The Fighting Edge



William MacLeod Raine

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Title: The Fighting Edge

Author: William MacLeod Raine

Release date: September 4, 2008 [eBook #26520]
Most recently updated: January 4, 2021

Language: English

Other information and formats: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/26520

Credits: Produced by Roger Frank and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at https://www.pgdp.net

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THE FIGHTING EDGE ***

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BY

WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

AUTHOR OF “MAN-SIZE,” “GUNSIGHT PASS,” “TANGLED TRAILS,” ETC.



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1922

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The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

TO
MY MOTHER

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THE FIGHTING EDGE

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CHAPTER I

PETE'S GIRL

She stood in the doorway, a patched and ragged Cinderella of the desert. Upon her slim, ill-poised figure the descending sun slanted a shaft of glory. It caught in a spotlight the cheap, dingy gown, the coarse stockings through the holes of which white flesh peeped, the heavy, broken brogans that disfigured the feet. It beat upon a small head with a mass of black, wild-flying hair, on red lips curved with discontent, into dark eyes passionate and resentful at what fate had made of her young life. A silent, sullen lass, one might have guessed, and the judgment would have been true as most first impressions.

The girl watched her father drive half a dozen dogies into the mountain corral perched precariously on the hillside. Soon now it would be dusk. She went back into the cabin and began to prepare supper.

In the rickety stove she made a fire of cottonwood. There was a business-like efficiency in the way she peeled potatoes, prepared the venison for the frying-

pan, and mixed the biscuit dough.

June Tolliver and her father lived alone on Piceance[1] Creek. Their nearest neighbor was a trapper on Eighteen-Mile Hill. From one month's end to another she did not see a woman. The still repression in the girl's face was due not wholly to loneliness. She lived on the edge of a secret she intuitively felt was shameful. It colored her thoughts and feelings, set her apart from the rest of the world. Her physical reactions were dominated by it. Yet what this secret was she could only guess at.

A knock sounded on the door.

June brushed back a rebellious lock of hair from her eyes with the wrist above a flour-whitened hand. "Come in."

A big dark man stood on the threshold. His glance swept the girl, searched the room, and came back to her.

"Pete Tolliver live here?"

"Yes. He's lookin' after the stock. Be in soon, likely."

The man closed the door. June dragged a chair from a corner and returned to her cooking.

From his seat the man watched her. His regard was disturbing. It had a quality of insistence. His eyes were cold yet devouring. They were possessive, not clear but opaque. They did not look at her as other eyes did. She felt the blood burning in her cheeks.

Presently, as she passed from the table to the stove to look at the sputtering venison, she flashed a resentful glance at him. It did not touch his effrontery.

"You Pete's girl?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You've grown. Knew you when you was learnin' to crawl."

"In Brown's Park?" The words were out before she could stop them.

"You done said it." He smiled, not pleasantly, she thought. "I'm a real old friend of yore father."

Curiosity touched with apprehension began to stir in her. For those early years she had only memory to rely upon. Tolliver never referred to them. On that subject the barriers were up between the two. Fugitive flashes of that first home came back to June. She remembered a sweet, dark-eyed woman nuzzling her little body with kisses after the bath, an hour when that mother wept as though her heart would break and she had put little baby arms in tight embrace round her neck by way of comfort. That dear woman was not in any of the later pictures. A pile of stones on a hillside in Brown's Park marked the grave.

Between the day of 'Lindy Tolliver's outburst of grief and the child's next recollection was a gap. The setting of the succeeding memories was a frame house on a dusty road at the edge of a frontier town. In front of it jolted big freight wagons, three of them fastened together and drawn by a double row of oxen so long she could not count them. The place was Rawlins, Wyoming, and it was an outfitting point for a back country in Colorado hundreds of miles from the railroad. The chief figure in June's horizon was a stern-eyed, angular aunt who took the place of both father and mother and did her duty implacably. The two lived together forever, it seemed to the child.

June wakened one night from the light of a lamp in her aunt's hand. A man was standing beside her. He

was gaunt and pallid, in his eyes a look of hunger that reminded her of a hunted coyote. When he took her tightly in his arms she began to cry. He had murmured, “My li’l’ baby, don’t you be scared of yore paw.” As mysteriously as he had come to life, so Pete Tolliver disappeared again.

Afterward there was a journey with a freight outfit which lasted days and days. June was in charge of a bullwhacker. All she remembered about him was that he had been kind to her and had expended a crackling vocabulary on his oxen. The end of the trek brought her to Piceance Creek and a father now heavily bearded and with long, unkempt hair. They had lived here ever since.

Did this big man by the window belong to her father’s covered past? Was there menace in his coming? Vaguely June felt that there was.

The door opened and Tolliver stepped in. He was rather under middle-size, dressed in down-at-the-heel boots, butternut jeans, cotton shirt, and dusty, ragged slouch hat. The grizzled beard hid the weak mouth, but the skim-milk eyes, the expression of the small-featured face, betrayed the man’s lack of force. You may meet ten thousand like him west of the Mississippi. He lives in every village, up every creek, in every valley, and always he is the cat’s-paw of stronger men who use him for good or ill to serve their ends.

The nester stopped in his tracks. It was impossible for June to miss the dismay that found outlet in the fallen jaw and startled eyes.

In the stranger’s grin was triumphant malice. “You sure look glad to see me, Pete, and us such old friends too. Le’s see, I ain’t seen you since—since—”

He stopped, as though his memory were at fault, but June sensed the hint of a threat in the uncompleted sentence.

Reluctantly Tolliver took the offered hand. His consternation seemed to have stricken him dumb.

“Ain’t you going to introduce yore old pal to the girl?” the big man asked.

Not willingly, the rancher found the necessary words. “June, meet Mr. Houck.”

June was putting the biscuits in the oven. She nodded an acknowledgment of the introduction. Back of the resentful eyes the girl’s brain was busy.

“Old side pardners, ain’t we, Pete?” Houck was jeering at him almost openly.

The older man mumbled what might be taken for an assent.

“Branded a heap of cattle, you ’n’ me. Eh, Pete?” The stranger settled deeper in the chair. “Jake Houck an’ you could talk over old times all night. We was frolicsome colts.”

Tolliver felt his hand forced. “Put off yore hat and wash up, Jake. You’ll stay to-night, o’ course.”

“Don’t mind if I do. I’m headed for Glenwood. Reckon I’d better put the horse up first.”

The two men left the cabin. When they returned half an hour later, the supper was on the table. June sat on the side nearest the stove and supplied the needs of the men. Coffee, hot biscuits, more venison, a second dish of gravy: no trained waiter could have anticipated their wants any better. If she was a bit sulky, she had reason for it. Houck’s gaze followed her like a searchlight. It noted the dark good looks of

her tousled head, the slimness of the figure which moved so awkwardly, a certain flash of spirit in the undisciplined young face.

“How old’s yore girl?” the man asked his host.

Tolliver hesitated, trying to remember. “How old are you, June?”

“Going on sixteen,” she answered, eyes smouldering angrily.

This man’s cool, impudent appraisal of her was hateful, she felt.

He laughed at her manner, easily, insolently, for he was of the type that finds pleasure in the umbrage of women annoyed by his effrontery. Of the three the guest was the only one quite at his ease. Tolliver’s ingratiating jokes and the heartiness of his voice rang false. He was troubled, uncertain how to face the situation that had arisen.

His daughter reflected this constraint. Why did her father fear this big dominating fellow? What was the relation between them? Why did his very presence bring with it a message of alarm?

She left them before the stove as soon as the dishes were washed, retiring to the bedroom at the other end of the log cabin. Far into the night she heard them talking, in low voices that made an indistinct murmur. To the sound of them she fell asleep.

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[1]

Pronounced *Pee-ance*.

CHAPTER II

"A SPUNKY LI'L' DEVIL"

Houck rode away next morning after breakfast, but not before he had made a promise June construed as a threat.

"Be back soon, girl."

Her eyes were on the corral, from which her father was driving the dogies. "What's it to me?" she said with sullen resentment.

"More'n you think. I've took a fancy to you. When I come back I'll talk business."

The girl's eyes did not turn toward him, but the color flooded the dark cheeks. "With Father maybe. Not with me. You've got no business to talk over with me."

"Think so? Different here. Take a good look at me, June Tolliver."

"What for?" Her glance traveled over him disdainfully to the hound puppy chasing its tail. She felt a strange excitement drumming in her veins. "I've seen folks a heap better worth lookin' at."

"Because I'm tellin' you to." His big hand caught her chin and swung it back. "Because I'm figurin' on marryin' you right soon."

Her dark eyes blazed. They looked at him straight enough now. "Take yore hand off'n me. D'you hear?"

He laughed, slowly, delightedly. “You’re a spunky li’l’ devil. Suits me fine. Jake Houck never did like jog-trotters in harness.”

“Lemme go,” she ordered, and a small brown fist clenched.

“Not now, nor ever. You’re due to wear the Houck brand, girl.”

She struck, hard, with all the strength of her lithe and supple body. Above his cheek-bone a red streak leaped out where the sharp knuckles had crushed the flesh.

A second time he laughed, harshly. Her chin was still clamped in a vice-like grip that hurt. “I get a kiss for that, you vixen.” With a sweeping gesture he imprisoned both of the girl’s arms and drew the slim body to him. He kissed her, full on the lips, not once but half a dozen times, while she fought like a fury without the least avail.

Presently the man released her hands and chin.

“Hit me again if you like, and I’ll c’lect my pay prompt,” he jeered.

She was in a passionate flame of impotent anger. He had insulted her, trampled down the pride of her untamed youth, brushed away the bloom of her maiden modesty. And there was nothing she could do to make him pay. He was too insensitive to be reached by words, no matter how she pelted them at him.

A sob welled up from her heart. She turned and ran into the house.

Houck grinned, swung to the saddle, and rode up the valley. June would hate him good and plenty, he

thought. That was all right. He had her in the hollow of his hand. All her thoughts would be full of him. After she quit struggling to escape she would come snuggling up to him with a girl's shy blandishments. It was his boast that he knew all about women and their ways.

June was not given to tears. There was in her the stark pioneer blood that wrested the West in two generations from unfriendly nature. But the young virgin soul had been outraged. She lay on the bed of her room, face down, the nails of her fingers biting into the palms of the hands, a lump in the full brown throat choking her.

She was a wild, free thing of the hills, undisciplined by life. Back of June's anger and offended pride lurked dread, as yet indefinite and formless. Who was this stranger who had swaggered into her life and announced himself its lord and master? She would show him his place, would teach him how ridiculous his pretensions were. But even as she clenched her teeth on that promise there rose before her a picture of the fellow's straddling stride, of the fleering face with its intrepid eyes and jutting, square-cut jaw. He was stronger than she. No scruples would hold him back from the possession of his desires. She knew she would fight savagely, but a chill premonition of failure drenched the girl's heart.

Later, she went out to the stable where Tolliver was riveting a broken tug. It was characteristic of the man that all his tools, harness, and machinery were worn out or fractured. He never brought a plough in out of the winter storms or mended a leak in the roof until the need was insistent. Yet he was not lazy. He merely did not know how to order affairs with any system.

“Who is that man?” June demanded.

He looked up, mildly surprised and disturbed at the imperative in the girl’s voice. “Why, didn’t I tell you, honey—Jake Houck?”

“I don’t want to know his name. I want to know who he is—all about him.”

Tolliver drove home a rivet before he answered. “Jake’s a cowman.” His voice was apologetic. “I seen you didn’t like him. He’s biggity, Jake is.”

“He’s the most hateful man I ever saw,” she burst out.

Pete lifted thin, straw-colored eyebrows in questioning, but June had no intention of telling what had taken place. She would fight her own battles.

“Well, he’s a sure enough toughfoot,” admitted the rancher.

“When did you know him?”

“We was ridin’ together, a right long time ago.”

“Where?”

“Up around Rawlins—thataway.”

“He said he knew you in Brown’s Park.”

The man flashed a quick, uncertain look at his daughter. It appeared to ask how much Houck had told. “I might ’a’ knowed him there too. Come to think of it, I did. Punchers drift around a heap. Say, how about dinner? You got it started? I’m gettin’ powerful hungry.”

June knew the subject was closed. She might have pushed deeper into her father’s reticence, but some instinct shrank from what she might uncover. There

could be only pain in learning the secret he so carefully hid.

There had been no discussion of it between them, nor had it been necessary to have any. It was tacitly understood that they would have little traffic with their neighbors, that only at rare intervals would Pete drive to Meeker, Glenwood Springs, or Bear Cat to dispose of furs he had trapped and to buy supplies. The girl's thoughts and emotions were the product largely of this isolation. She brooded over the mystery of her father's past till it became an obsession in her life. To be brought into close contact with dishonor makes one either unduly sensitive or callously indifferent. Upon June it had the former effect.

The sense of inferiority was branded upon her. She had seen girls giggling at the shapeless sacks she had stitched together for clothes with which to dress herself. She was uncouth, awkward, a thin black thing ugly as sin. It had never dawned on her that she possessed rare potentialities of beauty, that there was coming a time when she would bloom gloriously as a cactus in a sand waste.

After dinner June went down to the creek and followed a path along its edge. She started up a buck lying in the grass and watched it go crashing through the brush. It was a big-game country. The settlers lived largely on venison during the fall and winter. She had killed dozens of blacktail, an elk or two, and more than once a bear. With a rifle she was a crack shot.

But to-day she was not hunting. She moved steadily along the winding creek till she came to a bend in its course. Beyond this a fishing-rod lay in the path. On a flat rock near it a boy was stretched, face up,

looking into the blue, unflecked sky.

CHAPTER III

PALS

He was a red-headed, stringy boy between eighteen and nineteen years old. His hands were laced back of the head, but he waggled a foot by way of greeting.

"'Lo, June," he called.

"What you doin'?" she demanded.

"Oh, jes' watchin' the grass grow."

She sat down beside him, drawing up her feet beneath the skirt and gathering the knees between laced fingers. Moodily, she looked down at the water swirling round the rocks.

Bob Dillon said nothing. He had a capacity for silence that was not uncompanionable. They could sit by the hour, these two, quite content, without exchanging a dozen sentences. The odd thing about it was that they were not old friends. Three weeks ago they had met for the first time. He was flunkeying for a telephone outfit building a line to Bear Cat.

"A man stayed up to the house last night," she said at last.

He leaned his head on a hand, turning toward her. The light blue eyes in the freckled face rested on those of the girl.

Presently she added, with a flare of surging anger, “I hate him.”

“Why?”

The blood burned beneath the tan of the brown cheeks. “’Cause.”

“Shucks! That don’t do any good. It don’t buy you anything.”

She swung upon him abruptly. “Don’t you hate the men at the camp when they knock you around?”

“What’d be the use? I duck outa the way next time.”

Two savage little demons glared at him out of her dark eyes. “Ain’t you got any sand in yore craw, Bob Dillon? Do you aim to let folks run on you all yore life? I’d fight ’em if ’t was the last thing I ever did.”

“Different here. I’d get my block knocked off about twice a week. You don’t see me in any scraps where I ain’t got a look-in. I’d rather let ’em boot me a few,” he said philosophically.

She frowned at him, in a kind of puzzled wonderment. “You’re right queer. If I was a man—”

The sentence died out. She was not a man. The limitations of sex encompassed her. In Jake Houck’s arms she had been no more than an infant. He would crush her resistance—no matter whether it was physical or mental—and fling out at her the cruel jeering laughter of one who could win without even exerting his strength. She would never marry him—never, never in the world. But—

A chill dread drenched her heart.

Young Dillon was sensitive to impressions. His eyes, fixed on the girl's face, read something of her fears.

"This man—who is he?" he asked.

"Jake Houck. I never saw him till last night. My father knew him when—when he was young."

"What's the matter with this Houck? Why don't you like him?"

"If you'd see him—how he looks at me." She flashed to anger. "As if I was something he owned and meant to tame."

"Oh, well, you know the old sayin', a cat may look at a king. He can't harm you."

"Can't he? How do you know he can't?" she challenged.

"How can he, come to that?"

"I don't say he can." Looked at in cold blood, through the eyes of another, the near-panic that had seized her a few hours earlier appeared ridiculous. "But I don't have to like him, do I? He acted—hateful—if you want to know."

"How d'you mean—hateful?"

A wave of color swept through her cheeks to the brown throat. How could she tell him that there was something in the man's look that had disrobed her, something in his ribald laugh that had made her feel unclean? Or that the fellow had brushed aside the pride and dignity that fenced her and ravished kisses from her lips while he mocked? She could not have put her feeling into words if she had tried, and she had no intention of trying.

"Mean," she said. "A low-down, mean bully."

The freckled boy watched her with a curious interest. She made no more sex appeal to him than he did to her, and that was none at all. The first thing that had moved him in the child was the friendlessness back of her spitfire offense. She knew no women, no other girls. The conditions of life kept her aloof from the ones she met casually once or twice a year. She suspected their laughter, their whispers about the wild girl on Piceance Creek. The pride with which she ignored them was stimulated by her sense of inferiority. June had read books. She felt the clothes she made were hideous, the conditions of her existence squalid; and back of these externals was the shame she knew because they must hide themselves from the world on account of the secret.

Bob did not know all that, but he guessed some of it. He had not gone very far in experience himself, but he suspected that this wild creature of the hills was likely to have a turbulent and perhaps tragic time of it. She was very much a child of impulse. Thirstily she had drunk in all he could tell her of the world beyond the hills that hemmed them in. He had known her frank, grateful, dreamy, shy, defiant, and once, for no apparent reason, a flaming little fury who had rushed to eager repentance when she discovered no offense was meant. He had seen her face bubbling with mirth at the antics of a chipmunk, had looked into the dark eyes when they were like hill fires blazing through mist because of the sunset light in the crotch of the range.

“I reckon Mr. Tolliver won’t let this Houck bully *you* none,” the boy said.

“I ain’t scared of him,” she answered.

But June knew there would be small comfort for her in the thought of her father’s protection. She divined

intuitively that he would be a liability rather than an asset in any conflict that might arise between her and Jake Houck.

“If there was anything I could do—but o’ course there ain’t.”

“No,” she agreed. “Oh, well, I’m not worryin’. I’ll show him when he comes back. I’m as big as he is behind a gun.”

Bob looked at her, startled. He saw she was whistling to keep up her courage. “Are you sure enough afraid of him?”

Her eyes met his. She nodded. “He said he was coming back to marry me—good as said I could like it or lump it, he didn’t care which.”

“Sho! Tha’s jus’ talk. No girl has to marry a man if she don’t want to. You don’t need any gun-play. He can’t make his brags good if you won’t have him. It’s a free country.”

“If he told you to do something—this Jake Houck—you wouldn’t think it was so free,” the girl retorted without any life in her voice.

He jumped up, laughing. “Well, I don’t expect he’s liable to tell me to do anything. He ain’t ever met up with me. I gotta go peel the spuds for supper. Don’t you worry, June. He’s bluffin’.”

“I reckon,” she said, and nodded a careless good-bye.

CHAPTER IV

CLIPPED WINGS

The Cinderella of Piceance Creek was scrupulously clean even though ragged and unkempt. Every Saturday night she shooed Pete Tolliver out of the house and took a bath in the tub which usually hung suspended from a wooden peg driven into the outer wall of the log cabin. Regularly as Monday came wash day.

On a windy autumn day, with the golden flames of fall burning the foliage of the hill woods, June built a fire of cottonwood branches near the brook and plunged with fierce energy into the week's washing. She was a strong, lithe young thing and worked rapidly. Her methods might not be the latest or the best, but they won results. Before the sun had climbed halfway to its zenith she had the clothes on the line.

Since she had good soapy suds and plenty of hot water left in the iron kettle, June decided to scrub the bed covers. Twenty minutes later, barefooted and barelegged, her skirts tucked up above the knees, the young washwoman was trampling blankets in the tub. She had no reason to suppose that anybody was within a mile of her. Wherefore, since the world was beautiful and mere life a joy, she improvised a child's song of thanksgiving.

It was a foolish little thing without rhyme or reason. It began nowhere and finished at the same place. But it lifted straight from the heart and perhaps it traveled as far heavenward as most prayers. She danced among the suds as she sang it, brown arms,

bare to the elbows, stretched to the sunlit hills.

> Wings—wings—wings!
> I can fly, 'way 'way 'way off,
> Over the creek, over the piñons.
> Goodness, yes! Like a meadow-lark.
> Over the hills, clear to Denver,
> Where the trains are.
> And it's lovely—lovely—lovely.

It was an unschooled, impulsive cry of the heart to the great soul of life and beauty that lies back of nature. No human eyes or ears were meant to see or hear the outburst. A shy girl's first day-dreams of her lover ought no more to be dragged out to the public gaze than this.

Through the quaking asps by the creek narrowed eyes gloated. Out of the thicket Jake Houck strode with a ribald laugh.

"Right pretty, my dear, but don't you spread them wings an' leave yore man alone."

The dancing spirit fled her flying feet. She was no longer a daughter of the skies, attuned to sunshine and laughter and the golden harmony of the hills. Joy and life were stricken out of her.

He had heard. He had seen. A poignant shame enveloped and scorched the girl's body. She was a wild thing who lived within herself. It was easy to put her in the wrong. She felt the mortification of one who has been caught in some indecent exhibition.

The humiliation was at first for the song and dance. Not till another moment did she think of the bare legs rising out of the soapsuds. His smouldering gaze brought them to mind.

Instantly she leaped from the tub, shook down the skirts, snatched up shoes and stockings, and fled barefooted to the house. A brogan dropped a few steps from the start. She stopped, as though to pick it up. But Houck was following. The girl turned and ran like a deer.

Houck retrieved the brogan and followed slowly. He smiled. His close-set eyes were gleaming. This was an adventure just to his taste.

The door of the cabin was bolted. He knocked.

“Here’s yore shoe, sweetheart,” he called.

No answer came. He tried the back door. It, too, had the bolt driven home.

“All right. If it ain’t yore shoe I’ll take it along with me. So long.”

He walked away and waited in the bushes. His expectation was that this might draw her from cover. It did not.

Half an hour later Tolliver rode across the mesa. He found Houck waiting for him at the entrance to the corral. Pete nodded a rather surly greeting. He could not afford to quarrel with the man, but he was one of the last persons in the world he wanted to see.

“’Lo, Jake,” he said. “Back again, eh?”

“Yep. Finished my business. I got to have a talk with you, Pete.”

Tolliver slid a troubled gaze at him. What did Jake want? Was it money—hush money? The trapper did not have fifty dollars to his name, nor for that matter twenty.

“’S all right, Jake. If there’s anything I can do for you —why, all you got to do’s to let me know,” he said

uneasily.

Houck laughed, derisively. “Sure. I know how fond you are of me, Pete. You’re plumb glad to see me again, ain’t you? Jes’ a-honin’ to talk over old times, I’ll bet.”

“I’d as lief forget them days, Jake,” Tolliver confessed. “I done turned over another chapter, as you might say. No need rakin’ them up, looks like.”

The big man’s grin mocked him. “Tha’s up to you, Pete. Me, I aim to be reasonable. I ain’t throwin’ off on my friends. All I want’s to make sure they *are* my friends. Pete, I’ve took a fancy to yore June. I reckon I’ll fix it up an’ marry her.”

His cold eyes bored into Tolliver. They held the man’s startled, wavering gaze fixed.

“Why, Jake, you’re old enough to be her father,” he presently faltered.

“Maybe I am. But if there’s a better man anywheres about I’d like to meet up with him an’ have him show me. I ain’t but forty-two, Pete, an’ I can whip my weight in wild cats.”

The father’s heart sank. He knew Houck. The man would get by hook or crook what he wanted. He could even foretell what his next move would be.

“She’s only a kid, Jake, not thinkin’ none about gettin’ married. In a year or two, maybe—”

“I’m talkin’ about now, Pete—this week.”

Tolliver wriggled, like a trout on the hook. “What does she say? You spoke of it to her?”

“Sure. She’ll like it fine when she gets her mind used to it. I know how to handle women, Pete. I’m mentionin’ this to you because I want you to use

yore influence. See?"

Pete saw, too well. He moistened his lips with the tip of the tongue. "Why, I don't reckon I could very well do that. A girl's got to make up her own mind. She's too young to be figurin' on marryin'. Better give her time."

"No." Houck flung the word out like an oath. "Now. Right away."

The trapper's voice took on a plaintive note, almost a whine. "You was sayin' yoreself, Jake, that she'd have to get used to it. Looks like it wouldn't be good to rush—"

"She can get used to it after we're married."

"O' course I want to do what's right by my li'l' June. You do too for that matter. We wouldn't either one of us do her a meanness."

"I'm going to marry her," Houck insisted harshly.

"When a girl loses her mother she's sure lost her best friend. It's up to her paw to see she gets a square deal." There was a quaver of emotion in Tolliver's voice. "I don't reckon he can make up to her—"

A sound came from Houck's throat like a snarl. "Are you tryin' to tell me that Pete Tolliver's girl is too good for me? Is that where you're driftin'?"

"Now don't you get mad, Jake," the older man pleaded. "These here are different times. I don't want my June mixed up with—with them Brown's Park days an' all."

"Meanin' me?"

"You're twistin' my words, Jake," the father went on, an anxious desire to propitiate frowning out of the wrinkled face. "I ain't sayin' a word against you. I'm

explainin' howcome I to feel like I do. Since I—bumped into that accident in the Park—"

Houck's ill-natured laugh cut the sentence. It was a jangled dissonance without mirth. "What accident?" he jeered.

"Why—when I got into the trouble—"

"You mean when Jas Stuart caught you rustlin' an' you murdered him an' went to the pen. That what you mean?" he demanded loudly.

Tolliver caught his sleeve. "S-sh! She don't know a thing about it. You recollect I told you that."

The other nodded, hard eyes gloating over the rancher's distress. "An' o' course she don't know you broke jail at Cañon City an' are liable to be dragged back if any one should happen to whisper to the sheriff."

"Not a thing about all that. I wouldn't holler it out thataway if I was you, Jake," Tolliver suggested, glancing nervously toward the house. "Maybe I ought to 'a' told her, but I never did. Her maw died of it, an' I jes' couldn't make out to tell June. You see yoreself how it would be, Pete. Her a li'l' trick with nobody but me. I ain't no great shakes, but at that I'm all she's got. I figured that 'way off here, under another name, they prob'ly never would find me."

"Pretty good guess, Pete Purdy."

"Don' call me that," begged Tolliver.

Houck showed his teeth in an evil grin. "I forgot. What I was sayin' was that nobody knows you're here but me. Most folks have forgot all about you. You can fix things so 's to be safe enough."

"You wouldn't give me away, Jake. You was in on

the rustlin' too. We was pals. It was jes' my bad luck I met up with Jas that day. I didn't begin the shooting. You know that."

"I ain't likely to give away my own father-in-law, am I?"

Again the close-set, hard eyes clamped fast to the wavering ones of the tortured outlaw. In them Tolliver read an ultimatum. Notice was being served on him that there was only one way to seal Houck's lips.

That way he did not want to follow. Pete was a weak father, an ineffective one, wholly unable to give expression to the feeling that at times welled up in him. But June was all his life now held. He suffered because of the loneliness their circumstances forced upon her. The best was what he craved for her.

And Jake Houck was a long way from the best. He had followed rough and evil trails all his life. As a boy, in his cowpuncher days, he had been hard and callous. Time had not improved him.

June came to the door of the cabin and called.

"What is it, honey?" Tolliver asked.

"He's got my shoe. I want it."

Pete looked at the brogan sticking out of Jake's pocket. The big fellow forestalled a question.

"I'll take it to her," he said.

Houck strode to the house.

"So it's yore shoe after all," he grinned.

"Give it here," June demanded.

"Say pretty please."

She flashed to anger. “You’re the meanest man I ever did meet.”

“An’ you’re the prettiest barelegged dancer on the Creek,” he countered.

June stamped the one shoe she was wearing. “Are you going to give me that brogan or not?”

“If you’ll let me put it on for you.”

Furious, she flung round and went back into the house.

He laughed delightedly, then tossed the heavy shoe into the room after her. “Here’s yore shoe, girl. I was only foolin’,” he explained.

June snatched up the brogan, stooped, and fastened it.

CHAPTER V

JUNE ASKS QUESTIONS

Houck, an unwelcome guest, stayed at the cabin on Piceance nearly two weeks. His wooing was surely one of the strangest known. He fleered at June, taunted her, rode over the girl’s pride and sense of decorum, beat down the defenses she set up, and filled her bosom with apprehension. It was impossible to score an advantage over his stolid

strength and pachydermous insensibility.

The trapper sweated blood. He neither liked nor trusted his guest, but he was bound hand and foot. He must sit and watch the fellow moving to his end, see the gains he made day by day, and offer no effective protest. For Houck at a word could send him back to the penitentiary and leave June alone in a world to which her life had been alien.

Pete knew that the cowman was winning the campaign. His assumption that he was an accepted suitor of June began to find its basis of fact. The truth could be read in the child's hunted eyes. She was still fighting, but the battle was a losing one.

Perhaps this was the best way out of a bad situation, Tolliver found himself thinking. In his rough way Houck was fond of June. A blind man could see that. Even though he was a wolf, there were moments when his eyes were tender for her. He would provide well for a wife. If his little Cinderella could bring herself to like the man, there was always a chance that love would follow. Jake always had the knack of fascinating women. He could be very attractive when he wished.

On a happy morning not long since June had sung of her wings. She was a meadow-lark swooping over the hills to freedom, her throat throbbing with songs of joy. Sometimes Pete, too, thought of her as a bird, but through many hours of anguished brooding he had come to know she was a fledgling with broken wings. The penalty for the father's sins had fallen upon the child. All her life she must be hampered by the environment his wrongdoing had built up around them.

Since the beginning of the world masterful men have

drawn to them the eyes and thoughts of women. June was no exception. Among the hours when she hated Houck were increasing moments during which a naïve wonder and admiration filled her mind. She was primitive, elemental. A little tingle of delight thrilled her to know that this strong man wanted her and would fight to win what his heart craved. After all he was her first lover. A queer shame distressed the girl at the memory of his kisses, for through all the anger, chagrin, and wounded pride had come to her the first direct realization of what sex meant. Her alarmed innocence pushed this from her.

Without scruple Houck used all the weapons at hand. There came a day when he skirted the edges of the secret.

“What do you mean?” she demanded. “What is it you claim to know about Dad all so big?”

He could see that June’s eyes were not so bold as the words. They winced from his even as she put the question.

“Ask him.”

“What’ll I ask? I wouldn’t believe anything you told me about him. He’s not like you. He’s good.”

“You don’t have to believe me. Ask him if he ever knew any one called Pete Purdy. Ask him who Jasper Stuart was. An’ where he lived whilst you was stayin’ with yore aunt at Rawlins.”

“I ain’t afraid to,” she retorted. “I’ll do it right now.”

Houck was sprawled on a bench in front of the cabin. He grinned impudently. His manner was an exasperating challenge. Evidently he did not believe she would.

June turned and walked to the stable. The heavy brogans weighted down the lightness of her step. The shapeless clothes concealed the grace of the slim figure. But even so there was a vital energy in the way she moved.

Tolliver was mending the broken teeth of a hay-rake and making a poor job of it.

June made a direct frontal attack. “Dad, did you ever know a man named Pete Purdy?”

The rancher’s lank, unshaven jaw fell. The blow had fallen at last. In a way he had expected it. Yet his mind was too stunned to find any road of escape.

“Why, yes—yes, I—yes, honey,” he faltered.

“Who was he?”

“Well, he was a—a cowpuncher, I reckon.”

“Who was Jasper Stuart, then?”

An explanation could no longer be dodged or avoided. Houck had talked too much. Tolliver knew he must make a clean breast of it, and that his own daughter would sit in judgment on him. Yet he hung back. The years of furtive silence still held him.

“He was a fellow lived in Brown’s Park.”

“What had you to do with him? Why did Jake Houck tell me to ask you about him?”

“Oh, I reckon—”

“And about where you lived while I was with Aunt Molly at Rawlins?” she rushed on.

The poor fellow moistened his dry lips. “I—I’ll tell you the whole story, honey. Mebbe I’d ought to ’a’ told you long ago. But someways—” He stopped, trying for a fresh start. “You’ll despise yore old

daddy. You sure will. Well, you got a right to. I been a mighty bad father to you, June. Tha's a fact."

She waited, dread-filled eyes on his.

"Prob'ly I'd better start at the beginnin', don't you reckon? I never did have any people to brag about. Father and mother died while I was a li'l' grasshopper. I was kinda farmed around, as you might say. Then I come West an' got to punchin' cows. Seems like, I got into a bad crowd. They was wild, an' they rustled more or less. In them days there was a good many sleepers an' mavericks on the range. I expect we used a running-iron right smart when we wasn't sure whose calf it was."

He was trying to put the best face on the story. June could see that, and her heart hardened toward him. She ignored the hungry appeal for mercy in his eyes.

"You mean you stole cattle. Is that it?" She was willing to hurt herself if she could give him pain. Had he not ruined her life?

"Well, I—I—Yes, I reckon that's it. Our crowd picked up calves that belonged to the big outfits like the Diamond Slash. We drove 'em up to Brown's Park, an' later acrost the line to Wyoming or Utah."

"Was Jake Houck one of your crowd?"

Pete hesitated.

She cut in, with a flare of childish ferocity. "I'm gonna know the truth. He's not protecting you any."

"Yes. Jake was one of us. I met up with him right soon after I come to Colorado."

"And Purdy?"

"Tha's the name I was passin' under. I'd worked back in Missouri for a fellow of that name. They got to

callin' me Pete Purdy, so I kinda let it go. My father's name was Tolliver, though. I took it—after the trouble."

"What trouble?"

"It come after I was married. I met yore maw at Rawlins. She was workin' at the railroad restaurant waitin' on table. For a coupla years we lived there, an' I wish to God we'd never left. But Jake persuaded 'Lindy I'd ought to take up land, so we moved back to the Park an' I preëmpted. Everything was all right at first. You was born, an' we was right happy. But Jake kep' a-pesterin' me to go in with him an' do some cattle runnin' on the quiet. There was money in it—pretty good money—an' yore maw was sick an' needed to go to Denver. Jake, he advanced the money, an' o' course I had to work in with him to pay it back. I was sorta driven to it, looks like."

He stopped to mop a perspiring face with a bandanna. Tolliver was not enjoying himself.

"You haven't told me yet what the trouble was," June said.

"Well, this fellow Jas Stuart was a stock detective. He come down for the Cattlemen's Association to find out who was doing the rustlin' in Brown's Park. You see, the Park was a kind of a place where we holed up. There was timbered gulches in there where we could drift cattle in an' hide 'em. Then there was the Hole-in-the-Wall. I expect you've heard of that too."

"Did this Stuart find out who was doing the rustlin'?"

"He was right smart an' overbearin'. Too much so for his own good. Some of the boys served notice on him he was liable to get dry-gulched if he didn't take the

trail back where he come from. But Jas was right obstinate an' he had sand in his craw. I'll say that for him. Well, one day he got word of a drive we was makin'. Him an' his deputies laid in wait for us. There was shooting an' my horse got killed. The others escaped, but they nailed me. In the rookus Stuart had got killed. They laid it on me. Mebbe I did it. I was shooting like the rest. Anyhow, I was convicted an' got twenty years in the pen."

"Twenty years," June echoed.

"Three—four years later there was a jail break. I got into the hills an' made my getaway. Travelin' by night, I reached Rawlins. From there I came down here with a freight outfit, an' I been here ever since."

He stopped. His story was ended. June looked at the slouchy little man with the weak mouth and the skim-milk, lost-dog eyes. He was so palpably wretched, so plainly the victim rather than the builder of his own misfortunes, that her generous heart went out warmly to him.

With a little rush she had him in her arms. They wept together, his head held tight against her immature bosom. It was the first time she had ever known him to break down, and she mothered him as women have from the beginning of time.

"You poor Daddy. Don't I know how it was? That Jake Houck was to blame. He led you into it an' left you to bear the blame," she crooned.

"It ain't me. It's you I'm thinkin' of, honey. I done ruined yore life, looks like. I shut you off from meeting decent folks like other girls do. You ain't had no show."

"Don't you worry about me, Dad. I'll be all right.

What we've got to think about is not to let it get out who you are. If it wasn't for that big bully up at the house—"

She stopped, hopelessly unable to cope with the situation. Whenever she thought of Houck her mind came to an *impasse*. Every road of escape it traveled was blocked by his jeering face, with the jutting jaw set in implacable resolution.

"It don't look like Jake would throw me down thataway," he bewailed. "I never done him a meanness. I kep' my mouth shut when they got me an' wouldn't tell who was in with me. Tha's one reason they soaked me with so long a sentence. They was after Jake. They kep' at me to turn state's evidence an' get a short term. But o' course I couldn't do that."

"'Course not. An' now he turns on you like a coyote —after you stood by him." A surge of indignation boiled up in her. "He's the very worst man ever I knew—an' if he tries to do you any harm I'll—I'll settle with him."

Her father shook his unkempt head. "No, honey. I been learnin' for twelve years that a man can't do wrong for to get out of a hole he's in. If Jake's mean enough to give me up, why, I reckon I'll have to stand the gaff."

"No," denied June, a spark of flaming resolution in her shining eyes.

CHAPTER VI

“DON’T YOU TOUCH HIM!”

Inside the big chuck tent of the construction camp the cook was busy forking steak to tin plates and ladling potatoes into deep dishes.

“Git a move on you, Red Haid,” he ordered.

Bob Dillon distributed the food at intervals along the table which ran nearly the whole length of the canvas top. From an immense coffee pot he poured the clear brown liquid into tin cups set beside each plate. This done, he passed out into the sunshine and beat the triangle.

From every tent men poured like seeds squirted from a squeezed lemon. They were all in a hurry and they jostled each other in their eagerness to get through the open flap. Straw boss, wood walkers, and ground men, they were all hungry. They ate swiftly and largely. The cook and his flunkey were kept busy.

“More spuds!” called one.

“Coming up!” Dillon flung back cheerfully.

“Shoot along more biscuits!” a second ordered.

“On the way!” Bob announced.

The boss of the outfit came in leisurely after the rush. He brought a guest with him and they sat down at the end of the table.

“Beans!” demanded a line man, his mouth full.

“Headed for you!” promised the flunkey.

The guest of the boss was a big rangy fellow in the

early forties. Bob heard the boss call him “Jake,” and later “Houck.” As soon as the boy had a moment to spare he took a good look at the man. He did not like what he saw. Was it the cold, close-set eyes, the crook of the large nose, or the tight-lipped mouth gave the fellow that semblance to a rapacious wolf?

As soon as Bob had cleaned up the dishes he set off up the creek to meet June. The boy was an orphan and had been brought up in a home with two hundred others. His life had been a friendless one, which may have been the reason that he felt a strong bond of sympathy for the lonely girl on Piceance. He would have liked to be an Aladdin with a wonder lamp by means of which he could magically transform her affairs to good fortune. Since this could not be, he gave her what he had—a warm fellow-feeling because of the troubles that worried her.

He found June waiting at their usual place of meeting. Pete Tolliver’s forty-four hung in a scabbard along the girl’s thigh. Bob remembered that she had spoken of seeing a rattlesnake on the trail yesterday.

“’Lo, boy,” she called.

“’Lo, June. I met yore friend.”

“What friend?”

“Jake Houck. He was down at the camp for dinner to-day—came in with the boss.”

“He’s no friend of mine,” she said sulkily.

“Don’t blame you a bit. Mr. Houck looks like one hard citizen. I’d hate to cross him.”

“He’s as tough as an old range bull. No matter what you say or do you can’t faze him,” she replied

wearily.

“You still hate him?”

“More ’n ever. Most o’ the time. He just laughs. He’s bound an’ determined to marry me whether or not. He will, too.”

Bob looked at her, surprised. It was the first time she had ever admitted as much. June’s slim body was packed with a pantherish resilience. Her spirit bristled with courage. What had come over her?

“He won’t if you don’t want him to.”

“Won’t he?” June was lying on a warm flat rock. She had been digging up dirt at the edge of it with a bit of broken stick. Now she looked up at him with the scorn of an experience she felt to be infinitely more extensive than his. “A lot you know about it.”

“How can he? If you an’ Mr. Tolliver don’t want him to.”

“He just will.”

“But, June, that don’t listen reasonable to me. He’s got you buffaloed. If you make up yore mind not to have him—”

“I didn’t say I’d made up my mind not to have him. I said I hated him,” she corrected.

“Well, you wouldn’t marry a fellow you hated,” he argued.

“How do you know so much about it, Bob Dillon?” she flared.

“I use what brains I’ve got. Women don’t do things like that. There wouldn’t be any sense in it.”

“Well, I’ll prob’ly do it. Then you’ll know I haven’t got a lick o’ sense,” she retorted sullenly.

"You ce'tainly beat my time," he said, puzzled. "I've heard you say more mean things about him than everybody else put together, an' now you're talkin' about marryin' him. Why? What's yore reason?"

She looked up. For a moment the morose eyes met his. They told nothing except a dogged intention not to tell anything.

But the boy was no fool. He had thought a good deal about the lonely life she and her father led. Many men came into this country three jumps ahead of the law. It was not good form to ask where any one came from unless he volunteered information about antecedent conditions. Was it possible that Jake Houck had something on Tolliver, that he was using his knowledge to force June into a marriage with him? Otherwise there would be no necessity for her to marry him. As he had told her, it was a free land. But if Houck was coercing her because of her fears for Tolliver, it was possible this might be a factor in determining June to marry him.

"Don't you do it, June. Don't you marry him. He didn't look good to me, Houck didn't," Dillon went on. He was a little excited, and his voice had lifted.

A man who came at this moment round the bend of the creek was grinning unpleasantly. His eyes focused on Dillon.

"So I don't look good to you. Tha's too bad. If you'll tell me what you don't like about me I'll make myself over," jeered Houck.

Bob was struck dumb. The crooked smile and the stab of the eyes that went with it were menacing. He felt goose quills running up and down his spine. This man was one out of a thousand for physical prowess.

"I didn't know you was near," the boy murmured.

"I'll bet you didn't, but you'll know it now." Houck moved toward Dillon slowly.

"Don't you, Jake Houck! Don't you touch him!" June shrilled.

"I got to beat him up, June. It's comin' to him. D'you reckon I'll let the flunkey of a telephone camp interfere in my business? Why, he ain't half man-size."

Bob backed away warily. This Colossus straddling toward him would thrash him within an inch of his life. The boy was white to the lips.

"Stop! Right now!" June faced Houck resolutely, standing between him and his victim.

The big fellow looked at the girl, a slim, fearless little figure with undaunted eyes flinging out a challenge. He laughed, delightedly, then brushed her aside with a sweep of his arm.

Her eyes blazed. The smouldering passion that had been accumulating for weeks boiled up. She dragged out the six-shooter from its holster.

"I won't have you touch him! I won't! If you do I'll—I'll—"

Houck stopped in his stride, held fast by sheer amazement. The revolver pointed straight at him. It did not waver a hair's breadth. He knew how well she could shoot. Only the day before she had killed a circling hawk with a rifle. The bird had dropped like a plummet, dead before it struck the ground. Now, as his gaze took in the pantherish ferocity of her tense pose, he knew that she was keyed up for tragedy. She meant to defend the boy from him if it resulted in

homicide.

It did not occur to him to be afraid. He laughed aloud, half in admiration, half in derision.

“I b’lieve you would, you spunky li’l wild cat,” he told her in great good humor.

“Run, Bob,” called June to the boy.

He stood, hesitating. His impulse was to turn and fly, but he could not quite make up his mind to leave her alone with Houck.

The cowman swung toward the girl.

“Keep back!” she ordered.

Her spurt of defiance tickled him immensely. He went directly to her, his stride unfaltering.

“Want to shoot up poor Jake, do you? An’ you an’ him all set for a honeymoon. Well, go to it, June. You can’t miss now.”

He stood a yard or so from her, easy and undisturbed, laughing in genuine enjoyment. He liked the child’s pluck. The situation, with its salty tang of danger, was wholly to his taste.

But he had disarmed the edge of June’s anger and apprehension. His amusement was too real. It carried the scene from tragedy to farce.

June’s outburst had not been entirely for the sake of Bob. Back of the immediate cause was the desire to break away from this man’s dominance. She had rebelled in the hope of establishing her individual freedom. Now she knew this was vain. What was the use of opposing one who laughed at her heroics and ignored the peril of his position? There was not any way to beat him.

She pushed the six-shooter back into its holster and cried out at him bitterly. “I think you’re the devil or one of his fiends.”

“An’ I think you’re an angel—sometimes,” he mocked.

“I hate you!” she said, and two rows of strong little white teeth snapped tight.

“Sho! Tha’s just a notion you got. You like me fine, if you only knew it, girl.”

She was still shaken with the emotion through which she had passed. “You never were nearer death, Jake Houck, than right now a minute ago.”

His back to Dillon, the cowman gave a curt command. “Hit the trail, boy—sudden.”

Bob looked at June, whose sullen eyes were fighting those of her father’s guest. She had forgotten he was there. Without a word Bob vanished.

“So you love me well enough to shoot me, do you?” Houck jeered.

“I wish I could!” she cried furiously.

“But you can’t. You had yore chance, an’ you couldn’t. What you need is a master, some one you’ll have to honor an’ obey, some one who’ll look after you an’ take the devil outa you. Meanin’ me—Jake Houck. Understand?”

“I won’t! I won’t!” she cried. “You come here an’ bully me because—because of what you know about Father. If you were half a man—if you were white, you wouldn’t try to use that against me like you do.”

“I’m using it for you. Why, you li’l’ spitfire, can’t you see as Jake Houck’s wife you get a chance to live? You’ll have clothes an’ shoes an’ pretties like other

folks instead o' them rags you wear now. I aim to be good to you, June."

"You *say* that. Don't I know you? I'd 'most rather be dead than married to you. But you keep pesterin' me. I—I—" Her voice broke.

"If you don' know what's best for you, I do. To-morrow I got to go to Meeker. I'll be back Thursday. We'll ride over to Bear Cat Friday an' be married. Tha's how we'll fix it."

He did not take her in his arms or try to kiss her. The man was wise in his generation. Cheerfully, as a matter of course, he continued:

"We'll go up to the house an' tell Tolliver it's all settled."

She lagged back, sulkily, still protesting. "It's not settled, either. You don't run everything."

But in her heart she was afraid he had stormed the last trench of her resistance.

CHAPTER VII

AN ELOPEMENT

Bob Dillon was peeling potatoes outside the chuck tent when he heard a whistle he recognized instantly. It was a very good imitation of a meadow-lark's

joyous lilt. He answered it, put down the pan and knife, and rose.

“Where you going?” demanded the cook.

“Back in a minute, Lon,” the flunkey told him, and followed a cow trail that took him up the hill through the sage.

“I never did see a fellow like him,” the cook communed aloud to himself. “A bird calls, an’ he’s got to quit work to find out what it wants. Kinda nice kid, too, if he is queer.”

Among the piñons at the rock rim above Bob found June. He had not seen her since the day when she had saved him from a thrashing. The boy was not very proud of the way he had behaved. If he had not shown the white feather, he had come dangerously close to it.

“How are cases, June?”

His eyes, which had been rather dodging hers, came to rest on the girl at last. One glance told him that she was in trouble.

“I don’ know what to do, Bob,” she broke out. “Jake will be back to-day—by dinner-time, I reckon. He says I’ve got to go with him to Bear Cat an’ be married to-morrow.”

Dillon opened his lips to speak, but he said nothing. He remembered how he had counseled her to boldness before and failed at the pinch. What advice could he give? What could he say to comfort his friend?

“Haven’t you got any folks you could go to—some one who would tell Houck where to head in at?”

She shook her head. “My father’s all I’ve got.”

"Won't he help you?"

"He would, but—I can't ask him. I got to pretend to him I'd just as lief marry Jake."

"Why have you?"

"I can't tell you why, Bob. But that's how it is."

"And you still hate Houck?"

"Ump-ha. Except—sometimes." She did not explain that elusive answer. "But it don't matter about how I feel. When he comes back I've got to do like he says."

June broke down and began to weep. The boy's tender heart melted within him.

"Don't you. Don't you," he begged. "We'll find a way, li'l' pardner. We sure will."

"How?" she asked, between sobs. "There ain't—any way—except to—to marry Jake."

"You could run away—and work," he suggested.

"Who'd give me work? And where could I go that he wouldn't find me?"

Practical details stumped him. Her objections were valid enough. With her inexperience she could never face the world alone.

"Well, le's see. You've got friends. Somewhere that you could kinda hide for a while."

"Not a friend. We—we don't make friends," she said in a small, forlorn voice with a catch in it.

"You got one," he said stoutly. "Maybe he don't amount to much, but—" He broke off, struck by an idea. "Say, June, why couldn't you run off with me? We'd go clear away, where he wouldn't find us."

“How could I run off with you?” A pink flood poured into her face. “You’re not my brother. You’re no kin.”

“No, but—” He frowned at the ground, kicking at a piece of moss with his toe to help him concentrate. Again he found an idea. “We could get married.”

This left her staring at him, speechless.

He began to dress his proposal with arguments. He was a humble enough youth who had played a trifling part in life. But his imagination soared at seeing himself a rescuer of distressed maidens. He was a dreamer of dreams. In them he bulked large and filled heroic rôles amply.

June was a practical young person. “What d’ you want to marry me for?” she demanded.

He came to earth. He did not want to marry her. At least he had not wanted to until the moment before. If he had been able to give the reason for his suggestion, it would probably have been that her complete isolation and helplessness appealed to the same conditions in himself and to a certain youthful chivalry.

“We’re good pals, ain’t we?” was the best he could do by way of answer.

“Yes, but you don’t—you don’t—”

Beneath the tan of her dark cheeks the blood poured in again. It was as hard for her to talk about love as for him. She felt the same shy, uneasy embarrassment, as though it were some subject taboo, not to be discussed by sane-minded people.

His freckled face matched hers in color. “You don’t have to be thataway. If we like each other, an’ if it looks like the best thing to do—why—”

"I couldn't leave Dad," she said.

"You'll have to leave him if you marry Jake Houck."

That brought her to another aspect of the situation. If she ran away with Bob and married him, what would Houck do in regard to her father? Some deep instinct told her that he would not punish Tolliver for it if she went without his knowledge. The man was ruthless, but he was not needlessly cruel.

"What would we do? Where would we go—afterward?" she asked.

He waved a hand largely into space. "Anywhere. Denver, maybe. Or Cheyenne. Or Salt Lake."

"How'd we live?"

"I'd get work. No trouble about that."

She considered the matter, at first unsentimentally, as a workable proposition. In spite of herself she could not hold quite to that aspect of the case. Her blood began to beat faster. She would escape Houck. That was the fundamental advantage of the plan. But she would see the world. She would meet people. Perhaps for the first time she would ride on a train. Wonderful stories had been told her by Dillon, of how colored men cooked and served meals on a train rushing along forty miles an hour, of how they pulled beds down from the roof and folks went to sleep in little rooms just as though they were at home. She would see all the lovely things he had described to her. There was a court-house in Denver where you got into a small room and it traveled up with you till you got out and looked down four stories from a window.

"If we go it'll have to be right away," she said. "Without tellin' anybody."

"Yes," he agreed.

"I could go back to the house an' get my things."

"While I'm gettin' mine. There's nobody at the camp but Lon, an' he always sleeps after he gets through work. But how'll we get to Bear Cat?"

"I'll bring the buckboard. Dad's away. I'll leave him a note. Meet you in half an hour on Twelve-Mile Hill," she added.

It was so arranged.

June ran back to the house, hitched the horses to the buckboard, and changed to her best dress. She made a little bundle of her other clothes and tied them in a bandanna handkerchief.

On a scrap of coarse brown wrapping-paper she wrote a short note:

> DEAR DAD,
>
> I'm going away with Bob Dillon. We're going to be married. Don't blame me too much. Jake Houck drove me to it. I'll write you soon. Don't forget to take the cough medicine when you need it.
>
> JUNE

She added a postscript.

> I'll leave the team at Kilburn's Corral.

Unexpectedly, she found herself crying. Tears splashed on the writing. She folded the note, put it in the empty coffee pot, and left this on the table.

June had no time just now for doubts. The horses were half-broken broncos. They traveled the first hundred yards tied in a knot, the buckboard sometimes on four wheels, but more often on two.

At the top of the hill she managed to slacken them enough for Bob to jump in. They were off again as though shot from a bow. June wound the reins round her hands and leaned back, arms and strong thin wrists taut. The colts flew over the ground at a gallop.

There was no chance for conversation. Bob watched the girl drive. He offered no advice. She was, he knew, a better teamster than himself. Her eyes and mind were wholly on the business in hand.

A flush of excitement burned in June's cheeks. Tolliver never would let her drive the colts because of the danger. She loved the stimulation of rapid travel, the rush of the wind past her ears, the sense of responsibility at holding the lines.

Bob clung to the seat and braced himself. He knew that all June could do was to steady the team enough to keep the horses in the road. Every moment he expected a smash, but it did not come. The colts reached the foot of Twelve-Mile safely and swept up the slope beyond. The driver took a new grip on the lines and put her weight on them. It was a long hill. By the time they reached the top the colts were under control and ready to behave for the rest of the day.

The sparkling eyes of June met those of Bob. "Great, ain't it?"

He nodded, but it had not been fun for him. He had been distinctly frightened. He felt for June the reluctant admiration gameness compels from those who are constitutionally timid. What manner of girl was this who could shave disaster in such a reckless fashion and actually enjoy it?

At the edge of the town they exchanged seats at

June's suggestion and Bob drove in. It was mid-afternoon by the sun as he tied the horses to the rack in front of the larger of the two general stores.

"You stay here," the boy advised. "I'll get things fixed, then come back an' let you know."

He had only a hazy idea of the business details of getting married, but he knew a justice of the peace could tell him. He wandered down the street in search of one.

Half a dozen cowpunchers bent on sport drifted in his direction. One of them was riding down the dusty road. To the horn of his saddle a rope was tied. The other end of it was attached to a green hide of a steer dragging after him.

The punchers made a half-circle round Bob.

One grinned and made comment. "Here's one looks ripe, fellows. Jes' a-honin' for a ride, looks like."

"Betcha he don't last ten jumps," another said.

Before Bob could offer any resistance or make any protest he had been jubilantly seized and dumped down on the hide.

"Let 'er go," some one shouted.

The horse, at the touch of the spur, jumped to a gallop. Bob felt a sudden sick sense of helplessness. The earth was cut out from under him. He crouched low and tried to cling to the slippery hide as it bounced forward. Each leap of the bronco upset him. Within three seconds he had ridden on his head, his back, and his stomach. Wildly he clawed at the rope as he rolled over.

With a yell the rider swung a corner. Bob went off the hide at a tangent, rolling over and over in the

yellow four-inch-deep dust.

He got up, dizzy and perplexed. His best suit looked as though it had been through a long and severe war.

A boyish puncher came up and grinned at him in the friendliest way. “Hello, fellow! Have a good ride?”

Bob smiled through the dust he had accumulated. “It didn’t last long.”

“Most generally it don’t. Come in to Dolan’s an’ have a drink.” He mentioned his name. It was Dud Hollister.

“Can’t.” Bob followed an impulse. “Say, how do you get married?” he asked, lowering his voice.

“I don’t,” Dud answered promptly. “Not so long as I’m in my right mind.”

“I mean, how do I?” He added sheepishly, “She’s in the buckboard.”

“Oh!” Dud fell to sudden sobriety. This was serious business. “I’d get a license at the cou’t-house. Then go see Blister Haines. He’s the J. P.”

Bob equipped himself with a license, returned to June, and reported progress.

The bride-to-be was simmering with indignation. In those days she had not yet cultivated a sense of humor.

“I saw what they did to you—the brutes,” she snapped.

“Sho! That wasn’t nothin’, June. The boys was only funnin’. Well, I got things fixed. We gotta go to the J. P.”

The justice was having forty winks when they entered his office. He was enormously fat, a fact

notable in a country of lean men. Moreover, he had neither eyebrows nor hair, though his face announced him not more than thirty in spite of its triple chin. Mr. Haines was slumped far down in a big armchair out of which he overflowed prodigally. His feet were on a second chair.

Bob wakened him ruthlessly. He sat up blinking. Bob started to speak. He stopped him with a fat uplifted hand.

“I r-reckon I know what *you* want, y-young man,” he said.

CHAPTER VIII

BLISTER GIVES ADVICE

Blister Haines, J. P., was by way of being a character. His waggish viewpoint was emphasized by a slight stutter.

“S-so you want to h-hitch up to double trouble, do you?” he asked.

“We want to get married,” Bob said.

“S-same thing,” the fat man wheezed, grinning. “C-come right in an’ I’ll tie you tighter ’n a d-drum.”

“I’ve only got six dollars,” the bridegroom explained.

“No matter a-tall. My f-fee is jus’ six d-dollars,” the

justice announced promptly.

Bob hesitated. June nudged him and whispered. The husband-elect listened, nodded, and spoke up.

“I’ll pay you two dollars.”

Blister looked at the bride reproachfully. “L-lady, if you ain’t worth s-six dollars to him you ain’t worth a c-cent. But I’ll show you how good a sport I am. I’ll m-make you a wedding present of the j-job. Got any witnesses?”

“Do we have to have witnesses?” asked Bob helplessly. Getting married was a more formidable and formal affair than he had supposed.

“Sure. I’ll dig ’em up.”

The justice waddled to the door of the saloon adjoining and stuck his head inside. A row of cowpunchers were lined up in front of the bar.

“Y-you, Dud Hollister an’ Tom Reeves, I’m servin’ a subpoena on you lads as w-witnesses at a w-weddin’,” he said in the high wheeze that sounded so funny coming from his immense bulk.

“Whose wedding?” demanded Reeves, a lank youth with a brick-red face, the nose of which had been broken.

“N-none of yore darned business.”

“Do we get to kiss the bride?”

“You h-hotfoot it right to my office or I’ll throw you in the c-calaboose for c-contempt of court, Tom Reeves.”

The puncher turned to Hollister, grinning. “Come along, Dud. Might ’s well learn how it’s done, ol’ Sure-Shot.”

The range-riders jingled into the office at the heels of the justice. Blister inquired for the names of the principals and introduced the witnesses to them. The gayety and the audacity of the punchers had vanished. They ducked their heads and drew back a foot each in a scrape that was meant to be a bow. They were almost as embarrassed as June and Bob. Which is saying a good deal.

June had not realized what an ordeal it would be to stand up before strangers in her dingy dress and heavy cracked brogans while she promised to love, honor, and obey. She was acutely conscious of her awkwardness, of the flying, rebellious hair, of a hole in a stocking she tried to keep concealed. And for the first time, too, she became aware of the solemnity of what she was doing. The replies she gave were low and confused.

Before she knew it the ceremony was over.

Blister closed the book and dropped it on a chair.

“Kiss yore wife, man,” he admonished, chuckling.

Bob flushed to the roots of his hair. He slid a look at June, not sure whether she would want him to do that. Her long dark lashes had fallen to the dusky cheeks and hid the downcast eyes.

His awkward peck caught her just below the ear.

The bridegroom offered the justice two dollars. Blister took it and handed it to June.

“You keep it, ma’am, an’ buy yorese’f somethin’ for a p-pretty. I’d jes’ b-blow it anyhow. Hope you’ll be r-real happy. If this yere young s-scalawag don’t treat you h-handsome, Tom an’ Dud’ll be glad to ride over an’ beat him up proper ’most any time you give ’em the high sign. Am I right, boys?”

"Sure are," they said, grinning bashfully.

"As j-justice of the peace for Garfield County, S-state of C-colorado, I'm entitled to k-kiss the bride, but mos' generally I give her one o' these heart-to-heart talks instead, onloadin' from my chest some f-free gratis g-good advice," the fat man explained in his hoarse wheeze. "You got to r-remember, ma'am, that m-marriage ain't duck soup for n-neither the one nor the other of the h-high contractin' parties thereto. It's a g-game of give an' take, an' at that a h-heap more give than take."

"Yes, sir," murmured June tremulously, looking down at the hole in her stocking.

"Whilst I n-never yet c-committed matrimony in my own p-person, me being ample provided with t-trouble an' satisfied with what griefs I already got, yet I've run cows off an' on, an' so have had workin' for me several of this sex you've now got tangled up with, ma'am," Blister sailed on cheerfully. "I'll say the best way to keep 'em contented is to feed 'em good, treat 'em as if they was human, an' in general give 'em a more or less free rein, dependin' on their g-general habits an' cussedness. If that don't suit a p-puncher I most usually h-hand him his hat an' say, 'So long, son, you 'n' me ain't c-consanguineously constructed to ride the same range; no hard feelin's, but if you're w-wishful to jog on to another outfit I'll say adios without no tears.' You can't g-get rid of yore husband that easy, ma'am, so I'll recommend the g-good grub, s-seventy-five s-smiles per diem, an' the aforesaid more or less f-free rein."

Again June whispered, "Yes, sir," but this time her honest eyes lifted and went straight into his.

"An' you." The justice turned his batteries on the

groom. “You w-wanta recollect that this r-road you’ve done chose ain’t no easy one to t-travel. Tenderfoot come in the other day an’ w-wanted to know what kind of a road it was to S-stinking Creek. I tell him it’s a g-good road. Yesterday he come rarin’ in to f-find out what I told him that for. ‘Fellow,’ I says, ‘Fellow, any r-road you can g-get over is a good road in this country.’ It’s t-thataway with marriage, son, an’ don’t you forget it a h-holy minute. Another thing, this being u-united in wedlock ain’t no sinecure.”

“Ain’t no which kind of a sin?” inquired Reeves.

Dud Hollister grinned admiringly. “Blister sure ropes an’ hogties a heap of longhorn words.”

The justice scratched his bald poll and elucidated. “A s-sinecure, boys, is when a f-fellow rides the g-grub line habitual an’ don’t rope no d-dogies for his stack o’ wheats an’ c-coffee.” He wagged a fat forefinger at Bob. “You gotta quit hellin’ around now an’ behave yorese’f like a respectable m-married man. You gotta dig in an’ work. At that you ’n’ the little lady will have yore flareups. When you do, give her the best of it an’ you’ll never be sorry. Tha’s all.”

Blister slid a hand furtively into a drawer of the desk, groped for a moment, then flung a handful of rice over bride and groom.

The newly married couple left the office hurriedly. They did not look at each other. An acute shyness had swept over both of them. They walked to the buckboard, still without speaking.

June opened a perspiring little brown palm in which lay two warm silver dollars. “Here’s yore money,” she said.

"It's yours. He gave it to you," Bob answered, swallowing hard. "For a weddin' present."

"Well, I ain't no pockets. You keep it for me."

The transfer was accomplished, neither of them looking into the eyes of the other.

Blister Haines, flanked on each side by one of the witnesses, rolled past on his way to the bar of the Bear Cat House. His throat was dry and he proposed to liquidate his unusual exertion. He always celebrated a wedding by taking a few drinks. Any excuse was a good excuse for that. He waved a hand toward the newlyweds in greeting.

Bob answered by lifting his own. He had not taken three drinks in his life, but he felt that he would like one now. It might cheer him up a little.

What in the world was he to do with June? Where could he take her for the night? And after that what would they do? He had not money enough to pay stage fare to get them away. He did not know anybody from whom he could borrow any. Yet even if he found work in Bear Cat, they dared not stay here. Houck would come "rip-raring" down from the hills and probably murder him.

Anyhow, it would not do for him to act as though he were stumped. He managed a smile.

"We'd better take the team to the corral, then go get something to eat, June. I'm sure enough hungry. Ain't you?"

She nodded. Even to go to the hotel or a restaurant for dinner was an adventure for her, so little of experience had her life offered.

As they walked from the barn to the Bear Cat House,

the girl-bride was still dumb. The marriage ceremony had brought home to her the solemnity of what she had done. She had promised to love, honor, and obey this boy, to care for him in sickness and in health, till death came to part them.

What did she know about him? What manner of man had she married? The consequences of the step they had taken began to appall her. She would have to live with him in all the intimacies of married life, cook for him, wash his clothes, sit opposite him at the table three times a day for fifty years. He was to be the father of her children, and she knew nothing whatever about him except that he was gentle and friendly.

From under long curving lashes she stole a shy look at him. He was her husband, this stranger. Would she be able to please him? June thought of what Blister Haines had said. She was a pretty good cook. That was one thing. And she would try not to let herself sulk or be a spitfire. Maybe he would not get tired of her if she worked real hard to suit him.

The hotel was an adobe building. In the doorway stood a woman leaning against the jamb. She was smoking a cigar. June looked twice at her before she believed her eyes.

The woman took the cigar from between her lips. “Are you the children Blister Haines just married?” she asked bluntly.

“We—we’ve just been married by Mr. Haines,” Bob replied with an attempt at dignity.

The blue eyes of the woman softened as she looked at June—softened indescribably. They read instantly the doubt and loneliness of the child. She threw the cigar into the street and moved swiftly toward the

bride. A moment before she had been hard and sexless, in June's virgin eyes almost a monstrosity. Now she was all mother, filled with the protective instinct.

"I'm Mollie Gillespie—keep the hotel here," she explained. "You come right in an' I'll fix up a nice room for you, my dearie. You can wash up after yore ride and you'll feel a lot better. I'll have Chung Lung cook you both a bit of supper soon as he comes back to the kitchen. A good steak an' some nice French frys, say. With some of the mince pie left from dinner and a good cup of coffee." Mollie's arm was round June, petting and comforting her.

June felt and repressed an impulse to tears. "You're mighty good," she gulped.

The landlady of the Bear Cat House bustled the girl into a room and began to mother her. Bob hung around the door. He did not know whether he was expected to come in or stay out, though he knew which he wanted to do.

Mollie sent him about his business. "Scat!" she snapped. "Get outa here, Mr. Husband, an' don't you show up till five o'clock prompt. Hear me?"

Bob heard and vanished like a tin-canned pup. He was the most relieved youth in Bear Cat. At least he had a reprieve. Mrs. Gillespie would know what to do and how to do it.

If being a married man was like this, he did not wonder that Dud Hollister and Blister Haines felt the way they did toward that holy estate.

CHAPTER IX

THE WHITE FEATHER

At the appointed time Bob sneaked back to the hotel. He hung around the lobby for a minute or two, drifted into the saloon and gambling annex, and presently found himself hanging over the bar because he did not know what else to do with himself.

Was he to go to the room after June and bring her to supper? Or was he to wait until she came out? He wished he knew.

Mollie caught sight of him and put a flea in his ear. “What d’ you think you’re doing here, young fellow, me lad? Get outa this den of iniquity an’ hustle back to the room where the little lady is waitin’ for you. Hear me?” she snorted.

A minute later Bob was knocking timidly on the door of room 9. A small voice told him to come in. He opened the door.

June shyly met the eyes of her husband. “Mrs. Gillespie said maybe you’d want to wash up before supper.”

“I reckon that’d be a good idee,” he said, shifting from one foot to the other.

Did she expect him to wash here? Or what?

June poured water into the basin and found a towel.

Not for a five-dollar bill would Bob have removed his coat, though there had never been a time in his young life when he would have welcomed more a greenback. He did not intend to be indelicate while

alone with a young woman in a bedroom. The very thought of it made him scarlet to the roots of his red hair.

After he had scrubbed himself till his face was like a shining apple, June lent him a comb. She stole a furtive look at him while he was standing before the small cracked mirror. For better or worse he was her man. She had to make the best of him. A sense of proprietorship that was almost pride glowed faintly in her. He was a nice boy, even if he was so thin and red and freckled. Bob would be good to her. She was sure of that.

“Mrs. Gillespie said she reckoned she could fix you up a job to help the cook,” the bride said.

“You mean—to-night or for good?”

“Right along, she said.”

Bob did not welcome the suggestion. There was an imperative urge within him to get away from Bear Cat before Jake Houck arrived. There was no use dodging it. He was afraid of the fellow’s vengeance. This was a country where men used firearms freely. The big man from Brown’s Park might shoot him down at sight.

“I don’t reckon we’d better stay here,” he answered uneasily. “In a bigger town I can get a better job likely.”

“But we haven’t money enough to go on the stage, have we?”

“If there was a bull team going out mebbe I could work my way.”

“W-e-ll.” She considered this dubiously. “If we stayed here Mrs. Gillespie would let me wash dishes an’ all.

She said she'd give me two dollars a week an' my board. Tha's a lot of money, Bob."

He looked out of the window. "I don't want trouble with Jake Houck. It—it would worry you."

"Yes, but—" June did not quite know how to say what was in her mind. She had an instinctive feeling that the way to meet trouble was to face it unafraid and not to run away from it. "I don't reckon we'd better show Jake we're scared of him—now. O' course he'll be mad at first, but he's got no right to be. Jes' 'cause he kep' a-pesterin' me don't give him no claim on me."

"No, but you know what he is an' how he acts."

"I'll go where you want to go. I jes' thought, seein' how good to us Mrs. Gillespie has been, that maybe —"

"Well, we'll talk it over after supper," Bob said. "I'm for lighting out myself. To Laramie or Cheyenne, say."

As they had not eaten since breakfast they were a pair of hungry young animals. They did full justice to the steak, French frys, mince pie, and coffee Mrs. Gillespie had promised.

They hung for a moment awkwardly outside the dining-room. Both of them were looking for an excuse to avoid returning to their room yet.

"Like to look the town over?" Bob asked.

June accepted eagerly.

They walked up the single business street and looked in the windows. The young husband bought his bride a paper sack of chocolates and they ate them as they strolled. Somehow they did not feel half as shy of

each other in the open as when shut up together between the walls of a bedroom.

Dusk was beginning to fall. It veiled the crude and callow aspects of the frontier town and filled the hollows of the surrounding hills with a soft violet haze.

Bob's eyes met the dark orbs of June. Between them some communication flashed. For the first time a queer emotion clutched at the boy's heart. An intoxicating thrill pulsed through his veins. She was his wife, this shy girl so flushed and tender.

His hand caught hers and gave it a little comforting pressure. It was his first love gesture and it warmed her like wine.

"You're right good to me," she murmured.

She was grateful for so little. All her life she had been starved for love and friendship just as he had. Bob resolved to give them to her in a flood. A great tide of sympathy flowed out from him to her. He would be good to her. He wished she knew now how well he meant to look after her. But he could not tell her. A queer shame tied his tongue.

From a blacksmith shop a man stepped.

"Say, fellow, can I see you a minute?" he asked.

It was Dud Hollister. He drew Bob back into the smithy.

"Big guy in town lookin' for you. He's tankin' up. You heeled?"

Bob felt as though his heart had been drenched with ice water. Houck was here then. Already.

"No, I—I don't carry a gun," he replied, weakly.

"Here's mine. Shoots just a mite high, but she's a good old friend." Dud pressed a six-shooter on Dillon.

The boy took it reluctantly. The blood in his veins ran cold. "I dunno. I reckon mebbe I better not. If I talked to him, don't you think—?"

"Talk, hell! He's out for blood, that guy is. He's made his brags right over the bar at Dolan's what all he's gonna do to you. I'm no gunman, understand. But a fellow's got to look out for number one. I'd let him have it soon as I seen him. Right off the reel."

"Would you?"

"Surest thing you know. He's a bad actor, that fellow is."

"If I went to the marshal—"

Dud's eye held derision. "What good'd that do? Simp ain't gonna draw cards *till after some one's been gunned*. He don't claim to be no mind-reader, Simp don't."

"I'm not lookin' for trouble," Bob began to explain.

"Fellow, it's lookin' for you," cut in Dud. "You hold that gun right under yore coat, an' when you meet up with Mr. Hook or whoever he is, don't you wait to ask 'What for?' Go to fannin'."

Bob rejoined June. His lips were bloodless. He felt a queer weakness in the knees.

"What did he want?" asked June.

"Houck's here—lookin' for me," the wretched boy explained.

"What's that you've got under yore coat?" she demanded quickly.

"It's a—a gun. He made me take it. Said Houck was tellin' how he'd—do for me."

The fear-filled eyes of the boy met the stricken ones of his bride. She knew now what she had before suspected and would not let herself believe.

If it was possible she must help him to avoid a meeting with Houck. She could not have him shamed. Her savage young pride would not permit the girl to mate with one who proved himself a coward at a crisis of his life. It was necessary to her self-respect that she save his.

"We'd better go back to the hotel," she said. "You can stay in our room, and I'll send for Jake an' talk with him downstairs."

"I don't reckon I'd better do that," Bob protested feebly. "He might—hurt you. No tellin'."

June ignored this. "Did you hear whether Dad's with him?" she asked.

"No."

"Where is Jake?"

"He was at Dolan's drinking when that Dud Hollister seen him."

"I'll have him come right away—before he's had too much. Dad says he used to be mean when he was drinkin'."

The hotel was in the same block as Dolan's, a hundred feet beyond it. They were passing the saloon when the door was pushed open and a man came out. At sight of them he gave a triumphant whoop.

"Got ya!" he cried.

The look on his face daunted Bob. The boy felt the

courage dry up within him. Mouth and throat parched. He tried to speak and found he could not.

June took up the gage, instantly, defiantly. “You’ve got nothing to do with us, Jake Houck. We’re married.”

The news had reached him. He looked at her blackly. “Married or single, you’re mine, girl, an’ you’re going with me.”

“My husband will have a word to say about that,” June boasted bravely.

Houck looked at his rival, and a sinister, mocking smile creased the hard face. “I’m plumb scared of him,” he jeered.

“We g-got a right to get married, Mr. Houck,” Bob said, teeth chattering. “You hadn’t ought to make us trouble.”

“Speaks up right brave, don’t he?”

“He’s as brave as you are, Jake Houck, even if he ain’t a bully,” the bride flamed.

“So?” Houck moved a step or two toward Dillon.

The hand under the coat shook as though the boy had a chill.

“What you got there—in yore hand?” demanded Houck.

The revolver came to light.

Houck stuck his hands in his trouser pockets, straddled out his feet, and laughed derisively. “Allowin’ for to kill me, eh?”

“No, sir.” The voice was a dry whisper. “I’d like to talk this over reasonable, Mr. Houck, an’ fix it up so’s bygones would be bygones. I ain’t lookin’ for

trouble."

"I sure believe that." Houck turned to June. "It wouldn't be safe for me to leave you with this desperate character who goes around with a six-shooter not lookin' for trouble. I'm aimin' to take you with me, like I said."

Her eyes clashed with his and gave way at last. "You always act like you're God Almighty," she cried passionately. "Are you hard o' hearing? I'm married to Bob Dillon here."

"I ain't heard him raise any objections to yore goin'," Houck taunted. "Tolliver said for me to bring you, an' I'll do it."

June spoke to Bob, her voice trembling. "Tell him where to get off at," she begged.

"Mr. Houck, June's my wife. She's made her choice. That ends it," Bob said unsteadily.

The cold, cruel eyes of the ex-rustler gripped those of Dillon and held them. "End it, does it? Listen. If you're any kind of a man a-tall you'd better shoot me right now. I'm gonna take her from you, an' you're goin' to tell her to go with me. Understand?"

"He'll not tell me any such a thing," June protested. But her heart sank. She was not sure whether her husband would grovel. If he did—if he did—

The jeering voice went on taunting its victim. "If I was you I'd use that gun or I'd crawl into a hole. Ain't you got any spunk a-tall? I'm tellin' you that June's goin' with me instead o' you, an' that you're goin' to tell her to go. Tha's the kind of a man she married."

"No, Mr. Houck, I don't reckon—"

Houck moved forward, evenly, without haste, eyes cold as chilled steel and as unyielding. “Gimme that gun, if you ain’t goin’ to use it.” He held out a hand.

“Don’t, Bob,” begged June, in a panic of dismay.

While his heart fluttered with apprehension Bob told himself, over and over, that he would not hand the revolver to Houck. He was still saying it when his right arm began to move slowly forward. The weapon passed from one to the other.

June gave a sobbing sound of shame and despair. She felt like a swimmer in a swift current when the deep waters are closing over his head.

“Now tell her you ain’t good enough for her, that you’ve got no sand in yore craw, and she’s to go with me,” ordered Houck.

“No.” Young Dillon’s voice came dry from a throat like cotton.

The big man caught Bob’s wrist and slowly twisted. The boy gave an agonized howl of pain. June was white to the lips, but she made no attempt to interfere. It was too late. Bob must show the stuff that was in him. He must go through to a fighting finish or he must prove himself a weakling.

“If you give her up now, you’re a yellow dog, Dillon,” his tormentor sneered. “Stick it out. Tell me to go to red-hot blazes.”

He took an extra turn on the wrist. Bob writhed and shrieked. Tiny beads of perspiration stood on his forehead. “You’re killin’ me!” he screamed.

“Wish you’d gunned me when you had a chance, don’t you?” Houck spat at him. “Too late now. Well, what’s it to be?” Again he applied the torture.

The boy begged, pleaded, then surrendered. “I can’t stand it! I’ll do anything you say.”

“Well, you know yore li’l’ piece. Speak it right up,” ordered the cattleman.

Bob said it, with his eyes on the ground, feeling and looking like a whipped cur. “You better go with him, June. I—I’m no good.” A sob choked him. He buried his face in his hands.

Houck laughed harshly. “You hear him, June.”

In a small dead voice June asked a question. “Do you mean that, Bob—that I’m to go with him—that you give me up?”

Her husband nodded, without looking up.

No man can sacrifice his mate to save his own hide and still hold her respect. June looked at him in a nausea of sick scorn. She turned from him, wasting no more words.

She and Houck vanished into the gathering darkness.

CHAPTER X

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Houck's jeering laugh of triumph came back to the humiliated boy. He noticed for the first time that two or three men were watching him from the door of the saloon. Ashamed to the depths of his being, he hung his head dejectedly. All his life he would be a marked figure because Jake had stamped the manhood out of him, had walked off with his bride of an hour.

In the country of the open spaces a man must have sand. Courage is the basis upon which the other virtues are built, the fundamental upon which he is most searchingly judged. Let a man tell the truth, stick to his pal, and fight when trouble is forced on him, and he will do to ride the river with, in the phrase of the plains.

Bob had lost June. She would, of course, never look at him again. To have failed her so miserably cut deep into his pride and self-respect. With her he had lost, too, the esteem of all those who lived within a radius of fifty miles. For the story would go out to every ranch and cow-camp. Worst of all he had blown out the dynamic spark within himself that is the source of life and hope.

He did not deceive himself. Houck had said he was going to take June to her father. But he had said it

with a cynical sneer on his lips. For the girl to be Jake's wife would have been bad enough, but to be his victim without the protection of legality would be infinitely worse. And that was the lot to which June was destined. She had fought, but she could fight no longer.

Fate had played her a scurvy trick in the man she had chosen. Another husband—Dud Hollister, for instance—would have battled it out for her to a finish, till he had been beaten so badly he could no longer crawl to his feet. If Bob had done that, even though he had been hopelessly overmatched, he would have broken Houck's power over June. All the wild, brave spirit of her would have gone out to her husband in a rush of feeling. The battle would have been won for them both. The thing that had stung her pride and crushed her spirit was that he had not struck a blow for her. His cowardice had driven her to Jake Houck's arms because there was no other place for her to go.

Their adventure had ended in tragedy both for her and for him. Bob sank down on a dry-goods box and put his twitching face in his hands. He had flung away both his own chance for happiness and hers. So far as he was concerned he was done for. He could never live down the horrible thing he had done.

He had been rather a frail youth, with very little confidence in himself. Above all else he had always admired strength and courage, the qualities in which he was most lacking. He had lived on the defensive, oppressed by a subconscious sense of inferiority. His actions had been conditioned by fear. Life at the charitable institution where he had been sent as a small child fostered this depression of the ego and its subjection to external circumstances. The manager of

the home ruled by the rod. Bob had always lived in a sick dread of it. Only within the past few months had he begun to come into his own, a heritage of health and happiness.

Dud Hollister came to him out of Dolan's saloon. "Say, fellow, where's my gun?" he asked.

Bob looked up. "He—took it."

"Do I lose my six-shooter?"

"I'll fix it with you when I get the money to buy one."

The boy looked so haggard, his face so filled with despair, that Dud was touched in spite of himself.

"Why in Mexico didn't you give that bird a pill outa the gun?" he asked.

"I don't know. I'm—no good," Bob wailed.

"You said it right that time. I'll be doggoned if I ever saw such a thing as a fellow lettin' another guy walk off with his wife—when he ain't been married hardly two hours yet. Say, what's the matter with you anyhow? Why didn't you take a fall outa him? All he could 'a' done was beat you to death."

"He hurt me," Bob confessed miserably. "I—was afraid."

"Hurt you? Great jumpin' Jupiter. Say, fellows, listen to Miss—Miss Roberta here. He hurt him, so he quit on the job—this guy here did. I never heard the beat o' that."

"If you'll borrow one of yore friends' guns an' blow my brains out you'll do me a favor," the harried youth told Hollister in a low voice.

Hollister looked at him searchingly. "I might, at

that," agreed the puncher. "But I'm not doin' that kind of favor to-day. I'll give you a piece of advice. This ain't no country for you. Hop a train for Boston, Mass., or one o' them places where you can take yore troubles to a fellow with a blue coat. Tha's where you belong."

Up the street rolled Blister Haines, in time to hear the cowpuncher's suggestion. Already the news had reached the justice of what had taken place. He was one of those amiable busybodies who take care of other people's troubles for them. Sometimes his efforts came to grief and sometimes they did not.

"Hit the trail, you lads," he ordered. "I'll l-look out for this b-business. The exc-c-citement's all over anyhow. Drift."

The range-riders disappeared. At best the situation was an embarrassing one. It is not pleasant to be in the company of one who has just shown himself a poltroon and is acutely aware of it.

Blister took Dillon into his office. He lowered himself into the biggest chair carefully, rolled a cigarette, and lit up.

"Tell me about it," he ordered.

"Nothin' to tell." Bob leaned against the table and looked drearily at the floor. The world had come to an end for him. That was all. "He showed up an' took June from me—made me tell her to go along with him."

"How did he do that? Did he cover you with a gun?"

"No. I had the gun—till he took it from me." He gave the explanation he had used twice already within the hour. "I'm no good."

Blister heaved himself up from the chair and waddled closer to the boy. He shook a fat forefinger in his face. He glared at him fiercely.

“Say, where you from?”

“Austin, Texas, when I was a kid.”

“Well, damn you, Texas man, I w-want to t-tell you right now that you’re talkin’ blasphemy when you say you’re n-no good. The good Lord made you, didn’t He? D-d’ you reckon I’m goin’ to let you stand up there an’ claim He did a pore job? No, sir. Trouble with you is you go an’ bury yore talent instead of w-whalin’ the stuffin’ outa that Jake Houck fellow.”

“I wish I was dead,” Bob groaned, drooping in every line of his figure. “I wish I’d never been born.”

“Blasphemy number two. Didn’t He make you in His image? What right you got wishin’ He hadn’t created you? Why, you pore w-worm, you’re only a mite lower than the angels an’ yore red haid’s covered with glory.” Blister’s whisper of a voice took unexpectedly a sharp edge. “Snap it up! That red haid o’ yours. Hear me?”

Bob’s head came up as though a spring had been released.

“B-better. K-keep it up where it belongs. Now, then, w-what are you aimin’ for to do?”

Bob shook his head. “Get outa this country, like Hollister said. Find a hole somewheres an’ pull it in after me.”

“No, sir. Not none. You’re gonna stay right here—in the country round Bear Cat—where every last man, woman, an’ k-kid will know how you ate d-dirt when Houck told you to.”

"I couldn't do that," the boy pleaded. "Why, I wouldn't have a chance. I'd know what they were sayin' all the time."

"Sure you'd know it. Tha's the price you g-gotta pay for g-grovelin'. Don't you see yore only chance is to go out an' make good before the folks who know how you've acted? Sneak off an' keep still about what you did, amongst s-strangers, an' where do you get off? You know all yore life you're only a worm. The best you can be is a bluff. You'd be d-duckin' outa makin' the fight you've gotta make. That don't get you anywhere a-tall. No, sir. Go out an' reverse the verdict of the court. Make good, right amongst the people who're keepin' tabs on yore record. You can do it, if you c-clamp yore j-jaw an' remember that yore red haid is c-covered with g-glory an' you been given dominion."

"But—"

"S-snap it up!" squeaked Blister.

The red head came up again with a jerk.

"Keep it up."

"What'll I do? Where'll I find work?"

"Out on the range. At the K Bar T, or the Keystone, or the Slash Lazy D. It don't m-matter where."

"I can't ride."

"Hmp! Learn, can't you? Dud Hollister an' Tom Reeves wasn't neither one of them born on a bronc's back. They climbed up there. So can you. You'll take the dust forty times. You'll get yore bones busted an' yore red haid cut open. But if you got the guts to stick, you'll be ridin' 'em slick one o' these here days. An' you'll come out a m-man."

A faint glow began to stir in the boy's heart. Was there really a chance for him to reverse the verdict? Could he still turn over a leaf and make another start?

"You'll have one heluva time for a while," Blister prophesied. "Take 'em by an' large an' these lads chasin' cows' tails are the salt o' the earth. They'll go farther with you an' stick longer than anybody else you ever met up with. Once they know you an' like you. But they'll be right offish with you for a while. Kinda polite an' distant, I expect. S-some overbearin' g-guy will start runnin' on you, knowin' it'll be safe. It'll be up to you to m-make it mighty onsafe for him. Go through to a finish that once an' the boys will begin sizin' you up an' wonderin' about you. Those show-me lads will have to get evidence about 'steen times before they'll believe."

"I'll never be able to stick it. I'm such a—so timid," Dillon groaned.

The justice bristled. "H-hell's bells! What's ailin' you, Texas man? I tell you that you're made in His image. Bite on that thought hard whenever you're up against it an' want to hide yorese'f in a hole. Every time you get too s-scared to play yore hand out, you're playin' it low down on yore C-creator."

Bob came to another phase of the situation. "What about—June?"

"Well, what about her?"

"She's gone with Houck. He'll not take her home."

"What d' you m-mean not take her home? Where'll he take her?"

"I don't know. That's it. I'm responsible for her. I brought her here. He means to—to make her live

with him."

"Keep her by force—that what you're drivin' at?"

"No-o. Not exactly. He's got a hold over her father somehow. She's worn out fightin' him. When she ran away with me she played her last card. She'll have to give up now. He's so big an' strong, such a bulldog for gettin' his way, that she can't hold him off. June ain't seventeen yet. She's gettin' a mighty rotten deal, looks like. First off, livin' alone the way she an' Tolliver do, then Houck, then me, an' finally Houck again."

"I'll notify Tolliver how things are," Blister said. "Get word to him right away. We'll have to take a lead from him about June."

"I was thinkin'—"

"Onload it."

"Mrs. Gillespie was so kind to her. Maybe she could talk to June an' take her at the hotel—if June an' Houck haven't gone yet."

"You said something then, boy. I'll see Mollie right away. She'll sure fix it."

They were too late. The wrangler at Kilburn's corral had already seen Houck hitch up and drive away with June, they presently learned.

CHAPTER XI

JUNE PRAYS

When June turned away from her husband of an hour she abandoned hope. She had been like a child lost in the forest. A gleam of light from a window had cheered her for a moment, but it had flickered out and left her in the darkness.

In one sense June was innocent as an infant. She knew nothing of feminine blandishments, of the coquetry which has become so effective a weapon in the hands of modern woman when she is not hampered by scruples. But she had lived too close to nature not to be aware of carnal appetite.

It is a characteristic of frontier life that one learns to face facts. June looked at them now, clear-eyed, despair in her heart. As she walked beside Jake to the corral, as she waited for him to hitch up the broncos, as she rode beside him silently through the gathering night, the girl's mind dwelt on that future which was closing in on her like prison walls.

Not for an instant did she deceive herself. Houck did not mean to take her to Tolliver. She knew that his conscience would acquit him of blame for what he meant to do. He had given her a chance to marry him, and she had made it impossible. That was not his fault. He would take her to Brown's Park with him when he returned. Probably they were on the way there now.

After the plunging broncos had steadied down, Jake spoke. "You're well shet of him. He's no good, like he said himself. A man's got to have guts. You'd 'a' had to wear the breeches, June." The long whip curved out inexorably. "Git over there, Buckskin."

Houck drove like a master. After one wild bolt the dancing ponies had sensed that a strong hand was at the reins. They accepted the fact placidly. June watched his handling of the lines sullenly, a dull resentment and horror in her heart. He would subdue her as easily as he had the half-broken colts, sometimes bullying, sometimes mocking, sometimes making love to her with barbaric ardor. There were times when his strength and ruthlessness had fascinated June, but just now she felt only horror weighted by a dull, dead despair.

No use to fight longer. In a world filled with Jake Houck there was no free will. She was helpless as a wolf in a trap.

They drove through a country of sagebrush hills. The moon came out and carpeted the slopes with silver lace. Deep within June was a born love of beauty as it found expression in this land of the Rockies. But to-night she did not taste the scent of the sage or see the veil of mist that had transformed the draws magically to fairy dells.

“Where you goin’?” she asked at last. “You said you’d take me to Dad.”

He laughed, slipped a strong arm round her shoulders, and drew her closer. “Found yore tongue at last, June girl, eh? We’re going home—to my place up in Brown’s Park.”

She made a perfunctory protest. It was, she knew, quite useless, and her heart was not in it. No words she used, no appeal she could make, would touch this man or change his intentions.

“You got no right to take me there. I’m not yore slave. I want to go to Dad.”

"Tha's right," he mocked. "I'm *yore* slave, June. What's the use of fighting? I'm so set on you that one way or another I'm bound to have you."

She bit her lip, to keep from weeping. In the silvery night, alone with him, miles from any other human being, she felt woefully helpless and forlorn. The years slipped away. She was a little child, and her heart was wailing for the mother whose body lay on the hillside near the deserted cabin in Brown's Park. What could she do? How could she save herself from the evil shadow that would blot the sunshine from her life?

Somewhere, in that night of stars and scudding clouds, was God, she thought. He could save her if He would. But would He? Miracles did not happen nowadays. And why would He bother about her? She was such a trifle in the great scheme of things, only a poor ragged girl from the back country, the daughter of a convict, poor hill trash, as she had once heard a woman at Glenwood whisper. She was not of any account.

Yet prayers welled out in soundless sobs from a panic-stricken heart. "O God, I'm only a li'l' girl, an' I growed up without a mother. I'm right mean an' sulky, but if you'll save me this time from Jake Houck, I'll make out to say my prayers regular an' get religion first chance comes along," she explained and promised, her small white face lifted to the vault where the God she knew about lived.

Drifts floated across the sky blown by currents from the northwest. They came in billows, one on top of another, till they had obscured most of the stars. The moon went into eclipse, reappeared, vanished behind the storm scud, and showed again.

The climate of the Rockies, year in, year out, is the most stimulating on earth. Its summer breezes fill the lungs with wine. Its autumns are incomparable, a golden glow in which valley and hill bask lazily. Its winters are warm with sunshine and cold with the crisp crackle of frost. Its springs—they might be worse. Any Coloradoan will admit the climate is superlative. But there is one slight rift in the lute, hardly to be mentioned as a discord in the universal harmony. Sudden weather changes do occur. A shining summer sun vanishes and in a twinkling of an eye the wind is whistling snell.

Now one of these swept over the Rio Blanco Valley. The clouds thickened, the air grew chill. The thermometer was falling fast.

Houck swung the team up from the valley road to the mesa. Along this they traveled, close to the sage-covered foothills. At a point where a draw dipped down to the road, Houck pulled up and dismounted. A gate made of three strands of barbed wire and two poles barred the wagon trail. For already the nester was fencing the open range.

As Houck moved forward to the gate the moon disappeared back of the banked clouds. June's eye swept the landscape and brightened. The sage and the brush were very thick here. A grove of close-packed quaking asps filled the draw. She glanced at Jake. He was busy wrestling with the loop of wire that fastened the gate.

God helps those that help themselves, June remembered. She put down the lines Houck had handed her, stepped softly from the buckboard, and slipped into the quaking asps.

A moment later she heard Jake's startled oath. It was

certain that he would plunge into the thicket of saplings in pursuit. She crept to one side of the draw and crouched low.

He did not at once dive in. From where she lay hidden, June could hear the sound of his footsteps as he moved to and fro.

“Don’t you try to make a fool of Jake Houck, girl,” he called to her angrily. “I ain’t standin’ for any nonsense now. We got to be movin’ right along. Come outa there.”

Her heart was thumping so that she was afraid he might hear it. She held herself tense, not daring to move a finger lest she make a rustling of leaves.

“Hear me, June! Git a move on you. If you don’t—” He broke off, with another oath. “I’ll mark yore back for you sure enough with my whip when I find you.”

She heard him crashing into the thicket. He passed her not ten feet away, so close that she made out the vague lines of his big body. A few paces farther he stopped.

“I see you, girl. You ain’t foolin’ me any. Tell you what I’ll do. You come right along back to the buckboard an’ I’ll let you off the lickin’ this time.”

She trembled, violently. It seemed that he did see her, for he moved a step or two in her direction. Then he stopped, to curse, and the rage that leaped into the heavy voice betrayed the bluff.

Evidently he made up his mind that she was higher up the draw. He went thrashing up the arroyo, ploughing through the young aspens with a great crackle of breaking branches.

June took advantage of this to creep up the side of

the draw and out of the grove. The sage offered poorer cover in which to hide, but her knowledge of Houck told her that he would not readily give up the idea that she was in the asps. He was a one-idea man, obstinate even to pigheadedness. So long as there was a chance she might be in the grove he would not stop searching there. He would reason that the draw was so close to the buckboard she must have slipped into it. Once there, she would stay because in it she could lie concealed.

Her knowledge of the habits of wild animals served June well now. The first instinct was to get back to the road and run down it at full speed, taking to the brush only when she heard the pursuit. But this would not do. The sage here was much heavier and thicker than it was nearer Bear Cat. She would find a place to hide in it till he left to drive back and cut her off from town. There was one wild moment when she thought of slipping down to the buckboard and trying to escape in it. June gave this up because she would have to back it along the narrow road for fifteen or twenty yards before she could find a place to turn.

On hands and knees she wound deeper into the sage, always moving toward the rim-rock at the top of the hill. She was still perilously close to Houck. His muffled oaths, the thrashing of the bushes, the threats and promises he stopped occasionally to make; all of these came clear to her in spite of the whistling wind.

It had come on to rain mistily. June was glad of that. She would have welcomed a heavy downpour out of a black night. The rim-rock was close above. She edged along it till she came to a scar where the sandstone had broken off and scorched a path down

the slope. Into the hollow formed by two boulders resting against each other she crawled.

For hours she heard Jake moving about, first among the aspens and later on the sage hill. The savage oaths that reached her now and again were evidence enough that the fellow was in a vile temper. If he should find her now, she felt sure he would carry out his vow as to the horsewhip.

The night was cold. June shivered where she lay close to the ground. The rain beat in uncomfortably. But she did not move till Houck drove away.

Even then she descended to the road cautiously. He might have laid a trap for her by returning on foot in the darkness. But she had to take a chance. What she meant to do was clear in her mind. It would require all her wits and strength to get safely back to town.

She plodded along the road for perhaps a mile, then swung down from the mesa to the river. The ford where Jake had driven across was farther down, but she could not risk the crossing. Very likely he was lying in wait there.

June took off her brogans and tied them round her neck. She would have undressed, but she was afraid of losing the clothes while in the stream.

It was dark. She did not know the river, how deep it was or how strong the current. As she waded slowly in, her courage began to fail. She might never reach the other shore. The black night and the rain made it seem very far away.

She stopped, thigh deep, to breathe another prayer to the far-away God of her imagination, who sat on a throne in the skies, an arbitrary emperor of the universe. He had helped her once to-night. Maybe He

would again.

“O God, don’t please lemme drown,” she said aloud, in order to be quite sure her petition would be heard.

Deeper into the current she moved. The water reached her waist. Presently its sweep lifted her from the bottom. She threw herself forward and began to swim. It did not seem to her that she was making any headway. The heavy skirts dragged down her feet and obstructed free movement of them. Not an expert swimmer, she was soon weary. Weights pulled at the arms as they swept back the water in the breast-stroke. It flashed through her mind that she could not last much longer. Almost at the same instant she discovered the bank. Her feet touched bottom. She shuffled heavily through the shallows and sank down on the shore completely exhausted.

Later, it was in June’s mind that she must have been unconscious. When she took note of her surroundings she was lying on a dry pebbly wash which the stream probably covered in high water. Snowflakes fell on her cheek and melted there. She rose, stiff and shivering. In crossing the river the brogans had washed from her neck. She moved forward in her stocking feet. For a time she followed the Rio Blanco, then struck abruptly to the right through the sagebrush and made a wide circuit.

It was definitely snowing now and the air was colder. June’s feet were bleeding, though she picked a way in the grama-grass and the tumbleweed to save them as much as possible. Once she stepped into a badger hole covered with long buffalo grass and strained a tendon.

She had plenty of pluck. The hardships of the frontier had instilled into her endurance. Though she

had pitied herself when she was riding beside Jake Houck to moral disaster, she did not waste any now because she was limping painfully through the snow with the clothes freezing on her body. She had learned to stand the gaff, in the phrase of the old bullwhacker who had brought her down from Rawlins. It was a part of her code that physical pain and discomfort must be trodden under foot and disregarded.

A long détour brought her back to the river. She plodded on through the storm, her leg paining at every step. She was chilled to the marrow and very tired. But she clamped her small strong teeth and kept going.

The temptation to give up and lie down assailed her. She fought against it, shuffling forward, stumbling as her dragging feet caught in the snow. She must be near Bear Cat now. Surely it could not be far away. If it was not very close, she knew she was beaten.

After what seemed an eternity of travel a light gleamed through the snow. She saw another—a third.

She zigzagged down the road like a drunkard.

CHAPTER XII

MOLLIE TAKES CHARGE

Bear Cat was a cow-town, still in its frankest, most exuberant youth. Big cattle outfits had settled on the river and ran stock almost to the Utah line. Every night the saloons and gambling-houses were filled with punchers from the Diamond K, the Cross Bar J, the Half Circle Dot, or any one of a dozen other brands up or down the Rio Blanco. They came from Williams's Fork, Squaw, Salt, Beaver, or Piney Creeks. And usually they came the last mile or two on the dead run, eager to slake a thirst as urgent as their high spirits.

They were young fellows most of them, just out of their boyhood, keen to spend their money and have a good time when off duty. Always they made straight for Dolan's or the Bear Cat House. First they downed a drink or two, then they washed off the dust of travel. This done, each followed his own inclination. He gambled, drank, or frolicked around, according to the desire of the moment.

Dud Hollister and Tom Reeves, with Blister Haines rolling between them, impartially sampled the goods at Dolan's and at Mollie Gillespie's. They had tried their hand at faro, with unfortunate results, and they had sat in for a short session at a poker game where Dud had put too much faith in a queen full.

"I sure let my foot slip that time," Dud admitted. "I'd been playin' plumb outa luck. Couldn't fill a hand, an' when I did, couldn't get it to stand up. That last queen looked like money from home. I reckon I overplayed it," he ruminated aloud, while he waited for Mike Moran to give him another of the same.

Tom hooked his heel on the rail in front of the bar. "I ain't made up my mind yet that game was on the level. That tinhorn who claimed he was from Cheyenne ce'tainly had a mighty funny run o' luck.

D' you notice how his hands jes' topped ours? Kinda queer, I got to thinkin'. He didn't hold any more'n he had to for to rake the chips in. I'd sorta like a look-see at the deck we was playin' with."

Blister laughed wheezily. "You w-won't get it. N-never heard of a hold-up gettin' up a petition for better street lights, did you? No, an' you n-never will. An' you never n-noticed a guy who was aimin' to bushwhack another from the brush go to clearin' off the sage first. He ain't l-lookin' for no open arguments on the m-merits of his shootin'. Not none. Same with that Cheyenne bird an' his stocky pal acrost the table. They're f-figurin' that dead decks tell no tales. The one you played with is sure enough s-scattered every which way all over the floor along with seve-real others." The fat justice of the peace murmured "How!" and tilted his glass.

If Blister did not say "I told you so," it was not because he might not have done it fairly. He had made one comment when Dud had proposed sitting in to the game of draw.

"H-how much m-mazuma you got?"

"Twenty-five bucks left."

"If you s-stay outa that game you'll earn t-twenty-five bucks the quickest you ever did in yore life."

Youth likes to buy its experience and not borrow it. Dud knew now that Blister had been a wise prophet in his generation.

The bar at Gillespie's was at the front of the house. In the rear were the faro and poker tables, the roulette wheels, and the other conveniences for separating hurried patrons from their money. The Bear Cat House did its gambling strictly on the level,

but there was the usual percentage in favor of the proprietor.

Mollie was sitting in an armchair on a small raised platform about halfway back. She kept a brisk and business-like eye on proceedings. No puncher who had gone broke, no tenderfoot out of luck, could go hungry in Bear Cat if she knew it. The restaurant and the bar were at their service just as though they had come off the range with a pay-check intact. They could pay when they had the money. No books were kept. Their memories were the only ledgers. Few of these debts of honor went unpaid in the end.

But Mollie, though tender-hearted, knew how to run the place. Her brusque, curt manner suited Bear Cat. She could be hail-fellow or hard as flint, depending on circumstances. The patrons at Gillespie's remembered her sex and yet forgot it. They guarded their speech, but they drank with her at the bar or sat across a poker table from her on equal terms. She was a good sport and could lose or win large sums imperturbably.

Below her now there floated past a tide of hot-blooded youth eager to make the most of the few hours left before the dusty trails called. Most of these punchers would go back penniless to another month or two of hard and reckless riding. But they would go gayly, without regret, the sunshine of irrepressible boyhood in their hearts. The rattle of chips, the sound of laughter, the murmur of conversation, the even voice of the croupier at the roulette table, filled the hall.

Jim Larson, a cowman from down the river, sat on the edge of the platform.

"The Boot brand's puttin' a thousand head in the

upper country this fall, Mollie. Looks to me like bad business, but there's a chance I'm wrong at that. My bet is you can't run cows there without winter feed. There won't many of 'em rough through."

"Some'll drift down to the river," Mollie said, her preoccupied eyes on the stud table where a slight altercation seemed to be under way. Her method of dealing with quarrels was simple. The first rule was based on one of Blister Haines's paradoxes. "The best way to settle trouble is not to have it." She tried to stop difficulties before they became acute. If this failed, she walked between the angry youths and read the riot act to them.

"Some will," admitted Larson. "More of 'em won't."

Mollie rose, to step down from the platform. She did not reach the stud table. A commotion at the front door drew her attention. Mrs. Gillespie was a solid, heavy-set woman, but she moved with an energy that carried her swiftly. She reached the bar before any of the men from the gambling-tables.

A girl was leaning weakly against the door-jamb. Hat and shoes were gone. The hair was a great black mop framing a small face white to the lips. The stocking soles were worn through. When one foot shifted to get a better purchase for support, a bloodstained track was left on the floor. The short dress was frozen stiff.

The dark, haunted eyes moved uncertainly round the circle of faces staring at her. The lips opened and made the motions of speech, but no sound came from them. Without any warning the girl collapsed.

Dud Hollister's arm was under the ice-coated head in an instant. He looked up at Mollie Gillespie, who had been only a fraction of a second behind him.

"It's the li'l' bride," he said.

She nodded. "Brandy an' water, Mike. Quick! She's only fainted. Head not so high, Dud. Tha's right. We'll get a few drops of this between her teeth.... She's comin' to."

June opened her eyes and looked at Mollie. Presently she looked round and a slow wonder grew in them. "Where am I?" she murmured.

"You're at the hotel—where you'll be looked after right, dearie." Mrs. Gillespie looked up. "Some one get Doc Tuckerman. An' you, Tom, hustle Peggie and Chung Lung outa their beds if they're not up. There's a fire in my room. Tell her to take the blankets from the bed an' warm 'em. Tell Chung to heat several kettles o' water fast as he can. Dud, you come along an' carry her to the stove in the lobby. The rest o' you'll stay right here."

Mollie did not ask any questions or seek explanation. That could wait. The child had been through a terrible experience and must be looked after first.

From the lobby Dud presently carried June into the bedroom and departed. A roaring fire was in the stove. Blankets and a flannel nightgown were hanging over the backs of chairs to warm. With the help of the chambermaid Peggie, the landlady stripped from the girl the frozen dress and the wet underclothes. Over the thin, shivering body she slipped the nightgown, then tucked her up in the blankets. As soon as Chung brought the hot-water jugs she put one at June's feet and another close to the stomach where the cold hands could rest upon it.

June was still shaking as though she never would get warm. A faint mist of tears obscured her sight. "Y-you're awful good to me," she whispered, teeth

chattering.

The doctor approved of what had been done. He left medicine for the patient. “Be back in five minutes,” he told Mrs. Gillespie outside the room. “Want some stuff I’ve got at the office. Think I’ll stay for a few hours and see how the case develops. Afraid she’s in for a bad spell of pneumonia.”

He did not leave the sick-room after his return until morning. Mollie stayed there, too. It was nearly one o’clock when Blister Haines knocked gently at the door.

“How’s the li’l’ lady?” he asked in his high falsetto, after Mollie had walked down the passage with him.

“She’s a mighty sick girl. Pneumonia, likely.”

“Tell doc not to let her die. If he needs another doctor some of us’ll h-hustle over to Glenwood an’ g-get one. Say, Mrs. Gillespie, I reckon there’s gonna be trouble in town to-night.”

She said nothing, but her blue eyes questioned him.

Blister’s next sentence sent her moving toward the saloon.

CHAPTER XIII

BEAR CAT ASKS QUESTIONS

A man bow-legged into Gillespie's and went straight to the bar. "Gimme a drink—something damned hot," he growled.

He was a big, broad-shouldered fellow, hook-nosed, with cold eyes set close. Hair and eyebrows were matted with ice and a coat of sleet covered his clothes. Judging from voice and manner, he was in a vile humor.

A young fellow standing near was leaning with his back against the bar, elbows resting on it. One heel was hooked casually over the rail.

"Anything been seen of a strange girl in town tonight?" the newcomer asked. "She ain't right in her head an' I was takin' her to her dad's place when she slipped away. I'm worried about her, out in this storm."

The cowpuncher looked at him coldly, eye to eye. "I'd say you got a license to be. If she's lost out tonight she's liable to be frozen to death before mo'ning."

"Yes," agreed Houck, and his lids narrowed. What did this young fellow mean? There was something about his manner both strange and challenging. If he was looking for a fight, Houck knew just where he could be accommodated.

"In which case—"

The puncher stopped significantly.

"In which case—?" Houck prompted.

"—it might be unlucky for the guy that took her out an' lost her."

"What's yore name, fellow?" Jake demanded.

"Fellow, my name's Dud Hollister," promptly

answered the other. “D’you like it?”

“Not much. Neither it nor you.”

Houck turned insolently back to the bar for his drink.

Mike was stirring into the glass of liquor cayenne pepper which he was shaking from a paper. He was using as a mixer the barrel of a forty-five.

The salient jaw of Houck jutted out. “What monkey trick are you tryin’ to play on me?” he asked angrily.

“You wanted it hot,” Mike replied, and the bartender’s gaze too was cold and level.

It seemed to the former rustler that here was a second man ready to fasten a quarrel on him. What was the matter with these fellows anyhow?

Another puncher ranged himself beside Hollister. “Who did this bird claim he was, Dud?” he asked out loud, offensively.

“Didn’t say. Took that li’l’ bride out in this storm an’ left her there. Expect he’ll be right popular in Bear Cat.”

Houck smothered his rage. This was too serious to be settled by an explosion of anger and an appeal to arms.

“I tell you she hid whilst I was openin’ a gate. I been lookin’ for her six hours. Thought maybe she’d come to town. My idee is to organize a search party an’ go out after her. Quick as we can slap saddles on broncs an’ hit the trail.”

Fragments of the facts had drifted out to the boys from the sick-room.

Dud tried an experiment. “Where’ll we hunt for her —up toward Piceance?”

Houck deliberated before answering. If he were to tell the truth—that she had escaped from him in the hills nine miles down the river—these men would know he had been lying when he said he was taking June to her father. If he let the search party head toward Piceance, there would be no chance for it to save the girl. The man was no coward. To his credit, he told the truth.

A half-circle of hostile faces hemmed him in, for the word had spread that this was the man who had carried off June Tolliver. He was the focus of a dozen pairs of eyes. Among the cattlemen of the Old West you will still look into many such eyes, but never among city dwellers will you find them. Blue they are for the most part or gray-blue, level, direct, unfearing; quiet and steady as steel, flinging no flags of flurry, tremendously sure of themselves. They can be very likable eyes, frank and kind, with innumerable little lines of humor radiating from the corners; or they can be stern and chill as the Day of Judgment.

Jake Houck found in them no gentleness. They judged him, inexorably, while he explained.

“Where was you takin’ her?” asked Larson, of the Wagon Rod outfit.

In spite of his boldness, of the dominating imperiousness by means of which he had been used to ride roughshod over lesser men, Houck felt a chill sensation at his heart. They were too quiet—too quiet by half.

“We was to have been married to-day,” he said surlily. “This Dillon boy got her to run off with him. He was no good. I rode hell-for-leather into town to head ’em off.”

Blister brought him back to the question of the moment. “An’ you were t-takin’ her—?”

“To Brown’s Park.”

“Forcin’ her to go. Was that it?” Hollister broke in.

“No, sir. She went of her own accord.”

“Asked you to take her there, mebbe?”

“None o’ yore damn business.”

“How old is she, Mr. Houck?” Larson questioned.

“I dunno.”

“I do. Sixteen coming Christmas,” said Dud. “Dillon told me.”

“An’ how old are you, Mr. Houck?” the quiet, even voice of the owner of the Wagon Rod pursued.

“I d’no as that’s got anything to do with it, but I’m forty-three,” Jake retorted defiantly.

“You meant to live with her?”

“I meant to treat her right,” was the sullen reply.

“But livin’ with her, an’ her another man’s wife.”

“No, sir. That fake marriage with Dillon don’t go. She was promised to me.” He broke out suddenly in anger: “What’s eatin’ you all? Why don’t you go out an’ help me find the girl? These whatfors an’ whyfors can wait, I reckon.”

Blister dropped a bomb. “She’s found.”

“Found!” Houck stared at the fat man. “Who found her? Where? When?”

“Coupla hours ago. Here in this r-room. Kinda funny how she’d swim the river a night like this an’ walk eight-ten miles barefoot in the snow, all to get away

from you, an' her goin' with you of her own accord."

"It wasn't eight miles—more like six."

"Call it six, then. Fact is, Mr. Houck, she was mighty scared of you—in a panic of terror, I'd say."

"She had no call to be," the Brown's Park settler replied, his voice heavy with repressed rage. "I'm tellin' you she wasn't right in her head."

"An' you was takin' advantage of that to make this li'l' girl yore—to ruin her life for her," Hollister flung back.

In all his wild and turbulent lifetime Jake Houck had never before been brought to task like this. He resented the words, the manner, the quiet insistence of these range men. An unease that was not quite fear, but was very close to it, had made him hold his temper in leash. Now the savage in him broke through.

"You're a bunch of fool meddlers, an' I'm through explainin'. You can go to hell 'n' back for me," he cried, and followed with a string of crackling oaths.

The eyes of the punchers and cattlemen met one another. No word was spoken, but the same message passed back and forth a score of times.

"I expect you don't quite understand where you're at, Mr. Houck," Larson said evenly. "This is mighty serious business for you. We aim to give you a chance to tell yore story complete before we take action."

"Action?" repeated Houck, startled.

"You're up against it for fair," Reeves told him. "If you figure on gettin' away with a thing like that in a white man's country you've sure got another guess

comin'. I don't know where you're from or who you are, but I know where you're going."

"D-don't push on the reins, Tom," the justice said. "We aim to be reasonable about this, I reckon."

"Sure we do." Dud countered with one of Blister's own homely apothegms. "What's the use of chewin' tobacco if you spit out the juice? Go through, I say. There's a cottonwood back of the kitchen."

"You're fixin' for to hang me?" Houck asked, his throat and palate gone suddenly dry.

"You done guessed it first crack," Tom nodded.

"Not yet, boys," protested Haines in his whispering falsetto. "I reckon we'd ought to wait an' see how the girl comes out."

"Why had we?" demanded a squat puncher from the Keystone. "What difference does it make? If ever any one needed stringin' up, it's the guy here. He's worse than Douglas or any other Injun ever was. Is it yore notion we'd oughta sit around with our hands in our pockets, Blister, while reptiles like this Houck make our girls swim the river at night an' plough barefoot through snowstorms? I ain't that easy-dispositioned myself."

"Shorty's sure whistlin'. Same here," another chap-clad rider chipped in.

"An' here."

Blister dropped into the background inconspicuously and vanished. He appeared to be in a minority of one, not counting Houck, and he needed reënforcements.

"We'll hear what Mr. Houck has to say before we pass judgment," Larson said.

But Houck, looking into the circle of grim faces that surrounded him, knew that he was condemned. Nothing that he could say would make any difference. He shrugged his heavy shoulders.

“What’s the use? You’ve done made up yore minds.”

He noticed that the younger fellows were pressing closer to him. Pretty soon they would disarm him. If he was going to make a fight for his life, it had to be now. His arm dropped to his side, close to the butt of the revolver he carried.

He was too late. Hollister jumped for his wrist and at the same time Mike flung himself across the bar and garroted him. He struggled fiercely to free himself, but was dragged down to the floor and pinioned. Before he was lifted up his hands were tied behind him.

Unobserved, the front door of the barroom had opened. An ice-coated figure was standing on the threshold.

Houck laughed harshly. “Come right in, Tolliver. You’ll be in time to take a hand in the show.”

The little trapper’s haggard eyes went round in perplexity. “What’s the trouble?” he asked mildly.

“No trouble a-tall,” answered the big prisoner hardily. “The boys are hangin’ me. That’s all.”

CHAPTER XIV

HOUCK TAKES A RIDE

Tolliver rubbed a hand uncertainly over a bristly chin. “Why, what are they doin’ that for, Jake?”

“Are you the Tolliver girl’s father?” asked Larson.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then we got bad news for you. She’s sick.”

“Sick?” the trapper’s lips trembled.

“A mighty sick girl. This man here—this Houck, if that’s what he calls himself—took her away from the young fellow she’d married and started up to Brown’s Park with her. Somehow she gave him the slip, swam the river, an’ came back to town barefoot through the snow. Seems she lost her shoes while she was crossin’ the Blanco.”

The color washed away beneath the tan of the father’s face. “Where’s she at?”

“Here—at the hotel. Mrs. Gillespie an’ Doc Tuckerman are lookin’ after her.”

“I’d like to go to her right away.”

“Sure. Dud, you know where the room is. Take Mr. Tolliver there.”

“Pete.” Houck’s voice was hoarse, but no longer defiant. In this little man, whom he had always bullied and dominated, whose evil genius he had been, lay his hope of life. “Pete, you ain’t a-going to leave yore old pardner to be hanged.”

Tolliver looked bleakly at him. The spell this man had woven over him twenty-odd years ago was broken forever. “I’m through with you, Jake,” he said.

"You ain't intendin' to lift a hand for me?"

"Not a finger."

"Won't you tell these men howcome it I rode down to Bear Cat after June?"

The Piceance Creek man's jaw tightened. His small eyes flashed hate. "Sure, I'll tell 'em that. About two-three weeks ago Houck showed up at my place an' stayed overnight. I knew him when we was both younger, but I hadn't seen him for a long time. He took a notion to my June. She didn't want to have a thing to do with him, but he bullied her, same as he did me. June she found out he knew something about me, an' she was afraid to make him mad. I reckon finally he got some kinda promise outa her. He had some business at Meeker, an' he was comin' back to the ranch yestiddy. Then he aimed to bring her here to get married."

He was looking steadily at Houck. Pete had found at last the courage to defy him. He could tell anything he liked about the escape from Cañon City.

"I was away all day lookin' over my traps an' fixin' them up. When I reached home I found two notes. I got 'em here somewheres." Tolliver fumbled in his coat pockets, but did not find them. "One was from June. She said she was runnin' away to marry the Dillon boy. The other was from Jake Houck. He'd got to the house before I did, found her note to me, an' lit out after her. Soon's I could run up a horse I hit the trail too."

"Threw me down, eh, Pete?" Houck said bitterly. "Well, there's two can play at that."

Tolliver did not flinch. "Go to it, soon as you've a mind to. I don't owe you a thing except misery. You

wrecked my life. I suffered for you an' kept my mouth padlocked. I was coyote enough to sit back an' let you torment my li'l' girl because I was afraid for to have the truth come out an' hurt her. I'd ought to have gone after you with a forty-five. I'm through. They can't hang you any too soon to suit me. If they don't—an' if my June don't get well—I'll gun you sure as God made li'l' apples."

He turned and walked out of the room with Dud Hollister.

In the passage they met Mollie Gillespie and Blister Haines. The first words the landlady heard were from Houck.

"No, sir, I've got nothing to say. What'd be the use? You've made up yore minds to go through with this thing. A fool could see that. Far as Tolliver goes, I reckon I'll go it alone an' not do any beefin' about him. He threw me down hard, but he was considerable strung up about June. Wouldn't do any good for me to tell what I know."

"Not a bit," assented Reeves. "Might as well game it out."

Houck's hard, cold eye looked at him steadily. "Who said anything about not gaming it out? If you're expectin' me to beg an' crawl you've got hold of the wrong man. I'm a damned tough nut an' don't you forget it. Whenever you're ready, gents."

From the door Mrs. Gillespie spoke. "What's all this?"

She became at once the center of attention. The punchers grouped around Houck were taken by surprise. They were disconcerted by this unexpected addition to the party. For though Mrs. Gillespie led

an irregular life, no woman on the river was so widely loved as she. The mother of Bear Cat, the boys called her. They could instance a hundred examples of the goodness of her heart. She never tired of waiting on the sick, of giving to those who were needy. It was more than possible she would not approve the summary vengeance about to be executed upon the Brown's Park man.

The prisoner was the first to answer. "Just in time, ma'am. The boys are stagin' an entertainment. They're fixin' to hang me. If you'll accept an invite from the hangee I'll be glad to have you stay an'—"

"Hanging him? What for? What's he done?"

Tom Reeves found his voice. "He's the fellow done dirt to the li'l' Tolliver girl, ma'am. We've had a kinda trial an'—"

"Fiddlesticks!" interrupted the woman. She swept the group with an appraising eye. "I'm surprised to see you in this, Larson. Thought you had more sense. Nobody would expect anything better of these flyaway boys."

The owner of the Wagon Rod brand attempted defense, a little sheepishly. "What would you want us to do, Mollie? This fellow treated the girl outrageous. She's liable to die because—"

"Die! Nonsense! She's not going to die any more than this Houck is." She looked the Brown's Park man over contemptuously with chill, steady eyes. "He's a bad egg. It wouldn't hurt my feelings any if you rode him outa town on a rail, but I'm not going to have you-all mixed up in a lynching when there's no need for it."

Larson stole a look around the circle of faces. On the

whole he was glad Mrs. Gillespie had come. It took only a few minutes to choke the life out of a man, but there were many years left in which one might regret it.

“O’ course, if you say Miss Tolliver ain’t dangerous sick, that makes a difference,” he said.

“Don’t see it,” Tom Reeves differed. “We know what this fellow aimed to do, an’ how he drove her to the river to escape him. If you ask me, I’ll say—”

“But nobody’s askin’ you, Tom,” Mollie cut into his sentence sharply. “You’re just a fool boy chasin’ cows’ tails for thirty dollars a month. I’m not going to have any of this nonsense. Bear Cat’s a law-abidin’ place. We’re all proud of it. We don’t let bad-men strut around an’ shoot up our citizens, an’ we don’t let half-grown punchers go crazy an’ start hangin’ folks without reason. Now do we?” A persuasive smile broke out on the harsh face and transformed it. Every waif, every under-dog, every sick woman and child within fifty miles had met that smile and warmed to it.

Reeves gave up, grinning. “I ain’t such a kid either, Mrs. Gillespie, but o’ course you got to have yore way. We all know that. What d’ you want us to do with this bird?”

“Turn him over to Simp an’ let him put the fellow in the jail. There’s just as good law right here as there is anywhere. I’d hate to have it go out from here that Bear Cat can’t trust the officers it elects to see justice done. Don’t you boys feel that way too?”

“Can’t we even ride him outa town on a rail? You done said we might.”

Mrs. Gillespie hesitated. Why not? It was a crude and

primitive punishment, but it would take drastic treatment to get under the hide of this sneering bully who had come within an ace of ruining the life of June Tolliver. The law could not touch him. He had not abducted her. She had gone of her own volition. Unfulfilled intentions are not criminal without an overt act. Was he to escape scot free? She had scoffed at the idea that June might die. But in her heart she was not so sure. The fever was growing on her. It would be days before the crisis was reached.

"Will you promise, honest injun, not to kill or maim him, not to do anything that will injure him permanent?"

"Yes, ma'am. We'll jes' jounce him up some."

"All agree to that?"

They did.

"Will you go along with the boys, Jim?" She smiled. "Just to see they're not too—enthusiastic."

The owner of the Wagon Rod said he would.

Mollie nodded. "All right, boys. The quicker the sooner."

Fifteen minutes later Jake Houck went out of town on a rail.

CHAPTER XV

A SCANDAL SCOTCHED

Before the door of the room opened Tolliver heard the high-pitched voice of his daughter.

"If you'd only stood up to him, Bob—if you'd shot him or fought him ... lemme go, Jake. You got no right to take me with you. Tell you I'm married.... Yes, sir, I'll love, honor, an' obey. I sure will—in sickness an' health—yes, sir, I do...."

The father's heart sank. He knew nothing about illness. A fear racked him that she might be dying. Piteously he turned to the doctor, after one look at June's flushed face.

"Is she—is she—?"

"Out of her head, Mr. Tolliver."

"I mean—will she—?"

"Can't promise you a thing yet. All we can do is look after her and hope for the best. She's young and strong. It's pretty hard to kill anybody born an' bred in these hills. They've got tough constitutions. Better take a chair."

Tolliver sat down on the edge of a chair, nursing his hat. His leathery face worked. If he could only take her place, go through this fight instead of her. It was characteristic of his nature that he feared and expected the worst. He was going to lose her. Of that he had no doubt. It would be his fault. He was being punished for the crimes of his youth and for the poltroonery that had kept him from turning Jake out of the house.

June sat up excitedly in bed and pointed to a corner of the room. "There he is, in the quaking asps,

grinnin' at me! Don't you come nearer, Jake Houck! Don't you! If you do I'll—I'll—"

Dr. Tuckerman put his hand gently on her shoulder. "It's all right, June. Here's your father. We won't let Houck near you. Better lie down now and rest."

"Why must I lie down?" she asked belligerently. "Who are you anyhow, mister?"

"I'm the doctor. You're not quite well. We're looking after you."

Tolliver came forward timorously. "Tha's right, June. You do like the doctor says, honey."

"I'd just as lief, Dad," she answered, and lay down obediently.

When she was out of her head, at the height of the fever, Mrs. Gillespie could always get her to take the medicine and could soothe her fears and alarms. Mollie was chief nurse. If she was not in the room, after June had begun to mend, she was usually in the kitchen cooking broths or custards for the sick girl.

June's starved heart had gone out to her in passionate loyalty and affection. No woman had ever been good to her before, not since the death of her aunt, at least. And Mollie's goodness had the quality of sympathy. It held no room for criticism or the sense of superiority. She was a sinner herself, and it was in her to be tender to others who had fallen from grace.

To Mollie this child's innocent trust in her was exquisitely touching. June was probably the only person in the world except small children who believed in her in just this way. It was not possible that this faith could continue after June became strong enough to move around and talk with the

women of Bear Cat. Though she had outraged public opinion all her life, Mollie Gillespie found herself tugged at by recurring impulses to align herself as far as possible with respectability.

For a week she fought against the new point of view. Grimly she scoffed at what she chose to consider a weakness.

“This is a nice time o’ day for you to try to turn proper, Mollie Gillespie,” she told herself plainly. “Just because a chit of a girl goes daffy over you, is that any reason to change yore ways? You’d ought to have a lick o’ sense or two at yore age.”

But her derision was a fraud. She was tired of being whispered about. The independent isolation of which she had been proud had become of a sudden a thing hateful to her.

She went to Larson as he was leaving the hotel dining-room on his next visit to town.

“Want to talk with you. Come outside a minute.”

The owner of the Wagon Rod followed.

“Jim,” she said, turning on him abruptly, “you’ve always claimed you wanted to marry me.” Her blue eyes searched deep into his. “Do you mean that? Or is it just talk?”

“You know I mean it, Mollie,” he answered quietly.

“Well, I’m tired of being a scandal to Bear Cat. I’ve always said I’d never get married again since my bad luck with Hank Gillespie. But I don’t know. If you really want to get married, Jim.”

“I’ve always thought it would be better.”

“I’m not going to quit runnin’ this hotel, you understand. You’re in town two-three days a week

anyhow. If you like you can build a house here an' we'll move into it."

"I'll get busy *pronto*. I expect you want a quiet wedding, don't you?"

"Sure. We can go over to Blister's office this afternoon. You see him an' make arrangements. Tell him I don't want the boys to know anything about it till afterward."

An hour later they stood before Justice Haines. Mollie thought she detected a faint glimmer of mirth in his eye after the ceremony. She quelled it promptly.

"If you get gay with me, Blister—"

The fat man's impulse to smile fled. "Honest to goodness, Mrs. Gillespie—"

"Larson," she corrected.

"Larson," he accepted. "I w-wish you m-many happy returns."

She looked at him suspiciously and grunted "Hmp!"

CHAPTER XVI

BLISTER AS DEUS EX MACHINA

Blister Haines found an old pair of chaps for Bob

Dillon and lent him a buckskin bronco. Also, he wrote a note addressed to Harshaw, of the Slash Lazy D, and gave it to the boy.

“He’ll put you to ridin’, Ed will. The rest’s up to you. D-don’t you forget you’re made in the l-likeness of God. When you feel like crawlin’ into a hole s-snap that red haid up an’ keep it up.”

Bob grew very busy extricating a cockle burr from the mane of the buckskin. “I’ll never forget what you’ve done for me, Mr. Haines,” he murmured, beet red.

“Sho! Nothin’ a-tall. I’m always lookin’ for to get a chance to onload advice on some one. Prob’ly I was meant to be a grandma an’ got mixed in the shuffle. Well, boy, don’t weaken. When in doubt, hop to it.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll try.”

“Don’t w-worry about things beforehand. Nothin’s ever as bad as you figure it’s goin’ to be. A lickin’ don’t last but a few minutes, an’ if you get b-busy enough it’s the other fellow that’s liable to absorb it. Watch that r-rampageous scalawag Dud Hollister an’ do like he does.”

“Yes, sir.”

“An’ don’t forget that every m-mornin’ begins a new day. Tha’s all, son.”

Bob jogged down the road on this hazard of new fortune.

It chanced that Dud was still in town. Blister found him and half a dozen other punchers in front of the hotel.

“Betcha! Drinks for the crowd,” the justice heard him say.

"Go you," Reeves answered, eyes dancing. "But no monkey business. It's to be a straight-away race from the front of the hotel clear to the blacksmith shop."

"To-day. Inside of ten minutes, you said," Shorty of the Keystone reminded Hollister. "An' this Sunday, you recollect."

Dud's gaze rested on a figure of a horseman moving slowly up the road toward them. The approaching rider was the Reverend Melanchthon T. Browning, late of Providence, Rhode Island. He had come to the frontier to teach it the error of its ways and bring a message of sweetness and light to the unwashed barbarians of the Rockies. He was not popular. This was due, perhaps, to an unfortunate manner. The pompous little man strutted and oozed condescension.

"W-what's up?" asked Blister.

"Dud's bettin' he'll get the sky pilot to race him from here to Monty's place," explained Reeves. "Stick around. He'll want to borrow a coupla dollars from you to buy the drinks."

It was Sunday afternoon. The missionary was returning from South Park, where he had been conducting a morning service. He was riding Tex Lindsay's Blue Streak, borrowed for the occasion.

"What deviltry you up to now, Dud?" Blister inquired.

"Me?" The young puncher looked at him with a bland face of innocence. "Why, Blister, you sure do me wrong."

Dud sauntered to the hitching-rack, easy, careless, graceful. He selected a horse and threw the rein over its head. The preacher was just abreast of the hotel.

The puncher swung to the saddle and brought the pony round. A wild whoop came from his throat. The roan, touched by a spur, leaped to a canter. For an instant it was side by side with Blue Streak. Then it shot down the road.

Blue Streak was off in an eyeflash. It jumped to a gallop and pounded after the roan. The Reverend Melancthon T. Browning was no rider. His feet lost the stirrups. A hymn-book went off at a wild tangent. Coat-tails flew into the air. The exponent of sweetness and light leaned forward and clung desperately to the mane, crying, “Whoa! Stop! Desist!”

But Blue Streak had no intention of desisting as long as the roan was in front. Tex Lindsay’s horse was a racer. No other animal was going to pass it. The legs of the dark horse stretched for the road. It flew past the cowpony as though the latter had been trotting. The Reverend Melancthon stuck to the saddle for dear life.

At the blacksmith shop Dud pulled up. He rode back at a road gait to the hotel. His companions greeted him with shouts of gayety.

“Where’s the parson?” some one asked.

“Between here an’ ’Frisco somewheres. He was travelin’ like he was in a hurry when I saw him last. Who pays for the drinks?”

“I do, you darned ol’ Piute,” shouted Reeves joyously. “I never will forget how the sky pilot’s coat-tails spread. You could ’a’ played checkers on ’em. D’you reckon we’d ought to send a wreckin’ crew after Melancthon T. Browning?”

“Why, no. The way he was clamped to that Blue

Streak's back you couldn't pry him loose with a crowbar."

"Here he c-comes now," Blister announced.

When the home missionary reached the hotel he found a grave and decorous group of sympathizers.

"I was surely right careless, sir, to start thataway so onexpected," Dud apologized. "I hope you didn't get jounced up much."

"Some one had ought to work you over for bein' so plumb wooden-haided, Dud," the puncher from the Keystone reproved him. "Here was Mr. Browning ridin' along quiet an' peaceable, figurin' out how he could improve us Rio Blanco savages, an' you come rip-rarin' along an' jar up all his geography by startin' that fool horse of his'n."

Dud hung his head. "Tha's right. It was sure enough thoughtless of me," he murmured.

The preacher looked at the offender severely. He did not yet feel quite equal to a fitting reprimand. "You see the evil effects of letting that vile stuff pass your lips. I hope this will be a lesson to you, young man. If I had not kept my presence of mind I might have been thrown and severely injured."

"Yes, sir," agreed Dud in a small, contrite voice.

"Makin' the preacher race on Sunday, too," chided Reeves. "Why, I shouldn't wonder but what it might get out an' spread scandalous. We'll all have to tell folks about it so's they'll get the right of it."

Melancthon squirmed. He could guess how the story would be told. "We'll say no more about it, if you please. The young man is sorry. I forgive him. His offense was inadvertent even though vexatious. If he

will profit by this experience I will gladly suffer the incommodious ride."

After the missionary had gone and the bet been liquidated, Blister drew Hollister to one side. "I'm guessin' that when you get back to the ranch you'll find a new rider in the bunkhouse, Dud."

The puncher waited. He knew this was preliminary matter.

"That young fellow Bob Dillon," explained the fat man.

"If you're expectin' me to throw up my hat an' shout, Blister, I got to disappoint you," Dud replied. "I like 'em man-size."

"I'm p-puttin' him in yore charge."

"You ain't either," the range-rider repudiated indignantly.

"To m-make a man of him."

"Hell's bells! I'm no dry nurse to fellows shy of sand. He can travel a lone trail for all of me."

"Keep him kinda encouraged."

"Why pick on me, Blister? I don't want the job. He ain't there, I tell you. Any fellow that would let another guy take his wife away from him an' not hang his hide up to dry—No, sir, I got no manner o' use for him. You can't onload him on me."

"I've been thinkin' that when you are alone with him some t-time you'd better devil him into a fight, then let him whale the stuffin' outa you. That'll do him a l-lot of good—give him confidence."

Hollister stared. His face broke slowly to a grin. "I got to give it to you, Blister. I'll bet there ain't any

more like you at home. Let him lick me, eh? So's to give him confidence. Wallop me good an' plenty, you said, didn't you? By gum, you sure enough take the cake."

"Won't hurt you any. You've give an' took plenty of 'em. Think of him."

"Think of me, come to that."

"L-listen, Dud. That boy's what they call c-c-constitutionally timid. There's folks that way, born so a shadow scares 'em. But he's s-s-sensitive as a g-girl. Don't you make any mistake, son. He's been eatin' his h-heart out ever since he crawled before Houck. I like that boy. There's good s-stuff in him. At least I'm makin' a bet there is. Question is, will it ever get a chance to show? Inside of three months he'll either win out or he'll be headed for hell, an' he won't be travelin' at no drift-herd gait neither."

"Every man's got to stand on his own hind laigs, ain't he?" Hollister grunted. He was weakening, and he knew it.

"He needs a friend, worst way," Blister wheezed. "'Course, if you'd rather not—"

"Doggone yore hide, you're always stickin' me somehow," stormed the cowboy. "Trouble with me is I'm so soft I'm always gettin' imposed on. I done told you I didn't like this guy a-tall. That don't make no more impression on you than a cold runnin'-iron would on a cow."

"M-much obliged, Dud. I knew you'd do it."

"I ain't said I'd do it."

"S-some of the boys are liable to get on the prod with him. He'll have to play his own hand. Tha's

reasonable. But kinda back him up when you get a chance. That notion of lettin' him lick you is a humdinger. Glad you thought of it."

"I didn't think of it, an' I ain't thinkin' of it now," Dud retorted. "You blamed old fat skeezicks, you lay around figurin' out ways to make me trouble. You're worse than Mrs. Gillespie for gettin' yore own way. Hmp! Devil him into a fight an' then let him hand me a lacin'. I reckon not."

"He'll figure that since he can lick you, he can make out to look after himself with the other boys."

"He ain't licked me yet, an' that's only half of it. He ain't a-goin' to."

Fuming at this outrageous proposition put up to him, the puncher jingled away and left his triple-chinned friend.

Blister grinned. The seed he had scattered might have fallen among the rocks and the thorns, but he was willing to make a small bet with himself that some of it had lit on good ground and would bear fruit.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BACK OF A BRONC

The bunkhouse of the Slash Lazy D received Bob

Dillon gravely and with chill civility. He sat on his bunk that first evening, close enough to touch a neighbor on either hand, and was left as completely out of the conversation as though he were a thousand miles away. With each other the riders were jocular and familiar. They "rode" one another with familiar jokes. The new puncher they let alone.

Bob had brought some cigars with him. He offered them eagerly to the chap-clad youth on his right. "Take one, won't you? An' pass the others round."

The name of the cowboy was Hawks. He looked at the cigars with disfavor. "I reckon I'll not be carin' for a cigar to-night, thank you," he said slowly.

"Perhaps the others—if you'll pass them."

Hawks handed the cigars to a brick-red Hercules patching his overalls. From him they went to his neighbor. Presently the cheroots came back to their owner. They had been offered to every man in the room and not one had been taken.

Bob's cheeks burned. Notice was being served on him that the pleasant give-and-take of comradeship was not for him. The lights went out early, but long into the night the boy lay awake in torment. If he had been a leper the line could scarcely have been drawn more plainly. These men would eat with him because they must. They would sleep in the same room. They would answer a question if he put it directly. But they would neither give nor accept favors. He was not to be one of them.

Many times in the months that were to follow he was to know the sting of shame that burned him now at memory of the scene between him and Jake Houck at Bear Cat. He tossed on the bunk, burying his face in the blankets in a vain effort to blot out the picture.

Why had he not shot the fellow? Why, at least, had he not fought? If he had done anything, but what he did do? If he had even stuck it out and endured the pain without yielding.

In the darkness he lived over every little incident of the evening. When Hawks had met him he had grinned and hoped he would like the Slash Lazy D. There had been friendliness in the crinkled, leathery face. But when he passed Bob ten minutes later the blue eyes had frozen. He had heard who the new rider was.

He would not stand it. He could not. In the morning he would pack up his roll and ride back to Bear Cat. It was all very well for Blister Haines to talk about standing the gaff, but he did not have to put up with such treatment.

But when morning came Bob set his teeth and resolved to go through with it for a while anyhow. He could quit at any time. He wanted to be able to tell the justice that he had given his plan a fair trial.

In silence Bob ate his breakfast. This finished, the riders moved across to the corral.

“Better rope and saddle you a mount,” Harshaw told his new man curtly. “Buck, you show him the ones he can choose from.”

Hawks led the way to a smaller corral. “Any one o’ these except the roan with the white stockings an’ the pinto,” he said.

Dillon walked through the gate of the enclosure and closed it. He adjusted the rope, selected the bronco that looked to him the meekest, and moved toward it. The ponies began to circle close to the fence. The one he wanted was racing behind the white-

stockinged roan. For a moment it appeared in front. The rope snaked out and slid down its side. Bob gathered in the lariat, wound it, waited for a chance, and tried again. The meek bronco shook its head as the rope fell and caught on one ear. A second time the loop went down into the dust.

Some one laughed, an unpleasant, sarcastic cackle. Bob turned. Four or five of the punchers, mounted and ready for the day's work, were sitting at ease in their saddles enjoying the performance.

Bob gave himself to the job in hand, though his ears burned. As a youngster he had practiced roping. It was a pastime of the boys among whom he grew up. But he had never been an expert, and now such skill as he had acquired deserted him. The loop sailed out half a dozen times before it dropped over the head of the sorrel.

The new rider for the Slash Lazy D saddled and cinched a bronco which no longer took an interest in the proceedings. Out of the corner of his eye, without once looking their way, Bob was aware of subdued hilarity among the bronzed wearers of chaps. He attended strictly to business.

Just before he pulled himself to the saddle Bob felt a momentary qualm at the solar plexus. He did not give this time to let it deter him. His feet settled into the stirrups. An instant violent earthquake disturbed his equilibrium. A shock jarred him from the base of the spine to the neck. Urgently he flew through space.

Details of the landscape gathered themselves together again. From a corner of the corral Bob looked out upon a world full of grinning faces. A sick dismay rose in him and began to submerge his heart.

They were glad he had been thrown. The earth was inhabited by a race of brutal and truculent savages. What was the use of trying? He could never hold out against them.

Out of the mists of memory he heard a wheezy voice issuing from a great bulk of a man—"... yore red haid's covered with glory. Snap it up!" The words came so clear that for an instant he was startled. He looked round half expecting to see Blister.

Stiffly he gathered himself out of the snow slush. A pain jumped in the left shoulder. He limped to the rope and coiled it. The first cast captured the sorrel.

His limbs were trembling when he dropped into the saddle. With both hands he clung to the horn. Up went the bronco on its hind legs. It pitched, bucked, sun-fished. In sheer terror Bob clung like a leech. The animal left the ground and jolted down stiff-legged on all fours. The impact was terrific. He felt as though a piledriver had fallen on his head and propelled his vital organs together like a concertina. Before he could set himself the sorrel went up again with a weaving, humpbacked twist. The rider shot from the saddle.

When the scenery had steadied itself for Dillon he noticed languidly a change in one aspect of it. The faces turned toward him were no longer grinning. They were watching him expectantly. What would he do now?

They need not look at him like that. He was through. If he got on the back of that brute again it would kill him. Already he was bleeding at the nose and ears. Sometimes men died just from the shock of being tossed about so furiously.

The sorrel was standing by itself at the other end of

the corral. Its head was drooping languidly. The bronco was a picture of injured innocence.

Bob discovered that he hated it with an impotent lust to destroy. If he had a gun with him—Out of the air a squeaky voice came to him: “C-clamp yore jaw, you worm! You been given dominion.” And after that, a moment later, “... made in the image of God.”

Unsteadily he rose. The eyes of the Slash Lazy D riders watched him relentlessly and yet curiously. Would he quit? Or would he go through?

He had an odd feeling that his body was a thing detached from himself. It was full of aches and pains. Its legs wobbled as he moved. Its head seemed swollen to twice the normal size. He had strangely small control over it. When he walked, it was jerkily, as a drunk man sometimes does. His hand caught at the fence to steady himself. He swayed dizzily. A surge of sickness swept through his organs. After this he felt better. He had not consciously made up his mind to try again, but he found himself moving toward the sorrel. This time he could hardly drag his weight into the saddle.

The mind of a bronco is unfathomable. This one now pitched weakly once or twice, then gave up in unconditional surrender. Bob’s surprise was complete. He had expected, after being shaken violently, to be flung into the mire again. The reaction was instantaneous and exhilarating. He forgot that he was covered with mud and bruises, that every inch of him cried aloud with aches. He had won, had mastered a wild outlaw horse as he had seen busters do. For the moment he saw the world at his feet. A little lower than the angels, he had been given dominion.

He rode to the gate and opened it. Hawks was looking at him, a puzzled look in his eyes. He had evidently seen something he had not expected to see.

Harshaw had ridden up during the bronco-busting. He spoke now to Bob. “You’ll cover Beaver Creek today—you and Buck.”

Something in the cattleman’s eye, in the curtness of his speech, brought Dillon back to earth. He had divined that his boss did not like him, had employed him only because Blister Haines had made a personal point of it. Harshaw was a big weather-beaten man of forty, hard, keen-eyed, square as a die. Game himself, he had little patience with those who did not stand the acid test.

Bob felt himself shrinking up. He had not done anything after all, nothing that any one of these men could not do without half trying. There was no way to wipe out his failure when a real ordeal had confronted him. What was written in the book of life was written.

He turned his pony and followed Hawks across the mesa.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FIRST DAY

In the wake of Hawks Bob rode through the buckbrush. There was small chance for conversation, and in any case neither of them was in the mood for talk. Bob's sensitive soul did not want to risk the likelihood of a rebuff. He was susceptible to atmospheres, and he knew that Buck was sulky at being saddled with him.

He was right. Buck did not see why Harshaw had put this outcast tenderfoot on him. He did not see why he had hired him at all. One thing was sure. He was not going to let the fellow get round him. No, sir. Not on his tintype he wasn't.

Since it was the only practical way at present to show his disgust and make the new puncher feel like a fool, Hawks led him through the roughest country he could find at the fastest feasible gait. Buck was a notably wild rider in a country of reckless horsemen. Like all punchers, he had been hurt time and again. He had taken dozens of falls. Two broncos had gone down under him with broken necks. A third had twisted its leg in a beaver burrow and later had to be shot. This day he outdid himself.

As young Dillon raced behind him along side hills after dogies fleet as blacktails, the heart fluttered in his bosom like a frightened bird in a cage. He did not pretend to keep up with Hawks. The best he could do was to come loping up after the excitement was over. The range-rider made no spoken comment whatever, but his scornful blue eyes said all that was necessary.

The day's work did not differ except in details from that of yesterday and to-morrow. They headed back two three-year-olds drifting too far north. They came on a Slash Lazy D cow with a young calf and moved it slowly down to better feed near the creek. In the afternoon they found a yearling sunk in a bog. After

trying to pull it out by the ears, they roped its body and tugged together. Their efforts did not budge the animal. Hawks tied one end of the rope to the saddle-horn, swung up, and put the pony to the pull. The muscles of the bronco's legs stood out as it leaned forward and scratched for a foothold. The calf blatted with pain, but presently it was snaked out from the quagmire to the firm earth.

They crossed the creek and returned on the other side. Late in the afternoon they met half a dozen Utes riding their inferior ponies. They had evidently been hunting, for most of them carried deer. Old Colorow was at their head.

He grunted "How!" sulkily. The other braves passed without speaking. Something in their manner sent a shiver up Dillon's spine. He and Hawks were armed only with revolvers. It would be the easiest thing in the world for the Indians to kill them if they wished.

Hawks called a cheerful greeting. It suggested the friendliest of feeling. The instructions given to the punchers were to do nothing to irritate the Utes just now.

The mental attitude of the Indians toward the cattlemen and cowboys was a curious one. They were suspicious of them. They resented their presence in the country. But they felt a very wholesome respect for them. These leather-chapped youths could outride and outshoot them. With or without reason, the Utes felt only contempt for soldiers. They were so easily led into traps. They bunched together when under fire instead of scattering for cover. They did not know how to read sign on the warmest trail. These range-riders were different. If they were not as wary as the Utes, they made up for it by the dash and aplomb with which

they broke through difficulties.

In Bear Cat the day before Bob had heard settlers discuss the unrest of the Indians. The rumor was that soon they meant to go on the warpath again. Colorow himself, with a specious air of good will, had warned a cattleman to leave the country while there was time.

“You mebbe go—mebbe not come back,” he had suggested meaningly. “Mebbe better so. Colorow friend. He speak wise words.”

Until the Utes were out of gunshot Bob felt very uneasy. It was not many years since the Meeker massacre and the ambushing of Major Thornburg’s troops on Milk Creek.

Reeves and Hollister were in the bunkhouse when Bob entered it just before supper. He heard Dud’s voice.

“... don’t like a hair of his red haid, but that’s how it’ll be far as I’m concerned.”

There was a moment’s awkward silence. Dillon knew they had been talking about him. Beneath the deep gold of his blond skin Hollister flushed. Boy though he was, Dud usually had the self-possession of the Sphinx. But momentarily he was embarrassed.

“Hello, fellow!” he shouted across the room. “How’d she go?”

“All right, I reckon,” Bob answered. “I wasn’t much use.”

He wanted to ask Dud a question, but he dared not ask it before anybody else. It hung in his mind all through supper. Afterward he found his chance. He did not look at Hollister while he spoke.

"Did—did you hear how—Miss Tolliver is?" he asked.

"Doc says he can't tell a thing yet. She's still mighty sick. But Blister he sent word to you that he'd let you know soon as there is a change."

"Much obliged."

Bob moved away. He did not want to annoy anybody by pressing his undesirable society upon him.

That night he slept like a hibernating bear. The dread of the morrow was no longer so heavy upon him. Drowsily, while his eyes were closing, he recalled the prediction of the fat justice that no experience is as bad as one's fears imagine it will be. That had been true to-day at least. Even his fight with the sorrel, the name of which he had later discovered to be Powder River, was now only a memory which warmed and cheered.

Cowpunchers usually rode in couples. Bob learned next morning that he was paired with Dud. They were to comb the Crooked Wash country.

CHAPTER XIX

DUD QUALIFIES AS COURT JESTER

It was still dark when Dud Hollister and Bob Dillon waded through the snow to the corral and saddled

their horses.

They jogged across the mesa through the white drifts.

Bob's pony stumbled into a burrow, but pulled out again without damage.

In the years when cattle first came to the Rio Blanco the danger from falls was greater than it is now, even if the riding had not been harder. A long thick grass often covered the badger holes.

"How does a fellow look out for badger and prairie-dog holes?" Bob asked his companion as they jogged along at a road gait. "I mean when he's chasin' dogies across a hill on the jump."

"He don't," Dud answered ungrammatically but promptly. "His bronc 'tends to that. If you try to guide you're sure enough liable to take a fall."

"But when the hole's covered with grass?"

"You gotta take a chance," Dud said. "They're sure-footed, these cowponies are. A fellow gets to thinkin' they can't fall. Then down he goes. He jumps clear if he can an' lights loose."

"And if he can't?"

"He's liable to get stove up. I seen five waddies yesterday in Bear Cat with busted legs or arms. Doc's fixin' 'em up good as new. In a week or two they'll be ridin' again."

Bob had seen those same crippled cowboys and he could not quite get them out of his mind. He knew of two punchers killed within the year from falls.

"Ridin' for a dogie outfit ain't no sin-cure, as Blister told you while he was splicin' you 'n' Miss Tolliver," Dud went on. "It's a man-size job. There's ol' Charley

Mason now. He's had his ribs stove in, busted an arm, shot hisself by accident, got rheumatism, had his nose bit off by a railroad guy while he was b'iled, an' finally married a female battle-axe, all inside o' two years. He's the hard luck champeen, though, Charley is."

It had snowed heavily during the night. The day was "soft," in the phrase of the pioneer. In places the ground was almost clear. In others the drifts were deep. From a hillside they looked down into a grove of cottonwoods that filled a small draw. Here the snow had blown in and was heavy. Three elk were floundering in the white banks.

Dud waded in and shot two with his revolver. The third was a doe. The cowponies snaked them out to the open.

"We'll take 'em with us to 'Leven Mile camp," Dud said. "Then we'll carry 'em back to the ranch to-morrow. The Slash Lazy D is needin' meat."

Harshaw had given orders that they were to spend the night at Eleven Mile camp. The place was a deserted log cabin built by a trapper. Supplies were kept there for the use of Slash Lazy D riders. Usually some of them were there at least two or three nights a week. Often punchers from other outfits put up at the shack. Range favors of this sort were taken as a matter of course. If the cabin was empty the visiting cowboy helped himself to food, fire, and shelter. It was expected of him that he would cut a fresh supply of fuel to take the place of that he had used.

It was getting on toward dusk when they reached Eleven Mile. Bob made a fire in the tin stove while Dud took care of the horses. He found flour and lard[2] hanging in pails from the rafters. Coffee was

in a tin under the bunk.

Soon Dud joined him. They made their supper of venison, biscuits, and coffee. Hollister had just lit a pipe and stretched himself on the bed when the door opened and sixteen Ute bucks filed gravely in.

Colorow was the spokesman. “Hungry! Heap hungry!” he announced.

Hollister rolled out of the bunk promptly. “Here’s where we go into the barbecue business an’ the Slash ranch loses them elk,” he told Bob under cover of replenishing the fire in the stove. “An’ I can name two lads who’ll be lucky if they don’t lose their scalps. These birds have been drinkin’.”

It took no wiseacre to divine the condition of the Indians. Their whiskey breaths polluted the air of the cabin. Some of them swayed as they stood or clutched at one another for support. Fortunately they were for the moment in a cheerful rather than a murderous frame of mind. They chanted what was gibberish to the two whites while the latter made their preparations swiftly. Dud took charge of affairs. He noticed that his companion was white to the lips.

“I’ll knock together a batch of biscuits while you fry the steaks. Brace up, kid. Throw out yore chest. We better play we’re drunk too,” he said in a murmur that reached only Bob.

While Bob sliced the steaks from the elk hanging from pegs fastened in the mud mortar between the logs of the wall, Dud was busy whipping up a batch of biscuits. The Indians, packed tight as sardines in the room, crowded close to see how it was done. Hollister had two big frying-pans on the stove with lard heating in them. He slapped the dough in, spattering boiling grease right and left. One

pockmarked brave gave an anguished howl of pain. A stream of sizzling lard had spurted into his face.

The other Utes roared with glee. The aboriginal sense of humor may not be highly developed, but it is easily aroused. The friends of the outraged brave stamped up and down the dirt floor in spasms of mirth. They clapped him on the back and jabbered ironic inquiries as to his well-being. For the moment, at least, Dud was as popular as a funny clown in a sawdust ring.

Colorow and his companions were fed. The stove roared. The frying-pans were kept full of meat and biscuits. The two white men discarded coats, vests, and almost their shirts. Sweat poured down their faces. They stood over the red-hot cook stove, hour after hour, while the Utes gorged. The steaks of the elk, the hind quarters, the fore quarters, all vanished into the sixteen distended stomachs. Still the Indians ate, voraciously, wolfishly, as though they could never get enough. It was not a meal but an endurance contest.

Occasionally some wag would push forward the pockmarked brave and demand of Dud that he baptize him again, and always the puncher made motions of going through the performance a second time. The joke never staled. It always got a hand, no matter how often it was repeated. At each encore the Utes stamped their flatfooted way round the room in a kind of impromptu and mirthful dance. The baptismal jest never ceased to be a scream.

Dud grinned at Dillon. “These wooden heads are so fond of chestnuts I’m figurin’ on springin’ on them the old one about why a hen crosses the road. Bet it would go big. If they got the point. But I don’t reckon they would unless I had a hen here to show

'em."

The feast ended only when the supplies gave out. Two and a half sacks of flour disappeared. About fifteen pounds of potatoes went into the pot and from it into the openings of copper-colored faces. Nothing was left of the elk but the bones.

"The party's mighty nigh over," Dud murmured. "Wonder what our guests aim to do now."

"Can't we feed 'em anything more?" asked Bob anxiously.

"Not unless we finish cookin' the pockmarked gent for 'em. I'm kinda hopin' old Colorow will have sabe enough not to wear his welcome out. It'd make a ten-strike with me if he'd say 'Much obliged' an' hit the trail."

Bob had not the heart to jest about the subject, and his attempt to back up his companion's drunken playacting was a sad travesty. He did not know much about Indians anyhow, and he was sick through and through with apprehension. Would they finish by scalping their hosts, as Dud had suggested early in the evening?

It was close to midnight when the clown of Colorow's party invented a new and rib-tickling joke. Bob was stooping over the stove dishing up the last remnants of the potatoes when this buck slipped up behind with the carving-knife and gathered into his fist the boy's flaming topknot. He let out a horrifying yell and brandished the knife.

In a panic of terror Bob collapsed to the floor. There was a moment when the slapstick comedy grazed red tragedy. The pitiable condition of the boy startled the Ute, who still clutched his hair. An embryonic

idea was finding birth in the drunken brain. In another moment it would have developed into a well-defined lust to kill.

With one sweeping gesture Dud lifted a frying-pan from the red-hot stove and clapped it against the rump of the jester. The redskin's head hit the roof. His shriek of agony could have been heard half a mile. He clapped hands to the afflicted part and did a humped-up dance of woe. The carving-knife lay forgotten on the floor. It was quite certain that he would take no pleasure in sitting down for some few days.

Again a series of spasms of turbulent mirth seized upon his friends. They doubled up with glee. They wept tears of joy. They howled down his anguish with approving acclaim while they did a double hop around him as a vent to their enthusiasm. The biter had been bit. The joke had been turned against the joker, and in the most primitive and direct way. This was the most humorous event in the history of the Rio Blanco Utes. It was destined to become the stock tribal joke.

Dud, now tremendously popular, joined in the dance. As he shuffled past Bob he growled an order at him.

"Get up on yore hind laigs an' dance. I got these guys going my way. Hop to it!"

Bob danced, at first feebly and with a heart of water. He need not have worried. If Dud had asked to be made a blood member of the tribe he would have been elected by fourteen out of the sixteen votes present.

The first faint streaks of day were in the sky when the Utes mounted their ponies and vanished over the hill. From the door Dud watched them go. It had

been a strenuous night, and he was glad it was over. But he wouldn't have missed it for a thousand dollars. He would not have admitted it. Nevertheless he was immensely proud of himself in the rôle of court jester.

Bob sat down on the bunk. He was a limp rag of humanity. In the reaction from fear he was inclined to be hysterical.

"You saved my life—when—when that fellow—" He stopped, gulping down a lump in the throat.

The man leaning against the door-jamb stretched his arms and his mouth in a relaxing yawn. "Say, fellow, I wasn't worryin' none about yore life. I was plumb anxious for a moment about Dud Hollister's. If old Colorow's gang had begun on you they certainly wouldn't 'a' quit without takin' my topknot for a souvenir of an evenin' when a pleasant time was had by all." He yawned a second time. "What say? Let's hit the hay. I don't aim for to do no ridin' this mornin'."

A faint sniffling sound came from the bunk.

Dud turned. "What's ailin' you now?" he wanted to know.

Bob's face was buried in his hands. The slender body of the boy was shaken with sobs.

"I—I—"

"Cut out the weeps, Miss Roberta," snapped Hollister. "What in Mexico 's eatin' you anyhow?"

"I—I've had a horrible night."

"Don't I know it? Do you reckon it was a picnic for me?"

"You—laughed an' cut up."

"Some one had to throw a bluff. If they'd guessed we were scared stiff them b'iled Utes sure enough would have massacreed us. You got to learn to keep yore grin workin', fellow."

"I know, but—" Bob stopped. Dry sobs were still shaking him.

"Quit that," Dud commanded. "I'll be darned if I'll stand for it. You shut off the waterworks or I'll whale you proper."

He walked out to look at the horses. It had suddenly occurred to him that perhaps their guests might have found and taken them. The broncos were still grazing in the draw where he had left them the previous night.

When Dud returned to the cabin young Dillon had recovered his composure. He lay on the bunk, face to the wall, and pretended to be asleep.

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The lard in the White River country was all made in those days of bear grease and deer tallow mixed.

CHAPTER XX

"THE BIGGER THE HAT THE SMALLER THE HERD"

Combing Crooked Wash that afternoon Bob rode with a heavy and despondent heart. It was with him while he and Dud jogged back to the ranch in the darkness. He had failed again. Another man had trodden down the fears to which he had afterward lightly confessed and had carried off the situation with a high hand. His admiration put Hollister on a pedestal. How had the blond puncher contrived to summon that reserve of audacity which had so captivated the Utes? Why was it that of two men one had stamina to go through regardless of the strain while another went to pieces and made a spectacle of himself?

Bob noticed that both in his report to Harshaw and later in the story he told at the Slash Lazy D bunkhouse, Dud shielded him completely. He gave not even a hint that Dillon had weakened under pressure. The boy was grateful beyond words, even while he was ashamed that he needed protection.

At the bunkhouse Dud's story was a great success. He had a knack of drawling out his climaxes with humorous effect.

"An' when I laid that red-hot skillet on the nearest area of Rumpty-Tumpty's geography he ce'tainly went up into the roof like he'd been fired out of a rocket. When he lit—gentlemen, when he lit he was the most restless Ute in western Colorado. He milled around the corral considerable. I got a kinda notion he'd sorta soured on the funny-boy business. Anyhow, he didn't cotton to my style o' humor. Different with old Colorow an' the others. They liked to 'a' hollered their fool haids off at the gent I'd put the new Slash Lazy D brand on. Then they did one o' them 'Wow-wow-wow' dances round Rumpty-Tumpty, who was still smokin' like he'd set fire to

the cabin."

Cowpunchers are a paradox. They have the wisdom of the ages, yet they are only grown-up children. Now they filled the night with mirth. Hawks lay down on his bunk and kicked his feet into the air joyfully. Reeves fell upon Dud and beat him with profane gayety. Big Bill waltzed him over the floor, regardless of his good-humored protest.

"Tell us some more, Dud," demanded the cook. "Did yore friend Rumpty put hisse'f out by sittin' in a snowbank?"

"I don't rightly recollect. Me 'n' Bob here was elected to lead the grand march an' we had to leave Rumpty-Tumpty be his own fire department. But I did notice how tender he lowered himself to the back of his hawse when they lit out in the mawnin'."

Bob saw that Hollister made the whole affair one huge joke. He did not mention that there had been any chance of a tragic termination to the adventure. Nor did the other punchers refer to that, though they knew the strained relations between the whites and the Utes. Riding for a dogie outfit was a hard life, but one could always get a laugh out of it somehow. The philosophy of the range is to grin and bear it.

A few days later Bob rode into town with a pack-horse at heel. He was to bring back some supplies for the ranch. Harshaw had chosen him to go because he wanted to buy some things for himself. These would be charged against the Slash Lazy D account at Platt & Fortner's store. Bob would settle for them with the boss when his pay-check came due.

It was a warm sunny day with a touch of summer still in the air. The blue stem and the bunch grass were dry. Sage and greasewood had taken on the

bare look of winter. But the pines were still green and the birds singing.

It was an ordeal for Bob to face Bear Cat. June was better, he had heard. But it was not his fault she had not died of the experience endured. He could expect no friendliness in the town. The best he could hope for was that it would let him alone.

He went straight to the office of Blister Haines. The justice took his fat legs down from the desk and waved him to a chair.

“How’re cases?” he asked.

Bob told his story without sparing himself.

Blister listened and made no comment to the end.

“You’re takin’ that Ute business too s-serious,” he said. “Gettin’ s-scalped ’s no picnic. You’re entitled to feel some weak at the knees. I’ve heard from Dud. He says you stood up fine.”

“He told you—?”

“N-no particulars. T-trouble with you is you’ve got too much imagination. From yore story I judge you weakened when the danger was over. You gotta learn to keep up that red haid like I said. When you’re scared or all in, stretch yore grin another inch. You don’t need to w-worry. You’re doin’ all right.”

Bob shook his head. Blister’s view encouraged him, though he could not agree with it.

“Keep yore eye on that Dud Hollister hombre,” the justice went on. “He’s one sure enough go-getter.”

“Yes,” agreed Bob. “He’s there every jump of the road. An’ he didn’t tell on me either.”

“You can tie to Dud,” agreed Blister. “Here’s the

point, son. When you g-get that sinkin' feelin' in yore tummy it's notice for you to get up on yore hind laigs an' howl. Be a wolf for a change."

"But I can't. I seem to—to wilt all up."

"Son, you know the answer already. T-throw back yore haid an' remember you got dominion."

Dillon shifted the conversation, embarrassed eyes on the floor. "How's—Miss Tolliver?"

"G-gettin' well fast. On the porch yesterday. Everybody in town stopped to say how g-glad they was to see her out. Been havin' the time of her life, June has. Mollie's always right good to sick folks, but she c-ce'tainly makes a pet of June."

"I'm glad. She's through with me, o' course, but I hope her friends look out for that Jake Houck."

"You don't need to worry about him. He's learnt to keep hands off."

Bob was not quite satisfied to let the matter rest there. In spite of the fact that he had made an outcast of himself he wanted to reinstate himself with June.

Hesitantly Bob approached the subject. "Maybe I'd better send her word I'm glad she come through all right."

Blister's eyes were stony. "Maybe you'd better not. What claim you got to be remembered by that li'l' girl? You're outa her life, boy."

Bob winced. The harsh truth wounded his sensitive nature. She had been his friend once. It hurt him to lose her wholly and completely.

He rose. "Well, I gotta go an' get some goods for the ranch, Mr. Haines," he said.

"I reckon you'd like to s-slide back easy an' have folks forget," Blister said. "Natural enough. But it won't be thataway. You'll have to f-fight like a bulldog to travel back along that trail to a good name. You ain't really begun yet."

"See you again next time I get to town," Bob said.

He was sorry he had raised the point with Haines of a message to June. That the justice should reject the idea so promptly and vigorously hurt his pride and self-esteem.

At Platt & Fortner's he invested in a pair of spurs, a cheap saddle, and a bridle. The cowboy is vain of his equipment. He would spend in those days forty dollars for a saddle, ten for boots, twenty-five for a bridle and silver plated bit, fifteen for spurs, and ten or twelve for a hat. He owned his own horse and blankets, sometimes also a pack-animal. These were used to carry him from one job to another. He usually rode the ranch broncos on the range.

But even if he had been able to afford it Bob would not have bought expensive articles. He did not make any claim about his ability to punch cattle, and he knew instinctively that real riders would resent any attempt on his part to swagger as they did. A remark dropped by Blister came to mind.

"The b-bigger the hat the smaller the herd, son. Do all yore b-braggin' with yore actions."

It is often a characteristic of weakness that it clings to strength. Bob would have given much for the respect and friendship of these clear-eyed, weather-beaten men. To know that he had forfeited these cut deep into his soul. The clerk that waited on him at the store joked gayly with two cowboys lounging on the counter, but he was very distantly polite to

Dillon. The citizens he met on the street looked at him with chill eyes. A group of schoolboys whispered and pointed toward him.

Bob had walked out from Haines's office in a huff, but as he rode back to the ranch he recognized the justice of his fat friend's decision. He had forfeited the right to take any interest in June Tolliver. His nature was to look always for the easiest way. He never wanted trouble with anybody. Essentially he was peace-loving even to the point of being spiritless. To try to slip back into people's good will by means of the less robust virtues would be just like him.

Probably Blister was right when he had told him to be a wolf. For him, anything was better than to be a sheep.

He clamped his teeth. He would show the Rio Blanco country whether he had a chicken heart. He would beat back somehow so that they would have to respect him whether they wanted to or not. If he made up his mind to it he could be just as game as Dud Hollister.

He would go through or he would die trying.

CHAPTER XXI

JUNE DISCOVERS A NEW WORLD

Blister had not overstated the case to Bob when he told him that June had been having the time of her life getting well. She had been a lonely little thing, of small importance in a country very busy on its own affairs. The sense of inferiority had oppressed her, due both to the secret of her father's past and the isolation in which she dwelt. This had stimulated a sullen resentment and a shy pride which held even friendly souls at arm's length.

Now she was being petted by everybody with whom she came into contact. She was pathetically grateful, and the big-hearted men and women of the frontier were worthy of the feeling. They gave her eager good will and generous sympathy. Into her room came soups and custards made by the best cooks on the river. When she was well enough to see visitors the mothers of Bear Cat came in person.

Through Melancthon Browning the landlady of the hotel shrewdly enlisted the aid of the most influential women in the community. June needed clothes. She had not a garment that was not worn out and ragged. But Mollie recognized the fact that more than these she was in need of the moral support of the settlers' wives. Mrs. Larson could give her work and a home, but she could not give her that

bulwark of her sex, respectability. Mollie was an exception to an established rule. She was liked and respected by other women in spite of her peculiarities. But this would not be true of her protégée unless the girl was above criticism. June must never step inside the bar or the gambling-room. She must find friends among the other girls of the town and take part in their social activities.

Wherefore Mollie, by timely suggestion, put it into the mind of the preacher to propose a sewing-bee to his congregation. Tolliver, under supervision, bought the goods and the women sewed. They made underclothes, petticoats, nightgowns, and dresses. They selected from the stock of Platt & Fortner shoes, stockings, and a hat, charging them to the account of Pete.

It was on her sixteenth birthday that June was taken into an adjoining room and saw all these treasures laid upon the bed. She did not at first understand that the two pretty dresses and all the comfortable, well-made clothes were for her. When this was made clear to her the tears brimmed to the long-lashed eyes. The starved little Cinderella was greatly touched. She turned to Mollie and buried her twitching face in a friendly bosom.

“Now—now—now,” Mollie reproved gently, stroking the dark crisp hair. “This is no way to act, dearie, an’ all the ladies so kind to you. You want to thank ’em, don’t you?”

“Yes, but—but—I—I—”

The smothered voice was tearful.

Mollie smiled at the committee. “I reckon she wants me to tell you for her that she’s plumb outa words to let you know how good she thinks you-all are.”

The black head nodded vigorously. “You’re the *best* folks—”

Mrs. Platt, a large and comfortable mother of seven, answered placidly. “I expect you’ll find, dearie, that most folks are good when you get on the right side of them. Now you try on them clothes an’ see if they fit. We tried ’em on my Mary. She’s about your size. You’re comin’ down to our house to supper to-night. I want you should get acquainted with the girls.”

June looked at Mollie, who nodded smilingly.

“I’ll be terrible glad to come, ma’am,” June said.

“Then that’s settled. They’re nice girls, if I do say it myself that am their mother.”

So June took her first timid steps into the social life of the frontier town. Shyly she made friends, and with them went to church, to Sunday School, and to picnics.

It had been definitely decided that she was to wait on table at the hotel restaurant and not return with her father to Piceance Creek. The plan had originated with Mollie, but Tolliver had acquiesced in it eagerly. If June went home with him Houck might reappear on the horizon, but if she stayed at Bear Cat, buttressed by the support of the town, the man from Brown’s Park would not dare to urge his claim again.

June waited on table at the hotel, but this did not keep her from the dances that were held in the old army hospital building. There were no class distinctions in Bear Cat then. There are not many now. No paupers lived in the county. This still holds good. Except the owners of the big cattle companies there were no men of wealth. A man was not judged

by what he had or by the kind of work he was doing. His neighbors looked through externals to see what he was, stripped of all adventitious circumstance. On that basis solely he was taken into fellowship or cast out from it.

The girl from Piceance Creek worked hard and was content, even if not quite happy. If she ever thought of the boy she had married, no reference to him ever crossed her lips. She was known simply as June by the town. Strangers called her Miss Tolliver.

There was about her a quiet self-possession that discouraged familiarity on the part of ambitious and amorous cowboys. Her history, with its thread of tragedy running through the warp and woof of it, set her apart from other girls of her age. Still almost a child in years, she had been caught in the cross-currents of life and beaten by its cold waves. Part of the heritage of youth—its gay and adventurous longing for experience—had been filched from her before she was old enough to know its value. In time she would perhaps recover her self-esteem, but she would never know in its fullness that divine right of American maidenhood to rule its environment and make demands of it.

CHAPTER XXII

AN ALTERNATIVE PROPOSED AND

DECLINED

The prediction made by Blister Haines that some overbearing puncher would bully Bob because of his reputation as safe game did not long wait fulfillment. A new rider joined the Slash Lazy D outfit. He had been working for the K Bar T for a couple of months. Prior to that time he had not been seen on the river. The rumor was that he hailed from Wyoming. To ask for more specific information would not have been good form. More than one or two cowboys in the Rio Blanco country had left their former homes just ahead of a sheriff.

Bandy Walker knew how to rope and ride. That was the main consideration of Harshaw when he hired him. He guessed the fellow's name was not Walker any more than it was Bandy. One cognomen had been given him because he was so bow-legged; the other he had no doubt taken for purposes of non-identification.

Bandy was short, heavy-set, and muscular. At a glance one would have picked him out as dangerous. The expression on the face was sulky. The eyes were expressionless as jade.

He was given the bunk next Dillon and before twenty-four hours were past he had begun to bully him. It began with a surly request behind which Bob sensed a command.

"Fellow, get my bridle, won't you? I left it with my saddle somewheres close to the chuck house. Got to fix it to-night."

Dillon had taken off his high-heeled boots because they were hurting his feet. He observed that Walker,

lying fully dressed on the blankets, was still wearing his.

“Why, sure,” Bob said amiably, and he tugged on his boots.

Presently he returned with the bridle and handed it to Bandy.

That was the beginning of it. Before the week was out Bob was the man’s flunkey, the butt of his ill-natured jokes, the helpless victim of his bad temper. Inside, he writhed. Another failure was being scored against him. But what could he do? This Bandy Walker was a gunman and a rough-and-tumble fighter. He boasted of it. Bob would be a child in his hands.

The other punchers watched the affair, drew deductions, but made no audible comments. The law of the outdoors is that every man must play his own hand. The Slash Lazy D resented Bandy. He was ugly in face, voice, and manner. His speech was offensive. He managed to convey insult by the curl of his lip. Yet he was cunning enough to keep within the bounds of safety. Nobody wanted to pick a quarrel with him, for it might turn out to be a serious business. The fellow looked rancorous. Moreover, the ranch riders had no use for Dillon. It would be a relief if Bandy drove him away. They felt disgraced when cowboys from the Circle Bar or the Quarter Circle Triangle inquired for the health of their new rider Miss Roberta.

Dud and Bob were riding Milk Creek one day about a week after Walker’s arrival. They unsaddled at noon and lay down to loaf on a sunny bank close to the water’s edge.

Hollister had been silent all morning, contrary to his

usual custom. His good spirits usually radiated gayety.

“What’s the matter? Ain’t you feelin’ good?” Bob asked.

“No, I ain’t.”

“Stomach?”

“Heart,” returned Dud gloomily.

Bob sat up. “Why, I never heard there was anything the matter with yore heart. If there is, you hadn’t ought to be ridin’ these crazy colts you do.”

“Nothin’ the matter with *my* heart. It’s yore’s I’m worryin’ about.”

Bob flushed, but said nothing.

“I’m wonderin’ how long you’re aimin’ to let that bully puss fellow Walker run over you.”

“What can I do?” Bob did not look at his companion. He kept his eyes on the ground, where he was tracing figures with a broken stick.

“Well, there’s seve-re-al things you could do. You might work the plug-ugly over. It couldn’t hurt his looks none, an’ it might improve ’em. That’s one suggestion. I’ve got others where that come from.”

“He’s a bad actor. I expect he’d half kill me,” Bob muttered.

“I reckon he would, onless you beat him to it. That’s not the point. You got to fight him or admit you’re yellow. No two ways about that.”

“I can’t fight. I never did,” groaned Dillon.

“Then how do you know you can’t? If you can’t, take yore lickin’. But you be on top of him every minute

of the time whilst you're gettin' it. Go to it like a wild cat. Pretty soon something'll drop, an' maybe it won't be you."

"I—can't."

Dud's blue eyes grew steely. "You can't, eh? Listen, fellow. I promised Blister to make a man outa you if I could. I aim to do it. You lick Bandy good to-night or I'll whale you to-morrow. That ain't all either. Every time you let him run on you I'll beat you up next day soon as I get you alone."

Bob looked at him, startled. "You wouldn't do that, Dud?"

"Wouldn't I? Don't you bet I wouldn't. I'm makin' that promise right now."

"I thought you were—my friend," Bob faltered.

"Don't you think it. I'm particular who I call by that name. I ain't a friend of any man without sand in his gizzard. But I done give my word to Old Blister an' I gotta come through. It'll hurt you more'n it will me, anyhow."

"I'll quit an' leave this part of the country," Bob said wretchedly.

"I'm not stoppin' you, but you won't go till I've whopped you once good. Will you take it now?"

"Let's talk it over reasonable," Bob pleaded.

Dud looked disgusted. "I never see such a fellow for thinkin' he could chin himself outa trouble. Nothin' doing."

"You've got no right to interfere in my affairs. It's not yore business," the worried victim of circumstances declared with an attempt at dignity.

"Say, don't I know it? If I hadn't promised Blister—But what's the use? I done said I would, an' I got to go through."

"I'll let you off yore promise."

Dud shook his head. "Wish you could, but you can't. It was to Blister I give my word. No, sir. You gotta take or give a lickin', looks like. Either me or Bandy, I ain't particular which."

"You lay off me, Dud Hollister."

"Honest, I hope you'll fix it so's I can. Well, you got till to-morrow to decide. Don't forget. Me or Bandy one. You take yore choice."

"I won't fight you."

"Then it's Bandy. Suits me fine. Say, Bob, I ain't so darned sure that fellow'll be there so big when it comes to a show-down. He looks to me tricky rather than game. Take him by surprise. Then crawl his hump sudden. With which few well-chosen words I close. Yores sincerely, Well-wisher, as these guys sign themselves when they write to the papers."

All through the rest of the day Bob was depressed. He felt as cheerful as a man about to be hanged. Why couldn't they let him alone? He never in his life went looking for trouble and it seemed to hunt him out if he was anywhere in reach. It was not fair. What claim had Dud to mix into his difficulties with Bandy? Absolutely none.

He made up his mind to slip away in the night, ride to Glenwood, and take the train for Denver. There a fellow could live in peace.

CHAPTER XXIII

BOB CRAWLS HIS HUMP SUDDEN

There was a game of stud after supper in the bunkhouse. Bob lay on his bed, a prey to wretched dread. He had made up his mind to have it out with Bandy, but his heart was pumping water instead of blood. When he looked at the squat puncher, thick-necked and leather-faced, an ugly sneer on his lips, the courage died out of his breast.

Dud was sitting with his back to the wall. His attention was ostensibly on the game, but Bob knew he was waiting for developments.

Bandy sat next Dud. “Raise you once,” he snarled. His card-playing was like everything else he did, offensive by reason of the spirit back of it. He was a bad loser and a worse winner.

“And another blue,” said Hollister easily when it came his turn again. “Got to treat an ace in the hole with respect.”

The other two players dropped out, leaving only Bandy to contest the pot with Dud.

“Once more,” retorted the bow-legged puncher, shoving in chips.

“And again.”

“Hmp! Claim an ace in the hole, do you? Well, I’ll jes’ give it one more li’l’ kick.”

Hollister had showing a deuce of hearts, a trey of clubs, an ace of spades, and a four of hearts. He might have a five in the hole or an ace. Bandy had a

pair of jacks in sight.

Dud called.

“You see it,” growled Bandy. “One pair.”

His opponent flipped over an ace of diamonds. “One pair here—aces.”

“Knew it all the time. Yore play gave it away,” jeered Bandy with obvious ill-temper.

“I reckon that’s why you kept raisin’,” Dud suggested, raking in the pot.

“All I needed was to hook a jack or another pair to beat you.”

“If I didn’t catch another ace or a small pair.”

The game was breaking up.

“Hell! I was playin’ poker before you could navigate, young fellow,” Bandy boasted. He had lost four dollars and was annoyed.

“An’ you’re still an optimist about hookin’ another pair when you need ’em.” Dud was counting his winnings placidly. “Six-fifty—seven—seven and two bits. Wish I had yore confidence in the music of the spears workin’ out so harmonious.”

This last was a reference to a book left at the ranch recently by the Reverend Melancthon Browning, the title of which was, “The Music of the Spheres.” Its philosophy was that every man makes his own world by the way he thinks about it.

Bandy jingled back to his bunk. He unstrapped his spurs, hooked one foot behind the knee of the other leg, and tried to work the wet boot off. The slippery leather stuck.

He called to Bob. “Come here, fellow, an’ yank this

boot off for me."

Dillon did not move. His heart stood still, then began to race. A choking filled his throat. The hour was striking for him. It was to be now or never.

The bow-legged puncher slewed his head. "I'm talkin' to you."

Slowly, reluctantly, Bob rose. He did not want to move. Something stronger than his will lifted him out of the bed and dragged him across the floor. He knew his hands were trembling.

Malignant triumph rode in Bandy's eye. It was always safe to bully this timid youth. Dud Hollister had a "No Trespass" sign displayed in his quiet, cool manner. Very well. He would take it out of his riding mate. That was one way of getting at him.

"What's ailin' you? Git a move on. You act like you'd like to tell me to go take a walk. I'll bet you would, too, if you wasn't such a rabbit heart."

Bob stooped and picked up the dirty boot. He zigzagged it from the foot. As he straightened again his eyes met those of Dud. He felt a roaring in the temples.

"O' course any one that'd let another fellow take his wife from him—an' him not married more'n an hour or two—"

The young fellow did not hear the end of the cruel gibe. The sound of rushing waters filled his ears. He pulled off the second boot.

Again his gaze met that of Hollister. He remembered Dud's words. "Crawl his hump sudden. Go to it like a wild cat." The trouble was he couldn't. His muscles would not obey the flaccid will.

The flood of waters died down. The roaring ceased. The puncher's words came to him clear.

"... not but what she was likely glad enough to go with Jake. She was out with him four-five hours. Where was they, I ask? What was they doing? You can't tell me she couldn't 'a' got away sooner if she'd wanted to so darned bad. No, sir, I'm no chicken right out of a shell. When it comes to a woman I say, Where's the man?"

A surge of anger welled up in Dillon and overflowed. He forgot about Dud and his threats. He forgot about his trepidation. This hound was talking of June, lying about her out of his foul throat.

One of the boots was still in his hand. He swung it round and brought the heel hard against the fellow's mouth. The blood gushed from the crushed lips. Bob dropped the boot and jolted his left to the cheek. He followed with a smashing right to the eye.

Taken at disadvantage, Bandy tried to struggle to his feet. He ran into one straight from the shoulder that caught the bridge of his nose and flung him back upon the bunk.

His hand reached under the pillow. Bob guessed what was there and dropped hard with both knees on his stomach.

The breath went out of Bandy suddenly. He lay still for a moment. When he began to struggle again he had forgotten the revolver under the pillow. With a sweeping gesture Bob brushed pillow and gun to the floor.

The man underneath twisted his red, wrinkled neck and bit Bob's forearm savagely. The boy's fingers closed like a vice on the hairy throat and tightened.

His other fist beat a merciless tattoo on the bruised and bleeding face.

“Take him off!” Bandy presently gasped.

Dud appointed himself referee. With difficulty he unloosed the fingers embedded in the flesh of the throat.

“Had enough, Bandy? You licked?” he asked.

“Take him off, I tell you!” the man managed to scream.

“Not unless you’re whipped. How about it?”

“’Nough,” the bully groaned.

Bob observed that Hawks had taken charge of the revolver. He released Walker.

The bow-legged puncher sat at the side of the bed and coughed. The blood was streaming from a face bruised and cut in a dozen places.

“He—he—jumped me—when I wasn’t lookin’,” the cowboy spat out, a word at a time.

“Don’t pull an alibi, Bandy. You had it comin’,” Dud said with a grin. He was more pleased than he could tell.

Dillon felt as though something not himself had taken control of him. He was in a cold fury, ready to fight again at the drop of a hat.

“He said she—she—” The sentence broke, but Bob rushed into another. “He’s got to take it back or I’ll kill him.”

“Only the first round ended, looks like, Bandy,” Dud said genially. “You better be lookin’ this time when he comes at you, or he’ll sure eat you alive.”

"I'm not lookin' for no fight," Bandy said sulkily, dabbing at his face with the bandanna round his neck.

"I'll bet you ain't—not with a catamount like Miss Roberta here," Tom Reeves said, chuckling with delight.

One idea still obsessed Bob's consciousness. "What he said about June—I'll not let him get away with it. He's got to tell you-all he was lyin'."

"You hear yore boss speak, Bandy," drawled Dud. "How about it? Do we get to see you massacreed again? Or do you stand up an' admit you're a dirty liar for talkin' thataway?"

Bandy Walker looked round on a circle of faces all unfriendly to him. He had broken the code, and he knew it. In the outdoor West a man does not slander a good woman without the chance of having to pay for it. The puncher had let his bad bullying temper run away with him. He had done it because he had supposed Dillon harmless, to vent on him the spleen he could not safely empty upon Dud Hollister's blond head.

If Bob had been alone the bow-legged man might have taken a chance—though it is doubtful whether he would have invited that whirlwind attack again, unless he had had a revolver close at hand—but he knew public sentiment was wholly against him. There was nothing to do but to swallow his words.

That he did this in the most ungracious way possible was like him. "Since you're runnin' a Sunday School outfit I'll pack my roll an' move on to-morrow to where there's some he-men," he sneered. "I never met this girl, so I don't know a thing about her. All I did was to make a general remark about women.

Which same I know to be true. But since you're a bunch of sky pilots at the Slash Lazy D, I'll withdraw anything that hurts yore tender feelin's."

"Are you takin' back what you said—about—about her?" Bob demanded harshly.

Bandy's smouldering, sullen eyes slid round. "I'm takin' it back. Didn't you hear me say I don' know a thing about her? I know Houck, though. So I judged —" He spat a loose tooth out on the floor venomously. It would perhaps not be wise to put into words what he had deduced from his knowledge of Jake Houck.

"The incident is now clo-o-sed if Miss Roberta is satisfied," Dud announced to the public at large.

His riding mate looked at Hollister. "Don't call me that," he said.

For a moment Dud was puzzled. "Don't call you what?"

"What you just called me."

Dud broke into a grin of delight. He wondered if it would not be a good idea to make Bob give him a licking, too. But he decided to let good enough alone. He judged that Blister would be satisfied without any more gore. Anyhow, Bob might weaken and spoil it.

"Boy, I'll never call you Miss—what I called you—long as I live exceptin' when I'm meanin' to compliment you special." Dud slapped him hard between the shoulder blades. "You're a young cyclone, but you can't get a chance to muss Dud Hollister up to-night. You work too rapid. Doggone my hide, if I ever did see a faster or a better piece o' work. How about it, Tom?"

Reeves, too, pounded Dillon in token of friendship. If Bob had not wiped the slate clean he had made a start in that direction.

“You’re some scrapper when you get started. Bandy looks like he’s been through a railroad wreck,” he said.

Bandy was by this time at the wash-basin repairing damages. “Tell you he jumped me when I wasn’t lookin’,” he growled sulkily. “Fine business. You-all stood by an’ watched him do it.”

“After you’d deviled him for a week,” amended Big Bill. “Mebbe in that outfit of he-men you’re expectin’ to hit the trail for to-morrow they’ll wrop you up in cotton an’ not let a hundred-an’-thirty-pound giant jump you.”

“I ain’t askin’ it of ’em,” Bandy retorted. “I can look out for myself an’ then some. As for this sprout who thinks he’s so gosh-mighty, I’ll jus’ say one thing. Some o’ these days I’ll settle with him proper.”

He turned as he spoke. The look on his battered face was venomous.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN THE SADDLE

White winter covered the sage hills and gave the country a bleak and desolate look. The Slash Lazy D riders wrapped up and went out over the wind-swept mesas to look after the cattle cowering in draws or drifting with the storm. When Bob could sleep snugly in the bunkhouse he was lucky. There were nights when he shivered over a pine-knot fire in the shelter of a cutbank with the temperature fifteen degrees below zero.

At this work he won the respect of his fellows. He could set his teeth and endure discomfort with any of them. It was at sharp danger crises that he had always quailed. He never shirked work or hardship, and he never lied to make the way easier or more comfortable. Harshaw watched him with increasing approval. In Dillon he found all but one of the essential virtues of the cowboy—good humor, fidelity, truth, tenacity, and industry. If he lacked courage in the face of peril the reason was no doubt a constitutional one.

A heavy storm in February tried the riders to capacity. They were in the saddle day and night. For weeks they appeared at the ranch only at odd intervals, haggard, unshaven, hungry as wolves. They ate, saddled fresh mounts, and went out into the drifts again tireless and indomitable.

Except for such food as they could carry in a sack they lived on elk trapped in the deep snow. The White River country was one of the two or three best big game districts in the United States.[3] The early settlers could get a deer whenever they wanted one. Many were shot from the doors of their cabins.

While Harshaw, Dud, and Bob were working Wolf Creek another heavy snow fell. A high wind swept the white blanket into deep drifts. All day the riders

ploughed through these to rescue gaunt and hungry cattle. Night caught them far from the cabin where they had been staying.

They held a consultation. It was bitter weather, the wind still blowing.

“Have to camp, looks like,” Harshaw said.

“We’ll have a mighty tough night without grub and blankets,” Dud said doubtfully. “She’s gettin’ colder every minute.”

“There’s a sheltered draw below here. We’ll get a good fire going anyhow.”

In the gulch they found a band of elk.

“Here’s our supper an’ our beds,” Dud said.

They killed three.

While Bob gathered and chopped up a down and dead tree the others skinned the game. There was dry wood in Harshaw’s saddle-bags with which to start a fire. Soon Dillon had a blaze going which became a crackling, roaring furnace. They ate a supper of broiled venison without trimmings.

“Might be a heap worse,” Dud said while he was smoking afterward before the glowing pine knots. “I’m plenty warm in front even if I’m about twenty below up an’ down my spine.”

Presently they rolled up in the green hides and fell asleep.

None of them slept very comfortably. The night was bitter, and they found it impossible to keep warm.

Bob woke first. He decided to get up and replenish with fuel the fire. He could not rise. The hide had frozen stiff about him. He shouted to the others.

They, too, were helpless in the embrace of their improvised sleeping-bags.

“Have to roll to the fire an’ thaw out,” Harshaw suggested.

This turned out to be a ticklish job. They had to get close enough to scorch their faces and yet not near enough to set fire to the robes. More than once Bob rolled over swiftly to put out a blaze in the snow.

Dud was the first to step out of his blanket. In a minute or two he had peeled the hides from the others.

An hour later they were floundering through the drifts toward the cabin on Wolf Creek. Behind each rider was strapped the carcass of an elk.

“Reminds me of the time Blister went snow blind,” Harshaw said. “Up around Badger Bend it was. He got lost an’ wandered around for a coupla days blind as a bat. Finally old Clint Frazer’s wife seen him wallowin’ in the drifts an’ the old man brought him in. They was outa grub an’ had to hoof it to town. Clint yoked his bull team an’ had it break trail. He an’ the wife followed. But Blister he couldn’t see, so he had to hang on to one o’ the bulls by the tail. The boys joshed him about that quite a while. He ce’tainly was a sight rollin’ down Main Street anchored to that critter’s tail.”

“I’ll bet Blister was glad to put his foot on the rail at Dolan’s,” Dud murmured. “I’d be kinda glad to do that same my own se’f right now.”

“Blister went to bed and stayed there for a spell. He was a sick man.” Harshaw’s eye caught sight of some black specks on a distant hillside. “Cattle. We’ll come back after we’ve onloaded at the cabin.”

They did. It was long after dark before they reached shelter again.

The riders of the Slash Lazy D were glad to see spring come, though it brought troubles of its own. The weather turned warm and stayed so. The snow melted faster than the streams could take care of it. There was high water all over the Blanco country. The swollen creeks poured down into the overflowing river. Three punchers in the valley were drowned inside of a week, for that was before the bridges had been built.

While the water was still high Harshaw started a trail herd to Utah.

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[3]

According to old-timers the automobile is responsible for the extermination of the game supply going on so rapidly. The pioneers at certain seasons provided for their needs by killing blacktail and salting down the meat. But they were dead shots and expert hunters. The automobile tourists with high-power rifles rush into the hills during the open season and kill male and female without distinction. For every deer killed outright three or four crawl away to die later from wounds. One ranchman reports finding fifteen dead deer on one day's travel through the sage.

CHAPTER XXV

THE RIO BLANCO PUTS IN A CLAIM

Preparations for the drive occupied several days. The cattle were rounded up and carefully worked. Many of those that had roughed through the hard winter were still weak. Some of these would yet succumb and would increase the thirty per cent of losses already counted. Only those able to stand inspection were thrown into the trail herd. Afterward, a second cut was made and any doubtful ones culled from the bunch.

Word had come from Rangely that all the streams were high as far as and beyond the Utah line. But the owner of the Slash Lazy D was under contract to deliver and he could not wait for the water to go down.

When the road herd had been selected and the mavericks in the round-up branded with the Slash Lazy D or whatever other brand seemed fair considering the physical characteristics of the animal and the group with which it was ranging, Harshaw had the cattle moved up the river a couple of miles to a valley of good grass. Here they were held while the ranch hands busied themselves with preparations for the journey. A wagon and harness were oiled, a chuck-box built, and a supply of groceries packed. Bridles and cinches were gone over carefully, ropes examined, and hobbles prepared.

The remuda for the trail outfit was chosen by Harshaw himself. He knew his horses as he knew the trail to Bear Cat. No galled back or lame leg could escape his keen eye. No half-tamed outlaw could slip into the cavvy. Every horse chosen was of proved stamina. Any known to be afraid of water remained at the ranch. Every rider would have to swim streams a dozen times and his safety would depend upon his mount. Tails were thinned, hoofs trimmed,

manes cleared of witches' bridles, and ears swabbed to free them of ticks.

The start was made before dawn. Stars were shining by thousands when the chuck-wagon rolled down the road. The blatting of cows could be heard as the riders moved the phantom cattle from their bedding-ground.

The dogies were long-legged and shaggy, agile and wild as deer. They were small-boned animals, not fit for market until they were four-year-olds. On their gaunt frames was little meat, but they were fairly strong and very voracious. If not driven too hard these horned jackrabbits, as some wag had dubbed them, would take on flesh rapidly.

Harshaw chose five punchers to go with him—Dud, Big Bill, Tom Reeves, Hawks, and Bob. A light mess-wagon went with the outfit. Before noon the herd had grazed five miles down the river.

The young grass matted the ground. Back of the valley could be seen the greenclad mesas stretching to the foothills which hemmed in the Rio Blanco. The timber and the mesquite were in leaf. Wild roses and occasionally bluebells bloomed. The hillsides were white with the blossoms of service berries.

In the early afternoon they reached the ford. Harshaw trailed the cattle across in a long file. He watched the herd anxiously, for the stream was running strong from the freshet. After a short, hard swim the animals made the landing.

The mess-wagon rattled down to the ford as the last of the herd scrambled ashore.

"Think I'll put you at the reins, Dud," the cattleman said. "Head the horses upstream a little and keep 'em

going."

All the other punchers except Bob were across the river with the herd.

Dud relieved the previous driver, gathered up reins and whip with competent hands, and put the horses at the river. They waded in through the shallows, breasted the deep water, and began to swim. Before they had gone three yards they were in difficulties. The force of the current carried the light wagon downstream. The whiplash cracked around the ears of the horses, but they could not make headway. Team, wagon, and driver began to drift down the river. Supplies, floating from the top of the load, were scattered in all directions.

Instantly six men became very busy. Rope loops flew out and tightened around the bed of the wagon. Others circled the necks of the horses. Dud dived into the river to lighten the load. Harshaw, Bob, and the cook rode into the shallow water and salvaged escaping food, while the riders on the other bank guided wagon and team ashore.

Dud, dripping like a mermaid, came to land with a grin. Under one arm a pasty sack of flour was tucked, under the other a smoked venison haunch. "An' I took a bath only yesterday," he lamented.

The food was sun-dried and the wagon repacked.

At Dry Creek, which was now a rushing torrent, Harshaw threw the cattle into a draw green with young grass and made camp for the night.

"We got neighbors," announced Big Bill, watching a thin column of smoke rising from the mesa back of them.

"Guess I'll drift over after supper," Harshaw said.

"Maybe they can give me the latest news about high water down the river."

Hawks had just come in from the remuda. He gave information.

"I drifted over to their camp. An old friend, one of 'em. Gent by the name of Bandy Walker. He's found that outfit of he-men he was lookin' for."

"Yes," said the cattleman non-committally.

"One's a stranger. The other's another old friend of some o' the boys. Jake Houck he calls hisself."

Bob's heart shriveled within him. Two enemies scarcely a stone's throw away, and probably both of them knew he was here. Had they come to settle with him?

He dismissed this last fear. In Jake Houck's scheme of things he was not important enough to call for a special trip of vengeance.

"We'll leave 'em alone," Harshaw decided. "If any of them drop over we'll be civil. No trouble, boys, you understand."

But Houck's party did not show up, and before break of day the camp of the trail herd outfit was broken. The riders moved the herd up the creek to an open place where it could be easily crossed. From here the cattle drifted back toward the river. Dud was riding on the point, Hawks and Dillon on the drag.

In the late afternoon a gulch obstructed their path. It ran down at right angles to the Rio Blanco. Along the edge of this Harshaw rode till he found an easier descent. He drove the leaders into the ravine and started them up the other side of the trough to the mesa beyond. The cattle crowded so close that some

of them were forced down the bed of the gorge instead of up the opposite bank.

Bob galloped along the edge and tried to head the animals back by firing his revolver in front from above. In this he was not successful. The gulch was narrow, and the pressure behind drove the foremost cattle on to the river.

The dogies waded in to drink. The push of the rear still impelled the ones in advance to move deeper into the water. Presently the leaders were swimming out into the stream. Those behind followed at heel.

Dillon flung his horse down into the ravine in the headlong fashion he had learned from months of hill riding. He cantered along it, splashing through shallow pools and ploughing into tangled brush. When he came within sight of the river the cattle were emerging from it upon a sandy bar that formed an island in midstream.

He kicked off his chaps, remounted, and headed into the water. The current was strong and Powder River already tired. But the bronco breasted the rushing waters gamely. It was swept downstream, fighting every inch of the way. When at last the Wyoming horse touched bottom, it was at the lower edge of the long bar.

Bob swung down into the water and led his mount ashore.

From the bank he had just left, Hawks called to him. “Want I should come over, or can you handle ’em?”

“Better stay there till I see if I can start ’em back,” Bob shouted.

On Powder River he rounded up the cattle, a score or more of them, and drove them back into the stream.

They went reluctantly, for they too were tired and the swim across had been a hard one. But after one or two had started the others followed.

The young cowpuncher did not like the look of the black rushing waters. He had known one horrible moment of terror while he was crossing, that moment during which he had been afraid Powder River would be swept beyond the point of the sand spit. Now he cringed at the thought of venturing into that flood again. He postponed the hazard, trying two or three starting-places tentatively before he selected one at the extreme upper point of the island.

His choice was a bad one. The bronco was carried down into a swirl of deep, angry water. So swift was the undertow that Powder River was dragged from beneath its rider. Bob caught at the mane of the horse and clung desperately to it with one hand. A second or two, and this was torn from his clutch.

Dillon was washed downstream. He went under, tried to cry for help, and swallowed several gulps of water. When he came to the surface again he was still close to the island, buffeted by the boiling torrent. It swept him to a bar of willow bushes. To these he clung with the frenzy of a drowning man.

After a time he let go one hand-hold and found another. Gradually he worked into the shallows and to land. He could see Powder River, far downstream, still fighting impotently against the pressure of the current.

Bob shuddered. If he lived a hundred years he would never have a closer escape from drowning. It gave him a dreadful sinking at the stomach even to look at the plunging Blanco. The river was like some fearful monster furiously seeking to devour.

The voice of Hawks came to him. “Stay there while I get the boss.”

The dismounted cowboy watched Hawks ride away, then lay down in the hot sand and let the sun bake him. He felt sick and weak, as helpless as a blind and wobbly pup.

It may have been an hour later that he heard voices and looked across to the mouth of the ravine. Harshaw and Big Bill and Dud were there with Hawks. They were in a group working with ropes.

Harshaw rode into the river. He carried a coil of rope. Evidently two or more lariats had been tied together.

“Come out far as you can and catch this rope when I throw it,” Harshaw told the marooned cowboy.

Bob ventured out among the willows, wading very carefully to make sure of his footing. The current swirled around his thighs and tugged at him.

The cattleman flung the rope. It fell short. He pulled it in and rewound the coil. This time he drove his horse into deeper water. The animal was swimming when the loop sailed across to the willows.

Dillon caught it, slipped it over his body, and drew the noose tight. A moment later he was being tossed about by the cross-currents. The lariat tightened. He was dragged under as the force of the torrent flung him into midstream. His body was racked by conflicting forces tugging at it. He was being torn in two, the victim of a raging battle going on to possess him. Now he was on his face, now on his back. For an instant he caught a glimpse of blue sunlit sky before he plunged down again into the black waters and was engulfed by them....

He opened his eyes. Dud's voice came from a long way.

"Comin' to all right. Didn't I tell you this bird couldn't drown?"

The mists cleared. Bob saw Dud's cheerful smile, and back of it the faces of Harshaw, Hawks, and Big Bill.

"You got me out," he murmured.

"Sure did, Bob. You're some drookit, but I reckon we can dry you like we did the grub," his riding mate said.

"Who got me?"

"Blame the boss."

"We all took a hand, boy," Harshaw explained. "It was quite some job. You were headed for Utah right swift. The boys rode in and claimed ownership. How you feelin'?"

"Fine," Bob answered, and he tried to demonstrate by rising.

"Hold on. What's yore rush?" Harshaw interrupted. "You're right dizzy, I expect. A fellow can't swallow the Blanco and feel like kickin' a hole in the sky right away. Take yore time, boy."

Bob remembered his mount. "Powder River got away from me—in the water." He said it apologetically.

"I'm not blamin' you for that," the boss said, and laid a kindly hand on Dillon's shoulder.

"Was it drowned?"

"I reckon we'll find that out later. Lucky you wasn't. That's a heap more important."

Bob was riding behind Dud fifteen minutes later in

the wake of the herd. Hawks had gone back to learn what had become of Powder River.

Supper was ready when Buck reached camp. He was just in time to hear the cook's "Come an' get it." He reported to Harshaw.

"Horse got outa the river about a mile below the island. I scouted around some for it, but couldn't trail in the dark."

"All right, Buck. To-morrow Dud and Bob can ride back and get the bronc. We'll loaf along the trail and make a short day of it."

He sat down on his heels, reached for a tin plate and cup, and began one of the important duties of the day.

CHAPTER XXVI

CUTTING SIGN

Dud's observation, when he and Bob took the back trail along the river to find the missing bronco, confirmed that of Buck Hawks. He found the place where a horse had clawed its way out of the stream to the clay bank. From here it had wandered into the sage and turned toward the home ranch. The tracks showed that Powder River was moving slowly, grazing as it went.

"I reckon by noon we can say 'Hello!' to yore bronc," Dud prophesied. "No need to trail it. All we got to do is follow the river."

An hour later he drew up and swung from the saddle. "Now I wonder who we've had with us this glad mawnin'."

Dud stooped and examined carefully tracks in the mud. Bob joined him.

"Powder River ain't so lonesome now. Met up with friends, looks like. Takin' a li'l' journey north." The cowpuncher's blue eyes sparkled. The prosaic pursuit of a stray mount had of a sudden become Adventure.

"You mean—?"

"What do *you* read from this sign we've cut?"

Bob told his deductions. "Powder River met some one on horseback. The man got off. Here's his tracks."

"Fellow, use yore haid," admonished his friend. "Likewise yore eyes. You wouldn't say this track was made by the same man as this one, would you?"

"No. It's bigger."

"An' here's another, all wore off at the heel. We got three men anyhow. Which means also three horses. Point of fact there are four mounts, one to carry the pack."

"How do you know there are four?"

"They had four when they camped close to us night 'fore last."

Dillon felt a sinking at the pit of his stomach. "You think this is Houck's outfit?"

"That'd be my guess."

"An' that they've taken Powder River with them?"

"I'm doing better than guessin' about that. One of the party saw a bronc with an empty saddle an' tried to rope it. First time he missed, but he made good when he tried again."

"If I had yore imagination, Dud—"

"Straight goods. See here where the loop of the rope dragged along the top of the mud after the fellow missed his throw."

Bob saw the evidence after it had been pointed out to him. "But that don't prove he got Powder River next time he threw," he protested.

"Here's where that's proved." Dud showed him the impressions of two hoofs dug deep into the ground. "Powder River bucked after he was roped an' tried to break away. The other horse, like any good cowpony does, leaned back on the rope an' dug a toe-hold."

"Where's Houck going?"

"Brown's Park likely, from the way they're headed."

"What'll we do?"

"Why, drap in on them to-night kinda casual an' say 'Much obliged for roundin' up our stray bronc for us.'"

This programme did not appeal to Bob. In that camp were two enemies of his. Both of them also hated Dud. Houck and Walker were vindictive. It was not likely either of them would forget what they owed these two young fellows.

"Maybe we'd better ride back an' tell the boss first," he suggested.

"Maybe we'd better not," Hollister dissented. "By

that time they'd be so far ahead we'd never catch 'em. No, sir. We'll leave a note here for the boss. Tack it to this cottonwood. If we don't show up in a reasonable time he'll trail back an' find out what for not."

"That'd do us a lot of good if Houck had dry-gulched us."

Dud laughed. "You're the lad with the imagination. Far as Houck goes, an' Bandy Walker, too, for that matter, I'll make you a present of the pair of 'em as two sure-enough bad eggs. But they've got to play the hands dealt 'em without knowin' what we're holdin'."

"They've prob'ly got rifles, an' we haven't."

"It's a cinch they've got rifles. But they won't dare use 'em. How do they know we're playin' this alone? First off, I'll mention that I sent Buck back to tell the boss we'd taken the trail after them. That puts it up to them to act reasonable whether they want to or not. Another thing. We surprise 'em. Give the birds no chance to talk it over. Not knowin' what to do, they do nothing. Ain't that good psycho-ology, as Blister says when he calls a busted flush?"

"Trouble is we're holdin' the busted flush."

"Sure, an' Houck'll figure we wouldn't 'a' trailed him unless we'd fixed the play right beforehand. His horse sense will tell him we wouldn't go that strong unless our cards was all blue. We're sittin' in the golden chair. O' course we'll give the birds a chance to save their faces—make it plain that we're a whole lot obliged to 'em for lookin' after Powder River for us."

Bob's sagging head went up. He had remembered

Blister's injunction. "All right, Dud. Turn yore wolf loose. I'll ride along an' back the bluff."

They left the river and climbed to the mesa. The trail took them through a rough country of sagebrush into the hills of greasewood and piñon. In mid-afternoon they shot a couple of grouse scuttling through the bunch grass. Now and again they started deer, but they were not looking for meat. A brown bear peered at them from a thicket and went crashing away with an awkward gait that carried it over the ground fast.

From a summit they saw before them a thin spiral of smoke rising out of an arroyo.

"I reckon that's the end of the trail," Dud drawled. "We're real pleased to meet up with you, Mr. Houck. Last time I had the pleasure was a sorta special picnic in yore honor. You was ridin' a rail outa Bear Cat an' being jounced up considerable."

"If he thinks of that—"

"He'll think of it," Dud cut in cheerfully. "He's gritted his teeth a lot of times over that happenstance, Mr. Houck has. It tastes right bitter in his mouth every time he recollects it. First off, soon as he sees us, he'll figure that his enemies have been delivered into his hand. It'll be up to us to change his mind. If you're all set, Sure-Shot, we'll drift down an' start the peace talk."

Bob moistened his dry lips. "All set."

They rode down the hillside, topped another rise, and descended into the draw where a camp was pitched.

A young fellow chopping firewood moved forward to meet them.

"There's Powder River with the broncs," Bob said in a low voice to his friend.

"Yes," said Dud, and he swung from the saddle.

"'Lo, fellows. Where you headed for?" the wood-chopper asked amiably.

Two men were sitting by the fire. They waited, in an attitude of listening. Dusk had fallen. The glow of the fire lighted their faces, but the men who had just ridden up were in the gathering darkness beyond the circle lit by the flames.

"We came to get Powder River, the bronc you rounded up for us," Hollister said evenly. "Harshaw sent us ahead. We're sure much obliged to you for yore trouble."

The larger of the two men by the fire rose and straddled forward. He looked at Dud and he looked at Bob. His face was a map of conflicting emotions.

"Harshaw sent you, did he?"

"Yes, sir. Bob had bad luck in the river an' the horse got away from him. I reckon the pony was lightin' out for home when yore rope stopped the journey." The voice of Dud was cheerful and genial. It ignored any little differences of the past with this hook-nosed individual whose eyes were so sultry and passionate.

"So he sent you two fellows, did he? I'll say he's a good picker. I been wantin' to meet you," he said harshly.

"Same here, Houck." Bandy Walker pushed to the front, jerking a forty-five from its scabbard.

Houck's hand shot forward and caught the cowpuncher by the wrist. "What's bitin' you, Bandy? Time enough for that when I give the word."

The yellow teeth of the bow-legged man showed in a snarl of rage and pain. “I’d ’a’ got Dillon if you’d let me be.”

“Didn’t you hear this guy say Harshaw sent them here? Use yore horse sense, man.” Houck turned to Hollister. “Yore bronc’s with the others. The saddle’s over by that rock. Take ’em an’ hit the trail.”

In sullen rage Houck watched Dud saddle and cinch. Not till the Slash Lazy D riders were ready to go did he speak again.

“Tell you what I’ll do,” he proposed. “Get down off’n yore horses, both o’ you, an’ I’ll whale the daylight outa the pair of you. Bandy’ll stay where he’s at an’ not mix in.”

Hollister looked at Bandy, and he knew the fellow’s trigger finger itched. There was not a chance in the world that he would stand back and play fair. But that was not the reason why Dud declined the invitation. He had not come to get into trouble. He meant to keep out of it if he could.

“Last fellow that licked me hauled me down off’n my bronc, Mr. Houck,” Dud answered, laughing. “No, sir. We got to turn down that invite to a whalin’. The boss gave us our orders straight. No trouble a-tall. I expect if it was our own say-so we might accommodate you. But not the way things are.”

“No guts, either of you. Ain’t two to one good enough?” jeered Houck angrily.

“Not good enough right now. Maybe some other time, Mr. Houck,” Dud replied, his temper unruffled.

“You want it to be twelve to one, like it was last time, eh?”

"Harshaw will be lookin' for us, so we'll be sayin' good-evenin'," the rider for the Slash Lazy D said quietly.

He turned his horse to go, as did his companion. Houck cursed them both bitterly. While they rode into the gloom Bob's heart lifted to his throat. Goosequills ran up and down his spine. Would one of his enemies shoot him in the back? He could hardly keep from swinging his head to make sure they were not aiming at him. He wanted to touch his mount with a spur to quicken the pace.

But Dud, riding by his side, held his bronco to the slow even road gait of the traveler who has many miles to cover. Apparently he had forgotten the existence of the furious, bitter men who were watching their exit from the scene. Bob set his teeth and jogged along beside him.

Not till they were over the hill did either of them speak.

"Wow!" grunted Dud as he wiped the sweat from his face. "I'm sure enough glad to have that job done with. My back aches right between the shoulder blades where a bullet might 'a' hit it."

Bob relaxed in the saddle. He felt suddenly faint. Even now he found himself looking round apprehensively to make sure that a man carrying a rifle was not silhouetted on the hilltop against the sky-line.

CHAPTER XXVII

PARTNERS IN PERIL

Into the office of Blister Haines, J. P., a young man walked. He was a berry-brown youth, in the trappings of the range-rider, a little thin and stringy, perhaps, but well-poised and light-stepping.

With one swift glance the fat man swept his visitor from head to foot and liked what he saw. The lean face was tanned, the jaw firm, the eye direct and steady. There was no need to tell this man to snap up his head. Eight months astride a saddle in the sun and wind had wrought a change in Robert Dillon.

"'Lo, Red Haid," the justice sang out squeakily. "How's yore good health? I heerd you was d-drowned. Is you is, or is you ain't? Sit down an' rest yore weary bones."

"I took a swim," admitted Bob. "The boys fished me out while I was still kickin'."

"Rivers all high?"

"Not so high as they were. We noticed quite a difference on the way back."

"Well, s-sit down an' tell me all about it. How do you like ridin', Texas man?"

"Like it fine."

"All yore troubles blown away?"

"Most of 'em. I'm a long way from being a wolf yet, though."

"So? B-by the way, there's a friend of yours in town —Jake Houck."

There was a moment's pause. "Did he say he was my friend?" asked Bob.

"Didn't mention it. Thought maybe you'd like to know he's here. It's not likely he'll trouble you."

"I'd be glad to be sure of that. Dud an' I had a little run-in with him last month. He wasn't hardly in a position then to rip loose, seein' as he had my horse an' saddle in his camp an' didn't want Harshaw in his wool. So he cussed us out an' let it go at that. Different now. I'm playin' a lone hand—haven't got the boss back of me."

"F-fellow drifted in from Vernal yesterday," the justice piped, easing himself in his chair. "Told a s-story might interest you. Said Jake Houck had some trouble with a y-young Ute buck over a hawss. Houck had been drinkin', I reckon. Anyhow he let the Injun have it in the stomach. Two-three shots outa his six-gun. The Utes claimed it was murder. Jake he didn't wait to adjust no claims, but lit out on the jump."

"Won't the Government get him?"

The fat man shrugged. "Oh, well, a Ute's a Ute. Point is that Houck, who always was a t-tough nut, has gone bad since the boys rode him on a rail. He's proud as Lucifer, an' it got under his hide. He's kinda cuttin' loose an' givin' the devil in him free rein. Wouldn't surprise me if he turned into a killer of the worst kind."

Bob's eyes fastened to his uneasily. "You think he's—after me?"

"I think he'll d-do to watch."

"Yes, but—"

Blister rolled a cigarette and lit it before he asked casually, “Stayin’ long in town?”

“Leavin’ to-day for the ranch.”

“What size gun you carry for rattlesnakes?”

“Mine’s a forty-five.” Bob took it out, examined it, and thrust the weapon between his trousers and his shirt. If he felt any mental disturbance he did not show it except in the anxious eyes.

Blister changed the subject lightly. “Hear anything ab-b-bout the Utes risin’? Any talk of it down the river?”

“Some. The same old stuff. I’ve been hearin’ it for a year.”

“About ripe, looks like. This business of Houck ain’t gonna help any. There’s a big bunch of ’em over there in the hills now. They’ve been runnin’ off stock from outlying ranches.”

“Sho! The Indians are tamed. They’ll never go on the warpath again, Blister.”

“J-just once more, an’ right soon now.”

The justice gave his reasons for thinking so, while Bob listened rather inattentively. The boy wanted to ask him about June, but he remembered what his fat friend had told him last time he mentioned her to him. He was still extremely sensitive about his failure to protect his girl-wife and he did not want to lay himself open to snubs.

Bob sauntered from the office, and before he had walked a dozen steps came face to face with June. She was coming out of a grocery with some packages in her arms. The color flooded her dusky cheeks. She looked at him, startled, like a fawn poised for flight.

During the half-year since he had seen her June had been transformed. She had learned the value of clothes. No longer did she wear a shapeless sack for a dress. Her shoes were small and shapely, her black hair neatly brushed and coiffed. The months had softened and developed the lines of the girlish figure. Kindness and friendliness had vitalized the expression of the face and banished its sullenness. The dark eyes, with just a hint of wistful appeal, were very lovely.

Both of them were taken unawares. Neither knew what to do or say. After the first instant of awkwardness June moved forward and passed him silently.

Bob went down the street, seeing nothing. His pulses trembled with excitement. This charming girl was his wife, or at least she once had been for an hour. She had sworn to love, honor, and obey him. There had been a moment in the twilight when they had come together to the verge of something divinely sweet and wonderful, when they had gazed into each other's eyes and had looked across the boundary of the promised land.

If he had only kept the faith with her! If he had stood by her in the hour of her great need! The bitterness of his failure ate into the soul of the range-rider as it had done already a thousand times. It did not matter what he did. He could never atone for the desertion on their wedding day. The horrible fact was written in blood. It could not be erased. Forever it would have to stand between them. An unbridgeable gulf separated them, created by his shameless weakness.

When Bob came to earth he found himself clumping down the river road miles from town. He turned and walked back to Bear Cat. His cowpony was at the

corral and he was due at the ranch by night.

Young Dillon's thoughts had been so full of June and his relation to her that it was with a shock of surprise he saw Jake Houck swing out from the hotel porch and bar the way.

"Here's where you 'n' me have a settlement," the Brown's Park man announced.

"I'm not lookin' for trouble," Bob said, and again he was aware of a heavy sinking at the stomach.

"You never are," jeered Houck. "But it's right here waitin' for you, Mr. Rabbit Heart."

Bob heard the voices of children coming down the road on their way from school. He knew that two or three loungers were watching him and Houck from the doors of adjacent buildings. He was aware of a shouting and commotion farther up the street. But these details reached him only through some subconscious sense of absorption. His whole attention was concentrated on the man in front of him who was lashing himself into a fighting rage.

What did Houck mean to do? Would he throw down on him and kill? Or would he attack with his bare hands? Fury and hatred boiled into the big man's face. His day had come. He would have his revenge no matter what it cost. Bob could guess what hours of seething rage had filled Houck's world. The freckle-faced camp flunkey had interfered with his plans, snatched from him the bride he had chosen, brought upon him a humiliation that must be gall to his proud spirit whenever he thought of Bear Cat's primitive justice. He would pay his debt in full.

The disturbance up the street localized itself. A woman picked up her skirts and flew wildly into a

store. A man went over the park fence almost as though he had been shot out of a catapult. Came the crack of a revolver. Some one shouted explanation. “Mad dog!”

A brindle bull terrier swung round the corner and plunged forward. With bristling hair and foaming mouth, it was a creature of horrible menace.

Houck leaped for the door of the hotel. Bob was at his heels, in a panic to reach safety.

A child’s scream rang out. Dillon turned. The school children were in wild flight, but one fair-haired little girl stood as though paralyzed in the middle of the road. She could not move out of the path of the wild beast bearing down upon her.

Instinctively Bob’s mind functioned. The day was warm and his coat hung over an arm. He stepped into the road as the brindle bull came opposite the hotel. The coat was swung out expertly and dropped over the animal’s head. The cowpuncher slipped to his knees, arms tightening and fingers feeling for the throat of the writhing brute struggling blindly.

Its snapping jaws just missed his hand. Man and dog rolled over into the dust together. Its hot breath fanned Bob’s face. Again he was astride of the dog. His fingers had found its throat at last. They tightened, in spite of its horrible muscular contortions to get free.

There came a swish of skirts, the soft pad of running feet. A girl’s voice asked, “What shall I do?”

It did not at that moment seem strange to Dillon that June was beside him, her face quick with tremulous anxiety. He spoke curtly, as one who gives orders, panting under the strain of the effort to hold the dog.

"My gun."

She picked the forty-five up from where it had fallen. Their eyes met. The girl did swiftly what had to be done. It was not until she was alone in her room half an hour later that the thought of it made her sick.

Bob rose, breathing deep. For an instant their eyes held fast. She handed him the smoking revolver. Neither of them spoke.

From every door, so it seemed, people poured and converged toward them. Excited voices took up the tale, disputed, explained, offered excuses. Everybody talked except June and Bob.

Blister rolled into the picture. "Dawg-gone my hide if I ever see anything to b-beat that. He was q-quick as c-chain lightnin', the boy was. Johnny on the spot. Jumped the critter s-slick as a whistle." His fat hand slapped Bob's shoulder. "The boy was sure there with both hands and feet."

"What about June?" demanded Mollie. "Seems to me she wasn't more'n a mile away while you men-folks were skedaddlin' for cover."

The fat man's body shook with laughter. "The boys didn't s-stop to make any farewell speeches, tha's a fact. I traveled some my own self, but I hadn't hardly got started before Houck was outa sight, an' him claimin' he was lookin' for trouble too."

"Not that kind of trouble," grinned Mike the bartender. He could afford to laugh, for since he had been busy inside he had not been one of the vanishing heroes. "Don't blame him a mite either. If it comes to that I'm givin' the right of way to a mad dog every time."

"Hmp!" snorted Mollie. "What would 'a' happened to

little Maggie Wiggins if Dillon here had felt that way?"

Bob touched Blister on the arm and whispered in his ear. "Get me to the doc. I gotta have a bite cauterized."

It was hardly more than a scratch, but while the doctor was making his preparations the puncher went pale as service-berry blossoms. He sat down, grown suddenly faint. The bite of a mad dog held sinister possibilities.

Blister fussed around cheerfully until the doctor had finished. "Every silver l-lining has got its cloud, don't you r-reckon? Here's Jake Houck now, all s-set for a massacree. He's a wolf, an' it's his night to howl. Don't care who knows it, by gum. Hands still red from one killin'. A rip-snortin' he-wolf from the bad lands! Along comes Mr. Mad Dog, an' Jake he hunts his hole with his tail hangin'. Kinda takes the tuck outa him. Bear Cat wouldn't hardly stand for him gunnin' you now, Bob. Not after you tacklin' that crazy bull terrier to save the kids. He'll have to postpone that settlement he was promisin' you so big."

The puncher voiced the fear in his mind. "Do folks always go mad when they're bit by a mad dog, doctor?"

"Not a chance hardly," Dr. Tuckerman reassured. "First place, the dog probably wasn't mad. Second place, 't wa'n't but a scratch and we got at it right away. No, sir. You don't need to worry a-tall."

Outside the doctor's office Blister and Bob met Houck. The Brown's Park man scowled at the puncher. "I'm not through with you. Don't you think it! Jus' because you had a lucky fluke escape—"

"Tacklin' a crazy wild beast whilst you an' me were holin' up," Blister interjected.

Houck looked at the fat man bleakly. "You in this, Mr. Meddler? If you're not declarin' yoreself in, I'd advise you to keep out."

Blister Haines laughed amiably with intent to conciliate. "What's the use of nursin' a grudge against the boy, Houck? He never did you any harm. S-shake hands an' call it off."

"You manage yore business if you've got any. I'll run mine," retorted Houck. To Bob he said meaningly as he turned away, "One o' these days, young fellow."

The threat chilled Dillon, but it was impossible just now to remain depressed. He rode back to the ranch in a glow of pleasure. Thoughts of June filled every crevice of his mind. They had shared an adventure together, had been partners in a moment of peril. She could not wholly despise him now. He was willing to admit that Houck had been right when he called it a fluke. The chance might not have come to him, or he might not have taken it. The scream of little Maggie Wiggins had saved the day for him. If he had had time to think—but fortunately impulse had swept him into action before he could let discretion stop him.

He lived over again joyfully that happy moment when June had stood before him pulsing with life, eager, fear-filled, tremulous. He had taken the upper hand and she had accepted his leadership. The thing his eyes had told her to do she had done. He would remember that—he would remember it always.

Nor did it dim his joy that he felt himself to be a fraud. It had taken no pluck to do what he did, since he had only obeyed a swift dominating mental

reaction to the situation. The real courage had been hers.

He knew now that he would have to take her with him in his thoughts on many a long ride whether he wanted to or not.

CHAPTER XXVIII

JUNE IS GLAD

June turned away from the crowd surrounding the dead mad dog and walked into the hotel. The eyes of more than one man followed the slim, graceful figure admiringly. Much water had run down the Rio Blanco since the days when she had been the Cinderella of Piceance Creek. The dress she wore was simple, but through it a vivid personality found expression. No longer was she a fiery little rebel struggling passionately against a sense of inferiority. She had come down from the hills to a country filled with laughter and the ripple of brooks.

The desire to be alone was strong upon her—alone with the happy thoughts that pushed themselves turbulently through her mind. She was tremulous with excitement. For she hoped that she had found a dear friend who had been lost.

Once, on that dreadful day she would never forget,

June had told Jake Houck that Bob Dillon was as brave as he. It had been the forlorn cry of a heart close to despair. But the words were true. She hugged that knowledge to her bosom. Jake had run away while Bob had stayed to face the mad dog. And not Jake alone! Blister Haines had run, with others of tested courage. Bob had outgamed him. He admitted it cheerfully.

Maybe the others had not seen little Maggie Wiggins. But Bob had seen her. The child's cry had carried him back into the path of the brindle terrier. June was proud, not only of what he had done, but of the way he had done it. His brain had functioned swiftly, his motions been timed exactly. Only coördination of all his muscles had enabled him to down the dog so expertly and render the animal harmless.

During the months since she had seen him June had thought often of the man whose name she legally bore. After the first few hours there had been no harshness in her memories of him. He was good. She had always felt that. There was something fine and sweet and generous in his nature. Without being able to reason it out, she was sure that no fair judgment would condemn him wholly because at a crisis he had failed to exhibit a quality the West holds in high esteem and considers fundamental. Into her heart there had come a tender pity for him, a maternal sympathy that flowed out whenever he came into her musings.

Poor boy! She had learned to know him so well. He would whip himself with his own scorn. This misadventure that had overwhelmed him might frustrate all the promise of his life. He was too sensitive. If he lost heart—if he gave up—

She had longed to send a message of hope to him,

but she had been afraid that he might misunderstand it. Her position was ambiguous. She was his wife. The law said so. But of course she was not his wife at all except in name. They were joint victims of evil circumstance, a boy and a girl who had rushed to a foolish extreme. Some day one or the other of them would ask the law to free them of the tie that technically bound them together.

Now she need not worry about him any longer. He had proved his mettle publicly. The court of common opinion would reverse the verdict it had passed upon him. He would go out of her life and she need no longer feel responsible for the shadow that had fallen over his.

So she reasoned consistently, but something warm within her gave the lie to this cold disposition of their friendship. She did not want to let him go his way. She had no intention of letting him go. She could not express it, but in some intangible way he belonged to her. As a brother might, she told herself; not because Blister Haines had married them when they had gone to him in their hurry to solve a difficulty. Not for that reason at all, but because from the first hour of meeting, their spirits had gone out to each other in companionship. Bob had understood her. He had been the only person to whom she could confide her troubles, the only pal she had ever known.

Standing before the glass in her small bedroom, June saw that her eyes were shining, the blood glowing through the dusky cheeks. Joy had vitalized her whole being, had made her beautiful as a wild rose. For the moment at least she was lyrically happy.

This ardor still possessed June when she went into the dining-room to make the set-ups for supper. She

sang snatches of “Dixie” and “My Old Kentucky Home” as she moved about her work. She hummed the chorus of “Juanita.” From that she drifted to the old spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”

A man was washing his hands in the tin basin provided outside for guests of the hotel. Through the window came to him the lilt of the fresh young voice.

> “Swing low, sweet chariot,
> Comin’ fo’ to carry me home.”

The look of sullen, baffled rage on the man’s dark face did not lighten. He had been beaten again. His revenge had been snatched from him almost at the moment of triumph. If that mad dog had not come round the corner just when it did, he would have evened the score between him and Dillon. June had seen the whole thing. She had been a partner in the red-headed boy’s ovation. Houck ground his teeth in futile anger.

Presently he slouched into the dining-room.

Mollie saw him and walked across the room to June. “I’ll wait on him if you don’t want to.”

The waitress shook her head. “No, I don’t want him to think I’m afraid of him. I’m not, either. I’ll wait on him.”

June took Houck’s order and presently served it.

His opaque eyes watched her in the way she remembered of old. They were still bold and possessive, still curtained windows through which she glimpsed volcanic passion.

“You can tell that squirt Dillon I ain’t through with him yet, not by a jugful,” he growled.

"If you have anything to tell Bob Dillon, say it to *him*," June answered, looking at him with fearless, level eyes of scorn.

"An' I ain't through with you, I'd have you know."

June finished putting his order on the table. "But I'm through with you, Jake Houck," she said, very quietly.

"Don't think it. Don't you think it for a minute," he snarled. "I'm gonna—"

He stopped, sputtering with fury. June had turned and walked into the kitchen. He rose, evidently intending to follow her.

Mollie Larson barred the way, a grim, square figure with the air of a brigadier-general.

"Sit down, Jake Houck," she ordered. "Or get out. I don't care which. But don't you think I'll set by an' let you pester that girl. If you had a lick o' sense you'd know it ain't safe."

There was nothing soft about Houck. He was a hard and callous citizen, and he lived largely outside the law and other people's standards of conduct. But he knew when he had run up against a brick wall. Mrs. Larson had only to lift her voice and half a dozen men would come running. He was in the country of the enemy, so to say.

"Am I pesterin' her?" he demanded. "Can't I talk to a girl I knew when she was a baby? Have I got to get an O.K. from you before I say 'Good-mawnin' to her?"

"Her father left June in my charge. I'm intendin' to see you let her alone. Get that straight."

Houck gave up with a shrug of his big shoulders. He

sat down and attacked the steak on his plate.

CHAPTER XXIX

"INJUNS"

Bob swung down from the saddle in front of the bunkhouse.

Reeves came to the door and waved a hand. "'Lo, Sure-Shot! What's new in Bear Cat?"

"Fellow thinkin' of startin' a drug-store. Jim Weaver is the happy dad of twins. Mad dog shot on Main Street. New stage-line for Marvine planned. Mr. Jake Houck is enjoyin' a pleasant visit to our little city. I reckon that's about all."

Dud had joined Tom in the doorway. "Meet up with Mr. Houck?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Have any talk?"

"He had some, but he hadn't hardly got to goin' good when the mad dog sashayed up the street. Mr. Houck he adjourned the meetin' immediate."

"More important business, I reckon," Dud grinned.

"He didn't mention it, but all those present were in a kinda hurry."

"So's some one else." Reeves nodded his head toward a small cloud of dust approaching the ranch.

A rider galloped up and dragged his mount to a halt. "Utes have broke out! Killed a trapper on Squaw Creek! Burned two nesters' houses!" His voice was high and excited.

"Rumor?" asked Dud.

"No, sir. I talked with a fellow that seen the body. Met two families that had lit out from Squaw Creek. They're sure enough on the warpath."

Harshaw took the matter seriously. He gave crisp orders to his riders to cover the creeks and warn all settlers to leave for Bear Cat or Meeker. Dud and Bob were assigned Milk Creek.

It was hard for the young fellows, as they rode through a land of warm sunshine, to believe that there actually was another Indian outbreak. It had been ten years since the Meeker massacre and the defeat of Major Thornburg's troops. The country had begun to settle up. The Utes knew that their day was done, though they still came up occasionally from the reservation on illicit hunting trips.

This very country over which they were riding was the scene of the Thornburg battle-field. The Indians had lain in ambush and waited for the troops to come over the brow of the rise. At the first volley the commander of the soldiers had fallen mortally wounded. The whites, taken by surprise, fell back in disorder. The Utes moved up on them from both sides and the trapped men fled.

"Must 'a' been right about here Thornburg was shot," explained Dud. "Charley Mason was one o' the soldiers an' he told me all about it. Captain Jack was

in charge of this bunch of Utes. Seems he had signal fires arranged with those at the agency an' they began their attacks at the same time. Charley claimed they didn't know there was Injuns within twenty miles when the bullets began to sing. Says he ran five miles before he took a breath."

Bob looked around apprehensively. History might repeat itself. At this very moment the Utes might be lying in the draw ready to fire on them. He was filled with a sudden urgent desire to get through with their job and turn the heads of their ponies toward Bear Cat.

"Makes a fellow feel kinda squeamish," Dud said. "Let's move, Bob."

They carried the word to the settlers on the creek and turned in the direction of Bear Cat. They reached town late and found the place bustling with excitement. Families of settlers were arriving in wagons and on horseback from all directions. There were rumors that the Indians were marching on the town. A company of militia had been ordered to the scene by the Governor of the State and was expected to arrive on the second day from this.

Camp-fires were burning in the park plaza and round them were grouped men, women, and children in from the ranches. On all the roads leading to town sentries were stationed. Others walked a patrol along the riverbank and along the skirts of the foothills.

Three or four cowpunchers had been celebrating the declaration of war. In the community was a general feeling that the Utes must be put down once for all. In spite of the alarm many were glad that the unrest had come to an issue at last.

Bob and Dud tied their horses to a hitching-rack and

climbed the fence into the park. Blister came out of the shadows to meet them.

“W-whad I tell you, Texas man?” he asked of Bob. “Show-down at last, like I said.”

Into the night lifted a startled yell. “Here come the Injuns!”

Taut nerves snapped. Wails of terror rose here and there. A woman fainted. The sound of a revolver shot rang out.

One of the roisterers, who had been loud in his threats of what he meant to do to the Indians, lost his braggadocio instantly. He leaped for the saddle of the nearest horse and dug his spurs home. In his fuddled condition he made a mistake. He had chosen, as a mount upon which to escape, the fence that encircled the park.

“Gid ap! Gid ap!” he screamed.

“Yore bronc is some balky, ain’t it, Jud?” Hollister asked. He had already discovered that the panic had been caused by a false cry of “Wolf” raised by one of the fence rider’s companions.

“S-some one hitched it to a post,” Blister suggested.

“Ride him, puncher,” urged Bob. “Stick to yore saddle if he does buck.”

Jud came off the fence sheepishly. “I was aimin’ to go get help,” he explained.

“Where was you going for it—to Denver?” asked Blister.

The night wore itself out. With the coming of day the spirits of the less hardy revived. The ranchers on the plaza breakfasted in groups, after which their children were bundled off to school. Scouts rode out

to learn the whereabouts of the Utes and others to establish contact with the approaching militia.

Harshaw organized a company of rangers made up mostly of cowpunchers from the river ranches. During the day more of these drifted in. By dusk he had a group of forty hard-riding young fellows who could shoot straight and were acquainted with the country over which they would have to operate. Blister was second in command. All of the Slash Lazy D riders had enlisted except one who had recently broken a leg.

Scouts brought in word that the Utes had swung round Bear Cat and were camped about thirty miles up the river. Harshaw moved out to meet them. He suspected the Indians of planning to ambush the militia before the soldiers could join forces with the rangers.

Bob had joined the rangers with no enthusiasm. He had enlisted because of pressure both within and without. He would have been ashamed not to offer himself. Moreover, everybody seemed to assume he would go. But he would much rather have stayed at Bear Cat with the home guards. From what he had picked up, he was far from sure that the Utes were to blame this time. The Houck killing, for instance. And that was not the only outrage they had endured. It struck him more like a rising of the whites. They had provoked the young bucks a good deal, and a sheriff's posse had arrested some of them for being off the reservation hunting. Wise diplomacy might at least have deferred the conflict.

During the bustle of preparing to leave, Bob's spirits were normal even though his nerves were a little fluttery. As they rode out of town he caught sight for a moment of a slim, dark girl in a blue gingham at

the door of the hotel. She waved a hand toward the group of horsemen. It was Dud who answered the good-bye. He had already, Bob guessed, said a private farewell of his own to June. At any rate, his friend had met Hollister coming out of the hotel a few minutes before. The cowpuncher's eyes were shining and a blue skirt was vanishing down the passage. There had been a queer ache in Bob Dillon's heart. He did not blame either of them. Of course June would prefer Dud to him. Any girl in her senses would. He had all the charm of gay and gallant youth walking in the sunshine.

None the less it hurt and depressed him that there should be a private understanding between his friend and June. A poignant jealousy stabbed him. There was nothing in his character to attract a girl like June of swift and pouncing passion. He was too tame, too fearful. Dud had a spice of the devil in him. It flamed out unexpectedly. Yet he was reliable too. This clean, brown man, fair-haired and steady-eyed, riding with such incomparable ease, would do to tie to, in the phrase of the country. Small wonder a girl's heart turned to him.

CHAPTER XXX

A RECRUIT JOINS THE RANGERS

Harshaw did not, during the first forty-eight hours after leaving Bear Cat, make contact with either the Indians or the militia. He moved warily, throwing out scouts as his party advanced. At night he posted sentries carefully to guard against a surprise attack. It was not the habit of the tribes to assault in the darkness, but he was taking no chances. It would be easy to fall into an ambush, but he had no intention of letting the rangers become the victims of carelessness.

At the mouth of Wolf Creek a recruit joined the company. He rode up after camp had been made for the night.

"Jake Houck," Bob whispered to Dud.

"Who's boss of this outfit?" the big man demanded of Blister after he had swung from the saddle.

"Harshaw. You'll find him over there with the cavvy."

Houck straddled across to the remuda.

"Lookin' for men to fight the Utes?" he asked brusquely of the owner of the Slash Lazy D brand.

"Yes, sir."

"If you mean business an' ain't bully-pussin' I'll take a hand," the Brown's Park man said, and both voice and manner were offensive.

The captain of the rangers met him eye to eye. He did not like this fellow. His reputation was bad. In the old days he had been a rustler, rumor said. Since the affair of the Tolliver girl he had been very sulky and morose. This had culminated in the killing of the Ute. What the facts were about this Harshaw did not know. The man might be enlisting to satisfy a grudge

or to make himself safe against counter-attack by helping to drive the Indians back to the reservation. The point that stood out was that Houck was a first-class fighting man. That was enough.

“We mean business, Houck. Glad to have you join us. But get this straight. I’ll not have you startin’ trouble in camp. If you’ve got a private quarrel against any of the boys it will have to wait.”

“I ain’t aimin’ to start anything,” growled Houck. “Not till this job’s finished.”

“Good enough. Hear or see anything of the Utes as you came?”

“No.”

“Which way you come?”

Houck told him. Presently the two men walked back toward the chuck-wagon.

“Meet Mr. Houck, boys, any of you that ain’t already met him,” said Harshaw by way of introduction. “He’s going to trail along with us for a while.”

The situation was awkward. Several of those present had met Houck only as the victim of their rude justice the night that June Tolliver had swum the river to escape him. Fortunately the cook at that moment bawled out that supper was ready.

Afterward Blister had a word with Bob and Dud while he was arranging sentry duty with them.

“Wish that b-bird hadn’t come. He’s here because he wants to drive the Utes outa the country before they get him. The way I heard it he had no business to kill that b-buck. Throwed down on him an’ killed him onexpected. I didn’t c-come to pull Jake Houck’s chestnuts outa the fire for him. Not none. He ain’t

lookin' for to round up the Injuns and herd 'em back to the reservation. He's allowin' to kill as many as he can."

"Did anybody see him shoot the Ute?" asked Bob.

"Seems not. They was back of a stable. When folks got there the Ute was down, but still alive. He claimed he never made a move to draw. Houck's story was that he shot in self-defense. Looked fishy. The Injun's gun wasn't in s-sight anywheres."

"Houck's a bad actor," Dud said.

"Yes." Blister came back to the order of the day. "All right, boys. Shifts of three hours each, then. T-turn an' turn about. You two take this knoll here. If you see anything movin' that looks suspicious, blaze away. We'll c-come a-runnin'."

Bob had drunk at supper two cups of strong coffee instead of his usual one. His thought had been that the stimulant would tend to keep him awake on duty. The effect the coffee had on him was to make his nerves jumpy. He lay on the knoll, rifle clutched fast in his hands, acutely sensitive to every sound, to every hazy shadow of the night. The very silence was sinister. His imagination peopled the sage with Utes, creeping toward him with a horrible and deadly patience. Chills tattooed up and down his spine.

He pulled out the old silver watch he carried and looked at the time. It lacked five minutes of ten o'clock. The watch must have stopped. He held it to his ear and was surprised at the ticking. Was it possible that he had been on sentry duty only twelve minutes? To his highly strung nerves it had seemed like hours.

A twig snapped. His muscles jumped. He waited, gun

ready for action, eyes straining into the gloom. Something rustled and sped away swiftly. It must have been a rabbit or perhaps a skunk. But for a moment his heart had been in his throat.

Again he consulted the watch. Five minutes past ten! Impossible, yet true. In that eternity of time only a few minutes had slipped away.

He resolved not to look at his watch again till after eleven. Meanwhile he invented games to divert his mind from the numbing fear that filled him. He counted the definite objects that stood out of the darkness—the clumps of sage, the greasewood bushes, the cottonwood trees by the river. It was his duty to patrol the distance between the knoll and those trees at intervals. Each time he crept to the river with a thumping heart. Those bushes—were they really willows or Indians waiting to slay him when he got closer?

Fear is paralyzing. It pushes into the background all the moral obligations. Half a dozen times the young ranger was on the point of waking Dud to tell him that he could not stand it alone. He recalled Blister's injunctions. But what was the use of throwing back his head and telling himself he was made in the image of God when his fluttering pulses screamed denial, when his heart pumped water instead of blood?

He stuck it out. How he never knew. But somehow he clamped his teeth and went through. As he grew used to it, his imagination became less active and tricky. There were moments, toward the end of his vigil, when he could smile grimly at the terror that had obsessed him. He was a born coward, but he did not need to let anybody know it. It would always be within his power to act game whether he was or not.

At one o'clock he woke Dud. That young man rolled out of his blanket grumbling amiably. "Fine business! Why don't a fellow ever know when he's well off? Me, I might be hittin' the hay at Bear Cat or Meeker instead of rollin' out to watch for Utes that ain't within thirty or forty miles of here likely. Fellow, next war I stay at home."

Bob slipped into his friend's warm blanket. He had no expectation of sleeping, but inside of five minutes his eyes had closed and he was off.

The sound of voices wakened him. Dud was talking to the jingler who had just come off duty. The sunlight was pouring upon him. He jumped up in consternation.

"I musta overslept," Bob said.

Dud grinned. "Some. Fact is, I hadn't the heart to waken you when you was poundin' yore ear so peaceful an' tuneful."

"You stood my turn, too."

"Oh, well. It was only three hours. That's no way to divide the night anyhow."

They were eating breakfast when a messenger rode into camp. He was from Major Sheahan of the militia. That officer sent word that the Indians were in Box Cañon. He had closed one end and suggested that the rangers move into the other and bottle the Utes.

Harshaw broke camp at once and started for the cañon. A storm blew up, a fierce and pelting hail. The company took refuge in a cottonwood grove. The stones were as large as good-sized plums, and in three minutes the ground was covered. Under the stinging ice bullets the horses grew very restless.

More than one went plunging out into the open and had to be forced back to shelter by the rider. Fortunately the storm passed as quickly as it had come up. The sun broke through the clouds and shone warmly upon rivulets of melted ice pouring down to the Blanco.

Scouts were thrown forward once more and the rangers swung into the hills toward Box Cañon.

“How far?” Bob asked Tom Reeves.

“’Bout half an hour now, I reckon. Hope we get there before the Injuns have lit out.”

Privately Bob hoped they would not. He had never been under fire and his throat dried at the anticipation.

“Sure,” he answered. “We’re humpin’ along right lively. Be there in time, I expect. Too bad if we have to chase ’em again all over the map.”

Box Cañon is a sword slash cut through the hills. From wall to wall it is scarcely forty feet across. One looks up to a slit of blue sky above.

Harshaw halted close to the entrance. “Let’s make sure where Mr. Ute is before we ride in, boys. He might be up on the bluffs layin’ for us. Dud, you an’ Tom an’ Big Bill go take a look-see an’ make sure. We’ll come a-runnin’ if we hear yore guns pop.”

Two men in uniform rode out of the gulch. At the sight of the rangers they cantered forward. One was a sergeant.

“Too late,” said he. “They done slipped away from us. We took shelter from the hail under a cutbank where the cañon widens. They musta slipped by us then. We found their tracks in the wet ground.

They're headin' west again, looks like."

"We've got a warm trail," Harshaw said to Blister Haines. "We better go right after 'em."

"Hot foot," agreed Blister.

"Major Sheahan's followin' them now. He said for you to come right along."

The cavalcade moved at once.

CHAPTER XXXI

"DON'T YOU LIKE ME ANY MORE?"

Harshaw's rangers caught up with the militia an hour later. The valley men were big, tanned, outdoor fellows, whereas the militia company was composed of young lads from Colorado towns, most of them slight and not yet fully developed. The state troopers were, however, brisk, alert, and soldierly. Some of them were not used to riding, but they made the best of it with the cheerful adaptability of American youth.

The trail of the Indians cut back across the mesa toward Utah. Evidently they were making for their home country again. Bob began to hope that the Utes would reach the reservation without a fight. In this desire the owner of the Slash Lazy D heartily joined. He had no impulses toward the slaughter of the

tribal remnants.

Others of the party did not share this feeling. Without going into the causes of the Indian troubles, it can safely be said that the frontiersmen generally believed that the tribes were dangerous and not to be trusted. In any difficulty between a white and a red man they assumed the latter was to blame. Many old-timers held that the only way to settle the Indian question was to exterminate the tribes or at least reduce them to impotence.

The pursuers followed a hot trail. Twice they had a brush with the rear guard of the flying Utes, during which Bob heard bullets singing above his head. He felt a very unpleasant sinking in the pit of his stomach, and could hardly resist the temptation to slip out of the saddle and take refuge behind the horse he was riding.

The rangers and the soldiers reached Bear Cat long after dark. Dud and Reeves had ridden into town ahead of their companions, so that when the rest came in they found a hot supper waiting for them on the plaza.

June helped serve the weary men. Big fires had been built on the square and by the light of the flames Bob could see her slim figure flitting to and fro. Afterward, when the meal was at an end, he saw Dud Hollister walking beside her to the hotel. The cowpuncher was carrying a load of dishes and supplies. It would have surprised Bob to learn that he was the subject of their conversation.

For the first time Dud had heard that day from Blister the story of the mad dog episode. He made June tell it to him again from her viewpoint. When she had finished he asked her a question.

"Anybody ever tell you about the fight Bob had with Bandy Walker?"

The light in her dark eyes quickened. "Did they have a fight?" she asked evenly, with not too great a show of interest.

"I dunno as you could rightly call it a fight," Dud drawled. "Bob he hammered Bandy, tromped on him, chewed him up, an' spit him out. He was plumb active for about five minutes."

"What was the trouble?"

"Bandy's one o' these mean bullies. He figured he could run on Bob. The boy took it meek an' humble for a week or so before he settled with Bandy generous an' handsome. The bow-legged guy might have got away with it if he hadn't made a mistake."

"A mistake?" repeated June.

"He had a few remarks to make about a young lady Bob knew."

June said nothing. In the darkness Dud made out only the dusky outline of her profile. He could not tell what she was thinking, had no guess that her blood was racing tumultuously, that a lump was swelling in the soft round throat.

Presently she asked her companion a question as to how Jake Houck came to be with the rangers. Dud understood that the subject was changed.

The soldiers found beds wherever they could. Some rolled up in their blankets near the fires. Others burrowed into haystacks on the meadow. Before daybreak they expected to be on the march again.

The bugle wakened them at dawn, but a good many of the cowpunchers were already up. Big Bill went to

one of the haystacks to get feed for his horse. He gathered a great armful of hay and started away with it. A muffled voice inside wailed protest.

"Lemme out, doggone it."

Bill dropped the hay, and from it emerged a short and slender youth in uniform. He bristled up to the huge puncher.

"What d'you think you're doing, fellow?"

The cowpuncher sat down on a feed-rack and laughed till he was weak. "Drinks are on me, son," he gasped at last. "I 'most fed you to my hawss."

"Mebbe you think because I ain't as big as a house you can sit there an' laugh at me. I'll have you know you can't," the boy snapped.

"Fellow, I'm not laughin' at you. Napoleon was a runt, I've heard tell. But it was comical, you stickin' yore head up through the hay thataway. I'll stand pat on that, an' I ain't a-going to fight about it either."

The soldier's dignity melted to a grin. "Did you say drinks was on you, Jumbo?"

After Big Bill had fed his horse they went away arm in arm to see what Dolan could do for them in the way of liquid refreshment.

Just before the rangers and soldiers saddled for the start, Dud jingled over to his friend who was helping to pack the supply-wagons.

"Lady wants to see you, Bob. I'll take yore place here," Dud said.

Dillon lifted a barrel half full of flour into the nearest wagon and straightened a body cramped from stooping. "What lady?" he asked.

"Listen to the fellow," derided Hollister. "How many ladies has he got on the string, do you reckon?" The fair-haired cowpuncher grinned. "You meander round to the back of the hotel an' I expect you'll meet up with the lady. Mollie Larson she—"

"Oh, Mrs. Larson." For a moment a wild hope had flamed in Bob's heart. His thoughts had flashed to another woman in the hotel.

"Why, yes. Mollie runs the hotel, don't she? Was you lookin' for some other lady to send for you?" Dud asked innocently.

Bob did not answer this. He was already striding toward the hotel.

Out of the darkness of the adobe wall shadow a slim figure moved to meet the ranger. The young fellow's heart lost a beat.

"I—wanted to see you before you left," a low voice said.

A kind of palsy came over Dillon. He stood motionless, no life in him except for the eloquent eyes. No words came to help him.

"I thought—maybe—" June stopped, hesitated, and came out impetuously with what was in her mind. "Aren't we *ever* going to be friends again, Bob?"

A warm glow suffused him. The back of his eyes smarted with tears. He started to speak, but stopped. For he was boyishly ashamed to discover that he could not trust his voice.

"Don't you like me any more?" she asked. "Have I done something to make you mad?"

"No, you haven't." There was a rough edge to the words, put there by suppressed emotion. "You know

better 'n that. I keep away from you because—because I acted like a yellow dog."

"When you fought Bandy Walker to keep clean my good name?" she asked in a murmur.

"Oh, that!" He waved her question aside as of no importance.

"Or when you fought the mad dog in the street with yore bare hands?"

"You know when, June," he answered bitterly. "When I let Jake Houck walk off with you to save my worthless hide."

"I've forgotten that, Bob," she said gently. "So much has happened since. That was foolishness anyhow, what—what we did in Blister's office. But I hate to give up the boy on Piceance Creek who was kinda like a brother to me. Do I have to lose him?"

There was no need for her big dark eyes to plead with him. His face was working. He bit his lip to keep from breaking down. This was what he wanted more than anything else in the world, but he was embarrassed and irritated at the display of emotion he could not wholly control.

"'S all right with me," he said gruffly.

"Then we'll be friends again, won't we?"

"Ump-ha!" he grunted. "I—I'd just as lief." He recognized this as cavalier and added: "I mean it's awful good of you."

"When you come back you won't forget to ask for me if I'm not where you see me. I'll want to hear all about what you do."

"Yes," he promised; and in a burst of gratitude cried: "You're a dandy girl, June. If you treated me like I

deserved you'd never speak to me again."

She flushed. "That's silly. I never did feel thataway. Lots of times I've wanted to tell you that—that it needn't make any difference. But I couldn't, 'count of —what we did in Blister's office. A girl has to be awful careful, you know. If we hadn't done that foolish thing—"

"A judge'll fix you up with papers settin' you free, June," he told her. "I'll do anything to help that you want."

"Well, when you come back," she postponed. Talk on that subject distressed and humiliated her.

"I got to go," he said. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

She gave him her hand shyly. Their eyes met and fell away.

He stood a moment, trying to find an effective line of exit. He had missed his cue to leave, as thousands of lovers have before and since.

"Got to hit the trail," he murmured in anticlimax.

"Yes," she agreed.

Bob drew back one foot and ducked his head in a bow. A moment later he was hurrying toward the remuda.

CHAPTER XXXII

A CUP OF COLD WATER

The pursuers caught up with the Utes the third day out from Bear Cat. It was in the morning, shortly after they had broken camp, that Houck and Big Bill while scouting in advance of the troop jumped up an Indian out of the sagebrush.

He made across the mesa toward the river. Houck fired at him twice as he ran, but the sentinel disappeared from sight apparently unhit. The sound of the firing brought up rapidly the main body of the troopers. Before Major Sheahan and Harshaw could work out a programme another Indian sentry could be seen running through the sage.

The sight of him was like that of a red rag to a bull. Not waiting for orders, a dozen punchers instantly gave chase. The rest of the party followed. Houck was in the lead. Not far behind was Bob Dillon.

The mesa bench dropped sharply down a bare shale scarp to the willows growing near the river. The Indian camp below could be seen from the edge of the bluff. But the rush to cut off the Ute was so impetuous that the first riders could not check their horses. They plunged down the bare slope at a headlong gallop.

Bob heard the ping of bullets as they sang past him.

He saw little spatters of sand flung up where they struck. As his horse slithered down on its haunches through the rubble, the man just in front of him dived headlong from his horse. Bob caught one horrified glimpse of him rolling over and clutching at his breast. Next moment Dillon, too, was down. His mount had been shot under him.

He jumped up and ran for the willows, crouching low as he sped through the sage. Into the bushes he flung himself and lay panting. He quaked with fear. Every instant he expected to see the Utes rushing toward him. His rifle was gone, lost in the fall. The hand that drew the revolver from his belt trembled as with an ague.

Only a few of the riders had been unable to check themselves on the edge of the bluff. The others had now drawn back out of sight. A wounded horse lay kicking on the slope. It was the one upon which Bob had been mounted. The huddled figure of a man, with head grotesquely twisted, sat astride a clump of brush. Another sprawled on the hillside, arms and legs outflung.

Below, in the sage not far from the willows, another body lay in the sand. This one moved. Bob could see the man trying to hitch himself toward the shelter of the river bushes. Evidently he was badly wounded, for he made practically no progress. For a few minutes he would lie still, then try once more to crawl forward.

The popping of guns had shifted farther to the right. Bob judged that the rangers and soldiers were engaged with the Indians somewhere on the ridge. Only a few desultory shots came from the camp. But he knew it would be only a question of time till some Ute caught sight of the wounded man and picked

him off as he lay helpless in the open.

Bob did not know who the wounded man was. He might be Dud Hollister or Tom Reeves. Or perhaps Blister Haines. Young Dillon sweated in agony. His throat was parched. He felt horribly sick and weak, was still shaking in a palsy of fear.

It was every man for himself now, he reasoned in his terror. Perhaps he could creep through the willows and escape up the river without being seen. He began to edge slowly back.

But that man crouched in the sunshine, tied by his wound to a spot where the Utes would certainly find him sooner or later, fascinated Bob's eyes and thoughts. Suppose he left him there—and found out too late that he had deserted Dud, abandoning him to almost certain death. He could not do that. It would not be human. What Dud would do in his place was not open to question. He would go out and get the man and drag him to the willows. But the danger of this appalled the cowpuncher. The Utes would get him sure if he did. Even if they did not hit him, he would be seen and later stalked by the redskins.

After all there was no sense in throwing away another life. Probably the wounded man would die anyhow. Every fellow had to think of himself at a time like this. It was not his fault the ranger was cut off and helpless. He was no more responsible for him than were any of the rest of the boys.

But it would not do. Bob could not by any sophistry escape the duty thrust on him. The other boys were not here. He was.

He groaned in desperation of spirit. He had to go and get the ranger who had been shot. That was all there

was to it. If he did not, he would be a yellow coyote.

Out of the precarious safety of the willows he crept on hands and knees, still shaking in an ague of trepidation. Of such cover as there was he availed himself. From one sagebush to another he ran, head and body crouched low. His last halt was back of some greasewood a dozen yards from the ranger.

"I'll get you into the willows if I can," he called in a sibilant whisper. "You bad hurt?"

The wounded man turned. "My laig's busted—two places. Plugged in the side too."

Bob's heart sank. The face into which he looked was that of Jake Houck. If he had only known in time! But it was too late now. He had to finish what he had begun. He could not leave the fellow lying there.

He crawled to Houck. The big man gave directions. "Better drag me, I reckon. Go as easy as you can on that busted laig."

Dillon took him beneath the arms and hauled him through the sand. The wounded man set his teeth to keep back a groan. Very slowly and carefully, an inch here, a foot there, Bob worked Houck's heavy body backward. It was a long business. A dozen times he stopped to select the next leg of the journey.

Beads of perspiration stood on Houck's forehead. He was in great pain, but he clenched his teeth and said nothing. Bob could not deny him gameness. Not a sound escaped his lips. He clung to his rifle even though a free hand would greatly ease the jarring of the hurt leg.

Back of a scrub cottonwood Bob rested for a moment. "Not far now," he said.

Houck's eyes measured the distance to the willows. "No," he agreed. "Not far."

"Think maybe I could carry you," Bob suggested. "Get you on my shoulder."

"Might try," the wounded man assented. "Laig hurts like sixty."

Bob helped him to his feet and from there to his shoulder. He staggered over the rough ground to the willows. Into these he pushed, still carrying Houck. As gently as he could he lowered the big fellow.

"Got me as I came over the bluff," the Brown's Park man explained. "I was lucky at that. The Utes made a good gather that time. Outa four of us they collected two an' put me out of business. Howcome they not to get you?"

"Shot my horse," explained Bob. "I ducked into the willows."

It was hot in the willows. They were a young growth and the trees were close. The sun beat down on the thicket of saplings and no breeze penetrated it.

Houck panted. Already fever was beginning to burn him up.

"Hotter'n hell with the lid on," he grumbled. "Wisht I had some water." He drew out a flask that still had two fingers of whiskey in it, but he had resolution enough not to drink. This would not help him. "Reckon I better not take it," he said regretfully.

Bob took the bandanna handkerchief from his throat and soaked one end of it in the liquor. "Bathe yore head," he advised. "It'll cool it fine."

As the day grew older and the sun climbed the sky vault the heat increased. No breath of air stirred. The

wounded man had moments of delirium in which he moaned for water.

There was water, cool and fresh, not fifty yards from them. He could hear the rushing river plunging toward the Pacific, the gurgling of the stream as it dashed against boulders and swept into whirlpools. But between Bob and that precious water lay a stretch of sandy wash which the Blanco covered when it was high. One venturing to cross this would be an easy mark for sharpshooters from the camp.

It seemed to him that the firing was now more distant. There was a chance that none of the Utes were still in the camp. Fever was mounting in Houck. He was in much distress both from thirst and from the pain of the wounds. Bob shrank from the pitiful appeals of his high-pitched, delirious voice. The big fellow could stand what he must with set jaws when he was sentient. His craving found voice in irrational moments while he had no control over his will. These were increasing in frequency and duration.

Dillon picked up the flask. “Got to leave you a while,” he said. “Back soon.”

The glassy eyes of Houck glared at him. His mind was wandering. “Torturin’ me. Tha’s what you’re doin’, you damned redskin,” he muttered.

“Going to get water,” explained Bob.

“Tha’s a lie. You got water there—in that bottle. Think I don’t know yore Apache ways?”

Bob crept to the edge of the willows. From the foliage he peered out. Nobody was in sight. He could still see a faint smoke rising from the Indian camp. But the firing was a quarter of a mile away, at least. The bend of the river was between him and the

combatants.

Bob took his courage by the throat, drew a long breath, and ran for the river. Just as he reached it a bullet splashed in the current almost within hand's reach. The cowpuncher stooped and took two hasty swallows into his dry mouth. He filled the bottle and soaked the bandanna in the cold water. A slug of lead spat at the sand close to his feet. A panic rose within him. He got up and turned to go. Another bullet struck a big rock four paces from where he was standing. Bob scudded for the willows, his heart thumping wildly with terror.

He plunged into the thicket, whipping himself with the bending saplings in his headlong flight. Now that they had discovered him, would the Indians follow him to his hiding-place? Or would they wait till dusk and creep up on him unseen? He wished he knew.

The water and the cool, wet bandanna alleviated the misery of the wounded man. He shut his eyes, muttering incoherently.

There was no longer any sound of firing. The long silence alarmed Bob. Was it possible that his friends had been driven off? Or that they had retired from the field under the impression that all of the riders who had plunged over the bluff had been killed?

This fear obsessed him. It rode him like an old man of the sea. He could not wait here till the Utes came to murder him and Houck. Down in the bottom of his heart he knew that he could not leave this enemy of his to the fate that would befall him. The only thing to do was to go for help at once.

He took off his coat and put it under Houck's head. He moistened the hot bandanna for the burning forehead and poured the rest of the water down the

throat of the sick man. The rifle he left with Houck. It would only impede him while he was crossing the mesa.

None of us know what we can do till the test comes. Bob felt it was physically impossible for him to venture into the open again and try to reach his friends. He might at any instant run plumb into the Utes. Nevertheless he crept out from the willows into the sage desert.

The popping of the guns had begun again. The battle seemed to be close to the edge of the mesa round the bend of the river. Bob swung wide, climbing the bluff from the farther skirt of the willows. He reached the mesa.

From where he lay he could see that the whites held a ridge two hundred yards away. The Utes were apparently in the river valley.

He moved forward warily, every sense abnormally keyed to service. A clump of wild blackberries grew on the rim of the bluff. From this smoke billowed. Bullets began to zip past Bob. He legged it for the ridge, blind to everything but his desperate need to escape.

CHAPTER XXXIII

“KEEP A-COMIN’, RED HAID”

When the rangers and the militia stampeded after the Indian scout, Dud Hollister was examining the hoof of his mount. He swung instantly to the saddle and touched his pony with the spur. It shot across the mesa on the outskirts of the troop. Not impeded by riders in front, Dud reached the bluff above the river valley on the heels of the advance guard. He pulled up just in time to keep from plunging over.

The Utes, under cover of the willow saplings, were concentrating a very heavy fire on the bluff and slope below. Dud's first thought was that the troops had been drawn into a trap. Every man who had been carried over the edge of the mesa by the impetus of the charge was already unhorsed. Several were apparently dead. One was scudding for cover.

Dud drew back promptly. He did not care to stand silhouetted against the sky-line for sharpshooters. Nobody had ever accused the Utes of being good shots, but at that distance they could hardly miss him if he stayed.

The soldiers and rangers gathered in a small clump of cottonwoods. Harshaw read his boys the riot act.

"Fine business," he told them bitterly. "Every last one of you acted like he was a tenderfoot. Ain't you ever seen a Ute before? Tryin' to collect him so anxious, an' him only bait to lead you on. I reckon we better go home an' let Major Sheahan's boys do this job. I'm plumb disgusted with you."

The range-riders looked at each other out of the corners of meek eyes. This rebuke was due them. They had been warned against letting themselves be drawn on without orders.

"That fellow Houck he started it," Big Bill suggested humbly by way of defense.

"Were you drug into it? Did he rope you off yore horse an' take you along with him?" demanded Harshaw sarcastically. "Well, I hope you got yore lesson. How many did we lose?"

A roll-call showed four missing. Hollister felt a catch at the throat when his riding partner failed to report. Bob must be one of those who had gone over the ledge.

One of Sheahan's troopers on scout duty reported. "Indians making for a gulch at the end of the willows, sir. Others swarming up into the bushes at the edge of the mesa."

A cowpuncher familiar with the country volunteered information. "Gulch leads to that ridge over there. It's the highest point around here."

"Then we'd better take the ridge," Harshaw suggested to Sheahan. "Right quick, too."

The major agreed.

They put the troop in motion. Another scout rode in. The Utes were hurrying as fast as they could to the rock-rim. Major Sheahan quickened the pace to a gallop. The Indians lying in the bushes fired at them as they went.

Tom Reeves went down, his horse shot under him. Dud pulled up, a hundred yards away. Out of the bushes braves poured like buzzing bees. The dismounted man would be cut off.

Hollister wheeled his cowpony in its tracks and went back. He slipped a foot from the stirrup and held it out as a foot-rest for Reeves. The Utes whooped as they came on. The firing was very heavy. The pony, a young one, danced wildly and made it impossible for Tom to swing up.

Dud dismounted. The panicky horse backed away, eyes filled with terror. It rose into the air, trembling. Dud tried to coax it to good behavior.

The moments were flying, bringing the Utes nearer every instant.

“We gotta make a run for it, Dud,” his companion said hurriedly. “To the willows over there.”

There was no choice. Hollister let go the bridle and ran. Scarcely fifty yards behind them came the Utes.

Even in their high-heeled boots the cowpunchers ran fast. Once within the shelter of the willows they turned and opened fire. This quite altered the situation. The foremost brave faltered in his pigeon-toed stride, stopped abruptly, and dived for the shelter of a sagebush. The others veered off to the right. They disappeared into some blackberry bushes on the edge of the mesa. Whether from here they continued to the valley the punchers in the willows could not tell.

“Some lucky getaway,” Dud panted.

“Thought I was a goner sure when they plugged my bronc,” said Reeves.

He took a careful shot at the sagebush behind which the Indian had taken refuge. The Ute ran away limping.

“Anyhow, that guy’s got a souvenir to remember me by. Compliments of Tom Reeves,” grinned the owner of that name.

“We’ve got to get back to the boys somehow. I reckon they’re havin’ quite a party on the ridge,” Dud said.

The sound of brisk firing came across the mesa to

them. It was evident that the whites and redskins had met on the ridge and were disputing for possession of it.

“My notion is we’d better stick around here for a while,” Reeves demurred. “I kinda hate to hoof it acrost the flat an’ be a target the whole darned way.”

This seemed good to Hollister. The troopers seemed to be holding their own. They had not been driven back. The smoke of their rifles showed along the very summit of the rock-rim. The inference was that the Utes had been forced to fall back.

The two rangers lay in the willows for hours. The firing had died down, recommenced, and again ceased. Once there came the sound of shots from the right, down in the valley close by the river.

“They’re likely gettin’ the fellow that wasn’t killed when he went over the bluff,” Dud suggested. “There ain’t a thing we can do to help him either.”

“That’s it, I reckon. They’re collectin’ him now. Wonder which of the boys it is.”

Dud felt a twinge of conscience. There was nothing he could do to help the man hemmed in on the riverbank, but it hurt him to lie there without attempting aid. The ranger making the lone fight might be Bob Dillon, poor Bob who had to whip his courage to keep himself from playing the weakling. Dud hoped not. He did not like to think of his riding mate in such desperate straits with no hope of escape.

The battle on the ridge had begun again. Hollister and Reeves decided to try to rejoin their friends. From the north end of the willows they crept into a small draw that led away from the river toward the

hills beyond the mesa. Both of them were experienced plainsmen. They knew how to make the most of such cover as there was. As they moved through the sage, behind hillocks and along washes, they detoured to put as much distance as possible between them and the Utes at the edge of the bench.

But the last hundred yards had to be taken in the open. They did it under fire, on the run, with a dozen riflemen aiming at them from the fringe of blackberry bushes that bordered the mesa. Up the ridge they went pell-mell, Reeves limping the last fifty feet of the way. An almost spent bullet had struck him in the fleshy part of the lower leg.

Hawks let out a cowboy yell at sight of them, jumped up, and pulled Dud down beside him among the boulders.

"Never expected to see you lads again alive an' kickin' after you an' the Utes started that footrace. I'll bet neither one of you throwed down on yoreself when you was headin' for the willows. Gee, I'm plumb glad to see you."

"We're right glad to be here, Buck," acknowledged Dud. "What's new?"

"We got these birds goin', looks like. In about an hour now we're allowin' to hop down into the gulch real sudden an' give 'em merry hell."

Dud reported to Harshaw. The cattleman dropped a hand on his rider's shoulder with a touch of affection. He was very fond of the gay young fellow.

"Thought they'd bumped you off, boy. Heap much glad to see you. What do you know?"

"I reckon nothing that you don't. There was firin' down by the river. Looks like they found one o' the

boys who went over the bluff."

"An' there's a bunch of 'em strung out among the bushes close to the edge of the mesa. Fifteen or twenty, would you think?"

"Must be that many, the way their bullets dropped round Tom an' me just now."

"Tom much hurt?"

"Flesh wound only—in the laig."

Harshaw nodded. His mind was preoccupied with the problem before them. "The bulk of 'em are down in this gulch back of the ridge. We met 'em on the summit and drove 'em back. I judge they've had a-plenty. We'll rout 'em out soon now."

A brisk fire went on steadily between the Utes in the gulch and the whites on the ridge. Every man had found such cover as he could, but the numbers on both sides made it impossible for all to remain wholly hidden. The casualties among the troopers had been, however, very light since the first disastrous rush over the bluff.

Dud caught Harshaw's arm. "Look!" he cried, keenly excited.

A man had emerged from the bushes and was running across the flat toward the ridge. Dud and Tom had kept well away toward the foothills, not out of range of the Utes, but far enough distant to offer poor targets. But this man was running the gauntlet of a heavy fire close enough to be an easy mark. Blanco valley settlers, expert marksmen from much big-game hunting, would have dropped the runner before he had covered thirty yards. But the Indians were armed with cheap trade guns and were at best poor shots. The runner kept coming.

Those on the ridge watched him, their pulses quick, their nerves taut. For he was running a race with death. Every instant they expected to see him fall. From the bushes jets of smoke puffed like toy balloons continuously.

“Fire where you see the smoke, boys,” Harshaw shouted.

The rangers and militia concentrated on the fringe of shrubbery. At least they could make it hot enough for the Indians to disturb their aims.

“He’s down!” groaned Hollister.

He was, but in a second he was up once more, still running strong. He had stumbled over a root. The sage was heavy here. This served as a partial screen for the swiftly moving man. Every step now was carrying him farther from the sharpshooters, bringing him closer to the ridge.

“By Godfrey, he’ll make it!” Harshaw cried.

It began to look that way. The bullets were still falling all around him, but he was close to the foot of the ridge.

Dud made a discovery. “It’s Bob Dillon!” he shouted. Then, to the runner, with all his voice, “Keep a-comin’, Red Haid!”

The hat had gone from the red head. As he climbed the slope the runner was laboring heavily. Dud ran down the hill to meet him, half a dozen others at his heels, among them Blister. They caught the spent youth under the arms and round the body. So he reached the crest.

Blister’s fat arms supported him as his body swayed. The wheezy voice of the justice trembled. “G-glory

be, son. I 'most had heart f-failure whilst you was hoofin' it over the mesa. Oh, boy! I'm g-glad to see you."

Bob sat down and panted for breath. "I got to go—back again," he whispered from a dry throat.

"What's that?" demanded Harshaw. "Back where?"

"To—to the river. I came to get help—for Houck."

"Houck?"

"He's down there in the willows wounded."

CHAPTER XXXIV

AN OBSTINATE MAN STANDS PAT

A moment of blank silence fell on the little group crouched among the boulders. Bob's statement that he had to go back through the fire zone—to Houck—had fallen among them like a mental bombshell.

Blister was the first to find his voice. "You been down there l-lookin' after him?"

"Yes. They hit him in the leg—twice. An' once in the side. He's outa his head. I got him water from the river."

"Was that when I heard shootin' down there?" Dud asked.

"I reckon."

"Well, I'll be d-dawg-goned!" Blister exclaimed.

Of life's little ironies he had never seen a stranger example than this. It had fallen to Bob Dillon to look after his bitter enemy, to risk his life for him, to traverse a battle-field under heavy fire in order to get help for him. His mind flashed back to the boy he had met less than a year ago, a pallid, trembling weakling who had shriveled under the acid test of danger. He had traveled a long way since then in self-conquest.

"Houck was down in the open last I seen him," Hawks said. "Did he crawl to the willows?"

"I kinda helped him," Bob said, a little ashamed.

"Hmp! An' now you think we'd ought to let two-three men get shot going after him across the mesa," Harshaw said. "Nothin' doing. Not right away anyhow. Houck's foolishness got him into the hole where he is. He'll have to wait till we clean out this nest in the gulch. Soon as we've done that we'll go after him."

"But the Utes will rush the willows," Bob protested mildly.

"Sorry, but he'll have to take his chance of that. Any of the rest of us would in his place. You've done what you could, son. That lets you out."

"No, I'm going back," Bob said quietly. "I told him I would. I got to go."

"That wouldn't be r-right sensible, would it?" asked Blister. "N-not right away anyhow. After we get those b-birds outa the blackberry bushes, time enough then for you to h-hit the back trail."

"No, I promised." There was in Bob's face a look Blister had never seen there before, something hard and dogged and implacable. "My notion is for half a dozen of us to go on horses—swing round by the far edge of the mesa. We can drop down into the valley an' pick Houck up if we're lucky."

"And if you're not lucky?" Harshaw demanded.

"Why, o' course we might have trouble. Got to take our chances on that."

"They might wipe the whole bunch of you out. No, sir. I need my men right here. This whole thing's comin' to a show-down right soon. Houck will have to wait."

"I got to go back, Mr. Harshaw," Bob insisted. "I done promised him I would."

"Looky here, boy. You'll do as you please, of course. But there's no sense in being bull-haided. How much do you figure you owe this Jake Houck? I never heard tell he was yore best friend. You got him into the willows. You went to the river and brought him water. You ran a big risk comin' here to get help for him. We'll go to him just as soon as it's safe. That ought to content you."

Before Bob's mental vision there flashed a picture of a man in fever burning up for lack of water. He could not understand it himself. It was not reasonable, of course. But somehow Jake Houck had become his charge. He had to go through with the job.

"I'm going back to him," he said stubbornly.

"Then you're a darn fool. He wouldn't go a step of the way for you."

"Maybe not. That ain't the point. He needs me. Do I

get a horse?"

"Yes, if you're bound an' determined to go," Harshaw said. After a momentary hesitation he added: "And if any of the boys want to go along they can. I'm not hinderin' them. But my advice is for them to stick right here."

Bob's eyes swept the little group round him. "Any one want to take a chance? We'll snake Houck outa the willows an' make a getaway sure."

"Or else you'll stay there with him permanent," Harshaw contributed. "It's plumb foolishness, boys. Houck had his orders an' he broke away from them deliberate. He'd ought to take what's comin'."

Dud pleaded with Dillon. "If it was anybody but Houck, Bob, I'd trail along with you. I sure would. But I can't see as there's any call for us to take such a big risk for him. He's got it in for us both. Said himself he was layin' for us. You stood by him to a fare-you-well. Ain't that enough?"

Bob did not attempt to reason. He simply stated facts. "No, I got to go back, Dud. He's a mighty sick man, an' he needs me. The Utes are liable to find him any time. Maybe I could stand 'em off."

"An' maybe you couldn't," Blister said. "It's plumb s-suicide."

Dillon looked at his fat friend with a faint, dreary smile. He did not himself relish the task before him. "Thought you told me to be a wolf, to hop to it every chance I got to do some crazy thing."

Blister hedged. "Oh, well, a f-fellow wants to have some sense. I never see a good thing that couldn't be r-run into the ground. Far as I know, I never told you to stand on the D. & R. G. tracks an' try to stop the

express with yore head."

"I'll have to be going now," Bob said. He turned to Harshaw. "Where's that bronc I get to carry me back?"

"Up there in the piñons. Dud, you see he gets a good one. I'm wishin' you luck, son. An' I'll say one thing right out in meetin'. You're a better man than Lou Harshaw." The cattleman's hand gripped that of Dillon firmly.

"Shucks! Tha's foolishness," Bob murmured, embarrassed. "I'm scared stiff if you want to know."

"I reckon that's why you're aimin' for to make a target of yorese'f again," Hawks suggested ironically. "Damn 'f I'd do it for the best man alive, let alone Jake Houck. No, sir. I'll go a reasonable way, but I quit this side of suicide. I sure do."

Over to the left rifles were still popping, but at this point of the ridge the firing had temporarily died down. Bob Dillon was the center of interest.

A second time his eye traveled over the group about him. "Last call for volunteers, boys. Anybody want to take a ride?"

Blister found in that eye some compelling quality of leadership. "Dawg-gone you, I'll go," his high falsetto piped.

Bob shook his head. "Not you, Blister. You're too fat. We're liable to have to travel fast."

Nobody else offered himself as a sacrifice. There were men present who would have taken a chance for a friend, but they would not do it for Houck.

Dud went with Bob to the piñons. While Dillon saddled one horse, Hollister put the bridle on a

second.

“What’s that for?” Bob asked.

“Oh, I’m soft in the haid,” Dud grunted. “Gonna trail along. I’ll tell you right now I ain’t lost Houck any, but if you’re set on this fool business, why, I’ll take a whirl with you.”

“Good old Dud,” Bob beamed. “I’ll bet we get away with it fine.”

“Crazy old Dud,” the owner of the name grumbled. “I’ll bet we get our topknots scalped.”

They rode down from the rim-rock, bearing to the right, as far away from the river as possible. The Utes in the blackberry fringe caught sight of them and concentrated their fire on the galloping horsemen. Presently the riders dipped for a minute behind a swell of ground.

“A heap more comfortable ridin’ here,” Dud said, easing his horse for a few moments to a slower pace. “I never did know before why the good Lord made so much of this country stand up on end, but if I get outa this hole I’ll not kick at travelin’ over hills so frequent. They sure got their uses when Injuns are pluggin’ at you.”

They made as wide a circuit as the foothills would allow. At times they were under a brisk fire as they cantered through the sage. This increased when they swung across the mesa toward the river. Fortunately they were now almost out of range.

Riding along the edge of the bluff, they found a place where their sure-footed cowponies could slide and scramble down. In the valley, as they dashed across to the willows where Bob had left Houck, they were again under fire. Even after they had plunged into

the thicket of saplings they could hear bullets zipping through the foliage to right and left.

The glazed eyes in Houck's flushed face did not recognize the punchers. Defiance glowered in his stare.

"Where'd you get the notion, you red devils, that Jake Houck is a quitter? Torment me, will you? Burn me up with thirst, eh? Go to it an' see."

Bob took a step or two toward the wounded man. "Don't you know me, Houck? We've come to look after you. This is Dud Hollister. You know him."

"What if I did gun him?" the high-pitched voice maundered on. "Tried to steal my bronc, he did, an' I wouldn't stand for it a minute.... All right. Light yore fires. Burn me up, you hounds of Hades. I'm not askin' no favors. Not none a-tall."

The big man's hand groped at his belt. Brown fingers closed on the butt of a forty-five. Instantly both rescuers were galvanized to life. Dud's foot scraped into the air a cloud of sand and dust as Bob dived forward. He plunged at Houck a fraction of a second behind his friend.

Into the blue sky a bullet went singing. Bob had been in time to knock the barrel of the revolver up with his outflung hand.

CHAPTER XXXV

THREE IN A PIT

Wounded though he was, Houck managed to make a good deal of trouble for the punchers before they pinned him down and took the forty-five from him. His great strength was still at command, and he had the advantage that neither of his rescuers wanted to injure him during the struggle. They thrashed over the ground, arms and legs outflung wildly. Houck gave up only when his vigor collapsed.

His surrender was complete. He lay weak and panting, bleeding from reopened wounds, for the time as helpless and submissive as a child.

From a canteen they gave him water. Afterward they washed and tied up the wounds, bathed the fevered face, and kept the mosquitoes from him by fanning them away.

“Expect I’d better take a pasear an’ see where Mr. Ute’s at,” Dud said. “He’s liable to drap in onexpected while we’re not lookin’—several of him, huntin’ for souvenirs in the scalp line for to decorate his belt with.”

From the little opening he crept into the thicket of saplings and disappeared. Bob waited beside the delirious man. His nerves were keyed to a high tension. For all he knew the beadlike eyes of four or five sharpshooters might be peering at him from the jungle.

The sound of a shot startled him. It came from the direction in which Dud had gone. Had he been killed? Or wounded? Bob could not remain longer where he was. He too crept into the willows, following as well as he could the path of Hollister.

There came to him presently the faint crackle of twigs. Some one or something was moving in the bosk. He lay still, heart thumping violently. The sound ceased, began again.

Bob's trembling hand held a revolver pointed in the direction of the snapping branches. The willows moved, opened up, and a blond, curly head appeared.

Bob's breath was expelled in a long sigh of relief. "Wow! I'm glad to see you. Heard that shot an' thought maybe they'd got you."

"Not so you can notice it," Dud replied cheerfully. "But they're all round us. I took a crack at one inquisitive buck who had notions of collectin' me. He ce'tainly hit the dust sudden as he vamosed."

"What'll we do?"

"I found a kinda buffalo wallow in the willows. We'll move in on a lease an' sit tight till Harshaw an' the boys show up."

They carried and dragged Houck through the thicket to the saucer-shaped opening Hollister had discovered. The edges of this rose somewhat above the surrounding ground. Using their spurs to dig with, the cowpunchers deepened the hollow and packed the loose dirt around the rim in order to heighten the rampart.

From a distance came the sound of heavy, rapid firing, of far, faint yells.

"The boys are attackin' the gulch," Dud guessed. "Sounds like they might be makin' a clean-up too."

It was three o'clock by Bob's big silver watch. Heat waves were shimmering in the hollow and

mosquitoes singing. Occasionally Houck's voice rose in delirious excitement. Sometimes he thought the Utes were torturing him. Again he lived over scenes in the past. Snatches of babble carried back to the days of his turbulent youth when all men's cattle were his. In the mutterings born of a sick brain Bob heard presently the name of June.

"... Tell you I've took a fancy to you. Tell you Jake Houck gets what he wants. No sense you rarin' around, June. I'm yore man.... Mine, girl. Don't you ever forget it. Mine for keeps.... Use that gun, damn you, or crawl into a hole. I'm takin' yore wife from you. Speak yore piece. Tell her to go with me. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

The firing came nearer.

Again Dud guessed what was taking place. "They've got the Utes outa the gulch an' are drivin' them down the valley. Right soon they're liable to light on us hard. Depends on how much the boys are pressin' them."

They had two rifles and four revolvers, for Houck had lately become a two-gun man. These they examined carefully to make sure they were in order. The defenders crouched back to back in the pit, each of them searching the thicket for an angle of one hundred and eighty degrees.

The sound of the battle died down. Evidently the pursuers were out of contact with the natives.

"Don't like that," Dud said. "If the Utes have time they'll try to pick us up as they're passin'."

Bob fired.

"See one?" asked his friend.

"Think so. Something moved. Down in that hollow. He's outa sight now."

"They've got us located, then. Old Man Trouble headed this way. Something liable to start. Soon now."

The minutes dragged. Bob's eyes blurred from the intensity with which he watched.

A bullet struck the edge of the pit. Bob ducked involuntarily. Presently there was a second shot—and a third.

"They're gettin' warm," Dud said.

He and Bob fired at the smoke puffs, growing now more frequent. Both of them knew it would be only a short time till one of them was hit unless their friends came to the rescue. Spurts of sand flew every few moments.

There was another undesirable prospect. The Utes might charge and capture the pit, wiping out the defenders. To prevent this the cowpunchers kept up as lively a fire as possible.

From down the valley came the sound of scattered shots and yells. Dud swung his hat in glee.

"Good boys! They're comin' in on the rear. Hi yi yippy yi!"

Firing began again on the other side. The Utes were caught between the rangers to the left and the soldiers to the right. Bob could see them breaking through the willows toward the river. It was an easy guess that their horses were bunched here and that they would be forced to cross the stream to escape.

Five minutes later Harshaw broke through the saplings to the pit. "Either of you boys hurt?" he

demanded anxiously.

"Not a scratch on either of us," Dud reported.

The boss of the Slash Lazy D wrung their hands. "By Godfrey! I'm plumb pleased. Couldn't get it outa my head that they'd got you lads. How's Houck?"

"He's right sick. Doc had ought to look after him soon. He's had one mighty bad day of it."

Houck was carried on a blanket to the riverbank, where camp was being made for the night. The Utes had been routed. It was estimated that ten or twelve of them had been killed, though the number could not be verified, as Indians always if possible carry away their dead. For the present, at least, no further pursuit of them was feasible.

Dr. Tuckerman dressed the wounds of the Brown's Park man and looked after the others who had been hurt. All told, the whites had lost four killed. Five were wounded more or less seriously.

The wagons had been left on the mesa three miles away. Houck was taken here next day on a stretcher made of a blanket tied to willow poles. The bodies of the dead were also removed.

Two days later the rangers reached Bear Cat. They had left the soldiers to complete the task of rounding up the Utes and taking them back to the reservation.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A HERO IS EMBARRASSED

Following the Ute War, as it came to be called, there was a period of readjustment on the Rio Blanco. The whites had driven off the horses and the stock of the Indians. Two half-grown boys appropriated a flock of several thousand sheep belonging to the Indians and took them to Glenwood Springs. On the way they sold the sheep right and left. The asking price was a dollar. The selling price was twenty-five cents, a watermelon, a slice of pie, or a jack-knife with a broken blade.

The difficulties that ensued had to be settled. To get a better understanding of the situation the Governor of the State and a general of the United States Army with their staffs visited the White River country. While in Bear Cat they put up at the hotel.

Mollie did a land-office business, but she had no time to rest day or night. Passing through the office during the rush of the dinner hour, she caught sight of Blister Haines sprawled on two chairs. He was talking with Bob Dillon.

"Hear you done quit the Slash Lazy D outfit. What's the idee?" he said.

"Nothin' in ridin'," Bob told him. "A fellow had ought to get a piece of land on the river an' run some cattle of his own. Me an' Dud aim to do that."

"Hmp! An' meanwhile?"

"We're rip-rappin' the river for old man Wilson."[4]

Blister was pleased, but he did not say so. "Takes a good man to start on a s-shoestring an' make it go with cattle."

"That's why we're going into it," Bob modestly explained.

Mollie broke in. "What are you boys loafin' here for when I need help in the dining-room? Can either of you sling hash?"

The fat man derricked himself out of the chairs. "We can. L-lead us to the job, ma'am."

So it happened that Blister, in a white apron, presently stood before the Governor ready to take orders. The table was strewn with used dishes and food, débris left there by previous diners. The amateur waiter was not sure whether the Governor and his staff had eaten or were ready to eat.

"D-do you want a r-reloadin' outfit?" he asked.

The general, seated beside the Governor, had lived his life in the East. He stared at Blister in surprise, for at a council held only an hour before this ample waiter had been the chief spokesman in behalf of fair play to the Indians. He decided that the dignified thing to do was to fail to recognize the man.

Blister leaned toward the Governor and whispered confidentially. "Say, Gov, take my tip an' try one o' these here steaks. They ain't from dogy stock."

The Governor had been a cattleman himself. The free-and-easy ways of the West did not disturb him. "Go you once, Blister," he assented.

The waiter turned beaming on the officer. His fat hand rested on the braided shoulder. "How about you, Gen? Does that go d-double?"

Upon Blister was turned the cold, hard eye of West Point. "I'll take a tenderloin steak, sir, done medium."

"You'll sure find it'll s-stick to yore ribs," Blister said cheerfully.

Carrying a tray full of dishes, Bob went into the kitchen choking down his mirth.

"Blister's liable to be shot at daybreak. He's lessie-majesting the U.S. Army."

Chung Lung shuffled to the door and peered through. Internal mirth struggled with his habitual gravity. "Gleat smoke, Blister spill cup cloffee on general."

This fortunately turned out to be an exaggeration. Blister, in earnest conversation with himself, had merely overturned a half-filled cup on the table in the course of one of his gestures.

Mollie retired him from service.

Alone with Bob for a moment in the kitchen, June whispered to him hurriedly. "Before you an' Dud go away I want to see you a minute."

"Want to see me an' Dud?" he asked.

She flashed a look of shy reproach at him. "No, not Dud—you."

Bob stayed to help wipe the dishes. It was a job at which he had been adept in the old days when he flunkied for the telephone outfit. Afterward he and June slipped out of the back door and walked down to the river.

June had rehearsed exactly what she meant to say to him, but now that the moment had arrived it did not seem so easy. He might mistake her friendliness. He might think there was some unexpressed motive in the back of her mind, that she was trying to hold him to the compact made in Blister Haines's office a year ago. It would be hateful if he thought that. But she

had to risk it if their comradeship was going to mean anything. When folks were friends they helped each other, didn't they? Told each other how glad they were when any piece of good luck came. And what had come to Bob Dillon was more than good luck. It was a bit of splendid achievement that made her generous blood sing.

This was all very well, but as they moved under the cottonwoods across the grass tessellated with sunshine and shadow, the fact of sex thrust itself up and embarrassed her. She resented this, was impatient at it, yet could not escape it. Beneath the dusky eyes a wave of color crept into the dark cheeks.

Though they walked in silence, Bob did not guess her discomposure. As clean of line as a boy, she carried herself resiliently. He thought her beautiful as a wild flower. The lift and tender curve of the chin, the swell of the forearms above the small brown hands that had done so much hard work so competently, filled him with a strange delight. She had emerged from the awkwardness and heaviness of the hoydenish age. It was difficult for him to identify her with the Cinderella of Piceance Creek except by the eager flash of the eyes in those moments when her spirit seemed to be rushing toward him.

They stood on the bank above the edge of the ford. June looked down into the tumbling water. Bob waited for her to speak. He had achieved a capacity for silence and had learned the strength of it.

Presently June lifted her eyes to his. "Dud says you an' he are going to take up preëmptions and run cattle of your own," she began.

"Yes. Harshaw's going to stake us. We'll divide the

increase."

"I'm glad. Dud ought to quit going rippity-cut every which way. No use his wastin' five or six years before he gets started for himself."

"No," Bob assented.

"You're steadier than he is. You'll hold him down."

Bob came to time loyally. "Dud's all right. You'll find him there like a rock when you need him. Best fellow in all this White River country."

Her shining eyes sent a stab of pain through his heart. She was smiling at him queerly. "One of the best," she said.

"Stay with you to a fare-you-well," he went on. "If I knew a girl—if I had a sister—well, I'd sure trust her to Dud Hollister. All wool an' a yard wide that boy is."

"Yes," June murmured.

"Game as they make 'em. Know where he's at every turn of the road. I'd ce'tainly back his play to a finish."

"I know you would."

"Best old pal a fellow ever had."

"It's really a pity you haven't a sister," she teased.

Bob guessed that June had brought him here to talk about Dud. He did, to the exclusion of all other topics. The girl listened gravely and patiently, but imps of mischief were kicking up their heels in her eyes.

"You give him a good recommendation," she said at last. "How about his friend?"

"Tom Reeves?"

"No, Bob Dillon." Her dark eyes met his fairly. "Oh, Bob, I'm *so* glad."

He was suddenly flooded with self-consciousness. "About us preëmptin'?" he asked.

"No. About you being the hero of the campaign."

The ranger was miserably happy. He was ashamed to have the thing he had done dragged into the light, embarrassed to hear her use so casually a word that made him acutely uncomfortable. Yet he would not for the world have missed the queer little thrills that raced through him.

"That's plumb foolishness," he said.

"Yes, it is—not. Think I haven't heard all about it? How you dragged Jake Houck into the willows right spang from among the Utes? How you went to the river an' got him water? How you went for help when everybody thought you'd be killed? An' how you shamed Dud into going back with you? I made Mr. Harshaw tell me all he knew—and Dud too. He said—Mr. Harshaw said—"

Bob interrupted this eager attack. "I'll tell you how it was, June. When I saw Houck lying out there with a busted leg I didn't know who he was—thought maybe it was Dud. So I had to go an' get him. If I'd known it was Houck—"

"You knew it was Houck before you dragged him back, didn't you?" she charged. "You knew it when you went to the river to get him water?"

"Truth is, I was scared so I shook," he confessed humbly. "But when a fellow's sufferin' like Jake Houck was—"

"Even your enemy."

"Oh, well, enemies don't count when you're fightin' Utes together. I had to look after him—couldn't duck it. Different with Dud when he rode back to get Tom Reeves. Did you hear about that?"

She put a damper on the sudden enthusiasm that lilted into his voice. "Yes, I heard about that," she said dryly. "But we're talking of another man now. You've got to stand there an' take it, Bob. It won't last but a minute anyhow. I never was so tickled in my life before. When I thought of all you've suffered an' gone through, an' how now you've stopped the tongues of all the folks who jeered at you, I went to my room and cried like a little girl. You'll understand, won't you? I had to tell you this because we've promised to be friends. Oh, I am *so* glad for you, Bob."

He swallowed a lump in his throat and nodded. "Yes, I'll understand, June. It—it was awful nice of you to tell me. I reckon you ought to hate me, the way I treated you. Most girls would."

She flashed a quick look at his flaming face. His embarrassment relieved hers.

"As if *you* knew what most girls would think," she derided. Nevertheless she shifted the conversation to grounds less personal and dangerous. "Now you can tell me some more about that Dud you're always braggin' of."

Bob did not know as he talked of his friend that June found what he said an interpretation of Robert Dillon rather than Dudley Hollister.

[4]

Piling up brush to protect the bank from being washed away.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A RESPONSIBLE CITIZEN

Dillon and Hollister were lounging on the bank of Elk Creek through the heat of the day. They had been chasing a jack-rabbit across the mesa for sport. Their broncos were now grazing close at hand.

“Ever notice how a jack-rabbit jumps high when it’s crowded?” Dud asked idly.

Bob nodded. “Like a deer. Crowd one an’ he gets to jumpin’ high. ’D you see that jack turn a somersault just as I threw my rope the last time?”

Dud’s keen eyes ranged the landscape. They were on the edge of the mesa where it dipped down into the valley. Since he and Bob had decided to preëmpt a quarter-section each, it had become a habit of his to study the localities over which they rode.

“Country looks good round here,” he suggested.

“Yes,” agreed his friend.

“What we lookin’ for anyhow, Bob?”

“Wood, grass, and water.”

"Well, they're right here, ain't they?"

Bob had been thinking the same thing himself. They saddled and quartered over the ground carefully. There was a wide stretch of meadow close to the junction of Elk Creek and the river. Upon part of it a growth of young willow had sprung up. But he judged that there was nearly one hundred and fifty acres of prairie. This would need no clearing. Rich wild grass already covered it luxuriously. For their first crop they could cut the native hay. Then they could sow timothy. There would be no need to plough the meadow. The seed could be disked in. Probably the land never would need ploughing, for it was a soft black loam.

"How about roads?" Bob asked. "The old-timers claim we'll never get roads here."

"Some one's going to take up all this river land mighty soon. That's a cinch. An' the roads will come right soon after the settlers. Fact is, we've got to jump if we're going to take up land on the river an' get a choice location."

"My notion too," agreed Bob. "We'd better get a surveyor out here this week."

They did. Inside of a month they had filed papers at the land office, built cabins, and moved their few possessions to the claims. Their houses were made of logs mud-chinked, with dirt floors and shake roofs instead of the usual flat dirt ones. They expected later to whipsaw lumber for the floors. A huge fireplace in one end of each cabin was used for cooking as well as for heat until such time as they could get stoves. Already they planned a garden, and in the evenings were as likely to talk of turnips, beets, peas, beans, and potatoes as of the new

Hereford bulls Larson and Harshaw were importing from Denver.

For the handwriting was on the wall. Cattlemen must breed up or go out of business. The old dogy would not do any longer. Already Utah stock was displacing the poor southern longhorns. Soon these, too, would belong to the past. Dud and Bob had vision enough to see this and they were making plans to get a near-pedigreed bull.

Dud sighed in reminiscent appreciation of the old days that were vanishing. He might have been seventy-two instead of twenty-two coming February. Behind him lay apparently all his golden youth.

"We got to adopt ourselves to new ways, old Sure-Shot," he ruminated aloud. "Got to quit hellin' around an' raisin' Cain. Leastways I have. You never did do any o' that. Yes, sir, I got to be a responsible citizen."

The partner of the responsible citizen leaned back in a reclining chair which he had made from a plank sawed into five parts that were nailed together at angles.

"You'll be raisin' little towheads right soon," he said through a cloud of smoke.

"No, sir. Not me. Not Dud Hollister. I can boss my own se'f for a spell yet," the fair-haired youth protested vehemently. "When I said we got to adopt ourselves, I was thinkin' of barb-wire fences an' timothy hay. 'S all right to let the dogies rough through the winter an' hunt the gulches when the storms come. But it won't do with stock that's bred up. Harshaw lost close to forty per cent of his cattle three years ago. It sure put some crimp in him. He was hit hard again last winter. You know that. Say

he'd had valuable stock. Why, it would put him outa business. Sure would."

"Yes," admitted Bob. "There's a schoolmarm down at Meeker was askin' me about you. You know her—that snappin'-eyed brunette. Wanted to know all about yore claim, an' was it a good one, an' didn't I think Mr. Hollister a perfect gentleman, an'—"

Dud snatched a blanket from the bunk and smothered the red head. They clinched, rolled on the floor, and kicked over the chair and stool. Presently they emerged from battle feeling happier.

"No, we got to feed. Tha's the new law an' the gospel of the range," Dud continued. "Got to keep our cattle under fence in winter an' look after 'em right. Cattle-raisin' as a gamble will be a losing bet right soon. It's a business now. Am I right?"

"Sounds reasonable to me, Dud."

Bob's face was grave, but he smiled inwardly. The doctrine that his friend had just been expounding was not new to him. He had urged it on Dud during many a ride and at more than one night camp, had pointed to the examples of Larson, Harshaw, and the other old-timers. Hollister was a happy-go-lucky youth. The old hard-riding cattle days suited him better. But he, too, had been forced at last to see the logic of the situation. Now, with all the ardor of a convert, he was urging his view on a partner who did not need to be convinced.

Dillon knew that stock-raising was entering upon a new phase, that the old loose range system must give way to better care, attention to breeding, and close business judgment. The cattleman who stuck to the old ways would not survive.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

BEAR CAT ASLEEP

Bear Cat basked in the mellow warmth of Indian summer. Peace brooded over the valley, a slumberous and placid drowsiness. Outside Platt & Fortner's store big freight wagons stood close to the sidewalk. They had just come in from their long overland journey and had not yet been unloaded. A Concord stage went its dusty way down the street headed for Newcastle. Otherwise there was little evidence of activity.

It was about ten o'clock in the morning. The saloons and gambling-houses were almost deserted. The brisk business of the night had died down. Even a poker player and a faro dealer must sleep.

Main Street was in a coma. A dog lazily poked a none too inquisitive nose into its epidermis in a languid search for fleas. Past the dog went a barefoot urchin into a store for two pounds of eight-penny nails.

Three horsemen appeared at the end of the street and moved down it at the jog-trot which is the road gait of the cowpuncher. They dismounted near the back door of Platt & Fortner's and flung the bridle reins over the wheel spokes of the big freight wagons with the high sides. They did not tie the reins even in

slip knots.

The riders stood for a moment talking in low voices before they separated. One went into Dolan's. He was a good-looking young fellow about twenty. A second wandered into the hotel saloon. He was not good-looking and was twice twenty. The third strolled past the bank, glanced in, turned, and walked past it a second time. He straddled, with jingling spurs, into the big store.

Tom Platt nodded casually to him. "Anything I can do for you, Houck?"

"I reckon," Houck grunted.

Platt noticed that he limped slightly. He had no feeling of friendliness toward Houck, but common civility made him inquire how the wounded leg was doing. After the Indian campaign the Brown's Park man had gone to Meeker for his convalescence. That had been two months since.

"'S all right," growled the big fellow.

"Good. Thought you kinda favored it a little when you walked."

The Brown's Park man bought a plug of chewing tobacco and a shirt.

"Guess the soldiers got the Utes corralled all right by this time. Hear anything new about that?" Platt asked by way of making conversation.

"No," Houck replied shortly. "Got an empty gunnysack I could have?"

"Sure." The storekeeper found one and a string with which to tie it.

"I'll take a slab of side meat an' a pound of ground coffee," the big man growled.

He made other purchases,—flour, corn meal, beans, and canned tomatoes. These he put in the gunnysack, tying the open end. Out of the side door he went to the horses standing by the big freight wagons. The contents of the sack he transferred to saddle-bags.

Then, without any apparent doubt as to what he was going to do next, he dropped into another store, one which specialized in guns and ammunition, though it, too, sold general supplies. He bought cartridges, both for the two forty-fives and for the rifle he carried. These he actually tested in his weapons, to make sure they fitted easily.

The proprietor attempted a pleasantry. "You're kinda garnished with weapons, stranger. Not aimin' to hold up the town, are you?"

The amiable laugh died away. The wall-eyed stranger was looking at him in bleak silence. Not an especially timid man, the owner of the place felt a chill run down his spine. That stare carried defiance, an unvoiced threat. Later, the storekeeper made of it a stock part of his story of the day's events.

"When the stranger gave me that look of his I knew right away something was doing. 'Course I didn't know what. I'll not claim I did, but I was sure there'd be a job for the coroner before night. Blister come into the store just after he left. I said to him, 'Who's that big black guy?' He says, 'Jake Houck.' 'Well,' I says, 'Jake Houck is sure up to some deviltry.'"

It is easy to be a prophet after the event. When Houck jingled out of the store and along the sidewalk to the hotel, none of the peaceful citizens he met guessed what he had in mind. None of them saw the signal which passed between him and the young fellow who had just come out of Dolan's. This

was not a gesture. No words were spoken, but a message went from one to the other and back. The young puncher disappeared again into Dolan's.

Afterward, when Bear Cat began to assemble its recollections of the events prior to the dramatic climax, it was surprising how little that was authentic could be recalled. Probably a score of people noted casually the three strangers. Houck was recognized by three or four, Bandy Walker by at least one. The six-foot youngster with them was known by nobody who saw him. It was learned later that he had never been in the town before. The accounts of how the three spent the hour between ten and eleven are confusing. If they met during that time it was only for a moment or two while passing. But it is certain that Bandy Walker could not have been both in the blacksmith shop and at Platt & Fortner's five minutes before eleven. The chances are that some of the town people, anxious to have even a small part in the drama, mixed in their minds these strangers with others who had ridden in.

Bob Dillon and Dud Hollister dropped from their saddles in front of the hotel at just eleven o'clock. They had ridden thirty miles and stood for a moment stretching the cramp out of their muscles.

Dud spoke, nodding his head to the right. "Look what's here, Sure-Shot. Yore friend Bandy—old, tried, an' true."

Walker was trailing his high-heeled boots through the dust across the street from Dolan's toward the big store. If he saw Bob he gave no sign of knowing him.

The two friends passed into the hotel. They performed the usual rites of internal and external ablutions. They returned to the bar, hooked their

heels, and swapped with Mike the news of the day.

“Hear Larson’s bought the K T brand. Anything to it?” asked Dud.

“Paid seven thousand down, time on the balance,” Mike said. “How you lads makin’ it on Elk?”

“Fine. We got the best preëmptions on the river. Plenty of good grass, wood an’ water handy, a first-class summer range. It’s an A1 layout, looks like.”

“At the end of nowhere, I reckon,” Mike grinned.

“The best steers are on the edge of the herd,” Dud retorted cheerfully. “It’s that way with ranches too. A fellow couldn’t raise much of a herd in Denver, could he?”

A sound like the explosion of a distant firecracker reached them. It was followed by a second.

It is strange what a difference there is between the report of one shot and another. A riotous cowpuncher bangs away into the air to stress the fact that he is a live one on the howl. Nobody pays the least attention. A bullet flies from a revolver barrel winged with death. Men at the roulette wheel straighten up to listen. The poker game is automatically suspended, a hand half dealt. By some kind of telepathy the players know that explosion carries deadly menace.

So now the conversation died. No other sound came, but the two cattlemen and the bartender were keyed to tense alertness. They had sloughed instantly the easy indolence of casual talk.

There came the slap of running footsteps on the sidewalk. A voice called in excitement, “They’ve killed Ferril.”

The eyes of the Elk Creek ranchers met. They knew now what was taking place. Ferril was cashier of the Bear Cat bank.

CHAPTER XXXIX

BEAR CAT AWAKE

At exactly eleven o'clock Houck, Bandy Walker, and the big young cowpuncher who had ridden into town with them met at the corner of one of the freight wagons. Houck talked, the others listened, except for a comment or two. A cattleman passing them on his way to the bank recalled afterward that the low voice of the Brown's Park man was deadly serious.

The two big men walked into the bank. Bandy stayed with the horses. In the building, not counting the cashier and his assistant, were two or three patrons of the institution. One was Sturgis, a round little man who had recently started a drug-store in Bear Cat. He was talking to the assistant cashier. The cattleman was arranging with Ferril for a loan.

The attention of the cattleman drifted from the business in hand. "Carryin' a good deal of hardware, ain't they, Gus?"

Ferril smiled. "Most of the boys are quittin' that foolishness, but some of 'em can't get it out of their

heads that they look big when they're gun-toters. Kind of a kid business, looks to me."

The eyes of the cattleman rested on Houck. "I wouldn't call that big black fellow a kid. Who is he?"

"Don't know. Reckon we're due to find out. He's breakin' away from the other fellow and movin' this way."

Houck observed that the big cowpuncher was nervous. The hand hitched in the sagging belt was trembling.

"Don't weaken, Dave," he said in a whisper out of the corner of his mouth. "We'll be outa town in ten minutes."

"Sure," agreed the other in a hoarse murmur.

Houck sauntered to the cage. This was a recent importation from Denver. Bear Cat was proud of it as an evidence of progress. It gave the bank quite a metropolitan air.

He stood behind the cattleman, the wall at his back so that his broad shoulders brushed it. Jake had no intention of letting any one get in his rear.

"Stick yore hands up!" he ordered roughly.

The cattleman did not turn. His hands went up instantly. A half a second later those of the startled cashier lifted toward the ceiling.

The assistant made a bad mistake. He dived for the revolver in the desk close at hand.

Houck fired. The bank clerk dropped.

That shot sent panic through the heart of Sturgis. He bolted for the side door. A second shot from Houck's weapon did not stop him. A moment more, and he

was on the street racing to spread the alarm.

The leader of the bank robbers swung round on Ferril. His voice was harsh, menacing. He knew that every moment now counted. From under his coat he had drawn a gunnysack.

“The bank money—quick. No silver—gold an’ any bills you’ve got.”

Ferril opened the safe. He stuffed into the sack both loose and packed gold. He had a few bills, not many, for in the West paper money was then used very little.

“No monkey business,” snarled Houck after he had stood up against the opposite wall the cattleman and the depositor who chanced to be in the bank. “This all you got? Speak up, or I’ll drill you.”

The cashier hesitated, but the ominous hollow eye into which he looked was persuasive. He opened an inner compartment lined with bags of gold. These he thrust into the gunnysack.

The robber named Dave tied with shaking fingers the loose end of the sack.

“Time to go,” announced Houck grimly. “You’re goin’ with us far as our horses—all of you. We ain’t lookin’ for to be bushwhacked.”

He lined up the bodyguard in front and on each side of himself and his accomplice. Against the back of the cattleman he pushed the end of the revolver barrel.

“Lead the way,” he ordered with an oath.

Houck had heard the sound of running feet along the street. He knew it was more than likely that there would be a fight before he and his men got out of

town. This was not in his reckoning. The shots fired inside the bank had been outside his calculations. They had been made necessary only by the action of the teller. Jake's plan had been to do the job swiftly and silently, to get out of town before word of what had taken place reached the citizens. He had chosen Bear Cat as the scene of the robbery because there was always plenty of money in the bank, because he owed its people a grudge, and because it was so far from a railroad.

As he had outlined the hold-up to his fellows in crime, it had looked like a moderately safe enterprise. But he realized now that he had probably led them into a trap. Nearly every man in Bear Cat was a big-game hunter. This meant that they were dead shots.

Houck knew that it would be a near thing if his party got away in time. A less resolute man would have dropped the whole thing after the alarm had been given and ridden away at once. But he was no quitter. So he was seeing it out.

The cattleman led the procession through the side door into the street.

Sunshine warm and mellow still bathed the street, just as it had done ten minutes earlier. But there was a difference. Dave felt a shiver run down his spine.

From the horses Bandy barked a warning. "Hurry, Jake, for God's sake. They're all round us."

CHAPTER XL

BIG-GAME HUNTERS AT WORK

Bob and his partner did not rush out of the hotel instantly to get into the fray. They did what a score of other able-bodied men of Bear Cat were doing—went in search of adequate weapons with which to oppose the bank robbers. Bear Cat was probably the best-equipped town in the country to meet a sudden emergency of this kind. In every house, behind the door or hanging on the wall, was a rifle used to kill big game. In every house was at least one man who knew how to handle that rifle. All he had to do was to pick up the weapon, load it, and step into the street.

June was in the kitchen with Chung Lung. The Reverend Melancthon Browning had just collected two dollars from Chung for the foreign missionary fund. Usually the cook was a cheerful giver, but this morning he was grumbling a little. He had been a loser at hop toy the night before.

"Mister Blowning he keep busy asking for dollars. He tell me givee to the Lord. Gleat smoke, Lord allee timee bloke?"

The girl laughed. The Oriental's quaint irreverence was of the letter and not of the spirit.

Through the swing door burst Bob Dillon. "Know where there's a rifle, June?"

She looked at him, big-eyed. "Not the Utes again?" she gasped.

"Bank robbers. I want a gun."

Without a word she turned and led him swiftly down the passage to a bedroom. In one corner of it was a .40-.70 Marlin. From a peg above hung a cartridge belt. Bob loaded the gun.

June's heart beat fast. "You'll—be careful?" she cautioned.

He nodded as he ran out of the door and into the alley behind.

Platt & Fortner's was erecting a brick store building, the first of its kind in Bear Cat. The walls were up to the second story and the window frames were in. Through the litter of rubbish left by the workmen Bob picked a hurried way to one of the window spaces. Two men were crouched in another of these openings not fifteen feet from him.

"How many of 'em?" he asked in a loud whisper.

Blister answered from the embrasure opposite. "D-don't know."

"Still in the bank, are they?"

"Yes."

Some one peered out of Dolan's through the crack of a partly opened door. Bob caught the gleam of the sun upon the barrel of a gun. A hat with a pair of eyes beneath the rim of it showed above the sill of a window in the blacksmith shop opposite. Bear Cat was all set for action.

A man was standing beside some horses near the back door of Platt & Fortner's. He was partially screened from Bob's view by one of the broncos and by a freight wagon, but the young cattleman had a fleeting impression that he was Bandy Walker. Was he, too, waiting to get a shot at the bandits?

Probably so. He had a rifle in his hands. But it struck Dillon he was taking chances. When the robbers came out of the bank they would be within thirty feet of him.

Out of the front door of the bank a little group of men filed. Two of them were armed. The others flanked them on every side. Ferril the cashier carried a gunnysack heavily loaded.

A man stepped out upon the platform in front of Platt & Fortner's. From his position he looked down on the little bunch of men moving toward the horses. Bandy Walker, beside the horses, called on Houck to hurry, that they were being surrounded.

"I've got you covered. Throw down yore guns," the man on the platform shouted to the outlaws, rifle at shoulder.

Houck's revolver flashed into the air. He fired across the shoulder of the man whom he was using as a screen. The rifleman on the store porch sat down suddenly, his weapon clattering to the ground.

"Another of 'em," Houck said aloud with a savage oath. "Any one else lookin' for it?"

Walker moved forward with the horses. Afraid that general firing would begin at any moment, Ferril dropped the sack and ran for the shelter of the wagons. His flight was a signal for the others who had been marshaled out of the bank. They scattered in a rush for cover.

Instantly Houck guessed what would follow. From every side a volley of bullets would be concentrated on him and his men. He too ran, dodging back into the bank.

He was not a tenth part of a second too soon. A

fusillade of shots poured down. It seemed that men were firing from every door, window, and street corner. Bandy Walker fell as he started to run. Two bullets tore through his heart, one from each side. The big cowpuncher never stirred from his tracks. He went down at the first volley. Five wounds, any one of which would have been mortal, were later found in his body and head.

All told, the firing had not lasted as long as it would take a man to run across a street. Bear Cat had functioned. The bank robbers were out of business.

The news spread quicker than the tongue could tell it. From all directions men, women, and children converged toward the bank. In the excitement the leader of the bandits was forgotten for a minute or two.

“What about the third fellow?” a voice asked.

The question came from Dud Hollister. He had reached the scene too late to take any part in the battle, much to his chagrin.

“Went into the bank,” Blister said. “I s-saw him duck in just before the shooting began.”

The building was surrounded and rushed. Houck was not inside. Evidently he had run out of the back door and made for the willows by the river. A boy claimed that he had seen a man running in that direction.

A crowd of armed men beat the willows on both banks for a distance of a mile both up and down the stream wherever there was cover. No trace of the outlaw could be found. Posses on horseback took up the search. These posses not only rode up and down the river. They scoured the mesa on the other bank all day. When night fell Houck was still at large.

CHAPTER XLI

IN A LADY'S CHAMBER

The drama of the hold-up and of the retribution that had fallen upon the bandits had moved as swiftly as though it had been rehearsed. There had been no wasted words, no delay in the action. But in life the curtain does not always drop at the right moment. There was anticlimax in Bear Cat after the guns had ceased to boom. In the reaction after the strain the tongues of men and women were loosened. Relief expressed itself in chatter. Everybody had some contributing incident to tell.

Into the clatter Dud Hollister's voice cut sharply. "Some one get Doc Tuckerman, quick."

He was bending over the wounded man on the platform, trying to stop the flow of blood from a little hole in the side.

Mollie stepped toward him. "Carry Art into the hotel. I'll have a bed ready for him time you get there. Anybody else hurt?"

"Some one said Ferril was shot."

"No. He's all right. There he is over there by the wagons. See? Lookin' after the gold in the sack."

Blister came to the door of the bank in time to hear Mollie's question. "McCray's been s-shot—here in the bank."

"Bring him in too," ordered Mollie.

The wounded men were given first aid and carried into the hotel. There their wounds were dressed by

the doctor.

In the corridor outside Bob and his partner met June coming out of one of the rooms where the invalids had been taken. She was carrying a towel and some bandages.

“Got to get a move on me,” Dud said. “I got in after the fireworks were over. Want to join Blister’s posse now. You comin’, Bob?”

“Not now,” Dillon answered.

He was white to the lips. There was a fear in his mind that he might be going to disgrace himself by getting sick. The nausea had not attacked him until the shooting was over. He was much annoyed at himself, but the picture of the lusty outlaws lying in the dust with the life stricken out of them had been too much.

“All right. I’ll be hustlin’ along,” Dud said, and went.

Bob leaned against the wall.

June looked at him with wise, understanding mother-eyes. “It was kinda awful, wasn’t it? Gave me a turn when I saw them lying there. Must have been worse for you. Did you—hit ..?”

“No.” He was humiliated at the confession. “I didn’t fire a shot. Couldn’t, somehow. Everybody was blazin’ away at ’em. That’s the kind of nerve I’ve got,” he told her bitterly.

In her eyes the starlight flashed. “An’ that’s the kind I love. Oh, Bob, I wouldn’t want to think you’d killed either of those poor men, an’ one of them just a boy.”

“Some one had to do it.”

“Yes, but not you. And they didn’t have to brag afterward about it, did they? That’s horrible.

Everybody going around telling how they shot them. As if it was something to be proud of. I'm so glad you're not in it. Let the others have the glory if they want it."

He tried to be honest about it. "That's all very well, but they were a bad lot. They didn't hesitate to kill. The town had to defend itself. No, it was just that I'm such a—baby."

"You're not!" she protested indignantly. "I won't have you say it, either."

His hungry eyes could not leave her, so slim and ardent, all fire and flame. The sweetness of her energy, the grace of the delicate lifted throat curve, the warmth and color of life in her, expressed a spirit generous and fine. His heart sang within him. Out of a world of women she was the one he wanted, the lance-straight mate his soul leaped out to meet.

"There's no one like you in the world, June," he cried. "Nobody in all the world."

She flashed at him eyes of alarm. A faint pink, such as flushes the sea at dawn, waved into her cheeks and throat.

"I've got to go," she said hurriedly. "Mollie'll be expectin' me."

She was off, light-footed as Daphne, the rhythm of morning in her step.

All day she carried with her the treasure of his words and the look that had gone with them. Did he think it? Did he really and truly believe it? Her exaltation stayed with her while she waited on table, while she nursed the wounded men, while she helped Chung wash the dishes. It went singing with her into her little bedroom when she retired for the night.

June sat down before the small glass and looked at the image she saw there. What was it he liked about her? She studied the black crisp hair, the dark eager eyes with the dusky shadows under them in the slight hollows beneath, the glow of red that stained the cheeks below the pigment of the complexion. She tried looking at the reflection from different angles to get various effects. It was impossible for her not to know that she was good to look at, but she had very little vanity about it. None the less it pleased her because it pleased others.

She let down her long thick hair and combed it. The tresses still had the old tendency of her childhood to snarl unless she took good care of them. From being on her feet all day the shoes she was wearing were uncomfortable. She slipped them off and returned to the brushing of the hair.

While craning her neck for a side view June saw in the glass that which drained the blood from her heart. Under the bed the fingers of a hand projected into view. It was like her that in spite of the shock she neither screamed nor ran to the door and cried for help. She went on looking at her counterfeit in the glass, thoughts racing furiously. The hand belonged to a man. She could see that now plainly, could even make out a section of the gauntlet on his wrist. Who was he? What was he doing here in her room?

She turned in the chair, deliberately, steadying her voice.

“Better come out from there. I see you,” she said quietly.

From under the bed Jake Houck crawled.

CHAPTER XLII

A WALK IN THE PARK

June was the first to speak. “So you’re here. You didn’t get away.”

“I’m here,” Houck growled. “No chance for a getaway. I ran out the back door of the bank an’ ducked into the hotel. This was the first door I come to, an’ I headed in.”

She was not afraid of him. The power he had once held over her was gone forever. The girl had found resources within herself that refused him dominance. He was what he always had been, but she had changed. Her vision was clearer. A game and resourceful bully he might be, but she knew one quiet youth of a far finer courage.

“They’re lookin’ for you along the river,” she said.

The muscles of his jaw hardened. “They’d better hope they don’t find me, some of ’em,” he bragged.

“So had you,” she said significantly.

He took her meaning instantly. The temper of Bear Cat was on edge for a lynching. “Did they die, either o’ those fellows I shot?” the bandit demanded.

“Not yet.”

“Fools, the pair of ’em. If that bank teller hadn’t

grabbed for his gun we'd 'a' got away with it fine."

She looked at him with disgust, not untouched with self-scorn because she had ever let him become an overpowering influence in her life. He could no more help boasting than he could breathing.

"As it is, you've reached the end of your rope," the girl said steadily.

"Don't you think I'm at the end of a rope. I'm a long ways from there."

"And the men with you are gone."

"How gone? Did they get 'em?"

"Neither of them ever moved out of his tracks."

"When I heard the shootin' I figured it would be thataway," Houck said callously.

She could see in him no evidence whatever of regret or remorse for what he had done. This raid, she guessed, was of his planning. He had brought the others into it, and they had paid the penalty of their folly. The responsibility for their deaths lay at his door. He was not apparently giving a thought to that.

"You can't stay here," she told him coldly. "You'll have to go."

"Go where? Can you get me a horse?"

"I won't," June answered.

"I got to have a horse, girl," he wheedled. "Can't travel without one."

"I don't care how far you travel or what becomes of you. I want you out of here. That's all."

"You wouldn't want me shootin' up some o' yore friends, would you? Well, then. If they find me here

there'll be some funerals in Bear Cat. You can bet heavy on that."

She spoke more confidently than she felt. "They can take care of themselves. I won't have you here. I'll not protect you."

The outlaw's eyes narrowed to slits. "Throw me down, would you? Tell 'em I'm here, mebbe?" His face was a menace, his voice a snarl.

June looked at him steadily, unafraid. "You needn't try to bully me. It's not worth wasting your time."

To look at her was to know the truth of what she said, but he could not help trying to dominate the girl, both because it was his nature and because he needed so badly her help.

"Sho! You're not so goshalmighty. You're jes' June Tolliver. I'm the same Jake Houck you once promised to marry. Don't forget that, girl. I took you from that white-livered fellow you married—"

"Who saved you from the Utes when nobody else would lift a finger for you. That comes well from you of all men," she flung out.

"That ain't the point. What I'm sayin' is that I'll not stand for you throwin' me down."

"What can you do?" She stood before him in her stockings, the heavy black hair waving down to her hips, a slim girl whose wiry strength he could crush with one hand.

Her question stopped him. What could he do if she wanted to give him up? If he made a move toward her she would scream, and that would bring his enemies upon him. He could shoot her afterward, but that would do no good. His account was heavy

enough as it stood without piling up surplusage.

"You aimin' for to sell me out?" he asked hoarsely.

"No. I won't be responsible for your death." June might have added another reason, a more potent one. She knew Jake Houck, what a game and desperate villain he was. They could not capture him alive. It was not likely he could be killed without one or two men at least being shot by him. Driven into a corner, he would fight like a wild wolf.

"Tha's the way to talk, June. Help me outa this hole. You can if you're a mind to. Have they got patrols out everywhere?"

"Only on the river side of the town. They think you escaped that way."

"Well, if you'll get me a horse—"

"I'll not do it." She reflected a moment, thinking out the situation. "If you can reach the foothills you'll have a chance."

He grinned, wolfishly. "I'll reach 'em. You can gamble on that, if I have to drop a coupla guys like I did this mornin'."

That was just the trouble. If any one interfered with him, or even recognized him, he would shoot instantly. He would be a deadly menace until he was out of Bear Cat.

"I'll go with you," June said impulsively.

"Go with me?" he repeated.

"Across the park. If they see me with you, nobody'll pay any attention to you. Pull your hat down over your eyes."

He did as she told him.

"Better leave your guns here. If anyone sees them—"

"Nothin' doing. My guns go right with me. What are you trying to pull off?" He shot a lowering, suspicious look at her.

"Keep them under your coat, then. We don't want folks looking at us too curiously. We'll stroll along as if we were interested in our talk. When we meet any one, if we do, you can look down at me. That'll hide your face."

"You going with me clear to the edge of town?"

"No. Just across the square, where it's light an' there are liable to be people. You'll have to look out for yourself after that. It's not more than two hundred yards to the sagebrush."

"I'm ready whenever you are," he said.

June put on her shoes and did up her hair.

She made him wait there while she scouted to make sure nobody was in the corridor outside the room.

They passed out of the back door of the hotel.

Chung met them. He grunted "Glood-eveling" with a grin at June, but he did not glance twice at her companion.

The two passed across a vacant lot and into the park. They saw one or two people—a woman with a basket of eggs, a barefoot boy returning home from after-supper play. June carried the burden of the talk because she was quicker-witted than Houck. Its purpose was to deceive anybody who might happen to be looking at them.

It chanced that some one *was* looking at them. He was a young man who had been lying on the grass stargazing. They passed close to him and he

recognized June by her walk. That was not what brought him to his feet a moment later with a gasp of amazement. He had recognized her companion, too, or he thought he had. It was not credible, of course. He must be mistaken. And yet—if that was not Jake Houck's straddling slouch his eyes were playing tricks. The fellow limped, too, just a trifle, as he had heard the Brown's Park man did from the effects of his wounds in the Ute campaign.

But how could Houck be with June, strolling across the park in intimate talk with her, leaning toward her in that confidential, lover-like attitude—Jake Houck, who had robbed the bank a few hours earlier and was being hunted up and down the river by armed posses ready to shoot him like a wolf? June was a good hater. She had no use whatever for this fellow. Why, then, would she be with him, laughing lightly and talking with animation?

Bob followed them, as noiselessly as possible. And momentarily the conviction grew in him that this was Houck. It was puzzling, but he could not escape the conclusion. There was a trick in the fellow's stride, a peculiarity of the swinging shoulders that made for identification of the man.

If he could have heard the talk between them, Bob would have better understood the situation.

Ever since that memorable evening when Bear Cat had driven him away in disgrace, Houck had let loose the worse impulses of his nature. He had gone bad, to use the phrase of the West. Something in him had snapped that hitherto had made him value the opinions of men. In the old days he had been a rustler and worse, but no crime had ever been proved against him. He could hold his head up, and he did. But the shock to his pride and self-esteem

that night had produced in him a species of disintegration. He had drunk heavily and almost constantly. It had been during the sour temper following such a bout that he had quarreled with and shot the Ute. From that hour his declension had been swift. How far he had gone was shown by the way he had taken Dillon's great service to him. The thing rankled in his mind, filled him with surging rage whenever he thought of it. He hated the young fellow more than ever.

But as he walked with June, slender, light-swinging, warm with young, sensuous life, the sultry passion of the man mounted to his brain and overpowered caution. His vanity whispered to him. No woman saved a man from death unless she loved him. She might give other reasons, but that one only counted. It was easy for him to persuade himself that she always had been fond of him at heart. There had been moments when the quality of her opposition to him had taken on the color of adventure.

"I'll leave you at the corner," she said. "Go back of that house and through the barbed-wire fence. You'll be in the sage then."

"Come with me to the fence," he whispered. "I got something to tell you."

She looked at him, sharply, coldly. "You've got nothing to tell me that I want to hear. I'm not doing this for you, but to save the lives of my friends. Understand that."

They were for the moment in the shadow of a great cottonwood. Houck stopped, devouring her with his hungry eyes. Bad as the man was, he had the human craving of his sex. The slim grace of her, the fundamental courage, the lift of the oval chin,

touched a chord that went vibrating through him. He snatched her to him, crushing his kisses upon the disturbing mouth, upon the color spots that warmed her cheeks.

She was too smothered to cry out at first. Later, she repressed the impulse. With all her strength she fought to push him from her.

A step sounded, a cry, the sound of a smashing blow going home. Houck staggered back. He reached for a revolver.

June heard herself scream. A shot rang out. The man who had rescued her crumpled up and went down. In that horrified moment she knew he was Bob Dillon.

CHAPTER XLIII

NOT EVEN POWDER-BURNT

Houck stood over the prostrate man, the smoking revolver in his hand, on his lips a cruel twist and in his throat a wolfish snarl.

June, watching him with eyes held in a fascination of terror, felt that at any moment he might begin pumping shots into the supine body. She shook off the palsy that held her and almost hurled her soft young body at him.

“Don’t!” she begged. “Don’t!” Cold fingers clutched

at his wrist, dragged down the barrel of the forty-five.

“He had it comin’. He was askin’ for it,” the outlaw said. He spoke huskily, still looking down at the crumpled figure.

The girl felt in him the slackness of indecision. Should he shoot again and make sure? Or let the thing go as it was? In an instant he would have made up his mind.

She spoke quickly, words tumbling out pell-mell. “You must hurry—hurry! When they heard that shot —Listen! There’s some one coming. Oh, run, run!”

Her staccato warning deflected his mind from the course toward which it might have turned. He held up his head, listening. The slap of footsteps on a board walk could be plainly heard. A voice lifted itself in question into the night. The door of Dolan’s opened and let out a fan-shaped shaft of light. The figures of men could be seen as they surged across the lit space into the darkness. June had spoken the truth. He must hurry if he was to escape. To shoot again now would be to advertise the spot where he was.

He wrenched his arm from her fingers and ran. He moved as awkwardly as a bear, but he covered ground swiftly. In a few seconds the night had swallowed him.

Instantly the girl was beside Dillon, on her knees, lifting his head into her arms. “Oh, Bob—Bob!” she wailed.

He opened his eyes.

“Where did he hit you?” she cried softly.

His face was puzzled. He did not yet realize what had taken place. “Hit me—who?”

“That Houck. He shot you. Oh, Bob, are you much hurt?”

Dillon was recalled to a pain in his intestines. He pressed his hand against the cartridge belt.

“It’s here,” he said weakly.

He could feel the wet blood soaking through the shirt. The thought of it almost made him lose consciousness again.

“L-let’s have a look,” a squeaky voice said.

June looked up. Blister had arrived panting on the scene. Larson was on his heels.

“We better carry him to the hotel,” the cattleman said to the justice. “Who did it?”

“Houck,” June sobbed. She was not weeping, but her breath was catching.

Bob tried to rise, but firm hands held him down. “I can walk,” he protested. “Lemme try, anyhow.”

“No,” insisted June.

Blister knelt beside Dillon. “Where’s the wound at?” he asked.

The young fellow showed him.

“J-June, you go get Doc T-Tuckerman,” Blister ordered.

She flew to obey.

The fat man opened the shirt.

“Look out for the blood,” Bob said, still faintly. “Ouch!”

Blister's hand was traveling slowly next to the flesh. "N-no blood here," he said.

"Why, I felt it."

"R-reckon not, son." Blister exposed his hand in the moonlight.

The evidence bore out what he said.

"Maybe it's bleeding internally," Bob said.

Larson had picked up the belt they had unstrapped from Dillon's waist. He was examining it closely. His keen eyes found a dent in the buckle. The buckle had been just above the spot where Bob complained of the pain.

"Maybe it ain't," Larson said. "Looks like he hit yore belt an' the bullet went flyin' wild."

A closer examination showed that this must be what had taken place. There was no wound on Bob's body. He had been stunned by the shock and his active imagination had at once accepted the assumption that he had been wounded.

Bob rose with a shamefaced laugh. The incident seemed to him very characteristic. He was always making a fool of himself by getting frightened when there was no need of it. One could not imagine Dud Hollister lying down and talking faintly about an internal bleeding when there was not a scratch on his body, nor fancying that he could feel blood soaking through his shirt because somebody had shot at him.

As the three men walked back toward the hotel, they met June and Dud. The girl cried out at sight of Bob.

"I'm a false alarm," he told her bitterly. "He didn't hit me a-tall."

"Hit his b-belt buckle. If this here T-Texas man lives

to be a hundred he'll never have a closer call. Think of a fellow whangin' away with a forty-five right close to him, hitting him where he was aimin' for, and not even scratching Bob. O' course the shock of it knocked him cold. Naturally it would. But I'll go on record that our friend here was born lucky. I'd ought by rights to be holdin' an inquest on the remains," Blister burbled cheerfully.

June said nothing. She drew a long sigh of relief and looked at Bob to make sure that they were concealing nothing from her.

He met her look in a kind of dogged despair. On this one subject he was so sensitive that he found criticisms where none were intended. Blister was making excuses for him, he felt, was preparing a way of escape from his chicken-hearted weakness. And he did not want the failure palliated.

"What's the use of all that explainin', Blister?" he said bluntly. "Fact is, I got scared an' quit cold. Thought I was shot up when I wasn't even powder-burnt."

He turned on his heel and walked away.

Dud's white teeth showed in his friendly, affectionate grin. "Never did see such a fellow for backin' hisself into a corner an' allowin' that he's a plumb quitter. I'll bet, if the facts were known, he come through all right."

June decided to tell her story. "Yes, Dud. He must have seen Jake Houck with me, and when Jake—annoyed me—Bob jumped at him and hit him. Then Jake shot."

"Lucky he didn't shoot again after Bob was down," ventured Dud on a search for information.

In the darkness none of them could see the warm glow that swept across the cheeks of the girl. “I kinda got in his way—and told him he’d better hurry,” she explained.

“Yes, but—Where did you meet Houck? How did he happen to be with you?” asked Larson. “To be on this side of town he must ’a’ slipped through the guards.”

“He never went to the river. I found him under the bed in my room a few minutes ago. Said he ran in there after he left the bank. He wanted me to get him a horse. I wouldn’t. But I knew if he was found cornered he would kill somebody before he was taken. Maybe two or three. I didn’t know. And of course he wouldn’t ’a’ let me leave the room alone anyhow. So I said I’d walk across the park with him and let him slip into the sage. I thought it would be better.”

Dud nodded. “We’d better get the boys on his trail immediate.”

They separated, with that end in view.

CHAPTER XLIV

BOB HOLDS HIS RED HAID HIGH

At the corner of the street Bob came upon Tom Reeves and an old Leadville miner in argument. Tom made the high sign to Dillon.

"What's all the rumpus about?" he wanted to know.

"Jake Houck was seen crossin' the park. He got into the sage."

"Sho! I'll bet the hole of a doughnut he ain't been seen. If you was to ask me I'd say he was twenty-five miles from here right now, an' not lettin' no grass grow under his feet neither. I been talkin' to old wooden head here about the railroad comin' in." Tom's eyes twinkled. His friend guessed that he was trying to get a rise out of the old-timer. "He's sure some mossback. I been tellin' him the railroad's comin' through here an' Meeker right soon, but he can't see it. I reckon the toot of an engine would scare him 'most to death."

"Don't get excited about that railroad, son," drawled the former hard-rock driller, chewing his cud equably. "I rode a horse to death fifteen years ago to beat the choo-choo train in here, an' I notice it ain't arriv yet."

Bob left them to their argument. He was not just now in a mood for badinage. He moved up the street past

the scattered suburbs of the little frontier town. Under the cool stars he wanted to think out what had just taken place.

Had he fainted from sheer fright when the gun blazed at him? Or was Blister's explanation a genuine one? He had read of men being thrown down and knocked senseless by the atmospheric shock of shells exploding near them in battle. But this would not come in that class. He had been actually struck. The belt buckle had been driven against his flesh. Had this hit him with force enough actually to drive the breath out of him? Or had he thought himself wounded and collapsed because of the thought?

It made a great deal of difference to him which of these was true, more than it did to the little world in which he moved. Some of the boys might guy him good-naturedly, but nobody was likely to take the matter seriously except himself. Bob had begun to learn that a man ought to be his own most severe critic. He had set out to cure himself of cowardice. He would not be easy in mind so long as he still suspected himself of showing the white feather.

He leaned on a fence and looked across the silvery sage to a grove of quaking asp beyond. How long he stood there, letting thoughts drift through his mind, he did not know. A sound startled him, the faint swish of something stirring. He turned.

Out of the night shadows a nymph seemed to be floating toward him. For a moment he had a sense of unreality, that the flow and rhythm of her movement were born of the imagination. But almost at once he knew that this was June in the flesh.

The moonlight haloed the girl, lent her the touch of magic that transformed her from a creature not too

good for human nature's daily food into an ethereal daughter of romance. Her eyes were dark pools of loveliness in a white face.

"June!" he cried, excitement drumming in his blood.

Why had she come to find him? What impulse or purpose had brought her out into the night in his wake? Desire of her, tender, poignant, absorbing, pricked through him like an ache. He wanted her. Soul and body reached out to her, though both found expression only in that first cry.

Her mouth quivered. "Oh, Bob, you silly boy! As if—as if it matters why you were stunned. You were. That's enough. I'm so glad—so glad you're not hurt. It's 'most a miracle. He might have killed you."

She did not tell him that he would have done it if she had not flung her weight on his arm and dragged the weapon down, nor how in that dreadful moment her wits had worked to save him from the homicidal mania of the killer.

Bob's heart thumped against his ribs like a caged bird. Her dear concern was for him. It was so she construed friendship—to give herself generously without any mock modesty or prudery. She had come without thought of herself because her heart had sent her.

"What matters is that when I called you came," she went on. "You weren't afraid then, were you?"

"Hadn't time. That's why. I just jumped."

"Yes." The expression in her soft eyes was veiled, like autumn fires in the hills blazing through mists. "You just jumped to help me. You forgot he carried two forty-fives and would use them, didn't you?"

"Yes," he admitted. "I reckon if I'd thought of that—"

Even as the laughter rippled from her throat she gave a gesture of impatience. There were times when self-depreciation ceased to be a virtue. She remembered a confidence Blister had once made to her.

"T-Texas man," she squeaked, stuttering a little in mimicry, "throw up that red haid an' stick out yore chin."

Up jerked the head. Bob began to grin in spite of himself.

"Whose image are you m-made in?" she demanded.

"You know," he answered.

"What have you got over all the world?"

"Dominion, ma'am, but not over all of it, I reckon."

"All of it," she insisted, standing clean of line and straight as a boy soldier.

"Right smart of it," he compromised.

"Every teeny bit of it," she flung back.

"Have yore own way. I know you will anyhow," he conceded.

"An' what are you a little lower than?"

"I'm a heap lower than one angel I know."

She stamped her foot. "You're no such thing. You're as good as any one—and better."

"I wouldn't say better," he murmured ironically. None the less he was feeling quite cheerful again. He enjoyed being put through his catechism by her.

"Trouble with you is you're so meek," she stormed. "You let anybody run it over you till they go too far. What's the use of crying your own goods down? Tell

the world you're Bob Dillon and for it to watch your dust."

"You want me to brag an' strut like Jake Houck?"

"No-o, not like that. But Blister's right. You've got to know your worth. When you're sure of it you don't have to tell other people about it. They know."

He considered this. "Tha's correct," he said.

"Well, then."

Bob had an inspiration. It was born out of moonshine, her urging, and the hunger of his heart. His spurs trailed across the grass.

"Is my red haid high enough now?" he asked, smiling.

Panic touched her pulse. "Yes, Bob."

"What have I got over all the world?" he quizzed.

"Dominion," she said obediently in a small voice.

"Over all of it?"

"I—don't—know."

His brown hands fastened on her shoulders. He waited till at last her eyes came up to meet his. "Every teeny bit of it."

"Have your own way," she replied, trying feebly to escape an emotional climax by repeating the words he had used. "I know you will anyhow."

He felt himself floating on a wave of audacious self-confidence. "Say it, then. Every teeny bit of it."

"Every teeny bit of it," she whispered.

"That means June Tolliver too." The look in his eyes flooded her with love.

"June Dillon," the girl corrected in a voice so soft and low he scarcely made out the words.

He caught her in his arms. "You precious lamb!"

They forgot the rest of the catechism. She nestled against his shoulder while they told each other in voiceless ways what has been in the hearts of lovers ever since the first ones walked in Eden.

CHAPTER XLV

THE OUTLAW GETS A BAD BREAK

Houck crawled through the barbed-wire fence and looked back into the park from which he had just fled. June was kneeling beside the man he had shot. Some one was running across the grass toward her. Soon the pursuit would be at his heels. He dared not lose a second.

He plunged into the sage, making for the hills which rose like a saw-toothed wall on the horizon. If he could reach them he might find there a precarious safety. Some wooded pocket would give him shelter until the pursuit had swept past. He was hungry, but if he must he could do without food for a day.

The bandit was filled with a furious, impotent rage at the way fortune had tricked him. Thirty-five miles from Bear Cat, well back from the river, three horses

were waiting for him and his dead companions in a draw. Unless somebody found them they would wait a long time. The way that led to them was barred for him. He would have to try to reach Glenwood or Rifle. From there he could perhaps catch a freight east or west. His one chance was to get clear out of the country. After this day's work it would be too small to hold him.

Nothing had come out as he had planned it. The farthest thing from his hopes had been that he would have to fight his way out. He had not killed that fool Dillon of set purpose. He knew now that if his anger had not blazed out he might have made his getaway and left the fellow alive. But he had been given no time to think. It was a bad break of the luck. The White River settlers would not forgive him that. They would remember that Dillon had saved him from the Indians in the Ute campaign, and they would reason —the thickheaded idiots—that the least he could have done was to let the boy go.

He plunged through the sand of the sage hills at a gait that was half a run and half a walk. In his high-heeled boots fast travel was difficult. The footgear of the cattleman is not made for walking. The hill riders do most of their travel in a saddle. Houck's feet hurt. His toes were driven forward in the boots until each step became torture. From his heels the skin peeled from sliding up and down against the hard leather.

But he dared not stop. Already he could hear the pursuers. In the still night there came to him the shout of one calling to another, the ring of a horse's hoof striking on a stone. They were combing the mesa behind him.

Houck stumbled forward. Vaguely there rose before him a boulder-strewn slope that marked the limit of

the valley. Up this he scrambled in a desperate hurry to reach the rocks. For the pursuit was almost upon him now.

Two outcroppings of sandstone barred the way. They leaned against each other, leaving a small cave beneath. Into this Houck crawled on hands and knees.

He lay crouched there, weapon in hand, like a cornered wolf, while the riders swept up and past. He knew one palpitating moment when he thought himself about to be discovered. Two of the posse stopped close to his hiding-place.

“Must be close to him,” one said. “Got the makin’s, Jim?”

“Sure.” Evidently the tobacco pouch was passed from one to the other. “Right in these rocks somewhere, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“Mebbeso. Mebbe still hot-footin’ it for the hills. He’s in one heluva hurry if you ask me.”

“Killed Bob Dillon in the park, I heard.”

“If he did he’ll sure hang for it, after what Dillon did for him.”

There came the faint sound of creaking leather as their horses moved up the hill.

The outlaw waited till they were out of hearing before he crept into the open. Across the face of the slope he cut obliquely, working always toward higher ground. His lips were drawn back so that the tobacco-stained teeth showed in a snarl of savage rage. It would go ill with any of the posse if they should stumble on him. He would have no more mercy than a hunted wild beast.

With every minute now his chances of safety increased. The riders were far above him and to the left. With luck he should reach Piceance Creek by morning. He would travel up it till he came to Pete Tolliver's place. He would make the old man give him a horse. Not since the night he had been ridden out of Bear Cat on a rail had he seen the nester. But Pete always had been putty in his hands. It would be easy enough to bully him into letting him have whatever he wanted. All he needed was a saddled mount and provisions.

Houck was on unfamiliar ground. If there were settlers in these hills he did not know where they were. Across the divide somewhere ran Piceance Creek, but except in a vague way he was not sure of the direction it took. It was possible he might lay hold of a horse this side of Tolliver's. If so, he would not for a moment hesitate to take it.

All night he traveled. Once he thought he heard a distant dog, but though he moved in the direction from which the barking had come he did not find any ranch. The first faint glimmer of gray dawn had begun to lighten the sky when he reached the watershed of Piceance.

It had been seventeen hours since he had tasted water and that had been as a chaser after a large drink of whiskey. He was thirsty, and he hastened his pace to reach the creek. Moving down the slope, he pulled up abruptly. He had run into a cavvy grazing on the hill.

A thick growth of pine and piñon ran up to the ridge above. Back of a scrub evergreen Houck dropped to consider a plan of action. He meant to get one of these horses, and to do this he must have it and be gone before dawn. This was probably some round-

up. If he could drift around close to the camp and find a saddle, there would likely be a rope attached to it. He might, of course, be seen, but he would have to take a chance on that.

Chance befriended him to his undoing. As he crept through the brush something caught his ankle and he stumbled. His groping fingers found a rope. One end of the rope was attached to a stake driven into the ground. The other led to a horse, a pinto, built for spirit and for speed, his trained eye could tell.

He pulled up the stake and wound up the rope, moving toward the pinto as he did so. He decided it would be better not to try to get a saddle till he reached Tolliver's place. The rope would do for a bridle at a pinch.

The horse backed away from him, frightened at this stranger who had appeared from nowhere. He followed, trying in a whisper to soothe the animal. It backed into a small piñon, snapping dry branches with its weight.

Houck cursed softly. He did not want to arouse anybody in the camp or to call the attention of the night jinglers to his presence. He tried to lead the pinto away, but it balked and dug its forefeet into the ground, leaning back on the rope.

The outlaw murmured encouragement to the horse. Reluctantly it yielded to the steady pull on its neck. Man and beast began to move back up the hill. As soon as he was a safe distance from the camp, Houck meant to make of the rope a bridle.

In the pre-dawn darkness he could see little and that only as vague outlines rather than definite shapes. But some instinct warned the hunted man that this was no round-up camp. He did not quite know what

it was. Yet he felt as though he were on the verge of a discovery, as though an unknown but terrible danger surrounded him. Unimaginative he was, but something that was almost panic flooded up in him.

He could not wait to mount the horse until he had reached the brow of the hill. Drawing the rope close, he caught at the mane of the horse and bent his knees for the spring.

Houck had an instant's warning, and his revolver was half out of its scabbard when the rush of the attack flung him against the startled animal. He fought like a baited bear, exerting all his great strength to fling back the figures that surged up at him out of the darkness. From all sides they came at him, with guttural throat cries, swarming over each other as he beat them down.

The struggling mass quartered over the ground like some unwieldy prehistoric reptile. Houck knew that if he lost his footing he was done for. Once, as the cluster of fighters swung downhill, the outlaw found himself close to the edge of the group. He got his arms free and tried to beat off those clinging to him. Out of the mêlée he staggered, a pair of arms locked tightly round his thighs. Before he could free himself another body flung itself at his shoulder and hurled him from his feet.

His foes piled on him as ants do on a captured insect. His arms were tied behind him with rawhide thongs, his feet fastened together rather loosely.

He was pulled to a sitting posture. In the east the sky had lightened with the promise of the coming day.

His clothes torn from arms and body, his face bleeding from random blows, Houck looked round on the circle of his captors defiantly. In his glaring

eyes and close-clamped, salient jaw no evidence was written of the despair that swept over him in a wave and drowned hope. He had in this bleak hour of reckoning the virtue of indomitable gameness.

"All right. You got me. Go to it, you red devils," he growled.

The Utes gloated over him in a silence more deadly than any verbal threats. Their enemy had been delivered into their hands.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE END OF A CROOKED TRAIL

In the grim faces of the Utes Houck read his doom. He had not the least doubt of it. His trail ended here.

The terror in his heart rose less out of the fact itself than the circumstances which surrounded it. The gray dawn, the grim, copper-colored faces, the unknown torment waiting for him, stimulated his imagination. He could have faced his own kind, the cattlemen of the Rio Blanco, without this clutching horror that gripped him. They would have done what they thought necessary, but without any unnecessary cruelty. What the Utes would do he did not know. They would make sure of their vengeance, but they would not be merciful about it.

He repressed a shudder and showed his yellow teeth in a grin of defiance. “I reckon you’re right glad to see me,” he jeered.

Still they said nothing, only looked at their captive with an aspect that daunted him.

“Not dumb, are you? Speak up, some of you,” Houck snarled, fighting down the panic within him.

A wrinkled old Ute spoke quietly. “Man-with-loud-tongue die. He kill Indian—give him no chance. Indians kill him now.”

Houck nodded his head. “Sure I killed him. He’d stolen my horse, hadn’t he?”

The old fellow touched his chest. “Black Arrow my son. You kill him. He take your horse mebbe. You take Ute horse.” He pointed to the pinto. “Ute kill Man-with-loud-tongue.”

“Black Arrow reached for his gun. I had to shoot. It was an even break.” Houck’s voice pleaded in spite of his resolution not to weaken.

The spokesman for the Indians still showed an impassive face, but his voice was scornful. “Is Man-with-loud-tongue a yellow coyote? Does he carry the heart of a squaw? Will he cry like a pappoose?”

Houck’s salient jaw jutted out. The man was a mass of vanity. Moreover, he was game. “Who told you I was yellow? Where did you get that? I ain’t scared of all the damned Utes that ever came outa hell.”

And to prove it—perhaps, too, by way of bolstering up his courage—he cursed the redskins with a string of blistering oaths till he was out of breath.

The captive needed no explanation of the situation. He knew that the soldiers had failed to round up and

drive back to the reservation a band of the Utes that had split from the main body and taken to the hills. By some unlucky chance or evil fate he had come straight from Bear Cat to their night camp.

The Utes left Houck pegged out to the ground while they sat at a little distance and held a pow-wow. The outlaw knew they were deciding his fate. He knew them better than to expect anything less than death. What shook his nerve was the uncertainty as to the form it would take. Like all frontiersmen, he had heard horrible stories of Apache torture. In general the Utes did not do much of that sort of thing. But they had a special grudge against him. What he had done to one of them had been at least a contributory cause of the outbreak that had resulted so disastrously for them. He would have to pay the debt he owed. But how? He sweated blood while the Indians squatted before the fire and came to a decision.

The council did not last long. When it broke up Houck braced his will to face what he must. It would not be long now. Soon he would know the worst.

Two of the braves went up the hill toward the cavvy. The rest came back to their captive.

They stood beside him in silence. Houck scowled up at them, still defiant.

“Well?” he demanded.

The Utes said nothing. They stood there stolid. Their victim read in that voiceless condemnation an awful menace.

“Onload it,” he jeered. “I’m no squaw. Shoot it at me. Jake Houck ain’t scared.”

Still they waited, the father of Black Arrow with

folded arms, a sultry fire burning in his dark eyes.

The two men who had gone to the cavvy returned. They were leading a horse with a rope around its neck. Houck recognized the animal with a thrill of superstitious terror. It was the one about the possession of which he had shot Black Arrow.

The old chief spoke again. “Man-with-loud-tongue claim this horse. Utes give it him. Horse his. Man-with-loud-tongue satisfied then maybe.”

“What are you aimin’ to do, you red devils?” Houck shouted.

Already he guessed vaguely at the truth. Men were arranging a kind of harness of rope and rawhide on the animal.

Others stooped to drag the captive forward. He set his teeth to keep back the shriek of terror that rose to his throat.

He knew now what form the vengeance of the savages was to take.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE KINGDOM OF JOY

A prince of the Kingdom of Joy rode the Piceance trail on a morning glad with the song of birds and

the rippling of brooks. Knee to knee with him rode his princess, slim and straight, the pink in her soft smooth cheeks, a shy and eager light in the velvet-dark eyes. They were starting together on the long, long trail, and the poor young things could vision it only as strewn with sunbathed columbines and goldenrods.

The princess was a bride, had been one for all of twelve hours. It was her present conviction that she lived in a world wonderful, and that the most amazingly radiant thing in it was what had happened to her and Bob Dillon. She pitied everybody else in the universe. They were so blind! They looked, but they did not see what was so clear to eyes from which the veil had been stripped. They went about their humdrum way without emotion. Their hearts did not sing exultant pæans that throbbed out of them like joy-notes from a meadow-lark's throat. Only those who had come happily to love's fruition understood the meaning of life. June was not only happy; she was this morning wise, heiress of that sure wisdom which comes only to the young when they discover just why they have been born into the world.

How many joys there were for those attuned to receive them! Her fingers laced with Bob's, and from the contact a warm, ecstatic glow flooded both their bodies. She looked at his clean brown face, with its line of golden down above where the razor had traveled, with its tousled, reddish hair falling into the smiling eyes, and a queer little lump surged into the girl's throat. Her husband! This boy was the mate heaven had sent her to repay for years of unhappiness.

"My wife!" It was all still so new and unbelievable

that Bob's voice shook a little.

"Are you sorry?" she asked.

Her shy smile teased. She did not ask because she needed information, but because she could not hear too often the answer.

"You know whether I am. Oh, June girl, I didn't know it would be like this," he cried.

"Nor I, Bob."

Their lithe bodies leaned from the saddles. They held each other close while their lips met.

They were on their way to Pete Tolliver's to tell him the great news. Soon now the old cabin and its outbuildings would break into view. They had only to climb Twelve-Mile Hill.

Out of a draw to the right a horse moved. Through the brush something dragged behind it.

"What's that?" asked June.

"Don't know. Looks kinda queer. It's got some sort of harness on."

They rode to the draw. June gave a small cry of distress.

"Oh, Bob, it's a man."

He dismounted. The horse with the dragging load backed away, but it was too tired to show much energy. Bob moved forward, soothing the animal with gentle sounds. He went slowly, with no sudden gestures. Presently he was patting the neck of the horse. With his hunting-knife he cut the rawhide thongs that served as a harness.

"It's a Ute pony," he said, after he had looked it over carefully. He knew this because the Indians

earmarked their mounts.

June was still in the saddle. Some instinct warned her not to look too closely at the load behind that was so horribly twisted.

“Better go back to the road, June,” her husband advised. “It’s too late to do anything for this poor fellow.”

She did as he said, without another look at the broken body.

When she had gone, Bob went close and turned over the huddled figure. Torn though it was, he recognized the face of Jake Houck. To construct the main features of the tragedy was not difficult.

While escaping from Bear Cat after the fiasco of the bank robbery, Houck must have stumbled somehow into the hands of the Ute band still at large. They had passed judgment on him and executed it. No doubt the wretched man had been tied at the heels of a horse which had been lashed into a frenzied gallop by the Indians in its rear. He had been dragged or kicked to death by the frightened horse.

As Bob looked down into that still, disfigured face, there came to him vividly a sense of the weakness and frailty of human nature. Not long since this bit of lifeless clay had straddled his world like a Colossus. To the young cowpuncher he had been a superman, terrible in his power and capacity to do harm. Now all that vanity and egoism had vanished, blown away as though it had never been.

Where was Jake Houck? What had become of him? The shell that had been his was here. But where was the roaring bully that had shaken his fist blasphemously at God and man?

It came to him, with a queer tug at the heartstrings, that Houck had once been a dimpled baby in a mother's arms, a chirruping little fat-legged fellow who tottered across the floor to her with outstretched fingers. Had that innocent child disappeared forever? Or in that other world to which Jake had so violently gone would he meet again the better self his evil life had smothered?

Bob loosened the bandanna from his throat and with it covered the face of the outlaw. He straightened the body and folded the hands across the breast. It was not in his power to obliterate from the face the look of ghastly, rigid terror stamped on it during the last terrible moments.

The young husband went back to his waiting wife. He stood by her stirrup while she looked down at him, white-faced.

"Who was it?" she whispered.

"Jake Houck," he told her gravely. "The Utes did it—because he killed Black Arrow, I reckon."

She shuddered. A cloud had come over the beautiful world.

"We'll go on now," he said gently. "I'll come back later with your father."

They rode in silence up the long hill. At the top of it he drew rein and smiled at his bride.

"You'll not let that spoil the day, will you, June? He had it coming, you know. Houck had gone bad. If it hadn't been the Utes, it would have been the law a little later."

"Yes, but—" She tried to answer his smile, not very successfully. "It's rather—awful, isn't it?"

He nodded. “Let’s walk over to the cabin, dear.”

She swung down, into his arms. There she found comfort that dissipated the cloud from her mind. When she ran into the house to throw her arms around Pete Tolliver’s neck, she was again radiant.

“Guess! Guess what!” she ordered her father.

Pete looked at his daughter and at the bashful, smiling boy.

“I reckon I done guessed, honeybug,” he answered, stroking her rebellious hair.

“You’re to come and live with us. Isn’t he, Bob?”

The young husband nodded sheepishly. He felt that it was a brutal thing to take a daughter from her father. It had not occurred to him before, but old Pete would feel rather out of it now.

Tolliver looked at Bob over the shoulder of his daughter.

“You be good to her or I’ll—” His voice broke.

“I sure will,” the husband promised.

June laughed. “He’s the one ought to worry, Dad. I’m the flyaway on this team.”

Bob looked at her, gifts in his eyes. “I’m worryin’ a heap,” he said, smiling.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK
THE FIGHTING EDGE ***

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