

A Romance of Arizona

John Murray and Mills Miller

A Project Gutenberg Etext of The Round-Up: A Romance of Arizona
by John Murray and Mills Miller

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by John Murray and Mills Miller

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THE ROUND-UP

A Romance of Arizona
Novelized from Edmund Day's Melodrama
by John Murray and Mills Miller

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THE ROUND-UP

CHAPTER I

The Cactus Cross

Down an old trail in the Ghost Range in northwestern Mexico, just across the Arizona border, a mounted prospector wound his way, his horse carefully picking its steps among the broken granite blocks which had tumbled upon the ancient path from the mountain wall above. A burro followed, laden heavily with pack, bed-roll, pick, frying-pan, and battered coffee-pot, yet stepping along sure-footedly as the mountain-sheep that first formed the trail ages ago, and whose petrified hoof-prints still remain to afford footing for the scarcely larger hoofs of the pack-animal.

An awful stillness hung over the scene, that was broken only by the click of hoofs of horse and burro upon the rocks, and the clatter of the loose stones they dislodged that rolled and skipped down the side. Not a breath of air was stirring, and the sun blazed down from the zenith with such fierce and direct radiation that the wayfarer needed not to observe the shadows to note its exact position in the heavens. Singly among the broken blocks, and in banks along the ledges, the cactus had burst under the heat, as it were, into the spontaneous combustion of flowery flame. To the traveler passing beside them their red blooms blazed with the irritating superfluity of a torch-light procession at noonday.

The trail leads down to a flat ledge which overlooks the desert, and which is the observatory whither countless generations of mountain-sheep have been wont to resort to survey the strange world beneath them--with what purpose and what feelings, it remains for some imaginative writer of animal-stories to inform us. From the ledge to the valley below the trail is free from obstructions, and broader, more beaten, and less devious than above, indicating that it has been formed by the generations of men toiling up from the valley to the natural watch-tower on the heights. Reaching the ledge, the prospector found that what seemed from the angle above to be an irregular pile of large boulders was an artificial fortification, the highest wall being toward the mountains. Entering the enclosure the prospector dismounted, relieved his horse of its saddle and his burro of its pack, and proceeded to prepare his midday meal. Looking for the best place where he might light a fire, he observed, in the most

protected corner, a flat stone, marked by fire, and near it, in the rocky ground, a pot-hole, evidently formed for grinding maize. The ashes of ancient fires were scattered about, and in cleaning them off his new-found hearth the man discovered a potsherd, apparently of a native olla or water-jar, and a chipped fragment of flint, too small to indicate whether it had formed part of an Indian arrowhead or had dropped from an old flintlock musket.

"Lucky strike!" observed the prospector. "I was down to my last match." And, gathering some mesquit brush for fuel, and rubbing a dead branch into tinder, he drew out a knife and, rapidly and repeatedly striking the back of its blade with the flint, produced a stream of sparks, which fell on the tinder. Blowing the while, he started a flame. When the fire was ready the man shook his canteen. "Precious little drink left," he said. "I wish that potsherd carried water as the flint-chip does fire. However, there's lots of cactus around here, and they're natural water-jars. My knife may get me a drink out of the desert's thorns, as well as kindle a fire from its stones. And right here's my watermelon, the bisnaga, the first one I've found in months," he exclaimed, going over to the edge of the cliff, above the level of which peered the fat head of a cactus covered with spines that were barbed like a fish-hook. Its short tap-root was fixed in a crevice a few feet below the parapet. Lying on the edge of the cliff, the man sliced off the top of the cactus, and began jabbing into its interior, breaking down the fibrous walls of the water-cells, of which the top-heavy plant is almost entirely composed. In a few moments he arose.

"Now I can empty my canteen in the coffee-pot, sure of a fresh supply of water by the time I am ready to mosey along."

He filled the pot, set it on the fire, and then pressed the uncorked and empty canteen down into the macerated interior of the bisnaga.

While his coffee was boiling, the prospector continued his examination of the fortification, beginning, in the manner of his kind, with the more minute "signs," and ending with what, to a tourist, would have been the first and only subject of observation--the view. On the inner side of the large boulder in the wall he discerned, the faint outline of a cross, painted with red ochre.

Scraping with his pick beneath the rock, to see if the emblem was the sign of hidden treasure or relic, he unearthed a rattlesnake.

Before it could strike, with a quick fling of his tool he sent the reptile whirling high in the air toward the precipice. But from the clump of cactus growth along the parapet arose a sahuaro, with branching arms, and against this the snake was flung. Wrapped around the thorny top by the momentum of the cast, it hung, hissing and rattling with pain and hatred.

The prospector looked up at the impaled rattlesnake with a smile.

Reminiscences of Sunday-school flashed across his mind.

"Gee, I'm a regular Moses," he ejaculated. "First I bring water from the face of the rock, and then I lift up the serpent in the wilderness. The year I've spent in the mountains and desert seem like forty to me, and now,, at last, I have a sight of the Promised Land. God, what a magnificent view!"

Dropping his pick, he stretched out his arms with instinctive symbolization of the wide prospect, and expression of an exile's yearning for his native land.

"Over there is God's country, sure enough," he continued, giving the trite phrase a reverential tone, which he had not used in his first expression of the name of Deity. "Thank Him, the parallel with old Moses stops right here. Many a time I thought I would never get out of the mountains alive, and that my grave would be unmarked by so much as a boulder with a red cross upon it. But now, before night, I'll be back in States, and in three more days at home on the ranch. I promised to return in a year, and I'll make good to the hour. I sure did hate to leave that strike, though, after all the hard luck I had been having. Sixty dollars a day, and growing richer. But the last horn was blowing. No tobacco, six matches, and nothing left of the bacon but rinds. Well, the gold is there and the claim'll bring whatever I choose to ask for it. And Echo shall have a home as good as Allen Hacienda, and a ranch as fine as Bar One--yes, by God, it'll be Bar None, my ranch!"

Out of the sea of molten air that stretched before him, that nebulous chaos of quivering bars and belts of heated atmosphere which remains above the desert as a memorial of the first stage of the entire planet's existence, the imagination of the prospector created a paradise of his own. There took shape before his eyes a Mexican hacienda, larger and more beautiful even than that of Echo's father, the beau-ideal of a home to his limited fancy. And on the piazza in front, covered with flowering vines, there stood awaiting him the slender figure of a woman, with outstretched arms and dark eyes, tender with yearning love.

"Echo--Echo Allen!" he murmured, fondly repeating the name. "No, not Echo Allen, but Echo Lane, for Dick Lane has redeemed his promise, and returns to claim you as his own."

As he gazed upon the shimmering heat waves which distorted and displaced the objects within and beneath them, a group of horsemen suddenly appeared to him in the distance, and as suddenly vanished in thin air.

"Rurales!" ejaculated Lane. "I wonder if they are chasing Apaches? That infernal mirage gives you no idea of distance or direction. If the red devils have got away from Crook and slipped by these Greaser rangers over the border, they'll sure be making straight for the Ghost Range, and by this very trail. If so, I'm at the best place on it to meet them, and here I stay till the coast is clear." Turning to the red cross on the rock,

he reflected: "Perhaps, after all, it's a case of 'Nebo's lonely mountain.'"

Lane had hardly reached this conclusion before he found it justified by the sight of a mounted Apache in the regalia of war emerging from a hidden dip in the trail below the fortification. Lane dropped behind the parapet, evidently before he was observed, as the steadily increasing number and loudness of the hoof-beats on the rocky trail indicated to the listener.

Crawling back to his horse and burro, he made them lie down against the upper wall, and picketed them with short lengths of rope to the ground, for he foresaw that danger could come only from the mountainside. Taking his Winchester, he returned to the parapet, and, half-seated, half-reclining behind it, opened fire on the unsuspecting Apaches. The leader, shot through the head, fell from his horse, which reared and backed wildly down the trail. Other bullets must have found their billets also, but, because of the confusion which ensued among the Indians, the prospector was unable to tell how many of them he had put out of action. In a flash every rider had leaped off his horse, and, protecting himself by its body, was scrambling with his mount to the protecting declivity in the rear. The prospector was sorely tempted to pump his cartridges into the group as it poured back over the rim of the hollow, but he desisted from the useless slaughter of horses alone, knowing that he could be attacked only on foot, and that every one of his slender store of cartridges must find a human mark if he would return to the States alive. "They've got to put me out of business before they can go on," he ruminated. "An Apache is a good deal of a coward when he's fighting for pleasure, but just corner him, and, great snakes and spittin' wildcats, what a game he does put up! I must save my cartridges; for one thing's sure, they won't waste any of theirs.

They're not as good shots as white men, for ammunition is too scarce with them for use in gun practise; so they won't fire till they've got me dead to rights. Let me see; there's about a dozen left in the party, and I have fifteen cartridges--that's three in reserve for my own outfit, if some of the others fail to get their men. Those red devils enjoy skinning an animal alive as much as torturing a man, and you can bet they won't save me any bullets by shooting Nance and Jinny."

Reasoning that the Indians would not dare to attack by way of the open trail in front, and that it would take some time for them to make the detour necessary to approach him from above, since they would have to leave their ponies below and climb on hands and knees over jutting ledges and around broken granite blocks, Lane coolly proceeded to drink his coffee, and eat his lunch of hard bread and cold bacon-rind. After he had finished, he gave a lump of sugar to each of his animals, and pressed his cheek with an affectionate hug against the side of his horse's head.

"Old girl," he said. "I'm sorry we can't take a parting drink, for I'm afraid neither of us will reach our next water-hole. But you can count on me that the red devils won't get you."

Then, going to his pack, he undid it, and took out a double handful of yellow nuggets and a number of canvas bags. These he deposited in the pot-hole, and, prying up the flat stone of the fireplace, laid it over them, and covered the stone with embers.

"It's a ten to one shot that they finish me," he reflected; "but the wages I've paid for by a year of hard work and absence from her side, stay just as near Echo Allen as I can bring them alive, and, if there's any truth in what they say about spirits disclosing in dreams the place of buried treasure, with the chance of my getting them to her after I am dead."

Taking the useless boulders from the edge of the cliff, but carefully, so as not to expose himself to the fire of the Apaches, he piled them on top of the upper wall in such a fashion as to form little turrets. He left an opening in each, through which he could observe, in turn, each point of the compass whence danger might be expected, and could fire his Winchester without exposing himself. Then he began going from post to post on a continuous round of self-imposed sentinel duty. "If I could only climb the sahuaro," he thought, "and fly my red shirt as a flag, to let the Rurales know I've flanked the enemy, it might hurry them along in time to put a crimp in these devils before they get me. But it'll have to be 'Hold the Fort' without any 'Oh, Say Can You See?' business. Anyhow, I'm flying the rattlesnake flag of Bunker Hill, 'Don't Tread on Me!' Whether the Rurales see it or not, I've saved their hides. If the Apaches had got to this fort first, gee, how they would have crumpled up the Greasers as they came along the trail!"

Rendered thirsty by his exertions, Lane remembered the canteen in the bisnaga, which he had forgotten among his other preparations for defense. He cautiously reached his hand over the ledge, and secured the precious vessel, but, as he was withdrawing it, PING! came a bullet through the canteen, knocking it out of his hand. As it fell clattering down the side of the ledge, he groaned: "Damned good shooting,! They've probably left their best marksman below with the ponies. No hope for escape on that side.

Well, there's some consolation in the thought that they'll undoubtedly finish me before I get too damned thirsty. Glad it wasn't my hand."

Although the period he spent waiting for the attack was less than an hour by his watch, it seemed to last so long that he had hopes that the Rurales would appear in time to rescue him. His spirits rose with the prospect. Looking about him at the walls, the fireplace, and the red cross, he reflected: "I am not the first man, or even the first white man, that has withstood an attack in this place." In imagination he constructed the history of the fort. Here, in ages remote, a tribe of Indians, defeated and driven to the mountains had constructed an outpost against their enemies of the plain, but these had captured the stronghold, and fortified it against its former occupants. Later, a band of Spanish gold-seekers had made a stand here against natives whom they had roused against them by oppression. Or, perhaps, as indicated by the cross, it had afforded refuge to the Mission

Fathers, those heroic souls who had faced the horrors of the infernolike desert in their saintly efforts to convert its fiendish inhabitants.

With the symbol of Christianity in his mind, Lane turned toward the giant cactus, which he had heretofore regarded chiefly in the aspect of a flagpole, and saw in its columnar trunk and opposing branches a distinct resemblance to a cross. The plant was dead, and dry as punk. Suddenly there flashed into his mind a hideous suggestion. More cruel than even the Romans, the inventors of crucifixion, the Apaches are wont to bind their captives to these dead cacti, which supply at once scourging thorns, binding stake, and consuming fuel, and, kindling a fire at the top, leave it to burn slowly down to the victim, and, long before it despatches him, to twist his body and limbs into what appear to the Apache sense of humor to be exquisitely ludicrous contortions.

With his mind occupied by these horrible apprehensions, Lane looked at the rattlesnake upon the sahuaro whose struggles by this time had diminished to a movement of the tail.

"Poor old rattler," he thought. "I wish I could spare a cartridge to put you out of your misery."

At length, as Lane peered up the mountainside, he saw a bush on a ledge a little to the left of the trail quiver, as if stirred by a passing breath of wind. He aimed his Winchester through a crack in the wall at the spot, and when a moment later an Apache rose up from the ground and leaped toward the shelter of a rock below, Lane fired, and the savage fell crumpling. Like an echo of the explosion a rifle on the right spoke, and a bullet struck the rock by Lane's head. He marked the spot whence the shot came, and quickly ran to another part of the wall. From here he saw the edge of an Indian's thigh exposed by the side of the boulder he had noted. CRACK! went Lane's Winchester; the leg was suddenly withdrawn, and at the same moment a head appeared on the other side of the rock, as if the Indian had stretched himself involuntarily. CRACK! again, and Lane had got his man.

"Two shots to an Indian is expensive," thought the prospector, "otherwise this game of tip-jack would be very interesting."

There was a cry in the Apache tongue, and suddenly nine half-naked bodies arose from behind rocks and bushes extending in an irregular crescent above the fort, and rushed forward ten, fifteen, and even twenty, yards to the next cover. Lane did not count number or distance at the time, but he figured these out in his next period of waiting from the photograph flashed on his subconscious mind. At the time of the rush he was otherwise occupied. CRACK! CRACK! and two of the Indians fell dead in mid-career. CRACK! and a third crawled, wounded, to the cover he had almost safely attained. CRACK! and an eagle-feather in the head of the fourth Indian shot at was cut off at the stem, and fell forward on the rock behind which its wearer had dropped just in time to save his life. There was an answering volley from the rifles of the remaining Apaches, which was directed against the lookout of loose stones from which the prospector's fire had

come. One of the bullets penetrated the opening and plowed a furrow through Lane's scalp, toppling him to his knees. He scrambled quickly to his feet, and, hastily pressing his long hair back from his forehead, to stanch the bleeding wound, sought the protection the middle lookout. He congratulated himself.

"Lucky for me they didn't follow the first rush immediately with a second. Now I know to wait for their signal. Six, and possibly seven of them, are left, and they will storm my works in two more attempts. Here they come!"

The call again sounded. Six Apaches leaped forward, and from the rock that concealed the wounded warrior, a shot rang out in advance of the first discharge from Lane's Winchester. The Indian's bullet scored the top of the turret, and filled the eyes of the man behind it with powdered stone. The prospector, already dazed by his wound, fired wildly, and missed his mark. Quickly recovering himself, he fired again and again, severely wounding two Apaches. These lay clawing the ground within twenty yards of the wall. The four remaining Indians were safely concealed at the same distance, protected no less by the fortification than by the loose boulders behind which they crouched for the final spring. Lane realized the fact that his next shots, to be effective, must be at a downward angle, and to fire them he must expose himself.

"This is my finish," he thought to himself. "Better be killed instantly than tortured. I hope all four will hit me. Good-by, Jinny"--CRACK! went his rifle. "Good-by, Nance"--CRACK! again.

At the two shots, surmising that the prospector had shot himself and his horse, the Apaches did not wait for the signal, but sprang forward and climbed upon the wall before Lane had had time to mount it. Two of them he shot as they leaped down within the enclosure. As he reversed his Winchester to kill himself with the last cartridge, he noted that the two remaining Apaches had dropped their rifles and were leaping upon him to take him alive.

He brought his clubbed weapon down upon the head of one of them, crushing his skull. At the same instant Lane was borne to the ground by the other Apache, who, seizing him by the throat, began throttling him into insensibility. In desperation, Lane bethought himself of the cliff, and, by a mighty effort, whirled over upon his captor toward the precipice. The ground sloped slightly in that direction, and the combatants rolled over and over to the very edge of the cliff, where the Indian, for the first time realizing that the prospector's purpose was to hurl both of them to destruction, loosened his hold upon the prospector's throat that he might use his hands to brace himself against the otherwise inevitable plunge into the valley below. In an instant Lane's hands were at the Indian's throat, and in another turn he was uppermost, and kneeling upon his foe at the very verge of the precipice.

Both combatants were now thoroughly exhausted. Lane concentrated all his remaining strength in throttling the savage. But, just as the tense form beneath him grew lax with evident

unconsciousness, and head fell limply back, extending over the edge of cliff, his own head was jerked violently backward by a noose cast around his lacerated neck.

When Lane recovered consciousness he found himself lying on his back, bound hand and foot by a lariat, and looking up into a grinning face that he recognized.

"Buck McKee!" he gasped. "This is certainly white of you considering the circumstances of our last meeting. Did you come with the Rurales?"

"Hell, no! I come ahead of 'em. In fact, Dick Lane, you air jist a leetle bit off in your idees about which party I belong to. When you damned me fer a thievin' half-breed, and run me off the range, an' tole me to go to the Injun's, whar I belonged, I tuk yer advice. I'm what you might call the rear-guard of the outfit you've jist been havin' your shootin'-match with. Or I was the rear-guard, for you've wiped out the whole dam' battalion, so fur as I can see. Served 'em right fur detailin' me, the only decent shooter in the bunch, to watch the horses. I got one shot in as it wuz. Well, as the last of the outfit, I own a string of ten ponies. All I need now to set up in business is to have some prospector who hain't long to live, leave me his little pile uv dust an' nuggets, an' the claims he's located back in the mountains. You look a leetle mite like the man. It'll save vallible time if you make yer dear friend, Buck McKee, administrater uv yer estate without too much persuadin'. You had some objection oncet to my slittin' a calf's tongue. Well, you needn't be scared just yet. That's the last thing I'll do to you. Come, where's your cache? I know you've got one hereabouts, fer I foun' signs of the dust in your pack."

Lane set his teeth in a firm resolutions not to say a word. The taunts of his captor were harder to bear in silence than the prospects of torture.

"Stubborn, hey? Well, we'll try a little 'Pache persuadin'." And the renegade dragged his helpless captive up to the thorny sahuaro, and bound his back against it with the dead horse's bridle. McKee searched through Lane's pockets until he found a match.

"Last one, hey? Kinder 'propriate. Las' drink from the old canteen, las' ca'tridge, last look at the scenery, and las' will an' testyment. Oh, time's precious, but I'll spare you enough to map out in yer mind jes' where them claims is located. The Rurales won't be along fer an hour yet, if they hain't turned back after our other party."

McKee pulled off Lane's boots. "It 'ain't decent fer a man to die with 'em on," he said. He then kindled a fire on the stone, beneath which, if he but knew it, lay the treasure he sought. He returned with a burning brand to the captive. For the first time he observed the snake impaled on the sahuaro, writhing but feebly. "Hullo, ole rattler," he exclaimed; "here's somethin' to stir you up;" and he tossed the brand upon the top of the cactus.

Taking another burning stick from the fire, he applied it to the soles of his victim's feet. Lane writhed and groaned under the excruciating torture, but uttered no word or cry. McKee brought other brands, and began piling them about his captive's feet.

In the meantime the sahuaro had caught fire at the top, and was burning down through the interior. A thin column of smoke rose straight above it in the still air. The Rurales in the valley below, who had reached the beginning of the ascending trail, and were on the point of giving up the pursuit, saw the smoke, and, inferred that the Apaches, either through overconfidence or because of their superstitious fear of the mountains, which they supposed inhabited by spirits, had camped on the edge of the valley, and were signaling to their other party. Accordingly the Mexicans renewed the chase with increased vigor.

As McKee bent over his captive's feet, piling against them the burning ends of the sticks, the rattlesnake on the sahuaro, incited by the fire above, struggled free from the impaling thorns by a desperate effort, and dropped on the back of the half-breed. It struck its fangs into his neck. McKee, springing up with an energy that scattered the sticks he was piling, tore the reptile loose, hurled it upon the ground, and stamped it into the earth. Then he picked up one of the brands and with it cauterized the wound. All the while he was cursing volubly--the snake, himself, and even Dick Lane, who was now lying in a dead faint caused by the torture.

"Damn such a prospector! Not a drop of whisky in his outfit! I'd slit his tongue fer him if he wasn't already done fer. I must keep movin'--movin', or I'm a dead man. I must hustle along to the mountains, leadin' my horse. Up there I'll find yarbs to cure snake-bite that my Cherokee grandmother showed me. The Rurales will have to get the other ponies but some day I'll come back after Lane's cache."

A half-hour later the Mexican guards appeared upon the scene, and unbound Lane's unconscious form from the sahuaro, which the fire had consumed to a foot of his bowed head. They deluged his face and back, and bathed his tortured feet with the contents of their canteens, and brought him back to life, but, alas! not to reason.

Six months later there limped out of Chihuahua hospital a discharged patient, wry-necked, crook-backed, with drawn features, and hair and beard streaked with gray. It was Dick Lane, restored to old physical strength, so far as the distortion of his spine, caused by his torture, permitted, and to the full possession of his mental faculties. He mounted one of the captured ponies, and rode off with the proceeds of the sales of the others in his pocket, to purchase provisions for a return to his prospecting.

Before plunging into the wilderness he wrote a letter:

Chihuahua, Mexico

"Mr. John Payson,
"Sweetwater Ranch,
"Florence, Arizona Territory, U.S.A.

"Dear Jack: I have been sick and out of my head in the hospital here for the last six months. Just about the time you all were expecting me home, I had a run in with the Apaches. And who do you think was with them? Buck McKee, the half-breed that I ran off the range two years ago for tongue-slitting. After I had done for all the rest, he got me, and--well, the story's too long to write. I rather think McKee has made off with the gold I had cached just before the fight. I'm going back to see, and if he did, I'll hustle around to find a buyer for one of my claims. I don't want to sell my big mine, Jack. I tell you I struck it rich!--but that story can wait till I get back. Your loan can't, though, so expect to receive \$3,000 by express some time before I put in an appearance. I hope you got the mortgage renewed at the end of the year. If my failure to show up then has caused you trouble, you'll forgive me, old fellow, I know, under the circumstances. I'll make it up to you. I owe you everything. You're the best friend a man ever had. That's why I'm writing to you instead of to Uncle Jim, for I want you to do me another friendly service. Just break it gently to Echo Allen that I'm alive and well though pretty badly damaged by that renegade McKee and tell her that it wasn't my fault I wasn't home the day I promised. She'll forgive me, I know, and be patient a while longer. It's all for her sake I'm staying away. Give her the letter I enclose.

"Your old bunkie,
Dick Lane"

CHAPTER II The Heart of a Girl

Jim Allen was the sole owner and proprietor of Allen Hacienda. His ranch, the Bar One, stretched for miles up and down the Sweetwater Valley. Bounded on the east and west by the foot-hills, the tract was one of the garden spots of Arizona. Southward lay the Sweetwater Ranch, owned by Jack Payson. Northward was the home ranch of the Lazy K, an Ishmaelitish outfit, ever at petty war with the other settlers in the district. It was a miscellaneous and constantly changing crowd, recruited from rustlers from Wyoming, gamblers from California, half-breed outlaws from the Indian Territory; in short, "bad men" from every section of the Western country. They had a special grudge against Allen and Payson, whom they held to be accountable for the sudden disappearance, about a year before, of their leader, Buck McKee, a half-breed from the Cherokee Strip. However, no other leader had arisen equal to that masterful spirit, and their enmity expressed itself only in such petty depredations as changing brands on stray cattle from the Bar One and Sweetwater Ranches, and the slitting of the tongues of young calves, so that would be unable to feed properly, and, as a result, be disowned by their mothers, whereupon the Lazy K outfit would slap its brand on them as mavericks.

Allen was a Kentuckian who had served in the Confederate Army as

one of Morgan's raiders, and so had received, by popular brevet, the title of colonel. At the close of the war he had come to Arizona with his young wife, Josephine, and had founded a home on the Sweetwater. He was now one of the cattle barons of the great Southwest. Prosperity had not spoiled him. Careless in his attire, cordial in his manner, he was a man who was loved and respected by his men, from the newest tenderfoot to the veteran of the bunkhouse. His wife, however, was not so highly regarded, for she had never been able to recognize changes in time or location and so was in perpetual conflict with her environment. She attempted to make the free and independent cowboys of the Arizona plains "stand around" like the house servants of the Kentucky Bluegrass; and she persisted in the effort to manage her husband by the feminine artifice of weeping. In days of her youth and beauty this had been very effective, but now that these had passed, it was productive only of good-humored raillery from him, and mirth from the bystanders.

"No wonder Jim has the finest ranch in Arizony," the cowboys were wont to say, "with Josephine a irrigatin' it all the time."

Allen Hacienda was certainly a garden spot in that desert country. The building was of the old Mexican style, an architecture found, by centuries of experience, to be suited best to the climate and the materials of the land. The house was only one story in height. The rooms and outbuildings sprawled over a wide expanse of ground. The walls were of native stone and adobe clay; over them clambered grape-vines. In front of the home Mrs. Allen had planted a garden. A 'dobe wall cut off the house from the corral and the bunk-house. A heavy girder spanned the distance from the low roof to the top of the barrier. Latticework, supporting a grape-vine, formed, with a girder, a gateway through which one could catch from the piazza a view of a second cultivated plot. Palms and flowering cacti added color and life to the near prospect. Through the arbor a glimpse of the Tortilla Mountains, forty miles away, held the eye. The Sweetwater, its path across the plains outlined by the trees fringing its banks, flowed past the ranch. Yucca palms and sahuaroes threw a scanty shade over the garden.

Shortly after the arrival of the Allens in Arizona they were blessed with a daughter, the first white child born in that region. They waited for a Protestant clergyman to come along before christening her, and, as such visits were few and far between, the child was beginning to talk before she received a name. From a "cunning" habit she had of repeating last words of questions put to her, her father provisionally dubbed her Echo, which name, when the preacher came, he insisted upon her retaining.

As Echo grew older, in order that she might have a companion, Colonel Allen went to Kentucky and brought back with him a little orphan girl, who was a distant relative of his wife. Polly Hope her name was, and Polly Hope she insisted on remaining, though the Allens would gladly have adopted her.

Colonel Allen trained the girls in all the craft of the plains,

just as if they were boys. He taught them to ride astride, to shoot, to rope cattle. They accompanied him everywhere he went, cantering on broncos by the side of his Kentucky thoroughbred. Merry, dark-eyed, black-haired Echo always rode upon the off side, and saucy Polly, with golden curls, blue eyes, and tip-tilted nose, upon the near. The ex-Confederate soldier dubbed them, in military style, his "right and left wings." As the three would "make a raid" upon Florence, the county town, the inhabitants did not need to look out of doors to ascertain who were coming, for the merriment of the little girls gave sufficient indication. "Here comes Jim Allen ridin' like the destroyin' angel," said young Sheriff Hoover, on one of these occasions, "I know him by the rustlin' of his 'wings.'"

The household was again increased a few years later by the generous response of the Allens to an appeal from a Children's Aid Society in an Eastern city to give a home to two orphaned brothers, Richard and Henry Lane. "Dick" and "Buddy" (shortened in time to Bud), as they were called, being taken young, quickly adapted themselves to their new environment, and by the time they arrived at manhood had proved themselves the equals of any cowboy on the range in horsemanship and kindred accomplishments. Dick, the elder brother, was a steady, reliable fellow, modest as he was brave, and remarkably quick-witted and resourceful in emergencies. He gave his confidence over readily to his fellows, but if he ever found himself deceived, withdrew it absolutely. It was probably this last characteristic that attracted to him Echo Allen's especial regard, for it was also her distinguishing trait. "You have got to act square with Echo," her father was wont to say, "for if you don't you'll never make it square with her afterward."

Bud was a generous-hearted, impetuous boy, who responded warmly to affection. He repaid his elder brother's protecting care with a loyalty that knew no bounds. The Colonel, who was a strict disciplinarian, frequently punished him in his boyhood for wayward acts, and the little fellow made no resistance--only sobbed in deep penitence. Once, however, when Uncle Jim, as the boys and Polly called him, felt compelled to apply to rod to Dick-- unjustly, as it afterward appeared--Bud burst into a tempest of passionate tears, and, leaping upon the Colonel's back, clung there clawing and striking like a wildcat until Allen was forced to let Dick go. It is shrewdly indicative of the Colonel's character that not only did he refrain from punishing Bud on that occasion, but, when floggings were subsequently due the little fellow, laid on the rod less heavily out of regard for the loyalty to his brother he had then displayed.

This attack also won the admiration of Polly Hope, who was something of a spitfire herself. A little jealous of Dick for the chief place he held in Bud's affection, she openly claimed the younger brother as her sweetheart, and attempted to constitute him her knight--though with repeated discouragements, for Bud was a bashful lad, and, though he had a true affection for the girl, boylike concealed it by a show of indifference.

The tender relations of these boys and girls persisted naturally

into young manhood and womanhood. No word of love passed between Dick and Echo until that time when the "nesting impulse," the desire to have a home of his own, prompted the young man to go out into the world and win his fortune. For a year he had acted as foreman of the Allen ranch, working in neighborly cooperation with Jack Payson, of Sweetwater Ranch, a man of about his own age. The two young men became the closest of comrades. When the fever of adventure seized upon Lane, and he became dissatisfied with the plodding career of a wage-earner, Payson insisted on mortgaging Sweetwater Ranch for three thousand dollars and in lending Dick the money for a year's prospecting in the mountains of Sonora, Mexico, in search of a fabulous rich "Lost Mine of the Aztecs."

Traditions of lost mines are plentiful in Arizona and northern Mexico. First taken up by the Spanish invaders of three hundred years ago from the native Indians, they have been passed down to each subsequent influx of white men. The directions are always vague. The inquirer cannot pin his informant down to any definite data. Over the mountains always lies the road. Hundreds of lives have been sacrificed, and cruelty unparalleled practised upon innocent men women, and children, by gold-seekers in their lust for conquest. Prosperous Indian villages have been laid waste, and whole bands of adventurers have gone into the desert in the search of these mines, never to return.

When the time for Lane's departure came Echo wept at the thought of losing for so long a time the close companion of her childhood and the sympathetic confidant of her youthful thoughts and aspirations. Dick, in whom friendship for Echo had long before ripened into conscious love, took her tears as evidence that she was similarly affected toward him, and he allowed all the suppressed passion of his nature full vent in a declaration of love. The girl was deeply moved by this revelation of the heart of a strong man made tender as a woman's by a power centering in her own humble self, and, being utterly without experience of the emotion even in its protective form of calf-love, which is the varioloid of the genuine infection, she imagined through sheer sympathy that she shared his passion. So she assented with maidenly reserve to his plea that she promise to marry him when he should return and provide a home for her. Her more cautious mother secured a modification of this pledge by limiting the time that Echo should wait for him to one year. If at the expiration of that period Lane did not return to claim her promise, or did not write making satisfactory arrangements for continuance of the engagement, Echo was to be considered free to marry whom she chose.

Soon after Lane's departure Mrs. Allen persuaded the Colonel to send Echo east to a New England finishing-school for girls, where her mother hoped that her budding love for Lane might be nipped in the frigid atmosphere of intellectual culture, if not, indeed, supplanted by a saving interest in young men in general, and, perhaps, in some particular scion of a blue-blooded Boston family.

The plan succeeded in part only. The companionship of her

schoolfellows, her music and art-lessons, her books (during the limited periods allotted to serious study and reading), and, above all, her attrition at receptions with another order of men than that she had known in the rough, uncultured West, occupied her mind so fully that poor Dick Lane, who was putting a thought of Echo Allen in every blow of his pick, received only the scraps of her attention.

Dick had few opportunities to mail a letter, and none of them for receiving one. Unpractised in writing, his epistolary compositions were crude in the extreme, being wholly confined to bald statements of fact. Had he been as tender on paper as he was in his words and accents when he kissed away her tears at parting, her regard for him would have had fuel to feed on and might have kindled into genuine love. As it was, she was forced to admit that, in comparison, with the brilliant university men with whom she conversed, Dick Lane, intellectually, was as quartz to diamond.

On the other hand, she contrasted Dick in the essential point of manliness most favorably with the male butterflies of society that hovered around her. What one of them was so essentially chivalrous as the Western man; so modest, so self-sacrificing, so brave and resolute and resourceful? Dick Lane, or Jack Payson, for that matter, in all save the adventitious points of education and culture was the higher type of manhood, and Jack, at least, if not poor Dick, could hold his own in mental and artistic perception with the brightest, most cultured of Harvard graduates.

At the end of the year she came back home to await Dick's return from the wilds of Mexico. There was great anxiety about his safety, for Geronimo, attacked by Crook in the Apache stronghold of the Tonto Basin, had escaped to the mountains of northwestern Mexico with his band of fierce Chiricahuas.

Now Dick Lane had not been heard from in this region. When he neither made appearance nor sent a message upon the day appointed for his return, his brother, Bud, was for setting out instantly to find him and rescue him if he were in difficulties.

Then it was that Echo Allen discovered the true nature of her affection for her lover, that it was sisterly regard, differing only in degree, but not in kind, from that which she felt for his brother. She joined with Polly in opposing Bud's going, urging his recklessness as a reason. "You are certain to be killed," she said, "and I cannot lose you both." Jack Payson, for whom Bud was working, then came forward and offered to accompany him, and keep him with bounds. Again there was a revelation of her heart Echo, and one that terrified her with a sense of disloyalty. It was Jack she really loved, noble, chivalric, wonderful Jack Payson, whom, with a Southern intensity of feeling, she had unconsciously come to regard as her standard of all that makes for manhood. Plausible objections could not be urged against his sacrificing himself for his friend. With an irresistible impulse she cast herself upon his breast and said: "I cannot BEAR to see you go."

Payson gently disengaged her arms.

"I must, Echo. It is what Dick would do for me if I were in his place."

However, while Payson and Bud were preparing for their departure, Buck McKee appeared in the region and reported that Dick Lane had been killed by the Apaches. He told with convincing details of how he had met Lane as each was returning from a successful prospecting trip in the Ghost Range, and how they had sunk their differences in standing together against an attack of the Indians. He extolled Dick's bravery, relating how, severely wounded, he had stood off the savages to enable himself to escape.

When he handed over Dick's watch to Echo--for he had learned on his return that she was betrothed to Lane--as a last token from her lover, no doubt remained in the minds of his hearers of the truth of his story, and Payson and Bud Lane gave up their purposed expedition.

The owner of Sweetwater Ranch, while accepting McKee's account, could not wholly forget the half-breed's former evil reputation, and was reserved in his reception of the advances of the ex-rustler who was anxious to curry favor. Warm-hearted, impulsive Bud, however, whose fraternal loyalty had increased under his bereavement to the supreme passion of life, took the insinuating half-breed into the aching vacancy made by his brother's death. The two became boon companions, to the great detriment of the younger man's morals. McKee had plenty of money which he spent liberally, gambling and carousing in company with Bud. Polly was wild with indignation at her sweetheart's desertion, and savagely upbraided him for his conduct whenever they met, which may be inferred, grew less and less frequently. It was in revenge she made advances to another man who long "loved her from afar."

This was William Henry Harrison Hoover, sheriff of the county, known as "Slim" Hoover by the humorous propensity of men on the range to give nicknames on the principle of contraries, for he was fattest man in Pinal County. Slim was one of those fleshy men who have nerves of steel and muscles of iron. A round, boyish face, twinkling blue eyes, flaming red hair gave him an appearance entirely at variance with his personality. A vein of sentiment made him all the more lovable. His associates--ranchers, men of the plains, soldiers, and the owners and frequenters of the frontier barroom--respected him greatly.

"He's square as Slim" was the best recommendation ever given of a man in that region.

Pinal County settlers had made Slim sheriff term after term because he was the one citizen supremely fitted for the place. He had ridden the range and "busted" broncos before election After it he hunted wrong-doers. Right was right and wrong was wrong to him. There was no shading in the meaning. All he asked of men

was to ride fast, shoot straight, and deal squarely in any game. He admitted that murder, horse-stealing, and branding another man's calves were subjects for the unwritten law. But in his code this law meant death only after a fair trial, with neighbors for a jury. He was not scrupulous that a judge should be present. His duties were ended when he brought in his prisoner.

Hoover's rule had been marked by the taming of bad men in Florence, and a truce declared in the guerrilla warfare between the cattlemen and the sheepmen on the range.

Slim's seemingly superfluous flesh was really of great advantage to him: it served as a mask for his remarkable athletic abilities, and so lulled the outlaws with whom he had to deal into a false sense of superiority and security.

Slow and lethargic in his ordinary movements, in an emergency he was quick as a panther, never failing to get the drop on his man.

Furthermore, his fat exerted a beneficial influence on his character in keeping him humble-minded. Being the most popular man in the county, he would probably have been swollen with vanity had there been any space left vacant for it in his huge frame. He was especially admired by the women, but was at ease only in the company of those who were married. It was his fate to see the few girls of the region, with every one of whom, by turns, he was in love, grow up to marry each some less diffident wooer.

"Dangnation take it!" he used to say, "I don't git up enough spunk to cut a heifer out o' the herd until somebody else has roped her and slapped his brand onto her. Talk about too many irons in the fire, why, I've only got one, and it's het up red all the time waitin' fer the right chanct to use it; but some how I never git it out o' the coals. Hell! what's the use, anyhow? Nobody loves a fat man."

Slim was inordinately puffed up by Polly's preference of him, which she showed by all sorts of feminine tyrannies, and he was forced continually to slap his huge paunch to remind himself of what he considered his disabling deformity. "Miss Polly," he would apostrophize the absent lady, "you don't know what a volcano of seethin' fiery love this here mountain of flesh is that your walkin' over. Some day I'll erupt, and jest eternally calcify you, if you don't look out!"

The sheriff took no stock in Buck McKee's professed reformation, and was greatly worried over the influence he had acquired over Bud Lane, who had before this been Slim's protege. Accordingly, he readily conspired with her to break off the relations between the former outlaw and the young horse-wrangler, but thus far had met with no success.

Payson, feeling himself absolved by the death of Dick Lane from all obligations to his friend, began openly to woo Echo Allen, but without presuming upon the revelation of her love for him which she had made at his proposition to go into the desert to

Lane's rescue. She responded to his courteous advances as frankly and naturally as a bud opens to the gentle wooing of the April sun. Softened by her grief for Dick as for a departed brother, as the flower is by the morning dew, the petals of her affection opened and laid bare her heart of purest gold. The gentle, diffident girl expanded into a glorious woman, conscious of her powers, and proud and happy that she was fulfilling the highest function of womanhood, that of loving and aiding with her love a noble man.

Jack Payson, however, failed to get the proper credit for this sudden flowering of Echo's beauty and charm. These were ascribed to her year's schooling in the East, and her proud mother was offended by the way in which she accepted the young ranchman's advances. "You hold yourself too cheap," she said. "It is at least due to the memory of poor Dick Lane (whom, now that he was safely dead, she idealized as a type of perfect manhood) "that you make Jack wait as long as you did him." When Payson reasonably objected to this delay by pointing out he was fully able to support a wife, as Lane had not been, and proposed, with Echo's assent, six months as the limit of waiting, Mrs. Allen resorted to her expedient--tears.

"BOO-HOO! you are going to take away my only daughter!"

The Colonel, however, though he had loved Dick as if he were his own son, was delighted to the bottom of his hospitable soul that it was a man not already in the family circle who was to marry Echo, especially when he was a royal fellow like Jack Payson; so he arranged a compromise between the time proposed by Mrs. Allen and that desired by the lovers, and the date of the wedding was fixed nine months ahead.

"It will fall in June," said the old fellow, who knew exactly how to handle his fractions wife; "the month when swell folks back in the East do all their hitchin' up. Why, come to think of it, it was the very month I ran off with you in, though I didn't know, then that we was elopin' so strictly accordin' to the Book of Etikwet."

CHAPTER III A Woman's Loyalty

The first instinctive thought of a man reveals innate character; those that follow, the moral that he has acquired through environment and circumstances. That Jack Payson was at bottom good man is shown by his first emotion, which was joy, and his first impulse, which was to impart the glad news to everybody, upon receiving the letter from Dick Lane telling that he was alive and soon to come home. He was in his house at the time. Bud Lane had just brought in the packet of mail from Florence, and was riding away. Jack uttered a cry of joy which brought the young man back to the door. "What is it?" asked Bud. But Jack had already had time for his damning second thought. He was stunned by the consideration that the promulgation of the news in the letter meant his loss of Echo Allen. He dissembled, though

as yet he was not able to tell an outright falsehood:

"It's a letter telling me that I may expect to receive enough money in a month or so to pay off the mortgage. Now your brother's debt needn't trouble you any longer, Bud."

"Whew-w!" whistled Bud. "That's great! Where does it come from?"

"Oh, from an old friend that I lent the money to some time ago. But, say, Bud, there's another matter I want to talk with you about. You've got to shake Buck McKee. I've got it straight that he is the worst man in Arizona Territory, yes, worse than an Apache. Why, he has been with Geronimo, torturing and massacring lone prospectors, and robbing them of their gold."

"That's a damned lie, Jack Payson, and you know it!" cried the hot-headed young man. "It was Buck McKee who stood by Dick's side and fought the Apaches. And I'll stand by Buck against all the world. Everybody is in a conspiracy against him, Polly and Slim Hoover and you. Why are you so ready now to take a slanderer's word against his? You were keen enough to accept his story, when it let you out of going to Dick's rescue, and gave you free swing to court his girl. Let me see the name of the damned snake-in-the-grass that's at the bottom of all this!" And he snatched for the letter in Payson's hand.

The ranchman quickly thrust the missive into pocket. The injustice of Bud's reflections on former actions gave to his uneasy conscience just the pretext he desired for justifying his present course. His cause being weak and unworthy, he whipped up his indignation by adopting a high tone and overbearing manner, even demeaning himself by using his position as Bud's employer to crush the younger man. Indeed, at the end of the scene which ensued he well-nigh convinced himself that he had been most ungratefully treated by Bud while sincerely attempting to save the boy from the companionship of a fiend in human guise.

"No matter who told me, young man," he exclaimed; "I got it straight, and you can take it straight from me. You either give up Buck McKee or the Sweetwater Ranch. Snake-in-the-grass!" he was working himself up into false passion; "it is you, ungrateful boy, who are sinking the serpent's tooth in the hand that would have helped you. I tell you that I intended to make you foreman, though Sage-brush Charley is an older and better man. It was for Dick's sake I would have done it."

"No!" Bud burst forth; "for your guilty conscience's sake. It would have been to pay for stepping into Dick's place in the heart of a faithless girl. To hell with your job; I'm through with you!"

And, leaping on his horse, Bud rode furiously back to rejoin Buck McKee in Florence.

Jack Payson's purpose was now cinched to suppress Dick Lane's letter until Echo Allen was irrevocably joined to him in marriage. He argued with himself that she loved him, Jack

Payson, yet so loyal was she by nature that if Dick Lane returned before the wedding and claimed her, she would sacrifice her love to her sense of duty. This would ruin her life, he reasoned, and he could not permit it. There was honesty in this argument, but he vitiated it by deferring to act upon the suggestion that naturally arose with it: Why, then, not take Jim Allen, Echo's father, to whom her happiness was the chief purpose in life, into confidence in regard to the matter? There will be time enough to tell the Colonel before the wedding, he thought. In the meantime something might happen to Dick,, and he may never return. He is certain not to get back ahead of his money.

After the time that the note secured by the mortgage fell due, the young ranchman had already secured two extensions of it for three months each. He arranged a third, and began negotiating for the sale of some of his cattle to take up the note at the time of payment. "I can't take the money from Dick," he thought, "even if he does owe it to me. And yet if I refuse it, it will be like buying Echo--"paying for stepping into Dick's place,' as Bud expressed it. What to do I don't know. Well, events will decide." And by this favorite reflection of the moral coward, Jack Payson marked the lowest depths of his degradation.

That afternoon Payson rode to Allen Hacienda to see Echo, and to sound her upon her feelings to Dick Lane. He wished thoroughly to convince himself that he, Jack Payson, held complete sway over her heart. Perhaps he might dare to put her love to the test, and fulfil the trust his friend had imposed on him, by giving her Dick's letter.

Payson overtook Polly riding slowly on her way home from Florence. She barely greeted him. "Has she met Bud, and has he been slurring me?" he thought. He checked his pacing horse to the half-trot, half-walk, of Polly's mount, and, ignoring her incivility, began talking to her.

"D'yeh see Bud in Florence?"

"Yep. Couldn't help it. Him an' Buck McKee are about the whole of Florence these days."

"Too bad about Bud consorting with that rustler. I've had to fire him for it."

"Fire him? Well you ARE a good friend. Talk about men's loyalty! If women threw men down that easy you all would go to the bowwows too fast for us to bake dog-biscuit. Now, I've settled Buck McKee's hash by putting Slim Hoover wise to that tongue-slittin'. Oh, I'll bring Bud around, all right, all right, even if men that ought to be his friends go back on him."

"But, Pollykins--"

"Don't you girlie me, Jack Payson. I'm a woman, and I'm goin' to be a married one, too, in spite of all you do to Bud. Yes, sirree, bob. I've set out to make a man of him, and I'll marry him to do it if he ain't a dollar to his name. But money'd make

it lots quicker an' easier. He was savin' up till he run in with Buck McKee."

A sudden thought struck Payson. Here was a way to dispose of Dick Lane's money when it came.

"All right, Mrs. Bud Lane to be. Promise not tell Bud, and through you I'll soon make good to him many times over for the foreman's wages he's lost. It's money that's coming from an enterprise that his brother and I were partners in, and Bud shall Dick's share. He's sore on me now, and I can't tell him. Besides, he'd gamble it away before he got it to Buck McKee. Bud isn't strictly ethical in regard to money matters, Polly, and you must manage the exchequer."

"Gee, what funny big words you use, Jack! But I know what you mean; he's too free-handed. Well, he'll be savin' as a trade rat until we get our home paid for. And I'll manage the checker business when we're married. No more poker and keno for Bud. Thank you, Jack. I always knew you was square."

Polly's sincere praise of his "squareness" was the sharpest thrust possible at Payson's guilty conscience. Well, he resolved to come as near being square and level as he could. He had told half-truths to Bud and Polly; he would present the situation to Echo as a possible, though not actual, one. If Polly were wrong, and Echo loved him so much that she would break the word she had pledged to Dick Lane, then he would confess all, and they would do what could be done to make it right with the discarded lover.

Echo, observing from the window who was Polly's companion, ran out to Jack with a cry of joy. He looked meaningly at Polly. She said: "Oh, give me your bridle; I know how many's a crowd." Jack leaped to the ground and took Echo in his arms while Polly rode off with the horses to the corral, singing significantly:

"Spoon, spoon, spoon,
While the dish ran away with the spoon."

Jack and Echo embraced clingingly and kissed lingeringly. "It takes a crazy old song like that to express how foolish we lovers are," said Jack. "Why, I feel that I could outfiddle the cat, outjump the cow, outlaugh the dog, and start an elopement that would knock the performance of the tableware as silly as--well, as I am talking now. I'm living in a dream--a Midsummer Night's Dream, such as you were reading to me."

"The lunatic, the lover, and the poet," quoted Echo suggestively.

Dusk was falling. From the bunk-house rose the tinkling notes of a mandolin; after a few preliminary chords, the player, a Mexican, began a love-song in Spanish. The distant chimes of Mission bells sounded softly on the evening air.

Jack and Echo sat down upon the steps of the piazza. Jack continued the strain of his thought, but in a more serious vein:

"Echo, I'm so happy that I am frightened."

"Frightened?" she asked wonderingly.

"Yes, scared--downright scared," he answered. "I reckon I'm like an Indian. An Indian doesn't believe it's good medicine to let the gods know he's big happy. For there's the Thunder Bird--"

"The Thunder Bird?"

"The evil spirit of the storm," continued Jack. "When the Thunder Bird hears a fellow saying he's big happy, he sends him bad luck--"

Echo laid her hand softly on the mouth of her sweetheart. "We won't spoil our happiness, then, by talking about it. We will just feel it--just be it."

She laid her head upon Jack's knee. He placed his arm lightly but protectingly over her shoulder. They sat in silence listening to the Mexican's song. Finally Jack bent over and whispered gently in her ear:

"Softly, so the Thunder Bird won't hear, Echo; tell me you love me; that you love only me; that you will always love me, no matter what shall happen; that you never loved, until you loved me."

Echo sat upright, with a start. "What do you mean?" she exclaimed. "Of course I love you, and you only, but the future and the past are beyond our control. Unless you know of something that is going to happen which may mar our love, your question is silly, not at all like your Mother Goose nonsense--that was dear. And as for the past, you mean Dick Lane."

"Yes, I mean Dick Lane," confessed Payson, in a subdued tone. "I am jealous of him--that is--even of his memory."

"That is not like Jack Payson. What has come over you? It is the shadow of your Thunder Bird. You know what my feeling was for Dick Lane, and what it is, for it remains the same, the only difference being that now I know it never was love. Even if it were, he is dead, and I love you, Jack, you alone. Oh, how you shame me by forcing me to speak of such things! I have tried to put poor Dick out of my mind, for every time I think of him it is with a wicked joy that he is dead, that he cannot come home to claim me as his wife. Oh, Jack, Jack, I didn't think it of you!"

And the girl laid her face within her hands on her lover's knee and burst into a fit of sobbing.

Jack Payson shut his teeth.

"Well, since I have lowered myself so far in your esteem, and since your mind is already sinning against Dick Lane, we might as well go on and settle this matter. I promise I will not mention it again. I, too, have troubles of the mind. I am as I am, and

you ought to know it. I said I was jealous of Dick Lane's memory. It is more. I am jealous of Dick Lane himself. If he should return, would you leave me and go with him--as his wife?"

Again she sat upright. By a strong effort she controlled her sobbing.

"The man I admired does not deserve an answer, but the child he has proved himself to be and whom I cannot help loving, shall have it. Yes, if Dick Lane returns true to his promise I shall be true to mine."

She arose and went into the house. Payson rode homeward through the starlight resolved of tormenting doubt only to be consumed by torturing jealousy. He now had no thought of confiding in Jim Allen. He regretted that he had touched so dangerously near the subject of Dick Lane's return in talking to Bud and Polly. His burning desire was to be safely married to Echo Allen before the inevitable return of her former lover.

"Fool that I was not to ask her one more question: Would she forgive her husband where she would not forgive her lover? What will she think of me when all is discovered, as it surely will be? Well, I must take my chances. Events will decide."

On his return to Sweetwater Ranch he put the place in charge of his new foreman, Sage-brush Charlie, and went out to a hunting-cabin he had built in the Tortilla Mountains. Here he fought the problem over with his conscience--and his selfishness won. He returned, fixed in his decision to suppress Dick Lane's letter, and to go ahead with the marriage.

CHAPTER IV The Hold-up

Riding hard into Florence from Sweetwater Ranch Bud Lane hunted up Buck McKee at his favorite gambling-joint, and, in a white heat of indignation informed him in detail of everything that had passed between Payson and himself. At once McKee inferred that the writer of the letter was none other than Dick Lane. Realizing that Payson was already informed of his villainy, and that in a very short time Dick Lane himself would make his appearance on the Sweetwater, the half-breed concluded to make a bold move while he yet retained the confidence of Bud.

"Bud," he said, "I know the man who is sendin' the money to Payson. It's Dick, your brother."

"But," stammered Bud, his brain whirling, "if that's so, you lied about the Apaches killing him you--why you--must have been the renegade, the devil who tortured prospectors."

"Why, Bud, Dick never wrote all that dime-novel nonsense about the man who stood by him to--well, not the very last, for Dick has managed somehow to pull through--probably he was saved by the Rurales that were chasin' the band that rounded us up. No, it's

Payson, Jack Payson, that made up that pack of lies, just to keep you away from me, the man that was last with Dick and so may get on to Jack's game and block it."

"Game! what game?" asked Bud, bewildered.

"Why, you told me it yourself--to marry Dick's girl, and live on Dick's hard-earned money."

"But Dick borrowed the three thousand of Jack," objected Bud.

"Well, the dollars he borrowed have all gone, ain't they? And the money he's sendin' back Dick dug out of the ground by hard work, didn't he? Leastways, Payson hadn't ort 'o use the money to rope in Dick's girl. It ort 'o be kep' from him, anyhow, till Dick comes on the ground his own self. That 'u'd hold up the weddin', all right, if I know Josephine. It 'u'd be easy to steer her into refusin' to let Echo go into a mortgaged home."

Simple-minded Bud readily accepted the wily half-breed's explanations and surmises, and fell into the trap he was preparing. This was to hold up the express-agent and rob him of the money Payson was expecting, on securing which it was McKee's intention to flee the country before Dick Lane returned to denounce him. To ascertain just when the money came into the agent's hands, and to act as a cover in the robbery itself, an accomplice was needed. For this purpose no man in all the Sweetwater region was better adapted than Bud Lane. Frank and friendly with every one, he would be trusted by the most suspicious and cautious official in Pinal County. The fact that he had chosen Buck McKee as an associate had already gone far to rehabilitate this former "bad man" in the good graces of the community. Under cover of this friendship, McKee hoped to escape suspicion of any part in the homicide he contemplated. For it was murder, foul, unprovoked murder that was in the black soul of the half-breed. He intended to incriminate Bud so deeply as to put it beyond all thought that he would confess.

Young Lane, passionately loyal to his brother, was ready for anything that would delay Payson's marriage to Echo Allen. Together with the wild joy that sprang up in his heart at the thought that his brother was alive, was entwined a violent hatred against his former employer. In the fierce turbulence within his soul, generated by the meeting of these great emotions, he was impelled to enter upon a mad debauch, in which McKee abetted and joined him. Filling up on bad whisky, they rode through the streets of Florence, yelling and shooting their "guns" like crazy men. It was while they were engaged in this spectacular exhibition of horsemanship, gun-play, and vocalization that Bud's sweetheart rode into town to execute some commissions in preparation for Echo Allen's wedding. Already "blue" over the thought that her own wedding was far in the dim future, poor Polly was cast into the depths of despair and disgust by the drunken riot in which her prospective husband was indulging with her particular aversion, the cruel, calf-torturing half-breed, McKee. Thoroughly mortified, she slipped out of town by a side street, and moodily rode back to Allen Hacienda, meeting on the

way, as we have seen, Jack Payson.

After the debauch was over, and the merry, mad devil of nervous excitement was succeeded by the brooding demon of nervous depression, McKee broached to Bud the idea of robbing the express-agent of the money coming to Payson. This fell in readily with the young man's revengeful mood. He unreservedly placed himself under the half-breed's orders.

In accordance with these, Bud hung about the road-station a great deal, cultivating the friends of Terrill, the agent. 'Ole Man' Terrill, as he was called, although he was a vigorous specimen of manhood on the under side of sixty, was ticket and freight agent, express-messenger, and telegraph-operator, in fact, the entire Bureau of Transportation and communication at Florence station. Bud frankly told him he was out of a job, and had, indeed, decided in view of his coming marriage, to give up horse-wrangling for some vocation of a more elevating character. So Terrill let him help about the station, chiefly in the clerical work. While so engaged, Bud learned that a package valued at three thousand dollars was expected upon a certain train. Although consignee was mentioned, the fact that the amount tallied exactly with the sum Payson was expecting caused him to conclude it was Dick's repayment of his loan. Accordingly he informed McKee that the time they were awaiting had arrived.

Florence had grown up as a settlement about a spring of water some time before the advent of the railroad. Builders of the line got into trouble with the inhabitants, and in revenge located the station half a mile away from the spring, thinking new settlers would come to them. In this they were disappointed.

The point was an isolated one, and the station a deserted spot between trains.

Eastward and westward the single track of railroad drifted to shimmering points on the horizon. To the south dreary wastes of sand, glistening white under the burnished sun and crowned with clumps of grayish green sage-brush, stretched to an encircling rim of hills. Cacti and yucca palms broke the monotony of the roll of the plains to the uplands.

Sahuaroes towered over the low station, which was built in the style of the old Spanish missions. Its red roof flared above the purple shadows cast by its walls. In the fathomless blue above a buzzard sailed majestically down an air current, and hovered motionless over the lonely outpost of civilization.

Within the station a telegraph-sounder chattered and chirruped. 'Ole Man' Terrill was at the instrument. His duties were over for the forenoon, the east-bound express, which, with the west-bound, composed the only trains that traversed that section of the road each day, having arrived and departed a half-hour before, and he had cut in on the line to regale himself with the news of the world. But there was a dearth of thrilling events, such as his rude soul delighted in. The Apache uprising, that was feared, had not taken place. Colonel Hardie, of Fort Grant,

had the situation well in hand. The Nihilists were giving their latest czar a breathing-spell. No new prize-fighter had arisen to wrest the championship of the world from John Sullivan, who had put all his old rivals 'to sleep.' 'Ole Man' Terrill proceeded to follow their example. He had been up late the night before at a poker game. His head fell forward with a jerk. Aroused by the shock, he glanced drowsily about him. Heat-waves danced before the open window. Deep silence hung over his little world. Again his eyelids closed; his head dropped, and slowly he slipped into sleep.

Tragedy was approaching him now, but not along the wire. Down an arroyo, or "draw" (the dry bed of a watercourse), that wound in a detour around the town of Florence, and debauched into the open plain near the station, crept two men in single file, each leading a horse. They were Buck McKee and Bud Lane, who had ridden north from the town that morning with the declared purpose of going to Buck's old ranch, the Lazy K. They had circled about the town, timing their arrival at the station a little after the departure of the train which was expected to bring Dick Lane's money.

McKee emerged first from the mouth of the draw. He wore a coarse flannel shirt, loosened at the throat. About his neck was a handkerchief. His riding-overalls were tucked into high boots with Spanish heels and long spurs. A Mexican hat with a bead band topped a head covered with coarse black hair, which he inherited from his Cherokee mother.

Save for the vulture floating high in air not a living thing was in sight. With the caution of a coyote, McKee crept to the station door and peered blinkingly through the open door into the room. The change from the dazzling light without to the shaded interior blinded him for a moment. He heard the heavy breathing of the sleeper before he saw him.

Returning to the mouth of the arroyo, McKee motioned to his companion to bring out the horses. When this was done, the two men cinched the saddles and made every preparation for sudden flight. Lane and the horses remained outside the station behind a freight-car on a siding, while McKee stole softly through the open door to 'Ole Man' Terrill's side.

Now, the agent used as a safe-deposit vault his inside waistcoat pocket, the lock upon which was a huge safety-pin. For further defense he carried a revolver loosely hung at his hip, and easily reached. His quickness on the draw in the hour of need, and his accuracy of aim made him a formidable antagonist.

Some men are born into the world to become its watch-dogs; others to become its wolves. The presence of a human wolf is, as it were, scented by the human watch-dog, even when the dog is asleep. McKee was known instinctively as a man-wolf to the born guardians of society; Slim Hoover, himself a high type of the man-mastiff, used to say of the half-breed: "I can smell that b'ar-grease he slicks his hair with agin' the wind. He may be out o' sight an' out of mind, when somethin' tells me 'McKee's

around'; then I smell b'ar-grease, and the next thing, Bucky shows up. with his ingrasheatin' grin. It's alluz 'grease before meet, as the Sky Pilot would say."

'Ole Man' Terrill was of the watch-dog breed. Whether warned by the instinct of his kind or wakened by the scent of McKee's bear-grease, he suddenly opened his eyes. Like all men accustomed to emergencies, he was instantly in full possession of his wits, yet he pretended to be slightly confused in order to get a grasp upon the situation before greeting his visitor.

"Howdy, Buck," he said, adjusting his revolver as he swung half-round in his chair, that he might reach his weapon more readily in an emergency. "Bustin' or busted?"

"Well, I'm about even with the game," replied McKee, pulling from his pocket a bag of tobacco and papers, and deftly rolling a butterfly cigarette. "Goin' to shake it before I lose my pile. It's me for the Lazy K. Dropped in to say good-by."

Terrill, who had recently had an expensive seance with McKee at poker, remonstrated:

"Yuh ought 'o give me another chanct at yuh, Buck. Yo're goin' away with too much of my money."

"Well, 'Ole Man,' I'm likely to rob yuh of a lot more ef you ain't keerful," answered McKee.

"Yuh can't jet yeta while," said Terrill. "Dead broke."

"Aw, come off! everybody knows ye're a walkin' bank. Bet yuh got three thousan' in that inside pocket o' your'n this minute."

Terrill started at McKee's naming the exact amount he was carrying. He forgot his customary caution in his surprise. "Well, you did just hit it, shore enough. I believe ye're half-gipsy instid o' half-Injun. Jus' like yer knowin' I stood pat on four uv a kind when you had aces full, and throwin' down yer cyards 'fore I c'u'd git even with yuh. How do yuh do it, Buck?"

McKee gave a smile of cunning, inscrutable superiority. "Oh, it's jes' a power I has. 'Keen sabby,' as the Greasers say--I'm keen on the know-how. Why, I kin tell yuh more about the money. It's fer Jack Payson--"

"Now, there's whur ye're way off as a cleervoyant, Buck," said Terrill triumphantly. "Yuh guessed oncet too often, as yer old pard on the Lazy K said to the druggist. 'Peruna?' ast the druggist. 'Yep,' said yer pard. 'Beginnin' mild on a new jag?' ast the druggist a second time. 'Hell, no!' said yer pard they calls Peruna now from the in-sih-dent, 'ending up strong on an old one.' Nope, the three thousan' is county money, consigned to Sheriff Hoover. Jack Payson has jes' lef' with a package from K. C., but it wasn't money. It was a purty, gilt chair--a weddin'-present fer the gal he's go'n' to marry."

At that moment the sounder of the telegraph began clicking the call of the station. Terrill whirled about in his swivel-chair and faced the table.

McKee stood close behind him. His lips twitched nervously. His eyes narrowed as he watched every movement of the agent's big shoulders as he operated the key. At the same time the half-breed drew his revolver and covered the back of Terrill's head.

The agent completed his message and turned to continue his interrupted conversation. He found himself gazing into the muzzle of a .44, big, it seemed, as a thirteen-inch gun. "Why--what?" he stammered.

"I'm actin' jes' now as Slim's deppity," said McKee. "Unbutton an' han' that money over."

Once having his victim in his power, all the innate cruelty of the Indian blood of his maternal ancestors flashed to the surface. Terrill was at his mercy. For one desperate moment he would play with him; even torture him as his forefathers had once made miserable the last moments of a captive. He knew that unless he silenced Terrill his life must pay the forfeit. Death was the penalty of detection. The arm of the express company was long. Ultimate capture was certain. Pursued out of Arizona by the sheriff, he would be trailed through every camp and town in the far West.

With an oath, Terrill tried to rise and face his antagonist, reaching for his revolver as he did so. The butt of his weapon had caught in the arm of the chair hampering his movements.

McKee threw him roughly back into the chair.

"Throw up your han's," he cried. "Don't try that."

Up went Terrill's hands high over his head. He faced the open window. Not a sign of help was in sight.

Quickly the agent turned over in his mind various schemes to foil McKee, who now stood behind him with the muzzle of his revolver pressing into the middle of his back. Each was rejected before half-conceived.

McKee laughed sneeringly, saying: "You oughtn't to be so keerless to show where you cache your roll. Worse than a senorita with a stocking. She never keeps a whole pair when Manuel is playing faro."

Terrill made no reply. His hope of escape was slowly fading.

McKee had reached his left hand over his prisoner's shoulder to disarm Terrill, who moved slightly away from him, drawing in his feet as he did so.

One chance had come to him. He knew that, if he failed, death

was certain, yet he determined to take the risk in order to retrieve the slip he had made in admitting that he had money in his possession to a gambling crony; and so to keep clean his record for trustiness, of which he was so proud. This last desperate resource was an old wrestler's trick; one with which he had conquered others in the rough games of the corral.

Again Terrill moved to the right and farther under McKee, who had to extend his arm and body far beyond an upright position. Holding his revolver against Terrill handicapped the half-breed in his movements.

With a quick turn, Terrill grasped McKee's left arm, jerking it down sharply on his shoulder. With his right hand he grasped the back of his antagonist's neck, pulling his head downward and inward. Using his shoulder for a fulcrum, with a mighty heave of his legs and back he sought to toss McKee over his head.

So surprised for an instant was the cowboy by suddenness of the attack that he made no effort escape the clutches of the desperate express-agent.

His feet had left the floor, and he was swinging in the air before his finger pressed the trigger.

There was a muffled report.

The two men fell in a heap on the floor, McKee on top. Dazed and shaken, McKee scrambled to his feet. The air was pungent with odor of powder smoke. Terrill rolled over on his side, trembled convulsively, and died. He had paid the penalty for a moment's indiscretion with his life.

McKee quickly unfastened the pin and seized the roll of bills. Skimming through the package, he smiled with satisfaction to see that the most of it was in small bills, and none of them stained.

Carefully avoiding the fast-forming pool of blood which was oozing from the hole in the dead man's head, he hurried to the door.

A glance showed him the coast was clear. Running across the tracks, he joined Lane, who was waiting for him behind the freight-car with impatience. In silence they mounted their horses. For a short distance McKee led the way upon the railroad-track, in order to leave no hoof-prints, and then struck across the desert toward the hills in the south.

"Why did you shoot?" gasped Lane.

"He drew on me," snarled McKee. "It wasn't Dick's money, but you'll get half. Shut up."

The burning sun rose higher and higher. The buzzard dropped lower in the sky. The silence of death brooded over the railroad-station.

CHAPTER V

Hoover Bows to Hymen

Unknown to Bud Lane and Buck McKee, who were rioting in Florence, Jack Payson had hurried up the wedding. Colonel Jim had wheedled Josephine into consenting that it should take place two months ahead of the time that had been fixed. "April is the month fer showers, Josie, an' we'll let you weep all you please."

Two weeks' notice, however, gave scant time for preparation for the important ceremony that Mrs. Allen deemed necessary. During this period the busiest spot in Arizona was the kitchen of Allen hacienda. An immense cake, big as a cheese, was the crowning effort of Josephine, who wept copiously at the thought of losing her daughter as she measured and mixed the ingredients. A layer of frosting an inch in thickness encrusted this masterpiece of the art of pastry-making. Topping the creation were manikins of a bride and bridegroom.

This climax of the bridal cake had been brought up by wagon from Tucson with more caution than if it were a month's clean-up of a paying mine. Mrs. Allen allowed no one to go near the artistic achievement. Others might look at it from afar, but at the slightest movement to get close to it, she would push the observer back, with the warning: "Keep yer dirty fingers off'n it.

"'Tain't common icin'; that's confectionary."

Enough chickens to feed a darky camp-meeting were killed for the feast. Fried, roasted, cold or minced as tamales, the dishes filled ovens and tables, and overflowed into the spring-house. Favorite recipes carried across the plains by the wives of the Argonauts met in rivalry with the dishes of the cooks of old Mexico.

Colonel Allen wandered aimlessly about the ranch, while the preparations for the feast were in progress. The women folk drove him from one favorite loafing-place to another. His advice was scorned and his wishes made a subject for jests.

Defiantly he had taken full charge of the liquid refreshments. A friendly barkeeper in Tucson, acting under his orders, had shipped him cases of champagne, a barrel of beer, and a siphon of seltzer. Why the seltzer he never could explain. Later the unlucky bottle marred the supper and nearly caused a tragedy. A guest picked it up and peered into the metal tube to see "how the durned thing worked."

As he gazed and pondered, shaking the bottle in effort to solve the mystery, he pressed the handle. The stream struck him fairly between the eyes. Shocked, surprised, and half-blinded, he pulled his gun and declared immediate war on the "sheep-herder who had put up the job on him." Allen's other supplies were of the kind taken straight in the Southwest, and were downed with a hasty gulp.

Driven from the house on the day of the wedding he took refuge on the piazza. From behind the hacienda floated dreamily on the sun-drenched air the music of guitars and mandolins played by Mexicans, practising for the dance which would follow the ceremony.

The Colonel dozed and dreamed.

Suddenly the peace of the afternoon was shattered by the wild "yip-yips" of a band of cowboys, riding up the trail. Revolver-shots punctuated their shrill cries.

Allen bounded from his chair, shaking himself like a terrier. This riotous sound was the music he longed to hear.

When the staccato beats of the ponies' hoofs ceased, he shouted: "Come on, boys, make this your home. Everything goes, and the Sweetwater outfit is always welcome."

The foreman was the first to pull up in front of the house. "Hullo, Uncle Jim!" he cried.

"Hello, Sage-brush," answered the Colonel, a broad smile illuminating his face. Holding his pipe in one hand, he licked his lips at the thought of "lickering up" without the invention of an excuse for his wife.

Then he joined in a hearty laugh with the men about the corral as he heard the grunts and stamping of a plunging mustang. A cow-pony had entered into the spirit of the occasion and was trying to toss his rider over his head.

Fresno was the victim of the horse's deviltry.

His predicament aroused wild shouts of mirth and sallies of the wit of the corral.

"Hunt leather, Fresno, or he'll buck you clean over the wall," shouted Sage-brush.

"Grab his tail," yelled Show Low, with a whoop.

"All over," was the chorus, as Fresno, with a vicious jab of his spurs and a jerk of the head, brought the animal into subjection.

"Come right in, boys!" called Allen. "Let the Greasers take the hosses."

With shrill shouts, whoops, and much laughter the guests crowded about the ranchman.

Each wore his holiday clothes; new handkerchiefs were knotted about their necks. Fresno had stuck little American flags in the band of his hat, the crown, of which he had removed. "I want head-room for the morning after," he had said.

Show Low's chaps were conspicuously new, and his movements were heralded by the creaking of unsoftened leather.

Last of the band was Parenthesis, short, bow-legged, with a face tanned and seamed by exposure.

The cowboys ran stiffly, toeing slightly inward. Long hours in the saddle made them apparently awkward and really ungraceful when on the ground.

They greeted Allen with hearty enthusiasm, slapping him on the back, poking him in the ribs, and swinging him from one to the other, with cries of: "Howdy, Uncle Jim!"

"Howdy, Sage-brush? Hello, Fresno! Waltz right in, Show Low. Glad to see you all!" cried Allen, as he, in turn, brought his hand down with ringing slaps upon shoulder and back. Meantime Parenthesis hopped about the outer edge of the ring, seeking an entrance. Failing to reach his host, he crowed: "How de doddle do," to attract his attention.

Allen broke from the ring. Grasping Parenthesis by the hand, he said: "I'm tolerable, thankee, Parenthesis. Where's Jack?-- didn't he come over with you?"

"What! the boss? Ain't he got here yet?" asked the foreman. Tall and lean, with hardened muscles, Sage-brush Charley was as lithe as a panther on horseback. His first toy had been a rope with which, as a toddler, he had practised on the dogs and chickens about the ranch-yard. He could not remember when he could not ride. Days on the round-up, hours of watching the sleeping herd in the night-watch, had made him quiet and self-contained in his dealings with men. His eyes looked out fearlessly on the world. All of his life he had handled cattle. Daily facing dangers on the long drives or in the corral, he schooled himself to face emergencies. Acquiring self-control, he was trusted and admired. When Lyman, the old foreman of the Sweetwater resigned, Jack Payson promoted Sage-brush, although next to Bud Lane he was at the time the youngest man in the outfit. He made his employer's interests his own. At the mention of Payson's name he always became attentive. With a shade of anxiety he awaited Allen's answer.

"No," replied the ranchman, looking from one of his guests to the other.

"Why, he started three hours ahead of us!" explained Parenthesis.

With a challenging note in his tones, as if his word was disputed, the host answered: "Well, he ain't showed up."

The little group had become silent. Arizona was in a period of unrest. Rumors of another Apache uprising were growing stronger each day. Then Payson was successful, and, therefore, despised by less fortunate men ever eager for a quarrel.

After a moment's thought Sage-brush brushed aside his fears and

brightened up his comrades with the remark: "Mebbe he rid over to Florence station to get a present for Miss Echo. He said somethin' about gettin' an artickle from Kansas City."

"Mebbe so," agreed Allen, eager to cast out any forebodings. "It's time," he continued, "he wuz turnin' up, if this weddin's to be pulled off by the clock."

"Has the Sky Pilot got here yet?" asked Sage-brush.

"No," replied Allen. "He's started, though. There's one thing sartin, we can't tighten up the cinches till the bridegroom gits here."

The absence of Jack Payson and the failure of the minister to arrive aroused the suspicions of Sage-brush. Coming closer to Allen, he smiled knowingly, and, speaking in a confidential tone, asked:

"Say, Jim, they ain't figgerin' on gittin' away on the sly-like, are they?"

Show Low interrupted with the explanation: "You see, we're goin' to decorate the wagon some."

The suggestion that any one connected with Allen Hacienda would ride in anything on wheels, except the driver of the chuck-wagon out on round-up, aroused the indignation of the old cattleman. For him the only use to which a wheeled vehicle drawn by a horse should be put was to haul materials that could not be packed on a horse.

"They ain't using any wagon!" he fairly shouted; "they're goin' away in the leather."

The idea of carrying out the traditions of the horse in Pinal County even to a wedding-journey tickled the boys immensely.

Slapping one another on the back and nodding their heads in approbation, they shouted: "That's the ticket. Hooray!"

"This ain't no New York idea, where the bride and groom hits the life-trail in a hired hack," cried Fresno.

Allen's feelings apparently were not yet fully soothed. Turning to Sage-brush, he said: "Wheels don't go in my family. Why, her ma and me were married on hossback. The preacher had to make a hurry job of it, but it took."

"Hush, now," was Parenthesis' awed comment.

"For her pop was a-chasin' us, and kept it up for twenty miles after the parson said 'Amen.'"

"Did he ketch you?" asked Fresno, with great seriousness.

"He sure did," answered Allen, with a twinkle in his eye, "an'

thanked me for takin' Josephine off his hands."

The boys laughed. The joke was upon themselves, as they had expected to hear a romantic story of earlier days.

When the laughter had subsided, Show Low suggested: "If we can't decorate the wagon, let's put some fixin's on the ponies."

The proposal was received with more whoops, shouting, and yipping. They waltzed about the smiling rancher.

"That's what!" cried Sage-brush enthusiastically.

Allen grew sarcastic, remarking: "I reckon you-all must have stopped some time at the water-tank."

Renewed laughter greeted this sally.

"This is my first wedding," explained Sage-brush, rather apologetically.

"I want to know!" exclaimed Allen, in surprise.

"I'm tellin' you. I never seed a weddin' in all my life," replied Sage-brush, as seriously as if he was denying a false accusation of a serious crime. "Mother used to tell me about her'n, an' I often wisht I had been there."

Fresno shouted with amusement. He had Sage-brush rattled. The coolest man on the ranch was flustered by the mere thought of attending a wedding-ceremony.

"He's plum locoed over this one. Ain't you, Sage-brush?" he drawled tauntingly.

Sage-brush took his jibing in the best of humor. It was a holiday, and they were with people of their own kind. Had a stranger been present the remarks would have been resented bitterly. On this point cowboys are particularly sensitive. In the presence of outsiders they are silent, answering only in monosyllables, never leading in any conversation, and if any comment is necessary they make it indirectly.

"Well, I ain't no society-bud like you are," laughed Sage-brush. The others joined with him in his merriment over Fresno's discomfiture. "Weddin's ain't so frequent where I come from as they is in Californy."

"It's the climate," answered Fresno, with a broad grin.

"So you ain't never been at a weddin'?" asked Allen, who was looking for another opening to have more fun with Sage-brush.

Again the cowboy became serious and confessed: "Nope; I've officiated at several plain killin's, an' been chief usher at a lynchin', but this yere's my first weddin', an' I'm goin' to turn loose some and enjoy it."

Sage-brush grinned in anticipation of the good times that he knew lay in store for him at the dance.

"You're fixed up as if you was the main attraction at this event," said Allen, looking Sage-brush over carefully and spinning him around on his heel.

"Ain't I mussed up fine?" answered Sage-brush.

"You're the sure big turkey," interrupted Parenthesis.

"Served up fine, with all the trimmin's," laughed Fresno, taking another jab at his friend.

Their sport was broken up for the time being by the appearance of Polly at the door of the ranch-house. "Hello, boys," she shouted, with the fascinating cordiality of the Western girl, wherein the breath of the plains, the purity of the air, and the wholesomeness of life is embraced in a simple greeting and the clasp of a hand.

The cowboys took off their hats, and made elaborate bows to the young woman. "Howdy, Miss Polly!" they cried.

"You sure do look pert," added Sage-brush, with what he considered his most winning smile. Fresno snickered and hastily brushed back the hair from his forehead.

"Where's Jack?" she asked the two men, who at once ranged themselves one on each side of her.

"He did not start with the boys," explained Allen. "He'll be along soon, Polly."

"Well, now when it comes to lookers, what's the matter with Polly Hope?" exclaimed Sage-brush slyly.

Glances of admiration were cast at the girl, who was dressed simply and plainly in a little white gown which Mrs. Allen had made for her for the wedding. Polly's youth, good nature, and ability to take care of herself made her a favorite on the ranch.

She had no need of defenders, but if an occasion should arise that Polly required a knight, there were a score of guns at her service at an hour's notice.

"Looks like a picture from a book," said Fresno, hoping to win back the ground he had lost by Sage-brush's openly expressed admiration.

Polly was flattered by the comments and the glances of the boys, which expressed their approval of her appearance more loudly than spoken words. She pretended, however, to be annoyed. "Go 'long," she said. "Where's Bud Lane? Didn't you give him his invite?"

The boys turned from one to the other with feigned glances of disgust at being slighted by Polly for an absent one. The one-sided courtship of Bud and Polly was known up and down the valley, and indefinite postponement of their wedding-day was one of the jests of the two ranches.

"Oh, we sent it on to him at Florence. He'll git it in time, if he ain't gone to the Lazy K with Buck McKee," said Sage-brush; then, turning to the other cowboys, he added in an aggrieved tone: "Polly ain't got no eyes for no one excep' Bud."

Polly stepped to Allen's side, and, laying her head on his shoulder, said: "Ain't I?" Allen patted the girl's head. He was very fond of her, looking upon her as another daughter.

Polly smiled back into his face, and then, with a glance at the cowboys, said: "Say, Uncle Jim, there's some bottles to be opened."

The invitation was an indirect one, but all knew what it meant, and started for the house.

"Root-beer," added Polly mischievously; "the corks pull awful hard."

Allen glanced at her in feigned alarm.

"What do you want to do--stampede the bunch?"

Before she could answer, the approach of a horse attracted the attention of the group.

"There's Jack, now!" cried Sage-brush, in tones which plainly showed his relief; "no, it ain't," he added reflectively, "he rode his pacin' mare, and that's a trottin' horse."

The cry of the rider was heard quieting his mount. Allen recognized the voice. "It's Slim Hoover," he cried.

Polly clapped her hands, and said mischievously to Sage-brush: "Now you'll see me makin' goo-goo eyes to somebody besides Bud Lane. I ain't a-going to be the only girl in Pinal County Slim Hoover ain't set up to."

"An' shied off from," added Sage-brush, a little nettled by Polly's overlooking him as a subject for flirtation. "But what's Slim doin' over this way?"

"Come to Jack's weddin', of course," replied Polly, adding complacently: "And probably projectin' a hitch-up of his own."

Slim ran around the corner of the house directly into the crowd, who seized him before he could recover from his surprise, and proceeded to haze him, to their intense delight and the Sheriff's embarrassment, for he knew that Polly was somewhere near, enjoying his discomfiture. Polly waited until her victim was fully ready for her particular form of torture. The reception of

the cowboys was crude to her refined form of making the fat Sheriff uncomfortable.

With the velvety cruelty of a flirt she held out her hand, saying: "Hello, Slim."

The Sheriff flushed under his tan. The red crept up the back of his neck to his ears. He awkwardly took off his hat. With a bow and a scrape he greeted her: "Howdy, Miss Polly, howdy." Meantime he shook her hand until she winced from the heartiness of the grip.

"What's the news?" she asked, as she slowly straightened out her fingers one by one.

"There's been a killin' over Florence way," announced the Sheriff, putting on his hat and becoming an officer of the law with duty to perform.

"Who is the misfortunate?" asked Sage-brush, as they gathered about Hoover and listened intently.

Murder in Arizona was a serious matter, and punishment was meted out to the slayer or he was freed by his fellow citizens. Far from courts of justice and surrounded by men to whom death was often merely an incident in a career of crime, the settlers were forced to depend upon themselves to keep peace on the border. They acted quickly, but never hastily. Judgment followed quickly on conviction. Their views were broad, and rarely were their decisions wrong.

"'Ole Man' Terrill," replied the Sheriff. "Happened about ten this mornin'. Some man caught him alone in the railroad-station and blowed his head half-off."

"Do tell!" was Allen's exclamation.

"Yep," continued the Sheriff. "He must have pulled a gun on the fellow. He put up some sort of a fight, as the room is some mussed up."

"Robbery?" queried Polly, with wide-open eyes.

"That's what!" answered Slim, turning to her. "He had three thousan' dollars pinned in his vest--county money for salaries. You know how he toted his wad around with him, defyin' man or the devil to get it 'way from him? Well, some one who was both man an' devil was too much for him."

"Who found him?"

"I did myself. Went over around noon after the money. Didn't stop to go back to town fer a posse. Trail was already too cold. Could tell it was a man that rode a pacin' horse."

His auditors looked at each other, striving to remember who of their acquaintance rode a pacing horse. Sage-brush Charley shook

his head. "Nobody down this way, 'ceptin', of course, the boss, rides a pacer. Must be one of the Lazy K outfit, I reckon."

"Most likely," said the Sheriff; "he struck out south, probably to throw me off scent. Then he fell in with two other men, and this balled me up. I lost one of the tracks, but follered the other two round Sweetwater Mesa, till I came where they rode into the river. Of course I couldn't follow the trail any farther at that p'int, so, bein' as I was near Uncle Jim's, I rode over fer help to look along both banks an' pick up the trail wherever it comes out of the river. Sorry I must break up yer fun, boys, but some o' yuh must come along with me. Duty's duty. I want Sage-brush, anyhow, as I s'pose I can't ask fer Jack Payson."

Sage-brush pulled a long face. At any other time he would have jumped at the chance of running to earth the dastardly murderers of his old friend Terrill. But in the matter of this, his first experience a wedding, he had tickled his palate so long with the sweets of anticipation that he could not bear to forgo the culminating swallow of realization.

"I don't see why I shouldn't be let off as well as Jack," he grumbled; "our cases are similar. You see it's my first weddin'," explained the foreman to the sheriff.

The other cowboys howled with delight. The humor of the situation caught their fancy, and they yelled a chorus of protestation in Hoover's ears. In this Colonel Allen joined.

"Don't spile the weddin'," he pleaded. "This event has already rounded up the Sweetwater outfit fer yuh, an' saved yuh more time than you'll lose by waitin' till it's over. Then we'll all jine yuh."

Hoover commanded silence, and, rolling a cigarette, gravely considered the proposition. He realized that the murderers should be followed up at once, but that if he forced the cowboys by the legal power exercised to forego the pleasure they had been anticipating so greatly, they would not be so keen in pursuit as if they had first "given the boss his send-off." The considerations being equal, or, as he put it, "hoss an' hoss," it seemed to him wise to submit to Allen's proposition, backed as it was by the justice of his plan that the occasion of the wedding had already saved valuable time in assembling the posse. He assented, therefore, but, to maintain the dignity of his office and control of the situation, with apparent reluctance.

"Well, hurry up the sacreements an' ceremonies, then, an' the minute the preacher ties the knot, every man uv yuh but Jack an' the parson an' Uncle Jim gits on his boss an' folluhs me. I'll wait out in the corral."

At this there was another storm of expostulation, led this time by Allen. Of course Hoover was to come to the wedding, and be its guest of honor. "You shall be the first to wish Jack and Echo lucky" said Allen. "That means you'll be the next one to marry."

The ruddy-faced Sheriff blushed to the roots of his auburn hair.

"Much obliged, but I ain't fixed up fer a weddin'," and he looked down at his travel-stained breeches tucked in riding-boots white with alkali-dust, and felt of his buttonless waistcoat and gingham shirt open at the throat, with the bandanna handkerchief his neck in lieu of both collar and tie.

Polly assured him that he would do very well as he was, that for her part she "wouldn't want no better-dressed man than he to be present at her wedding, not even the feller she was goin' to be hitched up to;" whereat Slim Hoover was greatly set at ease.

Polly was bounding up the piazza steps to tell Echo of the accession to her party, when Hoover held up his hand. A terrifying suggestion had flashed through his mind.

"Hold on a minute!" he exclaimed, and, turning to Allen, he asked anxiously: "Does this yere guest of honor haf to kiss the bride?"

The question was so foreign to the serious topic which had just been under discussion that everyone laughed in relief of the nervous tension.

Allen's fun-loving nature at once bubbled to the surface. With an air of assumed anger he said to the Sheriff: "Of course; every guest has to do it." Then, turning to the cowboys, he asked: "Is there any one as holds out strong objection to kissin' my daughter?"

"Not me," laughed Sage-brush, "I'm here to go the limit."

"I'm an experienced kisser, I am," said Parenthesis, "I don't lose no chance at practise."

"I'll take two, please," simpered Fresno.

Show Low interrupted the general sally which followed this remark, saying: "I strings my chips along with Fresno."

"Slim's afraid of females!" drawled Polly provokingly.

"Oh, thunder!" exclaimed Slim to Polly. "No, I ain't, nothin' of the sort. I'm a peaceful man, I am. I never likes to start no trouble."

"Get out, what's one kiss?" laughed Allen.

"I've seen a big jack-pot of trouble opened by chippin' in just one kiss," wisely remarked the Sheriff.

Sage-brush, at this point, announced decisively: "The bride has got to be kissed."

Slim tried to break through the group and enter the house,

thinking that by making such a move he would divert their attention, and that in the excitement of the wedding he could avoid kissing the bride, an ordeal which to him was more terrible than facing the worst gun-fighter in Arizona.

"I deputize you to do the kissin' for me," he said to Parenthesis, who had laid his hand shoulder to detain him.

"No, siree," the cowboy replied. "Every man does his own kissin' in this game." Slim half-turned as if undecided. Suddenly he turned on his heel, started for the corral. "I'll wait outside," he shouted.

"No, you don't!" cried his companions. He turned to face a semicircle of drawn revolvers. He looked from one man to another, as if puzzled what move to make next. Allen was annoyed by the sheriff's actions, taking it as an insult that he would not kiss his daughter, although he had started to twit the Sheriff in the beginning.

"You ain't goin' to insult me and mine that way. No man sidesteps kissin' one of my kids," he said angrily.

Slim was plaintively apologetic: "I ain't kissed a female since I was a yearlin'."

"Time you started," snapped Polly.

"You kiss the bride, or I take it pussenel," said Allen, thoroughly aroused.

"Well, if you put it that way, I'll do it," gasped Slim, in desperation.

The agreement restored the boys to their good nature.

"You will have to put blinders on me, though, and back me up," cautioned Hoover.

"We'll hog-tie you and sit on your head," laughed Sage-brush, as the guests entered the house.

CHAPTER VI A Tangled Web

After fording Sweetwater River several times to throw pursuit off the track, Buck McKee and Bud Lane entered an arroyo to rest their mounts and hold council as to their future movements. During the flight both had been silent; McKee was busy revolving plans for escape in his mind, and Bud was brooding over the tragic ending of the lawless adventure into which he had been led by his companion. When McKee callously informed him that the agent had been killed in the encounter, Bud was too horrified to speak. A dry sob arose in his throat at the thought of his old friend lying dead, all alone, in the station. His first impulse was to turn back to Florence and surrender himself to the

Sheriff. Had this entailed punishment of himself alone, he would have done it but he still retained a blind loyalty in his associate and principal in the crime. Murder, it seemed, was to be expected when one took the law in his own hands to right an injustice. He didn't clearly understand it. It was his first experience with a killing. The heartlessness of McKee both awed and horrified him. Evidently the half-breed was used to such actions. It appeared to be entirely justified in his code. So Bud followed in dull silence the masterful man who had involved him in the fearful deed.

When they dismounted, however, his pent-up emotion burst forth.

"You said there would be no killing," he gasped, passing his hand wearily across his forehead as if to wipe out the memory of the crime.

"Well, what did the old fool pull his gun for?" grumbled McKee petulantly, as if Terrill was the aggressor in the encounter.

Bud threw himself wearily on the ground.

"I'd give the rest of my life to undo to-day's work," he groaned, speaking more to himself than to his companion.

McKee heard him. His anger began to arise. If Bud weakened detection was certain. Flight back to Texas must be started without delay. If he could strengthen the will of the boy either by promise of reward or fear of punishment, the chances of detection would lessen as the days passed.

"And that would be about twenty-four hours if you don't keep quiet. Why didn't he put up his hands when I hollered? He starts to wrestle and pull gun, and I had to nail him." McKee shuddered spite of his bravado.

Pulling himself together with an apparent effort, he continued: "We'll hold the money for a spell--not spend a cent of it till this thing blows over--they'll never get us. Here, we'll divide it."

"Keep it all. I never want to touch a penny of it," said Bud earnestly, moving along the ground to place a greater distance between him and the murderer.

"Thanks. But you don't git out of your part of the hold-up that easy. Take your share, or I'll blow it into you," said McKee, pulling his revolver.

Bud, with an effort, arose and walked over to Buck. With clenched fists, in agonized tones, he cried: "Shoot, if you want to. I wish I'd never seen you--you dragged me into this--you made me your accomplice in a murder."

McKee looked at him in amazement. This phase of human character was new to him, trained as he been on the border, where men rarely suffered remorse and still more rarely displayed it.

"Shucks! I killed him--you didn't have no hand in it," answered Buck. "This ain't my first killin'. I guess Buck McKee's pretty well known in some sections. I took all the chances. I did the killin. You git half. Now, brace up and take yer medicine straight."

"But I didn't want to take the money for myself," replied Bud, as if to soothe his conscience. "Oh! Buck, why didn't you let me alone?" he continued, as the thought of his position again overwhelmed him.

Buck gasped at the shifting of the full blame upon his shoulders.

"Well, I'll be darned!" he muttered. "You make me sick, Kid." His voice rose in anger and disgust. "Why, to hear you talk, one would think you was the only one had right feelin's. I'm goin' to take my share and start a decent life. I'm goin' back to Texas an' open a saloon. You take your half, marry your gal, and settle down right here. 'Ole Man' Terrill's dead; nothin' will bring him back, an' you might as well get the good o' the money. It's Slim Hoover's, anyhow. If Jack Payson can marry your brother Dick's gal on Dick's money--fer there's no hope o' stoppin' that now--you can cut Slim out with Polly, on Slim's salary. Aw, take the money!" and McKee pressed half of the bills into Bud's lax fingers.

The young man's hand closed upon them mechanically. A vague thought that he might some day make restitution conspired with McKee's insidious appeal to his hatred and jealousy to induce him to retain the blood-money, and he thrust it within an inside pocket of his loose waistcoat.

"Now," said McKee, thoroughly satisfied that he had involved Bud in the crime too deeply for him to confess his share in it, "we'll shake hands, and say 'adios.' Slim Hoover's probably on our track by this time, but I reckon he'll be some mixed in the trail around the mesa, and give the job up as a bad one when he reaches the river. I'll show up on the Lazy K, where the whole outfit will swear I've been fer two days, if Hoover picks on me as one of the men he's been follerin'. You're safe. Nobody'd put killin' anybody on to you, let alone your ole frien' Terrill.

Why, yuh ain't a man yet, Bud, though I don't it to discourridge yuh. You've made a start, an' some day yuh won't think no more'n me of killin' a feller what stan's in yer way. I shouldn't be so turribly surprised if Jack Payson got what's comin' to him someday. But what have you got there, Bud?" he inquired, as he saw the young man holding a letter he had withdrawn from the pocket into which he had put the bills.

"Letter I got in Florence yesterday when I was too full to read it," said Bud. He opened it. "Why, it's from Polly!" he exclaimed, "it's an invite--by God! it's an invite to Jack an' Echo's wedding! It's today! That damned scoundrel has hurried the thing up for fear Dick will get back in time to stop it! Buck McKee, I believe you're right! I could kill Jack Payson with no

more pity than I would a rattler or Gila monster!"

At this exhibition of hatred by his companion, a new thought flashed suddenly through the satanic mind of the half-breed. It involved an entire change of his plans, but the devilish daring of the conception was irresistible.

"Say," he broke in, with seeming irrelevance, "don't Payson ride a pacin' mare?"

"Yes," answered Bud, "what of it?"

"Oh, nothin'," said McKee; "it jus' struck me as sorter funny. PAYSON and PACIN', don't you see."

Bud was mystified. Had his companion gone daft?

McKee saw instantly that it would be very easy to fix the charge of murdering the station-agent upon Payson. The ranchman had evidently left the station a short time before the murder, and had gone straight south to the Sweetwater. Unless it had become confused with their own tracks, the trail would be a plain one, owing to the fact that it was made by a pacing horse, and the pursuit would undoubtedly follow this.

Payson rode the only pacing horse in the Sweetwater and Bar One outfits, and it was certain to come to light, from Terrill's receipts, that he had been with the agent about the time of the killing. The motive for the robbery would be evident. Payson was in need of three thousand dollars to pay off the mortgage on his ranch.

McKee said to Bud: "I've changed my mind. I think I'll see a little fun before I break for Texas. I'll go with you to the weddin'."

"But you ain't got no invite," objected Bud.

"Oh, I reckon they'll take me along on yours. I know too much fer Payson to object to me too strenuous."

They rode up to Allen Hacienda shortly after Slim Hoover had arrived. They could hear the merriment of the wedding-guests in the kitchen. Loud laughter was punctuated by the popping of corks, and McKee, who rode in advance of Bud, distinguished the voice of the Sheriff in expostulation against the general raillery concentrated upon him.

The half-breed grinned wolfishly. It was evident that the bloodhound of the law had tracked the supposed murderer just as the real criminal had conjectured and desired.

Polly ran out on the piazza. She saw the man whom she regarded as her lover's evil genius. As he greeted her ingratiatingly: "Howdy, Miss Polly," she replied sharply:

"You ain't got no invite to this weddin'."

"I come with my friend Bud," he explained, with an elaborate bow.

"I didn't see you, Bud," answered Polly slightly mollified, as she crossed the door-yard to shake hands with her sweetheart. Buck offered her his hand, but she ignored him. McKee shrugged his shoulders, and started for the house.

"Bud, he's some cast down because it's not his weddin'," was McKee's parting shot at the young couple. "I 'low I'll go in and join the boys. Excuse me."

"With pleasure," coldly replied the girl.

The half-breed ignored the sarcasm and, answering innocently, "Much obliged," he entered the house.

Polly turned on Bud, displaying her resentment. "You an' him always kick up the devil when you're together. What did you bring him along fer?" she demanded.

"It's his last chance to see any fun around here; he's leavin' for Texas," explained Bud.

"Fer how long?"

"Fer good."

"Fer our good, you mean. There's too many of his kind comin' into this country. Did you hear about 'Ole Man' Terrill?"

Bud did not wait for her to explain, but nervously answered: "They told us about it in Florence when we were coming through, We've been at the Lazy K."

"Wasn't it dreadful?" rattled on Polly. "Slim's here--the boys are goin' to turn out with him after the weddin' to see if they can ketch the feller who did the killin'."

Bud paled as he heard the news. To conceal his distress he moved toward the door. Anywhere to get away from the girl to whom he feared he would betray himself. "I'll join 'em," he huskily answered.

Polly, however, could see no reason for his evident haste to leave her.

She felt hurt, but thought his actions were due to her scolding him for being with McKee.

"You ain't ever ast me how I look," she inquired, seeking to detain him.

"You look fine," complimented Bud perfunctorily.

"W'en a feller ain't seen a feller in a week, seems like a feller ought to brace up and start something," replied Polly, in an

injured tone.

Bud smiled in spite of his fears. Catching the girl in his arms, he kissed her, and said: "I was a-waitin' for the chance."

Polly disengaged herself from his embrace, and sighed contentedly. "That's something like it. What's the use of bein' engaged to a feller if you can't have all the trimmin's that goes with it. You look as if you wasn't too happy."

Bud pulled himself together with an effort. He realized that if he did not show more interest in the girl and the wedding he might be suspected of connection with the murder.

He trumped up an explanation of his moodiness. "Well, what call have I to be happy? Ain't I lost my job?"

"Yes, but that's because you were hot-headed, gave your boss too much lip. But everything will come out all right. Jack says--"

"Has that low-down liar an' thief been comin' it over you, Polly? Did he tell you how he gave the place he promised me to Sage-brush?"

"That wasn't until you gave him slack, Bud. I'm sure he ain't a thief; why--"

"Thief, of course he is, an' a blacker-hearted one than the man that killed Terrill. Ain't he going to steal my brother Dick's girl this very night?"

"But Dick is dead," expostulated Polly.

"Dick ain't dead; I know it--that is," he stammered, "I feel it in my bones he ain't dead. An' Jack feels it, too; that's why he's hurried up this weddin'."

"But your own friend, Buck McKee, saw Dick just before the Paches killed him."

"But not after it. An' Buck now thinks the Rurales may have come up in time to save him."

"Seems to me if that's so he has had time enough since then to write," objected Polly. who was, nevertheless, impressed by Bud's vehemence.

"How do you know that he has not written?"

Polly could only gasp. These accusations were coming too fast for her to answer.

"You can't tell what a man might do in a case like that. Perhaps Dick's 'way in the mountains, away from the railroad, prospectin' down in the Ghost Range, where he has been tryin' to locate the lost lode. There's lots of reasons for his not writing to Echo. But Echo doesn't seem to mind. A year an' a half is enough to

mend any woman's heart."

"Now, you--" began Polly, who was growing angry under the charges which were being heaped on her two best friends by the overwrought boy.

Bud would not let her finish, but cried: "Echo never loved him. If she did she would not be acting like she is goin' to to-night."

Rushing to Echo's defense Polly answered: "She may or may not have loved Dick Lane, but I know that she loves Jack Payson now with all her heart and, even if the 'Paches did not get your brother, he's as dead to her as if they had."

Polly was startled and confused by Bud's accusations. Accordingly, it was a relief to her when Payson appeared on the scene. They had been so interested in their conversation that they did not hear him ride up to the house. "Hello, Polly! Hello, Bud!" were his cordial greetings, for he was determined to ignore his former employee's hostility. Bud did not answer, but looked moodily on the ground.

To Eastern eyes Payson's wedding-attire would appear most incongruous. About his waist was strapped a revolver. His riding-trousers, close-fitting and corded, were buttoned over the calves of his legs. Soft, highly polished leather boots reached to his knees. His shirt was of silk, deeply embroidered down the front and at the collar. His jacket gave him ample breathing-room about the chest, but tapered at the waist and clung closely over the hips. He wore a sombrero and a knotted silk handkerchief. His face was deeply sunburned, except a spot shaped like crescent just below the hairline on the forehead, which was protected from the sun by the hat and the shade of the brim. A similar line of fairer skin ran around the edge of the scalp, beginning over the ears. His hair shaded the upper part of his neck from the sun's rays. When his hair was trimmed the untanned part showed as plainly as if painted. It is the mark of the plainsman in a city or on a holiday.

"Well, it's about time that you got here," said Polly, with a sigh of relief. "Where have you been?"

"I stopped over to Sam Terrill's to see about something that I ordered from Kansas City. Then I had to go back to my ranch--"

Bud started guiltily. Forgetting his determination to ignore Payson, he asked anxiously. "You didn't see Terrill, did you?"

"Oh, yes. Why do you ask?"

Polly laid her hand on Payson's arm and told him briefly of the shooting of Terrill.

"Who shot him?" he asked, when she had finished.

"They don't know--he was robbed of a pile of money--Slim Hoover's

just rode over to get a posse," she replied, looking toward the door. At this bit of information Payson became anxious about the plans for his wedding. The ceremony was uppermost in his mind at the time.

"Well, he can get one after the wedding." Then he asked: "Is the minister here yet?"

Polly laughingly replied: "You're feelin' pretty spry now, but you'll be as meek as a baby calf in a little while. In this section a bridegroom is treated worse than a tenderfoot."

Payson smiled. He knew he was in for a thorough hazing by the boys. "That's all right. I'll get back at you some day--when you and Bud--"

Polly interrupted him with a remark about minding his own business.

Bud avoided entering into the conversation. He had walked toward the door and was standing on the steps when he answered for Polly.

"Looks as if you're chances of gettin' even with us is a long way off," he said. Turning, he entered the house, to join the other guests who, by the noise, were enjoying Allen's importations from Tucson to the bottom of every glass.

Polly looked after Bud, smiling quizzically. "Bud's mighty hopeful, ain't he? Ain't you happy?"

"You bet! Don't I look it?" cried Jack, rubbing his hands. "Never thought I could be so happy. A fellow doesn't get married every day in the week."

"Not unless he lives in Chicago; I hear it's the habit there," answered Polly.

"The sweetest girl in the Territory--" began Jack.

"You bet she is," Polly broke in. "If you just want to keep her lovin' and lovin' you--all you've got to do is to treat her white and play square with her."

"Play square with her," thought Payson. Was he playing square with her? He knew that he was not, but the chance of losing her was too great for him to risk.

"For if you ain't on the level with Echo Allen, well--you might as well crawl out of camp, that's the kind of girl she is," Polly exclaimed loyally.

CHAPTER VII Josephine Opens the Sluices

Entering the living-room, Bud found Echo surrounded by several

girls from Florence and the neighboring ranches, who were driving her almost distracted with their admiring attentions, for she was greatly disturbed about her lover's inexplicable absence. Had she been free from the duties of hospitality, she would have leaped on her horse and gone in search of him.

Echo's wedding-attire would seem as incongruous as Jack's to the eyes of an Easterner, yet it was entirely suited to the circumstances, for the couple intended, as soon as they were married, to ride to a little hunting-cabin of Jack's in the Tortilla Mountains, where they would spend their honeymoon.

She was dressed in an olive-green riding-habit, which she had brought from the East. The skirt was divided, and reached just below the knee; her blouse, of lighter material, and brown in color, was loose, allowing free play for her arms and shoulders. High riding-boots were laced to the knee. A sombrero and riding-gloves lay on the table ready to complete her costume.

Bud coldly acknowledged Echo's affectionate and happy greeting, and curtly informed her that Jack had arrived.

She rushed out of doors with a cry of joy.

Running across the courtyard toward her lover, who awaited her with outstretched arms, she began:

"Well, this is a nice time, you outrageous--" when Polly stopped her with a mock-serious look. "Wait a minute--wait a minute" (the girl drawled as if reining in a too eager horse) "don't commence calling love-names before you get the hitch--time enough after. He has been actin' up something scandalous with me."

Jack threw up his hands in protest, hastily denying any probable charge that the tease might make. "Why, I haven't been saying a word!" he cried.

Polly laughed as she ran to the door.

"No, you haven't," she answered mockingly, as one agrees with a child whose feelings have been hurt. "He's only been tellin' me he loved--" Pausing an instant, she pointed at Echo, ending her sentence with a shouted "you."

With her hand on Jack's shoulder, Echo said: "Polly, you are a flirt. You've too many strings to your bow."

"You mean I've too many beaux to my string!" laughingly answered the girl.

"You'll have Slim Hoover and Bud Lane shooting each other up all on your account," chided Echo.

"Nothing of the kind," pouted Polly. "Can't a girl have friends? But I know what you two are waiting for?"

"What?" asked Jack.

"You want me to vamose. I'm hep. I'll vam."

And Polly ran into the kitchen to tell the men that the bridegroom had arrived, but couldn't be seen until the bride was through with an important interview with him. So she hustled them all into the living-room, where the girls were.

This room was a long and low apartment, roughly plastered. The heavy ceiling-beams, hewn with axes, were uncovered, giving an old English effect, although this was not striven for, but made under the stress of necessity. The broad windows were trellised with vines, through which filtered the sunshine. A cooling evening breeze stirred the leaves lazily. The chairs were broad and comfortable--the workmanship of the monks of the neighboring mission. In the corners stood squat, earthen water-jars of Mexican molding. On the adobe walls were hung trophies of the hunt; war-bonnets and the crudely made adornments of the Apaches.

Navajo blankets covered the window-seats, and were used as screens for sets of shelves built into the spaces between the windows.

Polly carried in on a tray a large bowl of punch surrounded by glasses and gourds. This was received with riotous demonstrations. She placed it in the center of a table made of planks laid on trestles, and assisted by the other girls, served the men liberally from the bowl.

The guests showed the effects of outdoor life and training. Their gestures were full and free. The tones of their voices were high-pitched, but they spoke more slowly than their Eastern cousins, as if feeling the necessity, even when confined, of making every word carry. No one lolled in his seat, but sat upright, as if still having the feel of the saddle under him.

Toward women in all social gatherings, the cowboys act with exaggerated chivalry, but, as Sage-brush would describe it, they "herd by their lonesome." There is none of the commingling of sexes seen in the East. At a dance the girls sit at one end of the room, the men group themselves about the doorway until the music strikes up. Then each will seize his partner after the boldest has made the first move. When the dance-measure ends the cowboy will rarely escort partner to her seat, but will leave her to find her way back to her chum, while he moves sheepishly back to the doorway, to be received by his fellows with slaps on the back and loud jests. At table cowboys carry on little conversation with the girls. They talk amongst themselves, but at the women. The presence of the girls leads them to play many pranks on one another. The ice is long in breaking, for their habitual reserve is not easily worn off. Later in the evening this shyness is less marked.

As Jack and Echo entered the doorway, Parenthesis had arisen from his seat at the head of table and was beginning: "Fellow citizens--"

Confused cries of "Sit down," "Let him talk!" greeted him.

Sage-brush held up his hand for silence: "Go ahead, Parenthesis," he cried encouragingly.

Parenthesis climbed on a chair and put a foot on the table. This was too much for the orderly soul of Mrs. Allen. "Take your dirty feet off my tablecloth!" she commanded, making a threatening move toward the offender.

Allen restrained her, and Fresno caused Parenthesis to subside by yelling: "Get down offen that table, you idiot. There's the bride an' groom comin' in behind you. We CAN see 'em through yer legs, but we don't like that kin' of a frame."

Jack had slipped his arm about Echo's waist. She was holding his hand, smiling at the exuberance of their guests. Buck McKee, who had been drinking freely, staggered to his feet and hiccoughed: "Here, now, this,yere don't go--this spoonin' business--there ain't goin' to be no mush and milk served out before the weddin'--"

"Will you shut up?" admonished Slim Hoover.

"No, siree," cried the belligerent McKee. "There ain't no man here can shut me up. I'm Buck McKee, I am, and when I starts in on a weddin'-festivities--I deal--"

"This is one game you are not in on," answered Jack quietly, feeling that he would have to take the lead in the settlement of the unfortunate interruption of the fun.

"That's all right, Jack," McKee began, holding out his hand--"let bygones--"

Jack was in no mood to parley with the offender. McKee had not been invited to the wedding. The young bridegroom knew that if the first offense were overlooked it would only encourage him, and he would make trouble all evening. Moreover, he disliked Buck because of his evil habits and ugly record.

"You came to this weddin' without an invite," claimed Jack.

"I'm here," he growled.

"You're not wanted."

"What?" shouted McKee, paling with anger.

Turning to his friends, speaking calmly and paying no attention to the aroused desperado, Jack said: "Boys, you all know my objection to this man. Dick Lane caught him spring before last slitting the tongue of one of Uncle Jim's calves."

"It's a lie!" shouted McKee, pulling his revolver and attempting to level it at his accuser. Hoover was too quick for him. Catching him by the wrist, he deftly forced him to drop the

muzzle toward the floor.

With frightened cries the girls huddled in a corner. The other cowboys upset chairs, springing to their feet, drawing revolvers half-way from holsters as they did so.

Hoover had pressed his thumb into the back of McKee's hand, forcing him to open his fingers and drop his gun on the table. Picking it up, Hoover snapped the weapon open, emptied the cylinders of the cartridges.

Jack made no move to defend himself. He was aware his friends could protect him.

"That'll do," he said to the raging, disarmed puncher. "You can go, Buck. When I want you in any festivities, I'll send a special invite to you."

"I'm sure much obliged," sneered McKee, making his way toward the door.

"Here's your gun," cried Slim, tossing the weapon toward him.

McKee caught the weapon, muttering "Thanks."

"It needs cleaning," sneered the Sheriff.

Turning at the doorway, McKee said; "I ain't much stuck on weddin's, anyway." Looking at Jack, he continued threateningly: "Next time we meet it'll be at a little swaree of my own."

"Get," was Jack's laconic and ominous command.

With assumed carelessness, McKee answered: "I'm a-gettin'. Well, gents, I hopes you all'll enjoy this yere pink tea. Say, Bud, put a piece of weddin'-cake in your pocket for me. I wants to dream on it."

"Who brought him here?" asked Jack, facing his guests.

"I did," answered Bud defiantly.

"You might have known better," was Jack's only comment.

"I'm not a-sayin' who's to come and go. This ain't none of my weddin'."

Polly stopped further comment by laying her hand over his mouth and slipping into the seat beside him.

"Well, let it go at that," said Jack, closing the incident.

He rejoined Echo as he spoke. The guests reseated themselves. Mrs. Allen laid her hand on Jack's shoulder and said: "Just the same, it ain't right and proper for you to be together before the ceremony without a chaperonie."

"Nothin' that's right nice is ever right proper," laughed Slim.

"Well 'it ain't the way folks does back East," replied Mrs. Allen tartly, glaring at the Sheriff.

"Blast the East," growled Allen. "We does things in our own way out here."

With a mischievous smile, Slim glanced at his comrades, and then solemnly observed: "Still, I hear they does make the two contractin'-parties sit off alone by themselves--"

"What for?" asked Jack.

"Why, to give them the last bit of quiet enjoyment they're goin' to have for the rest of their lives," chuckled Slim.

The cowboys laughed hilariously at the sally, but Mrs. Allen, throwing her arms about Echo's neck, burst into tears, crying: "My little girl."

"What's the use of opening up the sluices now, Josephine?"

"Let her alone, Jim," drawled Slim; "her feelin's is harrowed some, an' irrigation is what they needs most."

The outburst of tears was incomprehensible to the bridegroom. Already irritated by the McKee incident, he took affront at the display of sentiment.

"I don't want any crying at MY wedding."

"It's half my wedding," pouted Echo tearfully.

"Ain't I losin' my daughter," sobbed Mrs. Allen.

"Ain't you getting my mother's son?" snapped Jack.

The men howled with glee at the rude badinage which only called forth a fresh burst of weeping on the part of Mrs. Allen, in which the girls began show symptoms of joining.

Polly sought to soothe the trouble by pushing Jack playfully to one side, and saying: "Oh, stop it all. Look here, Echo Allen, you know your hair ain't fixed yet."

"An' the minister due here at any minute," added Mrs. Allen.

"Come along, we will take charge of you now," ordered Polly. The girls gathered in a group about the bride, bustling and chattering, telling her all men were brutes at time and, looking at the fat Sheriff, who blushed to the roots of his hair at the charge, that "Slim Hoover was the worst of the lot." Mrs. Allen pushed them away, and again fell weeping on Echo's shoulder. "Hold on now, They ain't a soul goin' to do nothin' for her except her mother," she whimpered.

"There she goes again," said Jack in disgust.

"He's goin' to take my child away from me," wailed the mother.

Tears were streaming down Echo's cheek. "Don't cry, mother," she wept.

"No, no, don't cry," echoed the girls.

"It's all for the best," began Polly.

"It's all for the best, it's all for the best," chorused the group.

"Well, I'll be--" gasped Jack.

"Jack Payson you just ought to be ashamed of yourself," said Polly, stamping her foot. "You nasty, mean old thing," she threw in for good measure.

Mrs. Allen led Echo from the room. The girls followed, crying "You nasty, mean old thing to the unfortunate bridegroom.

The cowboys enjoyed the scene immensely. It was a bit of human comedy, totally unexpected. First they imitated the weeping women, and then laughed uproariously at Jack.

"Did you ever see such darned carryings on," said the bridegroom, in disgust. "What have I done?"

"Shucks! All mothers is like that," remarked Allen sympathetically. "They fuss if their girls marry and they fuss if they don't. Why, my ma carried on something scandalous when Josephine roped me."

All of the men chuckled except Jack.

"I'm appointed a committees" continued the old rancher, "to sit up with you till the fatal moment.

"I'm game," responded Jack grimly. "I know what's coming, but I won't squeal."

"You'll git all that's a-comin' to you," grinned Allen.

Slim had maneuvered until he reached the door blocking Jack's way. As the bridegroom started to leave the room he took his hand, and with an assumption of deep dejection and sorrow bade him "Good-bye."

"Oh, dry up!" laughed Jack, pushing the Sheriff aside. Halting, he requested: "One thing I want to understand right now, if you're goin' to fling any old boots after me remove the spurs."

"This yere's a sure enough event, an' I'm goin' to tap the barrel--an' throw away the bung. Wow!" shouted Sage-brush.

CHAPTER VIII

The Sky Pilot

With the waves of immigration which have rolled Westward from the more populous East, the minister of the gospel has always been in the van. Often he combined the functions of the school-teacher with the duties of the medical missionary. Wherever a dozen families had settled within a radius of a hundred miles, the representative of a church was soon to follow. He preached no creed. His doctrines were as wide as the horizon. Living in the open air, preaching to congregations gathered from the ends of the country, dealing with men more unconventional than immoral, his sermons were concerned with the square deal rather than with dogma. His influences were incalculable. He made ready the field for the reapers who gathered the glory with the advance of refinement. On the frontier he married the children, buried the dead, consoled the mourners, and rejoiced with those upon whom fortune smiled. His hardships were many and his rewards nothing. Of all the fields of human endeavor which built up the West, the ministry is the only one in which the material returns have not been commensurate with the labor expended.

The Reverend Samuel Price was the representative of the Christian army in Pinal County, Arizona, at the time of our story. He was long and lank, narrow in the chest, with sloping shoulders. Even life on the plains could not eradicate the scholarly droop. His trousers were black, and they bagged at the knees. When riding, his trousers would work up about his calves, showing a wide expanse of white socks. For comfort he wore an alpaca coat, which hung loosely about him, and, for the dignity of his profession, the only boiled shirt in the county, with a frayed collar and white string-tie.

The Reverend Mr. Price was liked by the settlers. He never interfered with what they considered their relaxations, and he had the saving grace of humor.

The guests were performing a scalp-dance about the table when he entered the room. For a tom-tom, Parenthesis was beating a bucket with a gourd, and emitting strange cries with each thump. The noise and shouts confused the minister. As he was blundering among the dancers, they fell upon him with war-whoops, slapping him on the back and crushing his straw hat over his ears.

Slim was the first to recognize the minister. He dashed into the group, and, swinging several aside, cried to the others to desist.

"Pardon me, but do I intrude upon a scalp-dance?" smilingly asked the parson.

"You sure have, Mr. Price," laughed Slim. "We hain't got to the scalpin'-part yet, but we're fixin' to dance off Payson's scalp to-night."

Peering at him with near-sighted eyes, Mr. Price extended his

hand, saying: "Ah, Mr. Hoover, our sheriff, is it not?"

Slim wrung the parson's hand until the preacher winced. Hiding his discomfort, he slowly straightened out his fingers with a painful grin. Slim had not noticed that he had hurt the parson by the heartiness of his greeting. With a gesture he lined up the cowboys for introduction.

"Yes, sir, the boys call me Slim because I ain't." Pointing to the first one in the group, he exclaimed: "This is Parenthesis."

Mr. Price looked at the awkwardly bowing cowboy in amazement. The name was a puzzle to him. He could not grasp the application. "The editor of the Kicker," explained Slim, "called him that because of his legs bein' built that way." Mr. Price was forced to smile in spite of his efforts to be polite. The editor had grasped the most striking feature of the puncher's physical characteristics for a label.

Parenthesis beamed on the minister. "I was born on horseback," he replied.

"That fellow there with a front tooth is Show Low," began Slim, speaking like a lecturer in a freak-show. "The one without a front tooth is Fresno, a California product. This yere chap with the water-dob hair is Sage-brush Charley. It makes him sore when you call him plain Charley."

"Charley bein' a Chink name," supplemented its owner.

Silence fell over the group, for they did not know what was the proper thing to do next. A minister was to be respected, and not to be made one of them. He must take the lead in the conversation. Mr. Price was at a loss how to begin. He had not recovered fully from the roughness of his welcome, so Slim took the lead again.

"I heard you preach once up to Florence," he announced, to the profound astonishment of his hearers.

"Indeed," politely responded Mr. Price, feeling the futility of making any further observations. He feared to fall into some trap. The answers made by the boys did not seem to fit particularly well with what he expected and was accustomed to. The parson could not make out whether the boys were joking with him, or whether their replies were unconscious humor on their part.

"Yep, I lost an election bet, and had to go to church," answered Slim, in all seriousness.

The cowboys laughed, and Mr. Price lamely replied: "Oh, yes, I see."

"It was a good show," continued Slim, doing his best to appear at ease. The frantic corrections of his companions only made him flounder about the more.

"Excuse me," he apologized, "I mean that I enjoyed it."

"Do you recall the subject of my discourse," inquired Mr. Price, coming to his assistance.

"Your what course?" asked Slim.

"My sermon?" answered the parson.

"Well, I should say yes," replied the Sheriff, greatly relieved to think that he was once more out of deep water. "It was about some shorthorn that jumped the home corral to maverick around loose in the alfalfa with a bunch of wild ones."

The explanation was too much for Mr. Price. Great student of the Bible as he had been, here was one lesson which he had not studied. As told by Slim, he could not recall any text or series of text from which he might have drawn similes fitted for his cowboy congregation, when he had one. "Really, I--" he began.

Slim, however, was not to be interrupted. If he stopped he never could begin again, he felt. Waving to the preacher to be silent, he continued his description: "When his wad was gone the bunch threw him down, and he had to hike for the sage-brush an' feed with the hogs on husks an' sech like winter fodder."

The minister caught the word "husks." Slim was repeating his own version of the parable of the Prodigal Son.

"Husks? Oh, the Prodigal Son," smiled Price.

"That's him," Slim sighed, with relief. "This yere feed not being up to grade, Prod he 'lows he'd pull his freight back home, square himself with the old man and start a new deal--"

Sage-brush was deeply interested in the story. Its charm had attracted him as it had scholars and outcasts alike since first told two thousand years ago on the plains of Old Judea.

"Did he stand for it?" he interrupted.

"He sure did," eloquently replied Slim, who was surprised and delighted with the great impression he was making with his experience at church. "Oh, he was a game old buck, he was. Why, the minute he sighted that there prodigious son a-limpin' across the mesa, he ran right out an' fell on his neck--"

"An' broke it," cried Fresno, slapping Sage-brush with his hat in his delight at getting at the climax of the story before Slim reached it.

The narrator cast a glance of supreme disgust at the laughing puncher. "No, what the hell!" he shouted. "He hugged him. Then he called in the neighbors, barbecued a yearlin' calf, an' give a barn-dance, with fireworks in the evenin'."

"That's all right in books," observed Sage-brush, "but if I'd made a break like that when I was a kid my old man would a fell on my neck for fair."

"That was a good story, Parson--it's straight, ain't it?" asked Slim, as a wave of doubt swept over him.

"It's gospel truth," answered the minister. "Do you know the moral of the story?"

"Sure," replied Slim. With a confidence born of deep self-assurance, Slim launched the answer: "Don't be a fatted calf."

At first his hearers did not grasp the full force of the misapplication of the parable. Mr. Price could not refrain from laughing. The others joined with him when the humor of the reply dawned upon them. Pointing scornfully at the fat Sheriff, they shouted gleefully, while Slim blushed through his tan.

"Now, if you'll kindly show me where--" began Mr. Price.

"Sure. All the liquor's in the kitchen--" said Sage-brush, expanding with hospitality.

Slim pushed Sage-brush back into his chair, and Parenthesis tapped the minister on the shoulder to distract his attention.

"Thanks. I meant to ask for a place to change clothes."

"Sure you mustn't mind Sage-brush there," apologized Parenthesis; "he's allus makin' breaks. Let me tote your war-bag. Walk this way."

"Good day, gentlemen," smiled Mr. Price. "When you are up my way, I trust you will honor my church with your presence--" adding, after a pause--"without waiting to lose an election bet."

The entrance of a Greaser to refill glasses diverted the attention of the guests until the most important function for them was performed. With "hows" and "here's to the bride," they drank the toast. Slim, as majordomo of the feast, felt it incumbent upon himself to keep the others in order. Turning angrily upon Sage-brush, he said. "Why did you tell the Sky Pilot where the liquor was?"

"I was just tryin' to do the right thing," answered Sage-brush defiantly.

"Embarrassin' us all like that. You ought to know that parsons don't hit up the gasoline--in public," scolded Slim.

Sage muttered sulkily: "I never herded with parsons none."

Parenthesis diplomatically avoided any further controversy by calling: "They're gettin' ready. Jim's got Jack in the back room tryin' to cheer him up. Boys, is everything ready for the

getaway?"

"Sage-brush, did you get that rice?" demanded Slim.

"That's so--I forgot. I couldn't get no rice though. Dawson didn't have none."

Without telling what he did get, Sage-brush ran from the room to the corral.

"I told you not to let him have anything to do with it," said Fresno, glaring at his fellow workers. Each was silent, as the accusation was general, and none had been taken into the confidence of Sage-brush and Fresno when arrangements were being made for the feast. Fresno had to blame some one, however. By this time Sage-brush had returned, carrying a bag.

"What did you get?" asked Slim.

"Corn," replied Sage-brush laconically.

"Ain't he the darndest!" Show Low expressed the disgust which the others showed.

"Why, darn it," shouted Slim, shaking his fist at the unfortunate Sage-brush, "you can't let the bride and groom hop the home ranch without chuckin' rice at 'em--it's bad medicine."

"Ain't he disgustin'!" interrupted Fresno.

"What does rice mean, anyhow?" asked the bewildered Sage-brush.

"It means something about wishin' 'em good luck, health, wealth, an' prosperity, an' all that sort of thing--it's a sign an' symbol of joy," rattled off Slim.

"Well, now, ain't there more joy in corn than in rice?" triumphantly asked Sage-brush.

Slim jerked open the top of the bag while Sage-brush stood by helplessly. "Well, the darned idiot!" he muttered, as he peered into it. "If he ain't gone and got it on the ear," he continued, as he pulled a big ear out.

"All the better," chuckled Sage-brush. "We'll chuck 'em joy in bunches."

"Don't you know that if you hit the bride with a club like this--you'll put her plumb out?" cried Slim.

Sage-brush was not cast down, however. Always resourceful, he suggested: "We'll shell some for the bride, but we'll hand Jack his in bunches."

The idea appealing to the punchers, each grabbed an ear of corn. Some brandished the ears like clubs; others aimed them like revolvers.

"I'll keep this one," said Slim, picking out an unusually large ear. "It's a .44. I'll get one of the Greasers to shell some for the bride."

The bride was arrayed in her wedding-gown. Mrs. Allen was ready for a fresh burst of weeping. The girls had assembled in the large room in which the ceremony was to be performed. Polly acted as her herald for the cowboys. Appearing in the doorway, she commanded: "Say, you folks come on and get seated."

Slim stood beside Polly as the boys marched past him. His general admonition was: "The first one you shorthorns that makes a break, I'm goin' to bend a gun over your head."

The guests grinned cheerfully as they marched past the couple.

"There's a heap of wickedness in that bunch," remarked Slim piously to the girl. Tossing a flower to him as she darted away, she cried: "You ain't none too good yourself, Slim."

"Ain't she a likely filly," mused the love-sick Sheriff. "If there's anybody that could make me good, it's her. I'm all in. If ever I get the nerve all at once--darn me if I don't ask her right out."

But Slim's courage oozed as quickly as it had arisen, and with a sigh he followed his companions to the wedding.

CHAPTER IX

What God Hath Joined Together

Dick Lane, on leaving the hospital at Chihuahua, went straight to the fortified ledge where he had made his heroic defense. As he conjectured, the renegade, McKee, had got there first, and found and made off with the buried treasure. So Dick manfully set to work to replace his lost fortune. It seemed too slow work to go to his mine and dig the gold he immediately required out of the ground, so he struck out for civilization to sell some of his smaller claims. In the course of a month, at the end of which his wanderings brought him to Tucson, he had sold enough of his holdings to give him three thousand dollars in ready cash. As he was near the Sweetwater, he resolved not to express the money to Payson, but to take it himself.

He entered the courtyard of Allen Hacienda while the wedding was taking place within. None of his friends would have recognized him. His frame was emaciated from sickness; his head was drawn back by the torture which he had suffered; he limped upon feet that had been distorted by the firebrands in McKee's hands; and his face was overgrown by an unkempt beard.

Sounds of laughter fell upon his ears as he mounted the steps. He heard Fresno shout to Slim to hurry up, as he was telling the story "about a fellow that was so tanked up he could not say "sasaparilla."

Dick halted. "There must be some sort of a party going on here," he thought to himself. "It won't do to take Echo too much by surprise. If Jack got my letter and told her, it's all right, but if it miscarried--the shock might kill her. I'll see Jack first."

Dick had ridden first to Sweetwater Ranch, but found the place deserted. The party, he mused, accounted for this. While he was planning a way to attract the attention of some one in the house, and to get Payson to the garden without letting Echo know of his presence, Sage-brush Charley, who had espied the stranger through the window, sauntered out on the porch to investigate. Every visitor to the Territory needed looking over, especially after the trouble with Buck McKee.

Sage-brush was bound that there should be no hitch at the wedding of his boss.

"Howdy," greeted Lane pleasantly. "I'm looking for Jack Payson."

"That so?" answered Sage-brush. "Who may you be?"

"I'm a friend of his."

The foreman could see no danger to come from this weak, sickly man. "Then walk right in," he invited; "he's inside."

Sage-brush was about to reenter the house, when Dick halted him with the request: "I want to see him out here--privately."

"What's the name," asked Sage-brush, his suspicions returning.

"Tell him an old friend from Mexico."

Sage-brush did not like the actions of the stranger and his secrecy. He was there to fight his boss's battles, if he had any. This was not in the contract, but it was a part read into the paper by Sage-brush.

"Say, my name's Sage-brush Charley," he cried, with a show of importance. "I'm ranch-boss for Payson. If you want to settle any old claim agin' Jack, I'm actin' as his substitoot for him this evenin'."

"On the contrary," said Lane, with a smile at Sage-brush's outbreak, "he has a claim against me."

It was such a pleasant, kindly look he gave Sage-brush, that the foreman was disarmed completely.

"I'll tell him," he said over his shoulder.

Dick mused over the changes that had occurred since he had left the region. Two years' absence from a growing country means new faces, new ranches, and the wiping out of old landmarks with the advance of population and the invasion of the railroad. He

wondered if Jack would know him with his beard. He knew--his mirror told him--that his appearance had changed greatly, and he looked twenty years older than on the day he left the old home ranch.

His trend of thought was interrupted by the entrance of Jack on the porch from the house.

"My name's Payson," Jack began hurriedly, casting a hasty glance backward into the hallway, for the ceremony was about to begin. "You want to see me?"

"Jack!" cried Dick, holding out his hand eagerly. "Jack, old man, don't you know me?" he continued falteringly, seeing no sign of recognition in his friend's eyes.

Payson gasped, shocked and startled. The man before him was a stranger in looks, but the voice--the voice was that of Dick Lane, the last man in the world he wanted to see at that moment. Frightened, almost betraying himself, he glanced at the half-open door. If Dick entered he knew Echo would be lost to him. She might love him truly, and her love for Dick might have passed away, but he knew that Echo would never forgive him for the deception that he had practised upon her.

Grasping his friend's hand weakly, he faltered, "Dick! Dick Lane!"

Jack realized he must act quickly. Some way or somehow Dick must be kept out of the house until after the marriage. Then he, Jack, must take the consequences. Dick saw his hesitation. It was not what he had expected. But something dreadful might have happened while he was away, there had been so many changes.

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked anxiously. "You got my letter? You knew I was coming?"

"Yes, yes, I know," lamely answered Jack. "But I expected notice-- you know you said--"

"I couldn't wait. Jack, I'm a rich man, thanks to you--"

"Yes, yes, that's all right," said Payson, disclaiming the praise of the man he had so grievously wronged with a hurried acknowledgment of his gratitude.

"And I hurried back for fear Echo--"

"Oh, yes. I'll tell her about it, when she's ready to hear it."

"What is the matter, Jack? Are you keeping something from me? Where is she?"

"In there," said Payson feebly, pointing to the door.

Dick eagerly started toward the house, but Jack halted him, saying: "No--you mustn't go in now. There's a party--you see, she

hasn't been well, doesn't expect you to-night. The shock might be too much for her."

Jack grasped at the lame excuse. It was the first to come to his mind. He must think quickly. This experience was tearing the heart out of him. He could not save himself from betrayal much longer.

"You're right," acquiesced Dick. "You tell her when you get a chance. Jack, as I was saying, I've made quite a bit of money out of my Bisbee holdings. I can pay back my stake to you now."

"Not now," said Jack nervously.

Would this torture never end? Here was his friend, whom he had betrayed come back in the very hour of his marriage to the woman who had promised first to marry him. Now he was offering him money, which Jack needed badly, for his prospective mother-in-law was complaining about his taking her daughter to a mortgaged home.

"Sure, now," continued Dick, pulling a roll of bills from his pocket. "It's three thousand dollars--here it is, all in one bundle."

"Not now, let that wait," said Jack, pushing the money aside.

"It's waited long enough," cried Dick doggedly. "You put the mortgage on your ranch to let me have the money, and it must be about due now."

"Yes, it will be due, but let it wait."

"What's the use? I'm all right now. I brought the cash with me on purpose. I wanted to square it with you on sight."

Dick pressed the money into Jack's hand, closing his fingers over the roll of bills. With a sigh of relief, as if a disagreeable task was completed, he questioned: "How's Bud?"

Jack replied shortly: "All right; he's inside."

"I didn't write to him," cheerfully resumed Dick. "I didn't want the kid to know. He is so excitable, he would have blabbed it right out. I'll sure be glad to see the boy again. He's impulsive, but his heart's all right. I know you've kept a lookout over him."

This trust in him was getting too much for Jack to bear, so the voice of Polly crying to him to hurry up was music to his ears. "I'm coming," he shouted. "I'll see you in a few minutes," he told Dick. "I've something to tell you. I can't tell you now."

"Go in, then," answered Dick. "I'll wait yonder in the garden. Don't keep me waiting any longer than you can help."

Dick turned and walked slowly toward the gate which lead to the

kitchen-garden, a part of every ranch home in Arizona. It was cut off from the house by a straggling hedge, on which Echo had spent many hours trying to keep it in shape.

Jack hesitated about going into the house. Even if Echo married him, he knew that she would never forgive him when she learned of his dastardly conduct from Dick Lane's own mouth. It was better to sacrifice the life of one to save three lives from being ruined.

Jack followed Lane up, partly drawing his gun. It would be so easy to shoot him. No one would recognize Dick Lane in that crippled figure. Jack's friends would believe him if he told them the stranger had drawn on him, and he had to shoot him in self-defense.

Then the thought of how dastardly was the act of shooting a man in the back, and he his trusting friend, smote him suddenly, and he replaced the pistol in its holster. "It is worse than the murder of 'Ole Man' Terrill," he muttered.

Dick walked on entirely unconscious of how close he had been to death, with his friend as his murderer.

So interested had the two men been in their conversation, that neither had noticed Buck McKee hiding behind the hedge, listening to their talk, and covering Jack Payson, when he was following Dick with his hand on his revolver. McKee heard Payson's ejaculation, and smiled grimly.

Jack's absence had aroused Jim Allen, who hurried out on the porch, storming. "Say, Jack, what do you mean by putting the brakes on this yere weddin'?"

"Jim--say, Jim! I-- want you to do something for me," cried Jack, as he rushed toward his future father-in-law, greatly excited.

"Sure," answered Allen heartily.

"Stand here at this door during the ceremony, and no matter what happens don't let any one in."

"But--" interrupted Allen.

"Don't ask me to explain," blurted Jack. "Echo's happiness is at stake."

"That settles it--I've not let any one spile her happiness yet, an' I won't in the few minutes that are left while I'm still her main protector. Nobody gets in."

"Remember--no one--no matter who it is," emphasized Jack, as he darted into the house.

Jim Allen lighted his pipe. "Now, what's eatin' him?" he muttered to himself. Then, "They're off!" he cried, looking

through the window.

The Reverend Samuel Price began to drone the marriage-service.

It is the little things in life that count, after all. Men will work themselves into hysteria over the buzzing of a fly, and yet plan a battle-ship in a boiler-shop. A city full of people will at one time become panic-stricken over the burning of a rubbish-heap, and at another camp out in the ruins of fire-swept homes, treating their miseries as a huge joke.

Philosophers write learnedly of cause and effect. In chemistry certain combinations give certain results. But no man can say: "I will do thus and so, this and that will follow." All things are possible, but few things are probable.

Dick Lane had planned to shield Echo by writing to Jack Payson, letting him break the news of his return. Fate would have it that she would not know until too late of his escape. A letter sent directly to her might have prevented much unhappiness and many heartaches. Not till months later, when happiness had returned, did Jack realize that his one great mistake was made by not telling Echo of Dick's rescue.

Both Dick and Echo might have had a change of heart when they met again. Echo was young. Dick had wandered far. Both had lost touch with common interests. Jack Payson had entered her life as a factor. He was eager and impetuous; Dick was settled and world-worn by hardship and much physical suffering. Now Jack was at the altar racked with mental torture, while Dick waited in the garden for his traitorous friend. The innocent cause of the tragedy was sweetly and calmly replying to the questions of the marriage-ritual, while Jack was looking, as Allen said to himself, "darned squeamish."

"According to these words, it is the will of God that nothing shall sever the marriage-bond," were the words that fell upon Allen's ears as he stooped to look in the window at the wedding-party.

"The Sky Pilot's taking a long time to make the hitch. Darned if I couldn't hitch up a twenty-mule team in the time that he's takin' to get them two to the pole," said Allen, speaking to himself.

Dick had grown impatient at Jack's absence, and wandered back from the garden to the front of the house. Spying Allen, he greeted him with "Hello, Uncle Jim."

"That's my name," answered Allen suspiciously. "But I ain't uncle to every stranger that comes along."

"I'm no stranger," laughed Dick. "You know me."

"Do I?" replied Allen, unconvinced. "Who are you?"

"The poor orphan you took from an asylum and made a man of--Dick

Lane."

"Dick Lane!" repeated the astonished ranchman. "Come back from the dead!"

"No, I ain't dead yet," answered Dick, holding out his hand, which Allen gingerly grasped, as if he expected to find it thin air. "I wasn't killed. I have been in the hospital for a long time. I wrote Jack--he knows."

"My God!" Allen cried. "Jack knows--you wrote to him--he knows." Over and over he repeated the astonishing news which had been broken to him so suddenly. Here was a man, as if back from the dead, standing in his own dooryard, telling him that Jack knew he was alive. No word had been told him. What could Echo say? This, then, explained Jack's strange request, and his distress.

"And Echo?" Dick questioned, glancing toward the house.

"Echo." The name aroused Allen. He saw at once that he must act definitely and quickly. Echo must not see Dick now. It was too late. The secret of his return on the wedding-day must be known only to the three men.

"Look here, Dick," he commanded. "You mustn't let her see you--she mustn't know you are alive."

Dick was growing confused over the mystery which was being thrown about Echo Allen. First Jack had told him he must wait to see her, and now her father tells him he must never see her again, or let her know that he is alive. His strength was being overtaxed by all this evasion and delay.

"Dick," said Allen, with deep sympathy, laying his hand upon the man's shoulder. "She's my daughter an' I want her life to be happy. Can't you see? Do you understand? She thinks you're dead."

"What are you saying?" cried Dick, trying to fathom the riddle.

"You've come back too late, Dick," sadly explained Allen.

"Too late," echoed Dick. "There's something back of all this. I'll see her now."

He started to enter the door, but Allen restrained him. "You can't go in," he shouted to the excited man, and pushed him down the steps. It was an easy task for him for Dick was too weak to offer much resistance. "No, you won't," he gently told him. His heart bled for the poor fellow, whom he loved almost as a son, but Echo's happiness was at stake, and explanations could come later. More to emphasize his earnestness than to indicate intention to shoot, he laid his hand on the butt of his revolver, saying: "Not if I have to kill you."

Dick began to realize that whatever was wrong was of the greatest consequence. It was a shock to him to have his oldest, his best

friend in the West treat him in this fashion.

"Jim!" he cried in his anguish.

"You've got to go back where you came from, Dick," sternly answered the ranchman. "If ever you loved my daughter, now's your chance to prove it--she must never know you're livin--"

"But--"

"It's a whole lot I'm askin' of you, Dick," continued Allen. "But if you love her, as I think you do, it may be a drop of comfort in your heart to know that by doin' this great thing for her, you'll be makin' her life better and happier."

"I do love her," cried Dick passionately; "but there must be some reason--tell me."

Allen held up his hand to warn Dick to be silent. He beckoned him to follow him. Slowly he led him to the door, and, partly opening it, motioned him to listen.

"Forasmuch as John Payson and Echo Allen have consented together in holy wedlock" were the words that fell upon his ears.

As the doomed man stands, motionless, before his judges, and hears his death-sentence read without a tremor, oftentimes thinking of some trifle, so Dick stood for a moment. At first he did not fully realize what it all meant. Then the full depth of his betrayal flooded him. "What?" he cried. "Payson!" Allen held him back.

Again the minister's voice fell upon their ears repeating the solemn words. "And have declared the same before God and in the presence of these witnesses, I pronounce them husband and wife. What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

Dick, shaken and hurt, slowly sank to his knees, covering his face with his hands. A dry sob shook his frame. Here was the end of all his hopes. Here was the sad reward for years of toil and waiting.

"Now you know why you can't stay here," said Allen, his tones full of pity.

"Now I know."

Dick staggered to his feet, and started blindly from the house.

"Dick!" cried Allen, in a broken voice, "forgive me. She's my child, she loves him now."

The betrayed friend took his hand without looking at him. In vain he tried to hide his deep emotion. "I know," he faltered, "I'll never trouble her. I'll go away never to return."

"Where'll you go?" asked Allen.

"Back where I came from, back into the desert--into the land of dead things. Good-by!"

As he wrung the ranchman's hand and turned to walk out of the life of his old comrades and the woman he loved, he heard the minister repeat: "The blessing of the Almighty Father rest upon and abide with you, now and forevermore. Amen."

"Evermore. Amen!" faltered Dick, bidding a last mute farewell to Allen.

The old ranchman watched him quietly as he mounted his horse and rode down the trail.

His reverie was interrupted by the bursts of laughter of the wedding-guests, and the cries of Fresno: "Kiss the bride, Slim! Kiss the bride!"

CHAPTER X The Piano

Five weeks had passed since the marriage of Echo and Jack. On her return from the honeymoon in the little hunting cabin in the Tortilla Range, the young wife set to work, and already great changes had been made in the ranch-house on the Sweetwater. Rooms were repapered and painted. The big center room was altered into a cozy living-room. On the long, low window, giving an outlook on fields of alfalfa, corn and the silver ribbons of the irrigation ditches, dainty muslin curtains now hung. Potted geraniums filled the sill, and in the unused fireplace Echo had placed a jar of ferns. A clock ticking on the mantelpiece added to the cheerfulness and hominess of the house. On the walls, horns of mountain-sheep and antlers of antelope and deer alternated with the mounted heads of puma and buffalo. Through the open window one caught a glimpse of the arms of a windmill, and the outbuildings of the home ranch. Navajo blankets were scattered over the floors and seats.

Echo had taken the souvenirs of the hunt and trail which Jack had collected, and, with a woman's touch of refinement, had used them for decorative effects. She had in truth made the room her very own. The grace and charm of her personality were stamped upon the environment.

The men of the ranch fairly worshiped Echo. Sending to Kansas City, they purchased a piano for her as a birthday-gift. On the morning when the wagon brought it over from Florence station, little work was done about the place. The instrument had been unpacked and placed in the living-room in Echo's absence. Mrs. Allen, Polly, and Jim rode over to be present at the presentation. The donors gathered in the living-room to admire the gift, which shone bravely under the energetic polishing of Mrs. Allen.

"That's an elegant instrument," was her observation, as she

flicked an imaginary speck of dust from the case.

Polly opened the lid, saying: "Just what Echo wanted."

Jim cocked his head, as if he were examining a new pinto pony.

"Sent all the way up to Kansas City for it, eh?"

"That's right, Uncle Jim," chorused the punchers.

"Now the room's complete," announced Polly. "Echo's made a big change around here." The group gravely followed Polly's approving glances.

"That she has," assented Mrs. Allen. "Looked a barn when Jack was a bachelor. This certainly is the finest kind of a birthday-present you all could have thought of."

"Josephine'll cry in a minute, boys," chuckled Allen.

"You hesh up," snapped his wife, glaring at the grinning ranchman.

Sage-brush poured oil on the roughening waters by changing the conversation. Speaking as if making a dare, he challenged: "What I want to know is, is there anybody here present as can rattle a tune out of that there box?"

No one came forward.

"Ain't there none of you boys that can play on a pianny?" he demanded.

"I've played on the big square one down at the Lone Star," gravely piped up Show Low.

"What did you play," asked the inquisitive Polly.

"Poker," answered Show Low seriously, his face showing no trace of humor.

"Poker!" Polly repeated, in disgust.

"That's all they ever plays on it," explained Show Low indignantly.

Polly grew impatient. This presentation was a serious affair and not to be turned into an audience for the exploitation of Show Low's adventures. Moreover, she did not like to be used even indirectly as a target for fun-making, although she delighted in making some one else a feeder for her ideas of fun.

Fresno modestly announced he was something of a musical artist.

"I 'low I can shake a tune out of that," he declared.

"Let's hear you," cried Polly, rather doubtful of Fresno's

ability.

"Step up, pefesser," cried Allen heartily, slapping him on the back.

Fresno grinned and solemnly rolled up his sleeves. His comrades eyed his every move closely. He spat on his hands, approached the piano, and glared fiercely at the keyboard.

"My ma had one of them there things when I was a yearlin'," he observed.

Fresno spun the seat of the piano-stool until it almost twirled off the screw. His actions created greatest interest, especially to Parenthesis, who peered under the seat, to see the wheels go round. Fresno threw his leg over the seat as if mounting a horse.

"Well, boys, what'll you have?" he asked, glancing from one to the other in imitation of the manner of his friend, the pianist in the Tucson honkytonk, on a lively evening.

"The usual poison," absently answered Show Low.

Sage-brush struck him in the breast with the with the back of his hand. "Shut up," he growled.

Turning to Fresno, he said: "Give us the--er--'The Maiden's Prayer.'"

Fresno whisked about so quickly that he almost lost his balance. Gazing at the petitioner in blank amazement, he shouted: "The what?"

Sage-brush blushed under his tan. In a most apologetic voice he said: "Well, that's the first tune my sister learned to play, an' she played it continuous--which is why I left home."

"I'd sure like to oblige you, but Maiden's Prayers ain't in my repety," explained the mollified musician.

Fresno raised his finger uncertainly over the keyboard searching for a key from which to make a start. The group watched him expectantly. As he struck a note each member of his audience jumped back in surprise at the sound. Fresno scratched his head and gingerly fingered another key. After several false starts, backing and filling, over the keyboard, he began to pick out with one finger the air "The Suwanee River."

"That's it. Now we're started," he cried exultantly.

His overconfidence led him to strike a false note.

"Excuse me," he apologized. "Got the copper on the wrong chip."

Once more he essayed playing the old melody, but became hopelessly confused.

"Darn the tune!" he mumbled.

Sage-brush, ever ready to cheer up the failing courage of a performer, chirruped: "Shuffle 'em up ag'in and begin a new deal."

Fresno spat on his hands and ruffled his hair like a musical genius. Again he sought the rhythm among the keys. He tried to whistle the air. That device failed him.

"Will you all whistle that tune? I'm forgettin' it," was his plaintive request.

"Sure, let her go boys," cried Sage-brush.

Falteringly, with many stops and sudden they tried to accompany Fresno's halting pursuit over the keyboard after the tune that was dodging about in his mind. All at once the player struck his gait and introduced a variation on the bass notes.

"That ain't in it," shouted Show Low indignantly.

"Shut up!" bellowed Sage-brush.

With both hands hammering the keys indiscriminately, Fresno made a noisy if not artistic finish, and whirled about on the stool, to be greeted by hearty applause.

"Well, I reckon that's goin' some!" he boasted, when the hand-clapping subsided, bowing low to Polly and Mrs. Allen.

"Goin'?" laughed Polly. "Limpin' is what I call it. If you don't learn to switch off, you'll get a callous on that one finger of yourn." Fresno looked at that member dubiously.

"Ain't music civiliz'in'?" suggested Show Low to Jim Allen.

"You bet!" the ranchman agreed. "Take a pianny an' enough Winchesters an' you can civilize the hull of China."

"Fresno could kill more with his pianny-play than his gun-play," suggested Show Low.

Mrs. Allen bethought herself that there was a lot of work to be done in preparation for the party. Even if everything was ready, the dear old soul would find something to do or worry about.

"Come, now, clear out of here, the hull kit an' b'ilin' of you," she ordered.

The men hastily crowded out on the piazza.

"Take that packin'-case out of sight, if you mean this pianny to be a surprise to Echo. She'll be trottin' back here in no time," she added.

Fresno had lingered to assure Jim: "This yere birthday's goin'

to be a success. Would you like another selection?" he eagerly asked.

"Not unless you wash your finger," snapped Mrs. Allen, busy polishing the keys Fresno had struck. "You left a grease-spot on every key you've touched," she explained.

Fresno held up his finger for Allen's inspection. "I've been greasin' the wagon," was his explanation.

"Git out with the rest of them," she commanded. "I've got enough to do to look after that cake." Mrs. Allen darted into the kitchen. Jim slowly filled his pipe and hunted up the most comfortable chair. After two or three trials he found one to suit him, and sank back with a sigh of content.

"Jack ain't back yet?" Polly put the question.

Polly rearranged the chairs in the room, picking up and replacing the articles on the table to suit her own artistic conceptions. She straightened out a war-bonnet on the wall. She was flicking off a spot of dust in the gilt chair that Jack had got as a wedding present for Echo on the day of the station-agent's murder, and, being reminded of the tragedy, she asked: "That posse didn't catch the parties that killed Terrill, did they?"

"Not that I hear on. Slim Hoover he took the boys that night an tried to pick up the trail after it entered the river, but they couldn't find where it come out."

"One of them fellers, the man that left the station alone, and probably done the job, rode a pacin' horse," answered Jim, between puffs of his pipe.

"Then he's a stranger to these parts. Jack's pinto paces--it's his regular gait. It's the only pacing hoss around here."

"That's so," he assented, but made no further comment. The full force of the observation did not strike him at the time.

Polly began to pump Colonel Jim. There were several recent happenings which she did not fully comprehend. At the inquisitive age and a girl, she wanted to know all that was going on.

"Jack's been acting mighty queer of late," she ventured. "Like he's got something on his mind."

Jim smiled at her simplicity and jokingly replied: "Well, he's married."

The retort exasperated Polly. She was not meeting with the success she desired. "Do hush!" she cried, in her annoyance.

"That's enough on any man's mind," Jim laughed as he sauntered out of the door.

"Something queer about Jack," observed Polly, seating herself at the table. "He ain't been the same man since the weddin'. He's all right when Echo's around, but when he thinks no one is watchin' him he sits around and sighs."

Jack entered the room at this moment. Absent-mindedly he hung his hat and spurs on a rack and leaned his rifle against the wall, sighing deeply as he did so. So engrossed was he in his thoughts that he did not notice Polly until he reached the table. He started in surprise when he saw her. "Hello, Polly!" was his greeting. "Where is Echo?"

Polly rose hastily at the sound of his voice.

"Didn't you meet her?" she asked. "We got her to ride over toward Tucson this morning to get her out of the way so's to snake the pianny in without her seein' it." Polly glided over to the instrument and touched the keys softly.

With admiration Jack gazed at the instrument.

"I came around by Florence," answered Jack, with a smile.

Eagerly Polly turned toward him. "See anything of Bud Lane?" she queried.

"No." Again Jack smiled--this time at the girl's impetuosity.

"He'll lose his job with me if he don't call more regular," she said.

"Say, Jack, you ain't fergettin' what you promised--to help Bud with the money that you said was comin' in soon, as Dick's share of a speculation you and him was pardners in? I'm powerful anxious to get him away from McKee."

Jack had not forgotten the promise, but, alas, under the goading of Mrs. Allen that he should clear off the mortgage on his home, he had used Dick Lane's money for this purpose. In what a mesh of lies and broken promises he was entangling himself! Now he was forced further to deceive trusting little Polly in the matter that was dearest to her heart.

"No, Polly, but the fact is--that speculation isn't turning out so well, after all."

The disappointed girl turned sadly away, and went out to Mrs. Allen in the kitchen.

Jack removed his belt and gun and hung them on the rack by the door. Spying his father at the corral, he called to him to come into the house.

"Hello, Jack!" was Allen's greeting as he entered, shaking the younger man's hand.

"When did you come over?"

"This morning," Allen told him. "Echo's birthday, you know, and the old lady allowed we'd have to be here. Ain't seen you since the weddin'--got things lookin' fine here." Allen slowly surveyed the room.

Jack agreed with him with a gesture of assent. A more important topic to him than the furnishing of a room was what had become of Dick Lane. After the wedding ceremony no chance had come to him to speak privately to Allen.

The festivities of the wedding had been shortened. Slim had gathered a posse and taken up the trail of the slayers. Jim Allen had joined them. The hazing of Jack, and the hasty departure of the bridal pair on horseback in a shower of corn, shelled and on cob, prevented the two men from meeting.

The older man had volunteered no explanation. Jack knew that in his heart Allen did not approve of his actions, but was keeping silent because of his daughter.

Jack could restrain himself no longer. "Jim--what happened that night?" he asked brokenly.

Allen showed his embarrassment. "Meanin'--" Then he hesitated.

"Dick," was all Jack could say.

"I seed him. If I hadn't, he'd busted up the weddin' some," was his laconic answer.

"Where is he?"

Allen relighted his pipe. When he got the smoke drawing freely, he gazed at Jack thoughtfully and answered: "He's gone. Back where he came from--into the desert." Jim puffed slowly and then added: "Looks like you didn't give Dick a square deal."

Allen liked his son-in-law, and was going to stand by him, but in Arizona the saying "All's fair in love and war" is not accepted at its face value.

"I didn't," acknowledged Jack. "I was desperate at the thought of losing her. She loved me, and had forgotten him--she's happy with me now."

"I reckon that's right," was Jim's consoling reply.

To clinch his argument and soothe his troublesome conscience, Jack continued: "She never would have been happy with him."

"That's what I told him," declared Allen. "He knew it, an' that's why he went away--an' Echo--no matter what comes, she must never know. She'd never forgive you--an', fer that matter, me, neither."

Jack looked long out of the window toward the distant mountains--

the barrier behind which Dick was wandering in the great desert, cut off from the woman he loved by a false friend.

"How I have suffered for that lie!" uttered Jack, in tones full of anguish. "That's what hurts me most--the thought that I lied to her. I might have killed him that night," pondered Jack. He shuddered at the thought that he had been on the point of adding murder to the lie. He had faced the same temptation which Dick had yet to overcome.

"Mebbe you did. There's more'n one way of killin' a man," suggested Allen.

Jack swung round and faced him. The observation had struck home. He realized how poignantly Dick must have endured the loss of Echo and thought of his betrayal by Jack. As he had suffered mentally so Dick must be suffering in the desert. In self-justification he returned to his old argument.

"I waited until I was sure he was dead. Six months I waited after we heard the news. After I had told Echo I loved her and found that I was loved in return--then came this letter. God! What a fight I had with myself when I found that he lived--was thinking of returning home to claim her for his own. I rode out into the hills and fought it out all alone, like an Indian--then I resolved to hurry the wedding--to lie to her--and I have been living that lie every minute, every hour."

Jack leaned heavily on the table. His head sank. His voice dropped almost to a whisper.

Allen slapped him on the back to cheer him up. Philosophically he announced: "Well, it's got to be as it is. You'll mebbe never hear from him again. You mustn't never tell her. I ain't a-goin' to say nothin' about it--her happiness means everything to me."

Jack grasped his hand in silent thankfulness.

The two men walked slowly out of the room to the corral.

As Echo galloped across the prairie in the glorious morning air, the sunshine, the lowing of the cattle on the hills, and the songs of the birds in the trees along the Sweetwater had banished all depressing thoughts, and her mind dwelt on her love for Jack and the pleasantness of the lines in which her life had fallen.

Only one small cloud had appeared on the horizon. Jack had not shared with her his confidences in the business of the ranch. He told her he did not want to worry her with such cares. True, there were times when he was deeply abstracted; but in her presence his moroseness vanished quickly. Carefully as he had tried to hide his secret, she had, with a woman's intuition, seen beneath the surface of things and realized that something was lacking to complete her happiness.

As Echo turned toward home a song sprang to her lips. Polly

spied her far down the trail.

"Boys, she's coming," she shouted to the men, who were at the bunk-house awaiting Mrs. Payson's return. As they passed the corral they called to Jack and Allen to join them in the living-room to prepare for the surprise for Echo.

The party quickly reassembled.

"Good land!" shouted Allen, "get something to cover the pianny with!"

The punchers rushed in confusion about the room in a vain search.

"Ain't there a plagued thing we can cover the pianny with?" cried the demoralized Allen, renewing his appeal.

Polly came to the rescue of the helpless men by plucking a Navajo blanket from the couch. Tossing one end of it to Show Low, she motioned to him to help hold it up before the instrument like a curtain.

"Stand in front of it, everybody," ordered Mrs. Allen, who had left her cake-baking and hurried in from the kitchen. "Polly, spread your skirts--you, too, Jim."

Allen ran in front of the piano, holding out an imaginary dress in imitation of Polly. "Which I ain't got none," he cried.

Parenthesis jumped in front of the piano-stool, trying vainly to hide it with his legs.

"Parenthesis, put your legs together," Mrs. Allen cried.

"I can't, ma'am," wailed the unfortunate puncher. He fell on his knees before the stool, spreading out his waistcoat for a screen.

Mrs. Allen helped him out with her skirts.

"Steady, everybody!" shouted Jack.

"Here she is!" yelled Sage-brush, as the door opened and the astonished Echo faced those she loved and liked.

Echo made a pretty picture framed in the doorway. She wore her riding-habit of olive-green--from the hem of which peeped her soft boots. Her hat, broad, picturesque, typical of the Southwest, had slipped backward, forming a background for her pretty face. An amused smile played about the corners of her mouth.

"Well, what is it?" she smiled inquiringly.

The group looked at her sheepishly. No one wanted to answer her question.

"What's the matter?" she resumed. "You're herded up like a bunch

of cows in a norther."

Sage-brush began gravely to explain. He got only as far as: "This yere bein' a birthday," when Echo interrupted him: "Oh! then it's a birthday-party?"

Once stopped, Sage-brush could not get started again. He cleared his throat with more emphasis than politeness; striking the attitude of an orator, with one hand upraised and the other on his hip, he hemmed and hawed until beads of perspiration trickled down his temples.

Again he nerved himself for the ordeal.

"Mebbe," he gasped.

Then he opened and dosed his mouth, froglike, several times, taking long, gulping breaths. At last, looking helplessly about him, he shouted: "Oh, shucks! you tell her, Jack." He pushed him toward, Echo. Jack rested his hand on the table and began: "We've a surprise for you--that is, the boys have--"

"What is it?" asked Echo eagerly.

"You've got to call it blind," broke in Sage-brush.

"Guess it," cried Fresno.

"A pony-cart," hazarded Echo.

"Shucks! no," said Show Low at the idea of presenting Echo with anything on wheels.

Echo then guessed: "Sewing-machine."

Sage-brush encouraged her, "That's something like it--go on--go on."

"Well, then, it's a--"

Sage-brush grew more excited. He raised and lowered himself on his toes, backing toward the piano. "Go it, you're gettin' there," he shouted.

"It's a--"

Again she hesitated, to be helped on by Sage-brush with the assurance: "She'll do it--fire away--it's a--"

"A--"

"Go on."

Sage-brush in his enthusiasm backed too far into the blanket screen. His spurs became entangled. To save himself from a fall, he threw out his hand behind him. They struck the polished cover of the instrument, slid off, and Sage-brush sat down on the

keys with an unmistakable crash.

"A piano!" cried Echo exultantly.

"Who done that?" demanded Show Low angrily.

Parenthesis, from his place on the floor, looked at the mischief-maker in disgust. "Sage-brush!" he shouted.

"Givin' the hull thing away," snarled Fresno.

Show Low could contain himself no longer. Going up to Sage-brush, he shook his fist in his face, saying: "You're the limit. You ought to be herdin' sheep."

The victim of the accident humbly replied: "I couldn't help it."

Mrs. Allen smoothed out the differences by declaring: "What's the difference, she wouldn't have guessed, not in a million years--stand away and let her see it."

Fresno swept them all aside with the blanket.

"Oh, isn't it beautiful, beautiful!" cried Echo.

"Who--what--where--" she stammered, glancing from one to the other, her eyes finally resting on Jack.

"Not guilty," he cried. "You'll have to thank the boys for this."

With happy tears welling up in her eyes, Echo said: "I do thank them, I do--I do--I can't tell how delighted I am. I can't say how much this means to me--I thank you--I say it once, but I feel it a thousand times." She seized each of the boys by the hand and shook it heartily.

"Would you like to have another selection?" asked Fresno, relieving the tension of the situation.

"No!" shouted the punchers unanimously. Fresno looked very much crestfallen, since he considered that he had made a deep impression by his first effort.

"Mrs. Payson's goin' to hit us out a tune," announced Sage-brush.

Echo seated herself at the piano. Jack leaned against the instrument, gazing fondly into her eyes, as she raised her face radiant with happiness. Allen had taken possession of the best rocking-chair. Mrs. Allen sat at the table, and the boys ranged themselves about the room. Their faces reflected gratification. They watched Echo expectantly.

Echo played the opening bars of "The Old Folks at Home." Before she sang Fresno, holding up his right index-finger, remarked to no one in particular: "I washed that finger."

The singing deeply affected her little audience. Echo had a sweet, natural voice. She threw her whole soul into the old ballad. She was so happy she felt like singing, not lively airs, but songs about home. Her new home had become so dear to her at that moment.

Mrs. Allen as usual began to cry. Polly soon followed her example. There were tears even in the eyes of some of the punchers, although they blinked vigorously to keep them back.

When she repeated the chorus, Sage-brush said to Fresno: "Ain't that great?"

That worthy, however, with the jealousy of an artist, and to hide his own deeply moved sensibilities, replied: "That ain't so much."

Jack had become completely absorbed in the music. He and Echo were oblivious to surroundings. His arm had slipped about his wife's waist, and she gazed fondly into his face. Sage-brush was the first to notice their attitude. On his calling the attention of the boys to their happiness, these quietly tiptoed from the room. Polly signaled to Mrs. Allen, and followed the boys. Josephine awoke Jim as if from a dream and led him slowly out, leaving the young couple in an earthly paradise of married love.

When Echo finished, she turned in surprise to find themselves alone.

"Was it as bad as that?" she naively asked Jack.

"What?"

"Why, they've all left us."

Jack laughed softly. "So they have--I forgot they were here," he said, looking fondly down at his wife.

Echo began to play quietly another ballad. "I've always wanted a piano," she said.

"You'd found one here waiting, if I'd only known it," he chided.

"You've given me so much already," she murmured. "I've been a big expense to you."

Jack again slipped his arm about her waist and kissed her. "There ain't any limit on my love," he declared. "I want you to be happy--"

"Don't you think I am," laughed Echo. "I'm the happiest woman on earth, Jack, and it's all you. I want to be more than a wife to you, I want to be a helpmate--but you won't let me."

A wistful expression crept over Echo's countenance.

"Who says so?" he demanded playfully, as if he would punish any

man who dared make such an accusation.

Echo turned on the stool and took his hand. "I know it," she said, with emphasis. "You've been worried about something for days and days--don't tell me you haven't."

Jack opened his lips as if to contradict her. "We women learn to look beneath the surface; what is it, Jack?" she continued.

Jack loosened his wife's handclasp and walked over to the table.

"Nothing--what should I have to worry about?" He spoke carelessly.

"The mortgage?" suggested Echo.

"I paid that off last week," explained Jack.

Echo felt deeply hurt that this news should have been kept from her by her husband.

"You did, and never told me?" she chided. "Where did you get the money?" she inquired.

"Why, I--" Jack halted. He could not frame an excuse at once, nor invent a new lie to cover his old sin. Deeper and deeper he was getting into the mire of deception.

Echo had arisen from the seat. "It was over three thousand dollars, wasn't it?" she insisted.

"Something like that," answered Jack noncommittally.

"Well, where did you get it?" demanded his wife.

"An old debt--a friend of mine--I loaned him the money a long time ago and he paid it back--that's all."

Jack took a drink of water from the olla to hide his confusion.

"Who was it?" persisted Echo.

"You wouldn't know if I told you. Now just stop talking business."

"It isn't fair," declared Echo. "You share all the good things of life with me, and I want to share some of your business worries. I want to stand my share of the bad."

Jack saw he must humor her. "When the bad comes I'll tell you," he assured her, patting her hand.

"You stand between me and the world. You're like a great big mountain, standing guard over a little tree in the valley, keeping the cold north wind from treating it too roughly." She sighed contentedly. "But the mountain does it all."

Jack looked down tenderly at his little wife. Her love for him moved him deeply.

"Not at all," he said to her. "The little tree grows green and beautiful. It casts a welcome shade about it, and the heart of the mountain is made glad to its rocky core to know that the safety of that little tree is in its keeping."

Taking her in his arms, he kissed her again and again.

"Kissing again," shouted Polly from the doorway. "Say, will you two never settle down to business? There's Bud Lane and a bunch of others just into the corral--maybe they want you, Jack."

Jack excused himself. As he stepped out on the piazza he asked Polly: "Shall I send Bud in?"

"Let him come in if he wants to. I'm not sending for him." Polly spitefully turned up her nose at him. Jack laughed as he closed the door.

Echo reseated herself at the piano, fingering the keys.

"How are you getting on with Bud?" she asked the younger girl.

"We don't get on a little bit," she snapped. "Bud never seems to collect much revenue an' we just keep trottin' slow like--wish I was married and had a home of my own."

"Aren't you happy with father and mother?"

Polly glanced at Echo with a smile. "Lord, yes," she replied, "in a way, but I'm only a poor relation--your ma was my ma's cousin or something like that."

Echo laughed. "Nonsense," she retorted. "Nonsense--you're my dear sister, and the only daughter that's at the old home now."

"But I want a home of my own, like this," said Polly.

"Then you'd better shake Bud and give Slim a chance."

Polly was too disgusted to answer at once. "Slim Hoover, shucks! Slim doesn't care for girls--he's afraid of 'em," she said at length. "I like Bud, with all his orneriness," she declared.

"Why doesn't he come to see you more often?"

"I don't know, maybe it's because he's never forgiven you for marryin' Jack."

"Why should he mind that?" she asked, startled.

"Well, you know," she answered between stitches, drawing the needle through the doth with angry little jerks, "Bud, he never quite believed Dick was dead."

Echo rose hastily. The vague, haunting half-thoughts of weeks were crystallized on the instant. She felt as if Dick was trying to speak to her from out of the great beyond. With a shudder she into a chair at the table opposite Polly.

"Don't," she said, her voice scarcely above a whisper, "I can't bear to hear him spoken of. I dreamed of him the other night--a dreadful dream."

Polly was delighted with this new mystery. It was all so romantic.

"Did you? let's hear it."

With unseeing eyes Echo gazed straight ahead rebuilding from her dream fabric a tragedy of the desert, in which the two men who had played so great a part in her life were the actors.

"It seems," she told, "that I was in the desert, such a vast, terrible desert, where the little dust devils eddied and swirled, and the merciless sun beat down until it shriveled up every growing thing."

Polly nodded her head sagely.

"That's the way the desert looks--and no water."

Echo paid no heed to the interruption. Her face became wan and haggard, as in her mind's eye she saw the weary waste of waterless land quiver and swim under the merciless sun. Not a tree, not a blade of grass, not a sign of life broke the monotony of crumbling cliffs and pinnacled rocks. Onward and ever onward stretched yellow ridges and alkali-whitened ravines, blinding the eye and parching the throat.

"Then I saw a man staggering toward me," she continued; "his face was white and drawn, his lips cracked and parched--now and then he would stumble and fall, and lie there on his face in the hot sand, digging into it with his bony fingers seeking for water."

Echo shut her eyes as if to blot out the picture. Its reality almost overpowered her.

"Suddenly he raised his eyes to mine," she resumed, after a pause. "It was Dick."

In her excitement she had arisen, stretching out her arms as if to ward off an apparition.

"He tried to call me. I saw his lips move, framing my name. Dragging himself to his feet, he came toward me with his arms outstretched. Then another form appeared between us fighting to keep him back. They fought there under the burning sun in the hot dust of the desert until at last one was crushed to earth. The victor raised his face to mine, and--it was Jack."

Echo buried her face in her hands. Dry sobs shook her bosom.

Awe-stricken, Polly gazed at the over-wrought wife.

"PFEW!" she laughed, to shake off her fright. "That was a sure enough nightmare. If I'd a dream like that I'd wake up the whole house yapping like a coyote."

As the commonplace ever intrudes upon the unusual, so a knock on the door relieved the tension of the situation. It was Slim. He did not wait for an invitation to enter, but, opening the door, asked: "Can I come in?"

"Sure, come in," cried Polly, glad to find any excuse to shake off the depression of Echo's dream.

"Howdy, Mrs. Payson, just come over to see Jack," was the jolly Sheriff's greeting.

"He's down at the corral," she informed him.

Mrs. Allen hurried in from the kitchen at this moment, calling: "Echo, come here, and look at this yere cake. It looks as if it had been sot upon."

Echo closed the lid of the piano and called her mother's attention to the presence of Slim Hoover.

"How d'ye do, Slim Hoover?--you might have left some of that dust outside."

The Sheriff was greatly embarrassed by her chiding. In his ride from Florence to the Sweetwater, the alkali and sand stirred up by the hoofs of the horses had settled on his hat and waistcoat so freely that his clothing had assumed a neutral, gray tone above which his sun-tanned face and red hair loomed like the moon in a fog. Josephine's scolding drove him to brush his shoulders with his hat, raising a cloud of dust about his head.

"Stop it!" Mrs. Allen shouted shrilly. "Slim Hoover, if your brains was dynamite you couldn't blow the top of your head off."

Polly was greatly amused by Slim's encounter with the cleanly Mrs. Allen. Slim stood with open mouth, watching Mrs. Allen flounce out of the room after Polly, who was trying in vain to suppress her laughter. Turning to the girl, he said: "Ain't seen you in some time."

Slim was thankful that the girl was seated at the table with her back to him. Somehow or other he found he could speak to her more freely when she was not looking at him.

"That so?" she challenged. "Come to the birthday?"

"Not regular," he answered.

Polly glanced at him over her shoulder. It was too much for Slim. He turned away to hide his embarrassment. Partly recovering from his bashfulness, he coughed, preparatory to

speaking. But Polly had vanished. As one looks sheepishly for the magician's disappearing coin, so Slim gazed at floor and ceiling as if the girl might pop up anywhere. Spying an empty chair behind him, he sank into it gingerly and awkwardly.

Meantime Polly returned with a broom and began sweeping out the evidences of Slim's visit. She spoke again:

"Get them hold-ups yet that killed 'Ole Man' Terrill?" she asked.

"Not yet. But we had a new shootin' over'n our town yesterday."

Slim was doing his best to make conversation. Polly did not help him out very freely.

"That so?" was her reply.

"Spotted Taylor shot two Chinamen."

Polly's curiosity was aroused.

"What for?" she asked, stopping her sweeping for a moment.

"Just to give the new graveyard a start," Slim chuckled.

Polly joined in his merriment.

"Spotted Taylor was always a public-spirited citizen," was her comment.

"He sure was," assented Slim.

"Get up there. I want to sweep under that chair." Polly brushed Slim's feet with the broom vigorously. With an elaborate "Excuse me," Slim arose, but re-seated himself in another chair directly in the pathway of Polly's broom.

"Get out of there, too," she cried.

"Shucks, there ain't any room for me nowhere," he muttered disgustedly.

"You shouldn't take up so much of it."

Slim attempted to take a seat on the small gilt chair which was Jack's wedding-present to Echo.

Polly caught sight of him in time. "Look out," she shouted. "That chair wasn't built for a full-grown man like you."

Slim nervously replaced the chair before a writing-desk. Polly wielded her broom about the feet of the Sheriff, who danced clumsily about, trying to avoid her.

"You're just trying to sweep me out of here," he complained.

"Well, if you will bring dust in with you, you must expect to be

swept out," Polly replied, with a show of spirit.

Polly was shaking the mat vigorously at the door when Slim said:

"I see they buried Poker Bill this mornin'."

"Is HE dead?" It was the first Polly had heard of the passing away of one of the characters of the Territory. She had expressed her surprise in the of an interrogation, emphasizing the "he," a colloquialism of the Southwest.

Slim, however, had chosen to ignore the manner of speech, and with a grin answered: "Ye-es, that's why they buried him."

Polly laughed in spite of herself. "What did he die of?" she asked.

As Slim was about to take a drink at the olla, he failed to hear her.

"Eh?" he grunted.

"What did he die of?" she repeated.

"Five aces," was the sober reply of the Sheriff, before he drained the gourd.

Polly put the broom back of the door, and was rearranging the articles on the table, before Slim could muster up enough courage to speak on the topic which was always uppermost in his mind when in her presence.

"Say, Miss Polly," he began.

"If you've anything to say to me, Slim Hoover, just say it--I can't be bothered to-day--all the fixin's and things," saucily advised the girl.

"Well, what I want to say is--" began the Sheriff.

At this moment Bud Lane, laboring under heavy excitement, burst open the door.

"Say, Slim, you're wanted down at the corral," he cried, paying no heed to Polly.

"Shucks!" exclaimed the disappointed Sheriff. "What's the row?"

"I don't know--Buck McKee--he's there with some of the Lazy K outfit. They want to see you."

Slim threw himself out the door with the mild expletive: "Darn the luck!"

Bud turned quickly to Polly. "Did Jack pay off the mortgage last week?" he almost shouted at the girl.

Polly stamped her foot in anger at what seemed to her to be a totally irrelevant question to the love-making she expected: "How do I know?" she angrily replied. "If that is all you came to see me for, you can go and ask him. It makes me so dog-gone mad!"

Polly, with flushed face and knitted brow, left the bewildered Bud standing in the center of the room, asking himself what it was all about.

The sound of the voices of disputing men floated in from the corral. Bud heard them, and comprehended its significance.

"It's all up with me," he cried, in mortal terror. "Buck McKee has stirred up the suspicion against Jack Payson. Jack paid off his mortgage, and they wanted to know where he raised the money. Well, Jack can tell. If he can't, I'll confess the whole business. I won't let him suffer for me. Buck sha'n't let an innocent man hang for what we've done."

The sound of footsteps on the piazza and the opening of the door drove Bud to take refuge in an adjoining room, where he could overhear all that was happening. He closed the door as the cow-punchers entered with Slim at their head.

CHAPTER XI

Accusation and Confession

Buck McKee had not been idle in the days following the slaying of 'Ole Man' Terrill. Having learned that Slim and his posse had discovered only the fact that the murderer had ridden a pacing horse to the ford, McKee took full advantage of this fact. In the cow-camps, the barrooms, and at the railroad-station he hinted, at first, that a certain person every one knew could tell a lot more about the death of the old man than he cared to have known. After a few days he began to bring the name of Payson into the conversation. His gossip became rumor, and then common report. When it became known that Jack had paid off the mortgage on his ranch, Buck came out with the accusation that Payson was the murderer. Finding that he was listened to, Buck made the direct charge that Payson had killed the station-agent, and with the proceeds of the robbery was paying off his old debts.

Gathering his own men about him, and being joined by the idle hangers-on, which are to be found about every town, Buck lead his party to the ranch on the Sweetwater to accuse Jack, and so throw off, in advance, any suspicions which might attach to himself.

Fortunately, Slim happened to be at Jack's ranch at the time. When he entered the corral he found Jack's accusers and defenders rapidly nearing a battle.

Jack was taking the charges coolly enough, as he did not know what support McKee had manufactured to uphold the charges he made. Slim informed McKee he would listen to what he had to say, and if afterward he thought Jack guilty, he would place him under arrest. For all concerned it would be better to go into the

house. The Sweetwater boys surrounded Jack as they followed Slim into the living-room. Lining up in opposing groups, Slim stood in the center to serve as judge and jury, with Buck and Jack at his right and left hand.

Inside the door Jack said: "Keep as quiet as you can, boys. I don't want to alarm my wife. Now what is it?"

The punchers hushed their discussion of the charge, and listened attentively to what the men most interested had to say.

"Well, darn it all," apologized the Sheriff to Jack, "it's all darn fool business, anyway. Buck here he started it."

Jack smiled sarcastically, and, glancing at McKee, remarked: "Buck McKee's started a good many things in his day--"

Buck began to bluster. He could not face Jack fairly. Already placed on the defense, when he had considered he would be the accuser, McKee took refuge in the plea of being wronged by false suspicion.

"I ain't goin'," he whined, "to have folks suspicion me of any such doin's as the killin' of 'Ole Man' Terrill. I got a witness to prove I wasn't in twenty miles of the place."

"Who's your witness?" asked Slim, in his most judicial tones.

"Bud Lane--me an' him rode over to the weddin' together--from the Lazy K, an' I was put out as not fittin' to be there, an' by that very man there that did the killin'."

The punchers had to grin, in spite of the seriousness of the occasion. Buck appeared to be deeply hurt at the unceremonious way he had been left out at the feast.

"What makes you point to me as the man?" asked Jack quietly.

"You was late gettin' to your own weddin'."

Fresno could not repress his feelings any longer. He started angrily toward McKee, but Jack and Sage-brush held him back. The others were about to follow his lead, when Slim motioned them back with the caution: "Keep out of this, boys!"

"I was late," explained Jack, "but I told you I rode around to the station to get a wedding-present I ordered for my wife--"

Jim interrupted him to substantiate the statement. Pointing to a chair, he said: "That's so. There it is, too--that there chair."

The Sweetwater outfit nodded in acquiescence, but the others looked incredulous.

Buck sneered at the defense which Jack made. "Nobody saw you over that way, did they?"

"I saw Terrill. It must have been just before he was killed. I didn't meet anybody else." Jack showed no trace of temper under the inquisition.

"Of course you saw him before he was killed--about a minute. Mebbe you didn't plug him the next minute with a .44."

The charge roused Sage-brush's fighting blood. Drawing his gun, he attempted to get a fair shot at the accuser. Fresno and Show Low grabbed him by the arms, holding him back. The foreman shouted: "There'll be some one plugged right now if you-all make another break like that."

Slim waved his hands over his head, driving the men backward, as if he were shooing away a flock of chickens.

"Easy now--easy," he drawled. "There ain't a-goin' to be nothin' doin' here, 'cept law an' justice."

Buck laughed sneeringly at the wavering of his men. He would have to do something to put more heart into them and regain the ground he had lost by his single-handed conduct of the case.

"There ain't, eh?" he asked contemptuously. "Well, it's lucky I brought some of my own outfit with me."

"Mebbe you'll need them if you get too careless with your talk," answered the unruffled Sheriff.

Turning to Jack, Slim said: "This fool thing can be settled with one word from you."

The young ranchman listened to the Sheriff earnestly. He wished to clear himself forever of all suspicion. He did not want Echo ever to hear that there was a false impression abroad that she was the wife of a slayer. "What is it?" he asked simply.

"Why, you paid off a mortgage of an even three thousan' dollars last week, didn't you?"

"Yes, what has that to do with it?" he asked.

Buck broke in at this point. Here was the strongest card that he had in his hand, and the Sheriff had played it to McKee's advantage.

"Plenty," Buck shouted. "Old Terrill was shot and killed and robbed, an' the man who did it got just three thousan' dollars."

"An' you mean to say that the boss here--" began Sage-brush, in his anger making a rush at McKee. He was held back, but the disturbance attracted Echo and Mrs. Allen from the kitchen. Echo hurried to her husband's side. He slipped his arm about her waist, and together they faced his accuser.

"All you got to say is where did you get that money," cried Buck,

who had seen Dick Lane pay it to Payson, and conjectured that Payson did not dare to reveal the fact of this payment, with all the disclosure it implied.

"Why, it was paid to me by--" Then Jack stopped. He could not tell who gave him the money without revealing to Echo the return of Dick. The whole miserable lie would then come out. Echo noticed Jack's hesitancy.

"What is it--what's the matter?" she asked, in frightened tones.

"Nothing, nothing," he answered lightly, to lessen her terror.

"Hats off, everybody," commanded Slim, in deference to the presence of Echo.

"Who are these men--what's wrong?" pleaded Echo.

Buck bowed to the trembling woman, who had thrown her arms about her husband's neck.

"Nothin'," he exclaimed. "Only we want to know where your husband got the money to pay off the mortgage on this ranch."

The request seemed a very simple one to Echo. All the talk of harming Jack, the high words, the threats, could be silenced easily by her hero. Smiling into his eyes, Echo said: "Tell them, Jack."

"I can't," he faltered.

"It was paid to him by a friend," bravely began Echo. "A friend to whom he lent it some time ago."

Buck interrupted her explanation. "Then let him tell his friend's name, and where we can find him." Turning to Jack, he bullied: "Come on--what's his name?"

Jack closed his eyes to shut out the sight of his wife. In his agony he clenched his fists, until his nails sank into the flesh. "I can't tell you that," he cried, in misery.

"Of course he can't," sneered Buck, smiling evilly in his triumph.

"He can't account for himself on the night of the weddin'; he rides a pacin' horse--rode on that night; he gets three thousand dollars paid him, and he can't tell who paid it; what's the verdict?" Buck did not wait for an answer. Raising his voice, he shouted: "Guilty."

"Damn you," bellowed Sage-brush, lunging toward him, only to be held in restraint by his associates.

"Jack! Jack! what have you to say?" begged Echo.

"Nothing," was his only answer.

"Tell him he lies!" cried Sage-brush. "Jack, we all know you--you're as white a man as ever lived, an' they ain't one of this outfit that ain't ready to die for you right now--"

"You bet!" chorused his men.

"He ain't goin' to get off like that," declared Buck. Looking confidently at his own followers, he said: "The Lazy K can take care of him."

Buck's men moved closer to him, preparing to draw their guns, if need be, and open fire on Jack's defenders.

"Look out, boss!" warned Sage-brush, at the hostile movement of Buck and his punchers.

"Hold on!" drawled the Sheriff, who, as the danger grew more real, became more deliberate in his movements. "They ain't goin' to be nothin' done here unless it's done in the law--you all know me, boys--I'm the sheriff--this man's my prisoner." Pointing to Jack, he added: "There ain't nobody goin' to take him from me--an' live."

Buck saw Jack slipping from his clutches. "You're not goin' to be bluffed by one man, are you, boys?"

"No," his punchers answered in unison, crowding toward Jack, who held up his hand and cried: "Stop! I want a fair deal, and I'll get it."

"I'll settle this thing all right. All I ask is a few words alone with my wife."

Jack clasped Echo to his breast as he begged this boon from the men who sought his life.

"No!" blustered Buck.

"Yes," ordered Slim quietly but emphatically. "Payson--you'll give me your word you won't try to escape?"

"Yes," agreed Jack.

"His word don't go with us," shouted Buck.

Slim laid his hand on the butt of his revolver, ready to draw, if necessary, to enforce his command. Buck saw the movement, and shouted to him: "Keep your hand away from that gun, Sheriff. You know I am quick on the draw." He significantly fingered his holster as he spoke.

"So I've heard tell," agreed Slim, hastily withdrawing his hand from his revolver.

Slim appeared to agree to the surrender of Jack to Buck and his punchers, permitting them to deal with him as they saw fit. He

fumbled in his left-hand waistcoat pocket, pulling out a bag of tobacco and a package of rice paper. Ostentatiously he began to roll a cigarette. Then, with the quickness of a cat, his left hand was plunged in the inside right-hand pocket of his waistcoat. Grasping a revolver by the muzzle he deftly jerked it upward, and seized the handle in its flight. He covered Buck McKee before that worthy realized what had happened. With his right hand Slim pulled the weapon which swung at his hip, and aimed it at the other boys of the Lazy K. The guns moved up and down the line, backed by the Sheriff's usually mild blue eyes, coldly steady now at the call to battle.

"I'll give you a lesson in pullin' guns, though," he declared, his voice as steady as his hands. "Don't move, Buck," he warned, as McKee wavered. "Nor any others of you. I'm playin' this hand alone. Buck McKee, you've been flirtin' with a tombstone for some time. Hands up, gents," he ordered, raising the pistols significantly.

"I said GENTS," he repeated, when Buck McKee did not obey him with alacrity. The balked leader of the Lazy K outfit reluctantly held his hands aloft.

"Sage-brush!" called Slim.

"Here," answered the foreman, covering a man with his revolver.

"Parenthesis!" summoned the Sheriff.

"Here," the man of the bowlegs replied, as he drew his gun.

"Me, too," cried Fresno, while Show Low came to the front with "An' likewise here."

When the Lazy K outfit was thoroughly under subjection, Slim stepped forward and said: "Now, gentlemen, if you please. You see, this yere's my party an' I regerate it my way. Jack here gave his word to stay and face this thing out. He's a-goin' to do it. I'm responsible for him--Sage-brush, you will collect at the door sech articles of hardware as these gentlemen has in their belts--I deputize you. Gents, as you walk out the do', you will deposit yo' weapons with Mr. Sage-brush Charley--the same to be returned to you when the court sees fit and proper."

"You ain't goin' to let him--" Buck did not finish the sentence, for Slim, thoroughly aroused, shouted: "Buck McKee, if you say another word, I'm goin' to kill you. Gents, there's the door--your hosses are in the corral--get."

Preceded by some of the Sweetwater boys, the Lazy K outfit filed out, Sage-brush taking their guns as they passed him. Fresno and Parenthesis brought up the rear.

"He needn't think he'll escape. We're bound to have him," declared Buck.

"Are you goin'?" demanded Slim, his voice full of menace.

"Can't you see me?" sneered Buck.

Sage-brush relieved him of his gun as he passed, handing it to Fresno. Buck paused in the doorway long enough to lament: "Talk of hospitality. I never get in but what I am put out."

Slim watched McKee from the window until he disappeared through the gate of the corral. Then walking down to Jack, he took him by the hand.

"It'll be all right in an hour--thank you, boys," Payson assured them.

"We all know you are the whitest man on the Sweetwater," assured Sage-brush, speaking for the punchers, as they left Jack a prisoner with Slim.

Speaking in a low tone, Jim asked Jack: "Where did you get that money?"

"Don't you know?" he asked, in surprise.

"From--"

Jack nodded his head.

"I'll wait for you in the other room," said Slim.

"Maw, Polly, we all better leave 'em alone."

As the woman and the girl left the room, the old ranchman paused at the doorway, leading to the kitchen, to advise his son-in-law earnestly: "I 'low you better tell her; it's best."

The two young people were left alone in the room in which they had passed so many happy hours to face a crisis in their lives. The day which had begun sunnily was to end in darkest clouds. The awful accusation was incredible to Echo. Her faith in her husband was not shaken. Jack, she felt, could explain. But, no matter what the outcome might be, she would be loyal to the man she loved. On this point she was wholly confident. Had she not pledged her faith at the marriage altar?

"Jack?" a volume of questions was in the word. Taking her hands in his and looking searchingly in her eyes, he said:

"Before I tell you what's been on my mind these many weeks--I want to hold you in my arms and hear you say: "Jack, I believe in you."

Echo put her arms about his neck and, nestling close to his breast, declared: "I do believe in you--no matter what circumstances may be against you. No matter if all the world calls you guilty--I believe in you, and love you."

Jack seated himself at the table, and drew his wife down beside

him. Putting his arms about her as she knelt before him, he murmured: "You're a wife--a wife of the West, as fair as its skies and as steadfast as its hills--and I--I'm not worthy--"

"Not worthy--you haven't--it isn't--" gasped Echo, starting back from him, thinking that Jack was about to confess that under some strange stress of circumstances he had slain the express-agent.

"No, it isn't that," hastily answered Jack, with a shudder at the idea. "I've lied to you," he simply confessed.

"Lied to me--you?" cried Echo, in dismay.

"I've been a living lie for months," relentlessly continued Jack, nerving himself for the ordeal through which he would have to pass.

"Jack," wailed Echo, shrinking from him on her knees, covering her face with her hands.

"It's about Dick."

Echo started. Again Dick Lane had arisen as from out the grave.

"What of him?" she asked, rising to her feet and moving away from him.

"He is alive."

Jack did not dare look at his wife. He sat with his face white and pinched with anguish.

The young wife groaned in her agony. The blow had fallen. Dick alive, and she now the wife of other man? What of her promise? What must he think of her?

"I didn't know it until after we were engaged," pursued Jack; "six months. It was the day I questioned you about whether you would keep your promise to Dick if he returned. I wanted to tell you then, but the telling meant that I should lose you. He wrote to me from Mexico, where he had been in the hospital. He was coming home--he enclosed this letter to you."

Jack drew from his pocket the letter which Dick enclosed in the one which he had sent Jack, telling of his proposed return.

She took the missive mechanically, and opened it slowly.

"I wanted to be square with him--but I loved you," pleaded Jack. "I loved you better than life, than honor--I couldn't lose you, and so--"

His words fell on unheeding ears. She was not listening to his pleadings. Her thoughts dwelt on Dick Lane, and what he must think of her. She had taken refuge at the piano, on which she bowed her head within her arms.

Slowly she arose, crushing the letter in her hand. In a low, stunned voice she cried: "You lied to me."

Jack buried his face in his hands. "Yes," he confessed. "He came the night we were married. I met him in the garden. He paid that money he had borrowed from me when he went away."

Horror-struck, Echo turned to him. "He was there that night?" she gasped. "Oh, Jack. You knew, and you never told me. I had given my word to marry him--you, knowing that, have done this thing to me?" Her deep emotion showed itself in her voice. The more Jack told her the worse became her plight.

"I loved you." Jack was defending himself now, fighting for his love.

"Did Dick believe I knew he was living?" continued the girl mercilessly.

"He must have done so."

"Jack! Jack!" sobbed Echo, tears streaming down her face.

"What could I do? I was almost mad with fear of losing you. I was tempted to kill him then and there. I left your father to guard the door--to keep him out until after the ceremony."

Jack could scarcely control his voice. The sight of Echo's suffering unmanned him.

"My father, too," wailed Echo.

"He thought only of your happiness," Jack claimed.

"What of my promise--my promise to marry Dick? Where is he?" moaned the girl.

"He's gone back to the desert."

Over her swept the memory of the terrible dream. Dick dying of thirst in the desert, calling for her; crushed to the earth by Jack after battling the awful silence. She moved to the middle of the room, as if following the summons.

"The desert, my dream," she whispered, in awe.

"He is gone out of our lives forever," cried Jack, facing her with arms outstretched.

"And you let him go away in the belief that I knew him to be living?" accused the wife.

"What will not a man do to keep the woman he loves? Dick Lane has gone from our lives, he never return," argued Jack.

"He must," screamed Echo. "There is a crime charged against you--he must return to prove your story as to the money--He must

know through your own lips the lie that separated us."

"You love him--you love him." Jack kept repeating the words, aghast at the knowledge that Echo seemed to be forcing upon him.

"Bring him back to me." Firmly she spoke.

Jack gazed at her in fear. Chokingly he cried again: "You love him!"

"I don't know. All I know is that he has suffered, is suffering now, through your treachery; bring him back to me, that I may stand face to face with him, and say: 'I have not lied to you, I have not betrayed your trust.'"

"You love him," he repeated.

"Find him--bring him back."

Jack was helpless, speechless. Echo's attitude overpowered him.

The wife staggered again to the piano, slowly sinking to the seat. She had turned her back on him. This action hurt him more than any word she had spoken. Her face was buried in her hands. Deep sobs shook her shoulders.

Jack followed her, to take her again in his arms, but she made no sign of forgiveness. Turning, he strode to the rack, and took down his hat and cartridge-belt. Picking up his rifle, he firmly declared: "I will go. I'll search the plains, the mountains, and the deserts to find this man. I will offer my life, if it will serve to place the life you love beside you. Good-bye."

The sound of the closing of the door roused Echo to a full realization of what she had done. She had driven the one man she really loved out of her life; sent him forth to wander over the face of the earth in search of Dick Lane, for whom she no longer cared. She must bring her husband back. She must know that he alone had her heart in his keeping.

"No, no, Jack--come back!" she called. "I love you, and you alone--come back! come back!"

Before she could throw open the door and summon him back to happiness and trust, Bud, who had heard the full confession from the room in which he had taken refuge when he thought Buck would throw the blame on Jack, caught her by the arm.

"Stop!" he commanded.

"Bud Lane!" exclaimed Echo, "you have heard--"

"I've heard--my brother--he is alive!"

Bud spoke rapidly. His belief was confirmed. He would have full revenge for what his brother had suffered at Payson's hands.

To Echo's plea of "Don't stop me I" he shouted: "No!" and caught the young wife, and pulled her back from the doorway. Echo struggled to free herself, but the young man was too strong.

"He had ruined Dick's life, stolen from him the woman he loved," he hissed in her ear.

"Jack! Jack!" was her only answer.

"No, he sha'n't come back--let him go as he let my brother go, out of your life forever."

"I can't--I can't. I love him!"

Throwing Bud off, she ran to the door. Bud pulled his revolver, and cried: "If he enters that door I'll kill him."

Outside Echo heard Jack inquiring: "Echo! Echo! you called me?"

Echo laid her hand on the knob to open the door, when she heard the click of the pistol's hammer as Bud raised it.

With a prayer in her eyes, she looked at the young man. He was obdurate. Nothing could move him.

Turning, she shrieked: "No, I did not call. Go! in God's name, go!"

"Good-bye!" was Jack's farewell. The rapid beat of horse's hoofs told of his mounting and riding away.

"Gone. Oh, Bud, Bud, what have you done?"

"I should have killed him," was Bud's answer, as he gazed after the retreating form galloping down trail.

Mrs. Allen, hearing Echo's calls, hastened in from the kitchen. She found her daughter sobbing at the table. "What is the matter, child?"

Then, turning to Bud, she fiercely demanded of him: "What have you been saying to her?"

"Nothin'," he replied, as he left the house.

"Oh, mother, mother!" wailed Echo. "Jack--I have sent him away."

"Sent him away," repeated the startled Mrs. Allen.

"Yes," assured Echo.

"You don't mean to say he is guilty--you don't mean--"

"No, no!" interrupted Echo. "Oh, I never thought of that--he must come back--call Dad, call Slim."

Echo had forgotten Jack's promise to Slim. He, too, in his

period of stress had overlooked the fact that he was a suspected murderer. Now he had fled. He must be brought back to clear his good name.

Mrs. Allen called her husband and the Sheriff into the room.

"What's the row?" shouted the Sheriff.

"Jack's gone," cried Mrs. Allen.

In amazement the two men could only repeat the news, "Gone!"

"Gone where?" crisply demanded the Sheriff.

"Don't stand there starin'; do something," scolded Mrs. Allen.

"He gave me his word to stay and face this thing out," shouted the bewildered Slim.

"It's all my fault. I sent him away." Echo seized Slim's hand as she spoke.

"You sent him away?"

She fell on her knees before him. Lifting her hands as in prayer, she implored: "I never thought of his promise to you. He never thought of it. Go find him--bring him back to me!"

"Bring him back?" howled the excited Sheriff, his eyes bulging, his cheeks swelling, his red hair bristling, and his voice ringing in its highest key. "Bring him back? You just bet I will. That's why I'm sheriff of Pinal County."

Slim whirled out of the door as if propelled by a gigantic blast. Echo fell fainting at her mother's feet.

CHAPTER XII

The Land of Dead Things

Forth to the land of dead things, through the cities that are forgotten, fared Dick Lane. Tricked by his friend, with the woman he loved lost to him, he wandered onward.

Automatically he took up again his quest for buried treasure. That which in the flush of youthful enthusiasm and roseate prospects of life and love had seized him as a passion was now a settled habit. And fortunately so, for it kept him from going mad. He had no thought of gain--only the achievement of a purpose, a monomania.

With this impulse was conjoined a more volitional motive--he wished to revenge himself upon the Apaches, and chiefly upon the renegade McKee, whom he supposed still to be with them. Somehow he blamed him, rather than Jack Payson, as being the chief cause of his miseries. "If he had not stolen the buried gold, I would have returned in time," he muttered, "He is at the bottom of all

this. As I walked away from Jack in the garden, I felt as if it was McKee that was following me with his black, snaky eyes."

Accordingly, Dick directed his way to a region reputed to be both rich in buried treasure and infested by hostile Indians.

The fable of the Quivira, the golden city marked now by the ruins of the Piro pueblo of Tabiri, south of the salt-deposits of the Manzano, is still potent in Arizona and New Mexico to lure the treasure-seeker. Three hundred and fifty years ago it inspired a march across the plains that dwarfs the famous march of the Greeks to the sea. It led to the exploration of the Southwest and California before the Anglo-Saxon settlers had penetrated half a hundred miles from the Atlantic coast. The cities are forgotten to-day. The tribe which gave it a name proved to be utter barbarians, eaters of raw meat, clad only in skins, without gold, knowing nothing of the arts; Teton nomads, wandering through Kansas. Yet each decade since witnesses a revival of a wonderful story of the buried treasures of the Grand Quivira.

The myth originated in New Mexico in 1540. Antonio de Mendoza was the viceroy of New Spain. Having practically conquered the New World, the adventurers who formed his court, having no fighting to do with common enemies, began to hack each other. Opportunely for the viceroy, Fra Marcos discovered New Mexico and Arizona. Gathering the doughty swordsmen together, Mendoza turned them over to the brilliant soldier and explorer, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, with strict orders to get them as far from the viceroy as he could, and then lose them.

Coronado and his band were the first to see the Grand Canon of the Colorado. In the latter weeks of 1540 they were in the town of Tiguex. As they were less welcome than the modern tourists, who are now preyed upon where these preyed, the natives sent them on to the pueblo of the Pecos. Mendoza had sent Coronado into New Mexico on the strength of the trimmings of the myth of the "Seven Cities of Cibola." The fabled cities of gold proved to be peaceful settlements. Coronado attempted to lose his cut-throats by having them settle in the country. A plains Indian, captive among the Pecos, changed his plans, and led him to undertake his wonderful march. The Pecos wished to get rid of the guests, so they concocted a marvelous story of buried treasures, and made the poor captive father it. To the gold-chasers the captive was known as "The Turk," his head being shaven and adorned only with a scalp-lock, a custom noticeable because of its variance from that of the long-haired Pueblos.

"The Turk" told of a tribe of plainsmen who had a great store of the yellow substance. They were called the Quivira. He would lead them to the ancient Rockefellers. Coronado put him at the head of his band, and followed him eastward over the plains. For months they plodded after him, the Indian trying to lose Coronado, and that valiant warrior endeavoring to obey orders to "shake" his band. About the middle of what is now the Indian Territory, Coronado began to suspect that "The Turk" was selling him a gold brick instead of a bonanza. Landmarks began to look strangely alike. "The Turk," as he afterward confessed, was

leading them in a circle. Coronado sent the most of his band back to the Mexican border, retaining about thirty followers. With the help of heated bayonets and sundry proddings, he then impressed upon "The Turk" that it was about time for him to find the Quiviras, or prepare to go to the happy hunting-grounds of his ancestors. After many hardships, "The Turk" located the tribe they were seeking near the present site of Kansas City. All that Coronado found in the way of metal was a bit of copper worn by a war-chief. Not only was the bubble burst, but the bursting was so feeble that Coronado was disgusted. He beheaded the guide with his own hands as a small measure of vengeance. With his followers he retraced his weary road to Tiguex. The lesson lasted for half a century, when the myth, brighter, more alluring than ever, arose and led others on to thirsty deaths in the bad lands and deserts of the Southwest.

It was to the modern version that Lane had succumbed. From the Sweetwater he roved to the south of Albuquerque, where the narrow valley of the Rio Grande is rimmed on the east by an arid plateau twenty miles wide; and this is, in turn, walled in by a long cordillera. Through the passes, over the summit, Lane climbed, descending through the pineries, park-like in their grandeur and immensity, to the bare, brown plains which stretch eastward to the rising sun. In the midst of the desert lies a chain of salines, accursed lakes of Tigua folk-lore. Beyond them the plain melts and rebuilds itself in the shimmering sun.

To the south and southeast spectral peaks tower to the clouds. Northward the blue shadows of the Sante Fe fall upon the pine-clad foot-hills.

Along the lower slopes of the Manzano are the ruins of the ancient pueblos. Abo and Cuarac are mounds of fallen buildings and desert-blown sand. Solemn in their grandeur, they dominate the lonely landscape in a land of adobe shacks.

Thirty miles from Cuarac, to the southeast, lies Tabiri, the "Grand Quivira." Huddled on the projecting slopes of the rounded ridges, access to it is a weary, dreary march. The nearest water is forty miles away. Toiling through sand ankle-deep, the traveler plods across the edge of the plains, through troughlike valleys, and up the wooded slope of the Mesa de los Jumanos. A mile to the south a whale-back ridge springs from the valley, nosing northward.

No sound breaks the stillness of the day. From the higher ridges the eye falls upon the pallid ghost of the city. Blotches of juniper relieve the monotony of the brown, lifeless grass. Grays fade into leaden hues, to be absorbed in the ashy, indeterminate colors of the sun-soaked plains. No fitter setting for a superstition could be found. Once a town of fifteen hundred inhabitants, the topography of ridge gave it an unusual shape. Ruins of three four-story terrace houses face one another across narrow alleys. Six circular cisterns yawn amid mounds of fallen walls. At the center of the southerly blocks towers a gray quadrangular wall, the last of a large building. At the western terminus of the village, where the slope falls away to the

valley, is a gigantic ruin. Its walls are thirty feet high and six feet thick. The roof has fallen, and the topmost layers of the bluish-gray limestone are ragged and time-worn.

The building had a frontage of two hundred and two feet, and its greatest depth was one hundred thirty-one feet. Flat-faced prisms, firmly laid in adobe mortar, are placed at irregular intervals in the walls.

The northern part of the ruin is one great cross-shaped room, thirty-eight feet wide and one hundred and thirty-one feet long. A gate fifteen feet wide and eleven feet high opens to the eastward. A mighty timber forms an arch supporting fifteen feet of solid masonry.

South of this is a great chamber cut up into smaller rooms, with long halls, with walls twenty feet in height. In one of the rooms is a fireplace, and over the doorways are carved wood lintels. An entrance from the south is given through a spacious antechamber. The rafters, hauled fifteen miles, must have weighed a ton.

Here lies the Colchis of the modern Argonaut. At first the Mexican pried through the debris-choked rooms, or feebly tunneled under the walls. With the coming of the white races and the drill, holes have been sunk into the original bed-rock. To the simple stories of the natives, fable-bearers have added maps, dying confessions, and discovered ciphers.

This ruin, which has caused so many heart-breaks and disappointments, are but the fragments of an old mission founded by Francisco de Atevedo in 1628. Tabiri was to be the central mission of Abo and Cuarac. The absence of water leads the modern explorer to believe that when the town was deserted the spring was killed. The gentle fathers who built the church supervised the construction of a water-works. On a higher ridge are three crudely made reservoirs, with ditches leading to the village. The Piroso had no animals save a few sheep, and the water supply was needed only for domestic uses, as the precipitation furnished moisture for small crops of beans and corn.

All these towns were wiped out by the Apaches, the red plague of the desert. First they attacked the outlying forts of the Salines, once supposed to be well-watered, teeming with game, and fruitful. Tradition again takes the place of unrecorded history, and tells that the sweet waters were turned to salt, in punishment of the wife of one of the dwellers in the city, who proved faithless. In 1675 the, last vestige of aboriginal life was wiped out. For a century the Apaches held undisputed control of the country; then the Mexican pioneer crept in. His children are now scattered over the border. The American ranchman and gold-seeker followed, twisting the stories of a Christian conquest into strange tales of the seekers of buried treasures.

Through this land Dick had wandered, finding his search but a rainbow quest. But he kept on by dull inertia, wandering westward to Tularosa, then down to Fort Grant, and toward the

Lava Beds of southwestern Arizona. In all that arid land there was nothing so withered as his soul.

Jack, well mounted, with a pack-mule carrying supplies, had picked up Dick's trail, after it left Tularosa, from a scout out of Fort Grant.

Slim Hoover headed for Fort Grant in his search for Jack. Although the ranchman had only a brief start of him, Slim lost the track at the river ford. Knowing Dick had gone into the desert, Jack headed eastward, while Slim, supposing that Jack was breaking for the border to escape into a foreign country turned southward.

From the scout who had met Jack and Dick, the Sheriff learned that the two men were headed for the Lava Beds, which were occupied by hostile Apaches.

Detachments of the 3d Cavalry were stationed at the fort, with Colonel Hardie in command of the famous F troop, a band of Indian fighters never equaled. In turn, they chased Cochise, Victoria, and Geronimo with their Apache warriors up and down and across the Rio Grande. Hard pressed, each chieftain, in turn, would flee with his band first to the Lava Beds, and then across the border into Mexico, where the United States soldiers could not follow. Hardie fooled Victoria, however. Texas rangers had met the Apache chief in an engagement on the banks of the Rio Grande. Only eight Americans returned from the encounter. Hardie took up his pursuit, and followed Victoria across the river. The Indians had relaxed their vigilance, not expecting pursuit and despising the Mexican Rurales. Troop F caught them off guard in the mountains. The fight was one to extermination. Victoria and his entire band were slain.

This was the troop which was awaiting orders to go after the Apaches.

Colonel Hardie told Slim that the Indians were bound to head for the Lava Beds. If the men for whom he was looking were in the desert, the troops would find them more quickly than Slim and his posse.

Slim waited at Fort Grant for orders, writing back to Sage-brush, telling him of his plans.

Fort Grant followed the usual plan of all frontier posts. A row of officers' houses faced the parade-grounds. Directly opposite were the cavalry barracks fort. On one side of the quadrangle were the stables, and the fourth line consisted of the quartermaster's buildings and the post-trader's store. Small ranchmen had gathered near the fort for protection, and because of the desire of the white man for company. In days of peace garrison life was monotonous. But the Apaches needed constant watching.

As a soldier, the Apache was cruel and cowardly. He always fought dismounted, never making an attack unless at his own

advantage. As infantryman he was unequalled. Veteran army officers adopted the Apache tactics, and installed in the army the plan of mounted infantry; soldiers who move on horseback but fight on foot detailing one man of every four to guard the horses. Methods similar to those used by the Apaches were put into use by the Boers in the South African War.

Indeed, the scouting of these Dutch farmers possessed many of the characteristics of the Apaches. So, too, the Japanese soldiers hid from the Russians with the aid of artificial foliage in the same way that an Indian would creep up on his victim by tying a bush to the upper part of his body and crawling toward him on his knees and elbows.

Mounted on wiry ponies inured to hardships, to picking up a living on the scanty herbage of the plains, riding without saddles, and carrying no equipment, the Indians had little trouble in avoiding the soldiers. Leaving the reservation, the Apaches would commit some outrage, and then, swinging on the arc of a great circle, would be back to camp and settled long before the soldiers could overtake them. Hampered by orders from the War Department, which, in turn, was molested by the sentimental friends of the Indians, soldiers never succeeded in taming the Apache Crook cut off communications and thrashed them thoroughly in these same Lava Beds that they never recovered.

In Slim's absence, Buck McKee and his gang had taken possession of Pinal County. Rustlers and bad men were coming in from Texas and the Strip. Slim's election for another term was by no means certain. He did not know this, but if he had, it would not have made any difference to him. He was after Jack, and, at any cost, would bring him back to face trial. The rogues of Pinal County seized upon the flight of Jack as a good excuse to down Slim. The Sheriff was more eager to find Jack and learn from him that Buck's charge was false than to take him prisoner. He knew the accusation would not stand full investigation.

Slowly the hours passed until the order for "boots and saddles" was sounded, and the troops trotted out of the fort gate. Scouts soon picked up their trail, but that was different from finding the Indians. Oft-times the troopers would ride into a hastily abandoned camp with the ashes still warm, but never a sight of a warrior could be had. Over broad mesas, down narrow mountain trails, and up canons so deep that the sun never fully penetrated them, the soldiers followed the renegades.

For a day the trail was lost. Then it was picked up by the print of a pony's hoof beside a water-hole. But always the line of flight led toward an Apache spring in the Lava Beds.

Slim and his posse took their commands from the officers of the pursuers. The cow-punchers gave them much assistance as scouts, knowing the country, through which the Indians fled. Keeping in touch with the main command, they rode ahead to protect it from any surprise. The chief Indian scout got so far ahead at one time in the chase that he was not seen for two days. Once, by lying flat on his belly, shading his eyes with his hands, and

gazing intently at a mountainside so far ahead that the soldiers could scarcely discern it, he declared he had seen the fugitives climb the trail. The feat seemed impossible, until the second morning after, when the scout pointed out to the colonel the pony-tracks up the Mountainside. The Apache scouts kept track of the soldiers' movements, communicating with the main body with blanket-signals and smoke columns.

The sign-language of the Indians of the South is an interesting field of study. On the occasion of a raid like the one described, the warriors who were to participate would gather at one point and construct a mound, with as many stones in it as there were warriors. Then they would scatter into small bands. When any band returned to the mound, after losing a fight and the others were not there, the leader would take from the mound as many stones as he had lost warriors. Thus, the other bands, on returning, could tell just how many men had fallen.

In the arid regions of the West, water-signs are quite frequent. They usually consist of a grouping of stones, with a longer triangular stone in the center, its apex pointing in the direction where the water is to be found. In some cases the water is so far from the trail that four or five of these signs must be followed up before the water is found.

Only the Indian and the mule can smell water. This accomplishment enabled the fleeing Apaches to take every advantage of the pursuing troopers, who must travel from spring to spring along known trails.

In the long, weary chase men and horses began to fail rapidly. Short rations quickly became slow starvation fare. Hardie fed his men and horses on mesquit bean, a plant heretofore considered poisonous. For water he was forced to depend upon the cactus, draining the fluid secreted at the heart of the plant.

With faces blistered by the sun and caked with alkali, blue shirts faded to a purple tinge, and trousers and accouterments covered with a gray, powdery dust, the soldiers rode on silently and determinedly. Hour after hour the troop flung itself across the plains and into the heart of the Lava Beds, each day cutting down the Apache lead.

CHAPTER XIII

The Atonement

False dawn in the Lava Beds of Arizona. The faint tinge on the eastern horizon fades, and the stars shine the more brilliantly in the brief, darkest hour before the true daybreak. An icy wind sweeps down canons and over mesas, stinging the marrow of the wayfarer's bones. In the heavens, the innumerable stars burn steadily in crystal coldness. Shadows lie in Stygian blackness at foot of rock and valley. Soft and clear the lights of night swathe the uplands. An awesome silence hangs over the desert. Hushed and humbled by the immensity of space, one expects to hear the rush of worlds through the universe. At times the bosom

swells with a wild desire to sing and shout in the glory of pure living.

The day comes quickly; the sun, leaping edge of the world, floods mesa and canon, withering, sparing no living thing, lavishing reds and purples, blues and violets upon canon walls and wind-sculptured rocks. But a remorseful glare, blinding, sight-destroying, is thrown back from the sand and alkali of the desert. Shriveled sage-brush and shrunken cactus bravely fight for life.

A narrow pathway leads from the mesa down the canon's wall, twisting and doubling on itself to Apache Spring. The trail then moves southward between towering cliffs, a lane through which is caught a far-distant glimpse of the mountains. Little whirlwinds of dust spring up, ever and anon, twirling wildly across the sandy wastes. The air suffocates, like the breath of a furnace. Ever the pitiless sun searches and scorches, as conscience sears and stings a stricken soul.

Down the narrow trail, past the spring, ride in single file the Apaches, slowly, on tired horses, for the pursuing soldiers have given them no halting space. Naked, save for a breech-clout, with a narrow red band of dyed buckskin about his forehead, in which sticks a feather, each rides silent, grim, cruel, a hideous human reptile, as native to the desert as is the Gila monster. The horse is saddleless. For a bridle, the warrior uses a piece of grass rope twisted about the pony's lower jaw. His legs droop laxly by the horse's sides. In his right hand he grasps his rifle, resting the butt on the knee. The only sound to break the stillness of the day is the rattle of stones, slipping and sliding down the pathway when loosened by hoofs of the ponies.

Creeping down the canon wall, they cross the bottom, pass the spring, and disappear at a turn in the canon walls. Nature and Indian meet and merge in a world of torture and despair.

Dick had fared badly in the Lava Beds. One spring after the other he found dry. His horse fell from exhaustion and thirst; he ended the sufferings of his pack-mule with a revolver-bullet.

Dick staggered on afoot across the desert, hoping to find water at Apache Spring. His blue shirt was torn and faded to a dingy purple. Hat and shoulders were gray with alkali dust. Contact with the rocks and cactus had rent trousers and leggings. His shoes, cut by sharply pointed stones, and with thread rotted by the dust of the deserts, were worn to shreds. Unshaven and unshorn, with sunken cheeks and eyes bright with the delirium of thirst, he dragged his weary way across the desert. He reached Apache Spring shortly after the passage of the Indians, but craving for water was so great that he did not observe their trail.

Reeling toward the spring, he cast aside his hat and flung down his rifle in his eagerness to drink. Throwing himself on his face before the hollow in the rock from which the water trickled, he first saw that the waters had dried up. With his bony fingers

he dug into the dry sand, crying aloud in despair. Stiffly he arose and blundered blindly to a rock, upon which he sank in his weakness.

"Another day like this and I'll give up the fight," he moaned. "Apache Spring dry--the first time in years; Little Squaw Spring, nothing but dust and alkali; it is twenty miles to Clearwater Spring--twenty-miles--if I can make it."

Dick trembled with weakness. His swollen tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. His lips were cracked and blackened. Bits of foam flickered about the corners of his mouth. The glare blinded his eyes, which were half-closed. At times fever-waves swept over him; again he shuddered with cold.

Sounds of falling waters filled his ears. The sighing of the wind through the canon walls suggested the trickling of fountains. Rivers flowed before his eyes through green meadows, only to fade into the desert as he gazed.

"What a land! what a land! It is the abode of the god of thirst! He tempts men into his valley with the lure of gold, and saps the life-blood from their bodies--drop by drop. Drop by drop I hear it falling. No, it is water I hear! There it is! How cool it looks!"

Dick rose and staggered toward the cliff. In his delirium of thirst he saw streams of water gush down the mountainside. Holding out his arms, he cried: "Saved, saved!"

His hands fell limply by his sides as the illusion faded. He then doubled them into fists, and shook them at the cliff in a last defiance of despair. "You sha'n't drive me mad!"

He seized his empty canteen, pressing it to his lips.

"No, I drained that two days ago--or was it three?" he whispered in panic, as he threw it aside.

Picking up his gun, he falteringly attempted the ascent. "I won't give up--I won't," he shouted huskily. "I've fought the desert before and conquered. I'll conquer again--I'll--"

His will-power ebbed with his failing strength. Blindness fell upon him. Oblivion swept over him. He sank, dying of thirst, in the sands of the desert.

As the buzzard finds the dead, so an Apache crept upon Dick as he lay prostrate. But as the Indian aimed, he heard footsteps from a draw. He saw a man approaching the spring. Silently he fled behind the rocks.

It was Jack. He had entered the Lava Beds from the east, closely following the man for whom he had searched for so many weary months. Others of the Apaches had marked him already. Knowing he would go to the spring, they waited warily to learn if he were alone. The band had scattered to surround him at the water-hole.

Jack's horse and burro, which he had left at the head of the canon, were already in the Indians' possession. With him he carried his rifle and a Colt revolver. A canteen of water was slung over his shoulder. The desert had placed its stamp upon him, turning his clothes to gray. The tan of his face was deepened. Lines about the eyes and mouth showed how much he had suffered physically and mentally in his search for the man he believed was his successful rival in love. Reaching the spring, he looked about cautiously before he laid down his Winchester. He tugged at the butt of his revolver to make certain that it could be pulled quickly from the holster. Taking off his hat, he knelt to drink. He smiled, and confidently tapped his canteen when he found the spring dry. He was raising his canteen to his lips when he spied Dick's body.

Jumping behind a rock, he pulled his revolver, covering the insensible man. It might be a trap. He scanned the trail, the cliff, the canon. Hearing and seeing nothing, he slipped his revolver into his holster and hurried to Dick's side. At first he did not recognize him. The desert and thirst had wrought many changes in his friend's face.

When recognition came, he threw his arms about the prostrate form, crying: "Dick, at last, at last!"

His voice was broken with emotion. The search had been so long, so weary, and the ending so sudden. He had found Dick, but it looked as if he came too late.

Gathering Dick up in his arms, he raised him until his head rested on his knees. Forcing open his mouth, he poured a little water down his throat.

Then with a moistened handkerchief he wetted temples and wrists. Slowly Dick struggled back to life.

"Water--water--it's water!" he gasped, struggling for more of the precious fluid.

"Easy," cautioned Jack. "Only a little now--more when you're stronger."

"Who is it?" cried Dick. Not waiting for Jack to enlighten him, he continued: "No matter--you came in time. I couldn't have held out any longer. All the springs are dry--I figured on reaching Clearwater."

Jack helped Dick to his feet. Taking his stricken friend's right arm, he drew it across his shoulders. With his left arm about his waist, Jack led him to a seat upon a convenient rock.

"I came by Clearwater yesterday," explained Jack. "It is nothing but mud and alkali."

"My horse dropped three days ago. I had to shoot the pack-mule. I--" Dick opened his eyes under the ministrations of Jack.

Gazing upward into his face, he shouted joyfully:

"Why--it's Jack--Jack Payson."

"Didn't you know me, Dick?" asked Jack sympathetically.

"Not at first--my eyes went to the bad out yonder in the glare."

The effort had been too much for Dick. He sat weakly over Jack's knees. Jack turned him partly on his back, and let more water trickle down his throat.

Dick clutched madly at the canteen, but Jack drew it back out of his reach. With his handkerchief he moistened lips and neck. When Dick's strength returned, Jack helped him to sit up.

"I've been hunting you for months," he told him.

"Hunting for me?" echoed Dick.

"Yes," answered Jack. "I traced you through the Lost Cities, then to Cooney, then up in the Tularosas. At Fort Grant they put me on the right trail."

As the clouds break, revealing the blue of the heavens, so Dick's memory came back to him. He shrank from the man at his side.

"Well?" he asked, as he stared at his betrayer.

Jack gazed fixedly ahead. He dared not look in the face of him he had wronged so bitterly.

"She wants you," he said, in a voice void of all emotion.

"Who wants me?" asked Dick, after a pause.

"Echo."

"Your wife?" gritted Dick. He fingered his gun as he spoke.

Huskily Jack replied: "Yes."

Bitter thoughts filled the mind of one; the other had schooled himself to make atonement. For the wrong he had done, Jack was ready to offer his life. He had endured the full measure of his sufferings. The hour of his delivery was at hand. Hard as it was to die in the midglory of manhood, it was easier to end it all here and now, than to live unloved by Echo, hated by Dick, despised by himself.

"She sent me to find you. 'Bring him back to me.' That's what she said," Jack cried, in his agony.

"Your wife--she said that?" faltered Dick.

Fiercely in his torture Jack answered: "Yes--my wife--my wife said it. 'Bring him back to me.'"

"Back?" Dick paused. "Back to what?" he asked himself. "She's your wife, isn't she?" he demanded.

"That's what the law says," answered Jack.

With the thought of the evening in the garden when he heard Jack and Echo pronounced man and wife surging over him, Dick murmured: "What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

"That's what the Book says," answered Jack. "But when hands alone are joined and hearts are asunder, it can't go on record as the work of God."

Dick bowed his head in his hands. "I don't understand."

Stubbornly Jack pursued his message to Dick. "She doesn't love me. I thought I had won her, but she married me with your image in her heart. She married me, yet all the while you were the man she loved--you--you--and in the end I found it out."

Jack's voice sank almost into a whisper as he finished his revelation to Dick, who raised his head and cried: "And yet she broke her faith with me--"

Jack arose in his misery. His task was harder than he expected. Dick was forcing him to tell all without concealing even the smallest trifle of his shame.

"She thought--you were dead. I never told her otherwise. I lied to her--I lied to her."

"She never knew?" asked Dick joyfully. "The letter--?"

"I never gave it to her," answered Jack simply.

Dick leaped to his feet, pulling his revolver from his holster. "And I thought her false to her trust!" He aimed his gun at Payson's heart. "I ought to kill you for this!"

Jack spread out his arms and calmly replied: "I'm ready."

Dick dropped his gun and slipped it into the holster with a gesture of despair. "But it's too late now, too late!"

In his eagerness to tell Dick the way he had solved the problem, Jack spoke nervously and quickly. "No, it isn't too late. There's one way out of this--one way in which I can atone for the wrong I've done you both, and I stand ready to make that atonement. It is your right to kill me, but it is better that you go back to her without my blood on your hands--"

"Go--back--to her?" questioned Dick, as the meaning of the phrase slowly dawned upon him.

"Yes," said Jack, holding out his hands. "Go back with clean hands to Echo Allen. It is you she loves. There's my horse up

yonder. Beyond, there're the pack-mule loaded with water and grub. Plenty of water. We'll just change places, that's all. You take them and go back to her and I'll stay here."

Dick walked toward the spring, but, a spell of weakness came over him and he almost sank to the ground. Jack caught him and held him up.

"It would be justice," muttered Dick, as if apologizing for his acceptance of Jack's renunciation.

Leaning over his shoulder, Jack said: "Sure, that's it, justice. Just tell her I tried to work it out according to my lights--ask her to--forgive, to forgive, that's all."

Jack took off his canteen and threw the strap around Dick's neck. As Lane weakly staggered toward the mouth of the canon, where the horse had been staked out, Jack halted him with a request:

"There's another thing; I left home under a cloud. Buck McKee charged me with holding up and killing 'Ole Man' Terrill for three thousand dollars. Tell Slim Hoover how you paid me just that sum of money."

"I will, and I'll fix the murder where it belongs, and then fix the real murderer."

Jack stepped to Lane's side and, holding out his hand, said: "Thank you. I don't allow you can forgive me?"

"I don't know that I could," coldly answered Dick.

"You'd better be going."

Again Dick started for the horse, but a new thought came to him. Pausing, he said. "She can't marry again until--"

"Well?" asked Jack; his voice was full of sinister meaning, and he fingered his gun as he spoke.

Dick realized at once that Jack's plan was to end his life in the desert with a revolver-shot.

"You mean to--" he shuddered.

Jack drew his gun. "Do you want me to do it here and now?" he cried.

Staggering over to him the weakened man grappled with his old friend, trying to disarm him. "No, no, you sha'n't!" he shouted, as Jack shook him free.

"Why not?" demanded Jack. "Go. There's my horse--he's yours--go! When you get to the head of the canon, you'll hear and know--know that she is free and I have made atonement."

"Why should I hesitate?" argued Dick with himself. "I wanted to

die. I came here in the desert to make an end of it all, but when I met death face to face, the old spirit of battle came over me, and fought it back, step by step. Now--now you come and offer me more than life--you offer to restore to me all that made life dear, all that you have stolen from me by treachery and fraud. Why should I hesitate? She is mine, mine in heart, mine by all the ties of love--mine by all its vows--I will go back, I will take your place and leave you here--here in this land of dead things, to make your peace with God!"

Beads of sweat broke out on Jack's forehead as he listened. He bit his lips until they bled. Clenching his fingers until the nails sank into the palms of his hands, he cried warningly in his agony: "I wouldn't say no more, if I was you. Go--for God's sake, go!"

Dick slowly moved toward the mouth of the canon, still hesitating.

From the hillside a rifle-shot rang out. The ball struck Dick in the leg. He fell, and lay motionless.

Pulling his revolver, Jack stooped and ran under the overhanging ledge, peering about to see where the shot had come from. He raised his gun to fire, when a volley of rifle-shots rang through the canon, the bullets kicking up little spurts of dust about him and chipping edges off the rocks. Jack dropped on his knees and crept to his rifle, clipping his revolver back into his holster.

Crouching behind a rock with his rifle to his shoulder, he waited for the attackers to show themselves.

Experience on the plains taught them that the fight would be a slow one, unless the Apaches sought only to divert attention for the time being to cover their flight southward. After the one shot, which struck Dick, and the volley directed at Jack, not a rifle had been fired. Peering over the boulder, Jack could see nothing.

The Lava Beds danced before his eyes in the swelter of the glaring sunshine. Far off the snow-capped mountains mockingly reared their peaks into the intense blue of the heavens. Since the attackers were covered with alkali-dust from the long ride, a color which would merge into the desert floor when a man lay prone, detection of any movement was doubly difficult. Behind any rock and in any clump of sage-brush might lie an assailant.

Dick had fallen near the spring. He struggled back to consciousness, to find his left leg numb and useless. When the ball struck him he felt only a sharp pinch. His fainting was caused by a shock to his weakened body, but not from fear or pain. With the return to his senses came a horrible, burning thirst, and a horrible sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. He lay breathing heavily until he got a grip on himself. Then he tore the bandanna handkerchief from his neck and bound up the wound, winding the bandage as tightly as his strength permitted to check the blood-flow.

"What is it?" asked Jack, over his shoulder.

"Indians--the 'Paches are out. I'm hit," gasped Dick. He crawled painfully and slowly to Jack's side, dragging his leg after him. He pulled with him his rifle, which he picked up as he passed from the spot where it had fallen in his first wild rush for water.

"The soldiers told me at Fort Grant about the 'Paches being out," Jack whispered hoarsely. "I thought they'd crossed the border into Mexico."

Seeing a spasm of pain sweep over Dick's face, he asked: "Are you hurt bad?"

"I don't know. My left leg is numb."

Both men spoke scarcely above a whisper, fearing to betray their positions by the sound of their voices. Dick lay on his back gathering strength to ward off with rifle and revolver the rush which would come sooner or later.

Jack caught the sound of a falling stone. Peering cautiously over the rock, he saw an Indian creep up a draw toward them. Throwing his rifle to his shoulder, he took quick aim and fired. The Apache jumped to his feet, ran a few steps forward, and fell sprawling. A convulsive shudder shook him, and he lay still.

"I got him!" cried Jack exultantly, as he saw the result of the shot.

But the exposure of his head and shoulders above their barricade had drawn forth more shots from other members of the band.

The bullets struck near the two men, showing that the Apaches had the range.

Dick's wound was bleeding freely, but the shock of the blow had passed away, and his strength returned. Drawing his revolver, he crept closer to Jack, crying: "I can shoot some."

"I reckon you haven't more than a flesh-wound," encouraged Jack. "Can you crawl to the horse?"

"I think I can," answered Dick.

"Then go. Take the trail home. I'll keep these fellows busy while you get away."

The Apaches were showing themselves more as they darted from rock to rock, drawing closer to the entrapped men down the boulder-strewn draws or ravines leading into the canon. An Apache had crawled to the head of a draw, and crossed the butte into a second ravine, which led to the trail down the cliffside. On his belly he had wormed his way up the pathway until he overlooked the rear of the defensive position the two men

occupied. Screened by a hedge he awaited a favorable shot.

Jack again cautiously raised his head and peered over the barricade. Still not an enemy was in sight. As the Apaches had ceased to fire, he knew they were gathering for another simultaneous rush. The purpose of these dashes was twofold: While one or two men might be killed in the advance, the whole party was nearer the object of attack at the finish, and the defenders were demoralized by the hopelessness of all resistance. For the silent rising of naked, paint-daubed Indians from out of the ground, the quick closing in of the cordon, similar to the turn of a lariat around a snubbing-post when a pony weakens for a moment, is calculated to shake the nerves of the strongest of Indian-fighters.

In the breathing-space which the Apaches had given them Jack, who had resigned himself to die, took a new grip on life. His dream of atonement had worked out better than he had planned. Selling his life bravely fighting in a good cause was far, far better than ending it by his own hand. It was a man's death. Fate had befriended him in the end.

Reaching his hand out to Dick, he touched his shoulder, rousing him from a stupor into which he was sinking.

"Quick, Dick, they're coming closer. Go," he ordered. "Don't be a fool, only one of us can escape. One of us alone. Let it be you, Dick, go back to her, back to home and happiness."

Dick struggled to a sitting posture, offering a fair target for the Indian hidden behind the ledge on the cliff trail. The Apache took full advantage and fired, but missed. Dick returned the shot with his revolver before the warrior could sink back behind the rock. The Apache lurched forward in his death-blindness, with the last convulsive obedience of the muscles ere the will flees. Then his legs crumpled up beneath him and he toppled forward off the ledge. His breech-clout caught in a rocky projection, causing the body to hang headlong against the side of the cliff. His rifle fell from his nerveless hands, clattering and breaking on the rocks below.

The sight served as a tonic to Dick. His success braced his strength and will. The old battle-spirit surged over him. Only with an effort did he suppress the desire to laugh and shout. He would have left Jack to fight it out alone but a minute before, but the one shot drove all such ideas from his mind.

"No. I'll be damned if I'll go!" he shouted. "I'll stay and fight with you," and, seizing his rifle joined Jack in stopping a rush of the Apaches.

"We stopped them that time," Jack cried, with satisfaction. In the lull he again urged his comrade to escape to the horse and return to Echo. "Take the horse," he insisted. "Go while there's a chance."

"No," shouted Dick determinedly. It was as much his fight as

Jack's now.

Jack thought more for Echo in that moment than he did for himself. Here was the man she loved. He must go back to her. The woman's happiness depended upon it. But Jack realized that while he was alive, Dick would stay. One supreme sacrifice was necessary.

"Go," he cried, "or I'll stand up and let 'em get me"

"No, we can hold them off," begged Dick, firing as he spoke.

Jack's hour had struck. It was all so supremely simple. There were no waving flags, no cheering comrades. He was only one of two men in the desert, dirty, grimy, and sweaty; his mouth dry and parched, his eyes stinging from powder-fumes, his hands numb from the effects of rapid firing. His mind worked automatically; he seemed to be only an onlooker. The man who first fought off the Apaches and who was now to offer himself as a sacrifice was only one of two Jack Paysons, a replica of his conscious self.

Swiftly Jack Payson arose and faced the Indians.

"Good-bye!" he cried to his comrade.

Dick struggled to his feet and threw himself on Jack to force him down behind the barricade. For a moment both men were in full view of the Apaches. A volley crashed up and across the canon. Both men fell locked in each other's arms, then lay still.

The Indians awaited the result of the shots. The strange actions of the men might be only a ruse. Silence would mean they were victorious.

Both Jack and Dick had been struck. Jack was the first to recover. Reviving, he struggled out of the clasp of his unconscious comrade. "He's hit bad," he said to himself, "and so am I. I'll fight it out to the last, and if they charge they won't get us alive."

Dick groaned and opened his eyes.

"I'm hit hard," he whispered, "you'd better go."

Jack was on his hands and knees crawling toward his rifle when his comrade spoke.

"Listen," he replied. "We're both fixed to stay now, so lie close. I'll hold 'em off as long as I can, but if they rush, save one shot for yourself--you understand?"

"Yes, not alive!" answered Dick weakly, his voice thin and his face ashen white with pain.

Jack reached the boulder, and with an effort raised himself and peered over the edge.

"They're getting ready. Will you take my hand now?" he asked, as he held it out to Dick.

"I sure will," his wounded comrade cried, grasping it with all the strength he possessed.

Jack smiled in his happiness. He felt he had made his peace with all men and at last was ready to meet death with a clear conscience.

"It looks like the end. But we'll fight for it."

The shrill war-whoops of the Indians, the first sound they had made in the fight, showed they felt confident of overcoming the men in the next rush.

Jack and Dick had abandoned the rifles and were now fighting the Indians off with their revolvers as they closed in on them.

Hardie had halted the night before at Clearwater Spring. Finding it but mud and alkali, he had merely rested his men and horses for a few hours, and then pushed on for Apache Spring, where he hoped to strike water. The troop rode through the early morning hours, full of grit, and keen to overtake the Apaches, traces of whose flight were becoming more evident every mile. All weariness had vanished. Even the horses felt there was something in the air and answered the bugle-call with fresh vigor and go.

A scout first heard the firing at the spring. He did not wait to investigate, knowing he could do nothing alone. The volleys, the difference in the reports of the rifles, proved to him that one party was firing Springfields and the other Winchesters. He knew that the Apaches were being held off. Galloping back to the troop, he reported the fight to its commander.

The bugles sounded. The horses were forced into a gallop. With clashing accouterments and jingling spurs and bits, they dashed across the mesa to the head of the trail. Here they met Slim Hoover and his posse coming from an opposite direction.

The firing in the canon was more intermittent now. Dick and Jack were saving their revolver-shots. The Indians were closing in for the last rush.

Hardie dismounted his men and threw his troops as groups of skirmishers down the draws leading into one side of the canon. Slim and his posse were on the left flank, armed with revolvers. Hardie, with a section, dashed down the trail.

They came upon the Apaches with the rush of a mountain torrent, striking them in the front and on the flank. The cavalrymen fired at will, each plunging from one cover to another as he picked out his man.

The Indians, for a few moments, replied shot for shot. Their stand was a short one, however, and they began to fall back.

Slim entered the canon at the head of the scouts, driving the Apaches before him. Both Jack and Dick had fallen. Across the bodies a wave of the battle flowed.

Once the Indians rallied, but so sudden was the attack, so irresistible the forward dash of the cavalymen, that they became discouraged, and broke and fled toward their horses, with the soldiers in pursuit.

Slim hurried to Dick's side, seeing he was the worst hurt. As he knelt beside him, the dying man opened his eyes and smiled. Leaning over him, Slim heard him gently whisper: "Tell her I know she was true, and not to mind."

With a deep sigh, his eyelids fluttered, and all was still.

The scouts had taken charge of Jack, who was unconscious, and bleeding freely.

From the spring the fighting had drifted southward. Few of the Indians reached the horses, and fewer still got away. Scattering shots showed the hunt for those who fled on foot was still on.

Then soft and mellow over canon and mesa and butte floated the bugle-call, recalling the cavalymen to the guidon. Back they came, cheering and tumultuous, only to be silenced by the presence of their dead.

They buried Dick's body near the spring, and carved his name with a cavalry saber on a boulder near-by.

At dawn the next day they began the long march back to Fort Grant.

Slim took charge of Jack, nursing him back to life.

CHAPTER XIV The Round-up

Much has been written of the passing of the cowboy. With the fenced range, winter feeding, and short drives his occupation once appeared to be gone. But the war of the sheep and cattlemen in the Western States has recently caused the government to compel the cattlemen to remove the fences and permit the herds of sheep and cattle to range over public lands, and this means a return of the regime of the cowboy, with its old institutions.

Chief among these is the round-up.

A sheepman can shear wherever he happens to be. He can entrain at the nearest shipping-point to his grazing-bed. But a herd of cattle will range four hundred miles in a season, so the cattlemen will be forced to revive the round-up, and make the long drives either back to the home ranch, or to the railroad. More cowboys will have to be employed. All the free life of the open will return. At work the cow-puncher is not of the

drinking, carousing, fight-hunting type; nor again is he of the daring romantic school. He is a Western man of the plains. True, after loading up his cattle and getting "paid off," he may spend his vacation with less dignity and quiet than a bank clerk. But after a year of hard work with coarse fare he must have some relaxation. He takes what he finds. The cattle-towns cater to his worst passions. He is as noisy in his spending as a college boy, and, on the average, just as good natured and eager to have a good time.

Only a man of tried and proved courage can hold his job. Skill and daring are needed to handle the half-wild beasts of the herds. The steer respects no one on foot, but has a wholesome fear for a mounted man. Taken separately, neither man nor horse has the smallest chance with range cattle, but the combination inspires the fear noticeable among the Apaches for cavalryman as compared with their contempt for foot-soldiers.

The longhorned steer will fight with the ferociousness of a tiger. A maddened cow will attack even a man on horseback. The most desperate battles of the range are with cows who have lost their calves.

The cow-puncher first comes in contact with his cattle at the round-up. The outfit consists of a foreman with eight men to each thousand head as drivers. Each man has from six to ten mounts. The broncos are only half-broken. But they follow a steer like a terrier does a ball. They delight in the game as much as a polo-pony.

A chuck-wagon accompanies each outfit. This is usually of the United States Army type, solidly built and hauled by four mules. The cook of the outfit is the driver. He has a helper, a tenderfoot, or a boy learning the trade. In the field only the bravest dares defy the cook. His word on the camp is law. All the men are subject to his call. In the wagon are carried a tent, the men's bedding, sleeping-bags, and stores consisting of pork, navy beans, flour, potatoes, canned tomatoes, and canned peaches. At the rear end of the wagon bed is a built-up cupboard, the door of which can be lowered with straps to make a table. Dishes, the lighter food supplies, and a small medicine-chest are stored there. A water-barrel is strapped to the side of the wagon. Enough fire-wood for emergency use is packed under the driver's seat. No wagon is complete without a bucket hanging from the axle.

The spare horses are driven with the herd, the men taking turns at the task. At daybreak each morning the cowboys scatter from the mess-wagon, riding up and down the draws and over the hills, driving in the cattle for branding and the "cutting out," or separating from the herd, of marketable beeves. These are known as "dogies," "sea-lions," and "longhorns." The size as well as the nickname depends upon the location of the range. The cattle of the Sweetwater valley were smaller than the northern stock. From four to six thousand were driven at a time. The calves are lassoed and thrown, and the owner's brand is burned into the hide, leaving a scar which, if the work is well done, will last

until the beef is sold. Branding is hard work. The dust, the odor of burning flesh, the heat of the corral fire for heating the irons, the bellowing of frightened mother cows, and the bleating of the calves, the struggles with the victims, these try men's strength and tempers severely. Once branded, the calf is turned loose and not touched again until it is four years old and ready for the market. Stray unbranded cattle over a year old are known as "mavericks," and become the property of any person branding them.

Having cut out the stock for the drive, a road mark, a supplementary brand for identification burned into the hides. The long march then begins.

A start is made usually in the late spring to reach the railroad in the fall. The drive is as orderly as the march of an army. By natural selection the leaders of the cattle take the head of the herd. They are especially fitted for the place. The same ones are found in the front every day, and the others fall into position, so that throughout the drive the cattle occupy the same relative position each day.

A herd of a thousand beef will stretch out for two miles. The leaders are flanked by cowboys riding upon Mexican saddles with high backs and pommels. The stirrups are worn long, the riders standing in them in emergency. The Mexican is the only saddle fitted for rough work. The cowboy's seat, his ease in the saddle, would make a poor showing in a riding academy or in a cavalry school. Yet the park rider and the soldier would be helpless on the range. The cow-puncher of the plains and the Cossack of the steppes are said to be the best riders in the world, yet each has a different saddle and seat. An exchange of equipment makes poor riders of both of them.

The cow-puncher of Texas and Arizona wears chaps of leather or sheepskin to protect his legs from the mesquit-bushes or the thorns of the cactus. These plants not being found in the northern plains, chaps are not worn there. The cowboy wears a handkerchief about the neck, not for protection from the sun, but to cover the mouth while riding through sand and windstorms.

Flankers ride on each side of the herd at regular intervals. The chuck-wagon and the spare horses follow far enough in the rear to avoid the dust.

For the first few days the drives are long and hard, averaging from twenty-five to thirty miles a day, until the cattle are well tired. Then the pace is set at twelve to fifteen miles.

From dawn until noon the herd is allowed to water and graze along the trail toward their destination. About noon they become restive. The cowboys then drive them steadily forward for eight or ten miles, until early evening, when they are halted for another graze. As night falls they are turned into the bedding grounds. The men ride slowly around the herd, crowding them into a compact mass. As the circle lessens the beasts lie down to rest and chew their cuds.

About midnight the cattle usually get up, stand a while, and then lie down again, having changed sides. The night-guard slowly circles the herd, the men relieving each other at stated intervals.

On rainy, stormy nights, the guard has to double, as the cattle are restless and easily stampeded. Under a clear sky, breathing the bracing air of the plains, with the herd well in hand, the day's work is a pleasant one. But in a steady downpour, with the thunder rolling and the animals full of fear, the task is one to tax the stoutest heart.

The cause of a stampede is always some trifle. A heavy clap of thunder, a flash of lightning, the breaking of a stick, the howl of a wolf, will start the herd off in a blind rush in any direction, heedless of cliffs over which they may tumble, or of rivers whose current will sweep hundreds of the frightened beasts to death.

Once the cattle are off on a stampede, the cowboys ride recklessly, madly to the head of the herd, getting to one side of the leaders. With shouts and pistol-shots they turn the leaders to one side, gradually at first, and then into the arc of a great circle. Blindly racing after the leaders the other cattle follow; and round they plunge until head and tail of the herd meet, and "milling" begins. Any that fall are ground to death by the hoofs of the others. This mighty grind continues until the animals are exhausted or they have recovered from the fight.

To soothe the hysterical beasts, the men begin to sing. Any song will do, but the drawling old hymn tunes of the Methodist camp-meetings have the best effect. Ofttimes the more hysterical members of the herd are shot, as a stampede means a great loss. Animals that stampede once are prone to do it again. The mingling of herds increases the danger. In old days the approach of a herd of buffalo was sure to start a stampede among cattle. Men were detailed to turn the shaggy monsters aside whenever they came within hearing.

Rivers are crossed by one of the cow-punchers swimming his horse in the lead and the other men driving the animals after him.

Once near the shipping-point, the herd is allowed to rest up and fatten, while the owner makes his deal with the cattle-buyers of Omaha or Chicago.

The animals are driven or decoyed into the cars, and the last journey, to the packing-house, begins. Punchers accompany them to feed and water the beasts on the trip. They help turn them into the pens. One night in Chicago, one meal, a dinner ending with a "Lillian Russell" (peaches or apple pie covered with ice-cream) as dessert, and the punchers start West again to begin anew the work of the fall roundup, which is on a smaller scale than the spring one.

It is dawn in the valley of the Sweetwater. The spring rains

have freshened the verdure of the plain. Clumps of coarse grass fringe the river's brink. Cacti and Spanish bayonets nod in the morning breeze, which sweeps down from the mountains. Yucca palms and sahuaroos glisten with the dew. In the distance rise the foot-hills crowned with stunted live-oaks. On the horizon tower the mountains, pine-clad to the timber-line, bare and desolate above.

The outfit of Sweetwater Ranch has gathered for the round-up and the drive to the railroad. In the absence of her husband, Echo Payson had assumed complete charge of the ranch, and with the help of Sage-brush had carried on the work just as she thought Jack would do, hoping against hope for his return in safety, and hiding her sorrow from those about her.

Under a clump of cottonwood, a chuck-wagon has halted. Many of the boys on the round-up are still asleep, the night herders returning to camp. The cook has started his preparations for breakfast. His wagon has a covered top like a prairie-schooner. The tail-board has been lowered to form a table, supported by rawhide straps. About him are scattered tin cups and kitchen utensils. A thin spiral of smoke arises from the fire which has been made in a shallow pit to prevent a spread of flames. The flickering flashes illumine the cook's face as he bends over a steaming pot of coffee, and reveal the features of Parenthesis.

Parenthesis is mixing dough in a dish-pan set on the tail-board. Sage-brush kneels near him, putting on his spurs, preparatory to saddling up as he goes on the first relief.

"Wake up Texas and the other boys, Fresno," ordered Sage-brush. The Californian threw away the butt of his cigarette and shook each man by the shoulder. With much yawning and rubbing of eyes the men crawled from their sleeping-bags. Dashing cold water into their faces from a basin beside the water-barrel, they drank copiously of the coffee which Parenthesis poured out for them.

"Mostly all the boys are in now, ain't they?" asked Parenthesis, looking about the group.

"Yep," answered Sage-brush, "we'll finish brandin' the calves to-day. I reckon Fresno will have to take charge of the drive. I can't leave the ranch until Jack gets back."

Show Low was the only sleeper who had not responded to Parenthesis' call. That worthy walked over and gave him a kick which brought forth a grunt but no other sign of an awakening. Returning to the fire, Parenthesis took a tin cup and poured himself out a cup of coffee.

"Heard any word from him yet?" he asked, as he gulped the beverage.

"Nothin'," replied Sage-brush grimly. "Slim wrote from Fort Grant he was on the trail, but the 'Paches were out an' they wouldn't let him leave the fort till the soldiers went with him."

"Slim hadn't oughter gone and left things the way he did. Buck McKee is gettin' a lot of bad men together, and 'lows he is goin' to run for sheriff himself," growled Fresno.

"He's sure got a tough outfit with him; Slim being away ain't doin' us any good. All the rustlers from Texas an' New Mexico came trailin' into the country just as soon as they heard he was gone. Won't surprise me if we have a run in with the bunch afore we git through with this round-up."

"I got my eye on that Peruna," interjected Fresno.

"Peruna! who's he?" asked Texas.

"One of Buck's outfit," answered Fresno. "He is mighty slick with the runnin'-iron and brandin' other folks' calves."

"We can't be too careful," warned Sage-brush. "Things is strained to the bustin'-point, and any promise of gun-play is goin' to set off a whole lot of fireworks.

Show Low was on the verge of waking up. This he did, by gradually increasing the volume of each snore and breaking it off with a whistle.

At the very moment Sage-brush suggested gunplay, Show Low snorted his loudest.

"What's that?" asked Sage-brush, grabbing his revolver.

"Show Low. He's a regular brass band when he gets started--from the big trombone down to the tin whistle," laughed Fresno.

"It's a wonder he can sleep alongside of that noise."

"He can't," Fresno volunteered. "He'll wake himself up in a minute. He's off now."

The snores of Show Low grew more frequent until he climaxed his accompaniment to sleep with one awful snort, which awakened him. "Eh, what's that?" he yelled, as he bounded to a sitting posture.

"Didn't I tell you?" queried Fresno.

Sage-brush grinned and slowly arose, gathering up his saddle and rope.

Swinging one over each arm, he started toward the corral, saying: "Come on, boys, we got a lot to do to-day. Git your hosses."

The night riders, were coming into camp greeting their comrades with grunts, or in a few words telling them what to guard against in some particular part of the grazing herd.

The sun had risen. The cattle were on their feet browsing the short, sweet grass, moving slowly toward the river.

"Work," growled Show Low, "darn me if I ain't commenced to hate it."

Fresno picked up his saddle to follow his foreman, but paused long enough to fire this parting shot at the cook: "Say, Parenthesis, if them biscuits you're makin' is as hard as the last bunch, save four of 'em for me. I want to shoe that pony of mine."

Parenthesis threw a tin cup at Fresno, who dodged it. Punching the dough viciously, he said: "Darn his housekeepin'. Gets a feller's hands all rough,--it's enough to spile the disposition of a saint."

His soliloquy was interrupted by Buck McKee riding up to the wagon from Lazy K outfit, which was camping a mile below them.

"Hello, Cookie! How goes it?" was his greeting.

"You wind it up, and it goes eight days." Parenthesis bellowed, his temper fast reaching the breaking-point.

"Jack Payson ain't back yet?" Buck asked, paying no attention to the bad humor of Parenthesis.

"Not that I knows on."

The cook rolled the dough with elaborate care.

"Nor Hoover?"

"Ain't seen him," he replied curtly.

"Well, they ain't comin' back, either. They pulled it off pretty slick on us fellers. Hoover he lets Payson go and makes a bluff at chasin' after him. Then they gets off somewhere, splits up the money, and gives us the laugh."

Parenthesis turned on him in anger and shouted: "'I'll bet my outfit against a pair of green socks either one of 'em or both will be back here before this round-up is over."

"You will, eh?" snarled Buck. "Well, we're just waitin' for 'em. We'll swing Payson so high he'll look like a buzzard, and as for Hoover--well, he's served his last term as sheriff in this yere county, you hear me shouting."

McKee cut his pony with his quirt and dashed away in time to escape an unwelcome encounter with several members of the Sweetwater outfit who were riding back to camp.

"S-t-a-y with him, Bud, s-t-a-y with him," shouted Parenthesis, as the first of the cowboys pitched on a bucking horse past the chuck-wagon, the rider using quirt and spurs until he got the bronco into a lope. The other boys followed, each cayuse apparently inventing some new sort of deviltry.

For two weeks before the round-up the outfit had been busting broncos at the home ranch. Each morning at dawn they started, working until the heat of the day forced them to rest. When the temperature crawls to 104 in the shade, and the alkali-dust is so thick in the corral that the hoofs raise a cloud in which horses can hide themselves twenty feet away, when eyes smart and the tongue aches in the parched mouth, it becomes almost impossible to handle yourself, let alone a kicking, struggling bronco.

As one day is like another, and one horse differs from another only in the order of his tricks to avoid the rope and the saddle, a glimpse of the horsemanship of Bud Lane and his fellows will serve as a general picture of life on any Western ranch.

The breaking of the ponies was the work of Bud Lane, who, through the influence of Polly, had broken with McKee and returned to work on Sweetwater Ranch in order to assist Echo, with whom he had become reconciled on discovering that she had been loyal to his brother even to the extent of sending her husband into the desert to bring Dick back.

Bud was the youngest of the hands, but a lad born to the saddle and rope. "Weak head and strong back for a horse-fighter" is a proverb on the plains, and Bud had certainly acted the part.

Fresno and Show Low, with four flankers, had driven into the corral a half-dozen horses untouched by man hands since the days of colthood. A shout, a swing of a gate, and the beasts were huddled in the round corral, trembling and snorting. This corral has a circular fence slightly higher than a man's head with a snubbing-post in the center.

While this is going on, Bud has laid out his cow-saddle, single-rigged, his quirt, and pieces of grass rope for cross-hobbling.

"Ready, Bud?" asks Sage-brush.

"Yep," he replies, as he drops into the corral.

Bud adjusts the hondo and loop of his lariat, keeping his eye on the circling horses, and picking out his first victim. The rope snakes through the air, and falls over the head of a pony. Leaping, bucking, striking with his hoofs at the rope about his neck, the horse fights and snorts. As the rope tightens, shutting off his wind, he plunges less viciously.

Bud, with the help of Fresno and Show Low, takes a turn about the snubbing-post, easing up the rope to prevent the horse from breaking his neck when he falls.

The pony, with braced feet, hauls on the lariat, until choking, it throws itself. Bud in a twinkling has his knee on the bronco's neck. Grasping the under jaw, he throws the head up in the air until the nose points skyward. The turn is slipped from the post, and the noose is slackened and pulled like a bridle over the animal's head, to be fastened curbwise to his under jaw.

Stunned and choked, the horse fights for breath, giving Bud time to hobble his front feet and bridle it. Bud jumps aside as the bronco struggles to his feet. But every move of the beast to free itself results in a fall.

Meantime the hind foot has been noosed and fastened to the one in front. Bud has cross-hobbled the horse, preparing it for the saddle and the second lesson. Holding the pony by the reins and rope, Bud, after many failures, throws a saddle-blanket across its back. With one hand he must also toss a forty-pound saddle into place. Every move Bud makes is fought by the bronco, every touch of blanket resented. With his free hand, Bud must now slip the latigo strap through the cinch-ring. Dodging, twisting, struggling, covered with sweat, the horse foils Bud's quick movements. Finally he succeeds, and with one tight jerk the saddle is in place.

No time to think is given the beast. Fresno and Show Low remove the hobbles, but Bud is twisting an ear to distract its attention. This new torture must be met with a new defense, and the horse is so dazed that it stands still to puzzle out the problem.

This is what Bud has been waiting for. With the agility of a cat, he swings himself into the saddle. The pony arches its back like a bow-string, every muscle taut.

Bud jerks the reins. The horse moves forward, to find that its legs are free. Up it goes in a long curve, alighting with his four feet stiffly planted together. The head is down. Maddened and frightened, the bronco bawls, like a man in a nightmare. Up in air the animal goes again, drawing up its hind feet toward the belly, as if it would scrape off the cinch-strap. The fore feet are extended stiffly forward. Every time the bronco hits the ground, the jar is like the fall of a pile-driver's weight. Bud watches every move. When the feet hit the earth, he rises in stirrups to escape the jolt. But always he is in the saddle, for any unexpected move.

The horse rises on its hind legs to throw the rider. Should it fall backward, the wind will be knocked of the animal, but Bud will be out of the saddle before he strikes the ground, and into it again before horse can struggle erect.

If it tries the trick again, Bud uses the quirt, lashing it about the ears, the flanks, and under the belly. There is not a part of the body into which the biting leather does not cut. Lashing the flanks drives the horse forward.

The struggle has been going on for twenty minutes. Bud is covered with sweat and dust. The horse has begun to sulk. It will not respond to rein or quirt.

Now is the time for the steel. Bud drives the spurs deep into its flanks. The horse plunges forward with a bounding leap. Again the spurs rasp, and again it plunges. The bronco finds that going ahead is the only way in which to avoid punishment.

Round and round the corral it gallops until exhausted. The sweat is pouring off the brute in rivulets. It has taken Bud forty minutes to give the first lesson. Easing up the bronco, Bud swings out of the saddle, and then remounts. This is done a half-dozen times, as the horse stands panting and blowing. Then, with a quick movement, the saddle and bridle are flung against the post. Bud pats the bronco on the neck and the flank, and turns it loose for a second lesson in a couple of days. A third will follow before the end of the week. Then he will saddle the horses, unaided, ride them once or twice about the corral, and finally let one of the hands give each the first lesson on the open plains. This means a wild dash anywhere away from the ranch. The rider must avoid holes in the ground, and keep up the pace until the horse slows up on its own account. Four or five of these lessons with a post-graduate course in dodging a waving slicker, and Sage-brush will declare all of the broncos are "plumb gentle."

The men were riding out their new string to-day. As each passed, Parenthesis flung a jibe at him. He had resumed his bread-making when Polly rode to the wagon.

"Hello, Parenthesis!" was her greeting. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothin'. This yere housekeepin' is gettin' on my nervous system some fearful." Parenthesis struck the dough a savage whack, and added: "I ain't cut out for housekeepin'."

"You've been cut out all right," retorted Polly, glancing at his legs, "whatever it's for."

Parenthesis was not abashed. "Yep, fer straddlin' a hoss," he proudly replied, as if that were the chief end of man.

Polly, thus balked in her teasing, tried a new form of badinage.

"Say, the boys are all braggin' on your bread-makin'. Won't you give me your receipt?"

"Good cooks," said Parenthesis, "never give away their receipts. Brings bad luck to 'em next time."

"Aw, come now, Parenthy, tell me, an' I'll let you make my weddin'-cake."

"Will you? an' let me put in whatever I want fer jokes on the boys?"

"Yep, everything goes."

"Oh, I'll give 'em somethin' to dream on, you can bet yer sweet life! Soap fer Fresno's finger, clothes-pin fer Show Low's nose, bottle o' anty-fat fer Slim. It's a swop, Miss Polly!"

"Well, out with yer great secret o' bread-makin'."

"Well, Miss Polly, I take flour, an' water, an' sourin's, an' a pinch o' salt--"

"Flour an' water, an' sourin's, an' a pinch o' salt," repeated Polly, totting the list off on her fingers. "Why, so do I, an' so does every one. It must lie in the workin'. How long do you work the dough, Parenthesis?"

"It must lie in the workin'," repeated Parenthesis solemnly. "Why, I work it, an' work it--" he continued, with exasperating slowness.

"How long do you work it?" asked Polly impatiently.

"Till my han's look purty clean like!" said Parenthesis, holding up his floury paws.

"Then you've got a day's work still before you!" snapped Polly, huffed at seeing herself the victim of a chaffing that she herself had begun. "I won't bother you any longer. So long!"

Parenthesis, however, desired to continue the conversation. "When is this yere hitch between you and Bud comin' off?" he asked.

Polly drew herself up proudly, and, speaking assumed haughtiness, replied: "We're figurin' on sendin' out the cards next month."

The cowboy's eyes twinkled. "Well, I'm a-goin' to give up cigaroot-smokin'."

"What for?" asked Polly, in surprise.

"Goin' in trainin' to kiss the bride."

"That's nice!" said Polly, beaming.

"Yep, have to take up chawin', like Bud Lane."

Polly was saved from having to answer by Sage-brush galloping up to the wagon.

"Put on your gun!" he shouted to Parenthesis.

Asking no questions, the cow-puncher obeyed his foreman. Trouble was brewing, that he could plainly see. All he had to do was to obey orders, and shoot when any one tried to point a gun at him.

Turning to Polly, he cried: "Where's Mrs. Payson?"

"She came over with me, but stopped to look over the tally for those cows that are goin' with the drive."

More to himself than to Parenthesis or Polly, Sage-brush said: "I wish she'd stayed at the ranch. This range is no place for women now. Buck McKee and his outfit has tanked up with Gila whisky, an' they're just pawin' for trouble."

"What's come over people lately?" asked Polly.

"It's all along of Hoover goin' away like he did, and leavin' us without a sheriff, or nobody that is anybody makin' a bluff at law and order," cried Sage-brush.

"It's sot this section back twenty years," observed Parenthesis.

"That's what it has," agreed the foreman. "Fresno reports that he found that Peruna slappin' the Lazy K brand on one of our calves. There ain't nobody can maverick no calves belongin' to this outfit. Not so long as I'm ranch boss an' captain of the round-up. We've got to take the law in our own han's an' make an example of this bunch, right now."

Sage-brush meant what he said. He was gathering reenforcements from his own men. He knew that the boys of the Allen ranch would side with him, and he felt that there were enough lovers of law and order in the county to declare themselves against the high-handed methods of Buck McKee and his followers.

"Come on, you fellows!" shouted Show Low, as he rode past the wagon up the range.

"What is it now?" asked Sage-brush.

Over his shoulder Show Low shouted: "We all had a run in with that Buck McKee's bunch. Fresno's laid out with a hole in his shoulder. Billie Nicker's cashed in. I've got some of the Triangle boys, and we're goin' to make a clean-up."

"You ain't goin' to do nothin' unless I say so. We don't want no range-war--we'll git the man that did the killin'. Come on," commanded Sage-brush.

Polly galloped after the men, saying: "Gee, I'll miss something if I don't hurry up."

CHAPTER XV Peruna Pulls His Freight

When Jack closed the door behind him to follow and find Dick Lane and bring him back to the woman who, the restorer believed, loved him, Echo Payson realized the supremacy over her soul--her pure ideals, her lofty sense of justice--of its tenement, the woman's body--that fair but fragile fabric which trembled responsive to the wild wind of emotional desire, and the seismic shock of the passion of sex. Ever since Jack had revealed to her his jealousy of Dick Lane, she knew that he was living on a lower moral and spiritual plane than herself, and that no longer could she look up to him as the strong protector, the nobler being than herself that had been her girlish ideal of a husband. Instead of this, another love sprang instantly into her heart, that of the stronger soul for the weaker, like to the feeling of the mother toward the child. The moral side of her desire toward Jack now

became fixed in the purpose to lift him up to her own level.

Now that he had gone from her on a mission that was fulfilling this very purpose of regeneration, although she had not sent him upon it for his own sake, but her own--Echo knew that, after all, she was a woman. She loved Jack Payson with the unreasoning and unrestrained passion that sways even the highest of her sex. By the balance of natural law she was lowering herself to meet him as he was coming up in the moral scale, and thus preparing for herself and her husband a happy union of a mutual understanding of weaknesses held in common. Were Echo to remain always on the heights and Jack in the valley, sooner or later a cloud would have separated them, a ghostly miasma rising from the grave of Dick Lane, whom Echo would have idealized as the nobler man.

She very sensibly took refuge from these perplexing problems by jumping into the active life of the ranch.

Faithfully she tried to perform all that she thought Jack would have done. Her father and mother wanted her to come back to her old home until he returned. There she would have more company and fewer memories of Jack surrounding her. Each offer, each suggestion was kindly but firmly put aside. When Jack returned she must be the first to welcome him, the first to greet him at his threshold, whether it was broad daylight or in the silent watches of the night. From her lips he must learn he had been forgiven; she alone must tell him how much she loved him, and that together they must go through life until the last round-up.

Echo and her father, who was looking after his own cattle on the round-up, rode up to the chuck-wagon, after Parenthesis and Sage-brush crossed the valley to mete out justice to Peruna and fight out any attempts at a rescue.

Dismounting, Echo walked wearily to the fire and sat down on a box. Bravely though she tried to conceal it, the strain was beginning to tell upon her. The tears would come at times, despite her efforts to fight them off. The burden was so heavy for her young shoulders to bear.

A note from Slim, written at Fort Grant, with a lead-pencil, on a sheet of manila paper, told her briefly that he was going into the Lava Beds with the troops--as the Apaches were out. Dick and Jack, he wrote, were somewhere in the Lava Beds, and he would bring them back with him. She dared not let herself think of the Apaches and the horrors of their cruelties.

"Better let me get you somethin' to eat," said her father, returning from picketing the horses.

Echo smiled wanly at her father's solicitude. "I am not hungry, Dad."

Jim seated himself by the fire. He recognized his helplessness in this trouble. There was nothing he could do. If one of the boys was what Allen would have called it, "down on his luck," he would have asked him to have a drink, but with Josephine and the

girls he was at his wit's end. The sufferings of his loved daughter cut deeply into his big heart.

"You been in the saddle since sunup," he said. "You hain't had nuthin' to eat since breakfast--I don't see what keeps you alive."

"Hope, Dad, hope. It is what we women live upon. Some cherish it all their lives, and never reap a harvest. I watch the sun leap over the edge of the world at dawn, and hope that before it sinks behind the western hills the man I love will come home to my heart. Oh, Dad, I'm not myself! I haven't been myself since the day I sent him away--my heart isn't here. It's out in the desert behind yon mountains--with Jack."

"Thar, thar, don't take on so, honey."

Kneeling beside her father, she laid her head on his lap, as she did in childhood when overwhelmed with the little troubles of the hour. Looking into his eyes, she sighed: "Oh, Dad, it's all so tangled. I haven't known a peaceful moment since he went away. I've sent him away into God knows what unfriendly lands, perhaps never to return--never to know how much I loved him."

Patting her head, as if she were a tired child, he said: "It'll all come out right in the end. You can't never tell from the sody-card what's in hock at the bottom of the deck."

Further confidences between father and daughter were interrupted by the boys of the round-up dashing up to the wagon, with Peruna in the midst of the group. Peruna had been disarmed. Dragging the prisoner from his bronco, they led him before Allen, who had risen from his seat.

"What's all this, boys?" asked the ranchman.

Sage-brush, as foreman, explained: "This yere's Peruna of the Lazy K outfit."

Allen looked at the prisoner, who maintained a sullen silence. "What's he been doin'?"

"Mostly everything, but Fresno caught red-handed brandin' one of our yearlin's," cried Sage-brush.

"It's a lie!" broke in Peruna, glancing doggedly from one to another of his guards. He knew death was the penalty of the crime of which he stood accused. He felt that a stout denial would gain him time, and that Buck and his outfit might come up and save him.

"Polite your conversation in the presence of a lady," cried Parenthesis, nodding toward Echo.

"That calf was follerin' my cow," answered Peruna sullenly.

"It was follerin' one of our longhorned Texas cows with the

Sweetwater brand spread all over her," shouted Show Low, moving menacingly toward the cowering Peruna.

"Fresno he calls him," continued Sage-brush, taking up the story; "an' this yere Peruna--drinking bad turns loose his battery and wings Fresno some bad--then little Billie Nicker comes along, and Peruna plugs him solid."

Poor Billie had been Show Low's bunkie on many a long drive. That veteran now paid this last tribute to his friend. "Billie, who ain't never done no harm to no one--"

"He reached for his gun--" began Peruna. Sage-brush would not let him finish his lame defense.

"You shet up!" he cried. "We don't want your kind on this range, an' the quicker that's published the quicker we'll get shet of ye. We're goin' to take the law in our own hands now--come on, boys."

Two of the boys seized Peruna, dragging him toward his horse. Echo halted them, however, with the query: "What are you going to do with this man?"

"Take him down to the creek and hang him to that big cottonwood--" cried Show Low savagely.

Before Echo could answer, Peruna demanded a hearing. "Hol' on a minute, I got something to say about that!"

"Out with it," growled Sage-brush.

"Las' time there was an affair at that cottonwood the rope broke, an' the hoss-thief dropped into the creek, swum acrost, and got away."

Sage-brush glared grimly at Peruna. "Well, we'll see that the rope don't break with you."

In all seriousness Peruna replied: "I hope so. I can't swim."

Polly, glancing down the valley, saw Buck McKee with a half-dozen of his outfit, riding furiously to the rescue of Peruna.

"Look out, boys, here comes Buck McKee now!" she shouted.

Unconsciously the men laid their hands on their guns and assumed offensive attitudes.

Allen cried sharply: "Keep your hands off your guns, boys. One bad break means the starting of a lot of trouble."

Buck and his band threw themselves off their horses, ranging themselves opposite Sage-brush the Sweetwater boys.

Swaggering up to Sage-brush, the half-breed insolently demanded: "Who's the boss of this yere Payson outfit?"

"I reckon you are talkin' to him now," coolly replied the foreman.

"You've got one of my boys over here," bellowed Buck, adding with the implied threat: "an' we've come for him."

Sage-brush was not bluffed by Buck's insolence or his swaggering manners. "I reckon you can't have him just yet."

"What's he been doing?" demanded Buck.

"He killed Billie Nicker--that's one thing."

"Self-defense," loftily replied Buck. "He was 'tendin' to his own business when your two men come up and begin pickin' on him."

Bursting with anger, Parenthesis strode up to Buck, and shouted: "He was brandin' one of our yearlin's, that's what his business was."

Sage-brush suggested, in addition: "Perhaps you mean that brandin' other folks' cattle is the reg'lar business of the Lazy K outfit."

"Anythin' with hide and no mark is Lazy K to you all--" growled Show Low.

"Your goin' strong on reg'lar proceedin's, I see," said Buck to Sage-brush. "You ain't sheriff of this yere county, air you?"

"That's jest it. Somebody's got to act sooner or later, an' if there ain't no reg'lar law, we'll go back to the old times, an' make our own."

The Sweetwater outfit assented unanimously to Sage-brush's declaration of freedom from outlaw rule in the county.

"You're a fine lot to set up as law-abidin' citizens--" sneered Buck.

"Workin' for a man that had to hop the country to keep clear of the rope," interjected Peruna, who, heartened up by the advent of McKee, began pouring oil on a smoldering fire.

Sage-brush turned savagely upon him: "That'll do for you."

Echo walked hastily to Sage-brush's side. She felt her presence might help to avoid the outbreak which she saw could not long be avoided.

Peruna had lost control of tongue and discretion by this time.

"You'll never see him back in this section again. You all know where he is--across the line in Mexico--why, she's fixin' to make a clean-up now, an' sell out and join him!"

Sage-brush reached for his gun, but Echo restrained him.

"You--" he cried.

Buck turned angrily on Peruna. "You keep your mouth shet," he shouted.

Peruna subsided at his boss' command, mumbling: "There ain't no female can pull the forelock over my eyes."

"Take care," warningly called Buck.

Peruna fired up again, regardless of consequences. "Why, I see through her game. She's glad to get rid of him, so's she can play up to her ranch boss, Handsome Charley there."

Buck had to act instantly to preserve his supremacy over his men.

Before any of the Sweetwater outfit could reach Peruna's side, or pull a gun to resent the insult, Buck was on top of him. With a blow full in the mouth, he knocked him sprawling. Echo had seized Sage-brush's hand, preventing him from firing. The other men moved as if to kick Peruna as he lay prostrate.

"Let him alone. He's goin' to ask the lady's pardon," snarled Buck, covering him with his gun.

Peruna raised himself on one arm.

"No, I'll be--" he began.

Buck bent over him, speaking in a low tone, tensely and quickly. "Quick! I don't want to have to kill you. You damn' fool, don't you see what I'm playin' fer?"

"He ain't fit to live!" shouted Show Low.

Buck turned on the cowboy. It was his fight, and he was going to handle it in his own fashion.

"Lem me handle this case," he interrupted. "Ther' ain't no man can travel in my outfit and insult a woman--you ask her pardon--right smart."

Peruna struggled to his feet. Buck commanded:

"On your knees."

A glance at Buck showed Peruna how deadly in earnest he was. Reluctantly he sank to his knees.

"I didn't mean what I said. I hope you will excuse me--" he whined.

"That's enough. Now git up. Pull your freight," Buck ordered.

"By God, no!" interposed Sage-brush.

The cowboys seized Peruna.

Buck saw that his bluff at bossing the situation was called. He turned appealingly to Echo, and rapidly fabricated a moving tale about Peruna's heroic rescue of himself from drowning in the Gila River. "An I swore I would do as much fer him some day. Now I perpose that we all give him a kick, an' let him go; let him have two hours' start, after which the game-laws will be out on him."

Sage-brush cried out against the plan, but Echo was moved by McKee's appeal for his comrade, and, speaking low and beseechingly to Sage-brush, said: "It will save a range-war that we can't afford to have till Jack and Slim get back." Sage-brush finally assented.

"Two hours' start. Well, he'll have to go some, if he gets away. Kick him and let him go," he commanded.

Echo turned away.

The cowboys who held Peruna threw him to the ground, and every man of the Allen and Payson ranches gave him a vicious kick, Show Low putting in an extra one for his murdered bunkie. Last of all, McKee approached the prostrate man, and made the mistake which was to cost him his life by booting Peruna cruelly. The man was a stupid fellow by nature, and what wits he had were addled by the habit he had acquired of consuming patent-medicines containing alcohol, morphin, and other stimulating and stupefying drugs. He was as revengeful as stupid, and could have forgiven McKee's putting the rope around his neck more easily than Buck's joining in the humiliation which saved his life.

Rising from the ground and trembling with anger, Peruna turned on the half-breed, saying: "I'll square this deal, Buck McKee."

"Losin' vallyble time, Peruna. Git!" was all that his former boss deigned to answer.

Peruna limped over to his horse, which Parenthesis had been holding in custody, mounted it, and rode off at a lope for the river ford. He crossed it in sight of the Sweetwater outfit, and disappeared behind the riverbank. Here he dismounted, and, picking a small branch of cactus, put it under his horse's tail. The poor beast clapped the tail against it, and, with a scream, set off on a wild gallop across the mesa. Peruna hobbled up the river a mile or so, half-waded, half-swam, to the other side, and entered an arroyo, whose course led back near the camp of the Sweetwater outfit. He had been disarmed by the cowboys of his revolver, but not of his knife.

After Peruna had been visited with his punishment, Echo retraced her steps.

Bowing to her, hat in hand, Buck made his apologies. "Ma'am, I'm plumb sorry. My mother was a Cherokee squaw, but I'm white in

some spots. If you'll let your ranch boss come along with us, we'll settle this brandin'-business right now."

Sage-brush did not care to accept the offer, but Echo ordered him to go with the Lazy K outfit. Seeing it was useless to argue with her, he said: "Come on, boys."

Ere they had ridden out of sight, Echo sank, exhausted, on the seat by the fire. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Polly played the role of comforter.

"Don't mind 'em," she said. "Better come to the ranch with me. You're all tuckered out. You've been runnin' this ranch fer a month like a man."

"I'll take your advice, Polly, and ride home. Tell Dad I want him, will you?"

CHAPTER XVI

Death of McKee, Disappointed Desperado

Bud's conscience was not troubling him so much now. In fact, he was rather proud of his conduct of late. He had "shaken" Buck McKee, and he had forgiven Echo for all the hard thoughts he had against her--without considering that she would be more than woman if she failed to harbor resentment against the man who had prevented her from calling her husband back from the desert.

In the absence of Slim, both Bud and McKee attained a feeling of security in the matter of Terrill murder. McKee had already ventured to use some of his share of the robbery in gambling. Bud had not yet convinced himself either of the right or the advisability of spending his share. Both conscience and fear advised him to keep the blood-money intact. He carried it with him wherever he went, and became, in time, quite pleased with himself because of his compunctions in doing so. He was even pharisaical about McKee's gambling. No, when his mind had come clear about keeping it, he would make an honest use of it, such as investing it in a saloon in Florence. When, however, he suggested to Polly that dispensing liquors over a bar and running a faro-game on the side would be a congenial occupation, suited to their talents, she sat down forcibly upon his aspiration, and they finally compromised on Polly's proposition to conduct a livery-stable in Tucson, where, Polly felt, though she did not say so to Bud, that Sheriff Hoover, with whom she had been flirting too dangerously, would not be in evidence, as in Florence.

Polly, however, was greatly puzzled over Bud's confidence in his ability to raise the wind that would launch this delectable, but to her mind illusory, enterprise. In a moment of weakness he intimated that he already had the money in hand.

How had he got it? she demanded.

"Saved it," he said.

When she asked him how he could have saved the thousand dollars demanded for the stable out of his salary of forty dollars a month, he replied:

"By economizin'. I've cut off my chawin-tobacco."

"That cost you two bits a week, an' you've taken up cigarettes at a dime a day," said observant Polly. "I know what you've been doin', you've been gamblin'."

"Cross my heart, Polly, I haven't," said Bud, and Polly, who had no great objection to using money won at cards, so long as she did not positively know the fact, discontinued her objections, and resumed the delightful occupation of castle-building. The home she had in view consisted of three rooms over the livery-stable.

"I want a red carpet in the front room, and wallpaper like that at Bowen's store, with hosses jumpin' gates on it--"

"Don't you think there will be a leetle too much hoss there, Polly, with the stable under us, an' the smell a-comin' up--"

"Sho, Bud, you can't have too much hoss. Why, it was the hoss smell about your clothes that made me fall in love with you," exclaimed the enthusiastic horsewoman. She continued:

"An' I want a yellow plush furniture set, an' a photograph-album to match, an' a center-table, an' a Rock-of-Ages picture, an' a boudoir--"

A boudoir was beyond the ken of Bud. He knew nothing of housekeeping. This must be one of those strange articles, the mystery of which he would have to solve before he could feel that he was really a married man.

"What the devil is a boudoir?" he asked.

"I don't know what it is, but all rich women have them."

Bud took both of Polly's hands in his. Looking her fondly in the eyes, he said: "Then, by thunder, I'll get you two of 'em. We'll raise the limit when we furnish that shack. I'm the happiest man in the country."

"Well you ought to be," laughed Polly. "Just see what you are gettin'."

"I've got to chase myself back to the house. You're ridin' night herd to-night, ain't you?" she added.

"Yes. I'm on the cocktail to-night. I am goin' to bunk down here. I'll be up to the house at sunup, and we can go over to Florence together."

"I'll have breakfast ready for you. Rope my pony for me, will you?"

Bud was smiling and happy again. All of his troubles were forgotten. "All right!" he cried, as he started to mount.

"Say, you're awful forgetful, aren't you?" asked Polly demurely.

Bud looked about him slightly bewildered. Then he realized his oversight. He ran to Polly's and tried to kiss her, but she motioned him aside, saying: "Too late--you lose."

"But I didn't know," stammered Bud.

"Next time you'll know. On your way," airily commanded the girl.

Bud's face darkened. "Oh, well, good-by."

Polly looked after him perplexed and angry. His surrender to her whims without a fight nettled her.

"Good-by, yourself," she snapped. "He's the most forgetful man I ever loved. If I thought he was a gamblin'-man, I'd get a divorce from him before I married him. I would sure," murmured Polly, as Bud disappeared toward the corral.

Polly's musing was interrupted by the return of Buck McKee.

"Is Bud Lane over yere?" he asked.

"You must have passed him just now. He's just got in from night-herdin'."

"I thought I seed him comin' this way. When's the weddin'-bells goin' to ring?"

Polly flushed. "Next month. Then you'll lose Bud's company fer good," she answered defiantly.

"Well, I ain't been doin' him much good," Buck assented. "I'm goin' back home, though."

Polly gazed at Buck in surprise. Here was a new view of the man; one she had never considered. It was strange to hear this outlaw and bad man talk of a home. The repetition of the word "home" by Polly, led him to continue:

"Yep. Up to the Strip, where I was borned at. This yere climate's a leetle too dry to suit me. I'm goin' to get a leetle ranch and a leetle gal, an' settle down for sure."

"I wish you may," said Polly heartily. "You sure acted mighty fine about that Peruna insultin' Mrs. Payson."

Harshly as Polly had felt toward Buck, his actions in the recent incidents had softened her feelings toward him.

"I admire to hear you say it," said Buck, bowing. "I've played square with women all my life. I ain't never slipped a card nor rung in a cold deck on any one of 'em yet."

Buck sat down on the step of the wagon. He hesitated for a moment, and then asked: "Say, did you ever have a premonition?"

"Nope! The worst I ever had was the hookin'-cough."

Buck smiled, but did not explain to Polly the meaning of the word.

"Well, this premonition," he continued, "hits me hard, an' that's what makes me start for home. Thought I'd like to say good-by to you an' Bud. I go north with the big drive in the mornin', an' won't see you ag'in."

"Well, good luck and good-by to you." Polly held out her hand in her most friendly fashion.

Buck arose and took off his hat. As he stepped toward her, he cried: "Same to you. Good-by." Grasping her by the hand, he added warmly: "An'--happiness."

"I'll tell Bud you're here," cried Polly over her shoulder.

Buck looked after the girl as she swung across the prairie to find Bud.

"She's a darned fine leetle gal, she is," mused Buck. "Seein' Bud so happy, kinder makes me homesick. Things is gettin' too warm for me here, anyway. If Payson gets back, he'll be able to clear himself about that Terrill business, an' things is likely to p'int pretty straight at me an' Bud. I'm sorry I dragged Bud into that. I could have done it alone just as well--an' kep' all the money."

McKee sat down to wait for Bud. His mind was filled with pleasant thoughts. Having assumed a chivalrous role in the Peruna incident, he was tasting something of the sweet sensations and experiences that follow a sincerely generous action. Smiles and pleasant greetings from Polly, who had heretofore met him with venomous looks and stinging words, were balm to his soul. He felt well-satisfied with himself and kindly toward the whole world. The fiendish torturer of helpless men and harmless beasts, the cold-blooded murderer, the devilish intriguer to incriminate an innocent man, thought that he was a very good fellow, after all; much better than, say, such a man as Jack Payson. He had at least always treated women white, and had never gone back on a friend. When he thought how Payson had drawn his pistol on trusting, unsuspecting Dick Lane in the garden, he was filled with the same pharisaic self-righteousness that inflated Bud when comparing himself with McKee.

His enjoyment in contemplating his own virtues was overclouded, however, by a vague presentiment of impending danger, the "premonition" he had of to Polly--a word he had picked up from

fortune-tellers, whom he often consulted, being very superstitious, as are most gamblers.

And Nemesis in the person of Peruna was indeed approaching. The outlaw crept up out of the draw behind the contemplative half-breed, and, leaping upon his back, plunged his knife in McKee's neck,, with a fierce thrust, into which he concentrated all his hatred for the humiliation he had endured.

With a stifled cry Buck struggled to his feet to face his assailant, drawing his gun instinctively. The knife had bitten too deeply, however. With a groan he fell; weakly he tried to level his gun, his finger twitching convulsively at the trigger. Peruna waited to see if he had strength enough to fire. A sneering smile added to the evil appearance of his face. Seeing Buck helpless, he snatched the gun from his hand. Then he turned his victim over so he could reach the pocket of his waistcoat. With the blood-stained knife he ripped open the cloth and extracted a roll of paper and money. Peruna was kneeling beside the body of his former friend, when a voice drawled:

"Drop that knife!"

Peruna jumped up with a grunt of dismay to see Slim Hoover sitting on horseback, with his revolver held upright, ready for use.

Peruna hesitated: "Drop it!" ordered Slim sharply, slightly lowering the gun.

Peruna tossed away the knife with a snarl.

"I'll take care of your friend's bundle, and the papers and money you took from his pocket. Drop them. I didn't figure on gettin' back to business as soon as I got home, but you never can tell. Can you?"

The last remark was addressed to his deputy, Timber Wiggins, who had joined him.

"This yere's Timber Wiggins, deputy sheriff from Pinal County," explained Slim, for Peruna's enlightenment. "Mr. Wiggins, will you take care of this friend of mine?" continued the Sheriff, glancing from Peruna, who looked at him stolidly, to Wiggins. "I reckon he's been doin' something naughty."

The two men dismounted, keeping the outlaw covered and watching his every glance.

"Anything to oblige," replied Wiggins, who had solemnly entered with Slim into his assumed formality.

Wiggins stepped behind Peruna, and reaching forward, removed Buck's gun from the outlaw's holster, which had been empty since Buck, earlier in the day, had taken his revolver after he had insulted Echo.

"Anything to oblige," said Wiggins to Slim. Then to Peruna he commanded: "Let's take a walk. You first. I'm noted for my politeness."

"You might tie him up some," suggested Slim.

"I sure will," answered the deputy, as he marched his prisoner toward the corral.

Slim hastened to the side of the fallen man, and turned him over on his back to get a glimpse of Peruna's victim. He saw that Buck was still breathing although mortally wounded, the blood gushing from his mouth.

McKee recognized the Sheriff. "Hullo! when did you git back?" he asked.

"Jes' now. Is this your money?" said Slim, holding the roll in front of McKee's eyes.

"No; it's your'n. Part o' what I took from 'Ole Man' Terrill. The idee o' not recognizin' your own property!" McKee grinned at his joke on the Sheriff. "I held the old man up, and that's all there is to it."

"Who was with you?" asked Slim. "There was two."

McKee was silent.

"Bud Lane was the other man," hazarded Slim.

"No--" began Buck, but Slim interrupted him.

"He was with you that night. He came to the weddin' with you. It ain't no use in denyin' it. I've been thinkin' it all out. I was fooled by Jack's pacing hoss. You and Bud--"

Here McKee interrupted with a solemn denial. Whether from a desire to foil the Sheriff, whom he knew was Bud's rival in love, and so thought him the young man's enemy, or from the benevolent spirit induced by the recent contemplation of his virtues, McKee was impelled to give an account of the murder which very convincingly indicated Bud as a protesting catspaw, rather than a consenting accomplice.

At the end of the story he smiled grimly:

"So while you were out o' the county on a wil'-goose chase after an inercent man, Peruna, he goes loco on paten'-medicine, an' gits the guilty party. Joke's on you, Slim. I nomernate Peruna fer nex' sheriff."

Exhausted with the effort and pain of talking, McKee dropped his head upon Hoover's broad breast in a faint. Hoover bore him down to the spring, and bathed his wound and mouth. McKee revived, and in broken phrases, which were accompanied with blood from his pierced lungs frothing out of his mouth, continued his

observations on the ridiculous and unfortunate mistake Peruna made in killing him.

"Damn' fool--'s bes' fren'--I would herd--'th low-down intellecks--nev' 'preciated--no chance--to be firs'-class--bad man."

And so Buck McKee, desperado, died like many another ambitious soul, with expressions of disappointment on his lips.

CHAPTER XVII A New Deal

Bud Lane, returning to camp, saw the returned Sheriff supporting the dying murderer of Terrill, and listening to what was undoubtedly his confession. He stole away before he was observed.

"It's all up with me," he thought. "Buck has told him. Slim hates me along o' Polly. I'll get away from here' to-night."

He met Polly by the mess-wagon.

At once she saw that something had happened. Bud was deathly pale. He trembled when she spoke to him.

"Why, what on earth is the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing. I--" answered Bud, glancing about him, as if seeking some way to escape.

"You're looking mighty pale--are you sick?" persisted the girl.

"Slim Hoover--he's back--" Bud could scarcely speak. His throat was parched. Beads of perspiration stood on his forehead.

"What!" cried Polly joyfully. "Is Jack with him?"

"Listen here," exclaimed the young wooer. "Slim's heard about our goin' to get married, and he's sworn to shoot me at sight--" It was a lame, halting explanation, but the best Bud could invent on the spur of the moment. He wanted to get away to have time to think.

"I don't believe it!" replied Polly indignantly. "Why, Slim--"

In his excitement Bud would not let her continue her defense of the Sheriff.

"It's so. He's plum locoed. The sun mus' have tetched his brains out in the desert," he explained, with rapid invention.

"I don't want no run-in with a crazy man. I might have to shoot, an' Slim's been a good fr'en' of mine. So I'm going to keep out of his way for a while. I'll ride over to the railroad."

Polly could not comprehend this strange behavior of Bud.

Thinking to make him tell her his trouble by taunting him with cowardice, she asked:

"Say, look here, are you scared of Slim Hoover? Just let me handle him."

"No, no," expostulated Bud. "Can't you understand? We've been such good friends and--and--I can't pull a gun on him--"

Polly was speechless with surprise.

"Here he comes now," shouted Bud. "I'll hide in the wagon here--"

"Don't hide!" counseled Polly. "Why?"

Bud gave her no answer, for he had already disappeared under the cover of the mess-wagon.

"I don't like that a little bit. Slim never acted locoed before. I'll have to be mighty careful, I s'pose, for I think a heap of both Slim and Bud."

Slim came up to the wagon with his face wreathed in smiles. "If it ain't Miss Polly--" he yelled.

Polly, having heard that crazy people had to be humored, ran to meet him, and threw her arms about his neck.

"You dear, sweet, old red-headed thing!" she cried; "when did you get back? Where have you been? Where's Jack? Have you seen Echo?" One question was piled upon the other by the enthusiastic girl--Slim had tried to stop her talking that he might answer her, but he might as well have tried to check a sand-storm. Out of breath and puffing, he finally gasped:

"Whoa! whoa! Yes'm. I've heard of them Kansas cyclones, but I ain't never got hit with one afore."

Polly started all over again. "And Jack, did you find him?--tell me all about it."

"See yeah," answered Slim, "I ain't goin' to say nuthin' to nobody till I see Mrs. Payson."

"Oh, pshaw!" pouted Polly; "not even me?"

"Not even--what I've got to say she must heah first. I'm kinder stiff--if you don't mind, I'll set down a spell."

Slim's face was drawn and worn. Although he had lost none of his weight, he showed the effects of the siege of hard riding and fighting through which he had passed.

The mental strain under which he had labored had also worn him down. Polly was more than solicitous for his comfort. Not only did she like the Sheriff, but she was now fencing with him to

protect her sweetheart from his wrath. She had concluded that Bud's charge that the Sheriff was locoed and jealous was a cover to conceal some genuine apprehension.

"You look tuckered out," she said.

"Well, I 'low as maybe I am. Been in the saddle for two weeks. Kin I have a cup of coffee?"

Polly began to mother him. This appeal for bodily comforts aroused all her womanly instincts. She made him sit down and poured the coffee for him saying: "You sure can. With or without?"

"I'll play it straight," grinned Slim.

"I reckon you'll have to, anyway. Here you are."

Slim took the cup with a "thankee."

He drank long and deeply. Then he paused, made a wry face, and danced his feet up and down, as a child does in anger or excitement.

"What's the matter?" asked the girl, with a laugh.

"If this yeah's coffee give me tea, an' if it's tea give me coffee." The Sheriff put down his cup with a shrug of the shoulders.

"It's the best we've got," replied Polly. "Sage-brush got it."

"Oh, that's it. I thought it tasted like sage-brush. How's Bud?" he suddenly demanded.

Polly glanced nervously at the speaker.

"All right, I s'pose." She tried to be noncommittal.

Her nervousness almost betrayed her.

"Ain't you seen him lately?" Slim insisted.

Polly peeped into the wagon before she answered the question. "Yes--I see him every once in a while."

In an effort to change the subject of conversation, and get him away from all thoughts of Bud, she asked: "Say, Slim, what's a boudoir?"

"A what whar?" stuttered Slim.

"A boudoir," Polly repeated.

Slim was puzzled, and looked it. Then a new thought lighted up his face.

"You don't mean a Budweiser, do you?"

Polly, deeply serious, replied: "No--that ain't it--boudoir."

Slim ransacked his memory for the word. "Boudoir," he continued reflectively. "One of them 'fo' de wah' things we ust to have down in Kentucky?"

An explanation was demanded of him, and he proceeded to invent one. "Well, first you get a--get a--" Polly had fooled him so many times that he became suspicious in the midst of his creation, and asked:

"Look a here--you're sure you don't know what boudoir is?"

"Why, of course not," answered Polly simply.

Slim was relieved by her reply.

"All right," he resumed, crossing his legs, as if the position would help him better to think. "A boudoir is a see-gar."

"A see-gar?" echoed Polly, distinctly disappointed. Bud's offer to duplicate the boudoir was now reduced to the proportions of "two fer a nickel."

"Yep," assured the Sheriff. "They are named after a Roosian--one of them diplomat fellers."

"What's a diplomat?" Polly was finding Slim a mine of information, but all of the sort that needed plenty of expansion.

Slim chuckled, and with a twinkle in his eye drawled: "A diplomat is a man that steals your hat and coat, and then explains it so well that you give him your watch and chain. Sabe?"

Polly did not understand. She felt that Slim was laughing at her, but she could not see any fun in his remark. To end the discussion, however, she said: "I sabe."

Polly sauntered away from the wagon. As she passed Slim, he tried to put his arm about her waist. She skilfully evaded him. The Sheriff joined her in the shade of cottonwood. "You know I've been thinking a lot of you lately, Miss Polly?"

"Only lately?" she asked mischievously.

"Well, yes--that is--"

This conversation was becoming too personal for Bud, who in an effort to hear all Slim had to say moved incautiously in the wagon. Slim heard him.

"Who's in that wagon?" he cried, moving toward it. "Show Low asleep?"

"No. Buddy," said Polly, thinking she might as well confess the deception first as last, and using the childish nickname of her lover in order to soften Slim's anger against him.

"Nobody," repeated Slim, not fully convinced that he was mistaken, but stopping in deference to Polly's apparent denial.

"Who do you s'pose," asked Polly pertly, taking courage when she found that Slim did not continue his investigation. "You ain't after any Buddy, are you?"

"No, but I'll just take a look in here, 'cause I got somethin' particular to say to you, Miss Polly, an' I don't want no listeners." And he moved forward again.

At this juncture Polly began to ply her arts as a coquette. Looking shyly at Slim, she murmured, "Are you sure you are not after ANYbody?" The emphasis on the last word was so plain that a shrewder love-maker than Slim would have been deceived.

"Eh? What's that?"

Polly turned her back to him with assumed bashfulness. Slim's courage arose at the sight. "Well, I reckon this is a pat hand for me, and that's the way I'm a-goin' to play it, if I've got the nerve."

Slim smoothed down his tangled hair, and brushed off some of the dust which whitened his shoulders. "Look yeah, Miss Polly--"

Then his courage failed him, and he stopped. Polly glanced at him, to help him over the hard places. Slim was greatly embarrassed. "My heart is right up in any throat. Well, I might as well spit it out," he thought aloud.

Again Slim started toward the girl to tell her of his love, and again his courage failed him, although Polly was doing her best to help him.

"Look yeah, Miss Polly, I've been after somebody for a long time now--"

"Horse-thief?" asked Polly coquettishly.

"No, heart-thief," blurted Slim.

"Stealing hearts ain't no harm."

"Well, just the same, I'm goin' to issue a writ of replevin, an' try for to git mine back," laughed Slim.

He was about to slip his arm about her waist when she turned and faced him. The action so disconcerted him that he jumped backward, as if the girl was about to attack him.

"Where is it?" asked Polly.

Slim, deeply in earnest, replied: "You know it's hid. You know just as well as I kin tell you."

Polly became remorseful. She realized how much Slim was suffering, and she was sorry that her answer to him would be a disappointment.

"Please don't say any more, Slim"--as she stepped away from him. Slim followed her up, and, speaking over her shoulder, said: "I can't help it. You've got my feelin's stampeded now, an' they sure has to run. I've had an itchin' in my heart for you ever since I first knowed you. You come from Kentucky--well, I was kinder borned up that way myself--in Boone County, an' that sorter makes--well, if it did, what I want to know is--"

Slim hesitated, and nervously hauled at his chaps.

"Will you be my--"

Frightened at his boldness, he clapped his hand over his mouth.

"Can I be your--" he began again.

Angry at himself, he said under his breath: "I'll never get this damn' thing out of my system." In his earnestness he doubled up his fist and shook it behind the girl's back. Suddenly she turned, and found his clenched hand directly under her nose. She started back in dismay.

"Excuse me," humbly apologized Slim. "I didn't mean for to do that, ma'am--deedy, I didn't--I was only--that's--well, I reckon I'm a little bit--"

Slim looked directly at the girl for the first time. She was trying to restrain her hearty laughter. Slim's face broadened in a grin. "You're a mighty fine piece of work, you are, an' I've got an 'awful yearnin' to butt into your family."

Polly was greatly moved by Slim's sincerity.

"Don't, please don't!" she pleaded. "Why, I've known all along that you love me, but--"

"But what?" he asked, when she hesitated.

"I've always liked you real well, and I've been glad that you liked me. I don't want to lose your friendship, though--and, oh, please forgive me, please do." Polly was very repentant, showing it by the tones of her voice and in her eyes.

Slim was puzzled at first. Then it came to him that the girl had refused to marry him. "Oh! I 'low you-all ain't a-goin' to say you love me, then."

"I don't believe I am." Polly smiled through her tears.

Slim paused, as if steadying himself to meet the full force of

the blow.

"Mebbe it's along of my red hair?"

"It is red, isn't it?" Polly smiled kindly.

Slim ran his fingers through his locks, and looked at his fingers, as if expecting the color would come off on his hands. "Tain't blue," he said.

Another thought came to him. "Freckles," he asked laconically.

Polly only shook her head.

"There's only one cure for freckles--sandpaper," grinned Slim.

"But it isn't freckles," replied the girl.

Slim looked at his hands and feet. "Maybe it's fat?" he hazarded. "Oh, I know I'm too fat! It beats all how I do keep fat."

Slim looked into his hat and sighed. "Well, I suppose we don't get married this year, do we?"

"No, Slim," said Polly gently.

"Nor any other year to come?" Slim was still hopeful.

"That's the way it looks now."

Slim put on his hat and tried to walk jauntily to the fire, whistling a bit of a tune. The effort was a sad failure. "Here's where I get off. I'm in sure bad luck. Somebody must have put a copper on me when I was born. I 'low I gotter be movin'."

"You won't hate me, will you, Slim?"

The Sheriff took the girl's hands in his and kissed them. "Hate you?" he almost shouted. "Why, I couldn't learn to do that; no, siree! Not in a thousand years."

Polly slapped Slim on the back. "I'm glad of that," she cried. "Brace up. You'll get a good wife some day. There's lots of good fish in the sea."

Slim glanced at her ruefully. "I don't feel much like goin' fishin' jest now. Would you mind tellin' me if I lose out on this deal along of somebody else a-holdin' all the cards?" Slim waited for Polly's answer.

"Why, don't you know?"

"No," he said simply.

"But he told me--"

"Who is it?" he insisted.

"No--if you don't know his name, I won't tell you," decided Polly.

"Mebbe it's jest as well, too," assented Slim. "I don't think I'd feel any too friendly toward him."

Slim moved toward the wagon. The action was purely involuntary, but it frightened Polly so that she cried aloud.

Slim grasped at once the reason for her fear. "Is the feller in that wagon?" he shouted.

"You wouldn't do him any harm, would you?" cried Polly.

"Is he in that wagon?" Slim repeated angrily.

Polly caught hold of his arm.

"What's he hiding for?" he demanded.

Slim pulled his gun and covered the opening. "Come out, you coward," he shouted. Polly caught Slim by the right wrist, so he could not fire.

Bud leaped from the wagon, drawing his gun as he did so. "You sha'n't call me a coward," he shouted to Slim.

Polly ran behind Bud, and, reaching her arms about his waist, held down his hands, depressing the muzzle of his revolver. Slim danced up and down in the excitement with his revolver in his hand. Polly kept calling on both of the men not to shoot.

"Let him alone," shouted Slim excitedly. "Let him alone, Miss Polly. He's only four-flushin', and I ain't gun shy."

"Now, look a yeah, sonny," he cried to Bud, "if that squirt-gun of yours goes off an' hits me, an' I find it out--well, I reckon I'll have to spank you."

Bud tried to break away from Polly, begging her to "Let go."

The girl laid her hands on his shoulder, gazing pleadingly into his flushed face. "Don't, don't," she cried; "it's all right. Slim knows all about it. He knows I love you, and he wouldn't hurt any one that I love, would you, Slim?"

Polly smiled at the Sheriff, completely disarming him.

Shoving his gun back into the holster, Slim grinned, and said: "I reckon I wouldn't."

"We've been engaged forever so long now, waitin' for Bud to get rich, and now--and now it's come."

Her face radiated her happiness. Bud showed his alarm, motioning

her to be silent, but Polly rattled on: "Bud's been saving and saving, 'till he's got over a thousand dollars and--" Slim could not contain his indignation at the deception practised by the boy.

"You derved thief," he shouted. Then he plainly showing his annoyance at his lack of repression.

Bud's hand dropped to his gun. "You--" he began, but Polly stopped him with a gesture, looking from one to the other of the men, dazed and frightened.

"A thief. Bud a thief? What does it mean? Tell me," she gasped. Turning to Bud, she demanded: "Bud, you heard what he said?"

Dropping his head, fearing to look at either of them, he muttered sullenly: "He lied."

Slim checked his first betrayal of his anger and kept himself well in hand.

"Oh, Slim," pleaded Polly, "say you didn't mean it."

Simply and sadly Slim answered: "I didn't. I reckon as how I'm some jealous, an'--an'--I lied."

His voice dropped, and he turned aside, stepping away from the young couple.

Polly was still in doubt. Slim's actions were so strange. It was not like this big-hearted, brave Sheriff to accuse a man of stealing without being sure of his charges. Then Slim's accusing himself of lying was entirely at variance with his character. "I'm sorry," she said. "Please forgive me. It was all my fault. I didn't know that you--"

Slim held up his hand to silence her.

"Wouldn't you mind leavin' us together a bit," he requested. In answer to Polly's frightened glance, he continued: "There hain't goin' to be no trouble, only me an' him's got a little business to talk over. Ain't we, Bud? Eh?"

Slim led Polly toward the corral, glancing at Bud over his shoulder with a reassuring smile. "Just you step out yonder a bit and wait" he said to Polly.

"Now, you won't--"

"Can't you trust me any more?" he asked sincerely.

Grasping him by the hand, she looked him fairly and fearlessly in the eye, saying: "I do trust you. I trust you both."

As the girl strode out of ear-shot, Slim, absent-mindedly, kept shaking the hand she had held. Awakening suddenly to the fact

that his hand was empty, he looked at it curiously, and sighed. Turning quickly, he slapped his hat on his head, hitched up his chaps, and stepped up to Bud, who stood with a sneer on his lips.

"So you're the man that Polly loves," he said. "She's a good girl, and she loves a thief."

Bud turned on him fiercely, drawing his gun. "Take care!" he warned.

"You won't shoot. If you meant to shoot, you'd 'a' done it long ago, when you pulled your gun," exclaimed Slim coolly.

"I might do it now." Bud held his gun against Slim's breast.

Slim threw up his hands to show he was not afraid of the boy. "Go ahead. Squeeze your hardware. I reckon I'm big enough to kill," he said.

Then he took Bud's hand and gently slid the revolver back into the holster. The action broke down Bud's bravado. All barriers fell before the simple action.

"It's all up with me," he said brokenly.

Slim sympathized with the boy in his trouble.

"Buck, he told me. Buck, he 'lowed you had your share of that money," he explained.

The boy drew the money from his pocket and handed it to Slim, remarking: "Here it is--all of it, I never touched it--I was goin'--" Bud was about to lie again, but he realized the futility of more falsehoods. "Take it," he added.

Slim counted the money and slipped it in his pocket.

"Bud," he said to that young man. "Me an' you have been pretty good friends, we have. I learned you how to ride--to throw a rope, an' Bud--Bud--what did you take it for? I know you didn't murder Terrill for it, but what did you keep the money for?" He asked the question with anger and annoyance.

Slim had seated himself by the fire. He spoke to the boy as he would to a comrade.

"Can't you see?" the boy asked. "Polly. I wanted to make a home for her--and now she'll know me for what I am, a thief--a thief."

Bud buried his face in his hands, the tears trickling through his fingers, although he fought strongly against showing his weakness.

Slim rose and stepped to his side, laying his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Mebbe she won't have to know. Buck, he's dead, and only you and I know."

Bud looked at the speaker in amazement. A lovable smile crept over Slim's face. "I'm goin'," he said, "to slip you a new deck, an' give you a fresh deal. That was part my money that was stole. I never came back at the county fer it. Buck, he's paid half. I'll let 'em all think it was the whole. I'll put in a thousan' I have at home, that I was savin' to buy in with the Triangle B, in case I don't git elected nex' time. So, Bud, I'm going to lend a thousan' o' this to you, just to give you a chance at that little home."

"You're the whitest man I ever knew!" cried Bud.

"I reckon I ain't colored, 'cept a little red mite on top," laughed Slim. He disliked any show of feeling by the boy over the offer he had made.

"But I can't take your money," Bud protested.

"Yes, you can," assured Slim. "You pay it back when you get on your feet again. I'm going to take your word."

Slim's generosity overwhelmed the boy. "Take my word!" he cried.

Slim laid his hands on the boy's shoulders. "Yes," he declared, "You've made your first bad break, but you've had your first lessor. An' you ain't going to forget it," he added emphatically.

"And Polly?" he faltered.

"There ain't nobody going to tell her." Speaking sternly to Bud, he added: "You make her a good husband."

Bud seized the Sheriff's hand, wringing it warmly. "I will, Slim; I will," he promised.

The wait had been too long for Polly. She returned before Slim called her, saying: "I'm tired of waiting on you-all. Haven't you finished up that business yet?"

"Yes, ma'am, it's finished," replied Slim.

"Did Bud tell you about it?" inquired Polly.

"He told me. Seems like you two are going to get married."

"Uh-huh," laughed Polly happily. "And, oh, say, will you stand up for Bud?"

"I reckon Bud can stand up for himself now, with you to help him," answered Slim emphatically.

"We'll run over and tell the boys you're back," shouted Bud.

Slim took the hands of the young people in his own big ones. "I'm right glad you two are going to hitch up," he said. "I am dead sure you'll make a even runnin' team."

Polly glanced shyly at Slim. "Bud won't mind if you kiss me," she hinted. Slim grinned sheepishly. In his embarrassment he rubbed one foot on his other leg. "Well--I ain't--never--that is--" he stammered, "Bud, if you-all don't mind," he boldly asserted, after his bashfulness had waned, "I reckon I will play one little bet on the red."

The Sheriff never did anything in a small way. The kiss he gave her full on the lips was a resounding one.

Bud took Polly by the hand, and silently led her to the house. Slim sat down on a keg behind the fire. Taking some loose tobacco and a film of rice-paper from his pocket, he deftly rolled a cigarette, and lighted it with a brand from the blaze. With a sigh he removed his hat. He was the picture of dejection. For several moments he sat in deep thought. Then, with a deep in-drawing of his breath, and a shrug of the shoulders, he cried: "Hell! nobody loves a fat man."

CHAPTER XVIII

Jack!

When Polly told the boys in the corral that Slim had returned and was waiting for them at the mess-wagon, they dropped their work and made for him with wild whoops and yells. Slim smiled as he heard the coming.

Show Low made a running jump, throwing his arms about the Sheriff's neck. Parenthesis and Sage-brush each grabbed a hand, pumping up and down emphatically. The others slapped him on the back. All talked at once, asking him the news, and whether Jack had returned.

"Did you nip it up with the 'Paches," asked Parenthesis.

"Talk, darn ye, talk!" shouted Show Low, "or we'll hang out your hide."

Slim shook the hands of his comrades, in turn, affectionately.

For each he had his own, particular form of greeting. "No, boys," he said, when the group became more orderly, "I ain't a-goin' to say a word 'till I see Mrs. Payson first."

Polly had ridden at once to the house to tell the joyful news of Slim's return to Echo, who hurried at once to the boys about the wagon.

Parenthesis spied her riding down the trail. "She's comin' now," he cried.

"Boys," requested Slim, "would you mind herdin' off yonder a bit?"

The cow-punchers strolled over to the cottonwood, leaving Echo to meet Slim alone.

"Where is he?" was Echo's tearful greeting.

"Well, ma'am, there's a man out yonder that's been through fire and brimstone for you!"

Echo stared over the prairies. Then Jack was still searching for Dick. Slim had failed to find him. "Out yonder," she moaned, wringing her hands.

"Wait a minute," says Slim. "He says to me," says he: "'Break it to her, Slim; tell her gentle--an' if she wants me--call, and I'll come.' Ma'am, Dick Lane is dead."

Echo shuddered. "Dead," she repeated. "By his--"

"No, no," interrupted Slim; "not that way. Indians. Jack found Dick, an' the Indians found 'em both. When I come up with the soldiers from Fort Grant they was havin' the derndest mixup with Indians you ever did see. Both men were bad hurted, an' Dick--well, ma'am--I leaned over him jest in time to hear him say: 'Tell her I know she was true--and not to mind.' Then he gave a little ketch of his breath, and dropped back into my arms."

Echo sighed. The tragedy of the desert was very real to her. In the many months that the two men had been away she had lived through it with them in poignant imagination.

"Great-hearted Dick," she said. "I was not worthy of his love. And Jack, where is he?"

"Wait a minute--he wants to know if you can forgive him--if you will take him back."

"Slim!" was the only word Echo uttered, but the volume of love it contained told him everything.

"You needn't say nothin' more--I see it shinin' in your eyes," cried Slim.

"Jack! Jack!" he shouted, "you derved idiot, come a-runnin--"

Payson hurried up from the arroyo within which he had been waiting.

"Echo, I have not altogether failed in my mission. I have not brought Dick Lane back, but I hope I come from him bearing something of his loyalty and simple faith. If you ever can learn to trust me again--if you ever can learn to love me--" he said to Echo humbly.

"Don't be a derved fool, Jack," blurted Slim; "can't you see she ain't never loved no one else?"

"Echo, is it so?" asked Jack eagerly.

Slim grinned. Going over to Echo's side, he gave her a slight push, saying: "Go tell him."

"Jack!" was her only cry, as her husband enfolded her in his arms.

* * * * *

With the next election for sheriff in Pinal County, William Henry Harrison Hoover had no opposition, for Buck McKee's nomination for that office of one Peruna, formerly of the Lazy K outfit, was not ratified for several reasons, the chief of which was that W. H. H. Hoover, alias Slim, had, just previous to election, officially declared that the said Peruna was deceased, having come to his death in the jail-yard of Pinal County, by a sudden drop at the end of a new hempen rope, which did not break, as Slim, before the ceremony, had assured the apprehensive Peruna it would not.

The sudden and successive removals of its two most honored and influential members, Buck McKee and Peruna, greatly demoralized the Lazy K outfit, and the demoralization was completed by the pernicious activity of the reelected Sheriff in interfering with the main purpose of that industrial organization, which was the merger of the Sweetwater cattle-business through a gradual amalgamation of all brands into the Lazy K. One by one the captains or cavaliers of this industry sought more congenial regions, where public inquisition into such purely private concerns as theirs was not so vigorously prosecuted.

It must not be thought that the social graces and persuasive abilities of Sheriff Hoover were confined to the conduct of legalized necktie-parties and the dispersion of outlaws. In its extended account of the "Lane-Hope Nuptials," the Florence Kicker devoted much of the space to the part taken by the "best man" in the ceremony, "our genial and expansive boniface of the new county apartment hotel." And soon after it recorded that the same Sheriff Hoover had induced the "charming Miss Wiggins, sister of our deputy sheriff, to be his partner for life, as she had been for the dance at the Lane-Hope nuptials, described in our issue of June 15," and that "the happy couple receive their friends--which we are instructed our readers is an 'invite' to the entire county--at their future home, the new county jail, on the Fourth of July."

And in a "local" paragraph of the issue containing the latter notice, the editor of the Kicker remarks:

"Remember the Sheriff's Round-up on the Fourth. As (), our friend from the Sweetwater with the 'all round understanding,' says: '} up, Slim; all the boys will be there to [pointing finger] you a few; you'll sure see * * *.'"

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