

THE ONE-WAY TRAIL

A Story of the Cattle Country



BY RIDGWELL CULLUM

The Project Gutenberg EBook of The One-Way Trail, by Ridgwell Cullum

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.net

Title: The One-Way Trail
A story of the cattle country

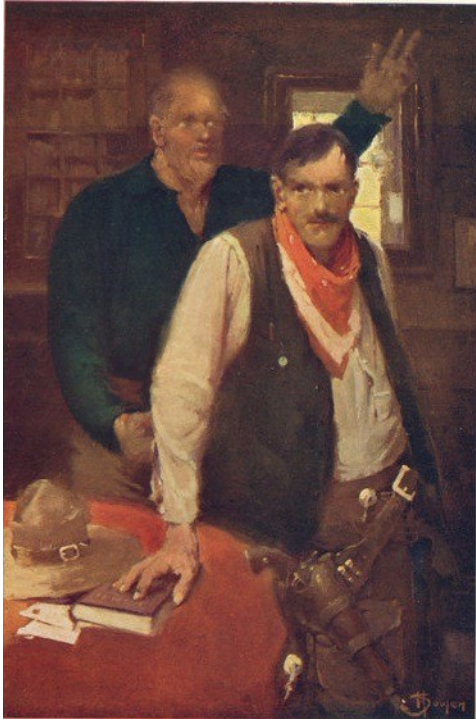
Author: Ridgwell Cullum

Release Date: September 27, 2009 [EBook #30113]

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ONE-WAY TRAIL ***

Produced by Roger Frank and the Online Distributed
Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>



"There's a great big God—just such a God as you and I have knelt to when we were bits of kiddies."

The One-Way Trail

A STORY OF THE CATTLE COUNTRY

By
RIDGWELL CULLUM

*Author of "The Watchers of the Plains,"
"The
Sheriff of Dyke Hole," "The Trail of the
Axe," etc.*

"... And the One-Way Trail is just the trail of Life. It's chock full of pitfalls and stumbling blocks that make us cuss like mad. But it's good for us to walk over it. There are no turnings or bye-paths, and no turning back. And maybe when we get to the end something will have been achieved in His scheme of things that our

PHILADELPHIA GEORGE W. JACOBS & COMPANY PUBLISHERS

Copyright, 1911, by
George W. Jacobs and Company

CONTENTS

I.	A Gentleman Ranker	<u>7</u>
II.	A Shooting Match	<u>18</u>
III.	In Barnriff	<u>28</u>
IV.	Jim Proposes	<u>36</u>
V.	To the Red, Dancing Devil	<u>53</u>
VI.	Eve and Will	<u>71</u>
VII.	The Chicken-killing	<u>78</u>
VIII.	The “Boys” of the Village	<u>86</u>
IX.	A Woman’s Care	<u>101</u>
X.	An Evil Night	<u>113</u>
XI.	A Wedding-day in Barnriff	<u>119</u>
XII.	The Quest of Peter Blunt	<u>135</u>
XIII.	After One Year	<u>146</u>

XIV.	The Breaking Point	<u>153</u>
XV.	A "Party Call"	<u>161</u>
XVI.	Devil Driven	<u>173</u>
XVII.	The Working of the Public Mind	<u>187</u>
XVIII.	A Woman's Instinct	<u>195</u>
XIX.	Branded	<u>206</u>
XX.	Approaching the Tribunal	<u>221</u>
XXI.	Inspiration	<u>226</u>
XXII.	The Vigilance Committee	<u>238</u>
XXIII.	Terror	<u>252</u>
XXIV.	For a Woman	<u>265</u>
XXV.	The Trail of the Rustlers	<u>275</u>
XXVI.	On the Little Bluff River	<u>286</u>
XXVII.	Annie	<u>303</u>
XXVIII.	Will	<u>312</u>
XXIX.	Jim	<u>324</u>
XXX.	Will Henderson Reaches the End	<u>333</u>
XXXI.	The Discomfiture of Smallbones	<u>345</u>
XXXII.	The Triumph of Smallbones	<u>355</u>
XXXIII.	After the Verdict	<u>364</u>
XXXIV.	The Truth	<u>369</u>
XXXV.	In the Shadow of the Gallows Tree	<u>383</u>
XXXVI.	The Passing of Elia	<u>393</u>
XXXVII.	Gold	<u>401</u>
XXXVIII.	On, Over the One-Way Trail	<u>406</u>

ILLUSTRATIONS

“There’s a great big God—just such a God as you and I have knelt to when we were bits of kiddies.”

[*Frontispiece*](#)

He sat glaring at the table, the smoke of his pipe clouding the still air of the neat kitchen.

[156](#)

Also he was gripping a heavy revolver in his hand.

[288](#)

“We’ve just come over to say that we, too, are going to hit the trail.”

[410](#)

THE ONE-WAY TRAIL

CHAPTER I

A GENTLEMAN RANKER

Dan McLagan shifted his cigar, and his face lit with a grin of satisfaction.

"Seventy-five per cent, of calves," he murmured, glancing out at the sunlit yards. "Say, it's been an elegant round-up." Then his enthusiasm rose and found expression. "It's the finest, luckiest ranch in Montana—in the country. Guess I'd be within my rights if I said 'in the world.' I can't say more."

"No."

The quiet monosyllable brought the rancher down to earth. He looked round at his companion with an inquiring glance.

"Eh?"

But Jim Thorpe had no further comment to offer.

The two were sitting in the foreman's cabin, a small but roughly comfortable split-log hut, where elegance and tidiness had place only in the more delicate moments of its occupant's retrospective imagination. Its furnishing belonged to the fashion of the prevailing industry, and had in its manufacture the utilitarian methods of the Western plains, rather than the more skilled workmanship of the furniture used in civilization. Thus, the bed was a stretcher supported on two packing-cases, the table had four solid legs that had once formed the sides of a third packing-case, while the cupboard, full of

cattle medicines, was the reconstructed portions of a fourth packing-case.

The collected art on the walls consisted of two rareties. One was a torn print of a woman's figure, classically indecent with regard to apparel; and the other was a fly-disfigured portrait of a sweet-faced old lady, whose refinement and dignity of expression suggested surroundings of a far more delicate nature than those in which she now found herself. Besides these, a brace of ivory-butted revolvers served to ornament the wall at the head of the bed. And a stack of five or six repeating rifles littered an adjacent corner.

It was a man's abode, and the very simplicity of it, the lack of cheap ornamentation, the carelessness of self in it, suggested a great deal of the occupant's character. Jim Thorpe cared as little for creature comforts as only a healthy-minded, healthy-bodied man, who has tasted of the best and passed the dish—or has had it snatched from him—will sometimes care. His thoughts were of the moment. He dared not look behind him; and ahead?—well, as yet, he had no desire to think too far ahead.

The ranch owner was sitting on the side of the stretcher, and Jim Thorpe, his foreman, stood leaning against the table. McLagan's Irish face, his squat figure and powerful head were a combination suggesting tremendous energy and determination, rather than any great mental power, and in this he strongly contrasted with the refined, thoughtful face of his foreman.

But then, in almost every characteristic the Irishman differed from his employee. While Jim's word was never questioned even by the veriest sceptic of the plains, McLagan was notoriously the greatest, most optimistic liar in the state of Montana. A reputation that required some niceness of proficiency to retain.

McLagan's ranch was known as the "AZ's." It was a brand selected to illuminate his opinion of his own undertakings. He said that his ranch

must be the beginning and end of all things in the cattle world, and he was proud of the ingenuity in his selection of a brand. The less cultured folk, who, perhaps, had more humor than respect for the Irishman, found his brand tripped much more easily off the tongue by replacing the Z with an S, and invariably using the plural.

"Say, Jim," the rancher went on, buoyed with his own enthusiasm, "it's been a great round-up. Seventy-five per cent. Bully! I'll open out my scheme. Listen. Ther's Donagh's land buttin' on us. Thirty sections. They got stations for 10,000 head of stock. We'll buy 'em right out of business. See? I'm goin' to turn those stations into double. That slice of land will carry me backing right up into the foot-hills, which means shelter for my stock in winter. See? Then I'll rent off a dozen or more homesteads for a supply of grain and hay. You know I hate to blow hot air around, but I say right here I'm going to help myself to a mighty big cinch on Montana, and then—why, I'll lay right on the heels of Congress."

He looked for approval into the bronzed face of his companion. But Thorpe hesitated, while a shadowy smile lurked in his clear, dark eyes.

"That's so," he observed, with a suspicious quietness.

"Sure," added the other, to clinch what he believed to be his companion's approval.

"And then?"

The rancher stirred uneasily. The tone of Thorpe's inquiry suggested doubt.

"And then?" McLagan repeated uncertainly.

"Why, when you've got all this, and you're the biggest producer in the country, the beef folk in Chicago 'll beat you down to their price, and the automobile folk will cut the ground clear from under your horses' feet. You won't hit Congress, because you won't have the dollars to

buy your graft with. Then, when you're left with nothing to round-up but a bunch of gophers, the government will come along and have you seen to."

The Irishman's face grew scarlet, and he began to splutter, but Jim Thorpe went on mercilessly.

"Cut it out, boss. We're cattlemen, both of us. You've grown up to cattle, and I—well, I've acquired the habit, I guess. But cut it out, and put your change into automobiles. They aren't things to breed with, I guess. But I'd say they'd raise a dust there's more dollars in than there's beans in our supper hash."

The rancher's swift anger had gone. He shook his head, and his hard, blue eyes stared out through the doorway at the busy life beyond. He could see the lines of buildings packed close together, as though huddling up for companionship in that wide, lonesome world of grass. He could see the acres and acres of corrals, outlying, a rampart to the ranch buildings. Then, beyond that, the barbed wire fencing, miles and miles of it. He could see horsemen moving about, engaged upon their day's work. He could hear the lowing of the cattle in the corrals. As Thorpe had said, he had grown up to cattle. Cattle and horses were his life.

He was rich now. This was all his. He was growing richer every year, and—Thorpe was prophesying the slump, the end. He couldn't believe it, or rather he wouldn't believe it. And he turned with a fierce expression of blind loyalty to his calling.

"To h— with automobiles! It's cattle for me. Cattle or bust!"

Thorpe shook his head.

"There's no alternative, boss. I can see it all coming. Everybody can—if they look. There's nothing between grain farming and—automobiles. The land here is too rich to waste on cattle. There's plenty other land elsewhere that'll feed stock, but wouldn't raise a

carrot. Psha! There won't be need for horses to plough, or even haul grain; and you've got 15,000 head. It'll be all automobiles!"

"I'd 'scrap' the lot!" added the Irishman, briefly and feelingly. Then he glanced at his companion out of the tail of his eye. "I s'pose it's your education, boy. That's what's wrong with you. Your head's running wheels. You come into cattle too late. You've got city doings down your backbone, and I guess you need weeding bad. Say, you're a West Point man, ain't you?"

Thorpe seemed to shrink at the question. He turned aside, and his eyes rested for a moment on the portrait nailed upon his wall. It was only for a moment his dark eyes encountered the tender old eyes that looked out at him from the faded picture. Then he looked again at the owner of the "AZ's," and gave him a smiling nod.

"Sure, boss. I intended to go into the engineers."

"Ah—wheels."

"You see, we've all been soldiers, since way back when my folks came over with the first lot from England. Guess I'm the first—backslider."

"Nope. You ain't a backslider, Jim Thorpe. I sure wouldn't say that. Not on my life. Guess you're the victim of a cow-headed government that reckons to make soldiers by arithmetic, an' wastin' ink makin' fool answers to a sight more fool questions. Gee, when I hit Congress, I'll make some one holler 'help.'"

The foreman's smile broadened.

"'Twasn't exams, boss," he said quietly. "I'd got a cinch on them, and they were mostly past cutting any ice with me. It was—well, it don't matter now." He paused, and his eyes settled again on the portrait. The Irishman waited, and presently Jim turned from the picture, and his quizzical smile encountered the hard blue eyes of the other.

"You said just now my head was full of wheels," he began, with a humorous light in his eyes that was yet not without sadness. "Maybe it is—maybe it has reason to be. You see, it was an automobile that finished my career at West Point. My mother came by her death in one. An accident. Automobiles were immature then—and—well, her income died with her, and I had to quit and hustle in a new direction. Curiously enough I went into the works of an automobile enterprise. I—I hated the things, but they fascinated me. I made good there, and got together a fat wad of bills, which was useful seeing I had my young cousin's—you know, young Will Henderson, of Barnriff; he's a trapper now—education on my hands. Just as things were good and dollars were coming plenty the enterprise bust. I was out—plumb out. I hunched up for another kick. I had a dandy patent that was to do big things. I got together a syndicate to run it. I'd got a big car built to demonstrate my patent, and it represented all I had in the world. It was to be on the race-track. Say, she didn't demonstrate worth a cent. My syndicate jibbed, and I—well, here I am, a cattleman—you see cattle haven't the speed of automobiles, but they mostly do what's expected. That's my yarn, boss. You didn't know much of me. It's not a great yarn as life goes. Mostly ordinary. But there's a deal of life in it, in its way. There's a pile of hope busted, and hope busted isn't a pleasant thing. Makes you think a deal. However, Will Henderson and I—we can't kick a lot when you look around. I'm earning a good wage, and I've got a tidy job—that don't look like quitting. And Will—he's netting eighty a month out of his pelts. After all things don't much count, do they? Fifty or sixty years hence our doings won't cut any ice. We're down, out, and nature shuts out memory. That's the best of it. We shan't know anything. We'll have forgotten everything we ever did know. We shan't be haunted by the 'might-have-beens'. We shall have no regrets. It'll just be sleep, a long, long sleep—and forgetfulness. And then—ah, well, boss, I'm yarning a heap, and the boys are out on the fences with no one to see they're not shooting 'craps.'"

The rancher turned to the door.

"I'm going out to the fences meself," he said, shortly. Then he went on: "There's a dozen an' more three-year-olds in the corrals needs bustin'. You best set two o' the boys on 'em. Ther's a black mare among 'em. I'll get you to handle her yourself. I'm goin' to ride her, an' don't want no fool broncho-buster tearing her mouth out."

"Right-ho, boss." Jim was smiling happily at the man's broad back as he stood facing out of the door. "But, if you've half a minute, I've got something else to get through me."

"Eh?" McLagan turned. His Irish face was alight with sudden interest. "Guess I ain't busy fer ten minutes."

"That's more than enough," said Jim, readily. "It's about that land I was speaking to you of the other day. I told you those things about myself—because of that. As I said, you didn't know much of me, except my work for you."

McLagan nodded, and chewed the end of his cigar. His keen eyes were studying the other's face. At last he removed his cigar, and spat out a bit of tobacco leaf.

"I know all I need to," he said cordially. "The proposition was one hundred and sixty acres for a homestead, with grazin' rights. You want a lease. Gettin' married?"

"It might happen that way," grinned the foreman somewhat sheepishly.

"Found the leddy?"

Jim nodded.

"Marryin's a fool game anyway."

"That's as maybe."

McLagan shrugged.

"Guess I don't want wimmin-folk in mine. You're goin' to hold your

job?"

"Sure. You see, boss——" Jim began to explain.

But McLagan broke in.

"You can have it for rent, boy," he said. "It suits me, if you don't mean quittin'."

"I don't mean quitting," said Jim. "I'm going to run it with a hired man. Y'see I've got one hundred and fifty stock and a bit saved for building. When I get married my wife'll see to things some. See the work is done while I'm here."

McLagan grinned and nodded.

"Guess you didn't seem like gettin' married jest now, talkin' of those things. You kind o' seemed 'down' some."

Jim's eyes became thoughtful.

"Makes you feel 'down' when you get remembering some things," he said. "Y'see it makes you wonder what the future feels like doing in the way of kicks. Things are going good about now, and—and I want 'em to keep on going good."

McLagan laughed boisterously.

"You've sure jest got to play hard to-day, let the future worry fer itself. Well, so long. I'll hand you the papers when you've selected the ground, boy. An' don't forget the black mare."

He left the hut and Jim watched him stumping busily away across to the big barn where the saddle horses were kept. His eyes were smiling as he looked after him. He liked Dan McLagan. His volcanic temper; his immoderate manner of expression suggested an open enough disposition, and he liked men to be like that.

But his smile was at the thought that somehow he had managed to make his "boss" think that extreme caution was one of his

characteristics. Yes, it made him smile. If such had been the case many things in the past, many disasters might have been averted.

As a matter of fact he had been thinking of the woman he hoped to make his wife. He was wondering if he had a reasonable prospect of helping her to all the comfort in life she deserved. He took an ultra serious view of matrimonial responsibilities. Eve must have a good ample home. She must have nothing to worry, none of little petty economies to study which make life so burdensome. Yes, they must start with that, and then, with luck, their stock would grow, he would buy more land, and finally she would be able to hold her place with the wives of all the richest ranchers in the district. That was what he wanted for her when they were married.

When they were married. Suddenly he laughed. He had not asked her yet. Still—— His eyes grew gloomy. His thoughts turned to another man, his cousin, Will Henderson. He knew that Will liked Eve Marsham. It was the one cloud upon his horizon. Will was younger than he by a good deal. He was handsome, too. Eve liked him. Yes, she liked him, he was sure. But somehow he did not associate marriage with Will. Well,—it was no good seeking trouble.

He pushed his thoughts aside and stood up. But the cloud upon his dark face was not so easily got rid of. How could it be? for Eve Marsham meant the whole world to him.

He moved toward the door, and as he looked out at the sunlit yards he started. A horseman had just come into view round the corner of one of the barns. But though his smile was lacking when the man came up and drew rein at his door, there was no mistaking the kindly cordiality of his greeting as he held out his hand.

“Why, Will,” he cried, “I’m real glad you’ve come along.”

CHAPTER II

A SHOOTING MATCH

In silence the two men sat smoking. Will Henderson, half sitting, half lying on the stretcher-bed, gazed out through the doorway at the distant mountain peaks. His hands were clasped behind his head, and a sullen, preoccupied look was in his eyes. Jim Thorpe was sitting, frog-fashion, on an upturned soap-box, watching him. His eyes were a shade anxious, but full of good feeling.

Jim was nine years his cousin's senior, and Will was twenty-four. They were really almost foster-brothers, for from the younger man's earliest days he had lived with Jim, in the care of the latter's widowed mother. He was an orphan, both his parents having died before he was two years old, and so it was that he had been adopted by Jim's mother, the child's only living relative. For years Jim had lavished on him an elder brother's affection and care. And when his own mother died, and he was left to his own resources, it still made no difference. Will must share in everything. Will's education must be completed adequately, for that was Jim's nature. His duty and inclination lay straight ahead of him, and he carried both out to the end. Perhaps he did more. Perhaps he overindulged and spoiled the youngster of whom he was so fond. Anyway, as in many similar cases, Will accepted all as his right, and gave very little in return. He was selfish, passionate, and his temper was not always a nice one.

In appearance there was a striking resemblance between these two. Not in face, but in figure, in coloring, in general style. A back view of

them was identical. In face they differed enormously. They were both extremely handsome, but of utterly different types. Jim was classically regular of feature, while Will possessed all the irregularity and brightness of his Hibernian ancestry. Both were dark; dark hair, dark eyes, dark eyebrows. In fact, so alike were they in general appearance that, in their New York days, they had been known by their intimates as the "twins."

Just now there was something troubling. And that something seemed to be worrying Will Henderson even more than his cousin. At least, to judge by outward appearances. He showed it in his expression, which was somewhat savage. He showed it in his nervous, impatient movements, in the manner in which he smoked. Jim had seen it at once, and understood. And he, too, was troubled.

They had been silent some time, and eventually it was Jim who spoke.

"Come on, lad. Let's have it out," he said, decidedly.

His voice was full and strong, and kindly.

The other stirred, but did not reply.

"This is your busy time, Will," Jim went on. "You didn't come away from those hills yonder to pass the time of day with me. You came because something wouldn't let you rest. I know you, boy; I know you. Something's troubling that mind of yours in a way that makes it hard for you to speak, even now you're here. Shall I try and begin it for you?"

There was infinite kindness in the man's tone. There was a smile in his eyes that might well have drawn a responsive smile from even an angry child.

Will removed his pipe, but the responsive smile was not forthcoming.

"I'll open out, Jim," he said coldly.

The other waited. The smoke of their pipes rolled up on the still, warm air of the room, upsetting the calculations of a few mischievously busy mosquitoes. The sun shone in through the doorway. The ranch was quiet now. All the "hands" had departed to their work, and only the occasional lowing of a solitary milch cow in one of the corrals, and the trampling feet of the horses waiting to be "broken," and the "yeps" of a few mouching dogs, afforded any sign of life outside in the ranch yards.

Jim began to grow restive.

"Well, boy: I've some 'breaking' to do. Maybe you'll come along. You can talk as we go."

He half rose, but Will sat up in a moment.

"Not yet, Jim," he said, almost roughly. Then his tone changed in a way through which his mercurial disposition spoke. "Look here," he went on, "whatever happens in the future, I'd like you to understand that all you've done for me in the past counts for something."

"Then it's real serious, lad?" Jim smiled back at him. But he failed to catch his eye. Then he, too, changed his manner, and there was a sudden coolness in it. "You needn't recite," he said. "Anything I've done has been a—a pleasure to me. Our ways have lain a bit apart for some months, but it makes no difference to my feelings, except to make me regret it. The fortunes of war, eh? And a fair bit of grist is rolling into our separate mills. Honest grist. We're good friends, lad—so let's have it. It's—it's a woman?"

At the mention of the word, "woman," Will seemed to utterly freeze up.

"Yes, it's—a woman," he said frigidly.

"Eve Marsham?"

"Yes."

Jim sighed. He knew there were breakers ahead. Breakers which

must be faced, and faced sternly.

"You love her?" There was a dryness in his throat.

"Yes. I—I can't live without her. She is my whole world. She is more than that. God! How I love her!"

"I love her, too."

Jim's darkly brilliant eyes were on the younger man's face. They compelled his gaze, and the two men looked long at each other, vainly trying to penetrate to that which lay behind. It was Will who turned away at last.

"I knew it," he said, and there was no longer any pretense of cordiality in his tone.

"Well?"

"Well?"

It was a tense moment for both men; and tremendous in its possibilities. There was no shrinking in either now; no yielding. But, as it ever was, Jim took the lead after a few moments' silence.

"And—does she love you?" he asked slowly.

His words were little above a whisper, but so tense was his feeling that his voice seemed to cut through the still air of the room. Will hesitated before replying. Perhaps he was reckoning up Jim's chances as compared with his own. Finally, he was reluctantly compelled to make an admission.

"I don't know—yet."

The other sighed audibly. Then he mechanically began to refill his pipe. He wanted to speak, but there seemed to be nothing adequate to say. Two men, virile, thrilling with the ripe, red blood of perfect manhood, friends, and—a woman stood between them.

"It's no good," Jim said, preparing to light his pipe. "The position is—"

impossible.”

“Yes.”

Now both pipes were smoking as under a forced draught.

“I’d give my life for her,” the elder muttered, almost unconsciously.

Will caught at his words.

“My life is hers,” he cried, almost defiantly.

They were no further on.

“Can you—suggest——?”

Will shook his head. The snow on the distant peaks glistened like diamonds in the gorgeous sunlight, and his attention seemed riveted upon it.

“What pay are you making, Will?” Jim inquired presently.

“Eighty dollars a month—why?”

“Ten more than me.” Jim laughed harshly. “You’re the better match. You’re younger, too.”

“She’s got a wad of her own. A thousand dollars,” added Will.

His remark was unpleasing, and Jim’s eyes grew colder.

“That don’t cut any figure. That’s hers,” he said sharply.

“But—it’s useful——”

“To her—maybe.”

The flow of their talk dried up again. They could make no headway in clearing up their dilemma. To Jim each passing moment was making things harder; with each passing moment their friendship was straining under the pressure. Suddenly a thought flashed through his brain. It was a light of hope, where, before, all had been darkness.

“I haven’t asked her yet,” he said. “And you—you haven’t?”

“No.”

“Say, we’re sailing an uncharted sea, and—there’s a fog.”

It was a reluctant nod Jim received in reply.

“We’ll have to ask her,” he went on. “She can’t marry us both. Maybe she’ll marry neither.”

“That’s so.” Jim failed to observe Will’s smile of confidence. “Yes, we’ll both ask her. I’ve got to go through Barnriff on my way to the hills. I’ll call and see her. You can ride in this evening.”

Jim shook his head.

“Guess that’s an elegant plan—for you.”

Quick as a flash Will turned on him. His volcanic anger rose swiftly.

“What d’you mean?”

“Just what I say.” Jim’s response seemed to have less friendliness in it. Then he knocked his pipe out, and rose from his seat. “No, boy,” he said. “We’ll just play the game right here. We’ll take a chance for who goes to her first. If she wants neither of us—well, we’ll have played the game by each other, anyway. And if she chooses either of us then the other must take his medicine like a man. Let’s—be sportsmen.”

“What’s your game?” There was no yielding in Will’s sharp question.

“Just this.”

Jim leaned forward, holding his empty pipe to point his words. There was a glow of excited interest in his eyes as he propounded his idea. With Will it was different. He sat frigidly listening. If through any generosity he lost Eve, he would never forgive himself—he would never forgive Jim. He must have her for his own. His love for her was a far greater thing, he told himself, than the colder Jim’s could ever be. He could not understand that Jim, in offering his plan, merely wanted to be fair, merely wanted to arrange things so that Eve should

not come between them, that neither should be able to reproach the other for any advantage taken. He suspected trickery. Nor had he any right to such base suspicion. Jim's idea was one to make their way easier. Eve would choose whom she pleased—if either of them. He could not, did not want to alter that. Whatever the result of her choice he was ready to accept it.

He pointed at the revolvers hanging on the wall.

"They shall decide who has first speak with her," he said. "We'll empty six at a mark, and the one who does the best shooting has—first go in."

Will shrugged.

"I don't like it."

"It's the best way. We're a fair match. You're reckoned the boss shot in the hills, and I don't guess there's any one on this ranch handier than I am. We've both played with those two guns a heap. It'll save bad blood between us. What say?"

Will shook his head.

"It's bad. Still——" He looked at the guns. He was thinking swiftly. He knew that he was a wonderful shot with a revolver. He was in constant practice, too. Jim was a good shot, but then his practice was very limited. Yes, the chances were all in his favor.

"Get busy then," he said presently, with apparent reluctance.

He rose and moved toward the guns.

"Whose choice?" he demanded.

Nor did he observe the other's smile as he received his reply.

"It's yours."

While Will chose his weapon with studied care, Jim picked up the soap box and fumbled through his pockets till he found a piece of

chalk. With this he drew a bull's-eye on the bottom of the box, and sketched two rough circles around it. Will had made his choice of weapons by the time the target was completed.

"Will it do?" Jim inquired, holding up the box for his inspection.

"It's got to," was the churlish reply.

Jim gave him a quick glance as he moved across the room and possessed himself of the remaining pistol. Then he examined its chambers and silently led the way out of the hut.

They left the ranch buildings and moved out upon the prairie. A spot was selected, and the box set down. Then Jim paced off sixty yards.

"Sixty," he said, as he came to a halt.

"Sixty," agreed Will, who had paced beside him.

"It's your choice. Will you—get busy?"

"All right."

Will stepped on to the mark confidently, raising his gun with the surety of a man who does not know what it means to miss. Yet, before dropping the hammer, he braced himself with unusual care.

"Plonk!" The bullet struck the box. He had found his mark, and in rapid succession the remaining five chambers of his gun were emptied. Each shot found its mark with deadly accuracy, for Will meant to win the contest.

Then they set out to inspect the target. Will led now. He was eager to ascertain the actual result. An exclamation of joy broke from him as he snatched up the box. The bull's-eye was about two inches in diameter; one of his shots had passed through it, three had broken its outer line, while the other two were within a quarter of an inch of the little white patch. All six shots could have been covered by a three-inch circle.

"Good," cried Thorpe. And he turned the box round and drew another target on its side.

The new bull's-eye was a shade smaller. It may have been accident. It may have been that Jim preferred to make his own task more difficult than err on the side of his own advantage. Will said nothing, and they walked back to the firing point.

Jim lifted his gun and fired. His shots rang out like the rattle of a maxim gun, so swiftly did he empty the six chambers. In a few moments they were once more on their way to inspect the target.

Five bullets had passed through the bull's-eye, the sixth had broken its line.

"I shall see Eve to-morrow morning," said Jim quietly. "You can see

her later.”

Without a word Will turned away, and moved off toward the ranch. Jim followed him. Nor was a word exchanged between them till the hut was reached, and Will had unhitched his horse from the tying-post.

“Going?” inquired Jim, for something to say.

“Yes.”

There was no mistaking the younger man’s tone, and his friend looked away while he leaped into the saddle.

Jim seemed to have drawn none of the satisfaction which the winning of the match should have afforded him, for he flung the box which he had been carrying aside as though it had offended him. He wanted to speak, he wanted to say something pleasant. He wanted to banish that surly look from Will’s eyes; but somehow he could find nothing to say, nothing to do. He looked on while the other lifted his reins to ride off. Then, in desperation, he came up to the horse’s shoulder.

“Shake, Will,” he said.

It was the effort of a big heart striving to retain a precious friendship which he felt was slipping away from him.

But Will did not see the outstretched hand. He hustled his horse, and, in moving off, his own right foot struck the waiting man violently. It was almost as though he had kicked him.

Jim watched him go with regretful eyes. Then, as the man disappeared among the ranch buildings, he turned and slowly made his way to the bunk house of the horse-breakers.

CHAPTER III

IN BARNRIFF

It has been said that the pretentiousness of a newly carpentered Western American settlement can only be compared to the "side" of a nigger wench, weighted down under the gaudy burden of her Emancipation Day holiday gown. Although, in many cases, the analogy is not without aptness, yet, in frequent instances, it would be a distinct libel. At any rate, Barnriff boasted nothing of pretentiousness. Certainly Barnriff was not newly carpentered. Probably it never had been.

It was one of those places that just grow from a tiny seedling; and, to judge by the anemic result of its effort, that original seedling could have been little better than a "scratching" post on an ill-cared-for farm, or perhaps a storm shelter. Certainly it could not have risen above an implement shed in the ranks of structural art. The general impression was in favor of the "scratching" post, for one expects to grow something better than weeds on a rich loam soil.

The architect of Barnriff—if he ever existed—was probably a drunkard, not an uncommon complaint in that settlement, or a person qualified for the state asylum. The inference is drawn from strong circumstantial evidence, and not from prejudice. As witness, the saloon seemed to have claimed his most serious effort as a piece of finished construction. Here his weakness peeps through in no uncertain manner. The bar occupies at least half of the building, and the fittings of it are large enough to accommodate sufficient alcohol

for an average man to swim in. His imagination must have been fully extended in this design, for the result suggested its having been something in the nature of a labor of affection. The other half of the building was divided up into three rooms: a tiny dining-room (obviously the pleasures of the table had no great appeal for him), a small bedroom for the proprietor (who seemed to have been considered least of all), and one vast dormitory, to accommodate those whose misfortunes of the evening made them physically incapable of negotiating the intricacies of the village on their way home.

Of course, this evidence might easily have been nullified, or even have been turned to the architect's favor, had the rest of the village borne testimony for him. A clever counsel defending would probably have declared that the architect knew the people of the village, and was merely supplying their wants. Of course he knew them, and their wants—he was probably one of them.

However, the rest of the village was all against him. Had he been an abstemious man, there is no doubt but the village market-place would have been a square, or a triangle, an oval, a circle, or—well, some definite shape. As it was, it had no definite shape. It was not even irregular. It was nothing—just a space, with no apparent defining line.

Then there were no definite roads—at least, the roads seemed to have happened, and ran just where the houses permitted them. It was a reversal of ordinary civilized methods, which possibly had its advantages. There were certainly no straight lines for the men-folk to walk after leaving the saloon at night for their homes.

As for the houses which composed the village, they were too uncertain to be described in any but a general view of their design, and their grouping. In the latter, of course, the evidence was all against the designer of the place. Who but a madman or a drunkard would set up a laundry next to the coal yard?

Then another thing. Two churches—they called them “churches” in Barnriff—of different denomination, side by side. On Sundays the discord that went on was painful. The voices of the preachers were in endless conflict through the thin weather-boarding sides, and when the rival harmoniums “got busy” there was nothing left for the confused congregations but to chant their rival hymns to some popular national tune upon which they were mutually agreed beforehand. The incongruities of this sort were so many that even the most optimistic could not pass them unheeded.

As regards the style of the buildings themselves, the less said about them the better. They were buildings, no one could deny that; but even an impressionist painter could claim no beauty for them. Windows and doors, weather-boarding, and shingle roof. One need say no more, except that they were, in the main, weatherproof. But wait. There was one little house that had a verandah and creepers growing around it. It was well painted, too, and stood out amongst its frowzy neighbors a thing approaching beauty.

But Barnriff, as a residential hamlet, was hardly worth considering seriously. It was a topsyturvy sort of place, and its methods were in keeping with its design. It was full of unique combinations of trade. Some of them were hardly justifiable. The doctor of the place was also a horse-dealer, with a side line in the veterinary business. Any tooth extraction needed was forcibly performed by John Rust, the blacksmith. The baker, Jake Wilkes, shod the human foot whenever he was tired of punching his dough. The Methodist lay-preacher, Abe C. Horsley, sold everything to cover up the body, whenever he wasn't concerned with the soul. Then there was Angel Gay, an estimable butcher and a good enough fellow; but it hardly seemed right that he should be in combination with Zac Restless, the carpenter, for the disposal of Barnriff's corpses. However, these things were, and had been accepted by the village folk for so long that it seemed almost a pity to disturb them.

Barnriff, viewed from a distance, was not without a certain picturesqueness; but the distance had to be great enough to lose sight of the uncouthness which a close inspection revealed. Besides, its squalor did not much matter. It did not affect the temper of the folk living within its boundaries. To them the place was a little temporary "homelet," to coin a word. For frontier people are, for the most part, transient. They only pause at such place on their fighting journey through the wilder life. They pass on in time to other spheres, some on an upward grade, others down the long decline, which is the road of the ne'er-do-well. And with each inhabitant that comes and goes, some detail of evolution is achieved by the little hamlet through which they pass, until, in the course of long years, it, too, has fought its way upward to the mathematical precision and bold glory of a modern commercial city, or has joined in the downward march of the ne'er-do-well.

The blazing summer sun burned down upon the unsheltered village. There was no shade anywhere—that is, outside the houses. For the place had grown up on the crests of the bald, green rollers of the Western plains as though its original seedling had been tossed there by the wanton summer breezes, and for no better reason.

Anthony Smallbones, familiarly known to his intimates as "fussy-breeches," because he lived in a dream-fever of commercial enterprise, and believed himself to be a Napoleon of finance—he ran a store, at which he sold a collection of hardware, books, candy, stationery, notions and "delicatessen"—was on his way to the boarding-house for breakfast—there was only one boarding-house in Barnriff, and all the bachelors had their meals there.

He was never leisurely. He believed himself to be too busy for leisure. Just now he was concentrated upon the side issues of a great irrigation scheme that had occupied his small head for at least twenty-four hours, and thus it happened that he ran full tilt into Peter Blunt before he was aware of the giant's presence. He rebounded and

came to, and hurled a savage greeting at him.

"Wher' you goin'?" he demanded.

"Don't seem to be your way," the large man vouchsafed, with quiet good-nature.

"No," was the surly response.

"Kind of slack, aren't you?" inquired Peter, his deep-set blue eyes twinkling with humor. "I've eaten two hours back. This lying a-bed is mighty bad for your business schemes."

"Schemes? Gee! I was around at half after five, man! Lying a-bed? Say, you don't know what business means." The little man sniffed scornfully.

"Maybe you're right," Peter responded. He hunched his great loose shoulders to shift the position of a small sack of stuff he was carrying.

He was a man of very large physique and uncertain age. He possessed a burned up face of great strength, and good-nature, but it was so weather-stained, so grizzled, that at first sight it appeared almost harsh. He was an Englishman who had spent years and years of hardy life wandering over the remotenesses of the Western plains of America. Little was known of him, that is to say, little of that life that must once have been his. He was well educated, traveled, and possessed an inexhaustible fund of information on any subject. But beyond the fact that he had once been a soldier, and that a large slice of his life had been lived in such places as Barnriff, no one knew aught of him. And yet it was probable that nobody on the Western prairies was better known than Peter Blunt. East and west, north and south, he was known for a kindly nature, and kindly actions. These things, and for a devotion to prospecting for gold in what were generally considered to be the most unlikely places.

"Right? Why o' course I'm right. Ef you'se folk jest got busy around here, we'd make Barnriff hum an elegant toon. Say, now I got a dandy

scheme fer irrigatin' that land back there——”

“Yep. You gave me that yesterday. It's a good scheme.” The giant's eyes twinkled. “A great scheme. You're a wonder. But say, all you told me that day has set my slow head busy. I've been thinking a heap since on what you said about ‘trusts.’ That's it, ‘trusts,’ ‘trusts’ and ‘combines.’ That's the way to get on to millions of dollars. Better than scratching around, eh? Now here's an idea. I thought I'd like to put it to you, finance and such things being your specialty. There's Angel Gay. Now he's running a fine partnership with Restless. Now you take those two as a nucleus. You yourself open a side-line in drugs, and work in with Doc Crombie, and pool the result of the four. The Doc would draw his fees for making folks sick, you'd clear a handsome profit for poisoning them, Gay 'ud rake in his dollars for burying 'em, and Restless?—why Restless 'ud put in white pine for oak, and retire on the profits in five years. Say——”

“What you got in that sack?” inquired Smallbones, blandly ignoring the other's jest at his expense.

“Well, nothing that's a heap of interest. I've been scratching around at the head waters of the river, back there in the foot-hills.”

“Ah, ‘prospects,’” observed the other, with a malicious shake of the head. “Guess you're allus prospectin' around. I see you diggin' Eve Marsham's tater patch yesterday. Don't guess you made much of a ‘strike’ in that layout?”

“No.” Peter shook his head genially. The little man's drift was obvious. He turned toward the one attractive cottage in the settlement, and saw a woman's figure standing at the doorway talking to a diminutive boy.

“Guess though you'll likely strike more profit diggin' spuds fer folk than you do scratching up loam and loose rocks the way you do,” Smallbones went on sourly.

Peter nodded.

"Sure. You're a far-seeing little man. There's a heap of gold about Eve's home. A big heap; and I tell you, if that was my place, I'd never need to get outside her fences to find all I needed. I'd be a millionaire."

Smallbones looked up into his face curiously. He was thinking hard. But his imagination was limited. Finally he decided that Peter was laughing at him.

"Guess your humor's 'bout as elegant as a fun'ral. An' it ain't good on an empty stummick. I pass."

"So long," cried the giant amiably. "I'll turn that 'trust' racket over in my mind. So long."

He strode away with great lumbering strides heading straight for his humble, two-roomed shack. Smallbones, as he went on to the boarding-house, was full of angry contempt for the prospector. He was a mean man, and like most mean men he hated to be laughed at. But when his anger smoothed down he found himself pitying any one who spent his life looking for profit, by wasting a glorious energy, delving for gold in places where gold was known to be non-existent.

He ruminated on the matter as he went. And wondered. Then there came to him the memory of vague stories of gold in the vicinity of the Barnriff. Indian stories it is true. But then Indian stories often had a knack of having remarkably truthful foundations. Immediately his busy brain began to construct a syndicate of townspeople to hunt up the legends, with a small capital to carry on operations. He would have the lion's share in the concern, of course, and—yes—they might make Peter Blunt chief operator. And by the time he reached the boarding-house all his irrigation scheme was forgotten in this new toy.

CHAPTER IV

JIM PROPOSES

Eve Marsham was in two minds of hailing Peter Blunt as she saw him pass on his way to his hut. She wanted him. She wanted to ask his advice about something. Like many others who needed a sympathetic adviser she preferred to appeal to Peter Blunt rather than to any of her sex in Barnriff. However, she allowed the opportunity to slip by, and saw him disappear within his doorway. Then she turned again to the boy sitting on the rough bench beside her, and a look of alarm leaped to her soft brown eyes. He was holding out a tiny pup at arm's length, grasping it by one of its little fore paws.

"Elia, how can you?" she cried. "Put him down, instantly."

The boy turned a bland, beautiful face to her. There was seemingly no expression beyond surprise in his pale blue eyes.

"He likes it," he said, while the whimpering pup still wriggled in his grasp.

Eve made a move to take the wretched animal away, but the boy promptly hugged it to his misshapen breast.

"He's mine," he cried. "I can do what I like with him."

There was no anger in his voice, not even protest. It was a simple statement of denial that at the same time had no resistance in it.

"Well, don't you be cruel," Eve exclaimed shortly, and her eyes turned once more in the direction of Peter Blunt's hut.

Her pretty face was very thoughtful. Her sun-tanned cheeks, her tall, rounded body were the picture of health. She looked as fresh and wholesome as any wild prairie flower with her rich coloring of almost tropical splendor. She was neatly dressed, more after town fashion than in the method of such places as Barnriff, and her expressed reason for thus differentiating from her fellow villagers was a matter of mild advertisement. She made her living as a dressmaker. She was Barnriff's leading and only *modiste*.

The boy at her side continued his amusement at the puppy's expense. He held it in his two hands and squeezed its little body until the poor creature gasped and retched. Then he swung it to and fro by its diminutive tail. Then he threw it up in the air, making it turn a somersault, and catching it again clumsily.

All this he did in a mild, emotionless manner. There was no boyish interest or amusement in it. Just a calm, serious immobility that gave one the impression of a painting by one of the old European masters.

Elia was Eve Marsham's crippled brother. He was seven years younger than she, and was just about to turn sixteen. In reality he was more than a cripple. He was a general deformity, a deformity that somehow even reached his brain. By this it must not be imagined that he was an idiot, or lacking in intelligence in any way, but he had some curious mental twists that marked him as something out of the normal. His chief peculiarity lay in his dread of pain to himself. An ache, a trifling bruise, a mere scratch upon himself, would hurl him into a paroxysm of terror which frequently terminated in a fit, or, at least, convulsions of a serious nature. This drove the girl, who was his only living relative, to great pains in her care of him, which, combined with an almost maternal love for him, kept her on a rack of apprehension for his well-being.

He had another strange side to his character, and one of which everybody but Eve was aware. He possessed a morbid love for

horror, for the sufferings of others. He had been known to sit for hours with a sick man in the village who was suffering agonies of rheumatism, for the mere delight of drawing from him details of the pains he was enduring, and reveling in the horror of the description with ghoulish delight.

When Restless, the carpenter, broke his leg the boy was always around. And when the wretched man groaned while they set it, his face was a picture of rapt fascination. To Eve his visits on such occasions were a sign of his sympathetic nature, and she encouraged him because she did not know the real meaning of them. But there were other things she did not know. He used to pay weekly visits to Gay's slaughter yard on killing day, and reveled in the cruel task of skinning and cutting up the carcase of the slaughtered beast. If a fight between two men occurred in the village Elia's instinct led him unerringly to it. It was a curious psychological fact that the pains and sufferings which, for himself, he dreaded with an almost insane abhorrence, he loved and desired in others.

He was a quaint figure, a figure to draw sympathy and pity from the hardiest. He was precisely four feet high. One leg was shorter than the other, and the hip was drawn up in a corresponding manner. His chest was sunken, and his back was hunched, and he carried his head bent sideways on his shoulders, in the inquiring attitude one associates with a bird.

He was his sister's sole charge, left to her, when much younger, by their dying mother. And the girl lavished on him all the wealth of a good woman's sympathy and love. She saw nothing of his faults. She saw only his deplorable physical condition, and his perfect angel-face. His skin and complexion were so transparent that one could almost have counted the veins beneath the surface; the sun had no power to burn that face to the russet which was the general complexion among prairie folk. His mouth had the innocence of a babe's, and formed a perfect Cupid's bow, such as a girl might well

be proud of. His eyes were large, inquiring and full of intelligence. His nose might have been chiseled by an old Greek sculptor, while his hair, long and wavy, was of the texture and color of raw silk.

He was certainly the idol of Eve's heart. In him she could see no wrong, no vice. She cherished him, and served him, and worked for him. He was her life. And, as is only natural, he had learned to claim as his right all that which out of her boundless affection it was her joy to bestow.

Suddenly the yelping of the pup brought Eve round on him again. He was once more holding it aloft by its tail. The girl darted to its rescue, and, instantly, Elia released his hold, and the poor creature fell with a squelching sound upon the ground. She gave a little scream, but the boy only looked on in silent fascination. Fortunately the poor pup was only badly shaken and hastily crawled away to safety. Elia was for recovering it, but Eve promptly vetoed his design.

"Certainly not, you cruel boy," she said sharply. "You remain where you are. You can tell me about the chicken killing down at Restless's."

In the interest of the subject on which Eve desired information Elia forgot all about the pup. He offered no protest nor made the least demur, but forthwith began his story.

"Sure I will," he said, with a curious, uncanny laugh. "Old Ma Restless is just raving her fat head off. I was around this morning and heard her. Gee! She was sayin' things. She was cussin' and cussin' like mad. So I jest turned in the yard to see. It was just as funny as a circus. She stood there, her fat sides all of a wobble, an' a reg'lar waterfall pourin' out of her eyes. He! He! But what made me laff most was to see those chickens around her on the ground. There was ten of 'em lying around, and somebody had chopped off all their heads. Say, the blood was tricklin', an'—well, there, you never did see such a mess. It was real comic, an' I—well, to see her wringin' her fat hands, and cussin'. Gee! I wonder she wasn't struck for it, an' her a woman

an' all."

He laughed silently, while his sister stared at him in amazement.

Finally she checked his amusement sharply.

"Yes? Well?"

"Well, then she see me, an' she turned on me like a wildcat, an' I was 'most scairt to death. She said, 'What you doin' here, you imp o' Satan? Who's done this? Tell me! Tell me an' I'll lay for 'em! I'll shoot 'em down like vermin.' I knew she wasn't really talkin' to me, so then I wasn't scairt. She was jest blowin' off steam. Then I got around an' looked close at 'em—the chickens, I mean—and I see just where the knife had cut their necks off. It was an elegant way of killing 'em, and say, how they must have flapped around after they'd got clear of their silly heads." He laughed gleefully again. "I looked up after that and see her watchin' me. Guess her eyes was kind of funny lookin', so I said, 'You don't need to take on, mam,' I said. 'They'll make elegant roasts, an' you can get busy and hatch out some more.' And somehow she got quiet then, and I watched her gather them chickens up, an' take 'em into the house. Then when she came out an' see me again, she says, 'Light you right out o' here, you imp o' Satan! I fair hates the sight o' you.' So I lit out. Say, Eve," he added, after a reflective pause, "why does folks all hate me so much?"

The girl sighed and shook her head. Then she came over to him, and, bending down, kissed his fair waving hair.

"Never mind, dear. I don't hate you," she said. "Perhaps it is you offend folks somehow. You know you do manage to upset folks at times. You seem to say—say queer things to them, and get them mad." She smiled down upon the boy a little wistfully. She knew her brother was disliked by most in the village, and it pained her terribly that it should be so. They tried to be outwardly kind to him, but she always felt that it was solely for her sake and never for his. As Elia had never spoken of it before, she had lived in the hope that he did

not understand their dislike. However, it was as well that he should know. If he realized it now, as he grew older he might endeavor to earn their good-will in spite of present prejudice.

"Guess it must be, sis. You see I don't kind of mean to say things," he said almost regretfully. "Only when they're in my head they must come out, or—or I think my head would jest bust," he finished up naively.

The girl was still smiling, and one arm stole round the boy's hunched shoulders.

"Of course you can't help saying those things you know to be true——"

"But they most generally ain't true."

The innocent, inquiring eyes looked straight up into hers.

"No," he went on positively, "they generally ain't. I don't think my head would bust keepin' in the truth. Now, yesterday, Will Henderson was down at the saloon before he came up to see you. He came and sort of spoke nice to me. I know he hates me, and—and I hate him worse'n poison. Well, he spoke nice to me, as I said, an' I wanted to spit at him for it. And I jest set to and tho't and tho't how I could hurt him. And so I said, right out before all the boys, 'Wot for do you allus come hangin' around our shack? Eve's most sick to death with you,' I said; 'it isn't as if she ast you to get around, it's just you buttin' in. If you was Jim Thorpe now——'"

"You never said all that, Elia," cried Eve, sternly. All her woman's pride was outraged, and she felt her fingers itching to box the boy's ears.

"I did sure," Elia went on, in that sober tone of decided self-satisfaction. "And I said a heap more. And didn't the boys jest laff. Will went red as a beet, and the boys laffed more. And I was real glad. I hate Will! Say, he was up here last night. Wot for? He was up here from six to nigh nine. Say, sis, I wish you wouldn't have him around."

Eve did not respond. She was staring out at the rampart of hills

beyond, where Will worked. She was thinking of Will, thinking of—but the boy was insistent.

“Say, I’d have been real glad if it had been Jim Thorpe. Only he don’t come so often, does he? I like him. Say, Jim’s allus good to me. I don’t never seem to want to hurt him. No, sure. Jim’s good. But Will—— Say, sis, Will’s a bad lot; he is certain. I know. He’s never done nuthing bad, I know, but I can see it in his face, his eyes. It’s in his head, too. Do you know I can allus tell when bad’s in folks’ heads. Now, there’s Smallbones. He’s a devil. You’ll see it, too, some day. Then there’s Peter Blunt. Now Peter’s that good he’d break his neck if he thought it ’ud help folks. But Will——”

“Elia,” Eve was bending over the boy’s crooked form. Her cheek was resting on his silky hair. She could not face those bland inquiring eyes. “You mustn’t say anything against Will. I like him. He’s not a bad man—really he isn’t, and you mustn’t say he is. Will is just a dear, foolish Irish boy, and when once he has settled down will be—you wait——”

The boy abruptly wriggled out of his sister’s embrace. His eyes sought hers so that she could no longer avoid them.

“I won’t wait for anything to do with Will Henderson—if that’s what you mean. I tell you he’s no good. I hate him! I hate him! And—and I hope some one’ll kill all the chickens he’s left in your care down at that old shack of his.” He scrambled to his feet and hobbled away, vanishing round the corner of the house in a fury of fierce resentment.

He had been roused to one of his dreaded fits of passion, and Eve was alarmed. In a fever of apprehension she was about to follow him up and soothe him, when she saw a horseman galloping toward the house. The figure was unmistakable, besides she knew the horse’s gait and color. It was Jim Thorpe, riding in from the AZ ranch.

In a few moments he drew rein at the gate of her vegetable patch. He flung the reins over his horse’s head and removed the bit from its

mouth. Then he let it wander grazing on the tawny grass of the market-place.

Eve waited for him to come up the garden path, and for the moment the boy was forgotten. She welcomed him with the cordiality of old friendship. There was genuine pleasure in her smile, there was hearty welcome in her eyes, and in the soft, warm grip of her strong young hand, but that was all. There was no shyness, no avoiding the honest devotion in his look. The radiant hope shining in his clear, dark eyes was not for her understanding. The unusual care in his dress, the neatly polished boots under his leather chaps, the creamy whiteness of his cotton shirt, the store creases of the new silk handkerchief about his neck, none of these things struck her as being anything out of the ordinary.

And he, blind soul, took courage from the warmth of her welcome. His heart beat high with a hope which no ordinary mundane affairs could have inspired. All the ill-fate behind him was wiped off the slate. The world shone radiant before eyes, which, at such times, are mercifully blinded to realities. An Almighty Providence sees that every man shall live to the full such moments as were his just then. It is in the great balance of things. The greater the joy, the harder— But what matters the other side of the picture!

“Eve,” he exclaimed, “I was hoping to find you—not busy. I’ve ridden right in to yarn with you—’bout things. Say, maybe you’ve got five minutes?”

“I’ve always got five minutes for you, Jim,” the girl responded warmly. “Sit right down here on this seat, and get—going. How’s things with the ‘AZ’s’?”

“Bully! Dan McLagan’s getting big notions of doing things; he’s heaping up the dollars in plenty. And I’m glad, because with him doing well I’m doing well. I’ve already got an elegant bunch of cows and calves up in the foot-hills. You see I make trade with him for my

wages. I've done more. Yesterday I got him to promise me a lease of grazing, and a big patch for a homestead way up there in the foothills. In another two years I mean to be ranching on my own, eh? How's that?"

The girl's eyes were bright with responsive enthusiasm. She was smiling with delight at this dear friend's evident success.

"It's great, Jim. But how quiet you've been over it. You never even hinted before——"

The man shook his head, and for a moment a shadow of regret passed across his handsome face.

"Well, you see I waited until I was sure of that lease. I've come so many falls I didn't guess I wanted to try another by anticipating too much. So I just waited. It's straight going now," he went on, with a return to his enthusiasm, "and I'm going to start building."

"Yes, yes. You'll get everything ready for leaving the 'AZ's' in——"

"Two years, yes. I'll put up a three-roomed shack of split logs, a small barn, and branding corrals. That'll be the first start. You see"—he paused—"I'd like to know about that shack. Now what about the size of the rooms and things? I—I thought I'd ask you——"

"Me?"

The girl turned inquiring eyes upon him. She was searching his face for something, and that something came to her as an unwelcome discovery, for she abruptly turned away again, and her attention was held by those distant hills, where Will Henderson worked.

"I don't know," she said seriously. The light of enthusiasm had died out of her eyes, leaving them somehow sad and regretful. "You see, I don't know a man's requirements in such things. A woman has ideas, but that is chiefly for herself. You see, she has the care of the house generally."

Yes, yes; that's it," Jim broke in eagerly. Then he checked himself. Something in Eve's manner gave him pause. "You see I—I wanted a woman's ideas. I don't want the house for a man. I——"

He did not finish what he had to say. Somehow words failed him. It was not that he found it difficult to put what he wanted to say into words. Something in the girl's manner checked his eagerness and drove him to silence. He, too, suddenly found himself staring out at the hills, where—Will worked.

For one fleeting instant Eve turned her gentle eyes upon the face beside her. She saw the strong features, the steady look of the dark eyes, the clean-cut profile and determined jaw. She saw, too, that he was thinking hard, and her woman's instinct came to her aid. She felt that she must be the first to speak. And on what she said depended what would follow.

"Why not leave the house until toward the end of the two years? By that time you will have been able to talk it over with—the right person."

"That's what I want to do now."

Jim's eagerness leaped again. He thought he saw an opening. His eyes had in them the question he wanted to ask. All his soul was behind his words, all his great depth of feeling and love looked out at the rounded oval of her sweet face. He hungrily took in the beauty of her hair, her eyes, her cheeks; the sweet richness of her ripe lips, the chiseled roundness of her beautiful neck. He longed to crush her to his heart where they sat. He longed to tell her that she and she only of all women could ever occupy the hut he intended to build; he longed to pour into her ears his version of the old, old story, and so full was his great, strong heart, so overwhelming was his lover's madness, that he believed he could tell that story as it had never been told before. But the question never reached his lips. The old story was not for his telling. Nor did he ask himself why. It was as though a power which was all-mastering forbade him to speak further.

"Have you seen Will to-day?" Eve suddenly inquired, with apparent irrelevance. "I half expected to——" And she broke off purposely.

The look in Jim's eyes hardened to one of acute apprehension.

"You were——expecting him?"

"Well, not exactly, Jim." She withdrew her gaze from the distant hills and, gently smiling, turned her eyes upon him. They were full of sympathy and profound kindness. "You see, he came here last night. And, well, I thought he said something about——"

Jim started. A shiver passed through his body. He suddenly felt cold in that blazing sun. His eyes painfully sought the girl's face. His look was an appeal, an appeal for a denial of what in his heart he feared. For some seconds he did not speak. There was no sound between them, but of his breathing, which had become suddenly heavy.

"Will——Will was here last night?" he said at last.

His voice was husky and unusual. But he dropped his eyes before the innocent look of inquiry in the girl's.

"Why, yes; he spent the evening with me."

In lowering his eyes Jim found them staring at the girl's hands, resting in her lap. On one of them he noticed, for the first time, a gold band. It was the inside of a ring. It was on the third finger of the left hand. He had never seen Eve wearing rings before. Suddenly he reached out and caught her hands in his. He turned them over with almost brutal roughness. Eve tried to withdraw them, but he held them fast.

"That ring!" he exclaimed, hoarsely. It was in full view now. "It is Will's. It was my father's signet ring. I gave it to him. Where?—How——? But no, you needn't tell me, I guess." He almost flung her hands from him. And a wave of sickness swept over him as he thought.

Then in a moment all the passion of his heart rose uppermost in him, and its scorching tide swept through his body, maddening him, driving

him. A torrent of words surged to his lips, words of bitterness, cruel words that would hurt the girl, hurt himself, words of hateful intensity, words that might ease his tortured soul at the expense of those who had always occupied foremost place in his heart.

But they were not uttered. He choked them back with a gasp, and seized himself in an iron grip of will. And, for some moments, he held on as a drowning man may cling to the saving hand. He must not hurt the girl, he must not wound her love by betraying his cousin. If Will had not played the game, at any rate he would. Suddenly, he spoke again, and no one would have suspected the storm raging under his calm exterior. Only his voice was hoarse, and his lips were dry, and the usually clear whites of his eyes were bloodshot.

"The boy has asked you, then?" he said slowly. And he waited for the death-knell of all his hopes, his love.

"Yes." Eve's voice was very low. Her gentle woman's heart ached, for her instinct told her of the pain she was causing. "Last night he asked me to be his wife, and I—I love him, Jim, and so I consented."

"Yes, yes." There was weariness in the man's voice now. It sounded almost as though he were physically weary. "I hope you will be happy, dear. Will's—a good boy——"

"Yes, and I asked him if you knew anything about it. And he said, 'No.' He said it would be a little surprise for you—— You are not going?" Jim had suddenly started to his feet. "Won't you wait for Will? He's staying in the village. He said he'd be up to see me this morning—— before he went out to the hills."

Jim could stand no more.

"I'm glad you told me, Eve," he said, almost harshly. "Will's not good at surprises. No, I won't stay. I'll get right back, after I've done some business in the village." He stood, glancing thoughtfully down at the village for some moments. Then he turned again, and a shadowy

smile lit his sombre eyes.

"I've given out a contract for that homestead," he went on. "Well, I'm going to cancel it. Good-bye, little girl."

"Oh, Jim, I——"

But the man shook his head.

"Don't you be sorry. Get all the happiness you can. Maybe Will will be a real good husband to you."

He moved away and strode after his horse. The beast was well out on the market-place, and Eve watched him catch it and clamber into the saddle. Then she turned away with a sigh, and found herself looking into the beautiful face of her brother. He had silently crept up to her side.

"You've hurt him, sis; you've hurt him real bad. Did you see? It was all inside. Inside here," the boy folded his delicate hands over his hollow breast. "I know it because I feel it here, too. It's as though you'd taken right hold of a bunch of cords here, and were pulling 'em, tearing 'em, an' someway they're fixed right on to your heart. That's the way you've hurt him, an' it hurts me, because I like him—he's good. You don't know what it feels when a man's hurt. I do. It's elegant pain. Gee!" His calm face was quite unlit by the emotion he described. "It don't stop at your heart. It gets right through to your muscles, and they tingle and itch to do something, and they mostly want to hurt, same as you've been hurt. Then it gets to the head, through the blood. That's it; the blood gets hot, and it makes the brain hot, an' when the brain's hot it thinks hot thoughts, an' they scorch an' make you feel violent. You think hurt for some one, see? It's all over the body alike. It's when men get hurt like that that they want to kill. Gee! You've hurt him."

The boy paused a little breathlessly. His tense nerves were quivering with some sort of mental strain. It was as though he were watching something that was going on inside himself, and the effort was

tremendous, physically and mentally. But, used as Eve was to his vagaries, she saw none of this. She was thinking only of Jim. Thinking of the suffering which her brother had said she had caused him. Woman-like, she felt she must excuse herself. Yet she knew she had nothing to blame herself with.

“I only told him I had promised to marry Will.”

The boy uttered a little cry. It was a strange sound, unlike anything human. He rushed at her, and his thin hands seized upon her wrists, and clutched them violently.

“You’re goin’ to marry Will? You! You! And you’ve hurt him—to marry Will?” Then, with the force of his clutch upon her wrists, he drew her down toward him till her face was near to his, and his placid eyes looked coldly into hers. “You’ve—hurt—me—too,” he hissed into her face, “and I almost—hate you. No, it’s not you—but I hate Will worse’n I ever hated anything in my life.”

CHAPTER V

TO THE RED, DANCING DEVIL

Jim Thorpe dashed the vicious rowels of his Mexican spurs into the flanks of his horse. Such unaccustomed treatment sent the willing beast racing headlong across the market-place, while the guiding hand mechanically directed toward the saloon.

A storm of bitterness wrung the man's heart. A murky pall of depression hung over his brain, deadening his sense of proportion for all those things that matter. For the time, at least, it crushed down in his heart that spirit of striving, which was one of his best characteristics, and utterly quenched the warm fires of his better nature. All thought was buried in a fog of wrath, which left him a prey to instincts utterly foreign to his normal condition. He had left Eve Marsham's presence in a furious state from which no effort seemed able to clear him. Nothing gripped his understanding—nothing save the knowledge of what he had lost, and the conviction of the low-down trick that had been played upon him by one whom he regarded as a dear, younger brother.

He drew rein at the saloon and flung out of the saddle. He mechanically hitched his horse to the tie-post. Then, with unconscious aggressiveness, he strode up to the building and pushed his way through the swing doors.

The bar was empty, an unusual enough circumstance at that time of the day to draw comment from any one who knew the habits of the men of Barnriff; but Thorpe did not notice it. His eyes were on the man

behind the counter standing ready to serve him. He strode over to him and flung down a ten-dollar bill, ordering a drink of whiskey, and a bottle of the spirit to take away with him. He was promptly served, and Silas Rocket, the proprietor, civilly passed the time of day. It elicited no responsive greeting, for Jim gulped down his drink, and helped himself to another. The second glass of the fiery spirit he swallowed greedily, while Rocket looked on in amazement. As he proceeded to pour out another the man's astonishment found vent.

"A third?" he said stupidly.

Jim dignified no answer, but drank the liquor down, and set the glass forcefully upon the counter.

The saloon-keeper quickly recovered himself. Nor was he slow to comment.

"Feelin' mean, some?" he observed, with a sympathetic wink. He cared little how his visitor took his remark. He was used to the vagaries of his customers, and cared not a snap of the fingers for them.

Jim's reply came swiftly.

"Yes, mean enough to need your hogwash," he said shortly.

Silas Rocket's eyes snapped. He was never a man to take things sitting down.

"Hogwash it is when a feller o' your manners swills it. Mebbe it'll clear some o' the filth off'n your measly chest. Have one on me; I'd be real glad to help in the cleanin' process."

There was a subtle threat underlying his last words. But Jim cared nothing for what he said.

"I'll pay for all I need," he retorted, turning from the counter, and bearing his bottle away over to the window.

Rocket shrugged and turned to his work of setting some sort of order

among his bottles. But, as Jim stood at the window with his back turned, his narrow eyes frequently regarded him and his busy brain speculated as to his humor. The ranchman was well liked in Barnriff, but his present attitude puzzled the worthy host.

However, the object of all this attention was wholly unaware of it. Even if it had been otherwise, it is doubtful if Thorpe would have cared in the least. He was lost in a rushing train of thought. His brain had cleared under the stimulating potions of raw whiskey, and, just as before his chaotic state had made him unable to grasp things fully, now it was equally chaotic in an opposite direction. His brain was running riot with a clearness and rapidity that showed only too plainly the nervous tension under which he was laboring. He was piecing this latest trick of fortune with the ill-luck which seemed to be ever pursuing him. Under the influence of the burning spirit he seemed to have lost the sting of the actual wrong to himself, and in its place a morbid train of thought had been set working.

It was a persecution that was steadily dogging him. When his early misfortunes had come he had accepted them stoically, believing them to be part of the balance of things, beginning on the wrong side, no doubt, but which would be leveled up later on. Time and again he had received these buffets, and he had merely smiled, a little grimly perhaps, and started to "buck the game" afresh.

Then, when things eventually turned slightly in his favor, very slightly, out here on the prairie amongst the derelicts, the flotsam of the grassy ocean, he had found a brief breathing space. He had begun to think the balance had really turned. Hope dawned, and life offered fresh possibilities. And now—now he had been let down afresh. Before, the attack had been directed against the worldly hopes of a man, such as all see crushed at some time in life, but now it was his spirit that was aimed at. It was that strong, living soul which was the mainspring of his moral existence.

He had lost the woman he loved; that was something he could face, something he could live down. But it was the manner of it. It was the fact of Will's treachery that had opened the vital wound.

The thought chilled his heart, it crushed him. Yet his anger was not all for the man who had so rankly betrayed his trust, his bitterness was not all for the fact itself. It was the evidence it afforded of the merciless hand of an invisible foe at work against him, and with which he was powerless to contend. The subtlety of it—to his exaggerated thought—was stupendous.

Slowly his bitterness resolved itself to an unutterable pessimism; the acuteness of the stimulant was wearing off. There was an unhealthy streak in his mind somewhere, a streak that was growing under these blows which had been so liberally dealt him. Where was the use in struggling? he began to ask himself. And the poison of the thought acted like a sedative. He grew strangely calm; he almost experienced pleasure and comfort under its influence. Why struggle? Nothing could go right with him. Nothing. He was cursed—cursed with an ill-starred fortune. This sort of thing was his fate. Fate. That was it. Why struggle against it?

He had but this one short life to live. He would live it. He would live it in the way he chose, without regard to the ethics of civilization. What mattered if he shortened it by years, or if he lived to what might be looked upon as an honored old age? And what was there afterward? He even began to doubt if there was anything before—if there was any just—— He paused and shivered as the thought came to him. And he was glad he paused. To question the Deity was to rank himself at once with a sect he had always despised as self-centred fools, and pitied them as purblind creatures who were in some degree mentally deficient.

He pulled himself together and returned to the bar.

"Give me another whiskey," he demanded.

But Silas Rocket had not forgotten; he rarely ever did forget things in the nature of rudeness.

"I'd hate to," he said quickly; "but I guess I'll sell you 'most anything."

Jim accepted the snub silently, drank his whiskey, paid for it, and went out.

Rocket looked after him. His eyes were unfriendly, but then they were generally unfriendly. As the doors swung to behind his customer he turned and looked in through the doorway behind him.

"Ma!" he cried, "Jim Thorpe's been in. He's had four drinks o' whiskey, and took a bottle with him. He's been thinkin' a whole heap, too. Guess he's goin' on a sky-high drunk."

And a shrewish voice called back to him in a tone of feminine spleen.

"Guess it's that Marsham gal," it said conclusively.

A woman's instinct is a wonderful thing.

Meanwhile Jim was riding across the market-place. Half-way across he saw Smallbones. He hailed him, and the little man promptly hurried up to his horse's side.

Jim knew that Smallbones disliked him. But just now he was only seeking ordinary information.

"Where'll I find Restless?" he inquired. "Where's he working?"

"Guess I see him over by Peter Blunt's shack. Him an' Peter wus gassin' together, while you wus up ther' seein' Eve Marsham," Smallbones replied meaningly. "I 'lows Peter's mostly nosin' around when——"

"Thanks, I'll ride over."

Jim made as though to ride off. He understood the spiteful nature of this little busybody, and was in no mood to listen to him now. But Smallbones was something of a leech when he chose. He had seen

the whiskey bottle sticking out of Jim's coat pocket, and his Barnriff thirst and curiosity were agog, for Jim was at no time a man to waste money in drink.

"Say, givin' a party?" he sneered, pointing at the bottle.

"Yes, a party to a dead friend," replied Jim, with a wintry smile. "It's inexpensive, less trouble, and there's more for myself. So long."

A minute or two later Smallbones was serving Angel Gay in his store. He had just sold him a butcher's knife of inferior quality at double New York prices.

"Say," he observed, in the intimate manner of fellow villagers. "Who's dead? I ain't heard nuthin'. Mebbe you'll know, your bizness kind o' runnin' in that line."

"Ain't heerd tell," the butcher replied, with a solemn shake of his large head. "An' most o' them come my way, too," he added, with thoughtful pride. "Here, wait." He drew out a greasy note-book. "Y'see I kind o' keep re-cords o' likely folks. Mebbe some o' the names'll prompt you. Now ther's M. Wilkes, she's got a swellin', I don't rightly know wher'—ther's folk talks of it bein' toomer—deadly toomer. You ain't heerd if she's gone?" he inquired hopefully, while he thumbed the pages of his book over.

"Nope. I ain't heerd," said Smallbones. "But I don't guess it's a woman. Friend o' Jim Thorpe's."

"Ah," murmured the happy butcher, lifting his eyes to the ceiling for inspiration. "That kind o' simplifies things. Jim Thorpe," he pondered. "He ain't got a heap o' friends, as you might say. Ther's Will Henderson," he turned over the pages of his book. "Um, healthy, drinks a bit. Hasty temper, but good for fifty year 'less he gits into a shootin' racket. 'Tain't him now?" he inquired looking up.

"No, 'tain't him. I see him this mornin'. He was soused some. Kind o' had a heavy night. Wot about McLagan of the 'AZ's'?"

Again the butcher turned over the pages of his note-book. But finished by shaking his head mournfully.

"No luck," he said. "McLagan's 'bout forty, never sick. Only chance 'accident on ranch.'"

The two men looked blankly at each other.

"Wot set you thinkin'?" inquired the butcher at last.

"Jest nuthin' o' consequence. Thorpe sed as he was givin' a party to a dead friend. He'd got a bottle o' whiskey."

"Ah!" murmured Gay, with an air of relief, returning his note-book to his pocket. "That clears things. He's speakin' metaphoric. I'll git goin', kind o' busy. I ain't sent out the day's meat yet, an' I got to design a grave fixin' fer Restless's last kid. Y'see it's a gratis job, I guess, Restless bein' my pardner, as you might say. So long."

Jim reached Peter Blunt's hut as the carpenter was leaving it. Peter was at the door, and smiled a genial welcome. He and Jim were excellent friends. They were both men who thought. They both possessed a wide knowledge of things which were beyond the focus of the Barnriff people, and consequently they interested each other.

"Howdy, Jim," the giant called to him, as he drew up beside the carpenter.

Jim returned his greeting.

"I'll come along, Peter," he said. "Guess I need a word with Restless first."

"Right-ho."

Jim turned to the man at his side.

"I won't need those buildings," he said briefly.

"But I ordered——"

Jim cut him short.

"I'll pay you anything I owe you. You can let me know how much."

He passed on to the hut without waiting for a reply. He had no intention of arguing anything concerning his future plans with Restless. If the carpenter stood to lose he would see him right—well, there was nothing more about it that concerned him.

Peter was inside his hut examining a litter of auriferous soil on his table when Jim entered. This man's home possessed an unique interior. It was such as one would hardly have expected in a bachelor in Barnriff. There were none of the usual impedimenta of a prairie man's abode, there was no untidiness, no dirt, no makeshift. Yet like the man himself the place was simple and unpretentious.

There were other signs of the man in it, too. There was a large plain wooden bookcase filled to overflowing with a choice collection of reading matter. There were rows of classics in several languages, there was modern fiction of the better kind, there were many volumes of classical verse. In short it was the collection of a student, and might well have been a worthy addition to many a more elaborate library.

There were, besides this, several excellent pictures in water-color on the walls, and the absence of all tawdry decoration was conspicuous. Even the bed, the chair, and the table, plain enough, goodness knows, had an air of belonging to a man of unusual personality.

It would be impossible to describe adequately the manner in which the character of Peter Blunt peeped out at one from every corner of his home, nevertheless it did impress itself upon his every visitor. And its peculiar quality affected all alike. There was a strangely gentle strength about the man that had a way of silencing the most boisterously inclined. He had a quiet humor, too, that was often far too subtle for the cruder minds of Barnriff. But most of all his sympathy was a thing that left no room for self in his thoughts. No one attempted undue familiarity with him; not that he would have been likely to

actively resent it, but simply, in his presence nobody had any inclination that way. Nobody could have been more a part of the Barnriff community than Peter Blunt, and yet nobody could have been more apart from it.

Peter did not even look up from his labors when his visitor flung himself into the vacant chair. He silently went on with his examination of first one fragment of quartz and then another. And the man in the chair watched him with moody, introspective eyes. It was a long time before either spoke, and when, at last, the silence was broken, it was by Peter's deep mellow voice.

"I'm looking for gold in a heap of dirt, Jim," he said, without lifting his eyes. "It's hard to find, there's such a pile of the—dirt."

"Why don't you wash it?"

"Yes, I s'pose I ought to," Peter allowed.

Then he glanced over, and his mild eyes focused themselves on the bottle protruding from Jim's pocket. For some moments he contemplated it, and then he looked up into his friend's face.

"How's the 'AZ's'?" he inquired casually.

"Oh, all right."

"In for a—vacation?"

Jim stirred uneasily. There was a directness about the other's manner that was disconcerting. He laughed mirthlessly, and shifted his position so that his bottle of whiskey was concealed.

"No," he said. "I'm getting back—sometime to-night."

"Ah." Then Peter went on after a pause: "I'm glad things are going well for you. Restless told me he'd got an order from you for some buildings on your *own* land."

Jim turned his eyes in the direction of the doorway and found them

gazing upon Eve Marsham's little home beyond it. As Peter offered no further comment he was finally forced to reply.

"I've—I've just canceled that order."

"Eh?"

Jim turned on him irritably.

"Confound it, Peter, you heard what I said. I've canceled that order. Do you get it now?"

The large man nodded. The brains behind his mild eyes were working swiftly, shrewdly.

"Will's in town. Been in since yesterday morning," he said after a while. "Seen him?"

Jim suddenly sprang from his seat, the moody fire of his dark eyes blazing furiously.

"Seen him! Seen him!" he cried, with a sudden letting loose of all the bitterness and smouldering passion which had been so long pent up.

"Seen him? I should say I have. I've seen him as he really is. I've seen——"

He broke off and began to pace the room. Peter was still at the table. His hands were still raking at the pile of dirt. His face was quite unmoved at the other's evident passion; only his eyes displayed his interest.

"God! but the thought of him sets me crazy," Jim went on furiously. Then he paused, and stood confronting the other. "Peter, I came in here without knowing why on earth I came. I came because something forced me, I s'pose. Now I know what made me come. I've got to get it off my chest, and you've got to listen to it."

Peter's smile was the gentlest thing imaginable.

"Guess that's easy," he said. "I knew there was something you'd got

that wasn't good for you to hold. Sort of fancied you'd like to get rid of it—here."

The calm sincerity of the man was convincing. Jim felt its effect without appreciation, for the hot blood of bitterness still drove him. His wrongs were still heavy upon him, water-logging his better sense, and leaving it rudderless.

He hesitated. It was not that he did not know how to begin. It was not that he had any doubts in his mind. Just for a second he wondered at the strange influence which was forcing his story from him. It puzzled him—it almost angered him. And something of this anger appeared in his manner and tone when he spoke.

"Will Henderson's a damned traitor," he finally burst out.

Peter nodded.

"We're all that," he said gently: "if it's only to ourselves."

"Oh, I don't want your moralizing," the other cried roughly. "Listen, this is the low, mean story of it. You'll have little enough moralizing to do when you've heard it."

Then he told Peter of their meeting the day before, and of the friendly honesty of his purpose in the shooting match. How Will had accepted, shot, and lost. This part he told with a grim setting of his teeth, and it was not until he came to the story of the man's treachery that his manner became intemperate. Then he spoke with all the color of a strongly passionate temperament, when the heart is stirred beyond all reason. And the giant listened to it, silent and attentive. What thoughts the story inspired in the listener it would have been impossible to say. His face was calm. There was no sign of any enthralled attention. There was no light in his eyes beyond the kindliness that ever seemed to shine there. And at its conclusion Jim's underlying feeling, that almost subconscious thought which hitherto had found expression only in bitter feeling and the uncertain activities of his mind, broke out

into raving.

"It's a curse that's on me, Peter!" he cried. "I tell you it's a curse! I've never had a chance. Everything from the start has been broken just when its completion was almost achieved. When I look back I can see it written all along the path I've trodden, in the ruins I've left behind me. Why, why, I ask, am I chosen for such persecution? What have I done to deserve it? I've played the game. I've worked. God knows how I've worked. And everything I've done has come to nothing, and not because I've always made mistakes, or committed foolishnesses. Every smash has been brought about by influences that could not have been humanly foreseen. I'm cursed. Cursed by an evil fate it is beyond my power to fight. God? It almost makes one question. Is there a God? A good God who permits such a fate to pursue a man? Is there an all-powerful God, ruling and guiding every human action? Is there? Is there a God, a merciful, loving God watching over us, such as kiddies are taught to believe in? Is there?"

"Yes."

Peter's answer so readily, so firmly spoken was arresting.

"Yes, Jim. There's a God," he went on, without any display. "There's a great big God—just such a God as you and I have knelt to when we were bits of kiddies. Maybe He's so big that our poor, weak brains can't understand Him. But He's there, right up above us, and for every poor mean atom we call 'man' He's set out a trail to walk on. It's called the One-way Trail. And the One-way Trail is just the trail of Life. It's chock full of pitfalls and stumbling-blocks, that make us cuss like mad. But it's good for us to walk over it. There are no turnings or by-paths, and no turning back. And, maybe, when we get to the end something will have been achieved in His scheme of things that our silly brains can't grasp. Yes, there is a God, Jim, and you're just hitting the trail He's set for you."

But Jim was in no reasonable mood.

"Then where's the cursed justice——" he began heatedly. But broke off as the other shrugged his great shoulders.

He waited for Peter to speak. He waited, stirred to a mad contentiousness, to tear his friend's arguments to ribbons, and fling their broken remains back in his face. But no arguments were forthcoming. Peter understood his temper, and saw the uselessness of argument. Besides, he could smell the reek of whiskey.

He thought swiftly with all the wisdom of a great understanding and experience. And finally his manner changed utterly. He suddenly became cordially sympathetic with the other's angry mood. He even agreed with him.

"Maybe you're right, though, Jim," he said. "Things have been mighty hard for you. You've had a heap of trouble. I can't say I wonder at you taking it bad, and thinking things. But—but what are you going to do now? Buck the game afresh?"

Jim did not pause to think. He jumped speedily at the bait held out to him so subtly.

"Yes," he cried, with a bitter laugh. "But it'll be a different game. A game most folks out here sure know how to play. We're most of us life's derelicts. I'll buck it, Peter, and set the devil dancing."

The other nodded.

"I know. I know. He's always ready to dance if we pay for the tune."

But Jim was lost in his own wild thoughts.

"Yes, and he's good company, too, Peter," he cried. "Devilish good." He laughed at his own humor. "The harder you play the harder and more merrily he'll dance. We've got one life. The trail's marked out for us. And, by gum, we'll live while we can. Why should we sweat and toil, and have it squeezed out of us whenever—they think fit? I'll spend every dollar I make. I'll have all that life can give me. I'll pick the fruit

within my reach. I'll do as the devil, or my stomach, guides me. I'll have my time——”

“And then?”

Jim sat down. He was smiling, but the smile was unreal.

“Then? Why, I'll go right down and out, and they can kick my carcass out to the town ‘dumps.’”

Peter nodded again.

“Let's begin now,” he said, with staggering abruptness. And he pointed at the bottle in Jim's pocket.

“Eh?” the other was startled.

“Let's begin now,” Peter said, with his calm smile. “You're good company, Jim. Where you go, I'll travel, too—if it's to hell.”

The smile had vanished from Jim's eyes. For a moment he wondered stupidly, and during that moment, as Peter's hand was outstretched for the bottle, he passed it across to him.

The other took it, and looked at the label. It was a well-known brand of rye whiskey. And as he looked he seemed to gather warmth and enthusiasm. It was as though the sight of the whiskey were irresistible to him.

“Rye,” he cried. “The juice for oiling the devil's joints.” And his lips seemed to smack over the words.

Jim was watching. He didn't understand. Peter's offer to go with him to hell was staggering, and—— But the other went on in his own mildly enthusiastic way.

“We'll start right here. I'll get two glasses. We'll drink this up, and then we'll get some more at the saloon, and——we'll paint the town red.” He rose and fetched two glasses from a cupboard and set them on the table. Then he took his sheath knife from his belt, and, with a skilful

tap, knocked the neck off the bottle.

"No water," he said. "The stuff'll act quicker. We want it to get right up into our heads quick. We want the mad whirl of the devil's dance; we——"

"But why should you——!"

"Tut, man! Your gait's good enough for me. There's room for more fools than one in hell. Here! Here's your medicine."

He rose and passed a glass across to Jim, while the other he held aloft.

"Here, boy," he cried, smiling down into Jim's face "Here, I'll give you a toast." The stormy light in the ranchman's eyes had died out, and in them there lurked a question that had something like fear in it. But his glass was not raised, and Peter urged him. "A toast, lad huyk your glass right up, and we'll drink it standing."

Jim rose obediently but slowly to his feet, and his glass was lifted half-heartedly. There was no responsive enthusiasm in him now; it had gone utterly. Peter's voice suddenly filled the room with a mocking laugh, and his toast rang out in tones of sarcasm the more biting for their very mildness.

"The devil's abroad. Here's to the devil, because there's no God and the devil reigns. Nothing we see in the world is the work of anybody but the devil. The soil that yields us the good grain, the grass that feeds our stock, the warm, beneficent sun that ripens all the world, the beautiful flowers, the magnificent forests, the great hills, the seas, the rivers, the rain; everything in life. All the beautiful world, that thrills with a perfect life, that rolls its way through æons of time held in space by a power that nothing can shake. All the myriads of worlds and universes we see shining in the limitless billions of miles of space at night, everything, everything. It is the arch-fiend's work, for there is no God. Here's to the mad, red, dancing devil, to whom we go!"

Jim's glass crashed to the floor. He seized the bottle of whiskey and served that in the same way.

"Stop it, you mad fool!" he cried in horror. And Peter slowly put his whiskey down untasted.

Then the dark, horror-stricken eyes looked into the smiling blue ones, and in a flash to Jim's troubled mind came inspiration. There was a long, long pause, during which eye met eye unflinchingly. Then Jim reached out a hand.

"Thanks, Peter," he said.

Peter shook his grizzled head as he gripped the outstretched hand.

"I'm glad," he said with a quaint smile, "real glad you came along—and stopped me drinking that toast. Going?"

Jim nodded. He, too, was smiling now, as he moved to the door.

"Well, I suppose you must," Peter went on. "I've got work, too." He pointed at his pile of dirt on the table. "You see, there's gold in all that muck, and—I've got to find it."

CHAPTER VI

EVE AND WILL

Elia was staring at his sister with wide, expectant eyes. Suspense was evidently his dominant feeling at the moment. A suspense which gave him a sickly feeling in the pit of the stomach. It was the apprehension of a prisoner awaiting a verdict; the nauseating sensation of one who sees death facing him, with the chances a thousand to one against him. A half-plaited rawhide rope was lying in his lap; the hobby of making these his sister had persuaded him to turn to profitable account. He was expert in their manufacture, and found a ready market for his wares on the neighboring ranches.

Eve was staring out of the window considering, her pretty face seriously cast, her eyes far away. Will Henderson, his boyishly handsome face moodily set, was standing beside the work-table that occupied the centre of the living-room, the fingers of one hand restlessly groping among the litter of dress stuffs lying upon it. He was awaiting her answer to a question of his, awaiting it in suspense, like Elia, but with different feelings.

Nor did the girl seem inclined to hurry. To her mind a lot depended on her answer. Her acquiescence meant the giving up of all the little features that had crept into her struggling years of independence. There was her brother. She must think for his welfare. There was her business, worked up so laboriously. There was the possible removal from Barnriff to the world of hills and valleys, which was Will's world. There were so many things to think of,—yet—yet she knew her

answer beforehand. She loved, and she was a woman, worldly-wise, but unworldly.

The evening was drawing in, and the soft shadows were creeping out of the corners of the little room. There was a gentle mellowness in the twilight which softened the darns in the patchwork picture the place presented. This room was before all things her shop; and, in consequence, comfort and the picturesque were sacrificed to utility. Yet there was a pleasant femininity about it. A femininity which never fails to act upon the opposite sex. It carries with it an influence that can best be likened, in a metaphoric sense, to a mental aroma which soothes the jagged edges of the rougher senses. It lulls them to a gentle feeling of seductive delight, a condition which lays men so often open to a bad woman's unscrupulousness, but also to a good woman's influence for bringing out all that is greatest and best in their nature.

The waiting was too long for Will. He was a lover of no great restraint. "Well, Eve?" he demanded, almost sharply. "Two months to-day. Will you? We can get the parson feller that comes here from Rocky Springs to—marry us."

The dwarf brushed his rope out of his lap, and, rising, hobbled to Eve's side, and stood peering up into her face in his bird-like way. But he offered no word.

Eve's hand caressed his silky head. She nodded, nodded at the distant hills through the window.

"Yes, Will, dear."

The man was at her side in an instant, while Elia slunk away. The youth drew back and turned tail, slinking off as though driven by a cruel lash in the hand of one from whom kindness is expected. He did not return to his seat, but passed out of the house. And the girl and man, in their moment of rapture, forgot him. At that moment their lives,

their happiness, their love, were the bounds of their whole thought.

For moments they stood locked in each other's arms, oblivious to all but the hot passion that ran through their veins. They were lost in the dream of love which was theirs. The world was nothing, life was nothing, except that it gave them this power to love. They drank in each other's kisses till the woman lay panting in the fierce embrace of the man, and he—he was devouring her with eyes which hungered for her, like the eyes of a starving man, while he crushed her in the arms of a man savage with the delicious pain of his passion.

At last it was the woman who stirred to release herself. It is ever the woman who leads where love dominates. She gently but firmly freed herself. She held his hands and looked up into his glowing eyes. She had something to say, something to ask him, and, reluctant though she be, she must abandon for the time the blissful moments when their mutual love was burning to the exclusion of all else. Will's passionate eyes held her, and for some moments she could not speak. Then, with an effort, she released his hands and defensively turned her eyes away.

"I—I want to speak to you about—Jim," she said at last, a little hesitatingly.

And the fire in the man's eyes abruptly died out.

"He was here this morning, and—he was a little strange."

Will propped himself against the table, and his face, strangely pale, was turned to the window. Nor did he see the snow-capped hills which bounded the entire view. Guilty thoughts filled his mind and crowded out everything else.

"Well?" he demanded, as Eve waited for him to speak.

"You are such friends, dear, that I wanted to ask you—Do you know why he came to see me?"

Will shook his head. Then a smile struggled round his clean shaven mouth.

"Maybe the same reason that makes most fellows crowd round a pretty girl."

It was a wistful smile that accompanied the girl's denial.

"I would like to think it was only that," she said. "Do you know I am very, very fond of Jim. No, no, not in the way you mean," she exclaimed hastily, as the man turned on her, hot with the jealousy which was so much a part of his Celtic nature. "I have always been fond of Jim. He's so generous; so kind and self-sacrificing. Do you know, Will, I believe he'd give up anything to you. It is my conviction that his first thought in life is for your welfare and happiness. And somehow, it—it doesn't seem right. No, I don't mean that you don't deserve it, but that—well, don't you think a man should fight every battle in which he finds himself on his own account? Don't you think, you who are so capable, that the struggles that every man must encounter in life demand the whole of his energies to bring them to a successful end? I do. It's not a matter of self exactly, but we are all so full of weaknesses that this unselfish way of dividing our energies is apt to weaken our own defenses. Thus the scheme for our own uplifting, our own purification, rather suffers. You see, I think we are here on this earth for the purpose of bettering ourselves and preparing for that future, which—I know what I am saying sounds selfish, but really, really, I don't think it is. Do you know, Jim came to ask me to marry him? I know he did. I avoided his direct question, and told him that you asked me last night, and that I had given you my promise. Well, he accepted it as though, as though he had no business to want what you wanted. And his only comment was that you were a 'good boy,' and that he thought you'd make me a good husband. Now, don't laugh"—the man showed not the slightest inclination to do so. His face was livid; there was something like horror in his eyes—"but if I'd been a man in his place I should have

been just mad. Do you think I'd have said that? No, Will; my thoughts would have been murderous. But with him it was otherwise, I'm sure. Yet he loved me, and he was hurt. I could see it—oh, I could see it. The agony in his eyes nearly broke my heart. Will, I think we owe Jim something. I know we can't ever repay it. But we owe him surely. You do, even more than I. I can't bear to think of his hurt."

The girl ceased speaking. Will had made no attempt to stop her, yet every word she had spoken lashed him to a savage self-defense.

"I—I didn't know he loved you," he lied. Then he stopped with a sickening impulse. But in a moment he went on. He had taken the plunge, and his selfish nature came to his aid. "Poor Jim," he said, with apparent feeling. "It's hard luck—mighty hard luck. But, then, Eve, a feller can't expect a man to stand by where a woman's concerned. Not even a brother. You see, dear, I love you so bad. I'd lose anything but you, yes, even my life." He drew nearer to her, but the girl made no response. "Jim's got to take his 'medicine.' Same as I'd have taken mine, if you'd loved him. If Jim squeals, he's not——"

"Oh, don't be afraid of that," Eve exclaimed, with some warmth. "Jim won't 'squeal.' It's not in him to 'squeal.' He'll take his 'medicine' with any man. I'm not thinking of that. It's—oh, I don't know—only I think you're lucky to have such a friend, and I—oh, I wish we could do something for him."

Eve did not know how to express all she felt, and Will did not help her. He displayed no sympathy, but seemed absolutely indifferent, and she almost felt angry with him.

"There's nothing to be done." Then something prompted the man, and he went on harshly. "It was a fair fight and no favor. I love you, Eve; God knows how I love you. And I wouldn't give you up or lose you for fifty Jims. If Jim stood in the way between us I'd—I'd—push him out at—any cost."

"Will!" There was horror in the girl's exclamation. Then the woman in

her rose at the contemplation of the man's love and passion for her. How could it be otherwise? She came to him, and was hugged in arms that almost set her gasping.

"I love you, Eve. I love you! I love you!"

Their lips met, and the woman clung to him in the rush of her responsive passion.

"Oh, Will," she cried at length. "It's good to be loved as you love. It's so good. Kiss me, dear, kiss me again. I am all yours."

The man needed no bidding. He had wronged his friend; had lied, lied in the worst way a man can lie, to make sure of her. He appreciated the cost, and its value made those moments all the more precious.

But he had no real regret for the wrong he had committed. And this was an unerring index to his nature. He would stand at nothing where his own desires were at stake.

CHAPTER VII

THE CHICKEN-KILLING

An hour later Will left the house. He felt good. He felt that he wanted to shout aloud his good fortune. To a temperament like his there was only one outlet to such feelings. He would go down to the saloon and treat the boys. They should share in his good fortune—to the extent of drink. He cared nothing for them in reality. He cared nothing for anybody but himself. He wanted drink, and to treat the boys served as an excuse.

Since winning Eve he had debated with himself the matter of “straightening up” with regard to drink. It is the usual condition of mind upon such occasions amongst men who live hard. It is an upward moral tendency for the moment, and often the highest inclination of their life’s moral switchback, the one that inevitably precedes the longest and severest drop. At no other time would he have needed an excuse to drink.

He hurried so as not to lose anything of the evening’s entertainment at the saloon, but his way did not take him direct. He had left the bulk of his money secreted in the cupboard in his old hut, a place he still kept in which to sleep when business or pleasure brought him in from the hunting-grounds of the trade which was his.

But the deviation was considerable, nor had he the assistance of any outside influence to keep his mind in focus. Thus he found it drifting whithersoever it chose. It passed from Eve to the saloon, to the money he required to help him pass the evening, to a dozen and one

things, and finally settled itself upon the one subject he would rather have avoided. It focused itself upon Jim Thorpe, and, try as he would to break away from this thrall, it clung tenaciously.

He could not get away from Eve's spoken sympathy for Jim, and every word he recollected stung him poisonously. His regard for Jim was of the frailest texture. He had always regarded him as something inevitable in his life, and that was all. Nor was he to be considered in the least where his own desires were concerned. Yet he cursed that shooting match. He cursed himself for going to see Jim at all. Why had he not gone to Eve in the first place? Then he promptly reassured himself that he had only gone to Jim out of a sense of honor. Yes, it was that shooting match. Jim had forced it on him. That was it. It was wholly Jim's fault. How was he to know he was going to lose? There was no doubt that Jim was a fine shot, but so was he.

Then through his brain flashed another thought. Maybe it had inspiration in the thought of Jim's shooting. What would happen when he met Jim, as, sooner or later, he knew he must? What would Jim's attitude be? He frowned heavily. This had not occurred to him before. Would there be trouble? Well, if there were it might be easier, at least less complicated. On the other hand, what else could Jim do? It was uncomfortably puzzling. His own disposition made it impossible for him to probe the possibilities of such a nature as Jim's.

He could not answer his question, and it left him with a feeling of apprehension which no prospect of violence could have inspired in him. He told himself he was sorry, regretted the whole occurrence, but there was less truth in his mental apology than in the feelings which his thoughts had inspired. Though in his heart he knew he had done wrong, he had acted with the grossest dishonor toward Jim, he would not admit it; consequently he experienced the nervous apprehension which every wrong-doer, however hardened, always feels at the thought of being confronted with his crime.

By the time he reached his hut he was in a bad mood. He not only rebelled against the worry of his thought, but wanted to vent his feelings. He probably hated Jim just then, and a meeting with him at that moment would undoubtedly have provoked a quarrel.

He was approaching his hut from the back. The place was in darkness, and he groped in his pockets for matches. He had to pass the old hen-roost, which, in their early days in Barnriff, had kept him and Jim supplied with fresh eggs. As he drew abreast of this he suddenly halted and stood listening. There was a commotion going on inside, and it startled him. He could hear the flapping of wings, the scuffling and clucking of the frightened hens.

For the moment he thought of the coyote, that thieving scavenger of the prairie which is ever on the prowl at night. But the next instant he remembered the chicken killing going on in the village. He ran to the door of the roost and flung it wide open. Without waiting for a light he stooped down and made his way in. And that act of stooping probably saved his life. Something whistled over his bent body, splitting the air like a well-swung sword. He knew instinctively it was a knife aimed at him. But the next moment he had grappled with his assailant, and held him fast in his two strong arms.

From that moment there was no further struggle. As he dragged his prisoner out he wondered. Then, in a moment, his wonder passed, as he felt a set of sharp, strong human teeth fasten themselves upon the flesh of his forearm. He dropped his hold and with his free hand seized his captive by the throat and choked him until the teeth released their grip.

To rush his prisoner along before him to the door of the hut and thrust him inside was curiously easy. There was no resistance or struggle for freedom. The captive seemed even anxious to avoid all further effort. Nor was there a word spoken until Will had struck a match and lit the guttered candle stuck in the neck of a whiskey bottle. Then, with the revealing light, he uttered an exclamation of blank astonishment.

Elia, Eve's brother, stood cowering before him with his usually mild eyes filled with such a glare of abject terror that it might well have inspired pity in the hardest heart.

But Will was not given to pity. The boy's terror meant nothing to him. All he remembered was his unutterable dislike of the boy, and his satisfaction at having caught the chicken-killer of Barnriff. And, to judge by the boy's blood-stained hands, in the thick of his fell work.

"So, I've caught you, my lad, have I?" he said, with a cold grin of appreciation. "It's you who spend your time killing the chickens? Well, you're going to pay for it, you—you wretched deformity."

The boy cowered back. His curious mind was filled with hatred, but his fear was all-mastering. Will suddenly reached forward and dragged him further into the feeble rays of the candle-light.

"Come here, you young demon!" he cried. "You're not going to escape punishment because of your sister. You haven't got her here to protect you. You've got a man to deal with. Do you understand, eh? A man."

"A devil," Elia muttered, his eyes gleaming.

"Well, at this moment, perhaps, a devil!" Will retorted, giving the boy's arm a cruel twist. "How's that?" he inquired, as the boy gave one of those curious cries of pain of his, which had so much likeness to an animal's yelp.

"Oh, that's nothing to what you're going to get," his persecutor went on. "We do the same here to boys who kill chickens as we do to those who kill and steal cattle. We hang 'em, Elia, we hang 'em. How would you like to be hanged?"

Will watched the working features. He saw and appreciated the terror he was causing, the suffering. But he could draw no further retort.

As a matter of fact he had no definite idea yet as to what he should do with his captive. He was Eve's brother, but that did not influence him. He probably disliked the boy all the more for it, because one day he would be his brother, and he knew that Elia came before all else in the world in Eve's thoughts. His jealousy and hatred were well blended, and, in a man of his mind, this was a dangerous combination.

He released his hold on his captive and looked at his bleeding arm. The boy's teeth had left an ugly wound, and the blood was flowing freely. He turned his eyes again to Elia's face and a devil lurked in them.

"I've a good mind to thrash you, you piece of deformity!" he cried angrily. And he made a move as though to fulfil his threat.

Then that cruel grin gathered round his lips again.

"That's a good idea," he said. "Thrash you for myself, and hand you over to those others, after."

But his words had not the effect which his physical force had. Perhaps the boy, with that peculiar twist he possessed, was reading the indecision, the uncertainty in his captor's mind. Anyway, the terror in his eyes was becoming less, and a defiant light was taking its place. But Will could see none of this, and he went on.

"I'd hate to be handed over to the boys for hanging——"

Elia suddenly shook his head.

"There's no hangin'!" he cried, "and you know it. You send me to—the others an' see what happens to you. I tell you, sis 'ud see you dead before she married you. Guess you best let me go right quick, an' no more bulldozing."

The boy had suddenly tacked to windward of him, and Will was confronted with an ugly "lee shore." The trap he had fallen into was difficult, and he stood thinking. The dwarf had recovered himself, and his bland look of innocence returned to his eyes.

"I killed 'em nigh all—your chickens," he said earnestly. "I'll kill the rest later, because they're yours. I can't kill you because you are stronger than me, but I hate you. I'm goin' right out of here now, an' you won't stop me."

But the boy had overreached himself. Will was not easy when at bay.

He took a step forward and seized him by his two arms.

"You hate me, eh?" he said cruelly. "I can't hand you over to the boys, eh?" He wrenched the arms with a twist at each question, and, at each twist, the boy uttered that weird cry that was scarcely human.

"Well, if I can't," Will went on through his clenched teeth, wrenching his arms as he spoke, "it cuts both ways; you'll get your med'cine here instead, and you daren't speak of it—see, see, see!"

The boy's cries were louder and more prolonged. Terror had again taken its place in his eyes. Yet he seemed to have no power for resistance. He was held in a paralysis of unutterable fear. With each of Will's three final words the lad's arms were nearly wrenched from their sockets, and, as the victim's final cry broke louder than the rest, the door was flung open and the candle set flickering.

"Stop that!" cried a voice, directly behind Will, and the man turned to find the burly form of Peter Blunt filling the doorway.

But Will was beside himself with rage and hatred.

"Eh?" he demanded. "Who says to stop? He's the chicken-killer. I got him red-handed." He held up one of the boy's blood-stained hands.

"I don't care what he is. If you don't loose him instantly I'll throw you out of this shack." The big man's voice was calm, but his eyes were blazing.

Will released the boy, but only to turn fiercely upon the intruder.

"And who in thunder-are you to interfere?" he cried savagely.

Without a moment's hesitation Peter walked straight up to him. For a second he stood towering over him, eye to eye. Then he turned his back, and thrust out one great arm horizontally across the other's body, as though to warn him back while he spoke to Elia. There was nothing blustering in his attitude, nothing even forceful. There was a simplicity, a directness that was strangely compelling. And Will found himself obeying the silent command in spite of his fury.

"Get out, laddie," said Peter gently. "Get out, quick."

And in those moments while Will watched his prey hobbling to freedom, he remembered Eve and what it would mean if the story of

his doings reached her.

As the boy vanished through the doorway Peter turned.

"Thanks, Will," he said, in his amiable way. "You'd far best let him go. When you hurt that boy you hurt Eve—ter'ble."

Swift protest leaped to Will's lips.

"But the chickens. He killed 'em. I caught him red-handed."

"Just so, Will," responded the big man easily. "He'll answer for it—somewhere. There's things we've been caught doing 'red-handed' by—some one. And we'll answer for 'em sure—somewhere."

CHAPTER VIII

THE "BOYS" OF THE VILLAGE

The saloon was well filled, and it was evident from the atmosphere pervading the place that something unusually welcome was afoot.

As a rule evenings spent in the saloon at Barnriff were not gatherings one would readily describe as being "gay." At least it would require a strong imagination to do so. A slight modification would be best. The Barnriff men were rarely lightsome, and when they disported themselves it was generally with a sombre sort of joy. That was their attitude just now. There was a peculiar earnestness about them, even in the fact of living. They seemed to be actuated by a deadly thoroughness which had a tendency to kill, not so much levity as lightness, and leave them mourning.

To-night such an atmosphere of sombre joy was prevailing. It was a similar attitude to that which they adopted on election day, Independence Day, at a funeral, or a wedding. It was the way anything out of the ordinary always affected them.

The fact of the matter was Doc Crombie, who was doctor, veterinary surgeon, horse dealer, and a sort of self-elected mayor of the place, was going to hold a meeting in the saloon. He was going to make a formal speech, and the speech was the point.

Now, if there was one thing Barnriff bowed the knee to it was the man who could, and would, make a speech. It had all the masses' love for oratory, and was as easily swayed by it as a crowd of ignorant

political voters. Besides, Doc Crombie was a tried orator in Barnriff. He had addressed a meeting once before, and, speaking on behalf of a church mission, and asking for support of the cause, he had created a great impression by his stern denunciation of the ungodly life in Barnriff, and his flowery laudation of those who allowed themselves to respond to the call of "religion."

On that occasion he said with all the dignity and consequence of his position at the moment—

"It ain't your dogone dollars we want. It's your souls. D'you git that? An' when we've sure got 'em wot'll we do with 'em, you ast? Wal, I don't guess we're doin' a cannibal line o' business. Nor ain't we goin' to stuff 'em an' set 'em up as objec's o' ridicool to the ungodly hogs wot wallers in the swill o' no adulteratin' son-of-a-moose of a dealer in liver pizen. No, gents, that ain't us. We're goin' to save 'em. An' I personal guarantees that savin' racket goes. Did I hear any mangy son-of-a-coyote guess he didn't believe no such guarantee? No, an' I guess he best not. I'm a man of peace, as all knows in this yer city, but I'd hate to try an' shut out a blizzard in winter by stuffin' that gopher's perforated carkis under the doorjamb when I was thro' with it. I say right here we're out to save carkises—I mean souls. An', say, fellers, jest think. Gettin' your souls saved for a few measly cents. Ain't that elegant? No argyment, no kickin'. Them souls is jest goin' to be dipped, an' they'll come up white an' shinin' out of the waters of righteousness a sight cleaner than you ever got your faces at Christmas, washin' in Silas Rocket's hoss trough, even when his hoss soap was plenty. Think of it, fellers, and I speak speshul to you whiskey souses wot ain't breathed pure air sence you was let loose on the same gent's bowel picklin' sperrit. You'll get right to Meetin' on Sundays with your boots greased elegant, an' your pants darned reg'lar by your wimmin-folk wot's proud of yer, an' don't kick when you blow into a natty game o' 'draw.' You'll have your kids lookin' up at your fancy iled locks, an' your bow-tie, an' in their little minds they'll

wonder an' wonder how it come your mouths ain't drippin' t'baccer juice, an' how they ain't got cow-hided 'fore the breakfast they mostly have to guess at, an' how it come you're leadin' them, 'stead o' them leadin' you, an' how their little bellies is blown out with grub like a litter o' prize hogs. Think of it, fellers, an' pass up your measly cents. It ain't the coin, it's the sperrit we want, an' when I think of all these yer blessin's I'm *personal* guaranteein' to the flower o' Barnriff's manhood I almost feel as though I was goin' to turn on the hose pipe like a spanked kid."

He talked till he had half of Barnriff's "flower" blubbering, and he had emptied the last cent out of their pockets, and the mission was set on a sound financial basis. But as to his guarantee—well, the doctor was well understood by his fellow citizens, and no one was ever heard to question its fulfilment.

It was wonderful what a power of persuasion he had in Barnriff. But then he was an awe-inspiring figure, with his large luminous eyes and eagle cast of feature. And, too, words flowed from his lips like words from the pen of a yellow journal reporter, and his phraseology was almost as picturesque.

The boys were gathered waiting for him. There was anticipatory pleasure in their hang-dog faces. One of them almost laughed at a light sally from the cheery Gay, but luckily it was nipped in time by the interposition of the mean-minded Smallbones.

"I sez it right here, boys," the latter observed, leaning with his back against the bar, and speaking with the air of having just arrived at a grave decision. "Old Sally Morby hadn't no right to burry her man in oak. Now I ast you, Gay, as man to man, if you'd know'd we was goin' to be ast to ante up fer her grub stake, wot could you ha' done him handsome an' moderate fer?"

Gay squared his fat shoulders. For the moment he was important. Moments of importance are always precious, even in places like

Barnriff.

"Wal, I can't rightly give it you down to cents without considerin' Restless some," he replied unctuously. "But we did Toby Randall slap-up in ash fer fifty odd dollars. Then ther' was Sadie O'Brien. We did her elegant in soft pine for twenty-eight odd. It 'ud sure have been twenty-five on'y fer her weight. Y'see the planks under her had to be two inch or she'd ha' fell through."

He produced his note-book and rapidly glanced over the greasy pages.

"Y'see," he observed, pausing at the entry he had been looking for, "Sally paid us a hundred an' forty-seven dollars an' seventy-five cents. I 'lows that's handsome fer buryin' a hop-headed skite like Charlie Morby was. But that wus her order, an' bein' a business man, an' takin' pride in my work, I sez to Restless, I sez, 'It's oak, boy, oak with silver plate trimmin's, an' a real elegant inscription to Charlie on it, tellin' folks o' virtues he didn't never handle when he was livin'.' He sure didn't deserve nothin' better than an apple bar'l, leavin' the head open so he had a chance to dodge the devil when he come along. An' I guess, knowin' Charlie, he'd 'a' given him an elegant run fer it."

"That's it," exclaimed Smallbones, peevishly. "That's it. She goes an' blows in her wad on a buzzock what ought to bin drowned in yaller mud, an' we've got to ante her grub stake. Psha! I ain't givin' a cent."

Lean Wilkes, the baker, was watching the trust schemer with baleful eye, and now his slow tongue evolved a pretty retort.

"No one sed you was—nor thought it likely."

"The duff puncher wakin' up," sneered Smallbones, angrily.

"Guess it's your voice hurtin' my ear drums," replied Jake, ponderously.

At that moment Abe Horsley joined the group. He called for drinks

before adding his bit to the talk. He had an axe to grind and wanted a sympathetic audience. While Rocket, observing his customers with shrewd unfriendly eyes, set out the glasses and the accompanying bottles—he never needed to inquire what these men would take; he knew the tittle of every soul in Barnriff by heart—Abe opened out. He was unctuous and careful of his diction. He was Barnriff's lay preacher, and felt that this attitude was "up to him."

"I do sure agree with the generality of opinion in this yer city," he said largely. "I consider that the largeness of heart for which our brothers in this important town—it has a great future, gentlemen, believe me; I mention this in parenthesis—are held in excellent esteem—" He broke off to nod to Jim Thorpe who entered the saloon at that moment—"should be—er fostered. I think, brethren—pardon me, 'gentlemen'—that we should give, and give liberally to Sally Morby, but—but I do not see why Doc Crombie should make the occasion the opportunity for a speech. Any of us could do it quite as well. Perhaps, who knows, some of us even better——"

"Smallbones," murmured the dissatisfied Wilkes, drinking his gin at a gulp.

"Yes, even Smallbones," shrugged Abe, sipping his whiskey.

Angel Gay bolted his whiskey and laid a gentle hand firmly on Horsley's shoulder.

"No," he said, "not Smallbones; not even Doc Crombie, both deadgut fellers sure. But you are the man, Abe. For elegance o' langwidge, an' flow—mark you—you—you are a born speaker, sure. Say, I believe that rye of Rocket's was in a gin bottle. It tasted like—like——"

"Have another?" suggested Abe, cordially.

"I won't say 'no,'" Gay promptly acquiesced.

But Rocket was serving drink to Jim Thorpe at one of the little poker tables on the far side of the room, and the butcher had to wait.

"How much are you givin'?" Smallbones inquired cautiously of Gay.

He was still worrying over the forthcoming demand on his charity. Gay Promptly puffed himself up.

"Wal," he said, with some dignity. "Y'see she's got six kiddies, each smaller nor the other. They mustn't starve for sure. Guess I'm givin' twenty-fi' dollars."

"Wot?" almost shrieked the disgusted Smallbones.

"Yes," said the butcher-undertaker coldly. "An' I ain't no trust magnate."

"That's right up to you, Smallbones," remarked Abe, passing his friend Gay his drink. "You'll natcherly give fifty."

But Abe's ponderous levity was too much for Smallbones.

"An' if I did it wouldn't be in answer to the hogwash preachin' you ladle out. Anyways I'll give as it pleases me."

"Then I guess them kiddies'll starve, sure," remarked Wilkes heavily.

How much further the ruffled tempers of these men might have been tried it is impossible to say, but at that moment a diversion was created by the advent of the redoubtable doctor. And it was easy to see at a glance how it was this man was able to sway the Barnriff crowd. He was an aggressive specimen of unyielding force, lean, but powerful of frame, with the light of overwhelming determination in a pair of swift, bright eyes.

He glanced round the vast dingy bar-room. There were two tables of poker going in opposite corners of the room, and a joyous collection of variegated uncleanness "bucking" a bank in another corner. Then there was the flower of Barnriff propping up the bar like a row of daisies in a window box—only they lacked the purity of that simple flower. He stepped at once to the centre of the room.

"Boys," he said in a hoarse, rasping voice, "I'm in a hurry. Guess natur' don't wait fer nuthin' when she gits busy on matters wot interest her; an' seein' Barnriff needs all the population that's comin' to it with so energetic a funeral maker as our friend, Angel Gay, around, I'll git goin'. I'm right here fer dollars fer pore Sally Morby. She's broke, dead broke, an' she's got six kiddies, all with their pore little bellies flappin' in the wind for want of a squar' feed. Say, I ain't hyar to git gassin', I ain't hyar to make flowery talk fer the sake o' them pore kiddies. I'm here to git dollars, an' I'm goin' to git 'em. Cents won't do. Come on. Ther's six pore kiddles, six pore lone little kiddies with their faces gapin' fer food like a nest o' unfledged chicks in the early frosts o' spring. Now every mother's son o' you 'ante' right here. Natur' busy or no natur' busy, I don't quit till you've dipped into your wads. Now you, Smallbones," he cried, fixing the little man with his desperate eyes. "How much?"

Every eye was on the trust manipulator. He hated it. He hated them all, but Doc Crombie most of all. But the tall, lean man was impatient. He knew it was a race between him and a baby in a distant quarter of the village.

"How much?" he threatened the hesitating man.

"A dollar," Smallbones muttered in the midst of profound silence. Even the chips of the poker players had ceased to rattle.

A faint light of amusement crept into every eye, every eye except the doctor's.

Suddenly his lean figure pounced forward and stood before the befuddled speaker.

"I said 'how much?'" he rasped, "'cause Barnriff knows its manners. Wal, the social etiquette o' Barnriff is satisfied, so I ken talk straight. Say, you an' me have piled a tidy heap in this yer city, so I guess you're goin' to match my hundred dollars right here. An' I tel you squar', an' I'm a man o' my word, if you don't you'll get a bath in

Rocket's hoss-trough which'll do you till the next Presidential Election—if it pizens every hoss for miles around Barnriff. Guess I'll take that hundred dollars."

And he did. The furious Smallbones "weighed out" amid a circle of smiles, which suddenly seemed to light up the entire bar-room. Nor had he a single spoken word of protest. But he yielded himself up to the demands of the masterful doctor only to save himself the ducking he was certain awaited his refusal.

The rest was play to Doc Crombie. As he had pointed out, Barnriff's social demands had been satisfied by his giving Smallbones the option of stating the amount of his contribution, and, as the result had not come up to requirements, he dispensed with further delicacy, and assessed each man present with the cool arbitrariness of a Socialist Chancellor. But in this case the process was not without justification. He knew just how much each man could afford, and he took not one cent more—or less.

This fact was exemplified when he came to Jim's table. Jim looked up from his cards. He understood Crombie.

"Well, Doc," he said, "how much?"

Crombie eyed him with shrewd amusement.

"Wal, Jim, I'll take on'y ten dollars from you, seein's your contrac's out for buildin', an' you need ev'rything that's comin' your way."

Jim laughed. It was a boisterous laugh that had little mirth in it.

"Guess I'll treble that," he said. "I've cut the contract."

But the laugh had irritated the doctor.

"I'll take ten from you;" he said, with an incisive clipping of his teeth. "Not a cent more, nor a cent less."

And Jim yielded to him promptly. The doctor passed on. Neither he nor those around him had understood the bitter humor underlying

Jim's laugh. Only, perhaps, Peter Blunt, who had entered the room with Will Henderson a moment or two before, and whose sympathetic ears had caught the sound, could possibly have interpreted it aright.

The "whip round" was completed, and the doctor read out the total. Five hundred and forty dollars was to be handed over to the widow, to ease the burden Fate had inflicted upon her. And it said something for the big hearts of this prairie folk, that, in the large majority at least, the memory of their charity left them with the departure of the doctor to complete his race with Nature at the far extremity of the village.

The saloon settled down to its evening's entertainment as though nothing unusual had happened. The majority gathered into various games of "draw," for which the great room was half filled with small tables. The few that resisted the seductive charms of the national card game continued to support the bar. Of these, Smallbones only remained long enough to air his spleen at the doctor's expense. But even he found it incumbent upon him to modify his tone. For one thing he received an unmerciful baiting from his companions, and besides, he knew, if he allowed his tongue to riot too far, how easy it would be for his denunciation to reach the strenuous doctor's ears. Gay and Wilkes left shortly after the trust magnate, and soon Abe Horsley was forced to seek a fresh gossip. He found one in Will Henderson, as soon as Peter Blunt had moved away to watch the games at the tables. Will's mood at the moment suited the lay-preacher. He wanted to drink, and Abe was possessed of a chronic thirst.

So, with the exception of these two, Silas Rocket, ever rapacious for custom, was left free to see that the games did not detract from the men's drinking powers. He had an eye like a hawk for possible custom. Wherever there was a big pot just won his rasping voice was always at the elbow of the winner, with his monotonous "Any drinks, gents?" If a table was slow to require his services he never left it alone. He drove the men at it to drink in self-defense. It was a skilful display—though not as uncommon as one might think, even in the

best restaurants in a big metropolis.

So the night wore on. Every man drank. They drank when they won. They drank when they lost. In the former case it was out of the buoyancy of their spirits, in the latter because they wished to elevate them. Whatever excuse they required they found, and when difficulty in that direction arose, there was always Silas Rocket on hand to coax them.

Jim, huddled away in a corner behind the great stove used for heating the place in winter, was busy with his game. He had shown no recognition of Will Henderson's coming. He had probably seen him, because, though hidden from it himself, he had a full view of the bar, and any time he looked up, his eyes must have encountered the two figures now left alone beside it.

He was drinking, and drinking hard. He was also losing. The cards were running consistently against him. But then, he was always an unlucky player. He rarely protested against it, for in reality he had little interest in the play, and to-night less than usual. He played because it saved him thinking or talking, and he wanted to sit there and drink until Silas turned them out. Then he intended returning to the ranch. He meant to have one night's forgetfulness, at least, even if he had to stupefy his senses in bad whiskey.

Abe and Will had reached the confidential stage. They were full of friendliness for each other, and ready to fall on each other's necks. For some time Will had desired an opportunity to open his heart to this man. He would have opened it to anybody. His Celtic temperament was a fire of enthusiasm. He felt that all the world was his, and he wanted to open his arms and embrace it. But so far Abe had given him little opportunity. His own voice pleased the lay-preacher, and he had orated on every subject from politics to street-paving, giving his companion little chance for anything but monosyllabic comments. But finally Will's chance came. Abe had abruptly questioned the propriety of permitting marriage in their

village, where the burden of keeping the offspring of the union was likely to fall upon the public shoulders. Will plunged into the midst of the man's oratory, and would not be denied.

"Marriage," he said, "is not for regulation by law. No one has the right," he declared, with an emphatic thump on the bar, "to dictate to the individual on the subject." He went on at high pressure in a heated crescendo for some moments, denouncing any interference by public bodies. Then of a sudden he laid a hand on Abe's shoulder and abruptly dropped his voice to a confidential whisper. His eyes were smiling and shining with the feelings which stirred him. Everything was forgotten except the fact of his engagement to Eve. Jim was obscured from his mental vision by the uplifting spirit vapors which supported his thoughts. Eve, and Eve alone, was in his mind, that—and the fact that she was to be—his.

"Listen to me, Abe," he said, a little thickly. "All this talk of yours don't hold water—no, nor spirit either," he laughed. "Say, I'm goin' to get married, and so I know."

Quite how he knew didn't seem clear; but he paused for the impression. Abe whistled interestedly and edged nearer, turning his ear so as not to miss what the youngster had to say.

"Who?" he demanded.

"A-ah!" Will prolonged the exclamation knowingly, and waited for the man to guess.

"You wus allus sweet on Eve Marsham—you and Jim Thorpe."

Will suddenly ceased to smile. He drank his whiskey at a gulp and banged his glass on the counter.

"By G——!" he exclaimed harshly, while Abe wondered at his changed tone. "Yes, it's Eve—Eve Marsham; and I'm going to marry her—not Jim. D'you git that? By heaven!—yes. Here, Rocket——!" He lurched round on the bar. "Here, you old Sky-Rocket, get drinks, quick! For

everybody! I'll pay! See, here's the wad," and he slammed a thick roll of bills on the counter. "I've got money, sure, and I'm—hic—goin' to burn it. Boys," he cried, swinging about and facing the tables, supporting himself against the bar, "you'll drink with me. Si—Silas here'll take your orders, an' serve you. You, too, Abe, ole pal."

Jim looked up from his cards the moment Will addressed the room and now he watched him swaying against the bar. The light in his dark eyes was peculiar. He seemed to be speculating, and his thoughts were uneasy. Will yawned drunkenly. Peter Blunt, from across the room, was watching Jim, and moved abruptly clear of the tables, but not ostentatiously so.

Will's eyes watched Silas passing round the drinks. He was smiling in the futile manner of a drunken man, and his fingers were clutching nervously at the moulded edge of the bar. Rocket came back and handed him and Abe their whiskey. The former promptly clutched his glass and raised it aloft, spilling the neat spirit as he did so. Then, with drunken solemnity, he called for order.

"Boys," he cried, "you'll—you'll drink a to—toast. Sure you will. Every one of you'll drink it. My fu—sher wife, Eve—Eve Marsham. Jim Th—Thorpe thought he'd best—me, but——"

A table was suddenly sent flying in the crowd. A man's figure leaped out from behind the stove and rushed up to the speaker. It was Jim Thorpe. His eyes were blazing, and a demon of fury glared out upon the drunken man.

"Another word, and I'll shoot you like a dog! You liar! You thieving——!"

But his sentence was never completed. Peter Blunt stood between them, one of his great hands gripping Jim's arm like a vice.

"Shut up!" he cried, in a hoarse whisper. "You'll have the whole story all over the village."

But the mischief was done. Everybody present was on their feet agog with excitement, and came gathering round to see the only possible finish to the scene, as they understood it. But, quick as lightning, Peter took in the situation. Flinging Jim aside as though he were a baby, he hugged the drunken Will Henderson in his two great arms, and carried him bodily out of the saloon.

The men looked after him wondering. Then some one laughed. It was an odd, dissatisfied laugh, but it had the effect of relieving the tension. And one by one they turned back to Jim, who was standing moodily leaning on the bar; his right hand was still resting on the gun on his hip.

There was a moment of suspense. Then Jim's hand left the gun, and he straightened himself up. He tried to smile, but the attempt was a failure.

"I'm sorry for upsetting your game, boys," he said stupidly.

Then Rocket came effectively to the rescue.

"Gents," he cried, "you'll all honor me by drinkin' with the house."

CHAPTER IX

A WOMAN'S CARE

"He's right now, Eve, dear—right as right. He'll sleep till morning, and then he'll wake up, an'—an' forget about being ill."

It was not so much the words as the tone that brought comfort to Eve. She was leaning over her brother's bed watching the beautiful face, so waxen now, and listening to his heavy breathing, which was steadily moderating to a normal ease. The boy was sleeping the result of a dose administered to him by Doc Crombie who had been urgently summoned immediately after winning his race with Nature in another part of the village. Elia had been prostrated with a nervous attack which ended in a terrible fit, and Eve, all unaware of what had gone before between her brother and Will, had been hard put to it, in her grief and anxiety.

When the boy first showed signs of illness she sent for Mrs. Gay to find the doctor, and the bright, busy little woman was still with her. Annie Gay was quite the antithesis of her husband. She was practical, energetic and, above all things, bright. She was quite young and pretty, and Eve and she were considerable friends. She answered the girl's summons without a moment's delay, and, to her utmost distress, when she arrived, she found Elia in a fierce paroxysm of convulsions.

"You think so, Annie?" Eve's eyes lifted hungrily to her friend's face. They were full of almost painful yearning. This boy's welfare meant more to her than any one knew.

Annie took her arm, and gently drew her from the bedside, nodding her pretty head sagely.

"Sure." Then she added with a great assumption of knowledge, "You see those weakly creatures like poor Elia have got a lot o' life in them. You can't kill 'em. Angel allus says that, an' he's sure to know. Elia's body ain't worth two cents as you might say, but he's got—what's the word—vi—vi——"

"Vitality," suggested Eve.

"Yes, sure. That's it. Now he'll just sleep and sleep. And then he'll be bully when he wakes. So come you and sit down while I make you a drop of hot coffee. Pore girl, you're wore out. There's no end to the troubles o' this world for sure," she added cheerfully, as she hustled off to the kitchen to get the promised coffee.

Eve sat down in her workroom. She was comforted in spite of herself. Annie Gay's manner was of an order that few could resist; it was illogical, and, perhaps, foolishly optimistic, yet it had that blessed quality of carrying conviction to all who were fortunate enough to lean on her warm, strong heart. And on Eve she practiced her best efforts.

But Eve's anxiety only lay dormant for the time. It was still there gnawing at her heart. She knew the danger of the fits Elia was subject to and a brooding thought clung to her that one day one of these would prove fatal. The least emotion, the least temper, fear, excitement, brought them on. This one—it was the worst she had known. Supposing he had died—she shuddered. Like a saving angel Annie reëntered with the coffee in time to interrupt her thoughts.

"Now, dear, you drink this at once," she said. Then she went on, in response to a mute inquiry, "Oh, yes, there's plenty here for me. And when I come back I'm going to make some more, and cook a nice light supper, while you watch the boy, and we can sit here together with his door open until morning."

"But you're not going to stop, Annie," Eve protested. "I can't have that. You must get your sleep. It's very kind of you——"

"Now look right here, Eve," the busy woman said decidedly, "you've got nothing to say about it, please. Do you think I could sleep in my bed with you fretting and worrying your poor, simple heart out? What if he woke up in the night an'—an' had another? Who's to go and fetch Doc? Now wot I says is duty's duty, and Angel Gay can just snore his head off by himself for once, and I'm not sure but what I shall be glad to be shut of the noise."

The genuine sympathy and kindness were quite touching, and Eve responded to it as only a woman can.

"Annie," she said, with a wistful smile, "you are the kindest, dearest thing——"

"Now don't you call me a 'thing,' Eve Marsham," the other broke in with a laugh, "or we'll quarrel. I'm just a plain woman with sense enough to say nothing when Gay gets home with more whiskey aboard than is good for his vitals. And don't you think I'm not putting a good value on myself when I say that. Not that Gay's given to sousing a heap. No, he's a good feller, sure, an' wouldn't swap him for—for your Will—on'y when he snores. So you see it's a kindness to me letting me stop to-night."

"You're a dear," Eve cried warmly,—“and I won't say 'thing.' Where are you going now?"

"Why, I'm going to set Angel's cheese an' pickles, and put his coffee on the stove. If he's to home when I get around, maybe I'll sit with him ten minutes or so, an' then I'll come right along back."

She had reached the door, which stood open, and now she paused, looking back.

"When are you gettin' married, Eve?" she demanded abruptly.

"Two months to-day," the other replied. She was surprised out of herself, and for a moment a warm glow swept over her as she realized that there was something still in the world which made for other than unhappiness.

"Two months," said Annie, thoughtfully. "Two months, eh?" Then she suddenly became mysterious and smiled into the other's face. "That'll be nice time for Gay to think about something that ain't—a coffin."

She hurried out on her mission of duty and affection. Gay was her all, but she had room in her heart for a good deal more than the worthy butcher-undertaker's great, fat image. She had no children of her own yet, but, as she often said, in her cheery, optimistic way, "time enough."

It was her attitude toward all things, and it carried her through life a heaven-sent blessing to all those who could number her amongst their friends. To Eve she had certainly been all this and more, for when a woman, alone in the world, is set the appalling task of facing the struggle for existence which is called Life, without the necessary moral and physical equipment for such a battle, the support of a strong heart generously given surely becomes the very acme of all charity.

After drinking her coffee, Eve went to the open door and stood looking out upon the village. It was a warm summer night, and the scent of the prairie was strong upon the air. As yet Barnriff was neither large enough, nor shut in enough by its own buildings to hold to itself that stale, stifling atmosphere which cities obtain. The air was the pure breath which swept over the vast green rollers of the grass world in the midst of which it stood.

The velvet heavens, clad in their perfect tinsel of a glorious night, spread a softness over the world upon which she gazed. An odd light or two twinkled from a tiny window here and there; and, then, like a vulgar centerpiece, the lights of the saloon stared out harshly. There

was no moon, but the mellow sheen of the stars hid the roughness from the mind, and conveyed an added peace.

The girl breathed a deep sigh. It was an expression of relief, of something almost like content. And it told of what Annie Gay's coming had meant to her. As though suddenly released from an insufferable burden her heart cheered, and hope told her that her brother would recover; and, in her relief, she gazed up at the starlit sky and thanked the great God who controlled those billions of sparkling worlds.

With each passing moment her mood lightened, and her thoughts inevitably turned upon those happier things which had been nearly obscured. She was thinking of Will, and wondering what he was doing. Was he in bed? Was he sleeping and dreaming of her? Or was he awake and thinking of their love, planning for their joint future? Her eyes drifted in the direction of his old hut, where she knew he was to pass the night. It was in darkness. Yes, he was a-bed, she told herself. Then she smiled. An idea had flashed through her mind. Should she walk over to the hut, and—and listen at the open window for the sound of his breathing?

Her smile brought with it a blush of modesty, and the idea passed. Then with its going her eyes turned away, and, suddenly, they became fixed upon the indistinct outline of the gate in the fencing of her vegetable patch. She could just make out the figure of a man standing on the far side of it. For the moment the joyous thought that it was Will came to her. Then she negatived the idea. The outline was too large. She thought for a moment, and then, in a low voice, called the man by name.

"Peter? That you?"

The gate opened, and the man's heavy tread came up the narrow path.

"Yes," he said, as he came. "I was just passing, and I thought I saw you in the doorway." He had reached the house, and with Eve

standing on the door-sill, his rugged face was on a level with hers. "You're kind of late up, Eve," he went on doubtfully. "That's what made me stop. There's nothing amiss with—Elia?" he asked, shrewdly.

It was by no means a haphazard question. He knew what the lad had been through that night. He knew, too, the boy's peculiar nervous temperament and its possibilities.

"What makes you ask?" Eve retorted sharply. She knew something must have happened to the boy, and was wondering if Peter knew what it was. "Why should Elia be ill?"

Peter scratched his rough, gray head. His mild, blue eyes twinkled gently in the lamplight from within the house.

"Well, seeing you were up—— But there, I'm glad it's nothing. I'll pass on." Then he added: "You see, when a pretty girl gets standing in the doorway late at night—and such a lovely summer night—and she's just—just engaged, I don't guess she wants the company of six foot three of a misspent life. Good-night, Eve, my dear. My best congratulations."

But the girl wanted him. Now he was here she wanted to talk to him particularly.

"Don't go, Peter," she said. "Something is the matter with Elia. He is ill—very ill. He's had the worst fit I've ever known him to have, and—and I don't know if he's going to pull round when he wakes up. He was out late this evening, and I don't know where he's been, or—or what happened to him while he was out. Something must have happened to him. I mean something to upset him—either to anger him, or to terrify him. I wish I knew. It would help me perhaps when he wakes."

Peter's smile had gone. His eyes were full of sympathy. There was also a shadow of trouble in them, too. But Eve did not see it, or, if she did, her understanding was at fault. They stood there for some moments in silence, he so massive yet so gentle, she so slight and

pretty, yet so filled with a concern which harassed her mind and heart. Peter was thinking very hard, and though he could have told her all she wanted to know, though his great heart ached for her at the knowledge which was his, he refrained from saying a word that could have betrayed the boy's secret, and the hideous aspect he had witnessed of the man she was going to marry.

"You had the Doc to him?" he inquired.

"Yes, oh yes. Doc dosed him to make him sleep. Annie Gay's been with me helping."

"Ah, she's a good woman."

"Yes, she's more than that. She's as near an angel as human nature will let her be." Then Eve abruptly changed her tone, and it became almost appealing. "Tell me, Peter, what do you think could have happened to Elia? I mean, to shock him so. I've tried and tried, but I can't think—nor can Annie. You know all the boys, you go amongst them, you may have heard?"

But Peter was ready, and answered her with such simple sincerity that she could not question him further.

"I guess, Eve, if the boy has had any trouble, or shock, he'll tell you of it when he wakes—if he wants you to know. I don't reckon if I did know that I'd have a right to speak while he—he was asleep. I say—if I did know."

"I see." Then the girl smiled up into his face a little whimsically. "You men have a curious code of honor in your dealings with each other. Quite different to us women."

Peter nodded.

"Yep," he said, "we haven't the same perspective."

The eastern horizon was lighting with a golden shadow and the skyline was faintly silhouetted against it. It was the soft, effulgent light

which heralded the full, rising moon. Eve watched it in silence for some moments. Peter followed the direction of her eyes while he went on speaking.

"When are you getting married, Eve?"

The question came hesitatingly.

"Then you know. Of course you know. You always seem to know, and yet you don't seem to nose about like Anthony Smallbones. I'm going to be married in two months."

The man's mild eyes were kept intently fixed on the lightening horizon.

"Two months," he said, pondering. "And Elia? What of him?"

The girl started. She turned on him, and her pretty eyes were wide with astonishment.

"It will make no difference," she said, with a sudden coldness she could not have accounted for. "What do you mean?"

Peter's great shoulders shrugged.

"Why, nothing," he said. "It kind of seemed a natural question."

The tone brought immediate contrition to the girl's warm heart. This man was always kind to her. It would have been difficult to remember a single week since she had lived in Barnriff which had not witnessed at least one small kindness from him. Her eyes wandered over her garden. He had not long finished digging it over for her.

"Of course it was a natural question," she exclaimed, "only I—well, it doesn't seem to me as if there could be any question about Elia. Wherever I am, he will be."

"Just so, just so. He'll still live with you—you and Will. Y'see, I was only thinking. If—if you wanted a home for him for a while, while you and Will were—honeymooning, now. Why, he'd be real welcome in my shack. He'd want for nothing, and I'd look after him same as—well, not perhaps as well as you could, but I'd do my best. Y'see, Eve, I like the boy. And, and his very weakness makes me want to help him. You know he'd get good food. I'm rather particular about my food, and I

cook it myself. He'd have eggs for breakfast, and good bacon, not sow-belly. And there's no hash in my shanty. The best meat Gay sells, and he could have all the canned truck he liked. Oh, I'd feed him well. And I've always got a few dollars for pocket money. Y'see, Eve, folks honeymooning don't want a third party around, even if he's a sick boy. I'd take it a real favor if you said 'yes,' I would, true. I can look after——"

The man felt one of her warm hands squeezing his arm with the tenderest pressure. There was a moisture in her eyes as she sought his, but she shook her head.

"Peter, Peter, I don't know where you come from, I don't know why you're here, unless it is to help us all to be better folks. I know why you want to take Elia off my hands. I know, and the matter has troubled me some. Elia doesn't like Will. I know that. But Elia is my care, he's more—he's my life. He will be with me as long as we both live, even—yes, even if I had to give Will up. I can't tell you, Peter, what my poor weakly brother is to me. If anything happened to him I think it would break my heart. And it seems so strange to me that everybody, that is everybody but Jim Thorpe and you, dislikes him. Even Will does a little, I—I'm afraid."

"Yes. You can't say how it is," Peter nodded. "But folks can't be blamed for their likes and dislikes. Maybe Will will get over it. Y'see he's just a wild sort of Irish boy. He's just quicksilver. Yes, yes, he'll maybe grow to be as fond of the lad as you, Eve. But any time you find you'd like me to have him for a bit—I mean—sort of—two's company, you know—you'll just be making me a happy man—eh?"

It was a cheery voice behind him that caused his exclamation. Annie Gay stepped briskly up the path.

"Why, it's Peter!" she declared. "Now if it had been Will," she added slyly. "But there, young engaged girls think they're safe from scandalous tongues like mine. Going, Peter? I've just been down to

the meat store and stolen an elegant bit of tripe. Now, if Eve's only sensible and got some onions, why there's a lunch fit for the President."

"Oh yes, I've got onions," Eve reassured her. Then she turned to the man. "Good-bye, Peter," she said, as he edged away, "and thank you——"

But Peter would have no thanks.

"No thanks, Eve, I'd take it a favor."

And he vanished in the darkness leaving Annie looking at Eve, who instantly began to explain as they went indoors.

"He thinks Elia will be in the way when Will and I are married," she said. "He wants to look after him. Isn't he kind?"

"Well?" Annie's merry eyes were deadly serious.

"Of course I couldn't think of it. I could never let him go. I——"

"Eve Marsham, you're a——fool, and now I've said it. Do you know why Peter wants——?"

She broke off in confusion. But she had successfully aroused Eve's curiosity.

"Well? Go on," she demanded.

But Annie shook a decided head.

"It don't matter. I was only thinking my own thoughts, and they began one way and finished another."

"How did they finish?" Annie's manner was quaintly amusing and Eve found herself smiling.

"I'd just called you a fool, an'——I'd forgot to include myself."

Nor could she be induced to speak further on the matter.

CHAPTER X

AN EVIL NIGHT

Peter lumbered heavily away from the house. He had known the futility of his request beforehand. Yet he had to make it even on the smallest chance. And now, more than ever, in spite of his disappointment, he saw how imperative it was that some one should stand by to help any one of these three. Old "saws" were not for him. The world-old advice to the would-be interferer might be for those of less thought, less tact. Besides, he had no intention of interfering. He only meant to "stand by." That was the key-note of his whole nature, his whole life.

And the night had revealed so much to him. His horizon was bounded by storm-clouds threatening unconscious lives. There they were banking, banking, low down, so as to be almost invisible, and he knew that they were only waiting a favoring breeze to mount up into the heavens into one vast black mass. And then the breaking of the storm. His calm brain was for once feverishly at work. Those three must somehow be herded to shelter; and he wondered how. His first play had proved abortive, and now he wondered.

It was his intention to return to his hut for the night, and he stood for a moment contemplating the dark village. His busy thoughts decided for him that there was nothing further to be done to-night. He told himself that opportunity must be his guide in the riddle with which he was confronted. He must rush nothing, and he felt, somehow, that the opportunity would come. He turned his eyes in the direction of his home, and as he was about to move off he became aware of a

footstep crossing the market-place toward him. He waited. The sound came from the direction of the saloon, and, as he gazed that way, he saw the lights in the building go out one by one. The person approaching was one of the "boys" homeward bound.

He was half inclined to continue on his way and thus avoid the probably drunken man, but something held him, and a moment later he was glad when he saw the figure of Jim Thorpe loom up. As they came into view of each other Thorpe hesitated. Nor was it till he recognized the huge outline of Peter that he came close up.

"That you, Peter?" he said.

And Peter, listening, recognized that Jim was sober.

"Yes," he replied, "just going home."

"Me, too."

There was a brief pause after that, and both men were thinking of the same thing. It was of the scene recently enacted at the saloon. Peter was the one to break the silence, and he ignored that which was in his thoughts.

"Goin' to the ranch on foot, and by way of Eve's shack," he said in his gently humorous fashion.

"Ye-es," responded Jim after a moment's thought. Then he added with a conscious laugh, "My 'plug' is back there at Rocket's tie-post, waiting, saddled." Then he went on, becoming suddenly earnest. "Peter, I'm going for good. That is, I'm going to quit McLagan's, and get out. You see, I just wanted to have a look at her shack—for the last time. I—I don't feel I can go without that. She won't see me, and——"

"Sort of final look round before you quit the—sinking ship, eh?"

The quiet seriousness of the big man's tone sounded keenly incisive in the stillness of the dark night. Jim started, and hot blood mounted to

his head. He had been through so much that day that his nerves were still on edge.

"What d'ye mean?" he demanded sharply. "Who's deserting a sinking ship—where's the sinking ship?"

Peter pointed back at Eve's home.

"There," he said.

But Jim shook his head.

"I've drunk a lot to-day. Maybe my head's not clear. Maybe——"

Peter's voice broke in.

"It doesn't need much clearness to understand, if you know all the facts. I'm not going to tell all I've seen and heard to-day either. But I'm going to say a few words to you, Jim, because I know you and like you, and because, in spite of a few cranks in your head, you're a man. Just now you're feeling reckless. Nothing much matters to you. You're telling yourself that there's no particular reason keeping straight. You have no interest, and when the end comes you'll just shut out your lights and—well, there's nothing more to it. That's how you're thinking."

"And what's my thoughts to do with quitting a sinking ship?" Jim asked a trifle impatiently. "I don't deny you're likely right. I confess I don't see that there's much incentive to—well, to stick to a straight and narrow course. I'll certainly strike a gait of my own, and I don't know that it'll be a slow one. It'll be honest though. It'll be honest as far as the laws of man go. As for the other laws, well, they're for my personal consideration as far as my life is concerned. But this sinking ship. I'd like to know."

"You love Eve?" Peter abruptly demanded.

"For G——'s sake, what are you driving at?"

"You love her?" Peter's demand would admit of no avoidance.

"Better than my life."

Jim's answer was deep down in his voice; his whole soul was in his reply.

"Then don't quit McLagan's, boy," Peter went on earnestly. "Don't quit Barnriff. Jim, boy, you can't have her, but you can help her to happiness by standing by. I'm going to stand by, too, for she's going to need all the help we can both give her."

"But how can I 'stand by' with Will—her husband?"

"You must stand by *because* he's her husband."

"God!"

"Jim, can't you try to forget things where he's concerned? Can't you try to forget that shooting match and its result? Can't you? Think well. Can't you, outwardly at least, make things up with him? It'll help to keep him right, and help toward her happiness. Jim, I ask you to do this for her sake, lad. I know what you don't know, and I can't tell you. It's best I don't tell you. It would do worse than no good. You say you love her better than life. Well, boy, if Eve's to be made happy we must help to keep Will right. He's got a devil in him somewhere, and anything that goes awry with him sets that devil raging. Are you going to help Eve, Jim?"

It was some moments before any answer was forthcoming. It was the old battle going on of the man against himself. All that was human in Jim was tearing him in one direction, while his better side—his love for Eve—was pulling him in the opposite. He hated Will now. He had given way in this direction completely. The man's final outrage at the saloon had killed his last grain of feeling for him. And now he was called upon to—outwardly, at least—take up his old attitude toward him, a course that would help Will to give the woman he had robbed him of the happiness which he himself was not allowed to bestow. Was ever so outrageous a demand upon a man? He laughed bitterly,

and aloud.

"No, no, Peter; it can't be done. I'm no saint. I'd hate to be a saint. Will can go hang—he can go to the devil! And I say that because I love Eve better than all else in the world."

"And the first sacrifice for that love you refuse?"

"Yes. I refuse to give my friendship to Will."

"You love her, yet you will not help her to happiness?"

"She shall never lack for happiness through me."

Peter smiled in the darkness. A sigh of something like satisfaction escaped him. He knew that, in spite of the man's spoken refusal, his appeal was not entirely unavailing.

"You won't leave McLagan's then?" he said.

"Not if Eve needs me."

"Then don't."

But Jim became suddenly impatient.

"For G——'s sake, man, can't you speak out?"

"For Eve's sake, I won't," was the quiet rejoinder.

"Then, Peter, I'm going right on to the ranch now. I'll remain. But, remember, I am no longer a friend of Will's—and never will be again. I'll never even pretend. But if I can help Eve you can call on me. And—I put no limit on the hand I play. So long."

"So long."

CHAPTER XI

A WEDDING-DAY IN BARNRIFF

If signs and omens meant anything at all, Eve Marsham and Will Henderson were about to embark on a happy and prosperous married life. So said the women of Barnriff on the day fixed for the wedding. The feminine heart of Barnriff was a superstitious organ. It loved and hugged to itself its belief in forebodings and portents. It never failed to find the promise of disaster or good-fortune in the trivialities of its daily life. It was so saturated with superstition that, on the morning of the wedding, every woman in the place was on the lookout for some recognized sign, and, finding none, probably invented one.

And the excitement of it all. The single-minded, wholesome delight in the thought of this wedding was as refreshing as the crisp breezes of a first bright spring day. To a woman they reveled in the thought. It was the first wedding actually to take place in the village for over seven years. Everybody marrying during that period had elected to seek the consummation of their happiness elsewhere. And as a consequence of this enthusiasm, there was a surplus of help in getting the meeting-room suitably clad for the occasion, and the preparations for the "sociable" and dance which were to follow the ceremony.

Was there ever such a day in Barnriff? the women asked each other. None of them remembered one. Then look at the day itself. True it was the height of summer; but then who had not seen miserable

weather in summer? Look at the sun gleaming out of a perfect azure.

Mrs. Crombie, a florid dame of adequate size, if of doubtful dignity to fill her position as spouse of Barnriff's first citizen, dragged Mrs. Horsley, the lay preacher's wife, through the door of the Mission Room, in which, with the others, they were both working at the decorations, to view the sky.

"Look at it, my dear!" she cried enthusiastically. "Was there ever a better omen for the poor dear? Not a cloud *anywhere*. Not one. And it's deep blue, too; none of your steel blues, or one of them fady blues running to white. Say, ain't she lucky? Now, when Crombie took me the heavens was just pouring. Everybody said 'Tears' prompt enough, and with reason. That's what *they* said. But me and Crombie has never shed a tear; no, not one. We've just laffed our way clear through to this day, we have. Well, I won't say Crombie does a heap of laffing, but you'll take my meaning."

And Carrie Horsley took it. She would have agreed to anything so long as she could get a chance to empty her reservoirs of enthusiasm into the Barnriff sea.

"You sure are a lucky woman, Kate. Maybe the rain wasn't an omen for you at all. Maybe it was for the folks that *didn't* marry on that day. You see, it's easy reading these things wrong. Now I never read omens wrong, an' the one I see this morning when I was bathin' my little Sammy boy was dead sure. You see, I got to bathe him every morning for his spots, which is a heap better now. And I'm real glad, for Abe has got them spots on his mind. He guessed it was my blood out of order. Said I needed sulphur in my tea. I kicked at that, an' said he'd need to drink it, too. An', as he allowed he'd given up tea on account of his digestion, nothing come of it. Of course I knew Sammy boy's spots was on'y a teething rash, but men is so queer; spechully if the child's the first, and a boy. Now what——"

"And the omen, dear?" inquired Mrs. Crombie, who had all a woman's

interest in babies, but was just then ensnared in the net of superstition which held all Barnriff.

"The omen? Oh, yes, I was coming to that. You see, as I said I can read them, an' this is one that never fails, never. I've *proved it*. When you prove an omen, stick to it, I says—and it pays. Now, this morning I set my stockings on the wrong—ahem—legs, and not one, but *both* of them was inside out. There's bad luck, as you might say. And folks say that to escape it you must keep 'em that ways all day. But I changed 'em! Yes, mam, I changed 'em right in the face of misfortune, as you might say. And why? you ask. Because I've done it before, and nothing come of it. And how did I change 'em? you ask. Why, I stood to my knees in Sammy's bath water, an' then told Abe I'd got my feet wet bathing him. He says change 'em right away, Carrie, he says, and, him being my man, why I just changed 'em, seein' I swore to obey him at the altar."

"Very wise," observed Kate Crombie, sapiently. "But this omen for Eve——?"

"To be sure. I was just coming to it. Well, it wasn't much, as you might say, but I've proved it before. It come when I was ladling out Abe's cereal—he always has a cereal for breakfast. He says it eases his tubes when he preaches for the minister—well, it come as I was ladling out his cereal; it was oatmeal porridge, Scotch—something come over me, an' my arm shook. It was most unusual. Well, some of the cereal dropped right on to the floor. Kate Crombie, that porridge dropped, an' when I looked there was a ring on the floor, a ring, my dear. A wedding-ring of porridge, as you might say. Did I call Abe's attention to it? I says, 'Abe,' I says, 'look!' He looked. And not getting my meaning proper, he says, 'Call the dog an' let him lick it up!' With that I says, 'Abe, ain't you got eyes?' And he being slow in some things guessed he had. Then seeing I was put about some, he says, 'Carrie,' he says, 'what d'ye mean?' I see he was all of a quiver then, and feeling kind of sorry for his ignorance I just shrugged at him.

‘Marriage bed!’ says I. ‘And,’ I says, feeling he hadn’t quite got it, ‘in Barnriff.’ If that wasn’t Eve’s good luck, why, I ask you.”

“And when you were bathing——”

“Oh, that—that was another,” Carrie replied hastily. “I’ll tell you——”

But Kate heard herself called away at that moment, and hurried back into the hall. Her genius for administration was the ruling power in the work of decoration, and the enthusiasm of the helpers needed her controlling hand to get the work done by noon, which was the time fixed for the wedding.

But omen was the talk everywhere; it was impossible to avoid it. Every soul in the place had her omen. Jane Restless had a magpie. That very morning the bird had stolen a leaden plummet belonging to Restless and carried it to her cage, where she promptly set to work to hatch it out. And she fought when Zac went to take it away. She made such a racket when it was gone that Jane was sorry, and picked out a small chicken’s egg and put it into the bird’s cage. “And, my dears,” she concluded triumphantly, “the langwidge that bird used trying to cover up all that egg was simply awful. What about that for luck? A magpie sittin’ on a wedding-day!”

But, perhaps, of the whole list of omens that happened that morning, Pretty Wilkes, the baker’s wife, held the greatest interest for them all. She was a woman whose austerity was renowned in the village, and Wilkes was generally considered something of a hero. Her man had won seventy dollars at poker the previous night, and had got very drunk in the process. And being well aware of the vagaries of his wife’s sense of conjugal honor, had, with a desperate drunken cunning, bestowed it over night in the coal-box, well knowing that it was one of his many domestic pleasures to have the honor of lighting the cook-stove for his spouse every morning. “And would you believe it, girls?” she cried ecstatically. “If it hadn’t have been Eve’s wedding-day, and I’d got to bake cakes for the sociable, and so had to be up

at three this very morning, while he was still dreaming he was a whiskey trust or some other drunken delusion, I'd sure never have seen that wad nor touched five cents of it, he's that close. Say, girls," she beamed, "I never said a word to Jake for getting soused, not a word. And I let him sleep right on, an' when he woke to light fires, and start baking, I just give him a real elegant breakfast with cream in his coffee, an' asked him if he'd like a bottle of rye for his head. But say, I never see him shovel coal harder in my life than he did in that coal-box after breakfast. I'd like to gamble he's still shovelin' it."

It certainly was a gala day in Barnriff. The festivity had even penetrated to the veins of Silas Rocket, and possessed him of an atmosphere which "let him in" to the extent of three rounds of drinks to the boys before eleven o'clock. The men for the most part took a long time with their morning ablutions. But the effect was really impressive and quite worth the extra trouble. The result so lightened up the dingy village, that some of them, one realized, had considerable pretensions to good looks. And a further curious thing about this cleansing process was that it affected their attitude toward each other. Their talk became less familiar, a wave of something almost like politeness set in. It suggested a clean starched shirt just home from the laundry. They walked about without their customary slouch, and each man radiated an atmosphere of conscious rectitude that became almost importance. Peter Blunt, talking to Doc Crombie, said he'd never seen so many precise creases in broadcloth since he'd lived in Barnriff.

There was no business to be done that day. Even Smallbones was forced to keep his doors shut, though not without audible protest. He asserted loudly that Congress should be asked to pass a law preventing marriages taking place in mercantile centres.

No one saw the bride and bridegroom that morning except Peter Blunt and Annie Gay. Annie was acting as Eve's maid for the occasion. She positively refused to let the girl dress herself, and

though she could not be her bridesmaid, had expressed her deliberate intention of being her strong support. She and Eve had worked together on the wedding dress, which was of simple white lawn. They had discussed together the trousseau, and made it. They had talked and talked together over the whole thing for two months, and she had handed Eve so much advice out of her store of connubial wisdom, that she was not going to give up her place now.

So it was arranged that Gay was to give Eve away, and Annie was to be ready at the girl's elbow. That was how Annie put it. And no one but herself knew quite what she meant. However, it seemed to be perfectly satisfactory to Eve, and their preparations continued, a whirl of delight to them both.

Peter Blunt was Will's best man. And he found himself left with nothing much to do but smile upon inquirers after the bridegroom on the eventful day. His other duties were wrested from him by anybody and everybody in the place, which was a matter of considerable relief, although he was willing enough. But there was one other duty which could not be snatched from him, and it was one that weighed seriously on his kindly mind. It was the care of the wedding-ring. That, and the fear lest he should not produce it at exactly the right moment, gave him much cause for anxiety. Mrs. Gay had done her duty by him. She had marked the place in the service which he must study. And he had studied earnestly. But as the hour of the wedding approached his nerves tried him, and between fingering the ring in his waistcoat pocket and repeating his "cues" over to himself, he reached a painful condition of mental confusion which bordered closely on a breakdown.

At half-past eleven the village was abustle with people emerging from their houses. It was Gay who sighed as he surveyed the throng. Not a soul but had a broad smile on his or her face. And what with that, and the liberal use of soap, such an atmosphere of health had been arrived at that he pictured in his mind the final winding up of his affairs

as an undertaker.

Then came the saunter over to the Mission Room. Everybody sauntered; it was as if they desired to prolong the sensation. Besides, the women required to look about them—at other women—and the men followed in their wake, feeling that in all such affairs they acknowledged the feminine leadership. They felt that somehow they were there only on sufferance, a necessary evil to be pushed into the background, like any other domestic skeleton.

The Mission Room was packed, and the rustle of starched skirts, and the cleanly laundry atmosphere that pervaded the place was wonderfully wholesome. The gathering suggested nothing so much as simple human nature dipped well in the purifying soap-suds of sympathy, rubbed out on the washing board of religious emotion, and ironed and goffered to a proper sheen of wholesome curiosity. They were assembled there to witness the launching of a sister's bark upon the matrimonial waters, and in each and every woman's mind there were thoughts picturing themselves in a similar position. The married women reflected on past scenes, while the maids among them possibly contemplated the time when that ceremonial would be performed with them as the central interest.

The happiness was not all Eve's, it was probably shared by the majority of the women present. She was the object that conjured their minds from the dull monotony of their daily routine to realms of happy fancy. And the picture was drawn in a setting of Romance, with Love well in the foreground, and the guardian angel of Perfect Happiness hovering over all. No doubt somewhere in the picture a man was skulking, but even in the light of matrimonial experience this was not sufficient to spoil the full enjoyment of those moments.

The bridegroom arrived. Yes, he was certainly good-looking in his new suit from "down East." Dressed as he was he did not belong to Barnriff. He looked what he had been brought up, of an altogether different class to the folks gathered in the room.

One or two of the matrons shook their heads. They did not altogether approve of him. He was well enough known for a certain unsteadiness; then, too, there was a boyishness about his look, an irresponsibility which was not general among the hard features of the men they knew. Most of these thought that Eve was rather throwing herself away. They all believed that she would have done far better to have chosen Jim Thorpe.

Then came the bride, and necks craned and skirts rustled, and audible whisperings were in the air. Annie Gay, following behind, heard and saw, and a thrill of delight brought tears to her sympathetic eyes. She knew how pretty Eve was. Had she not dressed her? Had she not feasted her eyes on her all the morning? Had she not been a prey to a good honest feminine envy?

And Eve's dress was almost as pretty as herself. There were just a few touches of a delicate pink on the white lawn to match her own warmth of coloring. Her gentle eyes were lowered modestly as she walked through the crowd, but if their pretty brown was hidden from the public gaze her wealth of rich, warm hair was not, and Eve's hair was the delight and envy of every woman in Barnriff. Yes, they were all very, very pleased with her, particularly as she, being a dressmaker with all sorts of possibilities in the way of a wedding-dress within her reach, had elected to wear a dress which any one of them could have afforded, any one of them had possibly worn in her time.

The ceremony proceeded with due solemnity. The minister was all sympathetic unction, and was further a perfect model of dignified patience when Peter Blunt finally scrambled the ring into the bridegroom's hand several lines later than was his "cue," but in time to save himself from utter disgrace. And the end came emotionally, as was only to be expected in such a community. Kate Crombie, being leader of the village society, started it. She promptly laid her head on Jake Wilkes' shoulder and sniveled. Nor was it until he turned his

head and fumbled out awkward words of consolation to her, that the reek of stale rye warned her of her mistake, and she promptly came to and looked for her husband to finish it out on.

Annie Gay wept happy tears, and laughed and cried joyously. Jane Restless borrowed her man's bandana and blew her nose like a steam siren, declaring that the heat always gave her catarrh. Carrie Horsley guessed she'd never seen so pretty a bride so elegantly dressed, and wept down the front of Eve's spotless lawn the moment she got near enough. Mrs. Rust sniffed audibly, and hoped she would be happy, but warned her strongly against the tribulations of an ever-increasing family, and finally flopped heavily into a chair calling loudly for brandy.

It was, in Doc Crombie's words, "the old hens who got emotions." It was only the younger women, the spinsters, who laughed and flirted with the men, giggling hysterically at the sallies ever dear at a matrimonial function which flew from lip to lip. But then, as Pretty Wilkes told her particular crony Mrs. Rust later on at the sociable—

"It was the same with us, my dear," she said feelingly. "Speaking personal, before I was married, I'd got the notion, foolish-like, that every man had kind o' got loose out of heaven, an' we women orter set up a gilded cage around 'em, an' feed 'em cookies, an' any other elegant fancy truck we could get our idiot hands on. They was a sort of idol to be bowed an' scraped to. They was the rulers of our destiny, the lords of the earth. But now I'm of the opinion that the best man among 'em couldn't run a low down hog ranch without disgracin' hisself."

It was not till after the ceremony was over, and before the "sociable," which was to precede the bride and bridegroom's departure for Will's shack up in the hills, where she was to spend a fortnight's honeymoon before returning to Barnriff to take up again the work of her dressmaking business, that Peter Blunt had time to think of other things. He was not required in the ordering of the "sociable." The

women would look to that.

Before he left the Mission Room, to return to his hut to see that his preparations were complete for Elia to take up his abode with him for the next fortnight—he had finally obtained Eve's consent to this arrangement—he scanned the faces of the assembled crowd closely. He had seen nothing of Jim Thorpe during the last two months, except on the rare occasions when the foreman of the "AZ's" had visited the saloon. And at these times neither had mentioned Eve's wedding. Now he was anxious to find out if Jim had been amongst the spectators at the wedding, a matter which to his mind was of some importance. It was impossible to ascertain from where he stood, and finally he made his way to the bottom of the hall where the door had been opened and people were beginning to move out. As he reached the back row benches he bumped into the burly Gay.

"Seen Thorpe?" he inquired quickly.

Gay pointed through the door.

"Yonder," he said. "Say, let's get a drink. This dogone marryin' racket's calc'lated to set a camel dry."

But Peter wanted Thorpe and refused the man's invitation. He was glad Jim had come in for the wedding, and hurried out in pursuit. He caught his man in the act of mounting his broncho.

"Say, Jim!" he exclaimed, as he hastened up.

Nor did he continue as the ranchman turned and faced him. He had never seen quite such an expression on Jim's face before. The dark eyes were fiercely alight, the clean-cut brows were drawn together in an expression that might have indicated either pain or rage. His jaws were hard set. And the pallor of his skin was plainly visible through the rich tanning of his face.

"Well?"

The monosyllable was jerked out through clenched teeth, and had something of defiance in it. Peter fumbled.

"I'm glad you came in," he said, a little helplessly.

The reply he received was a laugh so harsh, so bitter, that the other was startled. It was the laugh of a beaten man who strives vainly to hide his hurt. It was an expression of tense nerves, and told of the agony of a heart laboring under its insufferable burden. It was the sign of a man driven to the extremity of endurance, telling, only too surely, of the thousand and one dangers threatening him. Peter understood, and his own manner steadied into that calm strength which was so much the man's real personality.

"I was just going over to my shack," he said. "You'd best walk your horse over."

Jim shook his head.

"I'm getting back right away."

"Well, I won't press you," Peter went on, his mild eyes glancing swiftly at the door of the Mission Room, where the villagers were scrambling out with a great chattering and bustle. "Just bring your plug out of the crowd, Jim," he went on. "I'd like a word before you go." Without waiting for his friend's consent, he took the horse's bridle and led the animal on one side. And, oddly enough, his direction was toward the Mission Room door. Jim submitted without much patience.

"What is it?" he demanded, as they halted within three yards of the door. "Guess I haven't a heap of time. McLagan's busy breaking horses, and he told me to get right out after the—ceremony."

"Sure," nodded Peter, "I won't keep you long. I'd heard there was breaking on the 'AZ's.' That's just it. Now, I'm looking for a couple of plugs. One for saddle, and the other to carry a pack. You see, I've struck color in a curious place, and it promises good. But it's away off, near twenty miles in the foot-hills. It's an outcrop I've been tracing

for quite a while, and if my calculations are right, the reef comes right along down here through Barnriff. You see, I've been working on those old Indian stories."

He paused, and his quick eyes saw that the crowd was lining the doorway waiting for Eve and her husband to come out. Jim was interested in his tale in spite of himself, yet fidgeting to get away.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Well, I need two horses to carry myself and camp outfit. And—— Say, here's Eve," he cried, his large hand suddenly gripping Jim's arm and detaining him. The ranchman shook him off and made to mount his horse. But Peter had no idea of letting him go.

"Jim," he said in a tone for the man's ear alone, "you can't go yet. You can't push a horse through the crowd till she's gone. Say, boy—you can't go. Here she is. Just look at her. Look at her sweet, smiling eyes. Jim, look. That gal's real happy—now. Jim, there ain't much happiness in this world. We're all chasing it. You and me, too—and we don't often find it. Say, boy, you don't grudge her her bit, do you? You'd rather see her happy, if it ain't with you, wouldn't you? Ah, look at those eyes. She's seen us, you and me. That's me being such a lumbering feller. And she's coming over to us; Will, too." His grip on the man's arm tightened, and his voice dropped to a low whisper. "Jim, you can't go, now. You've got to speak to her. You're a man, a real live man; get a grip on that—and don't forget."

Then he released his hold, and Eve and Will came up. Eve's radiant eyes smiled on him, but passed at once to Jim. And she left Will's arm to move nearer to him. Peter's eyes were on the darkening brows of her husband, and the moment Eve's hand slipped from his arm, he gave the latter no choice but to speak to him. He began at once, and with all his resource held him talking, while Eve demanded Jim's congratulations.

"Jim," she said, "I haven't seen you since—since——"

"No, Eve." Then the man cleared his throat. It was parching, and he felt that words were impossible. What trick was this Peter had played on him? He longed to flee, yet in the face of all that crowd he could not. He knew he must smile, and with all the power of his body he set himself to the task.

"You see we've been up to our necks in work. I—I just snatched the morning to see you—you married."

"And no congratulations? Oh, Jim! And I've always looked on you and Peter as—as my best friends."

Every word she uttered struck home through the worn armor of his restraint. He longed madly to seize this woman in his arms and tear her from the side of his rival. The madness of his love cried out to him, and sent the blood surging to his brain. But he fought—fought himself with almost demoniac fury, and won.

"Eve," he said, with an intensity that must have struck her had she not been so exalted by her own emotions, "I wish you the greatest happiness that ever fell to a woman's lot. I hope, from the bottom of my heart, this world'll give you everything you most wish for. And, further, you are right to reckon Peter and me your best friends. As a favor, I ask you that whenever our friendship can be of service to you you'll call upon it. Good-bye and—bless you."

He had his reward, if reward it could be called. Eve thrust out one white-gloved hand and seized his, squeezing it with a gentle pressure that set his blood throbbing through his veins afresh.

Then the agony passed, and left him cold. The warm hand was withdrawn, and the girl turned back to her husband. Peter relinquished his ward. The big man's end had been accomplished. As husband and wife walked away, and the crowd dispersed, he turned to Jim, who stood gazing straight in front of him. He looked into his face, and the smile in his eyes disappeared. The expression of Jim's face had

changed, and where before storm had raged in every pulse, now there was a growing peace.

“Jim,” he said gently, “about those horses——”

“Guess you won’t need them now?”

Thorpe looked up into the grizzled face with a half ironical smile, but without displeasure.

“Peter, you had me beat from the start.”

But Peter shook his head.

“It’s you who’ve won to-day, boy. Guess you’ve beat the devil in you to a hash. Yes; I need those horses, an’ you can get ’em for me from McLagan.”

CHAPTER XII

THE QUEST OF PETER BLUNT

The crisp air of summer early morning, so fragrant, so invigorating, eddied across the plains, wafting new life to the lungs, and increased vigor to jaded muscles. The sun was lifting above the horizon, bringing with it that expansion to the mind which only those whose lives are passed in the open, and whose waking hours are such as Nature intended, may know.

The rustling grass, long, lean at the waving tops, but rich and succulent in its undergrowth, spoke of awakening life, obeying that law which man, in his superiority, sets aside to suit his own artificial pleasures. The sparkling morning haze shrouding the foot-hills was lifting, yielding a vision of natural beauty unsurpassed at any other time of the day. The earth was good—it was clean, wholesome, purified by the long restful hours of night, and ready to yield, as ever, those benefits to animal life which Nature so generously showers upon an ungrateful world.

Peter Blunt straightened up from his camp-fire which he had just set going. He stretched his great frame and drank in the nectar of the air in deep gulps. The impish figure of Elia sat on a box to windward of the fire, watching his companion with calm eyes. He was enjoying himself as he had rarely ever enjoyed himself. He was free from the trammels of his sister's loving, guiding hand—trammels which were ever irksome to him, and which, somewhere inside him, he despised as a bondage to which his sex had no right to submit. He was with his

friend Peter, helping him in his never-ending quest for gold. Hunting for gold. It sounded good in the boy's ears. Gold. Everybody dreamed of gold; everybody sought it—even his sister. But this—this was a new life.

There were Peter's tools, there was their camp, there was the work in process. There was his own little A tent, which Peter insisted that he should sleep in, while, for himself, he required only the starry sky as a roofing, and good thick blankets, to prevent the heat going out of his body while he slept. Yes; the boy was happy in his own curious way. He was living on "sow-belly" and "hardtack," and extras in the way of "canned truck," and none of the good things which his sister had ever made for him had tasted half so sweet as the rough cooking of this wholesome food by Peter. Something like happiness was his just now; but he regretted that it could only last until his sister returned to Barnriff. The boy's interest in the coming day's work now inspired his words.

"We go on with this sinking?" he inquired; and there was a boyish pride in the use of the plural.

Peter nodded. His eyes were watching the fire, to see that it played no trick on him.

"Yep, laddie," he said, in his kindly way. "We've got a bully prospect here. We'll see it through after we've had breakfast. Sleepy?"

Elia returned him an unsmiling negative. Smiling was apparently unnatural to him. The lack of it and the lack of expression in his eyes, except when stirred by terror, showed something of the warp of his mind.

"You aren't damp, or—or anything? There's a heap of dew around." The man was throwing strips of "sow-belly" into the pan, and the coffee water was already set upon the flaming wood.

"You needn't to worry 'bout them things for me, Peter," Elia declared

peevishly. "Wimmin folks are like that, an' it sure makes me sick."

The other laughed good-naturedly as he took a couple of handfuls of the "hardtack" out of a sack.

"You'd be a man only they won't let you, eh? You've the grit, laddie, there's no denying."

The boy felt pleased. Peter understood him. He liked Peter, only sometimes he wished the man wasn't so big and strong. Why wasn't he hump-backed with a bent neck and a "game" leg? Why wasn't he afraid of things? Then he never remembered seeing Peter hurt anything, and he loved to hurt. He felt as if he'd like to thrust a burning brand on Peter's hand while he was cooking, and see if he was afraid of the hurt, the same as he would be. Then his mind came back to things of the moment. This gold prospecting interested him more than anything else.

"How far are we from Barnriff?" he asked abruptly.

"Twenty odd miles west. Why?"

"I was kind o' wonderin'. Seems we've been headin' clear thro' fer Barnriff since we started from way back there on the head waters. We sunk nine holes, hain't we? Say, if we keep right on we'll hit Barnriff on this line?"

"Sure." The man's blue eyes were watching the boy's face interestedly.

"You found the color o' gold, an' the ledge o' quartz in each o' them holes, ain't you?"

"Yep."

"Well, if we keep on, an' we find right along, we're goin' to find some around Barnriff."

"Good, laddie," Peter replied, approving his obvious reasoning. "I'm working on those old Indian yarns, and, according to them, Barnriff

must be set right on a mighty rich gold mine."

The calm eyes of the boy brightened. Barnriff on a gold mine!

"An' when you find it?"

Peter's eyes dropped before the other's inquiring gaze. That was the question always before him, but it did not apply to material gold. And when he should find it, what then? Simply his quest would have closed at another chapter. His work for the moment would be finished; and he would once more have to set out on a fresh quest to appease his restless soul. He shook his head.

"We haven't found it yet," he said.

"But when you do?" the boy persisted.

Peter handed him his plate and his coffee, and sat down to his own breakfast. But the boy insisted on an answer.

"Yes?"

"Well, laddie, it's kind of tough answering that. I can't rightly tell you."

"But a gold mine. Gee! You'll be like a Noo York millionaire, with dollars an' dollars to blow in at the saloon."

Again Peter shook his head. His face seemed suddenly to have grown old. His eyes seemed to lack their wonted lustre. He sighed.

"I don't want the dollars," he said. "I've got dollars enough; so many that I hate 'em."

Elia gaped at him.

"You got dollars in heaps?" he almost gasped. "Then why are you lookin' for more?"

Peter buried his face in a large pannikin of coffee, and when it emerged the questioning eyes were still upon him.

"Folks guess you're cranked on gold, an' need it bad," the puzzled

boy went on. "They reckon you're foolish, too, allus lookin' around where you don't need, 'cause there ain't any there. I've heerd fellers say you're crazy."

Peter laughed right out.

"Maybe they're right," he said, lighting his pipe.

But Elia shook his head shrewdly.

"You ain't crazy. I'd sure know it. Same as I know when a feller's bad—like Will Henderson. But say, Peter," he went on persuasively, "I'd be real glad fer you to tell me 'bout that gold. What you'd do, an' why? I'm real quick understanding things. It kind o' seems to me you're good. You don't never scare me like most folks. I can't see right why——"

"Here, laddie"—Peter leaned his head back on his two locked hands, and propped himself against the pack saddle—"don't you worry your head with those things. But I'll tell you something, if you're quick understanding. Maybe, if other folks heard it—grown folks—they'd sure say I was crazy. But you're right, I'm not crazy, only—only maybe tired of things a bit. It's not gold I'm looking for—that is, in a way. I'm looking for something that all the gold in the world can't buy."

His tone became reflective. He was talking to the boy, but his thoughts seemed suddenly to have drifted miles away, lost in a contemplation of something which belonged to the soul in him alone. He was like a man who sees a picture in his mind which absorbs his whole attention, and drifts him into channels of thought which belong to his solitary moments.

"I'm looking for it day in day out, weeks and years. Sometimes I think I find it, and then it's gone again. Sometimes I think it don't exist; then again I'm sure it does. Yes, there've been moments when I know I've found it, but it gets out of my hand so quick I can't rightly believe I've ever had it. I go on looking, on and on, and I'll go on to my dying day, I

s'pose. Other folks are doing much the same, I guess, but they don't know they're doing it, and they're the luckier for it. What's the use, anyway—and yet, I s'pose, we must all work out our little share in the scheme of things. Seems to me we've all got our little 'piece' to say, all got our little bit to do. And we've just got to go on doing it to the end. Sometimes it's hard, sometimes it's so mighty easy it sets you wondering. Ah, psha!"

Then he roused out of his mood, and addressed himself more definitely to the boy.

"You see, laddie, I don't belong to this country. But I stay right here till I've searched all I know, and so done my 'piece.' Then I'll up stakes and move on. You see, it's no use going back where I belong, because what I'm looking for don't exist there. Maybe I'll never find what I'm looking for—that is to keep and hold it. Maybe, as I say, I'll get it in driblets, and it'll fly away again. It don't much matter. Meanwhile I find gold—in those places folks don't guess it's any use looking. Do you get my meaning?"

The quizzical smile that accompanied his final question was very gentle, and revealed something of the soul of the man.

Elia didn't answer for some moments. He was trying to straighten out the threads of light which his twisted mind perceived. Finally he shook his head. And when he spoke his words showed only too plainly how little he was interested in the other's meaning, and how much his cupidity was stirred.

"And that gold—in Barnriff? When you've found it?"

Peter laughed to think that he had expected the boy to understand him. How could he—at his age?

"I'll give it to you, laddie—all of it."

"Geel!"

Elia's cold eyes lit with sudden greed.

"But you'd best say nothing to the folks," Peter added slyly. "Don't let 'em know we're looking for anything."

"Sure," cried the boy quickly, with a cunning painful to behold. "They'd steal it. Will Henderson would."

Peter thought for a moment, and relit his pipe, which had gone out while he was talking.

"You don't like Will, laddie," he said presently, and so blundered into the midst of the boy's greedy reverie.

"I hate him!"

Any joy that the thought of the promised gold might have given him suddenly died out of the dwarf's vindictive heart, and in its place was a raging storm of hatred. Such savage passion was his dominating feature. At the best there was little that was gentle in him.

"You hate him because of that night—about the chickens?"

But no answer was forthcoming. Peter waited, and then went on.

"There's something else, eh?"

But the eyes of the boy were fixed upon the now smouldering fire, nor could the other draw them. So he went on.

"Will's your sister's husband now. Sort of your—brother. Your sister's been desperate good to you. You've had everything she could give you, and mind, she's had to work for it—hard. She loves you so bad, she'd hate to see you hurt your little finger—she's mighty good to you. Gee, I wish I had such a sister. Well, now she's got a husband, and she loves him bad, too. I was wondering if you'd ever thought how bad she'd feel if she knew you two were at loggerheads? You've never thought, have you? Say, laddie, it would break her up the back. It would surely. She'd feel she'd done you a harm—and that in itself is sufficient—and she'd feel she was upsetting Will. And between the

two she'd be most unhappy. Say, can't you like him? Can't you make up your mind to get on with him right when he comes back? Can't you, laddie?"

The boy's eyes suddenly lifted from the fire, and the storm was still in them.

"I hate him!" he snarled like a fierce beast.

"I'm sorry—real sorry."

"Don't you go fer to be sorry," cried the boy, with that strange quickening of all that was evil in him. "I tell you Will's bad. He's bad, an' he sure don't need to be, 'cause it's in him to be good. He ain't like me, I guess. I'm bad 'cause I'm made bad. I don't never think good. I can't. I hate—hate—allus hate. That's how I'm made, see? Will ain't like that. He's made good, but he's bad because he'd rather be bad. He's married my sister because she's a fool, an' can't see where Jim Thorpe's a better man. Jim Thorpe wanted to marry her. He never said, but I can see. An' she'd have married him, on'y fer Will comin' along. She was kind o' struck on Jim like, an' then Will butts in, an' he's younger, an' better lookin', an' so she marries him. An'—an' I hate him!"

"But your sister? What's poor Eve going to do with you always hating Will? She'll get no happiness, laddie, and you'd rather see her happy. Say, if you can't help hating Will, sure you can hide it. You needn't to run foul of him. You go your way, and he can go his. Do you know I'm pretty sure he'll try and do right by you, because of Eve——"

"Say, Peter, you're foolish." The boy had calmed, and now spoke with a shrewd decision that was curiously convincing. "Will'll go his way, and Eve won't figger wuth a cent with him. I know. Eve'll jest have to git her toes right on the mark, same as me. He's a devil, and I know. Will'll make Eve hate herself, same as he'll make me. Say, an' I'll tell you this, Eve'll hev to work for him as well as me. I know. I can see. You can't tell me of Will, nor of nobody that's bad—'cause I ken see

into 'em. I'm bad, an' I ken see into folks who 're bad."

There was no argument against such an attitude as the boy took. Besides, Peter began to understand. Here was an unique study in psychology. The boy either fancied he possessed—or did possess—such unusual powers of observation that they almost amounted to the prophetic, where that which was bad was concerned. He saw Will in a light in which no one else saw him, although already he, Peter, and Jim had witnessed unpleasant dashes of that side of the man's character which Elia seemed to read like an open book. However, he could not abandon his task yet, but he changed his tactics.

"Maybe you're right, laddie," he said. "I was thinking of poor Eve. I was wondering if you wouldn't like to try and make her happy, seeing she's always been so good to you. I do believe you'd rather she was happy."

The boy nodded his head, and an impish light crept into his eyes.

"And you're going to try and make her—happy?"

Peter was smiling with simple eager hope. The impish light deepened in the boy's eyes.

"Maybe," he said. "Guess I'll do what I ken. When Will treats me fair I'll treat him fair. I can't do a heap of work, seein' I'm as I am, but if he wants me to do things I'll do 'em—if he treats me fair. I'll do what I ken, but I hate him. Maybe you're guessin' that'll be makin' things fair for Eve. You best guess agin." Then the impish light left his eyes, and they became quite serious again. "Say, tell me some more 'bout that gold?"

But Peter laughed and shook his head.

"Time enough, laddie," he said, pleased with the result of his first essay on behalf of peace between Elia and Will. "You're going to get that gold when we find it, sure, so come right along and let's get to

work—and find it.”

CHAPTER XIII

AFTER ONE YEAR

Scandal was rampant in Barnriff. But it was not of an open nature. That is to say, it was scandal that passed surreptitiously from lip to lip, and was rarely spoken where more than two people foregathered. For small as Barnriff was, ignorant as were the majority of its people, scandal was generally tabooed, and it was only in bad cases where it was allowed to riot.

The reason of this restraint was simple enough. It was not that the people of the village were any different to those of other small places. They loved gossip as dearly as anybody else—when to gossip was safe. But years ago Barnriff had learned that gossip was not always safe in its midst.

The fact was that the peace laws of the place were largely enforced by a process which might be called the “survival of the strong.” There were no duly authorized peace officers, and the process had evolved out of this condition of things. Quarrels and bloodshed were by no means frequent in the village, rather the reverse, and this was due to the regulations governing peace.

If two men quarreled it was on the full understanding of the possible and probable consequences; namely, a brief and effective life and death struggle, followed by a sudden and immediate departure from the fold of the survivor. Hence, scandal was held in close check, and traveled slowly, with the slow twistings and windings of a venomous snake. But for this very reason it was the more deadly, and was the

more surely based upon undeniable fact. The place was just now a-simmer with suppressed scandal.

And its object. It was only a year since Eve and Will Henderson's marriage. A sufficiently right and proper affair, said public opinion. There were of course protestors. Many of the women had expected Eve to marry Jim Thorpe. But then they were of the more mature section of the population, those whose own marriages had taught them worldly wisdom, and blotted out the early romance of their youths. It had been a love match, a match where youth runs riot, and the madness of it sweeps its victims along upon its hot tide. Now the tide was cooling, some said it was already cold.

After their brief honeymoon the young people had returned to the village. The understanding was that Eve should again take up her business, while Will continued his season up in the hills, hunting with his traps and gun. He was to visit Barnriff at intervals during the season, and finally return and stay with Eve during the months when the furs he might take would be unfit for the market. This was the understanding, and in theory it was good, and might well have been carried out satisfactorily. All went passably well until the close of the fur season.

Eve returned to the village a bright and happy woman. She took up her business again, and, perhaps, the novelty of her married state was the reason that at first her trade increased. Then came Will's visits. At first they were infrequent, with the arranged-for laps of time between them. But gradually they became more frequent and their duration longer. The women wagged their heads. "He is so deeply in love, he can't stay away," they said. And they smiled approval, for they were women, and women can never look on unmoved at the sight of a happy love match. But against this the men shrugged their shoulders. "He's wastin' a heap o' time," they said; "pelts needs chasin' some, an' y' can't chase pelts an' make love to your own wife or any one else's, for that matter." And this was their way of expressing a kindly

interest.

The men were right and the women were wrong. Will did more than waste time. He literally pitched it away. He prolonged his stays in the village beyond all reason, and as Eve, dutifully engaged upon her business, could not give him any of her working hours, he was forced to seek his pleasures elsewhere. That elsewhere, in a man prone to drink, of necessity became the saloon. And the saloon meant gambling, gambling meant money. Sometimes he won a little, but more often he lost.

Being a reckless player, fired by the false stimulation of Rocket's bad whiskey, he began to plunge to recoup himself, and, as ever happens in such circumstances, he got deeper into the mire. At first these heavy losses had a salutary effect upon him, and he would "hit the trail" for the hills, and once more ply his trade with a feverish zest.

This sort of thing went on until the close of his fur season. Then he made up his bales of pelts, and, to his horror, discovered that his year's "catch" was reduced by over fifty per cent., while, in place of a wad of good United States currency in his hip pocket, he had floated a perfect fleet of I. O. U.'s, each in itself for a comparatively small amount, but collectively a total of no inconsiderable magnitude. And each I. O. U. was dated for payment immediately after he had marketed his pelts.

This stress, and the life he had been living in Barnriff, caused his mercurial temper to suffer. And as his nature soured, so all that was worst in him began to rise to the surface. He did not blame himself. Did ever one hear of a man blaming himself when things went wrong? No. He blamed the fur season. The hills were getting played out. The furs were traveling north, and, in consequence were scarce. Besides, how could he be in Barnriff and the hills at the same time? The position was absurd. Eve must join him and give up her business, and they must make their home up in the hills where she could learn to trap. Or they must live in Barnriff and he must find fresh employment.

Yes, he would certainly find out how Eve's business was prospering. If she had shown a better turnover than he, perhaps it would be as well for him to go into Barnriff for good. The idea rather pleased him. Nor could he see any drawback to it except those confounded I. O. U.'s.

The next news that Barnriff had was that Will and Eve were settled for good in the village, and that he had no intention of returning to the hills. Barnriff's comment was mixed. The women said, "Poor dears, they can't live apart." Again the men disagreed. Their charity was less kind, especially amongst those who had yet to collect the payment of their I. O. U.'s. They said with sarcastic smile, "Wants to live on his woman, and play 'draw.'" And time soon showed them to be somewhere near the mark.

Will sold his furs, paid his debts, sighed his relief, and settled down to a life in Barnriff. A month later he found to his profound chagrin that the small margin of dollars left over after paying off his I. O. U.'s had vanished, and a fresh crop of paper was beginning to circulate. Whiskey and "draw" had got into his blood, and all unconsciously he found himself pledged to it.

It was during this time that scandal definitely laid its clutch upon the village. But it was not until later that its forked tongue grew vicious. It was at the time that word got round the village that there was trouble in Eve's little home that the caldron began to seethe. No one knew how it got round; yet it surely did. Scandal said that Eve and Will quarreled, that they quarreled violently, that Will had struck her, that money was the bottom of the trouble, that Will had none to meet his gambling debts, and that Eve, who had been steadily supplying him out of her slender purse, had at last refused to do so any more.

It went on to say that Will was a drunken sot, that his methods at cards were not above suspicion, and that altogether he was rapidly becoming an undesirable.

Peter Blunt heard the scandal; he had watched things himself very

closely. Jim Thorpe heard, but, curiously enough, rumor about these two did not seem to reach the "AZ" ranch easily.

However, what did reach Jim infuriated him almost beyond words. It was this last rumor that sent him riding furiously into the village late one night, and drew him up at Peter Blunt's hut.

He found the gold seeker reading a well-known history of the Peruvian Aztecs, but without hesitation broke in upon his studies.

"What's this I hear, Peter?" he demanded, without any preamble. "I mean about the—the Hendersons."

His dark eyes were fierce. His clean-cut features were set and angry. But these signs didn't seem to hurry Peter's answer. He laid his book aside and folded his hands behind his head, while he searched the other's face with his calm blue eyes.

"We've just got it out on the ranch," Jim went on. "He's—he's knocking her about—they say."

"And so you've come in. What for?"

The big man's words had a calming effect.

"Peter, can't you tell me?" Jim went on, with a sudden change of manner that became almost pleading. "It's awful. I can't bear to think of Eve suffering. Is it, as they say, money? Has he—gone to the dogs with drink and gambling? Peter," he said, with sudden sternness, his feelings once more getting the better of him, "I feel like killing him if——"

But the other's face was cold, and he shook his head.

"I'm not going to talk this scandal," he said. "You've no right to feel like that—yet." And his words were an admission of his own feelings on the subject.

Peter's eyes wandered thoughtfully from his friend to the book shelves; and after a moment the other stirred impatiently. Then his

eyes came back to Jim's face. He watched the passionate straining in them, that told of the spirit working within. Nor could he help thinking what a difference there might have been had Eve only married this man.

"You better go back to the ranch," he said presently.

But the light that suddenly leaped to Jim's eyes gave him answer without the words which followed swiftly.

"I can't," he cried. "I can't without seeing her, and learning the truth from her own lips."

"That you'll never do, boy, if I know Eve."

But Jim became obstinate.

"I'll try," he declared, with an ugly threat in his passionate eyes. "And if it's Will—if he's——"

"You're talking foolish." The sharpness of Peter's voice silenced him. But it was only for a moment, and later he broke out afresh.

"It's no use, Peter, I can't and won't listen to reason on this matter. Eve is before all things in my life. I can't help loving her, even if she is another's wife, and I wouldn't if I could. See here," he went on, letting himself go as his feelings took fresh hold of him, "if Eve's unhappy there must be some way of helping her. If he's ruining her life he must be dealt with. If he's brutal to her, if he's hurting her, I mean knocking her about, Peter, I'll—I'll—smash him, if I swing for it! She's all the world to me, and by Heavens I'll rid her of him!"

Peter suddenly drew out his watch; he seemed wholly indifferent to the other's storming.

"We'll go and see her now," he said. "Will 'll be down at the saloon playing 'draw.' He don't generally get home till Rocket closes down. Come on."

And the two passed out into the night.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BREAKING POINT

Eve and Will were at supper. The girl's brown eyes had lost their old gentle smile. Their soft depths no longer contained that well of girlish hope, that trusting joy of life. It seemed as if the curtain of romance had been torn aside, and the mouldering skeleton of life had been laid bare to her. There was trouble and pain in her look, there was fear, too; nor was it quite plain the nature of her fear. It may have been that fear of the future which comes to natures where love is the mainspring of responsibility. It may have been the fear of the weaker vessel, where harshness and brutality are threatened. It may have been a fear inspired by health already undermined by anxiety and worry. The old happy light was utterly gone from her eyes as she silently partook of the frugal supper her own hands had prepared.

Will Henderson moodily devoured his food at the opposite end of the table. The third of their household was not there. Elia rarely took his meals with them. He preferred them by himself, for he hated and dreaded Will's tongue, which, though held in some check when he was sober, never failed to sting the boy when Silas Rocket's whiskey had done its work.

The meal was nearly finished, and husband and wife had exchanged not a single word. Eve wished to talk; there was so much she wanted to say to him. The flame of her love still burned in her gentle bosom, but it was a flame sorely blown about by the storm winds of their brief married life. But somehow she could not utter the words she wanted

to. There was no encouragement. There was a definite but intangible bar to their expression. The brutal silence of the man chilled her, and frightened her.

Finally it was he who spoke, and he made some sort of effort to hide the determination lying behind his words.

"How much money have you got, Eve?" he demanded, pushing his plate away with a movement which belied his tone. It was a question which had a familiar ring to the ears of the troubled girl.

"Thirty dollars," she said patiently. Then she sighed.

The man promptly threw aside all further mask.

"For God's sake don't sigh like that! You'll be sniveling directly. One would think I was doin' you an injury asking you a simple question."

"It's not that, Will. I'm thinking of what's going to happen when that's gone. It's got to last us a month. Then I get my money from Carrie Horsley and Mrs. Crombie. They owe me seventy dollars between them for their summer suits. I've got several orders, but folks are tight here for money, and it's always a matter of waiting."

"Can't you get an advance from 'em?"

That frightened look suddenly leaped again into the girl's eyes.

"Oh, Will!"

"Oh, don't start that game!" the man retorted savagely. "We've got to live, I s'pose. You'll earn the money. That sort of thing is done in every business. You make me sick." He lit his pipe and blew great clouds of smoke across the table. "I tell you what it is, we can't afford to keep your brother doing nothing all the time. If you insist on keeping him you must find the money—somewhere. It's no use being proud. We're hard up, and if people owe you money, well—dun 'em for it. I don't know how it is, but this darned business of yours seems to have gone to pieces."

"It's not gone to pieces, Will," Eve protested. "I've made more money this last four months than ever before." The girl's manner had a patience in it that came from her brief but bitter experiences.

"Then what's become of the money?"

But Eve's patience had its limits. The cruel injustice of his sneering question drove her beyond endurance.

"Oh, Will," she cried, "and you can sit there and ask such a question! Where has it gone?" She laughed without any mirth. "It's gone with the rest, down at the saloon, where you've gambled it away. It's gone because I've been a weak fool and listened to your talk of gambling schemes which have never once come off. Oh, Will, I don't want to throw this all up at you. Indeed, indeed, I don't. But you drive me to it with your unkindness, which—which I can't understand. Don't you see, dear, that I want to make you happy, that I want to help you? You must see it, and yet you treat me worse—oh, worse than a nigger! Why is it? What have I done? God knows you can have all, everything I possess in the world. I would do anything for you, but—but—you— Sometimes I think you have learned to hate me. Sometimes I think the very sight of me rouses all that is worst in you. What is it, dear? What is it that has come between us? What have I done to make you like this?"

She paused, her eyes full of that pain and misery which her tongue could never adequately express. She wanted to open her heart to him, to let him see all the gold of her feelings for him, but his moody unresponsiveness set her tongue faltering and left her groping blindly for the cause of the trouble between them.

It was some moments before Will answered her. He sat glaring at the table, the smoke of his pipe clouding the still air of the neat kitchen. He knew he was facing a critical moment in their lives. He saw dimly that he had, for his own interests, gone a shade too far. Eve was not a weakling, she was a woman of distinct character, and even in his dull,

besotted way he detected at last that note of rebellion underlying her appeal. Suddenly he looked up and smiled. But it was not altogether a pleasant smile. It was against his inclination, and was ready to vanish on the smallest provocation.

"You're taking things wrong, Eve," he said, and the strain of attempting a conciliatory attitude made the words come sharply. "What do I want your money for, but to try and make more with it? Do you think I want you to keep me? I haven't come to that yet." His tone was rapidly losing its veneer of restraint. "Guess I can work all right. No, no, my girl, you haven't got to keep me yet. But money gets money, and you ought to realize it. I admit my luck at 'draw' has been bad—rotten!" He violently knocked his pipe out on a plate. "But it's got to change. I can play with the best of 'em, an' they play a straight game. What's losing a few nights, if, in the end, I get a big stake? Why Restless helped himself to a hundred dollars last night. And I'm going to to-night."



He sat glaring at the table, the smoke of his pipe clouding the still air of the neat kitchen.

But, Will, you've said that every night for the last month. Why not be fair with yourself? Your luck is out; give it up. Will, give up the saloon for—for my sake. Do, dear." Eve rose and went round to the man's side, and laid a tenderly persuasive hand upon his shoulder. She was only waiting for a fraction of encouragement. But that fraction was not forthcoming. Instead he shook her off. But he tried to do it pleasantly.

"Here, sit you down, Eve, and listen to me. I'm going to tell you something that I hadn't intended to, only—only you're bothering such a hell of a lot."

His language passed. She was used to it now. And she sat shrinking at his rebuff, but curious and half fearful at what he might have to tell her.

"I'm going to have a flutter to-night, no matter what comes, make your mind up to that. And, win or lose, it's my last. Get that? But I've got a definite reason for it. You see I haven't been as idle as you think. I've been hunting around on the trail of Peter Blunt. Folks all think him a fool, and cranky some. I never did. He's been a gold prospector most of his life. And it's not likely he don't know. Well, I'm not giving you a long yarn, and to cut it short, I'm right on to a big find. At least I've got color in a placer up at the head waters, and to-morrow I go out to work it for all it's worth. No, I'm not going to tell even you where it is. You see it's a placer, and anybody could work it, and I'd be cut clean out if others got to know where it was. You savvee?"

Eve nodded, but without conviction. The man detected her lack of belief, and that brutal light which was so often in his eyes now suddenly flamed up. But after a moment of effort he banished it, and resorted to an imitation of jocularly.

"So now, old girl, hand over that thirty dollars. I'm going to make a 'coup,' and to-morrow begins a period of—gold. I give you my word you shall get it—sure as I'm a living man. I'm not talking foolish. The shining yellow stuff is there for the taking. And so easy, too."

He waited with a grin of cunning on his lips. He was intoxicated with his own surety. And, curiously, well as Eve knew him, that certainty communicated itself to her in spite of her reason. But the matter of handing over the thirty dollars was different.

A hard light crept into her eyes as she looked down at him from where she stood. Though he did not know it, he was rapidly killing all the love she had for him. Eve was one of those women who can love with every throb of their being. Self had no place in her. The man she loved was, as a natural consequence, her all. Kill her love and she could be as cold and indifferent as marble. At one time in their brief married life those dollars would never have been considered. They would have been his without the asking. Now——

She shook her head decidedly.

"You can't have them," she said firmly. "They've got to keep us for a month. If you depend on them for a game, you had better wait till you get the gold from your placer." She moved away, talking as she went. "There's not only ourselves to consider. There's Elia. I——"

But she got no further. The mention of her brother's name suddenly infuriated the man.

"Don't talk to me of that little devil!" he cried. "I want those thirty dollars, d'you understand?" He crashed his fist on the table and set the supper things clattering. "You talk to me of Elia! That devil's imp has been in the way ever since we got married. And d'you think I'm going to stand for him now?" He sprang to his feet, his eyes blazing with that fury which of late he rarely took the trouble to keep in check. "See here," he cried, "you've preached to me enough for one night, and, fool-like, I've listened to you. I listen to no more. So, just get busy and hand over those dollars."

But if he was in a fury, he had contrived to stir Eve as he had never stirred her before.

"You'll not get a cent of them," she cried, her eyes lighting with sudden cold anger.

For a moment they stood eyeing each other. There was no flinching in Eve now, no appeal, no fear. And the man's fury was driving him whither it would. He was gathering himself for a final outburst, and when it came it was evident he had lost all control of himself.

"You ——! I'll have those dollars if I have to take 'em!"

"You shall not!"

Will flung his pipe to the ground and dashed at Eve like a madman. He caught her by the shoulders, and gripped the warm rounded flesh until the pain made her writhe under his clutch.

"Where are they?" he demanded, with another furious oath. "I'm going to have 'em. Speak! Speak, you —— or I'll——"

But Eve was obdurate. Her courage was greater than her strength. He shook her violently, clutching at her shoulders as though to squeeze the information he needed out of her. But he got no answer, and, in a sudden access of demoniacal rage, he swung her round and hurled her across the room with all his strength. She fell with a thud, and beyond a low moan lay quite still. Her head had struck the sharp angle of the coal box.

In a moment the man had passed into the bedroom in search of the money. Nor did he have to search far. Eve kept her money in one place always, and he knew where it was. Having possessed himself of the roll of bills he came out into the kitchen. He looked about him, and his furious eyes fell upon the prostrate form of his wife. She was lying beside the coal box in the attitude in which she had fallen. He went over to her, and stood for a second gazing down at the result of his handiwork.

But there was neither pity nor remorse in his heart. For the time at least he hated her. She had dared to defy him, she had twitted him

with his gaming, she had refused him—in favor of Elia. He told himself all this, and, as he looked down at the still figure, he told himself it served her right, and that she would know better in the future. But he waited until he detected the feeble rise and fall of her bosom. Then he went out, conscious of a certain feeling of relief in spite of his rage.

CHAPTER XV

A "PARTY CALL"

Peter led the way up the path from the gate of Eve's garden. He had taken the lead in this visit; he felt it was necessary. Jim Thorpe's frame of mind was not to be trusted, should they encounter Henderson. He knocked at the door, reassured that Eve was within by the light in her parlor window.

At first he received no reply, and in silence the two men waited. Then Peter knocked again. This time Elia's voice was heard answering his summons.

"Come in."

Peter raised the latch, and, closely followed by Jim, passed directly into the parlor. He glanced swiftly round at the litter of dressmaking, but Eve was not there. Jim's eyes, too, wandered over the familiar little room. It was the first time he had entered it since the day he had ridden over to ask her to marry him.

He saw Eve now in every detail of the furnishing; he saw her in the work he had watched her at so often; he saw her in the very atmosphere of the place, and the realization of all he had lost smote him sorely. Then there came to him the object of his present visit, and he grew sick with the intensity of his feelings.

But the room was empty, and yet it had been Elia's voice that summoned them to enter. With only the briefest hesitation Peter started toward the kitchen door, and Jim, his thoughts running riot

over the past, mechanically followed him. And as they reached it, and Peter's great bulk filled up the opening, it was the latter's sharp exclamation that brought Jim to matters of the moment. He drew close up behind his companion and looked over his shoulder, and a startled, horror-stricken cry broke from him.

"Look!" he cried, and the horror in his voice was in his eyes, and the expression of his face.

The scene held them both for a second, and for years it lived in Jim's memory. The ill-lit kitchen with its single lamp; the yellow rays lighting up little more than the untidy supper-table with the misshapen figure of Elia sitting on the far side of it, calmly devouring his evening meal. The rest of the room was shadowy, except where the light from the cook-stove threw its lurid rays upon the white face and crumpled figure of Eve lying close beside it upon the floor. Her eyes were closed, and a great wound upon her forehead, with blood oozing slowly from it, suggested death to the horrified men.

In an instant Jim was at Eve's side, bending over her, seeking some signs of life. Then, as Peter came up, he turned to him with a look of unutterable relief.

"She's alive," he said.

"Thank God!"

"Quick," Jim hurried on, "water and a sponge, or towel or something."

Peter crossed the room to the barrel, and dipped out some water; and, further, he procured a washing flannel, and hastened back with them to Jim, who was kneeling supporting the girl's wounded head upon his hand.

And all the time Elia, as though in sheer idle curiosity, watched the scene, steadily continuing his meal the while. There was no sort of feeling expressed in his cold eyes. Nor did he display the least relief when Jim assured him Eve was alive. Peter watched the boy, and

while Jim bathed her wounded forehead with a tenderness which was something almost maternal, he questioned him with some exasperation.

"How did it happen?" he demanded, his steady eyes fixed disapprovingly on the lad's face.

"Don't know. Guess she must ha' fell some. Ther's suthin' red on the edge o' the coal box. Mebbe it's her blood."

The cold indifference angered even Peter.

"And you sit there with her, maybe, dying. Say, you're pretty mean."

The boy's indifference suddenly passed. He glanced at Eve, then at the door, and he stirred uneasily.

"I didn't know wher' Will 'ud be. If I'd called folks, an' he'd got around an' found 'em here——"

"Why didn't you fetch him?" Peter broke in.

"I come in jest after he'd gone out, an'——"

"Found—this?" Peter indicated Eve.

"Yes."

Jim suddenly looked up, and his fierce eyes encountered Peter's. The latter's tone promptly changed.

"How is she?" he asked gently, and it was evident he was trying to banish the thoughts which Elia's statement had stirred in Jim's mind.

"Coming to," he said shortly, and turned again to his task of bathing the injured woman's forehead.

But it was still some minutes before the flicker of the girl's eyelids proved Jim's words. Then he sighed his relief and for a moment ceased the bathing and examined the wound. Then he reached a cushion from one of the kitchen chairs and folded it under her head.

The wound on her forehead was an ugly place just over her right temple, and there was no doubt in his mind had it been half an inch lower it would have proved fatal. He knelt there staring at it, wondering and speculating. He glanced at the corner of the box, and the thought of Eve's height suggested the impossibility of a tumble causing such a wound. Suspicion stirred him to a cold, hard rage. This was no accident, he told himself, and his mind flew at once to the only person who, to his way of thinking, could have caused it. Will had left her just as Elia came in; but Peter's voice called him to himself.

"Best keep on with the bathing," he said.

And without a sign Jim bent to his task once more. A moment later Eve stirred, and her eyes opened. At first there was no meaning in her upward stare. Then the eyes began to move, and settled themselves on Jim's face. In a moment consciousness returned, and she struggled to sit up. It was then the man's arm was thrust under her shoulders, and he gently lifted her.

"Feeling better, Eve?" he asked gently.

There was a moment's pause; then a whispered, "Yes," came from her lips. But her wound began to bleed afresh, and Jim turned at once to Elia.

"Go you and hunt up Doc Crombie," he said hastily. And as the boy stirred to depart, he added in a tone that was curiously sharp set, "Then go on to the saloon and tell Will Henderson to come right up here."

But Peter interfered.

"Let him get the Doc," he said. "I'll see to him—later."

The two men exchanged glances, and Jim gave way.

"Very well. But hurry for Crombie."

After that Eve's voice demanding water held all Jim's attention. And

while Peter procured a cupful, helifted her gently in his arms and carried her into the parlor, and laid her on an old horsehair settee, propping her carefully into a sitting position. When the water was brought she drank thirstily, and then, closing her eyes, sank back with something like a sigh of contentment.

But with the first touch of the wet flannel which Jim again applied to her head she looked up.

"I fell on the coal box," she said hastily. And before Jim could answer Peter spoke.

"That's how we guessed," he said kindly. "Maybe you were stooping for coal—sure."

"Yes, yes. I was stooping for coal for the kitchen stove. I must have got dizzy. You needn't send for the doctor. I'm all right, and the bleeding will stop. I've just got a headache. Please don't send for Will; I'm glad you haven't. He'd only be alarmed for—for nothing—and really I'm all right. Thank you, Jim, and you too, Peter. You can't do anything more. Really you can't and I don't want to spoil your evening. I——"

"We're going to wait for the Doc, Eve," said Jim, firmly.

Her eagerness to be rid of them was painfully evident, and so unlike her.

"Yes," agreed Peter, "we better wait for the Doc, Eve. You see we came down to pay you a party call."

"A party call?"

"Yes. Y'see Jim rode in from the 'AZ's' to pay you a—party call."

The girl's eyes steadied themselves on Jim's face. He had drawn himself up a chair, and was sitting opposite her. Peter was still standing, his great bulk shutting the glare of the lamplight out of her eyes. She looked long and earnestly into the man's face, as though she would fathom the meaning of his visit before she in any way

committed herself. But she learned nothing from it.

"A party call—after all this time, Jim?" she asked, with something like a wistful smile.

Jim turned away. He could not face the pathos in her expression. His eyes wandered round the little room. Not one detail of it was forgotten, yet it seemed ages and ages since he had seen it all. He nodded.

"You see," he said lamely, "new married folks don't——"

Eve checked his explanation quickly. She didn't want any. All she wanted was for them to go before Will returned.

"Yes; I know. And, besides, the ranch is a long way. Yet—why did you come to-night?" She pressed her hand to her forehead lest the fear in her eyes should betray her.

The pause which followed was awkward. Somehow neither of the men was prepared for it. Neither had thought that such a question would be put to him. Peter looked at Jim, who turned deliberately away. He was struggling vainly for a way of approaching all he had to say to this girl, and now that he was face to face with it he realized the impossibility of his position. Finally it was the girl herself who helped him out.

"It's very, very kind of you, anyway," she said, in a low voice. "It's good to think that I've got friends thinking about me——"

"That's just it, Eve," cried Jim, seizing his opportunity with a clumsy rush. "I've been thinking a heap—lately. You see—Will Henderson's not working and—and—folks say——"

"And gossip says we're 'hard up,'" Eve added bitterly. She knew well enough the talk that was rife. "So you've come in to see—if it is true." She again pressed a hand to her forehead. This time it was the pain of her head which had become excruciating.

Jim nodded, and Peter's smiling eyes continued to watch him.

"But it wasn't exactly that," the former went on in his straightforward way. "Yet it's so blazing hard to put it so you can understand. You see, I've been doing very well, and—you know I've got a big bunch of cattle running up in the foot-hills now—I thought, maybe, seeing Will isn't working, money might be a bit tight with you. You see, we're folks of the world, and there's no fool sentiment about us in these things; I mean no ridiculous pride. Now, if I was down, and you'd offered to help me out, I'd just take it as a real friendly act. And I just thought—maybe——"

How much longer he would have continued to flounder on it was impossible to tell, but Peter saw his trouble and cut him short.

"You see, Eve," he said, "Jim wants to help you out. Some folks have got busy, and he's heard that you're hard pushed for ready dollars. That's how it is."

Jim frowned at his bluntness, but was in reality immensely relieved. Eve had been listening with closed eyes, but now opened them, and they were full of a friendliness.

"Thanks, Peter; thanks, Jim," she said softly. "You're both very good to me, but—don't worry about money. If things go right we have enough."

"That's it, Eve," Jim exclaimed eagerly. "If things go right. Are they going right? Will they go right? That's just it. Say, can't you see it hurts bad to think you've got to pinch, and that sort of thing? You can surely take a loan from me. You——"

But Eve shook her head decidedly.

"Things will go right, believe me. Will has got something up—in the hills. He says it's going to bring us in a lot." She turned wistful eyes upon Peter's rugged face. "It's something in your line," she said. "Gold. And he says——" She broke off with a look of sudden distress. "I forgot. I wasn't to say anything to—to anybody. Please—please

forget about it. But I only wanted to show you that—we are going to do very well.”

“So Will’s struck it rich.” It was Peter’s astonished voice that answered her. The news had a peculiar interest for him. “Placer?” he inquired.

“Yes—and easy to work. But you won’t say a word about it, will you? He told me not to speak of it. And if he knew he would be so angry. I——”

“Don’t worry, Eve,” broke in Jim, gently. “Your secret is safe with us—quite safe.”

Peter said nothing. The news had staggered him for a moment, and he was vainly trying to digest it. Jim rose from his seat and leaned against the table. His attempt had failed. She would have none of his help. But his coming to that house had told him, in spite of Eve’s reassurance, that the gossip was well founded. There was trouble in Eve’s home, and it was worse than he had anticipated.

The girl eyed them both for a moment with a return of that fear in her eyes.

“Are you going now?” she inquired, with an anxiety she no longer tried to conceal. She felt so ill that it didn’t seem to matter what she said.

“We’re going to wait till Doc Crombie’s fixed you up,” said Peter, steadily. Then he added thoughtfully, “After that I’m going to fetch Will.”

Eve gasped. Swift protest rose to her lips, but it remained unspoken, for at that moment there came the sound of footsteps outside, and Elia led the forceful doctor into the room.

“Hey, Mrs. Henderson,” he cried, nodding at the two men. “Winged your head some. Let’s have a look,” he added, crossing to Eve’s side and glancing keenly at her wound. “Whew!” he whistled. “How did you do it? Eh?” he demanded, and Peter explained. The explanation was

made to save Eve what both he and Jim knew to be a lie.

The doctor's blunt scorn was withering.

"Pooh! Leanin' over the coal box? Fell on the corner? Nonsense! Say, if you'd fell clear off o' the roof on to that dogone box, mebbe you could ha' done that amount o' damage. But——"

Eve's eyes flashed indignantly.

"I'd be glad if you'd fix me up," she said coldly.

The rough doctor grinned and got to work. She had made him suddenly realize that he was dealing with a woman, and not one of the men of the village. He promptly waived what had, in the course of years, become a sort of prerogative of his: the right to bully. In half an hour he had finished and the three prepared to take their departure.

"Guess you'll be all right now," Crombie said, in his gruff but not unkindly way. Then, unable to check entirely his hectoring, he went on with a sarcastic grin. "An', say, ma'm, if you've a habit o' leanin' so heavy over the coal box, I'd advise you to git the corners rounded some. When falls sech as you've jest bin takin' happen around they don't generly end with the first of 'em. I wish you good-night."

Peter also bade her good-night, and he and the doctor passed out. Jim was about to follow when Eve stayed him. She waited to speak till the others had passed out of ear-shot.

"Jim, you're real good," she said in a low voice. "And I can never thank you enough. No," as he made an attempt to stop her, "I must speak. I didn't want to, but—but I must. It isn't money we want—truth. Not yet. But maybe you can help me. I don't rightly know. You do want to, don't you? Sure—sure?"

Jim nodded. His eyes told her. At that moment he would have done anything for her.

"Well, if you want to help me there's only one way. Help him. Oh, Jim,

he needs it. I don't know how it's to be done, but—for my sake—help him. Jim, it's drink—drink and poker. They're ruining him. You can only help me—by helping him. No, don't promise anything. Good-night, Jim. God bless you!"

She held out her hand to him and, in a paroxysm of ardent feeling, he clutched it and kissed it passionately. A moment later he was gone.

As the door closed Elia stepped into the light. The girl had forgotten all about him. Now she was startled.

"Eve, wot fer did you lie about that?" he said, pointing at her bandaged head.

The girl's head was aching so that it seemed it would split, and she closed her eyes. But the boy would not be denied.

"You lied, sis," he exclaimed vehemently, though his face and eyes were quite calm. "Will did that, 'cause you wouldn't give him thirty dollars. I see him throw you 'crost the room. I hate him."

Eve was wide-eyed now.

"You saw him?" she cried in alarm. Then she paused. Suddenly her tone changed. "Come here, Elia," she said gently.

The boy came toward her and she took one of his hands and fondled it.

"How did you see him?" she went on.

"Through the window. I was waitin' fer supper." In spite of her caress the boy was sulky.

"Well, promise me you won't tell anybody. You haven't, have you?"

The boy shook his head.

"I won't tell, sis, if you don't want me. But—but why don't you kill him?"

The three men were walking across the market-place.

"That's Will Henderson's work," exclaimed Crombie with a fierce oath, nodding his head back at Eve's house.

Jim and Peter offered no comment. Both had long since realized the fact.

"Gol darn him!" cried the fiery doctor. "He'll kill her—if he don't get killed instead."

Jim said nothing. Eve's passionate appeal to him was still ringing in his ears. It was Peter who answered.

"You goin' to home, Doc? I'm goin' down to the saloon—to fetch Will."

"You are?" It was Jim's startled inquiry. "What for?"

"I'm going to yarn some—mebbe. You get right out to the ranch, boy. An' don't get around here till I send you word."

The doctor stood for a moment.

"He needs hangin'," he declared. Then, in the cheery starlight, he looked into the two men's faces and grinned. He had a great knowledge of the men of his village. "Well, so long," he added, and abruptly strode away.

The moment he had gone Jim protested.

"Peter," he said, "we've got to help him; we've got to get him clear of that saloon. It's not because I like him or want——"

"Just so. But we got to help him. So, you get right out to the ranch, an'—leave him to me."

CHAPTER XVI

DEVIL DRIVEN

The saloon was full and Rocket was busy. His face glowed with funereal happiness. He was sombrely delighted at the rapidity with which the tide of dollars was flowing across his dingy counter. He was more than ordinarily interested, too, which was somewhat remarkable.

The fact was Barnriff's scandal had received a fillip in a fresh and unprecedented direction. McLagan had been in, bringing two of his cow-punchers with him. The hot-headed Irishman had crashed into the midst of Barnriff with such a splash that it set the store of public comment hissing and spluttering, and raised a perfect roar of astonishment and outraged rectitude.

He had arrived late, after the usual evening game had started. His first inquiry was for Jim Thorpe, and he cursed liberally when told that nobody had seen him. Then he fired his angry story at the assembled company of villagers, and passed on to make camp at a rival ranch five miles to the northwest.

It was a rapidly told story full of lurid trimmings, and, judging by its force, came from his heart.

"It's duffing, boys," he cried, with an oath, and a thump on the bar which set the glasses, filled at his expense, rattling. "Dogone cattle-duffing! Can you beat it? The first in five year, since Curly Sanders got gay, and then spent a vacation treadin' air. We got first wind of it nigh

a week back, Jim an' me. We missed a bunch o' backward calves. We let 'em run this spring round-up, guessin' we'd round 'em up come the fall. Well, say, Jim went to git a look at 'em—they was way back there by the foot-hills, in a low hollow—an' not a blame trace or track of 'em could he locate. We just guessed they was 'stray,' and started in to round 'em up. Well, the boys has been busy nigh on a week, an' here, this sundown, Nat Pauley an' Jim Beason come riding in, till their bronchos was nigh foundered, sayin' a bunch of twenty cows on the Bandy Creek station has gone too. D'you git that? Those blamed calves was on the Bandy Creek range, too. It's darnation cattle-thievin', an' I'm hot on the trail."

And Barnriff was stirred. It was more. It was up in arms. There was no stronger appeal to its sympathies than the cry of "cattle-thief!" As a village it lived on the support of the surrounding ranches, and their ills became the scourge of this hornet's nest of sharp traders. McLagan had raised the cry here knowing full well the hatred he would stir, and the support that would be accorded him should he need it.

He had come and gone a veritable firebrand, and the hot trail he had left behind him was smouldering in a manner unhealthy for the cattle-thieves.

When Peter Blunt entered the saloon it was to receive McLagan's tale from all sides. And while he listened to the story, now garbled out of all semblance of its original form by the whiskey-stimulated imaginations, he found himself wondering how it came that Jim Thorpe had given him no word of it. And he said so.

"Say, boys," he observed, when he got a chance to speak, "I only left Jim Thorpe a while back. He rode in to see me. He didn't give me word of this."

It was Abe Horsley who explained.

"McLagan came in looking for him. Jim's only got the week old stuff. The news hit the ranch at sundown to-day."

Peter nodded.

"I see."

"You'll see more, Peter," broke in Smallbones viciously. "You'll see a vigilance committee right here, if this gambol don't quit. Barnriff don't stand for cattle-duffin' worth a cent."

"Upsets trade," lumbered Jake Wilkes, with the tail of his eye on the busy Smallbones.

Gay laughed ponderously.

"Smallbones'll show us how to form a corporation o' vigilantes. Though it ain't a finance job."

"Ay, that I will. I'm live anyways. I've had to do with 'em before."

"You didn't get hanged," protested Jake, after heavy thought. "Guess you ain't got no kick coming."

Smallbones purpled to the roots of his bristly hair. Jake irritated him to a degree, and the roar of laughter which greeted the slow-witted baker's sally set him completely on edge.

"Guess I was on the other end of the rope," he retorted, trying to turn the laugh, but the baker, with grave deliberation, added to his score.

"Which was a real mean trick o' fortune on us folks o' Barnriff," he murmured.

In the midst of the laughter Peter moved away to the tables. He looked on here and there watching the varying fortunes with all the interest of his intensely human mind. The weaknesses of human nature appealed to his kindly sympathy as they can only to those of large heart. He begrudged no man moments when the cares of everyday life might be pushed into the background, however they might be obtained.

He argued that the judgment of Nature needed no human

condemnation added to it. Human penalty must be reserved for the administration of social laws. To his mind the broad road of evil would automatically claim its own without the augmentation of the loads of human freight borne thither on the dump-carts of the self-righteous. Rather it was his delight to hold out a hand to a poor soul in distress, even if his own ground were none too secure.

At one table he saw the winnings almost entirely in one corner, and the expressive yet grim faces of the other players only too plainly showed their feelings. He noticed the greedy manner in which the losers clutched up their cards at each fresh deal. Their hope was invincible, and he loved them for it. It may have been the hope such as a drowning man is credited with. It may have been the sportsman's instinct seeking a fresh turn in fortune's wheel. It may have been inspired by the malicious hope of the winner's downfall. But he felt it was healthy, in spite of the ethical pronouncements of those who repose on the pedestal of their own virtues. It was, to his mind, the spirit of the fighter in the game of life, a spirit, which, even though misdirected, must never be unreservedly deplored. To his mind it were better to fight a battle, however wrong be the prompting instinct, than to run for the shelter of supine ineptitude.

He moved slowly round the room till he came to the table where Will Henderson was playing. He had reached his goal, and his self-imposed task had begun. His eyes quickly scanned the table and the faces of the five players. The other four were men he knew, not actually of the village, but hard-faced, lean ranchmen, men who came from heaven alone knew where, and whose earthly career was scarcely likely to bring about the final completion of the circle.

For the moment they mattered little. It was Will he was concerned with; nor was it with his fortunes in the game. The hand had just finished, and he saw one of the men rake in a small pot of "ante's" without a challenge. While the fresh dealer was shuffling the cards he caught Will's eye. He read there the anxiety of a gambler whose luck

is out. He glanced at his attenuated pile of chips, and took his opportunity.

"Feel like missing the deal, Will?" he asked casually.

But the set of the face lifted to him warned him of the negative which swiftly followed.

"Guess I'm not yearning."

Peter followed it up while the cards were being cut.

"I've got to speak to you *particular*."

A look of doubt suddenly leaped into Will's eyes, and he hesitated.

"What d'you want?"

Peter eyed the tumbler of whiskey at the man's elbow. He noted the heavy eyes in the good-looking young face. But the cards were dealt, and he waited for the finish of the hand. He saw Will bet, and lose on a "full-house." His pile was reduced to four fifty-cent chips and the man's language was full of venom at his opponent's luck. The moment he ceased speaking Peter began again.

"Your wife's hurt bad," he said. "Doc Crombie's only just left her."

Will started. He had forgotten. A sudden fear held him silent, while he waited for more. But no more was forthcoming. Only the blue eyes of his informant searched his face, and, to the guilty man, they seemed to be reading to the very depths of his soul. Something urged him, and he suddenly stood up.

"You best deal four hands," he said hastily to his companions. "I'll be back directly."

Then he moved away from the table unsteadily, and Peter made a guess at the quantity of bad whiskey he had consumed. He led the way from the tables, and, once clear of them, glanced over his shoulder.

"We best get outside," he said.

But Will was already regretting his game. The feeling of guilt was passing. It had only been roused by the suddenness of Peter's announcement. A look of resentment accompanied his reply.

"I ain't going to miss more than a couple of hands," he protested.

"Then we best hurry."

Peter led the way through the crowd, and the two passed out. With the glare and reek of the bar behind them he dropped abreast of Will, and walked him steadily in the direction of his own hut. At first Henderson failed to notice the intention; he was waiting for Peter to speak. He was waiting for the "particular" he had spoken of. Then, as it did not seem to be forthcoming, he promptly rebelled.

"You can tell me right here," he said, with distinct truculence, and coming to a dead standstill.

Peter reached out, and his powerful hand closed about the other's upper arm.

"What I've got to tell you can be told in my shack. You best come right on."

"Take your darned hand off me!" cried Will, angrily. "You'll tell me here, or I get back to my game." He tried to twist himself free. But Peter's hand tightened its hold.

"You're quitting that saloon for to-night, Will," he said quietly.

The other laughed, but he had a curiously uncomfortable feeling under his anger. Suddenly he put more exertion into his efforts to release himself, and his fury rose in proportion.

"Darn your soul, let me go!" he cried.

But Peter suddenly seized his wrist with his other hand, and it closed on it like a vice.

"Don't drive me to force," he warned. "That saloon is closed to you to-night. Do you understand? I've got to say things that'll likely change your way of thinking. Don't be a fool; come on up to my shack."

There was something so full of calm strength, so full of conviction in Peter's tone that it was not without its effect. That guilty thought rose again in Will's mind, and it weakened his power of resistance. His rage was no less, but now there was something else with it, an undermining fear, and in a moment he ceased to struggle.

"All right," he said, and moved forward at the other's side.

Peter released his wrist, but kept his hold on his arm.

And they walked in silence to the "shack." Will had long known the gold prospector, and had become so accustomed to the mildness of his manner, as had all the village, that this sudden display of physical and moral force brought with it an awakening that had an unpleasant flavor. Then, too, his own thoughts were none too easy, and the picture of Eve as he had last seen her would obtrude itself, and created, if no gentler feeling, at least a guilty nervousness that sickened his stomach.

Peter said that Doc Crombie had only just left her. What did that mean? Only just left her, and—it had occurred nearly two hours ago. He was troubled. But his trouble was in no way touched with either remorse or pity. He was thinking purely of himself.

Of course she had recovered, he told himself. He had watched her breathing before he left her. Yes, he had ascertained that. She had been merely stunned. Ah, a sudden thought! Perhaps she had told them what had happened. A black rage against her suddenly took hold of him. If she had—but no. Even though he was—as he was, he realized, as bad natures often will realize in others better than themselves, Eve's loyalty and high-mindedness. It could not be that. He wondered. And wondering they reached their destination.

Peter let him pass into the hut, and, following quickly, lit the lamp. Then he pointed at the only comfortable seat, and propped himself against the table, with the light shining full on Will's face.

"Will," he began, without any preamble, "you've got to take a fall—quick. You've got to get such a big fall that maybe it'll hurt some—at first. But you'll get better—later."

"I don't get you."

The man assumed indifference. He felt that he must steady himself. He wanted to get the measure of the other before giving vent to those feelings which were natural to him since drink had undermined all that was best in him.

"You've nearly killed your wife to-night," Peter went on, with a new note of harshness in his voice. "Look you, I'm not going to preach. It's not our way here, and none of us are such a heap good that preaching comes right from us. I'm warning you, and it's a warning you'll take right here, or worse'll come. Now I don't know the rights of what has happened between you and Eve, but I'll sort of reconstruct it to you in my own way, and it matters nothing if I am right or wrong. Eve and you had words. What about I can only guess at. Maybe it was money, maybe the saloon, maybe poker. You two must have got to words, which ended by you brutally pitching her on to the edge of the coal box, and nearly killing her. After that you went out, leaving her to die—by your act—if it took her that way. Mark you, she didn't fall. She couldn't have—and smashed her forehead as she did. She told us she did, but that, I guess, was to shield you."

"Then she didn't give you this pretty yarn?" inquired Will, sarcastically. He was feeling better. He gathered that Eve was not going to die. "You kind of made it up on your own?"

"Just so," replied Peter, quite unmoved. "I—we—Doc Crombie, Jim Thorpe, and I. We made it up, as you choose to call it, because we've eyes and ears and common sense. And Doc Crombie knows just

about how much force it would take to smash her head as it was smashed."

"And what were you fellows doing in my house?" Will demanded, his anger gaining ground in proportion to the abatement of his fears.

"We were in *Eve's* house," answered Peter, drily, "for the reason that we wished to have a chat with her. That is, Jim and I. Doc Crombie came because we'd a notion we were sorry for Eve, and didn't want her to die on our hands. That's why we were there."

Will laughed.

"Jim Thorpe was there, eh? And who's to say that you and he didn't do the mischief? Guess Jim hates things enough, seeing I married Eve. She'd got no broken head when I left her."

"You needn't to lie about it, Will," Peter said calmly. "Least of all to me. But that makes no odds. As I said, you've got to take a fall. Barnriff's got ears and eyes that puts it wise to a lot. It's wise to how things have been going with you and Eve. It's wise to the fact you're bumming your living out of her, that you're a drunken, poker-playing loafer, and that you're doing it on her earnings. And Barnriff, headed by a few of us, and Doc Crombie, aren't going to stand for it. If you don't get busy you'll find there's trouble for you, and if, from this out, Barnriff gets wise to your ill-treatment of Eve, in any way—God help you. You'll get less mercy shown you than you showed that poor girl to-night. That's what I brought you here to say. And I'd like to add a piece of friendly advice. Don't you show your face in Rocket's saloon to get a drink or deal a hand at poker for a month or—well, I needn't warn you further of what's going to happen. If you've got savvee you'll read through the lines. Maybe you'll take this hard—I can see it in your face. But you're a man, and you've got some grit—well, get right out and do things. That's your chance here in Barnriff."

Will Henderson's face was a study while he listened to his arraignment and final sentence by the mild Peter Blunt. At first rage

was his dominant emotion, but it gave way before the mild but resolute fashion in which the large man poured out the inexorable flow of the sentence. And somehow for a moment those calm words got hold of all that was vital in him, and he shrank before them. But neither did this feeling last. A bitter hatred rose up in his heart, a black, overmastering, passionate desire for vengeance fired him, and proportionate with its strength a cunning stirred which held it in check. He put an abrupt question, nor could he keep his angry feelings out of his voice.

"So Jim Thorpe's helped in this?" he said savagely. "No need to ask his reason. Gee, it's a mean man that can't take his med'cine."

"You needn't bark up that tree, Will," said Peter, patiently. "We're all responsible for this—the whole of Barnriff." Then he smiled. "You see, Doc Crombie has approved."

Then it was that Henderson saw fit to change his manner. It seemed almost as if the enormity of his offense had been suddenly brought home to him, and contrition had begun to stir.

"Seems to me, Peter, as if the ways of things were queer," he said, after a long pause. "I've got something that'll keep me out of Barnriff a good deal in future. I've had it a week an' more back. I've struck a good thing up in the hills." He laughed. "A real good thing—and it's easy, too."

"I'm glad," the other said genuinely.

"It's gold. Something in your line, eh? Placer. Gee, I'll make things hum when I've taken the stuff out of it. S'truth, I'll buy some of 'em! And sell 'em, too, for that matter."

Peter was interested.

"Gold, eh? Well, good luck to you. I'm glad—if it's to make a man of you."

For a second Will's eyes flashed.

"Yes, you're right; it'll make a man of me. And, being a man, there are some things I'm not likely to forget. Say, you've passed sentence—you and your friends, which include Jim Thorpe. You won't have to carry it out. I'll knuckle down, because I know you all. But, by gee! I've struck what you're looking for, and when I've gathered the dust I'll make some folks jump to my own tune! Get that, Peter Blunt."

Peter smiled at the sudden outburst of malicious rage. Then his face grew cold, and his even tone checked the tide of the other's impotent rage.

"I get it," he said. "But meanwhile Barnriff is top dog, an' you best write that down in big letters, and set it where you can read it easily. Now you can go home and look after your poor wife. And remember, as sure as there's a God in heaven, if you make that girl's life a misery, or in any way hurt her, you'll sicken at the thought of Barnriff. Now you can go."

Peter's quiet manner carried unpleasant conviction to the departing man. The conviction was so strong that he obeyed him to the letter. He walked without hesitation, without any desire to do otherwise, in the direction of his home. But this was an almost mechanical result. His mind was occupied in a way that would have astonished the men of Barnriff.

His fury had gone. His brain was filled with cold, hard thoughts, the more cruel for their lack of heat. His thoughts were of that which he had struck in the hills, and of a revenge which he felt he could play off on these people who demanded that he should guide his life as they dictated. He saw subtle possibilities which gave him enjoyment. He would work, and work hard. And then the manner of the revenge he would take! He laughed.

Then his laugh died out, for Jim Thorpe wholly occupied his thoughts, and there was no room for laughter where Jim was concerned. He remembered Jim was making money—and how. Suddenly he paused in his walk, and a delighted exclamation broke from him.

“Gee! The very thing I’ve been looking for. He’s got that land from McLagan. He’s going to run a ranch. He’s going to play big dog. Gee! That’s the game! Say, master Jim,” he went on, apostrophizing the absent man he had so easily learned to hate, “I’ll make you a sick man before the snow falls. Gee! You’d butt in in my affairs. You’re standing Eve’s friend.” He laughed. “Go ahead, boy. I’ll play up to you. Eve shall tell you I’m a reformed man, and you’ll feel better. And then——”

And by the time he reached his home there was apparently a complete transformation in him. The old moody selfishness and brutality toward his wife seemed to have fallen from him like a hideous cloak. He played the game he intended with such an appearance of good faith that the sick woman suddenly experienced the first relief and comfort she had known for months.

He waited on her, repentant and solicitous, till she could hardly believe her senses, and she even forgot to ask the result of his gamble. And the next morning, when necessity forced her to ask him for money, she was content that he returned to her something under ten dollars of that which he had stolen from her.

Later in the day he left for the hills, and from that moment an entire change came over Eve's whole life.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WORKING OF THE PUBLIC MIND

The month following Will's departure from the village saw stirring times for the citizens of Barnriff.

The exploding of Dan McLagan's bombshell in their midst was only the beginning; a mere herald of what was to follow. Excitement after excitement ran riot, until the public mind was dazed, and the only thing that remained clear to it was that crime and fortune were racing neck and neck for possession of their community.

The facts were simple enough in themselves, but the complexity of their possibilities was a difficult problem which troubled Barnriff not a little.

In the first instance McLagan's alarm set everybody agog. Then a systematic wave of cattle-stealing set in throughout the district. Nor were these depredations of an extensive nature. Cattle disappeared in small bunches of from ten to forty head, but the persistence with which the thefts occurred soon set the aggregate mounting up to a large figure.

The "AZ's" lost two more bunches of cattle within a week. The "◇ P's" followed up with their quota of forty head, which set "old man" Blundell raving through the district like a mad bull. Then came a raid on the "U—U's." Sandy McIntosh cursed the rustlers in the broadest Scotch,

and set out to scour the country with his boys. Another ranch to suffer was the "crook-bar," but they, like the "TT's," couldn't tell the extent of their losses definitely, and estimated them at close on to thirty head of three-year-old beeves.

The village seethed, furious with indignation. For years Barnriff had been clear of this sort of thing, and, as a consequence, the place had been left to bask in the sun of commercial prosperity consequent upon the thriving condition of the surrounding ranches. Now, that prosperity was threatened. If the ranches suffered Barnriff must suffer with them. Men spoke of a vigilance committee. But they spoke of it without any real enthusiasm. The truth was they were afraid of inaugurating an affair of that sort. There was scarcely a man in the place but had at some time in his life felt the despotic tyranny of a vigilance committee. Though they felt that such an organization was the only way to cope with the prevailing trouble they cordially dreaded it.

Then, in the midst of all this to-do, came the news of Will's rich strike in the hills. He had discovered a "placer" which was yielding a profit of fabulous dimensions. Of how rich his strike really was no one seemed to possess any very definite information. In the calm light of day men spoke of a handsome living wage, but, as the day wore on, and Silas Rocket's whiskey did its work, Will's possible wealth generally ended in wild visions of millions of dollars.

Under this inspiring news the commercial mind of Barnriff was stirred; it was lifted out of the despondency into which the news of the cattle-stealing had plunged it. It cleaned off its rust and began to oil its joints and look to its tools. With the first news it, metaphorically, "reared up." Then Will came into town with a bag of dust and nuggets, and the optical demonstration set lips smacking and eyes gleaming with envy and covetousness. They asked "Where?" But Will shook his head with a cunning leer. Let them go and seek it as he had to do, he said. And forthwith his advice was acted upon by no less than a dozen men,

who promptly abandoned profitable billets for the pursuit of the elusive yellow ore.

Two weeks later Will again visited the village. This time he staggered the folks by taking his wife to Abe Horsley's store, and spending two hundred dollars in dry-goods and draperies for her. He flashed a "wad" of bills that dazzled the lay-preacher's eyes, and talked of buying a ranch and building himself a mansion on it.

Nor did he visit the saloon. He was sober, and looked the picture of health and cheerfulness. He talked freely of his strike and its possibilities. He swaggered and patronized his less fortunate fellow townsmen, until he had them all by the ears and set them tumbling over each other to get out after the gold.

He was followed and watched. Men shadowed his every movement in the hope of discovering his mine, but he was too clever for them. They kept his trail to the hills, but there he quickly lost them. He never took the same route twice, and, on one occasion, traveled for three days and nights, due north, before entering the foot-hills. He was as elusive as the very gold his pursuers sought.

One by one the would-be prospectors returned disappointed to the village, and again took up their various works, forced to the sorry consolation of listening to the tales of Will's wealth, and watching him occasionally run in to the village and scatter his money broadcast amongst the storekeepers.

Of all Barnriff Peter Blunt seemed the least disturbed. He went calmly on with his work, smiling gently whenever spoken to on the subject. And his reply was invariably the same.

"I'm not handling 'placer,'" he told Doc Crombie one day, when that strenuous person was endeavoring to "pump" him on the subject. "I allow 'placers' are easy, and make a big show. But my 'meat' is high grade ore that's going to work for years. His strike don't interest me a heap, except it proves there's gold in plenty around these parts."

Nor could he be drawn into further discussion in the matter.

Yet his interest was far greater than he admitted. He was puzzled, too. He could not quite make out how he had missed the signs of alluvial deposit. Both scientifically and practically he was a master of his hobby, in spite of local opinion. Yet he had missed this rich haul under his very nose. That was his interest as a gold miner. But there was another side to it, which occupied his thoughts even more. And it was an interest based on his knowledge of Will Henderson, and—various other things.

He was out at a temporary camp at one of his cuttings with Elia, who, since his first sojourn with the prospector, now frequently joined him in his work. They had just finished dinner, and Peter was smoking and resting. Elia was perched like a bird on an upturned box, watching his friend with cold, thoughtful eyes. Suddenly he blurted out an irrelevant remark.

“Folks has quit chasin’ Will Henderson,” he said.

“Eh?”

Peter stared at him intently. He was becoming accustomed to the curious twists of the lad’s warped mind, but he wondered what he was now driving at.

“He’s too slim for ’em,” Elia went on, gazing steadily into the fire. “He’s slim, an’—bad. But he ain’t as bad as me.”

Peter smiled at the naive confession.

“You’re talking foolishly,” he said, in a tone his smile belied.

“Maybe I am. Say, I could track Will.”

“Well?”

“I’m goin’ to. But I’ll need your help. See here, Peter, I’ll need to get away from sis, an’ if I get out without sayin’, she’ll set half the village

lookin' to find me. If I'm with you, she won't. See?"

Peter nodded.

"But why do you want to track him?"

"Cause he's bad—an' ain't got no 'strike.' He's on some crook's work. Maybe he's cattle duffin'. I mean to find out."

Peter's eyes grew cold and hard, and the boy watching him read what he saw with a certainty that was almost uncanny.

"You've been thinking that always, too," he said. "You don't believe in his strike, neither," he added triumphantly.

"I don't see why I shouldn't," replied Peter, guardedly.

"Yes, you do," the boy persisted. "It's because he's bad. Say, he's makin' Eve bad takin' that money he sends her. An' she don't know it."

"And supposing it's as you say—and you found out?"

"The boys 'ud hang him. And—and Eve would be quit of him."

"And you'd break her heart. She's your sister, and would sooner cut off her right hand than hurt you."

Elia laughed silently. There was a fiendishness in his manner that was absolutely repulsive.

"Guess you're wrong," he said decidedly. "It wouldn't break Eve's heart worth a cent. She don't care a cuss for him, since—since that night. Eve's a heap high-toned in her notions. He hit her. He nigh killed her. She ain't one to fergit easy." He laughed again. "I ken see clear through Eve. If Will was dead, in six months she'd marry agin. D'ye know who? Jim Thorpe. She's jest a fool gal. She's allus liked Jim a heap. That night's stickin' in her head. She ain't fergot Jim—nor you. Say, d'you know what she's doin'? When Will sends her money she sets it aside an' don't touch it. She don't buy things for

herself. She hates it. She lives on her sewin'. That's Eve. I tell you she hates Will, same as I do, an' I'm—I'm glad."

Peter smiled incredulously. He didn't believe that the girl's love for her husband was dead. Possibly her attitude deceived the lad, as well it might. How could one of his years understand a matter of this sort? But he thought long before he replied to the venomous tirade. He knew he must stop the lad's intention. He felt that it was not for him to hunt Will down, even—even if he were a cattle-thief.

"Look here, laddie," he said at last, "I promised you all the gold I found in this place. I'm going to keep that promise, but you've got to do something for me. See? Now I'm not going to say you can't track Will if you've a notion to. But I do say this, if he's on the crook, and you find it out, you'll promise only to tell me and no one else. You leave Will to me. I'm not going to have you hanging your sister's husband. You've got to promise me, laddie, or you don't see the color of my gold. And don't you try to play me up, either, because I'll soon know if you are. Are you going to have that gold?"

The boy's face was obstinately set. Yet Peter realized that his cupidity was fighting with the viciousness of his twisted mind, and had no doubt of the outcome. The thought of seeing Will hang was a delirious joy to Elia. He saw the man he hated suffering, writhing in agony at the end of a rope, and dying by inches. It was hard to give it up. Yet the thought of Peter's gold—not the man himself, of whom, in his strange fashion, he was fond—was very sweet. Gold! It appealed to him, young as he was, as it might have appealed to a mind forty years older; the mind of a man beaten by poverty and embittered by a long life of hopeless struggle. Finally, as Peter expected, cupidity won the day, but not without a hot verbal protest.

"You're a fool man some ways, Peter," the boy at last declared in a snarling acquiescence. "What for d'you stop me? Gee, you've nothing to help him for. Say, I'd watch him die, I'd spit at him. I'd—I'd—" But his frenzy of evil joy made it impossible for him to find further words.

He broke off, and, a moment later, went on coldly: "All right, I'll do as you say. Gee, but it makes me sick. Eh? No. I won't tell other folk. Nor Eve—but—but you're goin' to give me that gold, an' I'll be rich. Say, I'll be able to buy buggies, an' hosses, an' ranches, an' things? I'll be able to have plenty folks workin' for me? Gee! I'll make 'em work. I'll make 'em sick to death when I get that gold."

Peter rose abruptly to return to work. The boy's diseased mind nauseated him. His heart revolted with each fresh revelation of the terrible degeneracy that possessed the lad.

CHAPTER XVIII

A WOMAN'S INSTINCT

The women of Barnriff were as keenly alive to the prevailing excitements as the men. Perhaps they were affected differently, but this was only natural. The village, with its doings, its gossip, was their life. The grinding monotony of household drudgery left them little margin for expansion. Their horizon possessed the narrowest limits in consequence. Nor could it be otherwise. Most of them lived in a state of straining two ends across an impossible gulf, and the process reduced them to a condition of pessimism which blinded them to matters beyond their narrow focus.

But just now the cloud had lifted for a moment and a flutter of excitement gave them an added interest in things, and relieved them from the burden of their usual topics. When they met now matters of housekeeping and babies, and their men-folk, were thrust aside for the fresher interests. And thus Pretty Wilkes, blustering out of Abe Horsley's emporium in a heat of indignation, found little sympathy for her grievance from Mrs. Rust and Jane Restless.

"Say, I'll give Carrie a word or two when I see her," she cried, viciously flourishing a roll of print in the faces of her friends. "If Abe isn't a money grubbing skinflint I just don't know nothin'. Look at that stuff. Do I know print? Do I know pea-shucks! He's been tryin' to sell me faded goods that never were anything else but faded, at twice the price they ever were, when they couldn't have been worth half of it if the color hadn't faded that never did, because there wasn't no decent color to

fade. I'll——"

But the two women's attention was wandering. They were gazing across at Eve's house where Annie Gay was just disappearing through the doorway. Pretty saw her, too, and, in a moment, her anger merged into the general interest.

"Say, if that ain't the third time this mornin'," she exclaimed.

"Meanin' Annie?" inquired Mrs. Rust.

"Chasin' dollars," added Jane Restless, with a sniff.

Pretty laughed unpleasantly.

"Why not?" she asked, and promptly answered herself. "Guess her man's taught her. However, I don't blame her. Dollars are hard enough to come by in this place. Say, they tell me Eve's gettin' 'em in hundreds."

"Thousands," said Mrs. Rust, her eyes shining.

"Say, ain't she lucky?" exclaimed Jane. "I don't care who knows it. I envy her good an' plenty. Thousands! Gee!"

"I don't know she's to be envied a heap," said Mrs. Rust. "I 'lows all men has their faults, but Will Henderson ain't no sort of bokay of virtues. He's a drunken bum anyway."

"An' he knocks her about," added Pretty, with a snap.

"But he's pilin' up the dollars for her," Jane urged, still lost in serious contemplation of the fabulous sums her simple mind attributed to Eve's fortune.

But Pretty Wilkes had no sympathy with such excuses.

"Well, dollars or no dollars, I wouldn't change places with Eve for a lot. Guess there's some folk as would sell their souls for dollars," she said, eyeing Jane Restless severely. "But if dollars means having Will Henderson behind 'em, I'd rather get out an' do chores all my life."

"Guess you're right," acquiesced Mrs. Rust, thoughtfully. "Will's a whiskey souse an' poker playin' bum. What I sez is, give me a fool man like my Rust, who's no more sense than to beat hot iron, an' keep out o' my way when I've a big wash doin'."

"That's so," agreed Pretty. "An' if I'm any judge, that's just 'bout how pore Eve feels."

"Pore?" sniggered Jane.

"Yes, 'pore.'" Pretty's manner assumed its most pronounced austerity. "That gal ain't what she was, an'—an' I can't get the rights of it. What for does she keep right on with her needle, with all those dollars? She don't never laff now for sure. There's something on her mind, and it's my belief it's Will Henderson. Say, Kate Crombie told me that Eve never spent any o' those dollars, an' it was her belief she ain't never touched 'em. *She* says it's 'cause of him. *She* says it's 'cause she hates Will, has hated him ever since that time she fell agin the coal box. That was Will. Kate said so; and her man fixed Eve up. Say, he orter been lynched. An' if the men-folk won't do it, then we ought to. It makes my blood boil thinkin' of it. Pore Eve! I allus liked her. But she's fair lost her snap since she's got married. Guess it 'ud bin different if she'd married Jim Thorpe."

"I don't know," exclaimed Jane, with some antagonism. "I don't know Jim Thorpe's a nice seemin' feller enough, someways, but——"

"But—what?" inquired Mrs. Rust, eagerly.

"Oh, nothin' much, on'y there's queer yarns goin' of that same Jim Thorpe. Restless was yarning with two of McLagan's boys, who are out huntin' the stolen cattle. Well, they got a yarn from one of the boys of the '◇ P.'s' Course I don't know if it's right, but this feller seen a big bunch of cattle running where Jim keeps his stock. An' he swore positive they was re-branded with Jim's mark. You know, '✱✱,' which, as he pointed out, was an elegant brand for covering up an original

brand. Them boys, Restless said, was off to look up the stock."

Jane told her story with considerable significance, and, for the moment, her two friends were held silent. Then Pretty Wilkes gathered herself to protest.

"But—but Jim's McLagan's foreman. He don't need to."

"That's just it. Folks wouldn't suspect him easy."

The force of Jane's argument almost carried conviction. But the blacksmith's wife liked Jim, and could not let Jane carry off honors so easily.

"Jim ain't no cattle-thief," she said. "And," she hurried on, with truly feminine logic, "if he was he'd be cleverer than that. Mark me, Jim's too dead honest. Now, if it was Will Henderson——"

But the gossip was becoming too concentrated, and Pretty helped it into a fresh channel.

"Talkin' of Will Henderson," she said, "Kate Crombie told me the Doc's goin' to make him say where he gets his gold—in the interest of public prosperity. That's how she called it. That's why he ain't showed up in town for nigh three weeks. Guess he'll go on keepin' away."

"Doc's up again Will someways," said Jane.

"Most folks is," added Mrs. Rust.

"Doc's a bad one to get up against," observed Pretty. "If he's going to make Will talk, our men-folk 'll all get chasin' gold. I don't know, I'm sure. Seems to me a roast o' beef in the cook-stove's worth a whole bunch o' cattle that ain't yours. Well, I'll get on to home, an' get busy on the children's summer suitings—if you can call such stuff as Abe sells any sort o' suitings at all. Good-bye, girls."

She left the matrons and hurried away. A moment later Jane Restless went on to the butcher's, while Mrs. Rust pattered heavily along to

Smallbones' store to obtain some iron bolts for her husband.

But these good women wronged Annie Gay when they hinted at time-serving to Eve on account of the money her husband was making. Her friendship for Eve was of much too long standing, and much too disinterested for it to be influenced by the other's sudden rise to prosperity. As a matter of fact it made her rejoice at the girl's sudden turn of fortune. She was cordially, unenviously glad of it.

She found Eve hard at work at her sewing-machine, in the midst of an accumulation of dress stuff, such as might well have appalled one unused to the business. But the busy rush of the machine, and the concentrated attitude of the sempstress, displayed neither confusion nor worry beyond the desire to complete that which she was at work on.

Eve glanced up quickly as Annie came in. She gave her a glance of welcome, and silently bent over her work again. Annie possessed herself of a chair and watched. She liked watching Eve at work. There was such a whole-hearted determination in her manner, such a businesslike directness and vigor.

But just now there was more to hold her interest. The girl was not looking well. Her sweet young face was looking drawn, and, as she had told her that very morning, she looked like a woman who had gone through all the trials of rearing a young family on insufficient means. Now she was here she meant to have it out with Eve. She was going to abandon her rôle of sympathetic onlooker. She was going to delve below the surface, and learn the reason of Eve's present unsmiling existence.

All this she thought while the busy machine rattled down the cloth seams of Jane Restless's new fall suit. The low bent head with its soft wavy hair held her earnest attention, the bending figure, so lissome, yet so frail as it swayed to the motion of the treadle. She watched and watched, waiting for the work to be finished, her heart aching for the

woman whom she knew to be so unhappy.

How she would have begun her inquiries she did not know. Nor did she pause to think. It was no use. She knew Eve's proud, self-reliant disposition, and the possibilities of her resenting any intrusion upon her private affairs. But she was spared all trouble in this direction, for suddenly the object of her solicitude looked up, raised her needle and drew the skirt away from the machine.

"Thank goodness that's done," she exclaimed. Then she leaned back in her chair and stretched her arms and eased her aching back. "Annie, I'm sick of it all. Sick to death. It's grind, grind, grind. No lightness, nothing but dark, uncheered work." She turned her eyes to the window with a look of sorrowful regret. "Look at the sunlight outside. It's mocking, laughing. Bidding us come out and gather fresh courage to go on, because it knows we can't. I mean, what is the use of it if we do go out? It is like salt water to the thirsty man. He feels the moisture he so needs, and then realizes the maddening parching which is a hundred times worse than his original state. Life's one long drear, and—and I sometimes wish it were all over and done with."

Annie's pretty eyes opened wide with astonishment. Here was the self-reliant Eve talking like the veriest weakling. But quick as thought she seized her opportunity.

"But, Eve, surely you of any folk has no right to get saying things. You, with your husband heapin' up the dollars. Why, my dear, you don't need to do all this. I mean this dressmakin'. You can set right out to do just those things you'd like to do, an' leave the rest for folks that has to do it."

She rose from her chair and came to her friend's side, and gently placed an arm about her shoulders.

"My dear," she went on kindly, "I came here now to talk straight to you. I didn't know how I was to begin for sure, but you've saved me the trouble. I've watched you grow thinner an' thinner. I've sure seen your

poor cheeks fadin', an' your eyes gettin' darker and darker all round 'em. I've seen, too, and worst of all, you don't smile any now. You don't never jolly folks. You just look, look as though your grave was in sight, and—and you'd already give my man the contract. I——”

The girl's gentle, earnest, half-humorous manner brought a shadowy smile to Eve's eyes as she raised them to the healthy face beside her. And Annie felt shrewdly that she'd somehow struck the right note.

“Don't worry about me, Annie,” she said. “I'm good for a few years yet.” Then her eyes returned to the gloomy seriousness which seemed to be natural to them now. “I don't know, I s'pose I've got the miserables, or—or something. P'raps a dash of that sunlight would do me good. And—yet—I don't think so.”

Suddenly she freed herself almost roughly from Annie's embracing arm and stood up. She faced the girl almost wildly, and leaned against the work-table. Her eyes grew hot with unshed tears. Her face suddenly took on a look of longing, of yearning. Her whole attitude was one of appeal. She was a woman who could no longer keep to herself the heart sickness she was suffering.

“Yes, yes, I am sick. It's not bodily though, sure, sure. Oh, sometimes I think my heart will break, only—only I suppose that's not possible,” she added whimsically. “Ah, Annie, you've got a good man. You love him, and he loves you. No hardship would be a trouble to you, because you've got him. I haven't got my man, and,” she added in a low voice, “I don't want him. That's it! Stare, child! Stare and stare. You're horrified—and so am I. But I don't want him. I don't! I don't! I don't! I hate him. I loathe him. Say it, Annie. You must think it. Every right-minded woman must think it. I'm awful. I'm wicked. I——!”

She broke off on the verge of hysteria and struggled for calmness. Annie sensibly kept silent, and presently the distracted woman recovered herself.

“I won't say anything like that again, dear. I mustn't, but—but I had to

say it to some one. You don't know what it is to keep all that on your mind and not be able to tell any one. But it's out now, and I—I feel better, perhaps.”

Annie came to her side and placed her arm about her waist. Her action was all sympathy.

“I came here to listen,” she said kindly. “I knew there was things troublin’. You can tell me anything—or nothing. And, Eve, you’ll sure get my meanin’ when I say the good God gave me two eyes to use, an’ sometimes to sleep with. Well, dear, I mostly sleep at nights.”

Eve tried to smile, but it was a failure.

“You’re a good woman, Annie, and—and I don’t know how I’d have got on all this time without you. But sit you down and listen. I’ve begun now, and—and I must go on. Oh, I can’t tell you quite why, but I want to tell it to somebody, and—and—I’ll feel better. You said I don’t need to do all this,” she hurried on, pointing at the dressmaking. “I do. It’s the only thing that keeps me from running away, and breaking my marriage vows altogether. Will’s got no love for me, and I—my love for him died weeks ago. Maybe with those sharp eyes of yours you’ve seen it.”

Annie nodded and Eve went on.

“I’m frightened, Annie, and—and I don’t know why. Will’s a different man, but it’s not that. No,” she added thoughtfully, “somehow I’m not frightened of him now. I—I hate him too much. But I’m frightened, and——”

She flung herself upon the worn settee, and lifted a pair of gloomy eyes to her friend’s face. “I can never touch his money, nor the things he buys. I want nothing from him, either for Elia or myself. I’m married to him and that I can’t undo. Would to God I could! But I can never take anything from the man I do not love, and my love for Will is dead—dead. No, Annie, I must go on working in my own way, and I only hope

and pray my husband will keep away. Maybe he will. Maybe when he's made a big pile out of his—claim he will go away altogether, and leave me in peace with Elia. I'm hoping for it—praying for it. Oh, my dear, my dear, what a mistake I've made! You don't know. You can't guess."

There was a silence for some moments. Annie was thinking hard. Suddenly she put a sharp question.

"Tell me, Eve. This fear you was saying. How can you be frightened? What of?"

There was no mistaking the effect of her words. Eve's brown eyes suddenly dilated. She looked like a hunted woman. And Annie shrank at the sight of it.

"I don't know," she said with a shiver. "I—I can't describe it. It's to do with Will. It's to do with"—she glanced about her fearfully—"his money, his gold find. Don't question me, because I don't know why I'm afraid. I think I first got afraid through Elia. He's a queer lad—you don't know how queer he is at times. Well"—she swallowed as though with a dry throat—"well, from the first, when—when Will found gold Elia laughed. And—and every time we speak about it he laughs, and will say nothing. Oh, I wish I knew."

"Knew what?"

Annie's question came with a curious abruptness. Eve stared. And when she spoke it was almost to herself.

"I don't know what I want to know. Only I—I wish I knew."

Annie suddenly came over to her friend's side. She took her hands in hers and squeezed them sympathetically.

"Eve, I don't guess I've got anything to say that can help you. But whenever you want to talk things that'll relieve you, why, you can just talk all you like to me. But don't you talk of these things to any other

folk. Sure, sure, girl, don't you do it. You can just trust me, 'cause I've got so bad a memory. Other folks hasn't. I'll be goin' now to get my man's dinner. Good-bye."

She bent over and kissed the girl's thin cheek with a hearty smack. But, as she left the house, there was a grave light such as was rarely, if ever, seen in her merry eyes.

CHAPTER XIX

BRANDED

There is no calm so peaceful, no peace so idyllic as that which is to be found on a Western ranch on a fine summer evening. Life at such a time and in such a place is at its smoothest, its almost Utopian perfection. The whole atmosphere is laden with a sense of good-fellowship between men and between beasts. The day's work is over, and men idle and smoke, awaiting the pleasures of an ample fare with appetites healthily sharp-set, and lounge contentedly, contemplating their coming evening's amusement with untroubled minds.

And the beasts which are their care. Fed to repletion on the succulent prairie grasses they know nothing but contentment. The shadow of the butcher's knife has no terrors for them. They live only for their day. And the evening, when their stomachs are full and repose is in sight, is the height of their contentment.

Then, too, Nature herself is at her gentlest. The fierce passion of heat has passed, the harsher winds have died down, the worrying insects are already seeking repose. There is nothing left to harry the human mind and temper. It is peace—perfect peace.

It was such an evening on the ranch of the "AZ's." All these conditions were prevailing, except that the mind of Dan McLagan, the owner, was disturbed. Six of his boys were out on the special duty of searching for stolen cattle. This was bad enough, but Dan was fretting and chafing at the unpleasant knowledge that the epidemic of cattle

stealing was spreading all too quickly.

He was never a patient man. His Celtic nature still retained all its native irritability, and his foreman, Jim Thorpe, had ample demonstration of it. He had spent several uncomfortable half hours that day with his employer. He was responsible for the working of the ranch. It was his to see that everything ran smoothly, and though the depredations of cattle-thieves could hardly come under the heading of his responsibilities, yet no employer can resist the temptation of visiting his chagrin on the head of his most trusted servant.

The hue and cry had been in progress for several weeks, and as yet no result of a hopeful nature had been obtained. And, in consequence, at every opportunity Dan McLagan cursed forcibly into the patient ears of his foreman.

Now, Jim was enjoying a respite. Dan had retired to his house for supper, and he was waiting for his to be served. He was down at the corrals, leaning on the rails, watching the stolid milch cows nuzzling and devouring their evening hay. His humor was interested. They had eaten all day. They would probably eat until their silly eyes closed in sleep. He was not sure they wouldn't continue to chew their cud amidst their bovine dreams. Each cow was already balloon-like, but the inflation was still going on. And each beast was still ready to horn the others off in its greediness.

He thought, whimsically, that the humbler hog was not given a fair position in the ranks of gluttony. Surely the bovine was the "limit" in that basest of all passions. One cow held his attention more particularly than the others. She was small, and black and white, and her build suggested Brittany extraction. She ran a sort of free lance piracy all round the corral. Her sharp horns were busy whenever she saw a sister apparently enjoying herself too cordially. And in every case she drove the bigger beast out and seized upon her choicest morsel.

Nor could he help thinking how little was the difference between man and beast. It was only in its objective. The manner was much the same. Yes, and the very means employed created in him an impression favorable to the hapless quadruped. Surely their battle for existence was more honest, more natural.

His mood was pessimistic, even for a man who sees the traffic which is his keenest interest threatened by a marauding gang of land pirates. Maybe it was the wearing hours of McLagan's nagging that caused his mood. Maybe it was an inclination brought about by the long train of disappointments that had been his as he trod his one-way trail. Maybe, as the cynical might suggest, his liver was out of order. However, whether it was sheer pessimism, or even the shadow cast by approaching events, he felt it would be good when the evening was past, and he could forget things in the blessed unconsciousness of sleep.

But his meditations were suddenly disturbed. The ranch dogs started their inharmonious chorus, and experience taught him that there are only two things which will stir the lazy ranch dog to vocal protest; the advent of the disreputable sun-downer, and the run of driven cattle.

He quickly discovered, at sight of a thick rising dust to the westward of the ranch, that the present disturbance was not caused by any ragged "bum." Cattle were coming in to the yards, and it needed little imagination on his part to guess that some of the boys on special duty were running in lost stock.

His pessimism vanished in a moment, and in its place a keen enthusiasm stirred. If it were some of the lost stock then they would probably have news of the thieves. Maybe even they'd made a capture. He hurried at once in the direction of the approaching cattle. Nor was he alone in his desire to learn the news. Every man had left his supper at the bunk house to greet the newcomers.

The incoming herd was still some distance away, but the bunch was

considerable judging by the cloud of dust. Jim found himself amongst a group of the boys, and each and all of them were striving to ascertain the identity of those who were in charge.

"Ther's two o' them, sure," exclaimed Barney Job, after a long scrutiny. "Leastways I ken make out two. The durned fog's that thick you couldn't get a glimpse o' Peddick's flamin' hair in it."

"Cut it out, Barney," cried the lantern-faced owner of the fiery red hair. "Anyways a sight o' my hair 'ud be more encouragin' than your ugly 'map.' Seems to me, bein' familiar with my hair 'll make the fires of hell, you'll likely see later, come easier to you when they git busy fumigatin' your carkis."

"Gee! that's an elegant word," cried Hoosier Pete, a stripling of youthful elderliness. "Guess you've bin spellin' out Gover'ment Reg'lations."

"Yep. San'tary ones. Barney's thinkin' o' gettin' scoured in a kettle o' hot water," said Peddick, with a laugh.

"Needs it," muttered a surly Kentuckian.

"Hey!" interrupted Barney, quite undisturbed by his comrades' remarks upon his necessity for careful ablutions. "Them's Joe Bloc an' Dutch Kemp. I'd git Dutch's beard anywher's. You couldn't get thro' it with a hay rake. Sure," he went on, shading his eyes, "that's them an' they're drivin' them forty three-year-olds that was pinched up at the back o' the northern spurs. Say——"

But he broke off, concentrating upon the oncoming cattle even more closely. Everybody was doing the same. Jim had also recognized the two cow-punchers. And he, like the rest, was wondering and speculating as to the news that was to be poured into their curious ears directly.

The cattle were running and it was evident the two boys were in a hurry for their supper, or to deliver their news. The waiting crowd

cleared the way. And one of the boys, at Jim's order, hurried down to the corrals to receive them. He stood by, joined by several others, to head the beasts into their quarters.

They came with a rush of shuffling, plodding feet bellowing protest at the hurry, or welcome at sight of the piles of hay that one or two of the men were already pitching into the corral for their consumption. And in less than five minutes they were housed for the night.

Then it was that Jim greeted the two cow-punchers.

"The boss'll be pleased, boys. Glad to see you back, Dutchy, and you, too, Joe. Guess you'll have things to report so——"

The boys were out of their saddles and loosening their cinchas. They eyed him curiously without attempting to acknowledge his greeting. The rest of the men had gathered round. And now it was noticeable that while they pointedly ignored their foreman, the newcomers, equally markedly, exchanged friendly nods and grins with their colleagues. Just for a moment Jim wondered. Then annoyance added sharpness to his words. He was not accustomed to being treated in this cool fashion.

"You best come right up to my shack and report," he said. "You can get supper after. I'll need to know at once——"

"Best get a look at them beasties fust," said Joe, in a harsh tone, and with an unmistakable laugh.

"Yep," sniggered Dutchy, with an insolent look into Jim's face.

The studied insult of both the men was so apparent that all eyes were turned curiously upon the foreman. For Jim Thorpe was popular. More than popular. He was probably the best-liked man on the range. Then, too, Jim, in their experience, was never one to take things "lying down."

His dark, clear brows drew ominously together, and his eyes

narrowed unpleasantly.

“Say, the sun’s hurt you some, boys, hasn’t it?” he asked sharply. Then he went on rapidly, his teeth clipping with each sentence: “See here, get right up to my shack. I’ll take that report. And I don’t need any talk about it. Get me?”

But though the men remained silent the insolence of their eyes answered him. Dutchy slung his saddle over his shoulder and stood while Joe picked up his belongings. And in those moments his eyes unflinchingly fixed his foreman, and a smile, an infuriating smile of contempt, slowly broke over his heavy Teutonic features.

It was too much for Jim. He pointed at his shack. "Hustle!" he cried.

But before the men had time to move away, two of the boys, who had elected to obey their comrade's suggestion, came running up from the corral.

"Say, boss," cried Barney, excitedly, "get a peek at their brands!"

Nor was there any mistaking the man's anxiety—even awe. There was a general rush for the corral. And by the time Jim reluctantly reached the fences he heard smothered exclamations on all sides of him. He came to the barred gateway and peered over at the cattle inside.

The first thing that caught his eye was the broadside of a big steer. On its shoulder was a brand, at which he stared first incredulously, but presently with horrified amazement. It was the familiar "★★." He looked at others. Everywhere he saw his own brand, "double-star twice," as it was popularly known, on cattle which he recognized at a glance as being some of his employer's finest half-bred Polled Angus stock.

His feelings at that moment were indescribable. Astonishment, incredulity, anger all battled for place, and the outcome of them all was a laugh at once mirthless and angry. He turned on the two men waiting with their shouldered saddles.

"I'll take your report—up at the shack." And he pointed at his hut, fifty yards away.

The men moved off obediently. And Jim, left to his own unpleasant thoughts, followed them up.

Half-way to the hut he was joined by McLagan. The Irishman had seen the cattle come in, and was anxious to learn the particulars. His manner, after his recent ill-humor, was almost jocular. He realized that these were cattle he had lost.

"Say, Jim, those boys have picked up a dandy bunch of the lost ones.

How many?"

But the foreman's humor did not by any means fit in with his employer's.

"Didn't count 'em," he said shortly. "I'm just getting the boys' report. You best come along. It looks like being interesting." Just for a moment a half-smile lit his face.

Dan glanced at him out of the tail of his eyes and fell in beside him. His foreman's manner was new, and he wondered at it. However, Jim made no effort to open his lips again until they reached the hut.

When they came up the boys were waiting outside the door. Jim promptly led the way in, angrily conscious of the meaning looks which passed between them.

Once inside, and Dan had seated himself on the bed, Jim called the two men in.

"Come along in, boys," he cried, and his manner had become more usual. He understood their attitude now, and somehow he found himself sympathizing with their evident suspicions. After all, he had grown into a thorough cattleman. "Speak up, lads. Let's get the yarn. The boss wants to hear where you found those cattle of his—re-branded with my own brand."

McLagan sat up with a jerk.

"Eh?"

His face was a study. But chiefly it expressed a belief that he was being laughed at. Jim looked squarely into his half-resentful eyes and nodded.

"Those cattle they've just brought in are branded with my brand. You know the brand. You helped me design it. '**' And," he added whimsically, "it's a mighty fine one for obliterating original brands, now I come to study it."

But Dan turned sharply on the two men.

"Let's hear it," he said; and there was no pleasantness in his tone.

It was Joe Bloc who took the lead. Dutchy, though speaking the language of the West freely enough, had, in moments of involved explanation, still the Teutonic failing of involving the verb.

"You see, boss," said Joe, his eyes steadily fixed on the foreman's unflinching face, "we got the news in Barnriff. We'd been out for nigh four days, and we'd decided to ride in here to get fresh plugs. Ours wus good an' done, an' we'd set 'em in Doc Crombie's barn, an' had got over to the saloon for a feed."

"Feed?"

But Dan's sarcasm had no effect.

"That's how, boss. Wal, right in the bar was one of the '◇ P' boys—one of old man Blundell's hands."

"Yes, yes."

"He'd got a tidy yarn, sure, an' seein' we was your hands, an' his yarn was to do with your stock, he handed it to us with frills. He'd just got in from the hills, wher' he'd been trailin'. He said he'd run into Jim Thorpe's stock, tucked away in as nice a hollow of sweet grass as you'd find this side of Kentucky. Wal, he hadn't no suspicion, seein' whose beasties they were, an' he was for makin' back. He'd started, he said, when somethin' struck him. Y'see he guessed of a sudden it was a mighty big bunch for a ranch-foreman to be running, an' ther' was such a heap o' half-bred Polled Angus amongst 'em. Wal, seein' that kind was your specialty, he just guessed he'd ride round 'em an' git a peek at the brands. Say, as he said, the game was clear out at once. They'd every son-of-a-cow got '**' on 'em, but nigh haf wus re-brands *over an' blottin' out the old one*. He got to work an' cut out an' roped one o' them half-breeds, an' hevin' threw him, got down an' looked close. The original brand had been burned out, an' the '**'

whacked deep over it. That's just all, boss. We got out an' brought the bunch in—that is, them we knew belonged to the 'AZ's.'"

An ominous silence followed the finish of his story. The smile on Jim's face seemed to be frozen and meaningless. Dan was staring intently at his boots and flicking them with his quirt. Joe turned his head and exchanged a smile of meaning with Dutchy, and both men shifted into an easy pose, as much as to say, "Well, we've found the cattle duffer for you." The moments passed heavily, then suddenly Dan looked up. There was storm in his eyes. He had forgotten the cow-punchers.

"Well, what are you waitin' for?" he cried. "Get out!"

It was all the thanks the men got for the unctuously given story, and their hard work.

They vanished rapidly through the door, and hastened to air their grievance and repeat their story with added "frills" to ready ears at the bunk house.

Jim gazed through the doorway after them, and Dan furtively watched him for some silent moments.

"Well?" he said at last.

The tone of his inquiry was peculiar. There was no definite anger in it, nor was it a simple question. Yet it stung the man to whom it was addressed in a way that set his teeth gritting, and the blood running hot to his head.

"Well?" he retorted. And their eyes met with the defiance of men of big physical courage.

Dan was the first to avert his gaze, but it was only to hide that which lay behind in his thoughts. And when he spoke there was a harsh smile in his eyes.

"What ha' ye got to say t'—"he jerked a thumb in the direction of the bunk house—"that feller's yarn?"

Jim's answer was unhesitating. He shrugged as he spoke.

"Guess there's no definite reason to doubt it. There are the cattle. They're all re-branded with my brand. I've seen 'em. The hand that did it was a prentice hand, though. That's the only thing. The veriest kid could detect the alteration."

"It's your brand." Dan's eyes were still averted.

"Sure it's my brand. There's no need for more than two eyes to see that."

McLagan's quirt again began to beat his boot-leg. Jim understood the temper lying behind that nervous movement. He felt sick.

"Wher' d'ye keep your brands?"

"There's one here and one up in the hills, in my little implement shack, where I run my cattle. I keep that there for convenience."

"Just so."

Jim was groping under the bed on which Dan was reclining. He heard the reply, but chose to ignore it.

But he knew by its tone that suspicion had been driven home in this cattleman's mind. He drew an iron out from amongst the litter under the bed, and held it up.

"That's the iron," he said. "It would be well to compare it on the brands. It is identical with the iron I keep up in the hills."

"For convenience."

The men's eyes met again.

"Yes—for convenience." There was a sharpness in the foreman's acquiescence.

The Irishman's eyes grew hot. The whites began to get bloodshot.

"Seems to me it's fer you to see if that iron fits, an', if so—why?"

In spite of Dan's evident heat his tone was frigid, and its suggestion could no longer be ignored. Jim Thorpe, conscious of his innocence, was not the man to accept such innuendoes without protest. Suddenly his swift rising anger took hold of him, and the fiery protest which McLagan had intended to call forth broke out.

"Look here, McLagan," he cried, vainly trying to keep his tone cool, "I've been with you about four years. You know something of my history, and the folks I spring from. You know more than any one else of me. For four years I've worked for you in a way, as you, yourself, have been pleased to say in odd moments of generosity, in a way that few hired men generally work out here in the West. You've trusted me in consequence. And you've never found me shirking responsibilities, nor slacking. You've helped me get together a bunch of cattle with a view to becoming independent, and shown me in every way your confidence. You've even offered to lease me grazing. These latter things have not been without profit to you. That's as it should be. However, I just mention these things to point the rise in confidence which has grown up between us. You understand? Now the cattle stealing begins. These cattle are brought in here with my brands on. There is no doubt they are your steers. You listen to the story of the manner of their finding. You witness the cold suspicion of me which those two men possess. Those four years go for nothing. Your confidence won't stand the least strain. You do not accuse me straight out, but show me the suspicion with which you are contaminated in a manner unworthy of an honest man. I tell you it's rotten. It's—it's despicable. Do you think I'm going to sit down under this suspicion? It will be all over the countryside by to-morrow, and I—I shall be a branded man. I tell you I'm going to sift this matter to the bottom. But make no mistake. Not for your sake—nor for anybody else but myself. Those four years of hard honest work don't count with you. Well, they shan't count with me. I'll stay here with you so that I'm handy whenever wanted—you understand me, I suppose—'wanted.' But I'll thank you to let me pursue my investigations in the way I choose. Your work

shan't suffer. If I don't lay my hands on the thief or thieves in a month's time, then write me down a wrong 'un. If I do round 'em up I'll at once take my leave of you, for I've no use for a man of your evident calibre."

He was standing when he finished speaking. His dark eyes said far more than his words, and the clenching hands at his sides conveyed a threat that Dan was quick to perceive. However he felt the other's words he gave no sign. And his attitude was once more disconcerting and puzzling to the furious Jim. He wanted one of those outbursts of Celtic passion he was used to; he wanted a chance to hand out unrestrained the fury that was working up to such a pitch inside him. But the opportunity was not given. Dan spoke coldly and quietly, a process which maddened the injured man.

"Words make elegant pictures," he said, "an' I hate pictures. See here, Jim Thorpe, you've ladled it out good an' plenty. Now I'm goin' to pass you a dipper o' hash. There's the cattle; there's your brands; there's wher' they was found. Three nuts that need crackin'. You guess you're goin' to crack them nuts. Wal, I'd say it's up to you. Crack 'em. An'—you needn't to stop here to do it. You can get right out an' do the crackin' where you like. An' when you've cracked 'em, an' you feel like it,—mind, I don't ask you to—you can come along and you'll find this shack still standin'. That, too, is up to you. Meanwhiles, Joe Bloc'll slep right here. Guess you'll be startin' out crackin' nuts to-morrow morning. There's just one thing I'd like to say before partin', Jim," he added, his frigidity thawing slightly. "I'm a cattleman first an' last. It's meat and drink an' pocket-money to me. My calibre don't cut any figure when there's cattle stealin' doing. As sure as St. Patrick got busy with the snakes, I'd help to hang the last cattle-rustler, an' dance on his face after he was dead—if he was my own brother. Think o' that, and maybe you'll understand things."

He rose from the bed and walked out of the hut without waiting for a reply.

For a full minute Jim stood staring after him through the doorway.

Then his eyes came back to the branding-iron on the bed. He stared at it. Then he picked it up and mechanically examined the stars at the end of it. Suddenly he flung it out of sight under the bed where it had come from, and sat on the blankets with his face resting in his hands.

It was a hideous moment. He was dismissed—under suspicion. Suddenly he laughed. But the sound that came was high-pitched, strained, and had no semblance of a laugh in it. A moment and he sprang to his feet.

“By G—, he can’t—he can’t know what he’s done!” he muttered, a new horror in his tone. “Sacked—‘fired’—kicked out! he’s branded me as surely—as surely as if he’d put the irons on me!”

CHAPTER XX

APPROACHING THE TRIBUNAL

The sun was mounting royally in the eastern sky. There was not a breath of air to temper the rapidly heating atmosphere. The green grassland rolled away on every hand, a fascinating, limitless plain whose monotony drives men to deep-throated curses, and yet holds them to its bosom as surely as might a well-loved mistress. It was a morning when the heart of man should be stirred with the joy of life, when lungs expand with deep draughts of the earth's purest air, when the full, rich blood circulates with strong, virile pulsations, and the power to do tingles in every nerve.

It was no day on which a man, branded with the worst crime known to a cattle country, should set out to face his fellow men. There should have been darkening clouds on every horizon. There should have been distant growlings of thunder, and every now and then the heavens should have been "rent in twain with appalling floods of cruel light," to match the hopeless gloom of outraged innocence.

But the glorious summer day was there to mock, as is the way of things in a world where the struggles and disasters of humanity must be counted so infinitesimal.

This was the morning when Jim Thorpe turned his stiffly squared back upon the "AZ" ranch. He wanted no melodramatic accompaniment. He wanted the light, he wanted the cheering sun, he wanted that wealth of natural splendor, which the Western prairie can so amply afford, to lighten the burden which had so suddenly fallen upon him.

It was another of Fate's little tricks that had been aimed at him, another side of that unfortunate destiny which seemed to be ever dogging him. Well might he have cried out, "How long? How long?" Whatever the fates had done for him in the past, whatever his disappointments, whatever his disasters, crime had found no place in the accusations against him. It almost seemed as though his destiny was working its heartless pranks upon him with ever-growing devilishness.

With subtle foresight, and knowledge of its victim it timed its efforts carefully, and directed them on a course that could hurt his spirit most. Even when his inclinations, his sensibilities were at their highest pitch, down came the bolt with unerring aim, and surely in the very direction which, at the moment, could drive him the hardest, could bow his head the lowest.

Four years in the cattle world had ingrained in him the instincts of a traffic which possesses a wholesome appeal to all that is most manly in men. Four years had taught him to abhor crime against that traffic in a way that was almost as fanatical as it was in such men as McLagan and those actually bred to it. He was no exception. He had caught the fever; and the cattleman's fever is not easily shaken off. As McLagan would show no mercy to his own brother were he a proven cattle-thief, so Jim loathed the crime in little less degree. And he was about to face the world, his world, branded with that crime.

It was a terrible thought, a hideous thought, and, in spite of his squared shoulders, his stiffened back, his spirit, for the time, was crushed under the burden so unjustly thrust upon him. He thought of Peter Blunt, and wondered vaguely what he would say. He wondered what would be the look in the kindly gray eyes when he spoke the words of comfort and disbelief which he knew would await him. That was it. The look. It was the thought behind the words that mattered—and could so hurt.

As the miles swept away under his horse's raking stride, he tried to puzzle out the riddle, or the "nut" he had set out to crack, as McLagan had been pleased to call it. He could see no explanation of it. Why his brand? He knew well enough that cattle rustlers preferred to use established brands of distant ranches when it was necessary to hold stolen cattle in hiding before deporting them from the district. But *his* brand. It was absurd from a rustler's point of view. Everybody knew his small bunch of cattle. Any excessive number with his brand on would excite suspicion. It was surely, as he had said, the work of a prentice hand. No experienced thief would have done it.

He thought and thought, but he could see no gleam of light on the matter.

As the miles were covered he still floundered in a maze of speculation that seemed to lead him nowhither. But his efforts helped him unconsciously. It kept his mind from brooding on the disaster to himself, and, to a man of his sensibilities, this was healthy. He had all the grit to face his fellow men in self-defense, but, to his proud nature, it was difficult to stand up under the knowledge of a disgrace which was not his due.

He was within a few miles of Barnriff when his mind suddenly lurched into a fresh channel of thought. With that roving, groping after a clue to the crime of which he was morally accused, Eve suddenly grew into his focus. He thought with a shudder what it would have meant to her had she married him instead of Will. He tried to picture her brave face, while she writhed under the taunts of her sex, and the meaning glances of the men-folk. It was a terrible picture, and one that brought beads of perspiration to his brow.

It was a lucky—yes, in spite of Will's defections—thing for her she had married the man she did. Besides, Will had mended his ways. He had kept to the judgment that Peter Blunt had passed on him. Well, he would have the laugh now.

Then there was Will's success. Everything had gone his way. Fortune had showered her best on him, whether he deserved it or not. She apparently found no fault in him. And they said he was turning out thousands of dollars. But there, it was no use thinking and wondering. The luck had all gone Will's way. It was hard—devilish hard.

Poor Eve! He caught himself pitying her. No, he had no right to pity her. The pity would have been had she married him. And yet—perhaps this would never have happened had she married him. No, he told himself, it would never, could never have happened then. For, in the fact of having won her, would not his luck have been the reverse of what it was?

Suddenly he wondered what she would think when he told her—or when others told her, as, doubtless by this time, they had already done. He shuddered. She was in a cattle country. She was ingrained with all its instincts. Would she condemn him without a hearing? When he went to speak to her, would she turn from him as from something unclean? Again the sweat broke out at his thought. She might. The facts were deadly against him. And yet—and yet somehow— No, he dared not speculate; he must wait.

There was the humble little village on ahead of him, nestling like some tiny boat amidst the vast rollers of the prairie ocean. There, ahead, were his judges, and amongst them the woman who was still more to him than his very life. He must face them, face them all. And when their verdict was pronounced, as he knew it would be in no uncertain manner, then, with girded loins, he must stand out, and, conscious of his innocence, fight the great battle. It was the world—his world—against him, he knew. What—what must be the result?

CHAPTER XXI

INSPIRATION

Half an hour later Jim rode into Barnriff. It was getting on toward noon, and most of the villagers were busy at their various occupations. As he rode on to the market-place he glanced quickly about him, and, all unconsciously, there was defiance and resentment in his dark eyes; the look of a man prepared for the accusations which he knew were awaiting him. But this attitude was quite wasted, for there were few people about, and those few were either too far off, or too busy to note his coming, or appreciate his feelings, as expressed in his dark eyes.

It is strange how instinct will so often take the lead in moments critical in the lives of human beings. Jim had no thought of whither his immediate destination lay, yet he was riding straight for the house of the friendly gold prospector. Doubtless his action was due to a subconscious realization of a friendliness and trust on the part of Peter, which was not to be overborne by the first breath of suspicion.

He was within fifty yards of that friendly, open door, when he became aware that a woman's figure was standing before it. Her back was turned, and she looked to be either peering within the hut, or talking to some one inside it. Nor, strangely enough, did he recognize the trim outline of her figure until she abruptly turned away and moved off in the direction of her own house. It was Eve Henderson. And, without hesitation, he swung his horse in her direction.

She saw him at once and, smiling a welcome, waited for him to come

up. He saw the smile and the unhesitating way she stepped forward to greet him. There could have been no doubt of her cordiality, even eagerness, yet with the shadow of his disgrace hanging over him, he tried to look beyond it for that something which he was ready to resent even in her.

He saw the shadow on her face, which even her smile had no power to lift out of its troubled lines. He saw dark shadows round her eyes, the tremulous, drooping mouth, once so buoyant and happy, and he selfishly took these signs to himself, and moodily felt that she was trying vainly to conceal her real thoughts of him behind a display of loyalty.

There was no verbal greeting between them, and he felt this to be a further ominous sign. Somehow, he could not force himself to an ordinary greeting under the circumstances. She had doubtless heard the story, so—— But he was quite wrong. Eve was simply wondering at his coming. Wondering what it portended. She had truly enough heard the story of the recovery of the cattle, as who in Barnriff had not? But her wonder and nervousness were not for him, but for herself. It was for herself, and had to do with that fear she had told Annie Gay of, and which now had become a sort of waking nightmare to her.

Jim sprang from the saddle. Linking his arm through the reins, he stood facing the woman he loved. "Well?" he said, in a curious, half-defiant manner, while his glance swept over every detail of her pretty, troubled face. Finally it settled upon the slight scar over her temple, and a less selfish feeling took possession of him. The change in her expression suddenly told him its own story. Her eyes were the eyes of suffering, not of any condemnation of himself.

"I—I've just been over to see if Peter was in," she said hesitatingly.

"Peter? Oh, yes—and, wasn't he?"

Jim was suddenly seized with a feeling of awkwardness such as he had never before felt when talking to Eve.

The girl shook her head and began to move in the direction of her house. He fell in beside her, and, for a moment, neither spoke. Finally she went on.

"No," she said regretfully. "And I sure wanted to see him so badly. You see," she added hastily, "Elia is away. He's been away for days, and, well, I want to know where he is. I get so anxious when he's away. You see, he's so——"

"And does Peter know where he is?"

"Yes. At least I'm hoping so. Elia goes with him a deal now, on his expeditions. Peter's real good to him. I think he's trying to help him in—in—you know Elia is so—so delicate."

The girl's evident reluctance to put into words her well-loved brother's weaknesses roused all Jim's sympathy.

"Yes, yes. And is he supposed to be with Peter now?"

"He went away with him four days ago."

"I see."

Then there was another awkward pause. Again Eve was the one to break it. They were nearing the gate of her little garden.

"But what has brought you into town, Jim?" she suddenly asked, as though his presence had only just occurred to her as being unusual.

With a rush the memory of all his disgrace came upon him again. He laughed bitterly, harshly.

"Another of Dame Fortune's kicks," he said.

"Another?"

"Yes—ah, I forgot. Of course. Well, we'll call it *one* of Dame Fortune's kicks."

"You mean the—cattle stealing?" She was staring straight ahead of

her, and into her eyes had leaped a sudden look of fear which she dared not let him see.

But Jim was too busy with himself to even notice her hesitation. He had no room to realize her emotions just then.

"Yes," he said, almost viciously. "It's about that—I s'pose I ought to say 'because' of that." She glanced at him swiftly, but waited for him to go on. He did so with another nervous laugh. "I'm 'fired,' Eve. Kicked out by Dan McLagan, and branded by him as a suspected cattle-thief, as surely—as surely as they've found a bunch of his cattle branded with my brand."

They had reached the gate, and Eve turned facing him. There was a curious look in her eyes. It was almost one of relief. Yet it was not quite. There was something else in it. There was incredulity, resentment; something which suggested a whole world of trust and confidence in the man before her.

"Nonsense," she cried. "You—you accused of cattle stealing? You? He must be mad. They must all be mad."

"They?"

The girl suddenly flushed. She had said more than she intended. But there was no use drawing back.

"Oh, yes," she cried hotly. "I didn't mean to let you know. I've heard the story. Of course I have. Who, living in such a place as Barnriff, wouldn't hear it?" she hurried on bitterly. "Directly they told me I laughed at them. But—but they do suspect you. Oh, Jim, I think I hate these folks. You—you suspected of cattle-duffing. McLagan ought to be ashamed of himself. It's cruel in such a country as this. And the evidence is so ridiculous. Oh, Jim, if it weren't so horrible it would be almost—almost laughable."

"Thanks, Eve. And that—is really what you feel?"

She looked him in the face with wide, wondering eyes.

"Why, of course it is."

The man smiled ever so slightly. He felt better. A few more loyal friends like this and his position would be considerably easier.

"But they are all branded with my '**'s," he went on doubtfully.

"And what of it? It's a blind. It's to put folks off the real track. I——" She broke off, and her eyelids were suddenly lowered to hide the fear with which her own words again inspired her. As she did not continue Jim seized his opportunity to pour out something of what he felt at her unquestioning loyalty.

"Eve," he cried, his eyes lighting with the love he was powerless to keep altogether under. "You don't know what all your words mean to me. You don't know how glad they make me feel. Do you know, when I was riding up to you just now I was looking for a sign of suspicion in your eyes? If I'd seen it—if I'd seen it, I can't tell you what it would have meant to me. I almost thought I did see it, but now I know I was wrong. There's just about two folks for whose opinion I care in this village, you and Peter. Well, now I feel I can face the rest. For the present I'm an unconvicted cattle rustler to them. There's not much difference between that and a rawhide rope with them. But there's just a bit of difference, and to that bit I'm going to hold good and tight."

Eve's face suddenly went an ashy gray.

"But, Jim, they'd never—never hang you." Her voice was low. There was a thrill of horror in it which made the man's heart glow. He felt that her horror was for his safety, and not for the fact of the hanging. Then the feeling swiftly passed. He remembered in time that she was the wife of another.

"They would," he said decidedly. "They'd hang me, or anybody else, with very little more proof than they've already got. You don't realize what cattle-duffing means to these folks. It's worse than murder. But,"

he went on, struggling to lighten his manner, "they're not going to hang me, if I know it. It's up to me to run this rustler to earth. I'm going to. That's what I'm out for. After I'd made up my mind to hunt the devil down McLagan informed me, not in so many words, of course, that to do so was the only way to convince folks of my innocence—himself included. So I'm going to hunt him down, if it takes months, and costs me my last cent. And when I find him"—his eyes lit with a terrible purpose—"may God have mercy on his soul, for I won't."

But the girl had no response for him. Her enthusiastic belief in his innocence found no further expression. When he pronounced his determination her eyes were wide and staring, and as he ceased speaking she turned them toward the distant hills, lest he should witness the terror she could no longer hide. A shudder passed over her slight figure. She was struggling with herself, with that haunting fear that was ever dogging her. The thought of the rawhide rope had set it shuddering through her nerve centres afresh in a way that bathed her in a cold perspiration.

For a moment she stood battling thus. Then, in the midst of the struggle something came upon her, and her heart seemed to stand still. It was as though a flash of mental light had illumined her clouded horizon. Realization swept in upon her, a full terrible realization of the source of her fear.

It was to do with this cattle stealing. Yes, she knew it now. She knew more. She knew who the cattle-rustler was, for whom Jim was to stand the blame. She needed no words to tell her. She had no evidence. She needed none. Her woman's instinct served her, as though she had witnessed his acts. It was Will. It was—her husband.

And, all unconsciously, for so long this had been her fear. She remembered now so many things. She remembered his cynical laugh when he told her of his gold find, and how easy it was to work. She remembered her lack of confidence in his story—knowing the man as she did. She remembered her repugnance at the sight of the money

he had spent on her, and how she could never bring herself to touch that which he sent to her. She had believed then that her reasons were personal. That it was because it came from him, the man who had struck her down, and left her to die at his hands, for all he cared; the man whose brutality had so quickly killed her love; the man whom she had long since admitted to herself that she detested, despised. No, she needed no further evidence. It was her woman's instinct that guided and convinced her.

She shuddered. She was chilled under a blazing sun that had no power to warm her. But her terror was not for Will. It was for herself. For the hideousness of the disgrace to which he had brought her. In fancy she saw him food for carrion at the end of a rope; she saw his body swaying to the night breeze, an ominous, hideous shadow, a warning to all of the fate awaiting those who sinned against the unwritten laws of the cattle world. She heard the pitying tones of the village women, she saw their furtive side glances, heard their whispering comments as they passed her, these women whom she had always lived amongst, whom she had always counted as friends. Oh, the horror of it all, and she was utterly—utterly powerless. Worse, she must strive her utmost to shield Will. And, because he was her husband, she must leave Jim to fight his own battle with her added wits pitted against him.

She remembered Jim's words. "May God have mercy on his soul, for I won't." Jim—Jim was to be Will's Nemesis—her Nemesis. He must be the man who would drive the sword crashing her to the dust beneath the weight of her husband's crime.

A despairing hope swept her. Ah, no, no. It could not be. That would be too cruel. No, no, she must be wrong. Will was not guilty. He could not be. This thing could surely never come upon her. What had she ever done to deserve it? What——? She thought of the man before her. What had he ever done to deserve his fate? And suddenly the momentary hope slid from under her feet.

Now her thought and terror found expression against her will. It would not be denied. It showed in her shrinking attitude. It was displayed in her horrified eyes. And Jim saw these things and read them in his own way. He deemed that he had shocked her by his words, nor could he clearly understand that the force of his determination to defend himself should so shock her. However, he promptly strove to lighten the impression he had made.

"Don't let us speak of these things. Let us think and speak of other matters. You see," he went on whimsically, "you were the first person I met, and I s'pose it was only natural you should get all the burden of—of my nightmare."

But Eve could not rid herself of her terror. She felt she must talk of this thing.

"No," she said with an effort to keep calm, "we must talk of it. We must think—think——"

"There is no need for you to think, Eve. Put it out of your head. I shall run him to earth——"

"But, Jim," she broke out, his words driving her to fresh terror, "it must be some half-breeds. Or—or—some 'toughs' from across the border. It must be. We are very near the Canadian border, remember. They're always being driven across by the Mounted Police."

"No, it's some one in the locality. Some one nobody would suspect. You see, there have been no strangers in the district for months."

"How do you know?" Eve's startled inquiry came almost defiantly.

If the man noticed her tone he gave no sign. He shook his head decidedly.

"We've had the district hunted, scoured thoroughly, sure." Then he shrugged. "But it don't matter. Psha! I'd sooner it was some half-breed or tough. I'd—I'd be less sorry for him." He paused and gazed

tenderly into her troubled face. "But you don't need to be so shocked. Why?" he inquired. "This thing can't hurt you."

The girl jumped at the chance of denial.

"No, no, of course not," she exclaimed eagerly. Then, with a pitiful effort at subterfuge, "But you, Jim. To think that you are blamed."

In an instant his love was uppermost again. Her distress, whatever its cause, appealed to all that was best and manliest in him. Just now he took it to himself. And, in consequence, he found it hard to keep himself within the bounds of restraint. She was so sweet, so desirable in the pathetic picture she made.

"Never you worry, Eve," he said, with infinite gentleness. "This is up to me, and—I'm going to see it through. But here, I'm so full of my own troubles I'm forgetting all the good things coming your way. Say, I'm mighty glad of your luck. Will's claim is a bonanza, I'm told. I hear wonderful accounts of it—and of him." Then his voice lowered and his calm eyes darkened. "He has straightened up, hasn't he? It's a great thing. You'll be happier—now. You—you won't need my help—I mean for him. They tell me he's hit the right trail, and is busy traveling it." He sighed. "I'm glad, real glad—for you."

But curiously enough his sympathy met with no response. On the contrary, Eve seemed to freeze up. Every word he uttered lashed her until she felt she must blurt out to him the thing she believed to be the truth. But even in her agony of heart and mind she remembered what she conceived to be her duty, and, in self-defense, assumed a cold unresponsiveness.

"They say he'll be a way up millionaire," Jim went on, so busy with his own thoughts that he did not notice her silence. "Gee, and so easy, too. It's queer how fortune runs. Some folks work like—like Dagos, and get—mud. Others have gold poured over 'em, whether they work or not. But he must have worked to find it. Yes, sure. And having found it you can't blame him for not letting folks into the secret—eh?"

But Eve had not spoken. It was only a look, and an inarticulate sound. But it was a look of such abject terror that it could no longer escape the man's thoughtful eyes. Eve had betrayed herself in her very dread lest he should suspect. His reference to Will's secret had suggested suspicion to her, and the rest was the result of her innate honesty and simplicity.

Jim stared at her. And slowly a curious look crept into his eyes. Her terror was so evident, and—he thought back over the words that had inspired it. He was talking of Will—of Will's secret. For the moment he stood dumbfounded at that which flashed through his mind. Then he turned slowly, and mechanically threw the reins over his horse's neck.

When he looked round again Eve was still staring at him. Her terror was, if possible, intensified. Suddenly a great pity for her rose up in his heart. All his love was stirred to the almost limitless depths of his big heart. How he loved this woman! How he longed to take her to his heart, and shelter her from all the cruel buffeting of a harsh life! How he would fight for her, strive for her, work for her—and now? He thought of the brand that had fallen upon him, and he thought of that something which her sudden terrified glance had stirred in his unsuspecting mind.

"Guess I'll get on to the saloon, as Peter isn't in his hut," he said, in a quiet, unmeaning tone. "I'll see if I can locate Elia for you." He paused, and then swung into the saddle. Glancing down at her, he leaned forward and spoke earnestly. "Eve," he said, "it still stands good: the old order. When you need me—for anything, mind—you've only got to send me word. Wherever I am I'll come." He straightened up. He saw the girl make an effort to swallow, and glanced away to give her a chance to recover her composure. As he did so he saw a number of women and some men scattered about at the doorways of various houses. He promptly turned to the girl.

"Gee!" he cried, with a slightly forced laugh. "The vultures are around. They're looking for scandal, and, by the signs, I'd say they guess they've found it. To a man—or woman—they're staring this way. Say, I'll get going. Good-bye—and don't forget."

He rode off. Eve had not spoken. She knew that he knew, and she was overwhelmed at the knowledge. She slowly turned to the house, and with weary steps passed up the narrow pathway.

And Jim? The moment his face was turned from her his smile died out, leaving it stern and hard.

CHAPTER XXII

THE VIGILANCE COMMITTEE

Silas Rocket's saloon was more than usually desirable just now. There was so much news of an exciting nature going about. Of course, fertile invention was brought to bear in its purveyance, but that only made it the more exciting.

On the morning that brought Jim Thorpe into Barnriff many of the men of the village were partaking of a general hash up of the overnight dish of news, to which was added the delectable condiment of Jim's sudden advent in their midst. From the windows of the saloon his movements were closely watched, as, also, were they from many of the village houses. Speculation was rife. Curious eyes and bitter thoughts were in full play, while his meeting with Eve Henderson was sufficiently significant to the scandalous minds of the more virtuous women and the coarser men.

The saloon rang with a discordant blending of curses aimed at the head of the unconscious visitor, and ribald jests at the expense of the absent gold discoverer.

For the moment Anthony Smallbones had the floor. It was a position he never failed to enjoy. He loved publicity. And, in his secret mind, he firmly believed that, but for the presence of Doc Crombie in the village, he would undoubtedly have held place and power, and have been dictating the destiny of the village. Thus it was that, just now, a considerable measure of his spleen was aimed at the absent doctor.

It's clear as day. That's sure. Doc Crombie's hangin' back," he was saying, in his curiously mean, high-pitched voice. "It ain't for me to say he ain't got grit. No, folks. But it's easy to guess for why he hangs back." He blinked truculently into the faces gathered about him, mutely daring anybody else to state that reason. But few cared to discuss the redoubtable doctor, so he was permitted to continue. "Doc's a sight too friendly disposed toward sech a skunk as Jim Thorpe. We've clear enough proof that feller is a cattle-rustler. We've the evidence of our eyes, sure. There's the cattle; ther's his brand—and—running with his own stock, hidden away up in the foot-hills. Do we need more? Psha! No. At least no one with any sawee. I've see fellers strung up on less evidence than that, an' I've bin on the——"

"Rope?" inquired Gay, sarcastically.

"Not the rope, mister. Not the rope, but the committee as condemned 'em," retorted Smallbones, angrily.

"Wuss!" exclaimed the baker with profound contempt.

"Eh?" snarled the little man with an evil upward glance at the other.

"Jest this," cried Wilkes with heat. "The feller that hangs his feller man on slim evidence is a lousy, yaller skunk. Say he'd orter hev his belly tarred, an' a sky-rocket turned loose in his vitals. I sez right here the evidence against Jim ain't 'nuff to condemn a gopher. It's positive ridiculous. Wot needs provin' is, who set that brand on McLagan's cattle? That's the question I'm astin'."

"Psha! You make me sick!" cried Smallbones, his ferret-eyes dancing with rage. "Put your question. An' when you put it, who's got to get busy answerin'? I tell you it's up to Jim Thorpe to prove he didn't brand 'em. If he can't do that satisfact'ry, then he's got to swing."

But he had a divided audience. Gay shook his head, and two others audibly disagreed with his methods. But, in spite of this, the weight of opinion against Jim might easily have been carried had not the

carpenter suddenly swept the last chance clear from under Smallbones' feet.

"Wal," cried the furious Jake, with such swift heat that even those who knew him best were staggered, "I'd sooner call a cattle-rustler friend than claim friendship, with such a low-down bum as Anthony Smallbones. Say, you scrap-iron niggler," he cried, advancing threateningly upon his victim. "I'll tell you something that ain't likely leaked in that sieve head o' yours. Cattle-rustlers is mostly men. Mebbe they're low-down, murderin' pirates, but they're men—as us folks understands men. They ain't allus skunkin' behind Bible trac's 'cos they're scairt to git out in the open. They're allus ready to put up a gamble, with their lives for the pot. An' when they gits it I guess they're sure ready to take their med'cine wi'out squealin'. Which needs grit an' nerve. Two things I don't guess Anthony Smallbones has ever heerd tell of outside a dime fiction. No, sir, I guess you got a foul, psalm-singin' tongue, but you ain't got no grit. Say," he added witheringly, "I'd hate to see such a miser'ble spectacle as you goin' to a man's death. I'd git sick feelin' sore I belonged to the human race. Nope, you couldn't never be a man. Say, you ain't even a—louse."

The laugh that followed ruined Smallbones' last chance of influencing the public mind. He spluttered and shouted furiously, but no one would listen. And, in the midst of his discomfiture, a diversion was created by the entrance of a small man with a round, cheery face and bad feet. He was a freighter. He walked to the bar, called for a drink, and inquired where Mrs. Henderson lived. It was his inquiry that made him the centre of interest at once.

"Mrs. Henderson?" said Silas, as he set the whiskey before his customer. "Guess that's her shanty yonder." And he pointed through the window nearest him. "Freight?" he inquired casually, after the little man had taken his bearings.

"Sure. Harmonium."

"Eh?"

Rocket's astonishment was reflected in all the faces now crowding round.

"Yep." Then the freighter perceived the interest he had created, and promptly became expansive. "From the Æolian Musical Corporation, Highfield, Californy. To order of William Henderson, shipped to wife of same, Barnriff, Montana. Kind o' musical around these parts?"

"Wal, we're comin' on—comin' on nicely," observed Silas, winking at his friends gathered round.

Gay nodded, and proceeded to support him.

"Y'see, most of our leddies has got higher than 'cordions an' sech things. Though I 'lows a concertina takes a beatin'. Still, education has got loose on Barnriff, an' I heerd tell as ther's some o' the folks yearnin' fer piannys. I did hear one of our leadin' citizens, Mr. Anthony Smallbones, was about to finance a brass band layout."

"Ther' ain't nuthin' to beat a slap-up band," agreed the freighter politely. "But these yer harmoniums, they're kind o' cussed, some. Guess my ma had one some years back, but she traded it off fer a new cook-stove, with a line o' Chicago bacon thrown in. I won't say but she had the best o' the deal, too. Y'see that ther' harmonium had its drawbacks. You never could gamble if it had a cold in the head or a mortal pain in its vitals. It wus kind o' passionate in some of its keys, and wep' an' sniveled like a spanked kid in others. Then it would yep like a hound if you happened to push the wrong button, an' groan to beat the band if you didn't. Nope. They're cur'us things if they ain't treat right, an' I guess my ma hadn't got the knack o' pullin' them bolts right. Y'see she'd been trained hoein' kebbeges on a farm in her early years, an' I guess ther' ain't nothin' more calc'lated to fix a woman queer fer the doin's o' perlite sassiety than hoein' kebbeges. Guess I'll get right on."

He paid for his drink, and, followed by the whole company, hobbled out to his wagon. He was a queer figure, but, at the moment, his defects were forgotten in the interest created by his mission to Barnriff.

What prosperity the possession of a harmonium suggested to those men might have been judged by the attitude they took up the moment they were outside. They crowded round the wagon and gazed at the baize-covered instrument, caged within its protecting crate. They reached out and felt it through the baize; they peeked in through the gaping covering, and a hushed awe prevailed, until, with a cheery wave of the hand, the teamster drove off in the direction of Eve's house.

Then the chorus of comment broke out.

"Geel!" exclaimed Wilkes. "A—a harmonium!" Then, overpowered by his emotion, he remained silent.

"Psha! Makes me sick!" cried Smallbones. "My sister in Iowa has got a fiddle; an' I know she plays five toons on it—I've heerd her. She's got a mouth organ, too, an' a musical-box—electric! One 'ud think nobody had got nuthin' but Will Henderson." He strode back to the bar in dudgeon, filled to the brim with malicious envy.

Others took quite a different tone.

"It's walnut," said Restless, his professional instincts fully alert.

"Yep," agreed Gay, "burr!"

"An' it's got pipes," cried Rust, impressively. "I see 'em sure, stickin' up under its wrappin'."

"Most likely imitation," suggested Gay, with commercial wisdom. "Y'see them things needs fakin' up to please the eye. If they please the eye, they ain't like to hit the ear-drums so bad. Wimmin is cur'us that aways."

Mebbe," agreed Rust, bowing to the butcher's superior knowledge. "But I guess it must 'a' cost a heap o' dollars. Say, Will must 'a' got it rich. I'd like to savvee wher'," he added, with a sigh, as they thoughtfully returned to the bar.

But nobody paid any attention to the blacksmith's regrets. They were all too busy with their own. There was not a man amongst them but had been duly impressed by the arrival of the harmonium. Gay, who was prosperous, felt that a musical instrument was not altogether beyond his means. In fact, then and there he got the idea of his wife learning to play a couple of funeral hymns, so he'd be able to charge more for interments, and, at the same time, make them more artistic.

Restless, too, was mildly envious. But being a carpenter, he got no further in his admiration of Will's wealth than the fact that he could decorate his home with burr walnut. He had always believed he had done well for himself in possessing a second-hand mahogany bureau, and an ash bedstead, but, after all, these were mere necessities, and their glory faded before burr walnut.

Rust, being a mere blacksmith, considered the wood but little, while the pipes fairly dazzled him. Henderson with a pipe organ! That was the wonder. He had only the vaguest notion of the cost, but, somewhere in the back of his head, he had a shadowy idea that such things ran into thousands of dollars.

A sort of depression crowded down the bar-room after the arrival of the harmonium. Nobody seemed inclined to drink, and talk was somehow impossible. Nor was it until Smallbones suddenly started, and gleefully pointed at the window, and informed the company that Jim Thorpe and Eve had parted at last at the gate of her cabbage patch, and that he was coming across to the saloon, that the gloom vanished, and a rapidly rising excitement took its place. All eyes were at once turned upon the window, and Smallbones again tasted the sweets of public prominence.

"Say," he cried, "he's comin' right here. The nerve of it. I l'ows it's up to us to get busy. I say he's a cattle-thief, an' ——"

But Jake turned on him furiously.

"Shut your ugly face," he cried, "or—or I'll break it."

The baker's threat was effective. Smallbones relapsed into moody silence, his beady eyes watching with the others the coming of the horseman. As Jim drew near they backed from the window. But they lost nothing of his movements. They watched him hitch his horse to the tying-post. They watched him thoughtfully loosen his cinchas. They saw that he had a roll of blankets at the cantle of his saddle, and saddle-bags at its sides. They saw, also, that he was armed liberally. A pair of guns on his saddle, and one attached to the cartridge belt about his hips. Each mind was speculating, and each mind was puzzled at the man's apparent unconcern.

A moment later the swing doors parted, and Jim strode in. His dark eyes flashed a swift glance about the dingy interior. He noted the familiar faces, and very evident attitudes of unconcern. He knew at once that his coming had been witnessed, and that, in all probability, he had been well discussed. He was in no mood to mince matters, and intended to test the public feeling at once. With a cheery "Howdy," which included everybody, he walked to the bar.

"Guess we'll all drink, Silas," he said cheerily, and laid a five-dollar bill on the counter.

But, for once in his life, the saloon-keeper felt it would be necessary to ask his customers what they would drink. This he did, while Jim turned to Jake and the butcher, who happened to be standing nearest to him.

"I've quit the 'AZ's," he said, with a light laugh. "Or p'r'aps I'd best say McLagan's quit me. Say, I'm out on the war-path, chasing cattle-rustlers," he went on, with a smile. "That bunch of cattle coming in with

my brand on 'em has set my name stinking some with Mac, and I guess it's up to me to—disinfect it. Eh?”

His final ejaculation was made at Rocket. There were three glasses set out on the counter, and the saloon-keeper was handing him his change.

“Three drinks,” that worthy was explaining. “The rest o’ the boys don’t guess they’re thirsty.”

Jim stiffened his back, and coldly glanced over the faces about him. He counted ten men, without including himself and Rocket. Of these, only two, Jake and Gay, had accepted his invitation. Suddenly his eyes rested on the triumphant face of Smallbones. Without a word he strode across the room, and his hand fell heavily on the man’s quaking shoulder. In a moment he had dragged him to the centre of the room.

“Guess you’ll do, Smallbones,” he began, as he released the man’s coat collar. “No, don’t move. You’re going to stand right there and hand me out the story I see dodging behind those wicked eyes of yours. You’ve got it there, good and plenty, back of them, so get going, and—we’ll all listen. Whatever I’ve got to say you’ll get after.”

Smallbones’ eyes snapped fire. He was furious at the rough handling, and he longed more than ever to hurt this man.

“You’re a strong man, an bein’ strong, you’re mighty free with your hands,” he snarled. “But you’re up agin it. Up agin it bad, Jim Thorpe.” His face lit with a grin of venom. “Say, you don’t need no story from me. You’ll get it plenty from—everywhere! McLagan’s quit you, because— Wal, I’m a law-abidin’ citizen, an’ don’t figger to drink with folks suspected of—cattle-rustlin’.”

Smallbones’ challenge held the whole room silent. Jake, watching and listening, was astonished at the man’s moral courage. But the chief interest was in the ex-ranch-foreman. What would he do?

The question was swiftly answered. Jim's head went up, and a light laugh prefaced his words.

"So I'm up against it?" he said calmly. Then he gazed contemptuously round on those who had rejected his hospitality. "So that's why all you fellows refused to drink with me. Well, it's a nasty pill, and it's likely to hand me indigestion." Then he deliberately turned his back on Smallbones and glanced at the counter. The drinks he had bought were still there. He looked up with a frank smile into the faces of the two men who were willing to drink with him. "Gentlemen," he said, "it seems to me there are just two drinks between me and—the rope. Will you honor a suspected man by clinking glasses with him?"

He raised his own glass to them, and Jake and Gay nearly fell over each other in their frantic efforts to express their willingness, and their disapproval of Smallbones. They clumsily clinked their glasses, and drank to the last drop. Then, in silence, they set their glasses down.

"Thanks, Jake. Thanks, Gay," said Jim, after a moment. Then he turned to the saloon-keeper. "I'm sorry the order's so small," he said, with a laugh.

"You can make it one bigger," grinned Silas, and Promptly held out his hand.

The two men gripped.

"Thanks," murmured Jim. And at the same instant Smallbones' offensive voice broke in.

"A real elegant scene," he sneered. "Most touchin'. Sort o' mothers' meetin'." But in a second his tone changed to a furious rasp. "But don't you mistake, Jim Thorpe; three drinks ain't buyin' you clear. If you're the honest man you say, you'll hev to prove it. There's the cattle with your brand on 'em. Whose hand set it on? Who keeps that brand? Who runs his stock in hidin' up in the hills? Them's the questions we're all astin', an' it's up to you to answer 'em right. Ef you

don't, then——" he finished with a suggestive motion of hanging.

But Jim had had enough. A moment of blind fury seized upon him, and he swung round on his accuser. The heavy rawhide quirt hanging on his wrist was raised aloft threateningly, and his eyes were the eyes of a man at the limit of endurance.

"Another word from you and I'll flay you alive with this quirt," he cried. "You've had your say, and now, I guess, I'll have mine. You know just as much as all the rest of the folk here; no more and no less. No more and no less than I do. When you or anybody else gets definite proof that I'm a cattle-thief you are at liberty to talk, but, until then, if I hear you, or of you, publicly charging me with cattle stealing, I'll smash you, if I swing for it. Get right out, now. Get right out, quick!"

Smallbones stood for a moment glaring at the threatening man. His teeth were bared in a tigerish grin. He was the picture of ferocity, but, as Jim took a step toward him, his dark face white with passion, he dropped back and finally made for the door.

But the turn of fortune's wheel was still against Jim. For Smallbones, the situation was saved by the advent of Doc Crombie. That redoubtable man pushed his way in through the swing doors and promptly hailed him back.

"Hold on, Smallbones," he cried, "I've a word for you fellows. How many are there here?" He glanced round the bar swiftly, and finally his eyes rested on Jim Thorpe.

"Ah!" He paused, while he mentally estimated the prevailing feeling. Then he addressed himself to Silas behind the bar. "You'll help the boys to drinks," he said. Then, pointedly, "All of 'em." After that, he turned to Jim. "Jest in from the 'AZ's'?" he inquired casually.

"McLagan's quit me on account of those cattle," Jim admitted, frankly.

"Those wi' your brand on?"

"Sure."

Doc smiled. He could not well have failed to become the leader of this village. Power was written in every line of his hard, shrewd face.

The moment the drinks had been served and heartily consumed, he addressed himself to the company generally. And, at his first words, Smallbones flashed a wicked look of triumph into the face of Jim Thorpe.

"It's this cattle-rustlin'," he said, coming to the point at once. "It's got to quit, an' it's right up to us to see it does quit. I ain't come here like a politician, nor a sky-pilot to talk the rights an' wrongs of things. It's not in my line ladlin' out psalms an' things. Ther's folks paid fer that sort o' hogwash. It's jest been decided to run a gang o' vigilantes over this district, an' every feller called upon's expected to roll up prompt. I've been around an' located twelve of the boys from the ranges. I want eight more. With me it'll make twenty-one. Smallbones," he proceeded, turning on the hardware merchant with an authority that would not be denied, "you'll make one. You two fellers, Jake, an' you, carpenter—that's three. You, Rust—that's four. Long Pete an' you, Sam Purdy, an' Crook Wilson; you three ain't doin' a heap hangin' around this bum canteen—that's seven." His eyes suddenly sought Jim's, and a cold command fell upon his victim even before his words came. "Guess, under the circ's," he remarked pointedly, "you'd best make the eighth."

But Jim shook his head. A light of determination, as keen as the doctor's own, shone in the smiling eyes that confronted the man of authority.

"Not for mine, Doc," he said deliberately. "Not on your life. Here, I don't want any mistake," he hastened on, as he watched the anger leap into the other's face, and beheld the sparkle of malice lighting the beady eyes of Smallbones. "Just listen to me. If you'll take a look around you'll see a number of fellers, mostly good fellers, more than

half of 'em believing me to be the rustler they're all looking for. Well, for one thing you can't put me on a vigilance committee with folks suspecting me. It isn't fair either way, to me or them. Then, in the second place, I've got a say. I tell you, Doc, straight up and down, as man to man, I don't hunt with hounds that are snapping at my shoulders in the run. I'm either a rustler or I'm not. I choose to say I'm not. That being so I guess I'm the most interested in running these gophers, who are, to their holes. Well, that's what I'm going to do. But I'm going to do it in my own way, and not under any man's command. I've got a few dollars by me and so long as they last, and my horse lasts out, I'm going to get busy. You're a man of intelligence, so I guess you'll see my point. Anyway, I hunt alone."

It was a lucky thing for Jim Thorpe that he was dealing with a really strong man, and a fearless one. One weak spot in the character of Doc Crombie, one trifling pettiness, which could have taken umbrage at the defiance of his authority, one atom of small-mindedness, whereby he could have been influenced by the curious evidence against this man, and the yelping hounds of Barnriff would have been let loose, and set raging at his heels. As it was, Doc Crombie, whatever may have been his faults, was before all things a man.

He turned from Jim with a shrug.

"Plain speakin's good med'cine," he said, glancing coldly over his shoulder. "You've spoke a heap plain. So will I. Hit your own trail, boy. But remember, this dogone rustler's got to be rounded up and finished off as neat as a rawhide rope'll do it. If he ain't found—wal, we're goin' to clear Barnriff of this trouble anyways. I don't guess you need a heap of extry-ordinary understandin' to get my meaning. You're gettin' a big chanct—why, take it. Gay," he said, turning abruptly to the butcher, "I guess you'll make the tally of the committee. We start out to-night."

CHAPTER XXIII

TERROR

Eve was alone. Never in all her life had she been so absolutely alone as now. She rocked herself to and fro beside her kitchen stove, her thoughts and fears rioting through body and mind, until she sat shivering with terror in the warmth of her own fireside.

It was nearly nine o'clock in the evening and the vigilantes were due back in the village before midnight. What would be their news? What——? She paused, listening fearfully. But the sound she heard was only a creaking of the frame of her little home.

The suspense was nerve racking. Would it never end? Yes, she felt it would end—certainly, inevitably. And the conviction produced a fresh shudder in her slight body. Three hours ago she had seen Jim Thorpe and his jaded horse return to the village. She had longed to seek him out—he had gone to Peter Blunt's hut for the night—and question him. But she had refrained. Whatever Jim's actual attitude toward her, she must think of him in her calculations as the bitterest enemy. In her tense nervousness she laughed hysterically. Jim, her enemy? How ridiculous it seemed. And a year ago he had been her lover.

For a moment her terror eased. Thoughts of a year ago were far removed from the horror of her present. Jim could be nobody's enemy unless it were his own. Her enemy? Never. He was too kind, too honest, too much a man. And yet—the haunting of the moment broke out afresh—he must be. In self-defense he must be her enemy. He could not clear his own name otherwise.

She pondered. Her eyes grew less wild, less frightened, and a soft glow welled up in her heart as she thought of the man whom she declared must be her enemy. Just for a moment she thought how different things might have been had only her choice fallen otherwise. Then she stifled her regrets, and, in an instant, was caught again in the toils of the horror that lay before her.

She tried to think out what she must do when the vigilantes returned. What would be her best course? She wanted advice so badly. She wanted to talk it over with somebody, somebody who had clear judgment, somebody who could think with a man's cool courage. Yes, she wanted a man's advice. And there was no man to whom she could appeal. Jim?—no, she decided that she could not go to him. She felt that, for safety, she had seen too much of him already. Peter? Ah, yes! But the thought of him only recalled to her mind another trouble with which she was beset. It was one, which, amidst the horror of the matter of the cattle stealing, had, for the moment, been banished from her mind.

She remembered the note she had received from him that morning, and groped for it in the bosom of her dress. It had reached her by a special messenger, and its tone, for Peter, was urgent and serious. She found it at last, and straightened out its creases. She was thankful for the occupation, and lingered over it before she read it over again.

"Dear Eve,

"Has Elia returned home? He left camp two mornings ago, before sun up. I've been hunting him ever since, but can't locate him. I've a shrewd idea that he's on the trail of your Will, but can't be sure. Anyway, I'm worried to death about him, and, as a last resource, thought he might have gone back to you. Send word by the bearer.

"Yours,
"Peter Blunt."

Elia gone. The thought filled her with dismay. Elia was the one person in the world she still clung to. And now he had gone—been spirited away.

She thought of the poor stricken lad with his crooked body. She loved him as she might have loved a child of her own. Yes, he was much more to her than her brother. Had not she cared and struggled for him all these years? He had become part of her very life.

And Peter, in whose care she had left him, had failed her. Who on earth could she trust, if not Peter? She blamed him, blamed him bitterly; but, in her heart, she knew she had no right to. Peter would not willingly hurt her, and she knew well enough that if Elia had gone it was through no carelessness of this gentle, kindly man.

She put the note away, and sat staring into the fire. The change of thought had eased the pitch of her nerves for a moment. If she could only blot that other out altogether—but even as the wish was formulated in her brain, the horror and dread were on her again crushing her.

She sprang to her feet and paced the room with rapid, uneven strides. She could not rest. The dread of the return of the vigilantes obsessed her. She found herself vaguely wondering if they were all out. Was Doc Crombie out? No, she knew he wasn't. That was something. That was the man she most dreaded. To her heated imagination he seemed inevitable. He could not fail in his self-imposed mission. He would hunt his man down. He would never pause until the wretched victim was swinging at the rope end.

She shuddered. This sort of thing had never before impressed its horror upon her as it did now. How should it? It had always seemed so far away, so remote from her life. And now—oh, God, to think that its shadow was so near her!

Then for a second her struggling brain eased with an undefined hope. She was thinking of how they had tried to track Will before, and how

they had failed. She tried to tell herself that then their incentive had been even greater. Had it not been the greed of gold? And she well knew its power with these men. Yes, it suggested hope. But that one passing gleam vanished all too swiftly. She felt in her inmost heart that no such luck would serve him now. These men were bloodhounds on a trail of blood. They were demanding a life, nor would they lift their noses from the scent until their work was accomplished.

It was not the man. It was not the thought of his life that drove her frantic now. It was the horror of such an end to her wretched marriage. The wife of a cattle-thief! The widow of a man lynched by his fellow citizens! She buried her face in her hands, and hard, dry sobs racked her body.

For a moment she stood thus. Then she suddenly lifted her head, her eyes staring, her whole attitude alert, intent. There was a sound outside. She heard the clank of the latch. And now an awkward shuffling gait just outside her door. She moved toward the parlor and stood listening in the doorway.

Suddenly a light broke in upon her. That awkward footstep! She knew it! Her relief was heartbreaking. It was Elia. With a rush she was at the door, and the next moment she dragged the boy in, and was crooning over him like some mother over a long-lost child.

But the boy pushed her away roughly. His calm face and gentle eyes now shone with excitement, one of those excitements she so dreaded in him.

"Quit, sis," he cried sharply. "I ain't no use fer sech slobberin'. I ain't a kid. Say——"

He broke off, eyeing her with his head bent sideways in the extraordinary attitude which a cruel nature had inflicted upon him.

"Yes."

Eve's eyes were full of a yearning tenderness. His rebuff meant

nothing to her devotion. She believed it to be only his way. Part of the cruel disease for which he must be pitied and not blamed.

But his broken sentence remained uncompleted. His eyes were fixed upon her face bland yet sparkling with the thought behind them.

"Peter sent word to me to-day that you—you were lost," Eve said.

The boy laughed without relaxing a muscle.

"Did he? He's a fule someways."

He passed into the kitchen and took Eve's rocking-chair. She followed him, and stood leaning against the table.

"Then you—you didn't get lost?"

"Say, you folks make me sick. Why 'ud I get lost more'n other fellers? You guess I'm a kid—but I ain't. Lost! Gee! Say, sis, Peter orter know'd wher' I was. I told him I was goin'. An' I went. Sure I went." He rubbed his delicate hands together in his glee. His eyes sparkled again with rising excitement. But Eve forgot her fears for him now; she was interested. She was lifted out of her own despair by his evident joy, and waited for him to tell his story.

But Elia had his own way of doing things, and that way was rarely a pleasant one. Nor was it now, as Eve was quickly to learn.

"Yes, sure, Peter's a fule, someways—but I like him. He's real good. Say, sis, he's goin' to give me all the gold he finds. He said so. Yep. An' he'll do it. Guess he's good. That's sure why I didn't do what he told me not to."

He sat blinking up at his sister with impish amusement. Suddenly something in his expression stirred his sister to alarm. Nor could she have said how it came to her, or what the nature of the alarm. It was there undefined, but none the less certain.

"What did he tell you not to do?" she asked anxiously.

"Give him away. Say, here, I'll tell you. It's a dandy yarn. Y'see I ain't just as other folks are, sis; there's things I ken do, an' things I ken understand wot other folks can't. Say, I ken trail like—like a wolf. Well, I guess one day I told Peter I could trail. I told him I could trail your Will, an' find out wher' he got his gold."

"And did you?"

The girl's demand was almost a shriek. The boy nodded his bent head wisely, and his eyes lit with malice.

"And you didn't give him away? You wouldn't—you wouldn't? He's my husband."

The pleading in his sister's voice was pitiful to hear.

"That's sure what Peter made me promise—or I wouldn't get his gold."

Eve breathed more freely. But her relief was short-lived.

The boy began to laugh. It was a soft chuckle that found no expression in his face. The sound of it sent a shudder through the harassed woman.

"No. I didn't give him away," he said suddenly. "Sis, I trailed an' trailed, an' I found him. Gee, I found him. He was diggin' his gold, but it was in the hides of cattle, an' with a red-hot brandin' iron. Gee! I watched him, but he didn't see me. Oh, no, I took care of that. If he'd seen me he'd sure have killed me. Say, sis, your Will's a cattle-thief. You've heerd tell of 'em, ain't you? Do you know what they do to cattle-thieves? I'll tell you. They hang 'em. They hang 'em slow. They haul 'em up, an' their necks stretch, an'—an' then they die. Then the coyotes come round an' jump up an' try to eat 'em. An' they hang there till they stink. That's how they treat cattle-rustlers. An' Will's a cattle-rustler."

"For God's sake, be quiet!"

The woman's face was terrible in its horror, but it only seemed to give the boy pleasure, for he went on at once.

"Ther' ain't no use in squealin'. I didn't give him away. I'd like to, because I'd like to see Will with his neck pulled sure. But I want Peter's gold, an' I wouldn't get it if I give him away."

"Did you come straight back here?" Eve questioned him sharply, a faint hope stirring her.

"Yep, sis, straight here." He laughed silently while he watched her with feline glee. "An' jest as fast as I could get, too. You see, I guessed I might miss Doc Crombie."

"Doc Crombie?" The girl's eyes dilated. She stood like one petrified.

"Sure. You see I couldn't give Will away because of Peter. But I told him wher' the stolen cattle wer'. An' that I'd seen the rustlers at work, an' if he got busy he'd get 'em right off, an'——"

But he got no further; Eve had him by the shoulders in a clutch that chilled his heart to a maddening fear. His eyes stared, and he gasped as though about to faint.

"You told him that—you—you? You never did! You couldn't! You wouldn't dare! Oh, God, and to think! Elia, Elia! Say you didn't. You'll never—you'll never get Peter's gold!"

The woman was beside herself. She had no idea of what she was saying. All she knew was that Doc Crombie had been told of Will's hiding-place, and, for all she knew, might be on his way there now. Discovery was certain; and discovery meant——

But suddenly she realized the boy's condition. He was on the verge of collapse from sheer dread of physical hurt. His face was ashen, and his eyes were almost starting from their sockets. In an agony of remorse and fear she released him and knelt before him.

"I'm sorry, Elia. I didn't mean to hurt you. But—but you haven't told

Doc?" she cried piteously. "Say you haven't, dear. Oh, God!"

She abruptly buried her face in her hands as though to shut out the horrid sight of this thing her brother had done.

Elia recovered quickly, but his vicious glee had dropped to a sulkily savagery.

"You're a fule, sis," he said, in a sullen tone. "I sure did it for you—an' 'cos I hate him. But say," he cried, becoming suddenly suspicious. "I didn't tell Doc who it was. I kep' my promise to Peter. I sure didn't give him away. So why for do you raise sech a racket? An' anyway if he hangs you won't be married to him no more. You——"

He broke off, listening. The sound of a horse galloping could be plainly heard. The noise abruptly ceased, and the boy looked up with the light of understanding in his eyes.

"One o' the boys, sis. One o' Doc's boys. Mebbe——"

But he was interrupted by the opening of the outer door, and Peter Blunt strode in.

The expression of the man's face was sufficient explanation of his unceremonious visit. He made no pretense at apology. He glanced swiftly round the little parlor, and finally espied Eve and her brother through the open kitchen door. He hurried across and stood before them, his eyes on the boy he had spent two days searching for.

"Thank God I've found you, laddie——" he began.

But Eve cut him short.

"Oh, Peter, Peter, thank God you've come!" she cried.

Immediately the man's eyes were transferred to her face.

"What is it?" he demanded sharply. And some of the girl's terror suddenly clutched at his heart.

"He's found him. Will, I mean. Will's the cattle-thief. He found him in

the midst of re-branding. And he came right in and told—told Doc Crombie.”

In an instant Elia was sitting forward defending himself.

“I didn’t tell him who he was. Sure I didn’t, ’cos you said I wouldn’t get that gold if I did—if I give him away. I didn’t give him away, sure—sure. I jest told Doc where he’d find the rustlers. That’s all. That ain’t giving Will away, is it?”

But Peter ignored the boy’s defense. His shrewd mind was working swiftly. Here was his own unspoken suspicion of the man verified. The whole situation was all too clear. He turned to Eve with a sharp inquiry.

“So Will’s the cattle-thief. You knew it?”

The girl shook her head and wrung her hands piteously.

“No, no; I didn’t know it. Indeed, indeed, I didn’t. Lately I suspected—thought—but I didn’t know.” Then she cried helplessly. “Oh, Peter, what’s to be done? We must—we must save him!”

In an instant Elia was on his feet protesting.

“What for you want to save him?” he cried. “He’s a crook. He’s a thief. He’s bad—I tell you he’s bad.”

But Peter suddenly thrust out one great hand and pushed him back into his chair.

“Sit there and keep quiet,” he said sternly. “Now, let’s think. You told Doc, eh?”

“Yes,” retorted the boy sulkily. “An’ he’s goin’ out after ’em to-night. An’ I’m glad, ’cos they’ll get him.”

“If they get him you’ll never get your gold, laddie, because you’ve given him away. Do you understand?”

Eve, watching these two, began to realize something of the working of

Peter's mind. He meant to win Elia over to his side, and was adopting the only possible means.

The boy remained obstinately silent, and Peter went on.

"Now, see here, which would you rather do, get that gold—an' there's plenty; it comes right through here to Barnriff—or see Will hang?"

In spite of his hatred of Will, the boy was dazzled.

"I'd like to see Will hang—but—I'd rather git the gold."

"Well," said Peter, with a sigh of relief, "ther's just one way for you to get it. You've got to put us wise how to get to Will to warn him before Doc gets him. If Will hangs, you don't get your gold."

A sudden hope lit Eve's troubled face. This man, she knew, was to be Will's savior—her savior. Her heart swelled with thankfulness and hope. This man, without a second's demur, had embraced her cause, was ready to incriminate himself, to save the worst criminal a cattle country knows, because—just because he wanted to help a woman, who was nothing to him, and never could be anything to him. It was the love he had for all suffering humanity, the wonderful charity of his kindly heart, that made him desire to help all those who needed his help.

She was listening now to the manner in which he extracted from her unwilling brother the information he sought. He did it bit by bit, with much care and deliberation. He wanted no mistake. The direction in which Will's secret corrals lay must be given with the last word in exactness, for any delay in finding him might upset his purpose.

Having extracted all the information necessary, he gave the lad a final warning.

"Now, see here, Elia, you're a good lad—better than you seem; but I'm not going to be played with. I've got gold in plenty, sure, and you're going to get it if you stay right here, and don't say a word to any one

about Will or this cattle-rustling. If you do anything that prevents Will getting clear away, or let folks know that he's the rustler, then you get no gold—not one cent.”

“Then, wot's this I've heerd about Jim? Guess you want him to get the blame. You want 'em to hang Jim Thorpe?”

The boy's cunning was paralyzing. Eve's eyes widened with a fresh fear, and, for a moment, Peter was gravely silent.

“Yes,” he said presently, “for a while he must still have the blame.”

Then he turned to the woman.

“I wish I could get hold of Jim,” he said regretfully. “Amongst other things, I want his horse.”

In an instant Eve remembered.

“He’s over in your shack. I saw him go there at sundown.”

Peter’s face cleared.

“Good,” he cried. “Come on, we’ll all go over there. I’ll go by the front way, with Elia. You sneak out the back way after we’re gone.”

CHAPTER XXIV

FOR A WOMAN

Seated before the cold stove in Peter Blunt's hut, Jim Thorpe was lost in moody thought. His day had been long and wearying. He had risen before sun-up with little enough hope in his heart to cheer his day in the saddle, and now he was contemplating his blankets at night with even less.

Search, search. That had been his day. A fruitless search for the one man whom he now believed to be the only person who could lift the blight of suspicion from his overburdened shoulders.

Yes, where most Eve had sought to shield, she had most surely betrayed by her woman's weakness and fear. For the truth had been forced upon Jim's unsuspecting mind even against himself. Eve's terror, during her long talk with him on his return from McLagan's ranch, had done the very thing she had most sought to prevent. Her whole attitude had told him its own story of her anxiety for some one, and that some one could only have been her husband. And the rest had been brought about by the arguments of his own common sense.

At first her fear had only suggested the anxiety of a friend for himself, at the jeopardy in which public suspicion had placed him. Now he laughed at the conceit of the thought, although, at the time, it had seemed natural enough. Then the intensity of her fears had become so great, and the personal, selfish note in her attitude so pronounced, that his suspicion was aroused, and he found himself groping for its meaning, its necessity.

Her terror seemed absurd. It could not be for him. It was out of all proportion. No, it was not for him. Was it for herself? He could see no reason. Then, why? For whom? And in a flash, as such realizations sometimes do come, even to the most unsuspecting, the whole thing leaped into his focus. If she had nothing to fear for herself, for whom did she fear? There was but one person—her husband.

If she feared for her husband, then she must suspect him. If she suspected, then there must be reason. But once this key was put into his hand, it needed little argument to make the whole thing plain. Point after point occurred to his mind carrying with each a conviction that was beyond the necessity of any argument that he could offer. He saw the whole thing with much the same instinctive conviction with which the wife had seen it.

Will had calculated his revenge on him carefully. He saw now what Eve had missed. The using of the “**” brand,—which he must have stolen from Jim’s implement shed—the running of the small bunch of McLagan’s cattle with his, Jim’s; these things had been well thought out, a carefully calculated revenge for his interference on the night Will had come so near to killing his own wife. He meant to throw suspicion upon him, suspicion which, in such a country of hot-headed cattlemen, was so narrowly removed from conviction.

So he had set out on his solitary quest to find this man, and had failed. He felt that he must find him, yet he hardly knew how it could serve him to do so. For there was that in the back of his mind which sorely troubled him.

He was thinking of Eve. Poor Eve! With Will found, or suspicion directed upon him, her troubles would be a hundred times magnified. The man was her husband, and there was no doubt in his mind, that, whatever his faults, she still loved him. If he needed confirmation of his belief there was her anxiety, her terrible dread when talking to him. The position was one to tax a far more subtle mind than his. What

was to be done?

Clear himself he must, but every way he looked seemed to be barred by the certainty of bringing disgrace and unhappiness upon Eve. The thought revolted him, and yet—and yet, why should he take the blame? Why should he leave his name stinking in the mire of such a crime? It was maddening. What devilish luck! Was there no end to the cruelty of his fate?

Suddenly, he laughed. He had to, or the thing would drive him to something desperate. Fate had such refreshing ways of getting at a man. She brought about his disgrace through no fault of his own, and then refused him the only means of clearing himself. Fortune certainly could be a jade when she chose. Clear himself at the expense of the one woman in the world he loved? No, he couldn't do that. Perhaps that was why he was given such a cruel chance.

But his whimsical moment was quickly gone. The tragedy of his position was all too harsh for such levity, and he frowned down at the cold iron of Peter's stove. What must he do? He could see no way out. For perhaps the hundredth time that day his question remained unanswered. One thing he had made up his mind to, although he could not see how it was to help him in his dilemma. He must find Will Henderson.

He rose from his seat, stretched his aching limbs, and turned to his blankets.

But he did not unroll them. The heavy step of some one approaching startled him. Who could it be? Peter was away—and yet—and yet—— He listened intently, and suddenly his eyes lit. It was like Peter's step. He went to the door and threw it open, and in a moment was greeting the one man whose coming at such a moment could have made him feel glad.

"Say, Peter, this is bully," he cried, shaking the big man's hand. "I didn't guess you'd be coming along in. Who's that with you? Eh? Oh,

Elia."

Peter nodded. But his usual smile was lacking.

"Yes. Eve's just coming along. Ah, here she is," he added, as the girl suddenly appeared in the doorway. "Come in, my dear," he went on kindly. "Guess we caught Jim before he got down for the night."

Jim offered the girl no greeting. All thought of formalities was driven from his mind at the sight of her expression. The hunted look in her eyes was even greater than it had been two days ago, and he wondered what fresh development had brought it about. He was not long left in doubt. Peter eyed him ruefully, and then glanced at the door which was still open.

"It's trouble, Jim, fresh trouble, so—I guess I'll shut this door tight."

While he was doing so, Jim pushed the chair toward Eve, into which she almost fell. Then he glanced at Elia, speculating. As Peter returned to the group he dropped back and seated himself on the rough bed, waiting for enlightenment. Peter leaned himself against the table, his grizzled face frowning thoughtfully.

"I'm needing a horse to-night—now," he said. "An' he's got to do sixty miles between this and sundown to-morrow. I want yours. Can I have it?"

The man's shrewd blue eyes were steadily fixed on Jim's face. He was putting all his knowledge of the ranchman to the test in his own subtle way. He was asking this man to help him against himself. He was asking this man to help him prevent his removing the unmerited suspicion with which he was branded. But he intended to do it openly, frankly. And his reason was because he understood a good deal of human nature, and of Jim Thorpe particularly.

"You can have him. What for?"

"No, no," Eve cried, starting up to prevent Peter answering.

But the big man motioned her to calm herself.

"Don't worry, Eve, my dear," he said. "This thing's between Jim and me. And I don't think there's going to be much explanation needed."

Jim nodded, and his glance fell on Elia. He was wondering what part the boy was playing in the scene.

"It's Will," said Peter. "We've got to get him warned—for her sake." He nodded in Eve's direction, but turned away quickly as her face dropped into her two hands and remained hidden.

"You don't need to tell me any more, Peter," said Jim, huskily. "Just give me the other details. You see, I fancy I know all about him, except his whereabouts."

Eve looked up startled.

"You know," she whispered in awe.

Jim nodded.

"I've thought things out this last two days," he said quietly. Then he turned to Peter. "But this warning. What's made it necessary? Have others been—thinking?"

"No. They've been put wise." Peter's eyes sought the unsmiling face of Elia. "You see, Elia hunted him out. He's told Doc where he'll find the rustlers. But mercifully he didn't say who the rustler was."

"Ah, Elia hates Will," Jim said thoughtfully.

"Doc's setting out to-night to—find him," Peter added.

Jim glanced from Eve to the grizzled man. Just for a second he marveled at him. Then the feeling passed as recollections flew through his mind of a dozen and one kindnesses of heart which this quaint Englishman had performed. This was just the sort of thing Peter would do. He would simply, and unconcernedly, thrust his head into the lion's jaws to help anybody.

"You're going to take the warning?" he inquired.

"Sure." Then Peter added apologetically, with a swift glance in Eve's direction, "You see, we can't let 'em—find him."

A shadowy smile grew into Jim's eyes. Peter wanted his horse for a purpose. And that very purpose would inevitably drive the brand which was already upon him deeper and deeper into his flesh. He was calmly asking him to sacrifice himself for Eve. He glanced in the girl's direction, and all the old love was uppermost in his simple heart.

"When did you get in?" he asked Peter, abruptly.

"Just now."

"Been in the saddle all day?"

"Yep. But that's no con——"

"No. Only I was thinking."

Jim's eyes were still on Eve. The girl was looking straight before her at the stove. She could only wait. These men, she felt, were shouldering her burden. But she was anxious. Somehow she hadn't the same knowledge of Jim that Peter had. But then, how should she? Her point of view was so different.

Suddenly Jim started up.

"No, Peter, old friend, you can't have the horse—I need it."

Peter started forward. He was startled out of his belief in the man.

"What in——"

But Jim cut him short.

"Hold up, Peter. Eve's here," he said. Then he glanced at Elia. "I'll carry that warning. And I'll tell you why. Oh, no," as Eve suddenly started to protest, "I'm only going to speak common sense. Here's the facts which you, old friend, with all your wisdom, seem to have

overlooked.” He smiled up into Peter’s face. “First, the man who goes must ride light. You can’t be accused of that. You see, we’ve sure got to get there first. My plug’s been out all day, and has only had about four hours’ rest. I can get the most out of him the easiest. Then, you see, you’re known to be in town, and if you pike the trail to-night folks’ll get guessing. Then, you see, it’s my business to be out—they expect it of me. Then—if things go wrong—which I don’t guess they will—my name stinks a bit around here, and, well, a bit more or less don’t cut any ice. Then there’s another thing—Elia. You’ve got to keep a close eye on him, sure. If they get at him—well— Anyway, that’s what I can’t do under the circumstances.”

Peter’s face grew almost stern as he listened to the marshaling of the man’s arguments. Jim saw his look and understood. But he had clearly made up his mind.

“It’s no use, Peter. You can’t have that horse. I’m going to get the saddle on.”

He rose to go. But the big man suddenly barred his way. His face was stern and set—something like a thunder-cloud seemed to have settled upon his kindly brow.

“Hold on. I’ll allow your arguments are mostly clear. Guess you’ll have to go. But I want to tell you this, Jim. If things go wrong, I’ll—I’ll shoot the man that lays hands on you. I’ll shoot him dead!”

But Eve was on her feet at Jim’s side, and her soft hands were gripping his arm with a nervous clutch.

“No, no, Jim,” she cried, with tears in her eyes. “You—you mustn’t go. I see it now. I didn’t see it before. You—you are branded now, and—and you’re going to help him. Oh, Jim, you mustn’t! We had no right to ask for your horse. Indeed, indeed we hadn’t. You mustn’t go. Neither of you must. No, please, please stay. It means hanging if you are—”

“Don’t you say anything more, Eve,” Jim said, gently but firmly

releasing himself from her hold. "I've thought of all those things. Besides, you must never forget that Will—is my cousin."

But Peter could stand no more.

"Come on," he said, almost roughly. "It's late enough already. Maybe they'll be starting directly. Here, Elia, you tell us just where Will's in hiding, and mind you don't miss anything."

It took barely five minutes for Elia to give the required directions again, which he did ungraciously enough. But Peter verified his account with the original story, and was satisfied.

Then the two men went out and saddled the horse. In three minutes Jim was in the saddle, and Peter gripped him by the hand.

"The good God'll help you out for this, Jim. So long."

"So long."

As the horseman passed the hut Eve and Elia were standing before the closed door. Jim saw them, but he would not pause. However, his keen ears heard the whispered "God bless you" which the woman threw after him. And somehow he felt that nothing else in his life much mattered.

A few moments later Eve was at her gate, fumbling for the latch. Elia was at her side, looking out at the lights of the village. Suddenly he turned and raised his beautiful face to hers.

"Say, sis, you're a fule woman," he declared sharply. He was listening to the sounds of bustle down at the saloon. "Can't you hear? That's the boys. They've come in, and they're gettin' ready to start with Doc. If they get him—they'll hang him."

"Him? Who? What d'you mean?"

The terrified woman was staring down into his calm eyes.

"Why—Jim."

"Oh, God, no! They can't! They won't! He's too good—too brave! God will never let them. It would be too cruel."

"Say, I guess you'd be sorry some?"

"Sorry?"

But Eve was fumbling again at the gate. Nor could the boy extract another word from her.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TRAIL OF THE RUSTLERS

The blackness of night begins to stir. Ahead and above roll vague shadows, darkening, threatening, in the immensity of their wave-like shapes. Away behind the stars shine pitifully, for a dim gray light in the east heralds the coming of day. Slowly the shadows change from black to a faint gray, and their rolling becomes more pronounced. Now, with each passing moment, the eastern light grows, and the darkness of the west responds; now, too, the shadows show themselves for what they are. They stir and seethe like the churning of water nearly boiling, under the rising zephyrs of mountain air. They are the dense morning mists, a hazy curtain shutting out the mountain splendor beyond.

In less than half an hour a wonderful metamorphosis. A tinted fringe of cloud appears on the mists high up, and gives the impression of a beam of sunlight amidst the shadows. But no sun has broken the eastern sky-line, nor will it for another half-hour. Yet the light increases, and the swirling mists become a rosy cloudland, deep, ruddy, and exquisitely beautiful. The living fog rolls up, lifting, lifting, and every moment the picture grows in beauty and in its wonders of changing colors.

Eastward the horizon lights a glowing yellow, shot with feathery dashes of ruddy orange; yellow to green, and then the gray of the high starlit vault. But the stars are dimming, whimpering under their loss of power. Their archenemy of day is approaching, and they must shrink

away and hide till the fiery path of the monarch of the universe cools, and they are left again to their own.

Doc Crombie was riding at the head of his men when the sun cleared the horizon. He was staring ahead at the still hazy foot-hills, the hiding-place of the criminal he sought. The light of battle was in his keen, quick, luminous eyes. His face was set and stern. There was no mercy in the set of his jaws, in the drawn shaggy brows. He was out to rid the country, his country, of a scourge, a pestilence neither he nor his fellow townsmen would tolerate.

The rest of the vigilantes rode behind him, no less stern-faced than their leader. With fresh horses they had traveled long and hard that night. The journey had been chilly, and the trail rough. Their tempers were at a low ebb, and the condition only added to their determination to hang the man as soon as he was in their power.

Doc drew rein suddenly and called Smallbones to his side. The trail, which had now faded into something little better than a cattle track, was leading into the mouth of a narrow valley, bordered on either side by towering, forest-clad hills. He pointed ahead.

"That blamed kid said we'd keep right on down this cuttin' to the third hill on the left," he said. "It's nigh four miles. Then we'd find a clump of scrub with two lone pines standin' separate. Here we'd get a track of cattle marked plenty. Then we'd follow that for nigh two miles, and we'd drop into the rustlers' hollow."

"Sure. Don't sound a heap o' trouble," said Smallbones, cheerfully.

"Say, I'm not figgerin' the trouble. But we've traveled slow. We won't make it for an hour an' more, an' we're well past sun-up now. It was waitin' for the boys to git in. I sort o' wish I'd brought that kid along."

They were moving on again at a rapid canter, and Smallbones was riding at his side. The little man, like the rest, was armed liberally. But whereas the others were, for the most part, content with two guns, he

had four. It would not be for lack of desire on his part if somebody did not die before noon.

"We couldn't help startin' late," grumbled the little man. "An' as fer that kid, I'd sure 'a' kep' him with us. Who's to say he ain't handed us a fool game? He's a crank, anyways, an' orter be looked after by State. He guessed he see the rustlers at work, but didn't rec'nize 'em. I said right then he was bluffin'. D'you think he wouldn't know Jim Thorpe?"

"Barkin' that yet, eh!" retorted Doc, sharply. "Say, boy," he went on with a great contempt, "you're dirty. Jim Thorpe ain't the man we're after. Leastways I won't believe it till we git him red-handed. I wouldn't be out to-night if I thought it was Jim Thorpe. We left him back ther' in the village. He's been out two days chasin' for rustlers. See here, you're mean on him 'bout this thing, because things are queer his way. An' you ain't got savvee to see that it's 'cos things is queer his way is just the reason he ain't the dogone rustler we're chasin'. You need to think a sight more. Mebbe it hurts some, but it's a heap good."

Smallbones shot a swift, sidelong glance at the doctor, in which there was little enough friendliness. He probably had no friendliness for anybody.

"I'll hand you a noo buggy to a three-year-old driver he's our man," he snapped.

"Done," grinned the sporting doctor promptly. And Smallbones was the least bit sorry he had laid so generous odds.

By this time day was in its full early-morning glory, but they were passing from the dazzling light of the plains into the more sheltered atmosphere of the valley. Everywhere the hills rose about them, on either side and ahead. The gloomy woods on the vast slopes threw a marked shadow over the prospect. Ahead lay a wide vista of tremendous mountains, with their crowning, snow-bound peaks lost in a world of gray, fleecy cloud. In the heart of one distant rift lay the

steely bed of a glacier, hoary with age and immovable as the very bedrocks of the mountains themselves. It sloped away into the distance, and lost itself in the heart of a mighty cañon. Even to these men on their trail of death, living, as they did, so adjacent to these mysterious wilds, the scene was not without its awe.

The doctor was watching the hills to the left. The first one seemed endless, and he sought a break in it in every shadowed indentation upon its face. He was feeling more anxious than his own words suggested. He was a shrewd man who had understood the ring of truth in Elia's story at once, but now, in face of this stupendous world, he was wondering if he had been well advised in leaving the boy behind. He had only done so on the score of his crippled condition being a nuisance to them. However, his doubt found no further expression now, and his keen eyes watched for the landmarks in a way that left him little chance of missing them.

At last the first hill came to a distinct end, and the second rose higher and more rough. Its face was torn and barren, and what timber there was grew low down almost at its foot. The valley was narrowing, and the rich prairie grass was changing to a lank tangle of weedy tufts. There was a suspicion of moisture, too, in the spongy tread. The sun further lost power here, between these narrowing crags, and, although summer was well advanced, the ground still bore the moist traces of the mountain spring.

The second hill was passed quickly. It was merely a split of the original mountain, the result, no doubt, of a great volcanic upheaval in the early days of the world. And now, as they rode on, the third and last landmark before the two lone pines rapidly slipped away behind them.

The leader bustled his horse. His nervous force was at a great tension of impatience. He, like the rest of the merciless band, was yearning for his goal.

At last the two lone pines loomed up. The eyes of the men brightened with eagerness, and their leader felt certain of the faith he had placed in Elia's story. Now for the cattle tracks.

As they came abreast of the low bush, the doctor scattered his men in various directions to hunt for the trail. Nor did the matter take long. In less than five minutes two of the ranch hands lit on the tracks simultaneously. A great broad track of hoof-marks deeply indented in the soft ground stretched away up over the shoulder of the hill. So plain were they that the horsemen were able to follow them at a gallop.

Away up the hillside they sped. The way was a sharp incline, but smooth and wide, and free from obstruction. And in ten minutes they were pausing to breathe their hard-blowing horses on the shoulder of the hill, with a wide view and a level track ahead of them.

The doctor turned to order a careful redistribution. They were near the rustlers' hollow now, he believed, and it was his intention to leave nothing to chance. Each man received his instructions for the moment when the hollow should be reached, for Elia had given him full details of its locality, and the possibilities of approach.

He knew it to be a mere cup, with, apparently, no entrance or exit, except the way they were now approaching it. It had appeared to Elia to be surrounded by towering hills, densely clad in forests of spruce and pine. He had described the corral as being on the left front from the entrance, and that a hut, backing into the flanking woods, occupied the distance on the right.

The doctor's disposition, in consequence, was simple. The whole party were to race at a gallop into the hollow. The eight leaders were to ride straight for the hut, no matter what fire might be opposed to them. The six men immediately in their rear were to open out and ride for the encompassing fringe of woods, lest any of the rustlers should make for escape that way. While the rest of the party were to ride for

the corral, and round up everything that looked like a saddle horse; this last with a view to preventing any chances of ultimate escape.

These matters settled they continued their journey without loss of time. For every man of them was sternly eager to come to clinches with their quarry. The excited interest was running high as they neared their goal. Then all at once Smallbones suddenly threw the whole party into confusion by flinging his horse abruptly upon its haunches, and wildly pointing up the hillside on their immediate left.

"Gee!" he cried, furiously. "Look at that. There! There! There he goes!"

But there was no need for his added explanation. Two hundred yards away to their left a horseman was racing headlong in a parallel direction. It needed no imagination to tell them that he was a scout carrying the alarm to his comrades in the hollow beyond.

But his course was a different one to that which might have been expected, for it showed no signs of converging with the track below, and was significant of an unsuspected, possibly secret entrance to the hiding-place.

But the doctor was a man for emergency. Four of the men carried rifles, and these he warned to be ready to fire on the fugitive when he gave the word.

Then he led his men at a race down the track.

It was an inspiring spot for the imaginative.

A little cup of perfect emerald green set within the darker border of the soft pinewoods. Above, the brilliant sky poured down a dazzling light through the funnel-like opening walled by an almost complete circle of hills. But the circle was not quite complete. There were three distinct, but narrow rifts, and they opened out in three widely opposite directions. The cup rim was almost equally divided into three.

In a spacious corral of raw timbers a number of cattle were moving restlessly about, vainly searching for something with which to satisfy their voracious morning appetites. Close beside the corral was a small branding forge, its fire smouldering dismally in the chill air. Round about this, strewn upon the trampled grass, lay a number of branding irons, coiled ropes, and all the paraphernalia of a cattle thief's trade, while beside the corral itself were three telltale saddle horses, waiting ready for their riders on the first sound of alarm.

Fifty yards away stood a log hut. It was solid and practical, and comparatively capacious. A couple of yards away a trench fire was burning cheerfully. And over it, on an iron hook-stanchion, was suspended a prairie cooking "billy," from which a steaming aroma, most appetizing at that hour of the morning, was issuing. Various camping utensils were scattered carelessly about, and a perfect atmosphere of the most innocent homeliness prevailed.

On the sill of the hut door Will Henderson was seated smoking, with his elbows planted on his knees, and his two hands supporting the bowl of his pipe. His eyes were as calmly contemplative as those of the stolen cattle in the corral.

To judge by his expression, he had no thought of danger, and his affairs were prospering to his keenest satisfaction. His handsome boyish face had lost all signs of dissipation. His eyes, if sullen, were clear, with the perfect health of his outdoor, mountain life. Nor was there anything of the vicious cattle-rustler about him. His whole expression suggested the hard-working youngster of the West, virile, strong, and bursting with the love of life.

But here, again, appearances were all wrong. Will's mood at that moment was dissatisfied, suspicious. He was yearning for the flesh-pots of town, as exemplified by the bad whiskey and poker in Silas Rocket's saloon.

Lying on the ground, close against the hut wall, two low-looking half-

breeds in gaudy shirts, and wearing their black hair long and unkempt, were filling in the time waiting for breakfast, shooting "crap dice." The only words spoken between them were the filthy epithets and slang they addressed to the dice as they threw them, and the deep-throated curses as money passed between them.

No, there was little enough to suggest the traffic in which these men were engaged. Yet each knew well enough that the shadow of the rope was hanging over him, and that, at any moment, he might have to face a life and death struggle, which would add the crime of murder to the list of his transgressions.

Will slowly removed his pipe from his mouth.

"Say, ain't that grub ready?" he growled. "Hi, you, Pete, quit those dice an' see to it. You're 'chores' to-day. We've got to make forty miles with those damned steers before sun-up to-morrow."

"Ho, you. Git a look at the grub yourself. Say——"

He broke off listening. Then he dropped the dice he was preparing to throw, and a look of alarm leaped to his eyes. "I tink I hear hoofs. Hush!"

Will was on his feet in a second. The sullen light had vanished from his eyes and a startled look of apprehension replaced it.

"Those plugs cinched up?" he demanded sharply. And mechanically his hand fell on the butt of one of the guns at his waist.

"Sure," nodded the other half-breed.

All three listened acutely. Yes, the sound of galloping was plain to their trained hearing. The mountains carried a tremendous echo.

Without further words all three men set off at a run for the corral. Will was the fleetest and reached his horse first. In a second he was in the saddle and sat waiting, and listening for the next alarming sound.

"It's Ganly, sure," he muttered, turning one ear in the direction of the

rapidly approaching sound.

"Sounds like dogone 'get out,'" cried Pete, sharply. The shadow of the rope was very near him at that moment.

The other half-breed nodded.

"Hist!" A sudden fear leaped into Will's eyes. "There's others," he cried. "Come on, and bad luck to the hindmost! Joe's safe. He can get clear by the south trail. They can't follow that way. I'm for the northeast. You best follow. Gee!"

His final exclamation burst from him at the echoing reports of several rifles. And now the sound of galloping hoofs was very near. The men waited no longer. Will set spurs into his horse, and the half-breeds, following him, raced for the northeast exit from the hollow.

But they had waited just a second or two longer than was safe. For, as they reached the forest path, and were vanishing beneath the shadowy trees, a fierce yell went up behind them. Pete, looking back over his shoulder, hissed his alarm to his speeding comrades.

"Ho, boy, it's Doc Crombie, an' a whole gang. An' dey see us, too, sure. But dey never catch us!"

Spurs went into their horses' flanks and the race began. For the noose of the rope was looming large and ominous before their terrified eyes.

A quarter of a mile from the hollow they divided and went their ways in three different directions.

CHAPTER XXVI

ON THE LITTLE BLUFF RIVER

Away to the west, where the plains cease and the hills begin, where the Little Bluff River debouches upon the plains from its secret path through cañon and crevasse, Jim Thorpe was standing beside a low scrub bush, gazing ruefully at his distressed horse. The poor brute was too tired to move from where he stood, nipping at the rich prairie grass about his feet. He still had the strength and necessary appetite to do this, but that was about all.

In his anxiety to serve the woman he loved Jim had done what years ago he had vowed never to do. He had ridden his willing servant to a standstill.

The saddle had been removed for more than an hour and was lying beside the bush, and the man, all impatience and anxiety, was considering his position and the possibility of fulfilling his mission. The outlook was pretty hopeless. He judged that he had at least ten miles to go, with no other means of making the distance than his own two legs.

And then, what would be the use? Doc Crombie was probably on the road. He had heard the men preparing for the start before he left the village. True, they had not overtaken him, but that was nothing. There were other ways of reaching the rustlers' hollow. He knew of at least three trails, and the difference in the distance between them was infinitesimal.

For all he knew the other men might have already reached their destination. Yes, they probably had. He had been out of the saddle more than an hour. It was rotten luck. What would Eve think? He had failed her in her extremity. At least his horse had. And it was much the same thing. He realized now the folly of his attempt on a tired horse. But then there had been no time to get a fresh one. No possibility of getting one without rousing suspicion. Truly his luck was devilish.

He sat down, his back propped against the stump of a dead sapling. And from beneath the wide brim of his hat, pressed low down upon his forehead, he gazed steadily out over the greensward at the southern sky-line. His face was moody. His feelings were depressed. What could he do? In profound thought he sat clasping one knee, which was drawn up almost to his chin.

The beauty and peace of the morning had no part in his thoughts just now. Bitter and depressed feelings alone occupied him. Behind him the noisy little river sped upon its tumultuous way, just below sharp, high banks, and entirely screened from where he sat. There was a gossipy, companionable suggestion in the bustling of the noisy waters. But the feeling was lost upon him. He prayed for inspiration, for help. It was not for himself. It was for a woman. And the bitterness of it all was that he, he with all his longing, was denied the power to help her.

He turned from the hills with a feeling of irritation. Away to his left the prairie rolled upward, a steady rise to a false sky-line something less than a mile away. There was sign of neither man, nor beast, nor habitation of any sort in the prospect. There was just the river bank on which he sat to break up the uniformity of the plain. Here was bush, here were trees, but they were few and scattered.

Presently he rose from his seat and moved over to his horse. The animal lifted its head and looked wistfully into his face. The man interpreted the appeal in his own fashion. And the look hurt him. It was as if the poor beast were asking to be allowed to go on feeding a little

longer. Jim was soft-hearted for all dumb animals, and he quietly and softly swore at his luck. However, he resaddled the animal to protect its back from the sun and turned back again to the bush.

But he never reached his seat. At that instant the quiet was suddenly and harshly broken. The stillness of the plain seemed literally split with the crack of firearms. Two shots rang out in rapid succession, and the faintest of echoes from the distant hills suggested an opposing fire at long range. But the first two shots were near, startlingly near.

All was still again. The man stood staring out in the direction whence came those ominous sounds. No, all was not quite still again. His quick ears detected a faint pounding of hoofs, and a racing thought flew through his brain. His movements became swift, yet deliberate. He crossed over to his horse and replaced the bit in its mouth. Then he faced round at the rising ground and watched the sky-line. It was thence that the reports had come, and his practiced ears had warned him that they were pistol shots.

Now he shaded his eyes gazing at one particular spot on the sky-line. For his horse, too, was gazing thither, with its ears sharply pricked. And, in consequence, he knew that the man, or men who had fired those shots were there, beyond the rise.



Also he was gripping a heavy revolver in his hand.

He waited. Suddenly a moving speck broke the sky-line. Momentarily

it grew larger. Now it was sufficiently silhouetted for him to recognize it. A horseman was coming toward him, racing as hard as spurs could drive the beast under him.

Just for a moment he wondered. Then he glanced swiftly round at the river behind him. Yes, the river. This man was riding from the hills. And he understood in a flash. He was pursued. The hounds had him out in the open. The only shelter for miles around was the sparse bush at the riverside, and—the river itself. His interest became excitement, and a sudden wild hope. He now searched the horizon behind the man. There was not a soul in sight—and yet—those two shots.

But the situation suddenly became critical for himself. He realized that the fugitive had seen him. From a low bending attitude over his horse's neck the man had suddenly sat erect. Also he was gripping a heavy revolver in his hand.

Suddenly a further excitement stirred the waiting man. As the fugitive sat up he recognized him. It was Will Henderson.

He was still a hundred yards away, but the distance was rapidly narrowing. At fifty yards he, Jim, would be well within range, and the memory of those two shots warned him that the revolver in the horseman's hand was no sort of bluff. It meant business, sure enough, and his own identity was not in the least likely to add to his safety. He must convey his peaceful intentions at once.

It was difficult. He dared not shout. He knew how the voice traveled over the plains. Suddenly he remembered. He was one of the few prairie men who still clung to the white handkerchief of civilization. He drew one out of his pocket. It was anything but clean, but it would serve. Throwing up both arms he waved it furiously at the man. This he did three times. Then, dropping it to the ground, he held up both hands in the manner of a prairie surrender.

There was a moment of anxious waiting, then, to his relief, he saw Will head his hard blowing horse in his direction. But still retaining his hold

of his pistol, he came on. And in those few moments before he reached him Jim had an opportunity of close observation.

First he saw that the horse was nearly done. Evidently the chase had been, if short, at least a hard one, and if the hunters were close behind, there was little enough chance of escape for him. The man's eyes were alight and staring with the suspicious look of the hunted. His young mouth was set desperately, and the watching man read in his face a determination to sell his life at the highest price he could demand. And somehow, in spite of all that had gone, he felt a great pity for him.

Then, in a moment, his pity fled. It was the color of the man's shirt that first caught his attention. It was identical with his own. From this he examined the rest of his clothing. Will Henderson was clad as much like himself as possible. And the meaning of it was quite plain to him.

The horseman came up. He flung himself back in the saddle and reined his horse up with a jerk.

"What's your game?" he demanded fiercely, still gripping the threatening revolver, as Jim dropped his hands.

"I came to warn you—but my horse foundered. See."

Jim pointed at the dejected beast. "I came because she asked me to come," he added.

Will glanced back up the hill. It needed little enough imagination to guess what he was looking for.

"Well, the game's up, and—I'm hunted. They're about three miles behind—all except one." He laughed harshly. Then he caught Jim's eyes. "You came because she sent you? That means you're goin' to help me, I guess, but only—because she sent you. Are you goin' to?" He edged his gun forward so that the other could not miss seeing it.

But Jim had no fear. He was thinking with all the power of his brain.

Time was everything. He doubted they had more than five minutes. He knew this patch of country by heart, which was one of the reasons he had taken the northern trail. Now his knowledge served him.

He answered instantly, utterly ignoring the threatening gun.

"Yes. Now get this quickly. Your only chance is to drop down into that river. It's shallow, though swift—about two feet to possibly two and a half. Ride down stream for two miles. It winds tremendously, so the others won't see you. You'll come to a thick patch of woods on either bank. Take the left bank, and make through the woods, north. Then keep right on to some foot-hills about ten miles due north. Once there you can dodge 'em, sure. Anyway it's up to you. Leave 'em to me, when they come up. I'll do my best to put 'em off."

Jim's voice was cold enough, but he spoke rapidly. Will, who had turned again to scan the sky-line, now looked down at him suspiciously.

"Is this bluff—or straight business?" he demanded harshly.

Jim shrugged.

"You best get on—if you're going to clear. You said they were three miles off," he reminded him, in the same cold manner.

Will looked back. He was still doubtful, but—he realized he must take the advice. He had delayed too long now for anything else.

"She sent you, eh?" he asked, sharply. "It's not your own doin'?"

"I've no sympathy with—cattle-thieves," Jim retorted. "Git, quick!"

His eyes were on the horizon now. And it was his alert look that finally decided the doubting man. He swung his horse round, and rode for the river.

"So long," he called back. But there was no word of thanks. Neither had the other any response to his farewell.

Jim watched him till he disappeared, then he turned again to the rising grassland and watched for the coming of the hunters. And as he watched his thoughts reverted to the doctrine of the one-way trail. Will was traveling it hard. For him there was certainly no turning back now.

But his horse had ceased grazing again, and once more stood with ears pricked, gazing up the slope. Its master understood. This was no moment to consider abstract problems, however they might interest him. Stern reality lay ahead of him, and he knew he was in for an unpleasant time. He linked his arm through his horse's reins, and, with head bent, trailed slowly up the incline, pausing and stooping to examine the hoof-prints of Will Henderson's horse, as though it were a trail he had just discovered, and was anxious to learn its meaning. He was thinking hard the while, and calculating his chances when the hunters should come up.

While he appeared to be studying the track so closely, he yet was watching the hill-crest ahead. He knew the men were rapidly approaching, for the rumble of galloping horses was quite distinct to his well-trained ears. He wanted his intentness to be at its closest when the gang first discovered him.

He had his wish. As the men topped the ridge he was on one knee studying a clearer imprint than usual. Doc Crombie and Smallbones, riding at the head of a party of five men, saw him, and the latter shouted his joy.

"Gee! we've got him! Say——" He broke off, staring hard at the kneeling figure. The outline was familiar. Suddenly Jim stood up, and the little man instantly recognized him. "Guess you lost that three-year-old 'driver,' Doc," he cried, his face alight with malice. "Ther's our man, an'—it's Jim Thorpe. I thought I rec'nized him from the first, when he broke cover. This is bully!"

But the stern-faced doctor had no answer for him. His eyes were fixed on the man, who now stood calmly waiting for him to approach.

Experienced in such matters as he was, he looked for the threatening gun in Jim Thorpe's hand. There was none. On the contrary, the man seemed to be waiting for them in the friendliest spirit. There was his horse, too; why was he on foot? It struck him that the riddle wanted more reading than Smallbones had given it. He was not so sure he had yet lost that three-year-old "driver."

Jim made no change of position as they clattered up. Smallbones was ahead, with a gun leveled as he came.

"Hands up! Hands up, you dogone skunk, or I'll blow your roof off!" he cried fiercely.

But Jim only grinned. It was not a pleasant grin, either, for the hardware dealer's epithet infuriated him.

"Don't be a blamed fool, Smallbones," he said sharply. "You're rattled."

"Put your darned hands up, or——!"

But Doc Crombie knocked the little man's gun up.

"Say, push that back in its kennel," he cried, harshly. "You sure ain't safe with a gun."

Then, after seeing that his comrade obeyed him, and permitting himself a shadowy grin at the man's crestfallen air, he turned to Jim Thorpe.

"Wal?" he drawled questioningly.

"Thanks, Doc," said Jim, with a cheery smile. "I guess you saved my life. Smallbones shouldn't be out without his nurse." Then he glanced swiftly down at the track he had been examining. "Say, I've hit a trail right here. It goes on down to the river, an' I can't locate it further. I was just going back on it a piece. Guess you've come along in the same direction. See, here it is. A horse galloping hell-for-leather. Guess it's not a lope. By the splashing of sand, I'd say he was racing." He

looked fearlessly into the doctor's eyes, but his heart was beating hard with guilty consciousness. He was trying to estimate the man's possible attitude.

"That's the trail we're on," the doctor said sharply. "Say, how long you been here?" he inquired, glancing at Jim's horse.

"Well, round about here, getting on for two hours."

"What are you out here for, anyway?"

Jim glanced from the doctor to Smallbones, and then on at the rest of the men. They were all cattlemen, none of them were villagers. He laughed suddenly.

"Say, is this an—er—inquisition?"

"Sure." The doctor's reply rapped out tartly.

"Well, that being the way of things, guess I'd best tell you first as last. You see, I got back to the village yesterday afternoon. As maybe you know, I've been out nearly two days on the trail. Well, late last night, Elia Marsham came to me with a yarn about a hollow in the hills, where he said he'd seen the rustlers at work. He told me how to find it, an'—well, I hit the trail. I hoped to head you, and get 'em myself, but," with a shrug, "I guess I was a fool some. My plug petered out two hours back, and I had to quit. You see he was stale at the start."

"An' this trail?" snapped the doctor.

"I was way back there down the river a goodish piece, getting a sleep by the bush, and easing my plug, when I woke up quick. Seemed to me I heard a gunshot. Maybe I was dreaming. Anyway I sat up and took notice, but didn't see a thing. So, after a while, I got dozing again. Then my plug started to neigh, and kept whinnying. I got around then, guessing something was doing. So I started to chase up the river. Then I found this trail. It's new, fresh done this morning, sure. Guess it must have been some feller passing that worried my horse.

You say you're on this trail? Whose? It isn't—eh?" as the doctor nodded. "Then come right on down to the river. We're losing time."

Jim turned to lead his horse away, but Smallbones laughed. There was no mistaking the derision, the challenge of that laugh. Jim turned again, and the look he favored the hardware dealer with was one that did not escape the doctor, who promptly interposed.

"If you're right an' he's wrong, you've got time in plenty to correct him later, Jim," he said, in his stern fashion. "Meanwhiles you'll keep your face closed, Smallbones, or—light right out." Then he turned back to Jim. "Ther' ain't a heap o' hurry now, boy, fer that feller. His horse was nigh done," he went on, glancing at the dejected creature Jim was leading. "Done jest about as bad as yours. An' his plug was the same color, and he was rigged out much as you are." Then his tone became doubly harsh. "Say, the feller we're chasin' was your build. He was so like you in cut, and his plug so like yours, that if I put it right here to the vote I'm guessin' you'd hang so quick you'd wonder how it was done. But then, you see, I've got two eyes, an' some elegant sawvee, which some folks ain't blessed with," with an eye in Smallbones' direction. "An' I tell you right here ther's just the fact your plug is stone cold between you an' a rawhide rope. You jest couldn't be the man we're chasin' 'less you're capable o' miracles. Get me? But I'm goin' to do some straight talk. Not more than ten minutes gone the feller we're after shot down one o' the boys back ther' over the rise. That boy was on a fast hoss, an' was close on that all-fired Dago's heels. Wal, he got it plenty, an' we're goin' back to bury that honest citizen later. Meanwhile, ten minutes gone that rustler got down here, an' as you say, made that river, an' you—you didn't see him. Get me? You're jest goin' to show me wher' you sat."

For a second Jim's heart seemed to stand still. He was not used to lying. However, he realized only too well how the least hesitation would surely hang him, and he promptly nodded his head.

"Sure I will. Come right along." And he led the way diagonally from the

horseman's tracks, so as to strike the river obliquely.

It was a silent procession, and the air was charged with possible disaster. Jim walked ahead, his horse hanging back and being urged forward by no very gentle kicks from Smallbones.

And as he walked he thought hard. He was struggling to remember a likely spot. He dare not choose one where grass lay under foot. These men had eyes like hawks for a spot on such ground. There was only one underlay where their eyes could be fooled, and that was under the shelter of a pine tree, where the pine-needles prevented impress and yielded no trace of footsteps. Was there such a spot near by? He vaguely remembered a small cluster of such trees beside his track, but he couldn't remember how far away it lay. He knew he must take a big risk.

He did not hesitate, and, though slowly, he walked deliberately in a definite direction, winding in and out the bush. Then to his intense relief, after about five minutes' walking, he saw the trees he was looking for. Yes, they were right in his track, and he remembered now skirting them as he came along. But he was not yet clear of trouble by any means. What was the underlay like?

He avoided giving any sign of his destination. That was most important. And he was fearful lest he should be questioned. He knew the shrewdness of the redoubtable doctor, and he feared it. He was on his own track now, which showed plain enough in the grass. And as he came to the clump of pines he still kept on until he had practically passed it. He did this purposely. It was necessary to satisfy himself that the ground under the trees was bare except for a thick carpet of pine-needles. Fortune was with him for once, and he suddenly turned and led his horse in among the trees. As he walked he disturbed the carpet as much as he could without attracting attention, and having come to a halt, he quickly turned his horse about the further to disturb the underlay. Then he flung himself into a sitting

posture at the foot of one of the trees, at the same time deliberately raising a dust with his feet.

"This is the spot," he said, looking frankly up into the doctor's face. "I s'pose I must have been here somewhere around two hours. How far have we come? A matter of two hundred yards? Look out there. It's more or less a blank outlook of trees."

But Doc Crombie was studying the ground. Jim sprang up and began to move round his horse, feeling the cinchas of his saddle. He felt he could reasonably do this, and further disturb the underlay without exciting suspicion. It was a dreadful moment for him, for he noted that all eyes were closely scrutinizing the ground.

Suddenly the doctor fixed an eagle glance on his face. Jim met it. He believed it to be the final question. But the man gave him no satisfaction. He left him with the uncertainty as to whether he had wholly fooled him or not. His words were peremptory.

"We'll git back an' finish the hunt," he declared. Then, "Will that durned plug carry you now?"

Jim shrugged.

"Maybe at a walk."

"Wal, git right on."

Jim obeyed. It would have been madness to refuse. But his brain was desperately busy.

They rode back to the river bank at the point where the fugitive had taken to the water. Most of the men dismounted, and, with noses to the ground, they studied the tracks. Two or three moved along the bank vainly endeavoring to discover the man's further direction; and two of them rode across to the opposite side. But the banks told them nothing. Their quarry had obviously not crossed the water. A quarter of an hour was spent thus, Jim helping all he knew; then finally Doc Crombie called his men together.

"We'll git right on," he declared authoritatively.

"Which way?" inquired Smallbones. He was angry, but looked depressed.

The doctor considered a moment, and the men stood round waiting.

"We'll head up-stream for the hills," he said at last. "Guess he'll make that way. We'll divide up on either side of the river. Guess you best take three men, Smallbones, an' cross over. You, Thorpe, 'll stop with me."

But Thorpe shook his head. He saw an opportunity to play a big hand

for Eve, and, win or lose, he meant to play it. He would not have attempted it on a man less keen than the doctor.

"You're wrong, Doc," he said coolly, and all eyes were at once turned upon him. Every man in the party was at once agog with interest, for not one of them but shared Smallbones' suspicion in some degree, however little it might be.

"See here," Jim went on, with a great show of enthusiasm, "do you know this river? Well," as the doctor shook his head, "I do. That's why I came this trail. I guessed if any of the rustlers were liable to hit the trail, it 'ud be somewhere around this river. You figger he's gone up-stream. I'd gamble he's gone down. There's a heavy timber two miles or so down-stream, and that timber is a sheer cover right up to the hills farther north. D'you get me? Well, personally, I don't think he's gone up-stream—so I hunt down."

He was relying on the independence of his manner and the truth of his arguments for success, and he achieved it even beyond his hopes. Doc Crombie's eyes blazed.

"You'll hunt with me, Jim Thorpe," he cried sharply.

But Jim was ready. This was what he was looking for.

"See here, Doc, I'm not out for foolishness, neither are you. Oh, yes, I know I'm suspected, and there's folks, especially our friend Smallbones, would like to hang me right off. Well, get busy and do the hanging, I shan't resist, and you'll all live to regret it; that is, except Smallbones. However, this is my point. This suspicion is on me, and I've got to clear it. I'm a sight more interested than any of you fellows. I believe that fellow has headed down-stream, and I claim the right, in my own self-defense, to follow him as far as my horse will let me. I want to hit his trail, and I'll run him to earth if I have to do it on foot. And I tell you right here you've no authority to stop me. I'm not a vigilante, and you're not a sheriff, nor even a 'deputy.' I tell you you have neither moral nor legal right to prevent me clearing myself in my own way."

"Want to get rid of us," snarled Smallbones.

Jim turned on him like a knife.

"I've a score to settle with you, and, small as you are, you're going to get all that's coming to you—later."

"You'll have to get busy quick, or you won't have time," grinned the little man, making a hideous motion of hanging.

But further bickering was prevented by the doctor. At this moment he rose almost to the greatness which his associates claimed for him. Bitter as his feelings were at thus openly being defied and flouted, he refused to blind himself to the justness of the other's plea. He even acquiesced with a decent grace, although he refused—as Jim knew he would—to change his own opinions.

"Hit your trail, boy," he cried, in his large, harsh voice. "Guess you sure got the rights of a free citizen, an'—good luck."

He rode off; and Smallbones, with a venomous glance back at the triumphant Jim, started across the river. Jim remounted his horse and rode off down the river. He glanced back at the retreating party with the doctor, and sighed his relief. He felt as though he had been passing through a lifetime of crime, and ahead lay safety.

He did not attempt to push his tired horse faster than a walk, but continued on until he came to the woods, where he knew Will had sought shelter; then he off-saddled. He had no intention of proceeding farther until sundown.

He thanked his stars that he had read Doc Crombie aright. He would never have dared to bluff a lesser man than he.

And then, having seated himself for rest under a bush, his last waking thoughts were black with the despair of an honest man who has finally and voluntarily made it impossible to prove his own innocence.

CHAPTER XXVII

ANNIE

Doc Crombie and his men had returned to Barnriff after a long and fruitless hunt. Two days and two nights they had spent on the trail. They had found the haunt of the rustlers; they had seen the men—at least, they had had an excellent view of their backs; they had pursued—and they had lost them all four. But this was not all. One of the boys had been shot down in his tracks by the man they believed to be the leader of the gang. So it was easy enough to guess their temper.

The doctor said little, because that was his way when things went wrong. But the iron possessed his soul to a degree that suggested all sorts of possibilities. And Barnriff was a raging cauldron of fury and disappointment. So was the entire district, for the news was abroad, travelling with that rapidity which is ever the case with the news of disaster. Every rancher was, to use a local phrase, “up in the air, and tearing his sky-piece” (his hair), which surely meant that before long there would be trouble for some one, the nature of which would be quite easy to guess.

The “hanging committee,” as the vigilantes were locally called, returned at sundown, and the evening was spent in spreading the news. Thus it was that Annie Gay learned the public feeling, and the general drift of Barnriff’s thought. Her husband dutifully gave her his own opinions first, that there might be no doubt in her own mind; then he proceeded to show her how Barnriff saw these things.

"Of course," he said. "What ken you expect wi' folk like Smallbones an' sech on a committee like this! Doc's to blame, sure. Ef he'd sed to me, 'Gay, you fix this yer racket. I leave it to you,' I'd sure 'a' got *men* in the gang, an' we'd 'a' cleared the country of all sech gophers as rustlers. But ther', guess I don't need to tell you 'bout Doc."

Annie's loyalty to him stood the test, and she waited for the rest. It came with his recounting of the details of their exploits. He told her of their journey, of the race. Then he passed on to the story of the Little Bluff River, as he had been told it by Smallbones. He assured her that now everybody, urged on by Smallbones, wanted to hang somebody, and, as far as he could make out, unless they quickly laid hands on the real culprit, Jim Thorpe was likely violently to terminate his checkered career over the one-way trail.

He was convinced that the venom of Smallbones, added to the tongues of the women, which were beginning to wag loudly at what they believed was Jim's clandestine intimacy with Eve during her husband's absence, would finally overcome the scruples of Doc Crombie and force him to yield to the popular cry.

He gave her much detail, all of which she added to her own knowledge. And, with her husband's approval, decided to go to Eve, and, in her own phraseology, "do what she could." Her husband really sent her, for he liked Jim Thorpe.

So, on the third morning, Annie set out on her errand of kindly warning. The position was difficult. But she realized that this was no time to let her feelings hinder her. She loved Eve, and, like her husband, she had a great friendliness for Jim.

Then she was convinced that there was nothing between these two yet, other than had always existed, a liking on the woman's part and a deep, wholesome, self-sacrificing love on the man's. She saw the danger for Eve well enough, since her husband had turned out so badly; but her sympathetic heart went out to her, and she would never

have opened her mouth to say one word to her detriment, even if she knew the women's accusations to be true. In fact, in a wave of sentimental emotion, she rather hoped they were true. Eve deserved a little happiness, and, if it lay in her power to help her to any, she would certainly not hesitate to offer her services.

To Eve, fighting her lonely battle in the solitude of her small home amidst the cloth and trimmings of her trade, the sight of Annie's cheerful, friendly face always had a rousing effect. She lived from day to day in a world of grinding fear. Her mind was never clear of it now. And she clung to her work as being the only possible thing. She dared not go out more than she was actually obliged for fear of hearing the news she dreaded. There was nothing to be done but wait for the sword to fall.

But these last three days her fears had been divided, and she found herself torn in two different directions by them. Where before it had always been her husband, now, ever since the night of Jim Thorpe's going, he was rarely out of her thoughts. Now, even more than at the time when she first understood the sacrifice he was about to make for her. And the nobleness of it appealed to her simple woman's mind as something sublime. He was a branded man before, but now, so long as he remained in Barnriff, or wherever he met a man who had lived in Barnriff at this time, so long as Will escaped capture, the pointing finger would be able to mark honest Jim Thorpe as a—cattle-thief. He was powerless to do more than deny it. The horror of it was dreadful.

He had done it for her. And her woman's heart told her why. Her thoughts flew back to those days, such a little way back, yet, to her, so far, far away, when his kind serious eyes used to look into hers in their gentle caressing fashion, when his unready tongue used to halt over speaking those nice things a woman, in her simple vanity, loves to hear from a man she likes. She thought of the little presents he used to make her so awkwardly, all prompted by his great, golden, loving heart.

And she had passed him by for that other. The man with the ready, specious tongue, with the buoyant, self-satisfied air, with the bright, merry eyes of one who knows his power with women, who rarely fails to win, and, having won easily, no longer cares for his plaything. But she had loved Will then, and had Jim been an angel sent straight from heaven he could not then have taken her from him.

But now? Ah, well, now everything was different. She was older. She was, perhaps, sadly wiser. She was also married, and Jim was, could be, nothing to her. His nobleness to her was the nobleness which was not the result of a selfish love that looks and hopes for its reward, she told herself. It was part of the man. He would have acted that way whatever his feelings for her. He was a great, loyal friend, she told herself again and again, and her feeling for him was friendliness, a friendliness she thanked God for, and nothing more. She told herself all this, as many a woman has told herself before, and she fancied, as many another good and virtuous woman has fancied, that she believed it.

When Annie entered her workroom she looked up with a wistful smile of welcome, but the sight of the clouds obscuring the sunshine of the girl's face stopped her sewing-machine at once, and ready sympathy found prompt expression in her gentle voice.

"What is it, dear?" she inquired. "You look—you look as if you, too, were in trouble."

Annie tried to smile back in response. But it was a poor attempt. She had been thinking so hard on her way to Eve. She had been calculating and figuring so keenly in her woman's way. And curiously enough she had managed to make the addition of two and two into four. She felt that she must not hesitate now, or the courage to display the accuracy of her calculation, and at the same time help her friend, would evaporate.

"Trouble?" she echoed absently. "Trouble enough for sure, but not for

me, Eve," she stepped round to the girl's side and laid a protecting arm about her shoulders. "You can quit those fears you once told me of. I—think he's safe away."

Had Annie needed confirmation of her deductive logic she had it. The look of absolute horror which suddenly leaped into Eve's drawn face was overwhelming. Annie's arm tightened round her shoulders, for she thought the distraught woman was about to faint.

"Don't say a word, Eve, dear. Don't you—now don't you," she cried. "I'm going to do the talking. But first I'll just shut the door." She crossed to the door, speaking as she went. "You've just got to sit an' listen, while I tell you all about it. An' when we've finished, dear," she said, coming back to her place beside her, "ther's just one thing, an' only one person we've got to think an' speak about. It's Jim Thorpe."

Annie's intuition must have been something approaching the abnormal, for she gave Eve no chance whatever to reply. She promptly sat down at the table, and, gazing straight into the stricken woman's face, told her all that her husband had told her, and all that she had gleaned for herself, elsewhere. She linked everything together in such a manner as to carry absolute conviction, showing the jeopardy in which Jim stood.

Never once did she refer to Will, or hint again that she had discovered Eve's secret, the secret which Doc Crombie and the whole of Barnriff would have given worlds to possess, but she told her story from the point of view of Jim's peril as a suspected cattle-thief, and his apparent interest in her, Eve, which the whole of the village women were beginning so virtuously to resent.

"An' if all that wasn't sufficient to set a wretched lot o' scallywags hanging him, along comes this business of the Little Bluff River," she finished up.

Eve's face was a study in emotion during the girl's recital. From terror it passed to indignation, from horror to the shrinking of outraged

wifehood. Now she stammered her request for Annie to go on.

"I—I don't understand," she declared, "what has that——?"

"What's it got to do with it?" cried Annie, with hot anger at the thought. "Why, just this. It's that mean Smallbones for sure. It's him at the bottom of it. They're saying that Jim did see the rustler, an' helped him get clear away while he pretended to be chasin' him. That's what the mildest of 'em sez. But ther's others swear, an' Smallbones is one of 'em, that Jim himself was the rustler, an' they rec'nized him from the start. But someways he jest managed to fool Doc, 'cause his horse was cool, and didn't show no signs of the chase."

The girl's pretty eyes were wide with anger at these accusers. But her anger was nothing to compare with the fury which now stirred Eve.

"Oh, they're wicked, cruel monsters! They hate him, and they only want to hang him because they hate him. It's—it's nothing to do with the cattle stealing. Smallbones has always hated Jim, because—because Jim's better educated and comes from good people. Jim a cattle-thief? Jim wouldn't steal a—a—blade of grass. He's too noble, and good, and—and honest. Oh, I hate these people! I hate them all—all!"

Annie sat aghast at the storm she had roused. But her woman's wit at once told her the nature of the real feeling underlying the girl's words. She had suspected before, but now she understood what, perhaps, Eve herself had no definite understanding of. With the wrecking of her love for her husband it had been salved and safely anchored elsewhere. And Jim was the man who had—anchored it.

However, she wisely refrained from revealing her discovery. She was delighted, sentimentally, foolishly delighted, but unhesitatingly continued with the purpose of her coming.

"Yes, dear," she agreed, nodding her pretty head sagely. "And so do I. But we've sure got to think of Jim Thorpe. And—and that's why I

came along. Gay knows why I came, too. You know how queer Gay is 'bout some things. He said to me, 'You best get along. Y'see, I got Jim down fer buryin' proper when his time comes, an' I don't figger to get fooled by any low-down hanging.' That's what Gay said, an' I didn't think it quite elegant of him at the time. But there," with a sigh, "men are curious folk 'bout things. Still," she bustled on alertly, "we got to give him warning. We got to make him keep away for a while anyway. He hasn't been seen in the village since, and there's folks say we ain't likely to see him again. I—I almost hope they're right, for his sake. It won't never do for him to come along—true—true it won't."

The girl's earnestness and alarm were reflected in Eve's face. She saw the necessity, the emergency. But how—how to get word to him? That was the difficulty. How? Neither of them knew where he was, and certainly none of the villagers did.

Eve shook her head desperately.

"I—I don't seem to be able to think," she said piteously. "I've done so much thinking, and—and scheming, that my head feels silly, and I—I—don't know what to suggest."

But Annie was paying only slight attention. Now her round eyes suddenly brightened.

"I've got it," she cried. "There's—there's Peter Blunt. He's sure to know where Jim is, or be able to find him. Yes, and there's your Elia—if Peter fails."

But Eve shook her head at the latter suggestion.

"Peter, yes. He'll help us, surely. But we must not think of Elia. He's—he's too—delicate."

"Then it's Peter," cried Annie, impulsively. "Now I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll find Peter some time to-day, and—and tell him to come along and see you to-night, after dark. You see," she added naively, "he

best not be seen visitin' you in daylight. Then you can tell him all I've told you, and he'll sure know the best to do. He likes Jim."

"Yes, yes," agreed Eve, brightening visibly and catching something of Annie's confidence in her scheme. "Peter will help me, I know. Oh, Annie, you are a dear, good thing! I don't know how I'd get through all this without you. But—but—you'll be secret, won't you, dear? You see, I'm quite helpless, and—and you know so much."

"You can trust me, Eve, you can trust me like you can trust—Jim Thorpe. Good-bye, dear, an' keep bright. I'll come along after you've seen Peter. Yes, we've got to help Jim out—that's how my man said, too. Good-bye."

She hurriedly kissed her friend and bustled out of the house. All this scheming had got hold of her busy brain, and she was eager to get to work on it.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WILL

It was a long day of suspense for Eve. There was so little to distract her mind from the things which troubled. A few household duties, that was all. There was Elia's food to be prepared when he came in from Peter's new cutting, just outside the village limits. There was her dressmaking. But this last left her so much room for thought, and only helped to lengthen the dragging hours.

At dinner-time Elia informed her that there were some jack-rabbits in a bluff just outside the village, and declared his intention of snaring them for her that night. But she paid only the slightest attention to him, and gave him permission to go almost without thinking. Since Will had escaped there was only one thing of any consequence. It was Jim's safety from the angry villagers.

That afternoon, as she sat over her work, he alone occupied her thoughts and troubled her to a degree that would have startled her had she been less concerned in his danger. She saw now how the cowardly part she had played in accepting his help to save her worthless husband had thrown the burden of his crime upon Jim's willing shoulders. And now they wanted to hang him. She was to blame and she alone. She who would not willingly hurt one hair of his head.

Hurt him? Oh, no, no! And yet, how she had hurt him already. She had never meant to. It had been rushed upon her. She had acted upon the impulse of the moment. And then—then he had refused to listen when

she realized the meaning of what she had done. Hurt him? No. Now she felt that nothing else mattered if only she could see a way to clear his name.

She thought long and hopelessly. Then, of a sudden, she sprang to her feet with a cry. Yes, yes, there was a way. They should not hang him. She still had it in her power to save him. She still had it in her power to tell the whole miserable, pitiful truth. She had been a coward, but she would be a coward no longer. This was for Jim. The other had been for herself. Yes, she would tell the truth. She would tell them that Will Henderson—her husband—was the thief. They would believe—yes—

But her hope suddenly dropped from her. Would they believe? She remembered what Annie had told her. She had been seen with Jim several times in the village since he had left McLagan's. How many times? Once—twice— Yes, three times in all. And already the women of the place had started scandalous stories. Would they believe her? If she denounced Will, what then? Their retort would promptly be that she was trying to rid herself of her husband, for—her own ends. Oh, it was cruel!

She flung herself into her chair, and buried her face in her hands. She could do nothing. Nothing but wait for help from others. And God alone knew into what trouble she might not plunge them.

But gradually she became calmer. She began to think in a different channel. She was thinking of these scandalous tongues, and searching for an answer to them. She began to question her feelings. She told herself that Jim was nothing but a friend. A well-liked friend. She told herself this several times, and thought she believed it. Why should it be otherwise? She had only seen him three times since he came in from McLagan's. So why should it be otherwise? No, it was not otherwise.

Slowly, as she thought, and the hours drifted on, her fears fell away

into the background. Her heart grew very tender, and her denial less decided. She wondered where Jim was. She longed to go to him. She would have loved to carry the warning to him herself. Somehow, she wanted to be at his side, to tell him all she felt at the trouble she had brought upon him. At the wrong she had so thoughtlessly, unintentionally done him. She wanted to show him how she had only done as her weak woman's conscience had prompted her. She had not thought beyond what she believed to be her duty. She had not paused to think what trouble she was bringing on others—on him. Had she only realized at the time, that, with all her might, she was driving the searing brand deeper into his flesh, she would rather have faced the rope herself. She wanted to tell him all this, to open her heart to him, and let him see that she was not the cruel, selfish creature he must think her for having accepted his sacrifice in bearing the warning to Will.

The fascination of her self-abnegating thought held her, and she drifted on to more personal details. She pictured his kind eyes, and heard his deep, gentle voice telling her that he forgave her, that he preferred to carry the warning rather than she should suffer. She felt in her heart that this was what he would say, for she knew, as most women know these things, that the old love of a year ago was still as it was then. And the thought of it was sweet and comforting now in her trouble.

She remained in her wondrously seductive dreamland while the minutes crept on. And, as the dusky shadows of evening gathered, she sat silent in her woman's dream of the man. It was gentle, soothing, irresistible. It was the natural reaction after long hours of mental struggle, when a merciful Providence brings relief to the suffering mind, the saving sedative of a few restful moments in the realms of a gentle dreaming of subconsciousness.

But perhaps this respite was something in the nature of an inversion of the tempering of the wind. Perhaps a strange Providence was

giving her a few moments in which to strengthen herself for the blow that was to follow so quickly. It is of small consequence, however. These things pass in a lifetime almost unobserved. It is only on subsequent reflection that they become apparent.

The darkness had closed down, and for once the usually brilliant summer evening was clouded, and the twilight quickly lost. The woman's introspective gaze was smiling, the drawn lines about her pretty mouth, the shadows under her eyes seemed to have fallen from her. It almost seemed as though the happiness of her dreams had entirely banished the trouble that had so long weighed her down.

Then suddenly the latch of her door lifted with a rattle. She started at once into perfect consciousness. At last. It was Peter Blunt come with his ready help. She started to her feet, all her dream-castles tumbling about her. The door was pushed roughly open, and Will, her husband, came hurriedly in:

"You?"

Eve's exclamation was the last thing in horror, the last thing in unconscious detestation. But his eyes held hers as one fascinated by the eyes of some cruel reptile. Nor was it until he nodded his reply that the spell was broken.

"Yes—and I guess you ain't too pleased."

There was a harsh sarcasm in his tone, which added to the steely horror in the woman's heart. Now her eyes glanced swiftly over his body. He was dressed differently to anything she had ever seen him in. He was wearing a suit of store clothes, and a soft cotton shirt with a collar. His whole appearance suggested the Sunday costume of any of the villagers, which they generally wore when setting out on a visit to a town of some importance. Just for a moment she wondered if this was Will's intention. Was he about to make a bolt out of the country?

He shut the door carefully, and glanced round the darkened room. There was just sufficient glow from the stove to tell him there was no one else in the place.

"Where's Elia? Are you alone?"

His tone was peremptory and suspicious. His furtive eyes told Eve that he was apprehensive. She nodded.

"Elia's gone snaring jack-rabbits on the bluff, out back," she said unsuspiciously. "Shall I light a lamp?"

"No." His negative came emphatically.

He came round to the stove, and stood looking down at her for some moments. There was a dark, sullen frown in his eyes which might well have suggested possibilities to the most unsuspicious. But she was not suspicious, just then. She was wondering and fearful that he had returned to the village instead of getting away. Why had he come? she asked herself. But her question found no voice.

"Well?" he said at last, with such a sneer that she lifted a pair of startled eyes to his face. Her heart was hammering in her bosom. She had suddenly realized his temper.

"I'm going away," he said sharply. "I've got to get out. I came in for money. Have you got any of my money?"

"All of it."

"Ah, good. You're more use than I thought you. How much?"

"Over a thousand dollars."

Eve's voice was icy. Her whole attitude seemed almost mechanical. Yet a wild terror was slowly creeping over her, mounting steadily to her brain. Nor was the reason for it quite apparent yet.

The man's eyes sparkled, and for a moment his frown lightened.

"Good. You can hand it over." And his voice was almost friendly.

Eve went into her bedroom and returned with a pile of bills. Will held out his hand for them, but she ignored it, and laid them on the table. He seized upon them greedily, glancing queerly at her as he pocketed them.

"Good," he said thoughtfully, "now I can get busy." He lifted his eyes to his wife's face again, and stared at her malevolently, and the woman shivered under his scrutiny. She had shrunk from coming into contact with the hand that had shot down one of the boys, and now she was thinking of this man as the murderer.

"You best go," she said, vainly trying to keep her voice steady.

But the man made no move. His malevolent stare had become more intense. Suddenly he laughed, his teeth baring, but his eyes remaining unchanged.

"So that's it, eh?" he said. Then the malevolence of his eyes changed to an angry fire. "I'm going sure, but not till I've done what I came to do. Y'see, there's no great hurry. Folks aren't chasin' me here. Here, I'm a respectable, hard-working gold prospector. An' I've been down at the saloon an' talked with the folks. Bluff, eh? Gold prospector. Gee! We know differently, eh? Don't we? Oh, yes, I'm goin'—when it suits me. Not when it suits you. Guess you'd be glad to be rid of me, eh? So it would leave room for Jim Thorpe. Oh, I've heard. All the folks are talking."

The girl started. An angry flush slowly mounted to her cheeks, and a sudden sparkle lit her eyes.

"But he don't cut any ice with me," the man went on with a laugh. "You won't get him. Nor will any other woman. They're goin' to hang him. Say, what was his price for riding out to me? Did you pay it beforehand, or do you reckon to pay it before they hang him? Ha, ha! guess you ain't paid it yet. Men don't work for women after they get their pay. I'd say you're shrewd enough someways."

Eve's fury at the man's loathsome suggestion drove her beyond all caution. And she flung her answer at him with a hatred that was wholly infuriating to the man.

"You best go. Remember, I know the truth of you," she cried. "We've saved you from the rope, once. I still have it in my power to——"

"Eh?"

He stepped up to her and stood, his face within a few inches of hers.

"So that's it, is it? You'd give me away. You!" He shook his head slowly, all his purpose plainly written in his furious eyes. "You won't give me away. I'll see to that. For two pins I'd silence you now, only—— only it isn't what I want. But don't make a mistake, you won't give me away. Sit down. Sit down right there in the chair behind you."

He stood over her, compelling her with the force behind his command, and the terrified woman found herself obeying him against her will. She almost fell into the chair. Then the man turned back to the door and secured it.

"We don't want any one buttin' in," he said. "I've got to do a big talk first, then I get goin'."

He came back and stood beside the stove, opposite her, so that he could look right down into her face and watch the effect of his words. He was brimful of a merciless project, which was to be carried out partly for her edification, partly for his own revenge, and wholly for the satisfaction of the devilish nature within him, which now, let fully loose, swayed him beyond any thought of consequences.

"See here, you've been my Jonah right along. I never had a cent's worth of luck since I got scratching around your fence," he began, almost quietly. Only was the threat in his eyes. "I don't guess I can say just how things happened—I mean how things got going wrong with me, unless it was you. I'm going to tell you straight when it happened. I got mean when I was fool enough to guess I was sweet on you. Jim

Thorpe was sweet on you too. I got mean toward him. We shot a target for first chance to ask you to marry. He won. I got in ahead, and, like a fool, married you. That was the beginning. An' I didn't feel any less mean after. Yes, you were my Jonah, sure. I couldn't work those first days 'cos of you, an' after I didn't guess I wanted to. But it set me savage I didn't want to. Well, I'm not here to tell you all the things that followed. You know them as well as me. But there's things you don't know. After you got hurt that night it was Peter Blunt who drove me out of Barnriff with threats of kicking me out, and setting the townsfolk on me for the way I'd treated you. But Jim was behind it. He didn't do the talkin' to me—Peter did that. But Jim came in that night to see you. I found that out. Say, I was mad. I was mad at Jim Thorpe, and not Peter, for I read his doing in my own way. Y'see I was still a fool, an' still sweet on you. But I saw how I could get back on him. I'd been at work some time on the cattle-duffing, an' I saw just how I could hurt him too.

"Say, cattle-duffing's a great gambol, an' I don't regret it. I'm going to keep on at it—only elsewhere. Well, I got hold of Master Jim's brand. I got kit as like he wears as two cents, in case I was located. We're alike in figure——"

"But, thank God, there's no other resemblance."

Eve's scathing comment came with startling suddenness. Her terror was passing, and only she felt a great loathing for this man.

"Keep all that till I've finished," Will said coolly. "Maybe you won't be so ready then. Well, I used his brand, and set a bunch of cattle running amongst his—McLagan's cattle, as you know. Then I waited for developments. They came—oh, yes, they came. Jim was the cattle-thief. I the lucky gold prospector. Good, eh?" He laughed heartily.

"But, say, I was still a fool," he went on, after a slight pause. "I was still sweet on you. Then I heard every time Jim came into the village he'd always call to see you. That set me mad—so mad you came mighty

near to passing in your checks, and Jim too. I'm glad those things didn't happen now. Y'see, I didn't reckon on Elia. I'd forgotten him. That imp of hell can hate, and it was me he hated, eh? Y'see, I've heard how he tracked me. I hear most things doing in Barnriff. Then you did your fool stunt sending Jim out to warn me. He got me clear, and—and I hate him worse for it; but not so bad as I hate you now. I see how it was done. I'm no fool. Jim did it for you, and I guess you'll pay his price. That's how you're both thinking. But you won't. They're goin' to hang him. There's only one person who can put them wise about this cattle stealing, that's Elia. And I'm going to kill him to-night. That's why I came in—that an' to get money. When I've finished him I'll see to you——”

But Eve was on her feet in a frenzy of horror and fear for the brother she loved. All her mother's instinct was roused to a fighting pitch.

“You shan't touch him!” she cried fiercely. “You shall kill me first! I swear it! Oh, you wretched murderer! You filth! Ha, ha—nobody but Elia knows. Peter knows, and—and others. You touch Elia, and I swear you shan't escape!”

“Peter knows, eh? Ho, ho, my girl,” the man mocked. Then he shook his head. “It doesn't matter—not a little bit. What I'm going to do will be done to-night. Elia will get his med'cine, and then I'll come back, and—well, you shan't get a chance of paying Jim his price. Oh, no,” as Eve opened her lips to speak again, “I'll take no chances. I'll leave you safe here. I could settle you first, but I want you to know your beloved brother is dead before—you join him. Get my meaning? You see, Peter and those others knowing have altered my plans some. You'll join your angel brother when I come back.”

He had been bending over her, to impress his cruel words upon her more forcibly. Now he suddenly straightened up and snatched some dress material from the table. Before the wretched woman was aware of his intentions he had flung it over her head. She tried to scream, but instantly he had her by the throat with one hand and choked her cries

back. With the other he thrust the cloth into her mouth till she was effectually gagged. Then he secured it in place with a long binding of braid. But the moment this was done, and he released her throat, she began to struggle violently, and he was forced to exert all his strength to crush her down into the chair. Here he knelt on her, while he lashed her hands together, and then her feet. Then he tied the two bindings together, so that her arms were locked immovable round her knees. Now, at his leisure, he took the table cover and securely bound her into the chair.

This accomplished, he stood up and surveyed his handiwork carefully. He was breathing hard with his exertion. Yes, she was well secured, and he smiled sardonically. He watched her thus for some moments. Then he glanced round the darkened room. It was the haunted look of the man engaged in crime.

Suddenly he stepped softly to her side, and, stooping, lifted the cloth with which she was gagged from before the upper part of her face. He looked into the hunted, terrified eyes and grinned. Then he put his lips close to one of her ears.

“Now I’m going to the bluff out back to—kill your brother, your beloved Elia. Then I’m coming back to—kill you,” he whispered. And the next moment he was gone.

CHAPTER XXIX

JIM

It was with no very cheerful feelings that Jim Thorpe approached Barnriff once more. He had delayed his return as long as possible, not from any fear for himself, but for the sake of giving color to his final protestations to Doc Crombie, when they parted company at the Little Bluff River.

After resting his horse in the river woods for a full twenty-four hours—and, in that time, the tough beast had fully recovered from his journey—he then, with simple strategy, hunted up Will's tracks where the fugitive had left the river, and steadily trailed him to the northern hills. There he gave up further pursuit, having fully satisfied himself that the man's escape had been accomplished. So he turned his horse's head toward Barnriff, and prepared himself to face the trouble that he knew would be awaiting him.

It was a cheerless journey, harassed by thoughts and speculations that could be hardly considered illuminating. Curiously enough he had no thought of making a run for it to a district where he was still unknown. Why should he? There was not a guilty thought in his mind, unless it were the recollection of the trick he had played on the lynching party to save Will from the rope.

No, his set purpose was to return to Barnriff and fight the public feeling he knew there was against him, and to live it down. Besides, there was Eve. Who could tell, with such a husband as Will, when she might not need the help of a strong, willing arm? His love for her was

stronger than his discretion, it was more powerful than any selfish consideration.

He had but one real friend in Barnriff that he knew of. There were several, he believed, who, at a crisis, would vote in his favor, but that was all. Peter Blunt he knew he could rely on to the last. And, somehow, this man, to his mind, was an even more powerful factor than Doc Crombie. It was not that Peter held any great appeal with the people, but somehow there was a reserve of mental strength in the man that lifted him far above his fellows, in his capacity to do in emergency. He felt that, with the great shadow of Peter standing by, he had little to fear from such jackals as Smallbones.

Yet the outlook was depressing enough as he drew near his destination. He no longer had the possibility of clearing his name. That was past. A hope abandoned with many others in his short life. All thought of establishing his innocence must be wiped out forever. He had enlisted himself in Eve's service for good or evil, and the only thing remaining to him was, by facing the yelping of the Barnriff pack, with a dogged, defiant front, to attempt to live down his disgrace. In this, to his simple mind, there was one great thing in his favor. The cattle stealing was at an end. There would be no further depredations. And this alone would be of incalculable help to him. He knew the cattle world well enough to understand that the ethics of the case were not of paramount importance with these people. It was the loss of stock which rankled. It was the definite, material loss and injury to the commerce of the district.

But to a man of his honor and love of fair play the position was desperately hard. Fate was driving him at a pace that threatened to wreck in no uncertain manner. The downward path looked so easy—was so easy. Lately he had frequently found himself wondering why he didn't go with the tide and head straight for the vortex that he felt would be only too ready to engulf him. He had been so near it once. That moment was indelibly fixed on his memory. He doubted that but

for Peter Blunt he would never have resisted the temptation. He knew himself, he was honest with himself. That day when he first discovered Will's treachery Peter had saved him.

Now everything seemed somehow different. His thoughts were frequently desperate enough, but, whereas a year ago he would have cried out against Heaven, against everything in Heaven or on earth now he wanted to set his back to the wall and fight. He felt it in him to fight, let the odds be what they might. And he knew that he owed this new spirit to the big-hearted Peter, who had once shown him how wrong he was.

But though less acknowledged, there was another influence at work within him. Eve was there alone, far more alone than if she had never married Will. He only guessed what her feelings must be, for she was still in doubt as to Will's safety. Yes, he would at least have the privilege of carrying her the glad tidings.

He laughed bitterly. He could not help it. Yes, she would be the happier for his tidings, and with that he must be content. Now, no one would ever know. Her disgrace would be hidden, and she would be able to live on quietly in the village with her young brother until such time as she felt it safe to join her husband.

Try as he would to appreciate the comparative happiness he was conveying to the woman, he felt the sharp pricks of the thorny burden he was bearing. He smiled in the growing darkness, and told himself that there was no disaster that brought happiness to any one but must be counted as a good work.

He could see the twinkling lights of the village less than half a mile ahead, and he glanced over them carefully. There was the saloon. Who could mistake it, with its flamboyant brilliance against the lesser twinkle of the smaller houses? His eyes searched for the lights of Eve's home. He could not see them. Possibly she was in her kitchen, that snug little room, where, up to a year ago, he had many a time taken tea with her. Yes, it would be about her supper-time. He looked back at the western sky to verify the hour. The last faint sheen of sunset was slipping away into the soft velvet of night.

He thought for a moment as to his best course. Should he wait until morning to bear his tidings to her? No, that would leave her unnecessary time for worry and anxiety. Best go to her to-night—at once.

He shook up his horse into a better gait. It were best to hurry. He did not want to be seen visiting her late in the evening. He knew the scandalous tongues of the village only too well.

In a few minutes he was nearing the saloon. He would pass within fifty yards of it. As he came abreast of it he turned his head curiously in its direction. There was a great din of voices coming from its frowzy interior, and he wondered. The men seemed to have begun their nightly orgie early. Then it occurred to him that perhaps Crombie's men had returned, and were out to make a night of it. He smiled to himself. They would need a good deal of drink to wash out the taste of the bitter pill of Will's escape.

Had he but known it, the occasion was a meeting of the townsmen to decide his fate. Had he but known it, Peter Blunt was there watching

his interests and ready to fight with both brains and muscle on his behalf. But then, had he known it, it might have altered the whole complexion of the events which happened in Barnriff that night.

He did not know it, so he rode straight on to Eve's house. Nor did it occur to him as strange, at that hour in the evening, that he did not encounter a single soul on his way.

Arrived at her gate he dismounted and off-saddled. He would not need his horse again that night, so he turned the animal loose to graze at its leisure. It would find its way to the water when it wanted to, and when he had seen Eve he would carry his saddle back to Peter's hut, where he was going to sleep.

Just for a moment he paused before opening the gate. The house was still in darkness. He had half a mind to go round the back and see if there were lights in the kitchen. But it seemed like spying to him, and so he refrained.

But somehow the place suggested that there was no one within, and eventually he started up the path with a feeling of keen disappointment. At the door he paused and felt for the latch. Then, just as his hand came into contact with it, and he was about to lift it, he started, and, motionless, stood listening.

What was that? He thought he heard a peculiar moaning beyond the door. No, he was mistaken. There was no sound now. At least—Ah, there it was again. He pressed one ear against the door and immediately started back. He had not been mistaken.

He no longer hesitated, but, lifting the latch noisily, pressed against the door. It was fast. And now the moaning suddenly became louder. Without a thought, without a scruple, he promptly thrust his toe against the foot of the door and pressed heavily. Then, lifting the latch, he threw all the weight of his powerful shoulder against the lock. The door gave before him, nearly precipitating him headlong into the room.

He managed to save himself and stepped hurriedly within. Then he again stood listening. The room was quite dark, but now he had no difficulty in placing the moaning. It came from just across the room beside Eve's stove.

"Eve," he called softly. "Eve!" But as no answer came a great fear gripped his heart. Was this a repetition of— No, Will was away out in the mountains.

Now the moaning was louder, and there was a distinct rustling whence the sound came. He fumbled a match from his pocket and struck it. One glance toward the stove set him rushing across to the parlor lamp.

He lit the lamp and hurried back to the chair beside the stove. He needed but one glance to realize Eve's condition, and his heart was filled with a great rage. Who? Who had done this thing? was the question that ran through his mind as he set to work to undo the cruel bonds that held her to her chair.

It was the work of a few moments to remove the gag that was nearly choking her. Then the knots about her wrists and feet were swiftly undone. Released at last, Eve sank back in a semi-fainting condition, and Jim looked on helplessly. And in those moments he made up his mind that some one was going to pay dearly for this.

Then it occurred to him that no time must be lost, so he hurried into the kitchen and came back with a dipper of drinking water. He held it to the girl's lips, and after she had drunk he soaked his handkerchief in what remained, and bathed her forehead and temples with a wonderful tenderness and silent sympathy.

But suddenly Eve opened her eyes. And at once he saw that her weakness had passed. The horror of recollection was alive once more within her, and her terrified eyes sought his. When she saw who he was she sprang to her feet with a great cry.

"Jim!" she cried. And, staggering in her weakness, she would have fallen.

He caught her just in time, and gently returned her to her seat. But with a great effort she overcame her faintness.

"For God's sake, save him!" she cried wildly. "Oh, Jim, he's gone to kill him! Save him for me! Only save him!"

The position was difficult. Jim's heart bled for the distraught woman. But he realized that he must calm her at once, or she would break out into shrieking hysterics.

"Be calm, Eve," he said almost roughly. "How can I understand when you talk like that? Don't let's have any foolishness. Now quietly. Who's gone to kill—who?"

His manner had its effect. Eve choked back her rising emotion with an effort, and her eyes lost some of their straining.

"It's Will," she said, with a sort of deliberate measuring of her words. "He's gone to kill Elia. Out there, back at the bluff. It's for setting the men after him. And—then, and then he's coming back——"

Jim was staggered. He looked at the woman wondering if she had suddenly lost her senses.

"And I came back to tell you he'd got clear away. By Heaven! And he did this?" He indicated the bonds he had just removed, and his eyes darkened with sudden fury.

The woman nodded. She was holding herself with all her might.

"Yes, but—that's nothing." Suddenly she let herself go. All the old terror surged uppermost again. "But don't wait! Jim, save him for my sake! Save him for me! Oh, my poor, helpless brother! Jim—Jim, you are the only one I can look to. Oh, save him! He's all I have—all I have."

It was a dreadful moment for the man. The woman he loved half dead

with terror and the cruel handling dealt her by her husband. Now she was appealing to him as the only man in the world she could appeal to. His love rushed to his head and came near to driving him to the one thing in the world he knew he must not do. He longed to crush her in his strong arms, and proclaim his right to protect her against the world. He loved her so that he wanted to defy everybody, all the world that he might claim her for his own. But she was not his. And he almost spoke the words aloud to convince himself and drive back the demon surging through his blood.

"Where did you say he was?" he demanded, almost savagely in his tremendous self-repression.

"At the bluff, out back. Hurry, hurry, for—God's sake!"

That was better. The less personal appeal helped him to calm himself.

"How long's he been gone?" he asked, turning his eyes from her terror-stricken face to help himself regain his own control.

"About a quarter of an hour, or even a half," she cried.

"It's a quarter of a mile, isn't it?"

"More. Nearly a mile."

"Right. You stay here." He threw a pistol on the table. "Keep that to protect yourself," he added, brusquely. "And—Eve, if I get there in time, I'll save your brother. If I don't, your husband shall die, as sure as——"

But his sentence remained unfinished. He rushed out of the house and sought his horse. The animal was still grazing near by. He slipped the bit into its mouth. Then he sprang on to its bare back and galloped off.

And as he rushed out Eve fell back into a chair laughing and crying at the same time.

CHAPTER XXX

WILL HENDERSON REACHES THE END

Will Henderson stalked his prey with a caution, a deliberateness, as though he were dealing with a grown man, a man who could resist, one whose power to retaliate was as great as was his to attack. But nothing of this was in his thoughts. It was the fell intent to murder that now cast its furtive, suspicious, even apprehensive spell over his mind, and so influenced his actions.

As Elia at one time had trailed him, so he was now tracking Elia. From bush to bush and shadow to shadow he searched the bluff for the hunter of jack-rabbits. But the bluff was extensive, the night dark, and the movements of the snarer as silent as those of the man hunting him. There was black murder in Will's heart, the cruel purpose of a mind turned suddenly malignant with a desire for adequate revenge. His was nothing of the fiery rage which drives a man spontaneously. He meant to kill his victim after he had satisfied his lust for torture, and no one knew better than he how easy his task was, and how cruelly he could torture this brother of Eve.

The starlit night yielded up the bluff a wide black patch amidst a shadowed world. There was no moon, but the wealth of stars shed a faint glimmer of soft light on the surrounding plains. The conditions could not have been more favorable for his purpose, and they gave him a fiendish satisfaction.

He had skirted the bluff all round. He had passed through its length. And still no sign of his quarry. Twice he started up a jack-rabbit, but the snarer did not seem to be in the vicinity. Now, with much care and calculation, he began to traverse the breadth of the bush in a zigzag fashion which was to continue its whole length. His old trapping instincts served him, and none but perhaps an Indian would have guessed that a human being was searching every inch of the woodland shadow.

The man had already traversed a third of the bush in this fashion when the unexpected happened. For the tenth time he approached the southern fringe of the bluff and stood half hidden in the shadow of one of the large, scattered bushes outlying. And in the starlight he beheld a familiar figure out in the open, watching intently the very spot at which he had emerged.

There was no mistaking the figure, even in that dim light. Did not everybody know that head, bent so deliberately on one side? The hunched shoulders? The drawn-up hip? It was Elia, and, in the darkness, a fierce grin of satisfaction lit the murderer's face. He realized that the snarer must have heard his approach, and, believing it to be a jack-rabbit, had waited to make sure. The thought tickled his cruel senses, and he wanted to laugh aloud. But he refrained, and, instead, moved stealthily forward.

The bush hid him while he had a good view of his victim through its upper branches. And he calculated that if the boy remained standing where he was, with a little care he could approach to within a yard or two of him without being discovered. So he moved forward, circling the bush without any sound. It was wonderful how his training as a trapper had taught him the science of silent woodcraft.

As he reached the limits of his shelter he dropped upon his stomach and began to wriggle through the grass. It pleased him to do this. It gave him a sense of delight at the thought of the horrible awakening the cowardly boy was presently to receive.

A yard—two yards, he slid through the grass. Three. One more, and he would be near enough for his purpose. Suddenly and silently he stood erect, like a figure rising out of the ground. He was directly in front of the boy, and within arm's length of him. He stood thus for a second that his victim might realize his identity thoroughly, and fully digest the meaning of the sudden apparition.

He had full satisfaction. Elia recognized him and stood petrified with terror. So awful to him was the meaning of that silent figure that he had not even the power to cry out. He shook convulsively and stood waiting.

The murderer raised one hand slowly and reached out toward the boy. His hand touched his clothing, and moved up to his throat. The powerful fingers came into contact with the soft flesh, and closed upon it. Then it was that the moment of paralysis passed. The boy fell back with a terrible cry.

But Will followed him up, and again his hand reached his throat. He grasped it, and tightened his fingers upon it. A gurgling cry of abject terror was the response. Again Will's hand released its hold. But now he seized one of the boy's outstretched arms, and, with a sudden movement, twisted it behind his back so hard that a third cry, this time of pain alone, was wrung from the terrified lad.

He held him thus and looked into the beautiful face now so pitifully distorted with fear.

"Guess I've done the tracking this time," Will said through his clenched teeth. "You put me to a lot of trouble coming all this way. Still, I don't guess I mind much. Most folks get their med'cine. You're going to get yours to-night. How d'you like it?"

He wrenched the weakly arm till the boy cried out again, and dropped to his knees in anguish. But, with a ruthless jolt, Will jerked him to his feet, nearly dislocating his arm in the process.

"Oh, you're squealing, now, eh? You're squealing," he repeated, striking the boy on the hump of his back with his clenched fist. "That hurts too, eh?" As a fresh cry broke from his victim. "I always heard that the hump was tender in a dog-ghasted cripple. Is it? Is it?" he inquired, at each question repeating the blow with increased force.

He released his hold, and the boy fell to the ground. He stood looking down at him with diabolical purpose in his eyes.

"Say, you figgered to hand me over to the rope, eh? You guessed you'd stand by watching me slowly strangle, eh? So you trailed me, and went on to Doc Crombie and told him. Ah—h. You like hurting things. You like seeing folks hurt. But you're scared to death being hurt yourself. That's how I know. I could kill you with the grip of one hand. But it wouldn't hurt you enough. At least not to suit me. You must be hurt first. You must know what it's like being hurt, you rotten, loathsome earthworm!"

He dealt the lad a terrific kick on his sickly, sunken chest, and a terrible cry broke the silence. It was almost like the cry of a pig being slaughtered, so piercing and shrill a squeak was it.

The noise of his cry startled his torturer. After all they were not far from the village. Then he laughed. A cry like that from the prairie must sound like a hungry coyote calling to its mate. Yes, no one would recognize it for a human cry. He would try it again.

He dealt the prostrate boy another furious kick, and he had his wish. A third time the blow was repeated to satisfy his savage lust, and he laughed aloud at the hideous resulting cry. Again and again he kicked. And the cries pleased him, and they sent a joyous thrill through him at the thought of the pain the lad was suffering. He would continue it until the cries weakened, then he would cease for a while to let his victim recover. Then again he would resume the fiendish kicking, and continue it at intervals, until he had kicked the life out of the deformed body.

He drew his foot back for another blow. But the blow remained undelivered. There was a rush of horse's hoofs, a clatter as they ceased, the sound of running feet, and a smashing blow took the torturer on the side of the jaw. He dropped like a log beside his victim. The whole thing was the work of an instant. So swift had come the avenging blow that, in the darkness, he had no time to realize its coming.

Jim Thorpe stood over his man waiting for him to rise, or show some sign of life. But there was neither movement nor apparent life in him. In the avenger's heart there was a wild hope that the man was dead. He had hit him with such a feeling in his frenzy of passion. But he knew he had only knocked the brute out.

As Will remained still where he had fallen, Jim turned away with a sigh. It would have been difficult to interpret his sigh. Maybe it was the sigh of a man who suddenly relaxes himself from a tremendous physical effort; maybe it was at the thought that his momentary desire had been accomplished; maybe it was for the poor lad whose terrible cries were still ringing in his ears.

Thinking only of Elia, he now dropped on his knees beside him. There was sufficient light from the stars to show him the lad's pallid upturned face and staring, agonized eyes. In a second his arms were about his misformed body, and he tenderly raised him up and spoke to him.

"Look up, laddie," he said gently. "You aren't hurt too bad, are you? I got here quick as I could. Say, he hasn't smashed you, has he? God! if he has!" He looked round at the fallen man with blazing eyes, as the thought flashed through his mind.

But suddenly he felt Elia's body writhe, and he turned to him again with eager words of encouragement.

"Buck up, laddie," he said, without much conviction. "Guess you aren't smashed as bad as you think. It's Jim. I'll look after you. He won't hit you again. I've fixed him."

Elia's staring eyes suddenly lost their tension. He moved his head and tried to free his arms. Jim picked him up and set him on his feet, and noted that he breathed more freely. Yes, he had been in time.

Elia steadied himself for a moment against his arm. He was silent, and still breathing hard. His body was racked with fierce pain, but his poor distorted mind was suffering greater. Jim waited patiently. He understood. It was the awful shock that the boy, in his helpless fashion, was struggling with.

Some moments passed thus, and at last the words which Jim was waiting for came. But they shocked him strangely.

"Did you kill him?" Elia asked, with a struggle controlling his halting tongue.

"No, boy, he's only knocked out—I think."

"You're a fule," whispered the lad viciously.

Jim had no answer to this, and the boy, recovering slowly, spoke again.

"Best kill him now," he said. "He's a devil. He's smashed me all up. He's smashed my sick body, and things feel queer inside me. Kill him, Jim! Kill him!"

Watching the working face, the man sickened at the inhuman desire of the boy. Where did he ever get such a frightful nature from? It was monstrous.

"Here," he said almost sternly, "can you walk?"

"I guess." The tone had that peculiar sullenness which generally portended an outbreak of the most vicious side of the boy's temper.

"Then get over there by my horse and wait till I come. I'll put you on him, and you can ride back home."

"What you going to do?"

The demand was an eager whisper. It suggested the hope that Jim was perhaps after all going to do as he asked—and kill Will Henderson.

“I’m going to see—how bad Will is. Be off now.”

“Can’t I stay—an’ watch you?”

“No. Get on after that horse.”

Elia turned away, and Jim watched his painful gait. Once he thought he saw him stagger, but, as he continued to hobble on, he turned again to the injured man. One glance at his face showed him the extent of his handiwork. He was ripped open right along the jaw, and the bone itself was badly broken.

He instantly whipped out his sheath-knife and a handkerchief. The latter he cut up into a bandage. Then, removing the silk scarf at his neck, he folded it into a soft pad, and bound it over the wound. Curiously he felt he must lend what aid he could first, and then send out adequate help from the village.

He stood up, took a final glance at the wounded face, and turned coldly away toward his horse.

But now events took an unexpected and disconcerting turn. When he reached his horse Elia was nowhere to be seen. He called, but received no answer. He called again, but still no answer. And suddenly he became alarmed. He remembered the boy’s condition. He must have collapsed somewhere.

He promptly began to search. Taking his horse as a central point he moved round it in ever widening circles, calling at intervals, and with his eyes glued to the long grass which swished under his feet. For more than ten minutes he searched in vain; and then, once more, he found himself beside the man he had knocked out.

He was thoroughly alarmed now. Eve was still anxiously awaiting

news of her brother. The thing was quite inexplicable. He could never have attempted to walk home. Why should he? Finally he decided that he must have strolled into the bush and sat down, and——

His glance fell upon the man lying at his feet. How still he lay. How—— Hello, what was this? He had left him lying on his side. Now his pale face was turned directly up at the sky. And——he dropped on his knees at his side——his bandage had been removed. He glanced about. There it was, a yard away in the grass. In wondering astonishment his eyes came back to the ghastly face of the unconscious man. Somehow it looked different, yet——

A glance at his body drew an exclamation of horror from his lips. For a moment every drop of blood seemed to recede from his brain, leaving him cold. A clammy moisture broke out upon his forehead at what he beheld. The man's clothing had been torn open leaving his chest bare, and he now beheld his own knife plunged to the hilt in the white flesh. Will Henderson was dead——stabbed through the heart by——

He sprang to his feet with a cry of horror, and his eyes flashed right and left as though in search of the murderer. Who had done this thing? Who——? As though in answer to his thought, Elia's voice reached him from out of the bushes.

"He's sure dead. I hate him."

Then followed a rustling of the brushwood, as though the boy had taken himself off.

Jim made no attempt to follow him. He remained staring into the black woods whence that voice had proceeded. He was petrified with the horror of the boy's deed.

He stood for some minutes thus. Then thought became active once more. And curiously enough it was cool, calm, and debating. The possibilities that had so suddenly opened up were tremendous.

Tremendous and—hideous. Yet they stirred him far less than might have been expected. Black, foul murder had been committed, and in a way that threw the entire blame on himself.

He saw it all in a flash. It needed but the smallest intelligence to do so. There was no mind in Barnriff but would inevitably fix on his guilt—even his friend Peter. How could it be otherwise? There was his knife. There were his handkerchiefs. The white one had his name on it. The knife had his initials branded on its handle. His last words to Eve had been a threat to kill her husband.

And Elia had done this hideous thing. A weak, sickly boy. It was terrible, and he shuddered. What hatred he must have had for the dead man. He found himself almost sympathizing with the lad's feelings. Yes, Will had certainly brought this thing upon himself. He—deserved his fate. Yet Elia—the thought revolted him.

But suddenly a fresh significance came to him. He had missed it before. What would this mean to Eve? Elia's guilt. What would Will's death mean to her? But now his thoughts ran faster. Elia's guilt? Eve would never believe it. Besides, if she did it would break her heart. The boy was something like a passion to her. He was almost as though he were part of herself. She loved him as though he were flesh of her own flesh.

No, even if it were possible to convince her, she must never be told. His crime must be covered up somehow. But how?

The man stood lost in thought for nearly half an hour. They were the thoughts of a man who at last sees the end of all things earthly looming heavily upon his horizon. There was no cowardly shrinking, there was very little regret. What he must do he felt was being forced upon him by an invincible fate, but the sting of it was far less poignant than would have been the case a few months ago. In fact the sting was hardly there at all.

At all costs Eve must be protected. She must never know the truth. It

was bad enough that her husband was dead. He wondered vaguely how far her love had survived the man's outrages. Yes, she loved him still. He could never forget her the night he had volunteered to carry the warning to Will. Strange, he thought, how a woman will cling to the man who has once possessed her love.

Ah, well, he had never known the possession of such a priceless jewel as a good woman's love. And now he was never likely to have the chance, he admitted with a simple regret. It seemed pretty hard. And yet—he almost smiled—it would be all the same after a few painful moments.

And only a brief hour ago he had been yearning to fight, with his back to the wall, against the suspicion and feeling against him in the village. He smiled with a shadow of bitterness and shook his head. Useless—quite useless. The one-way trail was well marked for him, and he had traveled it as best he knew how. As Peter said, there were no side paths. Just a narrow road, and the obstructions and perils on the way were set there for each to face. Well, he would face this last one with a “stiff upper-lip.”

One thing he was irrevocably determined upon, never by word or action would he add to Eve's unhappiness. And, if the cruel fate that had always dogged him demanded this final sacrifice, he would at least have the trifling satisfaction of knowing, as he went out of the world, that her future had been rendered the smoother by the blow that had removed Will from his sphere of crime.

He walked briskly back to his horse and leaped upon its back. Then, turning its head, he sat for a moment thinking. There was still a way out. Still a means of escape without Eve's learning the truth. But it was a coward's way, it was the way of the guilty. It was quite simple, too. He only had to go back and withdraw the knife from the man's body, and gather up the two handkerchiefs, and—ride away. It sounded easy; it was easy. A new country. A fresh people who did not know him. Another start in life. There was hope in the thought. Yes, a little,

but not much. The accusing finger would follow him pointing, the shadow of the rope would haunt him wherever he went in spite of his innocence.

“Psha! No!” he exclaimed, and rode away toward the village.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DISCOMFITURE OF SMALLBONES

Never in all his recollection had Silas Rocket had such a profitable night. From sundown on, his saloon was packed almost to suffocation, and he scarcely had time to wipe a single glass between drinks, so rapidly were the orders shouted across his bar. All the male portion of Barnriff were present, with the addition of nearly thirty men from the outlying ranges. It was a sort of mass meeting summoned by Doc Crombie, who had finally, but reluctantly, been driven to yield to the public cry against Jim Thorpe.

The doctor understood his people, and knew just how far his authority would carry him. He had exerted that authority to the breaking point to protect a man, whom, in his heart, he believed to be innocent of the charges laid at his door. But now the popular voice was too strong for him, and he yielded with an ill-grace.

Smallbones was the man responsible for this rebellion against a long-recognized authority. He was at the bottom of the campaign against Jim Thorpe. Whether he was himself convinced of the man's guilt it would have been difficult to say. For some reason, which was scarcely apparent, he meant to hang him. And, with all the persistence of a venomous nature, he shouted his denunciation, until at last his arguments gained credence, and his charges found echo in the deep throats of men who originally had little or nothing to say in

the matter.

The meeting was in full swing, tempers were roused in proportion to the arguments flung about at haphazard, and the quantities of liquor consumed in the process of the debate. At first the centre of the floor had been kept clear for the speakers, and the audience was lined up around the walls, but as the discussion warmed there was less order and Doc Crombie, in spite of his sternest language, was powerless to keep the judicial atmosphere necessary to treat the matter in a dignified manner. Smallbones kept up a fiery run of comment and spleenful argument on every individual who backed the doctor in his demand for moderation. He ridiculed, he cursed, he showered personal abuse, until he had everybody by the ears, and by the sheer power of his venom herded the majority to side with him.

One of the men he could not influence was Peter Blunt. He did his utmost to provoke the big man to a personal attack upon himself that he might turn loose personalities against him, and charge him with complicity in some of Jim's doings, however absurdly untrue they might be. He had all a demagogue's gift for carrying an audience with him. He never failed to seize upon an opportunity to launch a poisonous shaft, or sneer at the class to which Jim and such men as Peter belonged. Before he left that saloon he meant to obtain a verdict against his man.

Doc Crombie's anger was hot against the hardware dealer. He meant ruling against him in the end, but he was not quite sure how that ruling would be generally received. He was now listening to a final appeal from Peter in the hopes of gleaning something that might help him when he finally set his foot on the neck of Smallbones' charges.

"See here, fellers," Peter said, with a quiet directness of manner, but in a voice that rose above the hum of general talk, and at once silenced it, "you've heard a whole heap of 'tosh' from Smallbones and his gang. I tell you that feller's got a mind as big as a pea, and with just about as much wind in it. You've heard him accuse Jim Thorpe of

cattle stealing on evidence which we all know, and which wouldn't convince a kid of ten, by reason of its absurd simplicity. Do I need to ask sensible men such as you if any sane rustler is going to do the things which you're trying to say Jim Thorpe did? Is any sane rustler going to use his own brand, and run stolen cattle with his legitimate stock, in a place where folks can always see 'em? Sure, sure you don't need to ask yourselves even. Jim Thorpe's been a straight man all his days in Barnriff. 'Honest Jim Thorpe' you've all many a time called him. I tell you this thing is a put-up job. Some dirty, mean skunk has set out to ruin him for some reason unknown. There are mean folks," he went on, with his keen eyes fixed on Smallbones, "here in Barnriff. They're mean enough to do this if they only hated Jim enough. I'd hate to cast reflections, but I believe from the bottom of my heart that Smallbones, if he hated enough, would do such a trick. —"

"Are you accusin' me, you durned hulk?" shrieked the hardware dealer fiercely.

"I wasn't," remarked Peter, calmly. "But if you like, I will. I'm not a heap particular. And there'd be just about as much sense in doing so as there is in your accusations against Jim."

"Hark at him, fellers," cried the furious Smallbones, pointing at the big man. "He's his friend—he'd sell his stinkin' soul for him. He'd——"

"I'd sell my soul for no man," Peter replied, cutting him short. "But I'd like to keep it as decently clean as such folks as you will let me. Now listen to me. You've no right to condemn this man in the way you're trying to. I don't know what your ultimate intentions are about him. I dare say some of you would like to hang him, but there's too many sane men who'd stop such as Smallbones at tricks like that. But you've no right to banish him out of the district, or even censure him. He's done nothing——"

"What about the Henderson woman?" cried Smallbones.

"Yes, yes," cried several voices, standing near their little leader.

Peter's eyes lit.

"Don't you dare to mention her name in here, Smallbones," he cried, with a sudden fierceness, "or, small as you are, I'll smash you to a pulp, and kick you from here to your store. In your wretched gossip and in your scandal-loving hearts you must say and think what you please, but don't do it here, for I won't stand for it."

A murmur applauded him from Doc Crombie's direction, and even Smallbones was silenced for the moment. Peter went on.

"See here, I'm known to everybody. I'm known in most places where the grass of the prairie grows, and my name's mostly good. Well, I want to say right here, on my oath, Jim Thorpe's no cattle-thief, and, as God is my judge, I know that to be true. Jim Thorpe hasn't an evil thought in his——"

"Hold on," cried Doc Crombie, excitedly, as the swing doors were pushed suddenly open. "Here's some one who'll mebbe have a word to say fer himself. You're jest in time to say a word or two, Jim Thorpe," he smiled, as the man's pale face appeared in their midst.

"Here he is," cried Smallbones, his wicked eyes sparkling. "Here he is, fellers. Here is the man I accuse right here of bein' a low-down cattle-thief. That's your charge, Jim Thorpe. An' don't ferget we hang cattle——"

"Shut your rotten face, you worm!" cried Jim, contemptuously. He was standing in the centre of the room. Everybody had made way for him, and now he confronted a circle of accusing faces. He glanced swiftly round till his dark eyes rested on the hawk-like visage of the doctor.

"Say, Will Henderson's dead," he said, in a quiet, solemn voice. "He's been murdered. He's lying up there on the south side of the eastern bluff. Guess you'd best send up and—see to him."

His words produced a sudden and deathly silence. Every eye was upon his pale face in excited, incredulous wonderment. Will Henderson dead? Their questioning eyes asked plainly for more information, while their tongues were silent with something like awe. Smallbones reached his glass from the counter and drank its contents at a gulp, but his eyes never left Jim's face. His astonishment didn't interfere with the rapid working of his mean brain. To him Jim looked a sick man. There was something defiant in the dark eyes. The man, to his swift imagination, was unduly perturbed. He glanced down at his clothes, and his eyes fixed themselves greedily upon the fingers of the hand nearest to him. A flash of triumph shot into his eyes as he heard Doc Crombie's voice suddenly break the silence.

"How'd it happen? Who did it?" he asked sharply.

Jim's answer came promptly.

"He's up there stabbed to death. Stabbed through the heart. As to who did it, that's to be found out." He shrugged. His eyes were on the doctor without shrinking.

But he turned swiftly as Smallbones' harsh tones drew every one's attention.

"Say, hold up your left hand, Jim Thorpe," he cried gleefully. "Hold it right up an' tell us what that red is on it. Say, I don't guess we'll need to puzzle a heap over how Will Henderson come by his death."

Jim raised his hand. There was nothing else to be done. For a second he gazed at it ruefully. But it was only the sight of the murdered man's blood on it that disturbed him, and not any thought of the consequences of its discovery.

"It's Will Henderson's blood," he said frankly. "It was necessary for me to touch him."

The frankness of his admission was not without its effect upon those who did not belong to Smallbones' extremist party, but to them it

passed as a mere subterfuge. They promptly gave voice to an ominous murmur which momentarily threatened to break out into violence. But Smallbones saw fresh possibilities. He suddenly changed his frenzied tactics, and entirely moderated his tone.

"You've come straight in?" he inquired.

"Yep." Jim's face wore something approaching a smile. He knew exactly what to expect before the night was out, and Smallbones' questions had no terrors for him. He had nothing to gain, and nothing to lose, except that which he had already made up his mind to lose—if necessary.

"What wer' you doin' out by that bluff?" Smallbones demanded.

"That's my business."

The little man snarled furiously. All eyes were set curiously upon Jim's face, but there were several smiles at the manner of the snub. Peter Blunt standing beside Angel Gay was hopelessly wondering at the sudden turn of events.

But now Doc Crombie once more took the lead.

"We'll send up six boys and bring him in. I'll go myself." He turned and gave his orders. Then his luminous eyes settled themselves steadily upon Jim's face. "We want the rights o' this, sure. Do you know anything more?"

But Jim was tired of the questioning. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I've told all I've got to tell you. For Heaven's sake, go and fetch in the man's body. It'll maybe tell you more than it told me."

He turned to the bar and called for a drink, which he devoured thirstily.

But Doc Crombie was not to be dealt with in so cavalier a fashion.

"You'll come along up an' show us just wher' Henderson is," he said sharply. "It'll make it easier findin'." He stepped up to him, and tapped

him on the shoulder. "Do you get me? Ther's been murder done, an'——"

"I'll stay right here," said Jim, flashing round on him. "I've seen all I want to see up there. You'll have no difficulty locating him. He's on the south side."

"You'll come——" Doc began.

But Smallbones, still smarting under his snub, could no longer keep silent.

"Take him prisoner," he demanded. "Get him now. Are you goin' to let him get away? Once he's on his horse he'll—— Say, he's got blood on his hands, and he's the on'y man with reason to wish Will Henderson dead. Gee, get his guns away an' strap him fast."

But the doctor ignored the interruption.

"You're coming out there, Jim Thorpe," he said deliberately, "or you'll hand over your guns, and——"

"Consider myself under your arrest, eh?" Jim promptly removed both of his guns from their holsters, and handed them, butt first, to the doctor. "Guess I'll stay right here," he said easily. "And I'm glad to hand you those; it'll save me using them on Smallbones."

The furious hardware dealer now bristled up, and his mean face was thrust up so that he stared into Jim's with all the cruelty of his hatred laid bare in his eyes.

"Yes, you ken stay right here an' we'll look after you, me an' a few o' the boys. You're a prisoner, Jim Thorpe, and if you attempt to escape, we'll blow you to bits. We'll look after you, sure. You shan't escape, don't you mistake. It 'ud do me good to hand you a little lead pizenin'."

"I've no doubt," was all the answer Jim vouchsafed.

But before Smallbones could retort, Peter Blunt, followed by Jake Wilkes and Angel Gay, approached.

"We'll stay here too, Doc," he said. "Guess Smallbones'll need help. You see he isn't much of a man to look after a prisoner. Anyway, Jim Thorpe's a friend of ours."

"Right, Peter, an' you two fellers," cried the relieved doctor. "I ken hear the buckboard I sent over for comin' along. I'll start right out." Then he added pointedly, "I guess I'll leave him in your charge."

The doctor passed out and was followed at once by most of Rocket's customers, all eager to investigate the murder for their own morbid satisfaction. And thus only the three friends of Jim Thorpe, with Smallbones and two others, were left with the prisoner.

The moment the doors had swung to behind the last of the departures, Peter Blunt suddenly strode across the room to where Smallbones stood, staring at his intended victim with snapping eyes. So sudden was his approach that the little man was taken quite unawares. He seized him by the collar with one hand, and with the other deprived him of the guns with which he was still armed, as a result of his service on the vigilance committee, and, though he struggled and cursed violently, he carried him bodily to the door and deliberately flung him outside.

"If you attempt to get in here again till Doc returns I'll throw you out just the same again, if I have to do it twenty times," Peter declared. Then he turned back to the men at the bar.

"I feel mean havin' to do it," he said, almost shamefacedly. "Only I guess things'll be more comfortable all round now."

"Thanks, Peter," said Jim simply, holding out his hand.

Peter took it and wrung it.

"You see he wants to—hang you, Jim," he said by way of explanation.

“And he’ll do it.”

Jim’s words came so solemnly that the men beside him were startled.

“But—but you didn’t—kill him?” Peter stammered.

Jim shook his head.

“No,” he said decidedly. “But—he’ll hang me—sure.”

“Will he?” cried Peter emphatically. “We’ll see.”

And the startled look in his eyes was again replaced by the shrewd, kindly expression Jim knew so well.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE TRIUMPH OF SMALLBONES

Peter had been talking. Now he paused listening. Jake and Gay turned their eyes toward the swing doors. Silas Rocket, who had availed himself of the respite to wipe a few glasses, paused in his work. He, too, was listening. But the almost mechanical process of cleaning glasses was resumed at once. Not even life or death could long interfere with his scheme of money-making. He had seen too much of the forceful side of his customers in his time to let such a thing as a simple murder interfere with his long established routine.

It was Jim who now spoke. He was the calmest of those present, except perhaps Silas Rocket. He appeared to have no fear of the consequences of this affair to himself. Perhaps it was the confidence of innocence. Perhaps it was the great courage of a brave man for whom death—even a disgraceful death—has no terrors. Perhaps it was the knowledge of what he was saving the woman he loved, which served to inspire him. His eyes were even smiling as he looked into Peter's.

"They're coming along," he said, with one ear turned toward the door.

Peter nodded.

"It's them, sure," he said.

"I ken hear the buckboard. It's movin' slow," said Gay solemnly.

"Which means they got him," added Jake conclusively.

"We'll have a drink first," said Jim. Then he added whimsically, "Maybe we'll need it."

The silent acceptance of his invitation was due to the significance of their host's position. And afterward the glasses were set down empty upon the counter, without a word. Then Jim turned to Peter, and his manner was a trifle regretful. But that was all. An invincible purpose shone in his dark eyes.

"They'll be here in a minute, Peter," he said, with a shadowy smile. "I've got a word to say before they get around. We've been good friends, and now, at the last, I'd hate you to get a wrong notion of things. I call God to witness that I did not kill Will Henderson. It's because we're friends I tell you this, now. It's because these folk are going to hang me. You can stake your last cent on that being the truth, and if you don't get paid in this world, I sure guess you will in the next. Well—here they are."

As he finished speaking the doors were pushed open and men began to stream in. It was a curiously silent crowd. For these men a death, even a murder, had little awe. They understood too well the forceful methods of the back countries, where the laws of civilization had difficulty in reaching. They had too long governed their own social affairs without appeal to the parent government. What could Washington know of their requirements? What could a judge of the circuit know of the conditions in which they lived? They preferred their own methods, drastic as they were and often wrong in their judgments. Yet, on the whole, they were efficacious and salutary. Life and death were small enough matters to them, but the career of a criminal, and its swift termination, short, sharp and violent, was of paramount importance. It was the thought that they believed there was justice, their own justice, to be dealt out to a criminal that night, that now depressed them to an awed silence.

Three or four men placed several of the small tables together, forming them into a sort of bier. Then they stood by while others pushed their

way in through the swing doors. Finally, two men stood just inside, holding the doors open, while two of the ranchmen carried in their ominous, silent burden. Doc Crombie was the last but one to enter. The man who came last was the evil-minded hardware dealer. His eyes were sparkling, and his thin lips were tightly compressed. Now he had an added score to pay off. Nor was he particular to whom he paid it.

The body of the murdered man was laid upon the tables, and Silas Rocket provided a shroud.

Jim Thorpe watched these proceedings with the keenest interest. Never for a moment did he remove his eyes from the dead man, until the dirty white tablecloth had been carelessly thrown over him. He had in his mind many things during those moments. At first he had looked for his own telltale knife. But evidently it had been removed. There was no sign of its hideous projecting handle as he had last seen it. Neither had he noticed any one bearing his blood-stained handkerchiefs. He thought that Doc Crombie had possessed himself of these things, and expected he would produce them at the proper moment.

Somehow he felt a curious regret that Will was dead. It was not a mawkish sentimentality; he made no pretension, even to himself, that the regard that had once been his for Will still existed. But he was sorry. Sorry that the man's road had carried him to such disaster. He remembered Peter's definition of the one-way trail. Will's path had certainly been a hard one, and he had traveled every inch of it with—well, he had traveled it.

Then came the thought, the ironical thought, that after all their paths were not so very wide apart now. They had grown up together, and now, at the end, in spite of everything, death was bringing them very near together again.

But his reflections were cut short by the sharp voice of the doctor. His

authority was once more undisputed. He stood out in the centre of the room, a lean, harsh figure. His eagle face, with its luminous eyes, was full of power, full of a stern purpose.

"Folks," he began, "murder has been done—sheer, bloody murder. When fellers gits busy with guns, an' each has his chance, an' one of 'em gits it bad, we call that killing. Fair, square killing, an' I guess we treat it accordin'. But this is low-down murder. We was told it was a stabbing, but I've cast my eyes over the body, an' I seem to see a different story. Judging by what I found, I'd say Will Henderson was hit a smashin' blow by something heavy, which must sure 'a' knocked him senseless, an' then the lousy skunk did the rest of his work with a knife. Gents, I allow this murder was the work of a dirty, cowardly, mean-spirited skunk who hadn't the grit to face his enemy decently with a gun, and who doesn't need a heap of mercy when we get him. That's how I read the case. All of you have seen the body, so I need say no more on this."

Then he turned his keen eyes on Jim Thorpe, who had listened closely.

"You, Jim Thorpe, brought us word of this doing. An' in the interests of justice to his widow, to your feller citizens, your duty's clear. You got to tell us right here everything you know about Will Henderson's death."

There was an ominous pause when the doctor finished speaking, while all eyes were focused upon Jim's face. There was no doubt but that the majority were looking for signs of that guilt which in their hearts they believed to be his.

But they were doomed to disappointment. They certainly saw a change of expression, for Jim was puzzled. Why had Doc Crombie not produced the knife and the handkerchiefs? But perhaps he wanted his story first, and then would confront him with the evidence against him. Yet his manner was purely judicial. It in no way suggested that he possessed damning evidence.

He looked fearlessly around, and his gaze finally settled upon the doctor's face.

"I'm puzzled, Doc," he said quietly. "There's certainly something I can't make out. I told you all I had to tell," he went on. "I was out on the south side of that bluff, for reasons which I told Anthony Smallbones were my own business, when I found Will Henderson lying dead in the grass, a few feet from some bushes. I did not at first realize he was dead. I saw the wound on his jaw, and, touching it, discovered the bone was broken. Then I discovered that his clothes were torn open, his chest bare, and a large knife, such as any prairie man carries in his belt, was sticking in his chest, plunged right up to the hilt." There was a stir, and a murmur of astonishment went round the room. "Wait a moment," he continued, holding up his hand for silence. "I discovered more than that. I found two handkerchiefs, a white one, ripped into a rough bandage, and a silk neck scarf, such as many of us wear, was folded up into a sort of pad. Both were blood-stained, and looked as though they had been used as bandages for his face. They were lying a yard away from the body. Have you got those things, because, if so, they ought to be a handsome clue for sure?"

But by the expression of blank astonishment, even incredulity on the doctor's face, and a similar response from most of the onlookers, it was obvious that this was all news to them.

Doc shook his head.

"Ther' was no knife—no scarves. But say," he asked sharply, "why didn't you speak of 'em before?"

"It didn't occur to me. I thought you'd sure find 'em. So—I guess they've been removed since. Probably the murderer thought them incriminating——"

"A hell of a fine yarn." It was Smallbones' voice that now made itself heard. "Say, don't you'se fellows see his drift? It's a yarn to put you off, an' make you think the murderer's been around while he's been in

here. Guess him an' his friend Peter's made it up while I——"

"After I threw you out of here," interjected Peter coldly. "Keep your tongue easy, or I'll have to handle you again."

But Smallbones' fury got the better of him, and he meant to annoy Peter all he could.

"Yes, I dessay you would. But you can't blind us like a lot of gophers with a dogone child's yarn like that. If those things had been there they'd ha' been there when Will was found by Doc—— Say," he cried, turning with inspiration upon Jim, "wher's your knife? You mostly carry one. I see your sheath, but ther' ain't no knife in it."

He pointed at the back of Jim's waist, which was turned toward him. Every eye that could see the sheath followed the direction of the accusing finger, and a profound sensation stirred those who beheld. The sheath was empty.

Smallbones' triumph urged him on.

"Say, an' wher's your neck-scarf? You allus wear one, sure. An' mebbe you ain't got your dandy white han'k'chief. I 'lows you're 'bout the on'y man in these parts 'cep' Abe Horsley as fancies hisself enough to wear one. Wher's them things, I ask you? Say," he went on after a moment's pause, during which Jim still remained silent, "I accuse this lousy skunk publicly of murderin' Will Henderson. He's convicted hisself out o' his own mouth, an' he's got the man's blood on his hands. Jim Thorpe, you killed Will Henderson!"

The little man's fervor, his boldness, his shrewd argument carried his audience with him, as he stood pointing dramatically at the accused but unflinching man. Doc Crombie was carried along with the rest even against his own judgment. Peter Blunt and Angel Gay, with Jake Wilkes, were the only men present who were left unconvinced. Peter's eyes were sternly fixed on the beady eyes of Smallbones. Gay, too, in his slow way, was furious. But Jake would not have believed Jim had

committed the murder even if he had seen him do it, he detested Smallbones so much.

But everybody was waiting for Jim's reply to the challenge. And it came amidst a deathly silence. It came with a straightforwardness that carried conviction to three of his hearers at least, and set the redoubtable doctor wondering if he were dreaming.

"You're quite right I usually wear all those things you say, but I haven't got them with me now, because"—he smiled into the little man's eyes, "the particular articles I spoke of were all mine, and, apparently, now they've been stolen."

"Guilty, by Gad!" roared Smallbones.

And some one near him added—

"Lynch him! Lynch him!"

How that cry might have been taken up and acted upon, it needs little imagination to guess. But quick as thought Doc Crombie came to Jim's rescue. He silenced the crowd with a roar like some infuriated lion.

"The first man that moves I'll shoot!" he cried, behind the brace of leveled pistols he was now holding at arm's length.

He stood for a few seconds thus till order was restored, then he quietly returned one of his guns to its holster, while the other he retained in his hand. He turned at once to Jim.

"You're accused of the murder of Will Henderson by Smallbones," he said simply. "You've got more of this story back of your head. You've now got your chance of ladlin' it out to clear yourself. You'd best speak. An' the quicker the better. You say the knife that killed him was yours. Yes?"

The man's honest intention was obvious. He wanted to give Jim a chance. He was doing his utmost. But he knew the temper of these

men, and he knew that they were not to be played with. It was up to the accused man to clear himself.

Peter Blunt anxiously watched Jim's face. There was something like despair in his honest eyes. But he could do nothing without the other's help.

Jim looked straight into the doctor's eyes. There was no defiance in his look, neither was there anything of the guilty man in it. It was simply honest.

"I've told you all I have to tell," he said. "The knife that killed Will Henderson was my knife. But I swear before God that I am innocent of his death!"

The doctor turned from him with an oath. And curiously enough his oath was purely at the man's obstinacy.

"Fellers," he said, addressing the assembly, "I've been your leader for a goodish bit, an' I don't guess I'm goin' back on you now. We got a code of laws right here in Barnriff with which we handle sech cases as this. Those laws'll take their course. We'll try the case right here an' now. You, Smallbones, will establish your case." Then he turned to Jim. "If there's any feller you'd like——"

"I'll stand by Jim Thorpe," cried Peter Blunt, in a voice that echoed throughout the building.

Doc Crombie nodded.

"Gentlemen, the court is open."

CHAPTER XXXIII

AFTER THE VERDICT

Peter Blunt stared helplessly up at the eastern sky. His brain was whirling, and he stared without being conscious of the reason.

He breathed heavily, like a man saturating his lungs with pure air after long confinement in a foul atmosphere. Then it almost seemed as if his great frame shrank in stature, and became suddenly a wreck of itself. As if age and decay had suddenly come upon him. As if the weight of his body had become too heavy for him, and set his great limbs tottering under it as he walked.

The excitement, the straining of thought and nerve had passed, leaving him hopelessly oppressed, twenty years older.

The din and clamor of the final scenes in the saloon were still ringing in his ears. It was all over. The farce of Jim Thorpe's trial had been played out. But the shouts of men, hungering for the life of a fellow man, still haunted him. The voice of the accuser was still shrieking through his brain. The memory of the stern condemnation of Doc Crombie left his great heart crushed and helpless.

His brain was still whirling with all the strain he had gone through, his pulses were still hammering with the consuming anger which had raged in him as he stood beside his friend defending him to the last. And it had all proved useless. Jim Thorpe had been condemned by the ballot of his fellow citizens. Death—a hideous, disgraceful death was to be his, at the moment when the gray dawn should first lift the

eastern corner of the pall of night.

The saloon was behind Peter now. Its lights were still burning. For the condemned man was to remain there with his guards until the appointed time.

Peter remembered Jim's look when he finally bade him leave him. Could he ever forget it? He had seen death in many forms in his time. He had seen many men face it, each in his own way. But never in his life had he seen such calmness, such apparent indifference as Jim Thorpe had displayed.

When the ballot was taken and the doctor pronounced sentence, there was never a tremor of an eyelid. There was not even one quick-drawn breath. Nor was there a suggestion of any emotion—save that of indifference.

Then when the doctor had named the manner of his death—a rawhide rope on the bough of a tree—Jim had turned with a smile to Peter.

"I'd prefer to be shot," he said quietly. "But there, I s'pose this thing must proceed by custom."

So Jim received the pronouncement of the final penalty for a crime of which Peter was convinced he was innocent.

It had suddenly set his loyal heart longing with a mad, passionate longing to have his great hands about the mean throat of the man Smallbones. It had set him wild with rebellion against the merciless customs which permitted such an outrage upon justice. He had even challenged the doctor in his fury, on his right to administer justice and accept the condemnation of the men gathered there for the purpose.

In his desire to serve his friend he passed beyond the bounds of all discretion, of all safety for himself. He threatened that he would move the whole world to bring just retribution upon those who had participated in that night's work. And his threats and violence had

been received with a tolerant laughter. A derision more stinging and ominous than the most furious outbreak.

The work would go on. The death penalty would be carried out. He knew it. He knew it.

Then when it was all over, and the prisoner's guards had been appointed, Jim had begged him to leave him.

"Thanks, Peter, old friend," he said. And then added with a whimsical touch: "I'm tired to death of hearing your dear old voice. You've said such a heap to-night. Get along. I don't want you any more. You see you're too big, and you sure take up too much room—in my heart. So long."

So he had been driven from his friend's side, and out into the blackest night he had ever known.

Yes, it was an old, old man that now lurched his way across the market-place toward his hut. He was weary, so weary in mind and spirit. There was nothing now left for him to do but to go home and—and sit there till the dawn. Was there no hope, none? There was none. No earthly force could save Jim now. It wanted less than an hour to dawn, and, between now and then——

And yet he believed Jim could have saved himself. There was not a man in that room, from Doc Crombie downward, but knew that Jim was holding back something. What was it? And why did he not speak? Peter had asked him while the farce of a trial was at its height. He had begged and implored him to speak out, but the answer he received was the same as had been given to the doctor. Jim had told all he had to tell. Oh, the whole thing was madness——madness.

But there was no madness in Jim, he admitted. Once when his importunities tried him Jim had shown him just one brief glimpse of the heart which no death penalty had the power to reveal.

Peter remembered his words now; they would live in his memory to his dying day.

"You sure make me angry, Peter," he had said. "Even to you, old friend, I have nothing more to say of this killing than I have said to Doc, and the rest of 'em. I've done many a fool trick in my time, and maybe I'm doing another now. But I'm doing it with my eyes wide open. There's the rope ahead, a nasty, ugly, curly rope; maybe plaited by a half-breed with dirty hands. But what's the odds? Perhaps there's a stray bit of comfort in that rope, in the thought of it. You know the old prairie saw: 'It isn't always the sunniest day makes the best picnic.' Which means, I take it, choose your company of girls and boys well, and, rain or shine, you'll have a bully time. Maybe there's a deal I could say if I so chose, but, in the meantime, I kind of believe there's worse things in the world than—a rawhide rope."

It was just a glimpse of the man behind his mask of indifference, and Peter wondered.

But there was no key to the riddle in his words, no key at all. Somehow, in a vague sort of way, it seemed to him that Eve Henderson was in a measure the influence behind Jim. But he could not see how. He was well aware of Jim's love for her, and he believed that she was less indifferent to him now than when Will had been running straight. But for the life of him he could see no definite connection between such a matter and the murder. It was all so obscure—so obscure.

And now there was nothing left but to wait for the hideous end. He lurched into his hut, and, without even troubling to light his lamp, flung himself upon his bed.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE TRUTH

The moment Peter Blunt left the saloon, a lurking figure stole out from the shadow of one of the side walls, where it had been standing close under a window, listening to all that passed within the building. It followed on a few yards behind the preoccupied man with a stealthy but clumsy gait. Peter heard nothing and saw nothing. His mind and heart were too full to care in the least for anything that was going on about him now.

So it was that Elia, for it was he, laboriously followed him up until he saw the man's burly figure disappear into his hut. Then he turned away with something of relief, and hobbled in the direction of his own house. He had been anxious lest Peter should be on his way to carry the news to Eve. He had very definite reasons for wishing to give her the news himself. He felt that Peter was too convinced of Jim's innocence, judging by his defense of him in the saloon, to be a safe person to carry Eve the news. He was thinking of his own safety, and his distorted mind was at work gauging Peter from his own standpoint. He felt he must avoid Peter for the present. Peter was too shrewd. Peter might—yes, he must certainly avoid him until after—dawn. Then it would not matter.

Sick in body as well as in mind after the evening's events, the low, cruel cunning which possessed him was still hard at work scheming to fulfil both his vicious desires and to hedge himself round in safety.

This was the first time he had been near home since he had returned

from the bluff. He had painfully followed Jim into the village and shadowed him down to the saloon. He was in an extremity of terror the whole time, from the moment he realized Jim's intention to notify the villagers of what had happened until the end of the trial, when he heard the sentence passed. Then, curiously enough, his terror only abated the slightest degree.

But he was very sick, nearly dropping with fatigue and bodily suffering. Something was wrong in his chest, and the pain of it was excruciating. There were moments when the shooting pains in his poor curved spine set him almost shrieking. Will's blows had done their work on his weakly frame, and it felt to him to be all broken up.

When he reached his sister's gate, he stood for some moments leaning on it gasping for breath. His strength was well-nigh expended, leaving him faint and dizzy. Slowly his breathing eased, and he glanced at the windows. The lamps were still burning inside. Evidently Eve was waiting for something. Had she heard? He wondered. Was she now waiting for the verdict? Perhaps she was only waiting for his own return.

And while he considered a flash of the devil, that was always busy within him, stirred once more. He had come to tell her of it all. And the thought pleased him. For the moment he forgot something of his bodily sufferings in the joy of the thought of the pain he was about to inflict upon her. He groped his hand in his jacket pocket. Yes, they were all there, the knife and the handkerchief that had so puzzled the doctor and those others.

He stealthily opened the gate and walked up the path. At the door he stood listening. Some one was stirring within. Hark! That sounded like Eve sobbing. Now she was speaking. Was she speaking to herself—or to some one else? He listened acutely. He could only hear the murmur of her voice. There was no other sound within.

Suddenly he drew back from the door. He heard her footsteps

approaching. Wondering what she was going to do he withdrew out of sight. The door opened, and Eve stood leaning against the casing. He could only see her outline against the lamplight behind her, for her face was lost in the shadow. It seemed to him that she was staring out at the saloon. Maybe she was waiting till the lights were put out, and so she would know the trial was over. Maybe, even, she was contemplating going down there in search of the news she was so fearfully awaiting. These suggestions occurred to Elia, for he had a tremendously shrewd knowledge of his sister, as he had of most people with whom he came into contact.

It occurred to him now that it was time he showed himself. The grinding pains in his body would no longer be denied. He must get inside and rest.

"Sis," he called in a low voice. "Ho, sis!"

The woman started as the boy hobbled out into the light.

"Elia!" she cried. And the next moment she would have clasped him in her arms, and hugged him to her bosom. But he drew back. He feared her embraces. Nor was he in the mood to submit to them.

"Don't be a fule, sis. I'm tired—dog tired. I'm sick, too. I believe somethin's broken inside me."

He pushed her on one side and hurried into the room.

"Come in an' shut that gol-durned door," he cried, without turning, as he made his way to the rocking-chair. He dropped into it, his face contorting hideously with the awful pain the process caused him.

But the spasm passed after a few moments, and when he looked up Eve was standing before him. He eyed her silently for some time. He was wondering just how much she knew.

There was little doubt in his mind that she knew a great deal. Horror and suffering were so deeply lined upon her young face, and in her

beautiful eyes was such a wild, hunted look, that there was very little doubt in his mind that she knew what most of the village knew by this time. But she didn't know all he knew, not by a lot. And she wasn't going to know it all. Only some of it. She was suffering. So was he—in a different way. He would help her to suffer more yet. It was good to see other folks suffering.

"Who's bin here, sis?" he demanded.

"Only Annie. But, Elia, tell me you—you didn't meet Will?"

The boy chuckled without any visible sign. Even the pain of his body could not rob him of his cruel love of inflicting pain. He ignored her question for the moment.

"Annie?" he responded. "Did she tell you, sis? Did she tell you your Will was dead? Eh?" He leaned forward, his eyes sparkling. "I'm glad—real glad. He was sure bad, an' no use to you. She told you?"

But suddenly the poor woman buried her face in her hands, as though to shut out the hideous thoughts his words brought back to her.

"Yes, yes," she cried, "I know he's dead, and they're trying Jim for it. Oh, God, it's awful! They say he did it. But he didn't, I know he didn't. He only said he'd do it if Will had killed you. He didn't kill you, so Jim didn't do it. He wouldn't. He couldn't. And I sent him out there to the bluff. And if they hang him it's my doing. Oh, Jim, Jim!" She fell to moaning and rocking herself as she stood. "But they mustn't kill him. They won't. Will they? Say they won't, Elia. Oh, Jim, Jim! I want you so badly. I—I—"

"You're sweet on him, sis?" Elia said, with a gleam of fiendish satisfaction in his wonderful eyes.

"I sent him," reiterated the woman, ignoring his question, and lost in her own misery. "Oh, Jim, Jim!"

For a time at least the boy had quite forgotten his bodily sufferings.

His enjoyment was monstrous, unholy.

"Say, sis," he went on, "the trial's over. I've just come from there."

Eve looked up, startled. Every nerve in her body was quivering with a sudden tension.

"Yes, yes?" she cried.

"Yes, it's sure over," the boy added, prolonging his sister's agony.

"Well? They—they acquitted him?" There was something absolutely imploring in her manner. It might well have moved a heart of stone.

But Elia's heart, if he possessed such an organ, bore the brand of the fiend. He nodded first. Then, as he saw the joy leap to his sister's eyes he shook his head vigorously, and the result pleased him.

"He's got to die," he said.

The woman suddenly reeled, and fell on her knees at the table, with her face buried on her outstretched arms. Elia watched her for some moments. He felt that here was some recompense for what he had gone through.

"You was kind o' sweet on him, sis," he said presently. "That's why I tried to help him some. I kind o' like him, too. I feel sort o' queer Jim's goin' to get hanged—hanged, sis, at dawn." He paused, but beyond the racking sobs that shook the woman's frame she made no movement. "I sure feel queer about it, tho'. Y'see he came right up when Will had nigh kicked the life out o' me, an' he hit Will a smash that knocked him cold. Gee, it was a smash! Jim hurt Will bad, an' it was for me. Say, that's why I feel queer they're goin' to—hang him at dawn. Somehow, it don't seem good stretchin' Jim's neck. I don't seem to feel I'd like to see Jim hurted. Must be because he hurted Will fer me. Will 'ud 'a' killed me, sure, but fer Jim."

His words had become a sort of soliloquy. He had forgotten his sister for the moment. But now, as she looked up, he remembered.

"You tried to—to save him?" she demanded. "You told them what Will was doing? You told them how—how it all happened?"

The boy shook his head, and again his eyes lit with malice.

"I ain't been inside the saloon. I—I was scared. Y'see Will wasn't killed by the blow Jim give him. Guess that on'y jest knocked him out. Y'see he was killed with Jim's knife—after. Y'see Jim's a fule. After he'd hit him he fixed his face up with his han'k'chiefs, an' after he was good an' dead he went fer to leave his knife stickin' in his chest. That's wher' I helped him some. I took that knife out—an' them rags. Here they are, right here."

He suddenly produced the blood-stained knife and the handkerchiefs, and held them out toward her. But the woman shrank away from them.

"I guessed if I took 'em right away no one 'ud know how he come by his death, an' who did it. Y'see Jim had helped me some."

But Eve was not heeding the explanation.

"Then he did—kill him?" Her question was a low, horrified whisper.

"Ye—es."

"After he had—struck him senseless?"

"Ye—yes."

"I don't believe it. You are lying to me, Elia." The woman's voice was strident, even harsh.

Elia understood. It was her desire to convince herself of Jim's innocence that set her accusing him. It was not that she really disbelieved. Had it been otherwise he would have been afraid. As it was he gloated over her suffering instead.

"Yes, he's a fule, an' he's sure got to hang," he said mildly. "Guess it'll be dawn come half an hour. Then they're goin' to take him right out ther' wher' he killed your Will—an' hang him. Smallbones is goin' out

to find the tree. Say, sis, Smallbones is goin' to get busy pullin' the rope. I wish it wa'n't Jim, sure I do. I'd sooner it was Peter, on'y he's goin' to give me that gold. Guess it wouldn't matter if——"

"They shan't hang him! I don't believe it. I can't believe it. I don't believe you. Oh, God, this is awful! Elia, say it isn't so; say you are only——"

"Don't be a fule, sis," the boy cried, brutally. "Guess if you can't b'lieve me go an' ast Peter. He's in his hut. He helped defend Jim, an' said a heap o' fule things 'bout gettin' the law on Doc. Ast him if you don't b'lieve me."

But whereas he had only intended to force her belief by his challenge, Eve took him literally. She snatched at his words, and he suddenly became afraid. She picked up the knife and the rags, which before she had refused to touch, and grasped him by one wrist.

"Yes, yes, we'll go over to Peter, and I'll have the truth from him. I can't trust you, Elia. You were there when Will was murdered; you've been down to the saloon, outside it. You must have seen the killing, and you've not said one word in his defense, not one word as to the reason of Will's death. Jim did it in your defense, and you're letting him hang without a word to help him. You shall tell Peter what you've told me, and maybe it isn't too late to do something yet. Come along."

But the boy tried to drag free. His guilty conscience made him fear Peter, and in a frenzy he struggled to release himself.

But Eve was no longer the gentle, indulgent woman he had always known. She was fighting for a life perhaps dearer to her than Elia's. She saw a barely possible chance that through Elia she might yet save Jim. Will's brutal attack upon a cripple had met with perhaps something more than its deserts, but these men were men, and maybe the extenuation of the provocation might at least save Jim the rope.

Elia quickly gave up the struggle. His bodily hurts had robbed him of what little physical strength he possessed at the best of times; and Eve, for all her slightness, was by no means a weak woman. She literally forced him to go, half dragging him, and never for a moment relaxing her hold upon him.

And so they came to Peter's hut. She knocked loudly at the door, and called to him, fearing, because she saw no light, that the man had gone out again. But Peter was there, and his astonished voice answered her summons at once.

"Eve?" he cried, in something like consternation, for he was thinking of the news he must now give her. Then he appeared in the doorway.

"Quick, light a lamp," the woman cried. "Elia has told me all about it. He says Jim is to die at—dawn." She glanced involuntarily at the eastern horizon, and to her horror beheld the first pale reflection of morning light, hovering, an almost milky lightening, where all else was still jet black.

Peter had no words with which to answer her. He had dreaded seeing her, and now—she knew. He lit the lamp, and Eve dragged the unwilling boy in with her; and as she passed him over to Peter's bed he fell back on it groaning.

"Peter," she cried now, speaking with a rush, since dawn was so near. "Can't something be done? Surely, surely, there is extenuation! He did it all to defend Elia. Will was killing him out there at the bluff. Look at him! Can't you see his suffering? That's why Jim killed him. Elia's just told me so. He even took these things from—from the body after—thinking it might save Jim. He brought them to me just now; and he says he's been down at the saloon, and never said a word to help Jim. He said he was frightened to go in. Did Jim tell them it was to save Elia? Oh, surely they can be made to understand it was not wilful—wilful murder! They can't hang him. It's—it's—horrible!"

But as the astonished Peter listened to her words, words which told

him a side of the story he had never even dreamed of before, his eyes drifted and fixed themselves on the now ghastly face of the boy. He compelled the terror-stricken eyes and held them with his own. And when Eve ceased speaking he answered her without turning. He was reading, reading through the insane mind of the boy, right down into his very soul. In the long days he had had Elia working with him he had studied him closely. And he had learned the twists and warps of his nature as no one else understood them.

"Jim said nothing at all!" Peter said slowly.

"Nothing? What do you mean? He—he must have told them of—of Elia?"

Suddenly Peter's eyes shot in the direction of the door. A faint, distant sound reached them. It was a sound of bustle from the direction of the saloon. Eve heard too. They both understood.

"Oh, God!" she cried.

But Peter's eyes were on Elia's face once more. They were stern, and a curious light was in them.

"I seem to see it now," he said slowly. "Jim denied his guilt because he was innocent. But he admitted that the knife which killed Will was his, although no knife was found. He spoke the truth the whole time. He would not stoop to a lie, because he was innocent. Eve, that man was shielding the real culprit. Do you know any one that Jim would be likely to give his life for? I do." Suddenly he swung round on Elia, and, with an arm outstretched, and a great finger pointing, he cried, "Why did you kill Will Henderson?"

Inspiration had come. A great light of hope shone in his eyes. His demand was irresistible to the suffering, demented boy. Elia's eyes gleamed with a sudden cruel frenzy. There was the light of madness in them, a vicious, furious madness in them. Hatred of Will surged through his fevered brain, a furious triumph at the thought of having

paid Will for all his cruelties to him swept away any guilty fears as he blurted out his reply.

"Because I hate him. Because he's kicked me till I'm nigh dead. Because—I—I hate him."

It was a tremendous moment, and fraught with such possibilities as a few minutes ago would have seemed impossible. There was a silence of horror in the room. The shock had left Eve staggered. Peter was calculating what seemed almost impossible chances. Elia—Elia was in the agonies of realizing what he had done, and battling with an overwhelming physical weakness.

The sounds of commotion at the saloon were more decided. There was the ominous galloping of horses, and the rattle of the wheels of a buckboard. Peter glanced at the window. The sky outside was lightening. Suddenly he shivered.

"You killed him. How? How?" His voice was tense and harsh, though he strove to soften it.

But Elia had turned sullen. A fierce resentment held him silent, resentment and fear.

And in that moment of waiting for his answer Peter heard again the movements of the cavalcade at the saloon. It seemed to be under way for—the bluff.

Now he leaned toward the boy, and his great honest brow was sweating with apprehension.

“Elia,” he said. “If I go and tell them they’ll hang you, too. Do you understand? I’m not going to bluff you. This is just fact. They’ll hang you if I tell them. And I’m going to tell them, sure, if you don’t do as I say. If you do as I say they won’t touch you. You’ve got to come along with me and tell them you killed Will, and just why. They’re men, those fellers, and they’ll be real sorry for you. You’ve got to tell the whole truth just as it happened, and I give you my word they won’t touch you. You’ll save Jim’s life. Jim who was always good to you. Jim who went out to the bluff to save you from Will. You needn’t to be scared,” as signs of fresh terror broke out upon the boy’s face, “you needn’t to be scared any. I’ll be there with you——”

“And so will I,” cried Eve, her eyes suddenly lighting with hope.

“Will you come, boy? You’ll save Jim, who never did you anything but good. Will you come?”

But there was no answer.

“Say, laddie,” Peter went on, his eyes straining with fear, “they’re moving now. Can you hear them? That’s the men who’re taking Jim out to kill him—and when they’ve killed him they’ll kill you, because I shall tell them ’bout you. Will you help us save Jim—Jim who was always good to you, or will you let them kill him—an’ then you? Hark, they’re crossing toward us now. Soon, and they’ll be gone, and then it’ll be too late. They’ll then have to come back for you, and—you won’t be able to get that gold I promised you.”

Eve sat breathlessly watching. Peter's steady persistence was something to marvel at. She wanted to shriek out and seize the suffering cripple, and shake what little life there yet remained out of him. The suspense was dreadful. She looked for a sign of the lightening of that cloud of horror and suffering on the boy's face. She looked for that sign of yielding they both hoped and prayed for.

But Peter went on, and it seemed to the woman he must win out.

"Come, speak up, laddie," he said gently. "Play the man. They shan't hurt you, I swear it. Ther's all that gold waiting. You've seen it on the reef in the cutting, right here in Barnriff. It's yours when you've done this thing, but you won't be here to get it if you don't. Will you come?"

"They won't—won't hang me?" the boy whispered, in dreadful fear.

The death party were quite near now. Peter heard them. He felt that they were nearly across the market-place. He glanced out of the window. Yes, there they were. Jim was sitting in the buckboard beside Doc Crombie. The rest of the crowd were in the saddle.

"I swear it, laddie," he cried in a fear.

"An'—an'—you got that gold?" The boy's face was suddenly contorted with fierce bodily pain.

"Yes, yes, and it's yours when we come back."

Another glance showed the hanging party on the outskirts of the village. They were passing slowly. Peter knew they would travel faster when the last house was passed. Eve saw them, too, and her hands writhed in silent agony as they clasped each other in her lap. She turned again to stare helplessly at Elia. She must leave him to Peter. Instinctively she knew that one word from her might spoil all.

"Wher' are they now?" asked the boy, his ghastly face cold as marble after his seizure of pain.

"They're gettin' out of the village. We'll be too late in a minute."

Then of a sudden the boy cried out. His voice was shrill with a desperate fear, but there was a note of determination in it.

"I'll tell 'em—I'll tell 'em. Come on, I ken walk. But it's only for Jim, an'—an' I don't want that gold." And for the first time in her life Eve saw the boy's eyes flood with tears, which promptly streamed down his ghastly cheeks.

Peter's eyes glowed. There was just time, he believed. But he was thinking of the boy. At last—at last. It was for Jim Elia was doing it. For Jim, and not for the gold. He had delved and delved until at last he had struck the real color, where the soil had long been given up as barren.

"Come, laddie." He stepped up to the boy with a great kindness, and, stretching out his herculean arms, he lifted him bodily from the bed. "You can't walk, you're too ill. I'll jest carry you."

And he bore him out of the house.

CHAPTER XXXV

IN THE SHADOW OF THE GALLOWS TREE

The creak of a saddle; the shuffling and rustle of horses moving at a walk through the long prairie grass; the sudden jolt of a wheel as it dropped from a tufty wad to the barren sand intersecting the clumps of grass of which the prairie is largely made up; the half-hearted neigh of a horse, as though it were striving to break from under the spell of gloomy depression which seemed to weigh heavily upon the very atmosphere; these were the only sounds which broke the gray stillness of dawn.

No one seemed to have words to offer. No one seemed to have sufficient lightness even to smoke a morning pipe. There were few amongst those riding out from Barnriff who would not far sooner have remained in their beds, amidst the easy dreams of healthy, tired nature, now that the last moments of a man's life were at hand. There were few, now that the heat and excitement of accusation were past, but would far rather have had the easy thought that they had been on the other side of the ballot. But this was mere human sentimentality at the thought of the passing of one man's life. This thing was necessary, necessary for example and precept. A man had slain another. He was guilty; he must die. The argument was as old as the world.

Yet life is very precious. It is so precious that these men could not rid themselves of the haunting ghost of self-consciousness. They placed

themselves in the position of the condemned, and at once depression wrapped them in its pall, and, shrinking within themselves, all buoyancy left them. A man had to die, and each man felt he was instrumental in wresting from him that which of all the world must be most prized. And in many the thought was painful.

The gray world looked grayer for their mission. The daylight seemed to grow far more slowly than was its wont. Where was the ruddy splendor of the day's awakening, where the glory of dawning hope? Lost, lost. For the minds of these men could not grasp that which lay beyond the object of their journey.

The long-drawn howl of the prairie scavenger broke the stillness. It was answered by its kind. It was a fitting chorus for the situation. But ears were deaf to such things, for they were too closely in harmony with the doings of the moment. The gray owls fluttered by, weary with their night's vigil, but with appetites amply satisfied after the long chase, seeking their daylight repose in sparse and distant woodland hidings. But there were no eyes for them. Eyes were on the distant bluff to the exclusion of all else.

Six men rode ahead of the buckboard. Smallbones was on the lead. It was his place, and he triumphantly held it. His was the office. Jim Thorpe had reached the end of the one-way trail. And it was his to speed him on—beyond. The rope hung coiled over the horn of his saddle. It was a good rope, a strong, well-seasoned rope. He had seen to that, for he had selected it himself from a number of others. The men with him were those who would act under his orders, men whose senses were quite deadened to the finer emotions of life.

Those behind the buckboard were there to witness the administration of the sentence passed upon the prisoner by his fellow townsmen.

Doc Crombie drove the buckboard. And he watched the condemned man beside him out of the tail of his eye. Jim's attitude gave him relief, but it made him feel regret.

They had passed the limits of the village when his prisoner suddenly pointed with his bound hands at a pile of soil rising amidst the level of the prairie grass.

"Peter Blunt's cutting," he said, with curious interest. "He's tracked the gold ledge from the head waters down to here." His tone was half musing. It almost seemed as though he had no concern with the object of their journey.

"Peter's crazy on that gold," said the doctor. "He guesses too much."

Jim shook his head. And for some moments there was silence. Finally his answer came with a smile of understanding.

"He's not crazy. You fellers are all wrong. Peter's got the gold all right."

"He's welcome, sure."

The doctor had no sympathy with any gold find at that moment, and presently he looked round at his prisoner. The man's indifference almost staggered him. He chewed his wad of tobacco viciously. At that moment he hated himself, he hated Jim, he hated everybody—but most of all he hated Smallbones.

After a while he spoke, and though his manner was sharp he meant kindly—

"You ain't told what, I'm guessin', you could tell, Jim," he said. Then he added significantly, "We've nigh a mile to go."

But Jim was gazing out at the great arc of rosy light growing in the eastern sky, and the doctor stirred impatiently. At last the condemned man turned to him with a grave smile—

"Guess there's nothing so beautiful in nature as a perfect summer dawn," he said. "It makes a man feel strong, and—good. I'm glad it's dawn," he added, with a sigh.

The doctor spat out his tobacco, and his lean hands clenched tight on the reins.

"Maybe it makes you fool-headed, too."

"Maybe it does," Jim agreed, thoughtfully. "Maybe it's good to be fool-headed once in a while. The fool's generally a happy man." Then his eyes looked away in the direction of Peter's cutting. "And happiness, like Peter's gold, takes a heap of finding," he continued a moment later. "Guess the wiser you are the harder things hit you. And as you grow older it's so easy to be wise, and so hard to be fool-headed. That bluff we're riding to. Maybe it's foolish me riding to it. That's what you're thinking—because you're wise. It makes me glad I'm fool-headed."

The doctor unnecessarily slashed the horses with his whip. But he was careful not to increase the pace.

Jim went on after a moment's pause, while he watched the hawk-like mould of his companion's profile.

"Peter's a good friend," he said. "Last night, if I'd said the word, he'd have fought for me. He'd have fought for me till the boys shot him down in his tracks. And he'd have thought no more of giving his life for me than—than Smallbones would think of taking mine. And some of the gold he's looking for would—have come his way."

The doctor looked round sharply. He began to wonder if Jim were getting light-headed.

"You're talkin' foolish," he said.

But the other shook his head.

"You see, I don't guess you know Peter as I do—now. I didn't quite know him—before. I do now. Life's so mighty full of—well, the things we don't want, that it's well to get out and look for something that don't seem to be lying around. And every time you find one of those things, it seems to set the things life wants you to have farther and farther away. That's what Peter's doing." He smiled ever so gently. "He's

looking for what he calls gold. Guess I'll find some of Peter's gold—inyonder bluff."

The doctor's eyes were staring out at their destination. He had no answer. He caught something of Jim's meaning, but his hard mind had not the proper power of assimilation.

"If that bluff was a thousand miles off, Doc, I still shouldn't have anything in my fool-head to tell. Seems to me a bit chilly. Couldn't we drive faster?"

"No. By Gad, we couldn't!"

The driver's words came with a sudden outburst of passion. If half the silent curses he was hurling at the head of the venomous Smallbones at that moment took effect, the man would surely have then and there been blotted out of the history of Barnriff.

Jim had no more to say, and the other had no power to frame the thoughts which filled his mind. And so a silence fell upon them as they approached the woods.

Through the perfect fretwork of the upper branches the eastern light shone cold and pure; in the lower depths the gray gloom had not yet lifted. The dark aisles between the trees offered a gloomy welcome. They suggested just such an ending as was intended for their journey.

The leaders had passed round the southern limits, and were no longer in view. The doctor headed his horses upon their course. Something of the eagle light had gone out of his eyes. He stared just ahead of his horses, but no farther. As they came to the bend, where Barnriff would be shut off from their view, Jim turned in his seat, and who can tell what was in his mind at the moment? He knew it was his last glimpse of the place, which for him had held so many disappointments, so many heartaches. Yet—he wanted to see it.

But his eyes never reached the village. They encountered two objects upon the prairie, and fastened themselves upon them, startled, even

horrified. A large man was running, bearing in his arms a strange burden, and behind him, trailing wearily, but still running, was a woman. He could have cried out at the sight, and his cry would have been one of horror. Instead, he turned to his companion.

"No reasonable request is denied a—dying man, Doc," he said, eagerly. "Drive faster."

Without a word the other touched his horses with the whip, and they broke from their amble into a brisk trot.

In half a minute they drew up in the shadow of a great overhanging tree.

Jim was promptly assisted to the ground by the waiting men, for he was bound hand and foot. Now his bonds were removed, and immediately he stepped forward to where Smallbones had just succeeded in throwing his rope into position overhead, and was testing it with his own weight.

As the prisoner came up he turned, and a malicious sparkle shone in his eyes as he confronted the calm face.

"It'll bear my weight?" Jim inquired, coldly. "It wouldn't be pleasant to go through it twice." He glanced up at the tree as though interested.

"It's built fer ropin' 'outlaws,'" Smallbones grinned. "I sure don't guess a low-down skunk of a murderer'll——"

But the man never finished his sentence. Doc Crombie had him by the throat in a clutch that threatened to add another and more welcome crime to the records.

"Another word from your lousy tongue an' I'll strangle you!" roared the doctor, venting at last all the pent-up wrath gathered on the journey out.

But Jim was impatient. He remembered those two toiling figures behind.

"Let up, Doc," he said sharply. "His words don't hurt. Let's finish things."

The doctor's hand fell from the man's throat and he drew back.

"Fix the ropes," he said shortly.

In silence four of the men advanced, while the evil eyes of Smallbones savagely glowered at the doctor. In a few moments Jim's arms were pinioned, and his ankles bound fast. Then the rope was loosely thrown about his neck. And after that a man advanced with a large silk handkerchief, already folded, and with which to blindfold him.

But suddenly the doctor bethought him of something.

"Wait!" he cried. Then he addressed himself directly to the condemned man. "Jim Thorpe, you sure got friends present. You sure got friends ready to hear anything you got to tell. You're goin' out o' this world right now, actin' a lie if not speakin' one. Ther' are folks among us dead sure, or I wouldn't say it. Mebbe you ain't thought that if this thing is done, an' what I suspicion is true, you're makin' murderers of us all—an' in pertickler Smallbones. Say, you got your chance. Speak."

The men round the tree stood hushed in awe, waiting. There was not a sound to break the stillness except the soft rustle of the trees in the morning breeze.

"I have told you all, I am innocent," Jim said firmly. Then he shrugged. "Guess you must take your own chances what you are when this is done. We don't need to wait any longer."

For answer the doctor signed to the man with the handkerchief. The prisoner's face was pale, but his eyes were steady and his lips firm. There was no weakness in him, and the wondering crowd were troubled. Most of them had seen hangings in their time, but they had never seen a man face death in cold blood quite like this.

Suddenly, while the bandage was being secured, one of the younger men in the front rank threw up his arm as though to ward off a blow. He covered his eyes, and fled precipitately behind his comrades, where he could no longer see. Several others turned their backs deliberately. The whole thing was too terrible. It was hideous.

Doc Crombie stood with folded arms within two yards of the prisoner. Behind the prisoner Smallbones and the rest of his men stood, their hands grasping the plaited rope. They were only awaiting the silent signal from the doctor.

When the handkerchief had been adjusted the man fell in beside his comrades on the rope. The awful moment had arrived when the signal must be given. The tension amongst the onlookers was breathless, and the agony of the man about to die must have been appalling, in spite of his apparent calm.

The moments passed. It almost seemed as though the hardened nerve of the doctor needed support. At last he stiffened. He raised his head, and looked squarely at the pinioned man.

"Jim Thorpe," he cried, in a harsh, unyielding voice. "You are condemned to die by the ballot of your fellow citizens, for the murder of Will——"

"Ho! Ho, Doc! Hold on! For God's sake, hold your hand, Doc!"

A great hoarse voice split the deathly stillness with a roar that suddenly electrified the assembly. Everybody swung round in the direction whence it came. That is, everybody but the doctor. He had recognized the voice, and he had caught Smallbones' gleaming eye. With a spring he was at Jim's side, and threw the noose clear of his neck. He had no idea of the reason of the interruption, but he had caught Smallbones' eye.

He turned about in time to see Peter Blunt break through the crowd bearing in his arms the crippled brother of Eve Henderson. Following

close upon his heels was Eve herself, gasping and almost fainting with her exertion.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE PASSING OF ELIA

Peter Blunt paused, staggered, then with a great effort pulled himself together. Mighty man as he was, he had reached the limits of his strength, for he had run nearly a mile, carrying Elia in his arms. Eve now clung to his great arm for support.

Peter set the boy on his feet and supported him. A great fear was in him that a perverse fate would yet rob them of justice. Elia was dying, and he knew it. He needed no examination to tell him so. It was there, written in the glazing eyes, in the hideous blue pallor stealing over the lad's face.

"We're in time, laddie," he said hoarsely, with his mouth close to Elia's ear. "Speak up and say the truth."

Then he looked up to encounter the keen eyes of the doctor.

"What's all this?" the latter demanded harshly. But there was a sudden light of hope in his fierce eyes.

"It's him. He's got something to say. It's the truth about the killing." Peter indicated the boy. "Speak up, laddie, they're all friends. Speak up—for Jim's sake." Eve looked on with hands clasped. She was still breathing painfully from her exertions.

The crowd gathered round. All but Smallbones, who never for a moment removed his eyes from Jim's face. It was a bitter moment for him. He felt he was about to be robbed of his prey, and he resented it

with all that was mean in him. But Elia did not speak. His eyes were half closed, and a terrible helplessness seemed to have suddenly seized hold of him.

Peter urged him again with a sinking heart.

"Aren't you going to tell them, laddie? Aren't you going to tell them all you've told me—and save Jim?"

It was Jim's voice that answered him.

"Don't bother the lad," he said. He could not see, but instinctively he knew that Elia was in a bad way.

Peter caught at his words.

"Do you hear, laddie? That's Jim talking. You've come to tell the truth and save him. They've got him all bound up, and the rope's hanging over him. Eh? I didn't rightly hear."

He had seen the boy's lips move, and he strove by every means in his power to encourage him to a dying effort.

But in the pause that followed Smallbones' mean voice was suddenly heard.

"This ain't no sort o' justice. Wot's these folks buttin' in fer? They've stuffed him full o' lies 'cause he's sick an' dying. I tell yer it's a trick, an' when he speaks it'll be to tell his usual lies——"

"It ain't lies, I tell yer it ain't lies." It was Elia speaking, suddenly roused from his stupor by the vicious charge. His words came in a high, shrill voice. "I don't need to tell no lies. I killed Will Henderson. I killed him! I killed him! He's kicked me to death, an' I killed him with Jim's knife. It was lyin' ther' wher' he'd left it after he'd fixed them rags on his face. I killed him, I tell yer. An' I'm glad. 'Cos I——hate him, an'——he's——killed——me."

The boy's voice had risen to a shriek, and then died suddenly away to a whisper as he fell back into Peter's arms. It was the final effort,

which Peter had been unable to rouse him to, but which, to his own chagrin, Smallbones had achieved.

The boy was dead. The one honest action of his life had been performed with his last breath. Such was the overmastering cruelty of his nature that, in comparative health, and with all his faculties alert, the one spark of good, somewhere deep down in his heart, had had no power to shine. The flesh had been too strong for him—and now, now perhaps he had fulfilled his mission, and that one little step forward would carry him beyond the jaws of evil which had been so tightly shut about his poor, weakly spirit. Peter laid him gently upon the ground.

Then he stood up about to speak. There were tears in his eyes, and without shame he dashed them away with the back of his hand. But Eve stayed him with a gesture. She took a step forward. Her eyes were shining as she glanced round upon the familiar faces. Her mind was made up. There was no shrinking now at the disgrace she had in her cowardice so feared before. Jim had shown her the way to a loyal courage. She understood now why he had gone to his death shielding the real murderer. He had done it to save her, he had done it as once before he had sought to help her. She loved him, and no longer feared to tread the path he had so willingly, so readily trodden for her sake.

“I want to tell you all the things that I should have told you long ago,” she began, in clear ringing tones, “but I couldn’t, because—because he was my husband.”

A startled sound went round the listeners. The doctor’s eyes flashed suddenly in Jim’s direction. But before she could continue, the latter suddenly urged her to silence.

“There’s no need to speak of him, Eve,” he cried. “Leave it to me, and I’ll tell them how Will came by his death—now.”

But the doctor interfered. He signed to one of the men to release the

prisoner.

"We'll have Mrs. Henderson's story first," he said decidedly. "You'll please get right ahead, ma'am."

There was just the briefest possible hesitation. For a second Eve's eyes wandered over the faces now gathered so closely about. It was not that she was any longer afraid. It was merely that she looked for one friendly glance. She found it in the round face of Angel Gay. He was smiling on her. And at once she plunged into her story.

"Will Henderson—my husband, was the cattle-thief," she said. And for a moment she could go no further. Had she desired to create a sensation, she amply succeeded. The doctor had to call for silence so that she might proceed.

Having made the plunge, her story came clearly and concisely. She told everything without sparing either herself or her husband. She began from the time when Will had been ordered out of Barnriff, and told all the pitiful, sordid details, right down to his final return after escaping from the doctor's men at the Little Bluff River. Everything she told as she knew it, except the part Jim had played in his actual escape. This she could not bring herself to speak of.

The story took some time in the telling, but there was not a man amongst those assembled that did not hungrily take in every detail of it. And as it unrolled, to the final scene of Will's return, when again he ill-used her and departed in search of Elia to kill him, and his final promise to return later and kill her, a fierce light of understanding grew on the swarthy, rough faces, and muttered imprecations flew from lip to lip. All bitterness for Jim had passed from their thoughts, all except, perhaps, from the thoughts of Smallbones.

And Jim remained silent all the time. He, too, was listening. He, too, shared again in the thoughts which now assailed the others. The hideous brutality, as it appeared, told in Eve's simple words, set his blood boiling afresh against the dead man. Though he knew it all only

too well, it still had power to rouse the worst side of his nature.

At the conclusion, Doc Crombie suddenly turned to Jim. He offered no comment, no sympathy.

"Now, I guess, you'll talk some," he said, in his usual harsh tone. But somehow his words seemed to contain a smile.

"The boy has told you who killed Will Henderson," Jim answered at once. "I can't, because I didn't see him killed. I'll tell you the part I had in the affair. It's not pretty." He paused, but went on almost at once. "I happened along to Mrs. Henderson's house directly I came in to town. I had news for her. You know the news. Will had escaped."

"Yes," cried Smallbones, unable to keep silent longer, "because you helped him, an' bluffed the Doc. Oh, I'm wise to you."

"You look wise to a good deal," retorted Jim, with a cold smile. Then without further concern he went on with his story. "I came to her house and found her bound and gagged. Will had not long left her. She told me what had happened, that he had gone off to kill Elia, and I rode out at once to the bluff. I found Will kicking the life out of the poor boy. I jumped from my horse and hit him with my fist. I frankly admit I desired to kill him, and my whole intent was in that blow. He fell to the ground with his jaw badly smashed, and—and I was glad. I left him there and looked to Elia. He was in a pretty bad way, but he did not seem so bad as I now realize he must have been. However, when I saw that I had been in time to save him, my anger began to pass, and I felt I could not leave the wretched man lying there with his wound dripping, and—well, I thought I'd better do what I could for him. So I sent Elia over to my horse—I intended that he should ride home—while I fixed Will's face up some.

"Well, I had nothing much to do it with except my handkerchiefs," he went on, "so I knelt down beside him, took out my sheath-knife and ripped up my white handkerchief into a bandage and folded my neck-scarf into a pad, and bound it on his broken jaw. Then I got up, and

now I know I must have left my knife on the ground beside him. I didn't know it at the time. Anyway, I left him and went back to my horse expecting to find Elia. But he was not there. I was alarmed at once, and began to search round for him, calling at the same time. You see, I thought he'd maybe collapsed somewhere near by. But I got no answer, and so circling round and round I again came to where Will Henderson was lying. At first I didn't notice anything, it was fairly dark; then, of a sudden, I saw he was lying on his back, where before he had been on his side. The next thing was that I realized the bandages were off his face. Then, as I knelt down beside him again, I found that—other. My knife was sticking up in his chest. Then I knew the reason of Elia's absence, and—what he had done."

Jim ceased speaking, and presently his eyes sought Eve's face with a look of trouble in their dark depths. He had wanted to spare her all this, and now—

The doctor's voice was questioning him.

"And you come right into the village, wher' your flavor was mighty strong, to tell us he was dead?" he asked almost incredulously.

Jim shrugged. All eyes were upon him, silently echoing their leader's question.

"Why not?" he said. "I hadn't killed him. Besides, what else was there to do? The evidence was damning anyway. And I sure couldn't run away. I guessed I'd best trust to circumstances. Y'see my last words to Mrs. Henderson were a threat to kill her husband—if he'd killed Elia."

The doctor shook his head.

"Them things sure may have influenced you, but——"

"I think I can tell you."

Doc Crombie turned at the interruption. It was Eve who spoke. Her

eyes were shining, and she looked fearlessly into his face.

"Yes," she cried, with rising emotion, "I think I can see the rest. It was to shield Elia, and, shielding him, to save me from pain and the disgrace which he knew I was too cowardly to face. He did it as he did that other thing, when he set out to carry a warning to Will, simply to help me, and save me from my troubles. Oh, doctor, haven't you heard and seen sufficient? Must you stand here demanding all the inmost secrets and motives of two people's lives? Let us go. Let Jim go. I have yet to bury my dead."

The woman suddenly turned to Peter and buried her face against his rough flannel shirt, while the long-pent tears at last broke forth, and her body shook with sobs. Peter put his arm about her shoulders and patted her gently with his great rough hand.

"This thing is played right out, Doc," he said. "You've got the facts. Let them be sufficient." He turned to the boys, and his great kindly face was lit with something like a derisive smile. "Do you want a hanging, lads?" he asked them. "Because, out of all this racket, it seems to me there's only one needs the rope, an' that's Smallbones."

He needed no other answer than the harsh laugh which greeted his words. He had done it purposely. He meant to clip Smallbones' wings for him, and, at the same time, put an end to the scene for Eve and his friend.

His success was ample. Doc Crombie walked straight up to Jim Thorpe and held out his hand.

"I'm sorry for things, Jim," he said, "but you can't rightly blame us. Not even Smallbones."

Jim wrung his hand cordially, but silently. His eyes were still on Eve at Peter's side. The doctor saw his look and understood.

"Guess I'm gettin' right back to the city," he said. "And," he added, authoritatively, "I guess all you'se folks had best git busy that way,

too." Then he turned sharply and walked over to his buckboard. "Smallbones," he said, as he mounted to his seat, "you'll come right along in with me—an' bring that rope."

CHAPTER XXXVII

GOLD

The gray of dawn had passed. Now the rosy light of day was spreading its fresh beauty across the heavens, and gladdening the warming air, and painting afresh with generous brush the rolling, open world below.

Yes, the drab of dawn was past, and, as it was with all Nature about them, the rosy light of hope brushed lightly the weary hearts of those who had just passed through the fiery trials of the furnace of despair.

There were three people only standing beneath the tree, under whose shadow a man's life so recently was to have been offered a sacrifice to human justice—two men and a woman. There was something else there, but life had passed from it, and it lay there waiting, in the calm patience of the last, long sleep, to return to the clay from which it sprang.

Eve was kneeling beside the deformed body of her poor brother. Her tears were falling fast as she bent over the pale upturned face, even more beautiful still since Death had hugged him to its harsh bosom. All the woman's passionate love and regrets were pouring out over the unconscious clay. His cruelties, his weaknesses were forgotten, brushed away by an infinite love that had no power nor inclination to judge.

She loved him, and he was dead. He was gone beyond her ken; and for the moment in her grief she longed to be with him. In the midst of

her tears she prayed—prayed for the poor weak soul, winging its way in the mysterious Beyond. She asked Him that his sins might be forgiven. She prayed Him that the great loving forbearance, so readily yielded to suffering humanity, might be shed upon that weak, benighted soul. She poured out all the longings of her simple woman's heart in a passionate prayer that the Great Christ, who had shed His blood for all sinners, would stretch out His saving hand, and take her brother's erring spirit once again to His bosom.

The two men stood by in silence. Their heads were bowed in reverence. They, too, felt something of the woman's grief.

But presently Peter Blunt raised his head. His kindly blue eyes were full of sympathy. He moved across the intervening grass, and laid a hand with infinite tenderness upon the woman's shoulder.

"We must take him with us," he said gently.

The woman started, and looked up through her tears.

"Take him? Take him?" she questioned, without understanding.

Peter nodded.

"We'll take him to—his new home."

Eve bowed her head and covered her eyes with her hands.

"He's yours, Eve," the man went on softly. "Shall I?"

The woman nodded silently and rose to her feet. Peter stooped and picked the boy up in his arms to carry him as he had carried him before. Then he moved off and Eve followed him.

Jim hesitated for a moment. It almost seemed as though he had no right to force himself upon the woman's grief. It seemed to him like sacrilege, and yet— Finally he, too, joined in the silent procession.

They followed whither Peter chose to lead. There was no question. It was not a moment for question. The kindly heart dictated. It was only

for the others to acquiesce. Peter, too, perhaps in lesser degree, had loved the boy. But then it was in his nature to love all suffering humanity. He had never had anything but kindness for Elia in life. Now that he was dead his feelings were no less.

So they trailed across the prairie—on, slowly and solemnly on. Their course was marked straight as an arrow's flight in Peter's mind. No did he pause till the mound of gravel beside his cutting was reached.

He stood at the brink of the shallow pit. There in its depths lay a broad, jagged, soil-stained ridge. Here and there on its rough surface patches of dazzling white, streaked with the more generous tints of deep red, and blue, and green, showed where the hard-driven pick had split the gold-bearing quartz.

Eve stared wonderingly down. Jim looked on in silent awe. He knew something of that which was in Peter's mind. Peter had found the deposits for which he had so long searched. Here—here was the great reef, round which the Indian stories had been woven.

He laid his burden on the edge of the pit. Then he clambered down into it. He signed to Jim, and the waiting man understood. He carefully passed the boy's body to the man below.

Then he stood up, and Eve came to his side. Silently she rested one hand upon his shoulder, and together they watched the other at his work.

With the utmost tenderness Peter laid the boy down on his gravelly bed. They saw that the dead lad's face was turned so that its cheek rested against the cold, auriferous quartz. Then the man untied the silk scarf about his own neck and laid it over the waxen face. Then he stood up and stripped the shoring planks from the walls of the pit, and placed them a solid covering over the boy's body, resting them on two large stones, one at his head and one at his feet. Finally he tested their solidity, and climbed out of the grave.

Now he joined the others, and gazed silently down into the pit. For some moments he stood thus, until presently he glanced across at the eastern sky. A fiery line, like the light of a distant prairie fire, hovered upon the horizon. He knew it was the rising of the sun.

He turned to the still weeping woman.

“Little Eve,” he said gently, pointing into the pit. “There’s gold lies there. He wanted it, and—and I promised he should have it. Jim,” he turned, and looked into the dark eyes of his friend, “that poor, weak, suffering lad saved you, because—because you’d been good to him. Well, old lad, I guess now that we’ve found some of the gold that lies here in Barnriff, we—we must be content. We mustn’t take it with us, we mustn’t rob those who need. We’ve found it, so we’ll just cover it up again, and hope and pray that it may multiply and bear fruit. Then we’ll mark it with a headstone, so that others may know that this gold is to be found if folks will only seek long enough, and hard enough beneath the surface.”

Jim nodded. He understood.

Then, as the great arc of the morning sun lifted above the horizon, both men picked up the shovels lying close by them, and buried forever the treasure Peter had found.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ON, OVER THE ONE-WAY TRAIL

Eve's door was suddenly pushed open. She did not look up from her sewing-machine. She guessed who her visitor was.

"Sit down, Annie, dear," she said, cordially. "I'll be through with this in a moment."

Her visitor took the proffered chair and smiled, while the busy machine rattled down the last seam of the skirt on which the other was busy.

Eve was very good to look upon, as she bent over her work, and her visitor was well content to wait. Her slight figure was delightfully gracious; her pretty hair, loosely dressed, looked to have all the velvet softness and lustre of spun silk. Her face was hidden, but the beautifully moulded outline of her cheek was visible. There was such a wholesome air of purpose in her attitude that it was quite easy to imagine that the shadows of the past had long since faded from her gentle eyes, that youth had again conquered, now that those gray days had lightened to the rosy summer of peace.

Something of this was passing through the man's mind as he hungrily devoured the beauty, which for so long had held him its slave.

It was nearly two months since the happenings which had so nearly ended Jim Thorpe's earthly career. Two months during which he had honestly struggled to regain that footing he had once held in the district. And now the fall was advancing, and the hopes of winning

through with the people of the place seemed as far off as ever.

Prejudice still clung. Barnriff, willing enough to accept his actual innocence on the double charges made against him, still could not forget that he had helped the real thief to escape. It mattered nothing to them that in the end the man had died a violent death. He had been helped to escape—their justice. So there was no employment of any sort in Barnriff for Jim Thorpe. And Eve, too, was only completing orders which had been placed with her weeks before.

"There," she said, raising her needle and removing the stuff from beneath it. "I hate it, and I'm glad it's done."

She looked up with a smile to encounter the dark eyes of Jim Thorpe.

"You?" she cried, in a tone that should have made him glad. "Why, I thought surely it was Annie. But there, I might have known. Annie would not have sat silent so long. You see she was coming over for a gossip. But I s'pose it's too early for her."

Jim noticed now that something of the old happy light was in her eyes again. That joyous light which he had not seen in them for nearly a year. What a wonderful thing was youth.

"I saw her as I came along," he said slowly. "She said she'd come *after* supper. She sent her love, and said she was going to bring a shirt-waist to get fixed."

"The dear thing! It's the one thing that makes my life here possible, Jim. I mean her friendship. She's the only one in all the village that can forget things. I mean among the women." She came round the table and sat on its edge facing him, staring out of the window at the ruddy sunset with eyes that had suddenly become shadowed with regret. "Men aren't like that, it seems to me. They're fierce, and violent, and all that, but most of them have pretty big hearts when their anger is past."

Jim's eyes smiled whimsically.

"Do you think so?" he said. "Guess maybe I won't contradict you, but it seems to me I've learned pretty well how large their hearts are—in the last two months."

"You mean—you can get no work?"

The man nodded. But he had no bitterness now. He had learned his lesson from Peter Blunt. He had no blame for the weaknesses of human nature. Why should he have? Who was he to judge?

There was a silence for some moments. Eve continued to gaze at the sunset. The glorious ever-changing lights held her physical vision, but her mind was traveling in that realm of woman's thought, whither no mere man can follow it.

It was Jim who spoke at last.

"But I didn't come to—to air troubles," he said thoughtfully. "I came to tell you of two things. One of 'em is Peter. He's packing his wagon. He goes at sun-up to-morrow. He says he must move on—keep moving. He says all that held him to Barnriff is finished with, so now there's nothing left but to hit the trail."

"Poor old Peter!" Eve murmured softly. "I s'pose he means the gold business?"

"Maybe," replied the man, without conviction.

"Why—what do you mean?"

Eve's eyes were widely questioning. The other shrugged.

"You can't tell. It's hard to get at what's passing through his quaint mind. I don't think gold interests him as much as you'd think. Peter has plenty of money. Do you know, he offered to advance me ten thousand dollars to buy up a ranch around here. He pressed it on me, and tried to make out it would be a favor to him if I took it. Said I didn't know how much I'd be obliging him. He's a good man. A—a wonderful man. I tried to get him to stop on—but——"

"I don't blame him for going," said Eve, regretfully.

"Nor do I."

Again that silence fell, and each was busy with thoughts they neither could easily have expressed.

"What's the other?" Eve inquired presently. "You said—two things."

"Did I? Oh, yes, of course."

But Jim did not at once tell her the other reason for his visit. Instead he sat thinking of many things, and all his thoughts were centred round her. He was thinking the honest thoughts of a man who loves a woman so well that he shrinks from offering her so little of worldly goods as he possesses. He had come there, as a man will come, to hover round and burn his fingers at the fire which he has not the courage to turn his back upon. He had come there to tell her that he was going away, even as Peter was going—going away to make one more of those many starts which it had been his lot to make in the past.

"Well?" Eve faced him with smiling eyes. She understood that his second reason was troubling him, and she wanted to encourage him.

He shook his head.

"It isn't a scrap 'well,'" he said, with an attempt at a lightness he did not feel.

"Nothing can be so bad, as—as some things," she said. Her eyes had become serious again. She was thinking of those two short months ago.

"No," he breathed, with a sigh. "I—I suppose not." Then with a desperate effort he blurted out his resolve. "I'm going away, too," he said clumsily.

His announcement cost him more than he knew. But Eve showed not the least bit of astonishment.

"I knew you would," she said. Then she added, as though following out a thought which had been hers for a long time, "You see there are some things nobody can put up with—for long. Barnriff, for instance, when it turns against you."

Jim nodded. Her understanding delighted him, and he went on more easily.

"I've one hundred and fifty head of stock, and a thousand odd dollars," he said deliberately. "I'm going to make a fresh start."

He laughed, and somehow his laugh hurt the woman. She understood.

"Don't laugh like that, Jim," she said gently. "It's—it's not like you."

"I'm sorry, Eve," he replied in swift contrition. "But—but it's not much, is it?"

"I seem to fancy it's quite a deal." The girl's face wore a delightful smile. "Where are you thinking of?"



“We’ve just come over to say that we, too, are going to hit the trail.”

“Canada. Edmonton. It’s a longish piece off, but it’s good land—and

cheap.”

“It’s British.”

“Ye-es.”

“It’s not under the ‘stars and stripes.’”

“Most flags are made of bunting.”

The girl nodded her head.

“A monarchy, too,” she said.

“Monarchs and presidents are both men.”

Jim’s love for his flag was a sore point with him, and he gathered that Eve disapproved. He wanted her approval. He wanted it more than anything else, because— Suddenly he remembered something.

“Peter’s English,” he said slyly.

“God bless him!”

The fervor of the woman’s response was unmistakable.

“I must see him to-night before he goes,” she went on, “because—I’ve got something to tell him.”

She looked down at the table on which the dress she had just finished making was lying.

“That’s the last of them,” she said, pointing at it.

The man knew what she meant. She had completed her last order.

“I’m going to do no more—here.”

Jim’s eyes lit.

“Here?”

Eve shook her head.

“I’m going away,” she said, with a shamefaced smile. “That’s—that’s

what I want to tell—Peter.”

Jim sprang to his feet, and looked into the bright smiling eyes.

“I’ve got a sewing-machine,” Eve went on, deliberately mimicking him, “and—and some dollars. And I’m going to make a fresh start.”

Her manner of detailing her stock-in-trade, and the smile that accompanied her words were good to see. Jim’s heart beat hard beneath his buckskin shirt, and the light in his eyes was one of a hope such as he rarely permitted himself.

“Where?” he demanded. But he knew before she said the words.

“Canada, Edmonton. It’s—it’s a longish piece off—but——”

Eve never finished her mimicry. In a moment she was in his arms, and her lips were silenced with his kisses.

Some minutes later she protested.

“You haven’t let me finish, Jim,” she cried.

But he shook his head.

“No need. I’ll tell you the rest. We’ll start in together, up there, and—we’ll keep the sewing-machine for home use. You see my socks ’ll sure need darning.”

“Silly. You don’t do that with a sewing-machine.”

Peter’s spring wagon was standing outside his door. It was a quaint, old-fashioned vehicle—just such a conveyance as one would expect him to possess. It had lain idle during most of his time in Barnriff, and had suffered much from the stress of bitter winters and the blistering sun of summers. But it still possessed four clattering wheels, even though the woodwork and the tires looked conspicuously like parting company.

The last of his household goods, with the exception of his blankets,

had been loaded up. There was a confused pile of gold-prospecting tools and domestic chattels. Books and "washing" pans, pictures and steel drills, jostled with each other in a manner thoroughly characteristic of his disregard for the comforts of life. These material matters concerned him so little.

He was scraping out a large frying-pan, the one utensil which shared with his "billy" the privilege of supplying him with a means of cooking his food. The work he was engaged upon was something of a strain. It seemed so unnecessary. Still, the process was his habit of years, so he did not attempt to shirk it. But he looked up with relief when he heard voices, and a glad smile of welcome greeted Jim and Eve as they came up.

"Peter, I've——"

"Peter, we've——"

Jim and Eve both began to speak at the same time. And both broke off to let the other go on.

Peter glanced swiftly from one to the other. His shrewd eyes took in the situation at once.

"I'm glad," he said, "real glad. Jim," he went on, "I guess your luck's set in. Eve, my dear, your luck's running, too. I'm just glad."

The culprits exchanged swift glances of astonishment. Eve blushed, but it was Jim who answered him.

"Guess you see things easy, Peter," he said. "But you aren't as glad as I am."

"We are," corrected Eve.

Peter bent over his work again, smiling at the friendly pan with renewed interest. He scraped some long congealed black grease from its shoulder and gazed at it ruefully.

"Look at that," he said, with his quaint smile, holding up the knife with

the unwholesome fat sticking to it “Guess your pans won’t get like that, eh, Eve?” Then he added with a sigh, “It’s sure time I hit the trail. It’s been accumulating too long already. Y’see,” he went on simply, “it’s a good thing moving at times. Things need cleaning once in a while.”

He threw the pan into the wagon-box with a sigh of relief, and turned again to his two friends.

“I’d ask you to sit,” he began. But Jim cut him short.

“There’s no need, old friend. We’ve just come over to say we, too, are going to hit the trail. We’re going to hit it together.”

Peter nodded.

“We’re going to get the parson to marry us,” Jim went on eagerly, “and then we’re going to hit out for Canada—Edmonton—and start up a bit of a one-eyed ranch.”

Peter stood lost in thought, and Jim grew impatient.

“Well?” he inquired. “What do you think of it?”

The other nodded slowly, his eyes twinkling.

“Bully, but you’ll need a wagon to drive you out—when you’re getting married,” he said. “That’s how I was thinking. Guess I’ll drive you out in mine, eh?”

“But you’re going at sun-up,” cried Eve, in dismay. “We—we can’t get married so soon.”

“Guess I’ll wait over,” Peter answered easily. “It just means off-loading—and then loading up again. My frying-pan can have another cleaning.”

“Thanks, old friend,” cried Jim, linking his arm in Eve’s. “You’re a great feller. You’ll see us—married.” He squeezed the girl’s arm. “And then?”

"And then?"

Peter looked away at the dying light. His eyes were full of the kindly thought his two friends knew so well.

"Why, I'll just hit the trail again," he said.

"Where to?"

The big man turned his face slowly toward them, and his gentle humor was largely written in his expressive eyes.

"Why, Canada, I guess," he said. "Edmonton—it seems to me."

End of the Project Gutenberg EBook of The One-Way Trail, by Ridgwell Cullum

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ONE-WAY TRAIL ***

***** This file should be named 30113-h.htm or 30113-h.zip *****
This and all associated files of various formats will be found in:
<http://www.gutenberg.org/3/0/1/1/30113/>

Produced by Roger Frank and the Online Distributed
Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

Updated editions will replace the previous one--the old editions
will be renamed.

Creating the works from public domain print editions means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG-tm concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for the eBooks, unless you receive specific permission. If

you
do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the
rules is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose
such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and
research. They may be modified and printed and given away--you may
do
practically ANYTHING with public domain eBooks. Redistribution is
subject to the trademark license, especially commercial
redistribution.

*** START: FULL LICENSE ***

THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE
PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg-tm mission of promoting the free
distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work
(or any other work associated in any way with the phrase "Project
Gutenberg"), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full
Project
Gutenberg-tm License (available with this file or online at
<http://gutenberg.net/license>).

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project
Gutenberg-tm
electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg-tm
electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to
to
and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property
(trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all
the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or
destroy
all copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in your
possession.

If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project
Gutenberg-tm electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the
terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or
entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. "Project Gutenberg" is a registered trademark. It may only be

used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation ("the Foundation" or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is in the public domain in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg-tm mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg-tm works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg-tm name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg-tm License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or

creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg-tm work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country outside the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg-tm License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg-tm work (any work on which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" appears, or with which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.net

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work is derived from the public domain (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase "Project Gutenberg" associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution

must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg-tm License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg-tm License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg-tm.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg-tm License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg-tm work in a format other than "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg-tm web site (www.gutenberg.net), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg-tm License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg-tm works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing

access to or distributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works provided that

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg-tm works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg-tm License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from both the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and Michael Hart, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend

considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread public domain works in creating the Project Gutenberg-tm collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH F3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity

providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS' WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg-tm work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg-tm work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg-tm

Project Gutenberg-tm is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg-tm's goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg-tm collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg-tm and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation web page at <http://www.pgla.org>.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Its 501(c)(3) letter is posted at <http://pglaf.org/fundraising>. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's principal office is located at 4557 Melan Dr. S. Fairbanks, AK, 99712., but its volunteers and employees are scattered throughout numerous locations. Its business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887, email business@pglaf.org. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's web site and official page at <http://pglaf.org>

For additional contact information:
Dr. Gregory B. Newby
Chief Executive and Director
gbnewby@pglaf.org

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg-tm depends upon and cannot survive without wide spread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit <http://pglaf.org>

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg Web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: <http://pglaf.org/donate>

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works.

Professor Michael S. Hart is the originator of the Project Gutenberg-tm concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For thirty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as Public Domain in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our Web site which has the main PG search facility:

<http://www.gutenberg.net>

This Web site includes information about Project Gutenberg-tm, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.