Brand Blotters

William MacLeod Raine



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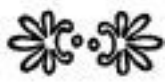
"WHO ARE YOU?" "WATER!" HE GASPED. *Page 20.*

BRAND BLOTTERS

BY
WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

AUTHOR OF
WYOMING, BUCKY O'CONNOR, MAVERICKS,
A TEXAS RANGER, RIDGWAY OF
MONTANA, ETC.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
CLARENCE ROWE



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Brand Blotters

TO
FRANK N. SPINDLER

In Memory of Certain Sunday Afternoon Tramps
Long Ago, During Which We Solved the
Problems of the Nation

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PART I
MELISSY OF THE BAR DOUBLE G

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CHAPTER I

A CROSSED TRAIL

The tenderfoot rose from the ledge upon which he had been lying and stretched himself stiffly. The chill of the long night had set him shivering. His bones ached from the pressure of his body upon the rock where he had slept and waked and dozed again with troubled dreams. The sharpness of his hunger made him light-headed. Thirst tortured him. His throat was a lime-kiln, his tongue swollen till it filled his mouth.

If the night had been bad, he knew the day would be a hundred times worse. Already a gray light was sifting into the hollow of the sky. The vague misty outlines of the mountains were growing sharper. Soon from a crotch of them would rise a red hot cannon ball to pour its heat into the parched desert.

He was headed for the Sonora line, for the hills where he had heard a man might drop out of sight of the civilization that had once known him. There were reasons why he had started in a hurry, without 12 a horse or food or a canteen, and these same reasons held good why he could not follow beaten tracks. All yesterday he had traveled without sighting a ranch or meeting a human being. But he knew he must get to water soon—if he were to reach it at all.

A light breeze was stirring, and on it there was borne to him a faint rumble as of thunder. Instantly the man came to a rigid alertness. Thunder might mean rain, and rain would be salvation. But the sound did not die away. Instead, it deepened to a steady roar, growing every instant louder. His startled glance

swept the cañon that drove like a sword cleft into the hills. Pouring down it, with the rush of a tidal wave, came a wall of cattle, a thousand backs tossing up and down as the swell of a troubled sea. Though he had never seen one before, the man on the lip of the gulch knew that he was watching a cattle stampede. Under the impact of the galloping hoofs the ground upon which he stood quaked.

A cry diverted his attention. From the bed of the sandy wash a man had started up and was running for his life toward the cañon walls. Before he had taken half a dozen steps the avalanche was upon him, had cut him down, swept over him.

The thud of the hoofs died away. Into the open desert the stampede had passed. A huddled mass lay motionless on the sand in the track of the avalanche. 13

A long ragged breath whistled through the closed lips of the tenderfoot. He ran along the edge of the rock wall till he found a descent less sharp, lowered himself by means of jutting quartz and mesquit cropping out from the crevices, and so came through a little draw to the cañon.

He dropped on a knee beside the sprawling, huddled figure. No second glance was needed to see that the man was dead. Life had been trampled out of him almost instantly and his features battered beyond any possible recognition. Unused to scenes of violence, the stranger stooping over him felt suddenly sick. It made him shudder to remember that if he could have found a way down in the darkness he, too, would have slept in the warm sand of the dry wash. If he had, the fate of this man would have been his.

Under the doubled body was a canteen. The trembling fingers of the tenderfoot unscrewed the cork. Tipping the vessel, he drank avidly. One swallow, a second, then a few trickling drops. The canteen had been almost empty.

Uncovering, he stood bareheaded before the inert body and spoke gently in the low, soft voice one instinctively uses in the presence of the dead.

“Friend, I couldn’t save your life, but your water has saved mine, I reckon. Anyhow, it gives me another chance to fight for it. I wish I could do something for you ... carry a message to your folks and tell them how it happened.” 14

He dropped down again beside the dead man and rifled the pockets. In them he found two letters addressed in an illiterate hand to James Diller, Cananea, Sonora, Mexico. An idea flashed into his brain and for a moment held him motionless while he worked it out. Why not? This man was about his size, dressed much like him, and so mutilated that identification was impossible.

From his own pocket he took a leather bill book and a monogrammed cigarcase. With a sharp stone he scarred the former. The metal case he crushed out of shape beneath the heel of his boot. Having first taken one twenty dollar yellowback from the well-padded book, he slipped it and the cigarcase into the inner coat pocket of the dead man. Irregularly in a dozen places he gashed with his knife the derby hat he was wearing, ripped the band half loose, dragged it in the dust, and jumped on it till the hat was flat as a pancake. Finally he kicked it into the sand a dozen yards away.

“The cattle would get it tangled in their hoofs and

drag it that far with them," he surmised.

The soft gray hat of the dead man he himself appropriated. Again he spoke to the lifeless body, lowering his voice to a murmur.

"I reckon you wouldn't grudge me this if you knew. I'm up against it. If I get out of these hills alive I'll be lucky. But if I do—well, it won't do you any harm to be mistaken for me, and it will accommodate me mightily. I hate to leave you 15 here alone, but it's what I've got to do to save myself."

He turned away and plodded up the dry creek bed.

The sun was at the meridian when three heavily armed riders drew up at the mouth of the cañon. They fell into the restful, negligent postures of horsemen accustomed to take their ease in the saddle.

"Do you figure maybe he's working up to the headwaters of Dry Sandy?" one suggested.

A squat, bandy-legged man with a face of tanned leather presently answered. "No, Tim, I expect not. The way I size him up Mr. Richard Bellamy wouldn't know Dry Sandy from an irrigation ditch. Mr. R. B. hopes he's hittin' the high spots for Sonora, but he ain't anyways sure. Right about now he's ridin' the grub line, unless he's made a strike somewhere."

The third member of the party, a lean, wide-shouldered, sinewy youth, blue silk kerchief knotted loosely around his neck, broke in with a gesture that swept the sky. "Funny about all them buzzards. What are they doing here, sheriff?"

The squat man opened his mouth to answer, but Tim took the word out of his mouth.

“Look!” His arm had shot straight out toward the cañon. A coyote was disappearing on the lope. 16 “Something lying there in the wash at the bend, Burke.”

Sheriff Burke slid his rifle from its scabbard. “We’ll not take any chances, boys. Spread out far as you can. Tim, ride close to the left wall. You keep along the right one, Flatray. Me, I’ll take the center. That’s right.”

They rode forward cautiously. Once Flatray spoke.

“By the tracks there has been a lot of cattle down here on the jump recently.”

“That’s what,” Tim agreed.

Flatray swung from his saddle and stooped over the body lying at the bend of the wash.

“Crushed to death in a cattle stampede, looks like,” he called to the sheriff.

“Search him, Jack,” the sheriff ordered.

The young man gave an exclamation of surprise. He was standing with a cigarcase in one hand and a billbook in the other. “It’s the man we’re after—it’s Bellamy.”

Burke left his horse and came forward. “How do you know?”

“Initials on the cigarcase, R. B. Same monogram on the billbook.”

The sheriff had stooped to pick up a battered hat as he moved toward the deputy. Now he showed the initials stamped on the sweat band. “R. B. here, too.”

“Suit of gray clothes, derby hat, size and weight 17 about medium. We’ll never know about the scar on

the eyebrow, but I guess Mr. Bellamy is identified without that."

"Must have camped here last night and while he was asleep the cattle stampeded down the cañon," Tim hazarded.

"That guess is as good as any. They ce'tainly stomped the life out of him thorough. Anyhow, Bellamy has met up with his punishment. We'll have to pack the body back to town, boys," the sheriff told them.

Half an hour later the party filed out to the creosote flats and struck across country toward Mesa. Flatray was riding pillion behind Tim. His own horse was being used as a pack saddle.

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CHAPTER II

BRAND BLOTTING

The tenderfoot, slithering down a hillside of shale, caught at a greasewood bush and waited. The sound of a rifle shot had drifted across the ridge to him. Friend or foe, it made no difference to him now. He had reached the end of his tether, must get to water soon or give up the fight.

No second shot broke the stillness. A swift zigzagged across the cattle trail he was following. Out of a blue

sky the Arizona sun still beat down upon a land parched by æons of drought, a land still making its brave show of greenness against a dun background.

Arrow straight the man made for the hill crest. Weak as a starved puppy, his knees bent under him as he climbed. Down and up again a dozen times, he pushed feverishly forward. All day he had been seeing things. Cool lakes had danced on the horizon line before his tortured vision. Strange fancies had passed in and out of his mind. He wondered if this, too, were a delusion. How long that 19 stiff ascent took him he never knew, but at last he reached the summit and crept over its cactus-covered shoulder.

He looked into a valley dressed in its young spring garb. Of all deserts this is the loveliest when the early rains have given rebirth to the hope that stirs within its bosom once a year. But the tenderfoot saw nothing of its pathetic promise, of its fragile beauty so soon to be blasted. His sunken eyes swept the scene and found at first only a desert waste in which lay death.

“I lose,” he said to himself out loud.

With the words he gave up the long struggle and sank to the ground. For hours he had been exhausted to the limit of endurance, but the will to live had kept him going. Now the driving force within had run down. He would die where he lay.

Another instant, and he was on his feet again eager, palpitant, tremulous. For plainly there had come to him the bleating of a calf.

Moving to the left, he saw rising above the hill brow a thin curl of smoke. A dozen staggering steps brought him to the edge of a draw. There in the hollow below, almost within a stone’s throw, was a

young woman bending over a fire. He tried to call, but his swollen tongue and dry throat refused the service. Instead, he began to run toward her.

Beyond the wash was a dead cow. Not far from it lay a calf on its side, all four feet tied together. 20 From the fire the young woman took a red-hot running iron and moved toward the little bleater.

The crackling of a twig brought her around as a sudden tight rein does a high-strung horse. The man had emerged from the prickly pears and was close upon her. His steps dragged. The sag of his shoulders indicated extreme fatigue. The dark hollows beneath the eyes told of days of torment.

The girl stood before him slender and straight. She was pale to the lips. Her breath came fast and ragged as if she had been running.

Abruptly she shot her challenge at him. “Who are you?”

“Water,” he gasped.

One swift, searching look the girl gave him, then “Wait!” she ordered, and was off into the mesquit on the run. Three minutes later the tenderfoot heard her galloping through the brush. With a quick, tight rein she drew up, swung from the saddle expertly as a *vaquero*, and began to untie a canteen held by buckskin thongs to the side of the saddle.

He drank long, draining the vessel to the last drop.

From her saddle bags she brought two sandwiches wrapped in oiled paper.

“You’re hungry, too, I expect,” she said, her eyes shining with tender pity.

She observed that he did not wolf his food, voracious

though he was. While he ate she returned 21 to the fire with the running iron and heaped live coals around the end of it.

“You’ve had a pretty tough time of it,” she called across to him gently.

“It hasn’t been exactly a picnic, but I’m all right now.”

The girl liked the way he said it. Whatever else he was—and already faint doubts were beginning to stir in her—he was not a quitter.

“You were about all in,” she said, watching him.

“Just about one little kick left in me,” he smiled.

“That’s what I thought.”

She busied herself over the fire inspecting the iron. The man watched her curiously. What could it mean? A cow killed wantonly, a calf bawling with pain and fear, and this girl responsible for it. The tenderfoot could not down the suspicion stirring in his mind. He knew little of the cattle country. But he had read books and had spent a week in Mesa not entirely in vain. The dead cow with the little stain of red down its nose pointed surely to one thing. He was near enough to see a hole in the forehead just above the eyes. Instinctively his gaze passed to the rifle lying in the sand close to his hand. Her back was still turned to him. He leaned over, drew the gun to him, and threw out an empty shell from the barrel.

At the click of the lever the girl swung around upon him.

“What are you doing?” she demanded. 22

He put the rifle down hurriedly. “Just seeing what

make it is."

"And what make is it?" she flashed.

He was trapped. "I hadn't found out yet," he stammered.

"No, but you found out there was an empty shell in it," she retorted quickly.

Their eyes fastened. She was gray as ashes, but she did not flinch. By chance he had stumbled upon the crime of crimes in Cattleland, had caught a rustler redhanded at work. Looking into the fine face, nostrils delicately fashioned, eyes clear and deep, the thing was scarce credible of her. Why, she could not be a day more than twenty, and in every line of her was the look of pride, of good blood.

"Yes, I happened to throw it out," he apologized.

But she would have no evasion, would not let his doubts sleep. There was superb courage in the scornful ferocity with which she retorted.

"Happened! And I suppose you *happened* to notice that the brand on the cow is a Bar Double G, while that on the calf is different."

"No, I haven't noticed that."

"Plenty of time to see it yet." Then, with a swift blaze of feeling, "What's the use of pretending? I know what you think."

"Then you know more than I do. My thoughts don't go any farther than this, that you have saved my life and I'm grateful for it." 23

"I know better. You think I'm a rustler. But don't say it. Don't you dare say it."

Brought up in an atmosphere of semi-barbaric

traditions, silken-strong, with instincts unwarped by social pressure, she was what the sun and wind and freedom of Arizona had made her, a poetic creation far from commonplace. So he judged her, and in spite of the dastardly thing she had done he sensed an innate refinement strangely at variance with the circumstances.

“All right. I won’t,” he answered, with a faint smile.

“Now you’ve got to pay for your sandwiches by making yourself useful. I’m going to finish this job.” She said it with an edge of self-scorn. He guessed her furious with self-contempt.

Under her directions he knelt on the calf so as to hold it steady while she plied the hot iron. The odor of burnt hair and flesh was already acrid in his nostrils. Upon the red flank F was written in raw, seared flesh. He judged that the brand she wanted was not yet complete. Probably the iron had got too cold to finish the work, and she had been forced to reheat it.

The little hand that held the running iron was trembling. Looking up, the tenderfoot saw that she was white enough to faint.

“I can’t do it. You’ll have to let me hold him while you blur the brand,” she told him.

They changed places. She set her teeth to it and 24 held the calf steady, but the brander noticed that she had to look away when the red-hot iron came near the flesh of the victim.

“Blur the brand right out. Do it quick, please,” she urged.

A sizzle of burning skin, a piteous wail from the tortured animal, an acrid pungent odor, and the

thing was done. The girl got to her feet, quivering like an aspen.

“Have you a knife?” she asked faintly.

“Yes.”

“Cut the rope.”

The calf staggered to all fours, shook itself together, and went bawling to the dead mother.

The girl drew a deep breath. “They say it does not hurt except while it is being done.”

His bleak eyes met hers stonily. “And of course it will soon get used to doing without its mother. That is a mere detail.”

A shudder went through her.

The whole thing was incomprehensible to him. Why under heaven had she done it? How could one so sensitive have done a wanton cruel thing like this? Her reason he could not fathom. The facts that confronted him were that she *had* done it, and had meant to carry the crime through. Only detection had changed her purpose.

She turned upon him, plainly sick of the whole business. “Let’s get away from here. Where’s your horse?” 25

“I haven’t any. I started on foot and got lost.”

“From where?”

“From Mammoth.”

Sharply her keen eyes fixed him. How could a man have got lost near Mammoth and wandered here? He would have had to cross the range, and even a child would have known enough to turn back into the valley where the town lay.

“How long ago?”

“Day before yesterday.” He added after a moment: “I was looking for a job.”

She took in the soft hands and the unweathered skin of the dark face. “What sort of a job?”

“Anything I can do.”

“But what can you do?”

“I can ride.”

She must take him home with her, of course, and feed and rest him. That went without saying. But what after that? He knew too much to be turned adrift with the story of what he had seen. If she could get a hold on him—whether of fear or of gratitude—so as to insure his silence, the truth might yet be kept quiet. At least she could try.

“Did you ever ride the range?”

“No.”

“What sort of work have you done?”

After a scarcely noticeable pause, “Clerical work,” he answered. 26

“You’re from the East?” she suggested, her eyes narrowing.

“Yes.”

“My name is Melissy Lee,” she told him, watching him very steadily.

Once more the least of pauses. “Mine is Diller—James Diller.”

“That’s funny. I know another man of that name. At least, I know him by sight.”

The man who had called himself Diller grew wary.

"It's a common enough name."

"Yes. If I find you work at my father's ranch would you be too particular about what it is?"

"Try me."

"And your memory—is it inconveniently good?" Her glance swept as by chance over the scene of her recent operations.

"I've got a right good forgettery, too," he assured her.

"You're not in the habit of talking much about the things you see." She put it in the form of a statement, but the rising inflection indicated the interrogative.

His black eyes met hers steadily. "I can padlock my mouth when it is necessary," he answered, the suggestion of a Southern drawl in his intonation.

She wanted an assurance more direct. "When *you* think it necessary, I suppose."

"That is what I meant to say." 27

"Come. One good turn deserves another. What about this?" She nodded toward the dead cow.

"I have not seen a thing I ought not to have seen."

"Didn't you see me blot a brand on that calf?"

He shook his head. "Can't recall it at all, Miss Lee."

Swiftly her keen glance raked him again. Judged by his clothes, he was one of the world's ineffectives, flotsam tossed into the desert by the wash of fate; but there was that in the steadiness of his eye, in the set of his shoulders, in the carriage of his lean-loined, slim body that spoke of breeding. He was no booze-fighting grubliner. Disguised though he was in cheap slops, she judged him a man of parts. He would do to

trust, especially since she could not help herself.

“We’ll be going. You take my horse,” she ordered.

“And let you walk?”

“How long since you have eaten?” she asked brusquely.

“About seven minutes,” he smiled.

“But before that?”

“Two days.”

“Well, then. Anybody can see you’re as weak as a kitten. Do as I say.”

“Why can’t we both ride?”

“We can as soon as we get across the pass. Until then I’ll walk.” 28

Erect as a willow sapling, she took the hills with an elastic ease that showed her deep-bosomed in spite of her slenderness. The short corduroy riding skirt and high-laced boots were made for use, not grace, but the man in the saddle found even in her manner of walking the charm of her direct, young courage. Free of limb, as yet unconscious of sex, she had the look of a splendid boy. The descending sun was in her sparkling hair, on the lank, undulating grace of her changing lines.

Active as a cat though it was, the cowpony found the steep pass with its loose rubble hard going. Melissy took the climb much easier. In the way she sped through the mesquit, evading the clutch of the cholla by supple dips to right and left, there was a kind of pantherine litheness.

At the summit she waited for the horse to clamber up the shale after her.

“Get down in your collar, you Buckskin,” she urged, and when the pony was again beside her petted the animal with little love pats on the nose.

Carelessly she flung at Diller a question. “From what part of the East did you say?”

He was on the spot promptly this time. “From Keokuk.”

“Keokuk, Indiana?”

“Iowa,” he smiled.

“Oh, is it Iowa?” He had sidestepped her little trap, but she did not give up. “Just arrived?”

“I’ve been herding sheep for a month.” 29

“Oh, sheep-herding!” Her disdain implied that if he were fit for nothing better than sheep-herding, the West could find precious little use for him.

“It was all I could get to do.”

“Where did you say you wrangled Mary’s little lamb?”

“In the Catalinas.”

“Whose outfit?”

Question and answer were tossed back and forth lightly, but both were watching warily.

“Outfit?” he repeated, puzzled.

“Yes. Who were you working for?”

“Don’t remember his name. He was a Mexican.”

“Must have been one of the camps of Antonio Valdez.”

“Yes, that’s it. That’s the name.”

“Only he runs his sheep in the Galiuros,” she

demurred.

“Is it the Galiuros? Those Spanish names! I can’t keep them apart in my mind.”

She laughed with hard, young cruelty. “It is hard to remember what you never heard, isn’t it?”

The man was on the rack. Tiny beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. But he got a lip smile into working order.

“Just what do you mean, Miss Lee?”

“You had better get your story more pat. I’ve punched a dozen holes in it already. First you tell me you are from the East, and even while you were telling me I knew you were a Southerner from the 30 drawl. No man ever got lost from Mammoth. You gave a false name. You said you had been herding sheep, but you didn’t know what an outfit is. You wobbled between the Galiuros and the Catalinas.”

“I’m not a native. I told you I couldn’t remember Spanish names.”

“It wasn’t necessary to tell me,” she countered quickly. “A man that can’t recall even the name of his boss!”

“I’m not in the witness box, Miss Lee,” he told her stiffly.

“Not yet, but you’re liable to be soon, I reckon.”

“In a cattle rustling case, I suppose you mean.”

“No, I don’t.” She went on with her indictment of his story, though his thrust had brought the color to her cheek. “When I offered you Antonio Valdez for an employer you jumped at him. If you want to know, he happens to be our herder. He doesn’t own a sheep and never will.”

“You know all about it,” he said with obvious sarcasm.

“I know you’re not who you say you are.”

“Perhaps you know who I am then.”

“I don’t know or care. It’s none of my business. But others may think it is theirs. You can’t be so reckless with the truth without folks having notions. If I were you I’d get a story that will hang together.”

“You’re such a good detective. Maybe I could 31 get you to invent one for me,” he suggested maliciously.

Her indignation flashed. “I’m no such thing. But I’m not quite a fool. A babe in arms wouldn’t swallow that fairy tale.”

Awkward as her knowledge might prove, he could not help admiring the resource and shrewdness of the girl. She had virtually served notice that if she had a secret that needed keeping so had he.

They looked down over a desert green with bajadas, prickly pears, and mesquit. To the right, close to a spur of the hills, were the dwarfed houses of a ranch. The fans of a windmill caught the sun and flashed it back to the travelers.

“The Bar Double G. My father owns it,” Miss Lee explained.

“Oh! Your father owns it.” He reflected a moment while he studied her. “Let’s understand each other, Miss Lee. I’m not what I claim to be, you say. We’ll put it that you have guessed right. What do you intend to do about it? I’m willing to be made welcome at the Bar Double G, but I don’t want to be too welcome.”

“I’m not going to do anything.”

“So long as I remember not to remember what I’ve seen.”

The blood burned in her cheeks beneath their Arizona tan. She did not look at him. “If you like to put it that way.” 32

He counted it to her credit that she was ashamed of the bargain in every honest fiber of her.

“No matter what they say I’ve done. You’ll keep faith?”

“I don’t care what you’ve done,” she flung back bitterly. “It’s none of my affair. I told you that before. Men come out here for all sorts of reasons. We don’t ask for a bill of particulars.”

“Then I’ll be right glad to go down to the Bar Double G with you, and say thanks for the chance.”

He had dismounted when they first reached the pass. Now she swung to the saddle and he climbed behind her. They reached presently one of the nomadic trails of the cattle country which wander leisurely around hills and over gulches along the line of least resistance. This brought them to a main traveled road leading to the ranch.

They rode in silence until the pasture fence was passed.

“What am I to tell them your name is?” she asked stiffly.

He took his time to answer. “Tom Morse is a good name, don’t you think? How would T. L. Morse do?”

She offered no comment, but sat in front of him, unresponsive as the sphinx. The rigor of her flat back told him that, though she might have to keep his shameful secret for the sake of her own, he could not

presume upon it the least in the world.

Melissy turned the horse over to a little Mexican 33 boy and they were just mounting the steps of the porch when a young man cantered up to the house. Lean and muscular and sunbaked, he looked out of cool, gray eyes upon a man's world that had often put him through the acid test. The plain, cactus-torn chaps, flannel shirt open at the sinewy throat, dusty, wide-brimmed hat, revolver peeping from its leather pocket on the thigh: every detail contributed to the impression of efficiency he created. Even the one touch of swagger about him, the blue silk kerchief knotted loosely around his neck, lent color to his virile competency.

He dragged his horse to a standstill and leaped off at the same instant. "Evenin', 'Lissie."

She was busy lacing her shoe and did not look up. He guessed that he was being snubbed and into his eyes came a gleam of fun. A day later than he had promised, Jack Flatray was of opinion that he was being punished for tardiness.

Casually he explained. "Couldn't make it any sooner. Burke had a hurry-up job that took us into the hills. Fellow by the name of Bellamy, wanted for murder at Nemo, Arkansas, had been tracked to Mesa. A message came over the wires to arrest him. When Burke sent me to his room he had lit out, taken a swift hike into the hills. Must a-had some warning, for he didn't even wait for a horse."

The dilated eyes of the girl went past the deputy to the man she had rescued. He was leaning 34 against one of the porch posts, tense and rigid, on his face the look of the hunted brought to bay.

"And did you find him?" she asked mechanically of

the deputy.

“We found him. He had been trampled to death by a cattle stampede.”

Her mind groped blindly for an explanation. Her woman’s instinct told her that the man panting on the porch within six feet of the officer was the criminal wanted. There must be a mistake somewhere.

“Did you identify him?”

“I guess there is no doubt about it. His papers and belongings all showed he was our man.”

“Oh!” The excitement of his news had for a moment thawed her, but a dignified aloofness showed again in her manner. “If you want to see father you’ll find him in the corral, Mr. Flatray.”

“Well, I don’t know as I’m looking for him awful hard,” the blue kerchiefed youth smiled genially. “Anyway, I can wait a few minutes if I have to.”

“Yes.” She turned away indifferently. “I’ll show you your room, Mr. Morse.”

The deputy watched them disappear into the house with astonishment printed on his face. He had ridden twenty-seven miles to see Melissy Lee and he had not quite expected this sort of a greeting.

“If that don’t beat the Dutch. Looks like I’ll do my callin’ on the old man after all, maybe,” he murmured with a grin.

35

CHAPTER III

AN ACCUSATION

The rescued man ate, drank, and from sheer fatigue fell asleep within five minutes of the time he was shown his bedroom.

Since he was not of the easily discouraged kind, the deputy stayed to supper on invitation of Lee. He sat opposite the daughter of his host, and that young woman treated him with the most frigid politeness. The owner of the Bar Double G was quite unaware of any change of temperature. Jack and his little girl had always been the best of friends. So now he discoursed on the price of cows, the good rains, the outrages of the rustlers, and kindred topics without suspecting that the attention of the young man was on more personal matters.

Though born in Arizona, Melissy was of the South. Due westward rolls the tide of settlement, and Beauchamp Lee had migrated from Tennessee after the war, following the line of least resistance to the sunburned territory. Later he had married a woman a good deal younger than himself. She had borne him two children, the elder of whom was 36 now a young man. Melissy was the younger, and while she was still a babe in arms the mother had died of typhoid and left her baby girl to grow up as best she might in a land where women were few and far. This tiny pledge of her mother's love Champ Lee had treasured as a gift from Heaven. He had tended her and nursed

her through the ailments of childhood with a devotion the most pure of his reckless life. Given to heady gusts of passion, there had never been a moment when his voice had been other than gentle and tender to her.

Inevitably Melissy had become the product of her inheritance and her environment. If she was the heiress of Beauchamp Lee's courage and generosity, his quick indignation against wrong and injustice, so, too, she was of his passionate lawlessness.

After supper Melissy disappeared. She wanted very much to be alone and have a good cry. Wherefore she slipped out of the back door and ran up the Lone Tree trail in the darkness. Jack thought he saw a white skirt fly a traitorous signal, and at leisure he pursued.

But Melissy was not aware of that. She reached Lone Tree rock and slipped down from boulder to boulder until she came to the pine which gave the place its name. For hours she had been forced to repress her emotions, to make necessary small talk, to arrange for breakfast and other household details. Now she was alone, and the floods of her bitterness were unloosed. She broke down and 37 wept passionately, for she was facing her first great disillusionment. She had lost a friend, one in whom she had put great faith.

The first gust of the storm was past when Melissy heard a step on the rocks above. She knew intuitively that Jack Flatray had come in search of her, and he was the last man on earth she wanted to meet just now.

"'Lissie!" she heard him call softly; and again, "'Lissie!"

Noiselessly she got to her feet, waiting to see what he would do. She knew he must be standing on the edge of the great rock, so directly above her that if he had kicked a pebble it would have landed beside her. Presently he began to clamber down.

She tiptoed along the ledge and slipped into the trough at the farther end that led to the top. It was a climb she had taken several times, but never in the dark. The ascent was almost perpendicular, and it had to be made by clinging to projecting rocks and vegetation. Moreover, if she were to escape undetected it had to be done in silence.

She was a daughter of the hills, as surefooted as a mountain goat. Handily she went up, making the most of the footholds that offered. In spite of the best she could do the rustling of bushes betrayed her.

Jack came to the foot of the trough and looked up.

“So you’re there, are you?” he asked.

Her foot loosened a stone and sent it rolling down. 38

“If I were you I wouldn’t try that at night, ’Liss,” he advised.

She made sure of the steadiness of her voice before she answered. “You don’t need to try it.”

“I said if I were you, girl.”

“But you are not. Don’t let me detain you here, Mr. Flatray,” she told him in a manner of icy precision.

The deputy began the climb too. “What’s the use of being so hostile, little girl?” he drawled. “Me, I came as soon as I could, burning the wind, too.”

She set her teeth, determined to reach the top in time to get away before he could join her. In her

eagerness she took a chance that proved her undoing. A rock gave beneath her foot and clattered down. Clinging by one hand and foot, she felt her body swing around. From her throat a little cry leaped. She knew herself slipping.

"Jack!"

In time, and just in time, he reached her, braced himself, and gave her his knee for a foot rest.

"All right?" he asked, and "All right!" she answered promptly.

"We'll go back," he told her.

She made no protest. Indeed, she displayed a caution in lowering herself that surprised him. Every foothold she tested carefully with her weight. Once she asked him to place her shoe in the crevice for her. He had never seen her take so much time 39 in making sure or be so fussy about her personal safety.

Safely on the ledge again, she attempted a second time to dismiss him. "Thank you, Mr. Flatray. I won't take any more of your time."

He looked at her steadily before he spoke. "You're mighty high-heeled, 'Lissie. You know my name ain't Mr. Flatray to you. What's it all about? I've told you twice I couldn't get here any sooner."

She flamed out at him in an upblaze of feminine ferocity. "And I tell *you*, that I don't care if you had never come. I don't want to see you or have anything to do with you."

"Why not?" He asked it quietly, though he began to know that her charge against him was a serious one.

"Because I know what you are now, because you have made us believe in you while all the time you

were living a lie."

"Meaning what?"

"I was gathering poppies on the other side of Antelope Pass this afternoon."

"What has that got to do with me being a liar and a scoundrel," he wanted to know.

"Oh, you pretend," she scoffed. "But you know as well as I do."

"I'm afraid I don't. Let's have the indictment."

"If everybody in Papago County had told me I wouldn't have believed it," she cried. "I had to 40 see it with my own eyes before I could have been convinced."

"Yes, well what is it you saw with your eyes?"

"You needn't keep it up. I tell you I saw it all from the time you fired the shot."

He laughed easily, but without mirth. "Kept tab on me, did you?"

She wheeled from him, gave a catch of her breath, and caught at the rock wall to save herself from falling.

He spoke sharply. "You hurt yourself in the trough."

"I sprained my ankle a little, but it doesn't matter."

He understood now why she had made so slow a descent and he suspected that the wrench was more than she admitted. The moon had come out from under a cloud and showed him a pale, tear-stained face, with a row of even, little teeth set firm against the lower lip. She was in pain and her pride was keeping it from him.

“Let me look at your ankle.”

“No.”

“I say yes. You’ve hurt it seriously.”

“That is my business, I think,” she told him with cold finality.

“I’m going to make it mine. Think I don’t know you, proud as Lucifer when you get set. You’ll lame yourself for life if you’re not careful.”

“I don’t care to discuss it.” 41

“Fiddlesticks! If you’ve got anything against me we’ll hear what it is afterward. Right now we’ll give first aid to the injured. Sit down here.”

She had not meant to give way, but she did. Perhaps it was because of the faintness that stole over her, or because the pain was sharper than she could well endure. She found herself seated on the rock shelf, letting him cut the lace out of her shoe and slip it off. Ever so gently he worked, but he could tell by the catches of her breath that it was not pleasant to endure. From his neck he untied the silk kerchief and wrapped it tightly around the ankle.

“That will have to do till I get you home.”

“I’ll not trouble you, sir. If you’ll stop and tell my father that is all I’ll ask.”

“Different here,” he retorted cheerfully. “Just so as to avoid any argument, I’ll announce right now that Jack Flatray is going to see you home. It’s his say-so.”

She rose. None knew better than she that he was a dominating man when he chose to be. She herself carried in her slim body a spirit capable of passion and of obstinacy, but to-night she had not the will to

force the fighting.

Setting her teeth, she took a step or two forward, her hand against the rock wall to help bear the weight. With narrowed eyes, he watched her closely, noting the catches of pain that shot through 42 her breathing. Half way up the boulder bed he interposed brusquely.

“This is plumb foolishness, girl. You’ve got no business putting your weight on that foot, and you’re not going to do it.”

He slipped his arm around her waist in such a way as to support her all he could. With a quick turn of the body she tried to escape.

“No use. I’m going through with this, ’Lissie. Someone has been lying to you about me, and just now you hate the ground I walk on. Good enough. That’s got nothing to do with this. You’re a woman that needs help, and any old time J. F. meets up with such a one he’s on the job. You don’t owe me ’Thank you,’ but you’ve got to stand for me till you reach the house.”

“You’re taking advantage of me because I can’t help myself. Why don’t you go and bring father,” she flung out.

“I’m younger than your father and abler to help. That’s why?”

They reached the top of the bluff and he made her sit down to rest. A pale moon suffused the country, and in that stage set to lowered lights her pallor was accented. From the colorless face shadowy, troubled eyes spoke the misery through which she was passing. The man divined that her pain was more than physical, and the knowledge went to him

poignantly by the heart route. 43

“What is it, ’Lissie? What have I done?” he asked gently.

“You know. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But I don’t know.”

“What’s the use of keeping it up? I caught you this afternoon.”

“Caught me doing what?”

“Caught you rustling, caught you branding a calf just after you had shot the cow.”

For an instant her charge struck him dumb. He stared at her as if he thought she had gone suddenly mad.

“What’s that? Say it again,” he got out at last.

“And the cow had the Bar Double G brand, belonged to my father, your best friend,” she added passionately.

He spoke very gently, but there was an edge to his voice that was new to her. “Suppose you tell me all about it.”

She threw out a hand in a gesture of despair. “What’s the use? Nothing could have made me believe it but my own eyes. You needn’t keep up a pretense. I saw you.”

“Yes, so you said before. Now begin at the start and tell your story.”

She had the odd feeling of being put on the defensive and it angered her. How dared he look at her with those cool, gray eyes that still appeared to bore a hole through treachery? Why did her heart 44 convict her of having deserted a friend, when she

knew that the desertion was his?

“While I was gathering poppies I heard a shot. It was so close I walked to the edge of the draw and looked over. There I saw you.”

“What was I doing?”

“You were hogtying a calf.”

“And then?”

“I didn’t understand at first. I thought to slip down and surprise you for fun. But as I got lower I saw the dead cow. Just then you began to brand the calf and I cried out to you.”

“What did I do?”

“You know what you did,” she answered wearily. “You broke for the brush where your horse was and galloped away.”

“Got a right good look at me, did you?”

“Not at your face. But I knew. You were wearing this blue silk handkerchief.” Her finger indicated the one bound around her ankle.

“So on that evidence you decide I’m a rustler, and you’ve only known me thirteen years. You’re a good friend, ’Lissie.”

Her eyes blazed on him like live coals. “Have you forgotten the calf you left with your brand on it?”

She had startled him at last. “With my brand on it?” he repeated, his voice dangerously low and soft.

“You know as well as I do. You had got the F 45 just about finished when I called. You dropped the running iron and ran.”

“Dropped it and ran, did I? And what did you do?”

"I reheated the iron and blurred the brand so that nobody could tell what it had been."

He laughed harshly without mirth. "I see. I'm a waddy and a thief, but you're going to protect me for old times' sake. That's the play, is it? I ought to be much obliged to you and promise to reform, I reckon."

His bitterness stung. She felt a tightening of the throat. "All I ask is that you go away and never come back to me," she cried with a sob.

"Don't worry about that. I ain't likely to come back to a girl that thinks I'm the lowest thing that walks. You're not through with me a bit more than I am with you," he answered harshly.

Her little hand beat upon the rock in her distress. "I never would have believed it. Nobody could have made me believe it. I—I—why, I trusted you like my own father," she lamented. "To think that you would take that way to stock your ranch—and with the cattle of my father, too."

His face was hard as chiseled granite. "Distrust all your friends. That's the best way."

"You haven't even denied it—not that it would do any good," she said miserably.

There was a sound of hard, grim laughter in his 46 throat. "No, and I ain't going to deny it. Are you ready to go yet?"

His repulse of her little tentative advance was like a blow on the face to her.

She made a movement to rise. While she was still on her knees he stooped, put his arms around her, and took her into them. Before she could utter her protest

he had started down the trail toward the house.

“How dare you? Let me go,” she ordered.

“You’re not able to walk, and you’ll go the way I say,” he told her shortly in a flinty voice.

Her anger was none the less because she realized her helplessness to get what she wanted. Her teeth set fast to keep back useless words. Into his stony eyes her angry ones burned. The quick, irregular rise and fall of her bosom against his heart told him how she was struggling with her passion.

Once he spoke. “Tell me where it was you saw this rustler—the exact place near as you can locate it.”

She answered only by a look.

The deputy strode into the living room of the ranch with her in his arms. Lee was reading a newspaper Jack had brought with him from Mesa. At sight of them he started up hurriedly.

“Goddlemighty, what’s the matter, Jack?”

“Only a ricked ankle, Champ. Slipped on a stone,” Flatray explained as he put Melissy down on the lounge. 47

In two minutes the whole house was upset. Hop Ling was heating water to bathe the sprain. A rider from the bunkhouse was saddling to go for the doctor. Another was off in the opposite direction to buy some liniment at Mammoth.

In the confusion Flatray ran up his horse from the pasture, slapped on the saddle, and melted into the night.

An hour later Melissy asked her father what had become of him.

“Doggone that boy, I don’t know where he went. Reckon he thought he’d be in the way. Mighty funny he didn’t give us a chanct to tell him to stay.”

“Probably he had business in Mesa,” Melissy answered, turning her face to the wall.

“Business nothing,” retorted the exasperated rancher. “He figured we couldn’t eat and sleep him without extra trouble. Ain’t that a fine reputation for him to be giving the Bar Double G? I’ll curl his hair for him onct I meet up with him again.”

“If you would put out the light, I think I could sleep, dad,” she told him in the least of voices.

“Sure, honey. Has the throbbing gone out of the ankle?” he asked anxiously.

“Not entirely, but it’s a good deal better. Good-night, dad.”

“If Doc comes I’ll bring him in,” Lee said after he had kissed her.

“Do, please.” 48

But after she was left alone Melissy did not prepare herself for sleep. Her wide open eyes stared into the darkness, while her mind stormily reviewed the day. The man who for years had been her best friend was a scoundrel. She had proved him unworthy of her trust, and on top of that he had insulted her. Hot tears stung her eyes—tears of shame, of wounded self-love, of mortification, and of something more worthy than any of these.

She grieved passionately for that which had gone out of her life, for the comradeship that had been so precious to her. If this man were a waddy, who of all her friends could she trust? She could have forgiven

him had he done wrong in the heat of anger. But this premeditated evil was beyond forgiveness. To make it worse, he had come direct from the doing of it to meet her, with a brazen smile on his lips and a lie in his heart. She would never speak to him again—never so long as she lived.

49

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN WITH THE CHIHUAHUA HAT

A little dust cloud was traveling up the trail toward the Bar Double G, the center of which presently defined itself as a rider moving at a road gait. He wore a Chihuahua hat and with it the picturesque trappings the Southwest borrows on occasion from across the border. Vanity disclosed itself in the gold-laced hat, in the silver conchos of the fringed chaps, in the fine workmanship of the saddle and bit. The man's finery was overdone, carried with it the suggestion of being on exhibition. But one look at the man himself, sleek and graceful, black-haired and white-toothed, exuding an effect of cold wariness in spite of the masked smiling face, would have been enough to give the lie to any charge of weakness. His fopperies could not conceal the silken strength of him. One meeting with the chill, deep-set eyes was certificate enough for most people.

Melissy, sitting on the porch with her foot resting on a second chair, knew a slight quickening of the blood as she watched him approach.

“Good evenin’, Miss M’lissy,” he cried, sweeping his sombrero as low as the stirrup. 50

“*Buenos tardes*, *Señor* Norris,” she flung back gayly.

Sitting at ease in the saddle, he leisurely looked her over with eyes that smoldered behind half-shuttered lids. To most of her world she was in spirit still more boy than woman, but before his bold, possessive gaze her long lashes wavered to the cheeks into which the warm blood was beating. Her long, free lines were still slender with the immaturity of youth, her soul still hesitating reluctantly to cross the border to womanhood toward which Nature was pushing her so relentlessly. From a fund of experience Philip Norris read her shrewdly, knew how to evoke the latent impulses which brought her eagerly to the sex duel.

“Playing off for sick,” he scoffed.

“I’m not,” she protested. “Never get sick. It’s just a sprained ankle.”

“Sho! I guess you’re Miss Make Believe; just harrowing the feelings of your beaux.”

“The way you talk! I haven’t got any beaux. The boys are just my friends.”

“Oh, just friends! And no beaux. My, my! Not a single sweetheart in all this wide open country. Shall I go rope you one and bring him in, *compadre*?”

“No!” she exploded. “I don’t want any. I’m not old enough yet.” Her dancing eyes belied the words.

“Now I wouldn’t have guessed it. You look to 51 me

most ready to be picked." He rested his weight on the farther stirrup and let his lazy smile mock her. "My estimate would be sixteen. I'll bet you're every day of that."

"I only lack three months of being eighteen," she came back indignantly.

"You don't say! You'll ce'tainly have to be advertising for a husband soon, Miss Three-Quarters-Past-Seventeen. Maybe an ad in the Mesa paper would help. You ain't so awful bad looking."

"I'll let you write it. What would you say?" she demanded, a patch of pink standing out near the curve of the cheek bone.

He swung from the saddle and flung the reins to the ground. With jingling spurs he came up the steps and sat on the top one, his back against a pillar. Boldly his admiring eyes swept her.

"*Nina*, I couldn't do the subject justice. Honest, I haven't got the vocabulary."

"Oh, you!" Laughter was in the eyes that studied him with a side tilt of the chin. "That's a fine way to get out of it when your bluff is called."

He leaned back against the post comfortably and absorbed the beauty of the western horizon. The sun had just set behind a saddle of the Galiuros in a splash of splendor. All the colors of the rainbow fought for supremacy in a brilliant-tinted sky that blazed above the fire-girt peaks. Soon dusk would slip down over the land and tone the hues to a softer harmony. A purple sea would flow over the 52 hills, to be in turn displaced by a deep, soft violet. Then night, that night of mystery and romance which transforms the desert to a thing of incredible

wonder!

“Did your father buy this sunset with the ranch? And has he got a guarantee that it will perform every night?” he asked.

“Did you ever see anything like it?” she cried. “I have looked at them all my life and I never get tired.”

He laughed softly, his indolent, sleepy look on her. “Some things I would never get tired of looking at either.”

Without speaking she nodded, still absorbing the sunset.

“But it wouldn’t be that kind of scenery,” he added. “How tall are you, *muchacha*?”

Her glance came around in surprise. “I don’t know. About five foot five, I think. Why?”

“I’m working on that ad. How would this do? ‘Miss Three-Quarters-Past-Seventeen wants to meet up with gentleman between eighteen and forty-eight. Object, matrimony. Description of lady: Slim, medium height, brunette, mop of blue-black hair, the prettiest dimple you ever saw——’”

“Now I know you’re making fun of me. I’m mad.” And the dimple flashed into being.

“‘—mostly says the opposite of what she means, has a——’” 53

“I don’t. I don’t”

“‘—has a spice of the devil in her, which——’”

“Now, I *am* mad,” she interrupted, laughing.

“‘—which is excusable, since she has the reddest lips for kissing in Arizona.’”

He had gone too far. Her innocence was in arms. Norris knew it by the swiftness with which the smile vanished from her face, by the flash of anger in the eyes.

“I prefer to talk about something else, Mr. Norris,” she said with all the prim stiffness of a schoolgirl.

Her father relieved the tension by striding across from the stable. With him came a bowlegged young fellow in plain leathers. The youngster was Charley Hymer, one of the riders for the Bar Double G.

“You’re here at the right time, Norris,” Lee said grimly. “Charley has just come down from Antelope Pass. He found one of my cows dead, with a bullet hole through the forehead. The ashes of a fire were there, and in the brush not far away a running iron.”

The eyes of Norris narrowed to slits. He was the cattle detective of the association and for a year now the rustlers had outgeneraled him. “I’ll have you take me to the spot, Charley. Get a move on you and we’ll get there soon as the moon is up.”

Melissy gripped the arms of her chair tightly with both hands. She was looking at Norris with a new expression, a kind of breathless fear. She 54 knew him for a man who could not be swerved from the thing he wanted. For all his easy cynicism, he had the reputation of being a bloodhound on the trail. Moreover, she knew that he was no friend to Jack Flatray. Why had she left that running iron as evidence to convict its owner? What folly not to have removed it from the immediate scene of the crime!

The cattle detective and her father had moved a few steps away and were talking in low tones. Melissy became aware of a footfall. The man who called himself Morse came around the corner of the house

and stopped at the porch steps.

“May I speak to you a moment, Miss Lee?” he said in a low voice.

“Of course.”

The voice of Norris rose to an irritated snarl. “Tell you I’ve got evidence, Lee. Mebbe it’s not enough to convict, but it satisfies me a-plenty that Jack Flatray’s the man.”

Melissy was frozen to a tense attention. Her whole mind was on what passed between the detective and her father. Otherwise she would have noticed the swift change that transformed the tenderfoot.

The rancher answered with impatient annoyance. “You’re ’way off, Norris. I don’t care anything about your evidence. The idea is plumb ridiculous. Twenty odd years I’ve known him. He’s the best they make, a pure through and through. Not a 55 crooked hair in his head. I’ve eat out of the same frying pan too often with that boy not to know what he is. You go bury those suspicions of yours immediate. There’s nothing to them.”

Norris grumbled objections as they moved toward the stable. Melissy drew a long breath and brought herself back to the tenderfoot.

He stood like a coiled spring, head thrust far forward from the shoulders. The look in his black eyes was something new to her experience. For hate, passion, caution were all mirrored there.

“You know Mr. Norris,” she said quickly.

He started. “What did you say his name was?” he asked with an assumption of carelessness.

“Norris—Philip Norris. He is a cattle detective.”

“Never heard of Mr. Norris before in my life,” he answered, but it was observable that he still breathed deep.

She did not believe him. Some tie in their buried past bound these two men together. They must have known each other in the South years ago, and one of them at least was an enemy of the other. There might come a day when she could use this knowledge to save Jack Flatray from the punishment dogging his heels. Melissy filed it away in her memory for future reference.

“You wanted to speak to me,” she suggested.

“I’m going away.”

“What for?” 56

“Because I’m not a hound. I can’t blackmail a woman.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean that you’ve found work here for me because I saw what you did over by Antelope Pass. We made a bargain. Oh, not in words, but a bargain just the same! You were to keep my secret because I knew yours. I release you from your part of it. Give me up if you think it is your duty. I’ll not tell what I know.”

“That wasn’t how you talked the other day.”

“No. It’s how I talk now. I’m a hunted man, wanted for murder. I make you a present of the information.”

“You make me a present of what I already know, Mr. Diller, alias Morse, alias Bellamy.”

“You guessed it the first day?”

“Yes.”

"And meant to keep quiet about it?"

"Yes, I meant to shelter you from the punishment you deserve." She added with a touch of bitter self-scorn: "I was doing what I had to do."

"You don't have to do it any longer." He looked straight at her with his head up. "And how do you know what I deserve? Who made you a judge about these facts? Grant for the sake of argument I killed him. Do you know I wasn't justified?"

His fierce boldness put her on the defense. "A man sure of his cause does not run away. The paper said this Shep Boone was shot from ambush. 57 Nothing could justify such a thing. When you did that——"

"I didn't. Don't believe it, Miss Lee."

"He was shot from behind, the paper said."

"Do I look like a man who would kill from ambush?"

She admitted to herself that this clear-eyed Southerner did not look like an assassin. Life in the open had made her a judge of such men as she had been accustomed to meet, but for days she had been telling herself she could no longer trust her judgment. Her best friend was a rustler. By a woman's logic it followed that since Jack Flatray was a thief this man might have committed all the crimes in the calendar.

"I don't know." Then, impulsively, "No, you don't, but you may be for all that."

"I'm not asking anything for myself. You may do as you please after I've gone. Send for Mr. Flatray and tell him if you like."

A horse cantered across the plaza toward the store. Bellamy turned quickly to go.

"I'm not going to tell anyone," the girl called after him in a low voice.

Norris swung from the saddle. "Who's our hurried friend?" he asked carelessly.

"Oh, a new rider of ours. Name of Morse." She changed the subject. "Are you—do you think you know who the rustler is?"

His cold, black eyes rested in hers. She read in 58 them something cruel and sinister. It was as if he were walking over the grave of an enemy.

"I'm gathering evidence, a little at a time."

"Do I know him?"

"Maybe you do."

"Tell me."

He shook his head. "Wait till I've got him cinched."

"You told father," she accused.

He laughed in a hard, mirthless fashion. "That cured me. The Lee family is from Missouri. When I talk next time I'll have the goods to show."

"I know who you mean. You're making a mistake." Her voice seemed to plead with him.

"Not on your life, I ain't. But we'll talk about that when the subject is riper. There will be a showdown some day, and don't you forget it. Well, Charley is calling me. So long, Miss Three-Quarters-Past-Seventeen." He went jingling down the steps and swung to the saddle. "I'll not forget the ad, and when I find the right man I'll ce'tainly rope and bring him to you."

"The rustler?" she asked innocently.

“No, not the rustler, the gent between eighteen and forty-eight, object matrimony.”

“I don’t want to trouble you,” she flung at him with her gay smile.

“No trouble at all. Fact is, I’ve got him in mind already,” he assured her promptly. 59

“Oh!” A pulse of excitement was beating in her throat.

“You don’t ask me who he is,” suggested Norris boldly, crouched in the saddle with his weight on the far stirrup.

She had brought it upon herself, but now she dodged the issue. “’Most anyone will do, and me going on eighteen.”

“You’re wrong, girl. Only one out of a thousand will do for your master.”

“Master, indeed! If he comes to the Bar Double G he’ll find he is at the wrong address. None wanted, thank you.”

“Most folks don’t want what’s best for them, I allow. But if they have luck it sometimes comes to them.”

“Luck!” she echoed, her chin in the air.

“You heard me right. What you need is a man that ain’t afraid of you, one to ride close herd on you so as to head off them stampede notions of yours. Now this lad is the very one. He is a black-haired guy, and when he says a thing——”

Involuntarily she glanced at his sleek black head. Melissy felt a sudden clamor of the blood, a pounding of the pulses.

“—he most generally means it. I’ve wrangled around

a heap with him and there's no manner of doubt he's up to specifications. In appearance he looks like me. Point of fact, he's a dead ringer for me." 60

She saw her chance and flashed out. "Now you're flattering him. There can't be two as—as fascinating as Señor Norris," she mocked.

His smoldering eyes had the possessive insolence she resented and yet found so stimulating.

"Did I say there were two?" he drawled.

It was his parting shot. With a touch of the spur he was off, leaving her no time for an adequate answer.

There were no elusions and inferences about Philip Norris when he wanted to be direct. He had fairly taken her breath away. Melissy's instinct told her there was something humiliating about such a wooing. But picturesque and unconventional conduct excuse themselves in a picturesque personality. And this man had that if nothing else.

She told herself she was angry at him, that he took liberties far beyond those of any of the other young men. Yet, somehow, she went into the house smiling. A color born of excitement burned beneath her sparkling eyes. She had entered into her heritage of womanhood and the call of sex was summoning her to the adventure that is old as the garden where Eve met Adam.

CHAPTER V

THE TENDERFOOT TAKES UP A CLAIM

Mr. Diller, alias Morse, alias Bellamy, did not long remain at the Bar Double G as a rider. It developed that he had money, and, tenderfoot though he was, the man showed a shrewd judgment in his investments. He bought sheep and put them on the government forest reserve, much to the annoyance of the cattlemen of the district.

Morse, as he now called himself, was not the first man who had brought sheep into the border country. Far up in the hills were several camps of them. But hitherto these had been there on sufferance, and it had been understood that they were to be kept far from the cattle range. The extension of the government reserves changed the equation. A good slice of the range was cut off and thrown open to sheep. When Morse leased this and put five thousand bleaters upon the feeding ground the sentiment against him grew very bitter.

Lee had been spokesman of a committee appointed to remonstrate with him. Morse had met them 62 pleasantly but firmly. This part of the reserve had been set aside for sheep. If it were not leased by him it would be by somebody else. Therefore, he declined to withdraw his flocks. Champ lost his temper and swore that he for one would never submit to yield the range. Sharp bitter words were passed. Next week masked men drove a small flock belonging to Morse over a precipice.

The tenderfoot retaliated by jumping a mining claim staked out by Lee upon which the assessment work

had not been kept up. The cattleman contested this in the courts, lost the decision, and promptly appealed. Meanwhile, he countered by leasing from the forest supervisor part of the run previously held by his opponent and putting sheep of his own upon it.

“I reckon I’ll play Mr. Morse’s own game and see how he likes it,” the angry cattleman told his friends.

But the luck was all with Morse. Before he had been working his new claim a month the Monte Cristo (he had changed the name from its original one of Melissy) proved a bonanza. His men ran into a rich streak of dirt that started a stampede for the vicinity.

Champ indulged in choice profanity. From his point of view he had been robbed, and he announced the fact freely to such acquaintances as dropped into the Bar Double G store.

“Dad gum it, I was aimin’ to do that assessment 63 work and couldn’t jest lay my hands on the time. I’d been a millionaire three years and didn’t know it. Then this damned Morse butts in and euchres me out of the claim. Some day him and me’ll have a settlement. If the law don’t right me, I reckon I’m most man enough to ’tend to Mr. Morse.”

It was his daughter who had hitherto succeeded in keeping the peace. When the news of the relocation had reached Lee he had at once started to settle the matter with a Winchester, but Melissy, getting news of his intention, had caught up a horse and ridden bareback after him in time to avert by her entreaties a tragedy. For six months after this the men had not chanced to meet.

Why the tenderfoot had first come West—to hide what wounds in the great baked desert—no man

knew or asked. Melissy had guessed, but she did not breathe to a soul her knowledge. It was a first article of Arizona's creed that a man's past belonged to him alone, was a blotted book if he chose to have it so. No doubt many had private reasons for their untrumpeted migration to that kindly Southwest which buries identity, but no wise citizen busied himself with questions about antecedents. The present served to sift one, and by the way a man met it his neighbors judged him.

And T. L. Morse met it competently. In every emergency with which he had to cope the man "stood the acid." Arizona approved him a man, without according him any popularity. He was too 64 dogmatic to win liking, but he had a genius for success. Everything he touched turned to gold.

The Bar Double G lies half way between Mammoth and Mesa. Its position makes it a central point for ranchers within a radius of fifteen miles. Out of the logical need for it was born the store which Beauchamp Lee ran to supply his neighbors with canned goods, coffee, tobacco, and other indispensables; also the eating house for stage passengers passing to and from the towns. Young as she was, Melissy was the competent manager of both of these.

It was one afternoon during the hour the stage stopped to let the passengers dine that Melissy's wandering eye fell upon Morse seated at one of the tables. Anger mounted within her at the cool impudence of the man. She had half a mind to order him out, but saw he was nearly through dinner and did not want to make a scene. Unfortunately Beauchamp Lee happened to come into the store just as his enemy strolled out from the dining-room.

The ranchman stiffened. “What you been doing in there, seh?” he demanded sharply.

“I’ve been eating a very good dinner in a public café. Any objections?”

“Plenty of ’em, seh. I don’t aim to keep open house for Mr. Morse.”

“I understand this is a business proposition. I expect to pay seventy-five cents for my meal.” 65

The eyes of the older man gleamed wrathfully. “As for yo’ six bits, if you offer it to me I’ll take it as an insult. At the Bar Double G we’re not doing friendly business with claim jumpers. Don’t you evah set yo’ legs under my table again, seh.”

Morse shrugged, turned away to the public desk, and addressed an envelope, the while Lee glared at him from under his heavy beetling brows. Melissy saw that her father was still of half a mind to throw out the intruder and she called him to her.

“Dad, José wants you to look at the hoof of one of his wheelers. He asked if you would come as soon as you could.”

Beauchamp still frowned at Morse, rasping his unshaven chin with his hand. “Ce’tainly, honey. Glad to look at it.”

“Dad! Please.”

The ranchman went out, grumbling. Five minutes later Morse took his seat on the stage beside the driver, having first left seventy-five cents on the counter.

The stage had scarce gone when the girl looked up from her bookkeeping to see the man with the Chihuahua hat.

"*Buenos tardes, señorita*," he gave her with a flash of white teeth.

"*Buenos*," she nodded coolly.

But the dancing eyes of her could not deny their pleasure at sight of him. They had rested upon 66 men as handsome, but upon none who stirred her blood so much.

He was in the leather chaps of a cowpuncher, gray-shirted, and a polka dot kerchief circled the brown throat. Life rippled gloriously from every motion of him. Hermes himself might have envied the perfect grace of the man.

She supplied his wants while they chatted.

"Jogged off your range quite a bit, haven't you?" she suggested.

"Some. I'll take two bits' worth of that smokin', *nina*."

She shook her head. "I'm no little girl. Don't you know I'm now half past eighteen?"

"My—my. That ad didn't do a mite of good, did it?"

"Not a bit."

"And you growing older every day."

"Does my age show?" she wanted to know anxiously.

The scarce veiled admiration of his smoldering eyes drew the blood to her dusky cheeks. Something vigilant lay crouched panther-like behind the laughter of his surface badinage.

"You're standing it well, honey."

The color beat into her face, less at the word than at the purring caress in his voice. A year ago she had

been a child. But in the Southland flowers ripen fast. Adolescence steals hard upon the heels of infancy, and, though the girl had never wakened 67 to love, Nature was pushing her relentlessly toward a womanhood for which her unschooled impulses but scantily safeguarded her.

She turned toward the shelves. “How many air-tights did you say?”

“I didn’t say.” He leaned forward across the counter. “What’s the hurry, little girl?”

“My name is Melissy Lee,” she told him over her shoulder.

“Mine is Phil Norris. Glad to give it to you, Melissy Lee,” the man retorted glibly.

“Can’t use it, thank you,” came her swift saucy answer.

“Or to lend it to you—say, for a week or two.”

She flashed a look at him and passed quickly from behind the counter. Her father was just coming into the store.

“Will you wait on Mr. Norris, dad? Hop wants to see me in the kitchen.”

Norris swore softly under his breath. The last thing he had wanted was to drive her away. It had been nearly a year since he had seen her last, but the picture of her had been in the coals of many a night camp fire.

The cattle detective stayed to dinner and to supper. He and her father had their heads together for hours, their voices pitched to a murmur. Melissy wondered what business could have brought him, whether it could have anything to do with the renewed rustling

that had of late annoyed the 68 neighborhood. This brought her thoughts to Jack Flatray. He, too, had almost dropped from her world, though she heard of him now and again. Not once had he been to see her since the night she had sprained her ankle.

Later, when Melissy was watering the roses beside the porch, she heard the name of Morse mentioned by the stock detective. He seemed to be urging upon her father some course of action at which the latter demurred. The girl knew a vague unrest. Lee did not need his anger against Morse incensed. For months she had been trying to allay rather than increase this. If Philip Norris had come to stir up smoldering fires, she would give him a piece of her mind.

The men were still together when Melissy told her father good-night. If she had known that a whisky bottle passed back and forth a good many times in the course of the evening, the fears of the girl would not have been lightened. She knew that in the somber moods following a drinking bout the lawlessness of Beauchamp Lee was most likely to crop out.

As for the girl, now night had fallen—that wondrous velvet night of Arizona, which blots out garish day with a cloak of violet, purple-edged where the hills rise vaguely in the distance, and softens magically all harsh details beneath the starry vault—she slipped out to the summit of the ridge in the big pasture, climbing lightly, with the springy ease 69 born of the vigor her nineteen outdoor years had stored in the strong young body. She wanted to be alone, to puzzle out what the coming of this man meant to her. Had he intended anything by that last drawling remark of his in the store? Why was it that his careless, half insulting familiarity set the blood

leaping through her like wine? He lured her to the sex duel, then trampled down her reserves roughshod. His bold assurance stung her to anger, but there was a something deeper than anger that left her flushed and tingling.

Both men slept late, but Norris was down first. He found Melissy superintending a drive of sheep which old Antonio, the herder, was about to make to the trading-post at Three Pines. She was on her pony near the entrance to the corral, her slender, lithe figure sitting in a boy's saddle with a businesslike air he could not help but admire. The gate bars had been lifted and the dog was winding its way among the bleating gray mass, which began to stir uncertainly at its presence. The sheep dribbled from the corral by ones and twos until the procession swelled to a swollen stream that poured forth in a torrent. Behind them came Antonio in his sombrero and blanket, who smiled at his mistress, shouted an "*Adios, señorita*," and disappeared into the yellow dust cloud which the herd left in its wake.

"How does Champ like being in the sheep business," Norris said to the girl. 70

Melissy did not remove her eyes from the vanishing herd, but a slight frown puckered her forehead. She chose to take this as a criticism of her father and to resent it.

"Why shouldn't he be?" she said quietly, answering the spirit of his remark.

"I didn't mean it that way," he protested, with his frank laugh.

"Then if you didn't mean it so, I shan't take it that way;" and her smile met his.

"Here's how I look at this sheep business. Some ranges are better adapted for sheep than cattle, and you can't keep Mary's little lamb away from those places. No use for a man to buck against the thing that's bound to be. Better get into the band-wagon and ride."

"That's what father thought," the girl confessed. "He never would have been the man to bring sheep in, but after they got into the country he saw it was a question of whether he was going to get the government reserve range for his sheep, or another man, some new-comer like Mr. Morse, for his. It was going to be sheep anyhow."

"Well, I'm glad your father took the chance he saw." He added reminiscently: "We got to be right good friends again last night before we parted."

She took the opening directly. "If you're so good a friend of his, you must not excite him about Mr. 71 Morse. You know he's a Southerner, and he is likely to do something rash—something we shall all be sorry for afterward."

"I reckon that will be all right," he said evasively.

Her eyes swept to his. "You won't get father into trouble will you?"

The warm, affectionate smile came back to his face, so that as he looked at her he seemed a sun-god. But again there was something in his gaze that was not the frankness of a comrade, some smoldering fire that strangely stirred her blood and yet left her uneasy.

"I'm not liable to bring trouble to those you love, girl. I stand by my friends."

Her pony began to move toward the house, and he

strode beside, as debonair and gallant a figure as ever filled the eye and the heart of a woman. The morning sun glow irradiated him, found its sparkling reflection in the dark curls of his bare head, in the bloom of his tanned cheeks, made a fit setting for the graceful picture of lingering youth his slim, muscular figure and springy stride personified. Small wonder the untaught girl beside him found the merely physical charm of him fascinating. If her instinct sometimes warned her to beware, her generous heart was eager to pay small heed to the monition except so far as concerned her father.

After breakfast he came into the office to see her before he left. 72

“Good-by for a day or two,” he said, offering his hand.

“You’re coming back again, are you?” she asked quietly, but not without a deeper dye in her cheeks.

“Yes, I’m coming back. Will you be glad to see me?”

“Why should I be glad? I hardly know you these days.”

“You’ll know me better before we’re through with each other.”

She would acknowledge no interest in him, the less because she knew it was there. “I may do that without liking you better.”

And suddenly his swift, winning smile flashed upon her. “But you’ve got to like me. I want you to.”

“Do you get everything you want?” she smiled back.

“If I want it enough, I usually do.”

“Then since you get so much, you’ll be better able to do without my liking.”

“I’m going to have it too.”

“Don’t be too sure.” She had a feeling that things were moving too fast, and she hailed the appearance of her father with relief. “Good morning, dad. Did you sleep well? Mr. Norris is just leaving.”

“Wait till I git a bite o’ breakfast and I’ll go with you, Phil,” promised Lee. “I got to ride over to Mesa anyhow some time this week.” 73

The girl watched them ride away, taking the road gait so characteristic of the Southwest. As long as they were in sight her gaze followed them, and when she could see nothing but a wide cloud of dust travelling across the mesa she went up to her room and sat down to think it out. Something new had come into her life. What, she did not yet know, but she tried to face the fact with the elemental frankness that still made her more like a boy than a woman. Sitting there before the looking-glass, she played absently with the thick braid of heavy, blue-black hair which hung across her shoulder to the waist. It came to her for the first time to wonder if she was pretty, whether she was going to be one of the women that men desire. Without the least vanity she studied herself, appraised the soft brown cheeks framed with ebon hair, the steady, dark eyes so quick to passion and to gaiety, the bronzed throat full and rounded, the supple, flowing grace of the unrestrained body.

Gradually a wave of color crept into her cheeks as she sat there with her chin on her little doubled hand. It was the charm of this Apollo of the plains that had set free such strange thoughts in her head. Why should she think of him? What did it matter whether she was good-looking? She shook herself resolutely together and went down to the business of

the day.

It was not long after midnight the next day that Champ Lee reached the ranch. His daughter came 74 out from her room in her night-dress to meet him.

“What kept you, Daddy?” she asked.

But before he could answer she knew. She read the signs too clearly to doubt that he had been drinking.

75

CHAPTER VI

“HANDS UP”

Melissy had been up the Cañ del Oro for wild poppies in her runabout and had just reached the ranch. She was disposing of her flowers in ollas when Jim Budd, waiter, chambermaid, and odd jobs man at the Bar Double G, appeared in the hall with a frightened, mysterious face.

“What’s the matter, Jim? You and Hop Ling been quarrelling again?” she asked carelessly.

“No’m, that ain’t it. It’s wusser’n that. I got to tell you-all su’thin’ I hearn yore paw say.”

The girl looked up quickly at him. “What do you mean, Jim?”

“That Mistah Norris he come back whilst you wus

away, and him and yore paw wus in that back room a-talkin' mighty confidential."

"Yes, and you listened. Well?"

Jim swelled with offended dignity. "No'm, I didn't listen neither. I des natcherally hearn, 'count of that hole fer the stovepipe what comes through the floor of my room."

"But what was it you heard?" she interrupted impatiently. 76

"I wus a-comin' to that. Plum proverdenshul, I draps into my room des as yore paw wus sayin', 'Twenty thousand dollars goin' down to the Fort on the stage to-day?' 'Cose I pricks up my ears then and tuk it all in. This yere Norris had foun' out that Mistah Morse was shippin' gold from his mine to-day on the Fort Allison stage, and he gits yore paw to go in with him an' hold it up. Yore paw cussed and said as how 't wus his gold anyhow by rights."

The girl went white and gave a little broken cry. "Oh, Jim! Are you sure?"

"Yas'm, 'cose I'm suah. Them's his ve'y words. Hope to die if they ain't. They wus drinkin', and when 't wus all fixed up that 't wus to be at the mouth of the Box Cañon they done tore an old black shirt you got for a dust-rag and made masks out of it and then rode away."

"Which way did they go?"

"Tow'ds the Box Cañon Miss M'lissy."

A slender, pallid figure of despair, she leaned against the wall to support the faintness that had so suddenly stolen the strength from her limbs, trying desperately to think of some way to save her father

from this madness. She was sure he would bungle it and be caught eventually, and she was equally sure he would never let himself be taken alive. Her helplessness groped for some way out. There must be some road of escape from this horrible 77 situation, and as she sought blindly for it the path opened before her.

“Where is Hop?” she asked quickly.

“A-sleepin’ in his room, ma’am.”

“Go to the store and tend it till I come back, Jim. I may be an hour, or mebbe two, but don’t you move out of it for a moment. And don’t ever speak of any of this, not a word, Jim.”

“No’m, ’cose I won’t.”

His loyalty she did not doubt an instant, though she knew his simple wits might easily be led to indiscretion. But she did not stay to say more now, but flew upstairs to the room that had been her brother’s before he left home. Scarce five minutes elapsed before she reappeared transformed. It was a slim youth garbed as a cowpuncher that now slipped along the passage to the rear, softly opened the door of the cook’s room, noiselessly abstracted the key, closed the door again as gently, and locked it from the outside. She ran into her own room, strapped on her revolver belt, and took her empty rifle from its case. As she ran through the room below the one Jim occupied, she caught sight of a black rag thrown carelessly into the fireplace and stuffed it into her pocket.

“That’s just like Dad to leave evidence lying around,” she said to herself, for even in the anxiety that was flooding her she kept her quiet commonsense.

After searching the horizon carefully to see that 78 nobody was in sight, she got into the rig and drove round the corral to the irrigating ditch. This was a wide lateral of the main canal, used to supply the whole lower valley with water, and just now it was empty. Melissy drove down into its sandy bed and followed its course as rapidly as she could. If she were only in time! If the stage had not yet passed! That was her only fear, the dread of being too late. Not once did the risk of the thing she intended occur to her. Physical fear had never been part of her. She had done the things her brother Dick had done. She was a reckless rider, a good shot, could tramp the hills or follow the round-up all day without knowing fatigue. If her flesh still held its girlish curves and softness, the muscles underneath were firm and compact. Often for her own amusement and that of her father she had donned her brother's chaps, his spurs, sombrero, and other paraphernalia, to masquerade about the house in them. She had learned to imitate the long roll of the vaquero's stride, the mannerisms common to his class, and even the heavy voice of a man. More than once she had passed muster as a young man in the shapeless garments she was now wearing. She felt confident that the very audacity of the thing would carry it off. There would be a guard for the treasure box, of course, but if all worked well he could be taken by surprise. Her rifle was not loaded, but the chances were a hundred to one that she would not need to use it. 79

For the first time in his life the roan got the whip from his mistress.

"Git up, Bob. We've got to hurry. It's for dad," she cried, as they raced through the sand and sent it

flying from the wheels.

The Fort Allison stage passed within three miles of the Lee ranch on its way to Mesa. Where the road met in intersection with the ditch she had chosen as the point for stopping it, and no veteran at the business could have selected more wisely, for a reason which will hereafter appear. Some fifty yards below this point of intersection the ditch ran through a grove of cottonwoods fringing the bank. Here the banks sloped down more gradually, and Melissy was able to drive up one side, turn her rig so that the horse faced the other way, and draw down into the ditch again in order that the runabout could not be seen from the road. Swiftly and skilfully she obliterated the track she had made in the sandy bank.

She was just finishing this when the sound of wheels came to her. Rifle in hand, she ran back along the ditch, stooping to pass under the bridge, and waited at the farther side in a fringe of bushes for the coming of the stage.

Even now fear had no place in the excitement which burned high in her. The girl's wits were fully alert, and just in time she remembered the need of a mask. Her searching fingers found the torn black shirt in a pocket and a knife in another. 80 Hastily she ripped the linen in half, cut out eyeholes, and tied the mask about her head. With perfectly steady hands she picked up the rifle from the ground and pushed the muzzle of it through the bushes.

Leisurely the stage rolled up-grade toward the crossing. The Mexican driver was half asleep and the "shotgun messenger" was indolently rolling a cigarette, his sawed-off gun between his knees. Alan McKinstra was the name of this last young

gentleman. Only yesterday he had gone to work for Morse, and this was the first job that had been given him. The stage never had been held up since the "Monte Cristo" had struck its pay-streak, and there was no reason to suppose it would be. Nevertheless, Morse proposed to err on the side of caution.

"I reckon the man that holds down this job don't earn his salt, José. It's what they call a sinecure," Alan was saying at the very instant the summons came.

"Throw up your hands!"

Sharp and crisp it fell on Alan's ears. He sat for a moment stunned, the half-rolled cigarette still between his fingers. The driver drew up his four horses with a jerk and brought them to a huddled halt.

"Hands up!" came again the stinging imperative.

Now, for the first time, it reached Alan's consciousness that the stage was actually being held up. He saw the sun shining on the barrel of a rifle 81 and through the bushes the masked face of a hidden cowpuncher. His first swift instinct was to give battle, and he reached for the shotgun between his knees. Simultaneously the driver's foot gave it a push and sent the weapon clattering to the ground. José at least knew better than to let him draw the road agent's fire while he sat within a foot of the driver. His hands went into the air, and after his Alan's and those of the two passengers.

"Throw down that box."

Alan lowered his hands and did as directed.

"Now reach for the stars again."

McKinstra's arms went skyward. Without his weapon, he was helpless to do otherwise. The young man had an odd sense of unreality about the affair, a feeling that it was not in earnest. The timbre of the fresh young voice that came from the bushes struck a chord in his memory, though for the life of him he could not place its owner.

"Drive on, José. Burn the wind and keep a-rollin' south."

The Mexican's whip coiled over the head of the leaders and the broncos sprang forward with a jump. It was the summit of a long hill, on the edge of which wound the road. Until the stage reached the foot of it there would be no opportunity to turn back. Round a bend of the road it swung at a gallop, and the instant it disappeared Melissy leaped from the bushes, lifted the heavy box, and carried it to the edge of the ditch. She flew down 82 the sandy bottom to the place where the rig stood, drove swiftly back again, and, though it took the last ounce of strength in her, managed to tumble the box into the trap.

Back to the road she went, and from the place where the box had fallen made long strides back to the bushes where she had been standing at the moment of the hold-up. These tracks she purposely made deep and large, returning in her first ones to the same point, but from the marks where the falling treasure box had struck into the road she carefully obliterated with her hand the foot-marks leading to the irrigation ditch, sifting the sand in carefully so as to leave no impression. This took scarcely a minute. She was soon back in her runabout, driving homeward fast as whip and voice could urge the horse.

She thought she could reason out what McKinstra and the stage-driver would do. Mesa was twenty-five miles distant, the "Monte Cristo" mine seventeen. Nearer than these points there was no telephone station except the one at the Lee ranch. Their first thought would be to communicate with Morse, with the officers at Mammoth, and with the sheriff of Mesa County. To do this as soon as possible they would turn aside and drive to the ranch after they reached the bottom of the hill and could make the turn. It was a long, steep hill, and Melissy estimated that this would give her a start of nearly twenty minutes. She would save about half a mile 83 by following the ditch instead of the road, but at best she knew she was drawing it very fine.

She never afterward liked to think of that drive home. It seemed to her that Bob crawled and that the heavy sand was interminable. Feverishly she plied the whip, and when at length she drew out of the ditch she sent her horse furiously round the big corral. Though she had planned everything to the last detail, she knew that any one of a hundred contingencies might spoil her plan. A cowpuncher lounging about the place would have ruined everything, or at best interfered greatly. But the windmill clicked over sunlit silence, empty of life. No stir or movement showed the presence of any human being.

Melissy drove round to the side door, dumped out the treasure-box, ran into the house, and quickly returned with a hammer and some tacks, then fell swiftly to ripping the oilcloth that covered the box which stood against the wall to serve as a handy wash-stand for use by dusty travellers before dining. The two boxes were of the same size and shape, and

she draped the treasure chest with the cloth, tacked it in place, restored to the top of it the tin basin, and tossed the former wash-stand among a pile of old boxes from the store, that were to be used for kindling. After this she ran upstairs, scudded softly along the corridor, and silently unlocked the cook's door, dropping the key on the floor to make it appear as if something had shaken 84 it from the keyhole. Presently she was in her brother's room, doffing his clothes and dressing herself in her own.

A glance out of the window sapped the color from her cheek, for she saw the stage breasting the hill scarce two hundred yards from the house. She hurried downstairs, pinning her belt as she ran, and flashed into the store, where Jim sat munching peanuts.

"The stage is coming, Jim. Remember, you're not to know anything about it at all. If they ask for Dad, say he's out cutting trail of a bunch of hill cows. Tell them I started after the wild flowers about fifteen minutes ago. Don't talk much about it, though. I'll be back inside of an hour."

With that she was gone, back to her trap, which she swung along a trail back of the house till it met the road a quarter of a mile above. Her actions must have surprised steady old Bob, for he certainly never before had seen his mistress in such a desperate hurry as she had been this day and still was. Nearly a mile above, a less well defined track deflected from the main road. Into this she turned, following it until she came to the head-gates of the lateral which ran through their place. The main canal was full of water, and after some effort she succeeded in opening the head-gates so as to let the water go pouring through.

Returning to the runabout, the girl drove across a kind of natural meadow to a hillside not far distant, 85 gathered a double handful of wild flowers, and turned homeward again. The stage was still there when she came in sight of the group of buildings at the ranch.

As she drew up and dismounted with her armful of flowers, Alan McKinstra stepped from the store to the porch and came forward to assist her.

“The Fort Allison stage has been robbed,” he blurted out.

“What nonsense! Who would want to rob it?” she retorted.

“Morse had a gold shipment aboard,” he explained in a low voice, and added in bitter self-condemnation: “He sent me along to guard it, and I never even fired a shot to save it.”

“But—do you mean that somebody held up the stage?” she gasped.

“Yes. But whoever it was can’t escape. I’ve ’phoned to Jack Flatray and to Morse. They’ll be right out here. The sheriff of Mesa County has already started with a posse. They’ll track him down. That’s a cinch. He can’t get away with the box without a rig. If he busts the box, he’s got to carry it on a horse and a horse leaves tracks.”

“But who do you think it was?”

“Don’t know. One of the Roaring Fork bunch of bad men, likely. But I don’t know.”

The young man was plainly very much excited and disturbed. He walked nervously up and down, 86 jerking his sentences out piecemeal as he thought of

them.

“Was there only one man? And did you see him?” Melissy asked breathlessly.

He scarcely noticed her excitement, or if he did, it seemed to him only natural under the circumstances.

“I expect there were more, but we saw only one. Didn’t see much of him. He was screened by the bushes and wore a black mask. So long as the stage was in sight he never moved from that place; just stood there and kept us covered.”

“But how could he rob you if he didn’t come out?” she asked in wide-eyed innocence.

“He didn’t rob *us* any. He must ’a’ heard of the shipment of gold, and that’s what he was after. After he’d got us to rights he made me throw the box down in the road. That’s where it was when he ordered us to move on and keep agoing.”

“And you went?”

“José handled the lines, but ’t would ’a’ been the same if I’d held them. That gun of his was a right powerful persuader.” He stopped to shake a fist in impotent fury in the air. “I wish to God I could meet up with him some day when he didn’t have the drop on me.”

“Maybe you will some time,” she told him soothingly. “I don’t think you’re a bit to blame, Alan. Nobody could think so. Ever so many times I’ve heard Dad say that when a man gets the drop on 87 you there’s nothing to do but throw up your hands.”

“Do you honest think so, Melissy? Or are you just saying it to take the sting away? Looks like I ought to ’a’ done something mor’n sit there like a bump on a

log while he walked off with the gold."

His cheerful self-satisfaction was under eclipse. The boyish pride of him was wounded. He had not "made good." All over Cattleland the news would be wafted on the wings of the wind that Alan McKinstra, while acting as shotgun messenger to a gold shipment, had let a road agent hold him up for the treasure he was guarding.

"Very likely they'll catch him and get the gold back," she suggested.

"That won't do me any good," he returned gloomily. "The only thing that can help me now is for me to git the fellow myself, and I might just as well look for a needle in a haystack."

"You can't tell. The robber may be right round here now." Her eyes, shining with excitement, passed the crowd moving in and out of the store, for already the news of the hold-up had brought riders and ranchmen jogging in to learn the truth of the wild tale that had reached them.

"More likely he's twenty miles away. But whoever he is, he knows this county. He made a slip and called José by his name."

Melissy's gaze was turned to the dust whirl that advanced up the road that ran round the corral. "That doesn't prove anything, Alan. Everybody 88 knows José. He's lived all over Arizona—at Tucson and Tombstone and Douglas."

"That's right too," the lad admitted.

The riders in advance of the dust cloud resolved themselves into the persons of her father and Norris. Her incautious admission was already troubling her.

“But I’m sure you’re right. No hold-up with any sense would stay around here and wait to be caught. He’s probably gone up into the Galiuros to hide.”

“Unless he’s cached the gold and is trying to throw off suspicion.”

The girl had moved forward to the end of the house with Alan to meet her father. At that instant, by the ironic humor of chance, her glance fell upon a certain improvised wash-stand covered with oilcloth. She shook her head decisively. “No, he won’t risk waiting to do that. He’ll make sure of his escape first.”

“I reckon.”

“Have you heard, Daddy?” Melissy called out eagerly. She knew she must play the part expected of her, that of a young girl much interested in this adventure which had occurred in the community.

He nodded grimly, swinging from the saddle. She observed with surprise that his eye did not meet hers. This was not like him.

“What do you think?”

His gaze met that of Norris before he answered, 89 and there was in it some hint of a great fear. “Beats me, ’Lissy.”

He had told the simple truth, but not the whole truth. The men had waited at the entrance to the Box Cañon for nearly two hours without the arrival of the stage. Deciding that something must have happened, they started back, and presently met a Mexican who stopped to tell them the news. To say that they were dazed is to put it mildly. To expect them to believe that somebody else had heard of the secret shipment and had held up the stage two miles from the place

they had chosen, was to ask a credulity too simple. Yet this was the fact that confronted them.

Arrived at the scene of the robbery both men had dismounted and had examined the ground thoroughly. What they saw tended still more to bewilder them. Neither of them was a tenderfoot, and the little table at the summit of the long hill told a very tangled tale to those who had eyes to read. Obvious tracks took them at once to the spot where the bandit had stood in the bushes, but there was something about them that struck both men as suspicious.

“Looks like these are worked out on purpose,” commented Lee. “The guy’s leaving too easy a trail to follow, and it quits right abrupt in the bushes. Must ’a’ took an airship from here, I ’low.”

“Does look funny. Hello! What’s this?” 90

Norris had picked up a piece of black cloth and was holding it out. A startled oath slipped from the lips of the Southerner. He caught the rag from the hands of his companion and studied it with a face of growing astonishment.

“What’s up?”

Lee dived into his pocket and drew forth the mask he had been wearing. Silently he fitted it to the other. The pieces matched exactly, both in length and in the figure of the pattern.

When the Southerner looked up his hands were shaking and his face ashen.

“For God’s sake, Phil, what does this mean?” he cried hoarsely.

“Search me.”

"It must have been—looks like the hold-up was somebody—my God, man, we left this rag at the ranch when we started!" the rancher whispered.

"That's right."

"We planned this thing right under the nigger's room. He must 'a' heard and—— But it don't look like Jim Budd to do a thing like that."

Norris had crossed the road again and was standing on the edge of the lateral.

"Hello! This ditch is full of water. When we passed down it was empty," he said.

Lee crossed over and stood by his side, a puzzled frown on his face. "There hadn't ought to be water running hyer now," he said, as if to himself. "I don't see how it could 'a' come hyer, for Bill Weston—he's 91 the ditch rider—went to Mesa this mo'ning, and couldn't 'a' got back to turn it in."

The younger man stooped and examined a foot-print at the edge of the ditch. It was the one Melissy had made just as she stepped into the rig.

"Here's something new, Lee. We haven't seen this gentleman's track before. Looks like a boy's. It's right firm and deep in this soft ground. I'll bet a cooky your nigger never made that track."

The Southerner crouched down beside him, and they looked at it together, head to head.

"No, it ain't Jim's. I don't rightly *savez* this thing at all," the old man muttered, troubled at this mystery which seemed to point to his household.

"By Moses, I've got it! The guy who did the holding up had his horse down here. He loaded the sack on its back and drove off up the ditch. All we got to do

is follow the ditch up or down till we come to the place where he climbed out and struck across country."

"That's right, Phil. He must have had a pardner up at the head-gates. They had some kind of signal arranged, and when Mr. Hold-up was ready down come the water and washed out his tracks. It's a blame' smooth piece of business if you ask me."

"The fellow made two bad breaks, though. That piece of shirt is one. This foot-print is another. They may land him in the pen yet."

"I don't think it," returned the old man with composure, and as he spoke his foot erased the telltale 92 print. "I 'low there won't anybody go to the pen for he'pin himself to Mr. Morse's gold dust. I don't give a cuss who it was."

Norris laughed in his low, easy way. "I'm with you, Mr. Lee. We'll make a thorough job while we're at it and mess up these other tracks. After that we'll follow the ditch up and see if there's anything doing."

They remounted their broncos and rode them across the tracks several times, then followed the lateral up, one on either side of the ditch, their eyes fastened to the ground to see any evidence of a horse having clambered over the bank. They drew in sight of the ranch house without discovering what they were looking for. Lee's heart was in his mouth, for he knew that he would see presently what his eye sought.

"I reckon the fellow went down instead of up," suggested Norris.

"No, he came up."

Lee had stopped and was studying wheel tracks that ran up from the ditch to his ranch house. His face was very white and set. He pointed to them with a shaking finger.

“There’s where he went in the ditch, and there’s where he came out.”

Norris forded the stream, cast a casual eye on the double track, and nodded. He was still in a fog of mystery, but the old man was already fearing the worst. 93

He gulped out his fears tremblingly. For himself, he was of a flawless nerve, but this touched nearer home than his own danger.

“Them wheel-tracks was made by my little gyurl’s runabout, Phil.”

“Good heavens!” The younger man drew rein sharply and stared at him. “You don’t think——”

He broke off, recalling the sharp, firm little foot-print on the edge of the ditch some miles below.

“I don’t reckon I know what to think. If she was in this, she’s got some good reason.” A wave of passion suddenly swept the father. “By God! I’d like to see the man that dares mix her name up in this.”

Norris met this with his friendly smile. “You can’t pick a row with me about that, old man. I’m with you till the cows come home. But that ain’t quite the way to go at this business. First thing, we’ve got to wipe out these tracks. How? Why, sheep! There’s a bunch of three hundred in that pasture. We’ll drive the bunch down to the ditch and water them here. *Savez?*”

“And wipe out the wheel-marks in the sand. Bully for

you, Phil."

"That's the idea. After twelve hundred chisel feet have been over this sand I reckon the wheel-tracks will be missing."

They rode up to the house, and the first thing that met them was the candid question of the girl: 94

"Have you heard, Daddy?"

And out of his troubled heart he had answered, "Beats me, 'Lissie."

"They've sent for the officers. Jack Flatray is on the way himself. So is Sheriff Burke," volunteered Alan gloomily.

"Getting right busy, ain't they?" Norris sneered.

Again Lee glanced quickly at Norris. "I reckon, Phil, we better drive that bunch of sheep down to water right away. I clean forgot them this mo'ning."

"Sure." The younger man was not so easily shaken. He turned to McKinstra naturally. "How many of the hold-ups were there?"

"I saw only one, and didn't see him very good. He was a slim fellow in a black mask."

"You don't say. Were you the driver?"

Alan felt the color suffuse his face. "No, I was the guard."

"Oh, you were the guard."

Alan felt the suave irony that covered this man's amusement, and he resented it impotently. When Melissy came to his support he was the more grateful.

"And we all think he did just right in using his

common sense, Mr. Norris," the girl flashed.

"Oh, certainly."

And with that he was gone after her father to help him water the sheep.

"I don't see why those sheep have to be watered 95 right now," she frowned to Alan. "Dad *did* water them this morning. I helped him."

Together they went into the store, where José was telling his story for the sixth time to a listening circle of plainsmen.

"And right then he come at you and ree-quested yore whole outfit to poke a hole in the scenery with yore front feet?" old Dave Ellis asked just as Melissy entered.

"*Si, Señor.*"

"One of MacQueen's Roaring Fork gang did it, I'll bet," Alan contributed sourly.

"What kind of a lookin' guy was he?" spoke up a dark young man known as Bob Farnum.

"A big man, *señor*, and looked a ruffian."

"They're always that way until you run 'em down," grinned Ellis. "Never knew a hold-up wasn't eight foot high and then some—to the fellow at the wrong end of the gun."

"If you mean to say, Dave Ellis, that I lay down to a bluff——" Alan was beginning hotly when the old frontiersman interrupted.

"Keep your shirt on, McKinstra. I don't mean to say it. Nobody but a darn fool makes a gun-play when the cards are stacked that-a-way. Yore bad play was in reaching for the gun at all."

“Well, Jack Flatray will git him. I’ll bet a stack of blues on that,” contributed a fat ranchman wheezily. 96

“Unless you mussed up the trail coming back,” said Ellis to the stage-driver.

“We didn’t. I thought of that, and I had José drive clear round the place. Jack will find it all right unless there’s too much travel before he gets here,” said Alan.

Farnum laughed malevolently. “Mebbe he’ll get him and mebbe he won’t. Jack’s human, like the rest of us, if he is the best sheriff in Arizona. Here’s hoping he don’t get him. Any man that waltzes out of the cactus and appropriates twenty thousand dollars belonging to Mr. Morse is welcome to it for all of me. I don’t care if he is one of MacQueen’s bad men. I wish it had been forty thousand.”

Farnum did not need to explain the reasons for his sentiments. Everybody present knew that he was the leader of that bunch of cattlemen who had bunched themselves together to resist the encroachments of sheep upon the range. Among these the feeling against Morse was explosively dangerous. It had found expression in more than one raid upon his sheep. Many of them had been destroyed by one means or another, but Morse, with the obstinacy characteristic of him, had replaced them with others and continually increased his herds. There had been threats against his life, and one of his herders had been wounded. But the mine-owner went his way with quiet fearlessness and paid no attention to the animosity he had stirred up. The general feeling was that the trouble must soon come to a head. 97 Nobody expected the rough and ready vaqueros, reckless and impulsive as they were, to submit to the

loss of the range, which meant too the wiping out of their means of livelihood, without a bitter struggle that would be both lawless and bloody.

Wherefore there was silence after Farnum had spoken, broken at length by the amiable voice of the fat ranchman, Baker.

“Well, we’ll see what we’ll see,” he wheezed complacently. “And anyways I got to have some horseshoe plug, Melissy.”

The girl laughed nervously as she reached for what he wanted. “You’re a safe prophet, Mr. Baker,” she said.

“He’d be a safe one if he’d prophesy that Jack Flatray would have Mr. Hold-up in the calaboose inside of three days,” put in a half-grown lad in leathers.

“I ain’t so sure about that. You’ll have to show me, and so will Mr. Deputy Sheriff Flatray,” retorted Farnum.

A shadow darkened the doorway.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen all—and Miss Lee,” a pleasant voice drawled.

The circle of eyes focused on the new-comer and saw a lean, muscular, young fellow of medium height, cool and alert, with the dust of the desert on every sunbaked inch of him.

“I’m damned if it ain’t Jack here already!” gasped Baker.

98

CHAPTER VII

WATERING SHEEP

The deputy glanced quietly round, nodded here and there at sight of the familiar face of an acquaintance, and spoke to the driver.

“Let’s hear you say your little piece again, José.”

The Mexican now had it by heart, and he pattered off the thing from beginning to end without a pause. Melissy, behind the counter, leaned her elbows on it and fastened her eyes on the boyish face of the officer. In her heart she was troubled. How much did he know? What could he discover from the evidence she had left? He had the reputation of being the best trailer and the most fearless officer in Arizona. But surely she had covered her tracks safely.

From José the ranger turned to Alan. “We’ll hear your account of it now, seh,” he said gently.

While Alan talked, Jack’s gaze drifted through the window to the flock of sheep that were being driven up from the ditch by Lee and Norris. That little pastoral scene had its significance for him. He 99 had arrived at the locality of the hold-up a few minutes after they had left, and his keen intelligence had taken in some of the points they had observed. A rapid circuit of the spot at the distance of thirty

yards had shown him no tracks leading from the place except those which ran up the lateral on either side of it. It was possible that these belonged to the horses of the robbers, but if so the fellows were singularly careless of detection. Moreover, the booty must be accounted for. They had not carried it with them, since no empty box remained to show that they had poured the gold into sacks, and it would have been impossible to take the box as it was on a horse. Nor had they buried it, unless at the bottom of the irrigating ditch, for some signs of their work must have remained.

Balancing probabilities, it had seemed to Flatray that these might be the tracks of ranchmen who had arrived after the hold-up and were following the escaping bandits up the lateral. For unless these were the robber's, there was no way of escape except either up or down the bottom of the ditch. His search had eliminated the possibility of any other but the road, and this was travelled too frequently to admit of even a chance of escape by it without detection. Jack filed away one or two questions in his brain for future reference. The most important of these was to discover whether there had been any water in the ditch at the time of the hold-up.

He had decided to follow the tracks leading up 100 the ditch and found no difficulty in doing so at a fast walk. Without any hesitation they paralleled the edge of the lateral. Nor had the deputy travelled a quarter of a mile before he made a discovery. The rider on the right hand side of the stream had been chewing tobacco, and he had a habit of splashing his mark on boulders he passed in the form of tobacco juice. Half a dozen times before he reached the Lee ranch the ranger saw this signature of identity writ

large on smooth rocks shining in the sun. The last place he saw it was at the point where the two riders deflected from the lateral toward the ranch house, following tracks which led up from the bottom of the ditch.

An instant later Flatray had dodged back into the chaparral, for somebody was driving a flock of sheep down to the ditch. He made out that there were two riders behind them, and that they had no dog. For the present his curiosity was satisfied. He thought he knew why they were watering sheep in this odd fashion. Swiftly he had made a circuit, drawn rein in front of the store, and dropped in just in time to hear his name. Now, as with one ear he listened to Alan's account of the hold-up, with his subconscious mind he was with the sheep-herders who were driving the flock back into the pasture.

"Looks like our friend the bad man was onto his job all right," was the deputy's only comment when Alan had finished.

"I'll bet he's making his getaway into the hills 101 mighty immediate," chuckled Baker. "He can't find a bank in the mountainside to deposit that gold any too soon to suit him."

"Sho! I'll bet he ain't worried a mite. He's got his arrangements all made, and likely they'll dovetail to suit him. He's put his brand on that gold to stay," answered Farnum confidently.

Jack's mild blue eyes rested on him amiably. "Think so, Bob?"

"I ain't knockin' you any, Jack. You're all right. But that's how I figure it out, and, by Gad! I'm hopin' it too," Farnum made answer recklessly.

Flatray laughed and strolled from the crowded room to the big piazza. A man had just cantered up and flung himself from his saddle. The ranger, looking at him, thought he had never seen another so strikingly handsome an Apollo. Black eyes looked into his from a sun-tanned face perfectly modelled. The pose of the head and figure would have delighted a sculptor.

There was a vigor, an unspoken hostility, in the gaze of both men.

“Mo’nin”, Mr. Deputy Sheriff, one said; and the other, “Same to you, Mr. Norris.”

“You’re on the job quick,” sneered the cattle detective.

“The quicker the sooner, I expect.”

“And by night you’ll have Mr. Hold-up roped and hog-tied?” 102

“Not so you could notice it. Are you a sheep-herder these days, Mr. Norris?”

The gentle irony of this was not lost on its object, for in the West a herder of sheep is the next remove from a dumb animal.

“No, I’m riding for the Quarter Circle K Bar outfit. This is the first time I ever took the dust of a sheep in my life. I did it to oblige Mr. Lee.”

“Oh! To oblige Mr. Lee?”

“He wanted to water them, and his herder wasn’t here.”

“Must ’a’ been wanting water mighty bad, I reckon,” commented Jack amiably.

“You bet! Lee feels better satisfied now he’s watered them.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

Norris changed the subject. “You must have burnt the wind getting here. I didn’t expect to see you for some hours.”

“I happened to be down at Yeager’s ranch, and one of the boys got me on the line from Mesa.”

“Picked up any clues yet?” asked the other carelessly, yet always with that hint of a sneer; and innocently Flatray answered, “They seem to be right seldom.”

“Didn’t know but you’d happened on the fellow’s trail.”

“I guess I’m as much at sea as you are,” was the equivocal answer. 103

Lee came over from the stable, still wearing spurs and gauntlets.

“Howdy, Jack!” he nodded, not quite so much at his ease as usual. “Got hyer on the jump, didn’t you?”

“I kept movin’.”

“This shorely beats hell, don’t it?” Lee glanced around, selected a smooth boulder, and fired his discharge of tobacco juice at it true to the inch. “Reminds me of the old days. You boys ain’t old enough to recall them, but stage hold-ups were right numerous then.”

Blandly the deputy looked from one to the other. “I don’t suppose either of you gentlemen happen to have been down and looked over the ground where the hold-up was? The tracks were right cut up before I got there.”

This center shot silenced Lee for an instant, but Norris was on the spot with smiling ease.

"No, Mr. Lee and I have been hunting strays on the mesa. We didn't hear about it till a few minutes ago. We're at your service, though, Mr. Sheriff, to join any posses you want to send out."

"Much obliged. I'm going to send one out toward the Galiuros in a few minutes now. I'll be right glad to have you take charge of it, Mr. Norris."

The derisive humor in the newly appointed deputy's eyes did not quite reach the surface.

"Sure. Whenever you want me." 104

"I'm going to send Alan McKinstra along to guide you. He knows that country like a book. You want to head for the lower pass, swing up Diable Cañon, and work up in the headquarters of the Three Forks."

Within a quarter of an hour the posse was in motion. Flatray watched it disappear in the dust of the road without a smile. He had sent them out merely to distract the attention of the public and to get rid of as many as possible of the crowd. For he was quite as well aware as the leader of the posse that this search in the Galiuros was a wild-goose chase. Somewhere within three hundred yards of the place he stood both the robber and his booty were in all probability to be found.

Flatray was quite right in his surmise, since Melissy Lee, who had come out to see the posse off, was standing at the end of the porch with her dusky eyes fastened on him, the while he stood beside the house with one foot resting negligently on the oilcloth cover of the wash-stand.

She had cast him out of her friendship because of his unworthiness, but there was a tumult in her heart at sight of him. No matter how her judgment

condemned him as a villain, some instinct in her denied the possibility of it. She was torn in conflict between her liking for him and her conviction that he deserved only contempt. Somehow it hurt her too that he accepted without protest her verdict, appeared so willing to be a stranger to her. 105

Now that the actual physical danger of her adventure was past, Melissy was aware too of a chill dread lurking at her heart. She was no longer buoyed up by the swiftness of action which had called for her utmost nerve. There was nothing she could do now but wait, and waiting was of all things the one most foreign to her impulsive temperament. She acknowledged too some fear of this quiet, soft-spoken frontiersman. All Arizona knew not only the daredevil spirit that fired his gentleness, but the competence with which he set about any task he assigned himself. She did not see how he *could* unravel this mystery. She had left no clues behind her, she felt sure of that, and yet was troubled lest he guessed at her secret behind that mask of innocence he wore. He did not even remotely guess it as yet, but he was far closer to the truth than he pretended. The girl knew she should leave him and go about her work. Her rôle was to appear as inconspicuous as possible, but she could not resist the fascination of trying to probe his thoughts.

“I suppose your posse will come back with the hold-ups in a few hours. Will it be worth while to wait for them?” she asked with amiable derision.

The ranger had been absorbed in thought, his chin in his hand, but he brought his gaze back from the distance to meet hers. What emotion lay behind those cold eyes she could not guess.

“You’re more hopeful than I am, Miss Lee.”

“What are you sending them out for, then?” 106

“Oh, well, the boys need to work off some of their energy, and there’s always a show they might happen onto the robbers.”

“Do you think some of the Roaring Fork gang did it?”

“Can’t say.”

“I suppose you are staying here in the hope that they will drop in and deliver themselves to you.”

He looked at her out of an expressionless face. “That’s about it, I reckon. But what I tell the public is that I’m staying so as to be within telephone connection. You see, Sheriff Burke is moving up to cut them off from the Catalinas, Jackson is riding out from Mammoth to haid them off that way, these anxious lads that have just pulled out from here are taking care of the Galiuros. I’m supposed to be sitting with my fingers on the keys as a sort of posse dispatcher.”

“Well, I hope you won’t catch them,” she told him bluntly.

“That seems to be a prevailing sentiment round here. You say it right hearty too; couldn’t be more certain of your feelings if it had been your own father.”

He said it carelessly, yet with his keen blue eyes fixed on her. Nevertheless, he was totally unprepared for the effect of his words. The color washed from her bronzed cheeks, and she stood staring at him with big, fear-filled eyes. 107

“What—what do you mean?” she gasped. “How dare you say that?”

“I ain’t said anything so terrible. You don’t need to take it to heart like that.” He gave her a faint smile

for an instant. “I’m not really expecting to arrest Mr. Lee for holding up that stage.”

The color beat back slowly into her face. She knew she had made a false move in taking so seriously his remark.

“I don’t think you ought to joke about a thing like that,” she said stiffly.

“All right. I’ll not say it next time till I’m in earnest,” he promised as he walked away.

“I wonder if he really meant anything,” the girl was thinking in terror, and he, “she knows something; now, I would like to know what.”

Melissy attended to her duties in the postoffice after the arrival of the stage, and looked after the dining-room as usual, but she was all the time uneasily aware that Jack Flatray had quietly disappeared. Where had he gone? And why? She found no answer to that question, but the ranger dropped in on his bronco in time for supper, imperturbable and self-contained as ever.

“Think I’ll stay all night if you have a room for me,” he told her after he had eaten.

“We have a room,” she said. “What more have you heard about the stage robbery?”

“Nothing, Miss Lee.”

“Oh, I thought maybe you had,” she murmured 108 tremulously, for his blue eyes were unwaveringly upon her and she could not know how much or how little he might mean.

Later she saw him sitting on the fence, holding genial converse with Jim Budd. The waiter was flashing a double row of white teeth in deep laughter at

something the deputy had told him. Evidently they were already friends. When she looked again, a few minutes later, she knew Jack had reached the point where he was pumping Jim and the latter was disseminating misinformation. That the negro was stanch enough, she knew, but she was on the anxious seat lest his sharp-witted inquisitor get what he wanted in spite of him. After he had finished with Budd the ranger drifted around to the kitchen in time to intercept Hop Ling casually as he came out after finishing his evening's work. The girl was satisfied Flatray could not have any suspicion of the truth. Nevertheless, she wished he would let the help alone. He might accidentally stumble on something that would set him on the right track.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BOONE-BELLAMY FEUD IS RENEWED

"Here's six bits on the counter under a seed catalogue. Did you leave it here, daddy?"

Champ Lee, seated on the porch just outside the store door, took the pipe from his mouth and answered:

"Why no, honey, I don't reckon I did, not to my ricollection."

"That's queer. I know I didn't——"

Melissy broke her sentence sharply. There had come into her eyes a spark of excitement, simultaneous with the brain-flash which told her who had left the money. No doubt the quarter and the half dollar had been lying there ever since the day last week when Morse had eaten at the Bar Double G. She addressed an envelope, dropped the money in, sealed the flap, and put the package beside a letter addressed to T. L. Morse.

Lee, full of an unhappy restlessness which he could not control, presently got up and moved away to the stables. He was blaming himself bitterly for the events of the past few days.

It was perhaps half an hour later that Melissy 110 looked up to see the sturdy figure of Morse in the doorway. During the past year he had filled out, grown stronger and more rugged. His deep tan and heavy stride pronounced him an outdoor man no less surely than the corduroy suit and the high laced miners' boots.

He came forward to the postoffice window without any sign of recognition.

"Is Mr. Flatray still here?"

"No!" Without further explanation Melissy took from the box the two letters addressed to Morse and handed them to him.

The girl observed the puzzled look that stole over his face at sight of the silver in one envelope. A glance at the business address printed on the upper left hand corner enlightened him. He laid the money down in the stamp window.

"This isn't mine."

“You heard what my father said?”

“That applies to next time, not to this.”

“I think it does apply to this time.”

“I can’t see how you’re going to make me take it back. I’m an obstinate man.”

“Just as you like.”

A sudden flush of anger swept her. She caught up the silver and flung it through the open window into the dusty road.

His dark eyes met hers steadily and a dull color burned in his tanned cheeks. Without a word he turned away, and instantly she regretted what she 111 had done. She had insulted him deliberately and put herself in the wrong. At bottom she was a tender-hearted child, even though her father and his friends had always spoiled her, and she could not but reproach herself for the hurt look she had brought into his strong, sad face. He was their enemy, of course, but even enemies have rights.

Morse walked out of the office looking straight before him, his strong back teeth gripped so that the muscles stood out on his salient jaw. Impulsively the girl ran around the counter after him.

He looked up from untying his horse to see her straight and supple figure running toward him. Her eager face was full of contrition and the color of pink rose petals came and went in it.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Morse. I oughtn’t to have done that. I hurt your feelings,” she cried.

At best he was never a handsome man, but now his deep, dark eyes lit with a glow that surprised her.

“Thank you. Thank you very much,” he said in a low

voice.

“I’m so tempery,” she explained in apology, and added: “I suppose a nice girl wouldn’t have done it.”

“A nice girl did do it,” was all he could think to say.

“You needn’t take the trouble to say that. I know I’ve just scrambled up and am not ladylike and proper. Sometimes I don’t care. I like to be able 112 to do things like boys. But I suppose it’s dreadful.”

“I don’t think it is at all. None of your friends could think so. Not that I include myself among them,” he hastened to disclaim. “I can’t be both your friend and your enemy, can I?”

The trace of a sardonic smile was in his eyes. For the moment as she looked at him she thought he might. But she answered:

“I don’t quite see how.”

“You hate me, I suppose,” he blurted out bluntly.

“I suppose so.” And more briskly she added, with dimples playing near the corners of her mouth: “Of course I do.”

“That’s frank. It’s worth something to have so decent an enemy. I don’t believe you would shoot me in the back.”

“Some of the others would. You should be more careful,” she cried before she could stop herself.

He shrugged. “I take my fighting chance.”

“It isn’t much of a one. You’ll be shot at from ambush some day.”

“It wouldn’t be a new experience. I went through it last week.”

“Where?” she breathed.

“Down by Willow Wash.”

“Who did it?”

He laughed, without amusement. “I didn’t have my rifle with me, so I didn’t stay to inquire.”

“It must have been some of those wild vaqueros.” 113

“That was my guess.”

“But you have other enemies, too.”

“Miss Lee,” he smiled.

“I mean others that are dangerous.”

“Your father?” he asked.

“Father would never do that except in a fair fight. I wasn’t thinking of him.”

“I don’t know whom you mean, but a few extras don’t make much difference when one is so liberally supplied already,” he said cynically.

“I shouldn’t make light of them if I were you,” she cautioned.

“Who do you mean?”

“I’ve said all I’m going to, and more than I ought,” she told him decisively. “Except this, that it’s your own fault. You shouldn’t be so stiff. Why don’t you compromise? With the cattlemen, for instance. They have a good deal of right on their side. They *did* have the range first.”

“You should tell that to your father, too.”

“Dad runs sheep on the range to protect himself. He doesn’t drive out other people’s cattle and take away their living.”

"Well, I might compromise, but not at the end of a gun."

"No, of course not. Here comes dad now," she added hurriedly, aware for the first time that she had been holding an extended conversation with her father's foe. 114

"We started enemies and we quit enemies. Will you shake hands on that, Miss Lee?" he asked.

She held out her hand, then drew it swiftly back. "No, I can't. I forgot. There's another reason."

"Another reason! You mean the Arkansas charge against me?" he asked quietly.

"No. I can't tell you what it is." She felt herself suffused in a crimson glow. How could she explain that she could not touch hands with him because she had robbed him of twenty thousand dollars?

Lee stopped at the steps, astonished to see his daughter and this man in talk together. Yesterday he would have resented it bitterly, but now the situation was changed. Something of so much greater magnitude had occurred that he was too perturbed to cherish his feud for the present. All night he had carried with him the dreadful secret he suspected. He could not look Melissy in the face, nor could he discuss the robbery with anybody. The one fact that overshadowed all others was that his little girl had gone out and held up a stage, that if she were discovered she would be liable to a term in the penitentiary. Laboriously his slow brain had worked it all out. A talk with Jim Budd had confirmed his conclusions. He knew that she had taken this risk in order to save him. He was bowed down with his unworthiness, with shame that he had dragged her into this horrible tangle. He was convinced that Jack

Flatray would get at the truth, 115 and already he was resolved to come forward and claim the whole affair as his work.

“I’ve been apologizing to Mr. Morse for insulting him, dad,” the girl said immediately.

Her father passed a bony hand slowly across his unshaven chin. “That’s right, honey. If you done him a meanness, you had ought to say so.”

“She has said so very handsomely, Mr. Lee,” spoke up Morse.

“I’ve been warning him, dad, that he ought to be more careful how he rides around alone, with the cattlemen feeling the way they do.”

“It’s a fact they feel right hot under the collar. You’re ce’tainly a temptation to them, Mr. Morse,” the girl’s father agreed.

The mine owner shifted the subject of conversation. He was not a man of many impulses, but he yielded to one now.

“Can’t we straighten out this trouble between us, Mr. Lee? You think I’ve done you an injury. Perhaps I have. If we both mean what’s right, we can get together and fix it up in a few minutes.”

The old Southerner stiffened and met him with an eye of jade. “I ain’t asking any favors of you, Mr. Morse. We’ll settle this matter some day, and settle it right. But you can’t buy me off. I’ll not take a bean from you.”

The miner’s eyes hardened. “I’m not trying to buy you off. I made a fair offer of peace. Since you have rejected it, there is nothing more to be 116 said.” With that he bowed stiffly and walked away, leading

his horse.

Lee's gaze followed him and slowly the eyes under the beetled brows softened.

"Mebbe I done wrong, honey. Mebbe I'd ought to have given in. I'm too proud to compromise when he's got me beat. That's what's ailin' with me. But I reckon I'd better have knuckled under."

The girl slipped her arm through his. "Sometimes I'm just like that too, daddy. I've just *got* to win before I make up. I don't blame you a mite, but, all the same, we should have let him fix it up."

It was characteristic of them both that neither thought of reversing the decision he had made. It was done now, and they would abide by the results. But already both of them half regretted, though for very different reasons. Lee was thinking that for Melissy's sake he should have made a friend of the man he hated, since it was on the cards that within a few days she might be in his power. The girl's feeling, too, was unselfish. She could not forget the deep hunger for friendship that had shone in the man's eyes. He was alone in the world, a strong man surrounded by enemies who would probably destroy him in the end. There was stirring in her heart a sweet womanly pity and sympathy for the enemy whose proffer of friendship had been so cavalierly rejected.

The sight of a horseman riding down the trail 117 from the Flagstaff mine shook Melissy into alertness.

"Look, dad. It's Mr. Norris," she cried.

Morse, who had not yet recognized him, swung to the saddle, his heart full of bitterness. Every man's hand was against his, and every woman's. What was

there in his nature that turned people against him so inevitably? There seemed to be some taint in him that corroded all natural human kindness.

A startled oath brought him from his somber reflections. He looked up, to see the face of a man with whom in the dead years of the past he had been in bitter feud.

Neither of them spoke. Morse looked at him with a face cold as chiselled marble and as hard. The devil's own passion burned in the storm-tossed one of the other.

Norris was the first to break the silence.

"So it was all a lie about your being killed, Dick Bellamy."

The mine owner did not speak, but the rigor of his eyes did not relax.

"Gave it out to throw me off your trail, did you? Knew mighty well I'd cut the heart out of the man who shot poor Shep." The voice of the cattle detective rang out in malignant triumph. "You guessed it c'rect, seh. Right here's where the Boone-Bellamy feud claims another victim."

The men were sitting face to face, so close that 118 their knees almost touched. As Norris jerked out his gun Bellamy caught his wrist. They struggled for an instant, the one to free his arm, the other to retain his grip. Bellamy spurred his horse closer. The more powerful of the two, he slowly twisted around the imprisoned wrist. Inch by inch the revolver swung in a jerky, spasmodic circle. There was a moment when it pointed directly at the mine owner's heart. His enemy's finger crooked on the trigger, eyes passionate with the stark lust to kill. But the pressure

on the wrist had numbed the hand. The weapon jumped out of line, went clattering down into the dust from the palsied fingers.

Lee ran forward and pushed between the men.

“Here. Ain’t you boys got ary bettah sense than to clinch like wildcats?” he demanded, jerking one of the horses away by the bridle. “No, you don’t, Phil. I’ll take keer of this gun for the present.” It was noticeable that Beauchamp Lee’s speech grew more after the manner of the plantations when he became excited.

The cowpuncher, white with anger, glared at his enemy and poured curses at him, the while he nursed his strained wrist. For the moment he was impotent, but he promised himself vengeance in full when they should meet again.

“That’ll be enough from you now, Phil,” said the old ex-Confederate good-naturedly, leading him toward the house and trying to soothe his malevolent chagrin. 119

Bellamy turned and rode away. At the corner of the corral he met Jack Flatray riding up.

“Been having a little difference of opinion with our friend, haven’t you, seh?” the deputy asked pleasantly.

“Yes.” Bellamy gave him only the crisp monosyllable and changed the subject immediately. “What about this stage robbery? Have you been able to make anything of it, Mr. Flatray?”

“Why, yes. I reckon we’ll be able to land the miscreant mebbe, if things come our way,” drawled the deputy. “Wouldn’t it be a good idea to offer a reward, though, to keep things warm?”

“I thought of that. I made it a thousand dollars. The posters ought to be out to-day on the stage.”

“Good enough!”

“Whom do you suspect?”

Jack looked at him with amiable imperturbability. “I reckon I better certify my suspicions, seh, before I go to shouting them out.”

“All right, sir. Since I’m paying the shot, it ought to entitle me to some confidence. But it’s up to you. Get back the twenty thousand dollars, that’s all I ask, except that you put the fellow behind the bars of the penitentiary for a few years.”

Flatray gave him an odd smile which he did not understand.

“I hope to be able to accommodate you, seh, about this time to-morrow, so far as getting the gold 120 goes. You’ll have to wait a week or two before the rest of your expectations get gratified.”

“Any reasonable time. I want to see him there eventually. That’s all.”

Jack laughed again, without giving any reason for his mirth. That ironic smile continued to decorate his face for some time. He seemed to have some inner source of mirth he did not care to disclose.

CHAPTER IX

THE DANGER LINE

Though Champ Lee had business in Mesa next day that would not be denied, he was singularly loath to leave the ranch. He wanted to stay close to Melissy until the dénouement of the hunt for the stage robber. On the other hand, it was well known that his contest with Morse for the Monte Cristo was up for a hearing. To stay at home would have been a confession of his anxiety that he did not want to make. But it was only after repeated charges to his daughter to call him up by telephone immediately if anything happened that he could bring himself to ride away.

He was scarcely out of sight when a Mexican vaquero rode in with the information that old Antonio, on his way to the post at Three Pines with a second drove of sheep, had twisted his ankle badly about fifteen miles from the ranch. After trying in vain to pick up a herder at Mesa by telephone, Melissy was driven to the only feasible course left her, to make the drive herself in place of Antonio. There were fifteen hundred sheep in the bunch, and 122 they must be taken care of at once by somebody competent for the task. She knew she could handle them, for it had amused her to take charge of a herd often for an hour or two at a time. The long stretch over the desert would be wearisome and monotonous, but she had the slim, muscular tenacity of a half-grown boy. It did not matter what she wanted to do. The thing to which she came back always was that the sheep must be taken care of.

She left directions with Jim for taking care of the place, changed to a khaki skirt and jacket, slapped a saddle on her bronco, and disappeared across country among the undulations of the sandhills. A tenderfoot would have been hopelessly lost in the sameness of these hills and washes, but Melissy knew them as a city dweller does his streets. Straight as an arrow she went to her mark. The tinkle of distant sheep-bells greeted her after some hours' travel, and soon the low, ceaseless bleating of the herd.

The girl found Antonio propped against a piñon tree, solacing himself philosophically with cigarettes. He was surprised to see her, but made only a slight objection to her taking his place. His ankle was paining him a good deal, and he was very glad to get the chance to pull himself to her saddle and ride back to the ranch.

A few quick words sent the dog Colin out among 123 the sheep, by now scattered far and wide over the hill. They presently came pouring toward her, diverged westward, and massed at the base of a butte rising from a dry arroyo. The journey had begun, and hour after hour it continued through the hot day, always in a cloud of dust flung up by the sheep, sometimes through the heavy sand of a wash, often over slopes of shale, not seldom through thick cactus beds that shredded her skirt and tore like fierce, sharp fingers at her legging-protected ankles. The great gray desert still stretched before her to the horizon's edge, and still she flung the miles behind her with the long, rhythmic stride that was her birthright from the hills. A strong man, unused to it, would have been staggering with stiff fatigue, but this slender girl held the trail with light grace, her weight still carried springily on her small ankles.

Once she rested for a few minutes, flinging herself down into the sand at length, her head thrown back from the full brown throat so that she could gaze into the unstained sky of blue. Presently the claims of this planet made themselves heard, for she, too, was elemental and a creature of instinct. The earth was awake and palpitating with life, the low, indefatigable life of creeping things and vegetation persisting even in this waste of rock and sand.

But she could not rest long, for Diablo Cañon must be reached before dark. The sheep would be 124 very thirsty by the time they arrived, and she could not risk letting them tear down the precipitous edge among the sharp rocks in the dark. Already over the sand stretches a peculiar liquid glow was flooding, so that the whole desert seemed afire. The burning sun had slipped behind a saddle of the purple peaks, leaving a brilliant horizon of many mingled shades.

It was as she came forward to the cañon's edge in this luminous dusk that Melissy became aware of a distant figure on horseback, silhouetted for a moment against the skyline. One glance was all she got of it, for she was very busy with the sheep, working them leisurely toward the black chasm that seemed to yawn for them. High rock walls girt the cañon, gigantic and bottomless in the gloom. A dizzy trail zigzagged back and forth to the pool below, and along this she and the collie skilfully sent the eager, thirsty animals.

The mass of the sheep were still huddled on the edge of the ravine when there came the thud of horses' hoofs and the crack of revolvers, accompanied by hoarse, triumphant yells and cries. Melissy knew instantly what it was—the attack of cattlemen upon her defenseless flock. They had waited until the

sheep were on the edge of the precipice, and now they were going to drive the poor creatures down upon the rocks two hundred feet below. Her heart leaped to her throat, but scarce more 125 quickly than she upon a huge boulder bordering the trail.

“Back! Keep back!” she heard herself crying, and even as she spoke a bullet whistled through the rim of her felt hat.

Standing there boldly, unconscious of danger, the wind draped and defined the long lines of her figure like those of the Winged Victory.

The foremost rider galloped past, waving his sombrero and shooting into the frightened mass in front of him. Within a dozen feet of her he turned his revolver upon the girl, then, with an oath of recognition, dragged his pony back upon its haunches. Another horse slithered into it, and a third.

“It’s ’Lissie Lee!” a voice cried in astonishment; and another, with a startled oath, “You’re right, Bob!”

The first rider gave his pony the spur, swung it from the trail in a half-circle which brought it back at the very edge of the ravine, and blocked the forward pour of terror-stricken sheep. Twice his revolver rang out. The girl’s heart stood still, for the man was Norris, and it seemed for an instant as if he must be swept over the precipice by the stampede. The leaders braced themselves to stop, but were slowly pushed forward toward the edge. One of the other riders had by this time joined the daring cowpuncher, and together they stemmed the tide. The pressure on the trail 126 relaxed and the sheep began to mill around and around.

It was many minutes before they were sufficiently

quieted to trust upon the trail again, but at last the men got them safely to the bottom, with the exception of two or three killed in the descent.

Her responsibility for the safety of the sheep gone, the girl began to crawl down the dark trail. She could not see a yard in front of her, and at each step the path seemed to end in a gulf of darkness. She could not be sure she was on the trail at all, and her nerve was shaken by the experience through which she had just passed. Presently she stopped and waited, for the first time in her life definitely and physically afraid. She stood there trembling, a long, long time it seemed to her, surrounded by the impenetrable blackness of night.

Then a voice came to her.

“Melissy!”

She answered, and the voice came slowly nearer.

“You’re off the trail,” it told her presently, just before a human figure defined itself in the gloom.

“I’m afraid,” she sobbed.

A strong hand came from nowhere and caught hers. An arm slipped around her waist.

“Don’t be afraid, little girl. I’ll see no harm comes to you,” the man said to her with a quick, fierce tenderness.

The comfort of his support was unspeakable. It stole into her heart like water to the roots of thirsty 127 plants. To feel her head against his shoulder, to know he held her tight, meant safety and life. He had told her not to be afraid, and she was so no longer.

“You shot at me,” she murmured in reproach.

“I didn’t know. We thought it was Bellamy’s herd.

But it's true, God forgive me! I did."

There was in his voice the warm throb of emotion, and in his eyes something she had never seen before in those of any human being. Like stars they were, swimming in light, glowing with the exultation of the triumph he was living. She was a splendid young animal, untaught of life, generous, passionate, tempestuous, and as her pliant, supple body lay against his some sex instinct old as creation stirred potently within her. She had found her mate. It came to her as innocently as the same impulse comes to the doe when the spring freshets are seeking the river, and as innocently her lips met his in their first kiss of surrender. Something irradiated her, softened her, warmed her. Was it love? She did not know, but as yet she was still happy in the glow of it.

Slowly, hand in hand, they worked back to the trail and down it to the bottom of the cañon. The soft velvet night enwrapped them. It shut them from the world and left them one to one. From the meeting palms strange electric currents tingled through the girl and flushed her to an ecstasy of emotion. 128

A camp fire was already burning cheerfully when they reached the base of the descent. A man came forward to meet them. He glanced curiously at the girl after she came within the circle of light. Her eyes were shining as from some inner glow, and she was warm with a soft color that vitalized her beauty. Then his gaze passed to take in with narrowed lids her companion.

"I see you found her," he said dryly.

"Yes, I found her, Bob."

He answered the spirit of Farnum's words rather than the letter of them, nor could he keep out of his

bearing and his handsome face the exultation that betrayed success.

“H’mp!” Farnum turned from him and addressed the girl: “I suppose Norris has explained our mistake and eaten crow for all of us, Miss Lee. I don’t see how come we to make such a blame’ fool mistake. It was gitting dark, and we took your skirt for a greaser’s blanket. It’s ce’tainly on us.”

“Yes, he has explained.”

“Well, there won’t any amount of explaining square the thing. We might ’a’ done you a terrible injury, Miss Lee. It was gilt-edged luck for us that you thought to jump on that rock and holler.”

“I was thinking of the sheep,” she said.

“Well, you saved them, and I’m right glad of it. We ain’t got any use for Mary’s little trotter, but 129 your father’s square about his. He keeps them herded up on his own range. We may not like it, but we ce’tainly aren’t going to the length of attackin’ his herd.” Farnum’s gaze took in her slender girlishness, and he voiced the question in his mind. “How in time do you happen to be sheep-herding all by your lone a thousand miles from nowhere, Miss Lee?”

She explained the circumstances after she had moved forward to warm herself by the fire. For already night was bringing a chill breeze with it. The man cooking the coffee looked up and nodded pleasantly, continuing his work. Norris dragged up a couple of saddle blankets and spread them on the ground for her to sit upon.

“You don’t have to do a thing but boss this outfit,” he told her with his gay smile. “You’re queen of the range to-night, and we’re your herders or your

punchers, whichever you want to call us. To-morrow morning two of us are going to drive these sheep on to the trading post for you, and the other one is going to see you safe back home. It's all arranged."

They were as good as his word. She could not move from her place to help herself. It was their pleasure to wait upon her as if she had really been a queen and they her subjects. Melissy was very tired, but she enjoyed their deference greatly. She was still young enough to find delight in the fact that three young and more or less good-looking men 130 were vying with each other to anticipate her needs.

Like them, she ate and drank ravenously of the sandwiches and the strong coffee, though before the meal was over she found herself nodding drowsily. The tactful courtesy of these rough fellows was perfect. They got the best they had for her of their blankets, dragged a piñon root to feed the glowing coals, and with cheerful farewells of "*Buenos Noches*" retired around a bend in the cañon and lit another fire for themselves.

The girl snuggled down into the warmth of the blankets and stretched her weary limbs in delicious rest. She did not mean to go to sleep for a long time. She had much to think about. So she looked up the black sheer cañon walls to the deep blue, starry sky above, and relived her day in memory.

A strange excitement tingled through her, born of shame and shyness and fear, and of something else she did not understand, something which had lain banked in her nature like a fire since childhood and now threw forth its first flame of heat. What did it mean, that passionate fierceness with which her lips had clung to his? She liked him, of course, but surely liking would not explain the pulse that her first kiss

had sent leaping through her blood like wine. Did she love him?

Then why did she distrust him? Why was there fear in her sober second thought of him? Had she done wrong? For the moment all her maiden defenses had been wiped out and he had ridden 131 roughshod over her reserves. But somewhere in her a bell of warning was ringing. The poignant sting of sex appeal had come home to her for the first time. Wherefore in this frank child of the wilderness had been born a shy shame, a vague trembling for herself that marked a change. At sunrise she had been still treading gayly the primrose path of childhood; at sunset she had entered upon her heritage of womanhood.

The sun had climbed high and was peering down the walls of the gulch when she awoke. She did not at once realize where she was, but came presently to a blinking consciousness of her surroundings. The rock wall on one side was still shadowed, while the painted side of the other was warm with the light which poured upon it. The Gothic spires, the Moorish domes, the weird and mysterious caves, which last night had given more than a touch of awe to her majestic bedchamber, now looked a good deal less like the ruins of mediæval castles and the homes of elfin sprites and gnomes.

"*Buenos dios, muchacha,*" a voice called cheerfully to her.

She did not need to turn to know to whom it belonged. Among a thousand she would have recognized its tone of vibrant warmth.

"*Buenos,*" she answered, and, rising hurriedly, she fled to rearrange her hair and dress.

It was nearly a quarter of an hour later that she reappeared, her thick coils of ebon-hued tresses shining 132 in the sun, her skirt smoothed to her satisfaction, and the effects of feminine touches otherwise visible upon her fresh, cool person.

“Breakfast is served,” Norris sang out.

“Dinner would be nearer it,” she laughed. “Why in the world didn’t you boys waken me? What time is it, anyhow?”

“It’s not very late—a little past noon maybe. You were all tired out with your tramp yesterday. I didn’t see why you shouldn’t have your sleep out.”

He was pouring a cup of black coffee for her from the smoky pot, and she looked around expectantly for the others. Simultaneously she remembered that she had not heard the bleating of the sheep.

“Where are the others—Mr. Farnum and Sam? And have you the sheep all gagged?” she laughed.

He gave her that odd look of smoldering eyes behind half-shut lids.

“The boys have gone on to finish the drive for you. They started before sun-up this morning. I’m elected to see you back home safely.”

“But——”

Her protest died unspoken. She could not very well frame it in words, and before his bold, possessive eyes the girl’s long, dark lashes wavered to the cheeks into which the hot blood was beating. Nevertheless, the feeling existed that she wished one of the others had stayed instead of him. It was born, no doubt, partly of the wave of shyness 133 running through her, but partly too of instinctive maidenly

resistance to something in his look, in the assurance of his manner, that seemed to claim too much. Last night he had taken her by storm and at advantage. Something of shame stirred in her that he had found her so easy a conquest, something too of a new vague fear of herself. She resented the fact that he could so move her, even though she still felt the charm of his personal presence. She meant to hold herself in abeyance, to make sure of herself and of him before she went further.

But the cowpuncher had no intention of letting her regain so fully control of her emotions. Experience of more than one young woman had taught him that scruples were likely to assert themselves after reflection, and he purposed giving her no time for that to-day.

He did not count in vain upon the intimacy of companionship forced upon them by the circumstances, nor upon the skill with which he knew how to make the most of his manifold attractions. His rôle was that of the comrade, gay with good spirits and warm with friendliness, solicitous of her needs, but not oppressively so. If her glimpse of him at breakfast had given the girl a vague alarm, she laughed her fears away later before his open good humor.

There had been a time when he had been a part of that big world “back in the States,” peopled so generously by her unfettered imagination. He knew 134 how to talk, and entertainingly, of books and people, of events and places he had known. She had not knowledge enough of life to doubt his stories, nor did she resent it that he spoke of this her native section with the slighting manner of one who patronized it with his presence. Though she loved

passionately her Arizona, she guessed its crudeness, and her fancy magnified the wonders of that southern civilization from which it was so far cut off.

Farnum had left his horse for the girl, and after breakfast the cowpuncher saddled the broncos and brought them up. Melissy had washed the dishes, filled his canteen, and packed the saddle bags. Soon they were off, climbing slowly the trail that led up the cañon wall. She saw the carcass of a dead sheep lying on the rocks half way down the cliff, and had spoken of it before she could stop herself.

“What is that? Isn’t it——?”

“Looks to me like a boulder,” lied her escort unblushingly. There was no use, he judged, in recalling unpleasant memories.

Nor did she long remember. The dry, exhilarating sunshine and the sting of gentle, wide-swept breezes, the pleasure of swift motion and the ring of that exultingly boyish voice beside her, combined to call the youth in her to rejoice. Firm in the saddle she rode, as graceful a picture of piquant girlhood as could be conceived, thrilling to the silent voices of the desert. They traveled in a sunlit sea 135 of space, under a sky of blue, in which tenuous cloud lakes floated. Once they came on a small bunch of hill cattle which went flying like deer into the covert of a draw. A rattlesnake above a prairie dog’s hole slid into the mesquit. A swift watched them from the top of a smooth rock, motionless so long as they could see. She loved it all, this immense, deserted world of space filled with its multitudinous dwellers.

They unsaddled at Dead Cow Creek, hobbled the ponies, and ate supper. Norris seemed in no hurry to resaddle. He lay stretched carelessly at full length,

his eyes upon her with veiled admiration. She sat upright, her gaze on the sunset with its splashes of topaz and crimson and saffron, watching the tints soften and mellow as dusk fell. Every minute now brought its swift quota of changing beauty. A violet haze enveloped the purple mountains, and in the crotch of the hills swam a lake of indigo. The raw, untempered glare of the sun was giving place to a limitless pour of silvery moonlight.

Her eyes were full of the soft loveliness of the hour when she turned them upon her companion. He answered promptly her unspoken question.

“You bet it is! A night for the gods—or for lovers.”

He said it in a murmur, his eyes full on hers, and his look wrenched her from her mood. The mask of comradeship was gone. He looked at her 136 hungrily, as might a lover to whom all spiritual heights were denied.

Her sooty lashes fell before this sinister spirit she had evoked, but were raised instantly at the sound of him drawing his body toward her. Inevitably there was a good deal of the young animal in her superbly healthy body. She had been close to nature all day, the riotous passion of spring flowing free in her as in the warm earth herself. But the magic of the mystic hills had lifted her beyond the merely personal. Some sense of grossness in him for the first time seared across her brain. She started up, and her face told him she had taken alarm.

“We must be going,” she cried.

He got to his feet. “No hurry, sweetheart.”

The look in his face startled her. It was new to her in her experience of men. Never before had she met

elemental lust.

“You’re near enough,” she cautioned sharply.

He cursed softly his maladroitness.

“I was nearer last night, honey,” he reminded her.

“Last night isn’t to-night.”

He hesitated. Should he rush her defenses, bury her protests in kisses? Or should he talk her out of this harsh mood? Last night she had been his. There were moments during the day when she had responded to him as a musical instrument does to skilled fingers. But for the moment his power 137 over her was gone. And he was impatient of delay.

“What’s the matter with you?” he asked roughly.

“We’ll start at once.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Frightened though she was, her gaze held steadily to his. It was the same instinct in her that makes one look a dangerous wild beast straight in the eye.

“What’s got into you?” he demanded sullenly.

“I’m going home.”

“After a while.”

“Now.”

“I reckon not just yet. It’s my say-so.”

“Don’t you dare stop me.”

The passion in him warred with prudence. He temporized. “Why, honey! I’m the man that loves you.”

She would not see his outstretched hands.

“Then saddle my horse.”

“By God, no! You’re going to listen to me.”

His anger ripped out unexpectedly, even to him. Whatever fear she felt, the girl crushed down. He must not know her heart was drowned in terror.

“I’ll listen after we’ve started.”

He cursed her fickleness. “What’s ailin’ you, girl? I ain’t a man to be put off this way.”

“Don’t forget you’re in Arizona,” she warned.

He understood what she meant. In the ranch country no man could with impunity insult a woman. 138

Standing defiantly before him, her pliant form very straight, the underlying blood beating softly under the golden brown of her cheeks, one of the thick braids of her heavy, blue-black hair falling across the breast that rose and fell a little fast, she was no less than a challenge of Nature to him. He looked into a mobile face as daring and as passionate as his own, warm with the life of innocent youth, and the dark blood mantled his face.

“Saddle the horses,” she commanded.

“When I get good and ready.”

“Now.”

“No, ma’am. We’re going to have a talk first.”

She walked across to the place where her pony grazed, slipped on the bridle, and brought the animal back to the saddle. Norris watched her fitting the blankets and tightening the cinch without a word, his face growing blacker every moment. Before she could start he strode forward and caught the rein.

“I’ve got something to say to you,” he told her

rudely. “You’re not going now. So that’s all about it.”

Her lips tightened. “Let go of my horse.”

“We’ll talk first.”

“Do you think you can force me to stay here?”

“You’re going to hear what I’ve got to say.”

“You bully!”

“I’ll tell what I know—Miss Hold-up.”

“Tell it!” she cried. 139

He laughed harshly, his narrowed eyes watching her closely. “If you throw me down now, I’ll ce’tainly tell it. Be reasonable, girl.”

“Let go my rein!”

“I’ve had enough of this. Tumble off that horse, or I’ll pull you off.”

Her dark eyes flashed scorn of him. “You coward! Do you think I’m afraid of you? Stand back!”

The man looked long at her, his teeth set; then caught at her strong little wrist. With a quick wrench she freed it, her eyes glowing like live coals.

“You dare!” she panted.

Her quirt rose and fell, the lash burning his wrist like a band of fire. With a furious oath he dropped his hand from the rein. Like a flash she was off, had dug her heels home, and was galloping into the moonlight recklessly as fast as she could send forward her pony. Stark terror had her by the throat. The fear of him flooded her whole being. Not till the drumming hoofs had carried her far did other emotions move her.

She was furious with him, and with herself for

having been imposed upon by him. His beauty, his grace, his debonair manner—they were all hateful to her now. She had thought him a god among men, and he was of common clay. It was her vanity that was wounded, not her heart. She scourged herself because she had been so easily deceived, because 140 she had let herself become a victim of his good looks and his impudence. For that she had let him kiss her—yes, and had returned his kiss—she was heartily contemptuous of herself. Always she had held herself with an instinctive pride, but in her passion of abandonment the tears confessed now that this pride had been humbled to the dust.

This gusty weather of the spirit, now of chastened pride and now of bitter anger, carried her even through the group of live-oaks which looked down upon the silent houses of the ranch, lying in a sea of splendid moon-beat. She was so much less confident of herself than usual that she made up her mind to tell her father the whole story of the hold-up and of what this man had threatened.

This resolution comforted her, and it was with something approaching calmness that she rode past the corral fence and swung from the saddle in front of the house.

141

CHAPTER X

JACK GOES TO THE HEAD OF THE CLASS

She trailed the bridle reins, went up the porch steps, and drew off her gauntlets. Her hand was outstretched to open the door when her gaze fell upon a large bill tacked to the wall. Swiftly she read it through, and, having read it, remained in suspended motion. For the first time she fully realized the danger and the penalty that confronted her.

ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS
WILL BE PAID BY THOMAS L. MORSE

> For the arrest and conviction of each of the men who were implicated in the robbery of the Fort Allison stage on April twenty-seventh last. A further reward of $1000 will be paid for the recovery of the bullion stolen.

This was what she read, and her eye was running over it a second time when she heard the jingle of a spur approaching.

“We’re red-hot after them, you see, Miss Lee,” 142 a mocking voice drawled. “If you want to round up a thousand plunks, all you’ve got to do is to tell me who Mr. Hold-up is.”

He laughed quietly, as if it were a joke, but the girl answered with a flush. “Is that all?”

“That’s all.”

“If I knew, do you suppose I would tell for five thousand—or ten thousand?”

For some reason this seemed to give him sardonic amusement. “No, I don’t suppose you would.”

“You’ll have to catch him yourself if you want him. I’m not in that business, Mr. Flatray.”

“I am. Sorry you don’t like the business, Miss Lee.” He added dryly: “But then you always were hard to please. You weren’t satisfied when I was a rustler.”

Her eyes swept him with a look, whether of reproach or contempt he was not sure. But the hard derision of his gaze did not soften. Mentally as well as physically he was a product of the sun and the wind, as tough and unyielding as a greasewood sapling. For a friend he would go the limit, and he could not forgive her that she had distrusted him.

“But mebbe you’d prefer it if I was rustling stages,” he went on, looking straight at her.

“What do you mean?” she asked breathlessly.

“I want to have a talk with you.”

“What about?” 143

“Suppose we step around to the side of the house. We’ll be freer from interruption there.”

He led the way, taking her consent for granted. With him he carried a chair for her from the porch.

“If you’ll be as brief as possible, Mr. Flatray. I’ve been in the desert two days and want to change my clothes.”

“I’ll not detain you. It’s about this gold robbery.”

“Yes.”

She could not take her eyes from him. Something told her that he knew her secret, or part of it. Her heart was fluttering like a caged thrush.

“Shall we begin at the beginning?”

“If you like.”

“Or in the middle, say.”

“If only you’ll begin anywhere,” she said impatiently.

“How will this do for a beginning, then? ‘One thousand dollars will be paid by Thomas L. Morse for the arrest and conviction of each of the men who were implicated in the robbery of the Fort Allison stage on April twenty-seventh last.’”

She was shaken, there was no denying it. He could see the ebb of blood from her cheeks, the sudden stiffening of the slender figure.

She did not speak until she had control of her voice. “Dear me! What has all that to do with me?” 144

“A good deal, I’m afraid. You know how much, better than I do.”

“Perhaps I’m stupid. You’ll have to be a great deal clearer before I can understand you.”

“I’ve noticed that it’s a lot easier to understand what you want to than what you don’t want to.”

Sharply a thought smote her. “Have you seen Phil Norris lately?”

“No, I haven’t. Do you think it likely that he would confess?”

“Confess?” she faltered.

“I see I’ll have to start at the beginning, after all. It’s pretty hard to say just where that is. It might be when Morse got hold of your father’s claim, or another fellow might say it was when the Boone-Bellamy feud began, and that is a mighty long time ago.”

“The Boone-Bellamy feud,” echoed the girl.

“Yes. The real name of our friend Norris is Dunc Boone.”

“He’s no friend of mine.” She flamed it out with such intensity that he was surprised.

“Glad to hear it. I can tell you, then, that he’s a bad lot. He was driven out of Arkansas after a suspected murder. It was a killing from ambush. They couldn’t quite hang it on him, but he lit a shuck to save his skin from lynchers. At that time he was a boy. Couldn’t have been more than seventeen.”

“Who did he kill?” 145

“One of the Bellamy faction. The real name of T. L. Morse is——”

“—Richard Bellamy.”

“How do you know that?” he asked in surprise.

“I’ve known it since the first day I met him.”

“Known that he was wanted for murder in Arkansas?”

“Yes.”

“And you protected him?”

“I had a reason.” She did not explain that her reason was Jack Flatray, between whom and the consequences of his rustling she had stood.

He pondered that a moment. “Well, Morse, or Bellamy, told me all about it. Now that Boone has recognized him, the game is up. He’s ready to go back and stand trial if he must. I’ve communicated with the authorities in Arkansas and I’ll hear from them in a day or two.”

“What has this to do with the hold-up?”

"That's right, the hold-up. Well, this fellow Boone got your father to drinking, and then sprung it on him to rob the stage when the bullion was being shipped. Somehow Boone had got inside information about when this was to be. He had been nosing around up at the mine, and may have overheard something. O' course we know what your father would have done if he hadn't been drinking. He's straight as a string, even if he does go off like powder. But when a man's making a blue blotter 146 of himself, things don't look the same to him. Anyhow he went in."

"He didn't. I can prove he didn't," burst from Melissy's lips.

"Be glad to hear your proof later. He ce'tainly planned the hold-up. Jim Budd overheard him."

"Did Jim tell you that?"

"Don't blame him for that. He didn't mean to tell, but I wound him up so he couldn't get away from it. I'll show you later why he couldn't."

"I'm sure you must have been very busy, spying and everything," she told him bitterly.

"I've kept moving. But to get back to the point. Your father and Boone were on the ground where the stage was robbed *either at the time or right after*. Their tracks were all over there. Then they got on their horses and rode up the lateral."

"But they couldn't. The ditch was full," broke from the girl.

"You're right it was. You must be some observing to know when that ditch is full and empty to an hour. I reckon you've got an almanac of tides," he said ironically.

She bit her lip with chagrin. “I just happened to notice.”

“Some folks *are* more noticing than others. But you’re surely right. They came up the ditch one on each side. Now, why one on each side, do you reckon?”

Melissy hid the dread that was flooding her heart. 147 “I’m sure I don’t know. You know everything else. I suppose you do that, too, if they really did.”

“They had their reasons, but we won’t go into that now. First off when they reach the house they take a bunch of sheep down to the ditch to water them. Now, why?”

“Why, unless because they needed water?”

“We’ll let that go into the discard too just now. Let’s suppose your father and Boone dumped the gold box down into the creek somewhere after they had robbed the stage. Suppose they had a partner up at the head-gates. When the signal is given down comes the water, and the box is covered by it. Mebbe that night they take it away and bury it somewhere else.”

The girl began to breathe again. He knew a good deal, but he was still off the track in the main points.

“And who is this partner up at the canal? Have you got him located too?”

“I might guess.”

“Well?”—impatiently.

“A young lady hailing from this *hacienda* was out gathering flowers all mo’ning. She was in her runabout. The tracks led straight from here to the head-gates. I followed them through the sands. There’s a little break in one of the rubber tires. You’ll

find that break mark every eight feet or so in the sand wash."

"I opened the head-gates, then, did I?" 148

"It looks that way, doesn't it?"

"At a signal from father?"

"I reckon."

"And that's all the evidence you've got against him and me?" she demanded, still outwardly scornful, but very much afraid at heart.

"Oh, no, that ain't all, Miss Lee. Somebody locked the Chink in during this play. He's still wondering why."

"He dreamed it. Very likely he had been rolling a pill."

"Did I dream this too?" From his coat pocket he drew the piece of black shirting she had used as a mask. "I found it in the room where your father put me up that first night I stayed here. It was your brother Dick's room, and this came from the pocket of a shirt hanging in the closet. Now, who do you reckon put it there?"

For the first time in her life she knew what it was to feel faint. She tried to speak, but the words would not come from her parched throat. How could he be so hard and cruel, this man who had once been her best friend? How could he stand there so like a machine in his relentlessness?

"We—we used to—to play at hold-up when he was a boy," she gasped.

He shook his head. "No, I reckon that won't go. You see, I've found the piece this was torn from, *and I found it in your father's coat*. I went into his room on

tiptoe that same hour. The coat was 149 on the bed. He had gone downstairs for a minute and left it there. Likely he hadn't found a good chance to burn it yet." Taking the two pieces, he fitted them together and held them up. "They match exactly, you see. Did your father used to play with you too when he was a boy?"

He asked this with what seemed to her tortured soul like silken cruelty. She had no answer, none at least that would avail. Desperately she snatched at a straw.

"All this isn't proof. It's mere surmise. Some one's tracks were found by you. How do you know they were father's?"

"I've got that cinched too. I took his boots and measured them."

"Then where's the gold, if he took it? It must be somewhere. Where is it?"

"Now I'm going up to the head of the class, ma'am. The gold—why, that's a dead easy one. *Near as I can make out, I'm sitting on it right now.*"

She gave a startled little cry that died in her throat.

"Yes, it's ce'tainly a valuable wash-stand. Chippendale furniture ain't in it with this kind. I reckon the king of England's is ace high against a straight flush when it bucks up against yours."

Melissy threw up her cards. "How did you find out?" she asked hoarsely.

The deputy forced her to commit herself more definitely. "Find out what?" 150

"Where I put the box."

"I'll go back and answer some of those other

questions first. I might as well own up that I knew all the time your father didn't hold up the stage."

"You did?"

"He's no fool. He wouldn't leave his tracks all over the place where he had just held up a stage. He might jest as well have left a signed note saying he had done it. No, that didn't look like Champ Lee to me. It seemed more likely he'd arrived after the show than before. It wouldn't be like him, either, to go plowing up the side of the ditch, with his partner on the other side, making a trail that a blind man could follow in the night. Soon as I knew Lee and Boone made those tracks, I had it cinched that they were following the lateral to see where the robber was going. They had come to the same conclusion I had, that there wasn't any way of escape *except by that empty lateral*, *assuming it had been empty*. The only point was to find out where the hold-up left the lateral. That's why they rode one on each side of it. They weren't missing any bets, you see."

"And that's why they drove the sheep down to water —to hide the wheel-tracks. I couldn't understand that."

"I must 'a' been right on their heels, for they were jest getting the trotters out of the corral when I reached the place where your rig left the water. 151 'Course I fell back into the brush and circled around so as to hit the store in front."

"But if dad knew all the time, I don't see—surely, he wouldn't have come right after me and made plain the way I escaped."

"That's the point. He didn't know. I reckon he was sort of guessing around in the dark, plumb puzzled; couldn't find the switch at all at first. Then it come

to him, and he thought of the sheep to blind the trail. If I'd been half a hour later he would have got away with it too. No, if he had guessed that you were in the hold-up, him and Boone would have hiked right out on a false trail and led us into the Galiuros. Having no notion of it at first, he trails you down."

"And the gold—how did you find that?"

"I knew it was either right around the place or else you had taken it on with you when you went to the head-gates and buried it up there somewhere. Next day I followed your tracks and couldn't find any place where you might have left it. I knew how clever you were by the way you planned your getaway. Struck me as mighty likely that you had left it lying around in plain view somewhere. If you had dumped it out of the box into a sack, the box must be somewhere. You hadn't had time to burn it before the stage got back. I drifted back to your kindling pile, where all the old boxes from the store are lying. I happened to notice a brass tack in one near the end; then the marks of the 152 tack heads where they had pressed against the wood. I figured you might have substituted one box for another, and inside of ten minutes I stumbled against your wash-stand and didn't budge it. Then I didn't have to look any further."

"I've been trying to get a chance to move it and haven't ever found one. You were always coming around the corner on me," she explained.

"Sorry I incommoded you," he laughed. "But it's too heavy for a lady to lift alone, anyhow. I don't see how you managed it this far."

"I'm pretty strong," she said quietly.

She had no hope of escape from the net of evidence

in which he had entangled her. It was characteristic of her that she would not stoop to tricks to stir his pity. Deep in her heart she knew now that she had wronged him when she had suspected him of being a rustler. He *could* not be. It was not in the man's character. But she would ask no mercy of him. All her pride rose to meet his. She would show him how game she could be. What she had sown she would reap. Nor would it have been any use to beseech him to spare her. He was a hard man, she told herself. Not even a fool could have read any weakness in the quiet gray eyes that looked so steadily into hers. In his voice and movements there was a certain deliberation, but this had nothing to do with indecision of character. He would do his duty as he saw it, regardless of whom it might affect. 153

Melissy stood before him in the unconscious attitude of distinction she often fell into when she was moved, head thrown back so as to bare the rounded throat column, brown little hands folded in front of her, erectly graceful in all her slender lines.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked.

His stone-cold eyes met hers steadily. "It ain't my say-so. I'm going to put it up to Bellamy. I don't know what he'll do."

But, cold as his manner was, the heart of the man leaped to her courage. He saw her worn out, pathetically fearful, but she could face him with that still little smile of hers. He longed to take her in his arms, to tell her it would be all right—all right.

"There's one thing that troubles me. I don't know how father will take this. You know how quick-tempered he is. I'm afraid he'll shoot somebody or do something rash when he finds out. You must let me

be alone with him when I tell him."

He nodded. "I been thinking of that myself. It ain't going to do him any good to make a gun-play. I have a notion mebbe this thing will unravel itself if we give it time. It will only make things worse for him to go off half-cocked."

"How do you mean it may unravel itself?" she asked.

"Bellamy is a whole lot better man than folks 154 give him credit for being. I expect he won't be hard on you when he knows why you did it."

"And why did I do it?" she asked quietly.

"Sho! I know why you did it. Jim Budd told you what he had heard, and you figured you could save your father from doing it. You meant to give the money back, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I can't prove that either in court or to Mr. Bellamy."

"You don't need to prove it to me. If you say so, that's enough," he said in his unenthusiastic voice.

"But you're not judge and jury, and you're certainly not Mr. Bellamy."

"Scrape Arizona with a fine-tooth comb and you couldn't get a jury to convict when it's up against the facts in this case."

At this she brightened. "Thank you, Mr. Flatray." And naïvely she added with a little laugh: "Are you ready to put the handcuffs on me yet?"

He looked with a smile at her outstretched hands. "They wouldn't stay on."

"Don't you carry them in sizes to fit all criminals?"

"I'll have to put you on parole."

"I'll break it and climb out the window. Then I'll run off with this."

She indicated the box of treasure.

"I need that wash-stand in my room. I'm going to take it up there to-night," he said. 155

"This *isn't* a very good safety deposit vault," she answered, and, nodding a careless good-night, she walked away in her slow-limbed, graceful Southern fashion.

She had carried it off to the last without breaking down, but, once in her own room, the girl's face showed haggard in the moonlight. It was one thing to jest about it with him; it was another to face the facts as they stood. She was in the power of her father's enemy, the man whose proffer of friendship they had rejected with scorn. Her pride cried out that she could not endure mercy from him even if he wished to extend it. Surely there must be some other way out than the humiliation of begging him not to prosecute. She could see none but one, and that was infinitely worse. Yet she knew it would be her father's first impulsive instinct to seek to fight her out of her trouble, the more because it was through him that it had fallen upon her. At all hazards she must prevent this.

156

CHAPTER XI

A CONVERSATION

Not five minutes after Melissy had left the deputy sheriff, another rider galloped up the road. Jack, returning from his room, where he had left the box of gold locked up, waited on the porch to see who this might be.

The horseman proved to be the man Norris, or Boone, and in a thoroughly bad temper, as Jack soon found out.

“Have you see anything of ’Lissie Lee?” he demanded immediately.

“Miss Lee has just left me. She has gone to her room,” answered Flatray quietly.

“Well, I want to see her,” said the other hoarsely.

“I reckon you better postpone it to to-morrow. She’s some played out and needs sleep.”

“Well, I’m going to see her now.”

Jack turned, still all gentleness, and called to Jim Budd, who was in the store.

“Oh, Jim! Run upstairs and knock on Miss Melissy’s door and tell her Mr. Norris is down here. Ask if she will see him to-night.”

“You’re making a heap of formality out of this, Mr. Buttinsky,” sneered the cowpuncher. 157

Jack made no answer, unless it were one to whistle gently and look out into the night as if he were alone.

“No, seh. She doan’ wan’ tuh see him to-night,” announced Jim upon his return.

“That seems to settle it, Mr. Norris,” said Jack pleasantly.

“Not by a hell of a sight. I’ve got something to say to her, and I’m going to say it.”

“To-morrow,” amended the officer.

“I said to-night.”

“But your say doesn’t go here against hers. I reckon you’ll wait.”

“Not so’s you could notice it.” The cowpuncher took a step forward toward the stairway, but Flatray was there before him.

“Get out of the way, you. I don’t stand for any butting-in,” the cowboy blustered.

“Don’t be a goat, Norris. She’s tired, and she says she don’t want to see you. That’s enough, ain’t it?”

Norris leaped back with an oath to draw his gun, but Jack had the quickest draw in Arizona. The puncher found himself looking into the business end of a revolver.

“Better change your mind, seh,” suggested the officer amiably. “I take it you’ve been drinking and you’re some excited. If you were in condition to *savez* the situation, you’d understand that the young lady doesn’t care to see you now. Do you 158 need a church to fall on you before you can take a hint?”

“I reckon if you knew all about her, you wouldn’t be so anxious to stand up for her,” Norris said darkly.

“I expect we cayn’t any of us stand the great white light on all our acts; but if any one can, it’s that little girl upstairs.”

“What would you say if I told you that she’s liable to

go to Yuma if I lift my hand?"

"I'd say I was from Missouri and needed showing."

"Put up that gun, come outside with me, and if I take a notion I'll show you all right."

Jack laughed as his gun disappeared. "I'd be willing to bet high that there are a good many citizens around here haided straighter for Yuma than Miss Melissy."

Without answering, Norris led the way out and stopped only when his arm rested on the fence of the corral.

"Nobody can hear us now," he said brusquely, and the ranger got a whiff of his hot whisky breath. "You've put it up to me to make good. All right, I'll do it. That little girl in there, as you call her, is the bad man who held up the Fort Allison stage."

The officer laughed tolerantly as he lit a cigarette.

"I hear you say it, Norris." 159

"I didn't expect you to believe it right away, but it's a fact just the same."

Flatray climbed to the fence and rested his feet on a rail. "Fire ahead. I'm listenin'."

"The first men on the ground after that hold-up were me and Lee. We covered the situation thorough and got hold of some points right away."

"That's right funny too. When I asked you if you'd been down there you both denied it," commented the officer.

"We were protecting the girl. Mind you, we didn't know who had done it then, but we had reasons to think the person had just come from this ranch."

“What reasons?” briefly demanded Flatray.

“We don’t need to go into them. We had them, anyhow. Then I lit on a foot-print right on the edge of the ditch that no man ever made. We didn’t know what to make of it, but we wiped it out and followed the ditch, one on each side. We’d figured that was the way he had gone. You see, though water was running in the ditch now, it hadn’t been half an hour before.”

“You don’t say!”

“There wasn’t a sign of anybody leaving the ditch till we got to the ranch; then we saw tracks going straight to the house.”

“So you got a bunch of sheep and drove them down there to muss things up some.”

Norris looked sharply at him. “You got there 160 while we were driving them back. Well, that’s right. We had to help her out.”

“You’re helping her out now, ain’t you?” Jack asked dryly.

“That’s my business. I’ve got my own reasons, Mr. Deputy. All you got to do is arrest her.”

“Just as soon as you give me the evidence, seh.”

“Haven’t I given it to you? She was seen to drive away from the house in her rig. She left footprints down there. She came back up the ditch and then rode right up to the head-gates and turned on the water. Jim Little saw her cutting across country from the head-gates hell-to-split.”

“Far as I can make out, all the evidence you’ve given me ain’t against her, but against you. She was out drivin’ when it happened, you say, and you expect

me to arrest her for it. It ain't against the law to go driving, seh. And as for that ditch fairy tale, on your own say-so you wiped out all chance to prove the story."

"Then you won't arrest her?"

"If you'll furnish the evidence, seh."

"I tell you we know she did it. Her father knows it."

"Is it worryin' his conscience? Did he ask you to lay an information against her?" asked the officer sarcastically.

"That isn't the point."

"You're right. Here's the point." Not by the faintest motion of the body had the officer's indolence 161 been lifted, but the quiet ring of his voice showed it was gone. "You and Lee were overheard planning that robbery the day after you were seen hanging around the 'Monte Cristo.' You started out to hold up the stage. It was held up. By your own story you were the first men on the ground after the robbery. I tracked you straight from there here along the ditch. I found a black mask in Lee's coat. A dozen people saw you on that fool sheep-drive of yours. And to sum up, I found the stolen gold right here where you must have hidden it."

"You found the gold? Where?"

"That ain't the point either, seh. The point is that I've got you where I want you, Mr. Norris, alias Mr. Boone. You're wound up in a net you cayn't get away from. You're wanted back East, and you're wanted here. I'm onto your little game, sir. Think I don't know you've been trying to manufacture evidence against me as a rustler? Think I ain't wise to your whole record? You're arrested for robbing the Fort

Allison stage."

Norris, standing close in front of him, shot his right hand out and knocked the officer backward from the fence. Before the latter could get on his feet again the cowpuncher was scudding through the night. He reached his horse, flung himself on, and galloped away. Harmlessly a bullet or two zipped after him as he disappeared.

The deputy climbed over the fence again and 162 laughed softly to himself. "You did that right well, Jack. He'll always think he did that by his lone, never will know you was a partner in that escape. It's a fact, though, I could have railroaded him through on the evidence, but not without including the old man. No, there wasn't any way for it but that grandstand escape of Mr. Boone's."

Still smiling, he dusted himself, put up his revolver, and returned to the house.

163

CHAPTER XII

THE TENDERFOOT MAKES A PROPOSITION

Melissy waited in dread expectancy to see what would happen. Of quick, warm sympathies, always

ready to bear with courage her own and others' burdens, she had none of that passive endurance which age and experience bring. She was keyed to the heroism of an occasion, but not yet to that which life lays as a daily burden upon many without dramatic emphasis.

All next day nothing took place. On the succeeding one her father returned with the news that the "Monte Cristo" contest had been continued to another term of court. Otherwise nothing unusual occurred. It was after mail time that she stepped to the porch for a breath of fresh air and noticed that the reward placard had been taken down.

"Who did that?" she asked of Alan McKinstra, who was sitting on the steps, reading a newspaper and munching an apple.

"Jack Flatray took it down. He said the offer of a reward had been withdrawn."

"When did he do that?"

"About an hour ago. Just before he rode off." 164

"Rode off! Where did he go?"

"Heard him say he was going to Mesa. He told your father that when he settled the bill."

"He's gone for good, then?"

"That's the way I took it. Say, Melissy, Farnum says Jack told him the gold had been found and turned back to Morse. Is that right?"

"How should I know?"

"Well, it looks blamed funny they could get the bullion back without getting the hold-up."

"Maybe they'll get him yet," she consoled him.

“I wish I could get a crack at him,” the boy murmured vengefully.

“You had one chance at him, didn’t you?”

“José spoiled it. Honest, I wasn’t going to lie down, ’Lissie.”

Again the days followed each other uneventfully. Bellamy himself never came for his mail now, but sent one of the boys from the mine for it. Melissy wondered whether he despised her so much he did not ever want to see her again. Somehow she did not like to think this. Perhaps it might be delicacy on his part. He was going to drop the whole thing magnanimously and did not want to put upon her the obligation of thanking him by presenting himself to her eyes.

But though he never appeared in person, he had never been so much in her mind. She could not rid herself of a growing sympathy and admiration for this man who was holding his own against many. 165 A story which was being whispered about reached her ears and increased this. A bunch of his sheep had been found poisoned on their feeding ground, and certain cattle interests were suspected of having done the dastardly thing.

When she could stand the silence no longer Melissy called up Jack Flatray on the telephone at Mesa.

“You caught me just in time. I’m leaving for Phoenix to-night,” he told her. “What can I do for you, Miss Lee?”

“I want to know what’s being done about that Fort Allison stage hold-up.”

“The money has been recovered.”

“I know that, but—what about the—the criminals?”

“They made their getaway all right.”

“Aren’t you looking for them?”

“No.”

“Did Mr. Morse want you to drop it?”

“Yes. He was very urgent about it.”

“Does he know who the criminals are?”

“Yes.”

“And isn’t going to prosecute?”

“So he told me.”

“What did Mr. Morse say when you made your report?”

“Said, ‘Thank you.’”

“Oh, yes, but—you know what I mean.”

“Not being a mind-reader——” 166

“About the suspect. Did he say anything?”

“Said he had private reasons for not pushing the case. I didn’t ask him what they were.”

This was all she could get out of him. It was less than she had hoped. Still, it was something. She knew definitely what Bellamy had done. Wherefore she sat down to write him a note of thanks. It took her an hour and eight sheets of paper before she could complete it to her satisfaction. Even then the result was not what she wanted. She wished she knew how he felt about it, so that she could temper it to the right degree of warmth or coolness. Since she did not know, she erred on the side of stiffness and made her message formal.

"MR. THOMAS L. MORSE,
"Monte Cristo Mine.

"DEAR SIR:

"Father and I feel that we ought to thank you for your considerate forbearance in a certain matter you know of. Believe me, sir, we are grateful.

"Very respectfully,
"MELISSY LEE."

She could not, however, keep herself from one touch of sympathy, and as a postscript she naïvely added:

"I'm sorry about the sheep." 167

Before mailing it she carried this letter to her father. Neither of them had ever referred to the other about what each knew of the affair of the robbery. More than once it had been on the tip of Champ Lee's tongue to speak of it, but it was not in his nature to talk out what he felt, and with a sigh he had given it up. Now Melissy came straight to the point.

"I've been writing a letter to Mr. Morse, dad, thanking him for not having me arrested."

Lee shot at her a glance of quick alarm.

"Does he know about it, honey?"

"Yes. Jack Flatray found out the whole thing and told him. He was very insistent on dropping it, Mr. Flatray says."

"You say Jack found out all about it, honey?" repeated Lee in surprise.

He was seated in a big chair on the porch, and she nestled on one arm of it, rumpled his gray hair as she had always done since she had been a little girl,

kissed him, and plunged into her story.

He heard her to the end without a word, but she noticed that he gripped the chair hard. When she had finished he swept her into his arms and broke down over her, calling her the pet names of her childhood.

“Honey-bird ... Dad’s little honey-bird ... I’m that ashamed of myse’f. ’Twas the whisky did it, lambie. Long as I live I’ll nevah touch it again. I’ll sweah that befo’ God. All week 168 you been packin’ the troubles I heaped on you, precious, and afteh you-all saved me from being a criminal....”

So he went on, spending his tempestuous love in endearments and caresses, and so together they afterward talked it out and agreed to send the letter she had written.

But Lee was not satisfied with her atonement. He could not rest to let it go at that, without expressing his own part in it to Bellamy. Next day he rode up to the mine, and found its owner in workman’s slops just stepping from the cage. If Bellamy were surprised to see him, no sign of it reached his face.

“If you’ll wait a minute till I get these things off, I’ll walk up to the cabin with you, Mr. Lee,” he said.

“I reckon you got my daughter’s letter,” said Lee abruptly as he strode up the mountainside with his host.

“Yes, I got it an hour ago.”

“I be’n and studied it out, Mr. Morse. I couldn’t let it go at that, and so I reckoned I’d jog along up hyer and tell you the whole story.”

“That’s as you please, Mr. Lee. I’m quite satisfied as it is.”

The rancher went on as if he had not heard. "'Course I be'n holding a grudge at you evah since you took up this hyer claim. I expect that rankles with me most of the time, and when I take to 169 drinking seems to me that mine still belongs to me. Well, I heerd tell of that shipment you was making, and I sets out to git it, for it ce'tainly did seem to belong to me. Understand, I wasn't drunk, but had be'n settin' pretty steady to the bottle for several days. Melissy finds it out, no matter how, and undertakes to keep me out of trouble. She's that full of sand, she nevah once thought of the danger or the consequences. Anyhow, she meant to git the bullion back to you afteh the thing had blown over."

"I haven't doubted that a moment since I knew she did it," said Bellamy quietly.

"Glad to hear it. I be'n misjudgin' you, seh, but you're a white man afteh all. Well, you know the rest of the story: how she held up the stage, how Jack drapped in befo' our tracks were covered, how smart he worked the whole thing out, and how my little gyurl confessed to him to save me."

"Yes, I know all that."

"What kind of a figure do I make in this? First off, I act like a durn fool, and she has to step in to save me. Then I let her tote the worry of it around while I ride off to Mesa. When Jack runs me down, she takes the blame again. To finish up with, she writes you a letter of thanks, jes' as if the whole fault was hers."

The old soldier selected a smooth rock and splashed it with tobacco juice before he continued with rising indignation against himself.

"I'm a fine father for a gyurl like that, ain't I? 170 Up to date I always had an idee I was some sort of a

man, but dad gum it! I cayn't see it hyer. To think of me lettin' my little gyurl stand the consequences of my meanness. No, Mr. Morse, that's one too much for Champ Lee. He's nevah going to touch another drop of whisky long as he lives."

"Glad to hear it. That's a square amend to make, one she will appreciate."

"So I took a *pasear* up hyer to explain this, and to thank you for yore kindness. Fac' is, Mr. Morse, it would have jest about killed me if anything had happened to my little 'Lissie. I want to say that if you had a-be'n her brother you couldn't 'a' be'n more decent."

"There was nothing else to do. It happens that I am in her debt. She saved my life once. Besides, I understood the motives for her action when she broke the law, and I honored them with all my heart. Flatray felt just as I did about it. So would any right-thinking man."

"Well, you cayn't keep me from sayin' again that you're a white man, seh," the other said with a laugh behind which the emotion of tears lay near.

"That offer of a compromise is still open, Mr. Lee."

The Southerner shook his grizzled head. "No, I reckon not, Mr. Morse. Understand, I got nothin' against you. The feud is wiped out, and I'll make you no mo' trouble. But it's yore mine, and I 171 don't feel like taking charity. I got enough anyhow."

"It wouldn't be charity. I've always felt as if you had a moral claim on an interest in the 'Monte Cristo.' If you won't take this yourself, why not let me make out the papers to Miss Lee? You would feel then that she was comfortably fixed, no matter what happened

to you."

"Well, I'll lay it befo' her. Anyhow, we're much obliged to you, Mr. Morse. I'll tell you what, seh," he added as an after-thought. "You come down and talk it over with 'Lissie. If you can make her see it that way, good enough."

When Champ Lee turned his bronco's head homeward he was more at peace with the world than he had been for a long time. He felt that he would be able to look his little girl in the face again. For the first time in a week he felt at one with creation. He rode into the ranch plaza humming "Dixie."

On the day following that of Lee's call, the mine-owner saddled his mare and took the trail to the half-way house. It was not until after the stage had come and gone that he found the chance for a word with Melissy alone.

"Your father submitted my proposition, did he?" Bellamy said by way of introducing the subject.

"Let's take a walk on it. I haven't been out of the house to-day," she answered with the boyish downrightness sometimes uppermost in her.

Calling Jim, she left him in charge of the store, 172 caught up a Mexican sombrero, and led the way up the trail to a grove of live-oaks perched on a bluff above. Below them stretched the plain, fold on fold to the blue horizon edge. Close at hand clumps of cactus, thickets of mesquit, together with the huddled adobe buildings of the ranch, made up the details of a scene possible only in the sunburnt territory. The palpitating heat quivered above the hot brown sand. No life stirred in the valley except a circling buzzard high in the sky, and the tiny moving speck with its wake of dust each knew to be the stage

that had left the station an hour before.

Melissy, unconscious of the charming picture she made, stood upon a rock and looked down on it all.

“I suppose,” she said at last slowly, “that most people would think this pretty desolate. But it’s a part of me. It’s all I know.” She broke off and smiled at him. “I had a chance to be civilized. Dad wanted to send me East to school, but I couldn’t leave him.”

“Where were you thinking of going?”

“To Denver.”

Her conception of the East amused him. It was about as accurate as a New Yorker’s of the West.

“I’m glad you didn’t. It would have spoiled you and sent you back just like every other young lady the schools grind out.” 173

She turned curiously toward him. “Am I not like other girls?”

It was on his tongue tip to tell her that she was gloriously different from most girls he had known, but discretion sealed his lips. Instead, he told her of life in the city and what it means to society women, its emptiness and unsatisfaction.

His condemnation was not proof positive to her. “I’d like to go there for myself some time and see. And anyhow it must be nice to have all the money you want with which to travel,” she said.

This gave him his opening. “It makes one independent. I think that’s the best thing wealth can give—a sort of spaciousness.” He waited perceptibly before he added: “I hope you have decided to be my partner in the mine.”

“I’ve decided not to.”

“I’m sorry. But why?”

“It’s your mine. It isn’t ours.”

“That’s nonsense. I always in my heart, recognized a moral claim you have. Besides, the case isn’t finished yet. Perhaps your father may win his contest. I’m all for settling out of court.”

“You know we won’t win.”

“I don’t.”

She gave him applause from her dark eyes. “That’s very fair of you, but Dad and I can’t do it.”

“Then you still have a grudge at me,” he smiled.

“Not the least little bit of a one.”

“I shan’t take no for an answer, then. I’ll order 174 the papers made out whether you want me to or not.” Without giving her a chance to speak, he passed to another topic: “I’ve decided to go out of the sheep business.”

“I’m so glad!” she cried.

“Those aren’t my feelings,” he answered ruefully. “I hate to quit under fire.”

“Of course you do, but your friends will know why you do it.”

“Why do I do it?”

“Because you know it’s right. The cattlemen had the range first. Their living is tied up in cattle, and your sheep are ruining the feed for them. Yesterday when I was out riding I counted the bones of eight dead cows.”

He nodded gravely. “Yes, in this country sheep are death to cows. I hate to be a quitter, but I hate worse

to take the bread out of the mouths of a dozen families. Two days ago I had an offer for my whole bunch, and to-morrow I'm going to take the first instalment over the pass and drive them down to the railroad."

"But you'll have to cross the dead line to get over the pass," she said quickly; for all Cattleland knew that a guard had been watching his herds to see they did not cross the pass.

"Yes. I'm going to send Alan with a letter to Farnum. I don't think there will be any opposition to my crossing it when my object is understood," he smiled. 175

Melissy watched him ride away, strong and rugged and ungraceful, from the head to the heel of him a man. Life had gone hard with him. She wondered whether that were the reason her heart went out to him so warmly.

As she moved about her work that day and the next little snatches of song broke from her, bubbling forth like laughter, born of the quiet happiness within, for which she could give no reason.

After the stage had gone she saddled her pony and rode toward the head of the pass. In an hour or two now the sheep would be pouring across the divide, and she wanted to get a photograph of them as they emerged from the pass. She was following an old cattle trail which ran into the main path just this side of the pass, and she was close to the junction when the sound of voices stopped her. Some instinct made her wait and listen.

The speakers were in a dip of the trail just ahead of her, and the voice of the first she recognized as belonging to the man Boone. The tone of it was

jubilantly cruel.

“No, sir. You don’t move a step of the way, not a step, Mr. Alan McKinstra. I’ve got him right where I want him, and I don’t care if you talk till the cows come home.”

Alan’s voice rang out indignantly, “It’s murder then —just plain, low-down murder. If you hold me here and let Morse fall into a death trap without 176 warning him, you’re as responsible as if you shot him yourself.”

“All right. Suits me down to the ground. We’ll let it go at that. I’m responsible. If you want the truth flat and plain, I don’t mind telling you that I wouldn’t be satisfied if I wasn’t responsible. I’m evening up some little things with Mr. Morse to-day.”

Melissy needed to hear no more to understand the situation, but if she had, the next words of Boone would have cleared it up.

“When I met up with you and happened on the news that you was taking a message to Farnum, and when I got onto the fact that Morse, as you call him, was moving his sheep across the dead line, *relying on you having got his letter to the cattlemen to make it safe*, it seemed luck too good to be true. All I had to do was to persuade you to stay right here with me, and Mr. Morse would walk into the pass and be wiped out. You get the beauty of it, my friend, don’t you? *I’m* responsible, but it will be Farnum and his friends that will bear the blame. There ain’t but one flaw in the whole thing: Morse will never know that it’s me that killed him.”

“You devil!” cried the boy, with impotent passion.

“I’ve waited ten years for this day, and it’s come at

last. Don't you think for a moment I'm going to weaken. No, sir! You'll sit there with my 177 gun poked in your face just as you've sat for six hours. It's my say-so to-day, sir," Boone retorted, malevolence riding triumph in his voice.

Melissy's first impulse was to confront the man, her next to slip away without being discovered and then give the alarm.

"Yes, sir," continued the cowpuncher; "I scored on Mr. Morse two or three nights ago, when I played hell with one of his sheep camps, and to-day I finish up with him. His sheep have been watched for weeks, and at the first move it's all up with him and them. Farnum's vaqueros will pay my debt in full. Just as soon as I'm right sure of it I'll be jogging along to Dead Man's Cache, and you can go order the coffin for your boss."

The venom of the man was something to wonder at. It filled the listening girl with sick apprehension. She had not known that such hatred could live in the world.

Quietly she led her pony back, mounted, and made a wide detour until she struck the trail above. Already she could hear the distant bleat of sheep which told her that the herd was entering the pass. Recklessly she urged her pony forward, galloping into the saddle between the peaks without regard to the roughness of the boulder-strewn path. A voice from above hailed her with a startled shout as she flew past. Again, a shot rang out, the bullet whistling close to her ear. But nothing could stop her till she reached the man she meant to save. 178

And so it happened that Richard Bellamy, walking at the head of his herd, saw a horse gallop wildly round

a bend almost into his bleating flock. The rider dragged the bronco to a halt and slipped to the ground. She stood there ashen-hued, clinging to the saddle-horn and swaying slightly.

"I'm in time.... Thank God!... Thank God!" her parched lips murmured.

"Miss Lee! You here?" he cried.

They looked at each other, the man and the girl, while the wild fear in her heart began to still. The dust of the drive was thick on his boots, his clothes, his face, but the soil of travel could not obscure the power of his carriage, the strong lines of his shoulders, the set of his broad, flat back, any more than it could tarnish her rarity, the sweetness of blood in her that under his gaze beat faintly into her dusky cheeks. The still force of him somehow carried reassurance to her. Such virility of manhood could not be marked for extinction.

She panted out her story, and his eyes never left her.

"You have risked your life to save mine and my herders," he said very quietly.

"You must go back," she replied irrelevantly.

"I can't. The entrance is guarded."

This startled her. "Then—what shall we do?"

"You must ride forward at once. Tell the vaqueros that I am moving my sheep only to take them to the railroad. Explain to them how Alan is 179 detained with the message I sent Farnum. In a few minutes we shall follow with the sheep."

"And if they don't believe that you are going out of the sheep business—what then?"

"I shall have to take my chance of that."

She seemed about to speak, but changed her mind, nodded, swung to the saddle, and rode forward. After a few minutes Bellamy followed slowly. He was unarmed, not having doubted that his letter to the cattleman would make his journey safe. That he should have waited for an answer was now plain, but the contract called for an immediate delivery of the sheep, as he had carefully explained in his note to Farnum.

Presently he heard again the clatter of a horse's hoofs in the loose shale and saw Melissy returning.

"Well?" he asked as she drew up.

"I've told them. I think they believe me, but I'm going through the gorge with you."

He looked up quickly to protest, but did not. He knew that her thought was that her presence beside him would protect him from attack. The rough chivalry of Arizona takes its hat off to a woman, and Melissy Lee was a favorite of the whole countryside.

So together they passed into the gulch, Bellamy walking by the side of her horse. Neither of them spoke. At their heels was the soft rustle of many thousands of padding feet.

Once there came to them the sound of cheering, 180 and they looked up to see a group of vaqueros waving their hats and shouting down. Melissy shook her handkerchief and laughed happily at them. It was a day to be remembered by these riders.

They emerged into a roll of hill-tops upon which the setting sun had cast a weird afterglow of radiance in which the whole world burned. The cactus, the stunted shrubbery, the painted rocks, seemed all afire with some magic light that had touched their

commonness to a new wonder.

A sound came to them from below. A man, rifle in hand and leading a horse, was stealthily crossing the trail to disappear among the large boulders beyond.

Melissy did not speak, scarce dared to draw breath, for the man beneath them was Boone. There was something furtive and lupine about him that suggested the wild beast stalking its kill. No doubt he had become impatient to see the end of his foe and had ridden forward. He had almost crossed the path before he looked up and caught sight of them standing together in the fireglow of the sunset.

Abruptly he came to a standstill.

“By God! you slipped through, did you?” he said in a low voice of concentrated bitterness.

Bellamy did not answer, but he separated himself from the girl by a step or two. He knew quite well what was coming, and he looked down quietly with steady eyes upon his foe. 181

From far below there came the faint sound of a horse breaking its way through brush. Boone paused to listen, but his eye never wandered from the bareheaded, motionless figure silhouetted against the skyline in the ruddy evening glow. He had shifted his rifle so that it lay in both hands, ready for immediate action.

Melissy, horror-stricken, had sat silent, but now she found her voice.

“He is unarmed!” she cried to the cowpuncher.

He made no answer. Another sound in the brush, close at hand, was distracting his attention, though not his gaze.

Just as he whipped up his rifle Melissy sprang forward. She heard the sound of the explosion fill the draw, saw Bellamy clutch at the air and slowly sink to the ground. Before the echoes had died away she had flung herself toward the inert body.

The outlaw took a step or two forward, as if to make sure of his work, but at the sound of running footsteps he changed his mind, swung to the saddle and disappeared among the rocks.

An instant later Bob Farnum burst into view.

“What’s up?” he demanded.

Melissy looked up. Her face was perfectly ashen. “Phil Norris ... he shot Mr. Morse.”

Farnum stepped forward. “Hurt badly, Mr. Morse?”

The wounded man grinned faintly. “Scared worse, I reckon. He got me in the fleshy part of the left arm.”

182

CHAPTER XIII

OLD ACQUAINTANCES

“You wanted to see me?”

The voice had the soft, slow intonation of the South, and it held some quality that haunted the memory. Or so Melissy thought afterward, but that may have been because of its owner’s appeal to sympathy.

“If you are Miss Yarnell.”

“Ferne Yarnell is my name.”

“Mr. Bellamy asked me to call on you. He sent this letter of introduction.”

A faint wave of color beat into the cheek of the stranger. “You know Mr. Bellamy then?”

“Yes. He would have been here to meet you, but he met with an accident yesterday.”

“An accident!” There was a quick flash of alarm in the lifted face.

“He told me to tell you that it was not serious. He was shot in the arm.”

“Shot. By whom?” She was ashen to the lips.

“By a man called Duncan Boone.”

“I know him. He is a dangerous man.” 183

“Yes,” Melissy nodded. “I don’t think we know how very dangerous he is. We have all been deceived in him till recently.”

“Does he live here?”

“Yes. The strange thing is that he and Mr. Bellamy had never met in this country until a few days ago. There used to be some kind of a feud between the families. But you must know more about that than I do.”

“Yes. My family is involved in the feud. Mr. Bellamy is a distant cousin of mine.”

“So he told me.”

“Have you known him long?”

Melissy thought that there was a little more than curiosity in the quick look the young woman flung at her.

“I met him when he first came here. He was lost on the desert and I found him. After that we became very unfriendly. He jumped a mining claim belonging to my father. But we’ve made it up and agreed to be friends.”

“He wrote about the young lady who saved his life.”

Melissy smiled. “Did he say that I was a cattle and a stage rustler?”

“He said nothing that was not good.”

“I’m much obliged to him,” the Western girl answered breezily. “And now do tell me, Miss Yarnell, that you and your people have made up your mind to stay permanently.” 184

“Father is still looking the ground over. He has almost decided to buy a store here. Yet he has been

in the town only a day. So you see he must like it."

Outside the open second story window of the hotel Melissy heard a voice that sounded familiar. She moved toward the window alcove, and at the same time a quick step was heard in the hall. Someone opened the door of the parlor and stood on the threshold. It was the man called Boone.

Melissy, from the window, glanced round. Her first impulse was to speak; her second to remain silent. For the Arkansan was not looking at her. His mocking ribald gaze was upon Ferne Yarnell.

That young woman looked up from the letter of introduction she was reading and a startled expression swept into her face.

"Dunc Boone," she cried.

The man doffed his hat with elaborate politeness. "Right glad to meet up with you again, Miss Ferne. You was in short dresses when I saw you last. My, but you've grown pretty. Was it because you heard I was in Arizona that you came here?"

She rose, rejecting in every line of her erect figure his impudent geniality, his insolent pretense of friendliness.

"My brother is in the hotel. If he learns you are here there will be trouble."

A wicked malice lay in his smiling eyes. "Trouble for him or for me?" he inquired silkily. 185

His lash flicked her on the raw. Hal Yarnell was a boy of nineteen. This man had a long record as a gunfighter to prove him a desperate man. Moreover, he knew how hopelessly heart sick she was of the feud that for many years had taken its toll of blood.

“Haven’t you done us enough harm, you and yours? Go away. Leave us alone. That’s all I ask of you.”

He came in and closed the door. “But you see it ain’t all I ask of you, Ferne Yarnell. I always did ask all I could get of a girl as pretty as you.”

“Will you leave me, sir?”

“When I’m through.”

“Now.”

“No, I reckon not,” he drawled between half shuttered eyes.

She moved toward the door, but he was there before her. With a turn of his wrist he had locked it.

“This interview quits at my say-so, honey. Think after so many years of absence-makes-the-heart-grow-fonder you’re going to trample over me like I was a kid? Guess again.”

“Unlock that door,” she ordered.

“When I get good and ready. We’ll have our talk out first.”

Her eyes blazed. She was white as paper though she faced him steadily. But her heart wavered. She dared not call out for fear her brother might 186 hear and come to her assistance. This she must forestall at all costs.

A heel clicked in the alcove. For the first time Norris, or Boone as the Southern girl had called him, became aware of a third party in the room. Melissy was leaning out of the window. She called down to a man standing on the street.

“Jack, come up here quick. I want you.”

Boone took a step forward. “You here, ’Lissie Lee?”

She laughed scornfully. “Yes, I’m here. An unexpected pleasure, isn’t it?”

“Do you know Ferne Yarnell?” he asked, for once taken aback.

“It looks as if I do.”

His quick furtive eye fell upon an envelope on the floor. He picked it up. Upon it was written, “Miss Ferne Yarnell,” and in the corner, “Introducing Miss Lee.”

A muscle twitched in his face. When he looked up there was an expression of devilish malignity on it.

“Mr. Bellamy’s handwriting, looks like.” He turned to the Arizona girl. “Then I didn’t put the fellow out of business.”

“No, you coward.”

The angry color crept to the roots of his hair. “Better luck next time.”

The door knob rattled. Someone outside was trying to get in. Those inside the room paid no 187 obvious attention to him. The venomous face of the cattle detective held the women fascinated.

“When Dick Bellamy ambushed Shep he made a hell of a bad play of it. My old mammy used to say that the Boones were born wolves. I can see where she was right. The man that killed my brother gets his one of these days and don’t you forget it. You just stick around. We’re due to shoot this thing out, him and me,” the man continued, his deep-socketed eyes burning from the grim handsome face.

“Open the door,” ordered a voice from the hall, shaking the knob violently.

“You don’t know he killed your brother. Someone

else may have done it. And it may have been done in self defence," the Arkansas girl said to Boone in a voice so low and reluctant that it appeared the words were wrung from her by torture.

"Think I'm a buzzard head? Why for did he run away? Why did he jump for the sandhills soon as the word came to arrest him?" He snapped together his straight, thin-lipped mouth, much as a trap closes on its prey.

A heavy weight hurtled against the door and shook it to the hinges. Melissy had been edging to the right. Now with a twist of her lissom body she had slipped past the furious man and turned the key.

Jack Flatray came into the room. His glance swept the young women and fastened on the man. 188 In the crossed eyes of the two was the thrust of rapiers, the grinding of steel on steel, that deadly searching for weakness in the other that duelists employ.

The deputy spoke in a low soft drawl. "Mornin', Boone. Holding an executive session, are you?"

The lids of the detective narrowed to slits. From the first there had been no pretense of friendship between these two. There are men who have only to look once at each other to know they will be foes. It had been that way with them. Causes of antagonism had arisen quickly enough. Both dominant personalities, they had waged silent unspoken warfare for the leadership of the range. Later over the favor of Melissy Lee this had grown more intense, still without having ever been put into words. Now they were face to face, masks off.

"Why yes, until you butted in, Mr. Sheriff."

"This isn't my busy day. I thought I'd just drop in to

the meeting."

"You've made a mistake. We're not holding a cattle rustlers' convention."

"There are so many ladies present I can't hear you, but maybe if you said it outside I could," the deputy suggested gently, a gleam of steely anger in his eyes.

"Say it anywhere to oblige a friend," sneered Boone.

From the moment of meeting neither man had lowered his gaze by the fraction of an inch. Red 189 tragedy was in the air. Melissy knew it. The girl from Arkansas guessed as much. Yet neither of them knew how to avert the calamity that appeared impending. One factor alone saved the situation for the moment. Flatray had not yet heard of the shooting of Bellamy. Had he known he would have arrested Boone on the spot and the latter would have drawn and fought it out.

Into the room sauntered Lee. "Hello, 'Lissie. Been looking for you an hour, honey. Mornin', Norris. Howdy, Jack! Dad burn yore ornery hide, I ain't see you long enough for a good talk in a coon's age."

Melissy seized on her father joyfully as an interposition of Providence. "Father, this is Miss Yarnell, the young lady I told you about."

The ranchman buried her little hand in his big paw. "Right glad to meet up with you, Miss Yarnell. How do you like Arizona by this time? I reckon Melissy has introduced you to her friends. No? Make you acquainted with Mr. Flatray. Shake hands with Mr. Norris, Miss Yarnell. Where are you, Norris?"

The owner of the Bar Double G swung round, to discover for the first time that harmony was not present. Boone stood back with a sullen vindictive

expression on his face.

“Why, what’s up, boys?” the rancher asked, his glance passing from one to another. 190

“You ain’t in this, Lee,” Boone informed him. Then, to Flatray: “See you later.”

The deputy nodded carelessly. “Any time you like.”

The lank old Confederate took a step forward to call Boone back, but Melissy caught him by the sleeve.

“Let him go,” she whispered emphatically.

“I know my boss,” returned Lee with a laugh.

“If you’re quite through with me, Miss Lee, I’ll not intrude longer,” Flatray said.

“But I’m not,” spoke Melissy quickly.

She did not intend to let him get away to settle his quarrel with Boone.

“I’m rather busy,” he suggested.

“Your business will have to wait,” she came back decisively.

Lee laughed and clapped Jack on the shoulder. “Might as well know your boss too, boy.”

Melissy flushed with a flash of temper. “I’m nothing of the kind, dad.”

“Sho! A joke’s a joke, girl. That’s twice hand-runnin’ I get a call-down. You’re mighty high-heeled to-day, ’pears like.”

Jack smiled grimly. He understood some things that were hidden from Lee.

191

CHAPTER XIV

CONCERNING THE BOONE-BELLAMY-YARNELL FEUD

The story that Ferne Yarnell told them in the parlor of the hotel had its beginnings far back in the days before the great war. They had been neighbors, these three families, had settled side by side in this new land of Arkansas, had hunted and feasted together in amity. In an hour had arisen the rift between them that was to widen to a chasm into which much blood had since been spilt. It began with a quarrel between hotheaded young men. Forty years later it was still running its blind wasteful course.

Even before the war the Boones had begun to go down hill rapidly. Cad Boone, dissipated and unprincipled, had found even the lax discipline of the Confederate army too rigid and had joined the guerrillas, that band of hangers-on which respected neither flag and developed a cruelty that was appalling. Falling into the hands of Captain Ransom Yarnell, he had been tried by drumhead courtmartial and executed within twenty four hours of his capture.

The boast of the Boones was that they never 192 forgot an injury. They might wait many years for the chance, but in the end they paid their debts. Twenty years after the war Sugden Boone shot down Colonel Yarnell as he was hitching his horse in front of the courthouse at Nemo. Next Christmas eve a brother of

the murdered man—Captain Tom, as his old troopers still called him—met old Sugden in the postoffice and a revolver duel followed. From it Captain Tom emerged with a bullet in his arm. Sugden was carried out of the store feet first to a house of mourning.

The Boones took their time. Another decade passed. Old Richard Bellamy, father of the young man, was shot through the uncurtained window of his living rooms while reading the paper one night. Though related to the Yarnells, he had never taken any part in the feud beyond that of expressing his opinion freely. The general opinion was that he had been killed by Dunc Boone, but there was no conclusive evidence to back it. Three weeks later another one of the same faction met his fate. Captain Tom was ambushed while riding from his plantation to town and left dead on the road. Dunc Boone had been seen lurking near the spot, and immediately after the killing he was met by two hunters as he was slipping through the underbrush for the swamps. There was no direct evidence against the young man, but Captain Tom had been the most popular man in the county. Reckless though he was, Duncan Boone had been forced 193 to leave the country by the intensity of the popular feeling against him.

Again the feud had slumbered. It was understood that the Yarnells and the Bellamys were ready to drop it. Only one of the opposite faction remained on the ground, a twin brother of Duncan. Shep Boone was a drunken ne'er-do-well, but since he now stood alone nothing more than empty threats was expected of him. He spent his time idly with a set of gambling loafers, but he lacked the quality of active malice so pronounced in Dunc.

A small part of the old plantation, heavily

mortgaged, still belonged to Shep and was rented by him to a tenant, Jess Munro. He announced one day that he was going to collect the rent due him. Having been drinking heavily, he was in an abusive frame of mind. As it chanced he met young Hal Yarnell, just going into the office of his kinsman Dick Bellamy, with whom he was about to arrange the details of a hunting trip they were starting upon. Shep emptied his spleen on the boy, harking back to the old feud and threatening vengeance at their next meeting. The boy was white with rage, but he shut his teeth and passed upstairs without saying a word.

The body of Shep Boone was found next day by Munro among the blackberry bushes at the fence corner of his own place. No less than four witnesses had seen young Yarnell pass that way with a rifle in his hand about the same time that Shep 194 was riding out from town. They had heard a shot, but had thought little of it. Munro had been hoeing cotton in the field and had seen the lad as he passed. Later he had heard excited voices, and presently a shot. Other circumstantial evidence wound a net around the boy. He was arrested. Before the coroner held an inquest a new development startled the community. Dick Bellamy fled on a night train, leaving a note to the coroner exonerating Hal. In it he practically admitted the crime, pleading self defence.

This was the story that Ferne Yarnell told in the parlor of the Palace Hotel to Jack Flatray and the Lees.

Melissy spoke first. “Did Mr. Bellamy kill the man to keep your brother from being killed?”

“I don’t know. It must have been that. It’s all so horrible.”

The deputy's eyes gleamed. "Think of it another way, Miss Yarnell. Bellamy was up against it. Your brother is only a boy. He took his place. A friend couldn't have done more for another."

The color beat into the face of the Arkansas girl as she looked at him. "No. He sacrificed his career for him. He did a thing he must have hated to do."

"He's sure some man," Flatray pronounced.

A young man, slight, quick of step, and erect as a willow sapling, walked into the room. He looked 195 from one to another with clear level eyes. Miss Ferne introduced him as her brother.

A thought crossed the mind of the deputy. Perhaps this boy had killed his enemy after all and Bellamy had shouldered the blame for him. If the mine owner were in love with Ferne Yarnell this was a hypothesis more than possible. In either case he acquitted the slayer of blame. In his pocket was a letter from the sheriff at Nemo, Arkansas, stating that his county was well rid of Shep Boone and that the universal opinion was that neither Bellamy nor young Yarnell had been to blame for the outcome of the difficulty. Unless there came to him an active demand for the return of Bellamy he intended to let sleeping dogs lie.

No such demand came. Within a month the mystery was cleared. The renter Munro delivered himself to the sheriff at Nemo, admitting that he had killed Shep Boone in self defence. The dead man had been drinking and was exceedingly quarrelsome. He had abused his tenant and at last drawn on him. Whereupon Munro had shot him down. At first afraid of what might happen to him, he had stood aside and let the blame be shouldered upon young Yarnell. But

later his conscience had forced him to a confession. It is enough here to say that he was later tried and acquitted, thus closing the chapter of the wastrel's tragic death.

The day after the news of Munro's confession reached Arizona Richard Bellamy called upon Flatray 196 to invite him to his wedding. As soon as his name was clear he had asked Ferne Yarnell to marry him.

PART II
DEAD MAN'S CACHE

199

CHAPTER I

KIDNAPPED

As a lake ripples beneath a summer breeze, so Mesa was stirred from its usual languor by the visit of Simon West. For the little Arizona town was dreaming dreams. Its imagination had been aroused; and it saw itself no longer a sleepy cow camp in the unfeatured desert, but a metropolis, in touch with twentieth-century life.

The great Simon West, pirate of finance, empire

builder, molder of the destinies of the mighty Southwestern Pacific system, was to touch the adobe village with his transforming wand and make of it a hive of industry. Rumors flew thick and fast.

Mesa was to be the junction for the new spur that would run to the big Lincoln dam. The town would be a division point; the machine shops of the system would be located there. Its future, if still a trifle vague, was potentially immense. Thus, with cheerful optimism, did local opinion interpret the visit of the great man.

Whatever Simon West may have thought of Mesa and its prospects, he kept behind his thin, close-shut lips. He was a dry, gray little man of 200 fifty-five, with sharp, twinkling eyes that saw everything and told nothing. Certainly he wore none of the visible signs of greatness, yet at his nod Wall Street trembled. He had done more to change the map of industrial America than any other man, alive or dead. Wherefore, big Beauchamp Lee, mayor of Mesa, and the citizens on the reception committee did their very best to impress him with the future of the country, as they motored out to the dam.

“Most promising spot on earth. Beats California a city block on oranges and citrons. Ever see an Arizona peach, Mr. West? It skins the world,” the big cattleman ran on easily.

The financier’s eye took in the girl sitting beside the chauffeur in the front seat, and he nodded assent.

Melissy Lee bloomed. She was vivid as a wild poppy on the hillsides past which they went flashing. But she had, too, a daintiness, a delicacy of coloring and contour, that suggested the fruit named by her father.

“You bet we raise the best here,” that simple gentleman bragged patriotically. “All we need is water, and the Lincoln dam assures us of plenty. Yes, sir! It certainly promises to be an Eden.”

West unlocked his lips long enough to say: “Any country can promise. I’m looking for one that will perform.”

“You’re seeing it right now, seh,” the mayor assured him, and launched into fluent statistics. 201

West heard, saw the thing stripped of its enthusiasm, and made no comment either for or against. He had plenty of imagination, or he could never have accomplished the things he had done. However, before any proposition appealed to him he had to see money in the deal. Whether he saw it in this particular instance, nobody knew; and only one person had the courage to ask him point-blank what his intentions were. This was Melissy.

Luncheon was served in the pleasant filtered sunlight, almost under the shadow of the great dam.

On the way out Melissy had sat as demure and dovelike as it was possible for her to be. But now she showed herself to be another creature.

Two or three young men hovered about her; notable among them was a young fellow of not many words, good-humored, strong, with a look of power about him which the railroad king appreciated. Jack Flatray they called him. He was the newly-elected sheriff of the county.

The great man watched the girl without appearing to do so. He was rather at a loss to account for the exotic, flamelike beauty into which she had suddenly sparkled; but he was inclined to attribute it to the

arrival of Flatray.

Melissy sat on a flat rock beside West, swinging her foot occasionally with the sheer active joy of life, the while she munched sandwiches and pickles. The young men bantered her and each other, and she flashed back retorts which gave them alternately 202 deep delight at the discomfiture of some other. Toward the close of luncheon, she turned her tilted chin from Flatray, as punishment for some audacity of his, and beamed upon the railroad magnate.

“It’s very good of you to notice me at last,” he said, with his dry smile.

“I was afraid of you,” she confided cheerfully.

“Am I so awesome?”

“It’s your reputation, you know. You’re quite a dragon. I’m told you gobble a new railroad every morning for breakfast.”

“’Lissie,” her father warned.

“Let her alone,” the great man laughed. “Miss Lee is going to give me the privilege of hearing the truth about myself.”

“But I’m asking. I don’t know what the truth is,” she protested.

“Well, what you think is the truth.”

“It doesn’t matter what we think about you. The important thing to know is what you think about us.”

“Am I to tell you what I think of you—with all these young men here?” he countered.

She was excited by her own impudence. The pink had spilled over her creamy cheeks. She flashed a look of pretended disdain at her young men.

Nevertheless, she made laughing protest.

“It’s not me, but Mesa, that counts,” she answered ungrammatically. “Tell me that you’re 203 going to help us set orchards blossoming in these deserts, and we’ll all love you.”

“You offer an inducement, Miss Lee. Come—let us walk up to the Point and see this wonderful country of yours.”

She clapped her hands. “Oh, let’s! I’m tired of boys, anyhow. They know nothing but nonsense.” She made a laughing moue at Flatray, and turned to join the railroad builder.

The young sheriff arose and trailed to his pony. “My marching orders, I reckon.”

They walked up the hill together, the great man and the untutored girl. He still carried himself with the lightness of the spare, wiry man who has never felt his age. As for her, she moved as one on springs, her slender, willowy figure beautiful in motion.

“You’re loyal to Mesa. Born and brought up there?” West asked Melissy.

“No. I was brought up on the Bar Double G ranch. Father sold it not long since. We’re interested in the Monte Cristo mine, and it has done so well that we moved to town,” she explained.

At the first bend in the mountain road Jack had turned in his saddle to look at her as she climbed the steep. A quarter of a mile farther up there was another curve, which swept the trail within sight of the summit. Here Flatray pulled up and got out his field glasses. Leisurely the man and the maid came into sight from the timber on the shoulder 204 of the hill, and topped the last ascent. Jack could discern

Melissy gesturing here and there as she explained the lay of the land.

Something else caught and held his glasses. Four riders had emerged from a little gulch of dense aspens which ran up the Point toward the summit. One of these had with him a led horse.

“Now, I wonder what that means?” the sheriff mused aloud.

He was not left long in doubt. The four men rode swiftly, straight toward the man and the girl above. One of them swung from the saddle and stepped forward. He spoke to West, who appeared to make urgent protest. The dismounted rider answered. Melissy began to run. Very faintly there came to Flatray her startled cry. Simultaneously he caught the flash of the sun on bright steel. The leader of the four had drawn a revolver and was covering West with it. Instantly the girl stopped running. Plainly the life of the railroad president had been threatened unless she stopped.

The man behind the weapon swept a gesture in the direction of the led horse. Reluctantly West moved toward it, still protesting. He swung to the saddle, and four of the horses broke into a canter. Only the man with the drawn revolver remained on the ground with Melissy. He scabbarded his gun, took a step or two toward her, and made explanations. The girl stamped her foot, and half turned from him. 205

He laughed, stepped still closer to her, and spoke again. Melissy, with tilted chin, seemed to be unaware that he existed. Another step brought him to her side. Once more he spoke. No stone wall could have given him less recognition. Then Jack let out a sudden fierce imprecation, and gave his pony the

spur. For the man had bent forward swiftly, had kissed the girl on the lips once—twice—three times, had swept his hat off in a low, mocking bow, and had flung himself on his horse, and galloped off.

Pebbles and shale went flying from the horse's hoofs as the sheriff tore down the trail toward Melissy. He cut off at an angle and dashed through cactus and over rain-washed gullies at breakneck speed, pounding up the stiff slope to the summit. He dragged his pony to a halt, and leaped off at the same instant.

Melissy came to him with flashing eyes. "Why didn't you get here sooner?" she panted, as if she had been running; for the blind rage was strong in her.

His anger burst out to meet hers. "I wish I had!" he cried, with a furious oath.

"He insulted me. He laughed at me, and taunted me —and kissed me!"

Jack nodded. "I saw. If I had only had my rifle with me! Who was he?"

"He wore a mask. But I knew him. It was Dunc Boone." 206

"With the Roaring Fork gang?"

"I don't know. Is he one of them?"

"I've been thinking so for years."

"They must have known about our picnic. But what do they want with Mr. West?"

"He's one of the world's richest men."

"But he doesn't carry his money with him."

"He carries his life."

"They must mean to hold him for a ransom. Is that it?"

"You've guessed it. That's the play." Jack considered, his eyes on the far-away hills. When he spoke again it was with sharp decision. "Hit the trail back to town with your motor. Don't lose a minute on the way. Send a dispatch to Bucky O'Connor. You'd ought to get him at Douglas. If not, some of his rangers will know where to reach him. Keep the wires hot till you're in touch with him. Better sign my name. I've been writing him about this outfit. This job is cut out for Bucky, and we've got to get him on it."

"And what are *you* going to do?"

"I can't do much—I'm not armed. First time I've been caught that way since I've been sheriff. Came out today for a picnic and left my gun at home. But if they're the Roaring Fork outfit, they'll pass through the Elkhorn Cañon, heading for Dead Man's Cache. I'm going to cut around Old Baldy and try to beat them to it. Maybe I can recognize some of them." 207

"But if they see you?"

"I ain't aiming to let them see me."

"Still, they may."

His quiet eyes met hers steadily. "Yes, they may."

They were friends again, though he had never fully forgiven her doubt of him. It might be on the cards that some day she would be more to him than a friend. Understanding perfectly the danger of what he proposed, she yet made no protest. The man who would storm her heart must be one who would go the limit, for her standards were those of the outdoor

West. She, too, was “game” to the core; and she had never liked him better than she did at this moment. A man must be a man, and take his fighting chance.

“All right, Jack.”

Not for years before had she called him by his first name. His heart leaped, but he did not let even his look tell what he was feeling.

“I reckon I’ll cut right down from here, Melissy. Better not lose any time getting to town. So-long!” And with that he had swung to the saddle and was off.

Melissy ran swiftly down to the picnic party and cried out her news. It fell upon them like a bolt out of a June sky. Some exclaimed and wondered and deplored; but she was proud to see that her father took instant command, without an unnecessary word. 208

“They’ve caught us in swimming, boys! We’ve got to burn the wind back to town for our guns. Dick, you ride around by the Powder Horn and gather up the boys on the ranch. Get Swain to swing around to the south and comb the lower gulches of the Roaring Fork. Tell him to get in touch with me soon as he can. I’ll come through by Elkhorn.”

Lee helped his daughter into the machine, and took his place beside her.

“Hit the high spots, Jim. I’ve got an engagement in the hills that won’t wait, prior to which I’ve got to get back to town immediate,” he told the chauffeur cheerfully; for he was beginning to enjoy himself as in the old days, when he had been the hard-riding sheriff of a border county which took the premium for bad men.

The motor car leaped forward, fell into its pace, and began to hum its song of the road as it ate up swiftly the miles that lay between the dam and Mesa.

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CHAPTER II

A CAPTURE

Flatray swung around Old Baldy through the sparse timber that edged its roots. He knew this country well; for he had run cattle here, and combed the draws and ridges on the annual spring and fall round-ups.

There was no trail to follow. Often the lay of the land forced him to a detour; for it was rough with washes, with matted cactus, and with a thick growth of netted mesquite and underbrush. But true as the needle of a compass, he turned back always to the direction he was following. He had the instinct for direction, sharpened almost to infallibility by the experience his work had given him.

So, hour after hour, he swung forward, pushing his horse over the ground in a sort of running walk, common to the plains. Sunset found him climbing from the foothills into the mountains beyond. Starlight came upon him in a saddle between the peaks, still plodding up by winding paths to the

higher altitudes that make the ridge of the continent's backbone.

The moon was up long before he struck a gulch 210 spur that led to Elkhorn Cañon. Whether he would be in time or not—assuming that he had guessed aright as to the destination of the outlaws—he could not tell. It would be, at best, a near thing. For, though he had come more directly, they had followed a trail which made the going much faster. Fast as the cow pony could pick its way along the rock-strewn gulch, he descended, eye and ear alert to detect the presence of another human being in this waste of boulders, of moonlit, flickering shadows, of dark awesome peaks.

His quick ear caught the faintest of sounds. He slipped from the saddle and stole swiftly forward to the point where the gulch joined the main cañon. Voices drifted to him—the sound of careless laughter, wafted by the light night wind. He had missed the outlaws by scarce a hundred yards. There was nothing for it but to follow cautiously. As he was turning to go back for his horse the moon emerged from behind a cloud and flooded the cañon with a cold, silvery light. It showed Jack a man and a horse standing scarce twenty yards from him. The man had his back to him. He had dismounted, and was tightening the cinches of his saddle.

Flatray experienced a pang of disappointment. He was unarmed. His second thought sent him flying noiselessly back to his horse. Deftly he unloosed the rope which always hung coiled below the saddle horn. On tiptoe he ran back to the gulch mouth, bearing to the right, so as to come directly 211 opposite the man he wanted. As he ran he arranged the lariat to his satisfaction, freeing the loop and

making sure that the coil was not bound. Very cautiously he crept forward, taking advantage for cover of a boulder which rose from the bed of the gulch.

The man had finished tightening the girth. His foot rose to the stirrup. He swung up from the ground, and his right leg swept across the flank of the pony. It did not reach the stirrup; for, even as he rose, Jack's lariat snaked forward and dropped over his head to his breast. It tightened sharply and dragged him back, pinioning his arms to his side. Before he could shake one of them free to reach the revolver in his chaps, he was lying on his back, with Flatray astride of him. The cattleman's left hand closed tightly upon his windpipe, while the right searched for and found the weapon in the holster of the prostrate man.

Not until the steel rim of it pressed against the teeth of the man beneath him did Jack's fingers loosen. "Make a sound, and you're a dead man."

The other choked and gurgled. He was not yet able to cry out, even had he any intention of so doing. But defiant eyes glared into those of the man who had unhorsed and captured him.

"Where are your pals bound for?" Flatray demanded.

He got no answer in words, but sullen eyes flung out an obstinate refusal to give away his associates. 212

"I reckon you're one of the Roaring Fork outfit," Jack suggested.

"You know so darn much I'll leave you to guess the rest," growled the prisoner.

"The first thing I'll guess is that, if anything happens to Simon West, you'll hang for it, my friend."

"You'll have to prove some things first."

Flatray's hand slid into the man's coat pocket, and drew forth a piece of black cloth that had been used as a mask.

"Here's exhibit A, to begin with."

The man on the ground suddenly gave an upward heave, grasped at the weapon, and let out a yell for help that echoed back from the cliff, while the cattleman let the butt of the revolver crash heavily down upon his face. The heavy gun came down three times before the struggling outlaw would subside, and then not before blood streamed from ugly gashes into his eyes.

"I've had enough, damn you!" the fellow muttered sullenly. "What do you want with me?"

"You'll go along with me. Let out another sound, and I'll bump you off. Get a move on you."

Jack got to his feet and dragged up his prisoner. The man was a heavy-set, bowlegged fellow of about forty, hard-faced, and shifty-eyed—a frontier miscreant, unless every line of the tough, leathery countenance told a falsehood. But he had made his experiment and failed. He knew what manner of man 213 his captor was, and he had no mind for another lesson from him. He slouched to his horse, under propulsion of the revolver, and led the animal into the gulch.

Both mounted, Jack keeping the captive covered every moment of the time; and they began to retrace the way by which the young cattleman had just come.

After they had ridden about a quarter of a mile Flatray made a readjustment of the rope. He let the

loop lie loosely about the neck of the outlaw, the other end of it being tied to the horn of his own saddle. Also, he tied the hands of the man in such a way that, though they were free to handle the bridle rein, he could not raise them from the saddle as high as his neck.

“If you make any sudden moves, you’ll be committing suicide. If you yell out, it will amount to about the same thing. It’s up to you to be good, looks like.”

The man cursed softly. He knew that the least attempt to escape or to attract the attention of his confederates would mean his undoing. Something about this young man’s cold eye and iron jaw told him that he would not hesitate to shoot, if necessary.

Voices came to them from the cañon. Flatray guessed that a reconnaissance of the gulch would be made, and prepared himself for it by deflecting his course from the bed of the *arroyo* at a point where the walls fell back to form a little valley. A 214 little grove of aspens covered densely the shoulder of a hillock some fifty yards back, and here he took his stand. He dismounted, and made his prisoner do the same.

“Sit down,” he ordered crisply.

“What for?”

“To keep me from blowing the top of your head off,” answered Jack quietly.

Without further discussion, the man sat down. His captor stood behind him, one hand on the shoulder of his prisoner, his eyes watching the point of the gulch at which the enemy would appear.

Two mounted men showed presently in silhouette. Almost opposite the grove they drew up.

“Mighty queer what has become of Hank,” one of them said. “But I don’t reckon there’s any use looking any farther. You don’t figure he’s aiming to throw us down—do you, Buck?”

“Nope. He’ll stick, Hank will. But it sure looks darned strange. Here’s him a-ridin’ along with us, and suddenly he’s missin’. We hear a yell, and go back to look for him. Nothin’ doin’. You don’t allow the devil could have come for him sudden—do you, Jeff?”

It was said with a laugh, defiantly, but none the less Jack read uneasiness in the manner of the man. It seemed to him that both were eager to turn back. Giant boulders, carved to grotesque and ghostly shapes by a million years’ wind and water, reared themselves aloft and threw shadows in the moonlight. 215 The wind, caught in the gulch, rose and fell in unearthly, sibilant sounds. If ever fiends from below walk the earth, this time and place was a fitting one for them. Jack curved a hand around his mouth, and emitted a strange, mournful, low cry, which might have been the scream of a lost soul.

Jeff clutched at the arm of his companion. “Did you hear that, Buck?”

“What—what do you reckon it was, Jeff?”

Again Jack let his cry curdle the night.

The outlaws took counsel of their terror. They were hardy, desperate men, afraid of nothing mortal under the sun. But the dormant superstition in them rose to their throats. Fearfully they wheeled and gave their horses the spur. Flatray could hear them crashing through the brush.

He listened while the rapid hoofbeats died away,

until even the echoes fell silent. “We’ll be moving,” he announced to his prisoner.

For a couple of hours they followed substantially the same way that Jack had taken, descending gradually toward the foothills and the plains. The stars went out, and the moon slid behind banked clouds, so that the darkness grew with the passing hours. At length Flatray had to call a halt.

“We’ll camp here till morning,” he announced when they reached a grassy park.

The horses were hobbled, and the men sat down opposite each other in the darkness. Presently the prisoner relaxed and fell asleep. But there was no 216 sleep for his captor. The cattleman leaned against the trunk of a cottonwood and smoked his pipe. The night grew chill, but he dared not light a fire. At last the first streaks of gray dawn lightened the sky. A quarter of an hour later he shook his captive from slumber.

“Time to hit the trail.”

The outlaw murmured sleepily, “How’s that, Dunc? Twenty-five thousand apiece!”

“Wake up! We’ve got to vamose out of here.”

Slowly the fellow shook the sleep from his brain. He looked at Flatray sullenly, without answering. But he climbed into the saddle which Jack had cinched for him. Dogged and wolfish as he was, the man knew his master, and was cowed.

217

CHAPTER III

THE TABLES TURNED

From the local eastbound a man swung to the station platform at Mesa. He was a dark, slim, little man, wiry and supple, with restless black eyes which pierced one like bullets.

The depot loungers made him a focus of inquiring looks. But, in spite of his careless ease, a shrewd observer would have read anxiety in his bearing. It was as if behind the veil of his indifference there rested a perpetual vigilance. The wariness of a beast of prey lay close to the surface.

“Mornin’, gentlemen,” he drawled, sweeping the group with his eyes.

“Mornin’,” responded one of the loafers.

“I presume some of you gentlemen can direct me to the house of Mayor Lee.”

“The mayor ain’t to home,” volunteered a lank, unshaven native in butternut jeans and boots.

“I think it was his house I inquired for,” suggested the stranger.

“Fust house off the square on the yon side of the postoffice—a big two-story brick, with a gallery and po’ches all round it.” 218

Having thanked his informant, the stranger passed down the street. The curious saw him pass in at the

mayor's gate and knock at the door. It opened presently, and disclosed a flash of white, which they knew to be the skirt of a girl.

"I reckon that's Miss 'Lissie," the others were informed by the unshaven one. "She's let him in and shet the door."

Inevitably there followed speculation as to who the arrival might be. That his coming had something to do with the affair of the West kidnapping, all were disposed to agree; but just what it might have to do with it, none of them could do more than guess. If they could have heard what passed between Melissy and the stranger, their curiosity would have been gratified.

"Good mornin', miss. Is Mayor Lee at home?"

"No—he isn't. He hasn't got back yet. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Two rows of even white teeth flashed in a smile. "I thought maybe there was something I could do for you. You are Miss Lee, I take it?"

"Yes. But I don't quite understand—unless you have news."

"I have no news—yet."

"You mean——" Her eager glance swept over him. The brown eyes, which had been full of questioning, flashed to understanding. "You are not Lieutenant O'Connor?"

"Am I not?" he smiled. 219

"I mean—are you?"

"At your service, Miss Lee."

She had heard for years of this lieutenant of rangers,

who was the terror of all Arizona "bad men." Her father, Jack Flatray, the range riders whom she knew —game men all—hailed Bucky O'Connor as a wonder. For coolness under fire, for acumen, for sheer, unflawed nerve, and for his skill in that deadly game he played of hunting down desperadoes, they called him chief ungrudgingly. He was a daredevil, who had taken his life in his hands a hundred times. Yet always he came through smiling, and brought back with him the man he went after. The whisper ran that he bore a charmed life, so many had been his hairbreadth escapes.

"Come in," the girl invited. "Father said, if you came, I was to keep you here until he got back or sent a messenger for you. He's hunting for the criminals in the Roaring Fork country. Of course, he didn't know when you would get here. At the time he left we hadn't been able to catch you on the wire. I signed Mr. Flatray's name at his suggestion, because he was in correspondence with you once about the Roaring Fork outlaws. He is out in the hills, too. He started half an hour after the kidnappers. But he isn't armed. I'm troubled about him."

Again the young man's white-toothed smile flashed. "You'd better be. Anybody that goes 220 hunting Black MacQueen unarmed ought to be right well insured."

She nodded, a shadow in her eyes. "Yes—but he would go. He doesn't mean them to see him, if he can help it."

"Black sees a heap he isn't expected to see. He has got eyes all over the hills, and they see by night as well as by day."

"Yes—I know he has spies everywhere; and he has

the hill people terrorized, they say. You think this is his work?"

"It's a big thing—the kind of job he likes to tackle. Who else would dare do such a thing?"

"That's what father thinks. If he had stolen the President of the United States, it wouldn't have stirred up a bigger fuss. Newspaper men and detectives are hurrying here from all directions. They are sure to catch him."

"Are they?"

She noticed a curious, derisive contempt in the man's voice, and laid it to his vanity. "I don't mean that *they* are. I mean that *you* are sure to get him," she hastened to add. "Father thinks you are wonderful."

"I'm much obliged to him," said the man, with almost a sneer.

He seemed to have so good an opinion of himself that he was above praise even. Melissy was coming to the decision that she did not like him—which 221 was disappointing, since she had expected to like him immensely.

"I didn't look for you till night. You wired you would be on number seven," she said. "I understood that was the earliest you could get here."

His explanation of the change was brief, and invited no further discussion. "I found I could make an earlier train."

"I'm glad you could. Father says it is always well to start on the trail while it is fresh."

"Have you ever seen this MacQueen, Miss Lee?" he asked.

"Not unless he was there when Mr. West was

kidnapped."

"Did you know any of the men?"

She hesitated. "I thought one was Duncan Boone."

"What made you think so?"

"He was the leader, I think, moved the way he does." Her anger flashed for an instant. "And acted like him —detestably."

"Was he violent to West? Injure him?"

"No—he didn't do him any physical injury that I saw. I wasn't thinking about Mr. West."

"Surely he didn't lay hands on *you*!"

She looked up, in time to see the flicker of amusement sponged from his face. It stirred vague anger in her. "He was insolent and ungentlemanly."

"As how?" 222

"It doesn't matter how." Her manner specifically declined to particularize.

"Would you recognize him again if you met him? Describe him, if you can."

"Yes. I used to know him well—before he became known as an outlaw," she added after a perceptible hesitation. "There's something ravenous about him."

"You mean that he is fierce and bloodthirsty?"

"No—I don't mean that; though, for that matter, I don't think he would stick at anything. What I mean is that he is pantherine in his movements—more lithe and supple than most men are."

"Is he a big man?"

"No—medium size, and dark."

"There were four of them, you say?"

"Yes. Jack saw them, too, but at a distance."

"He reached you after they were out of sight?"

"They had been gone about five minutes when I saw him—five or ten. I couldn't be sure."

"Boone offered no personal indignity to you?"

"Why are you so sure?" she flashed.

"The story is that he is quite the ladies' man."

Melissy laughed scornfully.

At his request, she went over again the story of the abduction, telling everything save the matter of the ravished kisses. This she kept to herself. She did not quite know why, except that there was something she did not like about this Bucky O'Connor. He had a trick of narrowing his eyes and 223 gloating over her, as a cat gloats over its expected kill.

However, his confidence impressed her. Cocksure he was, and before long she knew him boastful; but competence sat on him, none the less. She thought she could see why he was held to be the most deadly bloodhound on a trail that even Arizona could produce. That he was fearless she did not need to be told, any more than she needed a certificate that on occasion he could be merciless. On the other hand, he fitted very badly with the character of the young lieutenant of rangers, as Jack Flatray had sketched it for her. Her friend's description of his hero had been enthusiastic. She decided that the young cattleman was a bad judge of men—though, of course, he had never actually met O'Connor.

"I reckon I'll not wait for your father's report, Miss Lee. I work independent of other men. That is how I

get the wonderful results I do."

His conceit nettled her; also, it stung her filial loyalty. "My father was the best sheriff this county ever had," she said stiffly.

He smiled satirically. "Still, I reckon I'll handle this my own way—unless your father's daughter wants to go partners with me in it."

She gave him a look intended to crush his impudence. "No, thank you."

He ate a breakfast which she had the cook prepare hurriedly for him, and departed on the horse for which she had telephoned to the nearest livery 224 stable. Melissy was a singularly fearless girl; yet she watched him go with a decided relief, for which she could not account. He rode, she observed, like a centaur—flat-backed, firm in the saddle with the easy negligence of a plainsman. He turned as he started, and waved a hand debonairly at her.

"If I have any luck, I'll bring back one of the Roaring Fork bunch with me—a present for a good girl, Miss Melissy."

She turned on her heel and went inside. Anger pulsed fiercely through her. He laughed at her, made fun of her, and yet called her by her first name. How dared he treat her so! Worst of all, she read admiration bold and unveiled in the eyes that mocked her.

Half an hour later Flatray, riding toward town with his prisoner in front of him, heard a sudden sharp summons to throw up his hands. A man had risen from behind a boulder, and held him covered steadily.

Jack looked at the fellow without complying. He

needed no second glance to tell him that this man was not one to be trifled with. “Who are you?” he demanded quietly.

“Never mind who I am. Reach for the sky.”

The captured outlaw had given a little whoop, and was now loosening the rope from his neck. “You’re the goods, Cap! I knew the boys would pull it off for me, but I didn’t reckon on it so durn soon.” 225

“Shut up!” ordered the man behind the gun, without moving his eyes from Flatray.

“I’m a clam,” retorted the other.

“I’m waiting for those hands to go up; but I’ll not wait long, seh.”

Jack’s hands went up reluctantly. “You’ve got the call,” he admitted.

They led him a couple of hundred yards from the trail and tied him hand and foot. Before they left him the outlaw whom he had captured evened his score. Three times he struck Flatray on the head with the butt of his revolver. He was lying on the ground bleeding and senseless when they rode away toward the hills.

Jack came to himself with a blinding headache. It was some time before he realized what had happened. As soon as he did he set about freeing himself. This was a matter of a few minutes. With the handkerchief that was around his neck he tied up his wounds. Fortunately his hair was very thick and this had saved him from a fractured skull. Dizzily he got to his feet, found his horse, and started toward Mesa.

Not many people were on the streets when the sheriff passed through the suburbs of the little town, for it

was about the breakfast hour. One stout old negro mammy stopped to stare in surprise at his bloody head.

“Laws a mussy, Mistah Flatray, what they done be’n a-doin’ to you-all?” she asked. 226

The sheriff hardly saw her. He was chewing the bitter cud of defeat and was absorbed in his thoughts. He was still young enough to have counted on the effect upon Melissy of his return to town with one of the abductors as his prisoner.

It happened that she was on the porch watering her flower boxes when he passed the house.

“Jack!” she cried, and on the heels of her exclamation: “What’s the matter with you? Been hurt?”

A gray pallor had pushed through the tan of her cheeks. She knew her heart was beating fast.

“Bumped into a piece of bad luck,” he grinned, and told her briefly what had occurred.

She took him into the house and washed his head for him. After she saw how serious the cuts were she insisted on sending for a doctor. When his wounds were dressed she fed him and made him lie down and sleep on her father’s bed.

The sun was sliding down the heavens to a crotch in the hills before he joined her again. She was in front of the house clipping her roses.

“Is the invalid better?” she asked him.

“He’s a false alarm. But he did have a mighty thumping headache that has gone now.”

“I’ve been wondering why you didn’t meet Lieutenant O’Connor. He must have taken the road

you came in on."

The young man's eyes lit. "Is Bucky here already?" 227

"He was. He's gone. I was greatly disappointed in him. He's not half the man you think he is."

"Oh, but he is. Everybody says so."

"I never saw a more conceited man, or a more hateful one. There's something about him—oh, I don't know. But he isn't good. I'm sure of that."

"His reputation isn't of that kind. They say he's devoted to his wife and kids."

"His wife and children." Melissy recalled the smoldering admiration in his bold eyes. She laughed shortly. "That finishes him with me. He's married, is he? Well, I know the kind of husband he is."

Jack flashed a quick look at her. He guessed what she meant. But this did not square at all with what his friends had told him of O'Connor.

"Did he ask for me?"

"No. He said he preferred to play a lone hand. His manner was unpleasant all the time. He knows it all. I could see that."

"Anyhow, he's a crackerjack in his line. Have you heard from your father since he set out?"

"Not yet."

"Well, I'm going to start to-night with a posse for the Cache. If O'Connor comes back, tell him I'll follow the Roaring Fork."

"You'll not go this time without a gun, Jack," she said with a ghost of a smile.

“No. I want to make good this trip.” 228

“You did splendidly before. Not one man in a hundred would have done so well.”

“I’m a wonder,” he admitted with a grin.

“But you will take care of yourself—not be foolish.”

“I don’t aim to take up residence in Boot Hill cemetery if I can help it.”

“Boone and his men are dangerous characters. They are playing for high stakes. They would snuff your life out as quick as they would wink. Don’t forget that.”

“You don’t want me to lie down before Dunc Boone, do you?”

“No-o. Only don’t be reckless. I told father the same.”

Her dear concern for him went to Jack’s head, but he steadied himself before he answered. “I’ve got one real good reason for not being reckless. I’ll tell you what it is some day.”

Her shy, alarmed eyes fled his at once. She began an account of how her father had gathered his posse and where she thought he must have gone.

After dinner Jack went downtown. Melissy did some household tasks and presently moved out to the cool porch. She was just thinking about going back in when a barefoot boy ran past and whistled. From the next house a second youngster emerged.

“That you, Jimmie?” 229

“Betcherlife. Say, ’ve you heard about the sheriff?”

“Who? Jack Flatray! Course I have. The Roaring Fork outfit ambushed him, beat him up, and made him hit the trail for town.”

“Aw! That ain’t news. He’s started back after them again. Left jes’ a little while ago. I saw him go—him ’n’ Farnum ’n’ Charley Hymer ’n’ Hal Yarnell ’n’ Mr. Bellamy.”

“Bet they git ’em.”

“Bet they don’t.”

“Aw, course they’ll git ’em, Tom.”

The other youngster assumed an air of mystery. He swelled his chest and strutted a step or two nearer. Urbane condescension oozed from him.

“Say, Jimmie. C’n you keep a secret?”

“Sure. Course I can.”

“Won’t ever snitch?”

“Cross my heart.”

“Well, then—I’m Black MacQueen, the captain of the Roaring Fork bad men.”

“You!” Incredulity stared from Jimmie’s bulging eyes.

“You betcher. I’m him, here in disguise as a kid.”

The magnificent boldness of this claim stole Jimmie’s breath for an instant. He was two years younger than his friend, but he did not quite know whether to applaud or to jeer. Before he could 230 make up his mind a light laugh rippled to them from behind the vines on the Lee porch.

The disguised outlaw and his friend were startled. Both fled swiftly, with all the pretense of desperate necessity young conspirators love to assume.

Melissy went into the house and the laughter died from her lips. She knew that either her father’s posse

or that of Jack Flatray would come into touch with the outlaws eventually. When the clash came there would be a desperate battle. Men would be killed. She prayed it might not be one of those for whom she cared most.

231

CHAPTER IV

THE REAL BUCKY AND THE FALSE

Number seven was churning its way furiously through brown Arizona. The day had been hot, with a palpitating heat which shimmered over the desert waste. Defiantly the sun had gone down beyond the horizon, a great ball of fire, leaving behind a brilliant splash of bold colors. Now this, too, had disappeared. Velvet night had transformed the land. Over the distant mountains had settled a smoke-blue film, which left them vague and indefinite.

Only three passengers rode in the Pullman car. One was a commercial traveler, busy making up his weekly statement to the firm. Another was a Boston lady, in gold-rimmed glasses and a costume that helped the general effect of frigidity. The third looked out of the open window at the distant hills. He was a slender young fellow, tanned almost to a coffee brown, with eyes of Irish blue which

sometimes bubbled with fun and sometimes were hard as chisel steel. Wide-shouldered and lean-flanked 232 he was, with well-packed muscles, which rippled like those of a tiger.

At Chiquita the train stopped, but took up again almost instantly its chant of the rail. Meanwhile, a man had swung himself to the platform of the smoker. He passed through that car, the two day coaches, and on to the sleeper; his keen, restless eyes inspected every passenger in the course of his transit. Opposite the young man in the Pullman he stopped.

“May I ask if you are Lieutenant O’Connor?”

“My name, seh.”

The young man in the seat had slewed his head around sharply, and made answer with a crisp, businesslike directness.

The new-comer smiled. “I’ll have to introduce myself, lieutenant. My name is Flatray. I’ve come to meet you.”

“Glad to meet you, Mr. Flatray. I hope that together we can work this thing out right. MacQueen has gathered a bunch that ought to be cleaned out, and I reckon now’s the time to do it. I’ve been reading about him for a year. I’ve got a notion he’s about the ablest thing in bad men this Territory has seen for a good many years.”

Flatray sat down on the seat opposite O’Connor. A smile flicked across his face, and vanished. “I’m of that opinion myself, lieutenant.”

“Tell me all about this affair of the West kidnapping,” the ranger suggested. 233

The other man told the story while O’Connor

listened, alert to catch every point of the narrative.

The face of the lieutenant of rangers was a boyish one—eager, genial, and frank; yet, none the less, strength lay in the close-gripped jaw and in the steady, watchful eye. His lithe, tense body was like a coiled spring; and that, too, though he seemed to be very much at ease.

With every sentence that the other spoke, O'Connor was judging Flatray, appraising him for a fine specimen of a hard-bitten breed—a vigilant frontiersman, competent to the finger tips. Yet he was conscious that, in spite of the man's graceful ease and friendly smile, he did not like Flatray. He would not ask for a better man beside him in a tight pinch; but he could not deny that something sinister which breathed from his sardonic, devil-may-care face.

"So that's how the land lies," the sheriff concluded. "My deputies have got the pass to the south blocked; Lee is closing in through Elkhorn; and Fox, with a strong posse, is combing the hills beyond Dead Man's Cache. There's only one way out for him, and that is over Powderhorn Pass. Word has just reached us that MacQueen is moving in that direction. He is evidently figuring to slip out over the hills during the night. I've arranged for us to be met at Barker's Tank by a couple of the boys, with horses. We'll drop off the train quietly when it slows up to water, so that none 234 of his spies can get word of our movements to him. By hard riding we'd ought to reach Powderhorn in time to head him off."

The ranger asked incisive questions, had the topography of the country explained to him with much detail, and decided at last that Flatray was right. If MacQueen were trying to slip out, they

might trap him at the pass; if not, by closing it they would put the cork in the bottle that held him.

“We’ll try it, seh. Y’u know this country better than I do, and I’ll give y’u a free hand. Unless there’s a slip up in your calculations, you’d ought to be right.”

“Good enough, lieutenant. I’m betting on those plans myself,” the other answered promptly, and added, as he looked out into the night: “By that notch in the hills, we’d ought to be close to the tank now. She’s slowing up. I reckon we can slip out to the vestibule, and get off at the far side of the track without being noticed much.”

This they found easy enough. Five minutes later number seven was steaming away into the distant desert. Flatray gave a sharp, shrill whistle; and from behind some sand dunes emerged two men and four horses.

“Anything new?” asked the sheriff as they came nearer.

“Not a thing, cap,” answered one of them.

“Boys, shake hands with the famous Lieutenant O’Connor,” said Flatray, with a sneer hid by the 235 darkness. “Lieutenant, let me make you acquainted with Jeff Jackson and Buck Lane.”

“Much obliged to meet you,” grinned Buck as he shook hands.

They mounted and rode toward the notch in the hills that had been pointed out to the ranger. The moon was up; and a cold, silvery light flooded the plain. Seen in this setting, the great, painted desert held more of mystery, of beauty, and less of the dead monotony that glared endlessly from arid, barren reaches. The sky of stars stretched infinitely far, and

added to the effect of magnitude.

The miles slipped behind them as they moved forward, hour after hour, their horses holding to the running walk that is the peculiar gait of the cow country. They rode in silence, with the loose seat and straight back of the vaquero. Except the ranger, all were dressed for riding—Flatray in corduroys and half-knee laced boots; his men in overalls, chaps, flannel shirts, and the broad-brimmed sombrero of the Southwest. All four were young men; but there was an odd difference in the expressions of their faces.

Jackson and Lane had the hard-lined faces, with something grim and stony in them, of men who ride far and hard with their lives in their hands. The others were of a higher type. Flatray's dark eyes were keen, bold, and restless. One might have guessed him a man of temperament, capable of any extremes of conduct—often the victim of his own 236 ungovernable whims and passions. Just as he looked a picture of all the passions of youth run to seed, so the ranger seemed to show them in flower. There was something fine and strong and gallant in his debonair manner. His warm smile went out to a world that pleased him mightily.

They rode steadily, untired and untiring. The light of dawn began to flicker from one notched summit to another. Out of the sandy waste they came to a water hole, paused for a drink, and passed on. For the delay of half an hour might mean the escape of their prey.

They came into the country of crumbling mesas and painted cliffs, of hillsides where greasewood and giant cactus struggled from the parched earth. This they traversed until they came to plateaus,

terminating in foothills, crevassed by gorges deep and narrow. The cañons grew steeper, rock ridges more frequent. Gradually the going became more difficult.

Trails they seldom followed. Washes, with sides like walls, confronted them. The ponies dropped down and clambered up again like mountain goats. Gradually they were ascending into the upper country, which led to the wild stretches where the outlaws lurked. In these watersheds were heavy pine forests, rising from the gulches along the shoulders of the peaks.

A maze of cañons, hopelessly lost in the hill tangle into which they had plunged, led deviously to a 237 twisting pass, through which they defiled, to drop into a vista of rolling waves of forest-clad hills. Among these wound countless hidden gulches, known only to those who rode from out them on nefarious night errands.

The ranger noted every landmark, and catalogued in his mind's map every gorge and peak; from what he saw, he guessed much of which he could not be sure. It would be hard to say when his suspicions first became aroused. But as they rode, without stopping, through what he knew must be Powderhorn Pass, as the men about him quietly grouped themselves so as to cut off any escape he might attempt, as they dropped farther and farther into the meshes of that forest-crowned net which he knew to be the Roaring Fork country, he did not need to be told he was in the power of MacQueen's gang.

Yet he gave no sign of what he knew. As daylight came, so that they could see each other distinctly, his face showed no shadow of doubt. It was his cue to be a simple victim of credulity, and he played it to the

finish.

Without warning, through a narrow gulch which might have been sought in vain for ten years by a stranger, they passed into the rim of a bowl-shaped valley. Timber covered it from edge to edge, but over to the left a keen eye could see a thinning of the foliage. Toward this they went, following the sidehill and gradually dipping down 238 through heavy underbrush. Before him the officer of rangers saw daylight, and presently a corral, low roofs, and grazing horses.

“Looks like some one lives here,” he remarked amiably.

They were already riding into the open. In front of one of the log cabins the man who had called himself Flatray swung from his saddle.

“Better ’light, lieutenant,” he suggested carelessly. “We’ll eat breakfast here.”

“Don’t care if we do. I could eat a leather mail sack, I’m that hungry,” the ranger answered, as he, too, descended.

His guide was looking at him with an expression of open, malevolent triumph. He could scarce keep it back long enough to get the effect he wanted.

“Yes, we’ll eat breakfast here—and dinner, and supper, and breakfast to-morrow, and then about two more breakfasts.”

“I reckon we’ll be too busy to sit around here,” laughed his prisoner.

The other ignored his comment. “And after that, it ain’t likely you’ll do much more eating.”

“I don’t quite get the point of that joke.”

"You'll get it soon enough! You'd *savez* it now, if you weren't a muttonhead. As it is, I'll have to explain it. Do you remember capturing Tony Chaves two years ago, lieutenant?"

The ranger nodded, with surprise in his round, innocent eyes. 239

"What happened to him?" demanded the other. A child could have seen that he was ridden by a leering, savage triumph.

"Killed trying to escape four days later."

"Who killed him?"

"I did. It was necessary. I regretted it."

A sudden spasm of cruelty swept over the face of the man confronting him. "Tony was my partner."

"Your partner?"

"That's right. I've been wanting to say 'How d'ye do?' ever since, Lieutenant O'Connor. I'm right glad to meet you."

"But—I don't understand." He did, however.

"It'll soak through, by and by. Chew on this: You've got just ninety-six hours to live—exactly as long as Tony lived after you caught him! You'll be killed trying to escape. It will be necessary, just as you say it was with him; but I reckon I'll not do any regretting to speak of."

"You would murder me?"

"Well, I ain't particular about the word I use." MacQueen leaned against the side of his horse, his arm thrown across its neck, and laughed in slow maliciousness. "Execute is the word I use, though—if you want to know."

He had made no motion toward his weapon, nor had O'Connor; but the latter knew without looking that he was covered vigilantly by both of the other men. 240

"And who are you?" the ranger asked, though he was quite sure of the answer.

"Men call me Black MacQueen," drawled the other.

"MacQueen! But you said——"

"That I was Flatray. Yep—I lied."

O'Connor appeared to grope with this in amazement.

"One has to stretch the truth sometimes in my profession," went on the outlaw smoothly. "It may interest you to know that yesterday I passed as Lieutenant O'Connor. When I was O'Connor I arrested Flatray; and now that I am Flatray I have arrested O'Connor. Turn about is fair play, you know."

"Interesting, if true," O'Connor retorted easily.

"You can bank on its truth, my friend."

"And you're actually going to kill me in cold blood."

The black eyes narrowed. "Just as I would a dog," said the outlaw, with savage emphasis.

"I don't believe it. I've done you no harm."

MacQueen glanced at him contemptuously. The famous Bucky O'Connor looked about as competent as a boy in the pimply age.

"I thought you had better sense. Do you think I would have brought you to Dead Man's Cache if I had intended you to go away alive? I'm afraid, Lieutenant Bucky O'Connor, that you're a much overrated man. Your reputation sure would have 241

blown up, if you had lived. You ought to thank me for preserving it."

"Preserving it—how?"

"By bumping you off before you've lost it."

"Sho! You wouldn't do that," the ranger murmured ineffectively.

"We'll see. Jeff, I put him in your charge. Search him, and take him to Hank's cabin. I hold you responsible for him. Bring me any papers you find on him. When I find time, I'll drop around and see that you're keeping him safe."

Bucky was searched, and his weapons and papers removed. After being handcuffed, he was chained to a heavy staple, which had been driven into one of the log walls. He was left alone, and the door was locked; but he could hear Jeff moving about outside.

With the closing of the door the vacuous look slipped from his face like a mask. The loose-lipped, lost-dog expression was gone. He looked once more alert, competent, fit for the emergency. It had been his cue to let his adversary underestimate him. During the long night ride he had had chances to escape, had he desired to do so. But this had been the last thing he wanted.

The outlaws had chosen to take him to their fastness in the hills. He would back himself to use the knowledge they were thrusting upon him, to bring about their undoing. Only one factor in the case had come upon him as a surprise. He had not 242 reckoned that they would have a personal grudge against him. And this was a factor that might upset all his calculations.

It meant that he was playing against time, with the

chances of the game all against him. He had forty-eight hours in which to escape—and he was handcuffed, chained, locked up, and guarded. Truly, the outlook was not radiant.

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CHAPTER V

A PHOTOGRAPH

On the third morning Beauchamp Lee returned to Mesa—unshaven, dusty, and fagged with hard riding. He brought with him a handbill which he had picked up in the street. Melissy hung over him and ministered to his needs. While he was eating breakfast he talked.

“No luck yet, honey. He’s hiding in some pocket of the hills, I reckon; and likely there he’ll stay till the hunt is past. They don’t make them any slicker than Dunc, dad gum his ugly hide!”

“What is that paper?” his daughter asked.

Lee curbed a disposition toward bad language, as he viewed it with disgust. “This here is bulletin number one, girl. It’s the cheekiest, most impudent thing I ever saw. MacQueen serves notice to all the people of this county to keep out of this fight. Also, he mentions me and Jack Flatray by name—warning us

that, if we sit in the game, hell will be popping for us."

"What will you do?"

"Do? I'll get back to my boys fast as horseflesh 244 will get me there, once I've had a talk with that beef buyer from Kansas City I made an appointment to see before this thing broke loose. You don't allow I'm going to let any rustler dictate to me what I'll do and what I won't—do you?"

"Where do you reckon he had this printed?" she asked.

"I don't reckon, I know. Late last night a masked man woke up Jim Snell. You know, he sleeps in a room at the back of the printing office. Well, this fellow made him dress, set up this bill, and run off five hundred copies while he stood over him. I'll swan I never heard of such cheek!"

Melissy told what she had to tell—after which her father shaved, took a bath, and went out to meet the buyer from Kansas City. His business kept him until noon. After dinner Melissy's saddle horse was brought around, and she joined her father to ride back with him for a few miles.

About three o'clock she kissed him good-bye, and turned homeward. After she had passed the point where the Silver Creek trail ran into the road she heard the sound of a galloping horse behind. A rider was coming along the trail toward town. He gained on her rapidly, and presently a voice hailed her gayly:

"The top o' the mornin' to you, Miss 'Lissie."

She drew up to wait for him. "My name is still Miss Lee," she told him mildly, by way of correction. 245

“I’m glad it is, but we can change it in three minutes at any time, my dear,” he laughed.

She had been prepared to be more friendly toward him, but at this she froze again.

“Did you leave Mrs. O’Connor and the children well?” she asked pointedly, looking directly at him.

His smile vanished, and he stared at her in a very strange fashion. She had taken the wind completely out of his sails. It had not occurred to him that O’Connor might be a married man. Nor did he know but that it might be a trick to catch him. He did the only thing he could do—made answer in an ironic fashion, which might mean anything or nothing.

“Very well, thank you.”

She saw at once that the topic did not allure him, and pushed home her advantage. “You must miss Mrs. O’Connor when you are away on duty.”

“Must I?”

“And the children, too. By the way, what are their names?”

“You’re getting up a right smart interest in my family, all of a sudden,” he countered.

“One can’t talk about the weather all the time.”

He boldly decided to slay the illusion of domesticity. “If you want to know, I have neither wife nor children.”

“But I’ve heard about them all,” she retorted.

“You have heard of Mrs. O’Connor, no doubt; 246 but she happens to be the wife of a cousin of mine.”

The look which she flashed at him held more than doubt.

"You don't believe me?" he continued. "I give you my word that I'm not married."

They had left the road, and were following a short cut which wound down toward Tonti, in and out among the great boulders. The town, dwarfed to microscopic size by distance, looked, in the glare of the sunlight, as if it were made of white chalk. Along the narrow trail they went singly, Melissy leading the way.

She made no answer, but at the first opportunity he forced his horse to a level with hers.

"Well—you heard what I said," he challenged.

"The subject is of no importance to me," she said.

"It's important to me. I'm not going to have you doing me an injustice. I tell you I'm not married. You've got to believe me."

Her mind was again alive with suspicions. Jack had told her Bucky O'Connor was married, and he must have known what he was talking about.

"I don't know whether you are married or not. I am of the opinion that Lieutenant O'Connor has a wife and three children. More than once I have been told so," she answered.

"You seem to know a heap about the gentleman." 247

"I know what I know."

"More than I do, perhaps," he suggested.

Her eyes dilated. He could see suspicion take hold of her.

"Perhaps," she answered quietly.

"Does that mean you think I'm not Bucky

O'Connor?" He had pushed his pony forward so as to cut off her advance, and both had halted for the moment.

She looked at him with level, fearless eyes. "I don't know who you are."

"But you think I'm not Lieutenant O'Connor of the rangers?"

"I don't know whether you are or not."

"There is nothing like making sure. Just look over this letter, please."

She did so. It was from the governor of the Territory to the ranger officer. While he was very complimentary as to past services, the governor made it plain that he thought O'Connor must at all hazards succeed in securing the release of Simon West. This would be necessary for the good name of the Territory. Otherwise, a widespread report would go out that Arizona was a lawless place in which to live.

Melissy folded the letter and handed it back. "I beg your pardon, Lieutenant O'Connor. I see that I was wrong."

"Forget it, my dear. We all make mistakes." He had that curious mocking smile which so often 248 hovered about his lips. She felt as though he were deriding her—as though his words held some hidden irony which she could not understand.

"The governor seems very anxious to have you succeed. It will be a black eye for Arizona if this band of outlaws is not apprehended. You don't think, do you, that they will do Mr. West any harm, if their price is not paid? They would never dare."

He took this up almost as though he resented it. “They would dare anything. I reckon you’ll have to get up early in the mornin’ to find a gamer man than Black MacQueen.”

“I wouldn’t call it game to hurt an old man whom he has in his power. But you mustn’t let it come to that. You must save him. Are you making any progress? Have you run down any of the band? And while I think of it—have you seen to-day’s paper?”

“No—why?”

“The biggest story on the front page is about the West case. It seems that this MacQueen wired to Chicago to Mr. Lucas, president of one of the lines on the Southwestern system, that they would release Mr. West for three hundred thousand dollars in gold. He told him a letter had been mailed to the agent at Mesa, telling under just what conditions the money was to be turned over; and he ended with a threat that, if steps were taken to capture the gang, or if the money were not handed 249 over at the specified time, Mr. West would disappear forever.”

“Did the paper say whether the money would be turned over?”

“It said that Mr. Lucas was going to get into touch with the outlaws at once, to effect the release of his chief.”

A gleam of triumph flashed in the eyes of the man. “That’s sure the best way.”

“It won’t help your reputation, will it?” she asked. “Won’t people say that you failed on this case?”

He laughed softly, as if at some hidden source of mirth. “I shouldn’t wonder if they did say that Bucky O’Connor hadn’t made good this time. They’ll figure

he tried to ride herd on a job too big for him."

Her surprised eye brooded over this, too. Here he was defending the outlaw chief, and rejoicing at his own downfall. There seemed to be no end to the contradictions in this man. She was to run across another tangled thread of the puzzle a few minutes later.

She had dismounted to let him tighten the saddle cinch. Owing to the heat, he had been carrying his coat in front of him. He tossed it on a boulder by the side of the trail, in such a way that the inside pocket hung down. From it slid some papers and a photograph. Melissy looked down at the picture, then instantly stooped and picked it up. For it was 250 a photograph of a very charming woman and three children, and across the bottom of it was written a line.

"To Bucky, from his loving wife and children."

The girl handed it to the man without a word, and looked him full in the face.

"Bowled out, by ginger!" he said, with a light laugh.

But as she continued to look at him—a man of promise, who had plainly traveled far on the road to ruin—the conviction grew on her that the sweet-faced woman in the photograph was no loving wife of his. He was a man who might easily take a woman's fancy, but not one to hold her love for years through the stress of life. Moreover, Bucky O'Connor held the respect of all men. She had heard him spoken of, and always with a meed of affection that is given to few men. Whoever this graceless scamp was, he was not the lieutenant of rangers.

The words slipped out before she could stop them:

“You’re not Lieutenant O’Connor at all.”

“Playing on that string again, are you?” he jeered.

“I’m sure of it this time.”

“Since you know who I’m not, perhaps you can tell me, too, who I am.”

In that instant before she spoke, while her steady eyes rested on him, she put together many things 251 which had puzzled her. All of them pointed to one conclusion. Even now her courage did not fail her. She put it into words quietly:

“You are that villain Black MacQueen.”

He stared at her in surprise. “By God, girl—you’re right. I’m MacQueen, though I don’t know how you guessed it.”

“I don’t know how I kept from guessing it so long. I can see it, now, as plain as day, in all that you have done.”

After that they measured strength silently with their eyes. If the situation had clarified itself, with the added knowledge of the girl had come new problems. Let her return to Mesa, and he could no longer pose as O’Connor; and it was just the audacity of this double play that delighted him. He was the most reckless man on earth; he loved to take chances. He wanted to fool the officers to his heart’s content, and then jeer at them afterward. Hitherto everything had come his way.

But if this girl should go home, he could not show his face at Mesa; and the spice of the thing would be gone. He was greatly taken with her beauty, her daring, and the charm of high spirits which radiated from her. Again and again he had found himself

drawn back to her. He was not in love with her in any legitimate sense; but he knew now that, if he could see her no more, life would be a savorless thing, at least until his fancy had spent itself. Moreover, her presence at Dead Man's 252 Cache would be a safeguard. With her in his power, Lee and Flatray, the most persistent of his hunters, would not dare to move against the outlaws.

Inclination and interest worked together. He decided to take her back with him to the country of hidden pockets and gulches. There, in time, he would win her love—so his vanity insisted. After that they would slip away from the scene of his crimes, and go back to the world from which he had years since vanished.

The dream grew on him. It got hold of his imagination. For a moment he saw himself as the man he had been meant for—the man he might have been, if he had been able to subdue his evil nature. He saw himself respected, a power in the community, going down to a serene old age, with this woman and their children by his side. Then he laughed derisively, and brushed aside the vision.

"Why didn't the real Lieutenant O'Connor arrive to expose you?" she asked.

"The real Bucky is handcuffed and guarded at Dead Man's Cache. I don't think he's enjoying himself to-day."

"You're getting quite a collection of prisoners. You'll be starting a penitentiary on your own account soon," she told him sharply.

"That's right. And I'm taking another one back with me to-night."

"Who is he?" 253

"It's a lady this time—Miss Melissy Lee."

His words shook her. An icy hand seemed to clamp upon her heart. The blood ebbed even from her lips, but her brave eyes never faltered from his.

"So you war on women, too!"

He gave her his most ironic bow. "I don't war on you, my dear. You shall have half of my kingdom, if you ask it—and all my heart."

"I can't use either," she told him quietly. "But I'm only a girl. If you have a spark of manliness in you, surely you won't take me a prisoner among those wild, bad men of yours."

"Those wild, bad men of mine are lambs when I give the word. They wouldn't lift a hand against you. And there is a woman there—the mother of one of my boys, who was shot. We'll have you chaperoned for fair."

"And if I say I won't go?"

"You'll go if I strap you to your saddle."

It was characteristic of Melissy that she made no further resistance. The sudden, wolfish gleam in his eyes had told her that he meant what he said. It was like her, too, that she made no outcry; that she did not shed tears or plead with him. A gallant spirit inhabited that slim, girlish body; and she yielded to the inevitable with quiet dignity. This surprised him greatly, and stung his reluctant admiration. At the same time, it set her apart from him and hedged her with spiritual barriers. Her 254 body might ride with him into captivity; she was still captain of her soul.

"You're a game one," he told her, as he helped her to

the saddle.

She did not answer, but looked straightforward between her horse's ears, without seeing him, waiting for him to give the word to start.

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CHAPTER VI

IN DEAD MAN'S CACHE

Not since the start of their journey had Melissy broken silence, save to answer, in few words as possible, the questions put to her by the outlaw. Yet her silence had not been sullenness. It had been the barrier which she had set up between them—one which he could not break down short of actual roughness.

Of this she could not accuse him. Indeed, he had been thoughtful of her comfort. At sunset they had stopped by a spring, and he had shared with her such food as he had. Moreover, he had insisted that she should rest for a while before they took up the last stretch of the way.

It was midnight now, and they had been traveling for many hours over rough mountain trails. There was more strength than one would look for in so slender a figure, yet Melissy was drooping with fatigue.

“It’s not far now. We’ll be there in a few minutes,” MacQueen promised her.

They were ascending a narrow trail which ran 256 along the sidehill through the timber. Presently they topped the summit, and the ground fell away from their feet to a bowl-shaped valley, over which the silvery moonshine played so that the basin seemed to swim in a magic sea of light.

“Welcome to the Cache,” he said to her.

She was surprised out of her silence. “Dead Man’s Cache?”

“It has been called that.”

“Why?”

She knew, but she wanted to see if he would tell a story which showed so plainly his own ruthlessness.

He hesitated, but only for a moment.

“There was a man named Havens. He had a reputation as a bad man, and I reckon he deserved it —if brand blotting, mail rustling, and shooting citizens are the credentials to win that title. Hard pressed on account of some deviltry, he drifted into this country, and was made welcome by those living here. The best we had was his. He was fed, outfitted, and kept safe from the law that was looking for him.

“You would figure he was under big obligations to the men that did this for him—wouldn’t you? But he was born skunk. When his chance came he offered to betray these men to the law, in exchange for a pardon for his own sneaking hide. The letter was found, and it was proved he wrote it. What ought those men to have done to him, Miss ’Lissie?” 257

“I don’t know.” She shuddered.

“There’s got to be law, even in a place like this. We make our own laws, and the men that stay here have got to abide by them. Our law said this man must die. He died.”

She did not ask him how. The story went that the outlaws whom the wretched man had tried to sell let him escape on purpose—that, just as he thought he was free of them, their mocking laughter came to him from the rocks all around. He was completely surrounded. They had merely let him run into a trap. He escaped again, wandered without food for days, and again discovered that they had been watching him all the time. Turn whichever way he would, their rifles warned him back. He stumbled on, growing weaker and weaker. They would neither capture him nor let him go.

For nearly a week the cruel game went on. Frequently he heard their voices in the hills about him. Sometimes he would call out to them pitifully to put him out of his misery. Only their horrible laughter answered. When he had reached the limit of endurance he lay down and died.

And the man who had engineered that heartless revenge was riding beside her. He had been ready to tell her the whole story, if she had asked for it, and equally ready to justify it. Nothing could have shown her more plainly the character of the villain into whose hands she had fallen.

They descended into the valley, winding in and 258 out until they came suddenly upon ranch houses and a corral in a cleared space.

A man came out of the shadows into the moonlight to meet them. Instantly Melissy recognized his walk. It was Boone.

“Oh, it’s you,” MacQueen said coldly. “Any of the rest of the boys up?”

“No.”

Not a dozen words had passed between them, but the girl sensed hostility. She was not surprised. Dunc Boone was not the man to take second place in any company of riff-raff, nor was MacQueen one likely to yield the supremacy he had fought to gain.

The latter swung from the saddle and lifted Melissy from hers. As her feet struck the ground her face for the first time came full into the moonlight.

Boone stifled a startled oath.

“Melissy Lee!” Like a swiftly reined horse he swung around upon his chief. “What devil’s work is this?”

“My business, Dunc!” the other retorted in suave insult.

“By God, no! I make it mine. This young lady’s a friend of mine—or used to be. *Sabe*?”

“I *sabe* you’d better not try to sit in at this game, my friend.”

Boone swung abruptly upon Melissy. “How come you here, girl? Tell me!” 259

And in three sentences she explained.

“What’s your play? Whyfor did you bring her?” the Arkansan demanded of MacQueen.

The latter stood balanced on his heels with his feet wide apart. There was a scornful grin on his face, but his eyes were fixed warily on the other man.

“What was I to do with her, Mr. Buttinski? She found out who I was. Could I send her home? If I did how was I to fix it so I could go to Mesa when it’s

necessary till we get this ransom business arranged?"

"All right. But you understand she's a friend of mine. I'll not have her hurt."

"Oh, go to the devil! I'm not in the habit of hurting young ladies."

MacQueen swung on his heel insolently and knocked on the door of a cabin near.

"Don't forget that I'm here when you need me," Boone told Melissy in a low voice.

"I'll not forget," the girl made answer in a murmur.

The wrinkled face of a Mexican woman appeared presently at a window. MacQueen jabbered a sentence or two in her language. She looked at Melissy and answered.

The girl had not lived in Southern Arizona for twenty years without having a working knowledge of Spanish. Wherefore, she knew that her captor had ordered his own room prepared for her. 260

While they waited for this to be made ready MacQueen hummed a snatch of a popular song. It happened to be a love ditty. Boone ground his teeth and glared at him, which appeared to amuse the other ruffian immensely.

"Don't stay up on our account," MacQueen suggested presently with a malicious laugh. "We're not needing a chaperone any to speak of."

The Mexican woman announced that the bedroom was ready and MacQueen escorted Melissy to the door of the room. He stood aside with mock gallantry to let her pass.

"Have to lock you in," he apologized airily. "Not that it would do you any good to escape. We'd have you

again inside of twenty-four hours. This bit of the hills takes a heap of knowing. But we don't want you running away. You're too tired. So I lock the door and lie down on the porch under your window. *Adios, señorita.*"

Melissy heard the key turn in the lock, and was grateful for the respite given her by the night. She was glad, too, that Boone was here. She knew him for a villain, but she hoped he would stand between her and MacQueen if the latter proved unruly in his attentions. Her guess was that Boone was jealous of the other—of his authority with the gang to which they both belonged, and now of his relationship to her. Out of this division might come hope for her.

So tired was she that, in spite of her alarms, 261 sleep took her almost as soon as her head touched the pillow. When she awakened the sun was shining in at her window above the curtain strung across its lower half.

Some one was knocking at the door. When she asked who was there, in a voice which could not conceal its tremors, the answer came in feminine tones:

"'Tis I—Rosario Chaves."

The Mexican woman was not communicative, nor did she appear to be sympathetic. The plight of this girl might have moved even an unresponsive heart, but Rosario showed a stolid face to her distress. What had to be said, she said. For the rest, she declined conversation absolutely.

Breakfast was served Melissy in her room, after which Rosario led her outdoors. The woman gave her to understand that she might walk about the cleared space, but must not pass into the woods beyond. To point the need of obedience, Rosario

seated herself on the porch, and began doing some drawn work upon which she was engaged.

Melissy walked toward the corral, but did not reach it. An old hag was seated in a chair beside one of the log cabins. From the color of her skin the girl judged her to be an Indian squaw. She wore moccasins, a dirty and shapeless one-piece dress, and a big sunbonnet, in which her head was buried.

Sitting on the floor of the porch, about fifteen feet from her, was a hard-faced customer, with stony 262 eyes like those of a snake. He was sewing on a bridle that had given way. Melissy noticed that from the pocket of his chaps the butt of a revolver peeped. She judged it to be the custom in Dead Man's Cache to go garnished with weapons.

Her curiosity led her to deflect toward the old woman. But she had not taken three steps toward the cabin before the man with the jade eyes stopped her.

"That'll be near enough, ma'am," he said, civilly enough. "This old crone has a crazy spell whenever a stranger comes nigh. She's nutty. It ain't safe to come nearer—is it, old Sit-in-the-Sun?"

The squaw grunted. Simultaneously, she looked up, and Miss Lee thought that she had never seen more piercing eyes.

"Is Sit-in-the-Sun her name?" asked the girl curiously.

"That's the English of it. The Navajo word is a jawbreaker."

"Doesn't she understand English?"

"No more'n you do Choctaw, miss."

A quick step crunched the gravel behind Melissy. She

did not need to look around to know that here was Black MacQueen.

“What’s this—what’s this, Hank?” he demanded sharply.

“The young lady started to come up and speak to old Sit-in-the-Sun. I was just explaining to her 263 how crazy the old squaw is,” Jeff answered with a grin.

“Oh! Is that all?” MacQueen turned to Melissy.

“She’s plumb loony—dangerous, too. I don’t want you to go near her.”

The girl’s eyes flashed. “Very considerate of you. But if you want to protect me from the really dangerous people here, you had better send me home.”

“I tell you they do as I say, every man jack of them. I’d flay one alive if he insulted you.”

“It’s a privilege you don’t sublet then,” she retorted swiftly.

Admiration gleamed through his amusement. “Gad, you’ve got a sharp tongue. I’d pity the man you marry—unless he drove with a tight rein.”

“That’s not what we’re discussing, Mr. MacQueen. Are you going to send me home?”

“Not till you’ve made us a nice long visit, my dear. You’re quite safe here. My men are plumb gentle. They’ll eat out of your hand. They don’t insult ladies. I’ve taught ’em——”

“Pity you couldn’t teach their leader, too.”

He acknowledged the hit. “Come again, dearie. But what’s your complaint? Haven’t I treated you white so far?”

“No. You insulted me grossly when you brought me

here by force."

"Did I lay a hand on you?" 264

"If it had been necessary you would have."

"You're right, I would," he nodded. "I've taken a fancy to you. You're a good-looking and a plucky little devil. I've a notion to fall in love with you."

"Don't!"

"Why not? Say I'm a villain and a bad lot. Wouldn't it be a good thing for me to tie up with a fine, straight-up young lady like you? Me, I like the way your eyes flash. You've got a devil of a temper, haven't you?"

They had been walking toward a pile of rocks some little way from the cluster of cabins. Now he sat down and smiled impudently across at her.

"That's my business," she flung back stormily.

Genially he nodded. "So it is. Mine, too, when we trot in double harness."

Her scornful eyes swept up and down him. "I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth."

"No. Well, I'm not partial to that game myself. I didn't mention matrimony, did I?"

The meaning she read in his mocking, half-closed eyes startled the girl. Seeing this, he added with a shrug:

"Just as you say about that. We'll make you Mrs. MacQueen on the level if you like."

The passion in her surged up. "I'd rather lie dead at your feet—I'd rather starve in these hills—I'd rather put a knife in my heart!"

He clapped his hands. “Fine! Fine! That 265 Bernhardt woman hasn’t got a thing on you when it comes to acting, my dear. You put that across bully. Never saw it done better.”

“You—coward!” Her voice broke and she turned to leave him.

“Stop!” The ring of the word brought her feet to a halt. MacQueen padded across till he faced her. “Don’t make any mistake, girl. You’re mine. I don’t care how. If it suits you to have a priest mumble words over us, good enough. But I’m the man you’ve got to get ready to love.”

“I hate you.”

“That’s a good start, you little catamount.”

“I’d rather die—a thousand times rather.”

“Not you, my dear. You think you would right now, but inside of a week you’ll be hunting for pet names to give me.”

She ran blindly toward the house where her room was. On the way she passed at a little distance Dunc Boone and did not see him. His hungry eyes followed her—a slender creature of white and russet and gold, vivid as a hillside poppy, compact of life and fire and grace. He, too, was a miscreant and a villain, lost to honor and truth, but just now she held his heart in the hollow of her tightly clenched little fist. Good men and bad, at bottom we are all made of the same stuff, once we are down to the primal emotions that go deeper than civilization’s veneer.

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CHAPTER VII

"TRAPPED!"

Black MacQueen rolled a cigarette and sauntered toward the other outlaw.

"I reckon you better saddle up and take a look over the Flattops, Dunc. The way I figure it Lee's posse must be somewhere over there. Swing around toward the Elkhorns and get back to report by to-morrow evening, say."

Boone looked at him in an ugly manner. "Nothin' doing, MacQueen."

"What's that?"

"I'm no greaser, my friend. Orders don't go with me."

"They don't, eh? Who's major domo of this outfit?"

"I'm going to stay right here in this valley to-night. See?"

"What's eatin' you, man?"

"And every night so long as Melissy Lee stays."

MacQueen watched him with steady, hostile eyes. "So it's the girl, is it? Want to cut in, do you? 267 Oh, no, my friend. Two's company; three's a crowd. She's mine."

"No."

"Yes. And another thing, Mr. Boone. I don't stand for any interference in my plans. Make a break at it and you'll take a hurry up journey to kingdom come."

"Or you will."

"Don't bank on that off chance. The boys are with me. You're alone. If I give the word they'll bump you off. *Don't make a mistake, Boone.*"

The Arkansan hesitated. What MacQueen said was true enough. His overbearing disposition had made him unpopular. He knew the others would side against him and that if it came to a showdown they would snuff out his life as a man does the flame of a candle. The rage died out of his eyes and gave place to a look of cunning.

"It's your say-so, Black. But there will be a day when it ain't. Don't forget that."

"And in the meantime you'll ride the Flattops when I give the word?"

Boone nodded sulkily. "I said you had the call, didn't I?"

"Then ride 'em now, damn you. And don't show up in the Cache till to-morrow night."

MacQueen turned on his heel and strutted away. He was elated at his easy victory. If he had seen the look that followed him he might not have been so quiet in his mind. 268

But on the surface he had cinched his leadership. Boone saddled and rode out of the Cache without another word to anybody. Sullen and vindictive he might be, but cowed he certainly seemed. MacQueen celebrated by frequent trips to his sleeping quarters, where each time he resorted to a bottle and a glass.

No man had ever seen him intoxicated, but there were times when he drank a good deal for a few days at a stretch. His dissipation would be followed by months of total abstinence.

All day the man persecuted Melissy with his attentions. His passion was veiled under a manner of mock deference, of insolent assurance, but as the hours passed the fears of the girl grew upon her. There were moments when she turned sick with waves of dread. In the sunshine, under the open sky, she could hold her own, but under cover of the night's blackness ghastly horrors would creep toward her to destroy.

Nor was there anybody to whom she might turn for help. Lane and Jackson were tools of their leader. The Mexican woman could do nothing even if she would. Boone alone might have helped her, and he had ridden away to save his own skin. So MacQueen told her to emphasize his triumph and her helplessness.

To her fancy dusk fell over the valley like a pall. It brought with it the terrible night, under cover of which unthinkable things might be done. With no appetite, she sat down to supper opposite her 269 captor. To see him gloat over her made her heart sink. Her courage was of no avail against the thing that threatened.

Supper over, he made her sit with him on the porch for an hour to listen to his boasts of former conquests. And when he let her take her way to her room it was not "Good-night" but a mocking "Au revoir" he murmured as he bent to kiss her hand.

Melissy found Rosario waiting for her, crouched in the darkness of the room that had been given the

young woman. The Mexican spoke in her own language, softly, with many glances of alarm to make sure they were alone.

“Hist, señorita. Here is a note. Read it. Destroy it. Swear not to betray Rosario.”

By the light of a match Melissy read:

“Behind the big rocks. In half an hour.

“A FRIEND.”

What could it mean? Who could have sent it? Rosario would answer no questions. She snatched the note, tore it into fragments, chewed them into a pulp. Then, still shaking her head obstinately, hurriedly left the room.

But at least it meant hope. Her mind flew from her father to Jack Flatray, Bellamy, young Yarnell. It might be any of them. Or it might be O’Connor, who, perhaps, had by some miracle escaped. 270

The minutes were hours to her. Interminably they dragged. The fear rose in her that MacQueen might come in time to cut off her escape. At last, in her stocking feet, carrying her shoes in her hand, she stole into the hall, out to the porch, and from it to the shadows of the cottonwoods.

It was a night of both moon and stars. She had to cross a space washed in silvery light, taking the chance that nobody would see her. But first she stooped in the shadows to slip the shoes upon her feet. Her heart beat against her side as she had once seen that of a frightened mouse do. It seemed impossible for her to cover all that moonlit open unseen. Every moment she expected an alarm to ring out in the silent night. But none came.

Safely she reached the big rocks. A voice called to her softly. She answered, and came face to face with Boone. A drawn revolver was in his hand.

“You made it,” he panted, as a man might who had been running hard.

“Yes,” she whispered. “But they’ll soon know. Let us get away.”

“If you hadn’t come I was going in to kill him.”

She noticed the hard glitter in his eyes as he spoke, the crouched look of the padding tiger ready for its kill. The man was torn with hatred and jealousy.

Already they were moving back through the rocks to a dry wash that ran through the valley. The bed of this they followed for nearly a mile. 271 Deflecting from it they pushed across the valley toward what appeared to be a sheer rock wall. With a twist to the left they swung back of a face of rock, turned sharply to the right, and found themselves in a fissure Melissy had not at all expected. Here ran a little cañon known only to those few who rode up and down it on the nefarious business of their unwholesome lives.

Boone spoke harshly, breaking for the first time in half an hour his moody silence.

“Safe at last. By God, I’ve evened my score with Black MacQueen.”

And from the cliff above came the answer—a laugh full of mocking deviltry and malice.

The Arkansan turned upon Melissy a startled face of agony, in which despair and hate stood out of a yellow pallor.

“Trapped.”

It was his last word to her. He swept the girl back against the shelter of the wall and ran crouching toward the entrance.

A bullet zipped—a second—a third. He stumbled, but did not fall. Turning, he came back, dodging like a hunted fox. As he passed her, Melissy saw that his face was ghastly. He ran with a limp.

A second time she heard the cackle of laughter. Guns cracked. Still the doomed man pushed forward. He went down, struck in the body, but dragged himself to his feet and staggered on. 272

All this time he had seen nobody at whom he could fire. Not a shot had come from his revolver. He sank behind a rock for shelter. The ping of a bullet on the shale beside him brought the tortured man to his feet. He looked wildly about him, the moon shining on his bare head, and plunged up the cañon.

And now it appeared his unseen tormentors were afraid he might escape them. Half a dozen shots came close together. Boone sank to the ground, writhed like a crushed worm, and twisted over so that his face was to the moonlight.

Melissy ran forward and knelt beside him.

“They’ve got me ... in half a dozen places.... I’m going fast.”

“Oh, no ... no,” the girl protested.

“Yep.... Surest thing you know.... I did you dirt onct, girl. And I’ve been a bad lot—a wolf, a killer.”

“Never mind that now. You died to save me. Always I’ll remember that.”

“Onct you ’most loved me.... But it wouldn’t have done. I’m a wolf and you’re a little white lamb. Is

Flatray the man?"

"Yes."

"Thought so. Well, he's square. I rigged it up on him about the rustling. I was the man you liked to 'a' caught that day years ago."

"You!"

"Yep." He broke off abruptly. "I'm going, 273 girl.... It's gittin' black. Hold my hand till—till——"

He gave a shudder and seemed to fall together. He was dead.

Melissy heard the sound of rubble slipping. Some one was lowering himself cautiously down the side of the cañon. A man dropped to the wash and strutted toward her. He kept his eyes fixed on the lifeless form, rifle ready for action at an instant's notice. When he reached his victim he pushed the body with his foot, made sure of no trap, and relaxed his alertness.

"Dead as a hammer."

The man was MacQueen. He turned to Melissy and nodded jauntily.

"Good evening, my dear. Just taking a little stroll?" he asked ironically.

The girl leaned against the cold wall and covered her face with her arm. She was sobbing hysterically.

The outlaw seized her by the shoulders and swung her round. "Cut that out, girl," he ordered roughly.

Melissy caught at her sobs and tried to check them.

"He got what was coming to him, what he's been playing for a long time. I warned him, but the fool wouldn't see it."

“How did you know?” she asked, getting out her question a word at a time. 274

“Knew it all the time. Rosario brought his note to me. I told her to take it to you and keep her mouth shut.”

“You planned his death.”

“If you like to put it that way. Now we’ll go home and forget this foolishness. Jeff, bring the horses round to the mouth of the gulch.”

Melissy felt suddenly very, very tired and old. Her feet dragged like those of an Indian squaw following her master. It was as though heavy irons weighted her ankles.

MacQueen helped her to one of the horses Jackson brought to the lip of the gulch. Weariness rode on her shoulders all the way back. The soul of her was crushed beneath the misfortunes that oppressed her.

Long before they reached the ranch houses Rosario came running to meet them. Plainly she was in great excitement.

“The prisoners have escaped,” she cried to MacQueen.

“Escaped. How?” demanded Black.

“Some one must have helped them. I heard a window smash and ran out. The young ranger and another man were coming out of the last cabin with the old man. I could do nothing. They ran.”

They had been talking in her own language. MacQueen jabbed another question at her.

“Which way?”

“Toward the Pass.” 275

The outlaw ripped out an oath. “We’ve got ’em. They can’t reach it without horses as quick as we can with them.” He whirled upon Melissy. “March into the house, girl. Don’t you dare make a move. I’m leaving Buck here to watch you.” Sharply he swung to the man Lane. “Buck, if she makes a break to get away, riddle her full of holes. You hear me.”

A minute later, from the place where she lay face down on the bed, Melissy heard him and his men gallop away.

276

CHAPTER VIII

AN ESCAPE AND A CAPTURE

Far up in the mountains, in that section where head the Roaring Fork, One Horse Creek, and the Del Oro, is a vast tract of wild, untraveled country known vaguely as the Bad Lands. Somewhere among the thousand and one cañons which cleft the huddled hills lay hidden Dead Man’s Cache. Here Black MacQueen retreated on those rare occasions when the pursuit grew hot on his tracks. So the current report ran.

Whether the abductors of Simon West were to be found in the Cache or at some other nest in the almost inaccessible ridges Jack Flatray had no means

of knowing. His plan was to follow the Roaring Fork almost to its headquarters, and there establish a base for his hunt. It might take him a week to flush his game. It might take a month. He clamped his bulldog jaw to see the thing out to a finish.

Jack did not make the mistake of underestimating his job. He had followed the trail of bad men often enough to know that, in a frontier country, no hunt is so desperate as the man-hunt. Such men 277 are never easily taken, even if they do not have all the advantage in the deadly game of hide and seek that is played in the timber and the pockets of the hills.

And here the odds all lay with the hunted. They knew every ravine and gulch. Day by day their scout looked down from mountain ledges to watch the progress of the posse.

Moreover, Flatray could never tell at what moment his covey might be startled from its run. The greatest vigilance was necessary to make sure his own party would not be ambushed. Yet slowly he combed the arroyos and the ridges, drawing always closer to that net of gulches in which he knew Dead Man's Cache must be located.

During the day the sheriff split his party into couples. Bellamy and Alan McKinstra, Farnum and Charlie Hymer, young Yarnell and the sheriff. So Jack had divided his posse, thus leaving at the head of each detail one old and wise head. Each night the parties met at the rendezvous appointed for the wranglers with the pack horses. From sunrise to sunset often no face was seen other than those of their own outfit. Sometimes a solitary sheep herder was discovered at his post. Always the work was hard, discouraging, and apparently futile. But the young sheriff never thought of quitting.

The provisions gave out. Jack sent back Hal Yarnell and Hegler, the wrangler, to bring in a 278 fresh supply. Meanwhile the young sheriff took a big chance and scouted alone. He parted from the young Arkansan at the head of a gulch which twisted snakelike into the mountains; Yarnell and the pack outfit to ride to Mammoth, Flatray to dive still deeper into the mesh of hills. He had the instinct of the scout to stick to the high places as much as he could. Whenever it was possible he followed ridges, so that no spy could look down upon him as he traveled. Sometimes the contour of the country drove him into the open or down into hollows. But in such places he advanced with the swift stealth of an Indian.

It was on one of these occasions, when he had been driven into a dark and narrow cañon, that he came to a sudden halt. He was looking at an empty tomato can. Swinging down from his saddle, he picked it up without dismounting. A little juice dripped from the can to the ground.

Flatray needed no explanation. In Arizona men on the range often carry a can of tomatoes instead of a water canteen. Nothing alleviates thirst like the juice of this acid fruit. Some one had opened this can within two hours. Otherwise the sun would have dried the moisture.

Jack took his rifle from its place beneath his legs and set it across the saddle in front of him. Very carefully he continued on his way, watching every rock and bush ahead of him. Here and there in 279 the sand were printed the signs of a horse going in the same direction as his.

Up and down, in and out of a maze of crooked paths, working by ever so devious a way higher into the

chain of mountains, Jack followed his leader. Now he would lose the hoofmarks; now he would pick them up again. And, at the last, they brought him to the rim of a basin, a bowl of wooded ravines, of twisted ridges, of bleak spurs jutting into late pastures almost green. It was now past sunset. Dusk was filtering down from the blue peaks. As he looked a star peeped out low on the horizon.

But was it a star? He glimpsed it between trees. The conviction grew on him that what he saw was the light of a lamp. A tangle of rough country lay between him and that beacon, but there before him lay his destination. At last he had found his way into Dead Man's Cache.

The sheriff lost no time, for he knew that if he should get lost in the darkness on one of these forest slopes he might wander all night. A rough trail led him down into the basin. Now he would lose sight of the light. Half an hour later, pushing to the summit of a hill, he might find it. After a time there twinkled a second beside the first. He was getting close to a settlement of some kind.

Below him in the darkness lay a stretch of open meadow rising to the wooded foothills. Behind these a wall of rugged mountains encircled the valley like a gigantic crooked arm. Already he could 280 make out faintly the outlines of the huddled buildings.

Slipping from his horse, Jack went forward cautiously on foot. He was still a hundred yards from the nearest hut when dogs bayed warning of his approach. He waited, rifle in hand. No sign of human life showed except the two lights shining from as many windows. Flatray counted four other cabins as dark as Egypt.

Very slowly he crept forward, always with one eye to his retreat. Why did nobody answer the barking of the dogs? Was he being watched all the time? But how could he be, since he was completely cloaked in darkness?

So at last he came to the nearest cabin, crept to the window, and looked in. A man lay on a bed. His hands and feet were securely tied and a second rope wound round so as to bind him to the bunk.

Flatray tapped softly on a pane. Instantly the head of the bound man slewed round.

“Friend?”

The prisoner asked it ever so gently, but the sheriff heard.

“Yes.”

“The top part of the window is open. You can crawl over, I reckon.”

Jack climbed on the sill and from it through the window. Almost before he reached the floor his knife was out and he was slashing at the ropes.

“Better put the light out, pardner,” suggested the 281 man he was freeing, and the officer noticed that there was no tremor in the cool, steady voice.

“That’s right. We’d make a fine mark through the window.”

And the light went out.

“I’m Bucky O’Connor. Who are you?”

“Jack Flatray.”

They spoke together in whispers. Though both were keyed to the highest pitch of excitement they were as steady as eight-day clocks. O’Connor stretched his

limbs, flexing them this way and that, so that he might have perfect control of them. He worked especially over the forearm and fingers of his right arm.

Flatray handed him a revolver.

“Whenever you’re ready, Lieutenant.”

“All right. It’s the cabin next to this.”

They climbed out of the window noiselessly and crept to the next hut. The door was locked, the window closed.

“We’ve got to smash the window. Nothing else for it,” Flatray whispered.

“Looks like it. That means we’ll have to shoot our way out.”

With the butt of his rifle the sheriff shattered the woodwork of the window, driving the whole frame into the room.

“What is it?” a frightened voice demanded.

“Friends, Mr. West. Just a minute.”

It took them scarce longer than that to free him 282 and to get him into the open. A Mexican woman came screaming out of an adjoining cabin.

The young men caught each an arm of the capitalist and hurried him forward.

“Hell’ll be popping in a minute,” Flatray explained.

But they reached the shelter of the underbrush without a shot having been fired. Nor had a single man appeared to dispute their escape.

“Looks like most of the family is away from home tonight,” Bucky hazarded.

“Maybe so, but they’re liable to drop in any minute. We’ll keep covering ground.”

They circled round toward the sheriff’s horse. As soon as they reached it West, still stiff from want of circulation in his cramped limbs, was boosted into the saddle.

“It’s going to be a good deal of a guess to find our way out of the Cache,” Jack explained. “Even in the daytime it would take a ’Pache, but at night—well, here’s hoping the luck’s good.”

They found it not so good as they had hoped. For hours they wandered in mesquit, dragged themselves through cactus, crossed washes, and climbed hills.

“This will never do. We’d better give it up till daylight. We’re not getting anywhere,” the sheriff suggested.

They did as he advised. As soon as a faint gray sifted into the sky they were on the move again. 283 But whichever way they climbed it was always to come up against steep cliffs too precipitous to be scaled.

The ranger officer pointed to a notch beyond a cowbacked hill. “I wouldn’t be sure, but it looks like that was the way they brought me into the Cache. I could tell if I were up there. What’s the matter with my going ahead and settling the thing? If I’m right I’ll come back and let you know.”

Jack looked at West. The railroad man was tired and drawn. He was not used to galloping over the hills all night.

“All right. We’ll be here when you come back,” Flatray said, and flung himself on the ground.

West followed his example.

It must have been half an hour later that Flatray heard a twig snap under an approaching foot. He had been scanning the valley with his glasses, having given West instructions to keep a lookout in the rear. He swung his head round sharply, and with it his rifle.

"You're covered, you fool," cried the man who was strutting toward them.

"Stop there. Not another step," Flatray called sharply.

The man stopped, his rifle half raised. "We've got you on every side, man." He lifted his voice. "Jeff—Hank—Steve! Let him know you're alive."

Three guns cracked and kicked up the dust close to the sheriff. 284

"What do you want with us?" Flatray asked, sparring for time.

"Drop your gun. If you don't we'll riddle you both."

West spoke to Jack promptly. "Do as he says. It's MacQueen."

Flatray hesitated. He could kill MacQueen probably, but almost certainly he and West would pay the penalty. He reluctantly put his rifle down. "All right. It's your call."

"Where's O'Connor?"

The sheriff looked straight at him. "Haven't you enough of us for one gather?"

The outlaws were closing in on them cautiously.

"Not without that smart man hunter. Where is he?"

"I don't know."

“The devil you don’t.”

“We separated early this morning—thought it would give us a better chance for a getaway.” Jack gave a sudden exclamation of surprise. “So it was Black MacQueen himself who posed as O’Connor down at Mesa.”

“Guessed it right, my friend. And I’ll tell you one thing: you’ve made the mistake of your life butting into Dead Man’s Cache. Your missing friend O’Connor was due to hand in his checks to-day. Since you’ve taken his place it will be you that crosses the divide, Mr. Sheriff. You’d better 285 tell where he is, for if we don’t get Mr. Bucky it will be God help J. Flatray.”

The dapper little villain exuded a smug, complacent cruelty. It was no use for the sheriff to remind himself that such things weren’t done nowadays, that the times of Geronimo and the Apache Kid were past forever. Black MacQueen would go the limit in deviltry if he set his mind to it.

Yet Flatray answered easily, without any perceptible hesitation: “I reckon I’ll play my hand and let Bucky play his.”

“Suits me if it does you. Jeff, collect that hardware. Now, while you boys beat up the hills for O’Connor, I’ll trail back to camp with these two all-night picnickers.”

CHAPTER IX

A BARGAIN

Melissy saw the two prisoners brought in, though she could not tell at that distance who they were. Her watch told her that it was four-thirty. She had slept scarcely at all during the night, but now she lay down on the bed in her clothes.

The next she knew, Rosario was calling her to get up for breakfast. The girl dressed and followed Rosario to the adjoining cabin. MacQueen was not there, and Melissy ate alone. She was given to understand that she might walk up and down in front of the houses for a few minutes after breakfast. Naturally she made the most of the little liberty allowed her.

The old squaw Sit-in-the-Sun squatted in front of the last hut, her back against the log wall. The man called Buck sat yawning on a rock a few yards away. What struck Melissy as strange was that the squaw was figuring on the back of an old envelope with the stub of a lead pencil. 287

The young woman walked leisurely past the cabin for perhaps a dozen yards.

“That’ll be about far enough. You don’t want to tire yourself, Miss Lee,” Buck Lane called, with a grin.

Melissy stopped, stood looking at the mountains for a few minutes, and turned back. Sit-in-the-Sun looked quickly at her, and at the same moment she tore the paper in two and her fingers opened to release one piece of the envelope upon which she had been writing. A puff of wind carried it almost directly in front of the girl. Lane was still yawning sleepily, his

gaze directed toward the spot where he presently expected Rosario to step out and call him to breakfast. Melissy dropped her handkerchief, stooped to pick it up, and gathered at the same time in a crumpled heap into her hand the fragment of an envelope. Without another glance at the squaw, the young woman kept on her way, sauntered to the porch, and lingered there as if in doubt.

"I'm tired," she announced to Rosario, and turned to her rooms.

"*Si, señorita,*" answered her attendant quietly.

Once inside, Melissy lay down on her bed, with her back to the window, and smoothed out the torn envelope. On one side were some disjointed memoranda which she did not understand.

K. C. & T. 93
D. & R. B. 87
Float $10,000,000 Cortes for extension.
288

That was all, but certainly a strange puzzle for a Navajo squaw to set her.

She turned the paper over, to find the other side close-packed with writing.

> Miss Lee:
>
> In the last cabin but one is a prisoner, your friend Sheriff Flatray. He is to be shot in an hour. I have offered any sum for his life and been refused. For God's sake save him somehow.
>
> Simon West.

Jack Flatray here, and about to be murdered! The thing was incredible. And yet—and yet—— Was it so

impossible, after all? Some one had broken into the Cache and released the prisoners. Who more likely than Jack to have done this? And later they had captured him and condemned him for what he had done.

Melissy reconstructed the scene in a flash. The Indian squaw was West. He had been rigged up in that paraphernalia to deceive any chance mountaineer who might drop into the valley by accident.

No doubt, when he first saw Melissy, the railroad magnate had been passing his time in making notes about his plans for the system he controlled. But when he had caught sight of her, he had written the note, under the very eyes of the guard, had torn the envelope as if it were of no importance, and 289 tossed the pieces away. He had taken the thousandth chance that his note might fall into the hands of the person to whom it was directed.

All this she understood without giving it conscious thought. For her whole mind was filled with the horror of what she had learned. Jack Flatray, the man she loved, was to be killed. He was to be shot down in an hour.

With the thought, she was at her door—only to find that it had been quietly locked while she lay on the bed. No doubt they had meant to keep her a close prisoner until the thing they were about to do was finished. She beat upon it, called to Rosario to let her out, wrung her hands in her desperation. Then she remembered the window. It was a cheap and flimsy case, and had been jammed so that her strength was not sufficient to raise it.

Her eye searched the room for a weapon, and found an Indian tom-tom club. With this she smashed the

panes and beat down the wooden cross bars of the sash. Agile as a forest fawn, she slipped through the opening she had made and ran toward the far cabin.

A group of men surrounded the door; and, as she drew near, it opened to show three central figures. MacQueen was one, Rosario Chaves a second; but the most conspicuous was a bareheaded young man, with his hands tied behind him. He was going to his death, but a glance was enough 290 to show that he went unconquered and unconquerable. His step did not drag. There was a faint, grave smile on his lips; and in his eye was the dynamic spark that proclaimed him still master of his fate. The woolen shirt had been unbuttoned and pulled back to make way for the rope that lay loosely about his neck, so that she could not miss the well-muscled slope of his fine shoulders, or the gallant set of the small head upon the brown throat.

The man who first caught sight of Melissy spoke in a low voice to his chief. MacQueen turned his head sharply to see her, took a dozen steps toward her, then upbraided the Mexican woman, who had run out after Melissy.

“I told you to lock her door—to make sure of it.”

“*Si, señor*—I did.”

“Then how——” He stopped, and looked to Miss Lee for an explanation.

“I broke the window.”

The outlaw noticed then that her hand was bleeding. “Broke the window! Why?”

“I had to get out! I had to stop you!”

He attempted no denial of what he was about to do.

“How did you know? Did Rosario tell you?” he asked curtly.

“No—no! I found out—just by chance.”

“What chance?” He was plainly disconcerted that she had come to interfere, and as plainly eager to punish the person who had disclosed to her this 291 thing, which he would have liked to do quietly, without her knowledge.

“Never mind that. Nobody is to blame. Say I overheard a sentence. Thank God I did, and I am in time.”

There was no avoiding it now. He had to fight it out with her. “In time for what?” he wanted to know, his eyes narrowing to vicious pin points.

“To save him.”

“No—no! He must die,” cried the Mexican woman.

Melissy was amazed at her vehemence, at the passion of hate that trembled in the voice of the old woman.

MacQueen nodded. “It is out of my hands, you see. He has been condemned.”

“But why?”

“Tell her, Rosario.”

The woman poured her story forth fluently in the native tongue. O’Connor had killed her son—did not deny that he had done it. And just because Tony had tried to escape. This man had freed the ranger. Very well. He should take O’Connor’s place. Let him die the death. A life for a life. Was that not fair?

Flatray turned his head and caught sight of Melissy. A startled cry died on his lips.

“Jack!” She held out both hands to him as she ran

toward him.

The sheriff took her in his arms to console her. 292 For the girl's face was working in a stress of emotion.

"Oh, I'm in time—I'm in time. Thank God I'm in time."

Jack waited a moment to steady his voice. "How came you here, Melissy?"

"He brought me—Black MacQueen. I hated him for it, but now I'm glad—so glad—because I can save you."

Jack winced. He looked over her shoulder at MacQueen, taking it all in with an air of pleasant politeness. And one look was enough to tell him that there was no hope for him. The outlaw had the complacent manner of a cat which has just got at the cream. That Melissy loved him would be an additional reason for wiping him off the map. And in that instant a fierce joy leaped up in Flatray and surged through him, an emotion stronger than the fear of death. She loved him. MacQueen could not take that away from him.

"It's all a mistake," Melissy went on eagerly. "Of course they can't blame you for what Lieutenant O'Connor did. It is absurd—ridiculous."

"Certainly." MacQueen tugged at his little black mustache and kept his black eyes on her constantly. "That's not what we're blaming him for. The indictment against your friend is that he interfered when it wasn't his business."

"But it was his business. Don't you know he's 293 sheriff? He had to do it." Melissy turned to the outlaw impetuously.

"So. And I have to play my hand out, too. It wipes out Mr. Flatray. Sorry, but business is business."

"But—but——" Melissy grew pale as the icy fear gripped her heart that the man meant to go on with the crime. "Don't you see? He's the sheriff?"

"And I never did love sheriffs," drawled MacQueen.

The girl repeated herself helplessly. "It was his sworn duty. That was how he looked at it."

A ghost of an ironic smile flitted across the face of the outlaw chief. "Rosario's sworn duty is to avenge her son's death. That is how she looks at it. The rest of us swore the oath with her."

"But Lieutenant O'Connor had the law back of him. This is murder!"

"Not at all. It is the law of the valley—a life for a life."

"But—— Oh, no—no—no!"

"Yes."

The finality of it appalled her. She felt as if she were butting her head against a stone wall. She knew that argument and entreaty were of no avail, yet she desperately besought first one and then another of them to save the prisoner. Each in turn shook his head. She could see that none of them, save Rosario, bore him a grudge; yet none would 294 move to break the valley oath. At the last, she was through with her promises and her prayers. She had spent them all, and had come up against the wall of blank despair.

Then Jack's grave smile thanked her. "You've done what you could, Melissy."

She clung to him wildly. "Oh, no—no! I can't let you

go, Jack. I can't. I can't."

"I reckon it's got to be, dear," he told her gently.

But her breaking heart could not stand that. There must somehow be a way to save him. She cast about desperately for one, and had not found it when she begged the outlaw chief to see her alone.

"No use." He shook his head.

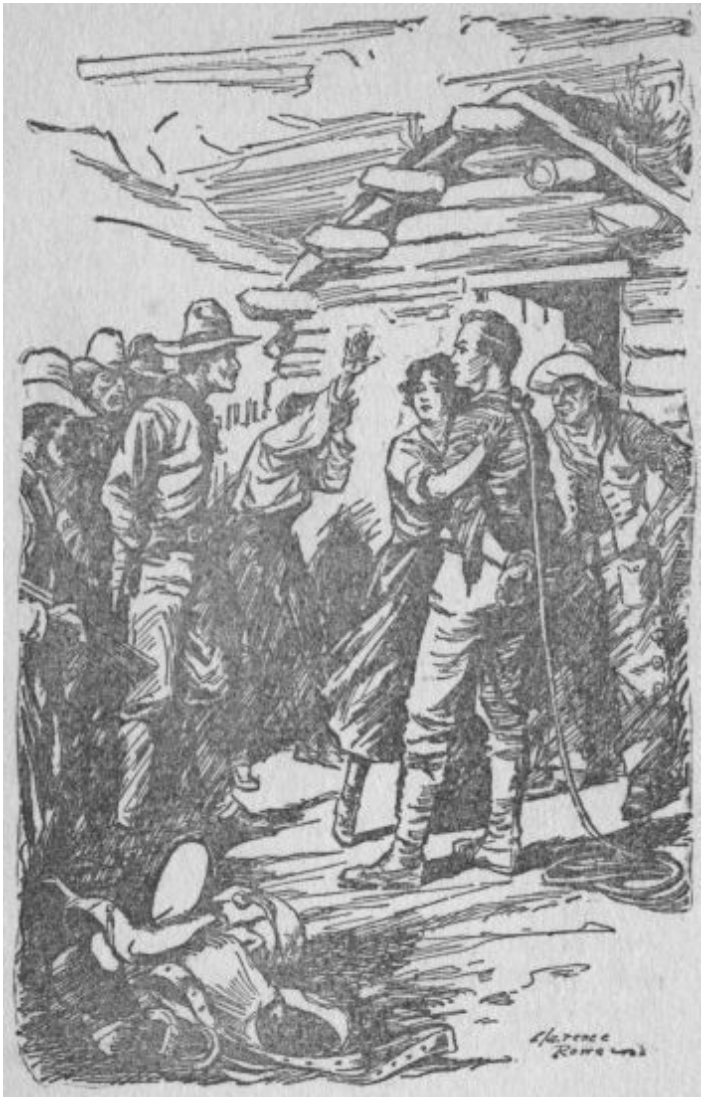
"But just for five minutes! That can't do any harm, can it?"

"And no good, either."

"Yet I ask it. You might do that much for me," she pleaded.

Her despair had moved him; for he was human, after all. That he was troubled about it annoyed him a good deal. Her arrival on the scene had made things unpleasant for everybody. Ungraciously he assented, as the easiest way out of the difficulty.

The two moved off to the corral. It was perhaps thirty yards distant, and they reached it before either of them spoke. She was the first to break the silence.



"OH, NO—NO! I CAN'T LET YOU GO, JACK. I CAN'T. I CAN'T." *Pa*

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"You won't do this dreadful thing—surely, you won't

do it."

"No use saying another word about it. I told you that," he answered doggedly.

"But—— Oh, don't you see? It's one of those things no white man can do. Once it's done, you have put the bars up against decency for the rest of your life."

"I reckon I'll have to risk that—and down in your heart you don't believe it, because you think I've had the bars up for years."

She had come to an impasse already. She tried another turn. "And you said you cared for me! Yet you are willing to make me unhappy for the rest of my life."

"Why, no! I'm willing to make you happy. There's fish in the sea just as good as any that ever were caught," he smirked.

"But it would help you to free him. Don't you see? It's your chance. You can begin again, now. You can make him your friend."

His eyes were hard and grim. "I don't want him for a friend, and you're dead wrong if you think I could make this a lever to square myself with the law. I couldn't. He wouldn't let me, for one thing—he isn't that kind."

"And you said you cared for me!" she repeated helplessly, wringing her hands in her despair. "But at the first chance you fail me."

"Can't you see it isn't a personal matter? I've 297 got nothing against him—nothing to speak of. I'd give him to you, if I could. But it's not my say-so. The thing is out of my hands."

"You could save him, if you set yourself to."

"Sure, I could—if I would pay the price. But I won't pay."

"That's it. You would have to give Rosario something —make some concession," she said eagerly.

"And I'm not willing to pay the price," he told her. "His life's forfeit. Hasn't he been hunting us for a week?"

"Let me pay it," she cried. "I have money in my own right—seven thousand dollars. I'll give it all to save him."

He shook his head. "No use. We've turned down a big offer from West. Your seven thousand isn't a drop in the bucket."

She beat her hands together wildly. "There must be some way to save him."

The outlaw was looking at her with narrowed eyes. He saw a way, and was working it out in his mind. "You're willing to pay, are you?" he asked.

"Yes—yes! All I have."

He put his arms akimbo on the corral fence, and looked long at her. "Suppose the price can't be paid in money, Miss Lee."

"What do you mean?"

"Money isn't the only thing in this world. There 298 are lots of things it won't buy that other things will," he said slowly.

She groped for his meaning, her wide eyes fixed on his, and still did not find it. "Be plainer, please. What can I do to save him?"

"You might marry me."

"Never!"

“Just as you say. You were looking for a way, and I suggested one. Anyhow, you’re mine.”

“I won’t do it!”

“You wanted me to pay the price; but you don’t want to pay yourself.”

“I couldn’t do it. It would be horrible!” But she knew she could and must.

“Why couldn’t you? I’m ready to cut loose from this way of living. When I pull off this one big thing, I’ll quit. We’ll go somewhere and begin life again. You said I could. Well, I will. You’ll help me to keep straight. It won’t be only his life you are saving. It will be mine, too.”

“No—I don’t love you! How could a girl marry a man she didn’t care for and didn’t respect?”

“I’ll make you do both before long. I’m the kind of man women love.”

“You’re the kind I hate,” she flashed bitterly.

“I’ll risk your hate, my dear,” he laughed easily.

She did not look at him. Her eyes were on the horizon line, where sky and pine tops met. He knew that she was fighting it out to a decision, and he did not speak again. 299

After all, she was only a girl. Right and wrong were inextricably mixed in her mind. It was not right to marry this man. It was not right to let the sheriff die while she could save him. She was generous to the core. But there was something deeper than generosity. Her banked love for Flatray flooded her in a great cry of protest against his death. She loved him. She loved him. Much as she detested this man, revolting as she found the thought of being linked to

him, the impulse to sacrifice herself was the stronger feeling of the two. Deep in her heart she knew that she could not let Jack go to his death so long as it was possible to prevent it.

Her grave eyes came back to MacQueen. “I’ll have to tell you one thing—I’ll hate you worse than ever after this. Don’t think I’ll ever change my mind about that. I won’t.”

He twirled his little mustache complacently.

“I’ll have to risk that, as I said.”

“You’ll take me to Mesa to-day. As soon as we get there a justice of the peace will marry us. From his house we’ll go directly to father’s. You won’t lie to me.”

“No. I’ll play out the game square, if you do.”

“And after we’re married, what then?”

“You may stay at home until I get this ransom business settled. Then we’ll go to Sonora.”

“How do you know I’ll go?”

“I’ll trust you.” 300

“Then it’s a bargain.”

Without another word, they turned back to rejoin the group by the cabin. Before they had gone a dozen steps she stopped.

“What about Mr. Flatray? You will free him, of course.”

“Yes. I’ll take him right out due north of here, about four miles. He’ll be blindfolded. There we’ll leave him, with instructions how to reach Mesa.”

“I’ll go with you,” she announced promptly.

"What for?"

"To make sure that you do let him go—alive."

He shrugged his shoulders. "All right. I told you I was going to play fair. I haven't many good points, but that is one of them. I don't give my word and then break it."

"Still, I'll go."

He laughed angrily. "That's your privilege."

She turned on him passionately. "You've got no right to resent it, though I don't care a jackstraw whether you do or not. I'm not going into this because I want to, but to save this man from the den of wolves into which he has fallen. If you knew how I despise and hate you, how my whole soul loathes you, maybe you wouldn't be so eager to go on with it! You'll get nothing out of this but the pleasure of torturing a girl who can't defend herself."

"We'll see about that," he answered doggedly.

CHAPTER X

THE PRICE

MacQueen lost no time in announcing his new program.

"Boys, the hanging's off. I've decided to accept West's offer for Flatray's life. It's too good to turn down."

"That's what I told you all the time," growled Buck.

"Well, I'm telling *you* now. The money will be divided equally among you, except that Rosario will get my share as well as hers."

Rosario Chaves broke into fierce protests. Finding these unheeded, she cursed the outlaws furiously and threatened vengeance upon them. She did not want money; she wanted this man's life. The men accepted this as a matter of course, and paid little attention to the ravings of the old woman.

At the first news of his reprieve, Jack saw things through a haze for a moment. But he neither broke down nor showed undue exultation.

His first thought was of relief, of profound comfort; his next of wonder and suspicion. How under 302 heaven had Melissy won his life for him? He looked quickly at her, but the eyes of the girl did not meet his.

"Melissy." Flatray spoke very gently, but something in the way he spoke compelled the young woman to meet his eyes.

Almost instantly the long lashes went down to her pale cheeks again.

MacQueen cut in suavely: "I reckon this is the time for announcements. Boys, Miss Lee has promised to marry me."

Before the stir which this produced had died away, Flatray flashed a question: "In exchange for my life?"

The chief of the outlaws looked at him with

insolence smoldering in his black eyes. “Now, I wonder when you ever will learn to mind your own business, sheriff! Nobody invited you to sit into this game.”

“This *is* my business. I make it mine. Give me a straight answer, Melissy. Am I right? Is it for my life?”

“Yes.” Her voice was so low he could hardly hear it.

“Then I won’t have it! The thing is infamous. I can’t hide behind the skirts of a girl, least of all you. I can die, but, by God, I’ll keep my self-respect.”

“It’s all arranged,” Melissy answered in a whisper. 303

Flatray laughed harshly. “I guess not. You can’t pay my debts by giving yourself to life-long misery.”

“You’re right pessimistic, sheriff,” sneered MacQueen.

“What do you take me for? I won’t have it. I won’t have it.” The sheriff’s voice was rough and hoarse. “I’d rather die fifty times.”

“It’s not up to you to choose, as it happens,” the leader of the outlaws suggested suavely.

“You villain! You damned white-livered coward!” The look of the young sheriff scorched.

“Speaks right out in meeting, don’t he?” grinned Lane.

“I know what he is, Jack,” Melissy cried. “And he knows I think he’s the lowest thing that crawls. But I’ve got to save you. Don’t you see, I’ve got to do it?”

“No, I don’t see it,” Flatray answered hotly. “I can take what’s coming to me, can’t I? But if you save my

life that way you make me as low a thing as he is. I say I'll not have it."

Melissy could stand it no longer. She began to sob. "I—I—Oh, Jack, I've got to do it. Don't you see? Don't you see? *It won't make any difference with me if I don't.* No difference—except that you'll be—dead."

She was in his embrace, her arms around his neck, whispering the horrible truth in his ear brokenly. And as he felt her dear young fragrance 304 of hair in his nostrils, the warm, soft litheness of her body against his, the rage and terror in him flooded his veins. Could such things be? Was it possible a man like that could live? Not if he could help it.

Gently he unfastened her arms from his neck. MacQueen was standing a dozen feet away, his hands behind his back and his legs wide apart. As Flatray swung around the outlaw read a warning in the blazing eyes. Just as Jack tore loose from his guards MacQueen reached for his revolver.

The gun flashed. A red hot blaze scorched through Jack's arm. Next instant MacQueen lay flat on his back, the sheriff's fingers tight around his throat. If he could have had five seconds more the man's neck would have been broken. But they dragged him away, fighting like a wild cat. They flung him down and tied his hands behind him.

Melissy caught a glimpse of his bleeding arm, his torn and dusty face, the appalling ferocity of the men who were hammering him into the ground. She took a step forward blindly. The mountains in front of her tilted into the sky. She moved forward another step, then stumbled and went down. She had fainted.

"Just as well," MacQueen nodded. "Here, Rosario, look after the young lady. Lift Flatray to a horse,

boys, after you've blindfolded him. Good enough. Oh, and one thing more, Flatray. You're covered by a rifle. If you lift a hand to slip that 305 handkerchief from your eyes, you're giving the signal for Jeff to turn loose at you. We're going to take you away, but we don't aim to let you out of the Cache for a few days yet."

"What do you mean?"

MacQueen jeered at his prisoner openly. "I mean, Mr. Sheriff, that you'll stay with us till the girl does as she has promised. Understand?"

"I think so, you hellhound. You're going to hold me against her so that she can't change her mind."

"Exactly. So that she can't rue back. You've guessed it."

They rode for hours, but in what direction it was impossible for Flatray to guess. He could tell when they were ascending, when dropping down hill, but in a country so rugged this meant nothing.

When at last he dismounted and the kerchief was taken from his eyes he found himself in a little pocket of the hills in front of an old log cabin. Jeff stayed with him. The others rode away. But not till they had him safely tied to a heavy table leg within the hut.

CHAPTER XI

SQUIRE LATIMER TAKES A HAND

"You're to make ready for a trip to town, *señorita*."

"When?"

"At once," Rosario answered. "By orders of *Señor* MacQueen."

"Then he is back?" the girl flashed.

"Just back."

"Tell him I want to see him—immediately."

"I am to take you to him as soon as you are ready to ride."

"Oh, very well."

In a very few minutes the young woman was ready. Rosario led her to the cabin in front of which she had seen the old Indian squaw. In it were seated Simon West and Black MacQueen. Both of them rose at her entrance.

"Please take a chair, Miss Lee. We have some business to talk over," the outlaw suggested.

Melissy looked straight at him, her lips shut tight. "What have you done with Jack Flatray?" she presently demanded. 307

"Left him to find his way back to his friends."

"You didn't hurt him ... any more?"

"No."

"And you left him alone, wounded as he was."

"We fixed up his wound," lied MacQueen.

“Was it very bad?”

“A scratch. I had to do it.”

“You needn’t apologize to me.”

“I’m not apologizing, you little wild-cat.”

“What do you want with me? Why did you send for me?”

“We’re going to Mesa to see a parson. But before we start there’s some business to fix up. Mr. West and I will need your help to fix up the negotiations for his release.”

“My help!” She looked at him in surprise. “How can I help?”

“I’ve laid my demands before his friends. They’ll come through with the money, sure. But I want them to understand the conditions right plainly, so there won’t be any mistake. What they have got to get soaked into their heads is that, if they do make any mistakes, they will not see Simon West again alive. You put that up to them strong.”

“I’m not going to be your agent in robbing people of their money!” she told him swiftly.

“You don’t understand. Mr. West wants you to do it. He wants you to explain the facts to his friends, so they won’t act rash and get off wrong foot first.” 308

“Oh! If Mr. West wishes it,” she conceded.

“I do wish it,” the great man added.

Though his face and hands were still stained with the dye that had been used on them, the railroad builder was now dressed in his own clothes. The girl thought that he looked haggard and anxious, and she was sure that her presence brought him relief. In his own

way he was an indomitable fighter, but his experience had not included anything of this nature.

Jack Flatray could look at death level-eyed, and with an even pulse, because for him it was all in the day's work; but the prospect of it shook West's high-strung nerves. Nevertheless, he took command of the explanations, because it had been his custom for years to lead.

MacQueen, his sardonic smile in play, sat back and let West do most of the talking. Both men were working for the same end—to get the ransom paid as soon as possible—and the multimillionaire released; and the outlaw realized that Melissy would coöperate the more heartily if she felt she were working for West and not for himself.

"This is Tuesday, Miss Lee. You will reach Mesa some time to-night. My friends ought to be on the ground already. I want you and your father to get in touch with them right away, and arrange the details along the line laid down by Mr. MacQueen. In case they agree to everything and understand fully, have the Stars and Stripes flying 309 from your house all day to-morrow as a signal. Don't on any account omit this—because, if you do, my captors will have to hold me longer, pending further negotiations. I have written a letter to Mr. Lucas, exonerating you completely, Miss Lee; and I have ordered him to comply with all these demands without parley."

"Our proposition seems to Mr. West very reasonable and fair," grinned MacQueen impishly, paring his finger nails.

"At any rate, I think that my life is worth to this country a good deal more than three hundred thousand dollars," West corrected.

“Besides being worth something to Simon West,” the outlaw added carelessly.

West plunged into the details of delivering the money. Once or twice the other man corrected him or amplified some statement. In order that there could be no mistake, a map of Sweetwater Cañon was handed to Melissy to be used by the man who would bring the money to the rendezvous at the Devil’s Causeway.

When it came to saying good-bye, the old man could scarce make up his mind to release the girl’s hand. It seemed to him that she was the visible sign of his safety, and that with her departure went a safeguard from these desperate men. He could not forget that she had saved the life of the sheriff, even though he did not know what sacrifice she had made so to do. 310

“I know you’ll do your best for me,” he said, with tears in his eyes. “Make Lucas see this thing right. Don’t let any fool detectives bunco him into refusing to pay the ransom. Put it to him as strongly as you can, that it will be either my life or the money. I have ordered him to pay it, and I want it paid.”

Melissy nodded. “I’ll tell him how it is, Mr. West. I know it will be all right. By Thursday afternoon we shall have you with us to dinner again. Trust us.”

“I do.” He lowered his voice and glanced at MacQueen, who had been called aside to speak to one of his men. “And I’m glad you’re going away from here. This is no place for you.”

“It isn’t quite the place for you, either,” she answered, with a faint, joyless smile.

They started an hour before midday. Rosario had

packed a lunch for both of them in MacQueen's saddlebags, for it was the intention of the latter to avoid ranches and traveled trails on the way down. He believed that the girl would go through with what she had pledged herself to do, but he did not mean to take chances of a rescue.

In the middle of the afternoon they stopped for lunch at Round-up Spring—a water hole which had not dried up in a dozen years. It was a somber meal. Melissy's spirits had been sinking lower and lower with every mile that brought her nearer the destiny into which this man was forcing her. Food 311 choked her, and she ate but little. Occasionally, with staring eyes, she would fall into a reverie, from which his least word would startle her to a shiver of apprehension. This she always controlled after the first instinctive shudder.

"What's the matter with you, girl? I'm not going to hurt you any. I never hit a woman in my life," the man said once roughly.

"Perhaps you may, after you're married. It's usually one's wife one beats. Don't be discouraged. You'll have the experience yet," she retorted, but without much spirit.

"To hear you tell it, I'm a devil through and through! It's that kind of talk that drives a man to drink," he flung out angrily.

"And to wife beating. Of course, I'm not your chattel yet, because the ceremony hasn't been read; but if you would like to anticipate a few hours and beat me, I don't suppose there is any reason you shouldn't."

"Gad! How you hate me!"

Her inveteracy discouraged him. His good looks, his debonair manner, the magnetic charm he knew how to exert—these, which had availed him with other women, did not seem to reach her at all. She really gave him no chance to prove himself. He was ready to be grave or gay—to be a light-hearted boy or a blasé man of the world—to adopt any rôle that would suit her. But how could one play up effectively to a chill silence which took no note of 312 him, to a depression of the soul which would not let itself be lifted? He felt that she was living up to the barest letter of the law in fulfilling their contract, and because of it he steeled himself against her sufferings.

There was one moment of their ride when she stood on the tiptoe of expectation and showed again the sparkle of eager life. MacQueen had resaddled after their luncheon, and they were climbing a long sidehill that looked over a dry valley. With a gesture, the outlaw checked her horse.

“Look!”

Some quarter of a mile from them two men were riding up a wash that ran through the valley. The mesquite and the cactus were thick, and it was for only an occasional moment that they could be seen. Black and the girl were screened from view by a live oak in front of them, so that there was no danger of being observed. The outlaw got out his field glasses and watched the men intently.

Melissy could not contain the question that trembled on her lips: “Do you know them?”

“I reckon not.”

“Perhaps——”

“Well!”

“May I look—please?”

He handed her the glasses. She had to wait for the riders to reappear, but when they did she gave a little cry.

“It’s Mr. Bellamy!” 313

“Oh, is it?”

He looked at her steadily, ready to crush in her throat any call she might utter for help. But he soon saw that she had no intention of making her presence known. Her eyes were glued to the glasses. As long as the men were in sight she focused her gaze on them ravenously. At last a bend in the dry river bed hid them from view. She lowered the binoculars with a sigh.

“Lucky they didn’t see us,” he said, with his easy, sinister laugh. “Lucky for them.”

She noticed for the first time that he had uncased his rifle and was holding it across the saddle-tree.

Night slipped silently down from the hills—the soft, cool, velvet night of the Arizona uplands. The girl drooped in the saddle from sheer exhaustion. The past few days had been hard ones, and last night she had lost most of her sleep. She had ridden far on rough trails, had been subjected to a stress of emotion to which her placid maiden life had been unused. But she made no complaint. It was part of the creed she had unconsciously learned from her father to game out whatever had to be endured.

The outlaw, though he saw her fatigue, would not heed it. She had chosen to set herself apart from him. Let her ask him to stop and rest, if she wanted to. It

would do her pride good to be humbled. Yet in his heart he admired her the more, 314 because she asked no favors of him and forbore the womanish appeal of tears.

His watch showed eleven o'clock by the moon when the lights of Mesa glimmered in the valley below.

"We'll be in now in half an hour," he said.

She had no comment to make, and silence fell between them again until they reached the outskirts of the town.

"We'll get off here and walk in," he ordered; and, after she had dismounted, he picketed the horses close to the road. "You can send for yours in the mornin'. Mine will be in the livery barn by that time."

The streets were practically deserted in the residential part of the town. Only one man they saw, and at his approach MacQueen drew Melissy behind a large lilac bush.

As the man drew near the outlaw's hand tightened on the shoulder of the girl. For the man was her father—dusty, hollow-eyed, and haggard. The two crouching behind the lilacs knew that this iron man was broken by his fears for his only child, the girl who was the apple of his eye.

Not until he was out of hearing did Melissy open her lips to the stifled cry she had suppressed. Her arms went out to him, and the tears rolled down her cheeks. For herself she had not let herself break down, but for her father's grief her heart was like water. 315

"All right. Don't break down now. You'll be with him inside of half an hour," the outlaw told her gruffly.

They stopped at a house not much farther down the street, and he rang the bell. It took a second ring to bring a head out of the open window upstairs.

“Well?” a sleepy voice demanded.

“Is this Squire Latimer?”

“Yes.”

“Come down. We want to get married.”

“Then why can’t you come at a reasonable hour?—consarn it!”

“Never mind that. There’s a good fee in it. Hurry up!”

Presently the door opened. “Come in. You can wait in the hall till I get a light.”

“No—I don’t want a light. We’ll step into this room, and be married at once,” MacQueen told him crisply.

“I don’t know about that. I’m not marrying folks that can’t be looked at.”

“You’ll marry us, and at once. I’m Black MacQueen!”

It was ludicrous to see how the justice of the peace fell back in terror before the redoubtable bad man of the hills.

“Well, I don’t know as a light is a legal necessity; but we got to have witnesses.”

“Have you any in the house?” 316

“My daughter and a girl friend of hers are sleeping upstairs. I’ll call them, Mr. Black—er—I mean Mr. MacQueen.”

The outlaw went with the squire to the foot of the stairs, whence Latimer wakened the girls and told them to dress at once, as quickly as possible. A few

minutes later they came down—towsled, eyes heavy with sleep, giggling at each other in girlish fashion. But when they knew whose marriage they were witnessing, giggles and sleep fled together.

They were due for another surprise later. MacQueen and his bride were standing in the heavy shadows, so that both bulked vaguely in mere outline. Hitherto, Melissy had not spoken a word. The time came when it was necessary for the justice to know the name of the girl whom he was marrying. Her answer came at once, in a low, scarcely audible voice:

“Melissy Lee.”

An electric shock could scarce have startled them more. Of all the girls in Mesa none was so proud as Melissy Lee, none had been so far above criticism, such a queen in the frontier town. She had spent a year in school at Denver; she had always been a social leader. While she had always been friendly to the other girls, they had looked upon her with a touch of awe. She had all the things they craved, from beauty to money. And now she was marrying at midnight, in the dark, the most notorious bad man of Arizona! 317

Here was a wonder of wonders to tell the other girls to-morrow. The only pity was that they could not see her face—and his. They had heard that he was handsome. No doubt that accounted for it. And what could be more romantic than a love match with such a fascinating villain? Probably he had stormed her heart irresistibly.

The service proceeded. The responses of the man came clearly and triumphantly, those of the girl low but distinctly. It was the custom of the justice to join the hands of the parties he was marrying; but when

he moved to do so this girl put both of hers quickly behind her. It was his custom also to kiss the bride after pronouncing them man and wife; but he omitted this, too, on the present occasion. Nor did the groom kiss her.

The voice of the justice died away. They stood before him man and wife. The witnesses craned forward to see the outlaw embrace his bride. Instead, he reached into his pocket and handed Latimer a bill. The denomination of it was one hundred dollars, but the justice did not discover that until later.

“I reckon that squares us,” the bad man said unsentimentally. “Now, all of you back to bed.”

MacQueen and his bride passed out into the night. The girls noticed that she did not take his arm; that she even drew back, as if to avoid touching him as they crossed the threshold. 318

Not until they reached the gate of her father’s house did MacQueen speak.

“I’m not all coyote, girl. I’ll give you the three days I promised you. After that you’ll join me wherever I say.”

“Yes,” she answered without spirit.

“You’ll stand pat to our agreement. When they try to talk you out of it you won’t give in?”

“No.”

She was deadly weary, could scarce hold up her head.

“If you lie to me I’ll take it out on your folks. Don’t forget that Jack Flatray will have to pay if you double-cross me.”

“No.”

“He’ll have to pay in full.”

“You mean you’ll capture him again.”

“I mean we won’t have to do that. We haven’t turned him loose yet.”

“Then you lied to me?” She stared at him with wide open eyes of horror.

“I had to keep him to make sure of you.”

Her groan touched his vanity, or was it perhaps his pity?

“I’m not going to hurt him—if you play fair. I tell you I’m no cur. Help me, girl, and I’ll quit this hell raising and live decent.”

She laughed without joy, bitterly.

“Oh, I know what you think,” he continued. “I can’t blame you. But what do you know about my 319 life? What do you know about what I’ve had to fight against? All my life there has been some devil in me, strangling all the good. There has been nobody to give me a helping hand—none to hold me back. I was a dog with a bad name—good enough for hanging, and nothing else.”

He was holding the gate, and perforce she had to hear him out.

“What do I care about that?” she cried, in a fierce gust of passion. “I see you are cur and coward! You lied to me. You didn’t keep faith and free Jack Flatray. That is enough.”

She was the one person in the world who had power to wound him. Nor did it hurt the less that it was the truth. He drew back as if the lash of a whip had swept across his face.

"No man alive can say that to me and live!" he told her. "Cur I may be; but you're my wife, 'Lissie MacQueen. Don't forget that."

"Go! Go!" she choked. "I hope to God I'll never see your face again!"

She flew along the grass-bordered walk, whipped open the front door, and disappeared within. She turned the key in the lock, and stood trembling in the darkness. She half expected him to follow, to attempt to regain possession of her.

But the creak of his quick step on the porch did not come. Only her hammering heart stirred in the black silence. She drew a long breath of relief, and sank down on the stairs. It was over at last, 320 the horrible nightmare through which she had been living.

Gradually she fought down her fears and took hold of herself. She must find her father and relieve his anxiety. Quietly she opened the door of the hall into the living room.

A man sat at the table, with his back to her, in an attitude of utter dejection. He was leaning forward, with his head buried in his arms. It was her father. She stepped forward, and put her hands on his bowed shoulders.

"Daddy," she said softly.

At her touch the haggard, hopeless, unshaven face was lifted toward her. For a moment Lee looked at her as if she had been a wraith. Then, with a hoarse cry, he arose and caught her in his arms.

Neither of them could speak for emotion. He tried it twice before he could get out:

"Baby! Honey!"

He choked back the sobs in his throat. "Where did you come from? I thought sure MacQueen had you."

"He had. He took me to Dead Man's Cache with him."

"And you escaped. Praise the Lord, honey!"

"No—he brought me back."

"MacQueen did! Goddlemighty—he knows what's best for him!"

"He brought me back to—to——" She broke down, and buried her head in his shoulder. 321

Long, dry sobs racked her. The father divined with alarm that he did not know the worst.

"Tell me—tell me, 'Lissie! Brought you back to do what, honey?" He held her back from him, his hands on her shoulders.

"To marry me."

"What!"

"To marry me. And he did—fifteen minutes ago, I am Black MacQueen's wife."

"Black MacQueen's wife! My God, girl!" Big Beauchamp Lee stared at her in a horror of incredulity.

She told him the whole story, from beginning to end.

CHAPTER XII

THE TAKING OF THE CACHE

It was understood that in the absence of the sheriff Richard Bellamy should have charge of the posse, and after the disappearance of Flatray he took command.

With the passing years Bellamy had become a larger figure in the community. The Monte Cristo mine had made him independently wealthy, even though he had deeded one-third of it to Melissy Lee. Arizona had forgiven him his experiment at importing sheep and he was being spoken of as a territorial delegate to Congress, a place the mine owner by no means wanted. For his interests were now bound up in the Southwest. His home was there. Already a little toddler's soft fat fist was clinging to the skirt of Ferne.

At first Bellamy, as well as Farnum, McKinstra, young Yarnell and the rest of the posse looked expectantly for the return of the sheriff. It was hard to believe that one so virile, so competent, so much a dominant factor of every situation he confronted, could have fallen a victim to the men he hunted. 323 But as the days passed with no news of him the conviction grew that he had been waylaid and shot. The hunt went on, but the rule now was that no move should be made singly. Not even for an hour did the couples separate.

One evening a woman drifted into camp just as they were getting ready to roll into their blankets. McKinstra was on sentry duty, but she got by him unobserved and startled Farnum into drawing his

gun.

Yet all she said was: "*Buenos tardes, señor*."

The woman was a wrinkled Mexican with a close-shut, bitter mouth and bright, snappy eyes.

Farnum stared at her in surprise. "Who in Arizona are you?"

It was decidedly disturbing to think what might have happened if MacQueen's outfit had dropped in on them, instead of one lone old woman.

"Rosario Chaves."

"Glad to meet you, ma'am. Won't you sit down?"

The others had by this time gathered around.

Rosario spoke in Spanish, and Bob Farnum answered in the same language. "You want to find the way into Dead Man's Cache, señor?"

"Do we? I reckon yes!"

"Let me be your guide."

"You know the way in?"

"I live there."

"Connected with MacQueen's outfit, maybe?"

"I cook for him. My son was one of his men." 324

"Was?"

"Yes. He was killed—shot by Lieutenant O'Connor, the same man who was a prisoner at the Cache until yesterday morning."

"Killed lately, ma'am?"

"Two years ago. We swore revenge. MacQueen did not keep his oath, the oath we all swore together."

Bellamy began to understand the situation. She wanted to get back at MacQueen, unless she were trying to lead them into a trap.

"Let's get this straight. MacQueen turned O'Connor loose, did he?" Bellamy questioned.

"No. He escaped. This man—what you call him?—the sheriff, helped him and Señor West to break away."

The mine owner's eye met Farnum's. They were being told much news.

"So they all escaped, did they?"

"*Si, señor*, but MacQueen took West and the sheriff next morning. They could not find their way out of the valley."

"But O'Connor escaped. Is that it?"

Her eyes flashed hatred. "He escaped because the sheriff helped him. His life was forfeit to me. So then was the sheriff's. MacQueen he admit it. But when the girl promise to marry him he speak different."

"What girl?"

"*Señorita* Lee." 325

"Not Melissy Lee."

"*Si, señor*."

"My God! Melissy Lee a prisoner of that infernal villain. How did she come there?"

The Mexican woman was surprised at the sudden change that had come over the men. They had grown tense and alert. Interest had flamed into a passionate eagerness.

Rosario Chaves told the story from beginning to end,

so far as she knew it; and every sentence of it wrung the big heart of these men. The pathos of it hit them hard. Their little comrade, the girl they had been fond of for years—the bravest, truest lass in Arizona—had fallen a victim to this intolerable fate! They could have wept with the agony of it if they had known how.

"Are you sure they were married? Maybe the thing slipped up," Alan suggested, the hope father to the thought.

But this hope was denied him; for the woman had brought with her a copy of the Mesa *Sentinel*, with an account of the marriage and the reason for it. This had been issued on the morning after the event, and MacQueen had brought it back with him to the Cache.

Bellamy arranged with the Mexican woman a plan of attack upon the valley. Camp was struck at once, and she guided them through tortuous ravines and gulches deeper into the Roaring Fork country. She left them in a grove of aspens, just 326 above the lip of the valley, on the side least frequented by the outlaws.

They were to lie low until they should receive from her a signal that most of the gang had left to take West to the place appointed for the exchange. They were then to wait through the day until dusk, slip quietly down, and capture the ranch before the return of the party with the gold. In case anything should occur to delay the attack on the ranch, another signal was to be given by Rosario.

The first signal was to be the hanging of washing upon the line. If this should be removed before nightfall, Bellamy was to wait until he should hear

from her again.

Bellamy believed that the Chaves woman was playing square with him, but he preferred to take no chances. As soon as she had left to return to the settlement of the outlaws he moved camp again to a point almost half a mile from the place where she had last seen them. If the whole thing were a “plant,” and a night attack had been planned, he wanted to be where he and his men could ambush the ambushers, if necessary.

But the night passed without any alarm. As the morning wore away the scheduled washing appeared on the line. Farnum crept down to the valley lip and trained his glasses on the ranch house. Occasionally he could discern somebody moving about, though there were not enough signs of activity to 327 show the presence of many people. All day the wash hung drying on the line. Dusk came, the blankets still signaling that all was well.

Bellamy led his men forward under cover, following the wooded ridge above the Cache so long as there was light enough by which they might be observed from the valley. With the growing darkness he began the descent into the bowl just behind the corral. A light shone in the larger cabin; and Bellamy knew that, unless Rosario were playing him false, the men would be at supper there. He left his men lying down behind the corral, while he crept forward to the window from which the light was coming.

In the room were two men and the Mexican woman. The men, with elbows far apart, and knives and forks very busy, were giving strict attention to the business in hand. Rosario waited upon them, but with ear and eye guiltily alert to catch the least sound. The mine owner could even overhear fragments of the talk.

“Ought to get back by midnight, don’t you reckon? Pass the cow and the sugar, Buck. Keep a-coming with that coffee, Rosario. I ain’t a mite afraid but what MacQueen will pull it off all right, you bet.”

“Sure, he will. Give that molasses a shove, Tom——”

Bellamy drew his revolver and slipped around to the front door. He came in so quietly that neither 328 of the men heard him. Both had their backs to the door.

“Figure it up, and it makes a right good week’s work. I reckon I’ll go down to Chihuahua and break the bank at Miguel’s,” one of them was saying.

“Better go to Yuma and break stones for a spell, Buck,” suggested a voice from the doorway.

Both men slewed their heads around as if they had been worked by the same lever. Their mouths opened, and their eyes bulged. A shining revolver covered them competently.

“Now, don’t you, Buck—nor you either, Tom!” This advice because of a tentative movement each had made with his right hand. “I’m awful careless about spilling lead, when I get excited. Better reach for the roof; then you won’t have any temptations to suicide.”

The hard eyes of the outlaws swept swiftly over the cattleman. Had he shown any sign of indecision, they would have taken a chance and shot it out. But he was so easily master of himself that the impulse to “draw” died stillborn.

Bellamy gave a sharp, shrill whistle. Footsteps came pounding across the open, and three armed men showed at the door.

“Darn my skin if the old son of a gun hasn’t hogged

all the glory!" Bob Farnum complained joyfully. "Won't you introduce us to your friends, Bellamy?" 329

"This gentleman with the biscuit in his hand is Buck; the one so partial to porterhouse steak is Tom," returned Bellamy gravely.

"Glad to death to meet you, gents. Your hands seem so busy drilling for the ceiling, we won't shake right now. If it would be any kindness to you, I'll unload all this hardware, though. My! You tote enough with you to start a store, boys."

"How did you find your way in?" growled Buck.

"Jest drifted in on our automobiles and airships," Bob told him airily, as he unbuckled the revolver belt and handed it to one of his friends.

The outlaws were bound, after which Rosario cooked the posse a dinner. This was eaten voraciously by all, for camp life had sharpened the appetite for a woman's cooking.

One of the men kept watch to notify them when MacQueen and his gang should enter the valley, while the others played "pitch" to pass the time. In spite of this, the hours dragged. It was a good deal like waiting for a battle to begin. Bellamy and Farnum had no nerves, but the others became nervous and anxious.

"I reckon something is keeping them," suggested Alan, after looking at his watch for the fifth time in half an hour. "Don't you reckon we better go up the trail a bit to meet them?"

"I reckon we better wait here, Alan. Bid three," returned Farnum evenly.

As he spoke, their scout came running in. 330

“They’re here, boys!”

“Good enough! How many of them?”

“Four of ’em, looked like. They were winding down the trail, and I couldn’t make out how many.”

“All right, boys. Steady, now, till they get down from their horses. Hal, out with the light when I give the word.”

It was a minute to shake nerves of steel. They could hear the sound of voices, an echo of jubilant laughter, the sound of iron shoes striking stones in the trail. Then some one shouted:

“Oh, you, Buck!”

The program might have gone through as arranged, but for an unlooked-for factor in the proceedings. Buck let out a shout of warning to his trapped friends. Almost at the same instant the butt of Farnum’s revolver smashed down on his head; but the damage was already done.

Bellamy and his friends swarmed out like bees. The outlaws were waiting irresolutely—some mounted, others beside their horses. Among them were two pack horses.

“Hands up!” ordered the mine owner sharply.

The answer was a streak of fire from a rifle. Instantly there followed a fusillade. Flash after flash lit up the darkness. Staccato oaths, cries, a moan of pain, the trampling of frightened horses, filled the night with confusion.

In spite of the shout of warning, the situation had come upon the bandits as a complete surprise. 331 How many were against them, whether or not they

were betrayed, the certainty that the law had at last taken them at a disadvantage—these things worked with the darkness for the posse. A man flung himself on his pony, lay low on its back, and galloped wildly into the night. A second wheeled and followed at his heels. Hank Irwin was down, with a bullet from a carbine through his jaw and the back of his head. A wild shot had brought down another. Of the outlaws only MacQueen, standing behind his horse as he fired, remained on the field uninjured.

The cattlemen had scattered as the firing began, and had availed themselves of such cover as was to be had. Now they concentrated their fire on the leader of the outlaws. His horse staggered and went down, badly torn by a rifle bullet. A moment later the special thirty-two carbine he carried was knocked from his hands by another shot.

He crouched and ran to Irwin's horse, flung himself to the saddle, deliberately emptied his revolver at his foes, and put spurs to the broncho. As he vanished into the hills Bob Farnum slowly sank to the ground.

"I've got mine, Bellamy. Blamed if he ain't plumb bust my laig!"

The mine owner covered the two wounded outlaws, while his men disarmed them. Then he walked across to his friend, laid down his rifle, and knelt beside him. 332

"Did he get you bad, old man?"

"Bad enough so I reckon I'll have a doc look at it one of these days." Bob grinned to keep down the pain.

Once more there came the sound of hoofs beating the trail of decomposed granite. Bellamy looked up and grasped his rifle. A single rider loomed out of the

darkness and dragged his horse to a halt, a dozen yards from the mine owner, in such a position that he was directly behind one of the pack horses.

“Up with your hands!” ordered Bellamy on suspicion.

Two hands went swiftly up from beside the saddle. The moonlight gleamed on something bright in the right hand. A flash rent the night. A jagged, red-hot pain tore through the shoulder of Hal Yarnell. He fired wildly, the shock having spoiled his aim.

The attacker laughed exultantly, mockingly, as he swung his horse about.

“A present from Black MacQueen,” he jeered.

With that, he was gone again, taking the pack animal with him. He had had the audacity to come back after his loot—and had got some of it, too.

One of the unwounded cowpunchers gave pursuit, but half an hour later he returned ruefully.

“I lost him somehow—darned if I know how. I seen him before me one minute; the next he was 333 gone. Must ’a’ known some trail that led off from the road, I reckon.”

Bellamy said nothing. He intended to take up the trail in person; but first the wounded had to be looked to, a man dispatched for a doctor, and things made safe against another possible but improbable attack. It was to be a busy night; for he had on hand three wounded men, as well as two prisoners who were sound. An examination showed him that neither of the two wounded outlaws nor Farnum nor Yarnell were fatally shot. All were hardy outdoors men, who had lived in the balsamic air of the hills; if complications did not ensue, they would recover beyond question.

In this extremity Rosario was a first aid to the injured. She had betrayed the bandits without the least compunction, because they had ignored the oath of vengeance against the slayer of her son; but she nursed them all impartially and skillfully until the doctor arrived, late next day.

Meanwhile Bellamy and McKinstra, guided by one of the outlaws, surprised Jeff and released Flatray, who returned with them to camp.

With the doctor had come also four members of the Lee posse. To the deputy in charge Jack turned over his four prisoners and the gold recovered. As soon as the doctor had examined and dressed his wound he mounted and took the trail after MacQueen. With him rode Bellamy.

334

CHAPTER XIII

MELISSY ENTERTAINS

The notes of Schumann's "Traümerei" died away. Melissy glanced over her music, and presently ran lightly into Chopin's "Valse Au Petit Chien." She was, after all, only a girl; and there were moments when she forgot to remember that she was wedded to the worst of unhanged villains. When she drowned herself fathoms deep in her music, she had the best

chance of forgetting.

Chaminade's "The Flatterer" followed. In the midst of this the door opened quietly and closed again. Melissy finished, fingered her music, and became somehow aware that she was not alone. She turned unhurriedly on the seat and met the smiling eyes of her husband.

From his high-heeled boots to his black, glossy hair, Black MacQueen was dusty with travel. Beside him was a gunny sack, tied in the middle and filled at both ends. Picturesque he was and always would be, but his present costume scarce fitted the 335 presence of a lady. Yet of this he gave no sign. He was leaning back in a morris chair, rakish, debonair, and at his ease. Evidently, he had been giving appreciative ear to the music, and more appreciative eye to the musician.

"So it's you," said Melissy, white to the lips.

MacQueen arose, recovered his dusty hat from the floor, and bowed theatrically. "Your long-lost husband, my dear."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm visiting my wife. The explanation seems a trifle obvious."

"What do you want?"

"Have I said I wanted anything?"

"Then you had better leave. I'll give you up if I get a chance."

He looked at her with lazy derision. "I like you angry. Your eyes snap electricity, sweet."

"Oh!" She gave a gesture of impatience. "Do you know that, if I were to step to that window and call

out your name, the whole town would be in arms against you?"

"Why don't you?"

"I shall, if you don't go."

"Are you alone in the house?"

"Why do you ask?" Her heart was beating fast.

"Because you must hide me till night. Is your father here?"

"Not now. He is hunting you—to kill you if he finds you." 336

"Servants?"

"The cook is out for the afternoon. She will be back in an hour or two."

"Good! Get me food."

She did not rise. "I must know more. What is it? Are they hunting you? What have you done now?" A strong suppressed excitement beat in her pulses.

"It is not what I have done, but what your friends have done. Yesterday I went to exchange West for the ransom money. Most of my men I had to take with me, to guard against foul play. We held the cañon from the flat tops, and everything went all right. The exchange was made. We took the ransom money back to the Cache. I don't know how it was—whether somebody played me false and sold us, or whether your friend Flatray got loose and his posse stumbled in by accident. But there they were in the Cache when we got back."

"Yes?" The keenest agitation was in Melissy's voice.

"They took us by surprise. We fought. Two of my men ran away. Two were shot down. I was alone."

"And then?"

The devil of torment moved in him. "Then I shot up one of your friend's outfit, rode away, changed my mind, and went back, shot your friend, and hiked off into the hills with a pack horse loaded with gold." 337

Out of all this one thing stood out terribly to her. "You shot Jack Flatray—again!"

He laughed. One lie more or less made no difference. "I sure did."

She had to moisten her lips before she could ask the next question: "You—killed him?"

"No—worse luck!"

"How do you know?"

"He and another man were on the trail after me to-day. I saw them pass up Moose Creek from a ledge on which I was lying. If I had had a rifle, I would have finished the job; but my carbine was gone. It was too far for a six-gun."

"But, if you wounded him last night, how could he be trailing you to-day?"

"I reckon it was a flesh wound. His shoulder was tied up, I noticed." Impatiently he waved Flatray out of the conversation. "I didn't come here to tell you about him. I got to get out on tonight's train. This country has grown too hot for me. You're going with me?"

"No!"

"Yes, by God!"

"I'll never go with you—never—never!" she cried passionately. "I'm free of the bargain. You broke

faith. So shall I."

She saw his jaw clamp. "So you're going to throw me down, are you?"

Melissy stood before him, slim and straight, without yielding an inch. She was quite colorless, for 338 he was a man with whose impulses she could not reckon. But one thing she knew. He could never take her away with him and escape. And she knew that he must know it, too.

"If you want to call it that. You tricked me into marrying you. You meant to betray me all the time. Go, while there's still a chance. I don't want your blood on my hands."

It was characteristic of him that he always wanted more what he could not get.

"Don't answer so quick, girl. Listen to me. I've got enough in that sack to start us in the cattle business in Argentina. There's more buried in the hills, if we need it. Girl, I tell you I'm going to run straight from to-day!"

She laughed scornfully. "And in the same breath you tell me how much you have stolen and are taking with you. If you were a Crœsus, I wouldn't go with you." She flamed into sudden, fierce passion. "Will you never understand that I hate and detest you?"

"You think you do, but you don't. You love me—only you won't let yourself believe it."

"There's no arguing with such colossal conceit," she retorted, with hard laughter. "It's no use to tell you that I should like to see you dead at my feet."

Swiftly he slid a revolver from its holster, and presented it to her, butt first. "You can have your

wish right easy, if you mean it. Go to it. There's 339 no danger. All you've got to give out is that I frightened you. You'll be a heroine, too."

She looked at the weapon and at him, and the very thought of it made her sick. She saw the thing almost as if it were already done—the smoking revolver in her hand, and the man lying motionless before her.

"Take it away," she said, with a shudder.

"You see, you can't do it! You can't even go to the window there and shout out that Black MacQueen is with you in the house. You don't hate me at all, my dear."

"Because I won't kill you with my own hand? You reason logically."

"Then why don't you betray my presence? Why don't you call your friends in to take me?"

"I'm not sure that I won't; but if I don't, it will be for their sakes, and not for yours. They could not take you without loss of life."

"You're right there," he agreed, with a flash of his tigerish ferocity. "They couldn't take me alive at all, and I reckon before I checked in a few of them would."

340

CHAPTER XIV

BLACK MACQUEEN CASHES HIS CHECKS

It was part of his supreme audacity to trust her. While he was changing his dusty, travel-stained clothes for some that belonged to her brother she prepared a meal for him downstairs. A dozen times the impulse was on her to fly into the street and call out that Black MacQueen was in the house, but always she restrained herself. He was going to leave the country within a few hours. Better let him go without bloodshed.

He came down to his dinner fresh from a bath and a shave, wearing a new tweed suit, which fitted him a trifle loosely, but was not unbecoming to his trim, lithe figure. No commercial traveler at a familiar hotel could have been more jauntily and blithely at home.

“So you didn’t run away!” He grinned.

“Not yet. I’m going to later. I owe you a meal, and I wanted to pay it first.”

It was his very contempt of fear that had held her. To fool away half an hour in dressing, knowing that it was very likely she might be summoning 341 men to kill him—to come down confident and unperturbed, possibly to meet his death—was such a piece of dare-deviltry as won reluctant admiration, in spite of her detestation of him. Even if she did not give him up, his situation was precarious in the extreme. All the trains were being watched; and in spite of this he had to walk boldly to the station, buy a ticket, and pass himself off for an ordinary traveler.

Both knew that the chances were against him, but he gave no sign of concern or anxiety. Never had

Melissy seen him so full of spirits. The situation would have depressed most men; him it merely stimulated. The excitement of it ran like wine through his blood. Driven from his hills, with every man's hand against him, with the avenues of escape apparently closed, he was in his glory. He would play his cards out to the end, without whining, no matter how the game might go.

Melissy washed the dishes, in order that the cook might not know that she had had a guest for luncheon. The two returned to the living room. It was his whim to have her play for him; and she was glad to comply, because it interfered with his wooing. She was no longer greatly afraid of him, for she knew that he was on his good behavior to win her liking.

Fortune favored her. For some time they had heard the cook moving about in the kitchen. Once she had poked her head in to know whether her 342 young mistress would like the cherry pie for dinner.

"I didn't know yez had company, Miss 'Lissie," she had apologized.

"This gentleman will stay to dinner," Melissy had announced.

At luncheon Melissy had not eaten with him; but at dinner it was necessary, on account of the cook, that she sit down, too. The meal had scarce begun when Kate came beaming in.

"Shure, Miss 'Lissie, there's another young gentleman at the door. It's Mr. Bellamy. I tould him to come right in. He's washing his face first."

Melissy rose, white as a sheet. "All right, Kate."

But as soon as the cook had left the room she turned

to the outlaw. “What shall I do? What shall I do?”

Little whimsical imps of mischief shone in his eyes. “Have him in and introduce him to your husband, my dear.”

“You must go—quick. If I don’t get rid of him, you’ll be able to slip out the back way and get to the depot. He doesn’t know you are here.”

MacQueen sat back and gave her his easy, reckless smile. “Guess again. Bellamy can’t drive me out.”

She caught her hands together. “Oh, go—go! There will be trouble. You wouldn’t kill him before my very eyes!”

“Not unless he makes the first play. It’s up to him.” He laughed with the very delight of it. 343 “I’d as lief settle my account with him right now. He’s meddled too much in my affairs.”

She broke out in a cry of distress: “You wouldn’t! I’ve treated you fair. I could have betrayed you, and I didn’t. Aren’t you going to play square with me?”

He nodded. “All right. Show him in. He won’t know me except as Lieutenant O’Connor. It was too dark last night to see my face.”

Bellamy came into the room.

“How’s Jack?” Melissy asked quickly as she caught his hand.

“Good as new. And you?”

“All right.”

The outlaw stirred uneasily in his seat. His vanity objected to another man holding the limelight while he was present.

Melissy turned. “I think you have never met

Lieutenant O'Connor, Mr. Bellamy. Lieutenant—Mr. Bellamy."

They shook hands. MacQueen smiled. He was enjoying himself.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Bellamy. You and Flatray have won the honors surely. You beat us all to it, sir. As I rode in this mornin', everybody was telling how you rounded up the outlaws. Have you caught MacQueen himself?"

"Not yet. We have reason to believe that he rode within ten miles of town this morning before he cut across to the railroad. The chances are that 344 he will try to board a train at some water tank in the dark. We're having them all watched. I came in to telephone all stations to look out for him."

"Where's Jack?" Melissy asked.

"He'll be here presently. His arm was troubling him some, so he stopped to see the doctor. Then he has to talk with his deputy."

"You're sure he isn't badly hurt?"

"No, only a scratch, he calls it."

"Did you happen on Dead Man's Cache by accident?" asked MacQueen with well-assumed carelessness.

Bellamy had no intention of giving Rosario away to anybody. "You might call it that," he said evenly. "You know, I had been near there once when I was out hunting."

"Do you expect to catch MacQueen?" the outlaw asked, a faint hint of irony in his amused voice.

"I can't tell. That's what I'm hoping, lieutenant."

"We hope for a heap of things we never get,"

returned the outlaw, in a gentle voice, his eyes half shuttered behind drooping lids.

Melissy cut into the conversation hurriedly. “Lieutenant O’Connor is going on the seven-five this evening, Mr. Bellamy. He has business that will take him away for a while. It is time we were going. Won’t you walk down to the train with us?”

MacQueen swore softly under his breath, but there was nothing he could say in protest. He knew he could not take the girl with him. Now he had 345 been cheated out of his good-byes by her woman’s wit in dragging Bellamy to the depot with them. He could not but admire the adroitness with which she had utilized her friend to serve her end.

They walked to the station three abreast, the outlaw carrying as lightly as he could the heavy suitcase that held his plunder. Melissy made small talk while they waited for the train. She was very nervous, and she was trying not to show it.

“Next time you come, lieutenant, we’ll have a fine stone depot to show you. Mr. West has promised to make Mesa the junction point, and we’re sure to have a boom,” she said.

A young Mexican vaquero trailed softly behind them, the inevitable cigarette between his lips. From under his broad, silver-laced sombrero he looked keenly at each of the three as he passed.

A whistle sounded clearly in the distance.

The outlaw turned to the girl beside him. “I’m coming back some day soon. Be sure of that, Mrs. MacQueen.”

The audacity of the name used, designed as it was to stab her friend and to remind Melissy how things

stood, made the girl gasp. She looked quickly at Bellamy and saw him crush the anger from his face.

The train drew into the station. Presently the conductor's "All aboard!" served notice that it was starting. The outlaw shook hands with Melissy and then with the mine owner. 346

"Good-bye. Don't forget that I'm coming back," he said, in a perfectly distinct, low tone.

And with that he swung aboard the Pullman car with his heavy suitcase. An instant later the Mexican vaquero pulled himself to the vestibule of the smoking car ahead.

MacQueen looked back from the end of the train at the two figures on the platform. A third figure had joined them. It was Jack Flatray. The girl and the sheriff were looking at each other. With a furious oath, he turned on his heel. For the evidence of his eyes had told him that they were lovers.

MacQueen passed into the coach and flung himself down into his section discontentedly. The savor of his adventure was gone. He had made his escape with a large share of the plunder, in spite of spies and posses. But in his heart he knew that he had lost forever the girl whom he had forced to marry him. He was still thinking about it somberly when a figure appeared in the aisle at the end of the car.

Instantly the outlaw came to alert attention, and his hand slipped to the butt of a revolver. The figure was that of the Mexican vaquero whom he had carelessly noted on the platform of the station. Vigilantly his gaze covered the approaching man. Surely in Arizona there were not two men with that elastic tread or that lithe, supple figure.

His revolver flashed in the air. “Stand back, Bucky O’Connor—or, by God, I’ll drill you!” 347

The vaquero smiled. “Right guess, Black MacQueen. I arrest you in the name of the law.”

Black’s revolver spat flame twice before the ranger’s gun got into action, but the swaying of the train caused him to stagger as he rose to his feet.

The first shot of Bucky’s revolver went through the heart of the outlaw; but so relentless was the man that, even after that, his twitching fingers emptied the revolver. O’Connor fired only once. He watched his opponent crumple up, fling wild shots into the upholstery and through the roof, and sink into the silence from which there is no awakening on this side of the grave. Then he went forward and looked down at him.

“I reckon that ends Black MacQueen,” he said quietly. “And I reckon Melissy Lee is a widow.”

Jack Flatray had met O’Connor at his own office and the two had come down to the station on the off chance that MacQueen might try to make his getaway from Mesa in some disguise. But as soon as he saw Melissy the sheriff had eyes for nobody else except the girl he loved. One sleeve of his coat was empty, and his shoulder was bandaged. He looked very tired and drawn; for he had ridden hard more than sixteen hours with a painful wound. But the moment his gaze met hers she knew that his thoughts were all for her and her trouble.

His free hand went out to meet hers. She forgot 348 MacQueen and all the sorrow he had brought her. Her eyes were dewy with love and his answered eagerly. She knew now that she would love Jack

Flatray for better or worse until death should part them. But she knew, too, that the shadow of MacQueen, her husband by law, was between them.

Together they walked back from the depot. In the shadow of the vines on her father's porch they stopped. Jack caught her hands in his and looked down into her tired, haggard face all lit with love. Tears were in the eyes of both.

"You're entitled to the truth, Jack," she told him. "I love you. I think I always have. And I know I always shall. But I'm another man's wife. It will have to be good-bye between us, Jack," she told him wistfully.

He took her in his arms and kissed her. "You're my sweetheart. I'll not give you up. Don't think it."

He spoke with such strength, such assurance, that she knew he would not yield without a struggle.

"I'll never be anything to him—never. But he stands between us. Don't you see he does?"

"No. Your marriage to him is empty words. We'll have it annulled. It will not stand in any court. I've won you and I'm going to keep you. There's no two ways about that."

She broke down and began to sob quietly in a heartbroken fashion, while he tried to comfort her. 349 It was not so easy as he thought. So long as MacQueen lived Flatray would walk in danger if she did as he wanted her to do.

Neither of them knew that Bucky O'Connor's bullet had already annulled the marriage, that happiness was already on the wing to them.

This hour was to be for their grief, the next for their joy.

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