water-pockets in the rocks. Blaze had become familiar with the old herder's movements; but he had not seen him leave his cabin this morning. And yet there were his sheep according to custom.

When the animals settled to grazing, they began moving directly toward the cabin. Noon-time always found them headed back to the higher ground. There were close to a thousand head in the herd; fine big merinos. Blaze laughed as he watched through his glasses the play of the big rams; but his smile deserted him as he saw two horsemen dash around the cabin

to the center of the herd. The sheep were in a panic almost instantly.

The men yelled and swung their ropes over them until the poor animals lost all sense of direction. A few broke for the east. The two men quickly whip-sawed a score more into following them.

Shooting and hallooing, the riders urged the sheep on, until they sped before the prancing horses. Another minute, and they were hurtling through space to the jagged rocks hundreds of feet below. Thirty, forty—Blaze turned away sick. An Indian could not have conceived anything more savage.

So far Kildare had caught only the backs of the two men; but as they began to cross the mesa, he knew they must come down by the trail that led to the cabin. Blaze moved to where his rifle commanded the road.

He had not long to wait. Five minutes, and the horsemen hove into view. Bodine was in front. The impulse to drop him out of his saddle was strong; but the thrill Blaze received when he recognized the man was as nothing compared to the start he experienced when Buck's companion turned his face squarely at Kildare.

The cow-boy sank back into his cover, his rifle dropping to his side. A grim, sagacious smile hardened his face; into his eyes came a flash of satisfaction.

From his pocket he took the picture he had shown Melody. It was Shorty's photograph.

"Gee, Kid!" he breathed aloud, "I'm going to keep my word with you."

CHAPTER XXV

LIOTARD was hours getting down to the valley with his story. Kildare had left for the Bull's Head long before the old man went by. It was a grim twist of fate that sent the sheep-man to Bodine's first with his tale of grief. Buck's sense of humor was equal to the occasion, however.

"They were fat, Señor; the wool that long." There were tears in Liotard's eyes. "My beautiful sheep; they are all kill."

"Wait till the folks down below hear about this," the big fellow roared, in a fine show of anger. "I'll go with you right now."

Thus the two of them burst upon the quiet town in mid-afternoon. Bad news travels fast, and their story was soon common property. Buck's violent indignation and old Liotard's repeated turning to him for confirmation of his loss began to have its effect on the Basques. Even Esteban met him without any open show of hostility.

A little thing in itself, but one from which Buck took a great deal of comfort, was the fact that Kent had gone back to Winnemucca. By evening the temper of the crowd in town was at white heat. An hour from now Bodine knew they would be cooling down. The abuse he had heaped on Acklin, added

to their own bitter hatred of the man, had brought the big fellow's plans to a climax. If he were to profit by them, he had to risk tossing the dice now.

He was in Benavides's bar surrounded by a small group that he held charmed with his vitriolic eloquence. To his listeners Buck seemed concerned only with them; but One-eyed Manuel and he had never for a second relaxed their furtive watch of each other. The bartender moved away to serve new customers near the door. Bodine recognized Esteban among the men who had just come in. He walked over to where the boy was draining his glass.

"Say, I hope you ain't tankin' up at a time like this," he began. "These folks are dependin' on you to do somethin' for them."

It was an adroit attack. It stilled some of the resentment Buck's words aroused.

"I won't be asking any advice of you."

"And I won't be givin' any, either." Bodine was at his best. "I ain't forgettin' that you told me once you'd take care of Acklin by yourself. Well, nothin' 's happened yet. You folks kill one of his cows, and he burns down your warehouse. You hit back, and he drives your sheep over the cliffs. You'll grow fat on that kind of stuff, won't you?"

The murmur behind him was encouragement enough to make Buck go on.

"There's only one thing to do. It'll give the Big Boss such a jolt he'll never get over it. But it'll take sand and nerve."

Bodine could feel the curiosity arising in the boy.

"But as I said, I ain't givin' advice where it ain't wanted. I 'm goin' home now. When I get to the cottonwoods by the bridge, I 'll wait five minutes. If you want to hear what I 've got to say, you meet me there."

He was too good an actor to wait for his applause. Only at the door did he turn to add:

"Don't bother if you don't mean business! If you do, come alone."

It was n't necessary for Buck to look at his watch. He had barely arrived in the shade of the trees when he saw Esteban come out and get on his horse.

"Make it quick," the boy snapped when he drew rein beside him.

"That suits me. But if you don't like what I 'm going' to say, it stops right here. You get that right, too."

"Go ahead!"

"Well, then, let 's forget this game of bushwackin'. I been doin' a little scoutin' on my own around the dam. You can't get near it from the south. Acklin's men are there night and day. The old wire fence does n't count any more. They 've moved their cattle back into the hills. Five men can guard the dam easier than twenty could ride that old line. You know how the country narrows up there."

Esteban nodded his head. Bodine had told him nothing he did not know himself. He continued to sit motionless as Buck went on.

"Lookin' round, I found a way to get by these Double A waddies. Get into the Kings first; follow

the creek north, say five miles beyond where that little branch cuts in from the west. You 'll see old Bengoa's ranch, but keep east of that, by'm by you 'll come to a little park of birches. You can't miss the trail east. It heads to the north in a little while. Disaster Peak will be right in front of you. When you get there, pick up a creek; any one; they 're all flowin' to the Martin. Coal Creek is the nearest. It hain't over five miles from there down to the head of the water Acklin 's backed up. His lake 's near full already."

"And if we get there, then what?"

"There won't be any *if* about it. We 'll get there. And when we do, we 'll blow his dam out so pretty he 'll be the rest of his life squaring the damage-suits."

Blowing up the dam had occurred to the boy, too; but he had found how impossible it was to get near the wall. Bodine's plan was still a closed book to the young Basque.

"How are you going to get down to the wall from there?" he asked. "You won't be any better off than trying it from this end."

"Oh, yes, we will! We won't even try to get near the wall. "Say——" Bodine's voice dropped to a whisper. "If I show you how, will you go through with this? I tell you we can't lose."

Esteban did not reply at once. Although the future seemed hopeless and the machinations of Acklin had made him desperate, he hung back from

making an alliance with Bodine. As he had said, he was not forgetting the past.

"I won't pass you my word on air," he answered at last. He shook his head. "I won't do it, Bodine. You know why. I'll do most anything to beat Acklin; he's made a beggar of me. It's different with you. He hasn't taken anything away from you but a gambling chance that you walked into with your eyes open. I'm trying to get my own; you're trying to get something for nothing. What you think about that won't change my opinion."

Buck swallowed a grin.

"How do I know but you'll leave me holding the bag?" Esteban demanded.

"How do you know?" the big fellow repeated. "Why, I aim to be right there with you when this thing's pulled off. We'll only want one more man; Romero'll do."

"Well, you can take me on faith, or forget it." The boy was still cautious. "I won't pass my word until I know what I'm promising."

"I'll go you on that." Bodine was not standing on ceremony. "You get the dynamite. Acklin would spot me afterward if I bought it. You hain't got any on hand, have you?"

"Six cases or so. My father was getting ready to use it this fall," Esteban answered after searching his companion's face.

"That's great," Buck shouted enthusiastically. "It's more than we'll need. I'll build a bomb

that 'll tear a hole in that wall big enough to put an elephant through. We 'll sneak the powder, and the other stuff we 'll want, up the way I said. We 'll make a raft—there 's lots of cedars up there—and put our little old mine on it. The wind drives down that cañon every night. It don't vary five minutes. All we 'll have to do is push her off and she 'll hit the dam. I timed a log one night. I 'll fix the fuse so we 'll be sure, and just to be certain of it, we 'll cover the raft with oil. If it happens to drift down quicker than I figure, the fuse will set the damn thing afire and blow up the works anyhow."

Esteban's eyes were the only answer Buck needed. He knew he had won before he asked:

"Well, what do you say now?"

The boy wiped the perspiration from his brow. His voice faltered as he spoke.

"Al-l—all right." To himself he murmured an audible "*Madre de Dios.*" There was admiration for Bodine in his blasphemy. "When do we try it?" he anxiously demanded in the next breath.

"I 'm ready now." Buck was not taking any chances on time.

"To-morrow night then," Esteban compromised. "I 'll be at your place by noon. Why not go straight north through the buttes? We can make it by way of the hills in two hours. What do you say?"

"It 's a terrible chance. Morrow will have his riders in the buttes."

"I 'll draw them away." There was a note of sureness in the boy's voice as he went on. "I 'll send

a dozen men up that trail across the peak to-night. They 'll make so much noise Morrow will have his men camping there to-morrow evening. We 'll go through in back of them."

This was unexpected cleverness of a sort Buck could appreciate.

"Gosh! That 's smart," he murmured. "You be on time to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXVI

IT was not quite ten o'clock the following morning when Kildare walked My Man to the top of the rise from which he had taken his first look at Paradise Valley. He was on his way to the Bull's Head from Winnemucca. He had taken his long deferred day off to attend to what he had told Morrow was personal business. The roundabout route by which he was returning was due to a promise given the foreman.

Blaze had kept to himself his knowledge of Bodine's part in the war of reprisals that was being waged. He had no intention of letting the Double A frighten Shorty out of the country. He had waited too long for that; and when the time was propitious he planned to settle the issue between them strictly by himself. But as he swept his eyes over the desolation that marked the once prosperous Buena Vista, he knew that he could not pass by without attempting to see the girl who had haunted him from the time he had first met her.

Three long weeks had elapsed since he had spoken to her last. But, as though it had been yesterday, he remembered the curve of her lips and the sadness of her eyes. He could guess what the past weeks must have been to her. That old desire to take her load on his shoulders took possession of him again. It was n't

to be, apparently, and yet as he remembered Shorty he wondered if the future might not point a way.

Blaze had heard nothing of Esteban; but unless the boy had changed greatly, he could imagine the pitch to which he must be aroused if he had been deceived into believing that Acklin had fired their wool and killed Liotard's sheep. As he sent My Man toward the hacienda, he resolved to try to tell the boy the truth, or at least part of it.

The sound of a crying child caught his ears as he rode by the open door of the barn. He stopped and called, and Basilio came out, rubbing his face with his sleeve.

"What's the matter, little chief?" he called solicitously.

The boy turned his sightless eyes up at him. In spite of his grief and the concern in Kildare's voice, he recognized the man.

"Come here to me," Blaze coaxed, as he held down his hand for the child. In a twinkling Basilio was in his arms. "Come on now, what're all those big tears about?"

"Esteban has gone to Uncle Peter's," the little tot sobbed, "and he would n't let me go along. He would—would—would n't take me."

"Don't you mind," Blaze consoled him. "It's a long, hot ride, and Uncle Peter will just about be busy with the haying, so don't you cry, little chief. The water in the Kings is so low you could n't do any fishin' nohow."

This last statement carried weight with Basilio.

By the time Blaze had turned My Man into the patio gate, the child had recovered his smile.

Mercedes had been aware of Kildare's advent for five minutes or more before Blaze dismounted. A warm glow of happiness enveloped her as she saw him approach. Grief, and the brooding misery of weeks, left her immediately. Yet she held back and trembled at the thought of meeting him. Nervous fingers performed miracles with her beautiful hair. Maidenly modesty bade her lower her eyes, but a flash of the carefree tomboy came back to her as she darted a quick glance into her mirror. There was color in her cheeks for the first time in many days; a sparkle in her eyes.

Blaze, with Basilio in his arms, reached the veranda as she came out. Language is useless to convey what they read in each other's eyes. Hat in hand, he stood before her silent. A word would have broken the spell the morning cast over them.

Kildare saw that she was thinner. A new wistfulness had crept into her finely carved face. Nor did her smile conceal from him the pensiveness behind her glowing eyes.

Basilio's demand to be let down brought back to Blaze a realization of why he was there. He began to say something, but as Mercedes put out her hand and his fingers closed over it he became speechless again.

Even the embarrassment of this man was precious to her. She caught the sound of the smothered breath unwillingly forced from him as he fought to repress the emotion her slight return of the pressure of his

own fingers caused him. What mattered it that the last time they had been together she had humbled him? Youth forgets quickly.

The miraculous flight of thought blinds with its swiftness. Mercedes found herself viewing these last few seconds as from a distance. She knew she had forgotten the workaday world with its unhappiness: Acklin, Bodine, never existed; the hacienda drowsed in contentment and prosperity. Why did she have to remember? Why could n't she go soaring on forever in that magic land of romance where all was happiness and kindness and love?

What a risk he had taken in coming here! She had seen the temper of her people rising after each fresh outrage, until Mercedes knew that Kildare would forfeit his life if he were caught. Not that her brother would strike him down; but those others, who had no knowledge of the man and who saw in him only one of Acklin's men-at-arms. Thought of his danger sent her throat dry.

"Oh, Señor, you do not know what you do when you come here like this."

Blaze nodded his head ever so slightly. The risk was worth it.

"Men like Ortega or Ugarde will kill you on sight."

A sudden impulse made Blaze lean toward her.

"I wonder if you 'd care very much if they did get me?"

He had won from her the confidence a woman usually gives only to one man; but true to her sex, the thought of being forced into the open filled her

with alarm. And because in such matters women are so much more the masters of themselves than men, she answered Blaze with a tantalizing laugh that carried him back to that day up the river, when she had awakened emotions long dead in him.

To atone for the confusion she caused him, she added:

“Of course I would care. You have been kind to me. I told you once I would speak true words to you. But why do you come?”

“I’ve been into town—Winnemucca; some things I had to look after for myself. I kept clear of the valley, but when I looked down from those hills below the river and saw how near I was to the hacienda, I had to risk coming. I wanted to have a talk with Esteban. Basilio tells me he has gone to Kings River.”

“As far as that?” A note of anxiety crept into her voice. “He left without telling me where he was going.”

“He would n’t take me,” the little fellow chirped up. “He said it was too dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” Both Mercedes and Blaze asked the question.

Basilio repeated his words. The same thought flashed into the minds of both.

If any danger was attached to Esteban’s trip, it could only be because he was taking a short cut across the Double A country by way of the buttes.

“He ought to know better than to try that,” Blaze

said with a shade of annoyance at the boy's foolhardiness. "Did he have a good horse?"

"He took the buckboard and a team."

"Why, you can't get through there with a rig. I've been over every foot of that country." He pointed to the child, and tapped his lips with his finger as he went on. "He's going around by the crossing, all right. There's three or four hundred Indians from the reservation over on the Kings right now, helping with the haying. I guess Esteban was afraid of them."

Mercedes tried to reward him with a smile, but her misgivings were only aroused the more by what Blaze had said. Basilio did not take kindly to his words either.

"Injuns!" he cried sarcastically. "I'm not afraid of Injuns. Teresa is an Injun. Wish I had a horse of my own."

Having relieved himself of this weighty statement, the little chap wandered back to the barn. When he was out of hearing, Mercedes appealed to Kildare.

"What can I do?" she asked. "That is not Esteban's habit to go away these days without telling me where he is going. He is not himself any longer. The fire, and all these other things——"

"I understand," Blaze responded. "I wanted to talk to him about that." He paused as if weighing his words. Then: "I've never lied to you yet, Mercedes." He had not addressed her quite so intimately before. But even now, in his earnestness, he was not

aware that he did so. "Will you take my word for this? The Double A has had no hand in these reprisals."

Mercedes's eyebrows lifted at this seeming heresy.

"I saw Liotard's sheep killed."

"You saw it, and did nothing?"

"There was nothing I could do," Blaze answered her. "I was in the buttes opposite his cabin, but it takes hours to come down and get up to his place. As far as the fire goes, I know there was n't a Double A man in the valley that time of night."

"But if the Double A is not to blame, who is?"

"Please," Kildare entreated. "I'm telling you more than I told Acklin. I can't go any further now."

Mercedes was silent in the face of his amazing statement.

"What you say is hard to believe," she murmured at last. "But I do believe you." She trustingly raised her eyes to his. "I am not to be blamed if I seem hard to convince. Señor Acklin has crushed the heart of my people with his scheming. His dam!" she cried scornfully. "It is a monument to his thieving. He is big and strong, and he makes war on the weak and helpless. You know what I say is true."

Blaze chose neither to deny or affirm her statement.

"At least," he said instead, "the dam was a blow to Bodine's plans. It sure sat him down with a dull thud. But he is n't through yet. You tell Esteban what I've said; but see that he keeps mum about it.

If I were him, I'd stick to Kent. He's got vision enough to see this thing through. Anyway, I may get in touch with Esteban soon."

"Don't risk coming again, Señor," she begged, her quick concern for his safety immediately overshadowing all thought of her own misery. "It is too dangerous. Even now some one may come at any moment. I know it is best you go."

Blaze saw her lips tremble. The urge to take her in his arms was great.

"You'll go round by the river, won't you—please?" she implored further. "Don't go through the valley."

Kildare turned and held out his hand to My Man; otherwise he would have been unable to stop the words that were on his tongue. He vaulted into his saddle lightly; Mercedes's eyes followed him.

"You know," he began, more at ease from the safety of his position, "I said once that I was going to see this thing through. And I'm taking good care that I'll be alive to do it. When I mentioned Esteban it was not only of the fight that I was thinking. Did you ever see that before?" He held out the charm Melody had found.

No trace of recognition showed in Mercedes's eyes.

"The man who owned that," Blaze went on, "murdered your father."

"You mean," she gasped, "that you know who did it?"

"I'm not giving him a name yet, but I will before I'm through."

Mercedes bowed her head, her hand against her cheek. Blaze knew the memories that were flooding her mind. His voice grew husky as he went on:

“I told you the morning we found your father’s body that I would stop at nothing in your service. I have n’t forgotten. You wonder, I know, why I stay with Acklin. He’s as hard and unrelenting as a steel trap; a throwback from thirty-five years ago when the big cattle-men were all like him. He’s got an evil name—well earned, no doubt—and with good reason, in that I am in his employ, you find it hard not to suspect me at times. Yet in spite of that I have tried to be a real friend to you. Men have called this valley a desert. But it bloomed once. The fields were green; flowers fought for your favor here in this patio. Little things sometimes are able to win great good from most hopeless clay. If you ever have cause to think of me, remember that. You know nothing of my past, and my talk tells you little; but I’ll be keeping my word with you. Good-by!”

They shook hands. Blaze saw her eyes were misty. My Man had reached the gate when he turned for a last look at her. She was leaning against a pillar of the veranda. He saw her lips tremble. Sweet and low, her words reached him.

“Good-by, . . . Blaze!”

Minutes passed as she stood there. Kildare was long out of sight before she sank into a chair, her eyes straining at the distances that lay beyond the Rebel, her ears dulled to ordinary sound. She knew Kildare

must be safe in the lower Santa Rosa hills by now. Thoughts of her father hovered in her mind. She wondered why she found Blaze so much like him.

Suddenly there burst upon her consciousness the mad gallop of a horse. Esteban was coming back! She felt relieved. She became alert, her senses on edge again. The pattering hoofs sounded very near; they seemed to be on the porch itself. Rising, she hurried round the corner of the veranda and came upon Basilio beating out a barbaric rhythm on an abandoned flower-tub. In lieu of drumsticks, he had possessed himself of part of the lid of a box; and, despite sharp nails, the little tot held the sticks in a vise-like grasp.

"Where you get these things?" Mercedes demanded as she stooped down to take them away.

"In the barn. Don't take them away," Basilio pleaded.

"But, *niño*, they are covered with nails. Feel!"

As she held out one of the sticks to him, she saw some strange, meaningless marks on it. Something had been stenciled across the box lid, and only the lower part of the letters had been printed on this particular piece of board. Curiosity prompted her to put the two pieces together. Her heart stopped as she read the words they made: "Dynamite—Dangerous."

Catching up her skirts, she fled to the barn. Scattered about on the floor were the remains of half a dozen empty boxes. They had been broken open hurriedly and left without any attempt at conceal-

ment. Mercedes's eyes widened in horror at the screaming letters printed on their sides and ends. Esteban's going now explained itself. This was why he had not taken Basilio. He was not going to Kings River. Uncle Peter had dynamite of his own for any need he might find.

Intuition began to leap ahead of the facts as they discovered themselves to her. Kildare had been right. Her brother was not going into the hills with a buckboard.

She followed the tracks of the wheels until they turned into the dim road that led to the northwest. That way did not lead to town, or to the crossing into the Kings. It went to Webster Creek.

Webster Creek . . . Bodine!

A feeling of faintness crept over her at the thought. Had Esteban made an alliance with that man? Had his evil genius won her brother into some desperate affair that needed dynamite for its accomplishment?

Ten torturing minutes of worry increased her nervousness until her body rebelled at inaction. Whatever his motive, she was certain that Esteban had gone to Bodine's ranch. With sudden resolve, she determined to follow him. A word to Teresa about Basilio and she was gone.

It took her more than two hours to reach the Webster place. No one met her as she rode up. She called aloud several times but got no answer. This, and the fact that she had trailed the buckboard right to the ranch yard, only increased her feeling of alarm.

She sat down to wait. Again inaction assailed her

and she began walking up and down the path that led to the barns. Bit by bit she increased the distance she was covering in her excitement, until her horse brought her to the doors of the old building. Her breath left her as she caught sight of the wagon Esteban had driven. A glance showed her it was empty.

Through an open door in the rear she saw her brother's team in the corral.

Some of her suspicions became certainties now. Esteban and Bodine were not enemies; they were striking together. He had ridden away on one of Bodine's horses. The dynamite was gone. Evidently their plans were coming to a climax immediately!

Mercedes scanned the ground between the barn and the corrals, trying to read signs in the dry sand. She came upon the fresh trail of three horses that led to the north.

The girl wondered who the third rider was. Her surmising gave her no clue. That it was not Kent she was certain. She unconsciously clenched her teeth at the memory of the promise Esteban had given him.

A quick glance at the sun told her it was after three o'clock. She hesitated over riding direct to the pass that led to the north, unless the trail of the three horsemen took her there. There was always the chance that they might circle back. Allowing for the time she must lose by following their trail, Mercedes could not hope to reach the buttes before six.

She did better than that, however. The fresh im-

print of shod hoofs held clear, and ever to the north. Six o'clock found her several miles beyond the cañon gate. The pace of those she followed had been rapid. Even on the bad footing where the country began to open again, she saw there had been no slackening.

She pressed on. The sun was down. Two hours at best, and night would be at hand. The thought scourged her to even more reckless riding. If the light failed before she found them, she was beaten.

Her pinto ate up the miles. There came then a turning to the east. She strained her eyes when her path led into an arroyo already bathed in the gathering dusk, so as not to miss the way they had taken. But it never failed her. Always when coming to higher ground she found it before her, stretching away to the east.

As she rode Mercedes kept continually asking herself where this trail led. Not bit by bit but with chilling suddenness the truth burst upon her. This continuous pointing to the east had told her at last.

"The dam!" she cried. "*Por Dios!* They are going to blow up the dam!"

The muscles of her limbs lost their power to hold her firmly in her saddle. She swayed crazily from side to side as she dashed on. Over and over she kept repeating aloud: "The dam . . . the dam." Or if not that, her lips moved in silent prayer that she would be in time to stop her brother. Prison stared him in the face if she failed.

She pictured the water rushing into the valley; the stock swept away; houses made into kindling wood,

people killed. A mad, wild scream came from her: "Basilio!"

It was an utterance of agony of soul and mind and body that echoed and reëchoed among the brooding peaks. Grief was in it, misery, despair. Even the animal marauders, getting ready for the night's kill, hung back at the sound of it.

And then, spread there before her, lay the placid water of Acklin's lake, reflecting the blues and purples of the neighboring mountains.

CHAPTER XXVII

A QUARTER of an hour after Mercedes caught her first glimpse of the lake, she stood at the water's edge. Her eyes swept the shore-line in every direction, but she caught sight of no moving thing. Far away to the south the top of the wall that held back the water showed a low gray streak against the horizon.

No trace of the men she pursued had been left on the rocky land where she stood. She rode an ever-enlarging semi-circle in the hope of picking up their trail. Half an hour's patient work rewarded her with clear-cut hoof-prints in the sand to the north. The horses that made them were going in that direction, too.

Her tedious progress took from her the last bit of strength she possessed. But had she been able to double her pace, she would have hardly caught up with her brother.

Neither he nor Bodine had stopped once in their wild ride from Webster Creek to peer back for possible pursuit. Romero had attended to that on his own initiative. But they had been nearly two hours ahead of Mercedes. With ease that surprised even Buck, they had cut through Acklin's country as they had planned.

Esteban had reached the little cove below Coal Creek by the time his sister had turned into the eastern leg of their trail. His companions were right behind him. Bodine gave the orders from then on.

With expert hands, he crumbled the dynamite and heated it. While he was getting the grease that he wanted, Romero and Esteban fashioned the raft that was to carry their instrument of destruction. Buck was ready as soon as they were. Each one of them had come in loaded down with material to supplement the iron and steel Buck had already cached for the bomb.

Esteban wondered at the big fellow's deftness as he watched him work.

He nailed an eight-foot cedar sapling spar-fashion at the end of the raft, and on this he looped and wired his long, slow-burning fuse.

"Pour the oil over the front of it now," he commanded when he had finished. "Once this fuse burns down to it, she'll blaze up like a house afire."

Esteban flung his empty can into the water.

"Nothin' more to do now but wait for the wind, light a match, and push her off," said Buck.

"It'll be better than half an hour before the wind comes," Romero stated.

Buck smiled. He knew the signs. The boy had been nervous all the way. The big fellow looked at Esteban. He was silent, brooding. Any thought of personal danger had long since left him. The near approach of the minute that would see the valley freed from Acklin's grasp had sobered him.

He thought of Mercedes and his little blind brother. It was for them he had done this thing. His father was gone; but at least an Arrascada had led his people to victory. There was a certain satisfaction in that.

“What a pretty sight that dam will be for smooth Mr. Acklin to-morrow,” Bodine said facetiously. He spread out his hands piously. “Well, you can’t make an omelet without breakin’ an egg, can you? Acklin’s our egg. It would n’t surprise me none to see this little hand-made lake change the whole map of the valley. It ’ll rip things up a-plenty as it tears along.”

“We ain’t going to drown no one, are we?” Romero demanded. His people would be right in the path of the flood.

Esteban jumped to his feet.

“That ’s so, Bodine. Is there water enough here to do that?”

For once Buck could be honest.

“You bet there is!” he cried. “This water ’s goin’ to drop about a thousand feet in seven miles. That ’ll give it a kick that ’ll tear the hinges right off the old barn-door.” He turned a cold eye on his companions. “You boys don’t mean you overlooked that, do you?”

Their blanched faces were answer enough.

“That ’s a fine thing to pull at this gasping last,” the big man growled. “Did you think we were goin’ to send out invitations to your friends advertisin’ this thing?” He pointed to the raft. “This ain’t no time to think about buildin’ arks.”

“You ’re too funny, Bodine,” Esteban ripped back at him. “I tell you this thing is all off!”

“Who says so?”

“I do!”

Esteban beat him to the nearest rifle.

“Put that gun down; it’s loaded,” Buck said carelessly.

“You heard me,” the boy’s tense face did not relax. “I tell you this thing’s off!”

Bodine began to believe him.

“You don’t *mean* it?”

“I mean it all right, Bodine. My people are down there! The Rancho will get it worse than any other place. This deal is off until I get them out.”

“I ain’t got no objection to that,” he cried. “Get ’em out! It won’t take three of us to push this raft off. You two beat it back and get your folks away. I’ll stay here.”

“Oh, no, you won’t.” Esteban did not raise his voice. “I’m not takin’ any chance on you. Once we got out of sight you’d let her go, and get out of here on the jump. I’ll be stayin’!”

“That suits me! But listen; don’t you lose your nerve in these God-awful hills when we’re gone. I’ll bust you if it’s the last thing I do if you double-cross me.”

“That goes two ways, Bodine! You fail me, and I’ll kill you in spite of hell. Romero, you go with him as far as his ranch. He’ll take you there; if he pulls a gun on you, plug him. I’ll wait until the moon comes up before I shove off the raft. You’ll have plenty of time to make it. You get Mercedes

and Basilio into the hills. God have mercy on you if you don't. You better get along now."

They walked to their horses. Romero waited for Bodine to move ahead. Buck stopped for a brief word.

"You be on the level with me to-night, Arrascada, and I'll be square with you. I'll see that the Señorita and the kid are all right."

Esteban watched without moving until they were out of sight. Before him were the longest hours of his life. In various ways he tried to beguile himself into believing that all was well. As time went on, his torture increased; but the agony he was enduring was as nothing compared to the suffering of the girl who was searching for him.

The long twilight had faded at last; and with the suddenness of a drawn curtain, darkness closed down upon the hushed world. The night sounds of the wild beat against her ears with the passing of an hour. Her pony stumbled repeatedly.

She determined to leave the horse behind. Removing his bridle, she left him to wander home as best he could. The pinto whinnied as she moved away in the blackness.

Her dress was soon torn to tatters; her limbs scratched and bleeding. More than once she missed her footing and came crashing down on jagged stumps or sharp roots.

The last time this happened she felt her ankle, and her hand came up wet with blood. Mercedes lay

where she had fallen, waiting for the strength to rise. She listened in vain for the murmur of the water. She was lost! She wanted to cry out; but she opened her mouth the first time, and no sound came. With supreme courage she forced herself to her feet. She tried calling again, and this time her voice rang out among the trees. The sound of it reassured her. She repeated her cry. It hung on in the stillness.

To the girl it was an eternity before the moon peered through the tops of the tangled cedars. Trees and brush began to take shape. Mercedes went on. She found a tiny spring trickling to her right. She wet her lips with its water and followed its course. Soon she caught the beat of waves. She had come out to the shore of the lake. She cried out with new courage. Her voice rolled over the water to the cove where her brother lay.

Esteban jumped at the sound of it. He had already waited long past the appointed time to send the raft adrift. The echo of that cry in the awful stillness decided him to tarry no longer. He cupped his hands to his lighted match, and the long fuse began to sputter. The wind at his back was strong and steady. A healthy push, and the raft with its deadly load floated away across the silvery water.

He did not wait to speculate on the success of its errand. He had had hours of that. Before long he was dashing for the buttes, intent only on reaching the valley.

His going brought no sound to the girl. The moon had given her her bearings, and keeping ever within sight of the lake, she stumbled to the north, dragging her tired body to new tortures. A glowing pin-point of fire moving across the water caught her attention. Its even, unhurried flight fascinated her. It was beautiful, unreal, ghostly. But as she watched it, the raft moved out of the shadows of the opposite shore into the full light of the moon.

She knew what it was then, even before the wind had sent it close enough to make recognition possible. The truth left her strangely unmoved. She even found herself admiring the cleverness of the men who were responsible for it. They had schemed well to beat Acklin! The never-halting approach of the raft, the black bulk of the mine rising from its surface, the glowing fuse held aloft as if it were a light at a masthead, brought no cry from her lips. This was the thing she had come to stop.

It came so close to her that she could hear the sputtering of the fuse. An eddy or a whim of the wind caught the raft then and sent it away from the shore. She could not swim a stroke. Just what she intended to do she did not know; but she knew she could never reach it, riding along as it was, fifty yards from the bank. She found, however, that she kept abreast of it as she followed the margin of the lake toward the dam.

This was all very well for a time, but as she came to a cove that cut back into the hills she began to despair. By the time she had got around it, the

raft would be far ahead. But without looking back she started on the attempt. She had not made more than half of the way, when she darted a glance at the moving raft. Her breath actually stopped for an instant at what she beheld. If it had been a liner making port the raft could not have turned more accurately and headed more directly for the little cove on the shore of which she stood. Mercedes ran towards it. She saw its speed slacken. Then came a second when it seemed to stand still. The next minute the current was moving it back into the lake.

Without stopping to ask herself what she would do, or how she would get back to the land, if she were once on the raft, she jumped for it. The force with which she landed was impetus enough to send it bobbing through the water until the cove was yards behind her.

Mercedes knelt on the logs before she rose to her feet, not in prayer or in fear of tipping over. She was asking herself what she could do. The fuse sputtered on above her. The sound of it began to break in on her consciousness. It came to her then; the fuse; that was it! To pull it down and stamp out the spark of fire that was slowly devouring it.

No longer did the raft alter its course. It was free from the trees and hills, and heading straight and sure for its appointed destination. She caught hold of the rope-like thing with its glowing end of fire and pulled and strained with such force that the little tree came crashing down across the raft. The girl tried to let go, but she was too late; the sapling

fell with a thud, and she rolled to the edge of the logs, her fingers digging into the bark as she sprawled over them.

She scrambled to her feet and with her boot-heel ground the coal into ashes. Her damp hair had fallen about her. She brushed it back from her eyes. She felt cold, numbed, in this minute of relaxation.

She lurched toward the center of the logs, her arms lowered to help herself to a sitting position, when a scream was wrung from her. The glowing coal that she had stamped into the cedar was gone, but in its place rose a blaze a foot high!

A little trickle of oil had seeped back to where she had crunched the end of the fuse. The wind had fanned an unseen spark to life.

What a fool's paradise she had dwelt in for that short few minutes! For the first time she noticed the oil that covered the front end of the raft.

Mercedes eyed the bulking mine. It looked too big for her to move; but she had to attempt it. She planted her feet firmly on the oil-soaked raft, and tugged, and pushed, and shoved; but the bomb would not budge.

The flames were mounting higher and higher, sending out greedy tongues that licked at her body. In a rage of helpless impotence, she raised her torn hands and struck and beat the iron thing before her. The cuts on her knuckles and fingers bled afresh, but she was fast losing the power to feel pain. Salty tears ran into the corners of her mouth. From her lips came a wild, almost insane cry.

The dam was near! Awfully near!

She called again, but it was unintelligible. The word she sought to utter was "Blaze!" If he were only here! He was so strong; so brave! She called for him once more. There was no one to answer her.

The end could not be long delayed. This was death! But she raised unafraid eyes to heaven. That she closed them was only because the spirit of her was reaching out for the man she loved.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ESTEBAN was coming to the higher ground where his trail turned to the south when he heard a horse whinny. He had to put his hat over his mount's nose to keep him from answering. The other horse called again; nearer this time. The boy did not wait. He wheeled and galloped back over the path he had just come from. When he had retraced his way some two miles, he turned to scan the lake far below him. His pulse jumped as he caught sight of the flaming logs; now so near the dam that from where he watched it seemed they must strike any minute. What had gone wrong? What had set them afire? Had his companions been caught by the Double A men?

Esteban moved higher up to wait for the explosion. In the confusion resulting from it he intended to make another dash for Webster Creek. No matter where Romero and Bodine were, they must be counting the seconds even as he.

And while he waited the Double A men, from Disaster Peak to the Bull's Head, kept their watch, unaware of the danger that was sweeping down upon them. Kildare alone, of all Acklin's riders, moved nervously about. Blaze had not forgotten his talk that morning with Mercedes. Esteban's mysterious

trip, coupled with Morrow's belief that trouble was brewing, seemed to argue more than mere coincidence.

He was within a quarter of a mile of the water when he caught the first dim reflection of the burning raft. From where he stood the fire seemed to be on the other side of the cañon. He could not see the lake itself, but the faint red tinge in the sky moved. By that he knew that something was burning on the water. There was n't timber of any sort east of the dam. He sent My Man into a gallop.

Long before he came within sight of the lake the reflection in the sky had deepened to red. The fire could not be a long way ahead. Far off, faint, he heard a shot. As the muffled report died away, he thought he heard a cry, a drawn-out scream. He released the safety-catch on his rifle. His horse fairly flew over the last hundred yards. He flung himself from his saddle at the brink of the cañon. The blazing raft was opposite him, lighting up the water for yards.

In kaleidoscopic fashion he saw the mine; the petrified girl shielding her face from the flames; the dam twenty yards away. He cupped his hands, and called to her.

Mercedes uncovered her face and looked up at him with wild, unseeing eyes. So great was the horror that transfixed her features that Kildare failed to recognize her at first. She turned her head slightly, and then he knew.

He did not stop to ask how she came there. He only saw the leaping flames, and guessed the intent

of the black thing that bulked on the surface of the raft.

Nothing could save the dam. It was doomed! A minute or two, and it would be all over. Jumping to her rescue would not help. If he ran out on the dam both of them would be killed or swept away and drowned.

He called to Mercedes; but she barely moved her head. Blaze called again. That voice! It seemed to come from leagues away; a phantom voice!

Kildare saw that she did not move. He cried out again. The wind whipped the sound of it behind him. But the girl looked up. She saw him and raised her hands. Blaze jerked his reata from his saddle-horn and ran to the very edge of the bank.

“Take off your skirt,” he cried, “and wet it and wrap it around you. Catch my rope when it drops.”

Mercedes nodded her head.

The raft was within ten feet of the dam as his reata began to play through his fingers.

Seconds—they are hours sometimes—were droning by as his rope circled lower and lower. There would never be time for another trial. He had to make it now! There was no room for a miss.

An instant—brief; life seemed to stop. Kildare blinked his eyes to clear them of the film that blinded him. Seconds were moving at express-train speed; yet even so, meaningless, irrelevant thoughts presented themselves in their entirety. Nothing seemed hurried. He had thrown his rope. In quite its accustomed way, it leaped out. He watched it now. It

was dropping. The girl's hands were still upraised. The rope was falling over them. It was at her waist. He was pulling then. It was subconscious effort!

A scream rose from Mercedes; she shot away from the raft. He could look down and see the water cascading over her as he dragged her through it.

He heard the raft bump the dam. Some one was calling; Chet or Melody, no doubt. A second in which to brace his feet; and hand over hand he began paying in his reata, lifting her to safety. She was half-way to the top of the ragged wall when Kildare felt rather than heard a snap. His hands tingled. He had been dragging his rope over the ledge, using the rock for leverage. One of the strands of the finely woven reata had given way—cut in two by the jagged quartz.

His arms trembled. There was nothing to do but risk the chance that the unraveling reata would hold. He leaned out over the water until Mercedes was a dead weight on him, and pulled. Another strand broke, but he had raised her to the top. His hands caught her arms; a last lift, and she was beside him.

Then it came, without warning—a trembling of the earth. Thunder rolled in his ears. The dam was gone. They were down, knocked flat! My Man went to his knees. Pieces of rock, from the size of a pea to big, jagged fragments of granite that would have killed had they struck, rained about them. Water splashed down in sheets.

Men were coming. There were sounds of horses, and voices that pierced the bellowing roar of the water as it sucked through the gaping hole in the wall.

Mercedes did not move. Kildare rolled her over and over. The girl's body was cold; her pulse seemed to have stopped. Blaze slapped her, and beat her with the flat of his hands. He continually raised her arms to expand her lungs.

Circulation began again in Mercedes's body. A tremor passed over her as she gasped for air. She began to live! Her head was in Kildare's arms, her back propped against his knee. He continued to watch her. She behaved as if she was sleeping. Blaze brushed the wet hair from her face with his hand. Gently he caressed her white forehead.

He felt her stir; a second, and she opened her eyes. Mercedes refused to believe what she saw. She lifted her hand slowly and felt the man beside her. He *was* real then!

She uttered his name: "Blaze!" It was a whisper. Unconsciously her fingers searched for his. The feel of his hand seemed to give her peace. Her eyelids closed, and she slept.

CHAPTER XXIX

WHILE Blaze knelt with Mercedes in his arms on the brink of the cañon, the roaring below them grew in violence. Grinding, screeching, the rushing water was ripping the hole, through which it was pouring, into an ever-widening gap. The concrete was still green. It had set well enough to hold back the placid water, but against this flood it was helpless. One block would give way, and bring its neighbors tumbling down with it. The titanic force, sweeping by, caught them up as if they had been marbles and hurled them into the valley.

The moon revealed the foaming, angry flood as it spread out over the country below. It was like an ocean. Not a tree or stick was left standing. If Brother Jones or any of the boys had been caught down there they were lost. Nothing could have lived in the face of that torrent. The water was dropping rapidly in the lake. Fifteen minutes and it would be dry.

From the bank across the cañon somebody called him. It was Melody; good old Melody! Blaze answered him. He must have heard, for he did not cry out again. Acklin and many others would be there soon. He looked down at Mercedes. Her eyes

were wide open, staring at him. Her lips essayed a smile in response to his own. He stroked her forehead tenderly.

"Don 't talk till you feel strong enough," he suggested. "The dam is gone. There 'll be water in Paradise Valley to-night." Blaze smiled wisely: "We 'll be able to leave here soon. Are you still cold?"

Mercedes shook her head.

"I tried to save the dam," she murmured slowly. "Basilio . . . he 's down there."

"You trailed Esteban, eh?"

She nodded.

"The little chief may be all right," Blaze lied, wondering how Esteban could have failed to think of his brother and sister. "The water will be spread out long before it gets to the hacienda."

Mercedes tried to sit up.

"You 're not hurt?" Kildare asked.

"Just tired . . . very tired, Blaze. What will happen to Esteban now?"

"Let the others ask that. You keep still," he warned. "Some one 's coming now. It 'll be Acklin, too."

It was the Big Boss. Skip and a dozen others were with him. The fury of the man suggested the onrush of the angry waters through the gorge. At first he saw only Kildare.

"What did it?" he shouted. "A bomb?"

His quick-acting brain had sensed an invasion of his empire that even the courts could not repair. He

was off his horse in advance of his men and striding toward Blaze when he saw Mercedes.

"What 's she doing here?" he bellowed. Without giving him time to answer, he yelled: "You saw her! What was she up to?"

Blaze got to his feet.

"She was doin' the best she could to save the dam," he drawled ominously.

Mercedes spoke for the first time.

"I was too late," she half whispered. "Too late to save even my little brother."

The men gathered close about her, hanging on her words. Acklin felt himself outside the circle of sympathy. He turned and stared at the remains of the dam that had been his life's dream. Some one would pay for that!

The lake was almost empty. Two men waded their horses across it and circled round until they were up with the others. It was Brother Jones and Melody with their questions.

Skip had produced a flask, and Blaze doled out the stimulant to the girl. Her face lost its whiteness.

"Guess we better get you back to the Rancho now," he suggested.

Acklin overheard him.

"This is a job for the sheriff," he snarled. "She 's going to the Bull's Head."

The crowd caught the clash of wills.

Blaze saw Melody. They exchanged a glance.

"You misunderstood me slightly." Kildare's tones

were too sweet, too even. "I said that she was going home," he went on.

Acklin should have known better than to continue this, but he was blind with rage over his loss. He refused to be warned. He raised his hand to Skip.

"Do what I tell you," he cried. "Take her to the Bull's Head. I'm still givin' the orders here." He reached for his revolver.

Skip started to move, but he took only a step. Kildare's guns covered the crowd.

"Throw up your hands, all of you!" he rasped out. "I'll bust the first one that moves. This is once when I give the orders. You got a horse, Melody?" he asked.

"I've heard him called that."

"Get her home then. I'm telling you! Don't look anywhere else."

Blaze turned to the girl.

"You go with Melody. He'll get you to the Rancho."

Acklin saw the look that passed between Kildare and her before she followed the red-haired one to his horse.

"She's pretty sweet on you, ain't she, the damned—"

"I'd never finish that remark if I were you, Acklin."

The Big Boss hesitated. The girl was gone before Blaze spoke again.

"All right, boys. You can take them down," he said slowly. "Thanks for obliging that way."

He dropped his guns as he spoke to Acklin.

"I've worn myself thin for your outfit. Things have been going on that I did n't savvy. But I did n't ask any questions. I could quit if I did n't like it. I guess I'm through now. I suppose I'll be getting my pay in the morning."

Acklin glared at Kildare. His expression changed as he told him what Mercedes had done. The girl's daring won muttered approval from the men.

"If I've lost my job," Blaze went on, "you'll not hear a peep from me. But I want to tell you she took a chance to save your dam that you wouldn't have taken. Her kid brother's down there in the valley. Maybe he's been drowned. You don't think she would have left him there if she had come here to blow up this thing, do you?"

Acklin walked back and forth for a minute or two before answering.

"You may be right," he growled at last. "I aim to find out, though. If she was n't in this deal, her brother was. She'd never been here, otherwise. He was n't alone, either. I'll never believe that a kid like Esteban could make a bomb good enough to blow that wall out."

The big cow-man returned to his pacing back and forth, as indication that the incident was closed for the time being. The men stood about uneasily, wondering what they would do next. Acklin did not usually keep them waiting for orders. Brother Jones spoke to Blaze. Several others joined them.

With modesty peculiar to men of his type, Blaze

said little of his rescue of Mercedes. Skip and the other boys were equally reticent in commenting on it, but they understood. It was the cow-boy code.

Acklin had been drawn back to his scrutinizing of the wrecked wall. So far no definite plan of action had evolved in his mind. His foreman must have heard the explosion and must be on the way to his side. Looking across the cañon, he saw a rider silhouetted against the sky. His first thought was that it was Morrow.

"Hello, there!" the other called. "That you, Double A?"

It was Chet Devine. Acklin answered him.

"Come on over here," the man shouted. "I got the bird that did this trick."

"Who is he?" the Big Boss demanded.

"I don't know. He 's hidin' between here and the cedars. He 's badly wounded."

By the time they had made the descent to the valley and climbed up to the high plateau on which Chet waited, some of Morrow's men from the peak had arrived. Cash himself had not yet shown up. Acklin left Patterson behind to wait for him.

Leaving their horses when they neared the trees, the men spread out and began beating the brush. Moving in an unbroken line they advanced toward the spot that had been the shore of the lake. They had come within sight of it without discovering any one when a voice cried out to them: "Come on! I'm done."

They saw him then leaning against the trunk of a tree. It was Esteban. He had dragged himself to the tree against which he now rested. From there he had watched the water go shooting past him. He had a smile on his face when they reached him. Acklin recognized him first.

"So it 's you, eh?" he questioned. "I 'm not surprised."

"I did n't think you would be," the boy answered with a grin.

Blaze came up at that. Esteban stared at him.

"Hello, Kildare," he smiled.

The cow-boy shook his head sadly. The thing he had feared had happened. The young fellow seemed to read his thoughts. His smile never deserted him, however.

"Roll me a smoke, will you?" he asked.

Blaze made a cigarette for him and put it in his mouth. By the light of the flaring match he saw the boy's condition.

"You 're hurt bad, eh?"

"I 'm going out this time, all right. But I have n't got any kick." He turned his eyes on the Big Boss. "I wanted to beat you once—just once. I guess I got my wish."

"Your pals will get their wish, too," the big cattleman replied meaningly.

"That 's talk, Acklin. Just talk! This was my party. I got the dynamite for the job. I made the raft. And I sent it adrift."

"Oh, no, you did n't!" It was Morrow who spoke. He had been there for a minute, unnoticed. "You did n't make the mine that did this job. You ain't smart enough."

His men fell back as the foreman advanced to Esteban's side.

"We got the fellow that bossed this job. Caught him over in the buttes. Bodine is the man!"

And Romero? Had they caught him, too? The boy had to risk a question.

"You got him with you, have yuh?"

Cash grinned.

"He 'll be here directly. And the other one, too." Cash did n't risk another name. Esteban did n't notice that. His heart sank. Evidently Cash was not bluffing.

"Mercedes . . . Basilio!" Esteban groaned. His head fell forward on his chest. Blaze put his arm around him. In a few words he told the boy about his sister.

"But Basilio?" Esteban cried so that all heard. "Bodine promised to get him out in time."

He reached up and pulled Kildare's ear down close to his mouth. "You look out for her, will you? Tell her that I tried to get word to her and the baby."

"Buck up," Blaze pleaded. "You 're not going out."

"Hang on to me," the boy begged. "I 'm choking. I 'll be gone in just a minute."

His head fell forward. The little circle of men grew quiet. Blaze put his ear to the boy's heart.

"He 's not dead," he breathed hopefully. "Somebody get my horse. I 'm going to get him to a doctor. God knows, he may have a chance."

Acklin said nothing as his men helped Kildare.

"Where 've you got Bodine?" he demanded when Blaze had left.

"Got him?" Cash questioned. "I ain't got him nowhere."

"What?"

"No. I ain't seen Bodine. I was just runnin' a windy on the kid. I picked up the fresh trail of three horses this evening. They had come in from Webster Creek. I 've been chasin' back and forth tryin' to pick 'em up in the dark, or I 'd 'a' been here sooner."

"What made you think Bodine was among them?"

"Shucks! You do n't think there 's anyone else down there with the nerve or brains to do this thing. It took an old hand to make a mine that would rip out that wall. I knew that boy could n't have done it alone. My talk was all bluff, but it worked. Bodine *was* behind the whole thing."

"Who do you think was the third man?"

Cash shook his head.

"I ain't even got a guess."

Acklin contorted his mouth nervously.

"No matter," he said after an interval. "We 'll make Bodine tell before we get through. "We 'll all ride to the ranch first. I 'm going to turn out every man we 've got, Cash. We 'll throw a circle over this country that no one 'll crawl through. If we pick

up Bodine, he 'll be among the dear departed by morning."

Morrow's eyes bulged.

"You mean you 're goin' to stretch him?" he gasped.

"That 's exactly what I mean," Acklin growled.

"He 's got it comin' to him all right." Cash raised his arm. "Come on, boys, let 's ride. We 're goin' to organize!"

CHAPTER XXX

BODINE had relieved Romero of the responsibility of getting Mercedes and Basilio out of the path of the flood. Finding Mercedes gone, Buck picked up the child and dashed for Webster Creek. The explosion came as he entered the ranch-house.

Shorty, lantern in hand, followed him inside.

"Guess we had company this afternoon," he growled. "A lady at that!"

Taking Shorty's lantern, the big fellow followed the trail Esteban and Romero and he had taken that afternoon. A few minutes' search convinced him that his supposition was correct; Mercedes had followed them into the hills! Her only object could have been to stop them. Well, she had been too late, or had missed her brother altogether. With that for a basis on which to build, Buck was not long in settling upon what he wanted to do.

For months he had been trying to inveigle Mercedes to his place. He had the means to compel her to come now. Whether she had met Esteban or not, the explosion must have sent her dashing back to the Rancho as quickly as she could go. Her brother would never risk taking that shorter way. The girl would be there hours before Esteban arrived!

It was the work of a minute for him to pen a note

to her. To prove his point with the girl, he made the child scrawl an attempt at his name across the bottom of the note. This accomplished, he sent Shorty to deliver it.

Gloomy and the others lounged about the room.

Webster Creek was running about half full, proving that the flood had torn away the barrier they had built to keep the water out of the Rebel. That was all right as far as Buck was concerned. If he continued to get as much as old man Webster had had before nature turned things topsyturvy, the ranch was worth a small fortune.

Basilio, in the next room, began crying.

"Somebody shut that kid up," Buck bellowed.

Speculation as to Acklin's discomfiture had worn itself out. Gloomy yawned. One of the others got up.

"Guess I 'll turn in. The show's over."

Buck had done his share of the talking in the time that had elapsed since Shorty left, but his nimble brain had been busy with matters alien to the conversation. His men were surprised, therefore, when he said:

"Boys, I don't think you 'd better roost here to-night."

"We might scare the lady, eh?" Gloomy questioned.

"Don't you worry 'bout the lady," Buck said easily. "She don't enter into it at all." As a matter of truth, Mercedes's coming was in part responsible for Bodine's desire to get his men away.

"We 'll have visitors before morning," he went on;

“and they won’t be ladies. Even if those two boys keep their mouths shut, Acklin may get the hunch that we were mixed up in this thing. I ’ll bet his men are scourin’ the hills right now. If they come here, Morrow might trip some of you boys. If I ’m alone, there won’t be anybody to do the answerin’ but me. Drift into the hills in back of old Liotard’s place. Shorty ’ll be along. If I build a fire to-morrow morning, come in. It ’ll be all right. You better saddle up.”

Buck fanned the coals in the kitchen stove into a tiny blaze when they had gone. Next he filled the coffee-pot. When he had set it on the fire, he propped up his chair and fell to dreaming.

It had been an eventful day for him. He had paid Acklin in full for his double-crossing; there was water in Webster Creek once more; and on top of it, here was Shorty, bringing him the sweetest morsel of all.

He flashed a glance at his watch. It was nearly two. Shorty ought to be coming soon. This calculation, however, was wide of the mark. He had forgotten the impassable roads and the water-soaked flats over which the man had to travel.

Shorty had not yet reached the Rancho. Buck had sent him with a team and a light wagon, with instructions to take the short cut east of the cemetery in Paradise. But he had been turned back and had followed the main road to Winnemucca almost to the Little Washoe ’before he dared to strike eastward to the hacienda.

Mercedes and Melody had met with similar conditions. After several unsuccessful attempts to get across the valley, the poet had found it necessary to retrace their way and get into the hills, where they had found the old wood road that came down through Smoky Cañon.

The girl was exhausted. Melody wondered how she clung to her horse. He tried to cheer her up, but it was a hopeless task. For at least the twentieth time, he told the girl that some one must have taken Basilio to safety. He had no knowledge that warranted his certainty. His words sounded empty even to himself the last time he uttered them. So, in silence, they covered the last half-mile. After four or five unsuccessful attempts, Melody found a way through the choked creek-bottom.

He was in the lead when they came out and was the first to catch sight of the flood-swept home. Both wings of the house were gone. Not a sign remained of barns or corrals. Piled high about the portion of the building which still stood was wreckage of every description. The entire lower floor had been under water at one time. Not a window was left. Doors hung crazily on twisted hinges.

Melody knew Mercedes had come up beside him, but he could not take his eyes away from the ruins. Daylight would have revealed them relentlessly; but the searching rays of the sun could never invest that tangled pile of stone and torn timbers with the sepulchral air with which the moon now bathed it. It was unreal, ghastly.

The cow-boy nerved himself to face the girl beside him. She was staring fixedly at all that was left of the once beautiful hacienda. It had been the only home Mercedes had ever known. Every childhood memory centered within its walls. Under other circumstances its destruction would have crushed her; but she had been through too much this night already. Her nerves and emotions had lost the power to react to further torture.

She was dazed by what she beheld. She wanted to dash into the ruins and search with feverish haste for Basilio, but a trance-like lethargy enveloped her. It frightened Melody more than tears. His voice quavered uncertainly as he spoke to her.

"I 'll take a look inside, if you 'll wait out here."

Mercedes shook her head.

"No, I 'll go with you."

"You better not do that," the cow-boy begged. "Things 'll be torn up pretty bad in there."

"But B-B-Basilio." She hesitated over the word.

"I tell you, we won't find him, Señorita. He ain't here."

It was his old assertion. Mercedes had moved ahead of him. If she were determined to search the ruins, it would be useless for him to try to hold her back. It would be better to stay at her side and buck her up if she did find anything.

It took him some time to clear a passage into that part of the house which had escaped total destruction. A foot of mud and débris covered the floors.

Furniture was piled on end. Great holes gaped in the walls where the plaster had given way.

Melody found a lamp upstairs. He called time after time for the child before he came down. Mercedes had cried out, too, but they got no answer. With the aid of the light, they went over the wreckage carefully, but not a trace of the child or of the two old servants was to be had.

Faith in his own prophecy began to grow in the red-haired one.

"I knew somebody had got them out," he stated.

"Maybe they got lost when they try to run," Mercedes murmured mournfully.

"No! The flood came too quick for that. If they had n't been warned, they 'd be right here. We 'll find them at some of the neighbors to the west. If you say so, we 'll go now."

"I best stay here, Señor. I 'm tired . . . so tired. You will go quicker by yourself."

"But I can't leave you here all alone in this place. You 'd be scared to death. It looks haunted."

She smiled at him tenderly.

"There is nothing here to frighten me, my friend. Mercedes knows every rock and stone in this house. If spirits come here, they must be the spirits of those who loved me; my mother—or my father . . . My good father!"

"He was that, all right," Melody snapped out. "He was a hundred per cent."

The cow-boy gazed at the door. "I 'll be blubberin'

like a kid if I don't get out of here in a hurry," he murmured to himself. Aloud he said:

"I'll wait here till you get upstairs. It'll be light in three hours. Now don't you get nervous. I won't come back without him."

A few minutes later she heard him riding away.

CHAPTER XXXI

MELODY had instilled in Mercedes some degree of confidence in his ability to find Basilio. It sustained her, now that she was alone; that, and her faith in Kildare. She could count on him. He had even defied Acklin for her.

She tried to mutter a prayer, but mind and body were so exhausted that the effort was incoherent. With the little strength that remained in her, she managed to get to the bed that stood in the center of the room. Undressing was beyond her. She tried to unlace her boots, but her eyes closed.

Mercedes did not know how long she had been asleep when she was awakened by the sound of some one creeping stealthily up the stairs.

It was Shorty. He had called several times and, getting no answer, had begun searching the house, bent on picking up whatever trifles he could find and, at the same time, intending to make certain that he had not left himself open to Bodine's displeasure.

When Mercedes threw open her door and faced him, he was the more frightened of the two. But Shorty was truly an evil-looking figure as she saw him standing in the light that streamed on him.

"What you want here?" she demanded.

"You the Señorita?" Shorty questioned in turn.

"I am. What is your business?"

"I got a letter for you." He brought it forth from a coat-pocket. "I been callin' for ten minutes. I did n't think they was any one home."

Mercedes read the note hastily. Her heart beat faster as she recognized Basilio's strange letters. He was alive then!

"You are one of Bodine's men, huh?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. We bin together a long time."

"I never see you before," the girl cautiously remarked.

Shorty smiled.

"Well, to tell the truth, I ain't bin goin' round much. I sorta stay to home like."

"You have seen my brother then? He is not hurt?"

"No! He 's all right, unless he 's cried hisself to death."

"Oh, I wish you had brought him here," Mercedes gasped.

"Well, lady, Buck was afraid they would n't be anythin' left of this place. I bin hours gittin' here. I got a rig to take you in. We'll have to go round by the Winnemucca road to make it."

The girl weighed what she was doing, for all of her excitement, as she followed Shorty downstairs to his team. She had good reason to fear Bodine; but she had to go to Basilio. At least, it would be dawn when she arrived there.

In answer to a sudden impulse she snatched a pin from her dress, and as she stepped upon the veranda she fastened Bodine's note to the door without attract-

ing Shorty's attention. Melody would be sure to find it there.

With a distinct sense of fear she took her seat beside Bodine's man. Being alone with him in the hacienda, with its old associations and familiar objects to give her courage, had been terrible enough; being in the open with him in the dead of night was infinitely more terrifying.

Mercedes tried to keep to her end of the seat, but as the wagon jolted and swayed over the uneven ground, she was thrown against him from time to time. If Shorty noticed her effort to keep as much distance as possible between them, he gave no sign of it.

As they went on and the wagon continued to rock back and forth, the girl became drowsy. Her struggle to keep to her end of the seat began to cease. The man beside her was no longer the evil-looking thing he had been. Mercedes felt her head resting on his shoulder. It was soft and wonderfully comfortable. She sighed contentedly.

By the time they came to the main road she slept. Shorty's arm was around her to keep her from falling, the expression on his face as emotionless as ever. In this fashion they traveled to Webster Creek.

They had not yet arrived there when the note Mercedes had pinned to the door of the hacienda caught Kent's attention. His place had escaped, and his first thought had been of the girl and Basilio.

In the interval that had followed the first dim echo of the explosion he had realized, by a process

of deduction peculiar to himself, that the dam had been destroyed. By the time he had spoken a few brief words over the telephone, the flood-waters were whirling past.

The destruction of the dam caused Kent no regret. For all of his talk, Tuscarora was a lawless old soul. Dynamite had accomplished more in a second than all of his weeks of patient work. Acklin had got what he richly deserved. He might rant, and his legal henchmen tear their hair; but the dam was gone!

Some one would pay dearly for destroying it, if he were caught. Catching him was something else again! Thus, in spirit quite accepting the accomplished fact, he had ridden to Buena Vista.

The note on the door had caught his attention immediately. It told him very little. If Basilio was at Bodine's place, where were Mercedes and Esteban?

He was searching the rooms above when he heard some one ride up.

"Hello, there!" he called. "Who are you?"

"That you, Tuscarora?" the new-comer questioned anxiously.

Kent recognized Kildare's voice. He ran downstairs to meet him.

"Where's Mercedes and Melody?" Blaze demanded.

"Ain't no one here but me. They must 'a' got away in time."

"No, no! Melody brought her here after the dam went out."

Kent's eyes widened, and Kildare told him briefly

of the explosion and of taking Esteban to Paradise, where the doctor held out hope for the boy.

"Bodine promised to get Basilio to safety," Blaze exclaimed. "She did n't know that when she started down here, though."

"Guess he did!" Tuscarora answered. "Or what do you make of this?" He produced the note. "I found it pinned on the door."

"My God!" Blaze groaned. "She's gone to Bodine's as sure as fate. He's decoyed her there with this. But what happened to Melody? He was n't here when she received this note, or else she would n't have stuck it up like that. It was meant for him all right! Damn it! If I had n't had to go back to the ranch to get here, I'd a been in time."

His jaws closed with a click. He wheeled on Kent with an angry glitter in his eyes. Tuscarora's anxiety for the girl matched Kildare's.

"They been gone an hour, sure," the little man stated, "or I'd 'a' seen them on my way here."

"Let's not waste any more time," Blaze cried, as he flung himself into his saddle. "Listen, Kent," he went on. "How long will it take you to get the sheriff?"

"He may be in Paradise now. Land's a friend of mine. I 'phoned him as soon as I heard the explosion. He won't waste any time gettin' up here from Winnemucca."

"Well, you get him as quick as that old nag of yours will let you. Swear in all the deputies you can, and fan it for Bodine's place. There's going

to be hell to pay there in another hour. Acklin is going to swing him if he can."

"He means business, huh?"

"You bet he does! But I intend to have something to say about that. I don't want him hung! This party of Acklin's is going to throw the fear of God into an old friend of mine. I've got to stop it some way."

Blaze was thinking of Shorty.

"I'd have given an arm to have kept this thing from coming to a head to-night. The beans are in the fire now all right. Too bad! But say, if Bodine's harmed her he'll have to square it with me. Acklin won't cheat me out of that."

Still Blaze realized as Kent and he dashed along that if the Big Boss and his men got to Webster Creek first, as was most likely, the odds against being able to play for time until the sheriff and his posse arrived would make the effort almost hopeless. The cow-boy racked his brain to invent some game of cross purposes by which he could accomplish this seeming impossibility. He understood fully, too, that even with the sheriff there it was no certainty that Bodine would not be hanged. If Acklin insisted on going through with his threat, the law would be sorely tried to stop him.

They came directly to the place where the road forked. Blaze was ahead. He drew up until Kent was beside him.

"I'm going to try and get around by the cemetery now," he called to the little man. "I'll make it, too."

Don't forget; swear in all the deputies you can. You 've got to make good for me, Joe. Acklin will be there a hundred strong. He was 'phoning to the X L and the Bar Circle for men when I left the Bull's Head. His waddies from Eloise and Squaw Valley are moving already. He 's throwing a circle of riders around Bodine's ranch that won't stop at anything. By the time it begins to draw in, men will be thicker than flies along Webster Creek."

"I 'll be there 'fore long; pert and chipper, too," Tuscarora assured him.

"Don't lose a minute, Joe. I 'm going to try and catch Mercedes before she gets there. If I don't, anything is liable to happen. I 'll stall until you come."

Kent did not turn for a backward glance. Like a shadow he was gone in the night. Kildare had disappeared as rapidly. Far across the valley the same urge for haste had taken possession of Shorty. He lashed his lagging team into a gallop that sent them flying over the remaining miles.

And while they hurried, in the hills above them,—unseen and unheard, miles away in places,—Acklin's men were moving. Their speed was slow, in marked contrast to those below them. But they began to join hands, and they came on apace. The gaps in the circle began to fill. The Bar Circle boys came up. Over on the north the men from Eloise arrived at their appointed destination.

It was the gathering of the clans. The Double A had heard the call. And at their head rode Acklin, the Big Boss, the feudal lord.

CHAPTER XXXII

BODINE caught sound of Shorty's coming when the man was still some distance away. Buck had worked himself into a fine ferment as he waited. He put on his hat now and went to the barn. He wanted a word with Shorty before he faced the girl.

He heard him drive into the yard, and saw Mercedes get out of the wagon and walk into the kitchen. A few seconds later Shorty pulled up his team in front of the barn.

"Damn it, man, where you been?" Buck demanded angrily.

"You mean, where ain't I been," Shorty growled back at him. "Look at that rig. It's been over the hubs in mud half the time. I got what I went after, did n't I?"

"Yeh? And you had me scared to death, too. You unhitch your team and saddle up. The boys are waitin' for you on the trail that goes up to Liotard's place. I'll bring you down in the mornin' if everything's O. K."

"What about the kid?" Shorty asked.

"I clean forgot him," Buck admitted. "You stay and hang on to him. If he starts squawkin' again, wring his little neck."

Mercedes drew back, as Buck opened the kitchen door. The slovenly disorder of the room and the air of mystery which hung over the entire place, had thoroughly alarmed her. Bodine saw her nervous start.

"Well, I see you got here at last," he said with an easy smile. "I knew you 'd be worried about the kid."

"Is he all right?"

"Sure; sound asleep right now."

"Let me have him, please. I want to take him."

"You ain't thinkin' of leavin' here 'fore mornin', are you?" Buck demanded.

"Sí, Señor, I go at once."

"No you 're not, *querida*." Bodine used the term of endearment with assured familiarity. "I risked my neck gettin' the kid out of danger for you, and you ain't goin' to pay me back by refusin' my hospitality."

"It was kind of you to save him; but I want to get him and go. I am afraid here."

"Afraid?" Buck laughed. "There ain't nothin' to be afraid of with me herè. I 'll look out for you."

"But I want to go," Mercedes repeated anxiously as Buck tried to induce her to take a seat.

His eyes narrowed a trifle.

"Now, honey," he went on, "you forget that I said you was goin' to stay. I got a habit of bein' obeyed round this place. If you want the kid, you got to be good to me."

"What you mean?" the trembling girl demanded.

"Let 's get down to cases," Buck answered her. "There's no use beatin' round the bush. I been sweet on you ever since I first clamped my eyes on you. You knew it, too, and you gave me the low-down every time. But that 's all right. I like a woman with some scrap in her. You 've got nerve enough to match my own. That 's why I 'm strong for you. I swore I 'd get you some day, and I 'm goin' to make good. I did n't bring your kid brother here for nothin'."

"Stop—stop, please," Mercedes begged.

Her nearness to him drove Buck mad with desire. She was even more lovely that he had supposed.

"Why, *querida*," he said fervently, "there ain't a thing I 've got, I would n't give for you. I got water on this place again. It 's worth somethin' now. But I ain't a rancher. I 'd throw up this thing in a minute for you. There ain't no real money in ranching, nohow. I 'll take you where there 's some life and excitement. This God-forsaken desert ain't no place for a girl like you."

"You mean that you want me to go with you—?" Mercedes could not believe her ears.

"Yes, I 'll even marry you, if you 'll come with me," Buck replied.

The girl before him shook her head hopelessly. The man must be mad.

"Well, what do you say?" he demanded.

"I say no!" Mercedes cried. She put a chair between them as Buck advanced toward her. The look

in his eyes was proof enough of his intention. He wanted to take her in his arms and feel her warm flesh against his whether she would have it or not.

"You have trapped me!" she exclaimed. "I do not believe my brother is here at all."

"He's here all right," Bodine assured her. "Hey, Shorty," he called.

"Yep," came the muffled answer from the next room.

"Wake that kid up!"

Mercedes rushed towards the door excitedly.

"Don't hurt him," she wailed.

Buck got in front of her.

"He won't hurt him," he murmured. "I just want to show you he's here."

The girl heard Basilio's startled cry as Shorty awakened him.

"You beast!" Mercedes shrieked. "Let me have him! Let me have him!"

"Not till you say yes to me, Señorita."

"You coward! No wonder you want to run away. Señor Acklin will send you to prison for blowing up his dam."

"Yeh?" Buck questioned exasperatingly. "Esteban will go with me, too, won't he?" In a changed tone he went on: "You followed us into the hills this afternoon; I knew that long ago. What else you've found out, I don't know, and I don't care."

He disproved this last statement by immediately asking:

"Have you seen Acklin?"

Mercedes caught a hint of uneasiness in his voice.

"I have," she answered.

"Humph! I suppose you told him all you know?"

The big fellow's tones were threatening.

Mercedes saw her advantage.

"I tell him nothing!" she cried. "But I will if you do not give me Basilio and let me take him home."

Her words enraged Bodine.

"So you 're goin' to try and play me against him are you? He 's sweet on you, too. Say, you ain't kiddin' yourself that Acklin would marry you? He 's just playin'. I got you now, and I 'm goin' to keep you. He, nor anybody else, ain't goin' to take you away from me, you beautiful little devil. Come here!"

Buck reached out his long arms and caught her around the waist. Mercedes fought to get free, but he was too strong for her.

"Now you change your mind in a hurry, or I 'll make you." He raised his voice. "Give that kid's arm a twist or two." Then he continued to the girl: "I 'll show you who 's boss here."

Shorty more than obeyed Buck's order. Basilio let out a succession of shrieks, as the brute twisted his arm until the tender bones were almost snapping.

"Stop!" Mercedes cried so loudly that her voice carried to Kildare, who was still some distance down the road. "Stop!" she called out again.

"Maybe you 'll listen to reason now," Buck grumbled.

He caught her by the wrist as he spoke and drew her closer to him. Mercedes beat his face with her free hand. But his jaw was impervious to her light blows. With feline ferocity she bared her nails then, and ripped his cheeks until they were smeared with blood. Bodine did not release her, however.

"You fightin' wildcat," he mumbled through gritted teeth, "I 'll kiss you if it kills me."

Try as hard as she might, Mercedes could not hold him off. His cruel, sensuous mouth drew close to her own. To add to her horror, Basilio shrieked again and again. She redoubled her efforts to get free. Bodine pinioned her arms against her hips. She felt something sharp ripping her sleeve. It was Buck's revolver. Automatically her fingers closed upon it. With a wrench, she pulled it out of the holster. Bodine felt the gun-barrel boring into his stomach. His face grew white.

"Get back!" Mercedes gasped. "*En seguida! Al momento!* or you die here!"

Buck backed away. He knew she meant what she said. His rifle stood in the corner. He retreated toward it. The way to the door between the two rooms was clear now. Mercedes ran to it and flung it open.

Shorty sat on the bed beside Basilio, the child's arms still held in his big hands. A smoky wall lamp revealed him in all of his ugliness. But if he saw the girl, he did not show it. His grip on the child did not relax, either. Mercedes cried out for him to let go of her brother; she raised her gun to compel him. But

fear such as she could never inspire in him held Shorty in its grasp. He had caught sight of Blaze peering through the open window.

Mercedes saw only the man and child in front of her. Shorty's rigidity turned with incredible swiftness to most violent action. He dropped his arm and brought it up with a gun in his hand so quickly that it surpassed belief.

But Kildare had been more rapid than he. Shorty's gun came up, and up, and up, as Mercedes watched, spellbound. It seemed that it was pointing at her. Her finger twitched, and her own gun barked.

Kildare saw the play; the girl at the door, her gun raised; Shorty's pistol leaping into action; the frantic child struggling to throw off the iron hand on his arm. But more poignant than anything else was the glitter in Shorty's eyes. Blaze knew he was the man's target, not the girl. His gun was in his hand. A tightening of the lips and his automatic spat forth its deadly message.

He saw Mercedes's gun flash. The report of it smothered his own. Only a split-second of time, that words fail to express, had intervened between the two shots. So close had they been that neither the girl nor Bodine in the next room realized two guns had spoken.

Buck rushed to where the girl stood staring open-mouthed at the man on the bed. For a second, it seemed, Shorty hung poised in the air. His face was set, an unearthly light in his eyes. And then, with a thud, he crashed to the floor dead.

Mercedes's fingers stiffened. Her gun clattered against the wall. Basilio had heard her voice. He searched for her and came to her side as Buck laid his hand on her arm. She saw neither of them. The dead thing on the floor held her in a trance.

Kildare had not waited for a second look. He drew away from the window and picked up the empty shell from his gun. He threw it into the creek. Why he did this was not plain to him at the time. In some way, he knew, Shorty's death might be turned to his advantage. But how? How? He tried to whip his mind into helping him. He felt no regret over killing the man. It was part of the debt he had come to square. Acklin would be here in a few minutes. It was almost dawn. How could he twist this thing so that it would halt the Big Boss?

"How can I stall him?" he muttered to himself. "It's here somewhere."

Blaze caught sight of a man approaching on horseback. He had been there only a second or two. Kildare drew back into the shadows lurking about the house.

Bodine was looking up at Mercedes from where he knelt beside the body.

"You killed him all right," Blaze heard him say. "He's plumb dead. What you goin' to do now?" "Who's goin' to the pen? This State's no place for you. Say, I guess you'll be glad to beat it with me. You wait! I'll get a couple of fresh horses and we'll hit it for Oregon on the jump."

"Throw up your hands!"

It was a rude interruption of Buck's words.

"You ain't going to Oregon, or anywhere else."

Bodine looked around. In the doorway stood the Big Boss.

CHAPTER XXXIII

BODINE stared speechlessly at Acklin. Shorty's sudden death and Mercedes's maddening influence had destroyed Buck's boastful pose. He had been prepared earlier in the evening for the advent of Morrow or some lesser light in the Double A constellation. But at no time had he dreamed that Acklin himself would come single-handed to beard him in his own den.

The Big Boss walked across the kitchen to the doorway of the room in which Shorty lay. As Buck recovered from the daze he was in, he finally managed to articulate:

"I ain't armed!"

"Take your hands down then," Acklin snapped. "Back into the center of that room."

Bodine retreated as he was ordered, facing the other man as he stepped backward. The big cattleman kept pace with him. A movement near the window to which Mercedes had stepped with Basilio stopped him in his tracks. His gun was in position as he wheeled, but he dropped it in consternation as he recognized the girl and child.

Hatred flamed in Acklin's eyes. Finding her here with Bodine was a staggering blow to his vanity. He had overheard Buck's words urging flight to Oregon. They were going together!

He remembered how she had repulsed him; how he had found her that very night in the arms of one of his hired hands. What a fool he had been to let her slip through his fingers. Well, he 'd put a stop to Bodine's little game! And then he 'd have his way. He 'd take her back to the Bull's Head and keep her there until he was ready to let her go.

Mercedes bit her finger nails nervously under the searching scrutiny of Acklin's eyes. Her very excitement made her seem guilty to him. The crying child brought back to the man a recollection of Esteban's words. Bodine *had* taken care of the child then! She had come, too! In some way she had got rid of his man, Melody.

He stamped his feet in exasperation and rage as he reasoned it out. It was all too pat, too well joined up to be anything but connivance. The girl had helped to blow up the dam no matter what Kildare had said. She looked guilty, and she was guilty!

His voice rose to a roar as he opened his mouth to speak.

"So you 're getting ready to skip with Bodine, eh? That 's your little plan, is it? You forget it! He 's done all the traveling he 's going to do. You 'll go with me when I leave here. Aw-w-wh! Who did that?"

He pointed to Shorty.

"She did!" Bodine cried, wiping the blood from his scratched face. "Pulled my gun out and got him from the door there!"

"Is that right?" Acklin bellowed.

Mercedes covered her face with her hands. He could hear her sob as she turned away. It was answer enough for him.

"They'll take you to jail for this," he grumbled. He stopped to mutter to himself. Then: "No, they won't either! I'll fix that!"

He came close to Bodine. Buck's nerve had returned in a measure.

"You won't take her away from me, Acklin; not that way," he cut in before the Big Boss could speak. But Acklin laughed in his face for his pains.

"You have your little joke, Bodine," he warned. "Your time's short enough."

Buck's face paled a trifle at the studied ease with which the man before him uttered this statement.

"What you hintin' at now?" he demanded.

"When my men get here you'll find out. You didn't think you could get away with what you pulled on me to-night, did you? You bossed this deal!"

Bodine's lips twitched uneasily. Had that fool kid given him away? His poker eyes searched Acklin's face for some sign of bluffing, but he found nothing to reassure him.

"You ain't goin' to have me arrested on that bosco's word, are you?" he asked.

"No. We ain't going to arrest you, Bodine."

The directness of this statement blanched the big fellow's face. They were going to do without the law: that was what Acklin was saying! The blood along Buck's spine grew cold for a brief second. But his concern passed. He had been in dire straits be-

fore and lived through. He summoned a grin to his mouth now and laughed derisively, pretending not to understand the innuendo.

"You 're all cut up about your dam, ain't yuh?" The laugh died out of Bodine's voice. "You 'll never rebuild that little toy, either; not if you jug me!"

It was Acklin's turn to smile.

"We clean forgot about your injunction when we built it, did n't we?" he asked sarcastically.

"No!" Buck shook his head. "You forget how the water was tricked out of the Rebel so that you could build your dam! When I tell my story to a jury, you 'll go into eclipse."

"The jury that 's going to hear your case will use a rope! You get that, Bodine. By the time the coroner comes to get this thing on the floor, the buzzards will be picking your bones. There won't be anybody but me to say how this man got shot. And if I say that you did it the matter will be ended. You are going to swing!"

Unconsciously in his anger Acklin raised his voice until it registered even on Mercedes's bewildered mind. The significance of that word "swing" brought her back to a realization of where she was. It had a marked effect on Bodine, too. The conviction settled on him that the time for flight had arrived. The lord of the Double A was too matter-of-fact in both words and manner to argue anything but strong reinforcements at his back. When they arrived he would indeed be helpless.

Buck cast an anxious, calculating eye at the win-

dows. The one at his back was open. It was near enough, too. A flying leap, and he could make it. In the murky grayness of early dawn he could steal away. Acklin was looking at his watch. It was an opportunity, a chance!

Mercedes was watching Bodine. She saw his fingers clench, his muscles knot. She divined his intention. Her mouth opened in amazement.

Bodine crouched then for the spring that was to take him to safety; but the patter of horses outside the window at which he was aiming stopped him short. Acklin smiled at him pityingly. He had heard, also.

Kildare had watched Acklin and Bodine. He blessed every minute that passed without bringing the rank and file of the Double A to thwart him. That the Big Boss had come there single-handed revealed Acklin in a new light. Blaze had always found him cautious, tactful, unemotional. His coming here was madness. He could not have known that Bodine was alone. Or had he figured that the man was in hiding; that the house on Webster Creek would be deserted?

And Bodine—what was his game? Had his men got wind of trouble? Shorty's presence argued against that.

Acklin's frank statement of what he intended doing with Mercedes inflamed Blaze more than anything Bodine had said. The mask was off!

He had heard the bustle of approaching men a long minute before Buck or Acklin became aware of their

noise. There were five or six in the party. He recognized Brother Jones's cackling voice. A second later the old man and his companions were tramping into the kitchen.

Blaze recognized Chet and Patterson bringing up the rear. They were all heavily armed. Brother Jones was already at the door of the room in which Acklin had cornered Bodine. The others were at his heels.

Kildare sprang into action. He placed his hands on the sill and vaulted into the kitchen. When the Big Boss caught sight of him, he believed the man had come in with the others.

"Here he is!" the owner of the Double A called out, pointing at Bodine.

"My Gawd! Who done that?" Brother Jones exclaimed, catching sight of the body in the corner. He walked over to the corpse and touched it with his foot. "Humph! He 's dead, ain't he?"

The coming of these men turned Buck's face a sickly hue. He actually stammered when he said: "She d-d-did it!"

Mercedes's heart leaped as she saw Kildare. He made no attempt to go to her. The girl's half-raised hand fell limply to her side. She dimly realized that the man's eyes were trying to convey some message to her. She saw him tap his lips significantly. And then Acklin was saying:

"You boys forget that remark of his. He 's lying. There was only the three of us here, and——"

"You 're not counting me, I guess."

The crowd wheeled on Kildare.

"Why, you just came in, now—with Jones, didn't you?" Acklin roared.

Blaze shook his head.

"No, I 've been here for almost half an hour. Bodine did n't do any shooting."

Life flowed back into Buck's veins immediately. This was help from an unexpected source.

"That 'll stop your little game, Acklin!" he cried.

The Big Boss paid no attention to Bodine's words. His eyes were on Blaze. In tense tones he said to him:

"You ain't saying who did it, Kildare. But you and I know. It means a trial—jail! We don't want that. If you 'll pass me your word, we 'll string up this skunk for blowing out the dam and killing this man, and let it go at that."

Here was an argument, a stall! Blaze hesitated over his answer.

"Hanging," he drawled provokingly, "won't do away with that thing in the corner!"

Then came the clatter of many horses.

"Here are the rest of the boys. We'll get moving!" The Big Boss raised his voice. "Somebody bring in a rope," he cried. "Hurry up!"

Blaze heard the men dismounting. There were not less than twenty-five in the crowd. There would n't be any delay now. This affair was going through to its sordid finish. Bodine's face was ghastly. Without quite knowing why he did it, Kildare walked past him into the kitchen.

There seemed to be some delay outside. He could hear a murmur of voices. Bodine's rifle stood in the corner. Blaze picked it up and threw a shell into the barrel. In the past he had pondered at some length over acquiring this gun. He saw that it was the same caliber as Acklin's. That effectually snapped the flimsy thread of circumstantial evidence by which he had expected to trap José's murderer. He told himself now that he should not have expected any other end to such reasoning. At least he still had the Indian charm.

The others started moving into the kitchen. Brother Jones had a gun at Bodine's back. Acklin sang out again for those outside to hurry up. In answer to his second call the door was flung open. Blaze could hardly see for joy. The man who had just entered was Tuscarora!

"Sorry I had to keep you waiting," the little fellow cried. "I been hurryin' to beat all get out!"

"What 're you doing here?" Acklin shouted.

Kent smiled faintly.

"You might enlighten me, too, in that direction. I got the sheriff and some twenty deputies outside, if that's any news to you."

CHAPTER XXXIV

IN the silence that followed, Land squeezed past the little man in the doorway. He was broad-shouldered, gigantic; a sheriff of bygone days. In the crook of his arm he carried a time-worn army Winchester that he had taken away from a renegade Piute.

“Well, Acklin?” he asked easily.

“You ’re making yourself a lot of trouble butting in here, Land.”

“Don’t you go worryin’ about me. I ’ll take care of myself.” He turned to Kent: “Are your friends here, Joe?”

“How about that, Blaze?” Tuscarora demanded. “Is the Señorita and her brother here?”

“They ’re in the next room.”

Mercedes had heard Kent’s question. She left the window against which she had been leaning and came to the door between the rooms. The child was asleep in her arms.

The girl’s woeful appearance stabbed the little man to the heart. “What’s the matter, honey?” he murmured sympathetically as he reached out to help her.

“Tell Peter to come in here,” he called to Land, a second later. When the old Basque came in, Kent gave the sleeping child to him.

“Take him outside till this thing ’s over,” he advised.

Mercedes placed her hands on the shoulders of the two men. She seemed to gain strength from the very nearness of Kent and her uncle.

“You better go with Peter, too,” Tuscarora advised. “We ’ll get you home in a few——” He stopped as he caught sight of the grisly object in the corner. “Land!” he cried, “look here!”

The sheriff called in several of his deputies before he moved out of the kitchen.

“You know what the law is,” he warned them “You ’re here to defend it.”

His shrewd eyes scanned Acklin’s face. The Big Boss scowled darkly. As Land was about to step past him, the cattle-man spoke.

“There ’s a dead man in the next room. That little pouter-pigeon who came in with you has found him. You ’d better let the coroner take care of this.”

The sheriff’s mustache began to bristle.

“According to last reports, the county is payin’ me my wages; not you. Don’t you be so hostile.”

Bodine grinned at this speech. His respect for the law increased a hundredfold.

Land hastily examined the dead man.

“Everybody step in here,” he ordered. He got to his feet and wiped his hands on his trousers. “Who knows about this?” he continued. “He ain’t been dead long.”

Bodine answered him. Had not this good sheriff saved his neck?

"I reckon I can tell you about it," he said. "Acklin knows, too. Me and Kildare and the girl were here when it happened. She killed him!"

"No," Land groaned, unable to believe his ears. "Not that little girl there."

"That 's who I mean. She pulled my gun out of my holster and fired from the doorway."

The sheriff shook his head uneasily. His deputies—all Paradise men—caught their breath. Acklin glared at Bodine.

Kent placed his arm about Mercedes's shoulders.

"You did n't do this, honey, did you?" he murmured.

The crowd waited for her answer. They were a hard-living lot, for the most part, but Mercedes won their instant sympathy. They saw how the hysterical girl fought to gain control of herself.

"I . . . I . . . I don't . . . don't know," she sobbed. "I came to get Basilio. Bodine had him. He would not let me go. He said I must go away with him. . . . I would not do that. He made the other man hurt the baby. He was . . ." A sob choked her.

Land's Basque deputies muttered angrily and the Double A men scowled at Bodine. Before Mercedes could go on, Acklin got the sheriff's attention.

"She don't know what she 's saying," he cried. "She 's in no condition to know what she did. You can't take the word of a hysterical girl. I know what happened. Kildare was here; he knows also. Bodine 's trying to save his own skin. I ain't going to

see this girl thrown into jail. I tell you, Bodine did it!"

The Big Boss turned until his eyes met Kildare's. They stared at each other for a full second before Acklin continued. The crowd caught the deadly intentness of that glance. It held its breath again. The Big Boss turned back to the sheriff.

"You ask Kildare if what I say is n't so." The words clicked off his tongue.

Land arched his eyebrows. "Well?" he demanded.

It grew quiet. The crowd waited for Kildare's answer. He began to shake his head. He was speaking. The crowd strained its ears.

"That 's not what happened," they heard him say.

He was about to go on when the kitchen door flew open and Big Homer, Acklin's Kelly Creek foreman, came in, herding before him Bodine's men. Morrow was back of him.

"Found these birds hidin' out in the hills beyond Liotard's shack," Cash announced. "Had to be a little bit rough with 'em before we could induce 'em to come along with us."

Nez Percé looked as if he had been rolled down a mountain-side. Some of the others were not much better off.

Bodine's eyes bulged. His surprise was not greater than Kildare's. For the first time since he had left the dam, he breathed a sigh of relief.

The room was in an uproar. Blaze walked over to the sheriff's side. Bodine was just behind him.

"That 's my gun you 've got there," he said. "I 'll trouble you for it."

"Guess that 's so," Blaze answered. He broke it and threw out the shell he had snapped into position. It was daylight by now. Quite without premeditation, Kildare glanced at his watch. Bodine saw the charm that dangled from its chain. He reached out his hand to examine it.

"What you doin' with my charm?" he asked.

"Your charm?" Blaze queried in a tone to match his own. "Melody gave me that weeks ago. Found it outside the Bull's Head. What makes you think it 's yours?"

"I 'd recognize that luck-piece with one eye shut. I fell off a horse once and bent that lower end there. That little trick has brought me plenty luck." He pushed it back into Kildare's hand. "You keep it. We 'll need some luck before this thing 's over."

Buck had scented a possible ally in Blaze. He saw that Kildare and Acklin were against each other. Blaze wanted to shout: Bodine had killed José!

Land called for order. His deputies had their guns ready.

"Watch Bodine," Blaze whispered to Kent as Land began speaking.

"I want it quiet now," the sheriff was saying. "We can't go on with all this commotion. I want to hear the rest of your story, Kildare. I aim to find out who killed this man."

"There is n't much to tell," Blaze drawled. "I came up to the house and heard the little chief scream-

ing. This thing on the floor was trying to twist off the child's arms. He saw me and drew. I happened to be a little quicker." Blaze paused to glance at Mercedes. "Yes," he went on, "I killed him."

Acklin and Morrow began to whisper excitedly. The Double A men began to gather about them.

"Guess you 'd better get your prisoner and get out of here, Land," Acklin said ominously. "We got a little personal matter to settle with Bodine."

"You're pretty cocky, ain't you, Acklin?" the sheriff flung at him. "It's your move! You get along or I'll arrest the lot of you for disturbin' the peace."

"Say!" roared the Big Boss. "I've got a hundred men strung out along the creek. They've been circling on this place for three hours. All I've got to do is to raise my hand to bring them tumbling into this room. I don't want any trouble with you. But sheriff or no sheriff, we're going to take care of that skunk! He blew up the dam! God knows how many people have been drowned and how much damage the flood has done. If you folks are homeless, you can thank him for it. I warn you, Land, keep your hands off! Bodine is going to swing. Get your rope, Jones."

Brother started for the door.

"Whoa, there! Easy in the boat," Land warned. "Men," he called to his deputies, "you've been sworn to uphold the law. If any of these boys refuse to stop, use your guns. The State will back you up." His eyes turned on Acklin. "That was a nice little

party you had arranged. But it won't come off. Why? Well, just because it won't. I've got you outnumbered three to one. Kent here got busy on the telephone before we left Paradise. All the Basque *gente* between this ranch and the Washoe are headin' in this direction. And they 're comin' armed! Take a look through the window and see what you make of that dust-cloud there to the south. They 'll be here in five minutes."

Acklin was dumbfounded. Morrow was equally crestfallen.

"You went out along with your dam," Kent chirped. "You 'll learn that when the votes are counted to-night. You won't forget this election day in some time."

The Big Boss could have throttled the little man.

"If you want me to take Bodine into custody on your say-so for blowin' up the dam," said Land, "I 'll do it. With the boy here accounted for, they ain't no lives lost as far as I know. The Doc says Esteban won't die."

Acklin made no effort to answer the sheriff.

"I guess he won't be anxious about that," Bodine said in unctuous tones. "He 'll be a trifle coy about puttin' me in front of a jury. I know too much."

Some one laughed at the baffled look on Acklin's face. Kent smiled openly. The Big Boss ground his teeth.

"You fools don't mean to tell me," he cried, "that you 're going to let this man wipe you out of house

and home, and then turn around and thank him for doing it?"

"Why not?" Romero's father exclaimed. "We got water now!"

"But we 're law-abidin'," Tuscarora insisted. "You go ahead and prosecute the man that blew up your little old dam. We 'll be tickled to death. We 'll prove to you while you 're doin' that that you broke a few laws yourself."

The dust-cloud the sheriff had noticed had developed rapidly. The men who had made it were riding into the yard. Their coming did not lessen the cattle-man's discomfiture. He started for the door, beckoning his men to follow him.

"Don't expect any help from me, Kildare," he said to Blaze. "You 've crossed me once too often."

"I 'll get along all right, I guess," Blaze answered evenly. "I shot in self-defense when I killed Bandy."

Bandy? Acklin stopped. He did n't quite follow Kildare. Bandy meant nothing to him, but Bodine and his men stiffened. Nez Percé felt for the guns that had been taken away from him. Buck fingered his rifle. Kent was watching him.

"He almost got me the first time I came to this place. Did n't he, Buck?" Bodine refused to answer. "I did n't know who he was, or why he tried it at that time."

"Little Bandy Griggs," Blaze went on, taking the photograph he had carried so long from his pocket. "I 've been trailing him for two years."

Bodine's face had gone white. Blaze handed the picture to Land.

"Sheriff, my name's not Kildare. Kent here has known me for years. I'm Bob Blaisdell of Wind River, Wyoming. Blaze has always been short for Blaisdell. Years ago I was a ranger in the park."

"Not old Timberline, the head ranger?" Buck cried.

Blaze smiled. "That's where I met Bandy."

Bodine's heart sank. He seemed to know what was coming. His hands and forehead grew damp. Mercedes looked from one to the other. She did not comprehend this situation. Land seemed very much alive to it. Acklin likewise felt the tension creeping into the room.

"You ain't from Laramie, are you?" Land asked. "The sheriff?"

"No; that was my brother; the Kid! He was only twenty-two when they elected him. He was a white lad, I'll tell you." Blaze's voice lost its drawl. "There was n't a wrong bone in his body. He was right all through. I brought him up that way. And because he was square they went out to get him. When you've been father and mother, and brother and pal to a kid like that, you'll know what it means to lose him."

Blaze had been facing Land. He turned now and stared at Bodine.

"I guess you've heard of the Mooney gang; or the 'money' gang as we got to call them. They were running wild in Wyoming. Banks, post-offices, trains

—they were n't missing a thing. But they kept out of Laramie! And the word was passed that they were afraid of the Kid. Mooney could n't stand that! On the eleventh of November, two years ago, he and his gang stole up to the restaurant where the boy and two of his men were eating their supper, and murdered them; shot them in the back. They did n't have a chance. That 's right, ain't it, Mooney?"

"What?" Land cried.

"You heard me!" Blaze whipped out. "He 's the man! Bodine is an alias. His entire gang is in this room right now. The law forgot or got sick and gave up; but I did n't! The Kid died in my arms, and I promised him I 'd get Mooney if it took me the rest of my life."

Buck moved a step. Land's gun cut down.

"I 'll bust you if you try it," the sheriff droned.

"That 's right. I don't want to lose you, Buck," Blaze echoed. "I 've followed you too long. You got the Kid!"

The excitement of the present moment dwarfed anything that had gone before. Land saw that he had been helped to fame beyond his wildest dreams.

"Why, they 're wanted for a dozen mail and train robberies," he cried. "If you boys will give me a hand we 'll put the bracelets on them."

He turned to his men, and as he did so Bodine made a flying leap for the window. Blaze caught him around the waist and they went down with a thud. Land was over them in a second, and manacled Buck's wrists. The sheriff got to his feet casually.

"Now, I don't want any more trouble," he began. "We 've had enough of that. You boys line up."

In a few seconds the sheriff and his men had the gang in irons and standing beside Buck, whose eyes were molten with hatred and baffled rage.

The feeling of the iron manacles on his wrists infuriated the big fellow. He had roamed the mountains and desert for five years without coming to grief. He knew what he was going back to face. He caught sight of Acklin, who was silently enjoying the proceedings. It brought a curse to his lips. "Say, Land," he cried, "before they get me out of this State I want you to get the right of this water fight. I tricked it! Acklin was in with me. His foreman was there. Timberline knows the facts, too. The whole idea was to establish in the courts that the water that came down from the Santa Rosas did not flow into the river. I showed Acklin how to do it by turning it into the Webster and on into the sink. But he was too good a crook for me. He wanted it all! I thought he was just hoggin' it. But I was wrong. He knew if he got the water he could drive these Basques out of the valley. That's what he wanted. He was afraid of Brand and what he's been preachin'. He'll try to rebuild his dam."

"No," Kent said, "I don't think he'll try that."

"Suit yourself about that," Bodine snarled. "Say, Blaisdell, how'd yuh ever get me?"

"The Kid recognized Bandy's picture before he died. I used to see Bandy often, up in the park or at the Hole. I knew if I found him, I'd be pretty close

to finding you. I've been sure of him for days, but I wanted to get the bunch."

Buck showed his teeth in a nasty grin.

"Where'd you ever get Bandy's picture?"

"The one they took when he was sent up from Cheyenne seven or eight years ago."

Buck shook his head. What a freak of fortune! He had been the brains of the gang, but, aside from the shooting of the Kid, had never participated in the actual crimes they had committed. No marshal or sheriff in the West had ever met Mooney face to face to know him until this day.

The crowd drew back as the prisoners filed out, the wily Buck at their head, and then followed them.

Blaze turned to Mercedes. She caught his hand. Kent had told her about Esteban.

"Why do you do so much for me?" she asked brokenly.

Blaze felt a lump come into his throat as he saw how white and tired she was. His fingers closed over hers.

"Why?" he smiled. "Because—because—why, I do little enough."

Land came to the door. "I'll have to take you along, too," he announced. "The coroner won't get up before evenin'."

Blaze nodded.

"I'll be right out," he answered. He felt Mercedes tugging at his arm. Her face was even whiter, if that could be.

"But you did not kill that man! It was my gun. I shot him. Why you do this thing to save me?"

Blaze looked at her in surprise. He saw that she meant what she said.

"No, no!" he hastily assured her. "I got Bandy. You shot, but your marksmanship was terrible." He tried to smile. "Look at that hole in the wall! We fired together."

Mercedes's eyes widened. What Blaze said was almost impossible for her to believe.

"But jail," she insisted. "They're going to put you in jail."

Land came back in time to overhear her words. He coughed discreetly before entering.

"Don't worry about jail, little girl," he grinned. "We ain't goin' to commit a man for shootin' in self-defense. Looks to me as if happiness was comin' back to Paradise Valley. Bodine—or Mooney—made most of the trouble."

They rode away then, and Mercedes stood at the window watching them until they were only bobbing specks on the horizon. Kent found her there, softly crying. He sensed her interest in those bobbing specks and unconsciously began watching them, too. A turn in the road, and they disappeared. He felt the girl wince but did not catch the softly muttered "*Madre de Dios*, don't let him go away; I love him."

CHAPTER XXXV

THREE days later Blaze sat in front of the Eldorado Hotel in Winnemucca. The little town, after the fashion of its big brothers, had settled down to its routine existence. The flood and the election had already held the stage overly long. Bodine and his gang were on their way to Laramie, Brand had been elected by the narrowest of margins, Esteban had been removed to the Rancho, the true story of the fallen Buck's reprisals and of José's death were universally known: these were facts now, and accepted as such.

Blaze had been cheered for a day and forgotten. Certainly he preferred it. In more ways than one, Brand was like him. The attorney had preached an idea. The votes had not been for him, but for what he had promised. The big ranches must go!

He came down Bridge Street as Blaze waited for the Paradise stage, walking with a seemingly careless shuffle, the inevitable cigarette in his mouth. He smiled as Blaze nodded. They had not spoken half a dozen words to each other, and yet in their smile flashed complete understanding. It is the way of the true desert breed. Thanks to him, Blaze had been released without the semblance of a trial.

One could not have failed to remark the difference between the man who lounged in the shade of the

Eldorado and the Blaze Kildare who had ridden the ranges for the Double A. Kildare had been ever buoyant, half-smiling, but the man who waited for the stage was a forlorn figure, sad of eye.

Blaze knew he had come to the time when he must say good-by to Nevada: a day or two at the most, and he would be going back to Wyoming. His Wind River ranch claimed him for a dozen different tasks. Then, too, he would be needed at Bodine's trial. Wyoming was home, and yet Nevada had never seemed so fair as on this glorious morning. Winnemucca Mountain, a towering, clean-limbed giant in the clearness of early day, seemed to march into the very outskirts of the town. Blaze could see the patch of green which marked the China Gardens. South of him the Harmony Range, all blues and purples now, tantalized him. It made him think of the Tetons and the Gros Ventres back home. But there was wine in the air here such as even Wyoming did not know.

Blaze sighed disconsolately. Well enough he knew the air was sweeter because of one who breathed it. He was going up to Paradise to say good-by to her. He dreaded the trip in some ways, because it was so palpably a good-by trip. Pretty speeches were not intended for his tongue. So lost in reverie was he that he paid no attention to the man who took the chair next to him. Imagine his surprise when he heard him say:

"You ain't exactly what you 'd call a social favorite to-day, are yuh?"

"Melody! Why, you old son-of-a-gun!" Blaze's

face broke into a smile. "Where you been?" he asked.

"I been representin', I 'll tell yuh!" Both were happier over seeing each other than either would have admitted. "I been all over Nevada since I saw you." He laughed to himself. "Guess I was 'bout the only one that did n't hear the fire-bell the other night. You were right up 'mong the flames, were n't yuh?"

"It was tolerably warm, all right. Go on tell me 'bout yourself."

"I been workin' down to the Rancho, helpin' Kent. We got the ditches all fixed up. Beginnin' to look like itself again, except for the house. It 'll take a lot of money for that work, but I guess Esteban won't have no trouble borrowin' all he wants. Banks seems to think pretty well of a Basque's word. Ain't no reason why Esteban should n't get one crop of alfalfa before snow flies. That 'll help get him over the winter."

"You 're not telling me what I want to know," said Blaze. "How is she?"

Melody had never caught quite that note in his friend's voice. He looked at him sharply. "She don't talk much," he murmured. "She just looks as if she was waitin', an' waitin'. God! wimmen are beyond me. Kent's seen Acklin. They had a big pow-wow when it got noised around that Bodine had killed our yearlin's and burnt the wool-house and all the rest of it. The Big Boss is willin' to rebuild the dam and let the Basques own their part of it. He's seen the handwritin' on the wall. Storin' up the snow

water in the spring will give everybody all they want."

"I guess that 's why Brand was smiling this morning," Blaze answered.

The stage rolled up to the sidewalk and Blaze got to his feet.

"Where *you* goin'?" asked Melody.

"To say good-by."

"I reckoned you would." The red-haired one paused. Nothing but the hope of seeing Blaze had brought him to town, but he would have denied it most profanely had he been accused of it. "I may not see you no more," he went on. "I 'm goin' to Kelly Creek to-night. I stopped in Paradise on the way down. Your horse is all right. I put that long rope of mine on your saddle. Thought you might like it."

Blaze climbed to his seat in the stage to hide his embarrassment. He knew the reata Melody referred to; his favorite for many years, a finely woven Mexican. He wanted to thank him, but he did not know how to express his gratitude. He put his head through the open window and said banteringly, "I 'll buy you a drink for that if you 're here when I get back."

Melody knew, as well as a man can know a thing, that Blaze was really telling him he appreciated the rope, and that he would repay him some day without counting the cost to himself, either.

"Come easy, go easy," he flung back at his friend. "Don't you go spending all your wages for liquor. Costs a lot of money to ride the trains these days."

The stage started then. Melody did not doubt for a moment that this was good-by. Blaze waved his hand to him.

"Well, don't get hurt," the freckle-faced man called to him. It was a stupid remark, but it served to erase the emotion from his face.

Late afternoon found Blaze on the well-known trail to the Rancho. Three days are almost too short a time for even nature to work her miracles, but even so the precious water was giving full promise of the days to come.

Henaro, Mariano, and Teresa, and one or two of the old hands had come back to work. The flood-torn débris was being removed. There was hopefulness and courage in the air. Blaze saw that the patio which had been José's pride had received marked attention. This last was Mercedes's doing; her first relaxation in weeks. She rested now on the steps where Acklin had given her the forgotten vanity-case. Blaze was almost beside her before she became aware of him.

"Señor!" It was a cry of gladness, accompanied by a look that left Blaze all a-tremble. Her face no longer held the pallor he had become accustomed to seeing.

"You did n't think I would go without coming to say good-by?"

Mercedes shook her head.

"No," she said, "I know you come. The Rancho begins to look like old times, eh? You hear that the Señor Acklin offer us part of the dam?"

“Yes; Melody told me. It’s wonderful! You’ve won your fight. Has Kent gone home?”

“No, Señor. He is upstairs with Esteban. My brother be glad to see you.”

They turned at the sound of pattering feet. Basilio had heard his big friend’s voice. Blaze caught hold of him.

“You come back to stay, Señor Blaze?” the child questioned.

“No, no, little chief. I’ve got to go home, to Wyoming. I came to say good-by.”

Basilio crept closer to him.

“I’m going to miss you, old-timer,” Blaze added unevenly.

“Why you go away then? I want you to stay.”

Blaze smiled. My Man had edged his way to his master’s side.

“You’re going to be real lonesome for me, little chief?”

The child nodded his head.

He lifted Basilio so the little fellow could pet the horse’s cold muzzle.

“He’ll sort of make up for the loss of me, won’t he?”

“You’re going to give him to me, Mr. Blaze?”

“He’s yours, little chief. I’ll leave him in Paradise. You be good to him.”

He lifted Basilio to My Man’s back. When he turned to Mercedes, she was looking away. She knew the sacrifice he made in parting with My Man.

A few steps about the patio on the horse’s back,

and Mercedes bade Basilio tell Terese that the Señor would stay for supper. When they were alone, Mercedes searched the eyes of the man who sat beside her. What a lot he had dared for her! Did n't he know that she loved him? Why did n't he speak?

Mercedes failed to realize that her very nearness rendered Blaze almost speechless.

"I hate to leave," he muttered at last, "and right along I've been telling myself I'd be mighty well pleased to get home if Mooney went back, too. Did you ever get mistaken about yourself like that?"

Mercedes did not answer lest her voice should betray her.

"I'm awfully blue," Blaze went on. "In spite of all the trouble and the fighting, I've been happier here than ever before in my life. I've been trailing Mooney for two years. I've kept my word with the Kid. When their trial's over, I'll be through. I'll go back to my ranch. But no matter; I'm going to be homesick for Paradise Valley and you."

"Homesick for me?" Mercedes queried in broken tones.

Blaze looked away, but he nodded his head.

"Yes, Mercedes. I'm going to miss you."

My Man whinnied as Blaze stopped.

"I'm going to miss him, too. And he'll miss me. I want you to ride him once in a while, Mercedes."

"I'll be very good to him," she whispered in hushed tones. "I'll keep him until you come back, Señor Blaze." She stopped short and got up. "You will be—coming back, eh, Señor?"

Blaze caught the note of fear, of concern, in her question; but he failed to take advantage of it. Instead he murmured unhappily: "I 'll be coming back some day, but when, *quien sabe?*?"

This was not at all what he wanted to say, nor was it entirely the truth. He had a very definite idea of when he would be coming back. He wanted to tell her so; to ask her to care for him, and to wait until he came back. To his credit, he was not well experienced in the ways of love. The modesty of the man was his best virtue. So he pretended not to understand, to be surprised; when it was only because he could not believe that happiness, such as having her meant, was to be his. Mercedes was so close, so lovely. She seemed so well poised, so at ease, that his own confusion was only magnified by comparison. His habitual and often tested composure had deserted him in his hour of need. Blaze was truly miserable, and in an evident attempt to stem his own feelings, he resorted to the bantering tone that had served him so well in his man-world.

"And what will I find when I do come back?" He tried to laugh good-naturedly. Mercedes bowed her head. Blaze put a hand on each of her shoulders. "I 'll ask Kent, or somebody, how Mercedes is, and they 'll say, 'Humph! She 's a big lady now. She 's got a new name!' Maybe it will be Ugarde, or Rodriguez, or Liotard! Yes, sir! That 's what they 'll say. I 'll look at my old gray hair—how time flies! But I 'll find you. And there you 'll be: a great lady with three or four black-haired kiddies of your own!"

Mercedes shook her head. Her eyes were misty, but she smiled.

"No!" she murmured. "I don't think so; not those kids."

This was the Mercedes of old.

"Yes, you will!" Blaze grinned. "The right man will come along, *querida*. You look sharp so that he don't get by."

"Huh!" she muttered. "I look sharp, all right. But he don't."

"He?"

"*Sí!* That right man! He's so blind like a bat. But maybe he don't want to see Basque girl. Still, if he comes back—with his gray hairs—I'll be here. Arrascada! That's a good name. I'll keep it." She forced a tantalizing smile to her face as she went on: "You won't have to waste no time then when you come."

Once before, in that very patio, they had looked into each other's eyes as they did now. Blaze saw there what he should have seen long ago.

"Oh, *querida mía*," he breathed.

Whatever else he intended to say was smothered in Mercedes's hair. He caught her up in his arms and held her to him. There was color in her face again; her lips red for his kisses.

"I'll be coming back," she heard him say.

From a distance, it seemed, came her low, wild, tom-boy laugh. He was wafted in spirit again to that unforgettable day on the river. She was speaking, and even her voice was reminiscent of that afternoon.

"I guess maybe," she managed to say, with a defiant little toss of her head, "Mercedes will have those three, four black-haired kids anyhow, huh?"

Minutes passed as they sat there without speaking. The shadows began their evening tryst. Peace and happiness settled down upon the patio.

In a room above, some one lighted a lamp. Its mellow glow reached the man and girl on the steps. His arm held her closer for a second and then relaxed. Mercedes laughed liquidly. From its accustomed place she caught up her guitar and crooned a plaintive little Spanish love-song in a voice for Blaze's ears alone:

If stars in the sky far above you
Have brought you, beloved, to me,
If, in their wisdom, they've chosen you,
How, then, can I help loving thee?
How, then, can I help loving thee?

"La-la-la-la-la, la, la-la-la," throbbed the guitar. Blaze closed his eyes. This was the end of the trail! Life began anew here.

A tear stole down Mercedes's cheek. Happiness had overwhelmed her. The morrow no longer threatened. She was ready for the dawn.

The greatest pleasure in life is that of reading. Why not then own the books of great novelists when the price is so small

Of all the amusements which can possibly be imagined for a hard-working man, after his daily toil, or in its intervals, there is nothing like reading an entertaining book. It calls for no bodily exertion. It transports him into a livelier, and gayer, and more diversified and interesting scene, and while he enjoys himself there he may forget the evils of the present moment. Nay, it accompanies him to his next day's work, and gives him something to think of besides the mere mechanical drudgery of his every-day occupation—something he can enjoy while absent, and look forward with pleasure to return to.

Ask your dealer for a list of the titles in Burt's Popular Priced Fiction

In buying the books bearing the A. L. Burt Company imprint you are assured of wholesome, entertaining and instructive reading

THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION

- Harbor Road, The. Sara Ware Bassett.
Harriet and the Piper. Kathleen Norris.
Havoc. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Head of the House of Coombe, The. Frances Hodgson
Burnett.
Heart of the Desert, The. Honoré Willis.
Heart of the Hills, The. John Fox, Jr.
Heart of the Range, The. William Patterson White.
Heart of the Sunset. Rex Beach.
Heart of Unaga, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Helen of the Old House. Harold Bell Wright.
Hidden Places, The. Bertrand W. Sinclair.
Hidden Trails. William Patterson White.
Hillman, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Hira Singh. Talbot Mundy.
His Last Bow. A. Conan Doyle.
His Official Fiancee. Berta Ruck.
Homeland. Margaret Hill McCarter.
Homestead Ranch. Elizabeth G. Young.
Honor of the Big Snows. James Oliver Curwood.
Hopalong Cassidy. Clarence E. Mulford.
Hound from the North, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
House of the Whispering Pines, The. Anna Katharine Green.
Humoresque. Fannie Hurst.
Illustrious Prince, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
In Another Girl's Shoes. Berta Ruck.
Indifference of Juliet, The. Grace S. Richmond.
Infelice. Augusta Evans Wilson.
Initials Only. Anna Katharine Green.
Innocent. Marie Corelli.
Innocent Adventuress, The. Mary Hastings Bradley.
Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu, The. Sax Rohmer.
In the Brooding Wild. Ridgwell Cullum.
In the Onyx Lobby. Carolyn Wells.
Iron Trail, The. Rex Beach.
Iron Woman, The. Margaret Deland.
Ishmael. (Ill.) Mrs. Southworth.
Isle of Retribution. Edison Marshall.
I've Married Marjorie. Margaret Widdemer.
Ivory Trail, The. Talbot Mundy.
Jacob's Ladder. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Jean of the Lazy A. B. M. Bower.
Jeanne of the Marshes. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Jeeves. P. G. Wodehouse.

AT A POPULAR PRICE

- Jimmie Dale and the Phantom Clew. Frank L. Packard.
Johnny Nelson. Clarence E. Mulford.
Joseph Greer and His Daughter. Henry Kitchell Webster.
Judith of the Godless Valley. Honoré Willsie.
Keeper of the Door, The. Ethel M. Dell.
Keith of the Border. Randall Parrish.
Kent Knowles: Quahaug. Joseph C. Lincoln.
Kilmeny of the Orchard. L. M. Montgomery.
Kingdom of the Blind, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
King of Kearsarge. Arthur O. Friel.
King of the Khyber Rifles. Talbot Mundy.
King Spruce. Holman Day.
Knave of Diamonds, The. Ethel M. Dell.
Land-Girl's Love Story, A. Berta Ruck.
Land of Strong Men, The. A. M. Chisholm.
Laramie Holds the Range. Frank H. Spearman.
Last Trail, The. Zane Grey.
Laughing Bill Hyde. Rex Beach.
Laughing Girl, The. Robert W. Chambers.
Law Breakers, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Law of the Gun, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Leavenworth Case, The. Anna Katherine Green. (Photoplay Edition).
Light That Failed, The. Rudyard Kipling. (Photoplay Ed.).
Lighted Way, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Lin McLean. Owen Wister.
Lister's Great Adventure. Harold Bindloss.
Little Moment of Happiness, The. Clarence Budington Kelland.
Little Red Foot, The. Robert W. Chambers.
Little Warrior, The. Pelham Grenville Wodehouse.
Lonely Warrior, The. Claude C. Washburn.
Lonesome Land. B. M. Bower.
Lone Wolf, The. Louis Joseph Vance.
Long Live the King. Mary Roberts Rinehart. (Photoplay Edition).
Lost Ambassador. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Lost Discovery, The. Baillie Reynolds.
Lost Prince, The. Frances Hodgson Burnett.
Lost World, The. A. Conan Doyle.
Luck of the Kid, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Lucretia Lombard. Kathleen Norris.
Luminous Face, The. Carolyn Wells.
Lydia of the Pines. Honoré Willsie.

THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION

- Lynch Lawyers. William Patterson White.
McCarty Incog. Isabel Ostrander.
Major, The. Ralph Connor.
Maker of History, A. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Malefactor, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Man and Maid. Elinor Glyn.
Man from Bar 20, The. Clarence E. Mulford.
Man from the Bitter Roots, The. Caroline Lockhart.
Man in the Moonlight, The. Rupert S. Holland.
Man in the Twilight, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Man Killers, The. Dane Coolidge.
Man Who Couldn't Sleep, The. Arthur Stringer.
Man's Country. Peter Clark Macfarlane.
Marqueray's Duel. Anthony Pryde.
Martin Conisby's Vengeance. Jeffery Farnol.
Mary-Gusta. Joseph C. Lincoln.
Mary Wollaston. Henry Kitchell Webster.
Mason of Bar X Ranch. H. Bennett.
Master of Man. Hall Caine.
Master Mummer, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes. A Conan Doyle.
Men Who Wrought, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Meredith Mystery, The. Natalie Sumner Lincoln.
Midnight of the Ranges. George Gilbert.
Mine with the Iron Door, The. Harold Bell Wright.
Mischievous Maker, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Missioner, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Miss Million's Maid. Berta Ruck.
Money, Love and Kate. Eleanor H. Porter.
Money Master, The. Gilbert Parker.
Money Moon, The. Jeffery Farnol.
Moonlit Way, The. Robert W. Chambers.
More Limehouse Nights. Thomas Burke.
More Tish. Mary Roberts Rinehart.
Moreton Mystery, The. Elizabeth Dejeans.
Mr. and Mrs. Sen. Louise Jordan Miln.
Mr. Grex of Monte Carlo. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Mr. Pratt. Joseph C. Lincoln.
Mr. Pratt's Patients. Joseph C. Lincoln.
Mrs. Red Pepper. Grace S. Richmond.
Mr. Wu. Louise Jordan Miln.
My Lady of the North. Randall Parrish.
My Lady of the South. Randall Parrish.
Mystery Girl, The. Carolyn Wells.

AT A POPULAR PRICE

- Mystery of the Hasty Arrow, The. Anna K. Green.
Mystery of the Silver Dagger, The. Randall Parrish.
Nameless River. Vingie E. Roe.
Ne'er-Do-Well, The. Rex Beach. (Photoplay Ed.).
Net, The. Rex Beach.
Never Fail Blake. Arthur Stringer.
Next Corner, The. Kate Jordan.
Nightfall. Anthony Pryde.
Night Horseman, The. Max Brand.
Night of the Wedding, The. C. N. and A. M. Williamson.
Night Operator, The. Frank L. Packard.
Night Riders, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Nine Unknown, The. Talbot Mundy.
Nobody's Man. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
No Defence. Gilbert Parker.
North. James B. Hendryx.
Obstacle Race, The. Ethel M. Dell.
Odds. Ethel M. Dell.
Old Misery. Hugh Pendexter.
Omoo. Herman Melville.
One Thing Is Certain. Sophie Kerr.
One-Way Trail, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Ordeal of Honor, An. Anthony Pryde.
Outlaw, The. Jackson Gregory.
Owner of the Lazy D. William Patterson White.
Panelled Room, The. Rupert Sargent Holland.
Paradise Bend. William Patterson White.
Pardners. Rex Beach.
Partners of the Tide. Joseph C. Lincoln.
Patricia Brent, Spinster. Anonymous.
Patrol of the Sun Dance Trail, The. Ralph Connor.
Paul Anthony, Christian. Hiram W. Hayes.
Pawned. Frank L. Packard.
Pawns' Count, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Pay Gravel. Hugh Pendexter.
Peacemakers, The. Hiram W. Hayes.
Peregrine's Progress. Jeffery Farnoll.
Peter Ruff and the Double Four. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Phantom Wires. Arthur Stringer.
Pointed Tower, The. Vance Thompson.
Pollyanna; "The Glad Book." Eleanor H. Porter. (Lim. Ed)
Trade Mark—Trade-Mark.
Poor Man's Rock. Bertrand W. Sinclair.
Poor Wise Man, A. Mary Roberts Rinehart.

THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION

- Poisoned Paradise, The. Robert W. Service. (Photoplay Ed.).
Portygee, The. Joseph C. Lincoln.
Possession. Olive Wadsley.
Postmaster, The. Joseph C. Lincoln.
Prairie Child, The. Arthur Stringer.
Prairie Flowers. James B. Hendryx.
Prairie Mother, The. Arthur Stringer.
Prairie Wife, The. Arthur Stringer.
Pretender, The. Robert W. Service.
Prince of Sinners, A. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Prodigal Daughters, The. Joseph Hocking. (Photoplay Ed.).
Prodigal Son. Hall Caine. (Photoplay Ed.).
Profiteers, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Promise, The. J. B. Hendryx.
Public Square, The. Will Levington Comfort.
Purple Mask, The. Louise Jordan Miln.
Purple Pearl, The. Anthony Pryde.
Quemado. William West Winter.
Quest of the Sacred Slipper, The. Sax Rohmer.
Quill's Window. George Barr McCutcheon.
Rainbow's End, The. Rex Beach.
Rainbow Valley. L. M. Montgomery.
Ramshackle House. Hulbert Footner.
Ranch at the Wolverine, The. B. M. Bower.
Ranching for Sylvia. Harold Bindloss.
Rangy Pete. Guy Morton.
Raspberry Jam. Carolyn Wells.
Reclaimers, The. Margaret Hill McCarter.
Re-Creation of Brian Kent, The. Harold Bell Wright.
Red and Black. Grace S. Richmond.
Red Pepper Burns. Grace S. Richmond.
Red Pepper's Patients. Grace S. Richmond.
Red Seal, The. Natalie Sumner Lincoln.
Restless Sex, The. Robert W. Chambers.
Return of Dr. Fu-Manchu, The. Sax Rohmer.
Return of Frank Clamart, The. Henry C. Rowland.
Return of Tarzan The. Edgar Rice Burroughs.
Riddle of the Frozen Flame The. M. E. and T. W. Hanshew.
Riddle of the Mysterious Light The. M. E. and T. W. Hanshew.
Riddle of the Purple Emperor The. M. E. and T. W. Hanshew.
Riddle of the Spinning Wheel, The. M. E. and T. W. Hanshew.

AT A POPULAR PRICE

- Rider of the Golden Bar, The. William Patterson White.
Rider of the King Log, The. Holman Day.
Rider o' the Stars. R. J. Horton.
Riders of the Silences. John Frederick.
Rilla of Ingleside. L. M. Montgomery.
Rimrock Trail. J. Allan Dunn.
Rise of Roscoe Paine, The. Joseph C. Lincoln.
River Trail, The. Laurie Y. Erskine.
Robin. Frances Hodgson Burnett.
Rocks of Valpre, The. Ethel M. Dell.
Rogues of the North. Albert M. Treynor.
Romance of a Million Dollars, The. Elizabeth Dejeans.
Rosa Mundi. Ethel M. Dell.
Rose of Santa Fe, The. Edwin L. Sabin.
Round the Corner in Gay Street. Grace S. Richmond.
Round-Up, The. Oscar J. Friend.
Rung Ho! Talbot Mundy.
Rustler of Wind River, The. G. W. Ogden.
St. Elmo. (Ill. Ed.) Augusta J. Evans.
Sand. Olive Wadsley.
Scarlet Iris, The. Vance Thompson.
Scattergood Baines. Clarence Budington Kelland.
Second Violin, The. Grace S. Richmond.
Secret Power, The. Marie Corelli.
Self-Raised. (Ill). Mrs. Southworth.
Settling of the Sage. Hal G. Evarts.
Seven Ages of Woman, The. Compton Mackenzie.
Seven Darlings, The. Gouverneur Morris.
Seventh Man, The. Max Brand.
Shadow of the East, The. E. M. Hull. (Photoplay Ed.).
Shadow on the Glass, The. Charles J. Dutton.
Shavings. Joseph C. Lincoln.
Sheik, The. E. M. Hull.
Sheila of Big Wreck Cove. James H. Cooper.
Shepherd of the Hills, The. Harold Bell Wright.
Shepherds of the Wild. Edison Marshall.
Sheriff of Dyke Hole, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Sherry. George Barr McCutcheon.
Shoe-Bar Stratton. Joseph B. Ames.
Sight Unseen, and The Confession. Mary Roberts Rinehart.
Silver Horde, The. Rex Beach.
Silver Poppy, The. Arthur Stringer.
Singing Bone, The. R. Austin Freeman.
Singing Wells, The. Roland Pertwee.

THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION

- Sinister Mark, The. Lee Thayer.
Sin That Was His, The. Frank L. Packard.
Sir or Madam. Berta Ruck.
Sisters-in-Law. Gertrude Atherton.
Sky Line of Spruce. Edison Marshall.
Slayer of Souls, The. Robert W. Chambers.
Smiles: A Rose of the Cumberlands. Eliot H. Robinson.
Snowdrift. James B. Hendryx.
Snowshoe Trail, The. Edison Marshall.
Son of His Father, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Son of Tarzan, The. Edgar Rice Burroughs.
Souls for Sale. Rupert Hughes. (Photoplay Ed.).
Speckled Bird, A. Augusta Evans Wilson.
Spirit of the Border, The. Zane Grey. (New Edition).
Spirit-of-Iron. Harwood Steele.
Spoilers, The. Rex Beach. (Photoplay Ed.).
Spoilers of the Valley, The. Robert Watson.
Star Dust. Fannie Hurst.
Steele of the Royal Mounted. James Oliver Curwood.
Step on the Stair, The. Anna Katherine Green.
Still Jim. Honoré Willsié.
Story of Foss River Ranch, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Story of Marco, The. Eleanor H. Porter.
Strange Case of Cavendish, The. Randall Parrish.
Strawberry Acres. Grace S. Richmond.
Strength of the Pines, The. Edison Marshall.
Subconscious Courtship, The. Berta Ruck.
Substitute Millionaire, The. Hulbert Footner.
Sudden Jim. Clarence B. Kelland.
Sweethearts Unmet. Berta Ruck.
Sweet Stranger. Berta Ruck.
Tales of Chinatown. Sax Rohmer.
Tales of Secret Egypt. Sax Rohmer.
Tales of Sherlock Holmes. A. Conan Doyle.
Talkers, The. Robert W. Chambers.
Talisman, The. Sir Walter Scott. (Photoplay Ed.). Screened
as Richard the Lion Hearted.
Taming of Zenas Henry, The. Sara Ware Basset.
Tarzan of the Apes. Edgar Rice Burroughs.
Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar. Edgar Rice Burroughs.
Tattooed Arm, The. Isabel Ostrander.
Tempting of Tavernake, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Tess of the D'Urbervilles. Thomas Hardy. (Photoplay Ed.).
Tex. Clarence E. Mulford.

AT A POPULAR PRICE

- Texan, The. James B. Hendryx.
Thankful's Inheritance. Joseph C. Lincoln.
That Affair at "The Cedars." Lee Thayer.
That Printer of Udell's. Harold Bell Wright.
Their Yesterdays. Harold Bell Wright.
Thief of Bagdad, The. Achmed Abdullah. (Photoplay Ed.).
Thieves' Wit. Hulbert Footner.
Thirteenth Commandment, The. Rupert Hughes.
This Side of Paradise. F. Scott Fitzgerald.
Thoroughbred, The. Henry Kitchell Webster.
Thread of Flame, The. Basil King.
Three Black Bags. Marion Polk Angellotti.
Three Men and a Maid. P. G. Wodehouse.
Three Musketeers, The. Alexander Dumas.
Three of Hearts, The. Berta Ruck.
Through the Shadows with O. Henry. Al. Jennings.
Thunderbolt, The. Clyde Perrin.
Timber. Harold Titus.
Timber Pirate. Charles Christopher Jenkins.
Tish. Mary Roberts Rinehart.
To Him That Hath. Ralph Connor.
Toilers of the Sea, The. Victor Hugo. (Photoplay Ed.).
Toll of the Sands. Paul Delaney.
Trail of the Axe, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Trailin'. Max Brand.
Trail to Yesterday, The. Chas. A. Seltzer.
Treasure of Heaven, The. Marie Corelli.
Trigger of Conscience, The. Robert Orr Chipperfield.
Triumph of John Kars, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Triumph of the Scarlet Pimpernel, The. Baroness Orczy.
Trodden Gold. Howard Vincent O'Brien.
Trooper O'Neill. George Goodchild.
Trouble at the Pinelands, The. Ernest M. Porter.
T. Tembarom. Frances Hodgson Burnett.
Tumbleweeds. Hal G. Evarts.
Turn of the Tide. Eleanor H. Porter.
Twenty-fourth of June. Grace S. Richmond.
Twins of Suffering Creek, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Two-Gun Man, The. Chas. A. Seltzer.
Two-Gun Man, The. Robert Ames Bennet.
Two-Gun Sue. Douglas Grant.
Typec. Herman Melville.
Tyrrel of the Cow Country. Robert Ames Bennet.
Under Handicap. Jackson Gregory.

THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION

- Under the Country Sky. Grace S. Richmond.
Uneasy Street. Arthur Somers Roche.
Unlatched Door, The. Lee Thayer.
Unpardonable Sin, The. Major Rupert Hughes.
Unseen Ear, The. Natalie Sumner Lincoln.
Untamed, The. Max Brand.
Up and Coming. Nalbro Bartley.
Up From Slavery. Booker T. Washington.
Ursula Trent. W. L. George.
Valiants of Virginia, The. Hallie Erminie Rives.
Valley of Content, The. Blanche Upright.
Valley of Fear, The. Sir A. Conan Doyle.
Valley of Gold, The. David Howarth.
Valley of the Sun, The. William M. McCoy.
Vandemark's Folly. Herbert Quick.
Vanguards of the Plains. Margaret Hill McCarter.
Vanished Messenger, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
Vanishing of Betty Varian, The. Carolyn Wells.
Vanity Fair. Wm. M. Thackeray. (Photoplay Ed.).
Vashti. Augusta Evans Wilson.
Viola Gwyn. George Barr McCutcheon.
Virginia of Elk Creek Valley. Mary Ellen Chase.
Virtuous Wives. Owen Johnson.
Voice of the Pack, The. Edison Marshall.
Wagon Wheel, The. William Patterson White.
Wall Between, The. Sara Ware Bassett.
Wall of Men, A. Margaret Hill McCarter.
Wasted Generation, The. Owen Johnson.
Watchers of the Plains, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Way of an Eagle, The. Ethel M. Dell.
Way of the Strong, The. Ridgwell Cullum.
Way of These Women, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.
We Can't Have Everything. Major Rupert Hughes.
Weavers, The. Gilbert Parker.
West Broadway. Nina Wilcox Putnam.
West Wind Drift. George Barr McCutcheon.
What's the World Coming To? Rupert Hughes.
What Will People Say? Rupert Hughes.
Wheels Within Wheels. Carolyn Wells.
Whelps of the Wolf, The. George Marsh.
When a Man's a Man. Harold Bell Wright. (Photoplay Ed.).
When Egypt Went Broke. Holman Day.
Where the Sun Swings North. Barnett Willoughby.
Where There's a Will. Mary Roberts Rinehart.

AT A POPULAR PRICE

- Whispering Sage. Henry Sinclair Drago and Joseph Noel.
White Jacket. Herman Melville.
White Moll, The. Frank L. Packard.
Why Not. Margaret Widdemer.
Window at the White Cat, The. Mary Roberts Rinehart.
Winds of Chance, The. Rex Beach.
Winds of the World, The. Talbot Mundy.
Wine of Life, The. Arthur Stringer.
Winning of Barbara Worth, The. Harold Bell Wright.
Winning the Wilderness. Margaret Hill McCarter.
Wire Devils, The. Frank L. Packard.
Wire Tappers, The. Arthur Stringer.
Wishing Ring Man, The. Margaret Widdemer.
With Juliet in England. Grace S. Richmond.
Within These Walls. Rupert Hughes.
Wolfville. Alfred Henry Lewis.
Woman from "Outside," The. Hulbert Footner.
Woman Gives, The. Owen Johnson.
Woman Haters, The. Joseph C. Lincoln.
Woman of Knockaloe, The. Hall Caine.
Woman Thou Gavest Me, The. Hall Caine.
Woodcarver of 'Lympus, The. Mary E. Waller.
Wooing of Rosamond Fayre, The. Berta Ruck.
Wrong Mr. Right, The. Berta Ruck.
Year of Delight. Margaret Widdemer.
Years for Rachel, The. Berta Ruck.
Yellow Claw, The. Sax Rohmer.
Yellow Horde, The. Hal G. Evarts.
You're Only Young Once. Margaret Widdemer.
Zeppelin's Passenger, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.

THIS BOOK IS DUE ON THE LAST DATE
STAMPED BELOW

AN INITIAL FINE OF 25 CENTS
WILL BE ASSESSED FOR FAILURE TO RETURN
THIS BOOK ON THE DATE DUE. THE PENALTY
WILL INCREASE TO 50 CENTS ON THE FOURTH
DAY AND TO \$1.00 ON THE SEVENTH DAY
OVERDUE.

JUL 31 1940

Flig 2
3

Reserve

NOV 19 1940M

AUG 8 1945

LIBRARY USE

SEP 21 '65

REC'D LD

SEP 21 '65 - 3 PM

INTER-LIBRARY

LOAN

SEP 29 1965

YB 66814

M60670

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY

