

The Heart of the Range

William Patterson White

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[Illustration: "They picked up our trail somehow ... they're about three miles back on the flat just a-burnin' the ground"]

THE HEART OF THE RANGE

BY WILLIAM PATTERSON WHITE

AUTHOR OF

"_The Rider of Golden Bar_," "_Hidden Trails_," "_Lynch Lawyers_,"
"_The Owner of the Lazy D_," "_Paradise Bend_," "_etc_."

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TO RANGER

A GOOD HORSE AND A BETTER FRIEND

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THE HEART OF THE RANGE

CHAPTER I

THE HORSE THIEF

It was a warm summer morning in the town of Farewell. Save a dozen horses tied to the hitching-rail in front of various saloons and the Blue Pigeon Store and Bill Lainey, the fat landlord of the hotel, who sat snoring in a reinforced telegraph chair on the sidewalk in the shade of his wooden awning, Main Street was a howling wilderness.

Dust overlay everything. It had not rained in weeks. In the blacksmith shop, diagonally across the street from the hotel, Piney Jackson was shoeing a mule. The mule was invisible, but one knew it was a mule because Piney Jackson has just come out and taken a two-by-four from the woodpile behind the shop. And it was a well-known fact that Piney never used a two-by-four on any animal other than a mule. But this by the way.

In the barroom of the Happy Heart Saloon there were only two customers and the bartender. One of the former, a brown-haired, sunburnt young man with ingenuous blue eyes, was singing:

"_Jog on, jog on, the footpath way,
An' merrily jump the stile O!
Yore cheerful heart goes all the day,
Yore sad tires in a mile O_!"

Mr. Racey Dawson, having successfully sung the first verse, rested both elbows on the bar and grinned at the bartender. That worthy grinned back, and, knowing Mr. Dawson, slid the bottle along the bar.

"Have one yoreself, Bill," Mr. Dawson nodded to the bartender.
"Whu--where's Swing? Oh, yeah."

Mr. Dawson, head up, chest out, stepping high, and walking very stiffly as befitted a gentleman somewhat over-served with liquor, crossed the barroom to where bristle-haired Swing Tunstall sat on a chair and slumbered, his head on his arms and his arms on a table.

Mr. Dawson stooped and blew into Mr. Tunstall's right ear. Mr. Tunstall began to snore gently. Growing irritated by this continued indifference on the part of Mr. Tunstall, Mr. Dawson seized the chair by rung and back and incontinently dumped Mr. Tunstall all abroad on the saloon floor.

Mr. Tunstall promptly hitched himself into a corner and drifted deeper into slumber.

Mr. Dawson turned a perplexed face on the bartender.

"Now what you gonna do with a feller like that?" Mr. Dawson asked, plaintively.

Mr. Jack Richie, manager of the Cross-in-a-box ranch, entering at the moment, temporarily diverted Mr. Dawson's attention. For Mr. Dawson had once ridden for the Cross-in-a-box outfit. Hence he was moved literally to fall upon the neck of Mr. Richie.

"Lean on yore own breakfast," urged Mr. Richie, studiously dissembling his joy at sight of his old friend, and carefully steering Mr. Dawson against the bar. "Here, I know what you need. Drink hearty, Racey."

"S'on me," declared Mr. Dawson. "Everythin's on me. I gug-got money, I have, and I aim to spend it free an' plenty, 'cause there's more where I'm goin'. An' I ain't gonna earn it punchin' cows, neither."

"Don't do anything rash," Mr. Richie advised, and took advantage of a friend's privilege to be insulting. "I helped lynch a road-agent only last month."

"Which the huh-holdup business is too easy for a live man," opined Mr. Dawson. "We want somethin' mum-more diff-diff-diff'cult, me an' Swing do, so we're goin' to Arizona where the gold grows. No more wrastlin' cows. No more hard work for us. _We're_ gonna get rich quick, we are. What you laughin' at?"

"I never laugh," denied Mr. Richie. "When yo're stakin' out claims don't forget me."

"We won't," averred Mr. Dawson, solemnly. "Le's have another."

They had another--several others.

The upshot was that when Mr. Richie (who was the lucky possessor of a head that liquor did not easily affect) departed homeward at four P.M., he left behind him a sadly plastered Mr. Dawson.

Mr. Tunstall, of course, was still sleeping deeply and noisily. But Mr. Dawson had long since lost interest in Mr. Tunstall. It is doubtful whether he remembered that Mr. Tunstall existed. The two had begun their party immediately after breakfast. Mr. Tunstall had succumbed early, but Mr. Dawson had not once halted his efforts to

make the celebration a huge success. So it is not a subject for surprise that Mr. Dawson, some thirty minutes after bidding Mr. Richie an affectionate farewell, should stagger out into the street and ride away on the horse of someone else.

The ensuing hours of the evening and the night were a merciful blank to Mr. Dawson. His first conscious thought was when he awoke at dawn on a side-hill, a sharp rock prodding him in the small of the back and the bridle-reins of his dozing horse wound round one arm. Only it was not his horse. His horse was a red roan. This horse was a bay. It wasn't his saddle, either.

"Where's my hoss?" he demanded of the world at large and sat up suddenly.

The sharp movement wrung a groan from the depths of his being. The loss of his horse was drowned in the pains of his aching head. Never was such all-pervading ache. He knew the top was coming off. He knew it. He could feel it, and then did--with his fingers. He groaned again.

His tongue was dry as cotton, and it hurt him to swallow. He stood up, but as promptly sat down. In a whisper--for speech was torture--he began to revile himself for a fool.

"I might have known it," was his plaint. "I had a feelin' when I took that last glass it was one too many. I never did know when to stop. I'd like to know how I got here, and where my hoss is, and who belongs to this one?"

He eyed the mount with disfavour. He had never cared for bays.

"An' that ain't much of a saddle, either," he went on with his soliloquy. "Cheap saddle--looks like a boy's saddle--an' a old saddle--bet Noah used one just like it--try to rope with that saddle an' you'd pull the horn to hellen gone. Wonder what's in that saddle-pocket."

He pulled himself erect slowly and tenderly. His knees were very shaky. His head throbbed like a squeezed boil, but--he wanted to learn what was in that saddle-pocket. Possibly he might obtain therein a clue to the horse's owner.

He slipped the strap of the pocket-flap, flipped it open, inserted his fingers, and drew forth a small package wrapped in newspaper and tied with the blue string affected by the Blue Pigeon Store in Farewell.

Mr. Dawson balanced the package on two fingers for a reflective instant, then he snapped the string and opened the package.

"Socks an' a undershirt," he said, disgustedly, and started to say more, but paused, for there was something queer about that undershirt. His head was still spinning, and his eyes were sandy, but he perceived quite plainly that there were narrow blue ribbons running round the neck of that undershirt. He unrolled the socks and found them much longer in the leg than the kind habitually worn by men. Mr. Dawson agitatedly dived his hand once more into the saddle-pocket. And this time he pulled out a tortoise-shell shuttle round which was wrapped several inches of lingerie edging. But Mr. Dawson did not call it

lingerie edging. He called it tatting and swore again.

"That settles it," he said, cheerlessly. "I've stole some woman's cayuse."

CHAPTER II

THE YELLOW DOG

It was a chastened Racey Dawson that returned to Farewell. He went directly to the blacksmith shop.

"Lo, Hoss Thief," was Piney Jackson's cheerful greeting.

"Whose is it?" demanded Racey Dawson, wiping his hot face. "Whose hoss have I stole?"

"Oh, you'll catch it," chuckled the humorous Piney. "Yep, you betcha. You've got a gall, you have. Camly prancing out of a saloon an' glooming onto a lady's hoss. What kind o' doin's is that, I'd like to know?"

"You blasted idjit!" cried the worried Racey. "Whose hoss is this?"

"I kind o' guessed maybe something disgraceful like this here would happen when I seen you and yore friend sashay into the Happy Heart. And the barkeep said you had two snifters and a glass o' milk, too. Honest, Racey, you'd oughta be more careful how you mix yore drinks."

"Don't try to be a bigger jack than you are," Racey adjured him in a tone that he strove to make contemptuous. "You think yo're awful funny--just too awful funny, don't you? I'm askin' you, you fish-faced ape, whose hoss this is I got here?"

"Don't you know?" grinned Piney, elevating both eyebrows. "Lordy, I wouldn't be in yore shoes for something. Nawsir. She'll snatch you baldheaded, she will. The old lady was wild when she come out an' found her good hoss missing. And she shore said what she thought of you some more when she seen she had to ride home on that old crow's dinner of a moth-eaten accordeen you left behind."

Racey Dawson was too reduced in spirit to properly take umbrage at this insult to his horse. He could only repeat his request that Piney make not of himself a bigger fool than usual. And when Piney did nothing but laugh immoderately, Racey grinned foolishly.

"If my head didn't ache so hard," he assured the chortling blacksmith, "I'd shore talk to you, but--Say, lookit here, Piney, quit yore foolin', will you? Who owns this hoss, anyway?"

"Here comes Kansas," said Piney. "Betcha five even he arrests you for a hoss thief."

"Gimme odds an' I'll go you," Racey returned, promptly.

"Even," stuck out Piney.

"Naw, he might do it. You Farewell jiggers hang together too hard for me to take any chances. 'Lo, Kansas."

"Howdy, Racey," nodded Kansas Casey, the deputy sheriff. "How long you been rustlin' hosses?"

"A damsight longer'n I like," Racey replied, frankly. "Who _does_ own this hoss?"

"Y' oughta asked that question yesterday," said Kansas, severely, but with a twinkle in his black eyes that belied his tone. "This here would be mighty serious business for you if the Sheriff was in town. Jake's so particular about being legal an' all. Yessir, Racey, old-timer, I expect you'd spend some time in the calaboose--if you wasn't lynched previous."

"Don't scare the poor feller," pleaded Piney in a tone of deepest compassion. "He'll be cryin' in a minute."

"In a minute I'll be doing somethin' besides cry if you fellers don't stop yore funning. This here is past a joke, this is, and--"

"Shore it's past a joke," Kansas concurred, warmly, "an' I ain't funning, not for a minute. You go give that hoss back, Racey, or you'll be sorry."

"Well, for Gawd's sake tell me who to give it back to!" bawled Racey, and immediately batted his eyes and gingerly patted the back of his head.

"Head ache?" queried Kansas. "I expect it might after last night. You go give that hoss back like a good boy."

So saying Kansas Casey turned his back and retreated rapidly in the direction of the Starlight Saloon.

Racey Dawson glared vindictively after the departing deputy. Then he switched his angry blue eyes to the blacksmith's smiling countenance.

"You can all," said Racey Dawson, distinctly, "go plumb to hell."

He turned the purloined pony on a dime and loped up the street, followed by the ribald laughter of Piney Jackson.

"They think they're so terrible funny," Racey muttered, mournfully, as he dismounted and tied at the hitching rail in front of the Happy Heart. "Now if I can only find Swing--"

But Swing Tunstall, it appeared on consulting the bartender, had gone off hunting him (Racey). The latter did not appeal to the bartender to divulge the name of the horse's owner. He had, he believed, furnished the local populace sufficient amusement for one day. He had a small drink, for he felt that he needed a bracer, and with the liquor he imbibed inspiration.

Miss Blythe, Mike Flynn's partner in the Blue Pigeon Store! She would know whose horse it was, for certainly the horse's owner had bought

the undershirt and the stockings at the Blue Pigeon. Furthermore, Miss Blythe looked like a right-minded individual. She would take no pleasure in devilling a man. Not she.

Racey Dawson set down his glass and hurried to the Blue Pigeon Store. Miss Blythe, at his entrance, ceased checking tomato cans and came forward.

"Ma'am," said Racey, "will you come to the door a minute? No, no, don't be scared!" he added as the lady drew back a step. "I'm kind of in trouble, an' I want you to help me out. I'm--my name's Racey Dawson, an' I used to ride for the Cross-in-a-box before I got a job up at the Bend. Jack Richie knows me. I ain't crazy--honest."

For Miss Blythe continued to look doubtful. "I--" she began.

"Lookit," he interrupted, "yesterday I got a heap drunk an' I rode off on somebody's hoss without meaning to--I mean I thought it was my hoss and it wasn't. An' I thought maybe you'd tell me who the hoss belongs to so's I can return him and get mine back. She took mine, they tell me. Not that I blame her a mite," he added, hastily.

Pretty Miss Blythe smiled suddenly. "I did hear something about a switch in horses yesterday afternoon," she admitted. "But I thought Mr. Flynn said Tom Dowling was the man's name. Certainly I remember you now, Mr. Dawson, although at first your--your beard--"

"Yeah, I know," he put in, hurriedly. "I ain't shaved since I left the Bend, and I slept mostly on my face last night, but it's li'l ol' me all right behind the whiskers and real estate. Yeah, that's the hoss yonder--the one next the pinto."

"I know the horse," said Miss Blythe, drawing back from the doorway. "It belongs to the Dales over at Medicine Spring on Soogan Creek."

"Oh, I know _them_," Racey declared, confidently (he had been at the Dales' precisely once). "The girl married Chuck Morgan. Shore, Mis' Dale's hoss, huh? I'll take it right back soon's I get shaved. I s'pose I'll have a jomightyful time explaining it to the old lady."

"It isn't the mother's horse. It's the daughter's. She was in town yesterday."

"You mean Chuck's wife, Mis' Morgan?"

"I mean _Miss_ Molly Dale, the _other_ daughter."

"I didn't know they had another daughter," puzzled Racey, thinking of what Piney Jackson had said anent an "old lady." "They must 'a' kept her in the background when I was there that time. What is she--a old maid?"

"Oh, middle-aged, perhaps," was the straight-faced reply.

"Shucks, I might have known it," grumbled Racey; "middle-aged old maid! I know what they're like. I had one once for a school-teacher. I can feel her lickings yet. She was the contrariest female I ever met. Shucks, I--Well, if I gotta, I gotta. Might's well get it over with now as later. Thanks, ma'am, for helping me out."

Racey Dawson shambled dejectedly forth to effect the feeding of Miss Molly Dale's horse at the hotel corral. For his own breakfast he went to Sing Luey's Canton Restaurant. Because while Bill Lainey offered no objections to feeding the horse, Mrs. Lainey utterly refused to provide snacks at odd hours for good-for-nothing, stick-a-bed punchers who were too lazy to eat at the regular meal-time. So there, now.

"But I ain't gonna shave," he told himself, as he disposed of fried steak and potatoes sloshed down by several cups of coffee. "If she's a old maid like they say it don't matter how tough I look."

He was reflectively stirring the grounds in the bottom of his sixth cup when a small and frightened yellow dog dashed into the restaurant and fled underneath Racey's table, where he cowered next to Racey's boots and cuddled a lop-eared head against Racey's knee.

Racey had barely time to glance down and discover that the yellow nondescript was no more than a pup when a burly youth charged into the restaurant and demanded in no uncertain tones to know where that adjective dog had hidden himself.

Racey took an instant dislike to the burly youth, still--it was his dog. And it is a custom of the country to let every man, as the saying is, skin his own deer. He that takes exception to this custom and horns in on what cannot rightfully be termed his particular business, will find public opinion dead against him and his journey unseasonably full of incident.

Racey moved a leg. "This him, stranger?"

The burly youth (it was evident that he was not wholly sober) glared at Racey Dawson. "Shore it's him!" he declared. "Whatell you hidin' him for? Get outa the way!"

Whereupon the burly youth advanced upon Racey.

This was different. Oh, quite. The burly youth had by his brusque manner and rude remarks included Racey in his (the burly youth's) business.

Racey met the burly youth rather more than halfway. He hit him so hard on the nose that the other flipped backward through the doorway and landed on his ear on the sidewalk.

Racey followed him out. The burly youth, bleeding copiously from the nose, sat up and fumbled uncertainly for his gun.

"No," said Racey with decision, aiming his sixshooter at the word. "You leave that gun alone, and lemme tell you, stranger, while we're together, that I want to buy that pup of yores. A gent like you ain't fit company for a self-respecting dog to associate with. Nawsir."

"You got the drop," grumbled the burly youth.

"Which is one on you," Racey observed, good-humouredly.

"Maybe I'll be seein' you again," suggested the other.

"Don't lemme see you first," advised Racey. "Never mind getting up. Just sit nice and quiet like a good boy, and keep the li'l hands spread out all so pretty with the thumbs locked over yore head. 'At's the boy. How much for yore dog, feller?"

"What you done to my dog?" A woman's voice broke on Racey's ears. But he did not remove his slightly narrowed eyes from the face of the burly youth.

"What you done to my dog?" The question was repeated, and the speaker came close to the burly youth and looked down at him. Now that the woman was within his range of vision Racey perceived that she was the Happy Heart lookout, a good-looking creature with brown hair and a lithe figure.

The girl's fists were clenched so tightly that her knuckles showed whitely against the pink. Two red spots flared on the white skin of her cheeks.

"Dam yore soul!" swore the lady. "I want my dog! How many tunes I gotta ask you, huh? Where is he? Say somethin', you dumb lump of slum gullion!"

"He ain't yore dog!" denied the burly youth. "He never was yores! He's mine, you--!"

Which last was putting it pretty strongly, even for the time, the place, and the girl. She promptly swung a brisk right toe, kicked the burly youth under the chin, and flattened him out.

"That'll learn you to call me names!" she snarled. "So long as I act like a lady, I'm a-gonna be treated like one, and I'll break the neck of the man who acts different, and you can stick a pin in that, you dirty-mouthed beast!"

Muttering profanely true to form, the aforementioned beast essayed to rise. But here again Racey and his ready gun held him to the ground in a sitting position.

"You leave her alone," commanded Racey. "You got what was coming to yuh. Let it go at that. The lady says it's her dog, anyway."

"It's my dog, I tell yuh! I--"

"Yo're a liar!" averred the girl. "You kicked the dog out when he was sick, and I took him in and tended him and got him well. If that don't make him my dog what does?"

"Correct," said Racey. "Call him."

The girl put two fingers in her mouth and whistled shrilly. Forth from the Canton came the dog on the jump and bounced into the girl's arms and began to lick her ear with despatch and enthusiasm.

"You see how it is," Racey indicated to the man on the ground. "It's the lady's dog. You can go now."

The burly youth stared stupidly.

"You heard what I said," Racey told him, impatiently. "G'on. Go some'ers else. Get outa here."

"Say," remarked the burly youth in what was intended to be a menacing growl, "this party ain't over yet."

"Ain't you been enough of a fool already to-day?" interrupted Racey. "You ain't asking for it, are you?"

"You can't run no blazer on me," denied the other, furiously.

Racey promptly holstered his sixshooter. "Now's yore best time," he said, quietly.

When the smoke cleared away there was a rent in the sleeve of Racey's shirt and the burly youth sat rocking his body to and fro and groaning through gritted teeth. For there was a red-hot hole in his right shoulder which hurt him considerably.

Racey Dawson gazed dumbly down at the muzzle of his sixshooter from which a slim curl of gray smoke spiralled lazily upward. Then his eyes veered to the man he had shot and to the man's sixshooter lying on the edge of the sidewalk. It, too, like his own gun, was thinly smoking at the muzzle. The burly youth put a hand to his shoulder. The fingers came away red. Racey was glad he had not killed him. He had not intended to. But accidents will happen.

He stepped forward and kicked the burly youth's discarded sixshooter into the middle of the street. He looked about him. The girl and her dog had vanished.

Kansas Casey had taken her place apparently. From windows and doorways along the street peered interested faces. One knew that they were interested despite their careful lack of all expression. It is never well to openly express approval of a shooting. The shooter undoubtedly has friends, and little breaches of etiquette are always remembered.

Racey Dawson looked at Kansas Casey and shoved his sixshooter down into its holster.

"It was an even break," announced Racey.

"Shore," Kansas nodded. "I seen it. There'll be no trouble--from us," he added, significantly.

The deputy sheriff knelt beside the wounded man. Racey Dawson went into the Happy Heart. He felt that he needed a drink. When he came out five minutes later the burly youth had been carried away. Remained a stain of dark red on the sidewalk where he had been sitting. Piggy Wadsworth, the plump owner of the dance-hall, legs widespread and arms akimbo, was inspecting the red stain thoughtfully. He was joined by the storekeeper, Calloway, and two other men. None of them was aware of Racey Dawson standing in front of the Happy Heart.

"Was it there?" inquired Calloway.

"Yeah," said Piggy. "Right there. I seen the whole fraycas. Racey stood here an'--"

At this point Racey Dawson went elsewhere.

CHAPTER III

THE TALL STRANGER

"You'll have to manage it yoreself." Lanpher, the manager of the 88 ranch, was speaking, and there was finality in his tone.

"You mean you don't wanna appear in the deal a-tall," sneered his companion.

Racey Dawson, who had been kneeling on the ground engaged in bandaging a cut from a kick on the near foreleg of the Dale pony when the two men led their horses into the corral, craned his neck past the pony's chest and glanced at Lanpher's tall companion. For the latter's words provoked curiosity. What species of deal was toward? Having ridden for Lanpher in the days preceding his employment by the Cross-in-a-box and consequently provided with many opportunities for studying the gentleman at arm's-length, Racey naturally assumed that the deal was a shady one. Personally, he believed Lanpher capable of anything. Which of course was unjust to the manager. His courage was not quite sufficient to hold him abreast of the masters in wickedness. But he was mean and cruel in a slimy way, and if left alone was prone to make life miserable for someone. Invariably the someone was incapable of proper defense. From Farewell to Marysville, throughout the length and breadth of the great Lazy River country, Lanpher was known unfavourably and disliked accordingly.

To his companion's sneering remark Lanpher made no intelligible reply. He merely grunted as he reached for the gate to pull it shut. His companion half turned (his back had from the first been toward Racey Dawson), and Racey perceived the cold and Roman profile of a long-jawed head. Then the man turned full in his direction and behold, the hard features vanished, and the man displayed a good-looking countenance of singular charm. The chin was a thought too wide and heavy, a trait it shared in common with the mouth, but otherwise the stranger's full face would have found favour in the eyes of almost any woman, however critical.

Racey Dawson, at first minded to reveal his presence in the corral, thought better of it almost immediately. While not by habit an eavesdropper he felt no shame in fortuitously overhearing anything Lanpher or the stranger might be moved to say. Lanpher merited no consideration under any circumstances, and the stranger, in appearance a similar breed of dog as far as morals went, certainly deserved no better treatment. So Racey remained quietly where he was, and was glad that besides the pony to whom he was ministering there were several others between him and the men at the gate.

"Why don't you wanna appear in this business?" persisted the stranger, pivoting on one heel in order to keep face to face with Lanpher.

"I gotta live here," was the Lanpher reply.

"Well, ain't I gotta live here, too, and I don't see anything round here to worry me. S'pose old Chin Whisker does go on the prod. What can he do?"

"Tsall right," mumbled Lanpher, shutting the gate and shoving home the bar. "You don't know this country as well as I do. I got trouble enough running the 88 without borrowing any more."

"Now I told you I was gonna get his li'l ranch peaceable if I could. I got it all planned out. I don't do anything rough unless I gotto. But I'm gonna get old Chin Whisker out o' there, and you can stick a pin in that."

"Tsall right. 'Tsall right. You wanna remember ol' Chin Whisker ain't the only hoss yo're trying to ride. If you think that other outfit is gonna watch you pick daisies in their front yard without doing anything, you got another guess. But I'll do what I said--and no more."

"I s'pose you think that by sticking away off yonder where the grass is long nobody will suspicion you. If you do, yo're crazy. Folks ain't so cross-brained as all that."

"Not so dam loud!" Lanpher cautioned, excitedly.

"Say, whatsa matter with you?" demanded the stranger, leaning back against the gate and spreading his long arms along the top bar. "Which yo're the most nervous gent I ever did see. The hotel ain't close enough for anybody to hear a word, and there's only hosses in the corral. Get a-hold of yoreself. Don't be so skittish."

"I ain't skittish. I'm sensible. I know--" Lanpher broke off abruptly.

"What do you know?"

"What yo're due to find out."

"Now lookit here, Mr. Lanpher," said the stranger in a low, cold tone, "you said those last words a leetle too gayful to suit me. If yo're planning any skulduggery--don't."

"I ain't. Not a bit of it. But I got my duty to my company. I can't get mixed up in any fraycas on yore account, because if I do my ranch will lose money. That's the flat of it."

"Oh, it is, huh? Yore ranch will lose money if you back me up, hey? And you ain't thinkin' nothin' of yore precious skin, are yuh? Oh, no, not a-tall. I wonder what yore company would say to the li'l deal between you and me that started this business. I wonder what they'd think of Mr. Lanpher and his sense of duty. Yeah, I would wonder a whole lot."

"Well--" began Lanpher, lamely.

"Hell!" snarled the stranger. "You make me sick! Now you listen to me. Yo're in this as deep as I am. If you think you ain't, try to pull yore wagon out. Just try it, thassall."

"I ain't doing none of the work, that's flat," Lanpher denied,

doggedly.

"You gotta back me up alla same," declared the stranger.

"That wasn't in the bargain," fenced Lanpher.

"It is now," chuckled the stranger. "If I lose, you lose, too. Lookit," he added in a more conciliatory tone, "can't you see how it is? I need you, an' you need me. All I'm asking of you is to back me up when I want you to. Outside of that you can sit on yore shoulder-blades and enjoy life."

"We didn't bargain on that," harked back Lanpher.

"But that was then, and this is now. Which may not be logic, but it is necessity, an' Necessity, Mr. Lanpher, is the mother of all kinds of funny things. So you and I we got to ride together."

Lanpher pushed back his hat and looked over the hills and far away. The well-known carking care was written large upon his countenance.

Slowly his eyes slid round to meet for a brief moment the eyes of his companion.

"I can't answer for my men," said Lanpher, shortly.

"Can you answer for yoreself?" inquired the stranger quickly.

"I'll back you up." Grudgingly.

"Then that's all right. You can keep the men from throwing in with the other side, anyway, can't you?"

"I can do that much."

"Which is quite a lot for a ranch manager to be able to do," was the stranger's blandly sarcastic observation. "C'mon. We've gassed so much I'm dry as a covered bridge. I--What does Thompson want now? 'Lo, Punch."

"'Lo, Jack. Howdy, Lanpher." Racey could not see the newcomer, but he recognized the voice. It was that of Punch-the-breeze Thompson, a gentleman well known to make his living by the ingenious capitalization of an utter lack of moral virtue. "Say, Jack," continued Thompson, "Nebraska has been plugged."

"Plugged?" Great amazement on the part of the stranger.

"Plugged."

"Who done it?"

"Feller by the name of Dawson."

"Racey Dawson?" nipped in Lanpher.

"Yeah, him."

Lanpher chuckled slightly.

"Why the laugh?" asked Jack Harpe.

"I'd always thought Nebraska could shoot."

"Nebraska is supposed to be some swift," admitted the stranger. "How'd it happen, Punch?"

Thompson told him, and on the whole, gave a truthful account.

"What kind of feller is this Dawson?" the stranger inquired after a moment's silence following the close of the story.

"A skipjack of a no-account cow-wrangler," promptly replied Lanpher. "He thinks he's hell on the Wabash."

"Allasame he must be old pie to put the kybosh on Nebraska thataway."

"Luck," sneered Lanpher. "Just luck."

"Is he square?" probed the stranger.

"Square as a billiard-ball," said Lanpher. "Why, Jack, he's so crooked he can't lay in bed straight."

At which Racey Dawson was moved to rise and declare himself. Then the humour of it struck him. He grinned and hunkered down, his ears on the stretch.

"Well," said the stranger, refraining from comment on Lanpher's estimate of the Dawson qualities, "we'll have to get somebody in Nebraska's place."

"I'm as good as Nebraska," Punch-the-breeze Thompson stated, modestly.

"No," the stranger said, decidedly. "Yo're all right, Punch. But even if we can get old Chin Whisker drunk, the hand has gotta be quicker than the eye. Y' understand?"

Thompson, it appeared, did understand. He grunted sulkily.

"We'll have to give Peaches Austin a show," resumed the stranger. "Nemmine giving me a argument, Punch. I said I'd use Austin. C'mon, le's go get a drink."

The three men moved away. Racey Dawson cautiously eased his long body up from behind the pony. With slightly narrowed eyes he stared at the gate behind which Jack Harpe and his two friends had been standing.

"Now I wonder," mused Racey Dawson, "I shore am wonderin' what kind of skulduggery li'l Mr. Lanpher of the 88 is a-trying to crawl out of and what Mr. Stranger is a-trying to drag him into. Nebraska, too, huh? I was wondering what that feller's name was."

He knelt down again and swiftly completed the bandaging of the cut on the pony's near fore.

As he rode round the corner of the hotel to reach Main Street he saw Luke Tweezy single-footing into town from the south. The powdery dust

of the trail filled in and overlaid the lines and creases of Luke Tweezy's foxy-nosed and leathery visage. Layers of dust almost completely concealed the original colour of the caked and matted hide of Luke Tweezy's well-conditioned horse. It was evident that Luke Tweezy had come from afar.

In common with most range riders Racey Dawson possessed an automatic eye to detail. Quite without conscious effort his brain registered and filed away in the card-index of his subconscious mind the picture presented by the passing of Luke Tweezy, the impression made thereby, and the inference drawn therefrom. The inference was almost trivial--merely that Luke Tweezy had come from Marysville, the town where he lived and had his being. But triviality is frequently paradoxical and always relative. If Dundee had not raised an arm to urge his troopers on at Killiekrankie the world would know a different England. A single thread it was that solved for Theseus the mystery of the Cretan labyrinth.

Racey Dawson did not like Luke Tweezy. From the sparse and sandy strands of the Tweezy hair to the long and varied lines of the Tweezy business there was nothing about Mr. Tweezy that he did like. For Luke Tweezy's business was ready money and its possibilities. He drove hard bargains with his neighbours and harder ones with strangers. He bought county scrip at a liberal discount and lent his profits to the needy at the highest rate allowed by law.

Luke Tweezy's knowledge of what was allowed by territorial law was not limited to money-lending. He had been admitted to the bar, and no case was too small, too large, or too filthy for him to handle.

In his dislike of Luke Tweezy Racey Dawson was not solitary. Luke Tweezy was as generally unpopular as Lanpher of the 88. But there was a difference. Where Lanpher's list of acquaintances, nodding and otherwise, was necessarily confined to the Lazy River country, Luke Tweezy knew almost every man, woman, and child in the territory. It was his business to know everybody, and Luke Tweezy was always attending to his business.

He had nodded and spoken to Racey Dawson as they two passed, and Racey had returned the greeting gravely.

"Slimy ol' he-buzzard," Racey Dawson observed to himself and reached for his tobacco.

But there was no tobacco. The sack that he knew he had put in his vest pocket after breakfast had vanished. Lack of tobacco is a serious matter. Racey wheeled his mount and spurred to the Blue Pigeon Store.

Five minutes later, smoking a grateful cigarette, he again started to ride out of town. As he curved his horse round a freight wagon in front of the Blue Pigeon he saw three men issue from the doorway of the Happy Heart Saloon. Two of the men were Lanpher and the stranger. The third was Luke Tweezy. The latter stopped at the saloon hitching-rail to untie his horse. "See yuh later, Luke," the stranger flung over his shoulder to Luke Tweezy as he passed on. He and Lanpher headed diagonally across the street toward the hotel. It seemed odd to Racey Dawson that Luke Tweezy by no word or sign made acknowledgment of the stranger's remark.

Racey tickled his mount with the rowels of one spur and stirred him into a trot. Have to be moving along if he wanted to get there some time that day. He wished he didn't have to go alone, so he did. The old lady would surely lay him out, and he wished for company to share his misery. Why couldn't Swing Tunstall have stayed reasonably in Farewell instead of traipsing off over the range like a tomfool. Might not be back for a week, Swing mightn't. Idiotic caper (with other adjectives) of Swing's, anyway. Why hadn't he used his head? Oh, Racey Dawson was an exceedingly irritable young man as he rode out of Farewell. The aches and pains were still throbbingly alive in his own particular head. The immediate future was not alluring. It was a hard world.

When he and his mount were breasting the first slight rise of the northern slope of Indian Ridge--which ridge marks with its long, broad-backed bulk the southern boundary of the flats south of Farewell and forces the Marysville trail to travel five miles to go two--a rider emerged from a small boulder-strewn draw wherein tamaracks grew thinly.

Racey stared--and forgot his irritation and his headache. The draw was not more than a quarter-mile distant, and he perceived without difficulty that the rider was a woman. She quirted her mount into a gallop, and then seesawed her right arm vigorously. Above the pattering drum of her horse's hoofs a shout came faintly to his ears. He pulled up and waited.

When the woman was close to him he saw that it was the good-looking, brown-haired Happy Heart lookout, the girl whose dog he had protected. She dragged her horse to a halt at his side and smiled. And, oddly enough, it was an amazingly sweet smile. It had nothing in common with the hard smile of her profession.

"I'm sorry I had to leave without thanking you for what you done for me back there," said she, with a jerk of her head toward distant Farewell.

"Why, that's all right," Racey told her, awkwardly.

"It meant a lot to me," she went on, her smile fading. "You wouldn't let that feller hurt me or my dog, and I think the world of that dog."

"Yeah." Thus Racey, very much embarrassed by her gratitude and quite at a loss as to the proper thing to say.

"Yes, and I'm shore grateful, stranger. I--I won't forget it. That dog he likes me, he does. And I'm teaching him tricks. He's awful cunnin'. And company! Say, when I'm feeling rotten that there dog _knows_, and he climbs up in my lap and licks my ear and tries his best to be a comfort. I tell you that dog likes me, and that means a whole lot--to me. I--I ain't forgetting it."

Her face was dark red. She dropped her head and began to fumble with her reins.

"You needn't 'a' come riding alla way out here just for this," chided Racey, feeling that he must say something to relieve the situation.

"It wasn't only this," she denied, tiredly. "They was something else."

And I couldn't talk to you in Farewell without him and his friends finding it out. That's why I borrowed one of Mike Flynn's hosses an' followed you thisaway--so's we could be private. Le's ride along. I expect you was going somewhere."

They rode southward side by side a space of time in silence. Racey had nothing to say. He was too busy speculating as to the true significance of the girl's presence. What did she want--money? These saloon floozies always did. He hoped she wouldn't want much. For he ruefully knew himself to be a soft-hearted fool that was never able to resist a woman's appeal. He glanced at her covertly. Her little chin was trembling. Poor kid. That's all she was. Just a kid. Helluva life for a kid. Shucks.

"Lookit here," said Racey, suddenly, "you in hard luck, huh? Don't you worry. Yore luck is bound to turn. It always does. How much you want?"

So saying he slid a hand into a side-pocket of his trousers. The girl shook her head without looking at him.

"It ain't money," she said, dully. "I make enough to keep me going." Then with a curious flash of temper she continued, "That's always the way with a man, ain't it? If he thinks yo're in trouble--Give her some money. If yo're sick--Give her money. If yo're dyin'--Give her money. Money! Money! Money! I'm so sick of money I--Don't mind me, stranger. I don't mean nothing. I'm a--a li'l upset to-day. I--it's hard for me to begin."

Begin! What was the girl driving at?

"Yes," said she. "It's hard. I ain't no snitch. I never was even when I hadn't no use for a man--like now. But--but you stuck up for me and my dog, and I gotta pay you back. I gotta. Listen," she pursued, swiftly, "do you know who that feller was you shot?"

"No." Racey shook his head. "But you don't owe me anything. Forget it. I dunno what yo're drivin' at, and I don't wanna know if it bothers you to tell me. But if I can do anything--anything a-tall--to help you, why, then tell me."

"I know," she nodded. "You'd always help a feller. Yo're that kind. But I'm all right. That jigger you plugged is Tom Jones."

The girl looked at Racey Dawson as though the name of Tom Jones should have been informative of much. But, Fieldings excluded, there are many Tom Joneses. Racey did not react.

"Dunno him," denied Racey Dawson. "I heard his name was Nebraska."

"Nebraska is what the boys call him," she said. "He used to be foreman of the Currycomb outfit south of Fort Seymour."

"I've heard of Nebraska Jones and the Currycomb bunch all right," he admitted, soberly. "And I'd shore like to know _what_ was the matter with Nebraska to-day."

"So would I. _You_ were lucky."

Racey nodded absently. The Currycomb outfit! That charming aggregation

of gunfighters had borne the hardest reputation extant in a neighbouring territory. Regarding the Currycomb men had been accustomed to speak behind their hands and under their breaths. For the Currycomb politically had been a power. Which perhaps was the _reason_ why, although the rustling of many and many a cow and the killing of more than one man were laid at their unfriendly door, nothing had ever been proved against them.

They had prospered exceedingly, these Currycomb boys, till the election of an opposition sheriff. Which election had put heart into the more decent set and a crimp in the Currycomb. It did not matter that legally the Currycomb possessed a clean bill of health. The community had decided that the Currycomb must be abolished. It was--cow, cayuse, and cowboy.

While some had remained on the premises at an approximate depth beneath the grass of two feet (for the ground was hard), the other Currycombers had scattered wide and far and their accustomed places knew them no more.

Now it seemed that at least one of the Currycomb boys, and that one the most notorious character of the lot, had scattered as far as Farewell and obtruded his personality upon that of Racey Dawson. Nebraska Jones! A cold smile stretched the corners of Racey's mouth as he thought on what he had done. He had beaten to the draw the foreman of the Currycomb. Which undoubtedly must have been the first time Nebraska had ever been shaded.

The girl was watching his face. "Don't begin to get the notion you beat him to it," she advised, divining his thought. "He was stunned sort of that first time, an' the second time his gun caught a little. Nebraska is slow lightnin' on the pull. Keep thinkin' you was lucky like you done at first."

Racey laughed shamefacedly. "Yo're too much of a mind reader for me. But what you telling all this to me for? I ain't the sheriff with a warrant for Nebraska Jones."

"I'm telling you so you'll know what to expect. So you'll get out of town and stay out. Because, shore as yo're a foot high, you won't live a minute longer than is plumb necessary if you don't."

"I beat Nebraska once, and he won't get well of that lead in the shoulder so jo-awful soon."

"Can you beat a shot in the dark? Can you dodge a knife in the night? It ain't a question of Nebraska Jones himself. It's the gang he's managed to pick up in this town. They are meaner than a nest of cross rattlesnakes. I know 'em. I know what they'll do. Right this minute they're fixing up some way to give you yore come-uppance."

"Think so?"

"Think so! Say, would I come traipsing out here just for my health--or yores? Figure it out."

"Seems like you know a lot about Nebraska and his gang," he cast at a venture, glancing at her sharply.

"I lived with Nebraska--for a while," she said, matter-of-factly, giving him a calm stare. "Li'l Marie knows all they is to know about Nebraska Jones--and a little bit more. Which goes double for his gang."

"Shucks," Racey grunted contemptuously. "Does he and his gang run Farewell? I'd always thought Farewell was a man's size town."

"They're careful," explained the girl. "They got sense enough not to run any blazers they can't back to the limit. Yeah, they're careful--now."

"Now, huh? Later, when they've filled their hands and there's more of 'em playin' they might not be so careful, huh, Marie?"

"Unless yo're a heap careful right now you won't have a thing to do with 'later,'" she parried. "You do like I say, Mister Man. I ain't a bit anxious to see you wiped out."

"Wiping me out would shore cramp my style," he admitted. "I--"

At this juncture hoofbeats sounded sharply on the trail behind them. Racey turned in a flash, his right hand dropping. But it was only Lanpher and the stranger riding out of a belt of pines whose deep and lusty souging had drowned the noise of their approach.

Lanpher and his comrade rode by at a trot. The former mumbled a greeting to Racey but barely glanced at the girl. Women did not interest Lanpher. He was too selfishly stingy. The stranger was more appreciative. He gave the girl a stare of frank admiration before he looked at Racey Dawson. The latter perceived that the stranger's eyes were remarkably black and keen, perceived, too, that the man as he rode past and on half turned in the saddle for a second look at the girl.

"Who's yore friend?" asked Marie, an insolent lift to her upper lip and a slightly puzzled look in her brown eyes as her gaze followed the stranger and Lanpher.

"Friend?" said Racey. "Speaking personal, now, I ain't lost either of 'em."

"I know who Lanpher is," she told him, impatiently. "I meant the other."

"I'll never tell yuh. I dunno him."

"I think I've seen him somewhere--sometime. I can't remember where or how--I see so many men. There! I almost had it. Gone again now. Don't it make you sick when things get away from you like that? Makes you think yo're a-losing yore mind almost."

"He looked at you almighty strong," proffered Racey. "Maybe _he'll_ remember. Why don't you ask him?"

"Maybe I will at that," said she.

"Didja know he was a friend of Nebraska's?" he asked, watching her face keenly.

She shook her head. "Nebraska knows a lot of folks," she said, indifferently.

"He knows Punch-the-breeze Thompson, too."

"Likely he would, knowing Nebraska. He belongs to Nebraska's bunch."

"What does Nebraska do for a living?"

"Everybody and anything. Mostly he deals a game in the Starlight."

"What does Peaches Austin work at?" he pursued, thinking that it might be well to learn what he could of the enemy's habits.

"He deals another game in the Happy Heart."

"The hand is quicker than the eye," he quoted, cynically, recalling what the stranger had said to Punch-the-breeze Thompson.

"Oh, Peaches is slick enough," said she, comprehending instantly. "But Nebraska is slicker. Don't never sit into no game with Nebraska Jones. Lookit here," she added, her expression turning suddenly anxious, "did I take my ride for nothing?"

"Huh?... Oh, that! Shore not. You bet I'm obliged to you, and I hope I can do as much for you some day. But I wasn't figuring on staying here any length of time. Swing--he's my friend--and I are going down to try Arizona a spell. We'll be pulling out to-morrow, I expect."

"Then all you got to look out for is to-night. But I'm telling you you better drag it to-morrow shore."

Racey smiled slowly. "If it wasn't I got business down south I'd admire to stay. I ain't leaving a place just because I ain't popular, not nohow. I'm over twenty-one. I got my growth."

"It don't matter why you go. Yo're a-going. That's enough. It's a good thing for you you got business, and you can stick a pin in that."

"I'll have to do something about them friends of his alla same, before I go," Racey said, thoughtfully.

"Huh?" Perplexedly.

"Yeah. If they're a-honing to bushwhack me for what I did to Nebraska, it ain't fair for me to go sifting off thisaway and not give 'em some kind of a run for their alley. Look at it close. You can see it ain't."

"I don't see nothing--"

"Shore you do. It would give 'em too much of a chance to talk. They might even get to saying they ran me out o' town. And the more I think of it the more I'm shore they'll be saying just that."

"But you said you was going away. You said you had business in Arizona."

"Shore I have, and shore I'm going. But first I gotta give Nebraska's friends a chance to draw cards. A chance, y' understand."

"You'll be killed," she told him, white-lipped.

"Why, no," said he. "Not never a-tall. Drawing cards is one thing and playing the hand out is a cat with another kind of tail. I got hopes they won't get too rough with me."

"Well, of all the stubborn damn fools I ever saw--" began the girl, angrily.

At which Racey Dawson laughed aloud.

"That's all right," she snapped. "You can laugh. Might 'a' knowed you would. A man is such a plumb idjit. A feller does all she can to show him the right trail out, and does he take it? He does not. He laughs. That's what he does. He laughs. He thinks it's funny. You gimme a pain, you do!"

On the instant she jerked her pony round, whirled her quilt cross-handed, and tore down the back-trail at full gallop.

"Aw, hell," said Racey, looking after the fleeing damsel regretfully. "I clean forgot to ask her about the rest of Nebraska's friends."

CHAPTER IV

THE OLD LADY

"Hope Old Man Dale is home," said Racey to himself when he saw ahead of him the grove of cottonwoods marking the location of Moccasin Spring. "But he won't be," he added, lugubriously. "I never did have any luck."

He passed the grove of trees and opened up the prospect of house and stable and corral with cottonwood and willow-bordered Soogan Creek in the background.

"Changed some since I was here last," he muttered in wonder. For nesters as a rule do not go in for flowers and shrubs. And here, besides a small truck garden, were both--all giving evidence of much care and attention.

Racey dismounted at the corral and approached the kitchen door. A fresh young voice in the kitchen was singing a song to the brave accompaniment of a twanging banjo:

"_When I was a-goin' down the road
With a tired team an' a heavy load,
I cracked my whip an' the leader sprung,
An' he almost busted the wagon tongue.
Turkey in the straw, ha! ha! ha!
Turkey in_--"

The singing stopped in the middle of a line. The banjo went silent in the middle of a bar. Racey looked in at the kitchen door and saw, sitting on a corner of the kitchen table, a very pretty girl. One knee was crossed over the other, in her lap was the mute banjo, and she was looking straight at him.

Racey, heartily and internally cursing himself for having neglected to shave, pulled off his hat and achieved a head-hob.

"Good morning," said the pretty girl, putting up a slim tanned hand and tucking in behind a well-set ear a strayed lock of black hair.

"Mornin'," said Racey, and decided then and there that he had never before seen eyes of such a deep, dark blue, or a mouth so alluringly red.

"What," said the pretty girl, laying the banjo on the table and sliding down till her feet touched the floor, "what can I do for you?"

"Nun-nothin'," stuttered the rattled Racey, clasping his hat to his bosom, so that he could button unseen the top button of his shirt, "except cuc-can you find Miss Dale for me. Is she home?"

"Mother's out. So's Father, I'm the only one home."

"It's yore sister I want, _Miss_ Dale--yore oldest sister."

"You must mean Mrs. Morgan. She lives--"

"No, I don't mean her. Yore _oldest_ sister, Miss. Her whose hoss was taken by mistake in Farewell yesterday."

"That was my horse."

"Yores! But they said it was an _old_ lady's hoss! Are you shore it--"

"Of course I'm sure. Did you bring him back?... Where?... The corral?"

The girl walked swiftly to the window, took one glance at the bay horse tied to the corral gate, and returned to the table.

"Certainly that's _my_ horse," she reiterated with the slightest of smiles.

Racey Dawson stared at her in horror. Her horse! He had actually run off with the horse of this beautiful being. He had thereby caused inconvenience to this angel. If he could only crawl off somewhere and pass away quietly. At the moment, by his own valuation, any one buying him for a nickel would have been liberally overcharged. Her horse! "I--I took yore hoss," he spoke up, desperately. "I'm Racey Dawson."

"So you're the man--" she began, and stopped.

He nodded miserably, his contrite eyes on the toes of her shoes. Small shoes they were. Cheerfully would he have lain down right there on the floor and let her wipe those selfsame shoes upon him. It would have been a positive pleasure. He felt so worm-like he almost wriggled. Slowly, oh, very slowly, he lifted his eyes to her face.

"I--I was drunk," he confessed, hoping that an honest confession would restrain her from casting him into outer darkness.

"I heard you were," she admitted.

"I thought it was yore oldest sister's pony," he bumbled on, feeling it incumbent upon him to say something. "They told me something about an old lady."

"Jane Morgan's the only other sister I have. Who told you this wild tale?"

"Them," was his vague reply. He was not the man to give away the jokers of Farewell. Old lady, indeed! Miss Blythe to the contrary notwithstanding this girl was not within sight of middle-age. "Yeah," he went on, "they shore fooled me. Told me I'd taken an old maid's hoss, and--"

"Oh, as far as that goes," said the girl, her long eyelashes demurely drooping, "they told you the truth. I'm an old maid."

"You? Shucks!" Hugely contemptuous.

"Oh, but I am," she insisted, raising her eyes and tilting sidewise her charming head. "I'm not married."

"Thank--" he began, impulsively, but choked on the second word and gulped hard. "I mean," he resumed, hastily, "I don't understand why I never saw you before. I was here once, but you weren't around."

"When were you here?... Why, that was two years ago. I was only a kid then--all legs like a calf. No wonder you didn't notice me."

She laughed at him frankly, with a bewildering flash of white teeth.

"I shore must 'a' been blind," he said, truthfully. "They ain't any two ways about _that_."

Under his admiring gaze a slow blush overspread her smooth cheeks. She laughed again--uncertainly, and burst into swift speech. "My manners! What have I been thinking of? Mr. Dawson, please sit down, do. I know you must be tired after your long ride. Take that chair under the mirror. It's the strongest. You can tip it back against the wall if you like. I'll get you a cup of coffee. I know you're thirsty. I'm sorry Mother and Father aren't home, but Mother drove over to the Bar S on business and I don't know where Father went!"

"I ain't fit to stay," hesitated Racey, rasping the back of his hand across his stubbly chin.

"Nonsense. You sit right down while I grind the coffee. I'll have you a potful in no time. I make pretty good coffee if I do say it myself."

"I'll bet you do."

"But my sister Jane makes better. You'll get some of hers at dinner."

"Dinner?" He stared blankly.

"Of course, dinner. When Mother and Father are away I always go down there for my meals. It's only a quarter-mile down stream. Shorter if you climb that ridge. But it's so stony I generally go along the creek bank where I can gallop.... What? Why, of course you're going with me. Jane would never forgive me if I didn't bring you. And what would Chuck say if you came this far and then didn't go on down to his house? Don't you suppose he enjoys seeing his old friends? It was only last week I heard him wonder to Father if you were ever coming back to this country. How did you like it up at the Bend?"

"Right fine," he told her, settling himself comfortably in the chair she had indicated. "But a feller gets tired of one place after a while. I thought maybe I'd come back to the Lazy River and get a job ridin' the range again."

"Aren't there any ranches round the Bend?" she asked, poking up the fire and setting on the coffee-pot.

"Plenty, but I--I like the Lazy River country," he told her. "Fort Creek country for yores truly, now and hereafter."

In this fashion did the proposed journey to Arizona go glimmering. His eye lingered on the banjo where it lay on the table.

"Can you play it?" she asked, her eye following his.

"Some," said he. "Want to hear a camp-meeting song?"

She nodded. He rose and picked up the banjo. He placed a foot on the chair seat, slid the banjo to rest on his thigh, swept the strings, and broke into "Inchin' Along". Which ditty made her laugh. For it is a funny song, and he sang it well.

"That was fine," she told him when he had sung it through. "Your voice sounds a lot like that of a man I heard singing in Farewell yesterday. He was in the Happy Heart when I was going by, and he sang _Jog on, jog on the footpath way_. If it hadn't been a saloon I'd have gone in. I just _love_ the old songs."

"You do?" said he, delightedly, with shining eyes. "Well, Miss Dale, that feller in the saloon was me, and old songs is where I live. I cut my teeth on 'The Barley Mow' and grew up with 'Barbara Allen'. My mother she used to sing 'em all. She was a great hand to sing and she taught me. Know 'The Keel Row?'"

She didn't, so he sang it for her. And others he sang, too--"The Merry Cuckoo" and "The Bailiff's Daughter". The last she liked so well that he sang it three times over, and they quite forgot the coffee.

Racey Dawson was starting the second verse of "Sourwood Mountain" when someone without coughed apologetically. Racey stopped singing and looked toward the doorway. Standing in the sunken half-round log that served as a doorstep was the stranger he had seen with Lanpher.

There was more than a hint of amusement in the black eyes with which the stranger was regarding Racey. The latter felt that the stranger was enjoying a hearty internal laugh at his expense. As probably he was. Racey looked at him from beneath level brows. The lid of the stranger's right eye dropped ever so little. It was the merest of

winks. Yet it was unmistakable. It recalled their morning's meeting. More, it was the tolerant wink of a superior to an inferior. A wink that merited a kick? Quite so.

The keen black eyes veered from Racey to the girl. The man removed his hat and bowed with, it must be said, not a little grace. Miss Dale nodded coldly. The stranger smiled. It was marvellous how the magic of that smile augmented the attractive good looks of the stranger's full face. It was equally singular how that self-same smile rendered more hawk-like than ever the hard and Roman profile of the fellow. It was precisely as though he were two different men at one and the same time.

"Does Mr. Dale live here?" inquired the stranger.

"He does." A breath from the Boreal Pole was in the two words uttered by Miss Dale.

The stranger's smile widened. The keen black eyes began to twinkle. He made as if to enter, but went no farther than the placing of one foot on the doorsill.

"Is he home?"

"He isn't." Clear and colder.

"I'm shore sorry," grieved the stranger, the smile waning a trifle. "I wanted to see him."

"I supposed as much," sniffed Miss Dale, uncordially.

"Yes, Miss," said the stranger, undisturbed. "When will he be back, if I might ask?"

"To-night--to-morrow. I'm not sure."

"So I see," nodded the stranger. "Would it be worth while my waitin'?"

"That depends on what you call worth while."

"You're right. It does. Standards ain't always alike, are they." He laughed silently, and pulled on his hat. "And it's a good thing standards ain't all alike," he resumed, chattily. "Wouldn't it be a funny old world if they were?"

The smile of him recognized Racey briefly, but it rested upon and caressed the girl. She shook her shoulders as if she were ridding herself of the touch of hands.

The stranger continued to smile--and to look as if he expected a reply. But he did not get it. Miss Dale stared calmly at him, through him.

Slowly the stranger slid his foot from the doorsill to the doorstep; slowly, very slowly, his keenly twinkling black gaze travelled over the girl from her face to her feet and up again to finally fasten upon and hold as with a tangible grip her angry blue eyes.

"I'm sorry yore pa ain't here," he resumed in a drawl. "I had some

business. It can wait. I'll be back. So long."

The stranger turned and left them.

From the kitchen window they watched him mount his horse and ford the creek and ride away westward.

"I don't like that man," declared Miss Dale, and caught her lower lip between her white teeth. "I wonder what he wanted?"

"You'll find out when he comes back." Dryly.

"I hope he never comes back. I never want to see him again. Do you know him?"

"Not me. First time I ever saw him was this morning in Farewell. He was with Lanpher. When I was coming out here he and Lanpher caught up with me and passed me."

"He didn't bring Lanpher here with him anyhow."

"He didn't for a fact," assented Racey Dawson, his eyes following the dwindling figures of the rider and his horse. "I wonder why?"

"I wonder, too." Thus Miss Dale with a gurgling chuckle.

Both laughed. For Racey's sole visit to the Dale place had been made in company with Lanpher. The cause of said visit had been the rustling and butchering of an 88 cow, which Lanpher had ill-advisedly essayed to fasten upon Mr. Dale. But, due to the interference of Chuck Morgan, a Bar S rider, who later married Jane Dale, Lanpher's attempt had been unavailing. It may be said in passing that Lanpher had suffered both physically and mentally because of that visit. Of course he had neither forgiven Chuck Morgan nor the Bar S for backing up its puncher, which it had done to the limit.

"I quit the 88 that day," Racey Dawson told the girl.

"I know you did. Chuck told me. Look at the time, will you? Get your hat. We mustn't keep Jane waiting."

"No," he said, thoughtfully, his brows puckered, "we mustn't keep Jane waitin'. Lookit, Miss Dale, as I remember yore pa he had a moustache. Has he still got it?"

Miss Dale puzzled, paused in the doorway. "Why, no," she told him. "He wears a horrid chin whisker now."

"He does, huh? A chin whisker. Let's be movin' right along. I think I've got something interesting to tell you and yore sister and Chuck."

But they did not move along. They halted in the doorway. Or, rather, the girl halted in the doorway, and Racey looked over her shoulder. What stopped them short in their tracks was a spectacle--the spectacle of an elderly chin-whiskered man, very drunk and disorderly, riding in on a paint pony.

"Father!" breathed Miss Dale in a horror-stricken whisper.

And as she spoke Father uttered a string of cheerful whoops and topped off with a long pull at a bottle he had been brandishing in his right hand.

"Please go," said Miss Dale to Racey Dawson.

He hesitated. He was in a quandary. He did not relish leaving her with--At that instant Mr. Dale decided Racey's course for him. Mr. Dale pulled a gun and, still whooping cheerily, shook five shots into the atmosphere. Then Mr. Dale fumblingly threw out his cylinder and began to reload.

"I'd better get his gun away from him," Racey said, apologetically, over his shoulder, as he ran forward.

But the old man would have none of him. He cunningly discerned an enemy in Racey and tried to shoot him. It was lucky for Racey that the old fellow was as drunk as a fiddler, or certainly Racey would have been buried the next day. As it was, the first bullet went wide by a yard. The second went straight up into the blue, for by then Racey had the old man's wrist.

"There, there," soothed Racey, "you don't want that gun, Nawsir. Not you. Le's have it, that's a good feller now."

So speaking he twisted the sixshooter from the old man's grasp and jammed it into the waistband of his own trousers. The old man burst into frank tears. Incontinently he slid sidewise from the saddle and clasped Racey round the neck.

"_I'm wild an' woolly an' full o' fleas
I'm hard to curry below the knees_--"

Thus he carolled loudly two lines of the justly popular song.

"Luke," he bawled, switching from verse to prose, "why didja leave me, Luke?"

Strangely enough, he did not stutter. Without the slightest difficulty he leaped that pitfall of the drunken, the letter L.

"Luke," repeated Racey Dawson, struck by a sudden thought. "What's this about Luke? You mean Luke Tweezy?"

The old man rubbed his shaving-brush adown Racey's neck-muscles. "I mean Luke Tweezy," he said. "Lots o' folks don't like Luke. They say he's mean. But they ain't nothin' mean about Luke. He's frien' o' mine, Luke is."

"Mr. Dawson," said Molly Dale at Racey's elbow, "please go, I can get him into the house. You can do no good here."

"I can do lots o' good here," declared Racey, who felt sure that he was on the verge of a discovery. "Somebody is a-trying to jump yore ranch, and if you'll lemme talk to him I can find out who it is."

"Who--how?" said Miss Dale, stupidly, for, what with the fright and embarrassment engendered by her father's condition the true significance of Racey's remark was not immediately apparent.

"Yore ranch," repeated Racey, sharply. "They're a-tryin' to steal it from you. You lemme talk to him, ma'am. Look out! Grab his bridle!"

Miss Dale seized the bridle of her father's horse in time to prevent a runaway. She was not aware that the horse's attempt to run away had been inspired by Racey surreptitiously and severely kicking it on the fetlock. This he had done that Miss Dale's thoughts might be temporarily diverted from her father. Anything to keep her from shooin' him away as she so plainly wished to do.

Racey began to assist the now-crumpling Mr. Dale toward the house. "What's this about Luke Tweezy?" prodded Racey. "Did you see him to-day?"

"Shore I seen him to-day," burbled the drunken one. "He left me at McFluke's after buyin' me the bottle and asked me to stay there till he got back. But I got tired waitin'. So I come along. I--hic--come along."

Limply the man's whole weight sagged down against Racey's supporting arm, and he began to snore.

"Shucks," muttered Racey, then stooping he picked up the limp body in his arms and carried it to the house.

"He's asleep," he called to Miss Dale. "Where'll I put him?"

"I'll show you," she said, with a break in her voice.

She hastily tied the now-quiet pony to a young cottonwood growing at the corner of the house and preceded Racey into the kitchen.

"Here," she said, her eyes meeting his a fleeting instant as she threw open a door giving into an inner room. "On the bed."

She turned back the counterpane and Racey laid her snoring parent on the blanket. Expertly he pulled off the man's boots and stood them side by side against the wall.

"Had to take 'em off now, or his feet would swell so after you'd never get 'em off," he said in justification of his conduct.

She held the door open for him to leave the room. She did not look at him. Nor did she speak.

"I'm going now," he said, standing in the middle of the kitchen. "But I wish you wouldn't shut that door just yet."

"I--Oh, can't you see you're not wanted here?" Her voice was shaking. The door was open but a crack. He could not see her.

"I know," he said, gently. "But you don't understand how serious this business is. I had good reason for believing that somebody is trying to steal yore ranch. From several things yore dad said I'm shorer than ever. If I could only talk to you a li'l while."

At this she came forth. Her eyes were downcast. Her cheeks were red with shamed blood. She leaned against the table. One closed fist

rested on the top of the table. The knuckles showed white. She was trembling a little.

"Where and what is McFluke's?" he asked.

"Oh, that's where he got it!" she exclaimed, bitterly.

"I guess. If you wouldn't mind telling me where McFluke's is, ma'am--"

"It's a little saloon and store on the Marysville road at the Lazy River ford."

"It's new since my time then."

"It's been in operation maybe a year and a half. What makes you think someone is trying to steal our ranch?"

"Lots o' things," he told her, briskly. "But they ain't gonna do it if I can help it. Don't you fret. It will all come out right. Shore it will. Can't help it."

"But tell me how--what you know," she demanded.

"I haven't time now, unless you're coming with me to see Chuck."

"I can't--now."

"Then you ask Chuck later. I'll tell him all about it. You ask him. So long."

Racey hurried out and caught up his own horse. He swung into the saddle and spurred away down stream.

CHAPTER V

McFLUKE'S

"They been after him to sell a long time," said Chuck Morgan, rolling a cigarette as he and Racey Dawson jogged along toward McFluke's at the ford of the Lazy.

"Who?" asked Racey.

"I dunno. Can't find out. Luke Tweezy is the agent and he won't give the party's name."

"Has Old Salt tried to buy him out?"

"Not as I know of. Why should he? He knows he won't sell to anybody."

"Have they been after you, too?"

"Not yet. Dad Dale's the lad they want special. My ranch would be a good thing, but it ain't noways necessary like Dale's is to anybody startin' a big brand. Lookit the way Dale's lays right across the

valley between them two ridges like a cork in a bottle. A mile wide here, twenty mile away between Funeral Slue and Cabin Hill she's a good thirty mile wide--one cracking big triangle of the best grass in the territory. All free range, but without Dale's section and his water rights to begin with what good is it?"

"Not much," conceded Racey.

"And nobody would dast to start a brand between Funeral Slue and Cabin Hill," pursued Chuck. "Free range or not, it as good as belongs to the Bar S."

"Old Salt used to run quite a bunch round Cabin Hill and another north near the Slue."

"He does yet--one or two thousand head in all, maybe. Oh, these fellers ain't foolish enough to crowd Old Salt that close. They know Dale's is their best chance."

Racey's eyes travelled, from one ridge to the other. "How come they allowed Dale to take up a six-forty?" he inquired.

"They didn't," was the answer. "The section is made up of four claims, his'n, Jane's, Molly's, an' Mis' Dale's. But they're proved up now, and made over to him all regular. That's how come."

"Haven't Silvertip Ransom and Long Oscar got a claim some'ers over yonder on Dale's land?" inquired Racey, looking toward the northerly ridge.

"They had, but they got discouraged and sold out to Dale the same time Slippery Wilson and his wife traded in their claims on the other side of the ridge to Old Salt and Tom Loudon. None of 'em's worth anything, though."

Racey nodded. "Dale ever drink much?" was his next question.

"He used to before he come here. But he took the cure and quit. To-day's the first bust-up he's had since he hit this country."

"That's it, then. Luke gave him the redeye so's he'd be easy meat for the butcher. Does he ever gamble any?"

"Shore--before he came West. Jane done told me how back East in McPherson, Kansas, he used to go the limit forty ways--liquor, cards, the whole layout o' hellraising. But his habits rode him to a frazzle final and he knuckled under to tooberclosis, and they only saved his life by fetchin' him West. All of us thought he was cured for good."

"Now Luke Tweezy has started him off so's Nebraska--Peaches Austin, I mean, can get in his fine work. It's plain enough."

"Shore," assented Chuck Morgan. "Yonder's McFluke's," he added, nodding toward two gray-brown log and shake shacks and a stockaded corral roosting on the high ground beyond the belt of cottonwoods and willows marking the course of the Lazy. "Them's his stables and corral," went on Chuck. "The house she's down near the river. Can't see her on account of the cottonwoods."

"And they can't see us count of the cottonwoods. So--"

"Unless he's at the corral."

"I'll take the chance, Chuck. You stay here--down that draw is a good place. I'll go on alone. McFluke don't know me. Maybe I can find out something, see. Bimeby you come along--half-hour, maybe. You don't know me, either. I'll get into conversation with you. You follow my lead. We'll pull McFluke in if we can. Between the two of us--Well, anyhow, we'll see what he says."

Chuck Morgan nodded, and turned his horse aside toward the draw.

Ten minutes later the water of the Lazy River was sluicing the dust from the legs and belly of Racey Dawson's horse. Racey spurred up the bank and rode toward the long, low building that was McFluke's store and saloon.

There were no ponies standing at the hitching-rail in front of the place. For this Racey was devoutly thankful. If he could only catch McFluke by himself.

As Racey dismounted at the rail a man came to the open doorway of the house and looked at him. He was a heavy-set man, dewlapped like a bloodhound, and his hard blue eyes were close-coupled. The reptilian forehead did not signify a superior mentality, even as the slack, retreating chin denoted a minimum of courage. It was a most contradictory face. The features did not balance. Racey Dawson was not a student of physiognomy, but he recognized a weak chin when he saw it. If this man were indeed McFluke, then he, Racey Dawson, was in luck.

Without a word the man turned from the doorway. Racey heard him walking across the floor. And for so heavy a man his step was amazingly light. Racey went into the house. The room he entered was a large one. In front of a side wall tiered to the low ceiling with shelves bearing a sorry assortment of ranch supplies was the store counter. Across the back of the room ran the long bar. Behind the bar, flanking the door giving into another room, were two shelves heavily stocked with rows of bottles.

The man that had come to the door was behind the bar. His hands were resting on top of it, and he was staring fixedly and fishily at Racey Dawson. There was no welcome in his face. Nor was there any unfriendliness. It was simply exceedingly expressionless.

Racey draped himself against the bar. "Liquor," said he.

Having absorbed a short one, he poured himself a second. "Have one with me," he nodded to the man.

"All right." The man's tone was as expressionless as his face. "Here's hell." He filled and drank.

Racey looked about the room.

"Where's Old Man Dale?" he asked, casually.

"He got away on me," replied the man. "He--Say!"--with sudden

suspicion--"who are you?"

"Are you McFluke?" shot back Racey.

The man nodded slowly, suspicion continuing to brighten his hard blue eyes.

"Then what didja let him get away for?" persisted Racey. "Luke Tweezy said he left him here, and he said he'd stay here. That was yore job--to see he _stayed_ here."

"Who are--" began the suspicious McFluke.

"Nemmine who I am," rapped out Racey, who believed he had formed a correct estimate of McFluke. "I'm somebody who knows more about this deal than you do, and that's enough for you to know. Why didn't you hold Old Man Dale?"

"I--He got away on me," knuckled down McFluke. "I was in the kitchen gettin' me some coffee, and when I come back he had dragged it."

"Luke Tweezy will be tickled to death with you," said Racey Dawson. "What do you s'pose he went to all that trouble for?"

"I couldn't help it, could I? I ain't got eyes in the back of my head so's I can see round corners an' through doors. How'd I know Old Man Dale was gonna slide off? When I left him he was all so happy with his bottle you'd 'a' thought he'd took root for life. Anyway, Peaches Austin oughta come before the old man left. He was supposed to come, and he didn't. If anything slips up account o' this it's gotta be blamed on Peaches."

"Yeah, I guess so. And Peaches ain't been here yet?"

"Not yet, and I wish to Gawd he was never comin'."

The man's tone was so earnest that Racey looked at him, startled.

"Why not?" he asked, coldly.

"Because I don't wanna get my head blowed off, that's why."

"Aw, maybe it won't come to that. Maybe Luke will win out."

"It ain't only Luke Tweezy who's gotta win out, and you know it. And they's an 'if' the size of Pike's Peak between us and winning out. I tell you, I don't like it. It's too damn dangerous."

"Shore, it's dangerous," assented Racey, slowly revolving his glass between his thumb and fingers, and wondering how far he dared go with this McFluke person. "But a gent has to live."

"He don't have to get himself killed doin' it," snarled McFluke, swabbing down the bar. "Who's that a-comin'?"

He went to the doorway to see for himself who it was that rode so briskly on the Marysville trail. "Peaches Austin!" he sneered. "He's only about three hours late."

It was now or never. Racey risked all on a single cast.

"What did the boss say when him and Lanpher got here and found old Dale gone?" he asked, carelessly.

"He raised hell," replied McFluke. "But Lanpher wasn't with him. Yuh know old Dale hates Lanpher like poison. Well, I told Jack, like I tell you, that if anything slips up account o' this, Peaches Austin can take the blame."

Racey nodded indifferently and slouched sidewise so that he could watch the doorway without dislocating his neck. McFluke, his back turned, still stood in the doorway. Racey lowered a cautious hand and loosened his sixshooter in its holster. He wished that he had taken the precaution to tie it down. It was impossible to foresee what the next few minutes might bring forth. Certainly the coming of Peaches Austin was most inopportune.

Peaches Austin galloped up. He dismounted. He tied his horse. He greeted cheerily the glowering McFluke. The latter did not reply in kind.

"This is a fine time for you to get here," he growled. "A fi-ine time."

"Shut up, you fool!" cautioned Peaches in a low voice. "Ain't you got no better sense, with the old man--"

"Don't let the old man worry you," yapped McFluke. "The old man has done flitted. And Jack's been here and _he's_ done flitted."

"Whose hoss is that?" demanded Peaches, evidently referring to Racey's mount.

"One of the boys," replied McFluke. "One o' Jack's friends. C'mon in."

Entered then Peaches Austin, a lithe, muscular person with pale eyes and a face the colour of a dead fish's belly. He stared non-committally at Racey Dawson. It was evident that Peaches Austin was taking no one on trust. He nodded briefly to Racey, and strode to the bar. McFluke went behind the bar.

"Ain't I seen you in Farewell, stranger?" Peaches Austin asked, shortly.

"You might have," returned Racey. "I'm mighty careless where I travel."

"Known Jack long?" Peaches was becoming nothing if not personal.

"Long enough," smiled Racey.

"Lookit here, who are you?"

"That's what's worryin' McFluke," dodged Racey, wishing that he could see just what it was McFluke was doing with his hands.

But McFluke was employing his hands in nothing more dangerous than the fetching of a bottle from some recess under and behind the bar. Now he

laughed.

"He ain't tellin' all he knows," he said to Peaches Austin. "Don't be so damn suspiciony, Peaches. He's a friend of Jack's, I tell you. He knows all about the deal."

"That don't make him no friend of Jack's," declared Peaches, stubbornly. "I--"

At which juncture Peaches' flow of language was interrupted by the sudden entrance of Chuck Morgan. Chuck, after a sweeping glance round the room, headed straight for the bar.

"McFluke," said Chuck, halting a yard from the bar, "did you sell any redeye to Old Man Dale to-day?"

"What's that to you?" demanded McFluke, truculently.

"Why, this," replied Chuck, producing a sixshooter so swiftly that McFluke blinked. "You listen to me," he resumed, harshly. "It don't matter whether you sold it to him or not. He got it here, and that's the main thing. I'm telling you if he gets any more I'm gonna make you hard to find."

"Is that a threat or a promise?" inquired McFluke.

"Don't do that," Racey said, suddenly, as his hand shot out and pinned fast the right wrist of Peaches Austin. "C'mon outside now, where we can talk. Right through the door. To yore left. Aw right, now they can't hear us. Lookit, they ain't any call for a gunplay, none whatever. This gent is only laying down the law to Mac. And here you have to get serious right away. See how easy Mac takes it. He ain't doing a thing, not a thing. Good as gold, Mac is. Can't you see how a killing thisaway, and a fellah like Morgan, too, would maybe put a crimp in this place for good? Have some sense, man. We need McFluke's."

"He hadn't oughta drewed on Mac," said Peaches, his pale eyes, shifty as a cat's, darting incessantly between Racey and the doorway.

"He didn't shoot him. And he ain't. You lemme attend to this, will you? I'll get him away quiet and peaceable--if I can. But you keep out of it. Y'understand?"

Peaches Austin gnawed his lower lip. "I never did like Chuck Morgan," he grumbled. "It was a good chance."

"A good chance to get yoreself lynched. Shore. It was all that."

"Say, I'd like to know where you come in, stranger. Jack never said anything to me about any feller yore size."

"Jack is like me. He ain't tellin' all he knows. And while we're talking about Jack, I'll tell you something. And that's to keep away from Farewell for three-four days."

"Why for?"

"So's to give Jack a chance to cool off. He's hotter than a wet wolf

'cause you didn't turn up here on time."

"I ain't afraid of Jack."

"Course you ain't. But you know how Jack is. Even if it don't come to a showdown, there'll be words passed. And I don't wanna run any risk of you quitting the outfit. Every man is needed. You be sensible and stick here with McFluke three-four days like I say, and after that c'mon in to Farewell. In the meantime, I'll see Jack and tell him how it happened you didn't get here on time. And how did it happen, anyway?"

Peaches Austin looked this way and that before replying.

"I shore don't like to tell how it happened," he said. "Sounds so babyish like. But my hat blowed off over this side of Injun Ridge a ways and when I leaned down to pick her up, my hoss started, my hand slipped, and I went off on my head kerblam. And do you know, I'll bet I was three hours a-running from hell to breakfast before I caught that hoss where he was feedin' in a narrow draw. I'm all tired out yet. They ain't no strength in my legs."

"I'll fix it up with Jack," Racey lied with a wonderfully straight face. "Don't you worry."

"I ain't worryin'," Peaches denied, irritably. "I ain't afraid of Jack, I tell you."

"Shore," soothed Racey, who, having formed an estimate of Peaches, ranked him scarcely higher than McFluke and treated him accordingly. "Shore, I know you ain't. But alla same you need considerable of a coolin' off yoreself. Just you stay out here now and watch me get Morgan away."

Racey nodded blithely to Peaches Austin, and turned to go into the house. He saw that Chuck Morgan had come outside, that he had brought McFluke with him, and was observing events with a cold and calculating eye.

"I tell you I couldn't help his getting the whiskey," McFluke was whining. "It ain't my fault if somebody gives it to him, is it?"

"Of course not," chimed in Racey, briskly. "Mac means all right. He didn't know there was any law against providing old Dale with whiskey."

"They is a law," insisted Chuck Morgan, belligerently, his gun trained unswervingly on McFluke's broad stomach. "They is a law. I made it. And it goes. Peaches," he added, raising his voice, "don't you slide round the house now. If you move so much as a yard from where yo're standing I ventilate McFluke immediate."

"I wouldn't do that," said Racey, mildly.

"I got my eye on you, too," declared Chuck. "What I said to Peaches goes for you, and don't you forget it."

"I ain't likely to, not me. All I want you to do is go some'ers else peaceful. You ain't figuring on living here, are you?"

Chuck uttered a short, hard laugh. McFluke's back was toward Racey. Peaches Austin was behind him, thirty feet away. Racey's left eyelid drooped. His head moved almost imperceptibly toward his horse.

"I'm going now," said Chuck.

"I'll go with you just to see you on yore way sort of," said Racey.

"You was going with me anyway sort of," Chuck told him. "Yo're the only _man_ round here so far's I can see, and I ain't taking any chances on you, not a chance. Yo're going down the trail a spell with me. Later you can come back. Keep yore hands where they are."

Quickly Chuck shoved McFluke to one side, rushed forward, and possessed himself of Racey's gun. "Crawl yore hoss," he commanded.

Racey obeyed without a word. Chuck climbed into his own saddle without losing the magic of the drop and without losing sight for an instant of McFluke and Peaches Austin.

"Take the trail south," said Chuck Morgan, and backed his horse in a wide half-circle.

Racey did as he was ordered. Three minutes later he was joined by his friend. Until the trail took them down into a draw grown up in spruce Chuck's gun remained very much in evidence. Any unbiased spectator without a knowledge of the facts would have said that he was keeping a close watch on Racey Dawson.

Once out of sight of the house of McFluke, Chuck sheathed his sixshooter with a jerk and returned Racey's gun.

"You did fine at the last," Racey said, admiringly, as he bolstered his weapon. "But what did you jump McFluke for thataway at first? That come almighty near kicking the kettle over, that play did."

"I know," said Chuck, shamefacedly, "and when I rode up to the shack I hadn't intended anything like that. But when I saw that slickery juniper McFluke standing there behind the bar so fat and sassy, it come over me all of a sudden what he'd done to the Dale family by letting old Dale have whiskey, that I couldn't help myself. Gawd, I wanted to knock him down and tromp his face flat as a floor. It ain't as if McFluke ain't been told about old Dale's failing. I warned him when he first came here last year not to let old Dale have redeye on any account."

"I know," nodded Racey, soberly, "but you want to remember his giving old Dale whiskey ain't the particular cow we're after. There's more to it than that, a whole lot more. We've got to be a li'l careful, Chuck, and go a li'l slow. If we go having a fraycas now they'll get suspicious and go fussbudgettin' round like a hound-dog after quail."

"Just as if they won't suspicion something's up soon as Peaches Austin gets back to Farewell."

"Peaches Austin ain't going back to Farewell right away. I've fixed Peaches for a few days. And a few days is all I need to find out what I want to. And even after Peaches does float in will he know me after

I've changed my shirt, dirtied my hat, and got me a clean shave twice over? He ain't got no idea what I look like under the whiskers. He wasn't living in Farewell before I went north, so all he knows about me is my voice and my hoss. It will shore be the worst kind of luck if I can't keep Peaches from hearing the one and seeing the other until after I'm ready. You leave it to yore uncle, Chuck. He knows."

"He's a great man, my uncle," assented Chuck, and struck a derisive tongue in his cheek. "What did you find out from McFluke--anything?"

"Anything? Gimme a match and I'll tell you."

CHAPTER VI

CHANGE OF PLAN

"It's a long way to Arizona," offered Racey Dawson, casually--too casually.

Swing Tunstall's bristle-haired head jerked round. Swing bent two suspicious eyes upon his friend. "You just find it out?" he queried.

"No, oh, no," denied Racey. "I've been thinking about it some time."

"Thinking!" sneered Swing. "That's a new one--for you."

"Nemmine," countered Racey. "It ain't catchin'--to _you_."

"_Is_ that so?" yammered Swing, now over his head as far as repartee was concerned. "Is _that_ so? What you gassing about Arizona for thisaway? You gonna renig on the trip?"

"I'll bet there's plenty of good jobs we can find right here in Farewell," dodged Racey. "_And_ vicinity," he amended. "Yep, Swing, old-timer, I'll bet the Bar S or the Cross-in-a-box would hire us just too quick. Shore they would. It ain't every day they get a chance at a jo-darter of a buster like--"

"Like the damndest liar in four states meaning you," cut in Swing.

"You're right," admitted Racey, promptly. "When I was speaking of a jo-darter I meant you, so I was a liar. I admit it. I might 'a' known you wouldn't appreciate my kind words. Besides being several other things, you're an ungrateful cuss. Gimme the makin's."

"Smoke yore own, you hunk of misery. You had four extra sacks in yore warbags this morning."

"_Had_? So you been skirmishin' round my warbags, have you? How many of those sacks did you rustle?"

"I left two."

"Two! Two! Say, I bought that tobacco myself for my own personal use, and not for a lazy, loafing, cow-faced lump of slumgullion to glom and

smoke. Why don't you spend something besides the evening now and then? Gawda-mighty, you sit on yore coin closer than a hen with one egg! I'll gamble that Robinson Crusoe spent more money in a week than you spend in four years. Two sacks of my smoking. You got a gall like a hoss. There was my extra undershirt under those sacks. It's a wonder you didn't smouch that, too."

"It didn't fit," replied Swing Tunstall, placidly constructing a cigarette. "Too big. Besides, all the buttons was off, and if they's anything I despise it's a undershirt without any buttons. Sort of wandering off the main trail though, ain't we, Racey? We was talking about Arizona, wasn't we?"

"We was not," Racey contradicted, quickly. "We was talking about a job here in Fort Creek County. T'ell with Arizona."

"T'ell with Arizona, huh? You're serious? You mean it?"

"I'm serious as lead in yore inwards. 'Course I mean it. Ain't I been saying so plain as can be the last half-hour?"

"You're saying so is plain enough. And so is the whyfor."

"The whyfor?"

"Shore, the whyfor. Say, do you take me for a damfool? Here you use up the best part of two days on a trip I could make in ten hours going slow and eating regular. Who is she, cowboy, who is she?"

"What you talking about?"

"What am I talking about, huh? I'd ask that, I would. Yeah, I would so. Is she pretty?"

"Poor feller's got a hangover," Racey murmured in pity. "I kind o' thought it must be something like that when he began to talk so funny. Now I'm shore of it. You tie a wet towel round yore head, Swing, and take a good pull of cold water. You'll feel better in the morning."

"So'll I feel better in the morning if you jiggers will close yore traps and lemme sleep," growled a peevish voice in the next room--on the Main Street side.

"As I live," said Racey in a tone of vast surprise, "there's somebody in the next room."

"Sounds like the owner of the Starlight," hazarded Swing Tunstall.

"It is the owner of the Starlight," corroborated the voice, "and I wanna sleep, and I wanna sleep _now_."

"We ain't got any objections," Racey told him. "She's a fine, free country. And every gent is entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, three things no home should be without."

"Shut up, will you?" squalled the goaded proprietor of the Starlight Saloon. "If you wanna make a speech go out to the corral and don't bother regular folks."

"Hear that, Swing?" grinned Racey, and twiddled his bare toes delightedly. "Gentleman says you gotta shut up. Says he's regular folks, too. You be good boy now and go by-by."

"_Shut up_!"

"Here, here, Swing!" cried Racey, struck by a brilliant idea. "What you doing with that gun?"

"I--" began the bewildered Swing who had not even thought of his gun but was peacefully sitting on his cot pulling off his boots.

"Leave it alone!" Racey interrupted in a hearty bawl. "Don't you go holding it at the wall even in fun. It might go off. You can't tell. You're so all-fired careless with a sixshooter, Swing. Like enough you're aiming right where the feller's bed is, too," he added, craftily.

Ensued then sounds of rapid departure from the bed next door. A door flew open and slammed. The parting guest padded down the stairs in his socks, invoking his Maker as he went.

"And that's the last of him," chuckled Racey.

"Oh, you needn't think I'm forgetting," grumbled Swing Tunstall, sliding out of his trousers and folding them tidily beside his boots. "You soft-headed yap, have you gotta let a woman spoil everything?"

"Spoil everything?"

"You don't think I'm going alla way to Arizona by myself, nobody to talk to nor nothing, do you? Well, I ain't. You can stick a pin in that."

Racey immediately sprang up, seized his friend's limp hand, and pumped it vigorously. "Bless you for them kind words," he said. "I knew you'd stick by me. I knew I could depend on old Swing to do the right thing. To-morrow you and I will traipse out and locate us a couple of jobs."

Swing doubled a leg, flattened one bare foot against Racey's chest, straightened the leg, and deposited Racey upon his own proper cot with force and precision.

"Don't you come honey-fuglin' round me," warned Swing. "And I didn't say anything about sticking by you, neither. And when it comes to the right thing you and me don't think alike a-tall. I--"

"I wish you'd pull yore kicks a few," interrupted Racey, rubbing his chest. "You like to busted a rib."

"Not the way you landed," countered the unfeeling Swing. "You're tryin' to get off the trail again. Here you and me plan her all out to go to--"

"You bet," burst in Racey, enthusiastically. "We planned to go to either the Bar S or the Cross-in-a-box and get that job. Shore we did. You got a memory like all outdoors. Swing. It plumb amazes me how clear and straight you keep everything in that head of yores. Yep, it shore does."

Hereupon, in the most unconcerned manner, Racey Dawson began to blow smoke rings toward the ceiling.

Swing Tunstall sank sulkily down upon an elbow. "Whatsa use?" said Swing Tunstall. "Whatsa use?"

It was then that someone knocked upon their chamber door.

"Come in," said Racey Dawson.

The door opened and Lanpher's comrade of the attractive smile and the ruthless profile walked into the room. He closed the door without noise, spread his legs, and looked upon the two friends silently.

"I heard you talking through the wall," he said in a studiedly low tone, a tone that, heard through a partition, would have been but an indistinguishable murmur.

"Hearing us talk through walls seems to be a habit in this hotel," commented Racey, tactfully following the other's lead in lowness of tone.

"I couldn't help hearing," apologized the stranger--he was vestless and bootless. Evidently he had been on the point of retiring when the spirit moved him to visit his fellow-guests. "I'd like to talk to you."

"You're welcome," said Racey, hospitably yanking his trousers from the only chair the room possessed. "Sit down."

The stranger sat. Racey Dawson, sitting on the bed, his knees on a level with his chin, clasped his hands round his bare ankles and accorded the stranger his closest attention. To the casual observer, however, Racey looked uncommonly dull and sleepy, even stupid. But not too stupid. Racey possessed too much native finesse to overdo it.

It was apparent that the stranger did not recognize him. Which was not surprising. For, at the Dale ranch, Racey had been wearing all his clothes and a beard of weeks. Now he was clean-shaven and attired in nothing but a flannel shirt. True, the stranger must have heard him singing to Miss Dale. But a singing voice is far different from a speaking voice, and Racey had not uttered a single conversational word in the stranger's presence. Now he had occasion to bless this happy chance.

Swing Tunstall, slow to take a cue, and still suffering with the sulks, continued to lie quietly, his head supported on a bent arm, and smoke. But he watched the stranger narrowly.

The stranger tilted back his chair, and levering with his toes, teetered to and fro in silence.

"I heard you say you were looking for a job in the morning," the stranger said suddenly to Racey.

"You heard right," nodded Racey.

"Are you dead set on working for the Bar S or the Cross-in-a-box?"

"I ain't dead set on working for anybody. Work ain't a habit with either of us, but so long as we got to work the ranches with good cooks have the call, and the Bar S and Richie's outfit have special good cooks."

The stranger nodded and began to smooth down, hand over hand, his tousled hair. It was very thick hair, oily and coarse. When sufficiently smoothed it presented that shiny, slick appearance so much admired in the copper-toed, black walnut era.

Not till each and every lock lay in perfect adjustment with its neighbour did the stranger speak.

"Cooks mean a whole lot," was his opening remark. "A good one can come mighty nigh holding a outfit together. Money ain't to be sneezed at, neither. Good wages paid on the nail run the cook a close second. How would you boys like to work for me?"

The stranger, as he asked the question, fixed Racey with his black eyes. The puncher felt as if a steel drill were boring into his brain. But he returned the stare without appreciable effort. Racey Dawson was not of those that lower their eyes to any man.

"I take it," drawled Racey, "that you're fixing to install all the comforts of home you were just now talking about--a good cook and better wages for the honest working-man?"

"Naturally I am." The stranger's eyes shifted to Swing Tunstall's face.

"Yeah--naturally." Thus Racey Dawson. The stranger's eyes returned quickly to Racey. There had been a barely perceptible pause between the two words uttered by Racey Dawson. Pauses signify a great deal at times. This might be one of those times and it might not. The stranger couldn't be sure. From that moment the stranger watched Racey Dawson even as the proverbial cat watches the mouse hole.

Racey knew that the stranger was watching him. And he knew why. So he smiled with bland stupidity and nodded a foolish head.

"What wages?" he inquired.

"Fifty per," was the reply.

"Where?"

"Southeast of Dogville--the Rafter H ranch."

"The Rafter H, huh? I thought that was Haley's outfit."

"I expect to buy out Haley," explained the stranger, smoothly. "My name's Harpe, Jack Harpe. What may I call you gents?... Dawson _and_ Tunstall, eh? I--"

"Haley ain't much better than a nester," interrupted Racey. "He don't own more'n forty cows. What you want with two punchers for a small bunch like that--and at fifty per?"

"I know she ain't much of a ranch now," admitted Jack Harpe. "But everything has to have a beginning. I'm figuring on a right smart growth for the Rafter H within the next year or two."

"Figuring on opposition maybe?" probed Racey Dawson.

"You never can tell."

"You can if you go to cutting any of Baldy Barbee's corners. Haley's little bunch never bothers Baldy none, but a man-size outfit so close to the south thataway would shore give him something to think about. Then there's the Anvil ranch east of the B bar B. They'll begin to scratch their heads, you bet. Hall, too, maybe, although he is a good ways to the east."

"She's all free range," said Jack Harpe. "I guess I got as good a right here as the next gent."

"Providing you can make the next gent see yore side of the case," suggested Racey.

"Most folks are willing to listen to reason," stated Jack Harpe.

"I ain't so shore," doubted Racey. "You ain't looked at the whole of the layout yet. How about the 88 ranch?"

"The 88?" repeated Jack Harpe in a tone of surprise. "What'll I have to do with the 88, I'd like to know?"

"I dunno," said Racey, his eyes more stupid than ever. "I was just a-wonderin'."

Jack Harpe laughed without a sound. It seemed to be a habit of his to laugh silently.

"You saw me with Lanpher, didn't you? Well, Lanpher and I are just friends, thassall. My cattle won't graze far enough south to overlap on the 88 anywheres."

"Nor the Bar S?" suggested Racey.

"Nor the Bar S."

"That's sensible." Thus Racey, watching closely Jack Harpe from under lowered lids.

Did his last remark strike a glint from the other man's eyes? He thought it did. Certainly Jack Harpe's eyes had narrowed suddenly and slightly.

"Yeah," Jack Harpe said, "I ain't counting on having any fussing with either the 88 or the Bar S. Of course Baldy Barbee and the Anvil are different. Dunno how they'll take it. Dunno that I care--much."

"Which is why you're payin' fifty per."

Jack Harpe nodded. "Yep. Gotta be prepared for them fellers--Baldy Barbee and the Anvil outfit."

"You're right," assented Racey Dawson. "Mustn't let 'em catch you napping. You would look foolish then, wouldn't you?" He broke off with a sounding laugh and slapped a silly leg.

"How about it, gents?" inquired Jack Harpe. "Are you riding for me or not?"

"You wanting to know right now this minute?"

"I don't have to know right now, because I won't be ready for you to begin for two or three weeks, but knowing would help my plans a few. I gotta figure things out ahead."

"Shore, shore. Let you know day after to-morrow, or sooner, maybe. How's that?"

"Good enough. Remember yore wages start the day you say when, even if you don't begin work for a month yet. All I'd ask is for you to stay round town where I can get hold of you easy. G'night."

With this the stranger slid from the chair, opened the door part way, and oozed into the hall. He closed the door without a sound. He regained his own room in equal silence. Racey did not hear the shutting of the other's door, but he heard the springs of the cot squeak under Jack Harpe's weight as he lay down.

Swing Tunstall framed a remark with his lips only. Racey Dawson shook his head. The partition was too thin and Jack Harpe's ears were too long and sharp for him to risk even the tiniest of whispers. With his hand he made the Indian sign for "to-morrow," stretched out his long legs, yawned--and fell almost instantly asleep.

CHAPTER VII

THE RIDDLE

"We'd oughta closed with Jack Harpe last night," said Swing Tunstall, easing his muscular body down on a broken packing-case that sat drunkenly beside the posts of the hotel corral. "What's the sense of putting things off thataway, Racey? Now we'll lose two days' wages for nothing."

"I had a reason," declared Racey Dawson, threading a new rawhide string through one of the silver conchas on his split-ear bridle. "I wanted to talk it over good with you first."

"Why for? What's there to talk over, I'd like to know? Why--"

"Because," interrupted Racey, "there's something up, if you ask me."

"What for a reason is that?" demanded the irritated Swing. "That ain't a reason, no good reason, anyway. I'm telling you flat, y' understand, that so long as we gotta take root here instead of going to Arizona like we'd planned it out--so long's yo're gonna renig on the play like I say, the best thing we can do is string our chips with Jack

Harpe's."

"That yore idea of a bright thing to do, huh?" questioned Racey, his nimble fingers busy with the rawhide.

"I done told you," said Swing with dignity.

"Poor, poor Swing," murmured Racey as though to the bridle's address. "The Gawd-forsaken young feller. It must be the devil and all to go through life in such shape as he's in. All right in lots of ways, too. He eats like a hawg, drinks like a fish, and snores like a rip saw, so you can see there's something almost human about him. But he hasn't any brains, not a brain. He never has anything on his mind but his hair and a hat. Yep, she's a sad, sad case. Lordy, Swing, old-timer, I feel sorry for you. You got my sympathy. I'll always stick up for you though. I won't let--"

"This here," cut in Swing, "has gone far enough. If you got anything to say, say it."

"I been saying it. Ain't it sunk in yet? Hand me that axe, and I'll make another try."

"Stop yore fool lallygaggin'," Swing exclaimed, impatiently. "Let's have the whole sermon. Gawd, yo're worse'n a woman. Gab, gab, gab! Nothing but. C'mon, tie the string to the latch, and slam the door. This tooth has been aching a long, long while."

"It's thisaway, Swing," Racey said, soberly. "There ain't any manner of use going into something we ain't got the whole straight of."

"What you talking about--the straight of?"

"Yep, the straight of. Don't you see anything funny about this jigger's offer?"

"Looks like a fair proposition to me. Fifty per shore listens well."

"As if that's all of it."

"Well, what's a li'l fussin' round with Baldy Barbee and the Anvil folks?"

"Nothin a-tall, that ain't. But the li'l green pea ain't under that shell. Listen here, Swing, old-timer, I got a long and gashly tale of wickedness to pour into those lily-white mule ears of yores. Yep, if it wasn't me a-telling it I'll bet you'd think it was a fairy tale."

"I might even so," said the sceptical Swing. "But I don't mind. I'm good-natured to-day. I feel just like being lied to. Turn yore wolf loose."

* * * * *

"What do you feed it on?" inquired solemn-faced Swing when he had heard Racey to the bitter end.

"Feed which on what?" demanded the unsuspecting Racey.

"Yore imagination."

"Say, lookit here--"

"Yeah, I know. Oh, aw right, aw right, I didn't go for to make you mad. I believe it. Every word. You're getting so dam touchy nowadays, Racey, they's no living with you. I swear they ain't. Why, if a feller so much as doubts one of yore reg'lar fish stories you gotta crawl his hump. Aw right, I believe you. How big was he again? Ugh-h-h! Uncle! Uncle! Get off my stummick! I said 'Uncle,' didn't I? Damittall, that left ear of mine will never be the same again. You rammed it into a rock with more points than a barb-wire fence. Nemmine no more foolin' now. Are you shore you got Peaches fixed for three-four days? 'Cause if you ain't--pop goes the weasel."

"This weasel ain't gonna pop. Not this trip. Peaches will stay put. Don't you fret. By the time he does drift in we'll know all we need to know, I guess."

"We," sniffed Swing. "Did I hear you say 'we'? Ain't you taking a awful lot for granted?"

"Shut up. I couldn't keep you out of this with a ten-foot pole. Yo're like Tom Kane thataway--always wantin' in where it's warm. Aw right, that's settled. Lookit, we know there's some crooked work on the towpath going on, and that Lanpher and Harpe are in it up to their hocks. We know that Nebraska is one of Harpe's friends, and we know that _after_ my fuss with Nebraska, Harpe comes to you and me and offers us jobs--jobs at fifty per, wages to start when we say when, and no work for a while, yet we're to stay round town till he wants us to start in. And he talks of maybe a li'l trouble in the future with Baldy Barbee and the Anvil boys, and he mentions Baldy and the Anvil several times, and the last time wasn't necessary. And, furthermore, he don't say anything a-tall about this Chin Whisker gent, who's old Dale or I'm Dutch. So there y'are, and plain enough," added Racey, holding up the bridle and turning it about. "From what Harpe said to Lanpher, we know he's bound to get old Dale's ranch come hell or high water. But he don't say anything about that to us. No, not him. It's all Barbee and the Anvil, and he's as friendly as a dog with fleas. His actions don't fit with the facts, and when a man's actions don't do that they'll stand watchin', him and them both."

"Fifty per ain't to be sneezed at." Swing, whose heart had been set on Arizona, was not prepared to give in without an argument. Besides, he invariably objected on principle to anything Racey might see fit to propose. Which was humanly natural, but more than maddening--to Racey.

"Shore not--unless it sets us against our friends."

"What you talkin' about?" persisted the wilfully blinded Swing. "Neither Baldy Barbee nor the Anvil outfit are any friends of mine. I don't even know 'em to speak to."

"But I tell you it ain't Baldy Barbee and the Anvil, you wooden-headed floop. If it was them, why would Lanpher be in it? And Nebraska? And Thompson? And Peaches Austin? I dunno exactly what it all means. But whatever it is, it's gotta do with the country round Farewell--with the ranches on the Lazy. Aw right. Besides Dale's and Morgan's there's

three ranches, ain't they, on the Lazy near Farewell?"

Racey Dawson held up three fingers, doubling a thumb and forefinger behind them.

"Three ranches," he continued, "and the manager of one is in cahoots with this Harpe of many strings." Here he doubled down his pinky and waved the remaining two fingers in the face of his friend. "Two ranches are left, the Cross-in-a-box and the Bar S. Jack Richie is manager of the Cross-in-a-box. I used to ride for Jack, and he's my friend. You dunno him, but you can take my word he's the pure quill forty ways. Then there's the Bar S. Who's foreman of that? Tom Loudon. You worked with him up at Scotty MacKenzie's Flyin' M ranch on the Dogsoldier, and I've knowed him ever since I come to this country. I ain't doing anything to make me bad friends with Tom Loudon. Then there's Dale, this Chin Whisker party. He's a good feller, and had a heap of hard luck, too. I ain't working against him, you betcha. Nawsir. And if I don't miss my guess you don't, either."

"Aw, hell! They ain't no rat in that hole. Yo're seem' a heap o' smoke where they ain't even a lighted match. I don't wanna do anything against either Richie's outfit nor the Bar S, nor old Dale, but I ain't satisfied--"

"You ain't! Good Gawdamighty! Ain't I been tellin' you? Ain't I been explaining of it all in words of one syllable? Can't you see Harpe's trying to pull us in with him is just a trick to get us shot by our friends? Because his jumping old Dale's ranch will shore start a war and you can gamble it's just as dangerous to be shot by yore friends as it is by the enemy. Here I'm telling you over and over and you ain't satisfied yet! I've heard of fellers like you, but I never believed it was possible. Like the whiffle-tit, they were just a damn lie. But it's all true. Swing, old settler, if you had a quarter-ounce more sense you'd be half-witted."

"If I had a quarter-ounce more sense I'd quit you cold like that." So saying Swing Tunstall rose to his feet and shuffled a guileful step or two closer to Racey. The movement of his right arm passed unnoticed by Racey. But the lighted cigarette that, following his movement, slipped down Racey's back between his shirt collar and his neck did not pass unnoticed.

Racey hopped up with a sharp exclamation and shucked himself out of his shirt with the utmost despatch. He did not stop at the shirt, but tore off his undershirt likewise.

"Better luck than I hoped for," Swing remarked from a safe distance. "I didn't think it would slide down inside yore undershirt, too. Burn you much, Racey, dear? You look awful cute standin' there with nothing on but yore pants. All you need now is a pair of wings and a bow n'arrer and you'd be a dead ringer for Cupid growed up. And there's Mis' Lainey and Mis' Galloway looking at you from their kitchen windows. They can hear what yo're saying, too. Fie, for shame."

But Racey Dawson had gathered up his clothing and fled to the back of the corral. Muttering to himself he was pulling on his shirt when Swing joined him--at a safe distance.

"Helluva trick to play on a feller," grumbled Racey.

"Served you right," was the return. "You hadn't oughta called me half-witted. Do you know you look just like a turtle in his shell with yore shirt half on half off thataway?"

"Aw, go sit on yoreself!"

At this juncture fat Bill Lainey wheezed round the corner of the corral.

"What you been doin', Racey?" inquired the hotel-keeper. "Taking a bath?"

"Naw, I ain't been taking a bath!" Racey denied ungraciously. "I do this for fun and my health twice a day--once on Sundays."

"Well, it must 'a' been a heap funny whatever it was, or Swing wouldn't be laughin' so hard. Yeah. Lookit, Racey--I meant to catch you at breakfast, but you was through before I got back from Mike Flynn's--lookit, I wish you'd go a li'l slow when yo're roughhousin' round in my place. Rack Slimson, my most payin' customer, hadda sleep on the dinin' room table all night because you druv him out of his room."

"Bill, that was a joke," Racey intoned, solemnly. "I didn't like the way the feller snored. Likewise he had too much to say. So naturally I had to make him take it on the run. What else could I do? I ask you, what else could I do?"

"Don't you believe him, Bill," cut in Swing, fearful that Racey would get credit for an effort at humour where, in his own estimation, none was due. "Racey hasn't got the guts to pick a fuss with a pack rat. It was me that chased Rack Slimson downstairs."

"That's right," Racey assented, smoothly, suddenly mindful both of a peculiar gleam in Bill Lainey's eye and a chance sentence uttered by the hasher in his hearing at breakfast. "That's right. It was Swing Tunstall what made so free and outrageous with Rack Slimson. You go and crawl Swing's hump, Bill. Lord knows he needs it. He's been getting awful brash and uppity lately. No living with him. Give him hell, Bill."

"I don't wanna give nobody hell. Live at peace is my motto. All I wanna know is who's gonna settle for six cups, eleven sassers, ten plates, and a middle-size pitcher Rack Slimson busted when he rolled off the table with 'em durin' the night. I don't think Rack oughta hafta pay, because he wouldn't 'a' had to sleep there on the table only bein' druv out thataway he couldn't help it like."

"Huh--how much, Bill?" inquired Swing in a still small voice, and thrust his hand within his pocket.

"Well, seein' as it's you, Swing," was the prompt reply, "I'll only say ten dollars and six bits. And that's dirt cheap. Honest, I'll bet it'll cost me fifteen dollars and a half to replace 'em, what with the scandalous prices we got now."

"And I hope that'll make you a better boy, Swing," said Racey, observing with relish the transfer of real money from Swing's hand to

the landlord's palm. "There's such a thing, Swing, old settler, as being too quick, as whirling too wide a loop as the man said when he roped the locomotive. And it all costs money. Yep, sometimes as much as ten dollars and six bits."

"... and one and one and two makes ten and six bits makes ten-seventy-five," totalled Swing Tunstall, "and that makes all square."

"Correct," said Bill Lainey, stuffing the money into a wide trousers pocket. "'Bliged to you, Swing. I wish all the gents paid up as prompt as you do."

"Oh, you needn't be surprised," chipped in the ready Racey. "Swing's a fair-minded boy. He'll do what's right every time, once you show him where he's wrong. Yeah. Say, Bill, has Nebraska Jones many friends in this town?"

"More than enough," was the enigmatic reply.

"'Enough,' huh? Enough for what?"

"For whatever's necessary, Racey. But I ain't talking about Nebraska and his friends. Not me. I got a wife and family to support, and they's enough trouble running a hotel without picking up any more by letting yore tongue waggle too much."

"Yo're right, Bill. Yore views do you credit. Is it against the law to tell a feller where Nebraska's friends hang out when they're in town?"

"The dance hall and the Starlight," replied Bill Lainey, promptly.

"Might you happen to know any of their names, Bill?"

"What you wanna do, Racey, is look out for a jigger named Coffin," declared Lainey, coming flatly to the point. "Doc Coffin. Yop. Then they's Punch-the-Breeze Thompson, Honey Hoke, and Peaches Austin. They's a few more, but they ain't the kind to take the lead in anything. They always follow. But Coffin, Thompson, Hoke, and Austin are the gents to keep yore eye peeled for. I ain't talking about 'em, y' understand. I ain't got a word to say against 'em, not a word. If I was you, though, and I wanted to live longer and healthier Doc Coffin is the one you wanna watch special--a heap special."

"Thanks, Bill, I--"

"No thanks needed," fended off the hotel-keeper, hastily. "I ain't said nothin', and don't you forget it."

"I won't. Is the Starlight's owner, Rack Slimson, any friend of Nebraska's, too?"

"We-ell, I dunno as he's a boom companion exactly, but Nebraska and his bunch spend a pile of money in the Starlight, a pile of money. A feller would be safe in saying that Rack Slimson's sympathy is with Nebraska."

CHAPTER VIII

THE STARLIGHT

"Where you going?" demanded Swing Tunstall.

"Over the hills and far away to pick the wild violets," chanted Racey.
"You wanna come along? Better not. Them violets are just too awful wild. Dangerous. Yeah. Catch yore death."

"You idjit! You plumb fool! Can't you let well enough alone? Ain't you satisfied till yo're ticklin' the mule's hind leg? If yo're crowded, hop to it. Make 'em hard to find. But why go a-huntin' trouble? Whatsa sense? What--"

"Always get the jump on trouble, Swing. Always. Then you'll find trouble don't wear so many guns after all and is a heap slower about pulling 'em than you thought likely."

"But if they're all four of 'em together now, and you--"

"I ain't said I was going to do anything, have I? Gawda-mighty, Swing, I only want to go and ask how Nebraska's gettin' along. Only tryin' to be neighbourly. Yeah. Neighbourly."

Racey Dawson nodded his head as one does when a subject is closed, hitched up his chaps, and started blithely round the hotel. Swing Tunstall followed in haste, caught up with his friend and fell into step at his side.

"This ain't any of yore muss, Swing," Racey said, mildly.

"It's gonna be," was the determined reply. "You shut up."

Racey grinned at nothing and stuck his tongue in his cheek. A warmly pleasant glow permeated his being. It was good to have a friend like Swing Tunstall--one who would not interfere but who would be in alert readiness for any contingency. And Racey was well aware that in his impending visit to the Starlight the contingencies were apt to be many and varied.

"It's so early in the day I don't guess none of 'em will be in the dance hall yet," murmured Swing Tunstall.

"I'm gonna drop in on the Starlight first, anyway," said Racey. "It's nearer."

Through a side window they inspected the Starlight and the customers thereof. Only two customers were visible. These, a long man and a short man, stood at the bar, their backs to the window and their hands cupped lovingly round glasses of refreshment. The tall man was talking to the bartender.

"This getting up so early in the mornin' is a fright," they heard him complain. "But bunking with a invalid shore does keep you on the jump."

He and his companion drank. Racey Dawson and Swing Tunstall glided rapidly along the wall to a side entrance. When the tall man and the short man set down their glasses Racey Dawson was leaning against the bar at a range of approximately six feet. Swing Tunstall stood at his back and slightly to the right. Thus that, should necessity warrant a resort to lethal weapons, Racey might not mask the latter's fire.

"Liquor," said Racey to the bartender.

The latter, an expert at his trade, with a jerk of both wrists slid two glasses and a bottle down the bar so that a glass stopped in front of each man and the bottle came to a standstill between them. Racey spun a dollar on the bar. The bartender nonchalantly swept the dollar into the cash drawer and resumed his chit-chat with the tall man. At which Racey's eyes narrowed slightly. But he made no comment.

Pouring out a short drink, he passed the bottle to his comrade. When Swing had filled Racey took the bottle, drove home the cork with the heel of his hand, and carefully tucked away the bottle in the inner pocket of his vest.

"It won't ride any too well," he observed to Swing, "but it ain't gonna be there a great while, I guess."

"You bet it ain't gonna be there a great while!" horned in the outraged bartender. "You put that bottle back on the bar!"

"Why, I gave you a dollar," said Racey, nervously, hesitantly, "and you kept the change. I supposed, of course, you was selling me the bottle."

"You supposed wrong!" As he spoke the bartender's right hand moved toward the shelf that Racey knew must be under the top of the bar. "That dollar was for yore two drinks."

"You mean to say yo're charging four bits apiece for those drinks!"

"Shore I am." As yet the bartender's hand had remained beneath the bar top.

"But two bits is the regular price," objected Racey, weakly.

"Four bits is the price to you," was the truculent statement, sticking out his chin. "_Put that bottle back on the bar_!"

As he gave the order his right shoulder hunched upward, and his face set like iron. He had what is known as a "fighting" face, this Starlight bartender. It was evident that he banked largely on that face. It had served him well in the past.

"One dollar is my regular price for a bottle," Racey said gently as the bartender's hand suddenly nipped into sight clutching a sixshooter, "but if you want it back, take it."

Racey's fingers gripped the bottle-neck and fetched it forth. But instead of placing it on the top of the bar as requested, he continued the motion, as it were, and smote the bartender across the head with it. Being a quart bottle and reasonably full of liquid, the bartender's chin came down with a chug on the bar. Then he slumped

quietly to the floor behind the bar. The sixshooter relinquished by his nerveless fingers remained on top of the bar between the whiskey glasses.

Racey stared speculatively at the long man and the short man. They in turn regarded him with something like respect. The long man wore a drooping, streaky-yellow horseshoe of a moustache dominated by a long and melancholy nose. Flanking the base of this sorrowful nose was a pair of eyes hard and bright and the palest of blue.

The short man was a blobby-nosed creature, who sported a three days' growth of red beard and a quid of chewing in the angle of a heavy jaw. Now he revolved the tobacco with a furtive tongue and spat thickly upon the floor.

Without removing his eyes from the two aforementioned gentlemen Racey reached for the bartender's gun. "Hadn't oughta be trusted with firearms," he observed, pleasantly, referring to what lay behind the bar. "Too venturesome. Yeah."

He thoughtfully lowered the hammer of the sixshooter and rammed it down to the trigger-guard behind the waistband of his trousers.

"Do you gents know anybody named Doc Coffin?" inquired Racey.

"I'm him," nodded the tall man, the pale eyes beginning to glitter.

"Then maybe you can tell me how Nebraska Jones is gettin' along?"

"You worrying about his health?" put in the short man.

"I dunno as I'd say 'worrying' exactly," disclaimed Racey, easily. "You can take it I'm just askin', that's all."

"Nebraska had oughta be as well as ever he was in about a month," supplied Doc Coffin. "And," he added, significantly, "I dunno but what he'd oughta be able to shoot as well as ever."

"I don't doubt it a mite," said Racey with a smile. "Question is, will he?"

The short man gave a short, harsh laugh. "He will, you can gamble on that," he averred, and spat again.

"That's good hearing," Racey said, looking quite pleased. "Of course I was only judging by past performances."

"His gun caught," Doc Coffin explained, kindly.

"Why don't he try filing off his foresight?" inquired Racey, chattily. "Or else he could shoot through his holster. Lots of folks do business that way. I suppose now you'll be seeing Nebraska in a day or two maybe."

"I might," admitted Doc Coffin.

"Friend of his?" purred Racey.

"I might be." Doc Coffin's spare frame grew somewhat rigid.

"Well," Racey drawled softly, "I heard Nebraska's friends are looking for me. I'm here to save 'em the trouble of strainin' their eyes."

"So that's it, huh?" Doc Coffin grinned, as he spoke, like a grieving wolf. "They ain't no hurry, is they?"

"I expect I'll be round Farewell a spell," said Racey.

"Then they ain't no hurry," Doc Coffin told him smoothly.

"None a-tall," contributed the short man.

"That's the way to look at it," laughed Racey. "I shore don't care anything about bein' pushed. Have a drink on me."

He slid in their direction the bottle with which he had knocked down the bartender, and, accompanied and imitated by Swing Tunstall, departed from that place crabwise.

When they were gone Doc Coffin looked at his companion.

"Asking for it, Honey," said Doc Coffin. "Just asking for it."

Then he went behind the bar, seized the senseless bartender by the ankles and skidded him out on the barroom floor. The man whom Doc Coffin had addressed as Honey (his other name was Hoke) spread his legs and whistled when he glimpsed the three-inch cut running fore and aft along the top of the bartender's skull. Blood from that cut had dribbled and oozed over the major portion of the bartender's face and shirt. For it had been the bartender's luck to hook his chin on the edge of the lowest shelf when he dropped and he had perforce remained crown upward.

Doc Coffin stood back and stared at the stertorously breathing lump on the floor with a cold eye.

"Ain't he a mess?" he observed. "Ain't he a mess? I expect he'll be right down peevish about it when he comes to."

"Think so?" Honey Hoke was not quite sure of the point of Doc's remark.

"Yeah, I think so. I'm shore he will when I tell him how he was kicked."

"Kicked?"

"Shore kicked. Kicked after he was down."

"How?"

"Didn't you see that feller Dawson kick Bull when he was down? Where was yore eyes?"

"That's the way of it, huh? Well, it _might_ save trouble if Bull was to go on the prod real vicious."

"Yo're whistlin'. They ain't no manner of reason for doin' a job

yoreself if you can get somebody else to do it for you."

When Bull came to he was lying on his cot in his little cubby hole adjoining the back room of the Starlight. Over across from the bed Doc Coffin was looking out of the grimy window. Behind the closed door giving egress to the back room certain folk were busy at faro. "King win, ten lose," the dealer was saying.

Doc Coffin turned at the rustle of Bull's slight movement. Doc nodded grimly.

"How's the head?" he inquired.

Bull put up a hand to the bandage encircling his bullet head and swore feelingly.

"Guess it does hurt some," was Doc's comment. "Doc Alton took three stitches. Lucky you was still senseless. He had to use a harness-needle."

Bull heartily damned Doc Alton, his methods, the faro players in the next room, himself, and wound up with a blistering curse directed against mankind in general and Racey Dawson in particular.

"Tha's right, Bull," Doc Coffin applauded dryly. "Cuss him out. Give him hell. Must do you a lot of good."

Bull was understood to consign Doc Coffin to the region of lost souls.

"I'd go a leetle slow," advised Doc Coffin, gently. "Just a leetle slow if I was you. Yo're on yore back now, but you'll be getting all right in a li'l while, and it's just possible, Bull, I might take it into my head to ask you what you meant by all them cuss words yo're throwin' at me."

There was an icy glint in the pale blue eyes of Doc Coffin. Bull shut up and subsided.

"What," queried Doc Coffin after a momentary silence, "was the matter with you?"

"With me?"

"Shore, with you. Who'm I talking to? What was the matter with you, anyway? Don't you know any better'n to go up against a jigger like that Dawson man? Yo're too cripplin' slow with a gun, feller."

"Well, I--"

"Y'oughta had him twice while he was swinging that bottle.... Yeah, twice, I'm tellin' you. You had time enough. But not you. You just stood there like a bump on a log and let him hit you. Yo're a fine-lookin' example of a two-legged man, you are. If you ain't careful, Bull, some two-year-old infant is gonna come along and spit in yore eye."

"He was so damn quick," alibied Bull. "I wasn't expectin' it."

"A whole lot of folks are underground because they didn't expect to

get what they got. Yo're lucky to be lyin' there with only a headache. Still, alla same, he needn't 'a' kicked you."

"Huh? Kicked me? You mean to say he kicked me? Dawson kicked me?"

"Shore I mean to say Dawson kicked you. Kicked you when you was lyin' there down and out and senseless."

A moment Bull lay quietly. Then when the full import of Doc Coffin's words had percolated through and through his brain he pulled himself to a sitting posture and swung a leg to the floor. Doc Coffin was beside him instantly.

"Lie down, you idjit!" commanded Doc Coffin, and with no gentle hand shoved Bull down upon his pillow. "Whadda you think yo're gonna do?"

"I'm goin' out and fill that ---- full of lead."

"Oh, you are, huh? Yo're gonna do all that? Tha's fine. Do you want a quiet burial or a regular funeral?"

"Say--"

"Say yoreself, and say something sensible while yo're about it."

"Nobody can kick me and get away with it!" Bull declared, passionately. "I'll--"

"Maybe you will, but not in a hurry. You start out after him now, and you wouldn't last as long as a short drink in a roomful of drunkards. Didn't you hear about Dawson's li'l run-in with Nebraska?"

"Hell, I _seen_ it!"

"You seen it, huh? And you _know_ what he done to you to-day, and still you wanna paint for war now and immediate? No, Bully, not a-tall. You listen to me. I got a better plan. A whole lot better plan. Lookit...."

CHAPTER IX

THROWING SAND

After leaving the Starlight, on their way back to the hotel, Racey said to Swing Tunstall: "Might as well tell Jack Harpe now we ain't gonna ride for him, huh?"

"Oh, shore," Swing sighed resignedly. "Have it yore own way! Have it yore own way! I never seen such a feller as you for gettin' his own way in all my life."

"Yo're young yet--maybe you will," said Racey, consolingly. "So don't get discouraged."

They did not find Jack Harpe at the hotel, nor was he at the Happy

Heart. But in the saloon Luke Tweezy was drinking by himself at one end of the bar. Perhaps the money-lender would know the whereabouts of Jack Harpe.

"Lo, Luke," was Racey's greeting. "Seen Jack Harpe around anywheres?"

Luke Tweezy's thin and sandy eyebrows lifted up in what would pass with almost any one for surprise. "Who?"

"Jack Harpe."

"Dunno him." Indifferently--too indifferently.

"You dunno him--long, slim feller, black hair and eyes, and a hawky kind of nose? Jack Harpe. Shore you know him. Why, I seen--" Racey broke off abruptly.

"Yeah," prompted Luke Tweezy after an interval. "You seen--what?"

"I don't see why you dunno him," parried Racey (it was a weak parry, but the best he could encompass at the moment). "I thought you knowed him. Somebody told me you did. My mistake. No harm done. Have a drink, Luke."

"Who told you I knowed this here now Jack Harpe?" probed Luke Tweezy, when he had smacked his lips over a second drink.

"I don't remember now," evaded Racey Dawson. "What does it matter?"

"It don't matter," was the answer--the miffed answer it seemed to Racey. "It don't matter a-tall. Have one on me, boys. Don't be afraid to fill 'em up. They's plenty more on the back shelf when this one's empty."

They filled and drank, filled and drank. Swing thought that he had never seen Racey overtaken by liquor so quickly. In no time he was telling Luke Tweezy the most intimate details of his private life. Swing knew that these details were a string of lies. But Luke Tweezy could not know that. He put an affectionate hand on Racey's shoulder and begged for more. He got it.

When Racey ran down and reverted to the bottle, Luke Tweezy generously purchased a second and invited him and his friend to a vacant table in the corner of the room. It was an amazing sight. Luke Tweezy the money-lender, the man who was supposed to still possess the first dollar he ever earned, had actually bought three eighths of one bottle of whiskey and the whole of another.

Racey Dawson greatly desired to laugh. But he didn't dare. He was too busy being drunk and getting drunker. Swing Tunstall, slow in the uptake as usual, perceived nothing beyond the fact that Luke Tweezy had suddenly become a careless spendthrift till halfway down the second bottle when Luke said:

"Shore is funny how you thought I knowed this Jack Harpe."

"Yuh-yeah," assented Racey, and overset a glass in such a way that four fingers of raw liquor splashed into Luke Tweezy's lap. "S'funny all right--an' that's fuf-funnier," he added as Luke and his chair

scraped backward to avoid the drip. "D'I wet yuh all up, Lul-luke? Mum-my min-mis-take. I'm makin' lul-lots of mistakes to-day."

Luke Tweezy twisted his leathery features into his best smile. "It don't matter," he told Racey. "Not a-tall. I--uh--who was it told you I knowed this Jack Harpe?"

"Dud-don't remember," denied Racey.

"Think," urged Luke Tweezy.

"Am thu-thinkin'," Racey said, crossly. "What you wanna know for?"

"I don't like to have folks talkin' so loose and free about me," was the Tweezy explanation.

"Duh-hic-quite right," hiccuped Racey Dawson. "An' you are, too, y'old catawampus. You a friend o' mim-mine, Lul-luke?"

"Shore," said Luke, with an eye out for another upset glass.

"Then lend me huh-hundred dollars, Lul-Luke."

"Lend you a hundred dollars! On what security?"

"My wuh-word," Racey strove to say with dignity. "Ain't that enough?"

"Shore, but--but I ain't got a hundred dollars with me to-day."

"Bub-but you can gug-get it," Racey insisted, weaving his head from side to side in a snake-like manner.

"We-ell, I dunno. You see, Racey--"

"I nun-need the money," interrupted Racey. "I'm broke--bub-broke bad. Swing's broke, too. That's too bad--I mean that's two bub-boke brad--whistle twice for the crossing--I mean--Aw, hell, I know whu-what I mean if-fif you don't. You lul-lend me that mum-money, Lul-Luke, like a good feller."

Luke Tweezy shook a regretful head. "I'm shore sorry you and Swing are busted, Racey, I'd do anything for you I could in reason. You know damwell I would, but money's tight with me just now. I ain't really got a cent I can lend. Got a mortgage comin' due next month, but that ain't now, of course."

"Of course not. Huh-how could you think it was now? Huh-how could you, Lul-Luke? Dud-do you know the child ain't a year old yet?"

"Child? What child?" Luke Tweezy began to look alarmed.

"What child?" frowned Racey Dawson, sitting up very straight and throwing a chest. "That child over there by the doorway--there in the streak o' sush-shine. Aw, the cute li'l feller! See him playin' with Windy Taylor's spurs. Ain't he cunnin'?"

"With most of 'em it's elephants and snakes an' such," proffered Luke Tweezy.

"Yeah," assented Swing Tunstall. "A kid is something new."

"Thu-then you can't lend me that money?" Racey inquired, querulously.

"No, Racey, I can't. Honest, I'd like to. Nothin' I'd like better. Only the way I'm fixed just now it's plain flat impossible."

"Then I s'puh-s'puh-s'pose I'll have to touch the Bar S folks or the Cross-in-a-box. I gotta have money. Gug-gotta. They're my friends. They'll give it to mum-me. Shore they will gimme all I want. They're all my _friends_, I tell you!"

As Racey uttered the word "friends" his toe pressed Swing Tunstall's instep.

"They're Swing's friends, too," continued Racey. "Ain't they, Sus-Swing?" Again the Dawson toe bore down upon the Tunstall foot.

"Shore they are," chimed in Swing, watching his friend closely--so closely that he was able to catch the extremely slight nod of approbation given by Racey.

"Thu-there's Tom Loudon an' Tim Pup-pup-page of the Bub-bar S," stuttered Racey, gazing blearily at Luke Tweezy. "Bub-best fuf-friends I ever had, them tut-two fellers. An' Old Man Sus-Saltoun. There's a pup-prince for you. Gug-give you the shirt off his bub-back."

Which last was stretching it rather. For Old Man Saltoun, while not precisely stingy, was certainly not the most generous person in the territory. Nor did it escape Racey Dawson that Luke Tweezy eyed him sharply as he made the remark. At once Racey began to roll his head from side to side and rock his body to and fro, and laugh crazily.

"The Bub-bub-bar S is the bub-best ranch in the worl'." Again Racey took up the thread of his discourse. "I tell you that outfit is great friends o' mine. Juh-juh-just tut-to shuh-show yuh, Lul-luke. Ol' Man Sush-Saltoun let three punchers go lul-last week an' then turned round an' gives us both jobs. That's huh-how we stand with Ol' Man Sush-Saltoun."

"That's fine," complimented Luke Tweezy.

"An' that ain't all," Racey galloped on, one toe pressing Swing's instep. "I'm gonna tell him, Swing. He ain't no friend o' Jack Harpe's. If I tell you you won't tell nobody, Lul-Luke, wuh-will yuh?"

Luke was understood to state that no clam could be tighter-mouthed.

"I knowed you wouldn't tell, Lul-luke," Racey declared, solemnly, reaching across the table and affectionately pawing the Tweezy sleeve. "I mum-maybe dud-drunk, but I know a friend when I see him. Yuh bub-bet I do. Lul-lookit, Luke, lean over--" Here Racey pressed heavily on Swing's instep. Then, when Luke leaned forward, Racey did the same and possessed himself of the money-lender's ear by the simple method of gripping it tightly between fingers and thumb. "Lul-luke," resumed Racey, "Jack Harpe's offered us a job, too, an' we're gonna take him up instead of the Bar S. Huh-how's that?"

Racey released the Tweezy ear, leaned back in his chair, and breathed

triumphantly through his nose.

Luke Tweezy likewise leaned back as far as his chair would permit, and fingered tenderly a tingling ear. "Whatcha gonna take Harpe's job for?" he asked, puzzled. "I thought you liked the Bar S such a lot."

"We do," chirped Racey, laying a long finger beside his nose and pressing again the Tunstall instep. "That's why we're gonna ride for Jack Harpe." Grinning at the mystification of Luke Tweezy, he leaned forward and whispered, "We got a idea we can help the Bar S most by bein' where we can watch Jack--and his outfit."

Luke Tweezy sat up very suddenly. Swing clapped a hand over Racey's mouth and shoved him backward.

"Shut up!" commanded Swing. "He dunno what he's talkin' about, the poor drunk."

Thus did Swing Tunstall come up to the scratch right nobly. Racey could have hugged him. Instead he bit him. This in order that Swing should pull his hand away in a natural manner. Having achieved his purpose, Racey smiled sottishly at Luke Tweezy.

"But what's Jack Harpe done?" Luke Tweezy inquired swiftly.

"It ain't what he's done," Racey replied. "It's what he's gug-gonna do. He's out to cuc-colddeck the Bub-bar S, an' they nun-know it."

Whereupon Swing began to shake him severely. "Stop yore ravin!" he commanded, and contrived to bang Racey's head against the wall with a bump that went a long way toward curing the pain of Racey's bite.

Racey, with real tears in his eyes, looked up at Swing and guggled, "I'm sho shleepy!" Then he laid his head upon his arms and slept. Luke Tweezy did not attempt to awaken him. Swing Tunstall advised against it. Luke Tweezy and he had a parting drink together. Then the money-lender took what was left of the second bottle of whiskey--the first was but a memory--to the bar and endeavoured to chivvy a rebate out of the bartender. But such a procedure was decidedly not the Happy Heart's method of doing business. Luke Tweezy, much to his disgust, for he never drank except in the way of trade, was forced to carry his bottle with him when he went.

Swing, sapient young person, walked casually to the window and watched Luke Tweezy cross the street to Calloway's store. Then he returned to Racey's table. Racey turned his tousled head sidewise and whispered from a corner of his mouth, "Help me out to Tom Kane's stable. He's out o' town, and there won't anybody bother us."

"C'mon, Racey, come alive," urged Swing Tunstall, making a great business of shaking awake his drunken friend. "You don't wanna stay here no longer. I know a fine place where you can sleep it off."

Ten minutes later Racey and Swing were sitting comfortably on a pile of hay in Tom Kane's new stable. Racey pulled off his boots, flopped down on the hay, and clasped his hands behind his head. He wiggled his toes luxuriously and laughed.

"Gawd," said he. "Think o' that old skinflint buying nearly two

bottles of whiskey! Bet that'll lay heavy on his mind for as much as a month. What you lookin' at me like that for?"

"Yeah, I'd ask if I was you. I shore would. What was yore bright idea of tellin' Luke Tweezy we were gonna ride for Jack Harpe so's to watch him?"

"So he'd know it."

"So he'd know it! So he'd know it! The man sits there and says '_so he'd know it_'! And you call me a thickskull! Which yore head has got mine snowed under thataway. Can't you see, you droolin' fool, that now they'll know as much as we do?"

"No, oh, no," Racey denied with a superior smile. "Not never a-tall. I ain't saying they mightn't know as much as you do by yoreself. But not while you got the benefit of my brains they won't know as much as we do. 'Tain't possibil."

"And what did you bite me for?" pursued Swing, disregarding the slur. "Hell's bells, if you'd bit Luke I wouldn't have a word to say, but why pick on me?"

"Well, you bumped my head so hard I saw sparks, so we're even. Say, stop squallin' about yore hand! I didn't bite you half as hard as I might have. Not half. You can still use the hand all right, can't you? Yeah. Well, then, you ain't got anything to cry about, not a thing."

"Talk sense, will you? You got us into a fine mess, you have. A fi-ine mess."

"Guess I fooled him, all right," Racey said with irritating complacency.

"What was you trying to do, anyway?" Swing snarled, glaring at his friend. "What was the notion of tearin' off all them confidences about bein' busted and yore dear friends at the Bar S and how you and me was gonna play detective? And to think Providence lets a what-you-may-call-it like you go on living! It ain't reasonable."

"That business of telling Luke we was busted," grinned Racey, "and asking him for a loan was just so I could work up roundabout and natural like to how the Bar S bunch was my personal friends and how we were gonna ride for Jack Harpe and watch him on their account. I wanted him to know those things, and I couldn't slam out and tell him dry so, could I? It wouldn't sound natural. It would make him think the wrong way, you bet. Luke Tweezy ain't a plumb fool, for all he made the mistake of denying he knowed Jack Harpe. That was a bad one."

"Yeah, but--"

"Lookit, Swing, we know that when Lanpher spoke of a front yard there in the hotel corral he meant the Bar S range. Aw right. While we're shore Jack Harpe wants to hire us to do his dirty work--which means being rubbed out by our own friends likely--would he let us ride for him if he thought the Bar S was paying us to watch him?"

"Not if he knowed what he was doing," admitted Swing.

"That's why I got so greasy and confidential with Mister Luke Tweezy. So Jack Harpe will know."

"And Luke will tell him?"

"Will Luke tell him? Luke will run to him a-pantin'. I'll gamble Jack Harpe knows the awful worst already. So we'll be safe enough to go to Jack to-morrow morning bright and early and tell him we've decided to give him the benefit of our services."

"But I thought we figured not to ride for him," said the now thoroughly bewildered Swing.

"Of course we ain't. In words of one syllable, Swing, I want to find out if it is the Bar S Jack Harpe's going against. Well, then, we knowing what we know, and Jack Harpe knowing what we know he knows, if he turns us down to-morrow after offering us the job yesterday, it'll not only give us the absolute proof we want, but it'll make him turn his wolf loose P D Q. And that last will be good medicine, because if I'm any judge he ain't ready to start anything yet awhile, and I notice when a gent ain't ready and has to jump anyhow he's a heap likely to fall down and smear himself all over the landscape."

"The man's right," said Swing. "But it's the oddest number alla same I ever did see. All kinds of clues to a crime, and no crime yet."

"It'll come," said Racey Dawson, grimly. "Jack Harpe is one bad actor."

"What you got against him--I mean, anything particular besides yore natural dislike?" Swing Tunstall at times was blessed with flashes of penetrating shrewdness.

"I ain't got any use for him, thassall." Much emphasis on the part of Racey Dawson.

Swing nodded. "See him at Moccasin Spring?" was his drawled question.

"I didn't say so." Stiffly.

"You didn't have to. And you don't--not now. I see it all. And you yawpin' out real loud how interested you are in seeing how the Bar S gets a square deal, and letting out only a small peep about old Dale, and thinking yo're foolin' Swing to a fare-you-well. Oh, yeah. It's the Dale's li'l ranch that's been worrying you alla time. I know. Racey's actually got a girl at last. I kind of suspicioned it, but I didn't think it was so heap big serious. Don't you fret, Racey, old-timer, I'll keep yore secret. Till death does--Ouch! Leggo me, you poor hickory! Yo're supposed to be sleeping off a drunk, remember! G'wan now! Lie down, Fido! Charge, you bad dog!"

"But lookit," resumed Swing Tunstall, when the dust of conflict was beginning to settle and he was poking about in the hay in search of three shirt-buttons and his pocket knife, "lookit, Racey, you didn't say anything to Luke about yore being friendly with this Dale party. Guess you forgot that, huh?"

"Guess I didn't forget it," returned Racey Dawson, placidly. "It ain't good euchre to lead all yore trumps before you have to. I'm saving

that about Dale to tell to Jack Harpe after he turns us down. I'm a heap anxious to see what he says then."

"Maybe he won't say anything."

"Maybe he won't turn us down. But will you bet he won't? Give you odds. Any money up to a hundred."

"I will not," said Swing Tunstall, shaking a decided head. "Yo're too lucky. Oh, lookit, lookit!"

CHAPTER X

THE BACK PORCH

Racey's gaze casually and uninterestedly followed Swing's pointing finger. Immediately his eye brightened and he sat up with a jerk.

"I'll shove the door a li'l farther open," said Swing, making as if to rise.

"Sit still," hissed Racey, pulling down his friend with one hand and endeavouring to smooth his own hair with the other. "Yo're all right, and the door's all right. I'm going over there in a minute and if yo're good I'll take you with me."

"Over there" was the back porch of the Blue Pigeon Store. Swing's exclamations and laudable desire to see better were called forth by the sudden appearance on the back porch of two girls. One was Miss Blythe. The other was Miss Molly Dale.

There were two barrel chairs on the porch. Miss Blythe picked up a piece of embroidery on a frame from the seat of one of the chairs and sat down. Molly Dale seated herself in the other chair, crossed her knees, and swung a slim, booted leg. From the breast pocket of her boy's gray flannel shirt she produced a long, narrow strip of white to which appeared to be fastened a small dark object. She held the strip of white in her left hand. Her right hand held the dark object and with it began to make a succession of quick, wavy, hooky dabs at one end of the strip of white.

"First time I ever seen anybody trying to knit without needles," said the perplexed Swing.

"That ain't knitting," said the superior Racey. "That's tatting."

"Tatting?"

"Tatting."

"What's it for?"

"Lingery." Racey pronounced the word to rhyme with "clingery."

"Lingery?"

"Lingery."

"What's lingery?"

"Lingery is clo'es."

"Clo'es, huh. Helluva funny name for clo'es. Why don't you say clo'es then instead of this here now lingery?"

"Because lingery is a certain _kind_ of clo'es, you ignorant Jack. Petticoats, and the like o' that. Don't you know nothin'?"

"I know yo're lying, that's what I know. Yo're bluffing, you hear me whistlin'. You dunno no more about it than I do. You can't tell me petticoats is made out of a strip of white stuff less'n a half-inch wide. I've seen too many washin's hangin' on the lines, I have. Yeah. And done too many. When I was a young one my ma would tie an apron round my neck, slap me down beside a tubful of clo'es, and tell me to fly to it. Petticoats! Petticoats, feller, is made of yards and yards and yards like a balloon."

"Who said they wasn't, you witless Jake? They don't _make_ petticoats of this tatting stuff. They use it for trimming like."

"Trimming on the petticoats?"

"_And_ the lingery."

"But you just now said petticoats and lingery was the same thing."

"Oh, my Gawd! They are! They are the same thing. Don't y' understand? Petticoats is always lingery, but lingery ain't always petticoats. See?"

"I don't. I don't see a-tall. I think yo're goin' crazy. That's what I think. Nemmine. Nemmine. If you say _lingery_ at me again I won't let you introduce me to yore girl."

"She ain't my girl," denied Racey, reddening.

"But you'd like her to be, huh? Shore. What does she think about it? Which one of 'em is she?"

"I didn't say neither of 'em was. You always did take too much for granted, Swing."

"I ain't taking too much for granted with you blushing thataway. Which one? Tell a feller. C'mon, stingy."

"Shucks," said Racey, "I should think you could tell. The best-looking one, of course."

"But they's two of 'em, feller, and they both look mighty fine to me. Take that one with the white shirt and the slick brown hair. She's as pretty as a li'l red wagon. A reg'lar doll baby, you bet you."

"Doll baby! Ain't you got any eyes? That brown-haired girl--and I want to say right here I never did like brown hair--is Joy Blythe, Bill

Derr's girl. Of course, Bill's a good feller and all that, and if he likes that style of beauty it ain't anything against him. But that other girl now. Swing, you purblind bat, when it comes to looks, she lays all over Joy Blythe like four aces over a bobtailed flush."

"She does, huh? You got it bad. Here's hoping it ain't catchin'. I've liked girls now and then my own self, but I never like one so hard I couldn't see nothing good in another one. Now, humanly speaking, either of them two on the porch would suit me."

"And neither of 'em ain't gonna suit you, and you can gamble on that, Swing Tunstall."

"Oh, ain't they? We'll see about that. You act like I never seen a girl before. Lemme tell you I know how to act all right in company. I ain't any hilltop Reuben."

"If you ain't, then pin up yore shirt where I tore the buttons off. You look like the wrath o' Gawd."

"You ain't something to write home about yore own self. I can button up my vest and look respectable, but they's hayseeds and shuttlin's all over you, and besides I got a necktie, and _yore_ handkerchief is so sloshed up you can't tie it round yore neck. Yo're a fine-lookin' specimen to go a-visitin'. A fi-ine-lookin' specimen. And anyway yo're drunk. You can't go."

"Hell I can't," snapped Racey, brushing industriously. "They never seen me."

"But Luke Tweezy did," chuckled Swing.

"What's Luke got to do with it?" Racey inquired without looking up.

"If you'd slant yore eyes out through the door you'd see what Luke Tweezy's gotta do with it."

Racey Dawson looked up and immediately sat down on the hay and spoke in a low tone.

Swing nodded with delight. "You'll cuss worse'n that when I go over and make Luke introduce me," he said. "He's been out there on the porch with 'em the last five minutes, and you was so busy argufyin' with me you never looked up to see him. And you talk of going over and doing the polite. Yah, you make me laugh. This is shore one on you, Racey. Don't you wish now you hadn't made out to be so drunk? Lookit, Luke. He's a-offerin' 'em something in a paper poke. They're a-eatin' it. He musta bought some candy. I'll bet they's all of a dime's worth in that bag. The spendthrift. How he must like them girls. It's yore girl he's shining up to special, Racey. Ain't he the lady-killer? Look out, Racey. You won't have a chance alongside of Luke Tweezy."

"Swing," said Racey, in a voice ominously calm and level, "if you don't shut yore trap I'll shore wrestle you down and tromp on yore stummick."

So saying he reached for Swing Tunstall. But the latter, watchful person that he was, eluded the clutching hands and hurried through the doorway.

Racey, seething with rage, could only sit and hug his knees while Swing went up on the porch and was introduced to the two girls. It was some balm to his tortured soul to see how ill Luke Tweezy took Swing's advent. Did Luke really like Molly Dale? The old goat! Why, the man was old enough to be her father.

And did she like him? Lordy man alive, how could she? But Luke Tweezy had money. Girls liked money, Racey knew that. He had known a girl to marry a more undesirable human being than Luke Tweezy simply because the man was rich. Personally, he, Racey Dawson, were he a girl, would prefer the well-known honest heart to all the wealth in the territory. But girls were queer, and sometimes did queer things. Molly, was she queer? He didn't know. She looked sensible, yet why was she so infernally polite to Luke Tweezy? She didn't have to smile at him when he spoke to her. It wasn't necessary. Racey's spirit groaned within him. Finally, the spectacle of the chattering group on the back porch of the Blue Pigeon proved more than Racey could stand. He retreated into a dark corner of the barn and lay down on the hay. But he did not go to sleep. Far from it. Later he removed his boots, stuffed them full of hay, and hunkered down behind a dismounted wagon-seat over which a wagon-cover had been flung. With a short length of rope and several handfuls of hay he propped the boots in such a position that they stuck out beyond the wagon-box ten or twelve inches and gave every evidence of human occupation.

Boosting up with a bushel basket the stiff canvas at the end opposite the boots he made the wagon-cover stretch long enough and high enough to conceal the important fact that there were no legs or body attached to the boots.

Which being done Racey took up a strategic position behind an upended crate near the doorway.

He proceeded to wait. He waited quite a while. The afternoon drained away. The sun set. In the dusk of the evening Racey heard footsteps. Swing Tunstall. He'd know his step anywhere. The individual making the footsteps came to the doorway of the barn, halted an instant, then walked in. Almost at once he stumbled over the boots. Then Racey sprang upon his back with a joyous shout and slammed him headforemost over the wagon-seat into the pile of hay.

The man swore--and the voice was not that of Swing Tunstall. On the heels of this unwelcome discovery Racey made another. The man had dragged out a knife from under his armpit, and was squirmingly endeavouring to make play with it. Racey's intended practical joke on Swing Tunstall was in a fair way to become a tragedy on himself.

There was no time to make explanations, even had Racey been so inclined. The man was strong and the knife was long--and presumably sharp. Racey, pinioning his opponent's knife arm with one hand and his teeth, flashed out his gun and smartly clipped the man over the head with the barrel.

Instantly, so far as an active participation in the affair of the moment, the man ceased to function. He lay limp as a sodden moccasin, and breathed stertorously. Racey knelt at his side and laid his hand on the top of the man's head. The palm came away warmly wet. Racey replaced his gun in its holster and pulled the senseless one out on

the barn floor near the doorway where he could see him better.

The man was Luke Tweezy.

Racey sat down and began to pull on his boots. There was nothing to be gained by remaining in the barn. Tweezy was not badly hurt. The blow on the head had resulted, so far as Racey could discover (later he was to learn that his diagnosis had been correct), in a mere scalp wound.

Racey, when his boots were on, picked up his hat. At least he thought it was his hat. When he put it on, however, it proved a poor fit. He had taken Tweezy's hat by mistake. He dropped it on the floor and turned to pick up his own where it lay behind the wagon-seat.

But, as we wheeled, a flicker of white showed inside the crown of Tweezy's hat where it lay on the floor. Racey swung back, stooped down, and turned out the leather sweatband of Tweezy's hat, at the edge of which had been revealed the bit of white.

The latter proved to be one corner of a folded letter. Without the least compunction Racey tucked this letter into the breast pocket of his flannel shirt. Then he set about searching Tweezy's clothing with thoroughness. But other than the odds and odds usually to be found in a man's pockets there was nothing to interest the searcher.

Racey carefully turned back the sweatband of the hat, placed the headpiece on top of the wagon-seat, and departed. He went as far as the Happy Heart corral. Behind the corral he sat down on his heels, and took out the letter he had purloined from Luke Tweezy. He opened the envelope and read the finger-marked enclosure by the light of matches shielded behind his hat. The letter ran:

DEAR FRIEND LUKE:

I don't think much of your plan. Too dangerous. The Land Office is getting stricter every day. This thing must be absolutely legal in every way. You can't bull ahead and trust to luck there aren't any holes. There mustn't be any holes, not a damn hole. Try my plan, the one I discussed so thoroughly with you last week. It will take longer, perhaps, but it is absolutely safe. You must learn to be more careful with the law from now on, Luke. I know what I'm talking about.

I tell you plainly if you don't accept my scheme and work to it religiously I'm out of the deal absolutely. I'm not going to risk my liberty because of other people's foolhardiness.

Show this letter to Jack Harpe, and let me know your decision.

Another thing, impress upon Jack the necessity of you two keeping publicly apart until after the deal is sprung. When you talk to him go off somewheres where no one will see you. I heard he spoke to you on the street. Lampher told me. This must not happen again while we are partners. Don't tell Doc Coffin's outfit more than they need to know.

Yours truly,

JACOB POOLEY.

Racey blew out the fourth match and folded the letter with care and

replaced it in the envelope. He sat back on his heels and looked up into the darkening sky. Jacob Pooley. Well, well, _well_. If Fat Jakey Pooley, the register of the district, was mixed up in the business, the opposition would have its work cut out in advance. Yes, indeedy. For no man could walk more convincingly the tight rope of the law than Fat Jakey. Racey Dawson did not know Fat Jakey, except by sight, but he had heard most of the tales told of the gentleman. And they were _tales_. Many of them were accepted by the countryside as gospel truth. Perhaps half of them were true. A good-natured, cunning, dishonest, and indefatigable featherer of a lucrative political nest--that was Fat Jakey.

Racey Dawson sat and thought hard through two cigarettes. Then he thumbed out the butt, got to his feet, and started to return to the hotel. For it had suddenly come upon him that he was hungry.

But halfway round the corral an idea impinged upon his consciousness with the force of a bullet. "Gawdamighty," he muttered, "I am a Jack!"

He turned and retraced his steps to the corner of the corral. Here he stopped and removed his spurs. He stuffed a spur into each hip pocket, and moved cautiously and on tiptoe toward Tom Kane's barn.

It was almost full night by now. But in the west still glowed the faintly red streak of the dying embers of the day. Racey suddenly bethought him that the red streak was at his back, therefore he dropped on all fours and proceeded catwise.

He was too late. Before he reached the back of the barn he heard the feet of two people crunching the hard ground in front of it. The sound of the footsteps died out on the grass between the barn and the houses fronting on Main Street.

Racey, hurrying after and still on all fours, suddenly saw the dark shape of a tall man loom in front of him. He halted perforce. His own special brand of bull luck was with him. The dark shape, walking almost without a sound, shaved his body so closely as it passed that he felt the stir of the air against his face.

When the men had gone on a few yards Racey looked over his shoulder. Silhouetted against the streak of dying red was the upper half of Jack Harpe's torso. There was no mistaking the set of that head and those shoulders. Both it and them were unmistakable. Jack Harpe. Racey swore behind his teeth. If only he could have reached the barn in time to hear what the two men had said to each other.

After a decent interval Racey went on. The Happy Heart was the nearest saloon. He felt reasonably certain that Luke Tweezy would go there to have his cut head dressed. He had. Racey, his back against the bar, looked on with interest at the bandaging of Luke Tweezy by the proprietor.

"Yep," said Luke, sitting sidewise in the chair, "stubbed my toe against a cordwood stick in front of Tom Kane's barn and hit my head on a rock. Knocked me silly."

"Sh'd think it might," grunted the proprietor, attending to his job with difficulty because Luke _would_ squirm. "Hold still, will you, Luke?"

"Yo're taking twice as many stitches as necessary," grumbled Luke.

"I ain't," denied the proprietor. "And I got two more to take. HOLD STILL!"

"Don't need to deafen me!" squalled Luke, indignantly.

"Shut up!" ordered the proprietor, who, for that he did not owe any money to Luke, was not prepared to pay much attention to his fussing. "If you think I'm enjoying this, you got another guess coming. And if you don't like the way I'm doing it, you can do it yoreself."

Luke stood up at last, a white bandage encircling his head, said that he was much obliged, and would like to borrow a lantern for a few moments.

"Aw, you don't need any lantern," objected the proprietor. "I forgot to fill mine to-day, anyway. Can't you find yore way to the hotel in the dark? That crack on the topknot didn't blind you, did it?"

"I lost something," explained Luke Tweezy. "When I fell down most all my money slipped out of my pocket."

"I'll get you a lantern then," grumbled the proprietor.

Ten minutes later Luke Tweezy, frantically quartering the floor of Tom Kane's barn, heard a slight sound and looked up to see Racey Dawson and Swing Tunstall standing in the doorway.

"I didn't know you fell down _inside_ the barn," Racey observed.

"There's lots you dunno," said Luke, ungraciously.

"So there is," assented Racey. "But don't rub it in, Luke. Rubbing it in hurts my feelings. And my feelings are tender to-day--most awful tender, Luke. Don't you go for to lacerate 'em. I ain't owing you a dime, you know."

To this Luke Tweezy made no comment. But he resumed his squatting about the floor and his poking and delving in the piles of hay. He raised a dust that flew up in clouds. He coughed and snorted and snuffed. Racey and Swing Tunstall laughed.

"Makes you think of a hay-tedder, don't he?" grinned Racey. "How much did you lose, Luke--two bits?"

At this Luke looked up sharply. "Seems to me you got over yore drunk pretty quick," said he.

"Oh, my liquor never stays by me a great while," Racey told him easily. "That's the beauty of being young. When you get old and toothless an' deecrepit like some people, not to mention no names of course, why then she's a cat with another tail entirely."

"What'ell's goin' on in here?" It was Red Kane speaking. Red was Tom Kane's brother.

Racey and Swing moved apart to let him through. Red Kane entered,

stared at the spectacle of Luke Tweezy and his bobbing lantern, stared and stared again.

"What you doing, Luke?" he demanded.

"Luke's lost a nickel, Red." Racey answered for the lawyer. "And a nickel, you know yoreself, is worth all of five cents."

"I lost some money," grumbled Luke.

"But you said you lost it when you tripped and fell," said Racey. "And you fell outside."

"I lost it here," Luke said, shortly.

"I don't giveadamn where you lost it or what you lost," declared Red Kane. "You can't go flirtin' round with any lantern in Tom's barn. First thing you know you'll set it afire. C'mon, Luke, pull yore freight."

"But lookit here," protested Luke, "I lost something valuable, Red. I gotta find it."

"It wasn't money then?" put in Racey.

"Of course it was money," averred Luke.

"You said 'it' this time, Luke."

"It don't matter what I said. I lost some money, and I want to find it."

"You can want all you like," said Red Kane, "but not in this barn. C'mon back to-morrow morning, and you can hunt the barn to pieces, but you can't do any more skirmishing round in here to-night. I'll lock the barn door so's nobody else will go fussbudgettin' round in here. C'mon, Luke, get a move on you."

So Luke was driven out much against his will, and Racey and Swing roamed around to the dance hall. Here at a table in the ell where the bar stretched its length they could sit and talk--unheard under cover of the music.

"But how come you had yore boots off?" Swing desired to know when a table, a bottle and two glasses were between them. "Don't try to tell me you stuck 'em behind that wagon-seat on purpose to trip him. You never knowed he was comin'."

"Well, no, I didn't exactly," admitted Racey, with a sly smile. "Those boots were laid out all special for you."

"For me?"

"For you."

"But why for me?" Perplexedly.

"Because, Swing, old settler, I didn't like you this afternoon. The more I saw you over there on that porch the less I liked you. So I

took off my boots and hid 'em careful like behind the wagon-seat so they'd stick out some, and you'd see 'em and think I was there asleep, and naturally you'd go for to wake me up and wouldn't think of looking behind the crate where I was laying for you all ready to hop on yore neck the second you stooped over the wagon-seat and give you the Dutch rub for glommin' all the fun this afternoon."

"And what didja think I'd be doin' alla time?" grinned Swing Tunstall.

"You wouldn't 'a' tried to knife me, anyway."

"G'on. He didn't."

"Oh, didn't he? You better believe he did. If I hadn't got a holt of his wrist and whanged him over the head with my Colt for all I was worth he'd 'a' had me laid out cold. Yep, li'l Mr. Luke Tweezy himself. The rat that don't care nothing about fighting with anything but a law book."

"A rat will fight when it's cornered," said Swing.

Racey nodded. "I've seen 'em. It's something to know Luke carries a knife and where."

"Where?"

"Under his left arm. Fill up, and shove the bottle over."

Swing filled abstractedly and slopped the table. He pushed the bottle toward Racey. The latter caught it just in time to prevent a smash on the floor.

"Say, look what yo're doing!" cried Racey. "Y' almost wasted a whole bottle of redeye. I ain't got money to throw away if you have."

"I was just wonderin' what Fat Jakey's plan is," said Swing, scratching his head.

"No use wonderin'," Racey told him. "It's their move."

CHAPTER XI

THE LOOKOUT

"Tell you, gents, somethin's come up to change my plans." It was Jack Harpe speaking. Racey and Swing had met him on the sidewalk in front of Lainey's hotel shortly after breakfast the following morning, and Racey had told him of their ultimate decision. As he spoke Mr. Harpe braced an arm against the side of the building, crossed his feet, and scratched the back of his head. "I'm shore sorry," he went on, "but I'd like to call off that proposition about you riding for me. Coupla men used to ride for me one time are coming back unexpected. You know. Naturally--you know how it is yoreself--I'd like to have these fellers riding for me, so if it's alla same to you two gents we'll call it off. But I wanna be fair. You expected a job on my ranch. I told you

you could have it. I owe you somethin'. What say to a month's wages apiece?"

Racey shook a slow head, and hooked his thumbs in his belt. "You don't owe us a nickel," he told Jack Harpe. "Take back yore gold. We're honest workin'-girls ourselves. Of course we may starve, but what's that between friends? In words of one syllable what do we care for poverty or precious stones?"

Jack Harpe followed this flight of fancy with an uncertain smile. "Alla same," he said, "I wish you'd lemme give you that month's wages. I'd feel better about it. Like I was paying my bets sort of."

"Tsall right," nodded Racey Dawson. "We still don't want any money. We're satisfied if you are. Yep, we're a heap satisfied--now. _But_ I ain't contented--much."

"That's tough," commiserated Jack Harpe, and dropped at his side the arm he had braced against the wall of the hotel. Also he straightened his crossed leg. His air and manner, even to the most casual of eyes, took on a sudden brisk watchfulness. "That's tough," repeated Jack Harpe, and added a headshake for good measure.

"Ain't it?" Racey Dawson said, brightly. "But maybe you can help me out. Lookit, I ain't trying to pry, y' understand. I'm the least prying feller in four states, but this here ranch of yores which ain't got anything to do with the 88 and won't cut any corners off the Bar S might it by any chance overlap on Mr. Dale's li'l ranch?"

"Overlap the Dale ranch! What you talkin' about?"

"I dunno," Racey replied, simply. "I'm trying to find out."

Jack Harpe laughed his soundless laugh. "I dunno what it is to you," he said, "but if my ranch don't come near the Bar S how can it hit the Dale place?"

"Stranger things than that have happened. But still, alla same, I'd shore not admire to see any hardship come to old Chin Whisker--Dale, I mean."

If Racey had hoped to gain any effect by mentioning "Chin Whisker" he was disappointed. Jack Harpe was wearing his poker face at the moment.

"I wouldn't like that any myself," concurred Jack Harpe. "Old Dale seems like a good feller, sort of shackles along a mite too shiftless maybe, but his daughter takes the curse off, don't she?"

"We weren't talking about the daughter," Racey pointed out.

Swing Tunstall immediately stepped to one side. There was a something in Racey's tone.

But Jack Harpe did not press the point. He smiled widely instead.

"We weren't talking about her, for a fact," he assented. "Coming right down to cases, we'd oughta be about done talking, oughtn't we?"

"Depends," said Racey. "It all depends. I'd just like folks to know

that I'd take it a heap personal if any tough luck came to old Dale and his ranch."

"Meanin'?"

"What I said. No more. No less."

"What you said can be took more ways than one."

"What do you care?" flashed Racey. "What I said concerns only the gent or gents who are fixing to colddeck old Dale. Nobody else a-tall. So what do you care?"

"I don't. Not a care, not a care. Only--only one thing. Mister Man, if you're aiming to drynurse old Dale you're gonna have yore paws most awful full of man's size work. Leastaways, that's the way she looks to a man up a tree. Me, I'm a great hand for mindin' my own business, but--"

"Yo're like Luke Tweezy thataway," cut in Racey. "That's what he's always doing."

"Who's Luke Tweezy?"

"So you've learned yore lesson," chuckled Racey. "It was about time. Guess you must 'a' bothered Luke Tweezy some when you spoke to him that day in front of the Happy Heart just before you and Lanpher crawled yore cayuses and rode to Dale's on Soogan Creek.... Don't remember, huh? I do. You said, 'See you later, Luke,' and he didn't speak back. Just kept on untying his hoss and keeping his head bent down like he hadn't heard a word you said. 'S'funny, huh?"

"Damfunny," assented Jack Harpe with an odd smoothness.

"Yeah, you fellers that don't know each other are all of that. Tell me something, do you meet in the cemetery by a dead nigger's grave in the dark of the moon at midnight or what? I'm free to admit I'm puzzled. She's all a heap too mysterious for me."

"Crazy talk," commented Jack Harpe. "You been wallowing in the nosepaint and letting yore imagination run on the range too much."

"Maybe," Racey said, equably. "Maybe. You can't tell. As a young one I had a powerful imagination. I might have it yet."

Jack Harpe gazed long and silently at Racey Dawson. The latter returned the stare with interest. With the sixth sense possessed by most men who live in a country where the law and the sixshooter are practically synonymous terms, Racey was conscious that Marie, the Happy Heart Lookout, had suddenly drifted up to his left flank and now stood with arms akimbo on the inner edge of the sidewalk. Her body was turned partly toward him but her head was turned wholly away. Evidently there was something of interest farther up the street.

Racey moved slightly to the left. He wished to have a little more light on Jack Harpe's right side. The Harpe right hand--it was in the shadow. Jack Harpe pivoted to face Racey. The light from the hotel window fell on the right hand. The member was near the gun butt, but not suggestively near.

"Listen here," said Jack Harpe, suddenly, in a snarling whisper designed solely for the ears of Racey Dawson, "I dunno what you been a-drivin' at, but just for yore better information I'm telling you that I always get what I go after. Whether it's land, cows, horses, or--women, I get what I want. Nothing ever has stopped me. Nothing ever will stop me. Don't forget."

"Thanks," smiled Racey. "I'll try not to."

"And here's somethin' else: What I take I keep--always."

"Always is a long word."

"There's a longer."

"What?"

"Death."

"Meanin'?"

"That folks who ain't for me are against me. Looks like yore friend there wanted to talk to you. So long."

Abruptly Jack Harpe faced about and went into the hotel. Racey felt a touch on his arm. He turned to find that Marie had almost bumped into him. Her head was still turned away. One of her hands was groping for his arm. Her fingers clutched his wrist, then slid upward to the crook of his elbow.

"Le's go across the street," she said in a breathless voice, and pulled him forward.

Her body as she pulled was pressed tightly against him. She seemed to hang upon him. And all to the discomfort and mental anguish of Racey Dawson. He was no prude. His moral sense had never oppressed him. But this calm appropriation of him was too much. But he accompanied her. For there was Swing Tunstall, a nothing if not interested observer. Other folk as well were spectators. To shake loose Marie's grip, to run away from her, would make him ridiculous. He continued to accompany the young woman quite as if her kidnapping of him was a matter of course.

In the middle of the street they were halted by the headlong approach of a rapidly driven buckboard. As it swept past in front of them the light of the lantern clamped on the dashboard flashed on their faces.

"Lo, Mr. Dawson," cried the driver, her fresh young voice lifting to be heard above the drum of the hoofs and the grind of the rolling wheels. And the voice was the voice of Miss Molly Dale.

Racey did not reply to the greeting. He was too dumb-foundedly aghast at the mischance that had presented him, while arm in arm with a person of Marie's stamp, to the eyes of one upon whom he was striving to make an impression. What would Molly Dale think? The worst, of course. How could she help it? Appearances were all against him. Then he recalled that she had been the sole occupant of the buckboard--that she had called him by name _after_ the light had fallen on the face of

the lookout. It was possible that she might not know who Marie was. Although it was no more than just possible, he cuddled the potentiality to him as if it had been a purring kitten.

He allowed Marie to lead him across the sidewalk and into the pot-black shadow between Tom Kane's house and an empty shack. But here in the thick darkness he paused and looked back to see whether Swing Tunstall were following. Swing was not. He was entering the hotel in company with Windy Taylor.

Marie jerked at his arm. "C'mon," she urged, impatiently. "Gonna take root, or what?"

Willy-nilly he accompanied his captor to the extremely private and secluded rear of Tom Kane's new barn. Here were the remains of a broken wagon, several wheels, and the major portion of a venerable and useless stove. Marie released his arm and Racey sat down on the stove. But it was a very useless stove, and it collapsed crashingly under his weight (later he learned that even when it had been a working member of Tom Kane's menage the stove had been held together mainly by trust in the Lord and a good deal of baling wire).

"Clumsy!" Marie hissed as he arose hurriedly. "All thumbs and left feet! Why don't you make a li'l more noise? I'll bet you could if you tried."

"Say," Racey snapped, temperishly, for a sharp corner of the stove door had totally obscured his sense of proportion, "say, I didn't ask to come over here with you! What do you want, anyway?"

"Want you to shut up and pay attention to me!" she flung back. "I thought you was gonna leave town. Why ain't you?"

"Changed my mind," was his answer.

"Why can't you do what you said you'd do?" She was quite vehement about it.

"I got a right to change my mind, ain't I?"

"Go, dammit! Why can't you go? You gave them a chance to even up when you ran that blazer on Doc Coffin an' Honey Hoke there in the Starlight. Let it go at that. Whadda you want to hang round here for? Don't you know that every hour you stay here makes it more dangerous for you?... Oh, you can laugh! That's all you do when a feller does her level best to see you don't come to any harm. Gawd! I could shake you for a fool!"

"Was that what you pulled me alla way over here to tell me?" he inquired, somewhat miffed at her acerbity.

"I pulled you across the street because if I'd left you where I found you you wouldn't 'a' lived a minute." The starlight was bright enough to reveal to him the set and earnest tenseness of her features.

"I wouldn't 'a' lived a minute, huh?" was his comment. "I didn't see anybody round there fit and able to put in a period."

"It wasn't anybody you could _see_. Don't you remember what I said

about a knife in the night, or a shot in the dark? Man, do you have to be killed before you're convinced?"

"Well--uh--I--"

"Whadda you guess I was standin' alongside of you for while you was talkin' to that other feller, huh? Tryin' to listen to what you was sayin'? Think so, huh?"

"You shore had yore nerve," he said, admiringly--and helplessly.

"Nerve nothin'!" she denied. "He wouldn't shoot through me. I know that well enough."

"Why wouldn't he? And how do you know?"

"Because, and I do. That's enough."

"Which particular _one_ is he?"

"I ain't sayin'."

"Do you like him as much as that?" Shrewdly.

"Not the way you mean." Dispassionately.

"Then who is he?"

"I ain't sayin', I tell you!"

"You snitched on Nebraska." Persuasively.

"This feller's different."

"How different?"

"None of yore business. Lookit, I'm doin' my best for you, but I won't have the luck every time that I had to-night--nor you won't, neither. Gawd! if I hadn't just happened to strike for a night off this evenin' I dunno where you'd be!"

"Say, I thought you didn't dare let them see you have anythin' to do with me?"

"I didn't, and I don't. But I had to. I couldn't set by an' let you be plugged, could I? Hardly."

"But--"

"Tsall right, 'tsall right. Don't you worry any about me. I got a ace in the hole if the weather gets wet. But I wanna tell you this: If yo're bound to go on playin' the fool, keep a-movin' and walk round a lighted window like it's a swamp."

She dodged past him and was gone. He made no move to follow. He pushed back his hat and scratched his head.

"Helluva town this is," he muttered. "Can't stand still any more without having some sport draw a fine sight where you'll feel it

most."

After she left Racey Dawson Marie diagonalled across Main Street, passed between the dance hall and Dolan's warehouse, and made her way to the most outlying of the half-dozen two-room shacks scattered at the back of the dance hall. She entered the shack, felt for the matches in the tin tobacco-box nailed against the wall, and struck one to light the lamp. Like the provident miss she was she turned the wick down after lighting in order that the chimney might heat slowly.

It may have been the dimness of the lighted lamp. It may have been that she was not as observing as usual. But certainly she had no inkling of another's presence in the same room with her till she had slipped out of her waist. Then a man in the corner of the room swore harshly.

"---- yore soul to ----!" were his remarks in part. "What did you horn in for to-night?"

CHAPTER XII

THE DISCOVERY

Racey Dawson did not remain long idle after Marie's departure. The girl had barely entered the narrow passage between the warehouse and the dance hall before he was crossing the street at a point beyond the jail, where there were no shafts of light from open windows and doorways to betray him.

Racey Dawson circled the sheriff's house and tippytoed past the outermost of the six two-room shacks at the rear of the dance hall. His objective was the Starlight Saloon, his purpose to discover the bushwhacker who had tried to shoot him.

As he passed the outermost shack a light flashed up within it. He saw Marie's head and shoulder silhouetted against the curtain. He recognized her immediately by the heavy mass of her hair. No other woman in Farewell possessed such a mop.

Racey resolved to speak with Marie again. His hand was lifted in readiness to knock when Marie's visitor spoke. Racey's hand promptly dropped at his side. He had recognized the voice. It was that of Bull, the Starlight bartender.

The shack door was fairly well constructed. At least there were no cracks in it. But a log wall has oftentimes an open chink. This wall had one between the third and fourth tiers of logs not more than a yard from the door. Racey crouched till his eyes were on a level with the narrow crack.

He could not see Bull. But he could see Marie. Apparently she was not according her visitor the slightest attention. She daintily and unhurriedly hung her waist over the back of a chair. Then she turned up the lamp, removed the pins from her abundant hair, shook it down, and began to brush it calmly and carefully.

"---- you!" snarled Bull, advancing to the table where he was within range of Racey's eyesight. "I spoke to you! What didja do it for?"

She raised her head and looked at him, the brush poised in one hand. "---- you, Bull," she drawled at him. "I'm tellin' you, because I felt like it."

Bull shot forth a hand and grabbed her right wrist. Marie, as a whole, did not move. But her left hand dropped languidly and nestled in the overhang of her bodice.

"Bull," she said, softly, staring straight into the evil eyes glowering upon her. "Bull, bad as you are, you ain't never laid a hand on me yet. You ain't gonna begin now, are you?"

Bull's great fingers began to tighten on her wrist, slowly, inexorably.

"I'm sorry, Bull," she resumed, when he made no reply, "but I got a derringer pointin' straight at yore stomach. Now you ain't gonna lemme make a mess on my clean carpet, are you?"

Bull released her wrist as though it burnt him.

"You devil!" he exclaimed. "I believe you'd do it."

"Shore I would," she affirmed, serenely, dragging a small and ugly derringer from its place of concealment and balancing it on a pink palm. "I'll drill you in one blessed minute if you don't keep yore paws to home. They's some things, Bull, you can't do to me. An' one of them things is hurting me. I don't believe in corporal punishment, Bull."

"I wanna know what you horned in for," he demanded, pounding the table till the lamp danced again.

"If you only knowed what a silly fool you looked," she commented, "you'd sit down and take it easy.... That's right, tell the neighbours, do! Squawk out good and loud how yore bushwhackin' li'l killing turned out a misdeal. Shore, I'd do that, if I was you. Whadda you guess they pay Jake Rule an' Kansas Casey for, huh?"

"What did you get in front of him for?" Bull persisted in a lower tone. "I pretty near had him, but you--Gawd, I could wring yore neck!"

"But you won't," she reminded him, sweetly. "Lookit here, Bull, if you hadn't locked the door leading up the stairs to the Starlight's loft, I'd 'a' come after you there and done my persuadin' of you right in the loft. As it was when I heard what you were up to--nemmene how I heard. I heard, that's enough--I had to go out in the street and do what I could there. I don't believe the feller liked it much, neither."

"But what's he to you? You ain't soft on him, are you, account of what he done for that yellow mutt of yores?"

"I owe him something," she evaded. "That dog--I like that dog. And then that man treats me like a lady. It ain't every man treats me like

a lady."

"I should hope not," guffawed the amiable Bull.

"Now that's a right funny joke," she assured him. "It almost makes me laugh. Still, alla same, I got feelin's. I'm a human being. And you'll notice molasses catches a heap more flies than vinegar does. I like that Dawson man, and I ain't gonna see him hurt."

"Did you tell him it was me up there with a rifle?" There was a hint of unease in the blustery tone.

"I didn't tell him nothin'," said Marie. "I ain't no snitch."

"Ah-h, you are soft on him," Bull sneered in disgust.

"What if I am?" she flared. "What business is it of yores?"

"What'll Nebraska say?" he proffered.

"Nebraska hell!" she sneered. "Nebraska and me are through!"

"I know you've split, but that ain't saying Nebraska will let you go with another gent."

"I'll go with anybody I please, and neither Nebraska nor you nore any other damn man is gonna stop me. If you think different, try it, just try it! Thassall I ask. This for you and Nebraska!" With which she snapped her fingers under his nose once, twice, and again.

"I wish Pap was still alive. He could always handle you. Remember the time you sassed him there in ..." Here Marie accidentally dropped her brush into an empty pail, and the clatter drowned out the name of the town so far as Racey was concerned. But Marie caught the name, for she straightened with a start and stared at Bull. "Yeah," continued Bull, "you remember it, huh? I guess you do. That was where Pap slapped yore chops and throwed you down the stairs. Like to broke yore neck that time. I wish you had."

"Pap," she repeated. "'Pap,' and that town. What made you think of them two names together?"

"Because that was the town where he throwed you down the stairs," Bull told her matter-of-factly.

"It was the town where we met up with Bill Smith."

"What about it?"

"Nothing--only Bill Smith is here in town."

"In Farewell?"

"In Farewell."

"Why ain't I seen him if he's in Farewell?"

"Because he's shaved off all of that beard and part of his eyebrows--they used to meet plumb in the middle, remember--till a body

would hardly know him. I didn't. I knowed they was somethin' familiar about him, but I couldn't tell what till you mentioned Pap and the town together. Then I knowed. Yeah, Bull, this gent's the same Bill Smith Pap picked up on the trail. He's a respectable member of society now, I guess. Calls himself Jack Harpe and spends most of his time runnin' round Lanpher."

"Then he ain't too respectable, the lousy pup. Calls himself Jack Harpe, huh? Shore, he come in the Starlight with Lanpher and gimme the eye without a quiver. Didn't know me, he didn't! And I ain't done nothin' to _my_ looks to change 'em."

"Huh, y' oughta seen the way he looked me up and down when he passed us on the Marysville trail. You'd 'a' thought he just seen me. Oh, he's got his nerve."

"Who is _us_?" Suspiciously.

"What it won't do you no good to know. I guess I can go riding with a friend if I like. You seem to keep forgettin' you ain't got any ropes on me--nary a rope. Stop botherin' yore fool head about me and my doings, and think of something worth while--for instance, Jack Harpe."

"Then what?"

"No wonder they call you Bull. That's all you are, beef to the heels and no more sense than a calf. Listen, Jack Harpe's respectable, ain't he? Or he aims to be, which is the same thing. Anyway, he's swelling round here like a poisoned pup and don't know us a-tall. Takin' him down a couple o' pegs wouldn't hurt him. He always was too tall. I'll bet if he was come at right he'd pay cash down on the hoof for us, me and you both, to keep our heads shut about what we know."

"But we was in that, too."

"But we didn't do what he done," pointed out Marie. "And you know yoreself the company don't drop the case like a ordinary sheriff does. No, I expect Jack Harpe would be worried some if he knowed we'd recognized him.... Aw, what are you scared of? Pap's dead, ain't he? How can Harpe hurt us? He never knowed how intimate we knowed Pap while he was stayin' at our house. He just thought Pap was a friend. He never knowed we got our share of the money. Nawsir, he can't hook us up with that killin' nohow, but we can hook him. Brace up to him, Bull. Maybe you can work him for a stake. They ain't no danger, I tell you."

"By Gawd, I'd like to!" declared Bull and swore a string of oaths.

"Then go ahead," urged Marie. "And don't forget I want in on the stake."

"Ah-h, I do all the work and then have to whack up with you, huh? I will not. What I get I keep."

"I remember Jack Harpe used to say that. He shore hated himself, the poor feller. Alla same, I guess maybe you'll go even Steven with me, Bull. Who is it recognized him first? Who give you the idea? Who did, huh? Who did? Whatever you get you'll divide with me or I'll know the reason why. And if you don't think I'm a wildcat get me roused, man,

get me roused."

Bull stood back and scratched a tousled head. "I--well--" he began and paused. Obviously the prospect did not wholly please him.

"Go to Jack Harpe easy like," suggested the girl. "Don't tell him too much, just enough to show yo're meanin' what you say. I'd do it myself only he'd laugh at me. He's one of those gents a woman has to shoot before they'll believe she's in earnest. He ain't the only one, they's another just like him in town.... Nemmine who. You go to Jack Harpe. He'll listen to a man. G'on! They's money in it, if you work it right. You want money, don't you? You need three hundred to pay what you owe Piggy Wadsworth, don't you? Yah, you big hunk, you been runnin' to me for money long enough! Here's a chance to make some of yore own. Fly at it."

When Bull had picked up a rifle standing in a corner and departed, slamming the door behind him, Marie sat down on the lid of a mottled zinc trunk and wiped her hot face on a petticoat that hung on the wall conveniently to hand. "Warm work, warm work!" she muttered, wearily. "I dunno when I seen Bull so mad. I shore thought one time there I wasn't gonna get rid of him without a fight." She rolled her well-shaped ankles and flipped the gilt tassels on her shoe tops to and fro (yes, indeed, some women wore tasseled footgear in those days). "Men," she went on, staring down at the shiny tassels, "men are shore hell."

CHAPTER XIII

A BOLD BAD MAN

Bull had halted a moment outside the door of the shack to roll a cigarette. Before he pulled out his tobacco bag he leaned the rifle against the doorjamb.

His eyes, unaccustomed to the darkness, did not see the crouching Racey Dawson within arm's-length.

Both of Bull's hands were cupped round the lighted match. He lifted it to the end of the cigarette. He sucked in his breath and--a voice whispered: "Drop that match an' grab yore ears."

Bull did not hesitate to obey, for the broad, cold blade of a bowie rested lightly against the back of his neck. Bull swayed a little where he stood.

"I got yore rifle," resumed the whisperer. "Walk away now. Yo're headin' about right. Don't make too much noise."

Bull did not make too much noise. In fact, he made hardly any. It is safe to say that he never progressed more quietly in his life. The man with the bowie steered him to a safe haven behind a fat white boulder half buried in sumac.

"Si'down," requested the captor in a conversational tone. "We can be

right comfortable here."

"Dawson!" breathed the captive.

"Took you a long time to find it out," said Racey Dawson. "Si'down, I said," he added, sharply.

Bull obeyed, his back against the rock, and was careful not to lower his hands. Racey hunkered down and sat on a spurless heel. The rifle was under his knee. He had exchanged the bowie for a sixshooter. The firearm was trained in the general direction of Bull's stomach.

Racey smiled widely. He felt very chipper and pleased with himself. He was managing the affair well, he thought.

"You show up right plain against that white rock," he remarked. "If yo're figuring to gamble with me, think of that."

"Whatcha want?" demanded Bull, sullenly.

"Lots of things," replied Racey, shifting a foot an inch to the left. "I'm the most wantin' feller you ever saw. Just now this minute I want you to tell me where it was you met up with Bill Smith and what it was he did so bad that you and Marie think you've got a hold on him."

"You _was_ listenin' quite a while," muttered Bull.

"Quite a while," admitted Racey Dawson. "Quite a while."

"But you didn't listen quite hard enough," suggested Bull.

"No," assented Racey, "I didn't. I'm expecting you to sort of fill in the gaps."

Bull shook a decided head. "No," he denied. "No, you got another guess comin'. I won't do nothin' like that a-tall."

"And why not?"

"Because I won't."

"'Won't' got his neck broke one day just because he wouldn't."

"Yeah, I guess so," sneered Bull.

"You must forget I heard all about how you tried to bushwhack me from the second floor of the Starlight," Racey put in, gently.

"Aw, that's a damn lie," bluffed Bull. "A damn lie. All a mistake. You heard wrong."

Racey shook a disapproving head. "When it's after the draw," he said, "and you ain't got a thing in yore hand, and the other gents have everything and know they have everything to yore nothing, she's poor poker to make a bluff. Whatsa use, sport, whatsa use?"

"I dunno what yo're talkin' about," persisted Bull.

"Aw right, let it go at that. Who put you up to bushwhack me?"

"Nun-nobody," hesitated Bull.

"Yore own idea, huh?"

Bull spat disgustedly on the grass. He had seen the trap after it had been sprung.

"You shore can't play poker," smiled Racey, his eyes shining with pleasure under the wide brim of his hat. "I--The starlight's pretty bright remember."

Bull's sudden movement came to naught. He settled back, his eyes furtively busy.

"Still, alla same," pursued Racey, "I wonder was it all yore own idea."

"Whatell didja kick me for?" snarled Bull.

"Kick you for?" Racey repeated, stupidly.

"Yeah, kick me," said Bull. "No damn man can kick me and me not take notice."

"Dunno as I blame you. Dunno as I do. If any damn man kicks you, Bull, you got a right to drill him every time. And you think I kicked you?"

"I know you did."

"You know I did, huh? Did you see me do it?"

"You kicked me after you'd knocked me silly with that bottle. Kicked me when I was down and couldn't help myself."

"So I did all that to you after you were down, huh? Who told you?"

"Nemmine who told me. You done it, that's enough."

"No, it ain't enough. It ain't enough by a long mile. I want to know who told you?"

"I ain't sayin'." Sullenly.

"Come to think, she's hardly necessary. Doc Coffin and Honey Hoke were the only two gents in the Starlight at the time. It was either one or both of 'em told you. Maybe I'll get a chance to ask 'em about it later. Now I dunno whether you'll believe it or not but to tell the truth and be plain with you, Bull, I didn't kick you."

"I don't believe you." But Bull's tone was not confident.

"I wouldn't expect you to--under the circumstances. What I'm tellin' you is true alla same. Lookit, you fool, is it likely after takin' the trouble to knock you down, I'd kick you besides? Do I look like a sport who'd do a thing like that? Think it over."

Bull was silent. But Racey believed that he had planted the seed of doubt in his mind.

"And another thing," resumed Racey, "do I look like a sport who'd let another jigger lay for him promiscuous? You go slow, Bull. I'm good-natured, a heap good-natured. But don't lemme catch you bushwhacking me again."

"I won't," said Bull with a flash of humour.

"Be dead shore of it," cautioned Racey. "If I ever get to even thinking that yo're laying for me, Bull, I'm liable to come a-askin' questions you can't answer. Yo're a bright young man, Bull, but you want to be careful how you strain yore intellect. You might need it some day. And if you want to keep on being mother's li'l helper, be good, thassall, be good."

"Yo're worse'n a helldodger," affirmed Bull.

"You got me sized up right. I'm worse than a helldodger, a whole lot worse." The words were playful, but the tone was sardonic.

Bull grunted.

"You tell me, will you, just where it was you met this Bill Smith-Jack Harpe feller, and what it was he did? There's a company in it, too. What company is it--the Northern Pacific?"

"Ah-h, you got a gall, you have," sneered Bull, savagely. "Think you'll make something out of Harpe yore own self, huh?"

"That is my idea," admitted Racey.

"Well, you got a gall, thassall I gotta say."

"You forget you've got a gall, too, when you try to bushwhack me," Racey reminded him. "I'm trying to play even for that."

"Try away."

"You seem to make it hard for me kind of," grinned Racey.

"Of course I'd enjoy makin' it easy for you all I could," observed Bull with sarcasm.

"I dunno as I'd go so far as to say _that_, " was the Dawson comment. "But maybe it's possible to persuade you to tell me what you know."

"It ain't."

"Suppose I decided to leave you here."

"You won't." Confidently.

"Why not?"

"Because you ain't shootin' a unarmed man."

"Yet you think I'm the boy to kick one that's down."

"Sometimes I change my mind," said Bull with a harsh laugh.

"You laugh as loud as that again," said Racey, irritably, "and you'll change somethin' besides yore mind. Don't be too trusting a jake, Bull, not too trusting. I might surprise you yet. About that information now--I want it."

"If anybody's gonna make money out of Harpe I am." Thus Bull, stubbornly.

"I ain't aimin' to make _money_ out of Harpe. What I'm figuring to make out of him is somethin' else again."

"Whatsa use of lying thataway? Don't--"

"That'll be about all," interrupted Racey. "You've called me a liar enough for one night. I ain't got _all_ kinds of patience. You going to tell me what I want to know?"

"No, I ain't."

"Yo're mistaken. You'll tell me, or you'll leave town."

"Leave town!"

"Yep, leave town, go away from here, far, far away. So far away that you won't be able to blackmail Jack Harpe. See? Yore knowledge won't be worth a whoop to you then. An' I'll find out what I want to know from Marie."

"She'll never tell."

"Oh, I guess she will," said Racey, but he knew in his heart that worming information out of Marie would not be easy. Saving his life was one thing, but giving up information with a money value would be quite another. The amiable Marie was certainly not working for her health.

"Yo're welcome to what you can get out of her," said Bull.

"Then you'll be starting to-night. From here we'll go get yore hoss and see you safely on yore way."

"What'll you gimme to tell you?" inquired the desperate Bull.

"Nothin'--not a thin dime, feller. C'mon, let's go."

"Nun-no, not yet. I--say, suppose you lemme talk to Jack Harpe first myself. Just you lemme get my share out of him, and I'll tell you all you wanna know."

"When you going to him?" Racey demanded, suspiciously.

"To-night if I can find him. It ain't so late. But to-morrow, anyway."

"I'll give you till sundown to-morrow night. If you ain't ready to tell me then you'll have to drift."

"Maybe, maybe not," sneered Bull.

"I've said it," Racey said, shortly, rising to his feet.

"There's no ropes on you. Skip.... Nemmine yore Winchester. She's all right where she is. So long, Bull, so long."

CHAPTER XIV

THE SURPRISE

The sun, lifting over the rim of the world, sprayed its rays through the window and splashed with gold the face of Racey Dawson. He awoke, and much to the profane disgust of Swing Tunstall, shook that worthy awake immediately.

"Aw, lemme sleep, will you?" begged Swing, with suspicious meekness, reaching surreptitiously for a boot. "You lemme alone, that's a good feller."

"Get up," commanded Racey. "Get up, it's the early worm catches the most fish. Rise and shine, Swing. Never let the sun catch you snorin'. Besides, I can't sleep any more myself. I--"

Wham! Swing's flung boot shaved Racey's surprised ear and smashed against the partition.

"You'll wake up that Starlight proprietor," Racey said, calmly, as he picked up the boot and dropped it out of the window. "Good dog," he continued, presumably addressing a canine friend without, "leave Swing's nice new boot alone, will you? Don't go gnawin' at it thataway. It ain't a bone."

Swing, pulling on his pants, left the room, hopping physically and mentally. Racey rested both elbows on the sill and waited happily for his comrade to appear beneath him.

"Shucks," he said in a tone of great surprise when Swing shot round the corner of the hotel, "I shore thought there was a dog there a-teasin' that boot. I could have took my Bible oath there was a great, big, black, curly-haired feller with lots of teeth down there. I saw him, Swing. Shore thought I did. Must 'a' been mistaken. And you went and believed me, and got splinters in yore feet because you were in such a hurry. Never mind, Swing, here's the other one."

He jerked the boot in question at his friend's head, and sat down on his cot to complete his own dressing.

Came then the sound of a prodigious yawn from the room next door occupied by Jack Harpe. A cot creaked. A boot was scraped along the floor.

"Shore must be a sound sleeper," said Racey Dawson to himself, "if he really did just wake up."

He buckled on his gunbelt, set his hat a-tilt on one ear, and went down to wash his face and hands in the common basin on the wash-bench

outside the kitchen door.

But Swing Tunstall was before him, and was disposed to make an issue of the dropped boots. Only by his superior agility was Racey enabled to dodge all save a few drops of a full bucket of water.

"Djever get left! Djever get left!" singsonged Racey from the corner of the building, and set the thumb of one hand to his nose and twiddled opprobrious fingers at his comrade. "You wanna be a li'l bit quicker when you go to souse me, Swing. Yo're too slow, a lot too slow. Yep. Now I wouldn't go for to fling that pail at me, Swing. You might bust it, and yore carelessness with crockery thataway has already cost you ten dollars and six bits."

This was too much for the ruffled Swing. Waving the pail he pursued his tormentor round the hotel and into the front doorway. Racey fled up the stairs. At the stair foot Swing gave over the chase and returned to the washbench to resume his face-washing. Racey went on into their room. There was in it several articles belonging to Swing that he intended to throw out of the window at once.

But when he had entered the room and the door was closed behind him he did not touch any of Swing's belongings. Instead he remained standing in the middle of the room looking thoughtfully at the floor. What had given him pause was the fact that he had found the door ajar. And he knew with absolute certainty that he had closed the door tightly before he went downstairs.

It is the vagrant straw that shows the wind's direction, and since the attempt to bushwhack him Racey was not overlooking any straws. The door had been ajar. Why?

There was no closet, and from where he stood he could see under both cots. No one lay concealed in the room. The bedclothes on Swing's cot had not been touched. At least they were in precisely the position in which they had been landed when thrown back by Swing's careless hand. Racey did not believe that his own had been touched, either. But the saddlebags and _cantenass_ lying on the floor at the head of his cot had certainly been moved. He recalled distinctly having, the previous evening, piled the _cantenass_ on top of the saddlebags. And now the saddlebags were on top of the _cantenass_.

He glanced at Swing's warbags. They had not been moved. He wondered if Jack Harpe and the Starlight's owner were still in their rooms. He listened intently. Hearing no sound he went out into the hall, and knocked gently on Jack Harpe's door and called him softly by name. Getting no reply, he lifted the latch and walked in. There were Jack Harpe's saddlebags, _cantenass_, and rifle in a corner. A coat lay on the tumbled blankets of the cot. Otherwise the room was empty.

Racey went out, being careful to close the door tightly, and went to the room of the Starlight's owner. This room, too, was empty. Racey returned to his own room, tossed his _cantenass_ and saddlebags on the cot, and began feverishly to paw through their contents.

Nothing had been subtracted from or added to the heterogeneous collection of articles in the _cantenass_. The contents of the off-side saddlebag were in their familiar disorder. There was nothing in or about the off-side saddlebag to arouse suspicion. Not a thing.

He unbuckled the flap of the near-side saddlebag, and flipped it back. Somebody had been at this saddlebag. He was sure of it. His extra shirt, instead of being wadded into the fore-end of the saddlebag on top of a pair of socks, had been stuffed into the hinder end on top of a pair of underdrawers. Which underdrawers should by rights have been at the bottom of the leather hold-all.

But there was something else at the bottom of the saddlebag. It was something long and hard and wrapped in the buttonless undershirt despised and rejected by Swing.

Racey unrolled the undershirt. His eyes stared in genuine horror at what the unrolling revealed. It was the commonest of butcher knives that someone's busy hand had wrapped in the undershirt. But what was not nearly so common was that the broad, thin blade was stained with blood. From point to haft the steel was as red as if it had been dipped in a pail of paint. Indeed, being dry, it looked not unlike paint. But Racey knew that it was not paint.

"It was dry before it was wrapped in that undershirt," he said to himself, testing the blood on the blade with a speculative fingernail. "There ain't a mark on the undershirt. Gawd! Here it is again--the earmark of a crime, and no crime--yet. This is getting monotonous."

He laid down the knife, settled his hat, and methodically searched Swing Tunstall's warbags. It turned out a needless precaution. He had felt that it would be. But he could not afford to take any risks. Having found nothing in Swing's warbags save his friend's personal belongings, Racey slid the knife up his sleeve and went downstairs to breakfast. On the way he stopped a moment at a fortuitous knothole in the board wall. When he passed on his way the knife was no longer with him.

Jack Harpe was still eating when Racey eased himself into the chair at Swing's right hand. Jack Harpe nodded to Racey and went serenely on with his meal. Racey seized knife and fork, squared his elbows, and began to saw at his steak. And as he chewed and swallowed and sloshed the coffee round in his cup in order to get the full benefit of the sugar he wondered whether it was Jack Harpe or Bull to whom he was indebted for the butcher knife. It was one of the two, he thought. Who else could it be?

He believed it would be wise to spend most of his spare time in his room. At least until he knew the inwardness of the butcher-knife incident. It was possible that the man who had secreted the knife would return. Racey might well be in line for other even more delicate attentions.

Before going up to his room Racey went to the corral. He had left his saddle-blanket out all night, he mentioned to Swing in the hearing of Jack Harpe. He was gone five minutes. When he returned, strangely enough minus the saddle-blanket, he was in time to see Piney Jackson dart round the corner of the blacksmith shop, cup his hand at his mouth, and raise a stentorian bellow for Jake Rule.

Piney did not wait to see whether the sheriff replied to his call. Instead he beckoned violently to the handful of men grouped on the sidewalk in front of the hotel.

"C'mon over!" he bawled. "Look what I found here this morning."

Jack Harpe and the owner of the Starlight being among those present and responding to the invitation, Racey Dawson took a chance and went with the rest.

"Look at that," said Piney Jackson, indicating a humped-up individual sitting behind the woodpile.

Racey and the other spectators went round the woodpile and viewed the humped-up individual. The latter was Bull, the Starlight bartender. And he was dead, very dead. His throat had been cut from ear to ear. He was a ghastly object.

"Who done it?" inquired one of the fools that infest every group of men.

"He didn't leave any card," the blacksmith replied with sarcasm.

The fool asked no more questions. Came then Jake Rule and Kansas Casey. Jake, a rather heavy, well-meaning officer, old at the business, began to sniff about for clues. Kansas Casey laid the body down on its back and thoroughly searched the pockets of the clothing.

"One thing," said Kansas Casey, looking up from what he had found--a handful of silver dollars, a pocket knife, and a silver watch, "robbery wasn't the motive."

Racey looked sidewise from under his eyebrows at Jack Harpe. The latter was staring down unmoved at the dead body.

"Somebody must 'a' had a grudge against Bull," offered the fool.

"You think so?" said Piney. "Yo're a real bright feller."

The fool subsided a second time.

"Lookit here, Jake," Piney continued to the sheriff's address, "you don't have to kick my wood all over the county, do you?"

"I'm lookin' for the knife," explained the sheriff, ceasing not to stub his toes against the solid chunks. "Feller after doing a thing like this gets frustrated sometimes and drops the knife. And finding the knife might be a help in locating the feller."

All of which seemed sufficiently logical to the bystanders.

Racey decided he had seen enough. Besides, he wanted to camp closer to his warbags. He should have been in his room before this, and he would have been had he cared to make himself conspicuous by not going along with the crowd to see what Piney Jackson had found.

Declining Swing's earnest invitation to drink he returned to the hotel. Swing went grouchily to the Happy Heart, wondering what was the matter with his friend. It was not like the Racey he knew to play the hermit.

Once in his room Racey again explored his own and Swing's saddlebags

and _cantenass_, looked under the cots and through the bedclothes. But he found nothing that did not belong to either himself or Swing.

"They didn't make a second trip," he said to himself. "I'm betting it's Jack Harpe. Shore it is, the polecat."

Then in order to have a water-tight reason for remaining in the room he pulled off his boots and trousers, fished a housewife from a _cantena_, and set about repairing a rip in his trousers. It was a perfectly good rip. He had had it a long time. What more natural that on this particular day he should wish to sew it up?

It was an hour later that he heard the tramp of several pairs of boots on the stairs. He could hear the wheezing, laboured breathing of Bill Lainey, the hotel proprietor. Climbing the stairs always bothered Bill. The latter and his followers came along the hall and stopped in front of Racey's door.

"This is his room," panted Bill Lainey.

Unceremoniously the latch was lifted. A man entered. The man was Jake Rule, the sheriff of Fort Creek County. He was followed by Kansas Casey, his deputy.

Jake looked serious. But Kansas was smiling as he closed the door behind him. Then he opened it quickly and thrust his head into the hall.

"No need of you, Bill," he said.

"Aw right," said Bill, aggrievedly, and forthwith shuffled away.

Kansas withdrew his head and nodded to Jake Rule. "He's gone," he said.

Racey Dawson, sitting crosslegged on his cot and plying his needle in most workmanlike fashion, grinned comfortably at the two officers. Lord, how glad he was he had found that knife! If he hadn't--

"Sidown, gents," invited Racey. "There's two chairs, or you can have Swing's cot if you like."

Jake Rule shook his head. "We don't wanna sit down, Racey," he said. "We got a li'l business with you, maybe."

"Maybe? Then you ain't shore about it?"

"Not unless yo're willing. You see, Dolan's drunk to-day, and of course we can't get a warrant till he's sober."

"A warrant? For me?"

"Not yet," said Jake Rule. "Only a search warrant--first. But of course if you ain't willing we can't even touch anything."

"Still, Racey," put in Kansas Casey, smoothly, "if you could see yore way to letting us go through yore warbags, yores and Swing's, it would be a great help, and we'd remember it--after."

"Yeah, we shore would," declared the sheriff. "You save us trouble now, Racey, and I'll guarantee to make you almighty comfortable in the calaboose. You won't have nothing to complain of. Not a thing."

Racey laughed cheerily. "Got me in jail already, have you?" he chuckled. "You'll have me hung next."

"Oh, they's quite some formalities to go through before _that_ happens," declared the sheriff, seriously.

"I'm glad," drawled Racey. "I thought maybe you were fixing to take me right out and string me up before dinner. Want to search our stuff, huh? Hop to it. Swing ain't here, but I'll give you permission for him. He won't mind."

Jake and Kansas went at the warbags like terriers digging out a badger. Racey leaned on his elbow and watched them. What luck that the door had been ajar and that he had noticed it! If it had not been a life-and-death matter he would have laughed aloud.

At the end of twenty minutes the officers stood up. They had gone through everything in the room, including the cots. Kansas Casey wore a pleased smile. Jake Rule looked disappointed.

"Don't look so glum, Jake," urged Racey. "Is it a fair question to ask what yo're hunting for?"

"The knife," he said, shortly. "The knife that cut Bull's throat."

"The knife, huh?" remarked Racey as if to himself. "So yo're suspectin' me of wiping out Bull, are you?"

"I never did," said Kansas, promptly. "I know you. You ain't that kind."

Jake looked reproachfully at his deputy. "You never can tell, Racey," he said, turning to the puncher. "I've got so myself I don't trust nobody no more."

"Was this here yore own idea," pursued Racey, "or did somebody sic you onto me?"

Jake made no immediate answer. It was obvious that he was of two minds whether to speak or not.

"Why not tell him?" suggested Kansas. "What's the odds?"

At this Jake took a piece of paper from his vest pocket and handed it to Racey.

"I found this lying on the floor of my office when I come back after attending to Bull," was his explanation.

There were words printed on the slip of paper. They read:

Look in Racey Dawson's room for what killed Bull.

The communication was unsigned.

Racey handed it back to Jake Rule. "Got any idea who put it in yore office?" he asked.

Jake shook his head. "I dunno," he said. "The window was open. Anybody passing could 'a' throwed it in."

"You satisfied now, Jake, or--" Racey did not complete the sentence.

"Oh, I'm satisfied you didn't do it," replied the sheriff, "if that's what you mean. But--the man who wrote this here _joke_"

As he spoke he tore the note in two, dropped the pieces on the floor, and stamped out of the room. Kansas Casey looked over his shoulder as he followed in the wake of his superior.

He saw Racey Dawson picking up the two pieces of the note. Racey's mouth was a grim, uncompromising line.

"If Racey ever finds out who wrote that," thought Kansas to himself, pulling the door shut, "hell will shore pop. And I hope it does."

For he liked Racey Dawson, did Kansas Casey, the deputy sheriff.

CHAPTER XV

FIRE! FIRE!

"Why didn't you tell me at breakfast?" demanded Swing Tunstall.

"And give it away to Jack Harpe!" said scornful Racey. "Shore, that would 'a' been a bright thing to do now, wouldn't it?"

"What didja do with the knife?"

"Dropped it through a knothole in the wall. The only way they'll ever get hold of it is by tearing the building down."

"Jack Harpe, if he _is_ the feller, will know you found it and try again."

"Shore. We can't help that. One thing, we'll know before the day is over whether it is Jack Harpe or not."

"How?"

"Remember me this morning telling you how I'd left my saddle-blanket out all night and then going out in the corral for the same. I said it so Jack could hear me. He did hear me, and he watched me go. He saw me go out round the corral, and he saw me come back without the saddle-blanket. Now anybody'd know I wouldn't leave my saddle-blanket out behind the corral, would I?"

"Not likely."

"But a feller who'd just found a knife with blood on it in his warbags

might go out back of the corral to lose the knife, mightn't he?"

"He might."

"Well, that's what I did. Naturally, having already lost the knife down through the knothole I couldn't lose her again. But I did the best I could. I dug in the ground with a sharp stick, and I made a li'l hole like, and I filled her in again, and tramped her all down flat, and sort of half smoothed down the roughed-up ground like I was trying to hide my tracks and what I'd been doing. Then I came away.

"Now I'm betting that if Jack Harpe is the lad tucked away that knife in my warbags he'll go skirmishing out behind the corral to see what I was really doing."

"Maybe." Doubtfully.

"There ain't any maybe if he's the man turned the trick. And from where we're a-laying under this wagon we can see the back of the corral plain as--There he comes now."

The posts of the corral were less than a hundred yards from where Racey and Swing lay beneath a pole-propped freight wagon. From the wagon, which was standing beyond the stage company's corral, the ground sloped gently to the hotel corral. Racey had taken the precaution to mask their position with a cedar bush.

Hatless he peered through the branches at the man quartering the ground behind the hotel corral.

"He's getting close to where I made that hole," he told Swing. "Now he's found it," he resumed as the man dropped on his knees. "Jack Harpe all along. Ain't he the humoursome codger?"

"He shore couldn't 'a' dug up that hole already," declared Swing when Jack Harpe jumped to his feet after a sojourn on his knees of possibly thirty seconds' duration.

"No," assented Racey, puzzled. "He couldn't. There's an odd number," he added, as Jack Harpe pelted back at a brisk trot over the way he had come. "Le's not go just yet, Swing. I have a feeling."

He was glad of this feeling when ten minutes later Jack Harpe returned with Jake Rule and Kansas Casey. The latter carried a shovel. The three men clustered round the spot where Racey had dug his hole. Kansas Casey set his foot on the shovel and drove it into the ground. Racey chuckled at the pleasant sight. What must inevitably follow would be even pleasanter.

The deputy sheriff made the dirt fly for six minutes. Then he threw down the shovel, pushed back his hat, and wiped his face on his sleeve. He spoke, but his language was unintelligible. Jack Harpe said something and picked up the shovel. He began to dig. He cast the earth about for possibly five minutes.

"Ain't he the prairie-dog, huh?" Racey demanded, jabbing his comrade in the ribs with stiffened thumb. "Just watch him scratch gravel."

Suddenly Jake Rule and Kansas Casey turned their backs on the

frantically labouring Jack Harpe and walked away. Jack Harpe watched them, threw up a few more half-hearted shovelfuls, and then slammed the implement to earth with a clatter, hitched up his pants, and strode hurriedly after the officers.

"That proves it, I guess," said Swing.

"Naturally. She's enough for us, anyhow.---- it to ----!"

"Whatsa matter?" inquired Swing, surprised at his friend's vehemence.

"Whatsa matter? Whatsa matter? Everythin's the matter. I just happened to think that now Bull won't be able to tell me what he was going to to-night."

"That'so. Can't you ask the girl?"

"I can, but I ain't shore it'll do any good. Marie ain't the kind that blats all she knows just to hear herself talk. If she wants to tell me she will. If she don't want to, she won't. Bull was my one best bet."

"What's that?" cried Swing, raising himself on an elbow.

"That" was the noise of a tumult in Farewell Main Street. There were shouts and yells and screams. Above all, screams. Racey and Swing hurried to the street. When they reached it the shouts and yells had subsided, but the screams had not. If anything they were louder than before. They issued from the mouth of Marie, whom Jake Rule, Kansas Casey, and four other men were taking to the calaboose. They were doing their duty as gently as possible, and Marie was making it as difficult for them as possible. She was as mad as a teased rattlesnake, and not a man of her six captors but bore the marks of fingernails, or teeth, or heels.

She had, it appeared, attacked without warning and with a derringer, Jack Harpe as he was walking peacefully along the sidewalk in front of the Starlight. Only by good luck and a loose board that had turned under the girl's foot as she fired had Mr. Harpe been preserved from sudden death.

"That's shore tough," Racey said to their informant. "I'm goin' right away now and get me a hammer and some nails and fix that loose board."

"You better not let Jack Harpe hear you say that," cautioned the other.

"If you want something to do, suppose now you tell him," was Racey's instant suggestion.

Racey's tone was light, but his stare was hard. The other man went away.

"Fire! Fire!" shrilled young Sam Brown Galloway, bouncing out of his father's store, and jumping up and down in the middle of Main Street. "The jail's afire! The jail's afire!"

Men added their shouts to his childish squalls and ran toward the jail. Racey and Swing trundled along the sidewalk together. "She's afire, all right," said Racey. "Lookit the smoke siftin' through the

window at the corner."

The smoke was followed by a vicious lash of flame that whipped up the side of the building and set the eaves alight. The glass of another window fell through the bars with a tinkle. A billow of smoke rushed forth. Smoke was seeping through cracks at the back of the building.

"My Gawd!" exclaimed Racey, as a shriek rent the air. "The girl's in there!"

He had for the moment forgotten that Marie was incarcerated in the jail. But Kansas Casey had not forgotten. Racey, having picked up a handy axe, raced round to the back only to find the deputy unlocking the back door. A burst of smoke as he flung open the door assailed their lungs. Choking, holding their breath, both men dashed into the jail. Kansas unlocked the girl's cell.

"You shore took yore time about comin'," drawled Marie. "I didn't know but what I'd be burned up with the rest of the jail. You big lummo! You don't have to bust my wrist, do you? Go easy, or I'll claw yore face off!"

Once outside they were immediately surrounded by the townsfolk. Most of them were laughing. But Jake Rule was not laughing.

"Good joke on you, Jake," grinned a friend. "Burned herself out on you, didn't she?"

"You can't keep a good man down," shouted another.

"Never let the baby play with matches," advised a third.

"Get pails, gents!" shouted Rule. "We gotta put it out. Where's a pail? Who--"

"Aw, let 'er burn," said Galloway. "Hownell you gonna put it out? She's all blazin' inside. You couldn't put it out with Shoshone Falls."

"The wind's blowin' away from town," contributed Mike Flynn. "Nothin' else'll catch. Besides, we been needing a new calaboose for a long time. You done us a better turn than you think, Marie."

"If you say I set the jail afire, Mike Flynn," cried Marie, "Yo're a liar by the clock."

"You set it afire," said the sheriff, sternly. "You'll find it a serious business setting a jail afire."

"Prove I done it, then!" squalled Marie. "Prove it, you slab-sided hunk! Yah, you can't prove it, and you know it!"

To this the sheriff made no reply.

"We gotta put her somewhere till the Judge gets sober," he said, hurriedly. "Guess we'll put her in yore back room, Mike."

"Guess you won't," countered Mike. "They ain't any insurance on my place, and I ain't taking no chances, not a chance."

"There's the hotel," suggested Kansas Casey.

"You don't use my hotel for no calaboose," squawked Bill Lainey.

"Nawsir. Not much. You put her in yore own house, Jake. Then if she sets you afire, it's your own fault. Yeah."

Jake Rule scratched his head. It was patent that he did not quite know what to do. Came then Dolan, the local justice of the peace. Dolan's hair was plastered well over his ears and forehead. Dolan was pale yellow of countenance and breathed strongly through his nose. He looked not a little sick. He pawed a way through the crowd and cast a bilious glance at Marie.

He inquired of Jake Rule as to the trouble and its cause. On being told he convened court on the spot. Judge Dolan agreed with Mike Flynn that the burning of the jail was a trivial matter requiring no official attention. For was not Dolan's brother-in-law a carpenter and would undoubtedly be given the contract for a new jail. Quite so.

"You can't prove anything about this jail-burning," he told Jake Rule and the assembled multitude, "but this assault on Jack Harpe is a cat with another tail. It was a lawless act and hadn't oughta happened. Marie, yo're a citizen of Farewell, and you'd oughta take an interest in the community instead of surging out and trying to massacre a visitor in our midst, a visitor who's figuring on settlin' hereabouts, I understand. Gawd knows we need all the inhabitants we can get, and it's just such tricks as yores, Marie, that discourages immigration."

Here Judge Dolan frowned upon Marie and thumped the palm of his hand with a bony fist. Marie stood first on one leg and then on the other and hung her head down. Since her raving outburst at the time of her arrest she had cooled considerably. It was evident that she was now trying to make the best of a bad business.

"Marie," resumed Judge Dolan, and cleared his throat importantly, "why did you shoot at Mr. Jack Harpe?"

"He insulted me," Marie replied without a quiver.

"I ain't ever said a word to her," countered Jack Harpe. "I don't even know the girl."

The judge turned back to Marie. "Have you any witnesses to this insult?" he queried.

"Nary a witness." Marie shook her brown head.

"Y' oughta have a witness. She's yore word against his. Where did this insult take place?"

"At my shack. He come there early this mornin'."

"That's a lie!" boomed Jack Harpe.

"Which will be about all from you!" snapped Judge Dolan, vigorously pounding his palm.

"What did he say to you?" was the judge's next question.

"I'd rather not tell," hedged Marie.

"Well, of course, you don't have to answer," said the judge, gallantly. "But alla same, Marie, you hadn't oughta used a gun on him. It--it ain't ladylike. Nawsir. Don't you do it again or I'll send you to Piegan City. Ten dollars or ten days."

"What?" Thus Jack Harpe, astonished beyond measure.

"Ten dollars or ten days," repeated Judge Dolan. "Taking a shot at you is worth ten dollars but no more. It don't make any difference whether you came here to invest money or not, you wanna go slow round the women."

"But I didn't even say howdy to her," protested Jack Harpe.

"She says different. You leave her alone."

Public opinion, which at first had rather favoured Jack Harpe, now frowned upon him. He shouldn't have insulted the girl. No, sir, he had no business doing that. Be a good thing if he was arrested for it, perhaps. What a virtuous thing is public opinion.

"I ain't got a nickel, Judge," said Marie. "You'll have to trust me for it till the end of the week."

"I'll pay her fine," nipped in Racey, glad of an opportunity to annoy Jack Harpe. "Here y' are, Judge. Ten dollars, you said."

It was a few minutes after he had eaten dinner that Racey Dawson presented himself at the door of Kansas Casey's shack. The door was open. Racey stood in the doorway and leaned the shovel against the wall of the room.

"You forgot yore shovel, Kansas," he said, gently, "or Jack Harpe did. Same thing, and here it is."

Kansas had the grace to look a trifle shamefaced. "Somebody said you'd buried that knife--" he began, and stopped.

"Yep, I know, Jack Harpe," smiled Racey. "Li'l Bright Eyes is shore a friend of mine. Only I wouldn't bank too strong on what he says about me."

"I ain't," denied the deputy.

"Another thing, Kansas," drawled Racey, "did you ever stop to think how come he knowed so much about that knife? And did you ask him if he was the gent left that paper in Jake's office? And going on from that did you ask him why he didn't come out flat footed at first and say what he thought he knowed instead of waiting till after you'd searched my room? You don't have to answer, Kansas, only if I was you I'd think it over, I'd think it over plenty. So long."

From the house of Casey he went to the shack of Marie. He found the girl cooking her dinner quite as if attempts at murder, dead men, and jailburning were matters of small moment. But if her manner was placid, her eyes were not. They were bright and hard, and they

flickered stormily upon him when she lifted her gaze from the pan of frying potatoes and saw who it was standing in the doorway.

"I'm obliged to you," she said, calmly, "for payin' my fine. You ran away so quick this mornin' you didn't gimme any chance to thank you. I'll pay you back soon's I get paid come Saturday."

Racey stared reproachfully. He shifted his weight from one uncomfortable foot to the other. "I didn't come here about the fine," he told her. "I--" He stopped, uncertain whether to continue or not.

"If you didn't come about the fine it must be something else important," said she, insultingly. "I shore oughta be set up, I suppose. So far it's always been me that's had to make all the moves."

"Moves?" repeated Racey, frankly puzzled.

"Moves," she mimicked. "Didn't you ever play checkers? Oh, nemmine, nemmine! Don't take it to heart. I don't mean nothin'. Never did. C'mon in an' set. Take a chair. That one. What do you want? Down feller, down!"

The command was called forth by the violent entry of the yellow dog which, remembering Racey as a friend, flung itself upon him with whines and tail-waggings.

"He's all right," said Racey, rubbing the rough head. "I just thought I'd ask you what you knew about Jack Harpe."

Marie's narrowed eyes turned dark with suspicion. "Whadda you know about me an' Jack Harpe?" she demanded.

"Not as much as I'd like to know," was his frank reply.

"I ain't talkin'." Shortly.

"Now, lookit here--" he began, wheedlingly.

She shook her head at him. "S'no use. I don't tell everything I know."

"Then you do know something about Jack Harpe?"

"I didn't say I did."

"You didn't. But--"

"That's what the goat done to the stone wall. Look out you don't bust yore horns, too."

"Meanin'?"

"Meanin' you'll knock 'em off short before you get anything out o' me I don't want to tell you. And I tell you flat I ain't talkin' over Jack Harpe with you."

"Scared to?" he hazarded, boldly.

"You can give it any name you like. Pull up a chair. Dinner's most ready. They's enough for two."

Despite the fact that he had just dined at the hotel he accepted her invitation in the hope that she could be persuaded to talk. And after dinner he smoked several cigarettes with her--still hoping. Finally, finding that nothing he could say was of any avail to move her, he took up his hat and departed.

"Don't go away mad," she called after him.

"I ain't," he denied, and went on, her mocking laughter ringing in his ears.

After Racey was gone out of sight Marie turned back into her little house. There was no laughter on her lips or in her eyes as she sat down in a chair beside the table and stared across it at the chair in which Racey had been sitting.

"He's a nice boy," she whispered under her breath, after a time. "I wish--I wish--"

But what it was she wished it is impossible to relate, for, instead of completing the sentence, she hid her face in her hands and began to cry.

Early next morning Racey Dawson and Swing Tunstall rode out of town by the Marysville trail. They were bound for the Bar S and a job.

* * * * *

"What have you been drinkin', Racey?" demanded Mr. Saltoun, winking at his son-in-law and foreman, Tom Loudon.

The latter did not return the wink. He kept a sober gaze fastened on Racey Dawson.

Racey was staring at Mr. Saltoun. His eyes began to narrow. "Meanin'?" he drawled.

"Now don't go crawlin' round huntin' offense where none's meant," advised Mr. Saltoun. "But you know how it is yoreself, Racey. Any gent who gets so full he can't pick out his own hoss, and goes weaving off on somebody else's is liable to make mistakes other ways. You gotta admit it's possible."

The slight tinge of red underlying Racey's heavy coat of tan acknowledged the corn. "It's possible," he admitted.

Mr. Saltoun saw his advantage and seized it. "S'pose now this is another mistake?"

"Tell you what I'll do," said Racey. "You said you had jobs for a couple of handsome young fellers like us. Aw right. We go to work. We ride for you six months for nothing."

"Huh?" Mr. Saltoun and Tom Loudon stared their astonishment.

"Oh, the cat's got more of a tail than that," said Racey. "You don't pay us a nickel for those six months _provided_ what I said will happen, don't happen. If it does happen like I say, you pay each of us

two hundred large round simoleons per each and every month."

"Come again," said Mr. Saltoun, wrinkling his forehead.

Racey came again as requested.

"Six months is a long time" frowned Mr. Saltoun. "If I lose--"

"But I dunno what I'm talkin' about," pointed out Racey. "I make mistakes, you know that. And you were so shore nothin' was gonna happen. Are you still shore?"

"Well--" hesitated Mr. Saltoun.

"If you take us up you stand to be in the wages of two punchers for six months. That's four hundred and eighty dollars. Almost five hundred dollars. Of course, it's a chance. What ain't, I'd like to know? But yo're so shore she's gonna keep on come-day-go-day like always, that I'd oughta have odds."

"Five to one," mused Mr. Saltoun, pulling at the ends of his gray mustache.

"And fair enough--seeing that nothing is going to happen."

"I wouldn't do it," put in Tom Loudon. "These trick bets are unlucky."

"Oh, I dunno," said Mr. Saltoun, running true to form in that he rarely took kindly to advice. "Looks like a good chance to get six months' work out of two men for nothing."

"Looks like a good chance to lose twenty-four hundred dollars," exclaimed Tom Loudon, wrathfully.

"My Gawd, Tom," said Mr. Saltoun, cocking a grizzled eyebrow, "you don't mean to tell me you think they's any chance a-tall of Racey's winning this bet, do you?"

"They's just about ten times more chance for him to win than to lose."

"Tom, do you ever see any li'l pink lizards with blue tails an' red feet? I hear that's a sign, too."

"Aw right, have it yore own way," said Tom Loudon with every symptom of disgust. "Only don't say I didn't warn you."

"Gawd, Tom, y' old wet blanket, yo're always a-warnin' me. I never see such a feller."

"Aw right, I said. Aw right. But when yo're a-writin' out a check for twenty-four hundred dollars, just remember how I always told you somebody was gonna horn in here some day and glom half the range."

"Laugh," said Mr. Saltoun. "Yo're shore the jokin'est feller, Tom Loudon. Even Racey and his partner are laughing."

"I should think they would," Tom Loudon returned, savagely. "I'd laugh, too, if I stood to win twenty-four hundred in six months."

Mr. Saltoun shook a whimsical head at Racey Dawson. "Whatsa use?" he asked, sorrowfully. "Whatsa use?"

* * * * *

"You was too easy with him," declared Swing, as he and Racey were unsaddling at the Bar S corral. "You could 'a' stuck him for three hundred a month just as easy."

Racey shook a decided head. "No, there's a limit even to Old Salt's stubbornness. I know him better'n you do ... Aw, what you kicking about? We've got enough coin in our overalls to last out six months if you don't drink too much."

"If I don't drink too much, hey! If _I_ don't drink too much! Which I like that. Who's--"

"Racey," interrupted Tom Loudon, who had approached unperceived, "this is a fine way to treat yore friends."

"What's bitin' you?"

"You hadn't oughta take advantage of Old Salt thisaway."

"And why not? What's wrong with the bet? Fair bet. Leave it to anybody."

"Shore, shore, but alla same, Racey, you'd oughta gone a li'l easy. Twenty-four hundred dollars--"

"What's the dif? You won't have to pay it."

"Tsall right, but I didn't think it of you, damfi did. You know how Old Salt is--always certain shore he's right, and you took advantage."

"Shore I took advantage," Racey acquiesced, amiably. "I got sense, I have. Alla same, he'd never 'a' taken me up if you hadn't slipped in yore li'l piece of advice for him not to. That was a bad play, Tom. You might know he'd go dead against you. But I ain't complaining, not me. Nor Swing ain't, either. We'll thank you for yore helping hand to our dying day."

"I guess you will," Tom Loudon said, ruefully. "When you get through here, Racey, you and Swing come on over to the wagon shed. I wanna sift through this Jack Harpe business once more."

CHAPTER XVI

THE BAR S

"_Kind friends, you must pity my horrible tale.
I'm an object of sorrow, I'm looking quite stale.
I gone up my trade selling Pink's Patent Pills
To go hunting gold in the dreary Black Hills_."

"I wish to Gawd you'd stayed there," said Jimmie, the Bar S cook, pausing in his march past to poke his head in at the bunkhouse doorway. "Honest, Racey, don't you ever get tired of yell-bellerin' thisaway?"

Racey Dawson, standing in front of the mirror, ceased not to adjust his necktie. The mirror was small and he was not, and it was only by dint of much wriggling that he was succeeding in his purpose. To Jimmie and his question he paid absolutely no attention.

"_Don't go away, stay at home if you can,
Stay away from that city, they call it Cheyenne_."

"Seemin'ly he don't get tired," Jimmie answered the question for himself. "And what's more, he don't ever get tired of dandy-floppin' himself all up like King Solomon's pet pony. Yup," Jimmie continued with enthusiasm, addressing the world at large, "I can remember when Racey used to ride for the 88 and the Cross-in-a-box how he was a regular two-legged human being. A handkerchief round his neck was good enough for him _always_. If his pants had a rip in 'em anywheres, or they was buttons off his vest, or his shirt was tore, did it matter? No, it didn't matter. It didn't matter a-tall. But now he's gotta buy new pants if his old ones is tore, and a new shirt besides, and he sews the buttons on his vest, and he's took to wearin' a necktie. A _necktie_!"

Jimmie, words failing him for the moment, paused and hooked one foot comfortably behind the other. He leaned hipshot against the doorjamb, and spat accurately through a knothole in the bunkhouse floor.

"Yop," he went on, ramming his quid into the angle of his jaw, "and he's always admiring himself in the mirror, Racey is. He pats his hair down, after partin' it and usin' enough goose-grease on it to keep forty guns from rusting for ten years, and he shines his boots with blacking, _my_ stove-blackening, the rustling scoundrel. Scrouge southwest a li'l more, Racey, and look at yore chin. They's a li'l speck of dust on it. Oh, me, oh, my! Li'l sweetheart will have to wash his face again. Who is she?"

Still Racey did not deign to reply. He placed, removed, and replaced a garnet stickpin in the necktie a dozen times handrunning. Jimmie beat the long roll with his knuckles on the bottom of the frying-pan, and winked at the broad back of Racey Dawson.

"I hear they's a new hasher at Bill Lainey's hotel," pursued the indefatigable Jimmie. "Tim Page told me she only weighed three hundred pounds without her shoes. It ain't her! Don't tell me it's her! You ain't, are you, Racey?"

Racey, pivoting on a spurred heel, faced Jimmie, stuck his arms akimbo, and spoke:

"Not mentioning any names, of course, but there's some people round here got an awful lot to say. Which if a gent was to say their tongues are hung in the middle he'd be only tellin' half the truth. Not that you ain't popular with me, James. You are. I think the world of you. How can I help it when you remind me all the time of my aunt's pet parrot in yore face and language. Except you ain't the right colour. If yore whiskers had only grown out green."

"We're forgetting what we was talkin' about," tucked in Jimmie the cook, smiling sweetly. "The lady, Racey. Who is she?"

"James," said Racey, his smile matching that of the cook, "they's something about you to-day, something I don't like. I dunno the name for it exactly. But if you'll step inside the bunkhouse a minute, I'll show you what I mean. I'll show you in two shakes."

Jimmie shook a wise head and backed out into the open. "Not while I got my health. You come out here and show me."

"Oh, I ain't gonna play any tricks on you," protested Racey Dawson.

"You bet you ain't," Jimmie concurred, warmly. "Not by several jugfuls. I--" He broke off, cocking a listening ear.

"Yeah," grinned Racey, "you hear a noise in the cook-shack, huh? I thought I saw the Kid slide past in the lookin'-glass while you were standing in the doorway."

"And you never told me!" squalled Jimmie, speeding toward his beloved place of business.

He reached it rather late. When he entered by the doorway the Kid, a pie in each hand, was disappearing through a back window.

"Did you ever get left!" tossed back the Kid as the flung frying-pan buzzed past his ear.--"Now see what you done," he continued, skipping safely out of range; "dented yore nice new frypan all up. You oughtn'ta done that, Jimmie. Fry-pans cost money. Some day, if you ain't careful, you'll break something, you and yore temper."

"Them's the Old Man's pies," declared Jimmie, leaning over the window-sill and shaking an indignant fist at the Kid. "You bring 'em back, you hear?"

"They ain't, and I won't, and I do," was the brisk answer. "Yo're making a big mistake, Jimmie boy, if you think they're his pies. Don't you s'pose I know he's gone to Piegan City, and he won't be back for a coupla weeks? And don't you s'pose I know them pies would be too stale for him to eat by the time he got back? You must take me for a fool, Jimmie. And you lied to me, Jimmie, you lied. Just for that I'll keep these pies, I'll keep 'em and eat 'em no matter how big a pain I get, and let this be a lesson to you. Hey, Racey, Jimmie gimme a coupla pies! C'mon out and we'll eat 'em where Jimmie can watch us."

"If I catch you--" began the angry Jimmie.

"But you ain't gonna catch me," tantalized the Kid. "C'mon, Racey, hurry up."

Racey came slowly and with dignity.

The Kid stared. "Well, I bedam! Where are you goin'?"

"Ride, just a li'l ride," was the vague reply.

"Is that all? I thought it was a funeral or a wedding or something,

an' I was wonderin'. Just a li'l ride, huh? And where might you be a-going to ride to, if I may make so bold as to ask?"

"You can ask, of course," replied Racey, shrugging his wide shoulders and spreading his hands after the fashion of Telescope Laguerre.

"But that ain't sayin' he'll tell you," put in Jimmie. "Bet you he's gonna go see that new hasher of Bill Lainey's."

"No," denied the Kid, judicially, "not that lady. Even Racey's arms ain't long enough to reach round her. I--_Say_, one of these pies is a _raisin_ pie!"

"You can gimme that one," suggested Racey Dawson, glad of an opportunity to change the subject.

The Kid, his teeth sunk in the raisin pie, shook a decisive head and mumbled unintelligibly. He thrust the other pie toward his friend.

Racey Dawson rode away westward munching pie. And it was a very good pie, and would have brought credit to any cook. He regretfully ate the last crumb, and rolled a cigarette. He felt fairly full and at utter peace with the world. Why not? Wasn't it a good old world, and a mighty friendly world despite the Harpes and Tweezys and Joneses that infested it? I should say so.

Racey Dawson inhaled luxuriously, pushed back his wide hat, and let the breeze ruffle his brown hair. He rubbed the back of one hand across his straight eyebrows, and stared across the range toward the distant hills that marked his goal. Which goal was the old C Y ranch-house at Moccasin Spring on Soogan Creek, where lived the Dales and their daughter Molly.

And as he looked at the hill and bethought him of what lay beyond it, he drew a Winchester from the scabbard under his left leg and made sure that he had not forgotten to load it. For Racey laboured under no delusion as to the danger that menaced not only his own existence but that of his friend Swing. He knew that their lives hung by a thread, and a thin thread at that. They were but two against many, and their position had not been aided by the string of uneventful days succeeding their advent at the Bar S. For their enemies were taking their time in the launching of their enterprise. And Racey had not expected this. It threw him off his balance somewhat. Certainly it worried him.

It was not humanly possible that Jack Harpe could be aware that Old Man Saltoun did not believe what Racey had told him. But he was acting as if he knew. Perhaps he was waiting till Nebraska Jones should be entirely well of his wound. That was possible, but not probable. Jack Harpe had not impressed Racey as a man who would allow his plans to be indefinitely held up for such a cause. There was no telling when Nebraska would be up and about. His recovery, thanks to past dissipations, had been exceedingly slow.

Again, perhaps the delay might be merely a detail of the plan Fat Jakey Pooley mentioned in his letter to Luke Tweezy, or it might be due to the more-than-watchful care the Dales and Morgans were taking of old Mr. Dale. Wherever the old gentleman went, some one of his relations went with him. Certainly no ill-wisher had been able to

approach Mr. Dale (since his spree at McFluke's) at any time. Mr. Dale, to all intents and purposes, was impossible to isolate.

At any rate, whatever the reason, the fact remained that Harpe had not moved and showed no signs of moving. Mr. Saltoun, every time he met Racey, took special pains to ask his puncher how much twice six times two hundred was. Then Mr. Saltoun, without waiting for an answer, would walk off slapping his leg and cackling with laughter. Even Tom London was beginning to take the view that perhaps his father-in-law was in the right, after all.

"You been here near two months now, Racey," he had said that very morning, "and they ain't anything happened yet."

"I've got four months to go," Racey had replied with a placidity he did not feel.

Now as he rode, his eyes closely scanning the various places in the landscape providing good cover for possible bushwhackers, he recalled what Loudon had said.

"I'll show him all the happenstances he wants to see before I'm through," he said, aloud. "Something's gonna happen. Something's got to happen. Jack Harpe won't let this slide. Not by a jugful."

The words were confident enough, but they were words that he had been in the habit of repeating to himself nearly every day for some time. Perhaps they had lost some of their force. Perhaps--

"Twelve hundred dollars," mused Racey. "And the same for Swing. Six months' work for--Hell, it can't turn out different! I know it can't. We'll show 'em all yet, won't we, Cuter old settler?"

Cuter old settler wagged his ears. He was a companionable horse, never kicked human beings, and bucked but seldom.

"Yep," continued Racey, sitting back against the cantle, "she's a long creek that don't bend some'ers or other."

And then the creek that was his flow of thought shot round a bend into the broad and sparkling reaches of a much pleasanter subject than the one that had to do with Harpes and Tweezys and Joneses. After a time he came to where the pleasanter subject, on her knees, was weeding among the flowers that grew tidily round Moccasin Spring. Baby-blue-eyes, low and lovely, cuddled down between tall columbines and orange wall-flowers. Side by side with the pink geranium of old-fashioned gardens the wild geranium nodded its lavender blooms in perfect harmony.

The subject, black-haired Molly Dale, rested the point of her hand-fork between two rows of ragged sailors and Johnny-jump-ups and lifted a pair of the clearest, softest blue eyes in the world in greeting to Racey Dawson.

"This is a fine time for you to be traipsing in," she told him, with a smile that revealed a deep dimple in each cheek. "I thought you promised to help me weed my garden to-day."

"I did," he returned, humbly, dismounting and sliding the reins over

Cuter's neck and head, "but you know how it is Sunday mornin's, Molly. There's a lot to do round the ranch sometimes. Now, this mornin'--"

"I'll bet," she interrupted, smoothing out the smile and frowning as severely as she was able. "I'd just tell a man that, I would. I would, indeed. I'm sure it must have taken you at least half-an-hour to shine those boots. Half-an-hour! More likely an hour. Why, I can see my face in them."

"And a very pretty face, too," said Racey, rising to the occasion. "If I owned that face I'd never stop looking at it myself. I mean--" He floundered, aghast at his own temerity.

But the lady smiled. "That'll do," she cautioned him. "Don't try to flirt with me. I won't have it."

"I ain't--" he began, and stopped.

Molly Dale continued to look at him inquiringly. But as he gave no evidence of completing the sentence, she lowered her gaze and resumed her weeding. Racey thought to have glimpsed a disappointed look in her eyes as she dropped her chin, but he could not be certain. Probably he had been mistaken. Why should she be disappointed? Why, indeed?

"Start in on that bed, Racey," she directed, nodding her head toward the columbines and wall-flowers. "There's some of that miserable pusley inching in on the baby-blue-eyes and they're such tiny things it doesn't take much to kill them. And Lord knows I had a hard enough job persuading 'em to grow in the first place."

"Wild things never cotton to living inside a fence," he told her. "They're like Injuns thataway--put 'em in a house and they don't do so well."

"Shucks, look at the Rainbow."

"Half-breed. There's the difference, and besides the Rainbow ain't lived in a house since she left the convent. She lives in a tepee same as her uncle and aunties."

"I don't care," defended Molly, straightening on her knees to survey her garden. "Every single plant in my garden except the pink geraniums is wild. Look at those thimble-berry bushes round the spring, and the blue camass along the brook, and the squaw bushes round the house, and the squaw grass and pussy paws back of the clothes-lines. Some I transplanted, the rest I grew from seeds. And where will you find a better-looking garden?"

Racey sagged back on his heels and stared critically about him.

"Yeah," he drawled, nodding a slow head, "they do look pretty good. Got to give you lots of credit. But those squaw bushes now--" He broke off, grinning.

"Oh, of course, you provoking thing!" cried she, irately. "Might know you'd pick on those squaw bushes. It is a mite too shady for 'em where they are, but still they're doing pretty well, considering. I'm satisfied--What's that?"

"That" was a horseman appearing suddenly among the cottonwoods that belted with a scattering grove the garden and the spring. The horseman was Lanpher, manager of the 88 ranch. He was followed by another rider, a lean, swarthy individual with a smooth-shaven, saturnine face. Racey knew the latter by sight and reputation. The man was one Skeel and rejoiced in the nick-name of "Alicran." The furtive scorpion whose sting is death is not indigenous to the territory, but Mr. Skeel had gained the appellation in New Mexico, a region where the tail-bearing insect may be found, and when the man left the Border for the Border's good the name left with him.

"Oh, lookout! The bushes! The bushes! Don't trample my thimble-berries!"

But Lanpher, heeding not at all Molly's cries of warning, spurred his sweating horse through the thimble-berry growth, breaking down three shrubs, and splashed cat-a-corneredly across the spring, the brook, and several rows of flowers.

The garden looked as if a miniature cyclone had passed that way.

Midway across the garden Lanpher's horse halted--halted because a flying figure in chaps had appeared from nowhere and seized it by the rein. But the horse did more than halt. In obedience to a powerful jerk administered by the man in chaps the horse pivoted on its forelegs and slid its rider out of the saddle and deposited him a-sprawl and face downward among the flowers.

Lanpher arose, snarling, to face a levelled sixshooter. It did not signify that Racey had not drawn the weapon. He was perfectly capable of shooting through the bottom of his holster and Lanpher knew it. And Racey knew that he knew it.

"Get out of this garden!" ordered Racey. "Take yore friend with you," he added, tossing the horse's bridle to Lanpher. "And if I were you I'd walk a heap careful between the rows. I just wouldn't go a-busting any more of these posies."

Lanpher went. He went carefully. He was followed quite as carefully by Racey Dawson.

When Lanpher was free of the neat rows he looked up venomously into the face of Alicran Skeel who had meticulously ridden round the garden.

"I was wondering where you was," Lanpher remarked with deep meaning.

"I ain't rooting up nobody's gyarden," Alicran returned, cheerfully. "And don't wonder too hard. Might strain yore intellect or something. I'll always be where I aim to be--always. You done scratched yore face, Lanpher."

Lanpher turned from Alicran Skeel and spat upon the ground.

"Alicran," said Racey, holding his alert attitude, "the first false move you make Lanpher gets it."

"I ain't makin' a move," said Alicran, thumbs hooked in the armholes of his vest. "I got plenty to do minding my own business."

"Huh?" Thus the sceptical Racey, who did not trust Mr. Skeel as far as he could throw a horse by the tail.

"Shucks," said Alicran, out of deference to the lady, "you don't believe me."

"Shore I do," asserted Racey, "Shore, you bet you. I--_Careful, Lanpher_! I can talk to somebody else and watch you at the same time!"

"If Alicran was worth a--" began Lanpher, furiously, and stopped.

"You was gonna say--what?" queried Alicran, softly.

"Nothing," said Lanpher, sulkily. "Put yore gun away," he continued to Racey. "I ain't gonna hurt you."

"Now that's what I call downright generous of you, Lanpher," Racey declared, warmly. "I'd shore hate to be hurt. I shore would. But if it's alla same to you, I'll keep my gun right where she is--if it's alla same to you."

"That'll do, Racey. Stop this rowing. I won't have it." It was Molly Dale pushing past Racey and standing with arms akimbo directly in front of his gun-muzzle. Racey let his gun and holster fall up-and-down, but he did not remove his hand from the gunbutt.

"Who do you want here?" Molly inquired of Lanpher.

Lanpher's rat-like features cracked into an ugly smile. "Is yore paw home?" he asked.

"Father's gone to Marysville."

"When'll he be back?"

"Day after to-morrow, I guess."

"Yeah, I kind of guess he'd want to spend the night so's he could do business in the morning, huh?" The Lanpher smile grew even uglier.

"He has some business to attend to in the morning, yes."

"I kind of thought he would. Yeah. You don't happen to know the nature of his business, do you?"

"His business is none of yours, and I'll thank you to pick up your feet and clear out, the pair of you."

"Not so fast." Lanpher spread deprecatory hands, and his smile became suddenly crooked. "I just come down to do yore paw a favour."

"A favour? You?" Blank unbelief was patent in Molly's tone and expression.

"A favour. Me. You see, yore paw's got a mortgage coming due on the tenth, and the reason yore paw went to Marysville was so he could be there bright and early to-morrow morning at the bank to renew the mortgage. Ain't I right?"

"You might be." Molly's face was now a mask of indifference, but there was no indifference in her heart. There was cold fear.

Racey's expression was likewise indifferent. But there was no fear in his heart. There was anger, cold anger. For he had sensed what was coming. He knew that the previous winter had been a hard one on the Dale fortunes. They had lost most of their little bunch of cattle in a blizzard, and the roof of their stable had collapsed, killing two team horses and a riding pony. Racey had conjectured that Mr. Dale would have been forced to borrow on mortgage to make a fresh start in the spring. And at that time in the territory the legal rate was 12 per cent. Stiff? To be sure. But the security in those days was never gilt-edged--cattle were prone to die at inconvenient moments, and land was not worth what it was east of the Mississippi.

"We'll take it I'm right," pursued Lanpher, lapping his tongue round the words as though they possessed taste and that taste pleasant. "And being that I'm right I'll say yore paw could 'a' saved himself the ride to Marysville by stayin' to home."

Oh, Lanpher was the sort of man who, as a boy, was accustomed to thoroughly enjoy the pastime of pulling wings from living flies and drowning a helpless kitten by inches.

Now he nodded his head and grinned anew, and put up a satisfied hand and rubbed his stubby chin. Racey yearned to kick him. It was shameful that Molly should be compelled to bandy words with this reptile. Racey stepped forward determinedly, and slid past Molly.

Promptly she caught him by the sleeve. "Don't mix in, Racey," she commanded with set face. "It's all right. It's all right, I tell you."

"Course it's all right," Lanpher hastened to say, more than a hint of worriment in his little black eyes. One could never be sure of these Bar S boys. They were uncertain propositions, every measly one of them. "Shore it's all right," went on the 88 manager. "I ain't meaning no harm. Yo're taking a lot for granted, Racey, a whole lot for granted."

"Nemmine what I'm taking for granted," flung back Racey. "I get along with taking only what's mine, anyway."

Which was equivalent to saying that Lanpher was a thief. But Lanpher overlooked the poorly veiled insult, and switched his gaze to Molly Dale.

"I just rid over to say," he told her, "that if yore paw is still set on renewing the mortgage when he comes back from Marysville he'll have to see me and Luke Tweezy at the 88. We done bought that mortgage from the bank."

Molly Dale said nothing. Racey felt that if he held his tongue another second he would incontinently burst. He sidestepped past the girl.

"You've said yore li'l piece," he told Lanpher, "and for a feller who was bellyaching so loud about keeping out of this deal it strikes me yo're a-getting in good and deep--buying up mortgages and all. Dunno what I mean, huh? Yep, you do. Shore you do. Think back. Think way

back, and it'll come to you. Jack Harpe. You know him. Bossy-looking jigger, seemed like. Has he been a-bearing down on you lately, Lanpher? Mustn't let him run you thataway. Bad business. Might be expensive. You can't tell. You be careful, Lanpher. You go slow--a mite slow. Yep. Well, don't lemme keep you. This way out."

He flicked a thumb westward, and stared at Lanpher with bright eyes. Lanpher's eyes dropped, lifted, then veered toward Alicran Skeel, that appreciative observer, who continued to sit his horse as good as gold and silent as a clam.

Lanpher turned to his horse without another word, slid the reins over the animal's neck and crossed them slackly. He stuck toe in stirrup and swung up. He looked down at Molly where she stood dumbly, her troubled eyes gazing at nothing and the fingers of one hand slowly plaiting and unplaiting a corner of her apron. Lanpher opened his mouth as if to speak, but no words issued. For Racey had coughed a peremptory cough.

Lanpher turned his horse's head toward the creek.

"Lookit here, Alicran," the peevish Lanpher burst forth when he and his henchman had forded the creek and were riding westward, "whatsa matter with you, anyway?"

"With me?" Alicran tilted a questioning bead. "I dunno. I don't feel a mite sick."

"What do you think I hired you for?" Heatedly.

"Gawd he knows." Business of rolling a cigarette.

"Yo're supposed to be a two-legged man with a gun."

"Yeah?" Indifferently.

"Yeah, but I got my doubts--now. Hell's bells! Wasn't you off to one side there when Racey pulled? Wasn't you?"

"Wasn't you listenin' to what Racey said at the time? Wasn't you?"

"After! I mean after! His gun was back hugging his leg after the girl slid in between. What more of a chance didja want?"

"So that's it, huh?"

"That's--it." Between the two words was a perceptible pause.

"I ain't shootin' nobody in the back. I never have yet, and I ain't beginnin' now, not for you or any other damn man."

"Say--" began Lanpher, threateningly.

Alicran Skeel turned a grim face on his employer so suddenly and sharply that Lanpher almost dodged.

"Lookit here, Lanpher," said he, quietly, "don't you try to start nothin' that I'll have to finish. I know you from way back, you lizard, and outside of my regular work I ain't taking no orders from

you. Don't gimme any more of yore lip."

"Aw, I didn't mean nothing, Alicran. You ain't got any call to get het. I need you in the business."

"Shore you do," Alicran declared, contemptuously. "You need me to do anything you ain't got the nerve to do."

"I got my duty to my company," Lanpher bluffed lamely.

"Duty bedam. You ain't got the guts for a tough job, that's whatsa matter."

This was rubbing it in. Lanpher plucked at the loose strings of his courage, and managed to draw out a faintly responsive twang. "I'll show you whether I got guts--" he began.

"Oh, look," said Alicran. "See that wild currant bush."

To Lanpher it seemed that the sixshooter was barely out of the holster before it was back again. But there was a swirl of smoke adrift in the windless air and the topmost branch of a wild currant bush thirty feet distant had been that instant cut in two.

"What was that you was gonna say?" Alicran prompted, softly.

"I forget," evaded Lanpher. "But they's one thing you wanna remember, Alicran. It don't pay to be squeamish. It comes high in the end usually. You'll find, if you keep on being mushy thisaway, that you'll have more'n you can swing at the finish."

"Is that so? You leave me do things my own way, you hear? Lemme tell you if I'd 'a' knowed all what you was up to by coming to Dale's this mornin' I'd never have allowed it."

"Allowed it!"

"Yes, allowed it, I said. Want me to spell it for you? You thumb-handed idjit, if you had any more sense you'd be a damfool. Don't you know that in anything you do, no matter what, they's no profit in unnecessary trimmings? Most always it's the extra frills on a feller's work that pushes the bridge over and lands him underneath with everything on top of him and the job to do again, if he's lucky enough to be livin' at the finish. And yore swashing through that girl's gyarden was a heap unnecessary. It was a close squeak you wasn't drilled by Racey Dawson. I wouldn't have blamed him if he had let a little light in on yore darkened soul. Done it myself in his place. And yore rubbing in that mortgage deal was another unnecessary piece o' damfoolishness. It only made Racey have it in for you more'n ever. And after acting like more kinds of a fool thataway in less time than anybody I ever see before, you sit up on yore hunkers and tell me I'll have more'n I can swing at the finish. Say, you make me laugh! Listen, Lanpher, for a feller that's come out second best with the Bar S outfit as many times as you have it looks to me like you was crowdin' Providence a heap close."

"That's all right," sulked Lanpher, then added, with a sudden flare of spite: "When I hired you as foreman I shore never expected to draw a skypilot full o' sermons into the bargain."

"No?" drawled Alicran, looking hard at Lanpher. "I often wonder just what you did hire me for."

On which Lanpher made no comment.

"Yeah," resumed Alicran, the fish having failed to bite, "I often wonder about that. Was it a foreman you wanted or a--gunman? And what did Racey mean about Jack Harpe a-bearing down on you so hard, huh?"

"Nothing, nothing, nothing a-tall," Lanpher replied, irritably.

"If Racey didn't mean nothing by it, what did yore eyes flip for and why didja shuffle yore feet?"

"Whatell business is it of yores?" burst out the goaded manager.

"None," Alicran replied, calmly. "I was just wondering. I got a curiosity to know why, thassall."

"Then hogtie yore curiosity--or you'll be gettin' yore time. I'm free to admit I need you, like I said before, but I can do without you if I gotta."

"That's just where yo're dead wrong," Alicran promptly contradicted. "You can't do without me. Lanpher, I like the job of bein' yore foreman. I like it so well that if you was to fire me I dunno what I wouldn't do. You know, Lanpher, a man is a whole lot bigger target than the branch of a wild currant bush."

Frankly speculative, the eyes of Alicran travelled up and down the spare frame of the 88 manager. Which gave Lanpher furiously to think, as it were.

"Why," said he, forcing a smile, "I guess we understand each other, Alicran."

"Shore we do," said Alicran, cheerfully. "And don't you forget it."

CHAPTER XVII

SIGNED PAPER

When the two 88 men had departed Molly Dale continued to stand where she was for a space and stare dumbly at nothing. Racey, realizing well enough that her world had crashed to pieces about her, wished that she would burst into tears. A sobbing woman is easily comforted. It is simply necessary to pet her and keep on petting her till her grief is assuaged. But this hard stillness of Molly Dale's gave Racey no opening. He could but gaze at her uncomfortably and shift his weight from one foot to the other.

"That was a dirty trick of the Marysville bank." Thus tentatively.

It is doubtful whether Molly heard him. "Poor Father," she said in a

low tone.

"Lookit here, Molly," said Racey, struck by a bright idea, "I've got a li'l money I been saving. I--I want you should take it."

Molly continued to stare into the distance.

"I've got some money--" he began again, thinking that Molly had not heard.

But she turned her face toward him at that, and he saw that her eyes were shining with unshed tears.

"Racey," she said, with a slight catch in her voice, and laid her hand lightly on his arm. "Racey, you're a dear, good boy. We--we'll manage somehow. I mum-must tell Mother."

Abruptly she swung away and left him. He watched her cross the garden and enter the kitchen of the ranch-house. Then slowly, thoughtfully, he set to work repairing as best he could the ravages left in the garden by the hoofs of Lanpher's horse.

Came then Swing Tunstall on a paint pony and was moved to mirth at sight of Racey Dawson engaged in earthy labour.

"See the pret-ty flowers," mouthed Swing Tunstall, after the fashion of a child wrestling with the First Reader. "Does Racey like pret-ty flow-ers? Yeth, he'th crathy ab-out them. Ain't he cute squattin' there all same hoptoad and a-workin' away two-handed? Only he ain't a-workin' now. He's stopped workin'. He's gettin' all red in the face. He's mad at Swing who never done him no harm nohow. Whatsa matter, Racey?" he added in his natural voice. "What bit you on the ear this fine an' summer day?"

Racey looked over his shoulder toward the house. Then he got to his feet and strode across the garden to where Swing Tunstall sat his horse.

"Swing," said he, quietly, "are you busy just now?"

Swing, suspecting a catch somewhere, stared in swift suspicion. "Why--uh--no," was his cautious reply.

"Then go off some'ers and die."

Without waiting for Swing's possible comment Racey turned his back on his friend and walked unhurriedly to his horse Cuter. Swing slouched sidewise in the saddle and watched him go.

He rolled a cigarette, lit it, and inhaled luxuriously. And all without removing his gaze from Racey's back. He watched while Racey flung the reins crosswise over Cuter's neck, mounted, and rode down into the creek. When he saw that Racey, after allowing Cuter to drink nearly all he wanted, rode on across the creek and up the farther bank, Swing's brow became corrugated with a puzzled frown.

"He means business," muttered Swing. "I ain't seen that look on his face for some time. I wonder what did happen this morning."

His eyes still fixed on the dwindling westward moving object that was Racey Dawson and his horse, he smoked his cigarette to a butt. Then he picked up his reins, found his stirrups, and rode away.

Racey Dawson, bound for the 88 ranch-house, did not smoke. He did not feel like it. He did not feel like doing anything but facing Lanpher. What he would be moved to do while facing Lanpher he was not sure. Time enough to cross that bridge when the crucial moment should arrive. He knew what he wanted to do, but he knew, too, that he could not do it unless Lanpher made the first break. Otherwise it would be murder, and Racey was no murderer.

"He'll back down if he can, the snake," Racey said aloud. "And he'll be shore to slick and slime round till all's blue. Damn him, riding over those flowers of hers!"

Racey did not hurry. He had no desire to come up with Lanpher on the open range. It would be better to meet the man at his own ranch-house--where there were apt to be plenty of witnesses. Racey realized perfectly that he might need a witness, several witnesses, before the sunset. He hoped that all the boys of the 88 outfit would be at the ranch. He hoped that Luke Tweezy would be there, too. Lanpher and Tweezy together, the pups.

"Fat Jakey Pooley's li'l playmates," he muttered and swore again--heartily.

He understood now the true reason for Jack Harpe's lack of activity. This purchasing by Lanpher and Tweezy of the Dale mortgage was the eminently safe and lawful plan of Jakey Pooley. In his letter Fat Jakey had written that it would take longer. And wasn't it taking longer? It was. Racey thought he saw the plan in its entirety, and was in a boil accordingly. He would have been in considerably more of a boil had he been blessed with the ability to read the future.

When he rode in among the buildings of the 88 ranch his eyes were gratified by the sight of freckle-faced Bill Allen straddling a cracker-box in front of the bunkhouse and having his hair cut by Rod Rockwell.

"That's right," Bill Allen was complaining, "whynell don't you cut off the whole ear while yo're about it?"

"Aw, shut up," said Rod Rockwell, "it was only the tip, and I didn't go to cut it, anyway."

"I don't give a damn whether you went to cut it or not, you cut it! I can feel the blood running down the back of my neck."

"That's only sweat, you bellerin' calf! Hold still, can't you? Djuh want me to hurt you?"

"You done have already," snarled Bill Allen, fidgeting on his cracker-box. "You wait till I cut yore hair after. I'll fix you. I'll scalp you, you pot-walloper."

"That's right, Bill," said Racey, checking his horse beside the quarrelling pair. "Talk to him. Givem hell."

"Lo, Racey," grinned the two youngsters in unison.

"Where did you rustle _this_ hoss?" asked Bill Allen.

"Nemmine where," smiled Racey, for both Bill and Rod had been his friends in his 88 days and could therefore insult him with impunity.

"I wouldn't wanna put li'l boys in the way of temptation. Does the cook still spank him regular, Rod?"

"Stab his hoss with the scissors, Rod," begged Bill Allen. "Let's see what for a rider Mr. Dawson is."

Racey pressed his off rein against his horse's neck. The animal whirled on a nickel, and reared, hard held, after the first plunge. The flying pebbles plentifully showered the two punchers. Bill Allen swore heartily, for one of the pebbles had clipped his damaged ear.

"You see what a good rider I am," Racey said, sweetly. "Can't feaze me, nohow. Sit still, Bill, and lemme try can I jump the li'l hoss over you. Rod, do you mind movin' back a yard?"

"No," said Bill Allen, decidedly, and picked up his cracker-box and retreated backward to the bunkhouse door. "No, you don't play any such tricks as that on me. He'd just as soon try it as not, the idjit," he added over his shoulder to Tile Stanton who was peering out to see what all the racket was about.

"Let him try it," Tile Stanton advised promptly. "If the cayuse does happen to hit yore head, it won't hurt yore thick skull. G'on, Bill, be a sport."

"Be a sport yoreself," returned Bill Allen, skipping into the bunkhouse. "Where's the other scissors? I'll finish this job myself."

Racey, left alone with Rod Rockwell, smiled slightly. "Bill ain't got a sense of humour this mornin'," he observed, softly. "He must 'a' thought I meant it."

There was no answering smile on Rod's features as he looked up at Racey Dawson. "Racey," said he, laying a hand on the horse's mane, "have you been to McFluke's lately?"

"I ain't," replied Racey, his smile fading out.

"Then keep on stayin' away."

"As bad as that?"

"As bad as that."

"McFluke been talking?" was Racey's next question.

"If McFluke was the only one it would be a mighty short hoss to curry."

"Then there are others?"

"Plenty." Rod Rockwell gave a short, hard laugh.

"All of Nebraska's bunch, huh?"

"All but Nebraska."

"How long has this been going on--this talking, I mean?"

"Doc Coffin started it about a week ago. He told Windy Taylor of the Double Diamond A he was gonna ventilate yore good health some fine day. He wasn't drunk, neither."

"Then he must have serious intentions."

"Somethin' like that. Five of us heard him say it. Lookit, while I was at McFluke's alone day before yesterday Doc and Peaches Austin and Honey Hoke was all three bellying the bar, and while I was tucking away my nosepaint they was mumbling to themselves how you was all kinds of a pup and would stand shootin' any day."

"Mumblin' loud enough for you to hear, huh?"

"Naturally, or I wouldn't 'a' heard it."

"Then they wanted you to hear. Guess they know yo're a friend of mine."

"Guess they do now," Rod Rockwell said, grimly.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothin'. I just talked to 'em a li'l bit."

"And you wasn't shot? Didn't they do anything?"

"Hell, no," Rod denied, disgustedly. "Kansas Casey come in just at the wrong time, and throwed down on the four of us and said he'd do all the shooting they was to be done. And when he went he took me with him. Said he'd arrest me if I didn't go peaceable. Ain't that just like Kansas?"

"Wearing the star shore means a lot to him."

"Aw, since he's been deputy he's gotten too big for his boots. And Jake the same way. The country's played out, that's whatsa matter. Law and order, law and order, till a feller can't turn round no more without fallin' into jail."

"She's one lucky thing for you, cowboy," said Racey, seriously, "that Kansas did come. Three of 'em! You had yore gall. Lookit here, next time you let 'em talk. Names don't hurt less they're said to a feller's face."

"They knowed you was my friend," said Rod, simply. "Anyway, you keep away from McFluke's."

"Maybe I will take yore advice. It has its points of interest, as the feller said when he sat down on the porkumpine. And speakin' of porkumpines, have you seen Lanpher?"

"Shore. Him and Alicran pulled in a hour ago. Guess he's in the

office--Lanpher."

"See anything of Tweezy lately?"

"Luke seems to be living with us _lately_."

"I never knowed him and Lanpher was good friends?" Racey cast at a venture.

"I didn't either--till lately."

"Jack Harpe ever come out here?"

"Long-geared feller--supposed to have capital? Hangs out in Farewell? The one that Marie girl tried to down? Bo, he ain't been here as I know of, but then he could easy drift in and out and me not know it."

Racey nodded. "Marie jump Jack again, do you know?" he asked.

"Damfino. Don't guess so, though. I seen her pass him on Main Street, and she didn't even look at him."

"I'll bet he looked at her."

"You can gamble he did. He ain't trustin' her, not him. I wonder what was at the bottom of the fuss between him an' her?" A sharp glance at Racey accompanied this remark.

"I dunno," yawned Racey. "They say Mr. Harpe has had a career both high, wide, and handsome."

"That's what I'd call one too many," grinned Rod Rockwell.

"You can put down a bet the career has been one too many, too."

"Yeah?" said Rod, wondering what was coming next.

"Yeah," said Racey, nodding mysteriously, but disappointing his friend by immediately changing the subject. "Say, Rod, I'd take it as a favour if you and Tile and Bill would sort of freeze round the bunkhouse till after I'm through with Lanpher."

"Shore," said Rod. "Tweezy's in the office, too, I guess."

Racey nodded, and started his horse toward the office.

He understood well enough that Rod and the other two punchers would not interfere in any way with him and whatever acts he might be called upon to perform during his conversation with Lanpher. Loyal to the last cartridge and after whenever it was ranch business, none of the 88 punchers ever felt it incumbent upon him to go out of his way so far as Lanpher personally was concerned. The manager was not the man either to engender or to foster personal loyalty.

At the open doorway of the office Racey dismounted. He dropped the reins over his horse's head and walked to the doorway. There he stopped and looked in. He saw Lanpher sitting behind his big homemade desk. Lanpher was watching him. At one side of the desk, on a chair tilted back against the wall, sat Luke Tweezy. Luke was chewing a

straw. His eyes were half closed, but Racey detected their glitter. Luke Tweezy was not overlooking any bets at that moment.

Racey stepped across the doorsill and halted just within the room. The thumb of his left hand was hooked in his belt. His right hand hung at his side. He was ready for action.

"Lanpher," said Racey without preliminary, "I want to serve notice on you here and now that if I catch you within one mile of Moccasin Spring you come a-shooting because I will."

Lanpher's hand remained motionless on the desktop. Then the man picked up a pencil and began to tap it on the wood. He licked his lips cat-fashion.

"Is that a threat or a promise?" he asked.

"You can take it she's both," Racey told him.

"You hear that, Luke?" Lanpher turned to Luke Tweezy. "Threatenin' my life, huh?"

"Shore," nodded Luke Tweezy. "Actionable, that is. Mustn't threaten a man's life, Racey. Against the law, you know."

Racey moved to one side and leaned his back comfortably against the wall. "Against the law, huh, Luke?" he said nervously. "Then I can be arrested?"

"You can," Luke Tweezy declared with evident relish. "That is, you can if Lanpher wants to make a complaint."

"You hear, Lanpher?" asked Racey, still more nervously. "You wanna make a complaint, huh?"

Lanpher had not failed to note the nervousness of Racey's tone. Now he licked his lips again. He felt quite cheerful of a sudden. It gave him a warm and pleasant feeling to think that Racey Dawson was to a certain degree in his power. Having licked his lips several times he rubbed his chin judicially and coughed, likewise judicially.

"Well, I dunno as I wanna make a complaint exactly," he said, slowly. "But you wanna walk a chalkline round here, Racey. You got too much to say for a fact."

"What do you think, Luke?" queried Racey. "Have I got too much to say?"

"You heard what Lanpher said," replied the cautious Luke.

"Yep, I heard all right. I just wanted to get yore opinion, because I ain't through yet--through talking, I mean. What I was going to say is that I wouldn't be particular about catching Lanpher round Moccasin Spring. If I only _heard_ he'd been hanging round there it would be enough."

"Meaning you'll drill him on suspicion?"

"Meaning I'll do just that."

"Now yo're threatenin' me again." Thus Lanpher.

"Takes you a long time to wake up, don't it?" The nervousness had vanished from Racey's voice. "Lanpher, you lousy skunk! Why don't you pull? There's a gun in that open drawer not six inches from your hand. Go after it, you hound-dog!"

Lanpher was not inordinately brave. He would go out of his way to avoid an appeal to lethal weapons. But Racey's words were more than he could stand. His hand jerked sidewise and down toward the sixshooter in the open drawer.

Bang! Shooting from the hip Racey drove an accurate bullet through the manager's right forearm. Lanpher grunted and gurgled with pain. But he made no attempt to seize his weapon with his left hand.

Luke Tweezy picked himself up from the floor where he had thrown himself a split second before the shot. Luke Tweezy's leathery face was mottled yellow with rage.

"I'll get you ten years for this!" he squalled, pointing a long arm at Racey. "You started this fight! You tried to murder him!"

"Oh, say not so," said Racey. "If I'd wanted to kill him I wouldn't 'a' plugged him in the arm, would I? That wouldn't 'a' been sensible."

"You provoked this fraycas!" snarled Luke, disregarding Racey's point in a true lawyer-like way. "You--"

"Why, no, Luke, yo're wrong, all wrong," interrupted Swing Tunstall, leaning over the windowsill at Tweezy's back. "I seen the whole thing, I did, and I didn't see Racey do anything he shouldn't. I could swear to it on the stand if I had to," he added, thoughtfully.

Come then Rod Rockwell, Bill Allen, and Tile Stanton from the bunkhouse. None made any comment on the state of affairs. But while Rod fetched water in a basin, Bill Allen cut away the sleeve of his groaning employer, and made all ready.

A few minutes later Alicran Skeel entered the office. "I thought I heard a gun," he drawled, his calm eyes embracing everyone in the room.

"That man!" bubbled Luke Tweezy, shaking his fist at Racey. "That man tried to kill Lanpher! I call upon you not to let him leave the premises until I can go to Farewell and swear out a warrant for his arrest."

"That man," said Swing Tunstall, pointing a derisive finger at Luke Tweezy, "is a liar by the clock. I saw the whole thing. And all I gotta say is that Lanpher went after his gun first."

"I ain't doubting yore word, Swing," Alicran said, tactfully, "but they seems to be a difference of opinion sort of, and--"

"I say that Luke Tweezy is a damn liar," reasserted Swing, "and they ain't no difference of opinion about that."

"Well, of course, if Luke--" Alicran did not complete the sentence.

"I am a lawyer," Luke Tweezy explained, hurriedly. "I ain't paying any attention to what his man says--now."

"Or any other time," jibed Swing.

"Any of you boys see this?" Alicran asked of his three punchers.

"He tried to kill me, I tell you!" Lanpher gritted through his teeth.

"He didn't gimme a chance!"

"Any of you boys see it?" repeated Alicran, paying no attention to Lanpher.

"How could we?" asked Rod Rockwell, glancing up from the bandaging of Lanpher's arm. "We was all in the bunkhouse."

"Then for the benefit of the gents who wasn't here," said Racey, smoothly, "I don't mind saying that I told Lanpher to go after his gun, and he did, and I did."

"He's a liar," gibbered Lanpher. "Alicran, ain't you man enough to take care of Racey Dawson?"

Alicran nodded composedly. "I guess him and me would come to some kind of an agreement provided I was shore he needed taking care of. But I ain't none shore he does. Looks like it was a even break to me--the word of you and Luke against his and Swing's. And what's fairer than that I'd like to know?"

"Alicran!" squalled Lanpher. "I'm telling you to--"

"Yo're all worked up, that's whatsa matter," Alicran assured him.

"You don't mean more'n half you say. You lie down now after Rod gets through with you and cool off--cool off considerable, I would. Do you a heap o' good. Yeah."

"And when you get all well, Lanpher," put in Racey, "will I still be a liar like you say?"

Lanpher looked at Racey and looked away. His heated blood was cooling fast. His arm--Lord, how it hurt! He perceived that discretion was necessary to preserve the rest of his precious skin from future perforation.

"I--I guess I was a li'l hasty," he mumbled, his eyelids lowered.

"Now that's what I call right down handsome--for you," drawled Racey.

"Gawd knows I ain't a hawg. I'm satisfied. Luke, s'pose you and me walk out to the corral together. I got a secret for yore pearly ear."

It was obvious that Luke Tweezy was of two minds. Racey grinned to see the other's hesitation.

"What you scared of, Luke?" he inquired. "It ain't far to the corral, and you can ask Alicran to come outside and watch me while I'm talkin' to you."

"I ain't got any business with you," denied Luke Tweezy.

"Oh, yo're mistaken, a heap mistaken. Yes, indeedy, you got business with me. But it ain't my fault, Luke. I can't help it. Of course, if you don't wanna talk to me private like, I can reel her off in here. My thoughts were all of you and yore feelin's, Luke, when I said the corral. I was shore you'd be happier there."

"I ain't got a thing to hide, not a thing," declared Luke Tweezy. "But if you want to we'll go out to the corral."

They went out to the corral and Racey found a seat on an empty nailkeg. Luke Tweezy sat perforce on the hardbaked ground. He hunched up his legs, clasped his hands round his shins, and rested his sharp chin on his bony knees. His eyes were fixed on Racey. The latter seemed in no hurry to begin. He rolled a cigarette with irritating slowness. To force one's opponent to wait is always good strategy.

"Well," said Luke Tweezy.

"Is it?" smiled Racey. "Have it yore own way, if you like. Lookit, Luke, you buy a lot of scrip now and then, don't you?"

"Shore," nodded Luke.

"Good big discount, I'll bet."

"Why not? I ain't in business for my health. They's no law--"

"Of course there ain't. And yore mortgages, Luke. Do a good business in mortgages, don't you?"

"So-so."

"This mortgage of Old Man Dale's now--you figurin' on foreclosin' if he can't pay?"

"Whadda you know about Dale's mortgage?"

"I heard Lanpher yawpin' about it. He talks too loud sometimes, don't he? You gonna foreclose on him, I suppose?"

"Like that!" Luke Tweezy snapped his teeth together with a click.

"But foreclosing takes time. You can't sell a man up the minute his mortgage is due. There's got to be notices in the papers and the like of that. Suppose now he gets to borrow the money some'ers before the sale? He'll have plenty of time to look round."

"Who'd lend him money?"

"Old Salt would. He's tight, but he'd rather have Dale at Moccasin Spring than someone else, and he'd lend Dale money rather than have him drove out."

"Shucks, he wouldn't lend him a dime. I know Old Salt. Don't fret, we'll foreclose when we get ready."

"I ain't fretting," said Racey. "You'll foreclose, huh? Aw right. I

just wanted to be shore. You can go now, Luke."

Thus dismissed Tweezy rose to his feet and glared down at Racey Dawson. His little eyes shone with spite.

"Say it," urged Racey. "You'll bust if you don't."

But Luke Tweezy did not say it. He knew better. Without a word he returned to the house.

"They ain't going to foreclose, that's a cinch," said Racey when the ponies were fox-trotting toward Soogan Creek and the Bar S range five minutes later. "Luke's telling me they were proves they ain't."

"Shore," acquiesced Swing, "but what are they gonna do?"

"I ain't figured that out yet."

"You mean you dunno. That's the size of it,"

"How'd you happen to be at that window so providential this mornin'?" Racey queried, hurriedly.

"How'd you s'pose? Don't you guess I'd know they was something up from the nice, kind way you said so-long to me back there at the Dales'? Huh? 'Course I did--I ain't no fool. You'd oughta had sense enough to take me along in the first place instead of makin' me trail you miles an' miles. And where would you 'a' been if I hadn't come siftin' along, I'd like to know? Might know you'd need a witness. Them two jiggers put together could easy make you lots of trouble. What was you thinking of, anyhow, Racey?"

"How could I tell they were _both_ gonna be together? Besides, three of the 88 boys were over in the bunkhouse. I was counting on them."

"Over in the bunkhouse, huh? A lot of good they'd done you there. A lot of good. Oh, yo're bright, Racey. I'd tell a man that, I would."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SHOWDOWN

Racey, walking suddenly round the corner of the Dale stable, came upon Mr. Dale tilting a bottle toward the sky. The business end of the bottle was inserted between Mr. Dale's lips. His Adam's apple slid gravely up and down. He did not see Racey Dawson.

"Howdy," said the puncher.

Mr. Dale removed the bottle, whirled, and thrust the bottle behind him.

"Oh, it's you," he said, blinking, and slowly producing the bottle. "Huh-have one on me."

"Not to-day," refused Racey, shaking his head. "I got a misery in my stummick. Doctor won't lemme drink any."

"Yeah?" Thus Mr. Dale with interest. Then, again proffering the liquor, he said: "This here's fine for the misery. Better have a snooter."

"No, I guess not."

"Well, I will," averred Mr. Dale and downed three swallows rapidly. "Yeah," he continued, driving in the cork with the heel of his hand, "a feller needs a drink now and then."

"Helps him stand off trouble, don't it?" Racey hazarded, sympathetically, perceiving an opening.

"Shore does," answered Mr. Dale. "I should say so. Dunno who'd oughta know that better'n I do. Trouble, Racey--well, say, I'm just made of trouble I am."

"Aw, it ain't as bad as that," encouraged Racey.

"Yes, it is, too," contradicted the other. "I got more trouble on my hands than a rat-tailed hoss tied short in fly-time. Trouble--nothing but."

"Nothing is as bad as it looks."

"Heaps of times she's worse."

"I'm yore friend. You know me. If I can help you--"

"Nobody can help me. I dunno what to do, Racey."

"Well, you know best, I expect, but I've always found if I talk over with somebody else anythin' that bothers me it don't seem to stick up half so big."

Mr. Dale sank down upon one run-over heel and stared blearily off across the flats. The bottle in his hip-pocket made a pronounced bulge under the cloth.

"I dunno what to do, Racey," he said, looking up sidewise at Racey where he stood in front of him, his hands in his pockets and his hat on the back of his head. "I owe a lot of money. I dunno how I'm gonna pay it, and I'm worried."

"Let the other feller do the worrying," suggested Racey.

"I wish I could," said Mr. Dale, drearily. "I wish I could."

"Why don't you, then?"

"He'll foreclose--they'll foreclose, I mean."

"Aw, maybe not."

"Yeah, they will. I know 'em! ---- 'em! They'd have the shirt off my back if they could. You see, Racey, she's thisaway: I borrowed five

thousand dollars from the Marysville bank, on a mortgage, and there they went and sold the mortgage to Lanpher of the 88 and Luke Tweezy. And there's the rub, Racey. The bank would 'a' renewed all right, but you can put down a bet and go the limit that Lanpher and Tweezy won't. I done asked 'em."

"Five thousand dollars is a lot of money," said Racey, soberly. He had been thinking that the mortgage would not have been above two thousand at the outside. But five thousand! What in Sam Hill had old Dale done with the money? In the next breath Dale answered the unspoken question.

"I needed the money," he said in a low voice, his eyes lowered, "and--and I had bad luck with it."

"Yeah, I know, the cattle dying and all."

"Cattle! What cattle?" Mr. Dale stared blankly at Racey. "Oh, them! Hell, they didn't have nothin' to do with it, them cattle didn't. I'd worked out a system, Racey--a system to beat roulette, and I was shore it was all right. By Gawd, it was all right! They was nothin' wrong with that system. But I had bad luck. I had most awful bad luck."

"And the system, I take it, didn't work?"

"It didn't--against my bad luck."

Mr. Dale again dropped his eyes, and Racey stared down at the hump-shouldered old figure with something akin to pity in his gaze. Certainly he was sorry for him. He was not in the least scornful despite the fact that it did not seem possible that any sensible man could be such a fool. A system--a system to beat roulette! And bad luck! The drably ancient and moth-eaten story with which every unsuccessful gambler seeks to establish an alibi.

"Whose wheel was it?" said Racey.

"Lacey's at Marysville."

"In the back room of the Sweet Dreams, huh? An' there's nothing crooked about Lacey's wheel, either. It's as square as Lacey himself."

"Lacey's wasn't the only wheel. They was McFluke's, too."

So McFluke had a wheel, had he? This was news to Racey Dawson.

"How long has McFluke been runnin' a wheel?" inquired Racey.

"Quite a while," was the vague reply.

"A year?"

"Maybe longer. I dunno."

"Funny it never got round."

"It was a private wheel. Only for his friends. Nothin' public about it."

"Who used to play it besides you?" persisted Racey, hanging to his subject like a bull-pup to a tramp's trousers.

Mr. Dale wrinkled his forehead. "Besides me? Lessee now. They were Doc Coffin, Nebraska Jones, Honey Hoke, and Punch-the-breeze Thompson."

"Nobody else?"

"Aw, Galloway and Norton and that bunch," Mr. Dale said, shamefacedly.

Racey nodded his head slowly. A crooked wheel. Of course it was crooked. Why not? That Dale, Galloway, Norton, and a few other gentlemen of the neighbourhood were under their wives' thumbs to such a degree that they did not dare to gamble openly was a matter of common knowledge. What more natural than that someone should provide them with a private gambling place? With such cappers as Nebraska and his gang, losers would not feel equal to making much of an outcry. It must be a paying occupation for McFluke, Nebraska, or whoever was at the bottom of the business.

Racey nodded again and squatted down on his heels. He picked up a stick and squinted along its length.

"None of my business, of course," he said, casually, "but would you mind telling me how much you lost to McFluke?"

"About seven thousand."

Racey looked up at the sky. Seven thousand dollars. The full amount of the mortgage and two thousand more. And McFluke had it all.

"You see," said Mr. Dale, dolefully. "I began to make money after I'd been here awhile and my health come back. Yeah, I made money all right, all right." He pushed back his hat and scratched a grizzled head. "I had luck," he added. "But you wasn't round here then. You'd gone to the Bend."

"Yep, I'd gone to the Bend, damitall, and it shore seems like I'd stayed there too long. Didn't you ever guess McFluke's wheel wasn't straight?"

"Aw, it was so straight. Mac wouldn't cheat nobody. Yo're--yo're mistaken, Racey."

"I am, huh? Likell I'm mistaken. I know what I'm talking about. I tell you flat, McFluke is so crooked he could swallow a nail and spit out a corkscrew. And he's got that wheel trained. You just bet he has. Look under the table and see what he's doing with his feet or his knees. My Gawd, Dale, didn't you know they make roulette wheels with a brake like a wagon?"

"I--I've heard of 'em," Mr. Dale nodded, hesitatingly. "But I'm shore Mac's is on the level."

"And you bet seven thousand dollars it was on the level, didn't you?"

"But--"

"But where did you come out? Do you think you ever got a show for yore

money?"

"Oh, I won a bet now and then," defended Mr. Dale.

"Small ones, shore. Naturally he has to let you win now and then to sort of toll you along and keep you good-natured. You won now and then, yep. But did you ever win when you had a sizable stake up?"

Mr. Dale shook his head. "No, come to think of it, I don't believe I ever did."

"I knowed you didn't," exclaimed Racey, triumphantly. "I tell you that wheel is crooked."

"Not so loud," cautioned Mr. Dale. "They'll hear you in the house."

"Don't they know nothing about it a-tall?" probed Racey.

"They know about the five-thousand-dollar mortgage," admitted Dale, reluctantly.

Racey rubbed his chin. "I was here when Molly found it out."

Mr. Dale nodded miserably. He was too utterly wretched to resent Racey's interference with his affairs. "She--she told me," he said.

"Don't they know about the other two thousand you lost to McFluke, or what you dropped at Lacey's?"

Mr. Dale shook his head. "I never told 'em. I--I only lost fifteen or sixteen hundred at Lacey's, anyway."

"Fifteen or sixteen hundred is a whole lot when you ain't got it," said the direct and brutal Racey. "Instead of seven thousand then, you done lost eighty-five or eighty-six hundred. I swear I don't see how you managed to lose all that and yore family not find it out."

"I kept quiet."

"I guess you did keep quiet. Gawd, yes! Lookit, Dale, I'm going to help you out of this. But you'll have to start fresh. You've got to go in and make a clean breast to the family about where the other thirty-six hundred over and above the five thousand went."

Mr. Dale's jaw dropped. "I--I never even told 'em where the five thousand went."

"Huh? I thought you said they knew about the mortgage--after Molly found it out."

"They knew about the mortgage all right enough, but they dunno where the money went. Yuh see, Racey, I--I done told 'em I lost it in a land deal."

"You did! Aw right, you go right in and tell 'em the truth, all of it, every last smidgen."

"I cuc-can't!" protested Mr. Dale. "I ain't got the heart!"

"You ain't got the nerve, you mean. You go on and tell 'em, Dale, an' I'll fix it up for you, but I won't fix up anything for you if you ain't gonna play square with those women from now on. And you can't play square with 'em without you begin by telling 'em the truth."

"How you gonna help me out?" temporized Mr. Dale.

"I'm goin' to Old Salt, that's what I'm going to do. I'll fix it up with him to lend you the money."

Mr. Dale shook his head. "He won't do it."

"Shore he'll do it. You don't think he's gonna have somebody else come in here in yore place, do you? Not much he ain't. He'll lend you the money and glad to."

"I done already asked him, an' he wouldn't."

"You asked him, and he wouldn't?" repeated Racey, stupidly. "When did you ask him?"

"About two months ago--soon as ever I found out I wouldn't be able to pay off the mortgage."

"And he wouldn't lend it to you? I don't understand it, damfi do. It ain't reasonable. Lookit here, did you tell him what you wanted it for? Did you tell him about the mortgage?"

"Non-no," said Mr. Dale in a still, small voice. "I didn't."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I was afraid he'd take advantage of me. I was afraid he'd fix it so as to take my ranch away from me if he knowed how bad and what for I needed it."

"But ain't that exactly what the Marysville bank could 'a' done if it wanted?" demanded Racey, aghast at the Dale obtuseness.

"Yeah, but I had hopes of standing off the bank, and--"

"But you ain't got any hope of standing off Lanpher and Tweezy. Nary a hope. Now lookit, Old Salt is yore only chance round here. Of course, he'd fix it to take away yore ranch if he could. That's his business. And it's yore business to see he don't. An' it's my business to help you see he don't. Suppose now I go to Old Salt and get him to lend you the money on a mortgage, say a ten-year mortgage?"

"But I got one mortgage on the place now. He'd never take a second mortgage."

"Naw, naw, that ain't gonna be the way of it a-tall. It will be fixed so's Old Salt's mortgage won't go into effect till the first one's paid off."

"But then till the first one is paid off--maybe it will be three-four days--Old Salt's five thousand will be unsecured."

"It won't be unsecured. It won't go out of Saltoun's hands. He'll pay

off the mortgage himself."

"Do you think you can get a easy rate from Old Salt?" asked Dale, the light of a new hope dawning in his faded old eyes. "It's a awful tax on a feller paying the full legal rate."

"We'll have to take what we can get, but I'll do my best to tone it down. Sometimes a man will take less if he has another object in view besides the interest. And you bet Old Salt will have a plenty big object in view in keeping out Lanpher and Tweezy. Money ain't tight now, anyway. I'll do the best I can for you. Don't you fret. You go on in now and square up with the women and I'll slide out to the Bar S instanter."

Mr. Dale, the poor old man, laid a hand on Racey's strong young forearm. "I'll tell 'em," he said. "I'll tell 'em. You--you fix it up with Old Salt."

Abruptly he turned away and hobbled hurriedly around the corner of the barn.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SHOOTING

Racey Dawson, riding back to Moccasin Spring, was in a warm and pleasant frame of mind. With him rode Old Salt, and with Old Salt rode Old Salt's check book. Racey had, after much argument and persuasion, made excellent arrangements with Mr. Saltoun. The latter, anxious though he was to own the Dale place himself, had agreed to pay off the mortgage bought by Lanpher and Tweezy and take in return a 6 per cent. mortgage for ten years. No wonder Racey was pleased with himself. He had a right to be.

As they crossed the Marysville and Farewell trail Racey's horse picked up a fortuitous stone. Racey dismounted. Mr. Saltoun, slouching comfortably back against his cante, looked doubtfully down at Racey where he stood humped over, the horse's hoof between his knees, tapping with a knife handle at the lodged stone.

"A ten-year mortgage is a long one, kind of," he said, slowly.

"I thought we'd settled all that." Racey lifted a quick head.

"Shore we've done settled it," Mr. Saltoun acquiesced, promptly. "That's all right. I'm going through with my part of it. Gotta do it. Nothing else to do. I was just a-thinking, that's all."

Racey merely grunted. He resumed his tapping.

"Alla same," Mr. Saltoun said, suddenly, "I don't believe this Jack Harpe feller had anything to do with this mortgage deal, Racey."

"Don't you?"

"No, I don't. You can't make me believe they's any coon in _that_ tree. If they was why ain't Jack Harpe done something before this? Tell me that. Why ain't he?"

"Damfino."

"Shore you don't. You was mistaken, Racey. Badly mistaken. Yore judgment was out by a mile. She's all just Luke Tweezy and that lousy skunk of a Lanpher trying to act spotty. No more than that."

"Well, ain't that enough?"

"Shore, but--"

"But nothing. Where'd you be if I hadn't found out about it, huh? Wouldn't you look nice feedin' other folks' cows on yore grass?"

"Alla same, they wouldn't 'a' been Jack Harpe's cows."

"Which is all you know about it. You never would take warning, and you know it. How about the time when Blakely was the 88 manager, and they were rustling yore cattle so fast it made a quarter-hoss racing full split look slow?"

"Well, but--" interrupted Mr. Saltoun, beginning to fidget with his reins.

"And the time Cutnose Canter tried to run off a whole herd of hosses on you?" Racey breezed on, warming to his subject. "You wouldn't let Chuck warn you. Oh, no, not you. He didn't know what he was talking about. No, he didn't. And how did it turn out, huh? What did that li'l party cost you? Yeah, I would begin frizzling round if I was you. You'll generally notice the feller who's the last to laugh enjoys it the most. I'm that feller--me and Swing both."

"Aw, say--"

"Yeah, me and Swing will be thanking you for a healthy big check apiece when our time-limit is up. Yes, indeedy, that's us."

"Is _that_ so? _Is_ that so? You got another guess, Racey, and it's me that will get the most out of that laugh. If it's like I say, even if Lanpher and Tweezy are trying a game you don't get paid a nickel if Jack Harpe and his cattle ain't in on the deal. You done put in the Jack Harpe end of it yoreself. I heard you. So did Tom Loudon, and Swing, too. Jack Harpe. Yeah. He is the tune you was playing alla time. And up to now I can't see that Jack Harpe has made a move, not a move."

"But--"

"Lanpher and Tweezy wasn't in the bet," insisted Mr. Saltoun. "It was Jack Harpe, and you know it. 'If Jack Harpe don't start trying to get Dale's ranch away from him and run cattle in on you inside of six months you don't have to pay us.' Them was yore very words, Racey. I got 'em wrote down all so careful. I know 'em by heart."

"I'll bet you do," Racey told him, heartily. "I'll gamble you been studying those words in all yore spare time."

"It pays to be careful," smiled Mr. Saltoun. "Always bear that in mind. I ain't wanting to rub anything in, Racey, but if you'd been a mite more careful, just a mite more careful, you wouldn't be out so much at the finish. Drinks are on you, cowboy. And when you stop to think that I'd 'a' made the bet just the same if you'd wanted Lanpher and Tweezy in on it. Only you didn't."

"Guess I must 'a' overlooked 'em, huh?" grinned Racey. "Feller can't think of everything, can he?"

"I'm glad to see yo're taking it thisaway," approved Mr. Saltoun. "Working for six months for nothing don't seem to bother you a-tall."

"I ain't worked six months for nothing--yet," pointed out Racey. "The six months ain't up--yet. You wanna remember, Salt, that a race ain't over till the horses cross the line."

"You gotta prove Jack Harpe's connection," began Mr. Saltoun.

Racey topped his mount, but as the horse started he held him up.

"Lessee who's coming," he suggested, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

He and Mr. Saltoun both turned their heads. Someone was riding toward them along the trail from the direction of the Lazy River ford--Racey had caught the clatter of the horse's hoofs on the rocks of a wash wherein the trail lay concealed.

"Siftin' right along," said Mr. Saltoun.

Racey nodded. Horse and rider slid into sight above the side of the wash and trotted toward them.

"Looks like Punch-the-breeze Thompson," said Mr. Saltoun.

"It is Thompson," confirmed Racey. "Didn't it strike you he sort of hesitated a li'l bit when he first seen us--like a man would whose breakfast didn't rest easy on his stomach, as you might say."

Mr. Saltoun nodded. "He did sway back on them lines at the top."

"And he ain't boiling along quite as fast now as he was in the wash," elaborated Racey.

"I noticed that, too," admitted Mr. Saltoun.

They waited, barring the trail. Punch-the-breeze Thompson did not attempt to ride around them. He pulled up and nodded easily to the two men.

"They's been a fraycas down at McFluke's," Thompson said.

"Fraycas?" Racey cocked an eyebrow.

"Yeah--old Dale and a stranger."

Racey nodded. He knew with a great certainty what was coming next.

"Anybody hurt?" he asked.

"Old Dale."

"Bad?"

"Killed."

Racey nodded again. "Even break?"

"We don't think so," Thompson stated, frankly.

"Who's we?" queried Racey.

"Oh, Austin, Honey Hoke, Doc Coffin, McFluke, Jack Harpe, Lanpher, and Luke Tweezy. We all just didn't like the way the stranger went at it, so I'm going to Farewell after the sheriff."

"Yo're holdin' the stranger then, I take it?" put in Mr. Saltoun.

"Well, no, not exactly," replied Thompson. "He got away, that stranger did."

"And didn't none of you make any try at stopping him a-tall?" demanded Racey.

"Plenty," Thompson replied with a stony face. "I took a shot at him myself just as he was hopping through the window. I missed."

"Yet they say yo're a good snap shot, Thompson," threw in Racey.

"I am--most usual," admitted Thompson. "But this time my hand must 'a' shook or something."

"Yep," concurred Racey, "I shore guess it must 'a' shook or--something."

Thompson faced Racey. "'Or something,'" he repeated, hardily. "Meaning?"

"What I said," replied Racey, calmly. "I never mean more'n I say--ever."

Thompson continued to regard Racey fixedly. Mr. Saltoun was glad that he himself was two yards to the right, and he would not have objected to double the distance.

Racey's hands were folded on the horn of his saddle. Thompson's right hand hung at his side. Racey had told the truth when he spoke of Thompson as a good snap shot. He was all of that. And he was fairly quick on the draw as well. It would seem that, taking into consideration the position of Thompson's right hand, that Thompson had a shade the better of it. Racey thought so. But he hoped, nevertheless, by shooting through the bottom of his holster, to plant at least one bullet in Thompson before the latter killed him.

The decision lay with Thompson. Would he elect to fight? Racey could almost see the thoughts at conflict behind Thompson's frontal bone. Mr. Saltoun, hoping against hope, sat tensely silent. Racey's eyes

held Thompson's steadily.

Slowly, inch by inch, Thompson's right hand moved upward--and away from the gun butt. He gathered his reins in his left hand and with his hitherto menacing right he tilted his hat forward and began to scratch the back of his head.

"If you don't mean more'n you say," offered Thompson, "you don't mean much."

"Which is all the way you look at it," said Racey.

"And a damn good way, too," nipped in Mr. Saltoun, hurriedly, inwardly cursing Racey for not letting well enough alone. "What was the fight about, Thompson?"

"Cards," said Thompson, laconically, switching his eyes briefly to Mr. Saltoun's face.

"And the stranger cold-decked him?" inquired Racey.

"Something like that, but I can't say for shore. I wasn't playing with him. Doc Coffin was, and so was Honey Hoke and Peaches Austin. Peaches said he kind of had an idea the stranger dealt himself a card from the bottom just before old Dale started to crawl his hump. But Peaches ain't shore about it. Seemin'ly old Dale is the only one was shore, and he's dead."

"And yo're going for the coroner, huh?" asked Racey.

"I said so."

"But you didn't say if anybody was chasing the stranger now. Are they?"

"Shore," was the prompt reply. "They all took out after him--all except McFluke, that is."

Racey nodded. "I expect McFluke would want to stay with Dale," he said, gently, "just as you'd want to go to Farewell after the coroner. Yo're shore it is the coroner, Thompson?"

"Say, how many times do you want me to tell you?" demanded the badgered Thompson. "Of course it's the coroner. In a case like this the coroner's gotta be notified."

"I expect," assented Racey. "I expect. But if yo're really goin' for the coroner, Thompson, what made you tell us when you first met us you were going for the sheriff?"

"Why," said Thompson without a quiver, "I'm a-goin' for him, too. I must 'a' forgot to say so at first."

"Yeah, I guess you did." Thus Racey, annoyed that Thompson had contrived to crawl through the fence. He had hoped that Thompson might be tempted to a demonstration, for which potentiality he, Racey, had prepared by removing his right hand from the saddle horn.

"It don't always pay to forget, Thompson," suggested Mr. Saltoun,

coldly.

"It don't," Thompson assented readily. "And I don't--most always."

"Don't stay here any longer on our account, Thompson," said Racey. "You've told us about enough."

"Try and remember it," Thompson bade him, and lifted his reins.

"We will, and, on the other hand, don't you forget yore sheriff and yore coroner."

"I won't," grinned Thompson and rode past and away.

"He ain't goin' for the sheriff and the coroner any more'n I am," declared Mr. Saltoun, disgustedly, turning in the saddle to gaze after the vanishing horseman.

"Of course he ain't!" almost barked Racey. "In this country fellers like Thompson don't ride hellbent just to tell the sheriff and the coroner a feller has been killed. Murder ain't any such e-vent as all that. Unless," he added, thoughtfully, "Thompson is the stranger."

"You mean Thompson might 'a' killed him?"

"I don't think it would spoil his appetite any. You remember how fast he was pelting along down in the wash, and how he slowed up after seeing us? A murderer would act just thataway."

Mr. Saltoun nodded. "A gent can't do anything on guesswork," he said, bromidically. "Facts are what count."

"You'll find before we get to the bottom of this business," observed Racey, sagely, "that guesswork is gonna lead us to a whole heap of facts."

"I hope so," Mr. Saltoun said, uncomfortably conscious that the death of Dale might seriously complicate the lifting of the mortgage.

Racey was no less uncomfortable, and for the same reason. He felt sure that the killing of Dale had been inspired in order to settle once for all the future of the Dale ranch. No wonder Luke Tweezy had been so positive in his assertion that Old Man Saltoun would not lend any money to Dale. The latter had been marked for death at the time.

Despite the fact that Tweezy and Harpe were at last being seen together in public, thus indicating that the "deal," to quote Pooley's letter to Tweezy, had been "sprung," Racey doubted that the murder formed part of Jacob Pooley's "absolutely safe" plan for forcing out Dale. While in some ways the murder might be considered sufficiently safe, the method of it and the act itself did not smack of Pooley's handiwork. It was much more probable that the killing was the climax of Luke Tweezy's original plan adhered to by the attorney and his friends against the advice and wishes of Jacob Pooley.

"Guess we'd better go on to McFluke's," was Racey's suggestion.

They went.

"Looks like they got back mighty soon from chasing the stranger," said Racey, when they came in sight of the place, eying the number of horses tied to the hitching-rail.

"Maybe they got him quick," Mr. Saltoun offered, sardonically.

They rode on and added their horses to the tail-switching string in front of the saloon. Racey did not fail to note that none of the other horses gave any evidence of having been ridden either hard or lately. Which, in the face of Thompson's assertion that the men he left behind had ridden in pursuit of the murderer, seemed rather odd. Or perhaps it was not so odd, looking upon it from another angle.

The saloon, when they had ridden up, had been quiet as the well-known grave. It remained equally silent when they entered.

McFluke, behind the bar, wearing a black eye and a puffed nose, nodded to them civilly. In chairs ranged round the walls sat an assortment of men--Peaches Austin, Luke Tweezy, Jack Harpe, Doc Coffin, Honey Hoke, and Lanpher. The latter was nursing a slung right arm. They were all there, the men mentioned by name by Thompson as having been in the place when Dale was killed.

"What is this, a graveyard meetin'?" asked Racey of McFluke, glancing from the assembled multitude to McFluke and smiling slightly. It was no part of wisdom, thought Racey, to let these men know of his encounter with Thompson. He had Thompson's story. He was anxious to hear theirs.

"A graveyard meeting," repeated the saloon-keeper. "Well, and that's what it is in a manner of speaking."

Racey stared. "I bite. What's the answer?"

The saloon-keeper cleared his throat. "Old Dale's been killed."

"Has, huh? Who killed him?" Racey allowed his eyes casually to skim the expressionless faces of the men backed against the walls.

"A stranger killed him," replied McFluke, heavily.

Racey removed his eyes from the slack-chinned countenance of the saloon-keeper to thin-faced, foxy-nosed Luke Tweezy. Luke's little eyes met his.

"You saw this stranger, Luke?" he asked.

Luke Tweezy nodded. "We all saw him."

"He was playing draw with Honey Hoke and Peaches Austin and me," Doc Coffin offered, oilily.

"And the stranger?" amended Racey.

"And the stranger," Doc Coffin accepted the amendment.

"What was the trouble?" pursued Racey.

"Well, we kind of thought"--Doc Coffin's eyes slid round to cross an

instant the shifty gaze of Peaches Austin--"we thought maybe this stranger dealt a card from the bottom. We ain't none shore."

"Dale said he did, anyhow," said Peaches Austin.

"He said so twice," put in Lanpher.

Racey turned deliberately. "You here," said he, softly. "I didn't see you at first. I must be getting nearsighted. You saw the whole thing, did you, Lanpher?"

"Yeah," replied Lanpher.

"Who pulled first?"

"The stranger." The answer came patly from at least five different men.

Racey looked grimly upon those present. "Most everybody seems shore the stranger's to blame," he observed. "Besides saying the stranger was dealing from the bottom did Dale use any other fighting words?"

"He called him a--tinhorn," burst simultaneously from the lips of McFluke and Peaches Austin.

"Only two this time," said Racey, shooting a swift glance at Jack Harpe and overjoyed to find the latter dividing a glare of disgust between McFluke and Austin. "But you'll have to do better than that."

Mr. Saltoun shivered inwardly. He was a man of courage, but not of foolhardy courage, the species of courage that dares death unnecessarily. He was getting on in years, and hoped, when it came his time to die, to pass out peacefully in his nightshirt. And here was that fool of a Racey practically telling Harpe and the other rascals that he was on to their game. No wonder Mr. Saltoun shivered. He expected matters to come to push of pike in a split second. So, being what he was, a fairly brave man in a tight corner, he put on a hard, confident expression and hooked his thumbs in his belt.

Racey Dawson spread his legs wide and laughed a reckless laugh. He felt reckless. He likewise felt for these men ranged before him the most venomous hate of which he was capable. These men had killed the father of Molly Dale. It did not matter whether any one or all of them had or had not committed the actual murder, they were wholly responsible for it. They had brought it about. He knew it. He knew it just as sure as he was a foot high. And as he looked upon them sitting there in flinty silence he purposed to make them pay, and pay to the uttermost. That the old man had been a gambler and a drunkard, and the world was undoubtedly a better world for his leaving it, were facts of no moment in Racey's mind. He, Racey, was not one to condone either murder or injustice. And this murder and the injustice of it would cruelly hurt three women.

He laughed again, without mirth. His blue eyes, glittering through the slits of the drawn-down eyelids, were pin-points of wrath. His hard-bitten stare challenged his enemies. Damn them! let them shoot if they wanted to. He was ready. He, Racey Dawson, would show them a fight that would stack up as well as any of which a hard-fighting territory could boast. So, feeling as he did, Racey stared upon his

enemies with a frosty, slit-eyed stare and mentally dared them to come to the scratch.

But in moments like these there is always one to say "Let's go," or give its equivalent, a sign. And that one is invariably the leader of one side or the other. Racey Dawson saw Luke Tweezy turn a slow head and look toward Jack Harpe. He saw Doc Coffin, Honey, and Austin, one after the other, do the same. But Jack Harpe sat immobile. He neither spoke nor gave a sign. Perhaps he did not consider the present a sufficiently propitious moment. No one knew what he thought. Had he known what the future held in store he might have gone after his gun.

Tense, nerves wire-drawn, Racey and Mr. Saltoun awaited the decision.

It came, and like many decisions, its form was totally unexpected. Jack Harpe looked at Racey and said smilelessly:

"Wanna view the remains?"

CHAPTER XX

DRAWING THE COVER

"You don't understand it, do you, Peaches?" Racey inquired genially of Peaches Austin when he found himself neighbours with that slippery gentleman at the inquest.

Peaches shied away from Racey on general principles. He feared a catch. There were so many things about Racey that he did not understand.

"Whatcha talking about?" Peaches grunted, surlily.

"You--me--Chuck--everybody, more or less. You don't, do you?"

"Don't what?" A trifle more surlily.

"You don't see how and why Chuck Morgan is so all-fired friendly with me, and how I'm a-riding for a good outfit like the Bar S, when the last you seen of me, Chuck was a-hazing me up the trail with my hands over my head. You don't understand it none. I can see it in your light green eyes, Peaches."

Peaches modestly veiled his pale green eyes beneath dropped lids and turned his head away. He would have given a great deal to go elsewhere. But to do that would be to make himself conspicuous, and there were many reasons, all more or less cogent, why he did not wish to make himself conspicuous. Peaches sat still on his chair and broke into a gentle perspiration.

Racey perceived the other's discomfort and ached to increase it. "Did you stay here three-four days like I told you to that time a few weeks ago? And was Jack Harpe most Gawd-awful hot under the collar when you did see him final? And if so, what happened?"

Racey gaped at Peaches like an expectant terrier watching a rat-hole. It may be that Peaches felt like a holed rat in a hole too small for comfort. He turned on Racey with a flash of defiance.

"There was a feller once," said Peaches, "who bit off more'n he could chew."

"I've heard of him," Racey admitted, gravely. "He was first cousin to the other feller that grabbed the bear by the tail."

"I dunno whose first cousin he was," frowned Peaches. "All I know is he didn't show good sense."

"Now that," said Racey, "is where you and I don't think alike. I may be wrong in what I think. I may have made a mistake, but I gotta be showed why and wherefore. Anybody is welcome to show me, Peaches, just anybody."

Racey accompanied his remarks with a chilling look. The perspiration of Peaches turned clammy.

"Meaning?" Peaches queried.

"Meaning? Why, meaning that you can show me if you like, Peaches."

This was too much for Peaches. He was out of his depth and unable to swim. He sank with a gurgle of, "I dunno what yo're drivin' at."

Racey shook a sorrowful head. "I'm shore sorry to hear it. I was guessin' you did. I had hopes of you, Peaches. You've done gimme a disappointment. Yep, she's a cruel world when all's said and done."

This was too much for Peaches. He resolved to shift his seat whether it made him conspicuous or not. The gambler removed to a vacant windowsill, upon which he sat and looked anywhere but at Racey Dawson. That young man leaned back in his chair and surveyed the multitude.

Besides the citizens found in the saloon on his and Mr. Saltoun's arrival there were now present Dolan, who combined with his office of justice of the peace that of coroner, and twelve good men and true, the coroner's jury and most intimate friends, ready and willing at any and all times to serve the territory for ten dollars a day and expenses. In addition to this representative group Alicran Skeel had dropped in from nowhere, Chuck Morgan had driven over with a wagon from Soogan Creek (mercifully the family at Moccasin Spring had not yet been informed of their bereavement), and Sheriff Jake Rule and his deputy Kansas Casey had ridden out from Farewell. Punch-the-breeze Thompson had returned with the sheriff. Which circumstance either disposed of the theory that Thompson was the murderer, or else Thompson had more nerve than he was supposed to have. Racey began to nurse a distinct grievance against Thompson.

The main room of the saloon, into which the body had been brought from the back room, was a fog of smoke and a blabber of voices. McFluke had not been idle at the bar, and the coroner's jury was three parts drunk. The members had not yet agreed on a verdict. But the delay was a mere matter of form. They always liked to stretch the time, and give the territory a good run for her money.

Racey Dawson, conscious that both Jack Harpe and Luke Tweezy were watching him covertly, rolled a meticulous cigarette. He scratched a match on the chair seat, held it to the end of the cigarette, and stared across the pulsing flame straight into the eyes of the Marysville lawyer. Tweezy's gaze wavered and fell away. Racey inhaled strongly, then got to his feet and lazed across to the bar where Jake Rule, with Kansas Casey at his elbow, was perfunctorily questioning McFluke. The latter's hard, close-coupled blue eyes narrowed at Racey's approach.

Racey, as he draped himself against the bar, was careful to nudge Casey's foot with a surreptitious toe.

"Jake," said Racey, "would I be interruptin' the proceedings too much if I made a motion for us to drink all round?"

"Not a-tall," declared the sheriff, heartily.

Racey turned to McFluke.

When their hands had encircled the glasses for the third time, Racey, instead of drinking, suddenly looked across the bar at McFluke who was industriously swabbing the bar top.

"Mac," he said, easily, "when that stranger ran out the door how many gents fired at him?"

"Punch Thompson," replied McFluke, the sushing cloth stopping abruptly. "You heard him tell the coroner how he fired and missed, didn't you?"

"Oh, I heard, I heard," Racey answered. "No harm in asking again, is there? Can't be too shore about these here--killin's, can you? Mac, which door did the stranger run through--the one into the back room or the one leadin' outdoors?"

"Why, the one leadin' outdoors, of course." McFluke's surprise at the question was evident.

"Jake," said Racey, "s'pose now you ask Punch Thompson what the stranger was doing when he cut down on him."

The sheriff regarded Racey with his keen gray gaze. Then he faced about and singled out Thompson from a conversational group across the room.

"Punch," he called, and then put Racey's question in his own words.

"What was he doin'?" said Thompson, heedless of McFluke's agonized expression. "Which he was hoppin' through that window there"--here he indicated the middle one of three in the side of the room--"when I drew and missed. I only had time for the one shot."

At this there was a sudden scrabbling behind the bar. It was McFluke trying to retreat through the doorway into the back room, and being prevented from accomplishing his purpose by Racey Dawson who, at the innkeeper's first panic-stricken movement, had vaulted the bar and grabbed him by the neck.

"None of that now," cautioned Racey Dawson, his right hand flashing down and up, as McFluke, finding that escape was out of the question, made a desperate snatch at the knife-handle protruding from his bootleg.

The saloon-keeper reacted immediately to the cold menace of the gun-muzzle pressing against the top of his spinal column. He straightened sullenly. Racey, transferring the gun-muzzle to the small of McFluke's back, stooped swiftly, drew out McFluke's knife and tossed it through a window.

"You won't be needing that again," said Racey Dawson. "Help yoreself, Kansas."

Which the deputy promptly proceeded to do by snapping a pair of handcuffs round the thick McFluke wrists.

"Whatell you trying to do?" bawled McFluke in a rage. "I ain't done nothing! You can't prove I done nothing! You--"

"Shut up!" interrupted Kansas Casey, giving the handcuffs an expert twitch that wrenched a groan out of McFluke. "Proving anything takes time. We got time. You got time. What more do you want?"

The efficient deputy towed the saloon-keeper round the bar and out into the barroom. He faced him about in front of Jake Rule. The sheriff fixed him with a grim stare.

"What did you try to run for, Mac?" he demanded.

"I had business outdoors," grumbled McFluke.

"What kind of business?"

"What's that to you? You ain't got no license to grab a-hold of me and stop me from transacting my legitimate business whenever and wherever I feel like it."

"You seem to know more about it than I do. Alla same unless you feel like telling me exactly what all yore hurry was for, we'll have to hold you for a while. Yo're shore it didn't have nothing to do with yore saying the stranger run out the door and Thompson saying he jumped through the window?"

"Why, shore I am," grunted McFluke.

"Glad to hear that. But how is it you and Thompson seen the same thing different ways? It's a cinch the stranger, not being twins, didn't use both the door and the window. Yo're shore he run out the door, Mac?"

"Shore I am. I seen him, I tell you." But McFluke's tone rang flat.

"Punch," said the sheriff to Thompson who, in company with everyone else in the room had crowded round the sheriff and the prisoner, "Punch, how did the stranger who shot Dale leave the room?"

"Through the window, like I said," Thompson declared, defiantly. "Ask anybody. They all seen him. Mac's drunk or crazy."

"Yo're a liar!" snarled McFluke. "I tell you he run out the door."

"Aw, close yore trap!" requested Thompson with contempt. "You ain't packin' no gun."

"Lanpher," said the sheriff, "how did the murderer get away."

"Through the window," was the prompt reply of the 88 manager.

The sheriff asked Harpe, Coffin, Tweezy, and the others who had been present at the killing, for their versions. In every case, each had seen eye-to-eye with Thompson. The evidence was overwhelmingly against the saloon-keeper. But he, a glint of fear in his hard blue eyes, stuck to his original statement, swearing that all men were liars and he alone was telling the truth.

Racey, standing a little back from the crowd, pulled out his tobacco-bag. But his fingers must have been all thumbs at the moment for he dropped it on the floor. He stooped to retrieve it. The movement brought his eyes within a yard of the body of Dale. And now he saw that which he had not previously taken note of--an abrasion across the knuckles of Dale's right hand. Not only that, but the hand, which was lying over the left hand on the body's breast, showed an odd lumpiness at the knuckles of the first and second fingers.

Racey stuffed his tobacco-bag into his vest pocket and knelt beside the body. It was cold, of course, but had not yet completely stiffened. He laid the two hands side by side and compared them. The left hand was as it should be--no lumpiness, bruises, or any discolouration other than grime. But now that the two hands were side by side the difference in the right hand was most apparent.

Certainly it was badly bruised across the knuckles and the skin was broken, too. Furthermore, there was that odd lumpiness about the knuckles of the first and second fingers, a lumpiness that gave the knuckles almost the appearance of being double.

He picked up the dead hand and gingerly fingered the lumpy knuckles. Then, in a flash of thought, it came to him. The hand was broken.

He raised his head and looked across the room. And as it chanced he looked across the packed shoulders and between the peering heads of the crowd straight into the face of McFluke and the black eye adorning that face.

He rose to his feet and pushed his way through the crowd to the side of the sheriff.

"Can I ask a question?" said he to the officer.

"Shore," nodded the sheriff. "Many as you like."

"Thompson," Racey said, but watching McFluke the while, "did Dale have any trouble here with anybody besides the stranger?"

"Not as I know of," came the reply after a moment's hesitation.

"He didn't have any fuss with anybody," spoke up Luke Tweezy.

"I was talking to Thompson," Racey reminded the lawyer. "When I want to ask you any questions I'll let you know."

"Huh," Luke contented himself with grunting, and subsided.

"No fuss a-tall, Thompson?" resumed Racey.

"Nary a fuss."

"And you was here alla time Dale was here?"

"I was here before Dale come, and I was still here when Dale--went away."

"In the same room with him?"

"In this room, yeah. In the same room with him alla time. Shore."

"Then if Dale had had a riot with anybody else but the stranger man you'd 'a' knowed it."

"You betcha. He didn't have no trouble, only with the stranger."

"Did anybody else have any trouble with anybody while you was here?"

At this Thompson frowned. Where were Racey's questions leading him? Was it a trap? Knowing Racey as he did, he feared the worst. He would have liked to leave the questioned unanswered. But this was impossible. As it was, he was delaying his answer longer than good sense warranted. Both Jake Rule and Kansas Casey were staring at him fixedly. Racey regarded him steadily, a slight and sinister smile lurking at the corner of his mouth.

"Well," prompted Racey, "you'd oughta be able to tell us whether there was any other fights while you was here?"

"They wasn't," plunged Thompson. "Everything was salubrious till Dale started his battle."

"And when did you get here?" pursued Racey.

"Oh, I'd been here all night."

"And you dunno of any other brush except the one between Dale and the stranger?"

"I done said so forty times," Thompson declared, peevishly. "How many times have I gotta repeat it?"

"As many times as yo're asked," put in the sheriff, sharply.

"Didja see anybody get hurt--have a accident or something while you were here, Thompson?" Racey bored on.

Thompson shook an impatient head. "Nobody got hurt or had a accident."

"Then," said Racey, turning suddenly on McFluke, "how did you get that black eye?"

CHAPTER XXI

GONE AWAY!

McFluke's eyes flickered at the question. His body appeared to sink inward. Then he straightened, and flung back his wide shoulders, and glowered at Racey Dawson.

"I ran into a door this morning," said the saloon-keeper in a tone of the utmost confidence.

"Oh, you ran into a door, did you," Racey observed, sweetly. "And what particular door did you run into?"

"The front door."

"That one?" Racey indicated the door of the barroom.

"That one."

"We'll just take a look at that door."

Accompanied by the deeply interested sheriff, who was beginning to sniff his quarry like the old bloodhound he was, Racey crossed to the barroom door. He looked at the door. He looked at the sheriff. The sheriff looked only at the door.

"Door's opened back flat against the wall, Mac," said the sheriff. "Was she like this when you ran into her?"

"Course not," was the heated reply. "She was swingin' open."

Racey squatted down on the floor. "Lookit here, Sheriff."

The sheriff stooped and regarded the wooden wedge under the door that jammed it fast. Racey drew a finger across the top of the wedge. He held up the finger-tip for the sheriff's inspection. The tip was black with the dust of weeks.

"That door has been wedged back all this hot weather," said Racey, gently. "Look at the dust under the door on both sides of the wedge, too. Bet that wedge ain't been out of place for a month."

Softly as he spoke McFluke heard him. "---- you! I tell you that door was opened this mornin'! I hit my head on it! Ask 'em all! Ask anybody! Jack, lookit here--"

"I didn't see you hit yore head on the door," interrupted Jack Harpe. "Maybe you did, I dunno."

Racey raised a quick head as Jack Harpe spoke. Quite plainly he saw Jack Harpe accompany his words with a slight lowering of his left eyelid. Racey glanced at McFluke. He saw the defiant expression depart from the McFluke countenance, and a look of unmistakable relief take its place.

Racey dropped his head. The sheriff was speaking.

"Mac," he was saying, "yo're lyin'. Yo're lyin' as fast as a hoss can trot. You never got yore black eye on this door. I dunno why yo're sayin' you did, but I'm gonna find out. Till--"

"You won't have far to go to find out," struck in Racey Dawson. "I know how he got his black eye."

"How?" demanded the sheriff, his grizzled eyebrows drawing together.

"Dale gave it to him," was the answer pat and pithy.

"He did not!" The saloon-keeper began to roar instantly, and had to be quieted by Kansas Casey.

When order was restored Racey explained his deductions. The sheriff listened in silence. Then he went to the body of the dead man, and examined the bruised and broken right hand.

"I'm tellin' you," declared Racey with finality, "he hit somebody when he broke that hand."

"He might 'a' broke it when he fell after being shot," put in Luke Tweezy.

The sheriff shook his head. "He couldn't fall hard enough to break them bones as bad as that. It's like Racey says. Question is, who did he hit? McFluke's eye and McFluke's lies are a good enough answer for me."

"You'll have to prove it!" snapped Luke Tweezy.

"I expect we'll do that, Luke," the sheriff said, calmly. "Have you agreed on a verdict, Judge?"

"We had," replied Dolan. "We was about satisfied that a plain 'killin' by a person unknown,' was as good as any, but I expect now we'll change it to murder _with_ the recommendation that McFluke be arrested on suspicion. Whadda you say, boys?"

"Shore," chorussed the "boys," and hiccuped like so many bullfrogs.

"Whu-why not lul-let the shush-shpicion shlide," suggested one bright spirit, "an' cue-convict him right now an' lul-lynch him after shupper whu-when it's cool?"

"No," vetoed Dolan, "it can't be done. He's gotta be indicted and held for the Grand Jury at Piegan City. I ain't allowed to try murder cases."

"Tut-too bad," mourned the bright spirit, and refused to be comforted.

"Can I take him now, Judge?" inquired Chuck Morgan, referring to the dead man.

"Any time," nodded Dolan.

Racey Dawson, whose eyes that day were missing nothing, saw that Jack Harpe was looking steadily at Luke Tweezy. Luke's nod was barely perceptible.

"Where were you thinking of taking him, Chuck?" was Tweezy's query.

"Moccasin Spring," Chuck replied, laconically.

"I wouldn't if I were you," said Luke Tweezy. "Better save trouble by taking him to yore house."

It was coming now--the answer to one puzzle at least. Racey was sure of it. He was not disappointed.

"And why had I better take him to my house?" demanded Chuck.

"Because the ranch at Moccasin Spring don't belong to the Dale family any more," Tweezy explained, smoothly. "Dale has turned over the place to Lanpher and me."

"It's a damn lie!" declared Chuck.

Tweezy smiled. He was a lawyer, not a fighter. Names signified nothing in his greasy life. "It's no lie," he tossed back. "You know Lanpher and me bought the mortgage on the Dale place from the Marysville bank. The mortgage is due in a couple of days. Dale didn't have the money to satisfy the mortgage. We was gonna foreclose. In order to save trouble all round he made the ranch over to us."

"You mean to tell me Dale did that just to save trouble?" burst out Racey. "Just because he liked you two fellers and wanted to make it as easy as possible for you? Aw, hell, Tweezy. Aw, hell again. Yo're as poor a liar as yore side-kicker McFluke."

Tweezy smiled once more and drew forth a long and shiny pocket-book from the inner pocket of his vest. From the pocket-book he extracted a legal-looking document. Which document he handed to Sheriff Rule.

"Read her off, Jake," requested Luke Tweezy.

The sheriff read aloud the lines of writing. Shorn of the impressive terms so beloved of law and lawyers, the document set forth that in consideration of being allowed to retain all his live-stock, wagons, and household goods, instead of merely the fixed number of cattle, horses, and wagons, and those specified household articles, exempt from seizure under the law, Dale voluntarily released to the mortgagers, without the formality of foreclosure proceedings, the mortgaged property comprising six hundred and forty acres as described hereinafter, etcetera.

The document was signed by Dale and witnessed by Doc Coffin and Honey Hoke:

The sheriff held the paper out to Chuck Morgan. "This Dale's signature, Chuck?"

Chuck Morgan examined the signature closely and long.

"Looks like it," he said, hesitatingly.

"It's his signature, all right," spoke up Honey Hoke. "I saw him sign it."

"Me, too," said Doc Coffin.

"Paper's dated to-day," said the sheriff. "How long before he was killed did Dale sign it, Luke?"

"About a hour," replied Tweezy.

"It's made out in yore writin', ain't it?" went on the sheriff.

"Shore," nodded Luke. "All but the signature. So, you see, Chuck," he continued, turning to Morgan, "you might as well pack him to yore house. We intend to take possession immediately."

"You do, huh," said Chuck. "You try it, thassall I gotta say. You try it."

"I'd admire to see you drive those women out of their home on the strength of that paper, Tweezy," remarked Racey.

"Sheriff, I'll make out eviction papers immediately and Judge Dolan will have you serve them on the Dale family." Thus Luke Tweezy, blustering.

"That's yore privilege," said the sheriff, "and I'll have to serve 'em, I suppose. But only in the regular course of business, Luke. I'm mighty busy just now. Yore eviction notice will have to take its turn."

"My punchers will throw 'em out then," averred Lanpher.

"They ain't nary a one of 'em would gorm up their paws on a job like that for you, Lanpher," Alicran stated in no uncertain tones. "If you got any dirty work to do you'll do it yoreself."

"Yo're--" began the 88 manager, and stopped suddenly.

"What was you gonna say?" Alicran's voice cut sharply across the general silence.

Lanpher controlled himself by an effort. Or perhaps it was not such an effort, after all. It may have been that he remembered the object lesson of the severed branch of the wild currant bush. At any rate, he did not pursue further the subject of the 88 cowboys cast as an eviction gang.

"I'll talk to you later, Alicran," said he in a tone he strove to make grimly menacing, but which actually imposed upon no one, least of all the truculent Alicran.

"We won't need yore boys, Lanpher," said Racey. "The sheriff will attend to it."

"Lookit here, Tweezy," said Judge Dolan, slouching to the front of the crowd, "are you gonna run them women off thataway after _this_?" Here the Judge jerked his head backward in the direction of the body.

"Why not?" Tweezy demanded, sulkily. "We got a right to."

"It don't always pay to stand on our rights, Luke," suggested the Judge. "I'd go a li'l easy if I was you."

"You ain't me," said Tweezy, rudely.

"Which is something I gotta be grateful for," the Judge returned to the charge. "But alla same, Luke, I'd scratch my head and think how this here is gonna look. Here Dale gives you this paper, and a hour later he's cashed. Of course, it looks like his signature, and you got witnesses who say it's his signature, but--" The Judge paused and gravely contemplated Luke Tweezy.

"I'll tell you what it looks like to me," announced Racey in a loud, unsympathetic tone. "The whole deal's too smooth. She's so smooth she's slick, like a counterfeit dollar. You and Lanpher are a couple of damn thieves, Tweezy."

But the sheriff's gun was out first. "None of that, Lanpher," he cautioned. "They ain't gonna be no lockin' horns _here_. That goes for you, too, Racey."

"I don't need to pull any gun," Racey declared, contemptuously. "All I'd have to use is my fingers on that feller. He never went after his gun till he seen you pull yores. He ain't got any nerve, that's all that's the matter with him."

Lanpher snarled curses at this. He yearned for the daredevil courage sufficient to risk all on a single throw by pulling his gun left-handed and sending a bullet smack through the scornful face of Racey Dawson. But it was precisely as Racey said. He did not have the nerve. With half-a-dozen drinks under his belt he undoubtedly would have made an attempt to clear his honour. But he was not carrying the requisite amount of liquor. Lanpher snarled another string of oaths. "If I didn't have my right arm in a sling--" he began.

"I guess," interrupted the sheriff, "this will be about all. Lanpher, yore hoss is outside. Git on and git out."

CHAPTER XXII

A CHECK

"Lookit here, Judge," said Racey, earnestly, "do you mean to say yo're gonna let the sheriff serve them eviction papers?"

Judge Dolan elevated his feet upon his desk and tilted back his chair before replying.

"Racey," he said, teetering gently, "I gotta do what the law says in this thing."

"Then yo're gonna sic the sheriff on, huh?"

"I ain't doin' no sicin', not me. Luke Tweezy's the boy you mean."

"But the law makes you back up Luke."

"In this case it does."

"Then it's a helluva law that lets a feller take away the home of two women."

"They's lots of times," observed Dolan, judicially, "when I think she's a helluva law, too. But what you gonna do? Under the law one man's word is as good as another's till he's proved a liar. And two men's words are better than one, and so on. And so far nobody ain't proved Doc Coffin and Honey Hoke and Luke Tweezy are liars."

"Of course we know they are," protested Racey.

"Not legally. You gotta remember that knowing a man is a liar is one thing, and being able to prove it is another breed of cat."

"Then they ain't nothing to be done short of rubbing out Lanpher and Tweezy?"

"And what good would wiping out either or both of them do? Beyond Lanpher and Tweezy are their heirs and assigns, whoever they may be. You can't go down the line and abolish 'em all."

"I s'pose not," grumbled Racey.

"Of course not. It ain't reasonable. You don't wanna bull along regardless like a bufflehead in this, Racey. You wanna use yore brains a few. They'll always go farther than main strength. You got brains, and you can bet you'll need every single one of 'em if you wanna get to the bottom of this business."

"Under the circumstances, then, what's yore advice, Judge?"

"I ain't got no particular advice to give," replied Dolan, promptly.

"I'm a judge, not a lawyer, but I'm free to say even if I was a lawyer, I dunno exactly what I'd do, or where I'd begin."

Racey nodded. He didn't see exactly where to begin, either.

"Lookit, Judge," he said at last, "can't you sort of delay the proceedin's for a while?"

"I'll do what I can," assented Dolan, "but I can't keep it up forever. I'm sworn to obey the law and see that it is obeyed. And if Luke Tweezy's paper can't be proved a forgery certain and soon, they's only one thing for me to do and one thing for the Dales to do. I'm sorry, but that's the way it stands under the law."

It was then that the door-latch clicked and one entered without knocking. It was Luke Tweezy. Beyond the merest flicker of a glance he did not acknowledge the presence of Racey Dawson. He nodded perfunctorily to Dolan.

"Mornin', Judge," said he, "are the papers ready for the sheriff yet?"

"Not yet, Luke, not yet," Dolan assured, him blandly. "I ain't had time to get at 'em."

"When you gonna get at 'em?"

"Soon as I get time."

"But lookit here, Judge. We're bein' delayed. We wanna get the Dales off their ranch soon as we can."

"Off their ranch is shore the truth," struck in Racey. "You do tell it sometimes, don't you, Luke?"

But Luke Tweezy was not to be drawn that morning. He focussed his eyes and attention steadily on Judge Dolan.

"We wanna take possession soon as we can," persisted Luke Tweezy.

"Shore you do," said the Judge, heartily. "No reason why you shouldn't wanna as I know of."

"If you can't see yore way to getting at this business within a reasonable time I'll have to sue out a mandatory injunction against you, Judge, and--"

Dolan smiled wintrily. "What judge are you figuring on to grant this injunction?"

Luke Tweezy was silent.

"You don't expect me to grant a mandatory injunction against myself, do you?" pursued Dolan.

"I can go to Judge Allison at Marysville or to Piegan City, and I guess--"

"I guess not," interrupted the Judge. "Judge Allison, as you know, is a Federal Judge, and these here eviction proceedin's are territorial business. And, furthermore, lemme point out that the Piegan City court ain't got any jurisdiction in this case."

"Why not?"

"Because the case ain't come to a hearing yet. That's why. You oughta know that, Luke. Yo're a lawyer."

"Alla same--" began Luke.

"Alla same nothing!" declared Judge Dolan. "After eviction proceedin's have been started, and if you don't have any luck in getting them women off the place, then you can apply to this court for redress. I'll set a date for a hearing. After the hearing, if you got a notion in yore numskull that I ain't doing you right, you can apply to the Piegan City court for all the ---- mandatory injunctions you feel like and be ---- to you. Is they any further business you got with me, Luke, or any more points of law you wanna be instructed on? 'Cause if they ain't, here's you, there's the door, and right yonder is outside."

Luke Tweezy departed abruptly.

Dolan laughed harshly as the door slammed. "He can't bluff me, the chucklehead. He knew he couldn't sue out a mandatory injunction yet, knew it damn well, but he didn't think I knew it, damn his ornery soul."

"Oh, he's slick, Luke Tweezy is," said Racey Dawson, "but like most slick gents he thinks everybody else is a fool."

"He makes a mistake once in a while," grunted Dolan.

At which Racey looked up sharply. "A mistake," he repeated. "There's an idea. I wonder if he has made any mistake."

"Who ain't?" nodded Dolan. "Luke's made plenty, I'll bet."

"I dunno about plenty," doubted Racey. "One would be enough."

Dolan rasped a hand across his stubbly chin. "One would be enough," he admitted. "If you could find the one."

"It wouldn't have to be a mistake having to do with this particular case, either, would it?"

"Not necessarily. Of course it would be better to trip him up on this case, but if you can get hold of something else Luke has done that can be proved anyways shady it would be four aces and the joker. Luke would have to pull in his horns about this mortgage. And if I know Luke, he'd do it. He's got nerve, but it ain't cold enough nor witless enough to go up against the shore thing."

"If only McFluke would talk. He knows the ins and outs of this business."

Dolan nodded. "Shore as yo're a foot high Dale gave him that black eye."

"And shore as _yo're_ a foot high he downed Dale."

"I guess likely. But circumstantial evidence is amazing queer. You can't ever tell how the jury's gonna take it. But anyway we got McFluke, and he'll do to start in on."

Entered then Kansas Casey with a serious face. "McFluke has sloped," said he without preliminary.

"What!" cried Judge Dolan.

But it was characteristic of Racey Dawson that he did not say "What!" He asked "How?"

"Because the jail was burned down," said Kansas; "you know we had to put him in yore warehouse, Judge, as the next strongest place, and they dug him out."

"Dug him out?" Thus Judge Dolan.

"That's what they did."

"'They!' 'They!' Who's 'they?'" Again Judge Dolan.

"If I knowed who they was," Kansas replied, "I'd dump 'em just too quick. Way I know it's a 'they,' is because the job of diggin' is bigger than a one-man job."

"We'll go look into this," Dolan exclaimed, wrathfully, and reached for his hat.

"He'd never 'a' been pulled out of the calaboose so easy," said Kansas, as he led Dolan and Racey up the street to the rear of the Dolan warehouse, "but yore foundation logs ain't sunk more'n six inches, and diggin' under and in was a cinch."

"But why didn't you handcuff this sport to a roof stanchion inside?" demanded the Judge.

"We did, man, we did. We got a log chain and the biggest pair of handcuffs in our stock and we ironed McFluke by the ankles to a stanchion in the middle of the warehouse. Besides that his hands was handcuffed, and no matter how he stretched he couldn't reach nothing. We seen to that."

"But, my Gawd, hownell did they have time to file through that log chain or them cuffs? A log chain ain't made of wire an' them cuffs is all special steel."

"They didn't file neither the chain nor the cuffs," explained Kansas, wearily. "They unlocked the cuffs."

"Unlocked 'em, huh? Where'd they get the key? Lose one of yores, did yuh?"

"Ours is all safe. They must 'a' had a key. Anyway, there's the handcuffs wide open when I found McFluke gone this mornin'."

Dolan pulled out his watch. "Nine o'clock," said he. "When did you first find Mac was gone, Kansas?"

"When I took his breakfast in less'n five minutes ago."

"Howcome you went to the warehouse so late?"

"Well," said Kansas, somewhat shamefacedly, "we didn't lock him up in the warehouse till one o'clock this morning, and I figured a li'l extra sleep wouldn't do him any harm."

"Or a li'l extra sleep wouldn't do yoreself any harm neither, huh?"

"Maybe I did sleep later than usual," admitted Kansas.

"I guess you did," said Dolan. "I guess you did. And Jake, too. Told anybody else about this?"

"Only Jake."

They had left the street while they talked, and walked down the long

side wall of the warehouse. Now they turned the corner and saw, heaped against a foundation log, a pile of freshly dug dirt. Beyond the dirt pile gaped the mouth of a hole leading beneath the log. The hole was quite large enough for an over-size man to crawl through without difficulty.

Judge Dolan got down on his hands and knees and peered into the hole. Then he eased down into it headfirst and pawed his way through.

"That's what you get for not walking in by the front door in the first place, Kansas," grinned Racey. "Root hog or die, feller, root hog or die."

Swearing under his breath Kansas went to ground like a badger. His broad shoulders did not scrape the sides of the hall. Observing which Racey knew that it must have been an easy matter for McFluke to crawl through, for the saloon-keeper's shoulders, wide as they were, were not as broad as those of Kansas Casey by a good inch and a half.

"That hole is four or five inches wider than necessary," ruminated Racey, preparing to follow the deputy. "I wonder why. Yep, I shore wonder why. Here they are in a harris of a hurry and they take time to make a hole big enough for two men almost. Maybe they robbed the warehouse, too."

He suggested as much to Dolan when he joined the latter within.

"No," said Dolan, sweeping with a glance the stacks of cases and crates that half filled the single floor of the warehouse. "No, I don't think they's anything missing. Who'd steal truck like this here, anyway? It ain't valuable enough. Where's Jake, Kansas?"

"I left him here when I went after you," replied the deputy. "Guess this is him," he added, as the front door opened.

It was the sheriff. He shut the door behind him and advanced toward the little group gathered about the stanchion. "This is a great note, Jake," said Dolan, eyeing the sheriff severely. "Can't you make out to hang onto yore prisoners no more?"

"Hang onto hell!" snapped back the sheriff. "Short of sleeping in here with him, I done all that could be expected. I put Shorty Rumbold on as guard, and Shorty--"

"Where's Shorty?"

"Went to the Starlight for a drink. He'll be along in a minute."

"Maybe he went to sleep," suggested Dolan.

"Not Shorty," denied the sheriff, with a decisive shake of his head. "I've used Shorty before. He don't go to sleep on duty, Shorty don't. Here he is now."

Entered then Shorty Rumbold, a tall, lean-bodied man with a twinkling eye and a square chin.

"Shorty," said Dolan, "Jake says he put you on guard here last night."

"Not here," said Shorty, always painfully meticulous as to facts. "Outside."

"Where outside?"

"Just outside. I sat on the doorstep all night."

"And didn't you go round to the back once even?"

"I didn't think they was any use. They's no door in the back, and the logs are forty inches through, some of 'em. I never thought of 'em gopherin' under this away."

"I guess the sheriff didn't, either," said Dolan, with a glance of strong disapproval at the sheriff. "You didn't hear anything, huh? Yo're shore of that?"

"Shore I am. If I'd heard anything I'd 'a' scouted round to see what made the noise."

"Maybe you went to sleep."

"Not me." The twinkle in Shorty's eyes was replaced by a frosty stare. "I don't sleep on duty, Judge."

"That's what the sheriff said, Shorty. But, hownell they could dig that tunnel and not make _some_ noise I don't see."

"I don't, either," Shorty Rumbold admitted, frankly. "But I didn't hear a single suspicious sound either inside or outside the jail the whole night."

"Did you hear any noise a-tall?" asked Racey Dawson.

"Only when some drunk gents had a argument out in front of the dance hall. You couldn't help hearin' 'em. They made noise enough to hear 'em a mile."

"How long did the argument last?"

"Oh, maybe a hour--a long time for a plain argument without any shooting."

"Did they call each other any fighting names?" pressed on Racey.

"Plenty."

"And no shooting?"

"Nary a shot."

"Didn't that hit you as kind of odd?"

"It did at the time sort of."

"Recognize any of the voices?"

Shorty Rumbold shook his head. "They was all too hoarse an' loud."

"That's the how of it, Judge," said Racey to Dolan. "That's why Shorty didn't hear any sounds of diggin'. The drunk gents a rowing together for a long time like that without any shooting proves they were doing it on purpose to keep Shorty from hearing anything else."

The sheriff swore. "I heard them fellers, too," he said. "They woke me up with their bellerin' and I had a job gettin' to sleep again. I guess Racey's right."

"I guess he is," assented the Judge. "Now we know how they managed that part of it, where did they get the key to open the cuffs? Kansas says you ain't lost any keys, Jake."

"We got 'em all, every one. I don't believe they used a key. Them handcuff locks was picked."

"Picked?"

"Picked. After Kansas went for you I found these here on the floor." Here he produced from a pocket a bent and twisted piece of baling-wire, and a steel half-moon horse-collar needle.

"That's a Number Six needle," observed the sheriff, who invariably scented clues in the most unpromising objects. "And the point's broke off."

"Number Six is a common size," said Racey. "Most stores carry 'em. And if the point didn't get broke off wigglin' round inside the lock it would be a wonder."

"Still it would take a mighty good man to open them locks with only bale-wire and a harness-needle," said the sheriff, hurriedly. "A expert, you bet."

"It don't matter whether he was a expert or not," said Dolan. "He opened them, and the prisoner has skedaddled. That's the main thing. Jake, how about trailin' him?"

"How? They's tracks, a few of 'em, leadin' from the pile of dirt straight to the hard ground in front of the stage corrals. Beyond there they ain't any tracks. Trail 'em! How you gonna trail 'em?"

"I dunno," replied Dolan, promptly passing the buck. "Yo're the sheriff. She's yore job. You gotta do _something_. C'mon out."

The five men, Dolan and the sheriff arguing steadily, went out into the street. Racey walked thoughtfully in the rear. He was revolving in his mind what the sheriff had said about an expert. Of course it had been an expert. And experts in lock-picking in the cattle country are few and far between.

Racey decided that it would be a good idea for him to have a little talk on lock-picking with Peaches Austin. Not that he suspected the excellent Peaches of having picked those locks. But Peaches knew who had. Oh, most certainly Peaches knew who had.

CHAPTER XXIII

TAKING FENCES

"Lo, Peaches."

Peaches Austin, standing at the Starlight bar, was raising a glass to his lips. But at the greeting he set down the liquor untasted, turned his head, and looked into the face of Racey Dawson.

"Whatsa matter, Peaches?" inquired Racey. "You don't look glad to see me."

"I ain't," Peaches said, frankly. "I don't give a damn about seein' you."

"I'm sorry," grieved Racey, edging closer to the gambler. "Peaches, yo're breaking my heart with them cruel words."

At this the bartender removed hastily to the other end of the bar. He sensed he knew not what, and he felt instead of curiosity a lively fear. Racey Dawson was the most unexpected sport.

Peaches looked nervously at Racey. A desperate resolve began to formulate itself in the brain of Peaches Austin. His right arm tensed. Slowly his hand slid toward the edge of the bar.

"Why, no," said Racey, who had never been more wide-awake than at that moment, "I wouldn't do anything we'd all be sorry for, Peaches. That is, all of us but you yoreself. You might not be sorry--or anythin' else."

This was threatening language, plain and simple. But it was no bluff. Peaches knew that Racey meant every word he said. Peaches' right hand moved no farther.

"Peaches," said Racey, "le's go where we can have a li'l private talk."

"All right," Peaches acquiesced, shortly, and left the saloon with Racey.

On the sidewalk they were joined by Swing Tunstall. The latter fell into step on the other side of Peaches Austin.

"Is he coming, too?" queried the gambler, with a marked absence of cordiality in expression and tone.

"He is," answered Racey.

"I thought this talk was gonna be private."

"It is--only the three of us. We wouldn't think of letting anybody else horn in. You can rest easy, Peaches. We'll take care of you."

The gambler didn't doubt it. His wicked heart sank accordingly. He knew that he had been a bad, bad boy, and he conceived the notion that Nemesis was rolling up her sleeves, all to his ultimate prejudice.

He perceived in front of the dance hall Doc Coffin and Honey Hoke, and plucked up heart at once. But Racey saw the pair at the same time, and said, twitching Peaches by the sleeve, "We'll turn off here, I guess."

Peaches turned perforce and accompanied Racey and Swing into the narrow space between the express office and a log house. When they came out into the open Racey obliqued to the left and piloted his companion to a large log that lay among empty tin cans, almost directly in the rear of and about fifty yards away from Dolan's warehouse.

"Here's a good place," said Racey, indicating the log. "Good seats, plenty of fresh air, and nobody round to bother us. Sidown, Peaches."

Peaches sat as requested. The two friends seated themselves one on his either hand. Racey laughed gently.

"Doc Coffin and Honey looked kind of surprised to see you with us," he remarked with enjoyment, "didn't they, Peaches?"

"I didn't notice," lied Peaches.

"It don't matter," nodded Racey. "See that pile of dirt over against the back wall of Dolan's warehouse, Peaches?"

"I ain't blind."

"No, then maybe you've heard how and why it come to be dug and all?"

"I ain't deaf, neither."

Racey smiled his approval. "I always said you had all yore senses except the common variety, Peaches."

"Hop ahead with yore private talk," grunted the badgered gambler.

"Gimme time, gimme time. It don't cost anything. Whadda you think of that hole, Peaches?"

"Good big hole," replied Peaches, conservatively.

"Too big--that is, too big for just McFluke, or for any other feller the size of McFluke."

"What of it?"

"Don't be in a hurry, Peaches, and you'll last longer. Did you know Mac's handcuffs were picked open?"

"How--picked open?"

"Whoever opened 'em didn't use a key," Racey explained. "They were picked open with a piece of bale-wire and a collar-needle."

"I heard that."

"I thought maybe so. But did you ever think that a feller has got to have a good and clever pair of hands to pick a lock with only a

collar-needle and bale-wire?"

"All that stands to reason," admitted Peaches.

"There can't be a great many fellers like that. No, not many--not around here, anyway. You'll find such sports in the big cities mainly."

"Yeah," chipped in Swing Tunstall, staring hard at Peaches, "I'll bet you a hundred even they ain't more than one or two such experts in the whole territory."

"Whadda you think, Peaches?" inquired Racey.

"Swing may be right," said Peaches, preserving a wooden countenance. "I dunno."

"Shore about that?" Sharply.

"Shore I'm shore. Why not?"

"You looked sort of funny when you said it. Well, then, Peaches, we'll go back to our hole yonder. It's reasonable to suppose that fellers hustlin' to dig it and without any too much time wouldn't make it any bigger than they had to. How about it, huh?"

"Guess so, maybe."

"Aw right, I told you a while ago the hole was too big for McFluke. Why was it made too big for McFluke?"

"Damfino."

"So as to let in the feller who was to pick open Mac's handcuffs."

"Well, what does that prove?"

"It proves that the expert who set Mac loose was a bigger man across the shoulders than McFluke. Now who all around here, besides Kansas Casey, is wider across the shoulders than McFluke?"

Peaches wrinkled his forehead. "I dunno," he said after a space.

"Think again, Peaches, think again. Don't you know anybody who's bigger sidewise than McFluke?"

"I don't. Mac's the biggest man across the shoulders I ever seen."

"Good enough, Peaches. I've found out what I wanted. I had a fair idea before, but now I know. I hear you were acting boisterous and noisy out front of the dance hall last night?"

"What of it?"

"Oh, nothin', nothin' a-tall. Only I'd think it over--I'd think everythin' over good an careful, and after I'd done that I'd do what looked like the best thing to do--under the circumstances. That's all, Peaches. You can go now. I think yore friends are looking for you. I saw Doc Coffin peekin' round the corner of the dance hall a couple of

times."

Peaches arose and faced Racey Dawson and Swing Tunstall. "I--" he began, and stopped.

"I--" prompted Swing.

"I what?" smiled Racey. "Speak right out, Peaches. Don't you care if you do hurt our feelin's. They're tough. They can stand it. Say what's on yore mind."

But Peaches did not say what was on his mind. He turned about and walked hurriedly away.

"So it _was_ Jack Harpe who picked the cuffs," murmured Racey. "Peaches, old timer, I didn't think you'd be so easy."

"Neither did I," said Swing. "And him a gambler. No wonder he ain't doin' so well."

CHAPTER XXIV

DIPLOMACY

Worried Mrs. Dale raised a work-scarred hand and pushed back a lock of gray hair that had fallen over one eye. "It's a forgery," she said, wretchedly. "I know it's a forgery. He--he wouldn't sign such a paper. I know he wouldn't."

Molly Dale, all unmindful of Racey Dawson sitting in a chair tilted back against the wall, slipped around the table and slid her arm about her mother's waist.

"There, there, Ma," she soothed, pulling her mother's head against her firm young shoulder. "Don't you fret. It will come out all right. You'll see. You mustn't worry this way. Can't you believe what Racey says? Try, dear, try."

But unhappy Mrs. Dale was beyond trying. She saw the home which she had worked to get and slaved to maintain taken from her and herself and her daughter turned out of doors. There was no help for it. There was no hope. The future was pot-black. She broke down and wept.

"Oh, oh," she sobbed, "if only I'd watched him closer that day. But I was washing, and I sort of forgot about him for a spell, and when I'd got the clothes on the line he wasn't anywhere in sight, and--and it's all my fuf-fault."

This was too much for Racey Dawson. He got up and went out. Savagely he pulled his hat over his eyes and strode to where his horse stood in the shade of a cottonwood. But he did not pick up the trailing reins. For as he reached the animal he saw approaching across the flat the figures of a horse and rider. And the man was Luke Tweezy.

With the sight of Mrs. Dale's tears fresh in his memory and the rage

engendered thereby galvanizing his brain he went to meet Mr. Tweezy.

"Howdy, Racey," said the lawyer, pulling up.

"Whadda you want?" demanded Racey, halting a scant yard from Luke Tweezy's left leg.

"I come to see Mrs. Dale," replied Tweezy, his leathery features wrinkling in a grimace intended to pass for a propitiating smile.

Racey's stare was venomous. "Tweezy," he drawled, "I done told you something about admiring to see you put these women off this ranch, didn't I?"

"Oh, you was just a li'l hasty. I understand. That's all right. I've done forgot all about it."

"So I see. So I see. I'm reminding you of it. After this, Luke, I'd hobble my memory if I was you, then it won't go straying off thisaway and get you into trouble."

"Trouble?"

Racey did not deign to repeat. He nodded simply.

"I ain't got no gun," explained the lawyer.

"Alla more easy for me, then. You can't shoot back."

Luke Tweezy choked. Choked and spat. "---- ----" he began in a violent tone of voice.

"Careful, careful," cautioned Racey, promptly kicking the lawyer's horse in the ribs. "There's ladies in the house. You get a-holt of yore tongue."

Luke Tweezy obeyed the command literally. For, his horse going into the air with great briskness at the impact of Racey's toe, even as the puncher had intended it should, he, Luke Tweezy, bit his tongue so hard that he wept involuntary tears of keenest anguish.

"You stop that cussin'," resumed Racey, seizing the bridle short and yanking the bouncing horse to a standstill with a swerve and a jerk that almost unseated its rider. "You be careful how you talk, you--hop toad!"

"Leggo that bridle!" yammered Tweezy, almost distraught with anger. His tongue pained him exquisitely and he was otherwise physically shaken. "Leggo that bridle!"

"I'll let it go!" Racey grated through set teeth, and he let it go with a backward flip to the lower branches of the severe curb bit that instantly sent the horse on its hind legs. If Luke Tweezy had not quickwittedly smacked the animal between the ears with the butt of his quirt it would have continued the motion to a backfall and rolled its rider out.

"Tough luck," mourned Racey, sorry to observe that Luke had contrived to ward off an accident. "I was expecting to see that horn dislocate

yore latest meal. If you ain't quite so set on going to the house you can flit."

"I wanna see Mrs. Dale," persisted the lawyer in a strangled voice. "I come to offer her money. I wanna do her a favour, can't you understand?"

"I can't," was the frank reply. "I can't see you doing anybody a favour or giving away any money. C'mon, get a-going."

It was then that the lawyer lifted up his voice and shouted aloud for Mrs. Dale. Undoubtedly Racey would have done Tweezy a mischief had he been given time. But unfortunately Molly Dale came to the lawyer's rescue precisely as she had once come to the rescue of his partner in evil, the bulldozer Lanpher. As it was Racey had contrived to pull Luke Tweezy partly from the saddle when Molly arrived and forced her defender to release his victim.

Reluctantly Racey dropped the leg he held and allowed Tweezy to come to earth on his hands and knees.

"What do you want?" inquired Molly, regarding Tweezy much as she would have regarded a poisonous reptile.

"I want to see yore mother," snuffled Tweezy, applying his sleeve to his nose. He had in the mixup smote his swell fork with the organ in question and it had begun to bleed.

"Why?"

"I want to pay her money to go away quietly," said Tweezy, switching from his sleeve to his handkerchief. "I--"

"Here she is," interrupted Molly. "Tell her."

"How do, ma'am," said Luke to the wet-eyed widow. "I guess it ain't necessary for me to go through a lot of explanations with you. You know what's what, and you know we'll take possession just as soon as the sheriff serves the eviction papers on you."

At this Racey Dawson made a noise in his throat. Molly laid cool fingers on his wrist.

"Steady, boy, steady," she whispered under her breath.

Despite the seriousness of the moment Racey's heart skipped a beat and the pleasantest shiver in the world ran about his body. "Boy!" she had called him. "Boy." Her hand was actually touching his own. He--

"I don't want to be hard on you, Mis' Dale," resumed Luke, after an apprehensive glance at Racey Dawson. "I don't like to be hard on anybody that's sittin' into a run of hard luck, but business is business, ma'am. You know that. And after all I'm--we're only asking for what we're by rights entitled to. We got title to this place fair and square, and--"

"Title, huh?" struck in Racey, unable to keep silent. "Not yet you ain't."

"S-s-sh," breathed Molly, tightening her grip on his wrist.

"It's like I say, Mis' Dale," Luke Tweezy burred on from behind his handkerchief, "I ain't got any wish to add to yore troubles, and so I got my partner to agree for me to give you five hundred dollars cash money if you'll pack up and clear out quiet and peaceful."

"Don't you do it, Mis' Dale!" urged Racey. "There's a trick in that offer."

"They ain't any trick!" contradicted Luke Tweezy, vehemently. "I just wanna save trouble, thassall."

Save trouble! That had been Lanpher's reason for coming the day he rode through the garden. Save trouble, indeed.

"If yo're so shore the sheriff is going to serve those eviction papers," said Racey as calmly as he could because of the warning pressure on his wrist, "if yo're so shore why are you giving away five hundred?"

"Because I don't like to be hard on Mis' Dale. Then, again, I'll admit we wanna get in here soon as we can."

"You admit it, huh? That's a good one, that is. Don't you do it, Mis' Dale. You stand pat."

"I don't want your five hundred dollars," said Mrs. Dale.

"Seven-fifty," climbed up Tweezy.

Mrs. Dale shook her head. "No."

"One thousand," Tweezy raised his ante.

"Lemme throw him out, Mis' Dale?" begged Racey Dawson. "Just lemme throw him out, and I'll guarantee he'll never bother you again."

Again Mrs. Dale shook her head, and the pressure on Racey's wrist increased. "You mustn't touch him," said Mrs. Dale. "He'll go."

"Think it over," Tweezy blundered on. "One thousand dollars gratis cash money in yore hands if you'll leave at once."

"I'll wait awhile," said Mrs. Dale. "Please go."

Luke Tweezy opened his mouth to speak. Racey broke from Molly's detaining grasp and stepped between him and Mrs. Dale, and Tweezy closed his mouth without speaking.

"You heard what she said," Racey drawled, softly. "Git."

And Tweezy got.

"Do you think the sheriff will put us out?" asked Mrs. Dale, twisting a corner of her apron between her hands.

"He'll take all the time to it he can," Racey evaded the direct reply. "But whatever happens don't think of taking any offer like that of

Tweezy's. It's a trick, thassall. No matter who comes to you nor what he offers don't you move till--Well, anyway, Judge Dolan and Jake Rule are with you from soda to hock, and they'll do all they can to hold things at a stand-still till I can fix it all up. You must remember that I know what you dunno, and when I say that everything will end fine and daisy you better believe I know what I'm talking about."

Molly looked at him keenly. "Racey, that's the third or fourth time you've said that. I wonder if you really have something up your sleeve."

"Of course I have," Racey insisted. "You wait. You'll see."

"What do you know? Tell us."

"Never mind, and I won't. It might spoil everything if I told you. You just leave it to me."

He had definitely made his bluff. He would have to make good. And he no more knew how to make good in the business than the year-old baby busy with its toes. But ere this men have killed dragons and made wonders come to pass all for the sake of their ladies' eyes. Men as prosaic and matter-of-fact as the puncher, Racey Dawson. Quite so.

Half-an-hour after the departure of Luke Tweezy Mr. Saltoun and Tom Loudon rode in on lathered horses. They were, it seemed, journeying homeward from the 88 whither they had gone in an endeavour to persuade Lanpher and Tweezy to sell the Dale mortgage.

"Tweezy, huh?" said Racey. "He's just left here."

"He must 'a' rode like the devil," said Mr. Saltoun. "He was in the office with Lanpher when we left."

"I thought I noticed a feller off to the south of us as we come along," observed Loudon. "He was just a-boilin'. I only saw him the once as he slid by the mouth of a draw. Looked like he was trying to keep out of sight. Rode a gray hoss."

"Tweezy rode a gray," nodded Racey.

"Him, all right. What did he want here, Racey?"

"Offered Mis' Dale one thousand cold if she'd pull her freight."

"She ain't gonna do it, is she?" demanded the alarmed Mr. Saltoun.

Racey shook his head. "She's gonna stick."

"She must. Hell, yes. Those papers of Luke's are forged. I know they are."

"So does everybody else," put in Tom Loudon, "but if something don't turn up damn quick--" He broke off, shaking a dubious head.

"Something will," declared Racey, making his bluff a second time with an air of supreme confidence.

"You know something, Racey," prodded Mr. Saltoun who prided himself on

his perspicacity. "Whadda you know?"

"I ain't telling it," answered Racey, coolly. "I ain't coming back to the ranch to-day, neither."

"Oh, you ain't. Listen to the new owner, Tom."

"That's all right," said Racey. "If I'm going to do the world any good I've got to have a free hand."

"You can have two of 'em," conceded Mr. Saltoun. "The bridle's off."

"Aw right, I'll take Swing Tunstall," Racey hastened to say.

"I meant yore own two hands," demurred Mr. Saltoun.

"I know you did, but I meant the other kind. Listen, do you want Lanpher and Tweezy to get this ranch?"

"---- it, no!"

"Then gimme Swing Tunstall."

"Take him. Need anybody else? Wouldn't you like all the rest of the outfit, and me, too?"

"My Gawd, no. This is a job requirin' brains."

"Say, lookit here, Racey--"

"When you get to the ranch tell Swing to come along soon as he can," interrupted Racey. "I'll be expecting him."

Tuckety-tuck! Tuckety-tuck! Somewhere beyond the cottonwood grove surrounding Moccasin Spring a galloping horse was coming in. A moment later horse and rider shot past the tail of the cottonwood grove, and bore down on the house.

"Marie!" exclaimed Racey.

"And riding one of my hosses," observed Mr. Saltoun.

At that instant Marie caught sight of the three men and swerved her mount toward them.

"They said at the Bar S you was here," panted the lookout, pulling up in front of Racey Dawson. "So I borrowed a fresh hoss and kep' on. Somethin's happened in Farewell, Racey. Swing Tunstall's shot."

"Downed?" Racey did not usually jump at conclusions, but Swing Tunstall was his friend.

Marie shook her tousled head. "Nicked--shoulder and leg. But it ain't their fault he wasn't rubbed out."

"Who's responsible?" demanded Racey.

"Doc Coffin."

"You said 'their'."

"Honey Hoke bumped into Swing just as he went after his gun, so Swing couldn't get his gun out a-tall. Swing said Honey grabbed his wrist, but Peaches Austin and Punch-the-breeze Thompson was on the other side in the way so none of the boys seen what happened to Swing exactly till after it had."

"Austin, Thompson, Hoke, and Coffin," said Racey. "What began the fuss?"

"Doc Coffin upset a glass of whiskey over Swing's arm, and then cussed him for getting his arm in the way."

"And Swing called him a liar, huh?"

"And a ---- one, too," elaborated Marie.

"Put-up job." Gruffly Mr. Saltoun gave his opinion.

"Shore." Tom Loudon nodded gravely.

"Where are those four men now?" Racey asked, quietly, looking at Marie.

"They were in the Starlight when I left town--and _they weren't drinkin_'."

"No, they wouldn't be."

"And the sheriff and Kansas went to Dogville this morning, and the marshal is sick. I thought you ought to know. My Gawd, I thought you'd hear the news from somebody else before I got here and go bustin' in regardless, and--"

"I guess I'll go in all right," he told her with a slight smile, "but it won't be regardless."

With that he turned on a spurred heel and crossed springily to where his horse stood.

"Aw, the devil!" exclaimed Marie, looking helplessly at Tom Loudon and Mr. Saltoun. "And he'll do it, too."

Then she "kissed" to her horse and rode into the cottonwood grove for a drink at the spring.

Racey, sticking foot in stirrup, found Molly Dale at his elbow. She was looking at him the way women do when they either don't understand or think they understand only too well.

"Who is that woman?" asked Molly Dale.

"Huh?" Thus Racey, stupidly. He was thinking of his friend lying wounded in Farewell. "What woman you mean?... Oh, her, that's Marie, she's--she's lookout in the Happy Heart."

"Oh, yes, Marie. I--I've seen you with her--one evening when you and she were crossing the street and I drove past. I--I, yes, indeed."

And as she spoke her eyes were very bright, and her figure was stiffer than the proverbial poker. Which was odd. And at the tail of her words she gave a stiff nod and hurried into the house. Which was odder. The species of nod and the hurry--both.

But Racey was in no mood to speculate on the idiosyncrasies of woman. Even _the_ woman. So he topped his mount and rejoined Tom Loudon and Mr. Saltoun. They regarded him silently.

"I guess," said Racey, whirling an empty tobacco-bag by it's draw-string, "I'll borrow some of yore smokin', Tom. I'm plumb afoot for tobacco at the present writing."

Tom Loudon handed over his pouch without a word. But Mr. Saltoun was fidgety. Unlike his son-in-law, he felt that he must speak.

"Lookit here, Racey," he said, hurriedly, "you ain't going to Farewell alone, are you?"

"Why, no, certainly not," Racey replied, solemnly. "I'm going to send word to Yardly for the troops. Hell's bells, there's only four of them, man!"

"Yes, well--Who's this? One of our boys?"

But it was not one of "our" boys. It was Rack Slimson, the proprietor of the Starlight Saloon. But he was riding in from the direction of the Bar S.

He rode soberly, as one bound on a journey of length. Even as Marie had done he glimpsed the three men and turned his horse toward them. Ten feet from the flank of Racey Dawson's mount he pulled in and nodded. There was spite--spite and something else--in the gaze he fixed on Racey Dawson.

"Yore friend's hurt," said he. "Got in a fight."

"Hurt bad?" asked Racey.

"Not _too_ bad. I've seen worse."

"Where's he hurt?"

Rack Slimson merely corroborated what Marie had said. So far he seemed to be telling the truth. And it was natural that there should be spite in his eyes. He had no cause to feel affection for either man. But there was the "something else" besides the spite in those eyes. That was what interested Racey.

"You come here special to tell me this?" said Racey, staring.

"Not me," denied Rack Slimson. "I was just passing by, and I thought I'd let you know."

"Just bein' neighbourly, huh?"

"I dunno as I'd go so far as to say that."

"Well, I'm obliged to you, Slimson. I'm shore a heap obliged to you. Is Swing Tunstall being taken care of all right?"

"He's in Mike Flynn's house. Joy Blythe is a-nursin' him."

"Then I ain't needed in Farewell right now." Racey's tone was casual.

Rack Slimson rose to the bait immediately. "He's asking for you alla time," said he.

"He is, is he? Why didn't you say so at first?"

"I didn't know it was necessary."

"Which is true more ways than one. Lookit here, Slimson, where might you happen to be going when you run into me so providential here at Moccasin Spring?"

"I might be going most anywhere," Rack Slimson replied with a flash of temper.

"No call to get het, Rack, no call to get het. What I'm asking is a fair question: Where might you be going to-day."

"Marysville."

"Ain't you off the trail some?"

"Shore I am, some. I remembered something I gotta see about at the 88 before I go to Marysville. That's how I'm going west instead of south."

"When did you first remember this here something of yores?"

"When I stopped at the Bar S for a drink of water."

"And after you'd just happened to remember this something, I s'pose you just happened to ask where I was and they told you Moccasin Spring. Is that the how of it?"

"Yo're a good guesser," replied Rack Slimson with sarcasm.

"Sometimes I do make a centre shot," Racey admitted, modestly.

It was then that Marie, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, rode forth from the cottonwood grove. At sight of her Rack Slimson's eyes opened wide, then they narrowed.

"Hell," he muttered, turning a slightly worried look on Racey.

"What you hellin' about?" Racey inquired, pleasantly.

"You knowed about Swing Tunstall alla time," complained Rack Slimson.

"What makes you think so?" Racey sidled his horse closer to Rack.

"She told you." Thus Rack, bluntly.

"'She?' What she you mean?"

"Aw, her." Rack Slimson jerked his head toward the approaching girl.

"He's got 'em again," said Racey to Mr. Saltoun and Tom Loudon. "I don't see any 'her' anywhere. Do you?"

"Not me," chorussed both men.

"You see how yo're mistaken, Rack," pointed out Racey. "Yore eyes are deceivin' you. Don't you trust 'em. You don't see any girls round here, exceptin' maybe Miss Dale over at the house. You might 'a' seen her according to whether she came to the kitchen door or not. But you ain't seen any other girl here. And you better be shore you ain't."

"Why had I?" blustered Rack Slimson, without, however, making any hostile motion with his hands.

"Because I say so."

"Whatell's it to you?"

"All you have to do is say in Farewell that you saw Marie here at Dale's and you'll find out. I'll even go farther than that. I'm tellin' you, Rack, that if anybody finds out in Farewell that Marie was here, or if any accident happens to her--any accident, y'understand--I'll have to take it as evidence that you had to blat. Fair enough, huh?"

"But supposing somebody else sees her and tells about it?" protested Rack Slimson.

"In that case yo're out of luck," was the unfeeling reply.

"But--" began again Rack Slimson.

"You might try prayer," Racey interrupted. "It would maybe help. You can't tell."

The unhappy Rack Slimson looked toward Mr. Saltoun and Tom Loudon. But there was no aid for him in that quarter. In fact, both men eyed him with frank hostility.

"So you see Marie is kept out of it." Racey laid his final injunction on Rack as the girl in question joined them. "You don't guess this girl is her, do you?"

"Nun-no," declared Rack, hastily. "I don't. She's somebody else for all I care."

"That's the way to talk," Racey said, nodding approvingly. "You keep right on holding to those sentiments and I wouldn't be surprised if you lived quite a long while."

Marie showed her teeth in a laugh. "I ain't a-scared of any such breed of chunker as Rack Slimson," said she, calmly. "I can manage him my own self. You goin' back to Farewell, Racey?"

"Right now."

"Then I'll be going with you."

"You'll do no such a thing. There's no sense in yore running into trouble thataway. You'll come in to Farewell after me and from another direction."

"Shore, I was going to. I was only gonna ride along with you part way."

Racey shook his head. "Wouldn't be sensible, that wouldn't. Somebody might see you. You come along later like I told you. Me and Rack will travel together."

"I was goin' to the 88," protested Rack.

"Yo're mistaken," Racey told him, firmly. "Yo're going to Farewell--with me. Ain't you?"

"I s'pose so," Rack Slimson capitulated.

"Then c'mon. Get a-goin'."

Marie watched the two men ride away together. "Ain't he the hellion?" she said, admiringly, to Tom and Old Salt. "Bound to have his own way if it kills him."

At this there was a slight sound from the direction of the garden. Marie and the two men turned to look. Trowel in hand Molly Dale was kneeling on one knee between the brook and a row of blue camass. But she was not doing any weeding. She was staring fixedly at Marie. While a man could breathe twice Molly stared at Marie, then she dropped her head and became very busy with the trowel.

Marie's sniff was audible at thirty feet. She picked up her reins and nodded to Tom Loudon and Mr. Saltoun.

"See you later," said she, and started her horse in the direction of Farewell. But she whirled him back before he had taken three steps.

"I clean forgot he was yore hoss," she said, apologetically, to Mr. Saltoun. "I'll have to go back to the Bar S first."

"Thassall right," Mr. Saltoun made haste to assure her. "You take him right along. One of the boys can ride yore hoss to town on the next trip an' ride this one back."

"That will save me a lot of trouble," said Marie, turning her bewildered mount a second time.

"She ain't ridin' straight toward Farewell," said Tom Loudon, rolling a slow cigarette.

"Aw, she's sensible," yawned Mr. Saltoun. "She'll do like Racey says all right. She must like him a lot. I--Whatsa matter with you?"

For Tom Loudon had contrived to make a long leg and give Mr. Saltoun a vigorous kick on the ankle.

"I guess we'll be goin'," dodged Tom Loudon, and then took off his hat

to Miss Dale. "So long, miss. If you--uh--You know where the Bar S is in case--just in case, y' understand."

He touched his horse with the spur and moved off with as much dignity as a colonel of cavalry. Not so Mr. Saltoun. He had been kicked, and the kick hurt, and he was very red and ruffled in consequence. Swearing under his breath he followed his son-in-law.

"Here," he demanded, crowding his horse alongside, "what did yuh kick me for?"

Tom Loudon looked over his shoulder before replying. The ranch-house was a hundred yards in the rear and Molly Dale was not in sight. He deliberately turned his head and looked his father-in-law straight in the eye. "What did I kick you for?" he repeated. "I kicked you because you didn't have any sense."

This was too much. "Huh? Because I--Lookit here, you--"

"'Tsall right, 'tsall right. You didn't have any sense. Here's Molly Dale thinks Racey is the only fellah ever rode a cayuse, and you have to blat out so she can hear you, 'Marie must shore like him a lot'."

"Well, what of it? I don't see--"

"You don't? Wait till I tell Kate."

"It ain't necessary to tell my daughter," Mr. Saltoun remonstrated, hurriedly. "I suppose my saying that about Marie might give Molly a wrong idea maybe about Racey. But how do you know she likes Racey? You been talking to her? Did she tell you so?"

"I ain't, and she didn't. I been talking to Kate. She told me. Don't ask me how she knows. She says she knows, and that's enough for me. You can't fool a woman in things like that."

"You can't fool 'em in anything," Mr. Saltoun corroborated, bitterly. "I shore oughtn't to said that about Racey and Marie. I'll go right back and tell Molly it ain't so."

Mr. Saltoun started to wheel his horse, but Tom Loudon halted that manoeuvre.

"You gotta let it go now," said he. "If you tell her you didn't mean what you said she shore _will_ think it's true."

"We-ell, if you think I'd better not, I won't," Mr. Saltoun assented, doubtfully. "But I wouldn't say anything to Kate if I was you."

"Then I won't," said Tom Loudon, his tongue in his cheek.

"Where you think yo're going?" Mr. Saltoun queried presently. "This ain't the way to the ranch."

"I know it ain't. It's the way to Farewell."

"Whyfor Farewell?"

"It's just possible Racey may need a li'l help before he's through

with this job."

"You're right," Mr. Saltoun said, contritely. "I've been so took up with this Dale mortgage and the idea of Luke Tweezy and that skunk Lanpher getting this land that I ain't give much thought to anything else. Of course Racey will need help, and you and I are the fellers to give it to him."

CHAPTER XXV

STRATEGY

Racey Dawson and Rack Slimson, rising a hill on the way to Farewell, simultaneously turned their heads and looked at each other. Rack's expression was dolefully sullen. Racey's was hard and uncompromising.

"Who was it put you up to this?" asked Racey.

"What?"

"Coming out here after me."

"I didn't come out after you, I tell you!"

"Shore, shore," soothed Racey, "I know all about that. Who put you up to it?"

"I dunno what yo're talkin' about."

"The ignorance of some people," said Racey, recalling sundry occasions when other folk had oddly failed to grasp his meaning.

They rode onward silently.

When they reached the southern slope of Indian Ridge, Racey headed to the east. A spirit of unease lit heavily upon the sagging shoulders of Rack Slimson.

"You ain't goin' straight for Farewell," he remarked at a venture.

"I ain't--no."

"I thought you was."

"I am--but not straight."

"Huh?" Rack Slimson wrinkled his forehead at this.

"We're goin' in town from the side," explained Racey Dawson.

This, too, was a puzzler. "Why?" queried Rack Slimson.

"So's nobody will know we're coming till we're there." The smile with which Racey garnished his answer was chilling to the soul of Mr. Slimson.

"But I don't see--"

"You wouldn't. I'll tell you how it is all in words of one syllable. You and me are coming into town from the east where that draw is and those shacks behind the dance hall. We'll leave our hosses in the draw, and proceed, like they say in the army, on foot. Then you and me--"

"But why me?" Rack Slimson desired to know. "What are you always putting 'me' in for?"

"Because yo're a-going with me, Rack, that's why. Yo're a-going with me while I'm hunting for Coffin and Honey Hoke and Punch-the-breeze Thompson and Peaches Austin. Those four will likely be together, see, and I wanna use you for a breastwork sort of."

"A breastwork!" cried the now thoroughly upset Mr. Slimson. "A breastwork!"

"Shore a breastwork. I'll shove you ahead of me into the saloon and if they--there's four of 'em, y'understand--cut down on me you'll be in the way."

"But they'll down me!"

"I'm counting on that."

"But--"

"Aw, shut up, you ---- skunk! You come out to Moccasin Spring on purpose to get me to come to Farewell and be peaceably shot by Doc Coffin and his gang. Can't tell me you didn't. I know better."

"I didn't! I didn't! I--"

"Aw right you didn't. In that case you got nothing to scare you. If Doc and his outfit ain't got any harsh thoughts against me they won't shoot when we run up on 'em. That'll prove yo're telling the truth, and I'll beg yore pardon. I'll do more'n beg yore pardon. I'll eat yore shirt an' my saddle."

Racey's assurance that he would do the right thing if his suspicions proved unfounded did not appear to cheer Rack Slimson.

"I--lookit here," he began, desperately, "can't we fix this here up some way? I dunno as--"

"Shore we can fix it up," interposed Racey, heartily. "Go after yore gun any time you feel like it. I been letting you keep it on purpose."

Rack Slimson did not accept the invitation. He had not the slightest desire to go after his gun. He was not fast enough, and he knew it.

"It ain't necessary to do that," said he.

"Suit yoreself," Racey told him calmly. "Hop into action any time you feel like it. Of course before we get to that draw outside Farewell where we're gonna leave our hosses I'll have to take yore gun away."

Later I might be too busy to do it--and I can't afford to take _every_ chance. Not with four or five men. You can see that yoreself."

Rack Slimson saw. He saw other things too. Oh, there was no warmth in the sunlight, and the sky was a drabby gray, and he was filled with bitterness unutterable.

"We'll be at the draw some time soon," suggested Racey ten minutes later.

But Rack Slimson's hands continued to remain in plain sight, the while Rack gnawed a thin and bloodless lip.

When at long last the draw opened before them Racey calmly reached over and removed the saloon-keeper's sixshooter. After satisfying himself that the weapon was fully loaded he stuffed it down inside the waistband of his trousers. Then he buttoned the two lower buttons of his vest and pulled the garment in question over the protruding butt.

For a space of time they rode the bottom of the draw. Where a few heavy willows grew about a tiny spring Racey pulled in.

"We'll leave the cayuses here," said he. "We're right close in back of Marie's shack."

They dismounted, tied the horses to separate willows, and climbed the side of the draw.

"No hurry," cautioned Racey, for Rack Slimson was showing signs of a nervous haste. "Besides, I want to pat you all over for a hideout."

Behind the blind end of Marie's shack Rack Slimson submitted to being searched for concealed weapons. Racey found none, not even a pocket-knife.

"Let's go," said Racey Dawson. "We'll go to yore saloon first. And you pray hard that nobody sees us from the back window."

They diagonalled down past the stage company's corral to the house next door to the Starlight.

"They haven't seen us yet," Racey observed, cheerfully, to Rack Slimson whose wretched knees had been knocking together ever since he had dismounted. "Slide over this way a li'l more, Rack. Now take off yore spurs."

Racey stooped and removed his own. And not for an instant did he lose the magic of the drop. As a matter of fact, he had kept Rack covered from the moment Rack set his boot-soles to earth. Rack's spurs jingled on the ground. Racey let them lie. His own spurs he jammed each into a hip pocket.

"I'll have to be careful how I sit down now," he remarked, jocularly, to Rack Slimson. "You ready? Aw right. You know the way to the Starlight's back door."

The back door of the saloon was wide open. They entered on tiptoe, the proprietor in the lead.

"Remember," whispered Racey, when he discovered the back room to be empty, "remember, I'm right behind you. Keep on yore toes."

He held Rack Slimson by the belt and pushed him toward the door giving into the front room. This door was shut. They paused behind it.

"He oughta be along pretty soon," complained a fretful voice that Racey recognized as belonging to Honey Hoke.

"We don't mind waiting," chimed in Punch-the-breeze Thompson.

"It's the best thing we do." This was big Doc Coffin speaking.

The two behind the door heard a bottle-neck clink against the rim of a glass.

"You better not take too much," advised Thompson.

"Aw, who's takin' too much?" flung back Honey Hoke.

"Well, you don't see the rest of us touching a single drop, do you? Speaking personal, I wouldn't drown _my_ insides with liquor when I'm due to go up against a proposition like Racey Dawson."

Here was praise indeed. Racey thumbed Rack Slimson in the ribs. Rack turned his head and saw that Racey was grinning. Rack grew even more spineless.

"You see," pointed out Racey in a sardonic whisper. "Yo're up against the pure quill, feller."

Which remark at any other time would have been in the worst possible taste, but license is extended to men in peril of their lives.

"They're at the table in the corner beside the bar, this end, ain't they?" resumed Racey. "Ain't it lucky the door opens that way?"

Then he was silent for a time while he strove to catch the accents of Peaches Austin. He wanted to know if they were all four at the one table. But Peaches was either not talking or elsewhere. A moment later the question was answered for him by Honey Hoke.

"If he slips by Peaches without Peaches seem' him--" began Honey.

"Aw, hownell can he?" sneered Doc Coffin. "They's Peaches camped down in front of the blacksmith shop right where he can see the trail alla way down Injun Ridge. A dog couldn't get past Peaches without being seen, let alone a two-legged man on a four-legged hoss."

"S'pose he goes round the ridge," offered the doubter, unconsciously hitting the nail on the head.

"He won't," declared the confident Doc. "He'll come boiling right in like he owned the place. Don't you lose no sleep over _that_."

"Maybe Rack couldn't find him," pursued Honey Hoke, and an answering quiver ran through the frame of Rack Slimson.

"Rack will find him all right," said Punch-the-breeze Thompson.

"He might be suspicious of Rack, alla same," Honey Hoke wavered on.

"Not the way Rack will tell him. Didn't we fix it up just what Rack was to say and all before he went? Shore we did. He won't make no mistake, Rack won't. You'll see."

"And anyway," broke in Doc Coffin, "they's four of us to take care of any mistakes."

At which the three laughed loudly.

"I hope," Racey whispered in Rack's rather grimy left ear, "I hope you heard all those fellers said. Proves I was right, don't it? Nemmine noddin' yore head more'n once. Hold still. Yo're doin' fine. Yep, I'm shore glad we stood here a-listenin' like we have. Makes me feel a heap easier in my mind about you. Otherwise I might always have had a doubt I did right. I'd have been shore, y' understand, but I wouldn't have been _dead_ shore."

At which the unfortunate Rack came within an eyewink of fainting. As it was his stomach seemed to roll over and over. He began to feel a little sick.

"The bartender now," went on Racey after a moment, "is he likely to mix into this?"

"I dunno," breathed Rack.

"Who is he? I ain't been in yore place for some time."

Rack told him the name of the bartender, and Racey nodded quite as if Rack were facing him and could see everything he did.

"Then that's all right," whispered Racey. "I know that feller. He's a friend of Mike Flynn's. He won't do anythin' hostile. Let's go right in. Open the door. G'on, damn yore soul, or I'll blow you apart!"

Rack Slimson opened the door and immediately endeavoured to spring to one side. But he reckoned not on the strength of Racey Dawson. The latter swung Rack back into place between himself (Racey Dawson) and the table at which Doc Coffin and his two friends were sitting.

It was a painfully surprised trio that confronted Racey and his unwilling barricade. The bartender was likewise surprised. He immediately fell flat on the floor. Not so the three men at the table. They sat quite still and stared at the man and the gun behind the body of their friend Rack Slimson. They said nothing. Perhaps there was nothing to say.

"I hear you were expectin' me, Doc," drawled Racey, his eyes bright with cold anger. "Whatsa matter?" he added. "Ain't three of you enough to take care of any mistakes?"

At which Doc Coffin's right hand flashed downward. Racey drove an accurate bullet through Doc Coffin's mouth. The bullet ranging upward, and making its exit through the parietal bone, let in the light on Doc's hitherto darkened intellect in more ways than one.

Doc Coffin's forefinger, tightening convulsively on the trigger of its wearer's sixshooter, sent an unaimed shot downward. But previous to embedding itself in a floor board, the bullet passed through Honey Hoke's foot. This disturbed Honey's aim to such an extent that instead of shooting Racey through the head he shot Rack through the hat.

Racey, attending strictly to his knitting, bored Honey Hoke with a bullet that removed the top of the second knuckle of Honey's right hand, shaved a piece from the wrist bone, and then proceeded to thoroughly lacerate most of the muscles of the forearm before finally lodging in the elbow. Thus was Honey Hoke rendered innocuous for the time being. He was not a two-handed gunfighter.

As yet Punch-the-breeze Thompson had remained strictly neutral. His hands were on the table top, and had been from the beginning.

"It's yore move, Thompson," Racey said with significance.

"Then I'll be goin'," said Thompson, calmly. "See you later--maybe."

So saying he rose to his feet, turned his back on Racey, and walked out of the place. Racey had no illusions as to Thompson, but he obviously could not shoot him in the back. He let him go. Watching from a window he saw Thompson go to the hitching-rail in front of the saloon, untie his horse, mount, and ride away northward.

And the blacksmith shop in front of which Peaches Austin was supposed to be on guard lay at the south end of the street. Where, then, was Thompson going?

"Where's he goin'?" he demanded of the now wriggling Rack Slimson.

"Huh? Who? Punch? I dunno."

"Where's Jack Harpe?"

"I dunno."

"Yo're a liar. Where is he?"

"I dunno! I dunno! I tell you! Yo're gug-gug-chokin' me!"

"Yo're lying again. If I was choking you you couldn't talk. Yo're talkin', ain't you? Where's Jack Harpe?"

"I dud-dud-dunno," insisted Rack Slimson, his teeth chattering as Racey shook him.

"Is he in town?"

"I dud-dunno."

"Is Thompson going after him, do you think?"

"I dud-dunny-dunno!"

"I guess maybe you don't, after all," Racey said, disgustedly, flinging the unfortunate saloon-keeper from him with such force that the fellow skittered quite across the floor and sat down in the

washpan into which the bartender was accustomed to throw the broken glassware.

"Ow-wow!" It was a hearty, full-lunged howl that Rack Slimson uttered as he bounded erect and clutched at his trousers.

Racey's eyes brightened at the sight. "Y' oughta known better than to sit down in all that glass. I could 'a' told you you'd get prickles in you. Why don't you stand still and let yore barkeep pick 'em out for you? You can get at most of the big pieces with yore fingers," he added to the bartender, who was gingerly emerging on all fours round the end of the bar. "And the little ones you can dig out with a sharp knife. Yep, Rack, old-timer, I'll bet you won't carry any more messages on horseback for a while."

There was a sudden crashing thud at the back of the room. Honey Hoke had fallen out of his chair. Now he lay on the floor, his legs drawn up and the back of his frowsy head resting against a rung of the chair in which still sat the dead body of Doc Coffin.

Racey went to Honey and spread him out in a more comfortable position.

Calloway and Judge Dolan entered the saloon together.

"We thought we heard shootin'--" began Galloway, staring in astonishment at the grotesque posture Rack Slimson had assumed the better to endure the ministrations of the bartender.

"We heard shootin', all right," said Judge Dolan, his glance sweeping past Slimson and the bartender to the rear of the room.

"What's happened, Racey?" queried Dolan, striding forward. "Both of 'em cashed?"

Racey shook his head. "Doc Coffin passed out," said he in a hard, dry voice. "But Honey Hoke's heart is beatin' regular enough. Guess he's only fainted from loss of blood."

The Judge nodded. "They do that sometimes." Here he looked at Doc Coffin's body lying humped over the table, an arm hanging free, the head resting on the table-top.

"Were they rowin' together?" was the Judge's next question.

Racey gave him a circumstantial account of the shooting and the incidents that had led up to it. The Judge heard him through without a word.

"They asked for it," said he, when Racey made an end. "'Sfunny Punch didn't pick up a hand. Tell you what you do, Racey: You come to my office in about a hour. Nothing to do with this business. I got no fault to find with what you done. Even break and all that. Something else I wanna see you about. Huh? What's that, Piggy?"

The place was beginning to fill up with inquisitive folk from the vicinity, and Racey decided to withdraw. He went out the back way. Closing the door, he set his shoulders against it, and remained motionless a moment. His eyes were on the distant hills, but they neither saw the hills nor anything that lay between.

"I had to do it," he muttered, bitterly. "I didn't want to down him. But I had to. They were gonna down me if they could. And he--they--they asked for it."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE QUARREL

"Lo, Peaches, ain't you afraid of gettin' sunburnt?" Peaches Austin, gambler though he was, flickered his eyelashes. He was startled. He had not had the slightest warning of Racey Dawson's approach.

"Didn't hear me, did you?" Racey continued, conversationally. "I didn't want you to. That's why I kept my spurs off and sifted round from the back of the blacksmith shop. And you were expecting me to come scampering down the trail over Injun Ridge, weren't you? Joke's on you, Peaches, sort of."

Still Peaches said nothing. He sat and gazed at Racey Dawson.

"Don't be a hawg," resumed Racey. "Move over and lemme sit down, too. That's the boy. Now we're both comfortable, Peaches, you mean to sit there and tell me you didn't hear any shooting up at the Starlight a while back?"

Peaches Austin wetted his lips with the tip of a careful tongue. "I heard shootin'," he admitted, stiff-lipped.

"And what did you think it was?"

"I didn't know."

"Didn't you see Thompson ride away?"

"Shore."

"And didn't you think anything about that, either?"

"Oh, I thought, but--"

"But you had yore orders to sit here and wait for li'l Willie. And you always obey orders. That it, Peaches?"

"What are you drivin' at?"

"Yo're always asking me that, Peaches. Try something new for a change. Look."

Racey extended a long arm past Peaches' nose and pointed up the street toward the Starlight Saloon. A man was backing out through the doorway. Another followed, walking forward. Between them they were carrying a third man. The hat of the third man was over his face. His arms, which hung down, jerked like the arms of a doll. Even at that distance Peaches could see that there was no life in the third man.

"That's Doc Coffin," Racey murmured without rancour. "I wonder where they're taking him? He used to bach with Nebraska Jones, didn't he? I guess that's where they're taking him to. Yep, they've gone round the corner of the stage company's corral."

"Where's Honey?" queried Peaches in a still, small voice.

"In the Starlight. He ain't hurt bad. Foot and arm. Lucky, huh?"

Peaches Austin considered these things a moment. "Doc Coffin was reckoned a fast man," he said in the tone of one who, after adding up a column of figures, has found the correct total, "and Honey Hoke wasn't none slow himself. And you got 'em both."

"I didn't get 'em both," corrected Racey. "Honey is only wounded."

"Same thing. You could 'a' got 'him if you wanted to. Yo're lucky, that's what it is. Yo're lucky. And you been lucky from the beginning. I ain't superstitious, but--" Here he lied. Like most gamblers Peaches was sadly superstitious. He looked at Racey, and there was something much akin to wonder on his countenance. He shook his head and was silent a long thirty seconds. "Yo're too lucky for me--I quit," he finished.

"How much?"

"Complete. I tell you, I don't buck no such luck as yores no longer. I'll never have none myself if I do. I'm goin'."

Peaches Austin got to his feet and walked across the street to the hotel. Twenty minutes later Racey, sitting on the bench in front of the blacksmith shop, saw him issue from the hotel, carrying a saddle, packed saddlebags, and _cantenass_, blanket and bridle, and go to the hotel corral.

Within three minutes Peaches Austin rode out from behind the hotel. As he passed the blacksmith shop he said "So long" to Racey.

"See you later," nodded that serene young man.

"I hope not," tossed back Peaches, and rode on down the trail that leads over Indian Ridge to Marysville and the south.

Racey watched him out of town. Then he went to Mike Flynn's to see and, if it were possible, to cheer up his wounded friend, Swing Tunstall. But he was not allowed to see him. Swing, it appeared, had been given an opiate by Joy Blythe, who was acting as nurse, and she refused to awaken her patient for anybody. So there.

Racey went to the Happy Heart to while away the remainder of the hour set by Judge Dolan. The bartender greeted him respectfully and curiously. So did several other men he knew. For that respect and that curiosity he understood the reason. It lay on a bunk in Nebraska Jones's shack.

No one asked him to drink. People are usually a little backward in social intercourse with a citizen who has just killed his fellowman. Of course in time the coolness wears off. In this case the time would

be short, Doc Coffin having been one of those that more or less encumber the face of the earth. But for the moment Racey felt his ostracism and resented it.

He set down his drink half drunk and walked out of the Happy Heart.

* * * * *

"See anything of Luke Tweezy lately?" asked Judge Dolan when Racey was sitting across the table from him in the Judge's office.

"Saw him to-day."

"Where?"

"Moccasin Spring."

Judge Dolan nodded and rasped a hand across his stubbly chin. "Luke is in town now," said he.

"I ain't lost any Luke Tweezys," observed Racey, looking up at the ceiling.

"I wonder how long Luke is figuring on staying in town," went on Judge Dolan, sticking like a stamp to his original subject.

"Nothing to me."

"It might be. It might be. You never can tell about them things, Racey."

Racey Dawson's eyes came down from the ceiling. He studied the Judge's face attentively. What was Dolan driving at? Racey had known the Judge for several years, and he was aware that the more indirect the Judge became in his discourse the more important the subject matter was likely to be.

"No," said Racey, willing to bite, "you never can tell."

"We was talking one day about a feller making mistakes." The tangent was merely apparent.

"Yep," acquiesced Racey. "We were saying Luke Tweezy made a good many."

"Something like that, yeah. You run across any of Luke's mistakes yet, Racey?"

Racey shook his head. "No."

"Did you go to Marysville?"

"Why for Marysville?"

"Luke Tweezy lives in Marysville."

"And you think there's somebody in Marysville would talk?"

Judge Dolan looked pained. "I didn't say so," he was quick to remark.

"I know you didn't, but--"

"I don't guess they's many folks in Marysville _know_ much about Luke--no, not many. Luke is careful and clever, damn clever. But they's other things besides folks which might have useful information."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. A gent, a lawyer anyway, keeps a lot of papers in his safe as a rule. Sometimes them papers make a heap interesting readin'." The Judge paused and regarded Racey coolly.

"They might prove interesting reading, that's a fact," drawled Racey.

"Now I ain't suggestin' anything," pursued Judge Dolan. "I couldn't on account of my oath. But it ain't so Gawd-awful far from Farewell to Marysville."

"It ain't _too_ far."

"I got a notion Luke Tweezy will find important business to keep him here in Farewell the next four or five days."

"I wonder what kind of a safe Luke has got," murmured Racey.

"Damfino," said the Judge. "You know anything about dynamite--how it's handled, huh?"

"Shore, handle it carefully."

"I mean how to prepare a fuse and detonator and stick it in the cartridge. You know how?"

"I helped a miner man once for a week. Shore I know. You cut the fuse square-ended. Stick the square end into the cap until it touches the fulminate, and crimp down the copper shell all round with a dull knife to hold the fuse. Then you make a hole in the end of the cartridge and--"

"I guess you know yore business, Racey," interrupted Judge Dolan. "You'll find a package on that shelf by the door. Handle it carefully. I'm glad you dropped in, Racey, Nice weather we're having."

"But there are some people about due for a cold wave," capped Racey, stopping on his way out to take the package from the shelf and wink at Judge Dolan.

The wink was not returned. But the Judge's tongue may have been in his cheek. He was a most human person, was Judge Dolan of Farewell.

Racey, handling the package with care, went back to the draw where he had left the two horses. In the draw he opened the package. It contained six sticks of dynamite and the necessary detonators and fuse.

"Good old Judge," said Racey, admiringly, and rewrapped the dynamite, the detonators, and the fuse with even more care than he had employed

in unwrapping them.

He rolled the package into his slicker and tied down the slicker behind the cantle of his saddle. Untying the two horses he mounted his own and, leading the other, rode to the hotel corral.

Bill Lainey was only too glad to lend him a fresh horse and a bran sack.

It was dusk when he dismounted at the Dale corral. There was a lamp in the kitchen. Its rays shone out through the open door and made a rectangle of golden light on the dusty earth. Molly was standing at the kitchen table. She was stirring something in a bowl. She did not turn her head when he came to the door.

"Evenin', Molly," said Racey.

"Good evening." Just that.

"Uh. Yore ma around?"

"She's gone to bed." Still the dark head was not raised.

He misunderstood both her brevity and the following silence. He left his hat on the washbench outside the door and stepped into the kitchen.

"Don't take it so to heart, Molly," he said, awkwardly.

"It's hard, but--Shucks, lookit, I've got something to tell you."

In very truth he had something to tell her but he had not meant to tell her so soon.

"Lemme take care of you, Molly--dear. You know I love you, and--"

"Stop!" Molly turned to him an expressionless face. She looked at him steadily. "You say you love me?" she went on.

"Shore I say it." He was plainly puzzled at her reception of what he had said. Girls did not act this way in books.

"How about that--that other girl? Marie, I think her name is."

"What about her?"

"A good deal."

"What has she got to do with my loving you, I'd like to know?"

"She loves you."

"Marie? Loves me? Yo're crazy!"

"Oh, am I? If she hadn't loved you do you think for one minute she'd come riding all the way out here to give you a warning?"

"Marie and I are friends," he admitted. "But there ain't any law against that."

"None at all." Molly's eyes dropped. Her head turned back. She resumed her operations with a spoon in the bowl.

"Lookit here, Molly--"

"Don't you call me Molly." Her tone was as lacking in expression as was her face.

"But you've got to listen to me!" he insisted, desperately. "I tell you there ain't anything between Marie and me."

"Then there ought to be." Thus Molly. Womanlike she yearned to use her claws.

"But--"

"Oh, I've heard all about your carryings on with that--creature; how you talk to her, and people have seen you walking with her on the street. I saw you myself. Yesterday when Mis' Jackson drove out here to buy three hens she told me when the girl was arrested and fined for trying to murder a man you stepped up and paid her fine. Did you?"

"I did. But--"

"There aren't any butts! You've got a nerve, you have, making love to me after running round with that wretched hussy!"

"She ain't a hussy!" denied the exasperated Racey, who was always loyal to absent friends. "She's all right. Just because she happens to be a lookout in the Happy Heart ain't anything against her. It don't give you nor anybody else license to insult her."

This was too much. Not content with confessing his friendship for the girl, he was standing up for her. Molly whirled upon him.

"Go!" Tone and business could not have been excelled by Peg Woffington herself.

Racey went.

"What's the matter?" queried a sleepy voice from the doorway giving into an inner room, as Racey's spurred heels jingled past the washbench. "What's goin' on? Who was here? What you yelling about, anyway?"

"Racey was here, Ma," said Molly.

"Seems to me you made an uncommon racket about it," grumbled her mother, plodding into the kitchen in her slippers.

Her gray hair was all in strings about her face. Her eyes and cheeks were puffed with sleep. She had pulled a quilt round her shoulders over her nightdress. Now she gave the quilt a hitch up and sat down in a chair.

"Make me a cup o' coffee, will you, Molly?" said Mrs. Dale. "My head aches sort of. I hope you didn't have a fight with Racey Dawson."

"Well, we didn't quite agree," admitted Molly, snapping shut the cover of the coffee-mill and clamping the mill between her knees. "I don't like him any more, Ma."

"And after he's helped us so! I was counting on him to fix up this mortgage business! Whatever's got into you, Molly?"

"He's been running round with that awful lookout girl at the Happy Heart."

"Is that all?" yawned Mrs. Dale, greatly relieved. "I thought it might have been something serious."

"It is serious! What right has he to--"

"Why hasn't he? You ain't engaged to him."

"I know I'm not, but he--I--you--" Molly began to flounder.

"Has he ever told you he loved you?" Mrs. Dale inquired, shrewdly.

"Not in so many words, but--"

"But you know he does. Well, so do I know he does. I knew it soon as you did--before, most likely. Don't you fret, Molly, he'll come back."

"No, he won't. Not now. I don't want him to."

"Then who's to fix up this mortgage business with Tweezy, I'd like to know? I declare, I wish I'd taken that lawyer's offer. We'd have something then, anyhow. Now we'll have to get out without a nickel. Oh, Molly, what did you quarrel with Racey for?"

CHAPTER XXVII

BURGLARY

Merely because he believed that the well-known all was over between Molly Dale and himself, Racey did not relinquish his plans for the future.

He rode to Marysville as he had intended. That is, he rode to the vicinity of Marysville. For, arriving at a hill five miles outside of town in the broad of an afternoon, he stopped in a hollow under the cedars and waited for night. Daylight was decidedly not appropriate for the act he contemplated.

"I wonder," he muttered, as he lay with his back braced against a tree and stared at the bulge in his slicker, "I wonder if I ought to use all them sticks at once. I never heard that miner man say how much of an argument a safe needed. I s'pose I better use 'em all."

Luke Tweezy was a bachelor. His office was in his four-room house, and he did not employ a housekeeper. Further than this, Racey Dawson knew nothing of the lawyer's establishment. But he believed that his

knowledge was sufficient to serve his purpose.

About midnight Racey Dawson removed himself, his horse, and his dynamite from the hollow on the hill to where a lone pine grew almost directly in the rear of and two hundred yards from the residence of Luke Tweezy. He had selected the tall and lonely pine as the best place to leave his horse because, should he be forced to run for it, he would have against the stars a plain landmark to run for. He thoroughly expected to be forced to run. Six sticks of dynamite letting go together would arouse a cemetery. And Marysville was a lively village.

Racey, taking no chances on the Lainey horse stampeding at the explosion, rope-tied the animal to the trunk of the pine. After which he removed his spurs, carefully unwrapped the dynamite and stuck three sticks in each hip-pocket. The caps, in their little box, he put in the breast-pocket of his shirt. With the coil of fuse in one hand and the bran sack given him by Lainey in the other he walked toward the house of Tweezy.

The house was of course dark. Nor were there any lights in the irregular line of houses stretching up and down this side of the street. The neighbours had apparently all gone to bed. Through an opening between two houses Racey saw a brightly lighted window in a house an eighth of a mile away. That would be Judge Allison's house. The Judge, then, was awake. Two hundred and twenty yards was not a long distance even for a portly man like Judge Allison to cover at speed. And Racey had known Judge Allison to move briskly on occasion.

Racey, moving steadily ahead, slid past someone's barn and opened up a view of the dance hall. It had previously been concealed from his sight by the high posts and rails of three corrals. The dance hall was going full blast. At least all the windows were bright with light. He was too far away to hear the fiddles.

The dance hall! He might have known it would still be operating at midnight. But it was almost twice as far from the Tweezy house to the dance hall as it was from the Judge's house to Tweezy's. That was something. Indeed it was a great deal. But he would have to work fast. All the neighbours would come bouncing out at the crash of the explosion.

Racey paused to flatten an ear at the kitchen door. He heard nothing, and tiptoed along the wall to the window of the room next the kitchen. The ground plan of the house was almost an exact square. There was a room in each angle. The office, which Racey knew contained the safe, was diagonally across from the kitchen.

Racey, halting at the window of the room next the kitchen, was somewhat surprised to find it open. He stuck in his head and saw a faint glow beyond the half-closed door of the office. The glow seemed to be brighter near the floor. Racey listened intently. He heard a faint grumble and now and then a squeak.

He crouched beneath the window and removed his boots. Then he crawled over the sill and hunkered down on the uncarpeted floor. The floor boards did not creak. Still crouching, his arms extended in front of him, he made his way silently across the room, skirting safely in the process two chairs and a table, and stood upright behind the crack of

the door.

Looking through the crack he perceived that the glow he had seen from the window emanated from a tin can pierced with several holes. The dim, uncertain light revealed the figure of a tall and hatless man kneeling beside the safe. The man's back was toward the lighted tin can. One of the tall man's hands was slowly turning the knob of the combination. The side of the man's head was pressed against the front of the safe near the combination. Racey could not see the man's face.

Across the window of the room two blankets had been hung. The door into the other front room was open. Then suddenly the doorway was no longer a black void. A man stood there--a fat man with a stomach that hung out over the waistband of his trousers. There was something very familiar about the figure of that fat man.

The fat man leaned against the doorjamb and pushed back his wide black hat. The light in the tin can illumined his countenance dimly. But Racey's eyes were becoming accustomed to the half darkness. He was able to recognize Jacob Pooley--Fat Jakey Pooley, the register of the district, whose home was in Piegan City.

"You ain't as fast as you used to be," observed Fat Jakey in a soft whisper.

"Shut up!" hissed the kneeling man, and turned his face for an instant toward Fat Jakey, so that the light shone upon his features.

It was Jack Harpe.

"What's biting your ear?" Fat Jakey asked, good-naturedly.

"I've told you more'n once to let what's past alone," grumbled Jack Harpe.

"Hell, there's nobody around."

"Nemmine whether they is or not. You get out of the habit."

"Rats," sneered Fat Jakey.

"What was that?" Jack Harpe's figure tautened in a flash.

"Rats," repeated Fat Jakey.

"I thought I heard something," persisted Jack Harpe.

"You heard rats," chuckled Fat Jakey. "You're nervous, that's what's the matter, or else you ain't able to open the safe."

"I can open the safe all right," growled Jack Harpe, bending again to his work.

"I wonder what he did hear," Racey said to himself. "I thought I heard something, too."

Whatever it was he did not hear it again.

"There she is," said Jack Harpe, suddenly, and threw open the safe

door.

It was at this precise juncture that a voice from the darkness behind Fat Jakey said, "Hands up!"

Oh, it was then that events began to move with celerity. Fat Jakey Pooley ducked and leaped. Jack Harpe kicked the tin can, the candle fell out and rolled guttering in a quarter circle only to be extinguished by one of Fat Jakey's flying feet.

There was a slithering sound as the blankets across the window were ripped down, followed by a scraping and a heaving and a grunting as two large people endeavoured to make their egress through the same window at the same time.

"So that window was open alla time," thought Racey as he prudently waited for the owner of the voice in the other room to discover himself. But this the voice's owner did not immediately do. Racey could not understand why he did not shoot while the two men were struggling through the window. Lord knows he had plenty of time and opportunity.

Even after Jack Harpe and Fat Jakey had reached the outer air and presumably gone elsewhere swiftly, there was no sound from the other room. Racey, his gun ready, waited.

At first his impulse had been incontinently to flee the premises as Jack and Jake had done. But a saving second thought held him where he was. It was more than possible that the mysterious fourth man had designs on the contents of the safe. In which event--

Racey stood pat.

He heard no sound for at least a minute after Jack and Jake had left, then he heard a soft swish, and a few stars which had been visible through the upper half of the window were blotted out. The blankets were being readjusted.

A match was struck and a figure stooped for the candle that had been dashed out by the foot of Fat Jakey Pooley. A table shielded the figure from Racey. Then the figure straightened and set the flaring match to the candle end. And the face that bent above the light was the face of one he knew.

"Molly!" he whispered, and slipped from his ambush.

At which Molly dropped candle and match and squeaked in affright. But her scare did not prevent her from drawing a sixshooter. He heard the click of the hammer, and whispered desperately, "Molly! Molly! It's me! Racey!"

He struck a match and retrieved the candle and lit it quickly. By its light he saw her staring at him uncertainly. Her eyes were bright with conflicting emotions. Her sixshooter still pointed in his general direction.

"Put yore gun away," he advised her. "We've got no time to lose. Hold the candle for me! Put it in the can first!"

Automatically she obeyed the several commands.

He knelt before the open safe and, beginning at the top shelf, he stuffed into his bran sack every piece of paper the safe contained. Besides papers there were two sixshooters and a bowie. These he did not take.

When the safe was clean of papers Racey tied the mouth of the bran sack, took Molly by the hand, and blew out the candle.

"C'mon," he said, shortly. "We'll be leavin' here now."

Towing her behind him he led her to the window of the rear room. Holding his hat by the brim he shoved it out through the window. No blow or shot followed the action. He clapped the hat on his head, and looked out cautiously. He satisfied himself that the coast was clear and flung a leg over the sill.

When he had helped out Molly he gave her the sack to hold and pulled on his boots.

"Where's yore hoss?" he whispered.

"I tied him at the corner of the nearest corral," was the answer.

"C'mon," said he and took her again by the hand.

They had not gone ten steps when she stumbled and fell against him.

"Whatsa matter?"

"Nothing," was the almost breathless reply. "I'm--I'm all right. I just stepped on a sharp stone."

"Yore shoes!" he murmured, contritely. "I never thought. Why didn't you say something? Here."

So saying he scooped her up in his arms, settled her in place with due regard for the box of caps in his breast-pocket, and plowed on through the night. Her arms went round his neck and her head went down on his shoulder. She sighed a gentle little sigh. For a sigh like that Racey would cheerfully have shot a sheriff's posse to pieces.

"I left my shoes in my saddle pocket," she said, apologetically. "I--I thought it would be safer."

There was a sudden yell somewhere on Main Street. It sounded as if it came from uncomfortably close to the Tweezy house. Then a sixshooter cracked once, twice, and again. At the third shot Racey was running as tight as he could set foot to the ground.

Encumbered as he was with a double armful of girl and a fairly heavy sackful of papers he yet made good time to the corner of the nearest corral. The increasing riot in Main Street undoubtedly was a most potent spur.

"Which way's the hoss?" he gasped when the dark rail of the corral fretted the sky before them.

"You're heading straight," she replied, calmly. "Thirty feet more and you'll run into him. Better set me down."

He did--literally. He turned his foot on a tin can and went down ker-flop. Forced to guard his box of caps with one hand he could not save Molly Dale a smashing fall.

"Ah-ugh!" guggled Molly, squirming on the ground, for she had struck the pit of her stomach on a round rock the size of a football and the wind was knocked out of her.

Racey scrambled to his feet, and knowing that if Molly was able to wriggle and groan she could not be badly hurt, picked up the sack and scouted up Molly's horse. He found it without difficulty, and tied the sack with the saddle strings in front of the horn. He loosed the horse and led it to where Molly still lay on the ground. The poor girl was sitting up, clutching her stomach and rocking back and forth and fighting for her breath with gasps and crows.

But there was not time to wait till she should regain the full use of her lungs--not in the face of the shouts and yells in Main Street. Lord, the whole town was up. Lights were flashing in every house. Racey stooped, seized Molly under the armpits, and heaved her bodily into the saddle.

"Hang onto the horn," he ordered, "and for Gosh sake don't make so much noise!"

Molly obeyed as best she could. He mounted behind her, and of course had to fight the horse, which harboured no intention of carrying double if it could help itself. Racey, however, was a rider, and he jerked Molly's quirt from where it hung on the horn. Not more than sixty seconds were wasted before they were travelling toward the lone pine as tight as the horse could jump.

At the pine Racey slipped to the ground and ran to untie his horse.

"Can you hang on all right at a trot if I lead yore hoss?" he queried, sharply, his fingers busy with the knot of the rope.

"I cue-can and gug-guide him, too," she stuttered, picking up her reins and making a successful effort to sit up straight. "Lul-look! At Tut-Tweezy's huh-house!"

He looked. There were certainly three lanterns bobbing about in the open behind the house of Luke Tweezy. He knew too well what those lights meant. The Marysville citizens were hunting for a hot trail.

He swung up with a rush.

"Stick right alongside me," he told her. "We'll trot at first till we get behind the li'l hill out yonder. After that we can hit the landscape lively."

She spoke no word till they had rounded the little hill and were galloping south. Then she said in her normal voice, "This isn't the way home."

"I know it ain't. We've got to lose whoever follows us before we skip

for home."

"Of course," she told him, humbly. "I might have known. You always think of the right thing, Racey."

All of which was balm to a hitherto tortured soul.

"That's all right," he said, modestly.

"And how strong you are--carrying me and that heavy sack all that distance." Both admiration and appreciation were in her tone. Any man would have been made happy thereby. Racey was overjoyed. And the daughter of Eve at his side knew that he was overjoyed and was made glad herself. She did not realize that Eve invariably employed the same method with our grandfather Adam.

He reached across and patted her arm.

"Yo're all right," he told her. "When we get out of this yo're going to marry me."

Her free hand turned under his and clasped his fingers. S6 they rode for a space hand-in-hand. And Racey's heart was full. And so was hers. If they forgot for the moment what dread possibilities the future held who can blame them?

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LETTERS

"But what was yore idea in coming to Marysville a-tall?"

"To get that release Father signed--I thought it might be in his safe."

"Anybody give you the idea it might be?"

She shook her head. "Nobody."

"You've got more brains than I have, for a fact. But how were you figuring on getting into the safe?"

"Oh, I brought a bunch of keys along. What are you laughing at? I thought one might fit."

"Keys for a safe! Say, don't you know you don't open safes with keys? They've got combinations, safes have."

"I didn't know it. How could I? I never saw a safe in my life till I saw this one to-night. I thought they had locks like any other ordinary--Oh, I think you're horrid to laugh!"

"I'm not laughing. Lean over, and I'll show you.... There, I ain't laughing, am I?"

"Not now, but you were.... Not another one, Racey. Sit back where you belong, will you? You can hold my hand if you like. But I wasn't such a fool as you seem to think, Racey. I brought an extra key along in case the others didn't fit."

"Extra key?"

"Surely--seven sticks of dynamite, caps, and fuse. Chuck had a lot he was using for blowing stumps, so I borrowed some from his barn. He didn't know I took it."

"I should hope not," Racey declared, fervently. "You leave dynamite alone, do you hear? Where is it now?"

"Oh, I left it on the floor in Tweezy's house when I found I didn't need it any longer."

"Thank God!" breathed Racey, whose hair had begun to rise at the bare idea of the explosives still being somewhere on her person. "What was yore motive in hold in' up Jack Harpe and Jakey Pooley?"

"Was that who they were? I couldn't see their faces. Well, when I had broken the lock and opened the back window and crawled through, I went into the front room where I thought likely the safe would be, and I was just going to strike a match when I heard a snap at the front window as the lock broke. Maybe I wasn't good and scared. I paddled into the other front room by mistake. Got turned around in the dark, I suppose. And before I could open a window and get out I heard two men in the front room I'd just left. I didn't dare open a window then. They'd have heard me surely, so I just knelt down behind a bed. And after a while, when one man was busy at the safe, the fat man came into my room and sat down on a chair inside the door. Lordy, I hardly dared breathe. It's a wonder my hair didn't turn white. Once I thought they must have heard me--the time the fat man said 'rats'. Honestly, I was so scared I was almost sick."

"But you have nerve enough to try and hold them up."

"I had to. When I found out they were going to rob the safe, I had to do something. Why, they might have taken the very paper I wanted, and somehow later Tweezy might have gotten it back. I couldn't allow that. I knew that I must get at what was inside the safe before they did. I just had to, so when the fat man got up from his chair and stood in the doorway with his back to me, I just gritted my teeth and stood up and said 'Hands up.'"

"My Gawd, girl, you might 'a' been shot!"

"I had a sixshooter," she said, tranquilly. "But I wouldn't have shot first," she added, reflectively.

Willy-nilly then he took her in his arms and held her tightly.

"But I don't see why," he said after an interval, "you had to go off on a wild-goose chase thisaway. Didn't I tell you I was going to fix it up for you? Couldn't you 'a' trusted me enough to lemme do it my own way?"

"We had that--that quarrel in the kitchen, and I thought you didn't

like me any more, and--and wouldn't have any more to do with me and that it was my job to do something to help out the family.... Please! Racey! I can't breathe!"

Another interval, and she resolutely pushed his arms down and held him away from her with both hands on his shoulders.

"Tell me," said she, her blue eyes plumbing the very depths of his soul, "tell me you don't love anybody else."

He told her.

Later. "There was a time once when I thought you liked Luke Tweezy," he observed, lazily.

"How horrible," she murmured with a slight shudder as she snuggled closer.

And that was that.

"I think, dearest," said Molly, raising her head from his shoulder some twenty minutes later, "that it's light enough now to see what's in the sack."

So, in the brightness of a splendid dawn, snugly hidden on the tree-covered flank of one of the Frying Pan Mountains, they opened the bran sack and went through every paper it contained.

There were deeds, mortgages, legal documents of every description. They found the Dale mortgage, but they did not find the release alleged to have been signed by Dale immediately prior to his death.

"Of course that mortgage is recorded," said Racey, dolefully, staring at the pile of papers, "so destroyin' that won't help us any. The release he's carrying with him, and I don't see anything--"

"Here's one we missed," said Molly Dale in a hopeless tone, picking up a slip of paper from where it had fallen behind a saddle. The slip of paper was folded several times. She opened it and spread it out against her knee. "Why, how queer," she muttered.

"Huh?" In an instant Racey was looking over her shoulder.

When both had thoroughly digested the meaning of the writing on that piece of paper they sat back and regarded each other with wide eyes.

"This ought to fix things," breathed Molly.

"Fix things!" cried Racey. "Cinch! We've got him like that."

He snapped his fingers joyfully.

Molly reached for the bran sack. "You only shook it out," she said. "I'm going to turn it inside out. Maybe we'll find something else."

They did find something else. They found a document caught in the end seam. They read it with care and great interest.

"Well," said Racey, when he came to the signatures, "no wonder Jack

Harpe and Jakey Pooley wanted to get into the safe. No wonder. If we don't get the whole gang now we're no good."

"And to think we never thought of such a thing."

"I was took in. I never thought anything else. And it does lie just right for a cow ranch."

"Of course it does. You couldn't help being fooled. None of us had any idea--"

"I'd oughta worked it out," he grumbled. "There ain't any excuse for my swallowing what Jack Harpe told me. Lordy, I was easy."

"What do you care now? Everything's all right, and you've got me, haven't you?" And here she leaned across the bran sack to kiss him.

She could not understand why his return kiss lacked warmth.

* * * * *

"Sun's been up two hours," he announced. "And the hosses have had a good rest. We'd better be goin'."

"What are you climbing the tree for, then?" she demanded.

"I want to look over our back trail," he told her, clambering into the branches of a tall cedar. "I know we covered a whole heap of ground last night, but you never can tell."

Apparently you never could tell. For, when he arrived near the top of the cedar and looked out across a sea of treetops to the flat at the base of the mountain, he saw that which made him catch his breath and slide earthward in a hurry.

"What is it?" asked Molly in alarm at his expression.

"They picked up our trail somehow," he answered, whipping up a blanket and saddle and throwing both on her horse. "They're about three miles back on the flat just a-burnin' the ground."

"Saddle your own horse," she cried, running to his side. "I'll attend to mine."

"You stuff all the papers back in the sack. That's yore job. Hustle, now. I'll get you out of this. Don't worry."

"I'm not worrying--not a worry," she said, cheerfully, both hands busy with Luke Tweezy's papers. "I'd like to know how they picked up the trail after our riding up that creek for six miles."

"I dunno," said he, his head under an upflung saddle-fender. "I shore thought we'd lost 'em."

She stopped tying the sack and looked at him. "How silly we are!" she cried. "All we have to do is show these two letters to the posse an'--"

"S'pose now the posse is led by Jack Harpe and Jakey Pooley," said he,

not ceasing to pass the cinch strap.

Her face fell. "I never thought of that," she admitted. "But there must be some honest men in the bunch."

"It takes a whole lot to convince an honest man when he's part of a posse," Racey declared, reaching for the bran sack. "They don't stop to reason, a posse don't, and this lot of Marysville gents wouldn't give us time to explain these two letters, and before they got us back to town, the two letters would disappear, and then where would we be? We'd be in jail, and like to stay awhile."

"Let's get out of here," exclaimed Molly, crawling her horse even quicker than Racey did his.

Racey led the way along the mountain side for three or four miles. Most of the time they rode at a gallop and all the time they took care to keep under cover of the trees. This necessitated frequent zigzags, for the trees grew sparsely in spots.

"There's a slide ahead a ways," Racey shouted to the girl. "She's nearly a quarter-mile wide, and over two miles long, so we'll have to take a chance and cross it."

Molly nodded her wind-whipped head and Racey snatched a wistful glance at the face he loved. Renunciation was in his eyes, for that second letter found caught in the bran sack's seam had changed things. He could not marry her. No, not now. And yet he loved her more than ever. She looked at him and smiled, and he smiled back--crookedly.

"What's the matter?" she cried above the drum of the flying hoofs.

"Nothing," he shouted back.

He hoped she believed him. And bitter almonds were not as bitter as that hope.

Then the wide expanse of the slide was before them. Now some slides have trails across their unstable backs, and some have not. Some are utterly unsafe to cross and others can be crossed with small risk. There was no trail across this particular slide, and it did not present a dangerous appearance. Neither does quicksand--till you step on it.

Racey dismounted at the edge and started across, leading his horse. Twenty yards in the rear Molly Dale followed in like manner. At every step the footing gave a little. Once a rounded rock dislodged by the forefoot of Racey's horse bounded away down the long slope.

The slither of a started rock behind him made him turn his head with a jerk. Molly's horse was down on its knees.

"Easy, boy, easy," soothed Molly, coaxingly, keeping the bridle reins taut.

The horse scrambled up and plunged forward, and almost overran Molly. She seized it short by the rein-chains. The horse pawed nervously and tried to rear. More rocks skidded downward under the shove of the hind hoofs. To Racey's imagination the whole slide seemed to tremble.

Molly's face when the horse finally quieted and she turned around was pale and drawn. Which was not surprising.

"It's all right, it's all right, it's all right," Racey found himself repeating with stiff lips.

"Of course it is," nodded Molly, bravely. "There's no danger!"

"No," said Racey. "Better not hold him so short. Don't wind that rein round yore wrist! S'pose he goes down you'd go, too. Here, you lemme take him. I'll manage him all right."

"I'll manage him all right myself!" snapped Molly, up in arms immediately at this slur upon her horsemanship. "You go on."

Racey turned and went on. It was not more than a hundred yards to where the grass grew on firm ground. Racey and his horse reached solid earth without incident. Then--a scramble, a scraping, and a clattering followed in a breath by the indescribable sound of a mass of rocks in motion.

Racey had wasted no time in looking to see what had happened. He knew. At the first sound of disaster he had snapped his rope strap, freed his rope and taken two half hitches round the horn. Then he leaped toward the slide, shaking out his rope as he went.

Twenty feet out and below him Molly Dale and her struggling horse were sliding downward. If the horse had remained quiet--but the horse was not remaining quiet and Molly's wrist was tangled in the bridle reins.

In the beginning the movement was slow, but as Racey reached the edge of the slide an extra strong plunge of the horse drove both girl and animal downward two yards in a breath. Molly turned a white face upward.

"So long, Racey," she called, bravely, and waved her free hand.

But Racey was going down to her with his rope in one hand. With the other hand and his teeth he was opening his pocket-knife. The loose stones skittered round his ankles and turned under his boot soles. He took tremendous steps and, with that white face below him, lived an age between each step.

"Grab the rope above my hand!" he yelled, although by now she was not a yard from him.

Racey was closer to the end of his rope than he realized. At the instant that her free hand clutched at the rope it tightened with a jerk as the cow pony at the other end, feeling the strain and knowing his business, braced his legs and swayed backward. Molly's fingers brushed the back of Racey's hand and swept down his arm. Well it was for him that he had taken two turns round his wrist, for her forearm went round his neck and almost the whole downward pull of girl and horse exerted itself against the strength of Racey Dawson's arm and shoulder muscles.

Molly's face and chin were pressed tightly against Racey's neck. Small blame to her if her eyes were closed. The arm held fast by the bridle

was cruelly stretched and twisted. And where the rein was tight across the back of her wrist, for he could reach no lower, Racey set the blade of his pocket-knife and sawed desperately. It was not a sharp knife and the leather was tough. The steel did not bite well. Racey sawed all the harder. His left arm felt as if it were being wrenched out of its socket. The sweat was pouring down his face. His hat jumped from his head. He did not even wonder why. He must cut that bridle rein in two. He must--he must.

Snap! Three parts cut, the leather parted, Molly's left arm and Racey's right fell limply. Molly's horse went down the slide alone. Neither of them saw it go. Molly had fainted, and Racey was too spent to do more than catch her round the waist and hold her to him in time to prevent her following the horse.

Smack! something small and hot sprinkled Racey's cheek. He looked to the left. On a rock face close by was a splash of lead. Smack! Zung-g-g diminuendo, as a bullet struck the side of a rock and buzzed off at an angle.

Racey turned his head abruptly. At a place where trees grew thinly on the opposite side of the slide and at a considerably lower altitude than the spot where he and Molly hung at the end of their rope shreds of gray smoke were dissolving into the atmosphere. The range was possibly seven hundred yards. The hidden marksman was a good shot to drive his bullets as close as he had at that distance.

Straight out from the place of gray smoke four men and four horses were making their way across the slide. They were halfway across. But they had stopped. The down rush of Molly's horse had apparently given them pause. Now two men started ahead, one stood irresolute and one started to retrace his steps. It is a true saying that he who hesitates is lost. Straight over the irresolute man and his horse rolled the dust cloud whose centre was Molly's horse. When the dust cloud passed on it was much larger, and both the man and his horse had disappeared.

The man who had started to retreat continued to retreat, and more rapidly. The two who had held on did not cease to advance, but they proceeded very slowly.

"If that feller with the Winchester don't get us we're all right for a spell," Racey muttered.

He knew that on their side of the slide for a distance of several hundred yards up and down the side of the mountain and for several miles athwart it the underbrush was impenetrable for horses and wicked travelling for men. There had been a forest fire four years before, and everyone knows what happens after that.

In but one place, where a ridge of rock reared through the soil, was it possible to cross the stretch of burned-over ground. Naturally Racey had picked this one spot. Whether the posse had not known of this rock ridge, or whether they had simply miscalculated its position it is impossible to say.

"Those two will shore be out of luck when they get in among the stubs," he thought to himself, as he waited for his strength to come back.

But youth recovers quickly and Racey was young. It may be that the lead that was being sent at him and Molly Dale was a potent revivifier.

Certainly within three or four minutes after he had cut the bridle Racey began to work his way up the rope to where his patient and well-trained horse stood braced and steady as the proverbial boulder.

Monotonously the man behind the Winchester whipped bullet after bullet into the rocky face of the slide in the immediate vicinity of Racey Dawson and the senseless burden in the crook of his left arm. Nevertheless, Racey took the time to work to the right and recover the hat that a bullet had flicked from his head.

Then he resumed his slow journey upward.

Ages passed before he felt the good firm ground under his feet and laid the still unconscious Molly on the grass behind a gray and barkless windfall that had once been a hundred-foot fir.

Then he removed his horse farther back among the stubs where it could not be seen, took his Winchester from the scabbard under the left fender and went back to the edge of the slide to start a return argument with the individual who had for the last ten minutes been endeavouring to kill him.

CHAPTER XXIX

HUE AND CRY

"Did you hit him?"

"I don't think so," replied Racey without turning his head. "Keep down."

"I am down."

"How you feel?"

"Pretty good--considering."

"Close squeak--considerin'."

"Yes," said she in a small voice, "it was a close squeak. You--you saved my life, Racey."

"Shucks," he said, much embarrassed, "that wasn't anythin'--I mean--you--you know what I mean."

"Surely, I know what you mean. All the same, you saved my life. Tell me, was that man shooting at us all the time after I fainted until you got me under cover?"

"Not all the time, no."

"But most of the time. Oh, you can make small of it, but you were very brave. It isn't everybody would have stuck the way you did."

Smack! Tchuck! A bullet struck a rock two feet below where Racey lay on his stomach, his rifle-barrel poked out between two shrubs of smooth sumac--another bored the hole of a gray stub at his back.

He fired quickly at the first puff of smoke, then sent two bullets a little to the left of the centre of the second puff.

"Not much chance of hittin' the first feller," he said to Molly. "He's behind a log, but that second sport is behind a bush same as me.... Huh? Oh, I'm all right. I got the ground in front of me. He hasn't. Alla same, we ain't stayin' here any longer. I think I saw half-a-dozen gents cuttin' across the end of the slide. Give 'em time and they'll cut in behind us, which ain't part of my plans a-tall. Let's go."

He crawfished backward on his hands and knees. Molly followed his example. When they were sufficiently far back to be able to stand upright with safety they scrambled to their feet and hurried to the horse.

"I'll lead him for a while," said Racey, giving Molly a leg up, for the horse was a tall one. "He won't have to carry double just yet."

So, with Racey walking ahead, they resumed their retreat.

The ridge of rock cutting across the burned-over area could not properly be called rimrock. It was a different formation. Set at an angle it climbed steadily upward to the very top of the mountain. In places weatherworn to a slippery smoothness; in others jagged, fragment-strewn; where the rain had washed an earth-covering upon the rock the cheerful kinnikinick spread its mantle of shining green.

The man and the girl and the horse made good time. Racey's feet began to hurt before he had gone a mile, but he knew that something besides a pair of feet would be irreparably damaged if he did not keep going. If they caught him he would be lynched, that's what he would be. If he weren't shot first. And the girl--well, she would get at the least ten years at Piegan City, if they were caught. But "if" is the longest and tallest word in the dictionary. It is indeed a mighty barrier before the Lord.

"Did you ever stop to think they may come up through this brush?" said Molly, on whom the silence and the sad gray stubs on either hand were beginning to tell.

"No," he answered, "I didn't, because they can't. The farther down you go the worse it gets. They'd never get through. Not with hosses. We're all right."

"Are we?" She stood up in her stirrups, and looked down through a vista between the stubs.

They had reached the top of the mountain. It was a saddle-backed mountain, and they were at the outer edge of the eastern hump. Far below was a narrow valley running north and south. It was a valley

without trees or stream and through it a string of dots were slipping to the north.

"Are we all right?" she persisted. "Look down there."

At this he turned his head and craned his neck.

"I guess," he said, stepping out, "we'd better boil this kettle a li'l faster."

She made no comment, but always she looked down the mountain side and watched, when the stubs gave her the opportunity, that ominous string of dots. She had never been hunted before.

They crossed the top of the mountain, keeping to the ridge of rock, and started down the northern slope. Here they passed out of the burned-over area of underbrush and stubs and scuffed through brushless groves of fir and spruce where no grass grew and not a ray of sunshine struck the ground and the wind soughed always mournfully.

But here and there were comparatively open spaces, grassy, drenched with sunshine, and sparsely sprinkled with lovely mountain maples and solitary yellow pines. In the wider open spaces they could see over the tops of the trees below them and catch glimpses of the way they must go.

A deep notch, almost a canon, grown up in spruce divided the mountain they were descending from the next one to the north. This next one thrust a rocky shoulder easterly. The valley where the horsemen rode bent round this shoulder in a curve measured in miles. They could not see the riders now.

"There's a trail just over the hill," said Racey, nodding toward the mountain across the notch. "It ain't been regularly used since the Daisy petered out in '73, but I guess the bridge is all right."

"And suppose it ain't all right?"

"We'll have to grow wings in a hurry," he said, soberly, thinking of the deep cleft spanned by the bridge. "Does this trail lead to Farewell?"

"Same thing--it'll take us to the Farewell trail if we wanted to go there, but we don't. We ain't got time. We'll stick to this trail till we get out of the Frying-Pans and then we'll head northeast for the Cross-in-a-box. That's the nearest place where I got friends. And I don't mind saying we'll be needing friends bad, me and you both."

"Suppose that posse reaches the trail and the bridge before we do?"

"Oh, I guess they won't. They have to go alla way round and we go straight mostly. Don't you worry. We'll make the riffle yet."

His voice was more confident than his brain. It was touch and go whether they would reach the trail and the bridge first. The posse in the valley--that was what would stack the cards against them. And if they should pass the bridge first, what then? It was at least thirty miles from the bridge to the Cross-in-a-box ranch-house. And there was only one horse. Indeed, the close squeak was still squeaking.

"Racey, you're limping!"

"Not me," he lied. "Stubbed my toe, thassall."

"Nothing of the kind. It's those tight boots. Here, you ride, and let me walk." So saying, she slipped to the ground.

As was natural the horse stopped with a jerk. So did Racey.

"You get into that saddle," he directed, sternly. "We ain't got time for any foolishness."

Foolishness! And she was only trying to be thoughtful. Foolishness! She turned and climbed back into the saddle, and sat up straight, her backbone as stiff as a ramrod, and looked over his head and far away. For the moment she was so hopping mad she forgot the danger they were in. They made their way down into the heavy growth of Engelmann spruce that filled the notch, crossed the floor of the notch, and began again to climb.

An hour later they crossed the top of the second mountain and saw far below them a long saddle back split in the middle by a narrow cleft. At that distance it looked very narrow. In reality, it was forty feet wide. Racey stopped and swept with squinting eyes the place where he knew the bridge to be.

"See," he said, suddenly, pointing for Molly's benefit. "There's the Daisy trail. I can see her plain--to the left of that arrowhead bunch of trees. And the bridge is behind the trees."

"But I don't see any trail."

"Grown up in grass. That's why. It's behind the trees mostly, anyhow. But she's there, the trail is. You can bet on it."

"I don't want to bet on it." Shortly. She was still mad at him. He had saved her life, he had succeeded in saving the family ranch, he had put her under eternal obligations, but he had called her thought for him foolishness. It was too much.

Yet all the time she was ashamed of herself. She knew that she was small and mean and narrow and deserved a spanking if any girl did. She wanted to cuff Racey, cuff him till his ears turned red and his head rang. For that is the way a woman feels when she loves a man and he has hurt her feelings. But she feels almost precisely the same way when she hates one who has. Truth it is that Love and Hate are close akin.

Down, down they dropped two thousand feet, and when they came out upon the fairly level top of the saddle back Racey mounted behind Molly.

"He'll have to carry double now," he explained. "She's two mile to the bridge, and my wind ain't good enough to run me two mile."

It was not his wind that was weak, it was his feet--his tortured, blistered feet that were two flaming aches. Later they would become numb. He wished they were numb now, and cursed silently the man who first invented cowboy boots. Every jog of the trotting horse whose

back he bestrode was a twitching torture.

"We'll be at the bridge in another mile," he told her.

"Thank Heaven!"

Silent and grass-grown lay the Daisy trail when they came out upon it winding through a meagre plantation of cedars.

"No one's come along yet," vouchsafed Racey, turning into the trail after a swift glance at its trackless, undisturbed surface.

He tickled the horse with both spurs and stirred him into a gallop. There was not much spring in that gallop. Racey weighed fully one hundred and seventy pounds without his clothes, Molly a hundred and twenty with all of hers, and the saddle, blanket, sack, rifle, and cartridges weighed a good sixty. On top of this weight pile many weary miles the horse had travelled since its last meal and you have what it was carrying. No wonder the gallop lacked spring.

"Bridge is just beyond those trees," said Racey in Molly's ear.

"The horse is nearly run out," was her comment.

"He ain't dead yet."

They rocked around the arrowhead grove of trees and saw the bridge before them--one stringer. There had been two stringers and adequate flooring when Racey had seen it last. The snows of the previous winter must have been heavy in the Frying-Pan Mountains.

Molly shivered at the sight of that lone stringer.

"The horse is done, and so are we," she muttered.

"Nothing like that," he told her, cheerfully. "There's one stringer left. Good enough for a squirrel, let alone two white folks."

"I--I couldn't," shuddered Molly.

They had stopped at the bridge head, Racey had dismounted, and she, was looking down into the dark mouth of the cleft with frightened eyes.

"It must be five hundred feet to the bottom," she whispered, her chin wobbling.

"Not more than four hundred," he said, reassuringly. "And that log is a good strong four-foot log, and she's been shaved off with the broadaxe for layin' the flooring so we got a nice smooth path almost two feet wide."

In reality, that smooth path retained not a few of the spikes that had once held the flooring and it was no more than eighteen inches wide. Racey gabbled on regardless. If chatter would do it, he'd get her mind off that four-hundred-foot drop.

"I cue-can't!" breathed Molly. "I cue-can't walk across on that lul-log! I'd fall off! I know I would!"

"You ain't gonna walk across the log," he told her with a broad grin. "I'll carry you pickaback. C'mon, Molly, slide off. That's right. Now when I stoop put yore arms round my neck. I'll stick my arms under yore legs. See, like this. Now yo're all right. Don't worry. I won't drop you. Close yore eyes and sit still, and you'll never know what's happening. Close 'em now while I walk round with you a li'l bit so's to get the hang of carryin' you."

She closed her eyes, and he began to walk about carrying her. At least she thought he was walking about. But when he stopped and she opened her eyes, she discovered that the horse was standing on the other side of the cleft. At first she did not understand.

"How on earth did the horse get over?" she asked in wonder.

"He didn't," Racey said, quietly, setting her down, "but we did. I carried you across while you had yore eyes shut. I told you you'd never know what was happenin'."

She sat down limply on the ground. Racey started back across the stringer to get the horse. He hurried, too. That posse they had seen in the valley! There was no telling where it was. It might be four miles away, or four hundred yards.

"C'mon, feller," said Racey, picking up the reins of the tired horse. "And for Gawd's sake pick up yore feet! If you don't that dynamite is gonna make one awful mess at the bottom of the canon."

Dynamite! Mess! There was an idea. Although in order to spare Molly an extra worry for the time being, he had told her they would push on together, it had been his intention to hold the bridge with his rifle while Molly rode alone to the Cross-in-a-box for help. But those six sticks of dynamite would simplify the complex situation without difficulty.

He did not hurry the horse. He merely walked in front holding the bridle slackly. The horse followed him as good as gold--and picked up his feet at nearly every spike. Once or twice a hind hoof grazed a spike-head with a rasping sound that sent Racey's heart bouncing up into his throat. Lord, so much depended on a safe passage!

For the first time in his eventful life Racey Dawson realized that he possessed a full and working set of nerves.

When they reached firm ground Racey flung the reins to Molly.

"Unpack the dynamite," he cried. "It's in the slicker."

With his bowie he began furiously to dig under the end of the stringer where it lay embedded in the earth. Within ten minutes he had a hole large enough and long enough to thrust in the whole of his arm. He made it a little longer and a little wider, and at the end he drove an offset. This last that there might be no risk of the charge blowing out through the hole.

When the hole was to his liking, he sat back on his haunches and grabbed the dynamite sticks Molly held out to him. With strings cut from his saddle, he tied the sticks into a bundle. Then he prepared

his fuse and cap. In one of the sticks he made a hole. In this hole he firmly inserted the copper cap. Above the cap he tied the fuse to the bundle with several lappings of a saddle-string.

"There!" he exclaimed. "I guess that cap will stay put. You and the hoss get out of here, Molly. Go along the trail a couple of hundred yards or so. G'on. Get a move on. I'll be with you in a minute. Better leave my rifle."

Molly laid the Winchester on the grass beside him, mounted the horse, and departed reluctantly. She did not like to leave Racey now. She had burned out her "mad". She rode away chin on shoulder. The cedars swallowed her up.

Racey with careful caution stuffed the dynamite down the hole and into the offset. Then he shovelled in the earth with his hands and tamped it down with a rock.

Was that the clack of a hoof on stone? Faint and far away another hoof clacked. He reached up to his hatband for a match. There were no matches in his hatband. Feverishly he searched his pockets. Not a match--not a match anywhere!

He whipped out his sixshooter, held the muzzle close to the end of the fuse and fired. He had to fire three times before the fuse began to sparkle and spit.

Clearly it came to his ears, the unmistakable thudding of galloping hoofs on turf. The posse was riding for the bridge full tilt. He picked up his rifle and dodged in among the trees along the trail. Forty yards from the mined stringer he met Molly riding back with a scared face.

"What is it?" she cried to him. "I heard shots! Oh, what is it?"

"Go back! Go back!" he bawled. "I only cut that fuse for three minutes."

Molly wheeled the horse and fled. Racey ran to where a windfall lay near the edge of the cleft and some forty yards from the stringer. Behind the windfall he lay down, levered a cartridge into the chamber, and trained his rifle on the bridge head.

The galloping horsemen were not a hundred paces from the stringer when the dynamite let go with a soul-satisfying roar. Rocks, earth, chunks and splinters of wood flew up in advance of a rolling cloud of smoke that obscured the cleft from rim to rim.

A crash at the bottom of the narrow canon told Racey what had happened to that part of the stringer the dynamite had not destroyed.

Racey lowered the hammer of his rifle to the safety notch just as the posse began to approach the spot where the bridge had been. It approached on foot by ones and twos and from tree to tree. Racey could not see any one, but he could see the tree branches move here and there.

"I guess," muttered Racey, as he crawfished away from the windfall, "I guess that settles the cat-hop."

* * * * *

The sun was near its rising the following day when Racey and Molly, their one horse staggering with fatigue, reached the Cross-in-a-box. Racey had walked all the distance he was humanly able to walk, but even so the horse had carried double the better part of twenty miles. It had earned a rest.

So had Racey's feet.

* * * * *

"My Gawd, what a relief!" Racey muttered, and sat back and gingerly wiggled his toes.

"Damn shame you had to cut 'em up thataway," said Jack Richie, glancing at Racey's slit boots. "They look like new boots."

"It is and they are, but I couldn't get 'em off any other way, and I'll bet I won't be able to get another pair on inside a month. Lordy, man, did you ever think natural-born feet would swell like that?"

"You better soak them awhile," said Jack Richie. "C'mon out to the kitchen."

"Shore feels good," said Racey, when his swelled feet were immersed in a dishpan half full of tepid water. "Lookit, Jack, let Miss Dale have her sleep out, and to-morrow sometime send a couple of boys with her over to Moccasin Spring."

"Whatsa matter with you and one of the boys doing it?"

"Because I have to go to Piegan City."

"Huh?"

"Yep--Piegan City. I'm coming back, though, so you needn't worry about losing the hoss yo're gonna lend me."

"That's good. But--"

"And if any gents on hossback _should_ drop in on you and ask questions just remember that what they dunno won't hurt 'em."

Jack Richie nodded understandingly. "Trust me," he said. "As I see it, Miss Dale and you come in from the north, and--"

"Only me--you ain't seen any Miss Dale--and I only stopped long enough to borrow a fresh hoss and then rode away south."

"I know it all by heart," nodded Jack Richie.

"In about a week or ten days, maybe less," said Racey Dawson, "you'll know more than that. And so will a good many other folks."

CHAPTER XXX

THE REGISTER

"Mr. Pooley," said Racey Dawson, easing himself into the chair beside the register's desk, "where is McFluke?"

Mr. Pooley's features remained as wooden as they were fat. His small, wide-set eyes did not flicker. He placed the tips of his fingers together, leaned back in his chair, and stared at Racey between the eyebrows.

"McFluke?" he repeated. "I don't know the name."

"I mean the murderer Jack Harpe sent to you to be taken care of," explained Racey.

Mr. Pooley continued to stare. For a long moment he made no comment. Then he said, "Still, I don't know the name."

"If you will lean back a li'l more," Racey told him, "you can look out of the window and see two chairs in front of the Kearney House. On the right we have Bill Riley, a Wells Fargo detective from Omaha, on the left Tom Seemly from the Pinkerton Agency in San Francisco. They know something but not everything. Suppose I should spin 'em _all_ my _li'l_ tale of grief--what then, Mr. Pooley?"

"Still--I wouldn't know the name McFluke," maintained Mr. Pooley.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Pooley," said Racey, rising to his feet. "I shore am."

"Don't strain yoreself," advised Mr. Pooley, making a brave rustle among the papers on his desk.

"I won't," Racey said, turning at the door to bestow a last! grin upon Mr. Pooley. "So long. Glad I called."

Mr. Pooley laughed outright. "G'by," he called after Racey as the door closed.

Mr. Pooley leaned far back in his chair. He saw Racey Dawson stop on the sidewalk in front of the two detectives. The three conversed a moment, then Racey entered the Kearney House. The two detectives remained where they were.

Mr. Pooley arose and left the room.

* * * * *

"You gotta get out of here!" It was Mr. Pooley speaking with great asperity.

"Why for?" countered our old friend McFluke, one-time proprietor of a saloon on the bank of the Lazy.

"Because they're after you, that's why."

"Who's they?"

"Racey Dawson for one."

McFluke sat upright in the bunk. "Him! That ----!"

"Yes, him," sneered Pooley. "Scares you, don't it? And he's got two detectives with him, so get a move on. I don't want you anywhere on my property if they do come sniffin' round."

"I'm right comfortable here," declared McFluke, and lay down upon the bunk.

"You'd better go," said Mr. Pooley, softly.

"Not unless I get some money first."

"So that's the game, is it? Think I'll pay you to drift, huh? How much?"

"Oh, about ten thousand."

"Is that all?"

"Well, say fifteen--and not a check, neither."

"No," said Mr. Pooley, "it won't be a check. It won't be anything, you--worm."

So saying Mr. Pooley laid violent hands on McFluke, yanked him out of the bunk, and flung him sprawling on the floor.

"Not one cent do you get from me," declared Mr. Pooley. "I never paid blackmail yet and I ain't beginning now. I always told Harpe you'd upset the applecart with yo're bullheaded ways. You stinking murderer, it wasn't necessary to kill Old Man Dale! Suppose he did hit you, what of it? You could have knocked him out with a bungstarter. But no, you had to kill him, and get everybody suspicious, didn't you? Why--you, you make me feel like cutting your throat, to have you upset my plans this way!"

McFluke raised himself on an arm. "I didn't upset yore plans none," he denied, sulkily. "Everythin's comin' out all right. Hell, he wouldn't play that day, anyway! Said he'd never touch a card or look at a wheel again as long as he lived, and when I laughed at him he hit me. Whatell else could I do? I hadda shoot him. I--"

"Shut up, you and your 'I's' and 'He wouldn't' and 'I hadda!' If you've told me that tale once since you came here you've told me forty times. Get up and get out! Yore horse is tied at the corral gate. I roped him on my way in. C'mon! Get up! or will I have to crawl yore hump again?"

But McFluke did not get up. Instead he scrabbled sidewise to the wall and shrank against it. His eyes were wide, staring. They were fixed on the doorway behind Mr. Pooley.

"I didn't do it, gents!" cried McFluke, thrusting out his hands before his face as though to ward off a blow. "I didn't kill him! I didn't! It's all a lie! I didn't kill him!"

Fat Jacob Pooley whirled to face three guns. His right hand fell away reluctantly from the butt of his sixshooter. Slowly his arms went above his head. Racey Dawson and his two companions entered the room. The eldest of these companions was one of the Piegan City town marshals. He was a friend of Jacob Pooley's. But there was no friendliness in his face as he approached the register, removed his gun, and searched his person for other weapons. Jacob Pooley said nothing. His face was a dark red. The marshal produced a pair of handcuffs. The register recoiled.

"Not those!" he protested. "Don't put handcuffs on me!"

"Put yore hands down," ordered the marshal.

"Look here, I'll go quietly. I'll--"

"Put yore hands _down_!" repeated the inexorable marshal.

Jacob Pooley put his hands down.

Racey and the other man were handcuffing McFluke, who was keeping up an incessant wail of, "I didn't do it! I didn't, gents, I didn't!"

"Oh, shut up!" ordered Racey, jerking the prisoner to his feet. "You talk too much."

"Where's yore Wells Fargo and Pinkerton detectives?" demanded Mr. Pooley.

"This gent is the Wells Fargo detective," replied Racey, indicating the man who had helped him handcuff McFluke. "There ain't any Pinkerton within five hundred miles so far as I know.... Huh? Them? Oh, they were just drummers from Chicago I happened to speak to because I figured you'd be expectin' me to after I'd told you who they were. The real Wells Fargo, Mr. Johnson here, was a-watchin' yore corral alla time, so when you got a friend of yores to pull them two drummers into a poker game and then saddled yore hoss and went bustin' off in the direction of yore claim we got the marshal and trailed you."

"You can't prove anything!" bluffed Mr. Pooley.

"We were here beside the door listenin' from the time McFluke said he was too comfortable to move out of here." Thus the marshal wearily.

Mr. Pooley considered a moment. "Who snitched where Mac was?" he asked, finally.

"Nobody," replied Racey, promptly.

"Somebody must have. Who was it?"

"Nobody, I tell you. McFluke had to go somewhere, didn't he? He couldn't hang around Farewell. Too dangerous. But the chances were he wouldn't leave the country complete till he got his share. And as nothing had come off it wasn't any likely he'd got his share. So he'd want to keep in touch with his friends till the deal was put through. It was only natural he'd drift to you. And when I come here to Piegan

City and heard you had hired a man to live on yore claim and then got a look at him without him knowing it the rest was easy."

"But what," inquired Mr. Pooley, perplexedly, "has Wells Fargo to do with this business?"

"Anybody that knows Bill Smith alias Jack Harpe as well as you do," spoke up Mr. Johnson, grimly, "is bound to be of interest to Wells Fargo."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE LAST TRICK

"I'd take it kindly if you gents would stick yore guns on the mantel-piece," said Judge Dolan.

Jack Harpe and Luke Tweezy looked at each other.

"I ain't wearing a gun," said Luke Tweezy, crossing one skinny knee over the other.

"But Mr. Harpe is," pointed out Judge Dolan.

Jack Harpe jackknifed his long body out of his chair, which was placed directly in front of an open doorway giving into an inner room, crossed the floor, and placed his sixshooter on the mantel-piece.

"What is this," he demanded, returning to his place "a trial?"

"Not a-tall," the Judge made haste to assure him. "Just a li'l friendly talk, thassall. I'm a-lookin' for information, and I've an idea you and Luke can give it to me."

"I'd like a li'l information my own self," grumbled Luke Tweezy. "When are you gonna make the Dales vacate?"

"All in good time," the Judge replied with a wintry smile. "I'll be getting to that in short order. Here comes Kansas and Jake Rule now."

"What you want with the sheriff?" Luke queried, uneasily.

"He's gonna help us in our li'l talk," explained the Judge, smoothly.

"I think I'll get my gun," observed Jack Harpe.

He made as if to rise but sank back immediately for Racey Dawson had suddenly appeared in the open doorway behind him and run the chill muzzle of a sixshooter into the back of his neck.

"Never sit with yore back to a doorway," advised Racey Dawson. "If you'll clamp yore hands behind yore head, Jack, we'll all be the happier. Luke, fish out the knife you wear under yore left armpit, lay it on the floor and kick it into the corner."

Luke Tweezy's knife tinkled against the wall at the moment that the sheriff, his deputy, and two other men entered from the street. The third man was Mr. Johnson, the Wells Fargo detective. The fourth man wore his left arm in a sling and hobbled on a cane. The fourth man was Swing Tunstall.

"What kind of hell's trick is this?" demanded Jack Harpe, glaring at the Wells Fargo detective.

"It's the last trick, Bill," said Mr. Johnson.

At the mention of which name Jack Harpe appeared to shrink inwardly. He looked suddenly very old.

"Take chairs, gents," invited Judge Dolan, looking about him in the manner of a minstrel show's interlocutor. "If everybody's comfortable, we'll proceed to business."

"I thought you said this wasn't a trial," objected Luke Tweezy.

"And so it ain't a trial," the Judge rapped out smartly. "The trial will come later."

Luke Tweezy subsided. His furtive eyes became more furtive than ever.

"Go ahead, Racey," said Judge Dolan.

Racey, still holding his sixshooter, leaned hipshot against the doorjamb.

"It was this way," he began, and told what had transpired that day in the hotel corral when he had been bandaging his horse's leg and had overheard the conversation between Lanpher and Jack Harpe and later, Punch-the-breeze Thompson.

"They's nothing in that," declared Jack Harpe with contempt, twisting his neck to glower up at Racey. "Suppose I did wanna get hold of the Dale ranch. What of it?"

"Shore," put in Luke Tweezy. "What of it? Perfectly legitimate business proposition. Legal, and all that."

"Not quite," denied Racey. "Not the way you went about it. Nawsir. Well, gents," he resumed, "what I heard in that corral showed plain enough there was something up. Dale wouldn't sell, and they were bound to get his land away from him. So they figured to have Nebraska Jones turn the trick by playin' poker with the old man. When Nebraska--They switched from Nebraska to Peaches Austin, plannin' to go through with the deal at McFluke's from the beginning. And that was where Tweezy come in. He was to get the old man to McFluke's, and with the help of Peaches Austin cheat Dale out of the ranch."

"That's a damn lie!" cried Tweezy.

"I suppose you'll deny," said Racey, "that the day I saw you ride in here to Farewell--I mean the day Jack Harpe spoke to you in front of the Happy Heart, and you didn't answer him--that day you come in from Marysville on purpose to tell Jack an' Lanpher about the mortgage having to be renewed and that now was their chance. I suppose you'll

deny all that, huh?"

"Yo're--yo're lyin'," sputtered Luke Tweezy.

"Am I? We'll see. When playin' cards with old Dale didn't work they caught the old man at McFluke's one day and after he'd got in a fight with McFluke and McFluke downed him, they saw their chance to produce a forged release from Dale."

"Who did the forging?" broke in the Judge.

"I dunno for shore. This here was found in Tweezy's safe." He held out a letter to the Judge.

Judge Dolan took the letter and read it carefully. Then he looked across at Luke Tweezy.

"This here," said he, tapping the letter with stiffened forefinger, "is a signed letter from Dale to you. It seems to be a reply in the negative to a letter of yores askin' him to sell his ranch."

The Judge paused and glanced round the room. Then his cold eyes returned to the face of Luke Tweezy who was beginning to look extremely wretched.

"Underneath the signature of Dale," continued the Judge, "somebody has copied that signature some fifty or sixty times. I wonder why."

"I dunno anything about it," Luke Tweezy denied, feebly.

"We'll come back to that," the Judge observed, softly. "G'on, Racey."

"I figure," said Racey, "that they'd hatched that forgery some while before Dale was killed. The killing made it easier to put it on record."

"Looks that way," nodded the Judge.

"Lookit here," boomed Jack Harpe, "you ain't got any right to judge us thisaway. We ain't on trial."

"Shore you ain't," asserted the Judge. "I always said you wasn't. This here is just a talk, a friendly talk. No trial about it."

"Here's another letter, Judge," said Racey Dawson.

The Judge read the other letter, and again fixed Luke Tweezy with his eye.

"This ain't a letter exactly," said Judge Dolan. "It's a quadruplicate copy of an agreement between Lanpher of the 88 ranch, Jacob Pooley of Piegan City, and Luke Tweezy of Marysville, parties of the first part, and Jack Harpe, party of the second part, to buy or otherwise obtain possession of the ranch of William Dale, in the northeast corner of which property is located an abandoned mine tunnel in which Jack Harpe, the party of the second part, has discovered a gold-bearing lode."

"A mine!" muttered Swing Tunstall. "A gold mine! And I thought they

wanted it for a ranch."

"So did I," Racey nodded.

"I know that mine," said Jake Rule. "Silvertip Ransom and Long Oscar drove the tunnel, done the necessary labour, got their patent, and sold out when they couldn't get day wages to old Dale for one pony and a jack. But Dale never worked it. A payin' lode! Hell! Who'd 'a' thought it?"

"Old Salt an' Tom Loudon got a couple o' claims on the other side of the ridge from Dale's mine," put in Kansas Casey. "They bought 'em off of Slippery Wilson and his wife. Them claims oughta be right valuable now."

"They are," nodded Judge Dolan. "The agreement goes on to say that Jack Harpe found gold-bearing lodes in both of Slippery's old tunnels, that these claims will be properly relocated and registered--I guess that's where Jakey Pooley come in--and all three mines will be worked by a company made up of these four men, each man to receive one quarter of the profits. This agreement is signed by Jack Harpe, Simon Lanpher, and Jacob Pooley."

"And after Pooley was arrested," contributed Racey Dawson, "the Piegan City marshal went through his safe and found the original of this agreement signed by Tweezy, Lanpher, and Harpe."

Luke Tweezy held up his hand. "One moment," said he. "Where was the agreement signed by Harpe, Pooley, and Lanpher found?"

"In yore safe," replied Racey Dawson.

"Did you find it there?"

"Yep."

"What were you doing at my safe?"

"Now don't get excited, Luke. I happened to be in the neighbourhood of yore house in Marysville about a month ago when I noticed one of yore back windows open. I snooped in and there was Jack Harpe working on yore combination with Jakey Pooley watchin' him. Jack Harpe was the boy who opened the safe.... Huh? Shore, I know him and Jakey Pooley sicked posses on my trail. Why not? They hadda cover their own tracks, didn't they? But that ain't the point. What I can't help wondering is why Harpe and Pooley was fussin' with the safe in the first place. What do you guess, Luke?"

Evidently Tweezy knew the answer. With a yelp of "Tried to cross me, you--!" he flung himself bodily upon Jack Harpe.

In a moment the two were rolling on the floor. It required four men and seven minutes to pry them apart.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE END OF THE TRAIL

Molly Dale looked at Racey with adoring eyes. "How on earth did you guess that the Bill Smith who robbed the Wells Fargo safe at Keeleyville and killed the agent was Jack Harpe?"

"Oh, that was nothing. You see, I'd heard somebody say--I disremember exactly who now--that Jack Harpe's real name was Bill Smith, that he'd shaved off his beard and part of his eyebrows to make himself look different, and that he'd done something against the law to some company in some town. I didn't know what company nor what town, but I had somethin' to start with when McFluke was let loose. I figured out by this, that, and the other that Jack Harpe had let McFluke loose. Aw right, that showed Jack Harpe was a expert lock picker. He showed us at Marysville that he was a expert on safe combinations. Now there can't be many men like that. So I took what I knew about him to the detective chiefs of three railroads. He'd done somethin' against a company, do you see, and of course I went to three different _railroad_ companies before I woke up and went to the Wells Fargo an' found out that such a man as Jack Harpe named Bill Smith was wanted for the Keeleyville job. So you see there wasn't much to it. It was all there waitin' for somebody to find it."

"But it lacked the somebody till you came along," she told him with shining eyes.

"Shucks."

"No shucks about it. That we have our ranch to-day with a sure-enough producing gold mine in one corner of it is all due to you."

"Shucks, suppose now those handwritin' experts Judge Dolan got from Chicago hadn't been able to prove at the time that the forgery and the fifty or sixty copies of yore dad's name were written by the same hand, ink, and pen? Suppose now they hadn't? What then? Where'd you be, I'd like to know? Nawsir, you give them the credit. They deserve it. Well, I'm shore glad yo're all gonna be rich, Molly. It's fine. That's what it is--fine--great. Well, I've got to be driftin' along. I'm going to meet Swing in town. We're riding south Arizona way to-morrow."

"Arizona!"

"Yeah, we're going to give the mining game a whirl."

"Why--why not give it a whirl up here in this country?"

"Because there ain't another mine like yores in the territory. No, we'll go south. Swing wants to go--been wanting to go for some time."

"Bub-but I thought you were going to stay up here," persisted Molly, her cheeks a little white.

"Not--not now," Racey said, hastily. "So long, take care of yoreself."

He reached for her hand, gave it a quick squeeze, then picked up his hat and walked out of the house without another word or a backward look.

* * * * *

"What makes me sick is not a cent out of Old Salt," said Racey, wrathfully, as he and Swing Tunstall walked their horses south along the Marysville trail.

"What else could you expect?" said the philosopher Swing. "We specified in the agreement that it was cows them jiggers was gonna run on the range. We didn't say nothin' about a mine."

"We?" repeated Racey. "We? You didn't have a thing to do with that agreement. I made it. It was my fool fault we worked all those months for nothing."

"What's the dif?" Swing said, comfortably. "We're partners. Deal yoreself a new hand and forget it. Tough luck we couldn't 'a' made a clean sweep of that bunch, huh?"

"Oh, I dunno. Suppose Peaches, Nebraska, and Thompson did get away. We did pretty good, considerin'. You can't expect everything."

"Alla same they'd oughta been a reward--for Jack Harpe, anyway. Wells Fargo is shore getting mighty close-fisted."

"Jack did better than I thought he would. He never opened his yap about Marie being in that Keeleyville gang."

"Maybe he didn't know for shore or else knowed better. Bull was in that gang, too, and Bull got his throat cut. If Jack had done any blattin' about Marie and Keeleyville he might 'a' had to stand trial for murder right here in this county instead of going down to New Mexico to be tried for a murder committed ten years ago with all that means--evidence gone rusty with age and witnesses dead or in jail themselves most like. Oh, he'll be convicted, but it won't be first degree, you can stick a pin in that."

"I wonder if he did kill Bull."

"I wonder, too. Didja know who Bull really was, Swing?... Marie's brother. Yep, she told me about it yesterday."

"Her own brother, huh? That's a odd number. Alla same I'll bet she don't miss him much."

"Nor Nebraska, neither. _He'll_ never come back to bother her again, that's a cinch. Who's that ahead?"

"That" was Molly waiting for them at a turn in the trail. When they came up to her she nodded to both men, but her smile was all for Racey Dawson. He felt his pulse begin to beat a trifle faster. How handsome she was with her dark hair and blue eyes. And at the moment those blue eyes that were looking into his were deep enough to drown a man.

"Can I see you a minute, Racey?" said she.

Swing immediately turned his horse on a dime and loped along the back trail. Left alone with Racey she moved her horse closer to his. Their ankles touched. His hands were clasped on the saddle-horn. She laid

her cool hand on top of them.

"Racey," she said, her wonderful eyes holding him, "why are you going away?"

This was almost too much for Racey. He could hardly think straight. "I told you," he said, hoarsely. "We're goin' to Arizona--minin'."

She flung this statement aside with a jerk of her head. "You used to like me, Racey," she told him.

He nodded miserably.

"Don't you like me any more?" she persisted.

He did not nod. Nor did he speak. He stared down at the back of the hand lying on top of his.

"Look at me, boy," she directed.

He looked. The fingers of the hand on top of his slid in between his fingers.

"Look me in the eye," said she, "and tell me you don't love me."

"I cuc-can't," he muttered in a panic.

"Then why are you going away?" Her voice was gentle--gentle and wistful.

"Because yo're rich now, that's why," he replied, thickly, the words wrung out in a rush. "You've lots o' money, and I ain't got a thing but my hoss and what I stand up in. How can I love you, Molly?"

"Lean over here, and I'll show you how," said Molly Dale.

THE END

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