The Gold Girl

James B. Hendryx

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THE MAN WAS UPON HIS FEET, NOW, BENDING TOWARDS HER WITH ARMS OUTSTRETCHED
Drawing by Monahan.

The Gold Girl

By

James B. Hendryx

Author of "The Promise," "The Gun-Brand," "The Texan," etc.

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CHAPTER I

A HORSEMAN OF THE HILLS

Patty Sinclair reined in her horse at the top of a low divide and gazed helplessly around her. The trail that had grown fainter and fainter with its ascent of the creek bed disappeared entirely at the slope of loose rock and bunch grass that slanted steeply to the divide. In vain she scanned the deeply gored valley that lay before her and the timbered slopes of the mountains for sign of human habitation. Her horse lowered his head and snipped at the bunch grass. Stiffly the girl dismounted. She had been in the saddle since early noon with only two short intervals of rest when she had stopped to drink and to bathe her fare in the deliciously cold waters of mountain streams—and now the trail had melted into the hills, and the broad shadows of mountains were lengthening. Every muscle of her body ached at the unaccustomed strain, and she was very hungry. She envied her horse his enjoyment of the bunch grass which he munched with much tongueing of the bit and impatient shaking of the head. With bridle reins gripped tightly she leaned wearily against the saddle.

"I'm lost," she murmured. "Just plain *lost*. Surely I must have come fifty miles, and I followed their directions exactly, and now I'm tired, and stiff, and sore, and hungry, and lost." A grim little smile tightened the corners of her mouth. "But I'm glad I came. If Aunt Rebecca could see me now! Wouldn't she just gloat? 'I told you so, my dear, just as I often told your poor father, to have nothing whatever to do with that horrible country of wild Indians, and ferocious beasts, and desperate characters.'" Hot tears blurred her eyes at the thought of her father. "This is the country he loved, with its mountains and its woods and its deep mysterious valleys—and I want to love it, too. And I *will* love it! I'll find his mine if it takes me all the rest of my life. And I'll show the people back home that he was right, that he did know that the gold was here, and that he wasn't just a visionary and a ne'er-do-well!"

A rattle of loose stones set her heart thumping wildly and caused her to peer down the back trail where a horseman was slowly ascending the slope. The man sat loosely in his saddle with the easy grace of the slack rein rider. A roll-brim Stetson with its crown boxed into a peak was pushed slightly back upon his head, and his legs were encased to the thighs in battered leather chaps whose lacings were studded with silver *chonchas* as large as trade dollars. A coiled rope hung from a strap upon the right side of his saddle, while a leather-covered jug was swung upon the opposite side by a thong looped over the horn. All this the girl took in at a glance as the rangy buckskin picked his way easily up the slope. She noted, also, the white butt-plates of the revolver that protruded from its leather holster. Her first impulse was to mount and fly, but the futility of the attempt was apparent. If the man followed she could hardly hope to elude him upon a horse that was far from fresh, and even if she did it would be only to plunge deeper into the hills—become more hopelessly lost. Aunt Rebecca's words "desperate character" seemed suddenly to assume significance. The man was very close now. She could distinctly hear the breathing of his horse, and the soft rattle of bit-chains. Despite her defiant declaration that she was glad she had come, she knew that deep down in her heart, she fervidly wished herself elsewhere. "Maybe he's a ranchman," she thought, "but why should any honest man be threading unfrequented hill trails armed with a revolver and a brown leather jug?" No answer suggested itself, and summoning her haughtiest, coldest look, she met the glance of the man who drew rein beside her. His features were clean-cut, bronzed, and lean—with the sinewy leanness of health. His gray flannel shirt rolled open at the throat, about which was loosely drawn a silk scarf of robin's-egg blue, held in place by the tip of a buffalo horn polished to an onyx luster. The hand holding the bridle reins rested carelessly upon the horn of his saddle. With the other he raised the Stetson from his head.

"Good evenin', Miss," he greeted, pleasantly. "Lost?"

"No," she lied brazenly, "I came here on purpose—I—I like it here."

She felt the lameness of the lie and her cheeks flushed. But the man showed no surprise at the statement, neither did he smile. Instead, he raised his head and gravely inspected the endless succession of mountains and valleys and timbered ridges.

"It's a right nice place," he agreed. To her surprise the girl could find no hint of sarcasm in the words, nor was there anything to indicate the "desperate character" in the way he leaned forward to stroke his horse's mane, and remove a wisp of hair from beneath the headstall. It was hard to maintain her air of cold reserve with this soft-voiced, grave-eyed young stranger. She wondered whether a "desperate character" could love his horse, and felt a wild desire to tell him of her plight. But as her eyes rested upon the brown leather jug she frowned.

The man shifted himself in the saddle. "Well, I must be goin'," he said. "Good evenin'."

Patty bowed ever so slightly, as he replaced the Stetson upon his head and touched his horse lightly with a spur. "Come along, you Buck, you!"

As the horse started down the steep descent on the other side of the divide a feeling of loneliness that was very akin to terror gripped the girl. The sunlight showed only upon the higher levels, and the prospect of spending the night alone in the hills without food or shelter produced a sudden chilling sensation in the pit of her stomach.

"Oh! Please——"

The buckskin turned in his tracks, and once more the man was beside her upon the ridge.

"I *am* lost," she faltered. "Only, I hated to admit it."

"Folks always do. I've be'n lost a hundred times, an' I never *would* admit it."

"I started for the Watts's ranch. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes, it's over on Monte's Creek."

Patty smiled. "I could have told *you* that. The trouble is, someone seems to have removed all the signs."

"They ought to put 'em up again," opined the stranger in the same grave tone with which he had bid her good evening.

"They told me in town that I was to take the left hand trail where it forked at the first creek beyond the canyon."

The man nodded. "Yes, that about fits the case."

"But I did take the trail that turned to the left up the first creek beyond the canyon, and I haven't seen the slightest intimation of a ranch."

"No, you see, this little creek don't count, because most of the time it's dry; an' this ain't a regular trail. It's an' old winter road that was used to haul out cord wood an' timber. Monte's Creek is two miles farther on. It's a heap bigger creek than this, an' the trail's better, too. Watts's is about three mile up from the fork. You can't miss it. It's the only ranch there."

"How far is it back to the trail?" asked the girl wearily.

"About two mile. It's about seven mile to Watts's that way around. There's a short cut, through the hills, but I couldn't tell you so you'd find it. There's no trail, an' it's up one coulee an' down another till you get there. I'm goin' through that way; if you'd like to come along you're welcome to."

For a moment Patty hesitated but her eyes returned to the jug and she declined, a trifle stiffly. "No, thank you. I—I think I will go around by the trail."

Either the man did not notice the curtness of the reply, or he chose to ignore it, for the next instant, noting the gasp of pain and the sudden tightening of the lips that accompanied her attempt to raise her foot to

the stirrup, he swung lightly to the ground, and before she divined what he was about, had lifted her gently into the saddle and pressed the reins into her hand. Without a word he returned to his horse, and with face flushed scarlet, the girl glared at the powerful gray shoulders as he picked up his reins from the ground. The next moment she headed her own horse down the back trail and rode into the deepening shadows. Gaining the main trail she urged her horse into a run.

"He—he's awfully strong," she panted, "and just *horrid!*"

From the top of the divide the man watched until she disappeared, then he stroked softly the velvet nose that nuzzled against his cheek.

"What d'you reckon, Buck? Are they goin' to start a school for that litter of young Wattses? There ain't another kid within twenty mile—must be." As he swung into the saddle the leather covered jug bumped lightly against his knee. There was a merry twinkle of laughter in his blue eyes as, with lips solemn as an exhorter's, he addressed the offending object. "You brown rascal, you! If it hadn't be'n for you, me an' Buck might of made a hit with the lady, mightn't we, Buck? Scratch gravel, now you old reprobate, or we won't get to camp till midnight."

"Anyway, she ain't no kin to the Wattses," he added reflectively, "not an' that clean, she ain't."

CHAPTER II

AT THE WATTS RANCH

It was with a decided feeling of depression that Patty Sinclair approached the Watts ranch. Long before she reached the buildings an air of shiftless dilapidation was manifest in the ill-lined barbed wire fences whose rotting posts sagged drunkenly upon loosely strung wire. A dry weed-choked irrigation ditch paralleled the trail, its wooden flumes, like the fence posts, rotting where they stood, and its walls all but obliterated by the wash of spring freshets. The depression increased as she passed close beside the ramshackle log stable, where her horse sank to his ankles in a filthy brown seepage of mud and rotting straw before the door. Two small, slouchily built stacks of weather-stained hay occupied a fenced-off enclosure, beside which, with no attempt to protect them from the weather, stood a dish-wheeled hay rake, and a rusty mowing machine, its cutter-bar buried in weeds.

Passing through a small clump of cottonwoods, in which three or four raw-boned horses had taken refuge from the mosquitoes, she came suddenly upon the ranch house, a squat, dirt-roofed cabin of unpeeled logs. So, *this* was the Watts ranch! Again and again in the delirium that preceded her father's death, he had muttered of Monte's Creek and the Watts ranch, until she had come to think of it as a place of cool halls and broad verandahs situated at the head of some wide mountain valley in which sleek cattle grazed belly-deep in lush grasses.

A rabble of nondescript curs came snapping and yapping about her horse's legs until dispersed by a harsh command from the dark interior of the cabin.

"Yere, yo' git out o' thet!"

The dogs slunk away and their places were immediately taken by a half-dozen ill-kempt, bedraggled children. A tousled head was thrust from the doorway, and after a moment of inspection a man stepped out upon the hard-trodden earth of the dooryard. He was bootless and a great toe protruded from a hole in the point of his sock. He wore a faded hickory shirt, and the knees of his bleached-out overalls were patched with blue gingham.

"Howdy," he greeted, in a not unkindly tone, and paused awkwardly while the protruding toe tried vainly to burrow from sight in the hard earth.

"Is—is this the Watts ranch?" The girl suppressed a wild desire to burst into tears.

"Yes, mom, this is hit—what they is of hit." His fingers picked vaguely at his scraggly beard. An idea seemed suddenly to strike him, and turning, he thrust his head in at the door. "Ma!" he called, loudly, and again "Ma! *Ma!*"

The opening of a door within was followed by the sound of a harsh voice. "Lawzie me, John Watts, what's ailin' yo' now—got a burr in under yo' gallus?" A tall woman with a broad, kindly face pushed past the man, wiping suds upon her apron from a pair of very large and very red hands.

"Sakes alive, if hit hain't a lady! Hain't yo' done tol' her to git off an' come in? Looks like yer manners, what little yo' ever hed of 'em, fell in the crick an' got drownded. Jest yo' climb right down offen thet cayuse, dearie, an' come on in the house. John, yo' oncinch thet saddle, an' then, Horatius Ezek'l, yo' an' David Golieth, taken the hoss to the barn an' see't he's hayed an' watered 'fore yo' come back. Microby Dandeline, yo' git a pot o' tea abilin' an' fry up a bate o' bacon, an' cut some bread, an' warm up the rest o' thet pone, an' yo', Lillian Russell, yo' finish dryin' them dishes an' set 'em back on the table. An' Abraham Lincoln Wirt, yo' fetch a pail o' water, an' wrinch out the worsh dish, an' set a piece o' soap by, an' a clean towel, an'

light up the lamp."

Under Ma Watts's volley of orders, issued without pause for breath, things began to happen with admirable promptitude.

"Land sakes!" cried the woman, as Patty climbed painfully to the ground, "hain't yo' that sore an' stiff! Yo' must a-rode clean from town, an' hits fifty mile, an' yo' not use to ridin' neither, to tell by the whiteness of yo' face. I'll help yo' git off them hat an' gloves, an' thar sets the worsh dish on the bench beside the do'. Microby Dandeline 'll hev a bite for ye d'rec'ly an' I'll fix yo' up a shake-down. Horatius Ezek'l an' David Golieth kin go out an' crawl in the hay an' yo' c'n hev theirn." Words flowed from Ma Watts naturally and continuously without effort, as water flows from a spring. Patty who had made several unsuccessful attempts to speak, interrupted abruptly.

"Oh, I couldn't think of depriving the boys of their bed. I——"

"Now, honey, just yo' quit pesterin' 'bout thet. Them young-uns 'druther sleep out'n in, any time. Ef I'd let 'em they'd grow up plumb wild. When yo've got worshed up come on right in the kitchen an' set by. Us Wattses is plain folks an' don't pile on no dog. We've et an' got through, but yo' take all the time yo're a mind to, an' me an' Microby Dandeline 'll set by an' yo' c'n tell us who yo' be, ef yo're a mind to, an' ef not hit don't make no difference. We hain't partic'lar out here, nohow—we've hed preachers an' horse-thieves, an' never asked no odds of neither. I says to Watts——"

Again the girl made forcible entry into the conversation. "My name is Sinclair. Patty Sinclair, of Middleton, Connecticut. My father——"

"Land o' love! So yo're Mr. Sinclair's darter! Yo' do favor him a mite about the eyes, come to look; but yer nose is diff'rnt to hisn, an' so's yer mouth—must a be'n yer ma's was like that. But sometimes they don't favor neither one. Take Microby Dandeline, here, 'tain't no one could say she hain't Watts's, an' Horatius Ezek'l, he favors me, but fer's the rest of 'em goes, they mightn't b'long to neither one of us."

Microby Dandeline placed the food upon the table and sank, quiet as a mouse into a chair beneath the glass bracket-lamp with her large dark eyes fixed upon Patty, who devoured the unappetizing food with an enthusiasm born of real hunger, while the older woman analyzed volubly the characteristics, facial and temperamental, of each and several of the numerous Watts progeny.

Having exhausted the subject of offspring, Ma Watts flashed a direct question. "How's yer pa, an' where's he at?"

"My father died last month," answered the girl without raising her eyes from her plate.

"Fer the land sakes, child! I want to know!"

"Watts! Watts!" The lank form appeared in the doorway. "This here's Mr. Sinclair's darter, an' he's up an' died."

The man's fingers fumbled uncertainly at his beard, as his wife paused for the intelligence to strike home. "Folks does," he opined, judiciously after a profound interval.

"That's so, when yo' come to think 'bout hit," admitted Ma Watts. "What did he die of?"

"Cerebrospinal meningitis."

"My goodness sakes! I should think he would! When my pa died—back in Tennessee, hit wus, the doctor 'lowed hit wus the eetch, but sho', he'd hed thet fer hit wus goin' on seven year. 'Bout a week 'fore he come to die, he got so's 't he couldn't eat nothin', an' he wus thet het up with the fever he like to burnt up, an' his head ached him fit to bust, an' he wus out of hit fer four days, an' I mistrust thet-all mought of hed somethin' to do with his dyin'. The doctor, he come an' bled him every day, but he died on him, an' then he claimed hit was the eetch, or mebbe hit wus jest his time hed come, he couldn't tell which. I've wondered sence if mebbe we'd got a town doctor he mought of lived. But Doctor Swanky wus a mountain man an' we wus, too, so we taken

him. But, he wus more of a hoss doctor, an' seems like, he never did hev no luck, much, with folks."

Her nerves all a-jangle from trail-strain and the depressing atmosphere of the Watts ranch, it seemed to Patty she must shriek aloud if the woman persisted in her ceaseless gabble.

"Yer pa wus a nice man, an' well thought of. We-all know'd him well. It wus goin' on three year he prospected 'round here in the hills, an' many a time he's sot right where yo're settin' now, an' et his meal o' vittles. Some said las' fall 'fore he went back East how he'd made his strike, an' hit wus quartz gold, an' how he'd gone back to git money to work hit. Mr. Bethune thought so, an' Lord Clendenning. They must of be'n thicker'n thieves with yer pa, 'cordin' to their tell." The woman paused and eyed the girl inquisitively. "Did he make his strike, an' why didn't he record hit?"

"I don't know," answered the girl wearily.

"An' don't yo' tell no one ef yo' do know. I b'lieve in folks bein' close-mouthed. Like I'm allus a-tellin' Watts. But yo' must be plumb wore out, what with ridin' all day, an' a-tellin' me all about yo'se'f. I'll slip in an' turn them blankets an' yo' kin jest crawl right into 'em an' sleep 'til yo' slep' out."

Ma Watts bustled away, and Microby Dandeline began to clear away the dishes.

"Can't I help?" offered Patty.

The large, wistful eyes regarded her seriously.

"No. I like yo'. Yo' hain't to worsh no dishes. Yo're purty. I like Mr. Bethune, an' Lord Clendenning, an' that Vil Holland. I like everybody. Folks is nice, hain't they?"

"Why—yes," agreed Patty, smiling into the big serious eyes. "How old are you?"

"I'm seventeen, goin' on eighteen. Yo' come to live with us-uns?"

"No—that is—I don't know exactly where I am going to live."

"That Vil Holland, he's got a nice camp, an' 'tain't only him there. Why don't yo' live there? I want to live there an' I go to his camp on Gee Dot, but he chases me away, an' sometimes he gits mad."

"What is Gee Dot?" Patty stared in amazement at this girl with the mind of a child.

"Oh, he's my pony. I reckon Mr. Bethune wouldn't git mad, but I don't know where he lives."

"I think you had better stay right here," advised Patty, seriously. "This is your home, you know."

"Yes, but they hain't much room. Me, an' Lillian Russell, an' David Golieth sleeps on a shake-down, an' they-all shoves an' kicks, an' sometimes when I want to sleep, Chattenoogy Tennessee sets up a squarkin' an' I cain't. Babies is a lot of bother. An' they's a lot of dishes an' chores an' things. Wisht I hed a dress like yo'n!" The girl passed a timid finger over the fabric of Patty's moleskin riding coat. Ma Watts appeared in the doorway connecting the two rooms.

"Well, fer the lands sakes! Listen at that! Microby Dandeline Watts, where's yo' manners?" She turned to Patty. "Don't mind her, she's kind o' simple, an' don't mean no harm. Yo' shake-down's ready fer yo' an' I reckon yo' glad, bein' that wore out. Hit's agin the east wall. Jest go on right in, don't mind Watts. Hit's dark in thar, an' he's rolled in. We hain't only one bed an' me an' Watts an' the baby sleeps in hit, on 'tother side the room. Watts, he aims to put up some bunks when he gits time."

Sick at heart, and too tired and sore of body to protest against any arrangement that would allow her to sleep the girl murmured her thanks and crossed to the door of the bedroom. Not at all sure of her

bearings she paused uncertainly in the doorway until a sound of heavy breathing located the slumbering Watts, and turning toward the opposite side of the room, proceeded cautiously through the blackness until her feet came in contact with her "shake-down," which consisted of a pair of blankets placed upon a hay tick. The odor of the blankets was anything but fresh, but she sank to the floor, and with much effort and torturing of strained muscles, succeeded in removing her boots and jacket and throwing herself upon the bed. Almost at the moment her head touched the coarse, unslipped pillow, she fell into a deep sleep, from which hours later she was awakened by an insistent tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap. "Someone has forgotten to pull up the canoe and the waves are slapping it against the side of the dock," she thought drowsily. "Did I have it last?" She stirred uneasily and the pain of movement caused her to gasp. She opened her eyes, and instead of her great airy chamber in Aunt Rebecca's mansion by the sea, she was greeted by the sight of the hot, stuffy room of the Watts cabin. A rumpled pile of blankets was mounded upon the bed against the opposite wall, and a shake-down similar to her own occupied a space beside the open door through which hot, bright sunlight streamed.

Several hens pecked assiduously at some crumbs, and Patty realized that it was the sound of their bills upon the wooden floor that had awakened her. She succeeded after several painful attempts in pulling on her boots, and as she rose to her feet, Ma Watts thrust her head in at the door.

"Lawzie! Honey, did them hens wake yo' up? Sho'! ef I'd a thought o' thet, I'd o' fed 'em outside, an' yo' could of kep' on sleepin'. 'They ain't nothin' like a good long sleep when yo' tired,' Watts says, an' he ort to know. He aims to build a house fer them hens when he gits time. Yo' know where the worsh dish is, jest make yo'se'f to home, dinner'll be ready d'rec'ly." The feel of the cold water was grateful as the girl dashed it over her face and hands from the little tin wash-basin on the bench beside the door. Watts sat with his chair resting upon its rear

legs and its back against the shady west wall of the cabin.

"Mo'nin'," he greeted. "Hit's right hot; I be'n studyin' 'bout fixin' them thar arrigation ditches."

Patty smiled brightly. "All they need is cleaning out, isn't it?"

"Yas, mom. Thet an' riggin' up them flumes. But it's a right smart o' work, an' then the resevoy's busted, too. I be'n aimin' to fix 'em when I git time. They hain't had no water in 'em fer three year. Yo' see, two year ago hit looked like rain mos' every day. Hit didn't rain none to speak, but hit kep' a body hatin' to start workin' fer fear it would. An' las' year hit never looked like rain none, so hit wasn't no use fixin' 'em. An' this year I don't know jest what to do, hit might, an' then agin hit mightn't. Drat thet sun! Here hit is dinner time. Seems like hit never lets a body set in one place long 'nough to study out *whut* he'd ort to do." Watts rose slowly to his feet, and picking up his chair, walked deliberately around to the east side of the house, where he planted it with the precision born of long practice in the exact spot that the shadow would be longest at the conclusion of the midday meal.

Patty entered the cabin and a few minutes later the sound of voices reached her ears. Ma Watts hurried to the window.

"Well, if hit ain't Mr. Bethune an' Lord Clendenning! Ef you see one you know the other hain't fer off. Hain't he good lookin' though—Mr. Bethune? Lord hain't so much fer looks, but he's some high up nobility like over to England where he come from, only over yere they call 'em remittance men, an' they don't do nothin' much but ride around an' drink whisky, an' they git paid for hit, too. Folks says how Mr. Bethune's gran'ma wus a squaw, but I don't believe 'em. Anyways, I allus like him. He's got manners, an' hit don't stan' to reason no breed would have manners."

Patty could distinctly see the two riders as they lounged in their saddles. The larger, whose bulging blue eyes and drooping blond mustache gave him a peculiar walrus-like expression, she swept at a

glance. The other was talking to Watts and the girl noted the slender figure with its almost feminine delicacy of mold, and the finely chiseled features dominated by eyes black as jet—eyes that glowed with a velvety softness as he spoke.

"We have been looking over your upper pasture," he said. "A fellow named Schmidt over in the Blackfoot country will be delivering some horses across the line this summer and he wants to rent some pastures at different points along the trail. How about it?"

Watts rubbed his beard uncertainly. "Them fences hain't hoss tight. I be'n studyin' 'bout fixin' 'em."

"Why don't you get at it?"

"Well they's the resevoy, an' the ditches——"

"Never mind the ditches. All that fence needs is a few posts and some staples."

"My ax hain't fitten to chop with no mo', an' I druv over the spade an' bruk the handle. I hain't got no luck."

Reaching into his pocket, Bethune withdrew a gold piece which he tossed to Watts. "Maybe this will change your luck," he smiled. "The fact is I want that pasture—or, rather, Schultz does."

"Thought yo' said Schmidt."

"Did I? Those kraut names all sound alike to me. But his name is Schultz. The point is, he'll pay you five dollars a month to hold the pasture, and five dollars for every day or night he uses it. That ten spot pays for the first two months. Better buy a new ax and spade and some staples and get to work. The exercise will do you good, and Schultz may want to use that pasture in a couple of weeks or so."

"Well, I reckon I kin. Hit's powerful hot fer to work much, but that's a sight o' money. As I wus sayin' to Mr. Sinclair's darter——"

"Sinclair's daughter! What do you mean? Is Sinclair back?"

Patty noted the sudden flash of the jet black eyes at the mention of her father's name. It was as though a point of polished steel had split their velvet softness. Yet there was no hostility in the glance; rather, it was a gleam of intense interest. The girl's own interest in the quarter-breed had been casual at most, hardly more than that accorded by a passing glance until she had chanced to hear him refer to the man in the Blackfoot country in one breath as Schmidt, and in the next as Schultz. She wondered at that and so had remained standing beside Mrs. Watts, screened from the outside by the morning-glory vines that served as a curtain for the window. The trifling incident of the changed name was forgotten in the speculation as to why her father's return to the hill country should be a matter of evident import to this sagebrush cavalier. So intent had she become that she hardly noticed the cruel bluntness of Watts's reply.

"He's dead."

"Dead!"

"Yas, he died back East an' his darter's come."

"Does she know he made a strike?" Patty noted the look of eagerness that accompanied the words.

"I do'no." Watts wagged his head slowly. "Mebbe so; mebbe not."

"Because, if she doesn't," Bethune hastened to add, "she should be told. Rod Sinclair was one of the best friends I had, and if he has gone I'm right here to see that his daughter gets a square deal. Of course if she has the location, she's all right." Patty wondered whether the man had purposely raised his voice, or was it her imagination?

Ma Watts had started for the door. "Come on out, honey, an' I'll make yo' acquainted with Mr. Bethune. He wus a friend of yo' pa, an' Lord too." As she followed the woman to the door, the girl was conscious of an indefinable feeling of distrust for the man. Somehow, his words

had not rung true.

As the two women stepped from the house the horsemen swung from their saddles and stood with uncovered heads.

"This yere's Mr. Sinclair's darter, Mr. Bethune," beamed Ma Watts. "An' I'd take hit proud ef yo'd all stay to dinner."

"Ah, Miss Sinclair, I am most happy to know you. Permit me to present my friend Lord Clendenning."

The Englishman bowed low. "The prefix is merely a euphonism Miss Sinclair. What you really behold in me is the decayed part of a decaying aristocracy."

Patty laughed. "My goodness, what frankness!"

"Come on, now, an' set by 'fore the vittles gits cold on us. Yere yo' Horatius Ezek'l an' David Golieth, yo' hay them hosses!"

"No, no! Really, Mrs. Watts, we must not presume on your hospitality. Important business demands our presence elsewhere."

"Lawzie, Mr. Bethune, there yo' go with them big words agin. Which I s'pose yo' mean yo' cain't stay. But they's a plenty, an' yo' welcome." Again Bethune declined and as the woman re-entered the house, he turned to the girl.

"I only just learned of your father's untimely death. Permit me to express my sincerest sympathy, and to assure you that if I can be of service to you in any way I am yours to command."

"Thank you," answered Patty, flushing slightly under the scrutiny of the black eyes. "I am here to locate my father's claim. I want to do it alone, but if I can't I shall certainly ask assistance of his friends."

"Exactly. But, my dear Miss Sinclair, let me warn you. There are men in these hills who suspected that your father made a strike, who would stop at nothing to wrest your secret from you." The girl nodded. "I

suppose so. But forewarned is forearmed, isn't it? I thank you."

"Thet Vil Holland wus by yeste'day," said Watts.

Bethune frowned. "What did he want?"

"Didn't want nothin'. Jest come a-ridin' by."

"I should think you'd had enough of him after the way he ran your sheep man off."

Watts rubbed his beard. "Well, I do'no. The cattlemen pays me same as that sheep man done. Vil Holland tended to that."

"That isn't the point. What right has Vil Holland and others of his ilk to tell you, or me, or anybody else who we shall, or shall not rent to? It is the principle of the thing. The running off of those sheep was a lawless act, and the sooner lawlessness, as exemplified by Vil Holland is stamped out of these hills, the better it will be for the community. He better not try to bulldoze me." Bethune turned to Patty. "That Vil Holland is the man I had in mind, Miss Sinclair, when I warned you to choose your friends wisely. He would stop at nothing to gain an end, even to posing as a friend of your father. In all probability he will offer to assist you, but if you have any map or description of your father's location do not under any circumstances show it to him."

Patty smiled. "If any such paper exists I shall keep it to myself."

Bethune returned the smile. "Good-by," he said. "I shall look forward to meeting you again. Shall you remain here?"

"I have made no plans," she answered, and as she watched the two riders disappear down the creek trail her lips twisted into a smile. "May pose as a friend of your father ... and probably will offer to assist you;" she repeated under her breath. "Well, Mr. Bethune, I thank you again for the warning."

CHAPTER III

PATTY GOES TO TOWN

Ma Watts called loudly from the doorway and numerous small Wattses appeared as if by magic from the direction of the creek and the cottonwood thicket. Dinner consisted of flabby salt pork, swimming in its own grease, into which were dipped by means of fingers or forks, huge misshapen slices of sour white bread. There was also an abundance of corn pone, black molasses, and a vile concoction that Ma Watts called coffee. Flies swarmed above the table and settled upon the food from which they arose in clouds at each repetition of the dipping process.

How she got through the meal Patty did not know, but to her surprise and disgust, realized that she had actually consumed a considerable portion of the unappetizing mess. Watts arose, stretched prodigiously, and sauntered to his chair which, true to calculation was already just within the shadow of the east side of the house.

Baby on hip, Ma Watts, assisted by Microby Dandeline and Lillian Russell, attacked the dishes. All offers of help from Patty were declined.

"Yo' welcome to stay yere jest as long as yo' want to, honey, an' yo' hain't got to work none neither. They's a old piece o' stack-cover somewheres around an' them young-uns kin rig 'em up a tent an' sleep in hit all summer, an' yo' kin hev their shake-down like yo' done las' night. I s'pose yo're yere about yo' pa's claim?"

"Yes," answered the girl, "and I certainly appreciate your hospitality. I hope I can repay you some day, but I cannot think of settling myself upon you this way. My work will take me out into the hills and——"

"Jest like yo' pa usta say. He wus that fond o' rale home cookin' thet

he'd come 'long every onct in a month 'er so, an' git him a squr meal, an' then away he'd go out to his camp."

"Where was his camp?" asked the girl eagerly.

"Lawzie, his camp wus a tent, an' he moved hit around so they couldn't no one tell from one day to 'nother where he'd be at. But, he never wus no great ways from here, gen'ally within ten mile, one way er 'nother. Hits out yonder in the barn—his tent an' outfit—pick an' pan an' shovel an' dishes, all ready to throw onto his pack hoss which hits a mewl an' runnin' in the hills with them hosses of ourn. If hit wusn't fer the fences they'd be in the pasture. Watts aims to fix 'em when he gits time."

"I don't know much about tents, but I guess I'll have to use it, that is, if there isn't another ranch, or a—a house, or something, where I can rent a room all to myself."

"Great sakes, child! They hain't another ranch within twenty-five mile, an' thet's towards town." As if suddenly smitten with an idea, she paused with her hand full of dishes and called loudly to her spouse:

"Watts! Watts!"

The chair was eased to its four legs, and the lank form appeared in the doorway. "Yeh?"

"How about the sheep camp?"

The man's fingers fumbled at his beard and he appeared plunged into deep thought. "What yo' mean, how 'bout hit?"

"Why not we-all leave Mr. Sinclair's darter live up there?"

Again the thoughtful silence. At length the man spoke: "Why, shore, she kin stay there long as she likes, an' welcome."

"Hit's a cabin four mile up the crick," explained Ma Watts, "what we built on our upper desert fer a man thet wanted to run a band o'

sheep. He wus rentin' the range offen us, till they druv him off—the cattlemen claimed they wouldn't 'low no sheep in the hill country. They warned him an' pestered him a spell, an' then they jest up an' druv him off—thet Vil Holland wus into hit, an' some more."

"Who is this Vil Holland you speak of, and why did he want to drive off the sheep?"

"Oh, he's a cowpuncher—they say they hain't a better cowpuncher in Montany, when he'll work. But he won't work only when he takes a notion—'druther hang around the hills an' prospeck. He hain't never made no strike, but he allus aims to, like all the rest. Ef he'd settle down, he could draw his forty dollars a month the year 'round, 'stead of which, he works on the round-up, an' gits him a stake, an' then quits an' strikes out fer the hills."

"I couldn't think of occupying your cabin without paying for it. How much will you rent it to me for?"

"'Tain't wuth nothin' at all," said Watts. "'Tain't doin' no good settin' wher' it's at, an' yo' won't hurt hit none a-livin' in hit. Jest move in, an' welcome."

"No, indeed! Now, you tell me, is ten dollars a month enough rent?"

"Ten dollars a month!" exclaimed Watts. "Why, we-all only got fifteen fo' a herder an' a dog an' a band o' sheep! No, ef yo' bound to pay, I'll take two dollars a month. We-all might be po' but we hain't no robbers."

"I'll take it," said Patty. "And now I'll have to have a lot of things from town—food and blankets, and furniture, and——"

"Hit's all furnished," broke in Ma Watts. "They's a bunk, an' a table, an' a stove, an a couple o' wooden chairs."

"Oh, that's fine!" cried the girl, becoming really enthusiastic over the prospect of having a cabin all her very own. "But, about the other

things: Mr. Watts can you haul them from town?"

Watts tugged at his beard and stared out across the hills. "Yes, mom, I reckon I kin. Le's see, the work's a-pilin' up on me right smart." He cast his eye skyward, where the sun shone hot from the cloudless blue. "Hit mought rain to-morrow, an' hit moughtn't. The front ex on the wagon needs fixin'—le's see, this here's a Wednesday. How'd next Sunday, a week do?"

The girl stared at him in dismay. Ten days of Ma Watts's "home cooking" loomed before her.

"Oh, couldn't you *possibly* go before that?" she pleaded.

"Well, there's them fences. I'd orter hev' time to study 'bout how many steeples hit's a-goin' to tak' to fix 'em. An' besides, Ferd Rowe 'lowed he wus comin' 'long some day to trade hosses an' I'd hate to miss him."

"Why can't I go to town. I know the way. Will you rent me your horses and wagon? I can drive and I can bring out your tools and things, too." As she awaited Watts's reply her eyes met the wistful gaze of Microby Dandeline. She turned to Ma Watts. "And maybe you would let Microby Dandeline go with me. It would be loads of fun."

"Lawzie, honey, yo' wouldn't want to be pestered with her."

"Yes, I would really. Please let her go with me, that is, if Mr. Watts will let me have the team."

"Why, shore, yo' welcome to 'em. They hain't sich a good span o' hosses, but they'll git yo' there, an' back, give 'em time."

"And can we start in the morning?"

"My! Yo' in a sight o' hurry. They's thet front ex——"

"Is it anything very serious? Maybe I could help fix it. Do let me try."

Watts rubbed his beard reflectively. "Well, no, I reckon it's mebbe the wheels needs greasin'. 'Twouldn't take no sight o' time to do, if a body could only git at hit. Reckon I mought grease 'em all 'round, onct I git started. The young-uns kin help, yo' jest stay here with Ma. Ef yo' so plumb sot on goin' we'll see't yo' git off."

"I kin go, cain't I, Ma?" Microby Dandeline's eyes were big with excitement, as she wrung out her dish towel and hung it to dry in the sun.

"Why, yas, I reckon yo' mought's well—but seem's like yo' allus a-wantin' to gad. Yo' be'n to town twict a'ready."

"Twice!" cried Patty. "In how long?"

"She's goin' on eighteen. Four years, come July she wus to town. They wus a circust."

"I know Mr. Christie. He lives to town."

"He's the preacher. He's a 'piscopalium preacher, an' one time that Vil Holland an' him come ridin' 'long, an' they stopped in fer dinner, an' that Vil Holland, he's allus up to some kind o' devilment er 'nother, he says: 'Ma Watts, why don't yo' hev the kids all babitized?' I hadn't never thought much 'bout hit, but thar wus the preacher, an' he seemed to think mighty proud of hit, an' hit didn't cost nothin', so I tol' him to go ahead. He started in on Microby Dandeline—we jest called her Dandeline furst, bein' thet yallar with janders when she wus a baby, but when she got about two year, I wus a readin' a piece in a paper a man left, 'bout these yere little microbys thet gits into everywheres they shouldn't ort to, jest like she done, so I says to Watts how she'd ort to had two names anyways, only I couldn't think of none but common ones when we give her hern. I says, we'll name her Microby Dandeline Watts an' Watts, he didn't care one way er t'other." Ma Watts shifted the baby to the other hip. "Babitizin' is nice, but hit works both ways, too. Take the baby, yere. When we'd got down to the bottom of the batch it come her turn, an', lawzie, I wus that

flustered, comin' so sudden, thet way, I couldn't think of no name fer her 'cept Chattenoogy Tennessee, where I come from near, an' the very nex' day I wus readin' in the almanac an' I found one I liked better. Watts, he hain't no help to a body, he hain't no aggucation to speak of, an' don't never read none, an' would as soon I'd name his children John, like his ma done him. As I was sayin' there hit wus in the almanac the name 'twould of fitten the baby to a T. Vernal Esquimaux, hit said, March 21, 5:26 a.m. The baby was borned March the 21st, 'tween five an' six in the mornin'. Nex' time I wus to town I hunted up preacher Christie, but he said he couldn't onbabitize her, an' he reckoned Chatenoogy Tennessee wus as good as Vernal Esquimaux, anyhow, an' we could save Vernal Esquimaux fer the next one—jest's ef yo' could hev 'em like a time table!"

The afternoon was assiduously devoted to overhauling the contents of a huge tin trunk in an effort to find a frock suitable for the momentous occasion of Microby Dandeline's journey. The one that had served for the previous visit, a tight little affair of pink gingham, proved entirely inadequate in its important dimensions, and automatically became the property of the younger and smaller Lillian Russell. Patty's suggestion of a simple white lawn that reposed upon the very bottom of the trunk was overruled in favor of a betucked and beflounced creation of red calico in which Ma Watts had beamed upon the gay panoply of the long remembered "circust." An hour's work with scissors and needle reduced the dress to approximately the required size. When the task was completed Watts appeared with the information that he reckoned the wagon would run, and that the "young-uns" were out in the hills hunting the "hosses."

At early dawn the following morning Patty was awakened by a timid hand upon her shoulder.

"Hit's daylight, an' Pa's hitchin' up the hosses." Arrayed in the red dress, her eyes round with excitement and anticipation, Microby Dandeline was bending over her whispering excitedly, "An' breakfus's ready, an' me an' Ma's got the lunch putten up, an' hit's a pow'ful long

ways to town, an' we better git a-goin'."

"Stay right clost an' don't go gittin' lost," admonished Ma watts, as she stood in the doorway and surveyed her daughter with approval born of motherly pride. The pink gingham sunbonnet that matched the tight little dress had required only a slight "letting out" to make it "do," and taken in conjunction with the flaming red dress, made a study in color that would have delighted the heart of a Gros Ventre squaw. Thick, home-knit stockings, and a pair of stiff cow-hide shoes completed the costume, and made Microby Dandeline the center of an admiring semi-circle of Wattses.

"Yo' shore look right pert an' briggity, darter," admitted Watts. "Don't yo' give the lady no trouble, keep offen the railroad car tracks, an' don't go talkin' to strangers yo' don't know, an' ef yo' see preacher Christie tell him howdy, an' how's he gittin' 'long, an' we're doin' the same, an' stop in nex' time he's out in the hills." He handed Patty the reins. "An' mom, yo' won't fergit them steeples, an' a ax, an' a spade?"

"I won't forget," Patty assured him, and as Microby Dandeline was saying good-by to the small brothers and sisters, the man leaned closer. "Ef they's any change left over I wisht yo'd give her about ten cents to spend jest as she pleases."

The girl nodded, and as Microby Dandeline scrambled up over the wheel and settled herself beside her upon the board that served as a seat, she called a cheery good-by, and clucked to the horses.

The trail down Monte's Creek was a fearsome road that sidled dangerously along narrow rock ledges, and plunged by steep pitches into the creek bed and out again. Partly by sheer luck, partly by bits of really skillful driving, but mostly because the horses, themselves knew every foot of the tortuous trail, the descent of the creek was made without serious mishap. It was with a sigh of relief that Patty turned into the smoother trail that lead down through the canyon toward town. In comparison with the bumping and jolting of the springless lumber

wagon, she realized that the saddle that had racked and tortured her upon her outward trip had been a thing of ease and comfort. Released from her post at the brake-rope, Microby Dandeline immediately proceeded to remove her shoes and stockings. Patty ventured remonstrance.

"Hit's hot an' them stockin's scratches. 'Tain't no good to wear 'em in the summer, nohow, 'cept in town, an' I kin put 'em on when we git there. Why does folks wear 'em in town?"

"Why, because it is nicer, and—and people couldn't very well go around barefooted."

"I kin. I like to 'cept fer the prickly pears. Is they prickly pears in town?" Without waiting far a reply the girl chattered on, as she placed the offending stockings within her shoes and tossed them back upon the hay with which the wagon-box was filled. "I like to ride, don't you? We've got to ride all day an' then we'll git to town. We goin' to sleep in under the wagon?"

"Certainly not! We will go to the hotel."

"The hotel," breathed the girl, rapturously. "An' kin we eat there too?"

"Yes, we will eat there, too."

"An' kin I go to the store with yo'?"

"Yes."

Patty's answers became shorter as her attention centered upon a horseman who was negotiating the descent of what looked like an impossibly steep ridge.

"That's Buck!" exclaimed Microby Dandeline, as she followed the girl's gaze. The rider completed the descent of the ridge with an abrupt slide that obscured him in a cloud of dust from which he emerged to approach the trail at a swinging trot. Long before he was

near enough for Patty to distinguish his features, she recognized him as her lone horseman of the hills. "If it is his intention to presume upon our chance meeting," she thought, "I'll——" The threat was unexpressed even in thought, but her lips tightened and she flushed hotly as she remembered how he had picked her up as though she had been a child and placed her in the saddle.

"Who did you say he is?" she asked, with a glance toward the girl at her side.

"He's Vil Holland, an' his hoss's name is Buck. I like him, only sometimes he chases me home."

"Vil Holland!" she exclaimed aloud, and her lips pressed tighter. So this man was Vil Holland—*that* Vil Holland, everybody called him. The man who had chased an inoffensive sheep herder from the range, and whose name stood for lawlessness in the hill country! So Aunt Rebecca's allusion to desperate characters had not been so far-fetched, after all. He looked the part. Patty's glance took in the vivid blue scarf with its fastening of polished buffalo horn, the huge revolver that swung in its holster, and the brown leather jug that dangled from the horn of his saddle.

"Good-mornin'!" He drew up beside the trail, and the girl reined in her horses, flushing slightly as she did so—she had meant to drive past without speaking. She acknowledged the greeting with a formal bow. The man ignored the frigidity.

"I see you found Watts's all right."

"Yes, thank you."

"Well, if there ain't Microby Dandeline! An' rigged out for who throw'd the chunk! Goin' to town to take in the picture show, an all the sights, I expect."

"We're goin' to the *hotel*," explained the girl proudly.

"My ain't that fine!"

"I got a red dress."

"Why so you have. Seein' you mentioned it, I can notice a shade of red to it. An' that bonnet just sets it off right. That'll make folks set up an' take notice, I'll bet."

"I'm a-goin' to the store, too."

"What do you think of that!" the man drew a half-dollar from his pockets. "Here, get you some candy an' take some home to the kids."

Microby reached for the coin, but Patty drew back her arm.

"Don't touch that!" she commanded sharply, then, with a withering look that encompassed both the man and his jug, she struck the horses with her whip and started down the trail.

"I could of boughten some candies," complained Microby Dandeline.

"I will buy you all the candy you want, but you must promise me never to take any money from men—and especially from that man."

Microby glanced back wistfully, and as the wagon rumbled on her eyes closed and her head began to nod.

"Why, child, you are sleepy!" exclaimed Patty, in surprise.

"Yes, mom. I reckon I laid awake all night a-thinkin' about goin' to town."

"If I were you I would lie down on the hay and take a nap."

The girl eyed the hay longingly and shook her head. "I like to ride," she objected, sleepily.

"You will be riding just the same."

"Yes but we might see somethin'. Onct we seen a nortymobile without

no hosses an' hit squarked louder'n a settin' hen an' went faster'n what a hoss kin run."

"You go to sleep and if there is anything to see I'll wake you up. If you don't sleep now you'll have to sleep when you get to town and I'm sure you don't want to do that."

"No, mom. Mebbe ef I hurry up an' sleep fast they won't no nortymobiles come, but if they does, you wake me."

"I will," promised Patty, and thus assured the girl curled up in the hay and in a moment was fast asleep.

Hour after hour as the horses plodded along the interminable trail, Patty Sinclair sat upon the hard wooden seat, while her thoughts ranged from plans for locating her father's lost claim, to the arrangement of her cabin; and from Vil Holland to the welfare of the girl, a pathetic figure as she lay sprawled upon the hay, with her bare legs, and the gray dust settling thickly upon her red dress and vivid pink sunbonnet.

CHAPTER IV

MONK BETHUNE

"When the devil was sick, the devil a monk would be,
When the devil got well, the devil a monk was he."

Pippin Larue chanted tipsily, as he strummed softly the strings of a muffled banjo. And Raoul Bethune, with the flush of liquor upon his pale cheeks, joined in the laugh that followed, and replenished his glass from the black bottle he had contrived to smuggle from the hospital stores when he had been returned to his room in the dormitory. And "Monk" Bethune he was solemnly rechristened by the half-dozen admiring satellites who had foregathered to celebrate his recovery from an illness. All this was long ago. Monk Bethune's dormitory life had terminated abruptly—for the good of the school, but the name had fastened itself upon him after the manner of names that fit. It followed him to far places, and certain red-coated policemen, who knew and respected his father, the Hudson Bay Company's old factor on Lake o' God's Wrath, hated him for what he had become. They knew him for an inveterate gambler who spent money freely and boasted openly of his winnings. He was soft of voice and mild of manner and aside from his passion for gambling, his conduct so far as was known was irreproachable. But, there were wise and knowing ones among the officers of the law, who deemed it worth their while to make careful and unobtrusive comparison between the man's winnings and his expenditures. These were the men who knew that certain Indians were being systematically supplied with whisky, and that there were certain horses in Canada whose brands, upon close inspection, showed signs of having been skillfully "doctored," and which bore unmistakable evidence of having come from the ranges to the southward of the international boundary.

But, try as they might, no slightest circumstance of evidence could they unearth against Bethune, who was wont to disappear from his usual haunts for days and weeks at a time, to reappear smiling and debonaire, as unexpectedly as he had gone. Knowing that the men of the Mounted suspected him, he laughed at them openly. Once, upon a street in Regina, Corporal Downey lost his temper.

"You'll make a mistake sometime, Monk, and then it will be our turn to laugh."

"Oh-ho! So until I make a mistake, I am safe, eh? That is good news, Downey—good news! Skill and luck—luck and skill—the tools of the gamblers' trade! But, granted that sometime I shall make a mistake—shall lose for the moment, my skill; I shall still have my luck—and your mistakes. You are a good boy, Downey, but you'll be a glum one if you wait to laugh at my mistakes. If I were a chicken thief instead of a—gambler, I should fear you greatly."

Downey recounted this jibe in the barracks, and the officers redoubled their vigilance, but the Indians still got their whisky, and new horses appeared from the southward.

When Monk Bethune refused Ma Watts's invitation to dinner, and rode off down the creek followed by Lord Clendenning, the refusal did not meet the Englishman's unqualified approval, a fact that he was not slow in imparting when, a short time later, they made noonday camp at a little spring in the shelter of the hills.

"I say, Monk, what's this bally important business we've got on hand?" he asked, as he adjusted a refractory hobble strap. "Seems to me you threw away an excellent opportunity."

Bethune grinned. "Anything that involves the loss of a square meal, is a lost opportunity. You're too beefy, Clen, a couple of weeks on pilot bread and tea always does you good."

"I was thinking more of the lady."

"La, la, the ladies! A gay dog in your day—but, you've had your day. Forget 'em, Clen, you're fifty, and fat."

"I'm forty-eight, and I weigh only fifteen stone as I stand," corrected the Englishman solemnly. "But layin' your bloody jokes aside, this particular lady ought to be worth our while."

Bethune nodded, as he scraped the burning ends of the little sticks closer about the teapot. "Yes, decidedly worth while, my dear Clen, and that's where the important business comes in. Those who live by their wits must use their wits or they will cease to live. I live by my wits, and you by your ability to follow out my directions. In the present instance, we had no plan. We could only have sat and talked, but talk is dangerous—when you have no plan. Even little mistakes are costly, and big ones are fatal. Let us go over the ground, now and check off our facts, and then we can lay our plans." As he talked, Bethune munched at his pilot bread, pausing at intervals for a swallow of scalding tea.

"In the first place, we know that Rod Sinclair made a strike. And we know that he didn't file any claim. Why? Because he knew that people would guess he had made a strike, and that the minute he placed his location on record, there would be a stampede to stake the adjoining claims—and he was saving those claims for his friends."

"His strike may be only a pocket," ventured Clendenning.

"It is no pocket! Rod Sinclair was a mining man—he knows rock. If he had struck a pocket he would have staked and filed at once—and taken no chances. I tell you he went back East to let his friends in. The fool!"

The Englishman finished his tea, rinsed out his tin cup in the spring, and filled his pipe. "And you think the girl has got the description?"

Bethune shook his head. "No. A map, perhaps, or some photographs. If she had the description she would not have come

alone. The friends of her father would have been with her, and they would have filed the minute they hit the country. It's either a map, or nothing but his word."

"And in either case we've got a chance."

"Yes," answered Bethune, viciously. "And this time we are not going to throw away our chance!" He glanced meaningly at the Englishman, who puffed contentedly at his pipe.

"Sinclair was too shrewd to have carried anything of importance, and there would have been blood on our hands. As it is, we sleep good of nights."

Bethune gave a shrug of impatience. "And the gold is still in the hills, and we are no nearer to it than we were last fall."

"Yes, we are nearer. This girl will not be as shrewd as her father was in guarding the secret, if she has it. If she hasn't it our chance is as good as hers."

"And so is Vil Holland's! He believes Sinclair made a strike, and now that Sinclair is out of the way, you may be sure he will leave no stone unturned to horn in on it. The gold is in these hills and I'm going to get it. If I can't get it one way, I will get it another." The quarter-breed glanced about him and unconsciously lowered his voice. "However, one could wish the girl had delayed her visit for a couple of weeks. A person slipped me the word he could handle about twenty head of horses."

The Englishman's face lighted. "I thought so when you began to dicker with Watts for his pasture. We'll get him his bally horses, then. This horse game I like, it's a sportin' game, and so is the whisky runnin'. But I couldn't lay in the hills and shoot a man, cold blooded."

"And you've never been a success," sneered Bethune. "You never had a dollar, except your remittance, until you threw in with me. And we'd have been rich now, if it hadn't been for you. I tell you I know

Sinclair carried a map!"

"If he had, we'll get it. And we can sleep good of nights!"

"You're a fool, Clen, with your 'sleep good of nights!' I sleep good of nights, and I've—" he halted abruptly, and when he spoke again his words grated harsh. "I tell you this is a fang and claw existence—all life is fang and claw. The strong rip the flesh from the bones of the weak. And the rich rip their wealth from the clutch of a thousand poor. What a man has is his only so long as he can hold it. One man's gain is another man's loss, and that is life. And it makes no difference in the end whether it was got at the point of the pistol in defiance of law, or whether it was got within the law under the guise of business. And I don't need you to preach to me about what is wrong, either."

The Englishman laughed. "I'm not preaching, Monk. Anyone engaged in the business we're in has got no call to preach."

"We're no worse than most of the preachers. They peddle out, for money, what they don't believe."

"Heigh-ho! What a good old world you've painted it! I hope you're right, and I'm not as bad as I think I am."

Bethune interrupted, speaking rapidly in the outlining of a plan of procedure, and it was well toward the middle of the afternoon when the two saddled up and struck off into the hills in the direction of their camp.

Twilight had deepened to dusk as Patty Sinclair pulled her team to a standstill upon the rim of the bench and looked down upon the twinkling lights of the little town that straggled uncertainly along the sandy bank of the shallow river.

"Hain't it grand lookin'?" breathed Microby Dandeline who sat

decorously booted and stockinged upon the very edge of the board seat. "You wouldn't think they wus so many folks, less'n you seen 'em yers'f. Wisht I lived to town, an' I wisht they'd be a circust."

Patty guided the horses down the trail that slanted into the valley and crossed the half-mile of "flats" whose wire fences and long, clean-cut irrigation ditches marked the passing of the cattle country. A billion mosquitoes filled the air with an unceasing low-pitched drone, and settled upon the horses in a close-fitting blanket of gray. The girls tried to fight off the stinging pests that attacked their faces and necks in whirring clouds. But they fought in vain and in vain they endeavored to urge the horses to a quickening of their pace, for impervious alike to the sting of the insects and the blows of the whip, the animals plodded along in the unvarying walk they had maintained since early morning.

"This yere's the skeeter flats," imparted Microby, between slaps. "They hain't no skeeters in the mountains, mebbe it's too fer, an' mebbe they hain't 'nough folks fer 'em to bite out there, they's only us-uns an' a few more." As the girl talked the horses splashed into the shallow water of the ford and despite all effort to urge them forward, halted in mid-stream, and sucked greedily of the crystal-clear water. It seemed an hour before they moved on and assayed a leisurely ascent of the opposite bank. The air became pungent with the smell of smoke. They were in town, now, and as the wagon wheels sank deeply into the soft sand of the principal street, Patty noted that in front of the doors of most of the houses, slow fires were burning—fires that threw off a heavy, stifling smudge of smoke that spread lazily upon the motionless air and hung thick and low to the ground.

"Skeeter smudges," explained Microby proud of being the purveyor of information, "towns has 'em, an' then the skeeters don't bite. Oh, look at the folks! Lest hurry up! They might be a fight! Las' time they wus a fight an' a breed cut a man Pap know'd an' the man got the breed down an' stomped on his face an' the marshal come an' sp'ilt hit, an' the man says if he'd of be'n let be he'd of et the breed up."

"My, what a shame! And now you may never see a man eat a breed, whatever a breed is."

"A breed's half a Injun." Microby was standing up on the seat at the imminent risk of her neck, peering over the heads of the crowd that thronged the sidewalk.

"Sit down!" commanded Patty, sharply, as she noted the amused glances with which those on the outskirts of the crowd viewed the ridiculous figure in the red dress and the pink sunbonnet. "They are waiting for the movie to open.

"Whut's a movie? Is hit like the circust? Kin I go?" The questions crowded each other, as the girl scrambled to her seat, her eyes were big with excitement.

"Yes, to-morrow."

"Looky, there's Buck!" Patty's eyes followed the pointing finger, and she frowned at sight of the rangy buckskin tied with half a dozen other horses to the hitching rail before the door of a saloon. It seemed as she glanced along the street that nearly every building in town was a saloon. Half a block farther on she drew to the sidewalk and stopped before the door of a two-story wooden building that flaunted across its front the words "Montana Hotel." As Patty climbed stiffly to the sidewalk each separate joint and muscle shrieked its aching protest at the fifteen-hour ride in the springless, jolting wagon. Microby placed her foot upon the sideboard and jumped, her cow-hide boots thudding loudly upon the wooden planking.

"Oughtn't you stay with the horses while I make the arrangements?"

Microby shook her head in vigorous protest. "They-all hain't a-goin' nowheres less'n they has to. An' I want to go 'long."

A thick-set man, collarless and coatless, who tilted back in his chair with his feet upon the window ledge, glanced up indifferently as they

entered and crossed to the desk, and returned his gaze to the window, beyond which objects showed dimly in the gathering darkness. After a moment of awkward silence Patty addressed him. "Is the proprietor anywhere about?"

"I'm him," grunted the man, without looking around.

The girl's face flushed angrily. "I want a room and supper for two."

"Nawthin' doin'. Full up."

"Is there another hotel in this town?" she flashed angrily.

"No."

"Do you mean to say that there is no place where we can get accommodation for the night?"

"That's about the size of it."

"Can't we get anything to eat, either?" It was with difficulty Patty concealed her rage at the man's insolence. "If you knew how hungry we are—we've been driving since daylight with only a cold lunch for food." She did not add that the cold lunch had been so unappetizing she had not touched it.

"Supper's over a couple hours, an' the help's gone out."

"I'll pay you well if you can only manage to get us something—we're starved." The girl's rage increased as she noticed the gleam that lighted the heavy eyes. That, evidently was what he had been waiting for.

"Well," he began, but she cut him short.

"And a room, too."

"I'm full up, I told you. The only way might be to pay someone to double up. An' with these here cowpunchers that comes high. I might —" The opening of the screen door drew all eyes toward the man who

entered and stood just within the room. As Patty glanced at the soft-brimmed hat, the brilliant scarf, and noticed that the yellow lamplight glinted upon the tip of polished buffalo horn, and the ivory butt of the revolver, her lips tightened. But the man was not looking at her—seemed hardly aware of her presence. The burly proprietor smiled.

"Hello, Vil. Somethin' I kin do fer you?"

"Yes," answered the man. He spoke quietly, but there was that in his voice that caused the other to glance at him sharply. "You can stand up."

The man complied without taking his eyes from the cowboy's face.

"I happened to be goin' by an' thought I'd stop an' see if I could take the team over to the livery barn for my—neighbors, yonder. The door bein' open, I couldn't help hearin' what you said." He paused, and the proprietor grinned.

"Business is business, an' a man's into it fer all he kin git."

"I suppose that's so. I suppose it's good business to lie an' cheat women, an'——"

"I hain't lied, an' I hain't cheated no one. An' what business is it of yourn if I did? All my rooms is full up, an' the help's all gone to the pitcher show."

"An' there's about a dozen or so cowmen stoppin' here to-night—the ones you talked of payin' to double up—an' there ain't one of 'em that wouldn't be glad to double up, or go out an' sleep on the street if he couldn't get nowhere else to sleep, if you even whispered that there was a lady needed his room. The boys is right touchy when it comes to bein' lied about."

The proprietor's face became suddenly serious. "Aw looky here, Vil, I didn't know these parties was friends of yourn. I'll see't they gits 'em a room, an' I expect I kin dig 'em out some cold meat an' trimmin's. I

was only kiddin'. Can't you take a joke?"

"Yes, I can take a joke. I'm only kiddin', too—an' so'll the boys be, after I tell 'em——"

"They hain't no use rilin' the boys up. I——"

"An' about that supper," continued the cowboy, ignoring the protest, "I guess that cold meat'll keep over. What these ladies needs is a good hot supper. Plenty of ham *and*, hot Java, potatoes, an' whatever you got."

"But the help's——"

"Get it yourself, then. It ain't so long since you was runnin' a short order dump. You ain't forgot how to get up a quick feed, an' to give the devil his due, a pretty good one."

The other started surlily toward the rear. "I'll do it, if——"

"You won't do it *if* nothin'. You'll do it—that's all. An' you'll do it at the regular price, too."

"Say, who's runnin' this here *hotel*?"

"You're runnin' it, an' I'm tellin you how," answered the tall hillman, without taking his eyes from the other's face.

The man disappeared, muttering incoherently, and Vil Holland turned to the door.

"I want to thank you," ventured Patty. "Evidently your word carries weight with mine host."

"It better," replied the cowpuncher, dryly. "An' you're welcome. I'll take the team across to the livery barn." He spoke impersonally, with scarcely a glance in her direction, and as the screen door banged behind him the girl flushed, remembering her own rudeness upon the trail.

"Lawless he may be, and he certainly looks and acts the part," she murmured to herself as the wagon rattled away from the sidewalk, "but his propensity for turning up at the right time and the right place is rapidly becoming a matter of habit." A door beside the desk stood ajar, and above it, Patty read the words "Wash Room." Pushing it open she glanced into the interior which was dimly lighted by a murky oil lamp that occupied a sagging bracket beside a distorted mirror. Two tin wash basins occupied a sink-like contrivance above which a single iron faucet protruded from the wall. Beside the faucet was tacked a broad piece of wrapping paper upon which were printed in a laborious scrawl the following appeals:

NOtiss

Ples DoNT LEEv THE WaTTer RUN ITS hAN Pumpt.
PLes DONT Waist THE ToWL.
Kome AN BREsh AN TOOTH BResH IS INto THR Rak BESIDS THE MiRRoW. PLeS PUT EM baCK.
THes IS hoUSE RULes AN WANts TO be OBayD KINLY.

F. RuMMEL, PROP.

Removing the trail dust from their faces and hands, the girls returned to the office and after an interminable wait the proprietor appeared, red-faced and surly. "Grub's on, an' yer room'll be ready agin you've et," he growled, and waddled to his place at the window.

A generous supply of ham and eggs, fried potatoes, bread and butter, and hot coffee awaited them in the dining-room, and it seemed to Patty that never before had food tasted so good. Twenty minutes later, when they returned to the office the landlord indicated the stairway with a jerk of his thumb. "First door to the right from the top of the stairs, lamp's lit, extry blankets in the closet, breakfast from five 'till

half-past-seven." The words rattled from his lips in a single breath as he sat staring into the outer darkness.

"If Aunt Rebecca could see me, now," smiled Patty to herself, as she led the way up the uncarpeted stairs, with Microby Dandeline's cow-hide boots clattering noisily in her wake.

CHAPTER V

SHEEP CAMP

If Patty Sinclair had anticipated annoyance from the forced attention of her tall horseman of the hills, she was disappointed, for neither at meals, nor during the shopping tour that occupied the whole of the following day, nor yet upon the long homeward drive, did he appear. The return trip was slower and more monotonous even than the journey to town. The horses crawled along the interminable treeless trail with the heavily loaded wagon bumping and rattling in the choking cloud of its own dust.

The expedition had been a disappointing one to Microby. The "pitcher show" did not compare in interest with the never forgotten "circust." There had been no "fight" to break the monotony of purchasing supplies. And they had encountered no "nortymobiles."

Despite the fact that they had started from town at daylight, darkness overtook them at the canyon and it was with fear and misgiving that Patty contemplated the devious trail up Monte's Creek. The descent of this trail by daylight had taxed the girl's knowledge of horsemanship to the limit, and now to attempt its ascent with a heavily loaded wagon in the darkness—Microby Dandeline seemed to read her thoughts.

"We-all cain't git up the crick, I don't reckon," she hazarded, but even as she spoke there was a flicker of light flashed through the darkness and, lantern in hand, Watts rose from his comfortable seat in a niche of rock near the fork of the trail and greeted them with his kindly drawl. "I 'lowed yo' all ort to be 'long d'rec'ly. I'll take 'em now, Miss; the trail's kind of roughish like, but ef yo'll jist take the lantern an' foller 'long ahead I reckon we'll make hit all right. I've druv hit afore in the dark, an' no lantern, neither." Taking turns with the lantern, the girls led the way, and an hour and a half later halted before the door of the Watts cabin, where they became the center of an admiring group of young Wattses

who munched their candy soberly as they gazed in reverent awe at the homing argonauts.

The three mile walk up the rough trail did wonders for Patty's stiffened muscles, and it was with a feeling of agreeable surprise that she rose from her shake-down the following morning with scarcely an ache or a pain in her body.

"Yer gittin' bruk in to hit," smiled Ma Watts, approvingly, as the girl sat down to her belated breakfast. But the surprise at her fit condition was nothing to the surprise of Ma Watts's next words. "Pa, he taken yer stuff on up to the sheep camp. He 'lowed yo'd want to git settled like. They taken yer pa's outfit along, too, an' when they git yo' onloaded they're a-goin' to work on the upper pasture fence. When Pa gits sot on a thing he goes right ahead an' does hit. Some thinks he's lazy, but hit hain't thet. He's easy goin'—all the Wattses wus—but when they git sot on a thing all kingdom come cain't stop 'em a-doin' hit. Trouble with Pa is he's got sot on settin'." Ma Watts talked on and on, and at the conclusion of the meal Patty drew a bill from her purse. But the woman would have none of it. "No siree, we-all hain't a-runnin' no *hotel*. Folks is welcome to come when they like an' stay as long as they want to, an' we're glad to hev 'em. Yer cayuse is a-waitin' out yender. The boys saddled him up fer yo'. Come down an' take pot luck whenever yo're a mind. Microby Dandeline, she ketched up Gee Dot an' went a-taggin' 'long fer to help yo' git settled. Ef she gits in the way jist send her home. Foller up the crick," she called, as Patty mounted her horse. "Yo' cain't miss the sheep camp, hit's about a mild 'bove the upper pasture."

Watts and the boys were just finishing the unloading of her supplies when Patty slipped from her horse and surveyed the little cabin with its dark background of pines.

"Hit hain't so big as some," apologized the man, as he climbed into the wagon and gathered up the reins. "But the chinkin's tol'ble, an' the roof's middlin' tight 'cept a couple places wher' it leaks."

The girl's glance strayed from the little log building to the untidy litter of rusty tin cans and broken bottles that ornamented its dooryard, and the warped and broken panels of the abandoned corral that showed upon the weed-choked flat across the creek. Stepping to the door, she peered into the interior where Microby was industriously sweeping the musty hay from the bunk with the brand-new broom. Thumbed and torn magazines littered the floor, a few discarded garments hung dejectedly from nails driven into the wall, while from the sagging door of the rough board cupboard bulged a miscellaneous collection of rubbish. A sense of depression obsessed her; *this* was to be her home! She sneezed and drew back hastily from the cloud of dust raised by Microby's broom. As she dabbed at her eyes and nose with a small and ridiculously inadequate handkerchief, she was conscious of an uncomfortable lump in her throat, and the moisture that dampened the handkerchief could not all be accredited to the sneeze tears. "What if I have trouble locating the mine and have to stay here all summer?" she was thinking, and instantly recalling the Watts ranch with its air of shiftless decay, the smelly Watts blankets in the overcrowded sleeping room, the soggy meals, the tapping of chickens' bills upon the floor, and the never ending voice of Ma Watts, she smiled. It was a weak, forced little smile, at first, but it gradually widened into a real smile as her eyes swept the little valley with its long vista of pine-clad hills that reached upward to the sky, their mighty sides and shoulders gored by innumerable rock-rimmed coulees and ravines. Somewhere amid the silence of those mighty slopes and high-flung peaks her father had found Eldorado—had wrested nature's secret from the guardianship of the everlasting hills. Her heart swelled with the pride of him. She was ashamed of that sudden welling of tears. The feeling of depression vanished and her heart throbbed to the lure of the land of gold. The two small Wattses had scrambled into the wagon-box.

"Yo' goin' to like hit," announced Watts, noticing the smile. "I 'lowed, fust-off yo'——"

"I'm going to *love* it!" interrupted the girl vehemently. "My father loved these hills, and I shall love them. And, as for the cabin! When Microby and I get through with it, it's going to be the dearest little place imaginable."

"Hit wus a good sheep camp," admitted Watts, his fingers fumbling judiciously at his head. "An' they's a heap o' good feed goin' to waste in this yere valley. But ef the cattlemen wants to pay fer what they hain't gittin' hit hain't none o' my business, I reckon."

"Why did they drive the sheep out? Surely, there is room for all here in the hills."

"Vil Holland, he claimed they cain't no sheeps stay in the hill country. He claims sheeps is like small-poxt. Onct they git a-goin' they spread, an' like's not, the hull country's ruint fer cattle range."

"It seems that Vil Holland runs this little corner of Montana."

"He kind o' looks after things fer the cattlemen, but the prospectin's got into his blood, an' he won't stick to the cattle, only on the round-up, 'til he gits him a grub-stake. He's a good man—Vil is—ef it wusn't fer foolin' 'round with the prospectin'."

Instantly, the girl's eyes flashed. "If it wasn't for the prospecting!" she exclaimed, in sudden anger. "My father was a prospector—and there was never a better man lived than he! Why is it that everyone looks askance at a prospector? You talk like the people back home! But, I'll show you all. My father made a strike. He told me of it on his death-bed, and he gave me the map, and the photographs and his samples. Maybe when I locate this mine and begin taking out more gold every day than most of you ever saw, you won't talk of people 'fooling around' prospecting. I tell you prospectors are the finest men in the world! They must have imagination, and unending patience, and the heart to withstand a thousand disappointments—" She broke off suddenly as the soft rattle of bit-chains sounded from behind her, and whirled to face Vil Holland. The man regarded her gravely, unsmiling.

A gauntleted hand raised the Stetson from his head. As her eyes took in every detail, from the inevitable leather jug, to the tip of polished buffalo horn, she flushed. How long had he stood there, listening?

The cowpuncher seemed to divine her thoughts. "I just happened along," he said regarding her with his steady blue eyes. "I couldn't help hearin' what you said about the prospectors. You're right in the main."

"I was speaking of my father. I am Rodney Sinclair's daughter."

The man nodded. "Yes, I know."

Watts rubbed his chin apologetically. "We-all thought a right smart o' yo' pa, didn't we, Vil? I didn't aim to rile yo'."

"I know you didn't!" the girl smiled. "And thank you so much for bringing my things up so early." She turned to the cowboy who sat regarding the outfit indifferently. "I hope you'll overlook my lack of hospitality, but really I must get to work and help Microby or she'll have the whole house cleaned before I get started."

"I saw the team here, an' thought I'd swing down to find out if Watts was movin' in another sheep outfit."

"I've heard about your driving away the sheep man," returned Patty, with more than a trace of sarcasm in her tone. "I am moving into this cabin—am taking up my father's work where he left off. I suppose I should ask your permission to prospect in the hill country."

"No," replied the man, gravely. "Just help yourself, only don't get lost, an' remember yer dad knew enough to play a lone hand. I must be goin', now. Good day." He turned his horse to see Microby standing in the doorway. "Hello, Microby Dandeline! House cleanin', eh? I s'pect you took in the picture show in town?"

"Yes, but circusts is better. I got some yallar ribbon fer my hat, an' a awful lot o' candies."

"My, that's fine! How's ma an' the baby?"

"They stayed hum. The baby'd squall. Pa an' the boys is goin' to mend fence, an' I'm a-goin' to stay yere an' he'p her clean up the sheep camp."

The cowpuncher turned to Watts. "What's the big hurry about the fences, Watts? You goin' to take over a bunch of stock?"

"Hosses," answered Watts with an important jerk at his scraggly beard. "I done rented the upper pasture to a man name o' Schultz over in Blackfoot country. Five dollars a month, I git fer hit, an' five dollars fer every day er night they's hosses in hit. He done paid two months' rent a'ready."

Vil Holland's brows puckered slightly. "Schultz, you say? Over in the Blackfoot country?"

"Yas, he's aimin' to trail hosses from there over into Canady an' he wants some pastures handy."

"Did Schultz see you about it himself?" asked Vil, casually.

"No, Monk Bethune; he come by this way, an' he taken the pasture for Schultz."

Patty noted an almost imperceptible narrowing of the cowpuncher's eyes, an expression, slight as it was, that spoke disapproval. The man's attitude angered her. Here was poor Watts, about to undertake the first work he had done in years, judging by the condition of the ranch, under stimulus of the few dollars promised him by Bethune, and this cowboy disapproved. "Are horses under the ban, too?" she asked quickly. "Hasn't Mr. Watts the right to rent his land for a horse pasture?"

The man's answer seemed studiously rude in its direct brevity. "No, horses ain't under the ban. Yes, Watts can rent his land where he wants to. Good day." Before the girl could reply he reined his horse

abruptly about, and disappeared in the timber upon the opposite side of the creek.

"Reckon I better be gittin' 'long, too," said Watts. "Microby's welcome to stay an' he'p yo'-all git moved in, but please mom, to see't she gits started fer hum 'fore dark. Hit takes thet ol' pinto 'bout a hour to make the trip."

Patty promised, and unsaddling, picketed her horse, and joined the girl in the dusty interior of the cabin. The musty hay, the discarded garments, and the two bushels or more of odds and ends with which the pack rats had filled the cupboard made a smudgy, smelly bonfire beside which Patty paused with an armful of discarded magazines. "Wouldn't you like to take these home?" she asked.

"Which?" inquired Microby, deftly picking a small stick from the ground with her bare toes and tossing it into the fire.

"These magazines. There are stories and pictures in them."

"No, I don't want none. We-alls cain't read, 'cept Ma, an' she's got a book—an' a bible, too," she added, with a touch of pride. "Davey, he kin mos' read, an' he kin drawer pitchers, too. Reckon he'll be a preacher when he's grow'd up, like Preacher Christie. He done read outen a book when he babitized us-uns. I don't like to read. Ma, she aimed to learn me onct, but I'd ruther shuck beans."

"Maybe you didn't keep at it long enough," suggested Patty.

"Yes, we did! We kep' at hit every night fer two nights 'til hit come bedtime. I cain't learn them letters—they's too many diffe'nt ones, an' all mixed up."

Patty smiled, but she did not toss the magazines into the fire. Instead she laid them aside with the resolve that when opportunity afforded, she would carry on the interrupted education.

Microby's literary delinquency in no wise impaired her willingness to

work. She had inherited none of her father's predilection toward eternal rest, and all day, side by side with Patty, she scraped, and scoured, and scrubbed, and washed, until the little cabin and its contents fairly radiated cleanliness. The moving in was great fun for the mountain girl. Especially the unpacking of the two trunks that resisted all efforts to lift them until their contents had been removed. But at last the work was finished even to the arrangement of dishes and utensils, the stowing of supplies, and the blowing up of the air mattress that replaced the musty hay of the sheep herder. And as the long shadows of mountains crept slowly across the little valley and began to climb the opposite slope, Patty stood in the door of her cabin and watched Microby mount the superannuated Indian pony and proceed slowly down the creek, her bare feet swinging awkwardly in the loops of rope that served as stirrups of her dilapidated stock saddle.

When horse and rider disappeared into a grove of cottonwoods, Patty's gaze returned to her immediate surroundings—her saddle-horse contentedly snipping grass, the waters of the shallow creek burbling noisily over the stones, the untidy scattering of tin cans, and the leaning panels of the old sheep corral. She frowned at the panels. "I'll just use you for firewood," she muttered. "And that reminds me that I've got to wake up to my responsibility as head of the household—even if the household does only consist of one bay cayuse, named Dan, and a tiny one-room cabin, and two funny little squirrel-tailed pack rats, and me." She reached for her brand new ax, and picking her way from stone to stone, crossed the creek, and attacked a sagging panel.

Patty Sinclair was no hot-house flower, and the hand that gripped the ax was strong and brown and capable. Back home she had been known to the society reporters as "an out-door girl," by which it was understood that rather than afternoon auction at henfests, she affected tennis, golf, swimming, and cross-country riding. She could saddle her own horse, and paddle a canoe for hours on end. Even the

ax was no stranger to her hand, for upon rare occasions when her father had returned during the summer months from his everlasting prospecting, he had taken her to camp in the mountains, and there from the quiet visionary whom she loved more than he ever knew, she learned the ax, and the compass, and a hundred tricks of camp lore that were to stand her well in hand. Partly inherited, partly acquired through association with her father upon those never-to-be-forgotten pilgrimages to the shrine of nature, her love of the vast solitudes shone from her uplifted eyes as she stood for a moment, ax in hand, and let her gaze travel slowly from the sun-gilded peaks of the mountains, down their darkening sides, to the dusk-enshrouded reaches of her valley. "He used to watch the sun go down, and he never wearied at the wonder of it," she breathed, softly. "And then, as the darkness deepened and the bull-bats came wheeling overhead, and the whip-poor-wills began calling from the thickets, he would light his pipe, and I would cuddle up close to him, and the firelight would grow redder and brighter and the soft warm dark would grow blacker. The pine trees would lose their shapes and blend into the formless night and mysterious shadow shapes would dance to the flicker of the little flames. It was then he would talk of the things he loved; of quartz, and drift, and the mother lode; of storms, and bears, and the scent of pines; of reeking craters, parched deserts, ice-locked barrens, and the wind-lashed waters of lakes. 'And some day, little daughter,' he would say, 'some day you are going with daddy and see all these things for yourself—things whose grandeur you have never dreamed. It won't be long, now—I'm on the right track at last—only till I've made my strike.' Always—'it won't be long now.' Always—'I'm on the right track, at last.' Always—'just ahead is the strike'—that lure, that mocking chimera that saps men's lives! And now, he is—gone, and I am chasing the chimera." Salt tears stung her eyes and blurred the timbered slopes. "They said he was a—a ne'er-do-well. He became almost a joke—" the words ended in a dry sob, as the bright blade of the ax crashed viciously into the rotting panel. A few moments later she picked up an armful of wood, and retracing her steps, piled it neatly behind the stove. She lighted the fire, fetched a pail of water

from the spring, and moved the picketed cayuse to a spot beside the creek where the grass was green and lush. She had intended after supper to study her map and familiarize herself with the two small photographs that were pinned to it. But, when the meal was over and the dishes washed and put away she was too sleepy to do anything but drop the huge wooden bar that the sheep herder had contrived to insure himself against a possible night attack from his enemies into its place and crawl into her bunk. How good it felt, she thought, sleepily—the yielding air mattress, and the soft, clean blankets, after the straw tick on the floor, and the course sour blankets in the Wattses' stuffy room.

Somewhere, way off in the hills, a wolf howled and almost before the sound had died away the girl was asleep.

CHAPTER VI

BETHUNE PAYS A CALL

It was past noon when Patty sank into the chair beside her table and glanced about her with a sigh of satisfaction. Warm June sunlight streamed through the open door and lay in a bright oblique patch upon the scrubbed floor. The girl's glance strayed past the door and rested with approval upon the little flat across the creek where a neat pile of panels replaced the broken sheep corral. She had spent hours in untwisting the baling wire with which they had been fastened to the posts and dragging them to the pile, and other hours in chopping a supply of firewood, and picking up the cans and broken bottles and pitching them into the deep ravine of a side coulee. Also she had built a little reservoir of rocks about her spring, and had found time to add a few touches to the interior of the cabin. "It's just as homey and cozy as it can be," she murmured, as her eyes strayed from the little window where the colored chintz curtain stirred lightly in the breeze, to the neatly arranged "dressing table" that she had contrived with the aid of four light packing boxes and a bit of figured cretonne. Another packing case, covered to match, served as a stool, and upon the wall above the table hung a small mirror. Four or five prints, looking oddly out of place, hung upon the dark log walls—pictures that had always hung in her room at Aunt Rebecca's, and which she had managed to crowd into one of the trunks. A fond imagination had pictured them adorning the walls of her "apartment" which was to be located in a spacious wing of the great Watts ranch house. "I don't care, I'm glad there wasn't any big ranch house," she muttered. "It's lots nicer this way, and I'm absolutely independent. We prospectors can't hope to be regular in our habits—and I've always wanted a house of my very own. Ten times better!" she exclaimed vehemently. "There won't be anybody to ask me every day or two if I've made my strike yet? And how much gold I brought back to-day? And all the other fool questions that seem so humorous to questioners and hearers, but which hurt

and sting and rankle when you're sick at heart with disappointment, and gritting your teeth to keep up your courage and your belief in yourself. Oh I know! Daddy didn't know I knew, but I did—how it hurt when the village wits would slyly wink at each other as they asked their cruel questions. Even when I was a little girl I knew, and I could have *killed* them!" Her glance rested upon the canvas covered pack that lay in the corner at the foot of the bunk. "There are his things—his outfit, they call it here. I'm going to examine it." The sack of stiff oiled canvas, with its contents, was heavy, but the girl dragged it to the middle of the floor and squatting beside it, stared in dismay at the stout padlock and the chain that threaded a set of grommets. She was about to search for the key among the contents of her father's pockets which she had placed in the tray of her trunk, when her eye fell upon a thin slit close along the edge of the hem that held the grommets—a slit that, pulled wide, disclosed an aperture through which the contents of the sack could be easily removed but withal so cunningly contrived as to escape casual inspection. With an angry exclamation the girl stared at the gaping hole. "Someone has cut it!" she cried. "He doesn't seem to have taken much, though. It's about as full as it can be." She began hurriedly to remove the contents, piling them about her upon the floor. "I wonder if—if he left any papers, or note books, or maps, or things that would enable anyone to locate the claim? If he did," she muttered, peering into the empty sack, "they're gone, now."

One by one, she returned the belongings, handling them tenderly, now, and examining them lovingly, and many an article was returned to the sack, wet with its splash of hot tears. "Here's his coffee pot, and his plate, and frying pan, and his old pipe—" the pipe she did not replace, but put it with the other things in her trunk. "And here—why, it's a revolver and a belt of cartridges—like Vil Holland's! And a hat like his, too! And I thought he was a desperado because he wore them!" She jumped to her feet and, hurrying to the mirror, tried on the hat, pinching the crown into a peak, tilting it this way and that, and arranging and rearranging the soft roll brim. "It fits!" she cried,

delighted as a child, and then with eyes sparkling, picked up the belt with its row of yellow cartridges and its ivory handled six gun dangling in the holster. Buckling the belt about her waist, she laughed aloud as the buckle tongue came to rest a full six inches beyond the last hole. "I'll look just as desperate as he does, now—except for his old jug. Daddy didn't have any jug, and I'm glad—that's where the difference is—it's the jug. But, I wish he had had one of those black horn effects for his scarf." She knotted the brilliant red scarf with its zigzag border of yellow, about her neck, and snatching a small pair of scissors from the dressing table, removed the heavy belt, and proceeded to bore a tongue hole at the point she had marked with her finger nail. So engrossed she became in the work, that she failed to hear the approach of horses' feet, and started violently at the sound of a voice from the doorway. "Permit me." The six shooter thudded to the floor, and sweeping the hat from his head, Monk Bethune crossed the room, and replaced it upon the table. He smiled as he noticed the scar left upon the thick leather by the scissor points; and repeated. "Permit me, please." He drew a penknife from his pocket, and picked up the belt. "A knife is so much better."

Ashamed of having been startled, Patty smiled. "Yes, please do. I had no idea it was so tough, or that scissors could be so dull."

Deftly twirling the penknife, Bethune bored a neat hole in the leather. "There should be several holes," he smiled, "for there are occasions in the hill country when one fails to connect with the commissary, and then it is that the tightening of the belt answers the purpose of a meal." Drilling as he talked, he soon finished the task and held up the belt for inspection. "Rod Sinclair's gun," he commented, sorrowfully. "And Rod's scarf, and hat, too. Ah, there was a man, Miss Sinclair! I doubt if even you yourself knew him as I knew him. You must ride and work with a man, in fair weather and foul; you must share his hardships, and his disappointments, yes and his joys, too, to really know him." A look of genuine affection shone from the man's eyes as he stood drawing his fingers gently along the rims of the shiny

cartridges. He seemed to be speaking more to himself than to the girl. His manner, the look in his eyes, the very tone of his voice, were so intrinsically honest in their expression of unbounded sympathy with his subject, and his mood fitted so thoroughly with her own, that the girl's heart suddenly warmed toward this man who spoke so feelingly of her father. She flushed slightly as she remembered that upon the occasion of their previous meeting, his words had engendered a feeling of distrust.

"You knew him—well?" she asked.

"Like a brother. For two years we have worked together in our search for the mother lode that both believed lay concealed deep within the bosom of these hills. A dozen times during those two years our hopes have risen, as only the hopes can rise, of those who seek gold. A dozen times it seemed certain that at last we had reached our goal. But, always it was the same—a false lead—shattered hopes—and a fresh start. Those were the times, Miss Sinclair, that your father showed the stuff that was in him. He was a better man than I. It was his Spartan acceptance of disappointment, his optimism, and his unshaken faith in ultimate success, that kept me going. I suppose it is my French ancestry that is responsible for my lack of just the qualities that made your father the man he was. I lacked his stability—his balance. I had imagination—vision, possibly greater than his. And under the stimulus of apparent success, my spirits would rise to heights his never knew. But I paid for it—no one knows how bitterly I paid. For when apparent success turned into failure, mine were depths of despair he never descended to. At first, before I learned that his disappointment was as bitter as my own, his smiling acceptance of failure, used to goad me to fury. There were times I could have killed him with pleasure—but that was only at first. Before we had been long together God knows how I came to depend on those smiles. Then, at last, we struck it—and poor Rod—" The man's voice which had dropped very low, broke suddenly. He cleared his throat and turning abruptly, stared out the door toward the green

sweep of pines on the mountain slopes.

There was a long silence during which the words kept repeating themselves in the girl's brain. "*Then, at last, we struck it.*" What did he mean? His back was toward her, and she saw that the muscles of his neck worked slowly, as though he were swallowing repeatedly.

When at last she spoke, her voice sounded strangely dull to her own ears. "Do you mean that you and my father were partners, and that you know the location of his mine?"

Bethune faced her, laying the belt gently upon the table. "Partners?" He repeated the word as though questioning himself. "Hardly partners, I should say. We were—it is hard to define the exact relationship that existed between Rod Sinclair and me. There was never any agreement of partnership, rather a sort of tacit understanding, that when we struck the lode, we should work it together. Your father knew vastly more about rock than I, although I had long suspected the existence of this lode. But extensive interests to the northward prevented me from making any continued search for it. However, I found time at intervals to spend a month or six weeks in these hills, and it was upon one of these occasions that we struck up the acquaintance that ripened into a sort of mutuality of interest. Neighbors are few and far between in the hill country, and those not exactly of the type that attract men of education. I think each found in the other a man of his own stripe, and thus a friendship sprang up between us that gradually led to a merging of interests. His were by far the most valuable activities in the field, while I, from time to time, advanced certain funds for the carrying on of the work.

"But let us not talk of business matters. Time enough for that." He stepped to the doorway and glanced down the creek. "Here comes Clen and we must be going. While he stopped at Watts's to reset a shoe I rode on to inquire if there is any way in which I may serve the daughter of my friend.

"Oh-ho! I see Clen is carrying something very gingerly. He has

prevailed upon the good Mrs. Watts to sell him some eggs. A great gourmand—but a good fellow at heart. I think a great deal of Clen, even though it was he who——"

"But tell me, before you go," interrupted the girl. "Do you know the location of my father's mine?"

Bethune turned from the door, smiling. Patty noticed with surprise that the dark, handsome features looked almost boyish when he smiled. There had been no hint of boyishness before, in fact something of baffling inscrutability in the black eyes, gave the man an expression of extreme sophistication. "Do not call it a mine," he laughed. "At least, not yet. A mine is a going proposition. If your father actually succeeded in locating the lode, it is a strike. Had he filed, it would be a claim. Had he started operation it would be a proposition—but not until there is ore on the dump will it be a mine."

"If he actually succeeded!" cried Patty. "I thought you said——"

The man interrupted with a wave of the hand. "So I did, for I believe he did succeed. In fact, knowing Rod Sinclair as I did, I am certain of it."

"But the location of the—the strike," she persisted, "do you know it?"

Bethune shook his head sadly. "Had your father filed the claim, all would have been well. But, who am I to question Rod's judgment? For on the other hand, if he had filed, word of the strike would have spread broadcast, and the whole hill country would immediately have been overrun by stampeders—those vultures that can scent a gold strike for five thousand miles. No one knows where they come from, and no one knows where they go. It was to guard our secret from these that prompted your father not to file. We had planned to establish our friends on the adjoining claims, and thus build up a syndicate of our own choosing. So he did not file, but it was through no fault of his that I remain ignorant of the location, but rather it was the result of a combination of unforeseen circumstances. You shall judge for yourself.

"I was deep in the wilds of British Columbia, upon another matter, when Rod unearthed the lode, and, not knowing this, he hastened at once to my camp. He found Clen there and after expressing disappointment at my absence, sat down and hurriedly sketched a map, and taking from his pocket a photograph, he wrapped both in a piece of oilskin, and handed them to Clen, with instructions to travel night and day until he had delivered the packet to me. He told him that he had located the lode and was hurrying East to procure the necessary capital and would return in the early spring for immediate operation." Bethune paused and, with his eyes upon the Englishman who was dismounting, continued:

"Poor Clen! He did his best, and I do not hold his failure against him, for his was a journey of hardship and peril such as few men could have survived. Upon receiving the packet he started within the hour. That night he camped at the line, and that night, too, came the first snow of the season. He labored on next day to the railway and took a train to Edmonton, and from there, to Fort George, where he succeeded in procuring an Indian guide for the dash into the wilderness beyond the railway. The early months of last winter were among the most terrible in the history of the North. Storm after storm hurtled out of the Arctic, and between storms the bitter winds from the barrens to the eastward roared with unabated fury. Yet Clen and his guide pushed on, fighting the cold and the snow. Up over the Height of Land, to the Hudson Bay Post at the head of the Parsnip, where I was making my headquarters, and where I had lain snowbound for ten days. It was during the descent of Crooked River, a quick water, treacherous stream, whose thin ice was covered with snow, that the accident happened that cost me the loss of the location, and nearly cost Clen his life. The Indian guide was mushing before, bent low with the weight of his pack, and head lowered to the sweep of the wind. Clen followed. At the head of a newly frozen rapid, the Englishman suddenly broke through and was plunged into the icy waters. Grasping the ice, he managed to draw himself up so that his elbows rested upon the edge, and in this position he called again and again

to the guide. But the Indian was far ahead, his ears were muffled in his fur cap, and the wind roared through the scrub, drowning Clen's voice. The icy waters numbed him and sucked at his body seeking to drag him to his doom. The heavy pack was dragging him slowly backward, and his hold upon the ice was slipping. Then, and not until then, Clen did what any other man who possessed the strength, would have done. He worked the knife from his belt and cut the straps of his pack sack. In an instant it disappeared beneath the ice, and with it the location of your father's strike. Relieved of the weight upon his shoulders, Clen had a fighting chance for his life, but it is doubtful if he would have won had it not been that the Indian, missing him at last, returned in the nick of time, and with the aid of a loop of *babiche*, succeeded in drawing him from the water. The rest of the day was spent in drying Clen's clothing beside a miserable fire of brushwood, and the next day they made Fort McLeod, more dead than alive."

"Lord" Clendenning had dismounted, deposited his precious basket of eggs upon the ground, and stood in the doorway as Bethune concluded his narrative. When the man ceased speaking the Englishman shook his head sadly. "Yes, yes, it seemed to me then, as I clung to the edge of the bloomin' ice, freezin' from my feet up, that my only chance was in bein' rid of the pack. But, I've thought since that maybe if I'd held on just a few minutes longer, the bloody Injun would have got there in time to save both me an' the pack to boot."

"There you go again!" exclaimed Bethune, with a trace of impatience in his voice. "How many times have I told you to quit this self-accusation. A man who covered fifty miles on horseback, seven hundred on the train, and then nearly a hundred a-foot, under conditions such as you faced, has nothing to be ashamed of in the failure of his mission. It is your loss as well as mine, for you also were to have profited by the strike. It is possible, however, that all will be well—that Miss Sinclair has her father's original map, and a duplicate of the photograph, or better yet, the film from which the print was made."

Pausing he glanced at the girl significantly, but she was gazing past him—past Clendenning, her eyes upon the giant up-sweep of the hills. He hurried on, "So now you have the whole story. I had not meant to speak of it, to-day. Really, we must be going. If I can be of service to you in any way, Miss Sinclair, I am yours to command. We will drop in again, after you have had time to get used to your surroundings, and lay our plans for the rediscovery of the mother lode." Smiling he pointed to the canvas bag upon the floor. "Your father's pack sack," he said. "I should know it in a thousand. He devised it himself. It is a clever combination of the virtues of several of the standard packs, and an elimination of the evils of all." He stooped closer. "What's this? You should not have cut it! Couldn't you find the key? If not, it would have been a simple matter to file a link of the chain, and leave the sack undamaged." He laughed, shortly. "But, that, I suppose, is a woman's way."

"I did not cut it. It was cut before it came here. My father left it in Mr. Watts's care and he stored it in the barn. Look at the edges, it is an old cut."

"So it is!" exclaimed Bethune, as he and Lord Clendenning bent close to examine it. "So it is. I wonder who—" Suddenly he ceased speaking, and stood for a moment with puckered brows. "I wonder," he muttered. "I wonder if he would have dared? Yes, I think he would. He knew of Rod's strike, and he would stop at nothing to steal the secret."

"I don't believe Mr. Watts, nor any of the Wattses cut that pack," defended the girl.

"Neither do I. Watts has his faults, but dishonesty is not one of them. No. The man who cut that pack, was the man who carried it there ——"

"Vil Holland!" exclaimed Lord Clendenning. "My word, d'ye think he'd dare? Yes, Watts told us that he brought in the pack because Sinclair was in a hurry. The bloody scamp! He should be jolly well trounced! I'll

do it myself if I see him, so help me Bob, I will!"

Bethune turned to the girl. "You have examined his effects. Was there evidence of their having been tampered with?"

"I'm sure I don't know. If he left any papers or maps or things like that in there it most certainly has been tampered with, for they are not there now."

The man smiled. "I think we are safe in assuming that there were no maps or papers of value in the outfit. Your father was far too shrewd to have left anything of the sort to the tender mercies of Vil Holland. By cutting the pack Vil merely gave evidence of his unscrupulous methods without in any way profiting by it. And, as for the map and photographs in your possession, I should advise you to find some good hiding place for them and not trust to carrying them about upon your person." Swiftly Patty glanced at the speaker. That last injunction, somehow, did not ring quite true. But he had turned to the door, and a moment later when he faced her to bid her adieu, the boyish smile was again curling his lips, and he mounted and rode away.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE CABIN

For a long time after the departure of her visitors, Patty Sinclair sat thinking. Was it true, all this man had told her? She remembered vividly the beautiful tribute he had paid her father and the emotion that had gripped him as he finished. Surely his words rang true. They were true, or else the man was a consummate actor as well as an unscrupulous knave. She recalled the boyish smile, the story of Lord Clendenning's terrible journey, and the impatience with which he had silenced the Englishman's self-criticism. What would be more natural than that two men thrown together in the middle of the hill country, as her father and Bethune had been thrown together, should have pooled their interests, especially if each possessed an essential that the other did not. There had been somehow a sincerity about the man that carried conviction. She liked his ready admission that her father's knowledge of mining greatly exceeded his own. And the assertion that he had advanced sums of money for the carrying on of the work sounded plausible enough, for the girl knew that her father's income had been small—pitiably small, but enough, he had always insisted, for his meager needs. Unquestionably, up to that point the man's words had carried the ring of truth. Then came the false notes; the open accusation of Vil Holland, and the warning as to the concealment of the map and photos which she had twice purposely refused to admit that she possessed. This was the second time he had gone out of his way to warn her against Vil Holland. On occasion of their previous meeting, he had hinted that Holland might pose as a friend of her father—a pose Bethune, himself, boldly assumed. Perhaps Vil Holland had been a friend of her father. In the matter of the pack sack, to whom would a man intrust his belongings, if not to a friend? Surely not to an enemy, nor to one he had reason to suspect. And now Bethune openly accused him of cutting the pack sack, and intimated that he would not hesitate to rob her of her secret.

For a long time she sat with her elbow on the table and her chin resting in her palm, staring out at the overshadowing hills. "If there was only somebody," she muttered. "Somebody I could—" Suddenly she leaped to her feet. "No, I'm glad there isn't! I'll play the game alone! I came out here to do it, and I'll do it, in spite of forty Vil Hollands, and Bethunes, and Lord Clendennings! I'll find the mine myself—and I'll call it a mine, too, if I want to! And then, after I find it, if Mr. Monk Bethune can show me that he is entitled to a share in it, I'll give it to him—and not before. I'll stay right here till I find it, or till my money gives out, and when it does, I'll earn some more and come back again till that's gone!" Crossing the room, she stamped determinedly out the door, threw the saddle onto her cayuse, and rode rapidly down the creek. Horseback riding always exhilarated her, even back home where she had been obliged to keep to roads, or the well-worn courses of the hunt club. But here in the hills where the very air was a tonic that sent the blood coursing through her veins, and where tier after tier, the mighty mountains rolled away into the distance, as if flaunting a challenge to come and explore their secrets, and unscarred valleys gave glimpses of alluring vistas, the exhilaration amounted almost to intoxication. As her horse's feet thudded the ground, and splashed in and out of the shallows of the creek, she laughed aloud for the very joy of living. She pulled her horse to a walk as she skirted the fence of Watts's upper pasture, and her eyes rested with approval upon the straightened posts and taut wire. "At last Mr. Watts has bestirred himself. I hope he will keep on, now, that he's got the habit, and fix up the rest of the ranch. I wonder why that Vil Holland disapproved when he mentioned that he had leased his pasture. It seems as though nothing can happen in this country unless Vil Holland is mixed up in it someway. And, now I'm down this far, I'll just find out whether Vil Holland did take that pack down here for daddy. And if he did I'll let him know mighty quick, the next time I see him, that I know all about it's being cut open."

With her tubs on a bench, and the baby propped and tied securely in

an old wooden rocker, Ma Watts was up to her elbows in her "week's worsh." Watts sat in his accustomed place, his chair tilted against the shady side of the house. "Laws sakes, ef hit hain't Mr. Sinclair's darter!" cried the woman, shaking the suds from her bare arms, "How be yo', honey? An' how's the sheep camp? Microby Dandeline tellen us how yo'-all scrubbed, an' scraped, an' cleaned 'til hit shined like a nigger's heel. Hit's nice to be clean, that-a-way ef yo' got time, but with five er six young-uns to take keer of, an' a passel of chickens a-runnin' in under foot all day, seems like a body cain't keep clean nohow. Microby says how yo' got a rale curtin' in yo' winder, an' all kinds of pert doin' an' fixin's. That's hit, git right down off yer horse. Land! I wus so busy hearin' 'bout yo' fixin' up the sheep camp, thet I plumb fergot my manners. Watts, get a cheer! An' 'pears like yo' could say 'Howdy' when anyone comes a visitin'."

"I aimed to," mumbled Watts apologetically, as he dragged a chair from the kitchen, "I wus jest a-aidgin' 'round fer a chanct."

"I can't stay but a minute, see, the shadows are already half way across the valley. I just thought I'd take a little ride before supper."

"Law, yes, some folks likes to ride hossback, but fer me, I'd a heap ruther go in a jolt wagon. Beats all the dif'fence in folks. Seems like the folks out yere jist take to hit nachel. Yo' be'n huntin' yo' pa's location yet?"

"No, I've been getting things in shape around the cabin. I'm going to start prospecting to-morrow." She glanced back along the valley, "I suppose my father came along this way when he left his pack on his way East," she said.

"No, mom," Watts rubbed his chin, reflectively. "Hit wus Vil Holland brung in his pack. Seems like yo' pa wus in a right smart of a hurry when he left, so Vil taken his pack down yere an' me an' the boys put hit in the barn fer to keep hit saft. Then Vil he rud on down the crick, hell bent fer 'lection——"

"Watts! Hain't yo' shamed a-cussin'?" cried his scandalized spouse.

"Why was he in such a hurry?" asked the girl.

"I dunno. He jes' turned the mewl loost an' says to keep the pack till yo' pa come back, an' larruped off."

Patty rose from the chair and gathered up her bridle reins. "I must be going, really. You see, I've got my chores to do, and supper to get, and I want to go to bed early so I'll be fresh in the morning." She mounted, and turned to Ma Watts: "Can't you come up some day and bring the children? I'd love to have you. Let's arrange the day now, so I will be sure to be home."

"Lawzie, I'd give a purty! Listen at thet, now, Watts. Cain't we fix to go?"

Watts fumbled his beard: "Why, yas, I reckon, some day, mebbe."

"What day can you come?" asked Patty.

"Well, le's see, this yere's about a Tuesday." He paused, glanced up at the sky, and gave careful scrutiny to the horizon. "How'd Sunday a week suit yo'—ef hit don't rain?"

"Fine," agreed the girl, smiling. "And, by the way, I came down past the upper pasture. The fence looks grand. It didn't take long to fix it, did it?"

"Well, hit tuk quite a spell—all day yeste'day, an' up 'til noon to-day. We only got one side an' halft another done, an' they's two sides an' a halft yet. But Mr. Bethune came by this noon, him an' Lord, an' 'lowed he worn't in no gret hurry fer hit, causen he heerd from Schultz thet the hoss business 'ud haf to wait over a spell——"

"An' Lord, he come down an' boughten a lot of aigs offen me. Him an' Mr. Bethune is both got manners."

"Women folks likes 'em better'n what men does, seems like," opined

Watts, reflectively.

"Why don't men like them?" asked the girl eagerly.

"I dunno. Seems like they jes' nachelly mistrust 'em someways."

"Did my father like him—Mr. Bethune?"

"'Cordin' to Mr. Bethune they wus gret buddies, but when I'd run acrost yo' pa in the hills, 'pears like he wus allus alone er elsen Vil Holland was along. But, Mr. Bethune claims he set a heap by yo' pa, like the time he come an' 'lowed to take away his pack. I wouldn't let hit go, 'cause thet hain't the way Vil said, an' Mr. Bethune, he started in to git mad, but then he laffed, an' said hit didn't make no diff'ence, 'cause all he wanted wus to be shore hit wus saft kep."

"An' Pa mos' hed to shoot him, though, 'fore he laffed. I done tol' Pa he hadn't ort to. Lessen yo' runnin' a still, yo' hain't no call to shoot folks comin' 'round."

"Shoot him!" exclaimed Patty, staring in surprise at the easy-going Watts.

"Yas, he aimed to take thet pack anyways. So I went in an' got down the ol' rifle-gun an' pintedly tole him I'd shoot him dead ef he laid holt o' thet pack, an' then he laffed an' rud off."

"But, would you have shot him, really?"

"Yas," answered the mountaineer, in a matter-of-fact tone, "I'd of hed to."

Patty rode home slowly and in silence—thinking. And that evening, by the light of her coal-oil lamp she puzzled over the roughly sketched map with its cryptic signs and notations. There were a half-dozen samples, too—chips of rough, heavy rock that didn't look a bit like gold. "High grade," her daddy had called them as he babbled incessantly upon his death-bed. But they looked dull and unpromising

to the girl as they lay upon the table. She returned to the sketch. With the exception of a single small dot, placed beside what was evidently the principal creek of the locality, the map consisted only of lines and shadings which evidently indicated creeks and mountains—no cross, no letter, no number—nothing to indicate landmark or location, only a confusing network of creeks and feeders branching out like the limbs of a tree. Along the bottom of the paper the girl read the following line:

"SC 1 S1 1/2 E 1 S ↑ to ∩ 2 W to a. to b. stake L.C. ∑ centre."

"I suppose that was all clear as daylight to daddy, and maybe it would be to anyone who is used to maps, but as for doing me any good, he might as well have copied a line from the Chinese dictionary."

She stared hopelessly at the unintelligible line, and then at the two photographs. One, taken evidently from a point well up the side of a hill, showed a narrow valley, flanked upon the opposite side by a high rock wall. Toward the upper end of the wall an irregular crack or cleft split it from top to bottom. The other was a "close up" taken at the very base of the cleft, and showed only the narrow aperture in the rock, and the ground at its base. For a long time she sat studying the photographs, memorizing every feature and line of them; the conformation of the valley, the contour of the rock wall, the position and shapes of the trees and rock fragments. "That must be the mine," she concluded, at length, "right there at the bottom of that crack." She closed her eyes and conjured a mental picture of the little valley, of the rock wall, and of the cleft that would mark the location. "I'd know it if I should see it," she muttered, "let's see: big broken rocks strewn along the floor of the valley, and a tiny creek, and then the rock cliff, it must be about as high as—about twice as tall as the trees that grow along the foot of it, and it's highest at the upper end, then there's a big tree standing alone almost in the middle of the valley, and the gnarled, scraggly trees that grow along the top of the rocks, and the valley must be as wide as from here to that clump of trees beyond my wood-pile—about a block, I guess. And there's the big crack in the cliff that starts straight," she traced the course of the crack with her finger upon

the table top, "and then zigzags to the ground." Her glance returned to the map, and she frowned. "I don't think that's a bit of good to me. But I don't care as long as I have the photographs. I'll just ride, and ride, and ride through these hills till I find that valley, and then—" The little clock on the shelf beside the mirror ticked loudly. Her thoughts strayed far beyond the confines of the little cabin on Monte's Creek, as she planned how she would spend the golden stream that was to flow from the foot of the rock ledge.

Gradually her vision became confused, the incessant ticking of the little clock sounded farther, and farther away, her head settled to rest upon her folded arms, and she was in the midst of a struggle of some kind, in which a belted cowboy and a suave, sloe-eyed quarter-breed were fighting to gain possession of her mine—or, were they trying to help her locate it? And what was it daddy was trying to tell her? She couldn't quite hear. She wished he would talk louder—but it was something about the mine, and the men who were struggling.... She awoke with a start, and glanced swiftly about the cabin. The roots of her hair along the back of her neck tingled uncomfortably. She felt she was not alone—that somewhere eyes were watching her. The chintz curtain that screened the open window swayed lightly in the night breeze and she jumped nervously. "I'm a perfect fool!" she exclaimed, aloud: "As if any 'Jack the Peeper' would be prowling around these mountains! It's just nerves, that's all it is."

Slipping the map and the photographs beneath a plate, she crossed to the door and made sure the bar was in place, took the white butted revolver from its holster, and with a determined tightening of the lips, stepped to the window, drew the curtain aside, and stood peering out into the dark. The only sounds were the ticking of the clock, and the purling of the water as it rushed among the stones of the shallow ford. Overhead the stars winked brightly, in sharp contrast to the velvet blackness of the pines. The sound of the water soothed her, and she laughed—a forced little laugh, but it made her feel better. Crossing to the table she blew out the lamp and, placing her revolver at the head

of her bunk, undressed in the darkness. She raised the plate, took the map and the two precious photographs, placed them in their envelope, and slipped the chain about her neck.

For a long time she lay between her blankets, wide awake, conscious that she was straining her ears to catch some faint sound. A half dozen times she caught herself listening with nerves on edge and muscles taut, and each time forced herself to relax. But always she came back to that horrible, tense listening. She charged herself with cowardice, and pooh-poohed her fears, but it was no use, and she wound up by covering her head with her blanket. "I don't care, there *was* somebody watching, but if he thinks he's going to find out where I keep these," her hand clutched the little oiled packet, "he'll have to come again, that's all."

It was nearly an hour later that Monk Bethune quitted his post close against the cabin wall, at the point where the chinking had fallen away from the logs, and slipped silently into the timber.

CHAPTER VIII

PROSPECTING

The gray of early morning was just beginning to render objects in the little room indistinguishable when Patty awoke. She made a hasty toilet, lighted the fire, and while the water was heating for her coffee, delved into the pack sack and drew out a gray flannel shirt which she viewed critically from every conceivable angle. She tried it on, turning this way and that, before the mirror. "Daddy wasn't so much larger than I am," she smiled, "I can take a tuck in the sleeves, and turn back the collar and it will fit pretty well. Anyway, it will be better than that riding jacket. It will look less citified, and more—more prospecty." A few moments sufficed for the alteration and as the girl stood before the mirror and carefully knotted her brilliant scarf, she nodded emphatic approval.

Breakfast over, she washed her dishes and as she put them on their shelf her glance rested upon the bits of broken rock fragments. Instantly, her thoughts flew to the night before, and the feeling that someone had been watching her. Rapidly her glance flashed about the cabin searching a place to hide them. "They're too heavy to carry," she murmured. "And, yet," her eyes continued their search, lingering for a moment upon some nook or corner only to flit to another, and another, "every place I can think of seems as though it would be the very first place anyone would look." Her eyes fell upon the empty tomato can that she had forgotten to throw into the coulee after last night's supper. She placed the samples in the can. "I might put it with the others in the cupboard, but if anybody looked there they would be sure to see that it had been opened. Where do people hide things? I might go out and dig a hole and bury it, but if anyone were watching —" Suddenly her eyes lighted: "The very thing," she cried: "Nobody would think of looking among those old bottles and cars." And placing the can in the pan of dish-water, she carried it out and threw it onto

the pile of rubbish in the coulee. Returning to the cabin, she put on her father's Stetson, slipped his revolver into its holster, and buckling the belt about her waist, gave one last approving glance into the mirror, closed the door behind her, and saddled her horse. With the bridle reins in her hand she stood irresolute. In which direction should she start? Obviously, if she must search the whole country, she should begin somewhere and work systematically. She felt in the pocket of her skirt and reassured herself that the compass she had taken from the pack sack was there. Her eyes swept the valley and came to rest upon a deep notch in the hills that flanked it upon the west. A coulee sloped upward to the notch, and mounting, the girl crossed the creek and headed for the gap. It was slow and laborious work, picking her way among the loose rocks and fallen trees of the deep ravine that narrowed and grew steeper as she advanced. Loose rocks, disturbed by her horse's feet, clattered noisily behind her, and marks here and there in the soil told her that she was not the first to pass that way. "I wonder who it was?" she speculated. "Either Monk Bethune, or Vil Holland, or Lord Clendenning, I suppose. They all seem to be forever riding back and forth through the hills." At last she gained the summit, and pulled up to enjoy the view. Judging by the trampled buffalo grass that capped the divide, the rider who preceded her had also stopped. She glanced backward, and there, showing above the tops of the trees that covered the slope, stood her own cabin, looking tiny and far away, but with its every detail standing out with startling clearness. She could even see the ax standing where she had left it beside the door, and the box she had placed at the end of the log wall to take the place of the cupboard as a home for the pack rats. "Whoever it was could certainly keep track of my movements from here without the least risk of being discovered," she thought, "and if he had field glasses!" She blushed, and turned her eyes to survey the endless succession of peaks and passes and valleys that lay spread out over the sea of hills. "How in the world am I ever going to find one tiny little valley among all these?" she wondered. Her heart sank at the vastness of it all, and at her own helplessness, and the utter hopelessness of her stupendous task. "Oh, I can never, never do it,"

she faltered, "—never." And, instantly ashamed of herself, clenched her small, gloved fist. "I will do it! My daddy found his mine, and he didn't have any pictures to go by either. He just delved and worked for years and years—and at last he found it. I'd find it if there were twice as many hills and valleys. It may take me years—and I may find it to-day—just think! This very day I may ride into that little valley—or to-morrow, or the next day. It can't be far away. Mrs. Watts said daddy was always to be found within ten miles of the ranch."

She headed her horse down the opposite slope that slanted at a much easier gradient than the one she had just ascended. The trees on this side of the divide were larger and the hillside gradually flattened into a broad, tilted plateau. She gave her horse his head and breathed deeply of the pine-laden air as the animal swung in beside a tiny creek that flowed smooth and black through the dusky silence of the pines whose interlacing branches, high above, admitted the sunlight in irregular splashes of gold. There was little under-brush and the horse followed easily along the creek, where here and there, in the softer soil of damp places, the girl could see the hoof marks of the rider who had crossed the divide. "I wonder whether it was he who watched me last night? There was someone, I could feel it."

The creek sheered sharply around an out-cropping shoulder of rock, and the next instant Patty pulled up short, and sat staring at a little white tent that nestled close against the side of the huge monolith which stood at the edge of a broad, grassed opening in the woods. The flaps were thrown wide and the walls caught up to allow free passage of air. Blankets that had evidently covered a pile of boughs in one corner, were thrown over the ridgepole from which hung a black leather binocular case, and several canvas bags formed an orderly row along one side. A kettle hung suspended over a small fire in front of the tent, and a row of blackened cooking utensils hung from a wooden bar suspended between two crotched stakes. Out in the clearing, a man was bridling a tall buckskin horse. The man was Vil Holland. Curbing a desire to retreat unobserved into the timber, the

girl advanced boldly across the creek and pulled up beside the fire. At the sound the man whirled, and Patty noticed that a lean, brown hand dropped swiftly to the butt of the revolver.

"Don't shoot!" she called, in a tone that was meant to be sarcastic, "I won't hurt you." Somehow, the sarcasm fell flat.

The man buckled the throat-latch of his bridle and picking up the reins, advanced hat in hand, leading the horse. "I beg your pardon," he said, gravely, "I didn't know who it was, when your horse splashed through the creek."

"You have enemies in the hills? Those you would shoot, or who would shoot you?"

He dropped the bridle reins, allowing them to trail on the ground. "If some kinds of folks wasn't a man's enemy he wouldn't be fit to have any friends," he said, simply. "And here in the hills it's just as well to be forehanded with your gun. Won't you climb down? I suppose you've had breakfast?"

Patty swung from the saddle and stood holding the bridle reins. "Yes, I've had breakfast, thank you. Don't let me keep you from yours."

"Had mine, too. If you don't mind I'll wash up these dishes, though. Just drop your reins—like mine. Your cayuse will stand as long as the reins are hangin'. It's the way they're broke—'tyin' 'em to the ground,' we call it." He glanced at her horse's feet, and pointed to a place beneath the fetlock from which the hair had been rubbed: "Rope burnt," he opined. "You oughtn't to put him out on a picket rope. Use hobbles. There's a couple of pair in your dad's war-bag."

"War-bag?"

"Yeh, it's down in Watts's barn, if he ain't hauled it up for you."

"What are hobbles?"

The man stepped to the tent and returned a moment later with two heavy straps fastened together by a bit of chain and a swivel. "These are hobbles, they work like this." He stooped and fastened the straps about the forelegs of the horse just above the fetlock. "He can get around all right, but he can't get far, and there is no rope to snag him."

Patty nodded. "Thank you," she said. "I'll try it. But how do you know there are hobbles in dad's pack?"

"Where would they be? He had a couple of pair. All his stuff is in there. He always traveled light."

"Did you leave my father's war-bag, as you call it, at Watts's?"

"Yeh, he was in somethin' of a hurry and didn't want to go around by the trail, so he left his outfit here and struck straight through the hills."

"Why was he in a hurry?"

The man placed the dishes in a pan and poured water over them. "I've got my good guess," he answered, thoughtfully.

"Which may mean anything, and tells me nothing."

Holland nodded, as he carefully wiped his tin plate. "Yeh, that's about the size of it."

His attitude angered the girl. "And I have heard he was not the only one in the hills that was in a hurry that day, and I suppose I can have my 'good guess' at that, and I can have my 'good guess' as to who cut daddy's pack sack, too."

"Yeh, an' you can change your guess as often as you want to."

"And every time I change it, I'd get farther from the truth."

"You might, an' you might get nearer." The cowpuncher was looking at her squarely, now. "You ain't left-handed, are you?" he asked, abruptly.

"No, of course not! Why?"

"Because, if you ain't, you better change that belt around so the holster'll carry on yer right side—or else leave it to home."

The coldly impersonal tone angered the girl. "Much better leave it home," she said, "so if anyone wanted to get my map and photographs, he could do it without risk."

"If you had any sense you'd shut up about maps an' photos."

"At least I've got sense enough not to tell whether I carry them with me, or keep them hidden in a safe place."

"You carry 'em on you!" commanded the man, gruffly. "It's a good deal safer'n *cachin*' 'em." He laid his dishes aside, poured the water from the pan, wiped it, hung it in its place, and picking up his saddle blanket, examined it carefully.

"I wonder why my father entrusted his pack sack to you?" said Patty, eyeing him resentfully. "Were you and he such great friends?"

"Knew one another tolerable well," answered Holland, dryly.

"You weren't, by any chance—partners, were you?"

He glanced up quickly. "Didn't I tell you once that yer dad played a lone hand?"

"You knew he made a strike?"

"That's what folks think. But I suppose he told Monk Bethune all about it."

The thinly veiled sneer goaded the girl to anger. "Yes, he did," she answered, hotly, "and he told me, too!"

"Told Monk all about it, did he—location an' all, I suppose?"

"He intended to, yes," answered the girl, defiantly. "The day he made

his strike, Mr. Bethune happened to be away up in British Columbia, and daddy told Lord Clendenning that he had made his strike, and he drew a map and sent it to Mr. Bethune by Lord Clendenning."

Holland smoothed the blanket into place upon the back of the buckskin, and reached for his saddle. "An' of course, Monk, he wouldn't file till you come, so you'd be sure an' get a square deal——"

"He never got the map or the photos. Lord Clendenning lost them in a river. And he nearly lost his life, and was rescued by an Indian."

There was a sound very like a cough, and Patty glanced sharply at the cowpuncher, but his back was toward her, and he was busy with his cinch. "Tough luck," he remarked, as he adjusted the latigo strap. "An', you say, yer dad told you all about this partnership business?"

"No, he didn't."

"Who did?"

"Mr. Bethune."

"Oh."

Something in the tone made the girl feel extremely foolish. Holland was deliberately strapping the brown leather jug to his saddle horn, and gathering up her reins, she mounted. "At least, Mr. Bethune is a gentleman," she emphasized the word nastily.

"An' they can't hang him for that, anyway," he flung back, and swung lightly into the saddle, "I must be goin'."

"And you don't even deny cutting the pack?"

He looked her squarely in the eyes and shook his head. "No. You kind of half believe Monk about the partnership. But you don't believe I cut that pack, so what's the use denying it?"

"I do——"

"If you should happen to get lost, don't try to outguess your compass. Always pack a little grub an' some matches, an' if you need help, three shots, an' then three more, will bring anyone that's in hearin' distance."

"I hope I shall never have to summon you for help."

"It is quite a bother," admitted the other. "An' if you'll remember what I've told you, you prob'ly won't have to. So long."

The cowboy settled the Stetson firmly upon his head, and with never a glance behind him, headed his horse down the little creek.

The girl watched him for a moment with angry eyes, and then, urging her horse forward, crossed the plateau at a gallop, and headed up the valley. "Of all the—the *boors*! He certainly is the limit. And the worst of it is I don't know whether he deliberately tries to insult me, or whether it's just ignorance. Anyway, I wouldn't trust him as far as I could see him. And I do believe he cut daddy's pack sack, so there!" The heavy revolver dangling at her side attracted her attention, and she pulled up her horse and changed it to the opposite side. "I suppose I did look like a fool," she admitted, "but he needn't have told me so. And I bet I know as much about a compass as he does, anyway. And I'll tie my horse up with a rope if I want to."

Beyond the plateau, the valley narrowed rapidly, and innumerable ravines and coulees led steeply upward to lose themselves among the timbered slopes of the mountain sides. Crossing a low divide at the head of the valley, she reined in her horse and gazed with thumping heart into the new valley that lay before her. There, scarcely a mile away, stretched a rock ledge—and, yes, there were scraggly trees fringing its rim, and the valley was strewn with rock fragments! Her valley! The valley of the photographs! She laughed aloud, and urged her horse down the steep descent, heedless of the fact that upon the precarious, loose rock footing of the slope, a misstep would mean almost certain destruction.

Directly opposite the face of the rock wall she pulled her horse to a stand. "Surely, this must be the place, but—where is the crack? It should be about there." Her eyes searched the face of the cliff for the zigzag crevice. "Maybe I'm too close to it," she muttered. "The picture was taken from a hillside across the valley. That must be the hill—the one with the bare patch half way up. That's right where he must have stood when he took the photograph." The hillside rose abruptly, and abandoning her horse, the girl climbed the steep ascent, pausing at frequent intervals for breath. At last, she stood upon the bare shoulder of the hill and gazed out across the valley, and as she gazed, her heart sank. "It isn't the place," she muttered. "There is no big tree, and the rock cliff isn't a bit like the one in the picture—and I thought I had found it sure! I wonder how many of those rock walls there are in the hills? And will I ever find the right one?"

Once more in the saddle, she crossed another divide and scanned another rock wall, and farther down, another. "I believe every single valley in these hills has its own rock ledge, and some of them three or four!" she cried disgustedly, as she seated herself beside a tiny spring that trickled from beneath a huge rock, and proceeded to devour her lunch. "I had no idea how hungry I could get," she stared ruefully at the paper that had held her two sandwiches. "Next time I'll bring about six."

Producing her compass, she leveled a place among the stones. "Let's see if I can point to the north without its help." She glanced at the sun and carefully scanned the tumultuous skyline. "It is there," she indicated a gap between two peaks, and glanced at the compass. "I knew I wouldn't get turned around," she said, proudly. "I didn't miss it but just a mite—anyway it's near enough for all practical purposes. If that's north," she speculated, "then I must have started east and then turned south, and then west, and then south again, and my cabin must be almost due north of me now." She returned the compass to her pocket. "I'll explore a little farther and then work toward home."

Mounting, she turned northward, and emerging abruptly from a clump

of trees, caught a glimpse of swift motion a quarter of a mile away, where her trail had dipped into the valley, as a horse and rider disappeared like a flash into the timber. "He's following me!" she cried angrily, "sneaking along my trail like a coyote! I'll tell him just what I think of him and his cowardly spying." Urging her horse into a run, she reached the spot to find it deserted, although it seemed incredible that anyone could have negotiated the divide unnoticed in that brief space of time. "I saw him plain as day," she murmured, as she turned her horse toward the opposite side of the valley. "I couldn't tell for sure that it was he—I didn't even see the color of the horse—but who else could it be? He knew I started out this way, and he knew that I carried the map and photos, and was hunting daddy's claim. I know, now who was watching the other night." She shuddered. "And I've got to stay here 'til I find that claim, knowing all the time that I am being watched! There's no place I can go that he will not follow. Even in my own cabin, I'll always feel that eyes are watching me. And when I do find the mine, he'll know it as soon as I do, and it will be a race to file." Drawing up sharply, she gritted her teeth, "And he knows the short cuts through the hills, and I don't. But I will know them!" she cried, "and when I do find the mine, Mr. Vil Holland is going to have the race of his life!"

Another parallel valley, and another, she explored before turning her horse's head toward the high divide that she had reasoned separated her from Monte's Creek at a point well above her cabin. Comparatively low ridges divided these valleys, and as she topped each ridge, the girl swerved sharply into the timber and, concealing herself, intently watched the back trail—a maneuver that caused the solitary horseman who watched from a safe distance, to chuckle audibly as he carefully wiped the lenses of his binoculars.

The sunlight played only upon the higher peaks when at last, weary and dispirited, she negotiated the steep descent to Monte's Creek at a point a mile above the sheep camp. "If he'd only photographed something besides a rock wall," she muttered, petulantly, "I'd stand

some show of finding it." At the door of the cabin she slipped from her saddle, and pausing with her hand on the coiled rope, dropped her eyes to the rubbed place below her horse's fetlock. A moment later she knelt and fastened a pair of hobbles about the horse's ankles, and, removing the saddle, watched the animal roll clumsily in the grass, and shuffle awkwardly to the creek where he sucked greedily at the cold water. Entering the cabin, she lighted the lamp and stared about her. Her glance traveled one by one over the objects of the little room. Everything was apparently as she had left it—yet—an uncomfortable, creepy sensation stole over her. She knew that the room had been searched.

CHAPTER IX

PATTY TAKES PRECAUTIONS

During the next few days Patty Sinclair paid scant attention to rock ledges. Each morning she saddled her cayuse and rode into the hills to the southward, crossing divides and following creeks and valleys from their sources down their winding, twisting lengths. After the first two or three trips she left her gun at home. It was heavy and cumbersome, and she realized, in her unskilled hand, useless. Always she felt that she was being followed, but, try as she would, never could catch so much as a fleeting glimpse of the rider who lurked on her trail. Nevertheless, during these long rides which she made for the sole purpose of familiarizing herself with all the short cuts through the hills, she derived satisfaction from the fact that, while the trips were of immense value to her, Vil Holland was having his trouble for his pains.

Ascertaining at length that, after crossing the high divide at the head of Monte's Creek, any valley leading southward would prove a direct outlet onto the bench and thereby furnish a short cut to town, she returned once more to her prospecting—to the exploration of little valleys, and the examination of innumerable rock ledges.

Accepting as part of the game the fact that her cabin was searched almost daily during her absence she derived grim enjoyment in contemplation of the searcher's repeated disappointment. Several attempts to surprise the marauder at his work proved futile, and she was forced to admit that in the matter of shrewdness and persistence, his ability exceeded her own. "The real test will come when I locate the mine," she told herself one evening, as she sat alone in her little cabin. "Then the prize will go to the fastest horse." She drew a small folding check-book from her pocket and frowningly regarded its latest stub. "A thousand dollars isn't very much, and—it's half gone."

Next day she rode out of the hills and, following the trail for town, dismounted at Thompson's ranch which nestled in its coulee well out upon the bench, and waited for the rancher, who drove up beside a huge stack with a load of alfalfa, to unhitch his team.

"Have you a good saddle horse for sale?" she asked, abruptly.

Thompson released the tug chains, and hung the bridles upon the hames, whereupon the horses of their own accord started toward the stable, followed by a ranch hand who slid from the top of the stack. Without answering, he called to the man: "Take the lady's horse along an' give him a feed."

"It's noon," he explained, turning to the girl. "You'll stay fer dinner." He pointed toward the house. "You'll find Miz T. in the kitchen. If you want to wash up, she'll show you."

The ranch hand was leading her horse toward the barn. "But," objected Patty, "I didn't mean to run in like this just at meal time. Mrs. Thompson won't be expecting a guest, and I brought a lunch with me."

Thompson laughed: "You must be a pilgrim in these parts," he said. "Most folks would ride half a day to git here 'round feedin' time. We always count on two or three extry, so I guess they'll be a-plenty." The man's laugh was infectious, and Patty found herself smiling. She liked him from the first. There was a ponderous heartiness about him, and she liked the way his little brown eyes sparkled from out their network of sun-browned wrinkles. "You trot along in, now, an' tell Miz T. she can begin dishin' up whenever she likes. We'll be 'long d'rectly. They'll be plenty time to talk horse after we've et. My work teams earns a good hour of noonin', an' I don't begrudge 'em an hour an' a half, hot days."

Patty found Mrs. Thompson slight and quiet as her husband was big and hearty. But her smile was as engaging as his, and an indefinable something about her made the girl feel at home the moment she crossed the threshold. "I came to see Mr. Thompson about a horse,

and he insisted that I stay to dinner," she apologized.

"Why, of course you'll stay to dinner. But you must be hot an' tired. The wash dish is there beside the door. You better use it before Thompson an' the hands comes, they always slosh everything all up—they don't wash, they waller."

"Mr. Thompson said to tell you you could begin to dish up whenever you're ready."

The woman smiled. "Yes, an' have everythin' set an' git cold, while they feed the horses an' then like's not, stand 'round a spell an' size up the hay stack, er mebbe mend a piece of harness or somethin'. I guess you ain't married, er you wouldn't expect a man to meals 'til you see him comin'. Seems like no matter how hungry they be, if they's some little odd job they can find to do just when you get the grub set on, they pick that time to do it. 'Specially if it's somethin' that don't 'mount to anythin', an' like's not's b'en layin' 'round in plain sight a week."

Patty laughingly admitted she was not married. "But, I'd teach 'em a lesson," she said. "I'd put the things on and let them get cold."

The older woman smiled, and at the sound of voices, peered out the door: "Here they come now," she said, and proceeded to carry heaping vegetable dishes and a steaming platter of savory boiled meat from the stove to the table. There was a prodigious splashing outside the door and a moment later Thompson appeared, followed by his two ranch hands, hair wet and shining, plastered tightly to their scalps, and faces aglow from vigorous scrubbing. "You mind Mr. Sinclair, that used to prospect in the hills," introduced Mrs. Thompson; "this is his daughter."

Her husband bowed awkwardly: "Glad to know you. We know'd yer paw—used to stop now an' again on his way to town. He was a smart man. Liked to talk to him. He'd be'n all over." The man turned his attention to his plate and the meal proceeded in solemn silence to its

conclusion. The two ranch hands arose and disappeared through the door, and tilting back in his chair Thompson produced a match from his pocket, and proceeded to whittle it into a toothpick. "I heard in town how you was out in the hills," he began. "They said yer paw went back East—" he paused as if uncertain how to proceed.

Patty nodded: "Yes, he went back home, and this spring he died. He told me he had made a strike and I came out here to locate it."

The kindly brown eyes regarded her intently: "Ever do any prospectin'?"

"No. This is my first experience."

"I never, either. But, if I was you I'd kind of have an eye on my neighbors."

"You mean—the Wattses?" asked the girl in surprise.

The brown eyes were twinkling again: "No, Watts, he's all right! Only trouble with Watts is he sets an' herds the sun all day. But, they's others besides Watts in the hills."

"Yes," answered the girl, quickly, "I know. And that is the reason I came to see you about a horse."

"What's the matter with the one you got?"

"Nothing at all. He seems to be a good horse. He's fast too, when I want to crowd him. But, I need another just as good and as fast as he is. Have you one you will sell?"

"I'll sell anything I got, if the price is right," smiled the man.

Patty regarded him thoughtfully: "I haven't very much money," she said. "How much is he worth?"

Thompson considered: "A horse ain't like a cow-brute. There ain't no regular market price. Horses is worth just as much as you can get

folks to pay fer 'em. But it looks like one horse ort to be enough to prospect 'round the hills on."

"It isn't that," explained the girl. "If I buy him I shall try to arrange with you to leave him right here where I can get him at a moment's notice. I shall probably never need him but once, but when I do, I shall need him badly." She paused, but without comment the man waited for her to proceed: "I believe I am being followed, and if I am, when I locate the claim, I am going to have to race for the register's office."

Thompson leaned forward upon the table and chewed his toothpick rapidly: "By Gosh, an' you want to have a fresh horse here for a change!" he exclaimed, his eyes beaming approval.

"Exactly. Have you got the horse?"

The man nodded: "You bet I've got the horse! I've got a horse out there in the corral that'll run rings around anythin' in this country unless it's that there buckskin of Vil Holland's—an' I guess you ain't goin' to have no call to race him."

Patty was on the point of exclaiming that the buckskin was the very horse she would have to race, but instead she smiled: "But, if your horse started fresh from here, and even Vil Holland's horse had run clear from the mountains, this one could beat him to town, couldn't he?"

"Could do it on three legs," laughed the man.

"How much do you ask for him?" The girl waited breathless, thinking of her diminishing bank account.

Thompson's brow wrinkled: "I hold Lightnin' pretty high," he said, after a pause. "You see, some of us ranchers is holdin' a fast horse handy, a-waitin' fer word from the hills—an' when it comes, they's goin' to be the biggest horse-thief round-up the hill country ever seen. An' unless I miss my guess they'll be some that's carried their nose pretty high that's goin' to snap down on the end of a tight one."

"Now, Thompson, what's the use of talkin' like that? Them things is bad enough to have to do, let alone set around an' talk about 'em. Anyone'd think you took pleasure in hangin' folks."

"I would—some folks."

The little woman turned to Patty: "He's just a-talkin'. Chances is, if it come to hangin', Thompson would be the one to try an' talk 'em out of it. Why, he won't even brand his own colts an' calves—makes the hands do it."

"That's different," defended the man. "They're little an' young an' they ain't never done nothin' ornery."

"But you haven't told me how much you want for your horse," persisted the girl.

"Now just you listen to me a minute. I don't want to sell that horse, an' there ain't no mortal use of you buyin' him. He's always here—right in the corral when he ain't in the stable, an' either place, all you got to do is throw yer kak on him an' fog it."

The girl stared at him in surprise: "You mean——"

"I mean that you're plumb welcome to use Lightnin' whenever you need him. An' if they's anything else I can do to help you beat out any ornery cuss that'd try an' hornswaggle you out of yer claim, you can count on me doin' it! An' whether you know it 'er not, I ain't the only one you can count on in a pinch neither." The man waved her thanks aside with a sweep of a big hand, and rose from the table. "Miz T. an' me'd like fer you to stop in whenever you feel like——"

"Yes, indeed, we would," seconded the little woman. "Couldn't you come over an' bring yer sewin' some day?"

Patty laughed: "I'm afraid I haven't much sewing to bring, but I'll come and spend the day with you some time. I'd love to."

The girl rode homeward with a lighter heart than she had known in some time. "Now let him follow me all he wants to," she muttered. "But I wonder why Mr. Thompson said I wouldn't have to race the buckskin. And who did he mean I could count on in a pinch—Watts, I guess, or maybe he meant Mr. Bethune."

As she saddled her horse next morning, Bethune presented himself at the cabin. "Where away?" he smiled as he rode close, and swung lightly to the ground.

"Into the hills," she answered, "in search of my father's lost mine."

The man's expression became suddenly grave: "Do you know, Miss Sinclair, I hate to think of your riding these hills alone."

Patty glanced at him in surprise: "Why?"

"There are several reasons. For instance, one never knows what will happen—a misstep on a dangerous trail—a broken cinch—any one of a hundred things may happen in the wilds that mean death or serious injury, even to the initiated. And the danger is tenfold in the case of a tender-foot."

The girl laughed: "Thank you. But, if anything is going to happen, it's going to happen. At least, I am in no danger from being run down by a street car or an automobile. And I can't be blown up by a gas explosion, or fall into a coal hole."

"But there are other dangers," persisted the man. "A woman, alone in the hills—especially you."

"Why 'especially me'? Plenty of women have lived alone before in places more dangerous than this, and have gotten along very well, too. You men are conceited. You think there can be no possible safety unless members of your own sex are at the helm of every undertaking or enterprise. But you are wrong."

Bethune shook his head: "But I have reason to believe that there is at

least one person in these hills who believes you possess the secret of your father's strike—and who would stop at nothing to obtain that secret."

"I suppose you mean Vil Holland. I agree that he does seem to take more than a passing interest in my comings and goings. But he doesn't seem very fierce. Anyhow, I am not in the least afraid of him."

"What do you mean that he seems to take an interest in your comings and goings?" The question seemed a bit eager. "Surely he has not been following you!"

"Hasn't he? Then possibly you can tell me who has?"

"The scoundrel! And when you discover the lode he'll wait 'til you have set your stakes and posted your notice, and have gotten out of sight, and then he'll drive in his own stakes, stick up his own notice beside them and beat you to the register."

Patty laughed: "Race me, you mean. He won't beat me. Remember, I shall have at least a half-hour's start."

"A half-hour!" exclaimed Bethune. "And what is a half-hour in a fifty-mile race against that buckskin. Why, my dear girl, with all due respect for that horse of yours, Vil Holland's horse could give you two hours' start and beat you to the railroad."

"Maybe," smiled the girl. "But he's going to have to do it—that is, if I ever locate the lode."

"Ah, that is the point, exactly. It is that that brings me here. Not that alone," he hastened to add. "For I would ride far any day to spend a few moments with so charming a lady—and indeed, I should not have delayed my visit this long but for some urgent business to the northward. At all events, I'm here, and here I shall stay until, together, we have solved our mystery of the hills."

The girl glanced into the face alight with boyish enthusiasm, and felt

irresistibly impelled to take this man into her confidence—to enlist his help in the working out of her unintelligible map, and to admit him to full partnership in her undertaking. There would be enough for both if they succeeded in uncovering the lode. Her father had intended that he should share in his mine. She recalled his eulogy of her father, and his frank admission that there had been no agreement of partnership. If anyone ever had the appearance of perfect sincerity and candor this man had. She remembered her seriously depleted bank account. Bethune had money, and in case the search should prove long—Suddenly the words of Vil Holland flashed into her brain with startling abruptness: "Remember yer dad knew enough to play a lone hand." And again. "Did yer dad tell you about this partnership?" And the significant emphasis he placed upon the "Oh," when she had answered in the negative.

Bethune evidently had taken her silence for assent. He was speaking again: "The first thing to do is to find the starting point on the map and work it out step by step, then when we locate the lode, you and Clen and I will file the first three claims, and we'll file all the Wattses on the adjoining claims. That will give us absolute control of a big block of what is probably a most valuable property."

Again Bethune had referred directly to the map which she had never admitted she possessed. He had not said, "If you have a map." The man's assumption angered her: "You still persist in assuming that I have a map," she answered. "As a matter of fact, I'm depending entirely upon a photograph. I am riding blindly through the hills trying to find the spot that tallies with the picture."

Bethune frowned and shook his head doubtfully: "You might ride the hills for years, and pass the spot a dozen times and never recognize it. If you do not happen to strike the exact view-point you might easily fail to recognize it. Then, too, the landscape changes with the seasons of the year. However," his face brightened and the smile returned to his lips; "we have at least something to go on. We are not absolutely in the dark. Who knows? If the goddess of luck sits upon

our shoulders, I myself may know the place well—may recognize it instantly! For years I have ridden these hills and I flatter myself that no one knows their hidden nooks and byways better than I. Even if I should not know the exact spot, it may be that I can tell by the general features its approximate locality, and thus limit our search to a comparatively small area."

Patty knew that her refusal to show the photograph could not fail to place her in an unfavorable position. Either she would appear to distrust this man whom she had no reason to distrust, or her action would be attributed to a selfish intention to keep the secret to herself, even though she knew she could only file one claim. The man's argument had been entirely reasonable—in fact, it seemed the sensible thing to do. Nevertheless, she did refuse, and refuse flatly: "I think, Mr. Bethune, that I would rather play a lone hand. You see, I started in on this thing alone, and I want to see it through—for the present, at least. After a while, if I find that I cannot succeed alone, I shall be glad of your assistance. I suppose you think me a fool, but it's a matter of pride, I guess."

Was it fancy, or did the black eyes flash a gleam of hate—a glitter of rage beneath their long up-curving lashes? And did the swarthy face flush a shade darker beneath its tan? Patty could not be sure, for the next moment he was speaking in a voice under perfect control: "I can well understand your feeling in the matter, Miss Sinclair, and I have nothing of reproach. I do think you are making a mistake. With Vil Holland knowing what he does of your father's operations, time may be a vital factor in the success of your undertaking. Let me caution you again against carrying the photograph upon your person."

"Oh, I keep that safely hidden where no one would ever think of searching for it," smiled the girl, and Bethune noted that her eyes involuntarily swept the cabin with a glance.

The man mounted: "I will no longer keep you from your work," he said. "I have arranged to spend the summer in the hills where I shall carry

on some prospecting upon my own account. If I can be of any assistance to you—if you should need any advice, or help of any kind, a word will procure it. I shall stop in occasionally to see how you fare. Good-bye." He waved his hand and rode off down the creek where, in a cottonwood thicket he dismounted and watched the girl ride away in the opposite direction, noted that Lord Clendenning swung stealthily, into the trail behind her, and swinging into his saddle rode swiftly toward the cabin.

In his high notch in the hills, Vil Holland chuckled audibly, and catching up his horse, headed for his camp.

CHAPTER X

THE BISHOP OF ALL OUTDOORS

The days slipped into weeks, as Patty Sinclair, carefully and methodically traced valleys to their sources, and explored innumerable coulees and ravines that twisted and turned their tortuous lengths into the very heart of the hills. Rock ledges without number she scanned, many with deep cracks and fissures, and many without them. But not once did she find a ledge that could by any stretch of the imagination be regarded as the ledge of the photograph. Disheartened, but not discouraged, the girl would return each evening to her solitary cabin, eat her solitary meal, and throw herself upon her bunk to brood over the apparent hopelessness of her enterprise, or to read from the thumbed and tattered magazines of the dispossessed sheep herder. She rode, now, with a sort of dogged persistence. There was none of the wild thrill that, during the first days of her search, she experienced each time she topped a new divide, or entered a new valley.

Three times since she had informed him she would play a lone hand in the search for her father's strike, Bethune had called at the cabin. And not once had he alluded to the progress of her work. She was thankful to him for that—she had not forgotten the hurt in her father's eyes as the taunting questions of the scoffers struck home. Always she had known of the hurt, but now, with the disheartening days of her own failure heaping themselves upon her, she was beginning to understand the reason for the hurt. And, guessing this, Bethune refrained from questioning, but talked gaily of books, and sunsets, and of life, and love, and the joy of living. A supreme optimist, she thought him, despite the half-veiled cynicism that threaded his somewhat fatalistic view of life, a cynicism that but added the

necessary *sauce piquante* to so abandoned an optimism.

Above all, the man was a gentleman. His speech held nothing of the abrupt bluntness of Vil Holland's. He would appear shortly after her early supper, and was always well upon his way before the late darkness began to obscure the contours of her little valley. An hour's chat upon the doorstep of the cabin and he was gone—riding down the valley, singing as he rode some old *chanson* of his French forebears, with always a pause at the cottonwood grove for a farewell wave of his hat. And Patty would turn from the doorway, and light her lamp, and proceed to enjoy the small present which he never failed to leave in her hand—a box of bon-bons of a kind she had vainly sought for in the little town—again, a novel, a woman's novel written by a man who thought he knew—and another time, just a handful of wild flowers gathered in the hills. She ate the candy making it last over several days. She read the book from cover to cover as she lay upon her air mattress, tucked snugly between her blankets. And she arranged the wild flowers loosely in a shallow bowl and watered them, and talked to them, and admired their beauty, and when they were wilted she threw them out, but she did not gather more flowers to fill the bowl, instead she wiped it dry and returned it to its shelf in the cupboard—and wondered when Bethune would come again. She admitted to herself that he interested—at least, amused her—helped her to throw off for the moment the spirit of dull depression that had fastened itself upon her like a tangible thing, bearing down upon her, threatening to crush her with its weight.

Always, during these brief visits, her lurking distrust of him vanished in the frank boyishness of his personality. The incidents that had engendered the distrust—the substitution of the name Schultz for Schmidt in the matter of the horse pasture, his abrupt warning against Vil Holland, and his attempt to be admitted into her confidence as a matter of right, were for the moment forgotten in the spell of his presence—but always during her lonely rides in the hills, the half-formed doubt returned. Pondering the doubt, she realized that the

principal reason for its continued existence was not so much in the incidents that had awakened it, as in the simple question asked by Vil Holland: "You say your dad told you all about this partnership business?" And in the "Oh," with which he had greeted the reply that she had it from the lips of Bethune. With the realization, her dislike for Vil Holland increased. She characterized him as a "jug-guzzler," a "swashbuckler," and a "ruffian"—and smiled as she recalled the picturesque figure with the clean-cut, bronzed face. "Oh, I don't know—I hate these hills! Nobody seems sincere excepting the Wattses, and they're—impossible!"

She had borrowed Watts's team and made a second trip to town for supplies, and the check that she drew in payment cut her bank account in half. As before she had offered to take Microby Dandeline, but the girl declined to go, giving as an excuse that "pitcher shows wasn't as good as circusts, an' they wasn't no fights, an' she didn't like towns, nohow."

Upon her return from town Patty stopped at the Thompsons' for dinner where she was accorded a royal welcome by the genial rancher and his wife, and where also, she met the Reverend Len Christie, the most picturesque, and the most un-clerical minister of the gospel she had ever seen. To all appearances the man might have been a cowboy. He affected chaps of yellow hair, a dark blue flannel shirt, against which flamed a scarf of brilliant crimson caught together by means of a vivid green scarab. He wore a roll brimmed Stetson, and carried a six-gun at his belt. A pair of high-heeled boots added a couple of inches to the six feet two that nature had provided him with, and he shook hands as though he enjoyed shaking hands. "I've heard of you, Miss Sinclair, back in town and have looked forward to meeting you on my first trip into the hills. How are my friends, the Wattses, these days? And that reprobate, Vil Holland?" He did not mention that it was Vil Holland who had spoken of her presence in the hills, nor that the cowboy had also specified that she utterly despised the ground he rode on.

To her surprise Patty noticed that there was affection rather than disapprobation in the word reprobate, and she answered a trifle stiffly: "The Wattses are all well, I think: but, as for Mr. Holland, I really cannot answer."

The parson appeared not to notice the constraint but turned to Thompson: "By the way, Tom, why isn't Vil riding the round-up this year? Has he made his strike?"

Thompson grinned: "Naw, Vil ain't made no strike. Facts is, they's be'n some considerable horse liftin' goin' on lately, an' the stockmen's payin' Vil wages fer to keep his eye peeled. He's out in the hills all the time anyhow with his prospectin', an' they figger the thieves won't pay no 'tention to him, like if a stranger was to begin kihootin' 'round out there."

"Have they got a line on 'em at all?"

"Well," considered Thompson. "Not as I know of—exactly. Monk Bethune an' that there Lord Clendennin' is hangin' 'round the hills—that's about all I know."

The parson nodded: "I saw Bethune in town the other day. Do you know, Tom, I believe there's a bad Injun."

"Indian!" cried the girl. "Mr. Bethune is not an Indian!"

Thompson laughed: "Yup, that is, he's a breed. They say his gran'mother was a Cree squaw—daughter of a chief, or somethin'. Anyways, this here Monk, he's a pretty slick article, I guess."

"They're apt to be worse than either the whites or the Indians," Christie explained. "And this Monk Bethune is an educated man, which should make him doubly dangerous. Well, I must be going. I've got to ride clear over onto Big Porcupine. I heard that old man Samuelson's very sick. There's a good man—old Samuelson. Hope he'll pull through."

"You bet he's a good man!" assented Thompson, warmly. "He seen Bill Winters through, when they tried to prove the murder of Jack Bronson onto him, an' it cost him a thousan' dollars. The district attorney had it in fer Bill, count of him courtin' his gal."

"Yes, and I could tell of a dozen things the old man has done for people that nobody but I ever knew about—in some instances even the people themselves didn't know." He turned to Patty: "Good-by, Miss Sinclair. I'm mighty glad to have met you. I knew your father very well. If you see the Wattses, tell them I shall try and swing around that way on my return." The parson mounted a raw-boned, Roman-nosed pinto, whose vivid calico markings, together with the rider's brilliant scarf gave a most unministerial, not to say bizarre effect to the outfit. "So long, Tom," he called.

"So long, Len! If they's anything we can do, let us know. An' be sure an' stop in comin' back." Thompson watched the man until he vanished in a cloud of dust far out on the trail.

"Best doggone preacher ever was born," he vouchsafed. "He can ride, an' shoot, an' rope, an' everything a man ort to. An' if anyone's sick! Well, he's worth all the doctors an' nurses in the State of Montany. He'll make you git well just 'cause he wants you to. An' they ain't nothin' too much trouble—an' they ain't no work too hard for him to tackle. There ain't no piousness stickin' out on him fer folks to hang their hat on, neither. He'll mix with the boys, an' listen to the natural cussin' an' swearin' that goes on wherever cattle's handled, an' enjoy it—but just you let some shorthorn start what you might call vicious or premeditated cussin'—somethin' special wicked or vile, an' he'll find out there's a parson in the crowd right quick, an' if he don't shut up, chances is, he'll be spittin' out a couple of teeth. There's one parson can fight, an' the boys know it, an' what's more they know he *will* fight—an' they ain't one of 'em that wouldn't back up his play, neither. An' preach! Why he can tear loose an' make you feel sorry for every mean trick you ever done—not for fear of any punishment after yer dead—but just because it wasn't playin' the game. That's him, every time. An'

he ain't always hollerin' about hell—hearin' him preach you wouldn't hardly know they was a hell. 'The Bishop of All Outdoors,' they call him—an' they say he can go back East an' preach to city folks, an' make 'em set up an' take notice, same as out here. He's be'n offered three times what he gets here to go where he'd have it ten times easier—but he laughs at 'em. He sure is one preacher that ain't afraid of work!"

As Watts's team plodded the hot miles of the interminable trail Patty's brain revolved wearily about its problem. "I've made almost a complete circle of the cabin, and I haven't found the rock ledge with the crack in it yet—and as for daddy's old map—I've spent *hours* trying to figure out what that jumble of letters and numbers mean, I'll just have to start all over again and keep reaching farther and farther into the hills on my rides. Mr. Bethune said I might not recognize the place when I come to it!" she laughed bitterly. "If he knew how that photograph has burned itself into my brain! I can close my eyes and see that rock wall with its peculiar crack, and the rock-strewn valley, and the lone tree—*recognize* it! I would know it in the dark!"

Her eyes rested upon the various packages of her load of supplies. "One more trip to town, and my prospecting is done, at least, until I can earn some more money. The prices out here are outrageous. It's the freight, the man told me. Five cents' freight on a penny's worth of food! But what in the world can I do to make money? What can anybody do to make money in this Godforsaken country? I can't punch cattle, nor herd sheep. I don't see why I had to be a *girl*!" Resentment against her accident of birth cooled, and her mind again took up its burden of thought. "There is one way," she muttered. "And that is to admit failure and take Mr. Bethune into partnership. He will advance the money and help with the work—and, surely there will be enough for two. And, I'm not so sure but that—" She broke off shortly and felt the hot blood rise in a furious blush, as she glanced guiltily about her—but in all the vast stretch of plain was no human being, and she laughed aloud at the antics of the prairie dogs that scolded and

barked saucily and then dove precipitously into their holes as a lean coyote trotted diagonally through their "town."

What was it they had said at Thompson's about Mr. Bethune? Despite herself she had approved the outlandishly dressed preacher with the smiling blue eyes. He was so big, and so wholesome! "The Bishop of All Outdoors," Thompson had called him. She liked that—and somehow the name seemed to fit. Looking into those eyes no one could doubt his sincerity—his every word, his every motion spoke unbounded enthusiasm for his work. What was it he had said? "Do you know, Tom, I believe there's a bad Injun." And Thompson had referred to Bethune as "a pretty slick article." Surely, Thompson, whole-souled, generous Thompson, would not malign a man. Here were two men whom the girl knew instinctively she could trust, who stood four-square with the world, and whose opinions must carry weight. And both had spoken with suspicion of Bethune and both had spoken of Vil Holland as one of themselves. "I don't understand it," she muttered. "Everybody seems to be against Mr. Bethune, and everybody seems to like Vil Holland, in spite of his jug, and his gun, and his boorishness. Maybe it's because Mr. Bethune's a—a breed," she speculated. "Why, they even hinted that he's a—a horse-thief. It isn't fair to despise him for his Indian blood. Why should he be made to suffer because his grandmother was an Indian—the daughter of a Cree chief? It sounds interesting and romantic. The people of some of our very best families point with pride to the fact that they are descendants of Pocahontas! Poor fellow, everybody seems down on him—everybody that is, but Ma Watts and Microby. And, as a matter of fact, he appears to better advantage than any of them, not excepting the very militant and unorthodox 'Bishop of All Outdoors.'"

The result of the girl's cogitations left her exactly where she started. She was no nearer the solution of her problem of the hills. And her lurking doubt of Bethune still remained despite the excuses she invented to account for his unpopularity, nor had her opinion of Vil Holland been altered in the least.

Upon arriving at her cabin she was not at all surprised to find that it had been thoroughly searched, albeit with less care than the searcher had been in the habit of bestowing upon the readjustment of the various objects of the room exactly as she had left them. Canned goods and dishes were disarranged upon their shelves, and the loose section of floor board beneath her bunk that had evidently served as the secret *cache* of the sheep herder, had been fitted clumsily into its place. The evident boldness, or carelessness of this latest outrage angered her as no previous search had done. Heretofore each object had been returned to its place with painstaking accuracy so that it had been only through the use of fine-spun cobwebs and carefully arranged bits of dust that she had been able to verify her suspicion that the room had really been searched—and there had been times when even the dust and the cobwebs had been replaced. Whoever had been searching the cabin had proven himself a master of detail, and had at least, paid her the compliment of possessing imagination, and a shrewdness equaling his own. Was it possible that the searcher, emboldened by her repeated failure to spy upon him at his work, had ceased to care whether or not she knew of his visits? The girl recalled the three weary days she had spent watching from the hillside. And how she had decided to buy a lock for her door, until the futility of it had been brought home to her by the discovery that her trunks were being searched along with her other belongings, and their locks left in perfect condition. So far, he might well scorn her puny attempts at discovery. Or, had a new factor entered the game? Had someone of cruder mold undertaken to discover her secret? The thought gave her a decided uneasiness. Tired out by her trip, she did not light the fire, and after disposing of the cold lunch Mrs. Thompson had put up for her, affixed the bar, and went to bed, with her six-gun within reach of her hand.

For a long time she lay in the darkness, thinking. "The way it was before, I haven't been in any physical danger. Mr. Vil Holland knows that if what he is searching for is not here I must carry it on my person. The obvious way to get it would be to take it away from me. Of course

the only way he could do that without my seeing him would be to kill me. He hesitates at murder. Either there are depths of moral turpitude into which he will not descend—or, he fears the consequences. He has imagination. He assumes that sometime I'll leave that packet at home—either through carelessness, or because I have learned its contents by heart and don't need it. In the meantime, in addition to his patient searching of the cabin, he is taking no chances, and while he waits for the inevitable to happen he is following me so if I do succeed in locating the claim, he can beat me to the register. It's a pretty game—no violence—only patience and brains. But this other," she shuddered, "there is something positively brutal in the crude awkwardness of his work. If he thinks I carry what he wants with me, would he hesitate at murder? I guess I'll have to carry that gun again—and I better practice with it, too. If I can only get rid of this last one, I believe I've got a scheme for catching the other!" She sat bolt upright in bed. "Oh, if I only could! If I could only beat him at his own game—and I believe I can!" For several minutes she sat thinking rapidly, and as she lay back upon her pillow, she smiled.

CHAPTER XI

LORD CLENDENNING GETS A DUCKING

Patty awoke at dawn and dressed hurriedly. Shivering in the chill air, she lighted a match and pushed back a lid of the little cast iron cook stove. Instead of the "cold fire" of neatly arranged wood and kindlings that she had built before leaving for town a pile of gray ashes and blackened ends of charcoal greeted her.

"Whoever it was knew he had plenty of time at his disposal so he helped himself to a meal," she muttered angrily. "He might, at least, have cut me some kindlings. I'm surprised that he had the good grace to wash up his dirty dishes." A few moments later, as the fire crackled merrily in the stove, she picked up the water pail and stepping through the door, threw back her head and breathed deeply of the crisp mountain air. "Oh, it's wonderful just to be alive!" she whispered. "Even if everybody is against you. It's just like a great big game and, oh, I want to win! I've got to win!" she added, grimly, as her thoughts flew to her depleted bank account.

At the spring she paused in the act of filling her pail and stared at a mark in the mud at the edge of the tiny rill formed by the overflow from the catch basin. She leaned over and examined the mark more closely. It was the track of a bare foot. Then, for the first time in many days, the girl threw back her head and laughed. "Microby Dandeline!" she cried. "And I was picturing some skulking murderer lying in wait to pounce on me at the first opportunity. And here it was only poor little Microby who happened along, and with her natural curiosity pawed over everything in the cabin, and then decided it would be a grand stunt to cook herself a meal and eat it at my table—and I haven't the

least doubt that she arrayed herself in one of my dresses when she did it." Patty hummed a light tune as, water pail in hand, she made her way up the path to the cabin. "Whee! but it's a relief to feel that I won't have to ride these hills peering behind every tree and rock for a lurking assassin. And I won't have to carry that horrid heavy old gun, either."

After breakfast she saddled her horse and headed up the ravine that she had followed upon the morning of her first ride. At the top of the divide she pulled up her horse and gazed downward at the little cabin. As before she was impressed by the startling distinctness with which each object was visible. "Anyway, I'm glad my window is not on this side," she muttered, as her eyes strayed to the ground at her horse's feet. For yards around, the buffalo grass had been trampled and pawed until scarcely a spear remained. "Here's where he watches me start out each morning, then he follows me until he's sure I'm well away from the valley, then he slips back and searches the cabin, and then takes up my trail again. The miserable sneak!" she cried, angrily. "If Mr. Thompson, and Watts, and that cowboy preacher knew what I knew about him, they wouldn't seem so impressed with him. Anyway," she added, defiantly, "Mr. Bethune and Lord Clendenning know him for what he is-and so do I."

It was in a very wrathful mood that she turned her horse's head and struck into the timber, being careful to avoid Vil Holland's camp by a wide margin. Crossing the timbered plateau, she topped a low divide and found herself at the head of a deep, rocky valley, whose course she could trace for miles as it wound in and out among the far hills. Giving her horse his head, she began the descent of the valley, scanning its sides carefully as the animal picked his way slowly among the rock fragments and patches of scrub timber that littered its floor. She had proceeded for perhaps an hour when, in passing the mouth of a ravine that slanted sharply into the hills, she was startled by a rattling of loose stones, and a horse and rider emerged almost

directly into her path. The next moment Vil Holland raised the Stetson from his head and addressed her gravely: "Good mornin' Miss Sinclair, I sure didn't mean to come out on you sudden, that way, but Buck slipped on the rocks an' we come mighty near pilin' up."

"It is about the first slip you've made, isn't it?" Patty answered, acidly. "Possibly if you'd left your jug at home you wouldn't have made that."

"Oh no. We've slipped before. Fact is, we've been into about every kind of a jack-pot the hills can deal. We rolled half way down a mountain once, an' barrin' a little skinnin' up, we come out of it all to the good. But it ain't the jug. Buck don't drink. It's surprisin' what a good habited horse he is. He's a heap better'n most folks." The man spoke gravely, with no hint of sarcasm in his tone, and Patty sniffed. He appeared not to notice. "How you comin' on with the prospectin'? Found yer dad's claim yet?"

"You ought to know whether I have or not," she retorted, hotly.

"That's so. If you had, you wouldn't still be huntin' it, would you?"

"No. And if I had, I'd have had a nice little race on my hands to file it, wouldn't I?"

"Well, I expect maybe you would. But that horse of yours is pretty handy on his feet. Used to belong to Bob Smith—that's his brand—that KN on the left shoulder."

"Yes," answered the girl, meaningly. "I understand there is only one horse in the hills that could outrun him."

"Buck can. I won ten dollars off Bob one time. We run a mile, an' Buck won, easy. But the best thing about Buck, he's a distance horse. He's got the wind—an' he don't know what it means to quit. He could run all day if he had to, couldn't you, Buck?" The man stroked the buckskin's neck affectionately as he talked.

Patty's eyes glinted angrily: "The stakes would have to be pretty high for you to run him, say, fifty miles, wouldn't they?"

"Yes. Pretty high," he repeated, and changed the subject abruptly. "Must find it kind of lonesome out here in the hills, after livin' in the East where there's lots of folks around all the time."

"Oh, not at all," answered the girl, quickly. "Some of my neighbors are good enough to call on me once in a while—*when I am at home*. And there is at least *one* that calls very regularly when I am not at home. He is a genius for detail—that one. Sharp eyes, and a light touch. He's something of an expert in the matter of duplicate keys, too. In any large city he should make a grand success—as a burglar. It is really too bad that he's wasting his talents, here in the hills."

"Maybe he figures that the stakes are higher, and the risk less—here in the hills."

"Of course," sneered Patty. "And I must say his reasoning does him credit. If he should succeed in burglarizing even the biggest bank in the richest city, he could not expect to carry off a gold mine. And, here in the hills, instead of burglar-proof devices and armed policemen, he has only an unlocked cabin, and a woman to contend with. Yes, the risk is far less here in the hills. His location speaks well for his reasoning—if not for his courage."

"I suppose he figures that plenty of brutes have got courage, but only humans can reason," answered the man, blandly. "But, ridin' out in the hills this way—that must be a lonesome job."

"Not at all," she answered, in a voice that masked the anger against the man who sat calmly baiting her. "In fact, I never ride alone. I have an unseen escort, who accompanies me wherever I go. 'My guardian devil of the hills' I call him, and even when I'm at home I know that he is watching from his notch in the rim of the hills."

"Guardian devil," the man repeated. "That's pretty good." He did not smile, in fact, Patty recalled, as she sat looking squarely into his eyes, that she had never seen him smile—had never seen him express any emotion. Without a trace of anger in tone or expression he had ordered the grasping hotel-keeper about—and had been obeyed to the letter. And without the slightest evidence of annoyance or displeasure he had listened, upon several occasions to her own sarcastic outbursts against him. Here was a man as devoid of emotion as a fish, or one whose complete self-mastery was astounding. "Pretty good," he repeated. "And does he know that you call him your 'guardian devil?'"

"Yes, I think he does—now," she answered, dryly. "By the way, Mr. Holland, you do a good deal of riding about the hills, yourself."

"Yeh, prospectors are apt to. Then, there's other little matters of interest here, too."

"Such as horse-thieving?" suggested the girl. "I heard you were paid to run down a gang of horse-thieves. I was wondering when you found time to earn your money."

"Yeh, there's some hair artists loose in the hills, an' some of the outfits kind of wanted me to keep an eye out for 'em."

An old saw flashed into the girl's mind, and the comers of her mouth drew into a sarcastic smile.

"'Settin' a thief to catch a thief,' is what you're thinkin'. We ain't so well acquainted yet as what we will be—when you get your eye teeth cut."

"I suppose our real acquaintance will begin when the game we are playing comes to a show-down?" she sneered. "But let me tell you this, if I win, our acquaintance will end, right where you think it will begin!"

The cowboy nodded: "That's fair an' square. An' if I win—*you'll have to be satisfied with what you get*. Good-day, I've fooled away time enough already." And, with a word to his horse, Vil Holland disappeared up the valley in the direction from which the girl had come.

When her anger had cooled sufficiently, Patty smiled, a rather grim, tight-lipped little smile. "If he wins I'll have to be satisfied with what I get," she muttered. "At least, he's candid about it. I think, now, Mr. Vil Holland and I understand each other perfectly."

Late in the afternoon she emerged from the mouth of her valley and, crossing a familiar tongue of bench, found herself upon the trail near the point of its intersection with Monte's Creek. Turning up the creek, she stopped for a few minutes' chat with Ma Watts.

"Law sakes! Climb right down an' set a while. I wus sayin' to Watts las' night how we-all hain't see nawthin' of yo' fer hit's goin' on a couple of weeks 'cept yo' hirein' the team, an' not stoppin' in to speak of, comin' er goin'. How be yo'? An' I 'spect yo' hain't found yer pa's claim yet. I saved yo' up a dozen of aigs. Hed to mighty near fight off that there Lord Clendennin' he wanted 'em so bad. But I done tol' him yo' wus promised 'em, an' yo'd git 'em not nary nother. So there they be, honey, all packed in a pail with hay so's they won't break. No sir, I tol' him how he couldn't hev' 'em if he wus two lords. An' all the time we wus a-augerin', Mr. Bethune an' Microby Dandeline sot out yonder a-talkin' an' laughin', friendly as yo' please." Ma Watts paused for breath and her eye fell upon her spouse, who stood meekly beside the kitchen door. "Watts, where's yer manners? Cain't yo' say 'howdy' to Mr. Sinclair's darter—an' her a-payin' yo' good money fer rent an' fer team hire. Yo' ort to be 'shamed, standin' gawpin' like a mud turkle. Folks 'ud think yo' hain't got good sense."

"I aimed to say 'howdy' first chanct I got." He shoved a chair toward the girl. "Set down an' take hit easy a spell."

"Where is Microby?" she asked, refusing the proffered seat with a smile, and leaning lightly against her saddle.

"Land sakes, I don't know! She's gittin' that no 'count, she goes pokin' off somewhere's in the hills on Gee Dot. Says she's a-prospectin'—like they all says when they're too lazy to do reg'lar work."

"My father was a prospector," answered the girl, quickly, "and there wasn't a lazy bone in his body. And I'm a prospector, and I'm sure I'm not lazy."

"Law, there I went an' done hit!" exclaimed Ma Watts, contritely. "I didn't mean no real honest-to-Gawd, reg'lar prospectors like yo' pa wus, an' yo', an' Mr. Bethune. But there's that Vil Holland, he's a cowpuncher, when he works, and a prospector when he don't. An' there's Lord Clendennin', he's a prospector all the time, 'cause he don't never work—an' that's the way hit goes. An' Microby Dandeline's a-gittin' as triflin' as the rest. Mr. Bethune, he tellin' her how she'd git rich ef she could find a gol' mind, an' how she could buy her some fine clos' like yourn, an' go to the city to live like the folks in the pitchers. Mr. Bethune, he's done found minds. He's rich. An' he's got manners, too. Watts, he's allus makin' light of manners—says they don't 'mount to nawthin'. But thet's 'cause he hain't quality. Quality's got 'em, an' they're nice to hev."

"Gre't sight o' quality—him," growled Watts. "He's part Injun."

"Hit don't make no diff'ence what he's part!" defended the woman. "He's rich, an' he's purty lookin', an' he's got manners like I done tol' yo'. Ef I wus you I'd marry up with him, an——"

"Why, Mrs. Watts! What do you mean?" exclaimed the girl flushing with annoyance.

"Jest what I be'n aimin' to tell yo' fer hit's goin' on quite a spell. Yo'n

him 'ud step hit off right pert. Yo' pretty, an' yo' rich, er yo' will be when yo' find yo' pa's mind, an' yo' manners is most as good as his'n."

The humor of the mountain woman's serious effort at match-making struck Patty, and she interrupted with a laugh: "There are several objections to that arrangement," she hastened to say. "In the first place Mr. Bethune has never asked me to marry him. He may have serious objections, and as for me, I'm not ready to even think of marrying."

"Don't take long to git ready, onct yo' git in the notion. An' I bet Mr. Bethune hain't abuzzin' 'round up an' down this yere crick fer nawthin'. Law sakes, child, when I tuk a notion to take Watts, come a supper time I wusn't no more a mind to git married than yo' be, an', by cracky! come moonrise me an' Watts had forked one o' pa's mewels with nothin' on but a rope halter, an' wus headin' down the branch with pa an' my brother Lafe a-cuttin' through the lau'ls with their rifle-guns fer to head us off."

"Yo' didn't take me fer looks ner manners, neither," reminded Watts.

"Law, I'd a be'n single yet, ef I hed. No sir, I tuk yo' to save a sight o' killin' that's what I done. Yo' see, Miss, my pa wus sot on me not marryin' no Watts—not that I aimed to, 'til he says I dasn't. But Watts hed be'n a pesterin' 'round right smart, nights, an' pa lowed he'd shore kill him daid ef he didn't mind his own business—so'd my brothers, they wus five of 'em, an' nary one that wusn't mighty handy with his rifle-gun.

"So Watts, he quit a-comin' to the cabin, but me an' him made hit up thet he'd hide out on t'other side o' the branch an' holler like a owl, an' then I'd slip out the back do'—an' that's the way we done our co'tin'. My folks didn't hev no truck with the Wattses thet lived on t'other side the mountain, 'count of them killin' two Strunkses a way back, the Strunkses bein' my pa's ma's folks, over a hawg. Even then I didn't

hev no notion o' marryin' Watts, jest done hit to be a-doin' like, ontil pa an' the boys ketched on to whut we wus up to. After thet, hit got so't every time they heerd a squinch owl holler, they'd begin a-shootin' into the bresh with their rifle guns. Watts lowed they was comin' doggone clust to him a time er two, an' how he aimed to bring along his own gun some night, an' start a shootin' back.

"Law knows wher it would ended, whut one with another, the Biggses an' the Strunkses, an' the Rawlins, an' the Craborchards would hev be'n drug into hit, along of the Wattses an' the Scrogginses. So I tuk Watts, an' we went to live with his folks, an' we sent back the mewel with Job Swenky, who they wouldn't nobody kill 'cause he wus a daftie. An' pa brung back the mewel hisself, come alone, an' 'thouten his rifle-gun. He says seem' how Watts hed got me fair an' squr, an' we wus reg'lar married, he reckoned the ol' grudge wus dead, the Strunkses wasn't no count much, nohow, an' we wus welcome to keep the mewel to start on. So Watts's pa killed a shoat, an' brung out a big jug o' corn whisky, an' we-all et an' drunk all we could hold, an' from then on 'til whut time we come away from ther, they wusn't a man, outside a couple o' revenoos, killed on B'ar Track.

"So yo' see," the woman continued, with a smile. "Hit don't take no time to git ready, onct yo' git in the notion."

"I'm afraid I haven't the same provocation," Patty laughed, as she picked up her pail of eggs and swung into the saddle. "Good-by, and be sure and tell Microby Dandeline to come up and see me. Maybe she'd like to come up on Sunday. I never ride on Sunday."

"She'll come fast enough," promised Ma Watts, and watched the retreating girl until a bend of the creek carried her out of sight.

The long shadows of the mountains were slowly climbing the opposite wall of the valley, as the girl rode leisurely up Monte's Creek. And as she rode, she smiled: "Why is it that every married woman—and

especially the older ones, thinks it is her bounden duty to pounce upon and marry off every single one? It is not one bit different out here in the heart of the hills, than it is in Middleton, or New York. And, it isn't because they're all so happy in their own marriages, either. Look at old Mrs. Stratford, who was bound and determined that I must marry that Archie Smith-Jones; she's been married four times, and divorced three. And Archie never will amount to a row of pins. He looks like a tailor's model, and acts like a Rolls-Royce. And, I don't see any supreme bliss about Mrs. Watts's married existence, although she's perfectly satisfied, I guess, poor thing. I love the subtle finesse with which she tried to arrange a match between me and Mr. Bethune. "Ef I wus yo' I'd marry up with him'—just like that! Shades of Mrs. Stratford who spent two whole months trying to get Archie and me into the same canoe! And when she did, the blamed thing tipped over and ruined the only decent summer things I had, all because that fool Archie thought he had to stand up to fend the canoe off the pier.... At least, Mr. Bethune has got some sense, and he is good looking, and he seems to have money, and there is a certain dash and verve about him that one would hardly expect to find here in the hills—and yet—there's something—it isn't his Indian blood, I don't care a cent about that—but sometimes, there's something about him that makes me wonder if he's genuine."

She passed through the cottonwood grove and emerged into the open only a few hundred yards below the sheep camp. A moment later she halted abruptly and stared toward the cabin. Two saddled horses stood before the door, reins hanging loosely, and upon the edge of a low cut-bank, just below the shallow waters of the ford, two men were struggling, locked in each other's embrace. Hastily the girl drew back into the cover of the grove and watched with intense interest the two forms that weaved precariously above the deep pool formed by a sudden bend in the creek. The horses she recognized as Vil Holland's buckskin, and the big, blaze-faced bay ridden by Lord Clendenning. In the gathering dusk she could not make out the faces

of the two men, but by their heaving, circling, swaying figures she knew that mighty muscles were being strained to their utmost, and that soon one or the other must give in. A dozen questions flashed through the girl's brain. What were they doing there? Why were they fighting at the very door of her cabin? And, above all, what would be the outcome? Would one of them kill the other? Would one of them be left maimed and bleeding for her to bind up and coax back to life?

The men were on the very verge of the cut-bank, now, and it seemed inevitable that both must go crashing into the creek. "Serve 'em right if they would," muttered Patty, "I'd like to give 'em a push." With the words on her lips, she saw a blur of motion, one of the forms leaped lightly back, and the other poised for a second, arms waving wildly in a vain effort to regain his balance, then fell suddenly backward and toppled headlong into the creek. Patty could distinctly hear the mighty splash with which he struck the water, as the other advanced to the edge and peered downward. She knew that this other was Vil Holland, and a moment later he turned away and catching up the reins of the buckskin, swung into the saddle, splashed through the ford, and disappeared into the scrub timber of the opposite side of the valley.

Patty urged her horse forward, at the imminent risk of injury to her pail of eggs. When she had almost reached the cabin, a grotesque, dripping form crawled heavily from the creek bed, gave one hurried glance in her direction, mounted his horse, and disappeared in a thunder of galloping hoofs.

CHAPTER XII

BETHUNE TRIES AGAIN

For several days following the incident of the two struggling horsemen, Patty rode, extending her quest farther and farther into the hills, and thus widening the circle of her exploration. She had overhauled her father's photographic outfit and found it contained complete supplies for the development and printing of his own pictures, and having brought several rolls of films from town, she proceeded to amuse herself by photographing the more striking bits of scenery she encountered upon her daily rides.

It was mid-summer, now, the sun shone hot and brassy from a cloudless sky, and the buffalo grass was beginning to exchange its fresh greenness for a shade of dirty tan. Only the delicious coolness of the short nights made bearable the long, hot, monotonous days during which the girl stuck doggedly to her purpose. Upon these rides she met no one. It was as if human beings had entirely forsaken the world and left it to the prairie dogs, the coyotes, and the lazily coiled rattle-snakes that lay basking upon the rocks in the hot glare of the sun. Even the occasional bunches of range cattle did not eye her with their accustomed interest, but lay in straggling groups close beside the cold waters of tiny streams.

And it was upon one of these hot days, long past the noon hour, that Patty dismounted in a narrow valley near the head of a cold mountain stream and, affixing the hobbles to her horse's legs, threw off the saddle and bridle, and spread the sweat-dampened blanket to dry in the sun. Freed of his accouterments, the horse shook himself, shuffled to the stream, and burying his muzzle to the eyes, sucked up great gulps of the cold water, and playfully thrashing his head, sent volleys of silver drops flying from side to side, as he churned the tiny pool into

a veritable mud wallow. Tiring of that, he rolled luxuriously, the crisping buffalo grass scratching the irking saddle-feel from his back and sides: and as the girl spread her luncheon upon a clean white napkin in the shade of a stunted cottonwood, fell to grazing contentedly.

As Patty chipped at the shell of a hard-boiled egg she glanced toward the horse, which had stopped grazing and stood facing down stream with ears nervously alert. A few moments later the soft rattle of bit-chains and the low shuffling of hoofs told her that a rider was approaching at a walk. "Probably my guardian devil, ostensibly paying strict attention to his own business of prospecting, or trying to strike the trail of the horse-thieves, but in reality hot on the trail of little me. I just wish I could find the mine. He'll have to stop and drive his stakes and fix his notice, and if his old buckskin is as good as he thinks he is, he'll just about overtake me at Thompson's. And then on a fresh horse—I just want one good look into his face when I pass him, that's all!"

The horseman came suddenly into view a few yards distant, and the girl looked up into the black eyes of Monk Bethune.

"Well, well, my dear Miss Sinclair!" The quarter-breed's tone was one of glad surprise, as he dismounted and advanced, hat in hand. "This is indeed an unexpected pleasure. La, la, la, the luck of it! Shall we say, the romance? Hot and saddle-weary from a long ride, to come suddenly upon the fairest of ladies, at luncheon alone in the most charming of little valleys. It is a situation to be dreamed of. And, am I not to be asked to share your repast?"

Patty laughed. The light whimsicality of the man's mood amused her: "Yes, you may consider yourself invited."

"And be assured that I accept, that is, upon condition that I be allowed to contribute my just share toward the feast." As he talked, Bethune fumbled at his pack-strings, and brought forth a small canvas bag,

from which he drew sandwiches of fried trout and bacon thrust between two slabs of doubtful looking baking-powder bread. "No dainty lunch prepared by woman's hand," he apologized, "but we of the hills, no matter how exotic or æsthetic our tastes may be, must of stern necessity descend to the common level of cowboys and offscourings in the matter of our eating. See, beside your own palatable food, this rough fare of mine presents an appearance unappetizing almost to repugnance."

"At least, it looks eminently satisfying," said Patty, eyeing the thick sandwiches.

"Satisfying, I grant you. Satisfying to the beast that is in man, in that it stays the pangs of hunger. So is the blood-dripping carcass of the fresh-killed calf satisfying to the wolf, and carrion satisfying to the buzzard. But, not at all satisfying to the unbestial ego—to the thing that makes man, man."

"You should have been a poet," smiled the girl. "But come, even poets must eat."

"God help the man who has no poetry in his soul—no imagination!" exclaimed Bethune, a trifle sententiously, thought the girl, as she resumed the chipping of her egg. "Imagination," the word hovered elusively in her brain—she had applied that word only recently to someone—oh, yes, the man whose habit it was to search her cabin. She smiled ever so slightly as she glanced sidewise at Bethune who was nibbling at one of his own sandwiches.

"Please try one of mine," she urged, "and there are some pickles, and an olive or two. I have loads of them at home, and really I believe I should like that other sandwich of yours. I haven't tasted fish for ages."

"Take it and welcome," smiled the man. "But do not deny yourself the pleasure of eating all the fish you want. Why, with a bent pin, a bit of

thread, and housefly, you can catch yourself a mess of trout any morning without venturing a hundred yards from your own door. Monte's Creek is alive with them, and taken fresh from the water and fried to a crisp in butter, they make a breakfast fit for a king, or in the present instance, I should have said, a queen."

"Tell me," asked Patty, abruptly. "Has Vil Holland imagination?"

"Imagination! My dear lady, Vil Holland is the veriest clod! Too lazy to do the honest work for which he is fitted, he roams the hills under pretense of prospecting."

"But, how does he make a living?"

Bethune shrugged. "Who can tell? I know for a certainty that he has never made a cent out of his alleged prospecting. It is true he rides the round-up for a couple of months in the spring and fall, but four months' work at forty dollars a month will hardly suffice for a man's yearly needs." He unconsciously lowered his voice, and continued: "Several ranchers have complained of losing horses and only a few days ago, up near the line, my good friend Corporal Downey, of the Mounted, told me that a number of American horses, with brands skillfully doctored, had been regularly making their appearance in Canada. It is an ugly suspicion, and I am making no open accusation, but—one may wonder."

The man finished his sandwich, dipped his fingers into the creek, wiped them upon his handkerchief, and proceeded to roll a cigarette. "Speaking of Vil Holland, why did you ask whether he had—imagination?"

"Oh, I don't know," replied the girl, lightly. "I just wondered."

Bethune regarded her steadily. "Has he been,—er, interfering in any way with your attempt to locate your father's strike?"

"Hardly interfering, I should say."

"You believe he still follows you?"

"Yes."

"You do not fear him?"

"No."

"That is because you do not know him! I tell you he is a dangerous man!" Bethune puffed shortly at his cigarette, hurled it from him, and faced the girl with glowing eyes: "Ah, Miss Sinclair, why don't you end this uncertainty? Why do you continue every day to jeopardize your interests—yes, your very life——?"

"Do you mean," interrupted the girl, "why don't I form a partnership with you?"

"A partnership! Ah, no, not a—and, yet—yes, a partnership. A partnership of life, and love, and happiness!" The man moved close, and the black eyes seemed, in the intensity of their gaze to devour her very soul. "There I have said it—the thing I have been wanting to say, yet have feared to say." Patty's lips moved, as if to speak, but the man forestalled the words with a gesture. "Before you answer, let me tell you how, since you first came into the hills, I have lived in the shadow of a mighty fear—I, who have lived my life among men, and have never known the meaning of fear, have been harassed by a multitude of fears. From the moment of our first meeting I have loved you. And, by all the saints, I swear you are the only woman I have ever loved! And, yet, I feared to tell you of that love. Twice the words have trembled on my tongue, and remained unspoken, because I feared that you might spurn me. Then in my heart rose another fear, and I cursed myself for a craven. I feared that chance might favor you in locating your father's strike, and then people would say, 'he loves her for her wealth.' I even thought that you, yourself, might doubt—might

ask yourself why he waited until I became rich before he told me of his love? But, believe me, my dear lady, for your wealth, I care not the snap of my fingers—so!" He snapped his fingers loudly and continued: "But say the word, and we will go far from the hill country, and leave your father's secret to the guardianship of his beloved mountains. For I am rich. I own mines, mines, mines! What is one mine more or less to me?"

Patty Sinclair felt herself drifting under the spell of his compelling ardor. "Why not?" she asked herself. "Why not marry this man and give up the hopeless struggle?" She thought of her depleted bank account. At best, she could not hope to hold out much longer. Bethune had taken her hand as he talked, and she had not withdrawn it from his palm. Swiftly he bent his head and pressed the brown hand passionately to his lips. She felt his grip tighten as the burning kisses covered her hand—her wrist. She drew the hand away.

"But, I do not want to leave the hill country," she said, quite calmly. "I shall never leave it until I have vindicated my father's course in the eyes of the people back home—the men who scoffed at him, and called him a ne'er-do-well, and a dreamer—who refused to back his judgment with their miserable dollars—who killed him with their cruelty, and their doubt!"

"I hoped you would say that!" exclaimed Bethune, his eyes alight with approval. "I knew you would say it! The daughter of your father could not do otherwise. I knew him well, and loved him as a son should love. And I, too, would see his judgment vindicated in the eyes of all the world. Listen, together we will remain, and together we will locate the lost strike, if it takes every cent I own." The man's voice gripped in its intensity, and Patty's eyes returned from the distance where the summer haze bathed far mountain tops in soft purple, and looked into the eyes of velvet black.

"But, why should you want to marry me?" she inquired, a puzzled little

frown wrinkling her forehead. "You hardly know me. You have not always lived in the hills. You have met many women."

"A man meets many women. He marries but one. You ask me why I want to marry you. I cannot tell you why. Many times since we first met I have asked myself why. I, who have openly scoffed at the yoke, and boasted proudly of my freedom. I do not know why, unless it is that to me you are the embodiment of all womanhood—of all that is desirable and worth while, or maybe the reason is in the fact that while I am with you I am supremely happy, and while I am absent from you I am restless and unhappy—a prey to my fears. I suppose it all sums up in the reason—world-old, but ever new—because I love you." The man was upon his feet, now, bending toward her with arms outstretched. For just an instant Patty hesitated, then shook her head.

"No!" she cried and struggling to her feet, faced him across the remains of the luncheon. "No, it would not be playing the game. I have my work to do, and I'll do it alone. It would be like quitting—like calling for help before I am beaten. This is my work—not yours, this vindication of my father!"

"But think," interrupted Bethune, "you will not let such Quixotic ideals stand between us and happiness! You have your right to happiness, and so have I, and in the end 'twill be the same, your father's name will be cleared of any suspicion of unworthiness."

"It is my work," Patty repeated, stubbornly, "and besides, I do not think I love you. I do not know——"

"Ah, but you will love me!" cried Bethune. "Such love as mine will not be denied!" The black eyes glowed, and he took a step toward her, but the girl drew away.

"Not now—not yet! Stop!" At the command Bethune recoiled slightly, and the arms that had been about to encircle the girl, fell slowly to his

sides. Patty had suddenly drawn herself erect and looked him eye for eye: and as she looked, from behind the soft glow of the velvet eyes, leaped a wolfish gleam—a glint of baffled rage, a flash of hate. In a moment it was gone and the man's lips smiled.

"Pardon," he said, "for the moment I forgot I have not the right." The voice had lost its intense timbre, and sounded dull, as if held under control only by a mighty effort of will. And in that moment a strange fear of him took possession of the girl, so that her own voice surprised her with its calm.

"I must be going, now."

Bethune bowed. "I will saddle your horse, while you clear up the table." He nodded toward the napkin spread upon the grass with the remains of the luncheon upon it. "My way takes me within a short distance of your cabin; may I ride with you?" he asked a few moments later, as he led her horse, bridled and saddled, to his own.

"Why certainly. I should be glad to have you. And we can talk."

"Of love?"

The girl laughed: "No, not of love. Surely there are other things——"

"Yes, for instance, I may again warn you that you are in danger."

"Danger?" she glanced up quickly.

"From Vil Holland." They had mounted, and turned their horses toward a long divide.

"Oh, yes, from Vil Holland," she repeated slowly, as she drew in beside him. "I had almost forgotten Vil Holland."

"I wish to God I could forget him," retorted the man, viciously. "But, as long as you remain unprotected in these hills I shall never for one

moment forget him. Your secret is not safe. Your person is not safe. He dogs your footsteps. He visits your cabin during your absence. He is bad—*bad!* And here I must tell you of an incident—or rather explain an incident, the unfortunate conclusion of which you saw with your own eyes. Poor Clen! He is beside himself with mortification at the sorry spectacle he presented when you rode up and saw him crawl dripping from the creek.

"I was away to the northward, on important business, and knowing that it had become my custom to ride over occasionally to see how you fared, he decided to do the same during my absence. Arriving at the cabin, he was surprised to see Vil Holland's horse before the door. He rode boldly up, dismounted, and caught the scoundrel in the act of searching among your effects. The sight, together with the memory of the cut pack sack, enraged him to such an extent that, despite the fact that the other was armed, he attacked him with his fists. In the fighting that ensued, Holland, being much the younger and more agile, succeeded in pitching Clen over the edge of the bank into the creek. Whereupon, he leaped into the saddle and vanished.

"When Clen finally succeeded in reaching the bank and drawing himself over the top, he was horrified to see you approaching. Above all things Clen is a gentleman, and rather than appear before you in his bedraggled condition, he fled. Upon my return he insisted that I see you and explain the awkward situation to you in person. I beg of you never to refer to the incident in Clen's presence, especially not in levity, for he has, more strongly than anyone I ever knew, the Englishman's horror of appearing ridiculous."

Patty smiled: "It was too funny for words. The way he gave one horrified glance in my direction and then scrambled into his saddle and dashed away, with the water flowing from him in rivulets. But of course, I shall never mention it to Lord Clendenning, and I wish you would thank him for his valiant championship of my cause."

Bethune shot her a swift sidewise glance. Was there just a trace of mockery in the tone? If so, her expression masked it perfectly.

They rode in silence for a time, following down the course of a broad valley, and presently came out onto the trail. A rider approached them at a walk, the low-hung white dust cloud in his wake marking the course of the long, hot trail. Bethune scrutinized the man intently. "Jack Pierce," he announced. "He runs a little yak outfit, a few head of horses, and some cattle over on Big Porcupine." A moment later Bethune drew up and greeted the rider with a great show of cordiality. "Hello, Pierce, old hand! How's everything over on Porcupine?"

The rancher returned the greeting with a curt nod, and a level stare: "Things on Porky's all right, I guess—so far."

"I hear old man Samuelson's sick?"

"Yes."

"How's he getting on?"

"Ain't heard. So long." He touched his horse with a quirt and the animal continued down the trail at a brisk trot.

"Surly devil," growled Bethune, as he gazed for a moment at the retreating horseman, and this time Patty was sure she detected the snake-like gleam in the black eyes. He dug his horse viciously with his spurs and jerked him in, dancing and fighting the bit. He laughed, shortly. "These little ranchers—bah!"

"Mr. Christie rode over to see Mr. Samuelson the other day. I met him at Thompson's."

"Oh, so you know the soul-puncher, do you? Makes a big play with his yellow chaps and six-gun. Suppose he had to be there to see that old Samuelson gets a ring-side seat if he happens to cash in."

"He said he was going over to see if there was anything he could do," answered the girl, ignoring the venom of the man's words.

"Pretty slick graft—preaching. Educated for it myself. Old Samuelson's rich. Christie goes over and pulls a long face, and sends up a hatful of prayers, and if he gets well Samuelson will hand him a nice fat check for the church. If he don't, the old woman kicks in. And you know, and I know how much of it the church ever sees. Did the soul-puncher have anything to say about me?"

"About you?" asked the girl in apparent surprise. "Why should he say anything about you?"

"Because they all take a crack at me!" said Bethune in an injured tone. "You just saw how Pierce answered a civil question. They all hate me because I have made money. They never made any, and they never will, and they're jealous of my success. They never lose a chance to malign and injure me in every way possible—but I'll show them! Damn them! I'll show them all!" They rode for a short distance in silence, then Bethune laughed. It was the ringing boyish laugh that held no hint of bitterness or sneer. "I hope you will pardon my outburst. I have my moments of irascibility, for which I am heartily ashamed. But—poof! Like a summer cloud, they are gone as quickly as they come. Why should I care what they say of me. They betray their own meanness of soul in their envy of my success. We part here for the time. I must ride over onto the east slope—a little matter of some horses." Again he laughed: "In a few days I shall return—I give you fair warning—return to win your love. And I will win—I am Monk Bethune—I always win!" Without waiting for a reply, the man drove his spurs into his horse's sides and, swerving abruptly from the trail, disappeared down a narrow rock chasm that led directly into the heart of the hills.

CHAPTER XIII

PATTY DRAWS A MAP

That evening after supper, Patty sat upon her doorstep and watched the slowly fading opalescent glow in which the daylight surrendered to encroaching darkness. "How wonderful it all is, and how beautiful!" she breathed. "The indomitable ruggedness of the hills—rough and forbidding, but never ugly. Always beckoning, always challenging, yet always repulsing. Guarding their secrets well. Their rock walls and mighty precipices frowning displeasure at the presumptuous meddling of the intruder, and their valleys gaping in sardonic grins at the puny attempts to wrest their secret from them. Always, the mountains mock, even as they stimulate to greater effort with their wonderful air, and soothe bitter disappointment with the soft caress of twilight's after-glow. I love it—and yet, how I hate it all! I can't hold out much longer. I'm like a general who has to withdraw his forces, not because he is beaten, but because he has run short of ammunition. It is August, and by the end of September I'll be done." She clenched her fists until the nails dug into her palms. "But I'll come back," she cried, defiantly. "I'll work—I'll find some way to earn some money, and I'll come back year after year, if I have to, until I have explored every single one of these mountains from the littlest foothill to the top of the highest peak. And someday, I'll win!"

"Mr. Bethune is rich." She started. The thought flashed upon her brain, vivid as whispered words. Involuntarily, she shuddered at the memory of his burning eyes, the hot touch of his lips upon her hand—her arm. She remembered the short, curt answers of the hard-eyed Pierce. And the thinly veiled distrust of Bethune, voiced by Vil Holland, Thompson, and the preacher whom he had affectionately referred to as "The Bishop of All Outdoors." Could it be possible—was it reasonable, that these were all so mean and contemptible of soul that

their words were actuated by jealousy of Bethune's success? Patty thought not. Somehow, the characters did not fit the rôle. "If he'd have explained their dislike upon the grounds of his Indian blood, it might have carried the ring of truth—at least, it would have been reasonable. But, jealousy—as Mr. Vil Holland would say, 'I don't grab it.'"

She recalled the wolfish gleam that flashed into Bethune's eyes, and the malicious hatred expressed in his insinuations and accusations against these men. Could it be possible that her distrust of Vil Holland was unfounded? But no, there was the repeated searching of her cabin—and had not Lord Clendenning caught him in the act? There was the trampled grass of the notch in the hills from which he was accustomed to spy upon her. And the cut pack sack—somehow, she was not so sure about that cut pack sack. But, anyway—there is the jug! "I don't trust him!" she exclaimed, "and I don't trust Monk Bethune, now. I'm glad I found him out before it was—too late. He's bad—I could see the evil glitter in his eyes. And, how do I know that he told the truth about Lord Clendenning and Vil Holland?" Darkness settled upon the valley and Patty sought her bunk where, for a restless hour, she tossed about thinking.

The following morning the girl paused, coffee pot in hand, in the act of preparing breakfast, and listened. Distinct and clear above the sound of sizzling bacon, floated the words of an old ballad:

> Oh, ye'll tak' the high road, and I'll tak' the low road,
> An' I'll be in Sco'lan' afore ye;
>
> But, oh, my true love I'll never meet again,
> On the bonnie, bonnie banks o' Loch Lomon'.

Hastening to the open door she peered down the valley. The song ceased, and presently from the cottonwood thicket emerged a horse

and rider. The rider wore a roll-brimmed hat and brilliant yellow chaps, and he was mounted upon a fantastically spotted pinto. "It's—'The Bishop of All Outdoors'," she smiled, as she returned to the stove. "He certainly has a voice. I don't blame Mr. Thompson for being crazy about him. Anybody that can sing like that! And he loves it, too."

A hearty "Good morning" brought her once more to the door.

"Just in time for breakfast," she smiled up into the eyes of the man on the pinto.

"Breakfast! Bless you, I didn't stop for breakfast. I figured on breakfasting with my friend, The Villain, over across the ridge."

"The Villain?"

"Vil Holland," laughed the man. "His name, I believe is, Villiers. I shortened it to Villain, and the natives hereabouts have bobbed it down to Vil. But he'll have to breakfast alone this morning, as usual. I've changed my mind. You see, I share the proverbial weakness of the clergy for a good meal. And against so charming a hostess, old Vil hasn't a chance in the world." Dismounting, the Reverend Len Christie removed his saddle and bridle and, with a resounding slap on the flank turned the pinto loose. "Get along, old Paint, and lay in some of this good grass!" he laughed as the pinto, cavorting like a colt, galloped across the creek to join Patty's hobbled cayuse.

"My, that bacon smells good," he said, a moment later, as he stood in the doorway and watched the girl turn the thin strips in the pan. "Do let me furnish part of the breakfast," he cried, eagerly and began swiftly to loosen from behind the cantle of his saddle a slender case, from which he produced and fitted together a two-ounce rod. "I'll take it right from your own dooryard in just about two jiffies." He affixed a reel, threaded a cobweb line, and selected a fly. "Just save that bacon fry for a few minutes and we'll have some speckled beauties in

the pan before you know it."

Pushing the frying pan to the back of the stove, Patty accompanied him to the bank of the stream where she watched enthusiastically as, one after another, he pulled four glistening trout from the water.

"That's enough," he said, as the fourth fish lay squirming upon the grass. And in what seemed to the girl an incredibly short time, he had them cleaned, washed, and ready for the pan. While she fried them he busied himself with his outfit, wiping his rod and carefully returning it to its case, and spreading his line to dry. And a few moments later the two sat down to a breakfast of hot biscuits, coffee, bacon, and trout, crisp and brown, smoking from the pan.

"You must have ridden nearly all night to have reached here so early," ventured the girl as she poured a cup of steaming coffee.

"No," laughed Christie, "I spent the night at the Wattses'. I had some drawing paper and pencils for David Golieth. Do you know, I've a notion to send that kid to school some place. He's wild about drawing. Takes me all over the hills for a mile or two around the ranch and shows me pictures he has drawn with charcoal wherever there is a piece of flat rock. He's as shy and sensitive as a girl, until he begins to talk about his drawing, then his big eyes fairly glow with enthusiasm as he points out the good points of some of his creations, and the defects of others. All of them, of course, are crude as the pictorial efforts of the Indians, but it seems to me that here and there I can see a flash of real genius."

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if he should become a famous artist!" exclaimed the girl. "And wouldn't you feel proud of having discovered him? And I guess lots of them do come from just as unpromising parentage."

"It wouldn't be so remarkable," smiled the man. "Watts, himself is a

genius—for inventing excuses to rest."

"How is the sick man?" asked Patty. "The one you went to see, over on Big Porcupine, wasn't it?"

"Yes, old man Samuelson. Fine old fellow—Samuelson. I sure hope he'll pull through. Doc Mallory came while I was there, and he told me he's got a good fighting chance. And a fighting chance is all that old fellow asks—even against pneumonia. He's a man!"

"I wonder if there is anything I could do?" asked the girl.

Christie's face brightened. "Why, yes, if you would. It's a long ride from here—thirty miles or so. There's nothing you could take them, they're very well fixed—capital Chinese cook and all that. But I've an idea that just the fact that you called would cheer them immensely. They lost a daughter years ago who would be about your age, I think. They've got a son, but he's up in Alaska, or some place where they can't reach him. Decidedly I think it would do those old people a world of good. You'll find Mrs. Samuelson different from——"

"Ma Watts?" interrupted Patty.

The man laughed, "Yes, from Ma Watts. Although she's a well meaning soul. She's going over and 'stay a spell' with the Samuelsons, just as soon as she can 'fix to go.' Mrs. Samuelson is a really superior old lady, refined and lovable in every way. You'll like her immensely. I'm sure. And I know she will enjoy you."

"Thank you," Patty bowed elaborately. "Poor thing, she must be frightfully lonely."

"Yes. Of course, the neighbors do all they can. But neighbors are few and far between. Vil Holland has been over a couple of times, and Jack Pierce stopped work right in the middle of his upland haying to go to town for some medicine. I tell you, Miss Sinclair, a person soon

learns who's who in the mountains."

Christie pushed back his chair. "I must be going. I hate to hurry off, but I want to see Vil and caution him to have an eye on the old man's stock—you see, there are some shady characters in the hills, and old man Samuelson runs horses as well as cattle. It is very possible they may decide to get busy while he is laid up.

"By the way, Miss Sinclair, may I ask if you are making satisfactory headway in your own enterprise?"

Patty shook her head. "No. I'm afraid I'm making no headway at all. Sometimes, I think—I'm afraid—" she stumbled for words.

"Is there anything in the world I can do to help you?" asked the man, eagerly. "If there is, just mention it. I knew your father, and admired him very much. I'm satisfied he made a strike, and I do hope you can locate it."

The girl shook her head. "No, nothing, thank you," she answered and then suddenly looked up, "That is—wait, maybe there is something ——"

"Name it." Christie waited eagerly for her to speak.

"It just occurred to me—maybe you could help me—find a school."

"A school!"

"Yes, a school to teach. You see, I have used nearly all my money. By the end of next month it will be gone, and I must get a job." The man noticed that the girl was doing her best to meet the situation bravely.

"Indeed I will help you!" he exclaimed. "In fact, I think I can right now promise that whenever you get ready to accept it, there will be a position waiting."

"Even if it is only a country school—just so I can make enough money this winter to come back next summer."

"I couldn't think of letting a country school get you. We need you right in town. You see, I happen to be president of the school board, and if I were to let a perfectly good teacher get away, I'd deserve to lose my job." Stepping to the door, he whistled shrilly, and a moment later the piebald cayuse trotted to his side. When the horse stood saddled and bridled, the man turned to Patty: "Oh, about the Samuelsons—do you know how to get to Big Porcupine?"

Patty shook her head. "No, but I guess I can find it."

"Give me a pencil and a piece of paper, and I'll show you in a minute." Leaning over the table, the man sketched rapidly upon the paper. "We'll say this is the Watts ranch, and mark it R. That's our starting point. Then you follow down the creek to the ford—here, at F. Then, instead of following the trail, you turn due east, and follow up a little creek about ten miles. This arrow pointing upward means up the creek. When you come to a sharp pinnacle that divides your valley—we'll mark that ∧ so—you take the right hand branch, and follow it to the divide. That leads, let's see, southeast—we'll mark it S. E. 3 to D; it runs about three miles to the divide which you cross. Then you follow down another creek four or five miles until it empties into Big Porcupine, 4 E. to P., and from there it's easy. Just turn up Porcupine, pass Jack Pierce's ranch, and about five miles farther on you come to Samuelson's. Do you get it?"

Patty watched every move of the pencil, as she listened to the explanation. And when, a few moments later, the big "Bishop of All Outdoors" crossed the ford and rode out of sight up the coulee that led to the trampled notch in the hills, she threw herself down at the table and with eyes big with excitement, drew her father's map from its silk envelope and spread it out beside Christie's roughly sketched one. "What a fool I am not to have guessed that those letters must

stand for the points of the compass!" she cried. "It ought to be plain as day, now." Carefully, she read the cabalistic line at the bottom of the map. "SC 1 S 1 1/2 E 1 S ↑ to ∩ 2 W to a. to b. Stake L. C. ∑ center." Her brow drew into a puzzled frown "SC," she repeated. "S stands for south, but what does SC mean? SW or SE would be southwest, or southeast, but SC—?" She glanced at the other map. "Let's see, Mr. Christie's first letter is R—that stands for Watts' Ranch. SC must represent daddy's starting point, of course! But, SC? Let's see, South Corner—south corner of *what?* I wish he'd put his letters right on the map like this one, instead of all in a row at the bottom, then I might figure out what he was driving at. SC, SC, SC, SC," she repeated over and over again, until the letters became a mere jumble of meaningless sounds. "S must stand for South," she insisted, "and C could stand for creek, or cave, only there are no caves around here that I've seen, or camp—South Camp—that don't do me any good, I don't know where any of his camps were. And he'd hardly say Creek, that would be too indefinite. Let's see, C—cottonwood—south cottonwood—short cottonwood, scarred cottonwood, well if I have to hunt these hills over for a short cottonwood or a scarred cottonwood, when there are millions of both, I might better keep on hunting for the crack in the rock wall."

For a long time she sat staring at the paper. "If I could only get the starting point figured out, the rest would be easy. It says one mile south, one and one half miles east, one mile south, then the arrowhead pointing up, must mean up a creek or a mountain to something that looks like an inverted horseshoe, then, two miles west to a. to b. whatever a. and b. are. There are no letters on the map, then it says to stake L. C.—L. C., is lode claim, at least, I know that much, and it can be 1500 feet long along the vein, and 300 feet each way from the center. But what does he mean by the wiggly looking mark before the word center? I guess it isn't going to be quite as easy as it looks," she concluded, "even when I know that the letters stand for the points of the compass. If I could only figure out where to start

from I could find my way at least to the a. b. part—and that would be something.

"Anyway, I know how to make a map, now, and that is just exactly what I needed to know in order to set my trap for the prowler who is continually searching this cabin. It's all ready but the map, and I may as well finish up the job to-day as any time." From the pocket of her shirt she drew a photograph and examined it critically. "It looks a good deal like the close-up of one of daddy's," she said approvingly, "and it certainly looks as if it might have been carried for a year." Returning the picture to her pocket, she folded the preacher's map with her father's and replaced them in the envelope, then making her way to the coulee, extracted from the tin can two or three of her father's ore samples. These, together with a light miner's pick, she placed in an empty flour sack which she secured to her saddle and struck out northwestward into the hills.

At the top of the first divide she stopped, carefully studied the back trail, and producing paper and pencil made a rough sketch which she marked 1 NW. She rode on, mapping her trail and adding letters and figures to denote distance and direction.

Her continued scrutiny of the back trail satisfied her that she was not followed. Two hours brought her to her journey's end, a rock wall some seven miles from her cabin. Producing the photograph, she verified the exact location, and with her pick, proceeded to stir up the ground and loose rocks at the base of the ledge. For an hour she worked steadily, then carefully replaced the dirt and small fragments, taking care to leave the samples from her sack where they would appear to have been tossed with the other fragments. Indicating the spot by a dot on the photograph she rode back to her cabin and spent the entire afternoon covering sheets of paper with trail maps, and letters, and figures, in an endeavor to produce a sketch that would pass as a prospector's hastily prepared field map. At last she

produced several that compared favorably with her father's and taking a blank leaf from an old notebook she found in the pack sack, drew a very creditable rough sketch.

"Now, for putting in the letters and figures," she said, as she held the paper up for inspection. "Let's see, where would daddy have started from? Watts's ranch, maybe, or he could have started from here. This cabin was here then, and that would make it seem all the more reasonable that I should have chosen this for my home. C stands for cabin, or, let's see, what did they call this place. The sheep camp, here goes SC—Why! SC—SC! That's the starting point on daddy's map! And here I sat right in this chair and nearly went crazy trying to figure out what SC meant! And, if it weren't so late, I'd start right out now to find my mine! If it weren't for that a. b. part I could ride right to it, and snap my fingers at the prowler. But, it may take me a long time to blunder onto the meaning of these letters, and anyway, I want to know 'who's who,' as Mr. Christie says." She continued her work, and a half-hour later examined the result critically. "SC 1 NW 1 N ↑ to ∩ 2 E to a. Stake L. C. center at dot," she read, "and just to make it easier for him, I put the a. down on the map." With a sigh of satisfaction the girl carefully placed the new map and photograph in the silk envelope, and placing the others in the pocket of her shirt, fastened it with a pin. Whereupon, she gathered up all the practice sketches and burned them.

Glancing out of the window, she saw Microby Dandeline approaching the cabin, her dejected old Indian pony, ears a-flop, placing one foot before the other with the extreme deliberation that characterized his every movement. Patty smiled as her eyes took in the details of the grotesque figure; the old harness bridle with patched reins and one blinder dangling, the faded gingham sunbonnet hanging at the back of the girl's neck, held in place by the strings knotted tightly beneath her chin, the misshapen calico dress caught over the saddle-horn in a manner that exposed the girl's bare legs to the knees, and the thick

bare feet pressed uncomfortably into the chafing rope stirrups—truly, a grotesque, and yet, Patty frowned—a pitiable figure, too. The pony halted before the door, and Patty greeted the girl who scrambled clumsily to the ground.

"Well, well, if it isn't Microby Dandeline! You haven't been to see me lately. The last time you were here I was not at home."

"Hit wasn't me."

"What!" exclaimed Patty, remembering the barefoot track at the spring.

"I wasn't yere las' time."

Patty curbed a desire to laugh. The girl was deliberately lying—but why? Was it because she feared displeasure at the invasion of the cabin. Patty thought not, for such was the established custom of the country. The girl did not look at her, but stood boring into the dirt with her bare toe.

"Well, you're here now, anyway," smiled Patty. "Come on in and help me get supper, and then we'll eat. You get the water, while I build the fire."

When the girl returned from the spring, Patty tried again: "While I was in town somebody came here and cooked a meal, and when they got through they washed all the dishes and put them away so nicely I thought sure it was you, and I was glad, because I like to have you come and see me."

"Hit wasn't me," repeated the girl, stubbornly.

"I wonder who it could have been?"

"Mebbe hit was Mr. Christie. He was to our house las' night. He brung Davy some pencils an' a lot o' papers fer to draw pitchers. Pa 'lowed

how Davy'd git to foolin' away his time on 'em, an' Mr. Christie says how ef he learnt to drawer good, folks buys 'em, an' then Davy'll git rich. Pa says, whut's folks gonna pay money fer pitchers they kin git 'em fer nothin'? But ef folks gits pitchers they does git rich, don't they?"

"Why, yes——"

"You got pitchers, an' yo' rich."

Patty laughed. "I'm afraid I'm not very rich," she said.

"Will yo' give me a pitcher?"

"Why, yes." She glanced at the few prints that adorned the log wall, trying to make up her mind which she would part with, and deciding upon a mysterious moonlight-on-the-waves effect, lifted it from the wall and placed it in the girl's hands.

Microby Dandeline stared at it without enthusiasm: "I want a took one," she said, at length.

"A what?"

"A one tooken with that," she pointed at the camera that adorned the top of the little cupboard.

"Oh," smiled Patty, "you want me to take your picture! All right, I'd love to take your picture. You can get on Gee Dot, and I'll take you both. But we'll have to wait till there is more light. The sun has gone down and it's too dark this evening."

The girl shook her head, "Naw, I don't want none like that. That hain't no good. I want one like yo' pa tookened of his mine. Then I'll git rich too."

"So that's it," thought Patty, busying herself with the biscuit dough.

And instantly there flashed into her mind the words of Ma Watts, "Mr. Bethune tellin' her how she'd git rich ef she could fin' a gol' mine, an' how she could buy her fine clos' like yourn an' go to the city an' live." And she remembered that the woman had said that all the time she and Lord Clendenning had been wrangling over the eggs, Bethune and Microby had "talked an' laughed, friendly as yo' please."

"How do you know my father took any pictures of his mine?" asked Patty, cautiously.

"'Cause he did."

"What would you do with the picture if I gave it to you?"

"I'd git rich."

"How?"

"'Cause I would."

Patty whirled suddenly upon the girl and grasping her shoulder with a doughy hand shook her smartly: "Who told you that? What do you mean? Who are you trying to get that picture for? Come! Out with it!"

"Le' me go," whimpered the girl, frightened by the unexpected attack.

"Not 'til you tell me who told you about that picture. Come on—speak!" The shaking continued.

"Hit—wu-wu-wus—V-V-Vil Hol-Holland!" she sniffled readily—all too readily to be convincing, thought Patty, as she released her grip on the girl's shoulder.

"Oh, it was Vil Holland, was it? And what does he want with it?"

"He—he—s-says h-how h-him an' m-me'd g-git r-r-rich!"

"Who told you to say it was Vil Holland?"

"Hit wus Vil Holland—an' that's whut I gotta say," she repeated, between sobs. "An' now yo' mad—an'—an' Mr. Bethune he'll—he'll kill me."

"Mr. Bethune? What has Mr. Bethune got to do with it?"

The girl leaped to her feet and faced Patty in a rage: "An' he'll kill yo', too—an' I'll be glad! An' he says he's gonna By God git that pitcher ef he's gotta kill yo', an' Vil Holland, an' everyone in these damn hills—an' I'm glad of hit! I don't like yo' no more—an' pitcher shows *hain't* as good as circusts—an' I don't like towns—an' I hain't a-gonna wear no shoes an' stockin's—an' I'm a-gonna tell ma yo' shuck me—an' she'll larrup yo' good—an' pa'll make yo' git out o' ar sheep camp—an' I'm glad of hit!" She rushed from the cabin, and mounting her pony, headed him down the creek, turning in the saddle every few steps to make hateful mouths at the girl who stood watching from the doorway.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SAMUELSONS

Patty retired that night with her thoughts in a whirl. So, it was Monk Bethune who, all along, had been plotting to steal the secret of her father's strike? Monk Bethune, with his suave, oily manner, his professed regard for her father, and his burning words of love! Fool that she couldn't have penetrated his thin mask of deceit! It all seemed so ridiculously plain, now. She remembered the flash of distrust that her first meeting with him engendered. And, step, by step, she followed the course of his insidious campaign to instill himself into her good graces. She thought of the blunt warning of Vil Holland when he told her that her father always played a lone hand, and his almost scornful question as to whether her father had told her of his partnership with Bethune. And she remembered her defiance of Holland, and her defense of Bethune. And, with a shudder, she recollected the moments when, in the hopelessness of her repeated failures, she had trembled upon the point of surrendering to his persuasive eloquence.

With the villainous scheming of Bethune exposed, her thoughts turned to the other, to her "guardian devil of the hills." What of Vil Holland? Had she misjudged this man, even as she had so nearly become the dupe of Bethune? She realized now, that nearly everyone with whom she had come into contact, distrusted Bethune, and that they trusted Vil Holland. She realized that her own distrust of him rested to a great extent upon the open accusations of Bethune, and the fact that he was blunt to rudeness in his conversations with her. If he were to be taken at his neighbors' valuation, why was it that he watched her comings and goings from his notch in the hills? Why did he follow her about upon her rides? And why did he carry that disgusting jug? She admitted that she had never seen him the worse for indulgence in the

contents of the jug, but if he were not a confirmed drunkard, why should he carry it? She knew Bethune hated him—and that counted a point in his favor—now. But it did not prove that he was not as bad as Bethune. But why had Bethune told Microby that he would get that picture if he had to kill her and Vil Holland? What had Vil Holland to do with his getting the picture! Surely, Bethune did not believe that Vil Holland shared her secret! Vil Holland *must* be lawless—the running of the sheep herder out of the hills was a lawless act. Why, then, were such men as Thompson and the Reverend Len Christie his friends? This question had puzzled her much of late, and not finding the answer, she realized her own dislike of the man had waned perceptibly. Instinctively, she knew that Len Christie was genuine. She liked this "Bishop of All Outdoors," who could find time to ride a hundred miles to cheer a sick old man; who would think to bring pencils and drawing paper to a little boy who roamed over the hillsides with a piece of charcoal, searching for flat rocks upon which to draw his pictures; and who sang deep, full-throated ballads as he rode from one to the other of his scattered hill folk, upon his outlandish pinto. Surely, such men as he, and the jovial, whole-hearted Thompson—men who had known Vil Holland for years,—could not be deceived.

"Is it possible I've misjudged him?" she asked herself. And when at last she dropped to sleep it was to plunge into a confused jumble of dreams whose dominant figure was her lone horseman of the hills.

Patty resolved to keep her promise to Christie and ride over to the Samuelson ranch, before she started to work out the directions of her father's map. "I may be weeks doing it if I continue to be as dumb as I have been," she laughed. "And when I get started I know I'll never want to stop 'til I've worked it out."

Immediately after breakfast she saddled her horse and returning to the cabin, picked up the little oiled silk packet that contained

photograph and map. Where should she hide it? Her glance traveled from the locked trunks to the loose board in the floor. Each had been searched time and again. "Whoever he is, he'd think it was funny that I decided all at once to hide the map, when I've been carrying it with me so persistently," she muttered. Her eyes rested upon the little dressing table. "The very thing!" she cried. "I'll leave it right out in plain sight, and he'll think I forgot it." Her first impulse was to remove the thin gold chain but she shook her head: "No, it will look more as if I'd just slipped it off for the night if I leave the chain on. And besides," she smiled, "he ought to get some gold for his pains." With a last glance of approval at the little packet lying as if forgotten upon the dressing table, she closed the door and headed down the creek.

It was evident to Patty, upon reaching the Watts ranch that Microby Dandeline had not carried out her threat to "tell ma" about the shaking. For the mountain woman was loquaciously cordial as usual: "Decla'r ef hit hain't yo', up an' a-ridin' fo' sun-up! Yo' shore favor yo' pa. He wus the gittin'est man—Yo'd a-thought he wus ridin' fer wages, 'stead o' jest prospectin'. Goin' down the crick, to-day, eh? Well, I don't reckon yo' pa's claim's down the crick, but yo' cain't never tell. He wus that clost-mouthed—I've heard him an' Watts set a hour, an' nary word between the two of 'em. 'Pears like they's jest satisfied to be a-lightin' matches an' a-puffin' they pipes. Wimmin folks hain't like thet. They jest nachelly got to let out a word now an' then, 'er bust—one."

"Microby Dandeline!" there was a sudden rush of bare feet upon the wooden floor, and Patty caught a flick of calico and a flash of bare legs as the girl disappeared around the corner of the barn.

"Land sakes! Thet gal acts like she's p'ssessed! She tellin' whut a nice time she had to yo' place las' evenin', an' then a-runnin' away like she's wild as a hawrk. Seems like she's a-gittin' mo' triflin' every day ——"

"Sence Monk Bethune's tuk to ha'ntin' this yere crick so reg'lar," interrupted Watts, who stood leaning against the door jamb.

"'T'aint nothin' agin Mr. Bethune, 'cause he's nice to Microby," retorted the woman; "I s'pose 'cordin' to yo' idee, he'd ort to cuss her an' kick her aroun'."

"Might be better in the long run, an' he did," opined the man, gloomily.

"Where's yo' manners at? Not sayin' 'howdy'?" reminded his wife.

"I be'n a-fixin' to," he apologized, "yo' lookin' mighty peart this mawnin'." A cry from the baby brought a torrent of recrimination upon the apathetic husband: "Watts! Watts! Looks like yo' ort to could look after Chattenoogy Tennessee, that Microby Dandeline run off an' left alone. Like's not she's et a nail thet yo' left a han'ful of on the floor thet day yo' aimed fer to fix me a shelft."

"She never et no nail," confided the man, as he returned a moment later carrying the infant. "She done fell out the do' an' them hens wus apeckin' her. She's scairt wuss'n hurt."

"Well," smiled Patty. "I must go. Tell Microby to come up to my cabin right soon. I'd like to have a talk with her."

"Might an' yo' pa's claim 'ud be som'ers up the no'th branch," suggested the woman. "He rid that-a-way sometimes, didn't he, Watts?"

"I'm not prospecting to-day. I'm going over to see the Samuelsons. Mr. Samuelson is sick."

"Law, yes! I be'n a-aimin' fer to git to go, this long while. I heern it a spell back, an' Mr. Christie done tol' us over again. They do say he's bad off. But yo' cain't never tell, they's hopes of 'em gittin' onto they feet agin right up 'til yo' hear the death rattle. Yo' tell Miz Samuelson I aim to git over soon's I kin. I'll bring along the baby an' a batch o'

sourdough bread, an' fix to stay a hull week. Watts'll hev to make out with Microby an' the rest. Yo' tell Miz Samuelson I say not to git down in the mouth. They all got to die anyhow. An' 'taint so bad, onct it's over an' done. But lots of 'em gits well, too. So they hain't no call to do no diggin' right up to the death rattle—an' even then they don't allus die. Ol' man Rink, over on Tom's Hope, back in Tennessee, he rattled twict, an' come to both times, an' then, couple days later, he up an' died on 'em 'thout nary rattle. So yo' cain't never tell—men's thet ornery, even the best of 'em."

Christie's prediction that Patty would like Mrs. Samuelson proved to be conservative in the extreme. From the moment the slight gray-haired little woman greeted her, the girl felt as though she were talking to an old friend. There was something pathetic in the old lady's cheerful optimism, something profoundly pathetic in the endeavor to transform her bit of wilderness into some semblance to the far-away home she had known in the long ago. And she had succeeded admirably. To cross the Samuelson threshold was to step from the atmosphere of the cow-country and the mountains into a region of comfort and quiet that contrasted sharply with the rough and ready air of the neighboring ranches. The house itself was not large, but it was built of lumber, not logs. The long living room was provided with tastefully curtained casement windows, and rugs of excellent quality took the place of the inevitable carpet upon the floor. A baby grand piano projected into the room from its niche beside the huge log fireplace, and bookcases, guiltless of glass fronts, occupied convenient spaces along the wall, their shelves supporting row upon row of good editions. It was in this room, looking as though she had stepped from an ivory miniature, that the mistress of the house greeted Patty.

"You are very welcome, my dear. Mr. Samuelson and I were deeply grieved to hear the sad news of your father. We used to enjoy his occasional brief visits."

"How is Mr. Samuelson?" asked Patty, as she pressed the little woman's thin, blue-veined hand.

"He seems better to-day."

The girl noted the hopeful tone of voice. "Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

"Not a thing, thank you. Mr. Samuelson sleeps a good part of the time, and Wong Yie is a wonderful nurse. But, come, you must have luncheon. I know you will want to refresh yourself after your long ride. The bathroom is at the head of the stairs. I'll take a peep at my invalid and when you are ready we'll see what Wong Yie has for us."

Patty looked hungrily at the porcelain tub—"A real bathroom!" she breathed, "out here in the mountains—and books, and a piano!"

Mrs. Samuelson awaited her at the foot of the stair and led the way to the dining room. When she was seated at the round mahogany table she smiled across at the old lady in frank appreciation.

"It seems like stepping right into fairyland," she said. "Like the old stories when the heroes and heroines rubbed magic lamps, or stepped onto enchanted carpets and were immediately transported from their miserable hovels to castles of gold inhabited by beautiful princes and princesses."

The old lady's eyes beamed: "I'm glad you like it!"

"Like it! That doesn't express it at all. Why, if you'd lived in an abandoned sheep camp for months and prepared your own meals on a broken stove, and eaten them all alone on a bumpy table covered with a piece of oilcloth, and taken your bath in an icy cold creek and then only on the darkest nights for fear someone were watching, and read a few magazines over and over 'til you knew even the advertisements by heart—then suddenly found yourself seated in a

room like this, with real china and silver, and comfortable chairs and a *luncheon cloth*—you'd think it was heaven."

Patty was aware that the old lady was smiling at her across the table. "If I had lived like that for months, did you say? My dear girl, we lived for years in that little shack—you can see it from where you sit—it's the tool house, now. Mr. Samuelson built it with his own hands when there weren't a half-dozen white men in the hills, and until it was completed we lived in a tepee!"

"You've lived here a long time."

"Yes, a long, long time. I was the first white woman to come into this part of the hill country to live. This was the first ranch to be established in the hills, but we have a good many neighbors now—and such nice neighbors! One never really appreciates friends and neighbors until a time—like this. Then one begins to know. A long time ago, before I knew, I used to hate this place. Sometimes I used to think I would go crazy, with the loneliness—the vastness of it all. I used to go home and make long visits every year, and then—the children came, and it was different." The woman paused and her eyes strayed to the open window and rested upon the bold headland of a mighty mountain that showed far down the valley.

"And—you love it, now?" Patty asked, softly, as she poured French dressing over crisp lettuce leaves.

"Yes—I love it, now. After the children came it was all different. I never want to leave the valley, now. I never shall leave it. I am an old woman, and my world has narrowed down to my home, and my valley—my husband, and my friends and neighbors." She looked up guiltily, with a tiny little laugh. "Do you know, during those first years I must have been an awful fool. I used to loathe it all—loathe the country—the men, who ate in their shirt sleeves and blew into their saucers, and their women. It was the uprising that brought me to a realization of the true

worth of these people—" The little woman's voice trailed off into silence, and Patty glanced up from her salad to see that the old eyes were once more upon the far blue headland, and the woman's thoughts were evidently very far away. She came back to the present with an apology: "Why bless you, child, forgive me! My old wits were back-trailing, as the cowboys would say. You have finished your salad, come, let's go out onto the porch, where we can get the afternoon breeze and be comfortable." She led the way through the living-room where she left the girl for a moment, to tiptoe upstairs for a peep at the sick man. "He's asleep," she reported, as they stepped out onto the porch and settled themselves in comfortable wicker rockers.

"What was the uprising?" asked Patty. "Was it the Indians? I'd love to hear about it."

"Yes, the Indians. That was before they were on reservations and they were scattered all through the hills."

A cowboy galloped to the porch, drew up sharply, and removed his hat. "We rode through them horses that runs over on the east slope an' they're all right—leastways all the markers is there, an' the bunches don't look like they'd be'n any cut out of 'em. But, about them white faces—Lodgepole's most dried up. Looks like we'd ort to throw 'em over onto Sage Crick."

The little woman looked thoughtful. "Let's see, there are about six hundred of the white faces, aren't there?"

"Yessum."

"And how long will the water last in Lodgepole?"

"Not more'n a week or ten days, if we don't git no rain."

"How long will it take to throw them onto Sage Creek?"

"Well, they hadn't ort to be crowded none this time o' year. The four of us had ort to do it in three or four days."

The old lady shook her head. "No, the cattle will have to wait. I want you boys to stay right around close 'til you hear from Vil Holland. Keep your best saddle horses up and at least one of you stay right here at the ranch all the time. The rest of you might ride fences, and you better take a look at those mares and colts in the big pasture."

The cowboy's eyes twinkled: "I savvy, all right. Guess I'll take the bunk-house shift myself this afternoon. Got a couple extry guns to clean up an' oil a little."

"Whatever you do, you boys be careful," admonished the woman. "And in case anything happens and Vil Holland isn't here, send one of the boys after him at once."

The other laughed: "Guess they ain't much danger, if anything happens he won't be a-ridin' right on the head of it." The cowboy gathered up his reins, dropped them again, and his gloved fingers fumbled with his leather hat band. The smile had left his face.

"Anything else, Bill?" asked Mrs. Samuelson, noting his evident reluctance to depart.

"Well, ma'am, how's the Big Boss gittin' on?"

"He's doing as well as could be expected, the doctor says."

The cowboy cleared his throat nervously: "You know, us boys thinks a heap of him, an' we'd like fer him to git a square deal."

"A square deal!" exclaimed the woman. "Why, what in the world do you mean?"

"About that there doc—d'you s'pect he savvys his business?"

"Of course he does! He's considered one of the best doctors in the State. Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's this way. When he was goin' back to town yesterday I laid for him. You see, the Old Man—er, I mean—you know, ma'am, the Big Boss, he's a pretty sick man—an' it looks to us boys like things had ort to break pretty quick, one way er another. So, I says, 'Doc, how's he gittin' on?' an' the doc he says, jest like you done, 'good as could be expected.' When you come right down to cases, that don't tell you nothin'. So I says, 'that's 'cordin' to who's doin' the expectin'. What we want to know,' I says, 'is he goin' to git well, er is he goin' to die?' 'I confidently hope we're going to pull him through,' he comes back. 'Meanin', he's goin' to git well?' I says. 'Yes,' he says. 'Fer how much?' I asks him. I didn't have but thirty-five dollars on me, but I shook that in under his nose. You see, I wanted to find out if the fellow would back his own self up with his money. 'What do you mean?' he says. 'I mean,' I informs him, 'that money talks. Here's the Missus payin' you good wages fer to cure up the Old Man. You goin' to do it, an' earn them wages, or ain't you? Here's thirty-five dollars that says you can't cure him.'"

The corners of the old lady's mouth were twitching behind the handkerchief she held to her lips: "What did the doctor say?" she asked.

"Tried to laugh it off," declared the cowboy in disgust. "But I reminds him that this here ain't no laughin' matter. 'D'you s'pose,' I says, 'if the Old Man told me: "Bill, there's a bad colt to bust," or "Bill, go over onto Monte's Crick, an' bring back them two-year-olds," do you s'pose I wouldn't bet I could do it? They's plenty of us here to do all the "confidently hopin'" that's needed. What you got to do is to git busy with them pills an' make him well,' I says, 'or quit an' let someone take holt that kin.'" The man paused and regarded the woman seriously. "What I'm gittin' at is this: If this here doc ain't got confidence enough

in his own dope to back it with a bet, it's time we got holt of one that will. Now, ma'am, you better let me send one of Jack Pierce's kids to town to see Len Christie an' tell him to git the best doc out here they is. I'll write a note to Len on the side an' tell him to tell the doc he kin about double his wages, 'cause the rest of the boys feels just like I do, an' we'll all bet agin him so't it'll be worth his while to make a good job of it." He paused, awaiting permission to carry out his plan.

The little woman explained gravely: "Doctors never bet on their cases, Bill. It isn't that they won't back their judgment. But because it isn't considered proper. Doctor Mallory is doing all any mortal man can do. He's a wonderfully good doctor, and it was Len Christie, himself, that recommended him."

The cowboy's eyes lighted: "It was? Well, then, mebbe he's all right. I never had no time fer preachers 'til I know'd Len. But, what he says goes with me—he's square. I don't go much on no doctor, though. They're all right fer women, mebbe, an' kids. I believe all the Old Man needs right now to fix him up good as ever is a big stiff jolt of whisky an' bitters." The cowboy rode away, muttering and shaking his head, but not until he was well out of sight round the corner of the house did the little woman with the gray hair smile.

"I hope Doctor Mallory will understand," she said, a trifle anxiously, "I have some rather trying experiences with my boys, and if Bill has gone and insulted the doctor I'll have to get Jack Pierce to go to town and explain."

"This Bill seems to just adore Mr. Samuelson," ventured Patty. "Why his voice was almost—almost reverent when he said 'the Old Man.'"

The little lady nodded: "Yes, Bill thinks there's no one like him. You see, Bill shot a man, one day when—he was not quite himself. Over in the Blackfoot country, it was, and Vil Holland knew the facts in the case, and he rode over and told Mr. Samuelson all about it, and they

both went and talked it over with the prosecuting attorney, and with old Judge Nevers, with the result that they agreed to give the boy a chance. So Mr. Samuelson brought him here. That was five years ago. Bill is foreman of this outfit now, and our other three riders are boys that were headed the same way Bill was. Vil Holland brought one of them over, and Bill and Mr. Samuelson picked up the other two —and, if I do say it myself," she declared, proudly, "there isn't an outfit in Montana that can boast a more capable or loyal, or a straighter quartet of riders than this one."

As Patty listened she understood something of what was behind the words of Thompson and Len Christie, when they had spoken that day of "Old Man" Samuelson. But, there was something she did not understand. And that something was—Vil Holland. Everybody liked him, everybody spoke well of him, and apparently everybody but herself trusted him implicitly. And yet, to her own certain knowledge, he did carry a jug, he did follow her about the hills, and he did tell her to her face that when she found her father's claim she would have a race on her hands, and that if she were beaten she would have to be satisfied with what she would get.

But Vil Holland, his comings and his goings were soon forgotten in the absorbing interest with which Patty listened as her little gray-haired hostess recounted incidents and horrors of the Indian uprising, the first sporadic depredations, the coming of the troops, and finally the forcing of the belligerent tribes onto their reservations.

It had been Patty's intention to ride back to her cabin in the evening, but Mrs. Samuelson would not hear of it. And, indeed the girl did not insist, for despite the fact that she had become thoroughly accustomed to her surroundings, the anticipation of a dinner prepared and served by the highly efficient Wong Yie, in the tastefully appointed dining room, with its real silver and china, proved sufficiently attractive to overcome even her impatience to begin the

working out of her father's map. And the realization fully justified the anticipation. When the meal was finished the two women had talked the long evening away before the cheerful blaze of the wood fire, and when at last she was shown to her room, the girl retired to luxuriate in a real bed of linen sheets and a box mattress.

CHAPTER XV

THE HORSE RAID

Patty did not know how long she had slept when she awoke, tense and listening, sitting bolt upright in bed. Moonlight flooded the room through the windows thrown wide to admit the chill night air. Beyond the valley floor, green with the luxuriant second crop of alfalfa, she could see the mountains looming dim and mysterious in the half-light.

The whole world seemed silent as the grave—and yet, something must have awakened her. She shuddered, partly at the chill that struck at her thinly clad shoulders, and partly at the recollection of some of the scenes those selfsame mountains had witnessed, during the uprisings, and which her hostess had so vividly recounted. The girl smiled, and gazing toward the mountains, pictured long lines of naked horsemen stealing silently into the valley. She started violently. Through the open window came sounds, the muffled thud of hoofs upon the soft ground, the low rattle of bit-chains and spur-rowels, and the creak of saddle leather. There *were* horsemen in the valley, and the horsemen were passing almost beneath her windows—and they were moving stealthily.

For a moment her heart raced madly—the fancy of those conjured horsemen, and then the mysterious sounds from the night that were not fancy, combined in just the right proportion to overcome her with a momentary terror. She realized that the sounds were passing—growing fainter, and leaping from the bed, rushed to the window and peered out. Only silence—profound, unbroken silence, and the moonlight. In vain she strained her ears to catch a repetition of the faint sounds, and in vain she peered into the dark shadows cast by the bunk house and the pole horse-corral. Her windows commanded the eastern wall of the valley, and its upper reaches. Had there

actually been horsemen, or were the sounds part of her vivid vision of the long ago? "No," she muttered, "those sounds were real," and she leaned far out of the window in a vain effort to catch a glimpse of the trail that led down the creek toward Pierce's.

For some time she remained at the window and then, shivering, crept back to bed, where she lay speculating upon the identity of these horsemen who passed in the night. She knew that a horse raid had been expected. Could these raiders have had the audacity to pass through the very dooryard of the ranch, knowing as they must have known, that four armed and determined cowboys occupied the bunk house?

And who were these raiders? At Thompson's she had heard Monk Bethune's name mentioned in connection with possible horse-thieving. Bethune had spoken of hurried trips, "to the northward." She remembered that upon the occasion of their first meeting, she had heard him dickering with Watts for the rent of his horse pasture, and she recollected the incident of the changed name. Then, again, only a few days before, she had parted with him when he struck off the trail to the eastward with the excuse that he was going over onto the east slope on a matter having to do with some horses. Bill had mentioned, in talking to Mrs. Samuelson, that he had been riding through the horses on the east slope. Could it be possible that the suave Bethune was a horse-thief? On the other hand, Bethune had openly hinted that Vil Holland was a horse-thief—and yet, these other people all believed that he was persistently on the trail of the horse-thieves.

For a long time she lay thinking, guessing, trying to recall little scraps of evidence that would bear upon the case. Again, a slight sound brought her to a sitting posture. This time it was the opening of a door across the hall from her room. The sound was followed by the soft padding of slippered feet in the hall, the low tapping, evidently at another door, a few low-voiced words, and a return of the padding

steps. A few moments later other steps hurried along the hall past her door and rapidly descended the stairs. Patty heard the opening of an outside door, and once more stealing to the window she saw the Chinaman hurry across the moonlit yard to the bunk house and throw open the door. He entered to emerge a moment later and rush to the horse-corral, where he peered between the poles for a moment and then made his way swiftly back to the house.

Without lighting the lamp Patty dressed hurriedly. Was the Samuelson ranch a place of mystery? What was the meaning of the light sounds—the soft tramp of horses, and the padding of feet upon the stairs? The footsteps paused at the door across the hall. There followed a whispered colloquy and the steps retreated rapidly to the lower regions. Patty opened her door to see Mrs. Samuelson, her face expressing the deepest agitation, and one thin hand catching together the folds of a lavender kimono.

"What is the matter?" asked the girl. "What has happened?"

The old lady closed the door from beyond which came sounds of heavy breathing. "I am afraid he is worse," she whispered. "Wong Yie went to the bunk house to send the boys for the doctor and for Mrs. Pierce, and he says they are gone! Their horses are not in the corral. I don't understand it," she cried. "I told them not to go away. They know, that with my husband sick, we are in momentary danger from the horse-thieves, and they know that their place is right here."

"You told Bill to stay until he heard from Vil Holland," reminded Patty. "Maybe they heard from him, and left without disturbing you."

"That's it, of course!" cried the woman. "I ought to have known I could trust them. But, for a moment it seemed that—" She stopped abruptly and glanced anxiously into the girl's face, "But what in the world will we do? Wong Yie can't ride a step, and if he could, I need him here ——"

"I'll ride to Pierce's!" exclaimed Patty. "And get Mr. Pierce to go for the doctor, and bring Mrs. Pierce back with me. My horse is in the corral, and I can get down there in no time."

"Oh, can you? Will you? And you are not afraid—alone at night in the hills? Under any other circumstances I wouldn't think of letting you do it, child—especially with the horse-thieves about. But, it seems the only way——"

"Of course it's the only way! And I'm not a bit afraid."

Hurrying to the corral, Patty saddled her horse, and a few moments later swung into the trail that led down the creek. She glanced at her watch; it was one o'clock. The moon floated high in the heavens and the valley was almost as light as day. Urging her horse into a run, she found a wild exhilaration in riding through the night, splashing across shallows and shooting across short level stretches to plunge through the water again.

After what seemed an interminable wait, Pierce himself appeared at the door in answer to her persistent pounding. Patty thought he eyed her curiously as he stood aside and motioned her into the kitchen. Very deliberately he lighted the lamp and listened in silence until she had finished. Then, coolly, he eyed her from top to toe: "'Pears to me I've saw you before," he announced. "Over on the trail, a while back. An' you was a-ridin' with—Monk Bethune."

"Well?" asked the girl, angered by the man's tone.

"Well," mocked Pierce. "So to-night's the night yer figgerin' on pullin' the raid, is it?"

"I'm figuring on pulling the raid! What do you mean?"

"I mean you, an' Bethune, an' yer gang. You be'n up a-spottin' the lay, so's to tip 'em off, an' now you come down here an' tell me the Old

Man's worst so's I'll take out to town fer the doc—an' one less posse-man in the hills. Yer a pretty slick article, Miss, but it hain't a-goin' to work."

Patty listened, speechless with rage. When the man finished she found her tongue. "You—you accuse me of being a—a horse-thief?" she choked.

"Yup," answered the man. "That's it—an' not so fur off, neither. Don't you s'pose I know that if the Old Man was worst one of his own boys would of be'n a foggin' it fer town hisself? I'd ort to take an' lock you up in the root cellar an' turn you over to Vil Holland, but I guess if we get all the he ones out of yer gang we kin leave you loose. 'Tain't likely you could run off no horses single-handed."

A woman whose appearance showed an evident hasty toilet had stepped from an inner room, and stood listening to the man. Patty was about to appeal to her when, from the outside came a thunder of hoofs, and suddenly a man burst into the room. Patty recognized him as Bill, of the Samuelson ranch. "Come on, Jack, quick! Git yer gun, while I slam the kak on yer cayuse. The raid's on, they've cut out a bunch of them three an' four-year-olds offen the east slope an' they're a-foggin' 'em off."

"Bill! Oh, Bill!" cried the girl, in desperation. But the man had plunged toward the corral, followed by Pierce, buckling on his cartridge belt as he ran. A moment later both men were in the saddle, and the sound of pounding hoofs grew far away.

In tears, Patty turned to the woman. "Oh, why couldn't he have believed me?" she cried. "He thinks I'm one of that detestable gang of thieves! But, you—surely you don't think I'm a horse-thief?" In broken sentences she related the facts to the woman, and finished by begging her to go up to the Samuelson ranch. "I'll ride on to town for the doctor myself!" she exclaimed. "And surely you can do that much

for your neighbor."

"Do that much fer 'em!" the woman exclaimed. "I reckon they ain't nothin' I wouldn't do fer *them*. Mebbe Jack's right, an' mebbe he's wrong. I've saw him be both, 'fore now. Anyways, it ain't a-goin' to do Samuelsons no harm, nor the horse-thieves no good fer me to go up there. You hit the trail fer town, an' I'll ride up the crick." The woman cut short the girl's thanks. "You better take straight on down Porky 'til it crosses the trail," she advised. "It's a little longer but you won't git lost that way, an' chances is you would if I tried to tell you the short cut. Thompsons is great friends with Samuelsons," called the woman, as Patty mounted. "Better change horses there! Or, mebbe Thompson'll go on to town fer you."

Below the Pierce ranch the trail was not so good but, unheeding, the girl held her horse to his pace. In her heart now was no wild exhilaration of moonlight, nor was there any lurking fear of unknown horsemen, only a mighty rage—a rage engendered by Pierce's accusation, but which expanded with each leap of her horse until it included Vil Holland, Bethune, the Samuelson cowboys, and even Len Christie and the Samuelsons themselves—a senseless, consuming rage that caused the blood to throb hotly to her temples and found vicious expression in driving the rowels into her horse's sides until the animal tore down the rough, half-lit trail at a pace that sent the loose stones flying from beneath his hoofs in rattling volleys.

Possibly, it was the rattling of loose stones, possibly her anger dulled her sensibilities to the point where they were incapable of taking note of her surroundings, but the fact remains that as she approached the mouth of a wide coulee that gave into the valley from the eastward, she did not hear the rumble of hundreds of pounding hoofs that each second grew louder and more ominous, until as she reached the mouth of the coulee a rider swept into the valley, his horse straining every muscle to keep ahead of the herd that thundered in his wake.

Apparently the horseman did not notice her, and the next moment Patty was engulfed in the herd. The girl lived one wild moment of terror. In front, behind, upon each side were madly plunging horses, eyes staring, mouths agape exposing long white teeth that flashed wickedly in the moonlight, manes tossing wildly, and air whistling through wide-flaring nostrils. On and on they swept down the valley. The roar of hoofs rose to a mighty crescendo of thunder, above which, now and then, the terrified girl caught fierce yells from the flank of the herd. So close were the terrorized horses running that it was impossible for the girl to see the ground before her. Sweating, plunging bodies surged against her legs threatening each moment to scrape her feet from the stirrups. Gripping the horn with both hands she rode in a sort of daze.

Glancing over her shoulder, she caught an occasional flash of white as the men on the flanks waved sheets above their heads, whose flapping, fluttering folds urged the maddened horses into a perfect frenzy of action.

In front, and a little to one side of Patty, a horse went down, a big roan colt, and she got one horrible glimpse of a grotesquely twisted neck, and a tangle of thrashing hoofs as another horse plunged onto his fallen comrade. A horrible scream split the air as he, too, went down, and the sudden side-surge of the herd all but unseated the clinging girl. In a second it was over and the herd thundered on. Patty closed her eyes, and with white, tight-pressed lips, wondered when her horse would go down. She pictured the bloody, battered *thing* that had been herself, lying flattened and gruesome, in the moonlight when the pounding hoofs swept past.

Time and distance ceased to be. Patty was carried helplessly on, a part of that frenzied flood of flesh, muscles rigid, brain tense—waiting for the inevitable moment—the horrible moment that was to mark the climax of this ride of horrors. She wondered if it would hurt, or would

merciful unconsciousness come with the first impact of the fall.

Suddenly she opened her eyes. She sensed a change in the rumble of hoofs. Horses surged together and the pace slackened from a wild rush to a wilder thrashing of uncertainty. In the forefront a thin red spurt of flame leaped forth and above the pounding hoofs rang the report of a shot. The leaders seemed to have stopped and the main body of the herd pressed and struggled against the unyielding front. Other spurts of flame pierced the night, and shots rang viciously from all sides. The horses were milling, churning, about in a huge maelstrom, in which Patty found herself being slowly forced to the outside as the unencumbered free horses crowded to the center away from the terrifying stabs of flame and the crack of guns. She could see a mounted form before her. Evidently it was the man who had ridden in the forefront of the herd. The rider was very close, now, his horse keeping pace with her own which had nearly reached the outer rim of the churning mass of animals. The brim of his hat shadowed his face but Patty could see that the gauntleted hand held a six-gun. A shift of position brought the moonlight full upon the man's front—upon a scarf of robin's-egg blue caught together at the throat with the polished tip of buffalo horn. No other horsemen were in sight, but an occasional sharp report sounded from the opposite side of the herd. "Vil!" she screamed. "Vil Holland!" The form stiffened in the saddle and the girl caught the flash of his eyes beneath the hat brim. The next instant the gun had given place to a heavy quirt in his hand, his tall, rangy horse plunged straight toward her, the wild horses, crowding frenziedly to escape the blows as the rider lashed furiously to the right and to the left as he forced his mount to her side.

"Good God! Girl, what are you doing here? I thought you were one of them—and I nearly—" The man leaned suddenly forward and grasped the bit-chain of her bridle. As if knowing exactly what was expected of them, side by side the two horses fought their way free of the herd, the big buckskin with ears laid back, snapping viciously at the crowding

horses. A six-gun roared twice. Patty felt a sudden brush of air against her cheek and the next instant the two horses plunged down the steep side of a narrow ravine. In the bottom the man released her bridle. "You stay here!" he commanded gruffly.

"But, the Samuelsons! Mr. Samuelson is—" The words were drowned in a shower of gravel as the rangy buckskin scrambled up the bank and disappeared over the top. The rapid transition from anger to terror, and from terror to relief, proved too much for the girl's nerves and she burst into a violent fit of sobbing. The tears enraged her and she shouted at the top of her voice. "I won't stay here!" but the words sounded puny and weak, and she knew that they had not penetrated beyond the rim of the ravine. "I won't do it! I won't stay here!" she kept repeating, the sentences broken by the hysterical sobbing. Nevertheless, stay there she did, until with a mighty rumble of hoofs and a scattering volley of shots, the horse herd swept northward, and when finally she succeeded in gaining the upper level, the sounds came to her ears faint and far away.

Hurriedly she glanced about her. What was that stretching to the southward, a long ribbon of white in the moonlight? "The trail!" she cried. "The trail to town—and to Thompson's!" Just beyond the trail, upon the brown-yellow buffalo grass a dark object lay motionless. Patty stared at it in horror. It was the body of a man. Her first impulse was to put spurs to her horse and fly down that long white ribbon of trail—to place distance between herself and the thing that lay sprawled upon the grass. Then a thought flashed into her brain. Suppose it were he? Vil Holland, the man whom everybody trusted—the man who had calmly braved the shots of the horse-thieves to rescue her from that churning maelstrom of horror.

Unconsciously, but surely, under the influence of those upon whose judgment she knew she could rely, her suspicion and distrust of him had weakened. She had half-realized the fact days ago, when at

thought of him she found herself forced to enumerate his apparent offenses over and over again to keep the distrust alive. She thought of him now as he had fought his way to her, lashing the infuriated horses from his path. He had appeared, somehow—different. She closed her eyes and clean cut as though chiseled upon her brain was the picture of him as he forced his way to her side. Like a flash the detail of difference broke upon her—The jug was missing! And close upon the heels of the discovery came the memory of the strange thrill that had shot through her as his leg pressed hers when their horses had been forced together by the milling herd, and the sense of security and well being that replaced the terror in her heart from the moment she had called his name. A sudden indescribable pain gripped her breast, as though icy fingers reached up and slowly clutched her heart. With staring eyes and breath coming heavily between parted lips, she rode toward the thing on the ground. As she drew near, her horse stopped, sniffing nervously. She attempted to urge him forward, but he quivered, shied sidewise, and, snorting his fear, circled the sprawling object with nostrils a-quiver.

Fighting a terrible dread, the girl forced her eyes to focus upon the gruesome form, and the next instant she uttered a quick little cry of relief. The man's hat had fallen off and lay at some distance from the body. She could see a shock of thick black hair, and noticed that he wore a cheap cotton shirt that had once been white. There were no chaps. One leg of his blue overalls had rolled up and exposed six inches of bare skin which gleamed whitely in the moonlight above the top of his shoe. The sight sickened, disgusted her, and whirling her horse she dashed southward along the trail forgetting for the moment the Samuelsons, the doctor, and everything else in a wild desire to put distance between herself and that awful thing on the ground.

Not until her horse's hoofs rang upon the hard rock of the canyon floor, did Patty slacken her pace. Thompson's was only a few miles farther on. It was dark in the high walled canyon and she slowed her horse to

a walk. He stopped to drink in the shallow creek and the girl glanced over the back trail. Where was he now! Thundering along with the recaptured horse herd, or following the thieves in a mad flight through the devious fastnesses of the mountains. Was it possible that even at this moment he was lying upon the yellow-brown grass, or among the broken rock fragments of some coulee, twisted, and shapeless, and still—like that other who lay repulsive and ugly, with his bare leg shining white in the moonlight? She shuddered. "No, no, no!" she cried aloud, "they can't kill him. They're cowards—and he is brave!" Her voice rang hollow and thin in the rocky chasm, and she started at the sound of it. Her horse moved on, tongueing the bit contentedly. "They were right, and I was wrong," she muttered. "And—and, I'm *glad*."

The canyon was left behind and before her the trail wound among the foothills that rolled away to the open bench. She noticed that the moon had sunk behind the mountains, yet it was not dark. Glancing toward the east, she realized that it was morning. She urged her horse into a lope, and reached Thompson's just as the ranchman and his two hands were starting for the barn.

"Well, dog my cats, if it ain't Miss Sinclair!" exclaimed the man, and stood silent for a second as if trying to remember something. He rushed toward her excitedly. "You want that horse?" he cried, and without waiting for an answer, turned to the astonished ranch hands: "You, Mike, throw the shell onto Lightnin', an' git him out here, an' don't lose no time about it, neither!

"Pete, git that rifle an' lay along the trail! An' if anyone comes a-foggin' along towards town shoot his horse out from in under him! Never mind chawin'—you git! Shoot his horse, an' I'll pay the bill. Any skunk that would try fer to beat a lady out of her claim ain't a-goin' to expect nothin' but what he gits around this outfit. An' say, Pete—if it should be Monk Bethune—an' you happen to shoot a leetle high fer to hit the

horse—don't worry none—git, now!

"You come right along of me, an' git a snack from Miz T. while Mike's a-saddlin' up. It's a long drag to town, even on Lightnin', an' you ain't et yet. If the coffee ain't hot, you can wait a couple o' minutes—that there Pete—he won't let nothin' git by—he kin cut a sage hen's head off twenty rod with that rifle!" Patty had made several unsuccessful attempts to speak—attempts to which Thompson paid no attention whatever. At last, she managed to make him understand. "No, no! It isn't the claim, Mr. Thompson—but, let him saddle the horse just the same. Mr. Samuelson is worse and I'm riding for the doctor."

"You!" exclaimed the astonished Thompson. "What's the matter with Bill or some of Samuelson's riders?"

"They're after the horse-thieves. They ran off a lot of Mr. Samuelson's horses last night, and they're after them. And they caught them, and had a battle, and I was in it, and there is a dead man lying back there beside the trail." Patty talked rapidly, and Thompson stared open-mouthed.

"Run off Samuelson's horses—battle—dead man—you was in it!" he repeated, in bewilderment. "Who run 'em off? Where's Vil Holland? Who's dead?"

"I don't know who's dead. A horse-thief, I guess. And Vil Holland's with them—with the Samuelson cowboys and that horrid Pierce, and that's why I had to ride for the doctor—because the cowboys were with Vil Holland, and Pierce thought I was one of the horse-thieves."

"If you know what you're talkin' about it's more'n what I do," sighed Thompson, resignedly, as the girl concluded the somewhat muddled explanation. "If the raid's come off, why wasn't I in on it—an' me keepin' Lightnin' up an' ready fer it's goin' on three months? They's a thing or two I do know, though. For one, you've rode fer enough." He

called to Pete, who, rifle in hand, was making for the trail. "Hey, Pete, come back here with that gun, an' quick as Mike gits the hull cinched onto Lightnin', you fork him an' hightail fer town an' fetch Doc Mallory out to Samuelson's. Tell him the Old Man's worse. Better fetch Len Christie along, too. If there's a dead man, even if he's a horse-thief, it's better he was buried accordin' to the book. Take Miss Sinclair's horse to the stable an' tell Mike to onsaddle him an' give him a feed." He turned to Patty: "You come along in an' rest up 'til Miz T. gits breakfast ready. Then when you've et, you kin begin at the beginnin' an' tell what's be'n a-goin' on in the hills."

A couple of hours later when Patty concluded her detailed narrative, Thompson leaned back in his chair. "I got a crow to pick with Vil Holland, all right, fer not lettin' me in on that there raid."

"Maybe he didn't have time," suggested the girl, and suppressed a desire to smile at the readiness with which she sprang to the defense of her "guardian devil of the hills."

Protesting that she needed no rest after her night of wild adventure, Patty refused the pressing invitation of the Thompsons to remain at the ranch, and mounting her horse, headed for the cabin on Monte's Creek.

Once through the canyon, she turned abruptly into the hills and as her horse, unguided, topped low divides, and threaded mile after mile of narrow valleys, her thoughts wandered from the all-absorbing topic of her father's location, to the man for whom she had so recently experienced such a signal revulsion of feeling. "How could I ever have been deceived by that disgusting Monk Bethune?" she muttered. "Especially after he warned me against him. It's a wonder I couldn't have seen him for the sleek oily devil that he is. I must have been crazy." She shuddered at the recollection of that day in the little valley when he boldly made love to her. "It's just blind luck that—that something *awful* didn't happen. I could see the lurking devil in his

eyes! And I saw it again, when he sneered at Mr. Christie. And when Pierce showed very plainly what he thought of him, he cursed everybody in the hills, and then offered his glaringly false explanation as to why people hate and distrust him." At the top of a low divide, she turned her horse into a valley that was not, by any means, the most direct route to the little cabin on Monte's Creek. A half hour later she came out onto the plateau, upon the edge of which Vil Holland's little tent nestled against its towering rock fragment.

For just an instant she hesitated, then, blushing, rode boldly across the open space toward the little patch of white that showed through the scrub timber. Pulling up before the tent door the girl glanced about her. Everything was in its place. Her eyes rested approvingly upon the well-scoured cooking utensils that hung in an orderly row. Evidently the camp had not been used the night before. She drew off her glove and, leaning over, felt the blankets that were thrown over the ridgepole. They were still wet with the heavy dew, and the dampened ashes showed that no fire had been built that morning. "Oh, where is he?" whispered the girl, glancing wildly about, "Surely, he has had time to reach here—if he's—all right." After a few moments of silence she laughed nervously: "He's all right," she assured herself with forced cheerfulness. "Of course, he wouldn't return here right away. He probably had to help drive those horses back, or—or help bury that man, or something. I wonder what he thinks of me? Pierce will tell him his suspicions, and then—finding me mixed in with those horses—he'll think I've 'thrown in' with Bethune, as he would say. I must see him. I must!"

Deciding to return later in the day, Patty headed her horse for the divide and soon found herself at the much trampled notch in the hills. For some moments she sat staring down at the ground. She glanced toward the cabin that showed so distinctly in the valley below. "He certainly watches from here," she mused. "And not just occasionally either." Suddenly, she straightened in her saddle, and her eyes

glowed: "I wonder if—if he has been watching—Monk Bethune? Watching to see that no harm comes to—me? Oh, if I only knew—if I only knew the real meaning of this trampled grass!" Resolutely, she gathered up her reins. "I *will know*!" she muttered. "And I'll know before very long, too. That is, I *hope* I will," she qualified, as the bay cayuse began to pick his way carefully down the steep descent to Monte's Creek.

CHAPTER XVI

PATTY FINDS A GLOVE

Dismounting before her cabin, Patty dropped her reins, pushed open the door, and entered. Her eyes flew to the little dressing table. The packet was gone! With a thrill of exultation she carefully inspected the room. Everything was exactly as she had left it. No blundering Microby had been here during her absence, for well she knew that Microby could no more have invaded the cabin without leaving traces of her visit than she could have flown to the moon. It was midday. She had intended to rest when she reached the cabin, but her impatience to establish once for all the identity of the cunning prowler dispelled her weariness, and after a hurried luncheon, she was once more in the saddle. "We've both earned a good rest, old fellow," she confided to her horse, as he threaded the coulee she had marked 1 NW, "but it's only six or seven miles, and we simply must know who it is that has been calling on us so persistently. And when I find daddy's mine and have just oodles of money, I'm going to make it up to you for working you so hard. You're going to have a nice, big, light, roomy box stall, and a great big grassy pasture with a creek running through it, and you're going to have oats three times a day, and you're never going to have to work any more, and every day I'll saddle you myself and we'll take a ride just for fun."

Having disposed of her horse's future in this eminently satisfactory manner, the girl fell to planning her own. She would build a big house and live in Middleton, and fairly flaunt her gold in the faces of those who had scoffed at her father—no, she *hated* Middleton! She would go there once in a while, to visit Aunt Rebecca, but mainly to show the narrow, hide-bound natives what they had missed by not backing her father with a few of their miserable dollars. She would live in New York

—in Washington—in Los Angeles. No, she would live right here in the hills—the hills, that daddy had loved, and whose secret he had wrested from their silent embrace. And when she tired of the hills she would travel. Not the slightest doubt as to her ability to locate her father's claim assailed her, now that she had learned to read his map.

It was wonderfully good to be alive. Her glance traveled from the tiny creek whose shallow waters purled and burbled about her horse's feet, to the high-flung peaks of the mountains, their loftier reaches rearing naked and craggy above the dark green girdle of pines. Slowly and majestically, hardly more than a speck against the blue, an eagle soared. It was a good world—courage and perseverance made things work out right. It was cowardly to despair—to become disheartened. She would find her father's mine—but, first she would prove that Bethune was a scoundrel of the deepest dye. And she would prove, she admitted to herself she wanted to prove, that Vil Holland was all his friends believed him to be. But, she blushed with shame—what must he think of her? Of her defense of Bethune, of her deliberate rudeness, and worst of all, of her night ride with the horse-thieves? He knew she had suspected him—had even accused him. Would he ever regard her as other than a silly fool? Vividly she pictured him as he had looked lashing his way to her through the wildly crowding horse herd, determined, capable, masterful—and wondered vaguely what her answer would have been had he made love to her as Bethune had done? She smiled at the thought of Vil Holland, the unsmiling, the outspoken, the self-sufficient Vil Holland making love!

Upon the summit of a high ridge she paused and gazed down into the little valley where she had located the false claim. A few moments more and she would know to a certainty the identity of the prowler who had repeatedly searched her cabin. Certain as she was whose stakes she would find marking the claim, it was with a rapidly beating heart that she urged her horse into the valley and across the creek

toward the rock wall. Yes, there was a stake! And another! And there was the plot of ground she had laboriously broken at the foot of the wall. She swung from the saddle and examined the spot. The rock fragments she had selected from her father's samples were gone! And now to find the notice! As she turned to search for the other stakes, her glance rested upon an object that held her rooted in her tracks. For a moment her heart stopped beating as she stared at the little patch of gray buckskin that lay limp and neglected where it had fallen. Slowly she walked to it, stooped, and recovered it from the ground. It was a gauntleted riding glove—Vil Holland's. She could not be mistaken, she had seen that glove upon the hand of its owner too many times, with its deep buckskin fringe, and the horseshoe embroidered in red and green silk upon its back.

For a long time she stared at the green and red horseshoe. So it was Vil Holland, after all, and not Monk Bethune, who had systematically searched her cabin. Vil Holland, who had watched continually from his notch in the hills. She had been right in the first place, and the others had been wrong. Everybody disliked Bethune, and disliking him, had attributed to him all the crookedness of the hill country, and all the time, under their very noses, Vil Holland was the real plotter—and they liked him! She could see it all, now—how, with Bethune for the scapegoat, he was enabled, unsuspected, to plan and carry out his various schemes, and with no possible chance of detection—for he himself was the confidential employee of the ranchmen—the man whose business it was to put an end to the lawlessness of the hill country.

Patty was surprised that she was not angry. Indeed, she was not conscious of any emotion. She realized, as she stood there holding the gaily embroidered glove in her hand, that the rapture, the gladness of mere existence had left her, and that where only a few minutes before, her heart had throbbed with the very joy of living, it now seemed like a thing of weight, whose heaviness oppressed her.

She felt strangely alone and helpless. She glanced about her. The sun still shone on the green pines and the sparkling waters of the creek, and above the high-tossed crags the eagle still circled, but the thrill of joy in these things was gone. Slowly she turned and, still holding the glove, mounted, and headed for the cabin on Monte's Creek.

At the door she unsaddled her horse, hobbled him, and turned him loose. She realized that she was very tired, and threw herself down upon the bunk. When she awoke the cabin was in darkness. The door stood wide open as she had left it. For a moment she lay trying to collect her bewildered senses. Through the open door, dimly silhouetted against the starry sky, she made out the notch in the valley rim. Her sense rallied with a rush, and she started nervously as a pack rat scurried across the floor and paused upon the door sill to peer inquisitively at her with his beady eyes. Crossing the room, she closed and barred the door, and lighted the lamp. It was twelve o'clock. She peered at herself in the glass and with an exclamation of anger, dampened her wash-cloth and scrubbed furiously at her cheek where, in deep tracery appeared the perfect shape of a horseshoe.

She was very hungry, and rummaging in the cupboard set out a cold lunch which she devoured to the last crumb. Then she blew out the lamp and, removing her riding boots, threw herself down upon the bunk to think. She was angry now, and the longer she thought the angrier she got. "I can see it all as plain as day," she muttered. "There isn't anything he wouldn't do! He *did* cut that pack sack, and he ran the sheep man out of the hills because he knew it would be dangerous for him to have a neighbor that might talk. And the Samuelson horse raid! Of all the diabolical plotting! With his outlaw friends holding trusted positions on the ranch, and old Mr. Samuelson sick in bed! Oh, it was cleverly planned! And that Pierce was right in with them. No wonder he wanted to lock me in his cellar!

"Who, then, was the man that lay sprawled by the side of the trail?"

The girl shuddered at the memory of the cheap cotton shirt torn open at the throat, and the moonlight shining whitely upon the bare leg. "Some loyal rancher, probably, who dared to oppose the outlaws. It's murder!" she cried aloud. "And yesterday I thought he was watching up there in the hills to see that no harm came to me!" She laughed—a hard, bitter laugh that held as much of mirth as the gurgle of a tide rip. "But he's come to the end of his rope! I'll expose him! I'm not afraid of his lawless crew! He'll find out it will take more than rescuing me from that herd of wild horses to buy my silence! I'll ride straight to Samuelson's ranch in the morning, and from there to Thompson's, and I'll tell them about his part in the raid, and about his watching like a vulture from his notch in the hills, and about his stealing what he thought was daddy's map, and about his filing the claim. And did show 'em the glove and—" She paused abruptly: "What a fool I was to come away without the notice! That would have proved it beyond any doubt, even if he hasn't recorded the claim!" For a long time she lay in the darkness planning her course for the day. All thought of sleep had vanished, and her eyes continually sought the window for signs of approaching light.

At the first faint glow of dawn the girl caught up her horse and headed for the false claim. It was but the work of a moment to locate the stake to which the notice was attached by means of a bit of twine. Removing the paper, she thrust it into her pocket and returned to the cabin where she ate breakfast before starting for the Samuelson ranch. Hurriedly washing the dishes, she picked up the glove and thrust it into the bosom of her shirt, and drawing the crumpled notice from her pocket, smoothed it out upon the table. Her glance traveled rapidly over the penciled words to the signature, and she stared like one in a dream. The blood left her face. She closed her eyes and passed her hand slowly over the lids. She opened them, and with a nerveless finger, touched the paper as if to make sure that it was real. Then, very slowly, she rose from her chair and crossing the room, stood in the doorway and gazed toward the notch in the hills until hot

tears welled into her eyes and blurred the distant skyline. The next moment she was upon her bunk, where she lay shaken between fits of sobbing and hysterical laughter. She drew the glove, with its fringed gauntlet and its gaudily embroidered horseshoe from her shirt front and ran her fingers along its velvety softness. Impulsively, passionately, she pressed the horseshoe to her lips, and leaping to her feet, thrust the glove inside her shirt and stepping lightly to the table reread the penciled lines upon the crumpled paper, and over and over again she read the signature; Raoul Bethune, known also as Monk Bethune.

The atmosphere of the little cabin seemed stifling. Crumpling the paper into her pocket, she stepped out the door. She must do something—go some place—talk to someone! Her horse stood saddled where she had left him, and catching up the reins she mounted and headed him at a gallop for the ravine that led to the trampled notch in the hills. During the long upward climb the girl managed to collect her scattered wits. Where should she go? She breathed deeply of the pine-laden air. It was still early morning. A pair of magpies flitted in short flights from tree to tree along the trail, scolding incessantly as they waited to be frightened on to the next tree. Patches of sunlight flashed vivid contrasts in their black and white plumage, and set off in a splendor of changing color the green and purple and bronze of their iridescent feathering. A deer bounded away in a blur of tan and white, and a little farther on, a porcupine lumbered lazily into the scrub. It was good to be alive! What difference did it make which direction she chose? All she wanted this morning was to ride, and ride, and ride! She had her father's map with her but was in no mood to study out its intricacies, nor to ride slowly up and down little valleys, scrutinizing rock ledges. She would visit the Samuelson ranch, and find out about the horse raid, and inquire after Mr. Samuelson, and then—well, there would be plenty of time to decide what to do then. But first, she would swing around by the little tent beside the creek and see if Vil Holland had returned. Surely, he

must have returned by this time, and she must tell him how it was she had been riding with the horses—and, she must give him back his glove. She blushed as she felt the pressure of its soft bulk where it rested just below her heart. Surely, he would need his glove—and maybe, if she were nice to him, he would tell her how it came to be there—and maybe he would explain—*this*. Her horse had stopped voluntarily after his steep climb, and she glanced down at the trampled grass, and from that to her own little cabin far below on Monte's Creek.

She wondered, as she rode through the timber how it was she had been so quick to doubt this grave, unsmiling hillman upon such a mere triviality as the finding of a glove. And then she wondered at her changed attitude toward him. She had feared him at first, then despised him. And now—she recalled with a thrill, the lean ruggedness of him, the unwavering eyes and the unsmiling lips—now, at least, she respected him, and she no longer wondered why the people of the hills and the people of the town held him in regard. She knew that he had never sought to curry her favor—had never deviated a hair's breadth from the even tenor of his way in order to win her regard and, in their chance conversations, he had been blunt even to rudeness. And, yet, against her will, her opinion of him had changed. And this change had nothing whatever to do with her timely rescue from the horse herd—it had been gradual, so gradual that it had been an accomplished fact even before she suspected that any change was taking place.

The huge rock behind which nestled the little tent loomed before her, and hastily removing the glove from its hiding place, she came suddenly upon his camp. A blackened coffee pot was nestled close against a tiny fire upon which a pair of trout and some strips of bacon sizzled in a frying pan. She glanced toward the creek, at the same moment that Vil Holland turned at the sound of her horse's footsteps, and for several seconds they faced each other in silence. The man

was the first to speak:

"Good mornin'. If you'll step back around that rock for a minute, I'll slip into my shirt."

And suddenly Patty realized that he was stripped to the waist, but her eyes never left the point high on his upper arm, almost against the shoulder, where a blood-stained bandage dangled untidily.

"You're hurt!" she cried, swinging from the saddle and running toward him.

"Nothin' but a scratch. I got nicked a little, night before last, an' I just now got time to do it up again. It don't amount to anything—don't even hurt, to speak of. I can let that go, if you'll just——"

"Well, I won't just go away—or just anything else, except just attend to that wound—so there!" She was at his side, examining the clumsy bandage. "Sit right down beside the creek, and I'll look at it. The first thing is to find out how badly you're hurt."

"It ain't bad. Looks a lot worse than it is. It was an unhandy place to tie up, left-handed."

Scooping up water in her hand Patty applied it to the bandage, and after repeating the process several times, began very gently to remove the cloth. "Why it's clear through!" she cried, as the bandage came away and exposed the wound.

"Just through the meat—it missed the bone. That cold water feels good. It was gettin' kind of stiff."

"What did you put on it?"

"Nothin'. Didn't have anything along, an' wouldn't have had time to fool with it if I'd been packin' a whole drug-store."

"Where's your whisky?"

"I ain't got any."

"Where's your jug? Surely there must be some in it—enough to wash out this wound."

The man shook his head. "No, the jug's plumb empty an' dry. I ain't be'n to town for 'most a week."

Patty was fumbling at her saddle for the little "first aid" kit that she faithfully carried, and until this moment, had never found use for. "Probably the only time in the world it would ever do you any good, you haven't got it!" she exclaimed, disgustedly, as she unrolled a strip of gauze from about a tiny box of salve.

"I'm sorry there ain't any whisky in the jug. I never thought of keepin' it for accident."

The girl smeared the wound full of salve and adjusted the bandage, "Now," she said, authoritatively, "you're going to eat your breakfast and then we're going to ride straight to Samuelson's ranch. The doctor will be there and he can dress this wound right."

"It's all right, just the way it is," said Holland. "I've seen fellows done up in bandages, one way an' another, but not any that was better 'tended to than that." He glanced approvingly at the neatly bandaged arm. "Anyhow, this is nothin' but a scratch an' it'll be all healed up, chances are, before we could get to Samuelson's."

"No, it won't be all healed up before you get to Samuelson's either! Run along, now, and I'll stay here while you finish dressing, and when you're through, you call me. I've had breakfast but I can drink a cup of coffee, if you'll ask me."

"You're asked," the man replied, gravely, "and while I go to the tent, you might take that outfit an' jerk a couple more trout out of the creek."

He pointed to a light fishing pole with hook and line attached that leaned against a tree. "It ain't as fancy as the outfit Len Christie packs, but it works just as good, an' ain't any bother to take care of."

A few minutes later Vil Holland emerged from the tent. "Sorry I ain't got a table," he apologized, "but a fryin' pan outfit's always suited me best—makes a fellow feel kind of free to pull stakes an' drift when the notion hits him."

"But, you've camped here for a long time."

The man glanced about him: "Yes, a long time. I guess I know every place in the hills for a hundred miles round an' this is the pick of 'em all, accordin' to my notions. Plenty of natural pasture, plenty of timber, an' this little creek's the coldest, an' it always seems to me, its water is the sparklin'est of 'em all. An' then, away off there towards the big mountains, early in the mornin' an' late in the evenin', when it's all kind of dim down here, you can see the sunlight on the snow—purple, an' pink, an' sometimes it shines like silver an' gold. It lays fine for a ranch. Sometime, maybe, I'm goin' to homestead it. I'll build the cabin right there, close by the big rock, an' I'll build a porch on it so in the evenin's we could watch the lights way up there on the snow."

Patty smiled: "Who is 'we'?" she asked, mischievously.

The man regarded her gravely: "Things like that works themselves out. If there ain't any 'we', there won't be any cabin—so there's nothin' to worry about."

"Did you catch the horse-thieves?"

Vil Holland's face clouded. "Part of 'em. Not the main ones, though."

Patty shuddered. "I saw one of them lying back there by the trail. It was horrible."

"Yes, an' a couple of more went the same way, further on. We'd rather have got 'em alive, but they'd had their orders, an' they took their medicine. We got the horses, though."

"I suppose you're wondering how I came to be in among those horses?"

"I figured you'd got mixed up in it at Samuelson's, somehow. The boys didn't know nothin' about it—except Pierce—an' he guessed wrong."

Patty laughed. "He accused me of being one of the gang, and even threatened to lock me in his cellar."

"He won't again," announced the man, dryly.

"I rode down there to get him to go for the doctor. Mr. Samuelson was worse, and there was no one else to go. And when I started on for town, the horses swept down on me and carried me along with them."

"Was the doctor got?" asked Holland with sudden interest.

"Yes, I rode on down to Thompson's, and Mr. Thompson sent a man to town. He was provoked with you for not letting him in on the raid."

"He'll get over it. You see, I didn't want to call out the married men. I surmised there'd be gun-play an' there wasn't any use takin' chances with men that was needed, when there's plenty of us around the hills that it don't make any difference to anyone if we come back or not. I didn't figure on lettin' Pierce in."

When they had finished washing the dishes the girl glanced toward the buckskin that was snipping grass in the clearing: "It's time we were going. The doctor may start for town this morning and we'll meet him on the trail."

"This ain't a doctor's job," protested the man. "My arm feels fine."

"It's so stiff you can hardly use it. It must feel fine. But it doesn't make a particle of difference how fine it feels. It needs attention. And, surely you won't refuse to do this for me, after I bandaged it all up? Because, if anything should go wrong it would be my fault."

Without a word the man picked up his bridle and walking to the buckskin, slipped it over his head and led him in. He saddled the horse with one hand, and as he turned toward the girl she held out the glove.

"Isn't this yours? I found it last evening—out in the hills."

Holland thrust his hand into it: "Yes, it's mine. I'm sure obliged to you. I lost it a couple of days ago. I hate to break in new gloves. These have got a feel to 'em."

"Do you know where I found it?"

"No. Couldn't guess within twenty miles or so."

Patty looked him squarely in the eyes: "I found it over where Monk Bethune has just staked a claim. And he staked that particular claim because it was the spot I had indicated on a map that I prepared especially for the benefit of the man who has been searching my cabin all summer."

Holland nodded gravely, without showing the slightest trace of surprise. "Oh, that's where I dropped it, eh? I figured Monk thought he'd found somethin', the way he come out of your cabin the last time he searched it, so I followed him to the place you'd salted for him." He paused, and for the first time since she had known him, Patty thought she detected a flicker of amusement in his eyes. "He didn't waste much time there—just clawed around a few minutes where you'd pecked up the dirt, an' then sunk his stakes, an' wrote out his notice, an' high-tailed for the register's office. That was a pretty smart trick of yours but it wouldn't have fooled anyone that knows rock. Bethune's

no prospector. He's a Canada crook—whisky runner, an' cattle rustler, an' gambler. Somehow, he'd got a suspicion that your father made a strike he'd never filed, an' he's been tryin' to get holt of it ever since. I looked your plant over after he'd hit for town to file, an' when I tumbled to the game, I let him go ahead."

"But, suppose the rock had been right? Suppose, it had really been daddy's claim?"

"Buck can run rings around that cayuse of his any old day. I expect, if the rock had be'n right, Monk Bethune would of met up with an adventure of some sort a long ways before he hit town."

"You knew he was searching my cabin all the time?"

"Yes, I knew that. But, I saw you was a match for 'em—him an' the fake Lord, too."

"Is that the reason you threw Lord Clendenning into the creek, that day?"

"Yes, that was the reason. I come along an' caught him at it. Comical, wasn't it? I 'most laughed. I saw you slip back into the brush, but I'd got so far along with it I couldn't help finishin'. You thought the wrong man got throw'd in."

"You knew I thought that of you—and you didn't hate me?"

"Yes, I knew what you thought. You thought it was me that was searchin' your cabin, too. An' of course I didn't hate you because you couldn't hardly help figurin' that way after you'd run onto the place in the rim-rocks where I watched from. If it wasn't for the trees I could have strung along in a different place each time, but that's the only spot that your cabin shows up from."

"And you knew that they always followed me through the hills?"

"Yes, an' they wasn't the only ones that followed. Clendenning ain't as bad as Bethune, for all he's throw'd in with him. The days Bethune followed you, I followed Bethune. An' when Clendenning followed you, I prospected, mostly."

"You thought Bethune might have—have attacked me?"

"I wasn't takin' any chances—not with him, I wasn't. One day, I thought for a minute he was goin' to try it. It was the day you an' him et lunch together—when he pretended to be so surprised at runnin' onto you. I laid behind a rock with a bead draw'd on him. He stopped just exactly one step this side of hell, that day."

Patty regarded the cowboy thoughtfully: "And Bethune told me he had to go over onto the east slope to see about some horses. It was after we had met Pierce, and Bethune asked about Mr. Samuelson and Pierce snubbed him. I believe Bethune planned that raid. And seeing us together that day, Pierce jumped to the conclusion that I was in with him."

"Yes, it was Monk's raid, all right, an' him an' Clendenning got away. He doped it all out that day. I followed him when he quit you there on the trail, an' watched him plan out the route they'd take with the horses. Then I done some plannin' of my own. That's why we was able to head 'em off so handy. We didn't get Bethune an' Clendenning but I'll get 'em yet."

They had mounted and were riding toward Samuelson's. "Maybe he's made his escape across the line," ventured the girl, after a long silence.

Holland shook his head: "No, he ain't across the line. He don't think we savvy he was in on the raid, an' he'll stick around the hills an' prob'ly put a crew to work on his claim." He relapsed into silence, and as they rode side by side, under the cover of her hat brim, Patty found

opportunity to study the lean brown face.

"Where's your gun?" The man asked the question abruptly, without removing his eyes from the fore-trail.

"I left it home. I only carried it once or twice. It's heavy, and anyway it was silly to carry it, I don't even know how to fire it, let alone hit anything."

"If it's too heavy on your belt you can carry it on your saddle horn. I'll show you how to use it—an' how to shoot where you hold it, too. Mrs. Samuelson ain't as husky as you are, an' she can wipe a gnat's eye with a six-gun, either handed. Practice is all it takes, an'——"

"But, why should I carry it? Bethune would hardly dare harm me, and anyway, now that he thinks he has stolen my secret, he wouldn't have any object in doing so."

"You're goin' to keep on huntin' your dad's claim, ain't you?"

"Of course I am! And I'll find it, too."

"An', in the meantime, what if Bethune finds out he's been tricked? These French breeds go crazy when they're mad—an' he'll either lay for you just to get even, or he'll see that he gets the right dope next time—an' maybe you know what that means, an' maybe you don't—but I do."

The girl nodded, and as the horses scrambled up the steep slope of a low divide, her eyes sought the hundred and one hiding places among the loose rocks and scrub that might easily conceal a lurking enemy, and she shuddered. As they topped the divide, both reined in and sat gazing silently down the little valley before them. It was the place of their first meeting, when the girl, tired, and lost and discouraged, had dismounted upon that very spot and watched the unknown horseman with his six-shooter, and his brown leather jug

slowly ascend the slope. She glanced at him now, as he sat, rugged and lean, with his eyes on the little valley. He was just the same, grave and unsmiling, as upon the occasion of their first meeting. She noticed that he held his Stetson in his hand, and that the wind rippled his hair. "Just the same," she thought—and yet—. She was aware that her heart was pounding strangely, and that instead of a fear of this man, she was conscious of a wild desire to throw herself into his arms and cry with her face against the bandage that bulged the shirt sleeve just below the shoulder.

"I call this Lost Creek," said Holland, without turning his head. "I come here often—" and added, confusedly, "It's a short cut from my camp to the trail."

Patty felt an overpowering desire to laugh. She tried to think of something to say: "I—I thought you were a desperado," she murmured, and giggled nervously.

"An' I thought you was a schoolma'am. I guess I was the first to change my mind, at that."

Patty felt herself blushing furiously for no reason at all: "But—I have changed my mind—or I wouldn't be here, now."

Vil Holland nodded: "I expect I'll ride to town from Samuelson's. My jug's empty, an' I guess I might's well file that homestead 'fore someone else beats me to it. I've got a hunch maybe I'll be rollin' up that cabin—before snow flies."

CHAPTER XVII

UNMASKED

At the Samuelson's ranch they found not only the doctor but Len Christie. Mr. Samuelson's condition had taken a sudden turn for the better and it was a jubilant little group that welcomed Patty as she rode up to the veranda. Vil Holland had muttered an excuse and gone directly to the bunk house where the doctor sought him out a few minutes later and attended to his wound. From the top of "Lost Creek" divide, the ride had been made almost in silence. The cowboy's reference to his jug had angered the girl into a moody reserve which he made no effort to dispel.

The news of Patty's rescue from the horse herd had preceded her, having been recounted by the Samuelson riders upon their return to the ranch, and Mrs. Samuelson blamed herself unmercifully for having allowed the girl to venture down the valley alone. Which self-accusation was promptly silenced by Patty, who gently forced the old lady into an arm chair, and called her Mother Samuelson, and seated herself upon the step at her feet, and assured her that she wouldn't have missed the adventure for the world.

"We'll have a jolly little dinner party this evening," beamed Mrs. Samuelson, an hour later when the girl had finished recounting her part in the night's adventure, "there'll be you and Mr. Christie, and Doctor Mallory, and the boys from the bunk house, and Vil Holland, and it will be in honor of Mr. Samuelson's turn for the better, and your escape, and the successful routing of the horse-thieves."

"Too late to count Vil Holland in," smiled the doctor, who had returned to the veranda in time to hear the arrangement, "said he had important business in town, and pulled out as soon as I'd got his arm

rigged up." And, in the doorway, the Reverend Len Christie smiled behind a screen of cigarette smoke as he noted the toss of the head, and the decided tightening of the lips with which Patty greeted the announcement.

"But, he's wounded!" protested Mrs. Samuelson. "In his condition, ought he attempt a ride like that?"

The doctor laughed: "You can't hurt these clean-blooded young bucks with a flesh wound. As far as fitness is concerned, he can ride to Jericho if he wants to. Too bad he won't quit prospecting and settle down. He'd make some girl a mighty fine husband."

Christie laughed. "I don't think Vil is the marrying kind. In the first place he's been bitten too deep with the prospecting bug. And, again, women don't appeal to him. He's wedded to his prospecting. He only stops when driven to it by necessity, then he only works long enough to save up a grub-stake and he's off for the hills again. I can't imagine that high priest of the pack horse and the frying pan living in a house!"

And so the talk went, everyone participating except Patty, who sat and listened with an elaborate indifference that caused the Reverend Len to smile again to himself behind the gray cloud of his cigarette smoke.

"You haven't forgotten about my school?" asked Patty next morning, as Christie and the doctor were preparing to leave for town.

"Indeed, I haven't!" laughed the Bishop of All Outdoors. "School opens the first of September, and that's not very far away. But badly as we need you, somehow I feel that we are not going to get you."

"Why?" asked the girl in surprise.

"A whole lot may happen in ten days—and I've got a hunch that before that time you will have made your strike."

"I hope so!" she exclaimed fervidly. "I know I shall just hate to teach school—and I'd never do it, either, if I didn't need a grub-stake."

As she watched him ride away, Patty was joined by Mrs. Samuelson who stepped from the house and thrust her arm through hers. "My husband wants to meet you, my dear. He's so very much better this morning—quite himself. And I must warn you that that means he's rough as an old bear, apparently, although in reality he's got the tenderest heart in the world. He always puts his worst foot foremost with strangers—he may even swear."

Patty laughed: "I'm not afraid. You seem to have survived a good many years of him. He really can't be so terrible!"

"Oh, he's not terrible at all. Only, I know how much depends upon first impressions—and I do want you to like us."

Patty drew the old lady's arm about her waist and together they ascended the stairs: "I love you already, and although I have never met him I am going to love Mr. Samuelson, too—you see, I have heard a good deal about him here in the hills."

Entering the room, they advanced to the bed where a big-framed man with a white mustache and a stubble of gray beard lay propped up on pillows. Sickness had not paled the rich mahogany of the weather-seamed face, and the eyes that met Patty's from beneath their bushy brows were bright as a boy's. "Good morning! Good morning! So, you're Rod Sinclair's daughter, are you? An' a chip of the old block, by what mama's been tellin' me. I knew Rod well. He was a real prospector. Knew his business, an' went at it business fashion. Wasn't like most of 'em—makin' their rock-peckin' an excuse to get out of workin'. They tell me you ain't afraid to live alone in the hills, an' ain't afraid to make a midnight ride to fetch the doc for an old long-horn like me. That's stuff! Didn't know they bred it east of the Mizoo. The ones mama an' I've seen around the theaters an' restaurants on

our trips East would turn a man's stomach. Why, damn it, young woman, if I ever caught a daughter of mine painted up like a Piute an' stripped to the waist smokin' cigarettes an' drinkin' cocktails in a public restaurant, I'd peel the rest of her duds off an' turn her over my knee an' take a quirt to her, if she was forty!"

"Why, *papa*!"

"I would too—an' so would you!" Patty saw the old eyes twinkling with mischief, and she laughed merrily:

"And so would I," she agreed. "So there's no chance for any argument, is there?"

"We must go, now," reminded Mrs. Samuelson. "The doctor said you could not see any visitors yet. He made a special exception of Miss Sinclair, for just a few minutes."

"I wish you would call me Patty," smiled the girl. "Miss Sinclair sounds so—so formal——"

"Me, too!" exclaimed the invalid. "I'll go you one better, an' call you Pat ——"

"If you do, I'll call you Pap—" laughed the girl.

"That's a trade! An' say, they tell me you live over in Watts's sheep camp. If you should happen to run across that reprobate of a Vil Holland, you tell him to come over here. I want to see him about——"

"There, now, papa—remember the doctor said——"

"I don't care what the doctor said! He's finished his job an' gone, ain't he? It's bad enough to have to do what he says when you're sick—but, I'm all right now, an' the quicker he finds out I didn't hire him for a guardian, the better it'll be all round. As I was goin' to say, you tell Vil that Old Man Samuelson wants to see him *pronto*. Fall's comin' on,

an' I'll have my hands full this winter with the horses. He's the only cowman in the hills I'd trust them white faces with, an' he's got to winter 'em for me. He's a natural born cowman an' there's big money in it after he gets a start. I'll give him his start. It's time he woke up, an' left off his damned rock-peckin', an' settled down. If he keeps on long enough he'll have these hills whittled down as flat as North Dakota, an' the wind'll blow us all over into the sheep country. Now, Pat, can you remember all that?"

The girl turned in the doorway, and smiled into the bright old eyes: "Oh, yes, Pap, I'll tell him if I see him. Good-by!"

"Good-by, an' good luck to you! Come to see us often. We old folks get pretty lonesome sometimes—especially mama. You see, I've got all the best of it—I've got her, an' she's only got me!"

As Patty threaded the hills toward her cabin her thoughts followed the events of the past few days; the visit of Len Christie in the early morning, when he had inadvertently showed her how to read her father's map, the staking of the false claim, the visit to the Samuelson ranch, the horse raid, the finding of Vil Holland's glove and the bitter disappointment that followed, then the finding of the notice that disclosed the identity of the real thief, and her genuine joy in the discovery, her visit to Holland's camp, and their long ride together. "I tried to show him that all my distrust of him was gone, but he hardly seemed to notice—unless—I wonder what he *did* mean about having a hunch that he would build that cabin before snow flies?"

For some time she rode in silence, then she burst out vehemently: "I don't care! I could love him—so there! I could just adore him! And I don't wonder everybody likes him. He seems always so—so capable—so confident. You just can't help liking him. If it weren't for that old jug! He had to drag that in, even up there when he stood on the spot where we first met—and then at the Samuelsons' he wouldn't even wait for dinner he was so crazy to get his old whisky jug filled. It never

seems to hurt him any," she continued. "But nobody can drink as much as he does and not be hurt by it. I just know he meant that the cabin was going to be for me—or, did he know that Mr. Samuelson was going to ask him to winter the cattle? He's a regular cave man—I don't know whether I've been proposed to, or not!"

She crossed the trail for town and struck into a valley that should bring her out somewhere along the Watts fences. So engrossed was she in her thoughts that she failed to notice the horseman who slipped noiselessly into the scrub a quarter of a mile ahead. Slowly she rode up the valley: "If he comes to teach me how to shoot, I'll tell him that Mr. Samuelson wants to see him, and if he says any more about the cabin, or—or anything—I'll tell him he can choose between me and his jug. And, if he chooses the jug, and I don't find daddy's mine—it isn't long 'til school opens. I don't mind—he has to work to get his grub-stake, and so will I."

Her horse snorted and shied violently, and when Patty recovered her seat it was to find her way blocked by a horseman who stood not ten feet in front of her and leered into her eyes. The horseman was Monk Bethune—a malignant, terrifying Bethune, as he sat regarding her with his sneering smile. The girl's first impulse was to turn and fly, but as if divining her thoughts, the man pushed nearer, and she saw that his eyes gleamed horribly between lids drawn to slits. Had he discovered that she had tricked him with a false claim? If not why the glare of hate and the sneering smile that told plainer than words that he had her completely in his power, and knew it.

"So, my fine lady—we meet again! We have much to talk about—you and I. But, first, about the claim. You thought you were very wise with your lying about not having a map. You thought to save the whole loaf for yourself—you thought I was fool enough to believe you. If you had let me in, you would have had half—now you have nothing. The claim is all staked and filed, and the adjoining claims for a mile are staked

with the stakes of my friends—and you have nothing! You were the fool! You couldn't have won against me. Failing in my story of partnership with your father, I had intended to marry you, and failing in that, I should have taken the map by force—for I knew you carried it with you. But I dislike violence when the end may be gained by other means, so I waited until, at last, happened the thing I knew would happen—you became careless. You left your precious map and photograph in plain sight upon your little table—and now you have nothing." So he had not discovered the deception, but, through accident or design, had seized this opportunity to gloat over her, and taunt her with her loss. His carefully assumed mask of suave courtliness had disappeared, and Patty realized that at last she was face to face with the real Bethune, a creature so degenerate that he boasted openly of having stolen her secret, as though the fact redounded greatly to his credit.

A sudden rage seized her. She touched her horse with the spur: "Let me pass!" she demanded, her lips white.

The man's answer was a sneering laugh, as he blocked her way: "Ho! not so fast, my pretty! How about the Samuelson horse raid—your part in it? Three of my best men are in hell because you tipped off that raid to Vil Holland! How you found it out I do not know—but women, of a certain kind, can find out anything from men. No doubt Clen, in some sweet secret meeting place, poured the story into your ear, although he denies it on his life."

"What do you mean?"

"Ha! Ha! Injured innocence!" He leered knowingly into her flashing eyes: "It seems that everyone else knew what I did not. But, I am of a forgiving nature. I will not see you starve. Leave the others and come to me——"

"*You cur!*" The words cut like a swish of a lash, and again the man

laughed:

"Oh, not so fast, you hussy! I must admit it rather piqued me to be bested in the matter of a woman—and by a soul-puncher. I was on hand early that morning, to spy upon your movements, as was my custom. I speak of the morning following the night that the very Reverend Christie spent with you in your cabin. I should not have believed it had I not seen his horse running unsaddled with your own. Also later, I saw you come out of the cabin together. Then I damned myself for not having reached out before and taken what was there for me to take."

With a low cry of fury, the girl drove her spurs into her horse's sides. The animal leaped against Bethune's horse, forcing him aside. The quarter-breed reached swiftly for her bridle reins, and as he leaned forward with his arm outstretched, Patty summoned all her strength and, whirling her heavy braided rawhide quirt high above her head, brought it down with the full sweep of her muscular arm. The feel of the blow was good as it landed squarely upon the inflamed brutish face, and the shrill scream of pain that followed, sent a wild thrill of joy to the very heart of the girl. Again, the lash swung high, this time to descend upon the flank of her horse, and before Bethune could recover himself, the frenzied animal shot up the valley, running with every ounce there was in him.

The valley floor was fairly level, and a hundred yards away the girl shot a swift glance over her shoulder. Bethune's horse was getting under way in frantic leaps that told of cruel spurring, and with her eyes to the front, she bent forward over the horn and slapped her horse's neck with her gloved hand. She remembered with a quick gasp of relief that Bethune prided himself upon the fact that he never carried a gun. She had once taunted Vil Holland with the fact, and he had replied that "greasers and breeds were generally sneaking enough to be knife men." Again, she glanced over her shoulder and smiled grimly

as she noted that the distance between the two flying horses had increased by half. "Good old boy," she whispered. "You can beat him—can 'run rings around him,' as Vil would say. It would be a long knife that could harm me now," she thought, as she pulled her Stetson tight against the sweep of the rushing wind. The ground was becoming more and more uneven. Loose rock fragments were strewn about in increasing numbers, and the valley was narrowing to an extent that necessitated frequent fording of the shallow creek. "He can't make any better time than I can," muttered the girl, as she noted the slackening of her horse's speed. She was riding on a loose rein, giving her horse his head, for she realized that to force him might mean a misstep and a fall. She closed her eyes and shuddered at the thoughts of a fall. A thousand times better had she fallen and been pounded to a pulp by the flying hoofs of the horse herd, than to fall now—and survive it. The ascent became steeper. Her horse was still running, but very slowly. His neck and shoulders were reeking with sweat, and she could hear the labored breath pumping through his distended nostrils.

A sudden fear shot through her. Nine valleys in every ten, she knew, ended in surmountable divides; and she knew, also, that one valley in every ten did not. Suppose this one that she had chosen at random terminated in a cul-de-sac? The way became steeper. Running was out of the question, and her horse was forging upward in a curious scrambling walk. A noise of clattering rocks sounded behind her, and Patty glanced backward straight into the face of Bethune. Reckless of a fall, in the blind fury of his passion, the quarter-breed had forced his horse to his utmost, and rapidly closed up the gap until scarcely ten yards separated him from the fleeing girl.

In a frenzy of terror she lashed her laboring horse's flanks as the animal dug and clawed like a cat at the loose rock footing of the steep ascent. White to the lips she searched the foreground for a ravine or a coulee that would afford a means of escape. But before

her loomed only the ever steepening wall, its surface half concealed by the scattering scrub. Once more she looked backward. The breath was whistling through the blood-red flaring nostrils of Bethune's horse, and her glance flew to the face of the man. Never in her wildest nightmares had she imagined the soul-curdling horror of that face. The lips writhed back in a hideous grin of hate. A long blue-red welt bisected the features obliquely—a welt from which red blood flowed freely at the corner of a swollen eye. White foam gathered upon the distorted lips and drooled down onto the chin where it mingled with the blood in a pink meringue that dripped in fluffy chunks upon his shirt front. The uninjured eye was a narrow gleam of venom, and the breath swished through the man's nostrils as from the strain of great physical labor.

"Oh, for my gun!" thought the girl. "I'd—I'd *kill* him!" With a wild scramble her horse went down. "Vil! Vil!" she shrieked, in a frenzy of despair, and freeing herself from the floundering animal, she struggled to her feet and faced her pursuer with a sharp rock fragment upraised in her two hands.

Monk Bethune laughed—as the fiends must laugh in hell. A laugh that struck a chill to the very heart of the girl. Her muscles went limp at the sound of it and she felt the strength ebbing from her body like sand from an upturned glass. The rock fragment became an insupportable weight. It crashed to the ground, and rolled clattering to Bethune's feet. He, too, had dismounted, and stood beside his horse, his fists slowly clenching and unclenching in gloating anticipation. Patty turned to run, but her limbs felt numb and heavy, and she pitched forward upon her knees. With a slow movement of his hand, Bethune wiped the pink foam from his chin, examined it, snapped it from his fingers, cleansed them upon the sleeve of his shirt—and again, deliberately, he laughed, and started to climb slowly forward.

A rock slipped close beside the girl, and the next instant a voice

sounded in her ear: "I don't reckon he's 'round yere, Miss. I hain't saw Vil this mo'nin'." Rifle in hand, Watts stepped from behind a scrub pine, and as his eyes fell upon Bethune, he stood fumbling his beard with uncertain fingers.

"He—he'll kill me!" gasped the girl.

"Sho', now, Miss—he won't hurt yo' none, will yo', Mr. Bethune? Gineral Jackson! Mr. Bethune, look at yo' face! Yo' must of rode again' a limb!"

"Shut up, and get out of here!" screamed the quarter-breed. "And, if you know what's good for you, you'll forget that you've seen anyone this morning."

"B'en layin' up yere in the gap fer to git me a deer. I heerd yo'-all comin', like, so's I waited."

"Get out, I tell you, before I kill you!" cried Bethune, beside himself with rage. "Go!" The man's hand plunged beneath his shirt and came out with a glitter of steel.

The mountaineer eyed the blade indifferently, and turned to the girl. "Ef yo' goin' my ways, ma'am, jest yo' lead yo' hoss on ahaid. They's a game trail runs slaunchways up th'ough the gap yender. I'll kind o' foller 'long behind."

"You fool!" shrilled Bethune, as he made a grab for the girl's reins, and the next instant found himself looking straight into the muzzle of Watts's rifle.

"Drap them lines," drawled the mountaineer, "thet hain't yo' hoss. An' what's over an' above, yo' better put up yo' whittle, an' tu'n 'round an' go back wher' yo' com' from."

"Lower that gun!" commanded Bethune. "It's cocked!"

"Yes, hit's cocked, Mr. Bethune, an' hit's sot mighty light on the trigger. Ef I'd git a little scairt, er a little riled, er my foot 'ud slip, yo'd have to be drug down to wher' the diggin's easy, an' buried."

Bethune deliberately slipped the knife back into his shirt, and laughed: "Oh, come, now, Watts, a joke's a joke. I played a joke on Miss Sinclair to frighten her——"

"Yo' done hit, all right," interrupted Watts. "An' thet's the end on't."

The rifle muzzle still covered Bethune's chest in the precise region of his heart, and once more he changed his tactics: "Don't be a fool, Watts," he said, in an undertone, "I'm rich—richer than you, or anyone else knows. I've located Rod Sinclair's strike and filed it. If you just slip quietly off about your business, and forget that you ever saw anyone here this morning—and see to it that you never remember it again, you'll never regret it. I'll make it right with you—I'll file you next to discovery."

"Yo' mean," asked Watts, slowly, "thet you've stoled the mine offen Sinclair's darter, an' filed hit yo'self, an' thet ef I go 'way an' let yo' finish the job by murderin' the gal, yo'll give me some of the mine—is thet what yo' tryin' to git at?"

"Put it anyway you want to, damn you! Words don't matter, but for God's sake, get out! If she once gets through the gap——"

"Bethune," Watts drawled the name, even more than was his wont, and the quarter-breed noticed that the usually roving eyes had set into a hard stare behind which lurked a dangerous glitter, "yo're a ornery, low-down cur-dog what hain't fitten to be run with by man, beast, or devil. I'd ort to shoot yo' daid right wher' yo' at—an' mebbe I will. But comin' to squint yo' over, that there damage looks mo' like a quirt-lick than a limb. Thet ort to hurt like fire fer a couple a days, an' when it lets up yo' face hain't a-goin' to be so purty as what hit wus. Ef she'd jest

of drug the quirt along a little when hit landed she c'd of cut plumb into the bone—but hit's middlin' fair, as hit stands. I'm a-goin' to give yo' a chanct—an' a warnin', too. Next time I see yo' I'm a-going' to kill yo'—whenever, or wherever hit's at. I'll do hit, jest as shore as my name is John Watts. Yo' kin go now—back the way yo' come, pervidin' yo' go fast. I'm a-goin' to count up to wher' I know how to—I hain't never be'n to school none, but I counted up to nineteen, onct—an' whin I git to wher' I cain't rec'lec' the nex' figger, I'm a-goin' to shoot, an' shoot straight. An' I hain't a-goin' to study long about them figgers, neither. Le's see, one comes fust—yere goes, then: One ... Two...." For a single instant, Bethune gazed into the man's eyes and the next, he sprang into the saddle, and dashing wildly down the steep slope, disappeared into the scrub.

"Spec' I'd ort to killed him," regretted the mountaineer, as he lowered the rifle, and gazed off down the valley, "but I hain't got no appetite fer diggin'."

CHAPTER XVIII

PATTY MAKES HER STRIKE

It was noon, one week from the day she had returned from the Samuelson ranch, and Patty Sinclair stood upon the high shoulder of a butte and looked down into a rock-rimmed valley. Her eyes roved slowly up and down the depression where the dark green of the scrub contrasted sharply with the crinkly buffalo grass, yellowed to spun gold beneath the rays of the summer sun.

She reached up and stroked the neck of her horse. "Just think, old partner, three days from now I may be teaching school in that horrid little town with its ratty hotel, and its picture shows, and its saloons, and you may be turned out in a pasture with nothing to do but eat and grow fat! If we don't find our claim to-day, or to-morrow, it's good-by hill country 'til next summer."

The day following her encounter with Bethune, Vil Holland had appeared, true to his promise, and instructed her in the use of her father's six-gun. At the end of an hour's practice, she had been able to kick up the dirt in close proximity to a tomato can at fifteen steps, and twice she had actually hit it. "That's good enough for any use you're apt to have for it," her instructor had approved. "The main thing is that you ain't afraid of it. An' remember," he added, "a gun ain't made to bluff with. Don't pull it on anyone unless you go through with it. Only short-horns an' pilgrims ever pull a gun that don't need wipin' before it's put back—I could show you the graves of several of 'em. I'm leavin' you some extry shells that you can shoot up the scenery with. Always pick out somethin' little to shoot at—start in with tin cans and work down to match-sticks. When you can break six match-sticks with six shots at ten steps in ten seconds folks will call you handy with a gun." He had made no mention of his trip to town, of his filing a homestead,

or of their conversation upon the top of Lost Creek divide. When the lesson was finished, he had refused Patty's invitation to supper, mounted his horse, and disappeared up the ravine that led to the notch in the hills. Although neither had mentioned it, Patty somehow felt that he had heard from Watts of her encounter with Bethune. And now a week had passed and she had seen neither Vil Holland nor the quarter-breed. It had been a week of anxiety and hard work for the girl who had devoted almost every hour of daylight to the unraveling of her father's map. Simple as the directions seemed, her inability to estimate distances had proven a serious handicap. But by dogged perseverance, and much retracing of steps, and correcting of false leads, she finally stood upon the rim of the valley she judged to lie two miles east of the humpbacked butte that she had figured to be the inverted U of her father's map.

"If this isn't the valley, I'm through for this year," she said. "And I've got to-day and to-morrow to explore it." She wondered at her indifference—at her strange lack of excitement at this, the crucial moment of her long quest, even as she had wondered at her absence of fear, believing as she did, that Bethune was still in the hills. The feeling inspired by the outlaw had been a feeling of rage, rather than terror, and had rapidly crystallized in her outraged mind into an abysmal soul-hate. She knew that, should the man accost her again, she would kill him—and not for a single instant did she doubt her ability to kill him. Vaguely, as she stood looking out over the valley, she wondered if he were following her—if at that moment he were lying concealed, somewhere among the surrounding rocks or patches of scrub? Yet, she was conscious of no feeling of fear. She even attempted no concealment as, standing there upon the bare rock, she drew her father's map and photographs from her pocket and subjected them to a long and minute scrutiny. And then, still holding them in her hand, gazed once more over the valley. "To 'a,' to 'b,'" she repeated. "What is there that daddy would have designed as 'a,' and 'b?'" Suddenly, her glance became fixed upon a point up the valley that lay just within

her range of vision. With puckered eyes and hat-brim drawn low upon her forehead, she stared steadily into the distance. She knew that she had never before seen this valley, and yet the place seemed, somehow, strangely familiar. With a low cry she bent over one of the photographs. Her hands trembled violently as her eyes once more flew to the valley. Yes, there it was, spread out before her just the way it was in the photograph—the rock-strewn ground—she could even identify the various rocks with the rocks in the picture. There was the lone tree, and the long rock wall, higher at its upper end, and—yes, she could just discern it—the zigzag crack in the rock ledge! Jamming the papers into her pocket she leaped into the saddle and dashed toward a fringe of scrub that marked the course of a coulee which led downward into the valley. Over its edge, and down its brush-choked course, slipping, sliding, scrambling, she urged her horse, reckless of safety, reckless of anything except that her weary, and at times it had seemed her hopeless, search was about to end. She had stood where her daddy had stood when he took that photograph—had seen with her own eyes—the jagged crack in the rock wall!

In the valley the going was better, and with quirt and spur she urged her horse to his best, her eyes on the lone pine tree. At the rock wall beyond, she pulled up sharply and stared at the jagged crevice that bisected it from top to bottom. It was the crevice of the photograph! Very deliberately she began at the top and traced its course to the bottom. She noted the scraggly, stunted pines that fringed the rim of the wall and that the crack started straight, and then zigzagged to the ground. Producing the "close up" photograph, she compared it with the reality before her—an entirely superfluous and needless act, for each minute detail of the spot at which she stared was indelibly engraved upon her memory. For hours on end, she had studied those photographs, and now—she laughed aloud, and the sound roused her to action. Slipping from the horse, she fumbled at the pack strings of the saddle and loosened the canvas bag. She reached into it, and stood erect holding a light hand-axe. Once more she consulted her

map. "Stake I. c.," she read. "That's lode claim—and then that funny wiggly mark, and then the word center." Her brows drew together as she studied the ground. Suddenly her face brightened. "Why, of course!" she exclaimed. "That mark represents the crack, and daddy meant to stake the claim with the crack for the center. Well, here goes!" She vehemently attacked a young sapling, and ten minutes later viewed with pride her four roughly hacked stakes. Picking up one of them and the axe, she paced off her distance, and as she reached the first corner point, stared in surprise at the ground. The claim had already been staked! Eagerly she stooped to examine the bit of wood. It had evidently been in place for some time—how long, the girl could not tell. Long enough, though, for its surface to have become weather-grayed and discolored. "Daddy's stakes," she breathed softly, and as her fingers strayed over the surface two big tears welled into her eyes and trickled unheeded down her cheeks. "If he staked the claim, I wonder why he didn't file," she puzzled over the matter for a moment, and dismissed it. "I don't know why. But, anyway, the thing for me to do is to get in my own stakes—only, I'll file, just as soon as I can get to the register's office."

After considerable difficulty, she succeeded in planting her own stake close beside the other, which marked the southwest corner of the claim, a short time later the northwest corner was staked, and the girl stared again at the rock wall. "Why, I've got to put in my eastern boundary stakes up on top—three hundred feet back from the edge!" she exclaimed; "maybe I'll find his notice on one of those stakes." It required only a moment to locate a ravine that led to the top of the ledge which was not nearly so high as the one that formed the opposite side of the valley. She found the old stakes, but no sign of a notice. "The wind, and the snow, and the rain have destroyed it long ago," she muttered. "And, now for my own notice." Producing from her bag a pencil and a piece of paper, she wrote her description and affixed it to a stake by means of a bit of wire. Then, descending once more into the valley, she produced her luncheon and threw herself

down beside the little creek. It was mid-afternoon, and she suddenly discovered that she was ravenously hungry. With her back against a rock fragment, she sat and feasted her eyes upon her claim—hers—Hers! Her thoughts flew backward to the enthusiasm of her father over this very claim. She remembered how his eyes had lighted as he told her of its hidden treasure. She remembered the jibes, and doubts, and covert sneers of the Middleton people, her father's death, her own anger and revolt, when she had suddenly decided, in the face of their council, entreaties, and commands to take up his work where he had left it. With kaleidoscopic rapidity her thoughts flew over the events of the ensuing months—the meeting with Vil Holland, her disappointment in the Watts ranch, her eager acceptance of the sheep camp, the long weary weeks of patiently riding along rock walls, taking each valley in turn, the growing fear of running out of funds before she could locate the claim. She shuddered as she thought of Monk Bethune, and of how nearly she had fallen a victim to his machinations. Her thoughts returned to Vil Holland, her "guardian devil of the hills," who had turned out to be in reality a guardian angel in disguise. "Very much in disguise," she smiled, "with his jug of whisky." Nobody who had helped make up her little world of people in the hill country was forgotten, the Thompsons, the Samuelsons, and the Wattses—she thought of them all. "Why, I—I love every one of them," she cried, as though the discovery surprised her. "They're all, every one of them, real friends—they're not like the others, the smug, sleek, best citizens of Middleton. And I'll not forget one of them. We'll file that whole vein from one end to the other!" Catching up her horse, she mounted, and sat for a moment irresolute. "I could make town, sometime to-night," she mused, and then her eyes rested for a moment upon her horse's neck where the white alkali dust lay upon the rough, sweat-dried hair. "No," she decided. "We'll go back to the cabin, and you can rest up, and to-morrow we'll start at daylight."

"Mr. Christie was right," she smiled, as she took the back trail for Monte's Creek. "I don't have to teach school. But, I wonder how he

could have gotten that 'hunch,' as he called it? When I've been searching for the claim for months?"

In a little valley that ran parallel to Monte's Creek, Patty encountered Microby Dandeline. The girl was lying stretched at full length upon the ground and did not notice her approach until she was almost on her, then she leaped to her feet, regarded her for a moment, and, with a frightened cry, sprang into the bush and scrambled out of sight along the steep side of a ravine. In vain Patty called, but her only answer was the diminishing sounds of the girl's scrambling flight. "What in the world has got into her of late," she wondered, as she proceeded on her way. Certain it was that the girl avoided her, not only at the Watts ranch, but whenever they had chanced to meet in the hills. At first she had attributed it to anger or resentment over her own treatment of her when she had tried to get possession of the map. But, surely, even the dull-witted Microby must know that the incident had been forgotten. "No," she decided, "there is something else." Somehow, the girl no longer seemed the simple child-like creature of the wild. There was a furtiveness about her, and she had developed a certain crafty side glance, as though constantly seeking a means of escape from something. Her mother had noticed the change, and had confided to Patty that she was "gittin' mo' triflin' every day, a-rammin' 'round the hills a-huntin' her a mine." "There's something worrying her," muttered the girl. "Something that she don't dare tell anyone, and it's sapping what little wit she has."

It was late that evening when Patty ate her solitary supper. The sun had long set, and the dusk of the late twilight had settled upon the valley of Monte's Creek as she wiped the last dish and set it upon the shelf of her tiny cupboard. Suddenly she looked up. A form darkened the doorway, and quick as a flash, her eyes sought the six-gun that lay in its holster upon the bunk.

"You won't need that." The voice was reassuring. It was Vil Holland's

voice; she had recognized him a second before he spoke and greeted him with a smile, even as she wondered what had brought him there. Only three times before had he come to her cabin, once to ascertain who was moving into the sheep camp, once when he had pitched Lord Clendenning into the creek, and again, only a few days before, when he had come to teach her to shoot. The girl noted that he seemed graver than usual, if that were possible. Certain it was that he appeared to be holding himself under restraint. She wondered if he had come to warn her of the proximity of Bethune.

"I was in town, to-day," he came directly to the point. "An' Len Christie told me you're goin' to teach school." He paused and his eyes rested upon her face as if seeking confirmation.

Patty laughed; she could afford to laugh, now that the necessity for teaching did not exist. "I asked him if he could find a school for me sometime ago," she replied, trying to fathom what was in his mind.

There was a moment of silence, during which Patty saw the man's fingers tighten upon his hat brim. "I don't want you to do that. It ain't fit work—for you—teachin' other folks' kids."

Patty stared at him in surprise. The words had come slowly, and at their conclusion he had paused.

"Maybe you could suggest some work that is more fit?"

The man ignored the hint of sarcasm. "Yes—I think I can." His head was slightly bowed, and Patty saw that it was with an effort he continued: "That is, I don't know if I can make you see it like I do. It's awful real to me—an' plain. Miss Sinclair, I can't make any fine speeches like they do in books. I wouldn't if I could—it ain't my way. I love you more than I could tell you if I knew all the words in the language, an' how to fit 'em together. I loved you that day I first saw you—back there on the divide at Lost Creek. You was afraid of me,

an' you wouldn't show it, an' you wouldn't own up that you was lost—'til I'd made the play of goin' off an' leavin' you. An' I've loved you every minute since—an' every minute since, I've fought against lovin' you. But, it's no use. The more I fight it, the stronger it gets. It's stronger than I am. I can't down it. It's the first time I ever ran up against anything I couldn't whip." Again he paused. Patty advanced a step, and her eyes glowed softly as they rested upon the form that stood in her doorway silhouetted against the after-glow. She saw Buck rub his velvet nose affectionately up and down the man's sleeve, and into her heart leaped a great longing for this man who, with the unconscious dignity of the vast open places upon him, had told her so earnestly of his love. She opened her lips to speak but there was a great lump in her throat, and no words came.

"That's why," he continued, "I know it ain't just a flash in the pan—this love of mine ain't. All summer I've watched you, an' the hardest thing I ever had to do was to set back an' let you play a lone hand against the worst devil that ever showed his face in the hills. But the way things stacked up, I had to. You had me sized up for the one that was campin' on your trail, an' anything I'd have done would have played into Bethune's hand. I know I ain't fit for you—no man is. But, I'll always do the best I know how by you—an' I'll always love you. As for the rest of it, I never saved any money. I know there's gold here in the hills, an' I've spent years huntin' it. I'll find it, too—sometime. But, I ain't exactly a pauper, either. I've got my two hands, an' I've got a contract with Old Man Samuelson to winter his cattle. I didn't want to do it first, but the figure he named was about twice what I thought the job was worth. I told him so right out, an' he kind of laughed an' said maybe I'd need it all, an' anyhow, them cattle was all grade Herefords, an' was worth more to winter than common dogies. So, you see, we could winter through, all right, an' next summer, we could prospect together. The gold's here, somewhere—your dad knew it—an' I know it."

Receiving no answering pat, the buckskin left off his nuzzling of the

man's sleeve, and turned from the doorway. As he did so the brown leather jug scraped lightly against the jamb. The girl's eyes flew to the jug, and swiftly back to the man who stood framed in the doorway. She loved him! For days and days she had known that she loved him, and for days and nights her thoughts had been mostly of him—this unsmiling knight of the saddle—her "guardian devil of the hills." Without exception, the people whose regard was worth having respected him, and liked him, even though they deplored his refusal to accept steady work. They're just like the people back home, she thought. They have no imagination. To their minds the cowpuncher who draws his forty dollars a month, year in and year out, is in some manner more dependable than the man whose imagination and love of the boundless open lead him to stake his time against millions. What do they know of the joys and the despairs of uncertainty? In a measure they, too, love the plains and the hills—but their love of the open is inextricably interwoven with their preconceived ideas of conduct. But, Vil Holland is bound by no such convention; his "outfit," a pack horse to carry it, and his home—all outdoors! Her father had imagination, and year after year, in the face of the taunts and jibes of his small town neighbors, he had steadfastly allowed his imagination full sway, and at last—he had won. She had adored her father from whom she had inherited her love of the wild. But—there was the jug! Always her thoughts of Vil Holland had led up to that brown leather jug until she had come to hate it with an unreasoning hatred.

"I see you have not forgotten your jug."

"No, I got it filled in town." The man's reply was casual, as he would have mentioned his gloves, or his hat.

"You said you had never run up against anything you couldn't whip, except—except——"

"Yes, except my love for you. That's right—an' I never expect to."

"How about that jug? Can you whip that?"

"Why, yes, I could. If there was any need. I never tried it."

"Suppose you try it for a while, and see."

The man regarded her seriously. "You mean, if I leave off packin' that jug, you'll——"

"I haven't promised anything." The girl laughed a trifle nervously. "But, I will tell you this much. I utterly despise a drunkard!"

Vil Holland nodded slowly. "Let's get the straight of it," he said. "I didn't know—I didn't realize it was really hurtin' me any. Can you see that it does? Have I ever done anything that you know of, or have heard tell of, that a sober man wouldn't do?"

The girl felt her anger rising. "Nobody can drink as much as you do, and not be the worse for it. Don't try to defend yourself."

"No, I wouldn't do that. You see, if it's hurtin' me, there wouldn't be any defense—an' if it ain't, I don't need any."

For an instant Patty regarded the man who stood framed in the doorway. "Clean-blooded," the doctor had called him, and clean-blooded he looked—the very picture of health and rugged strength, clear of eye and firm of jaw, not one slightest hint or mark of the toper could she detect, and the realization that this was so, angered her the more.

Abruptly, she changed the subject, and the moment the brown leather jug was banished from her mind, her anger subsided. In the doorway, Vil Holland noted the undercurrent of suppressed excitement in her voice as she said: "I have the most wonderful news! I—*I found daddy's mine!*" Seconds passed as the man stood waiting for her to proceed. "I found it to-day," she continued, without noting that his lean

brown hand gripped the hat brim even more tightly than before, nor that his lips were pressed into a thin straight line. "And my stakes are all in, and in the morning I'm going to file."

Vil Holland interrupted. "You—you say you located Rod Sinclair's strike? You really located it?" Somehow, his voice sounded different.

The girl sensed the change without defining it. "Yes, I really found it!" she answered. "Do you want to know where?" Hastily she turned to the cupboard and taking a match from a box, lighted the lamp. "You see," she laughed, "I am not afraid to trust you. I'm going to show you daddy's map, and his photographs, and the samples. Oh, if you knew how I've hunted and hunted through these hills for that rock wall! You see, the map was like so much Greek to me, until I happened by accident to learn how to read it. Before that, I just rode up and down the valleys hunting for the wall with the broad crooked crack in it. Here it is." The man had advanced to the table, and was bending over the two photographs, examining them minutely. "And here's his map." He picked up the paper and for several minutes studied the penciled directions. Then he laid it down, and turned his attention to the samples.

"High grade," he appraised, and returned them to the table beside the photographs. "So, you don't have to teach school," he said, speaking more to himself than to her. "An' you'll be goin' out of the hill country for good an' all. There's nothin' here for you, now that you've got what you come after. You'll be goin' back—East."

Patty laughed, and as Vil Holland looked into her face he saw that her eyes held dancing lights. "I'm not going back East," she said. "I've learned to love—the hill country. I have learned that—perhaps—there is more here for me than—than even daddy's mine."

Vil Holland shook his head. "There's nothin' for you in the hills," he repeated, slowly, and abruptly extended his hand. "I'm glad for your

sake your luck changed, Miss Sinclair. I hope the gold you take out of there will bring you happiness. You've earnt it—every cent of it, an' you've got it, an' now, as far as the hill country goes—the books are closed. Good-night, I must be goin', now."

Abruptly as he had offered his hand, he withdrew it, and turning, stepped through the door, mounted his horse, and rode out into the night.

CHAPTER XIX

THE RACE FOR THE REGISTER

Beside the little table Patty Sinclair listened to the sound of hoofs splashing through the shallows of the creek and thudding dully upon the floor of the valley beyond. When the sounds told her that the horseman had disappeared into the timber, she walked slowly to the door, and leaning her arm against the jamb, stared for a long time into the black sweep of woods that concealed the trail that led upward to the notch in the hills, just discernible against the sky where the stars showed through the last faint blush of after-glow in winking points of gold.

"Nothing here for me," she repeated dully. "Nothing but trees, and hills—and gold. He loves me," she laughed bitterly. "And yet, between me, and his jug, he chose—the jug." She closed the door, slipped the bar into place, thrust the photographs and map into her pocket, and threw herself face downward upon the bunk. And, in the edge of the timber, Vil Holland turned his horse slowly about and headed him up the ravine. At the notch in the hills he slipped to the ground and, throwing an arm across the saddle, removed his Stetson and let the night wind ripple his hair. Standing alone in the night with his soul-hurt, he gazed far downward where a tiny square of yellow light marked the window of the cabin.

"It's hell—the way things work out," he said, thoughtfully. "Yes, sir, Buck, it sure is hell. If Len had told me a week ago about her havin' to teach school, or even yesterday—she might have—But, now—she's rich. An' that cracked rock claim turnin' out to be *hers*—" He swung abruptly into the saddle and headed the buckskin for camp.

Patty spent a miserable night. Brief periods of sleep were

interspersed with long periods of wakefulness in which her brain traveled wearily over and over a long, long trail that ended always at a brown leather jug that swung by a strap from a saddle horn. She had found her father's claim—had accomplished the thing she had started out to accomplish—had vindicated her father's judgment in the eyes of the people back home—had circumvented the machinations of Bethune, and in all probability, the moment that she recorded her claim would be the possessor of more gold than she could possibly spend—and in the achievement there was no joy. There was a dull hurt in her heart, and the future stretched away, uninviting, heart-sickening, interminable. The world looked drab.

She ate her breakfast by lamplight, and as objects began to take form in the pearly light of the new day, she saddled her horse and rode up the trail to the notch in the hills—the trail that was a short cut, and that would carry her past Vil Holland's little white tent, nestling close beside its big rock at the edge of the little plateau. "He will still be asleep, and I can take one more look at the far snow mountains from the spot that might have been the porch of—our cabin."

Carefully keeping to the damp ground that bordered the little creek, she worked her way around the huge rock, and drew up in amazement. The little white tent was gone! Hastily, her eyes swept the plateau. The buckskin was gone, and the saddle was not hanging by its stirrup from its accustomed limb-stub. Crossing the creek, the girl stared at the row of packs, the blanket roll, and the neat tarpaulin-covered bundles that were ranged along the base of the rock.

"He has gone," she murmured, as if trying to grasp the fact and then, again: "He has gone." Slowly, her eyes raised to the high-flung peaks that reared their snowy heads against the blue. And as she looked, the words of Vil Holland formed themselves in her brain. "If there ain't any 'we,' there won't be any cabin—so there's nothing to worry about." "Nothing to worry about," she repeated bitterly, and touching her

horse with a spur, rode out across the plateau toward the head of a coulee that led to the trail for town. "Where has he gone?" she wondered, and pulled up sharply as her horse entered the coulee. Riding slowly down the trail ahead, mounted on the meditative Gee Dot, was Microby Dandeline. Urging her horse forward Patty gained her side, and realizing that escape was hopeless, the girl stared sullenly without speaking.

"Why, Microby!" she smiled, ignoring the sullen stare, "you're miles from home, and it's hardly daylight! Where in the world are you going?"

"Hain't a-goin' nowher'. I'm prospectin'."

"Where's Vil Holland, have you seen him?"

The girl nodded: "He's done gone to town. He's mad, an' he roden fas' as Buck kin run, an' he says, 'I'm gonna file one more claim, an' to hell with the hill country, tell yo' dad good-by!'"

Patty sat for an instant as one stunned. "Gone to town! Mad! File one more claim!" What did it mean? Why was Vil Holland riding to town as fast as his horse could run? And what claim was he going to file? He had mentioned no claim—and if he had just made a strike, surely he would have mentioned it—last night. She knew that he already had a claim, and that he considered it worthless. He told her once that he hadn't even bothered to work out the assessments—it was no good. Was it possible that he was riding to file *her claim*? Was he no better than Bethune—only shrewder, more patient, richer in imagination?

With a swish the quirt descended upon her horse's flanks. The animal shot forward and, leaving Microby Dandeline staring open-mouthed, horse and rider dashed headlong down the coulee. Into the long white trail they swept, through the canyon, and out among the foothills toward Thompsons'. "Why did I show him the map, and the pictures?

Why did I trust him? Why did I trust anybody? I see it all, now! His continual spying, and his plausible explanation that he was watching Bethune. He asked me to marry him, and when, like the poor little fool I was, I showed him the location, he was only too glad to get the mine without being saddled with me."

If Vil Holland reached town first—well, she could teach school. Scalding tears blinded her as with quirt and spur she crowded her horse to his utmost. Only one slender hope remained. With Thompson's fresh horse, Lightning, she might yet win the race. The chance was slim, but she would take it! Her own horse was laboring heavily, a solid lather of sweat, as his feet pounded the trail that wound white and hot through the foothills. "It's your last hard ride," she sobbed into his ear as she urged him on. "Win or lose, boy, it's your last hard ride—and we've got to make it!"

She whirled into Thompson's lane and, in the dooryard, threw herself from her horse almost into the arms of the big ranchman who stared at her in surprise. "Must be somethin's busted loose in the hills, that folks is all takin' to the open!" he exclaimed.

"Where's Lightning?" cried the girl. "Quick! I want him!"

"Lightnin'?" repeated Thompson. "Why, Lightnin's gone—Vil Holland come along an hour or so ago, an' rode him on to town. Turned Buck into the corral, yonder—he was rode down almost as bad as yourn."

Patty's brain reeled dizzily as from a blow. Lightning gone! Her one slim chance of saving her mine had vanished in a breath. She felt suddenly weak, and sick, and leaning against her saddle for support, she closed her eyes and buried her face in her arm.

"What's the matter, Miss? Somethin' wrong?"

The girl laughed, a dry hard laugh, and raising her head, looked into the man's face. "Oh, no!" she said. "Nothing's wrong—nothing except

that I've lost my father's claim—lost it because I relied on your horse to carry me into town in time to file ahead of *him*."

"Lost yer pa's claim?" cried Thompson. "What do you mean—lost? Has that devil dared to show his face after the horse raid?" He paused suddenly and smiled. "Now don't you go worryin' about that there claim. Vil Holland's on the job! I know'd there was somethin' in the wind when he come a-larrupin' in here an' jerked his kak offen Buck an' throw'd it on Lightnin' without hardly a word. Vil, he'll head him! An' when he does, Bethune'll be lucky if he lives long enough to git hung!"

"Bethune! Bethune!" cried the girl bitterly. "Bethune's got nothing to do with it! It's Vil Holland himself that's going to file my claim. Have you got another horse here?" she cried. "If you have I want him. I'm not beaten yet! There's still a chance! Maybe Lightning will go down, or something. Quick—change my saddle!"

Catching up a rope, Thompson ran to the corral and throwing his loop over the head of a horse led him out and transferred the girl's saddle and bridle.

"I don't git the straight of it," he said, eying her with a puzzled frown. "But if it's a question of gittin' to town before Vil Holland kin beat you out of yer claim—you've got plenty of time—if you walk."

Patty shot the man one glance of withering scorn. "You're all *crazy*! He's got you hypnotized! Everybody thinks he's a saint——"

Thompson grinned. "No, Miss, Vil ain't no saint—an' he ain't no devil—neither. But somewheres between the two of 'em is the place where good men fits in—an' that's Vil. You're all het up needless, an' barkin' up the wrong tree, as folks used to say back where I come from. Just come and have a talk with Miz T. She'll straighten you around all right. I'll slip in an' tell her to set the coffee-pot on, an' you kin take yer time

about gittin' to town." Thompson disappeared into the kitchen, and a moment later when he returned with his wife, the two stared in amazement at the flying figure that was just swinging from the lane into the long white trail.

Hours later the girl crossed the Mosquito Flats, forded the river, and passed along the sandy street of the town. Her eyes felt hot and tired from continual straining ahead in a vain effort to catch a glimpse of a fallen horse, whose rider must continue his way on foot. But the plain was deserted, and the only evidence that anyone had proceeded her was an occasional glimpse of hoof prints in the white dust of the trail.

A short distance up the street, standing "tied to the ground" before the hitching rail of a little false-front saloon, was Lightning. Patty noted as she passed that he showed signs of hard riding, and that the inevitable jug dangled motionless from the saddle horn. Her lips stiffened, and her hand tightened on the bridle reins, as she forced her eyes to the front. Farther on, she could see the little white-painted frame office of the register. She would pass it by—no use for her to go there. She must find Len Christie and tell him she had come to teach his school. A great wave of repugnance swept over her, engulfed her, as her eyes traveled over the rows of small wooden houses with their stiff, uncomfortable porches, their treeless yards, and their flaunting paintiness.

"And to think, that I've got to *live* in one of them!" she murmured, dully. "Nothing could be worse—except the hotel."

Opposite the register's office she pulled up, and gazed in fascination at the open door. Then deliberately she reined her horse to the sidewalk and dismounted. The characteristic thoroughness that had marked the progress of her search for her father's claim, and had impelled her to return to the false claim and procure the notice, and that very morning had prompted her to ride against the slender chance of Vil Holland's meeting with a mishap, impelled her now to

read for herself the entry of her father's strike.

The register shoved his black skull-cap a trifle back upon his shiny head, adjusted his thick eyeglasses, and smiled into the face of the girl. "Things must be looking up out in the hills," he hazarded. "You're the second one to-day and it ain't noon yet."

"I presume Mr. Holland has been here."

"Yes, Vil come in. I guess he's around somewheres. He——"

"Relinquished one claim and filed another?"

"That's just what he done."

Patty nodded wearily. She was gamely trying to appear disinterested.

"Did you want to file?" asked the man, whirling a large book about, and pushing it toward her. "Just enter your description there, an' fill out the application fer a patent, an' file your field notes, and plat."

The girl's glance strayed listlessly over the adjoining page, her eyes mechanically taking in the words. Suddenly, she became intensely alert. She leaned over the book and reread with feverish interest the written description. The location was filed in Vil Holland's name—but, *the description was not of her claim*!

"Where—where is this claim?" she gasped.

The old register turned the book and very deliberately proceeded to read the description. In her nervous excitement Patty felt that she must scream, and her fingers clutched the counter edge until the knuckles whitened. Finally the man looked up. "That must be somewheres over on the Blackfoot side," he announced. "Must be Vil's figuring on pulling over there. Too bad we won't be seeing him much no more." He swung the book back, as the import of his words dawned upon the girl she leaned weakly against the counter.

"Ain't you feeling well?" asked the old man, eying her with concern.

Without hearing him Patty picked up the pen, and as she wrote, her hand trembled so that she could scarcely form the letters. At last it was done, and the register once again swung the book and read the freshly penned words.

"Well, I'll be darned!" he exclaimed, when he had finished.

The blood had rushed back into the girl's face and she was regarding him with shining eyes. "What's the matter? Isn't it right? Because if it isn't you can show me how to do it, and I'll fix it."

"Oh it's right—all right." He was eying her quizzically. "Only it's blamed funny. That there's the claim Vil Holland just relinquished."

"*Just relinquished!*" gasped the girl, reaching out and shaking the old man's sleeve in her excitement. "What do you mean? Tell me!"

"Mean just what I said—here's the entry."

"Vil—Holland—just—relinquished," she repeated, in a dazed voice. "When did he file it?"

"I don't recollect—it was back in the winter, or spring." The man began to turn the pages slowly backward. "Here it is, March, the thirteenth."

"Why, that was before I came out here!"

"How?"

"Why did he relinquish?" The words rushed eagerly from her lips, and she awaited breathless, for the answer.

"It wasn't no good, I guess, or he found a better one—that's most generally why they relinquish."

"No good! Found a better one!" From the chaos of conflicting ideas the girl's thoughts began to take definite form. "The stakes in the ground were *his* stakes. Her father had never staked—would never have staked until ready to file."

Gradually it dawned upon her that, without knowing it was her father's, Vil Holland had staked and filed the claim. It was his. He did not know its value as her father had. He believed it to be worthless, but when he learned, only last night, back there in the cabin on Monte's Creek, that it was really of enormous value—that it was the claim Rod Sinclair had staked his reputation on, the claim for which Rod Sinclair's daughter had sought all summer—when he learned this he had relinquished—that she might come into her own! Hot tears filled her eyes and caused the objects in the little room to blur and swim together in hopeless jumble. She knew, now, the meaning of his furious ride, and why he had changed horses at Thompson's. And *this* was the man she had doubted! She, alone of all who knew him, had doubted him. Her cheeks burned with the shame of it. Not once, but again and again, she had doubted him—she, who loved him! This was the man with whom she had quarreled because he had carried a jug. Suddenly she realized why he had turned away from her—there in the little cabin. She recalled the words that came slowly from his lips, as, for a brief moment he stood holding her hand. "There is nothing for you in the hills." "And now, he is going away—his outfit's all packed, and he's going away!" With a sob she dashed from the office. As she blotted the tears from her eyes with a handkerchief that had been her father's, a wild, savage joy surged up within her. He should *not* go away! He was hers—*hers*! If he went, she would go too. He should never leave her! And never, never would she doubt him again!

She glanced down the street and her eyes fell upon Lightning, standing as he had stood a few minutes before. Only a moment she hesitated, and her spurs clicked rapidly as she hurried down the

sidewalk. The door of the saloon stood open and she walked boldly in. Vil Holland stood at the bar shaking dice with the bartender. The latter looked up surprised, and Vil followed his glance to the figure of the girl who had paused just inside the doorway. She beckoned to him and he followed her out onto the sidewalk, and stood, Stetson in hand, regarding her gravely, unsmiling as was his wont.

"Vil—Vil Holland," she faltered, as a furious blush suffused her cheeks. "I've changed my mind."

"You mean——"

"I mean, I will marry you—I wanted to say it—last night—only—only ——" her voice sounded husky, and far away.

"But, now, it's too late. It was different—then. I didn't know you'd made your strike. I thought we were both poor—but, now, you've struck it rich."

"Struck it rich!" flared the girl. "Who made it possible for me to strike it rich? Don't you suppose I know you relinquished that claim? Relinquished it so I could file it!"

"Old Grebble talks too much," growled the man. "The claim wasn't any good to me. I never went far enough in to get samples like those of your dad's. I'd have relinquished it anyway, as soon as I'd located another."

"But, you knew it was rich when you did relinquish it."

"A man couldn't hardly do different, could he?"

"Oh, Vil," there were tears in the girl's eyes, and she did not try to conceal them. The words trembled on her lips. "A man couldn't—your kind of a man! But—they're so hard to find. Don't—don't rob me of mine—now that I've found him!"

A shrill whistle tore the words from her lips. She glanced up, startled, to see Vil Holland take his fingers from his teeth. She followed his gaze, and a block away, in front of the wooden post-office, saw the Reverend Len Christie whirl in his tracks. The cowboy motioned him to wait, and taking the girl gently by the arm, turned her about, and together they walked toward the "Bishop of All Outdoors," who awaited them with twinkling eyes.

"It's about the school, I presume," he greeted. "Everything is all arranged, Miss Sinclair. You may assume your duties to-morrow."

"If I was you, Len," replied Vil Holland, dryly, "I wouldn't go bettin' much on that presoomer of yours—it ain't workin' just right, an' Miss Sinclair has decided to assoom her duties to-day. So, havin' disposed of presoom, an' assoom, we'll rezoom, as you'd say if you was dealin' from the pulpit, an' if you ain't got anything more important on your mind, we'll just walk over to the church an' get married."

The Reverend Len Christie regarded his friend solemnly. "I didn't think it of you, Vil—when I bragged to you yesterday about the excellent teacher I'd got—I didn't think you would slip right out and get her away from me!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry! Really, Mr. Christie, I didn't mean to disappoint you in this way, at the last minute——"

"Don't you go wastin' any sympathy on that old renegade," cut in Vil.

"That's right," laughed Christie, noting the genuine concern in the girl's eyes. "As a matter of fact, I have in mind a substitute who will be tickled to death to learn that she is to have the regular position. Didn't I tell you out at the Samuelsons' that I had a hunch you'd make your strike before school time? Of course, everyone knows that Vil is the one who made the real strike, but you'll find that the claim you've staked isn't so bad, and that after you get down through the surface,

you will run onto a whole lot of pure gold."

Patty who had been regarding him with a slightly puzzled expression suddenly caught his allusion, and she smiled happily into the face of her cowboy. "I've already found pure gold," she said, "and it lies mighty close to the surface."

In the little church after the hastily summoned witnesses had departed, the Reverend Len Christie stood holding a hand of each. "Never in my life have I performed a clerical office that gave me so much genuine happiness and satisfaction," he announced.

"Me, neither," assented Vil Holland, heartily, and, then—"Hold on, Len. You're too blame young an' good lookin' for such tricks—an' besides, I've never kissed her, myself, yet——!"

"Where will it be now?" asked Holland, when they found themselves once more upon the street.

"Home—dear," whispered his wife. "You know we've got to get that cabin up before snow flies—our cabin, Vil—with the porch that will look out over the snows of the changing lights."

"If the whole town didn't have their heads out the window, watchin' us I'd kiss you right here," he answered, and strode off to lead her horse up beside his own.

Swinging her into the saddle, he was about to mount Lightning, when she leaned over and raised the brown leather jug on its thong. "Why, it's empty!" she exclaimed.

"So it is," agreed Holland, with mock concern.

"Really, Vil, I don't care—so much. If it don't hurt men any more than it has hurt you, I won't quarrel with it. I'll wait while you get it filled."

"Maybe I'd better," he said, and swinging it from the saddle horn,

crossed the street and entered the general store. A few minutes later he returned and swung the jug into place.

"Why! Do they sell whisky at the store? I thought you got that at a saloon."

"Whisky!" The man looked up in surprise. "This jug never held any whisky! It's my vinegar jug. I don't drink."

Patty stared at him in amazement. "Do you mean to tell me you carry a jug of vinegar with you wherever you go?"

For the first time since she had known him she saw that his eyes were twinkling, and that his lips were very near a smile. "No, not exactly, but, you see, that first time I met you I happened to be riding from town with this jug full of vinegar. I noticed the look you gave it, an' it tickled me most to death. So, after that, every time I figured I'd meet up with you I brought the jug along. I'd pour out the vinegar an' fill it up with water, an' sometimes I'd just pack it empty—then when I'd hit town, I'd get it filled again. I bet Johnson, over there, thinks I'm picklin' me a winter's supply of prickly pears. I must have bought close to half a barrel of vinegar this summer."

"Vil Holland! You carried that jug—went to all that trouble, just to—to *tease* me?"

"That's about the size of it. An' Gosh! How you hated that jug."

"It might have—it nearly did, make me hate *you*, too."

"'Might have,' an' 'nearly,' an' 'if,' are all words about alike—they all sort of fall short of amountin' to anythin'. It 'might have'—but, somehow, things don't work out that way. The only thing that counts is, it didn't."

Out on the trail they met Watts riding toward town. "Wher's Microby?"

he asked, addressing Patty.

"Microby! I haven't seen Microby since early this morning. She was riding down a coulee not far from Vil's camp."

"Didn't yo' send for her?"

"I certainly did not!"

The man's hand fumbled at his beard. "Bethune was along last evenin' an' hed a talk with her, an' then he done tol' Ma yo' wanted Microby should come up to yo' place, come daylight. When I heern it, I mistrusted yo' wouldn't hev no truck with Bethune, so after I done the chores, I rode up ther'. They wasn't no one to hum." The simple-minded man looked worried. "Bethune, he could do anything he wants with her. She thinks he's grand—but, I know different. Then I met up with Lord Clendennin' in the canyon, an' he tol' me how Bethune wus headin' fer Canady. He said, had I lost anythin'. An' I said 'no,' an' he laffed an' says he guess that's right."

As Vil Holland listened, his eyes hardened, and at the conclusion, something very like an oath ground from his lips. Patty glanced at him in surprise—never before had she seen him out of poise.

"You go back home," he advised Watts, in a kindly tone, "to the wife and the kids. I'll find Microby for you!"

When the man had passed from sight into the dip of a coulee, Vil leaned over and, drawing his wife close to his breast, kissed her lips again and again. "It's too bad, little girl, that our honeymoon's got to be broke into this way, but you remember I told you once that if I won you'd have to be satisfied with what you got. You didn't know what I meant, then, but you know, now—an' I'm goin' to win again! I'm goin' to find that child! The poor little fool!" Patty saw that his eyes were flashing, and his voice sounded hard:

"You ride back to town and tell Len to get his white goods together an' ride back with you to Watts's. There's goin' to be a funeral—or better yet, a weddin' *an'* a funeral in it for him by this time to-morrow, or my name ain't Vil Holland!" And then, abruptly, he turned and rode into the North.

A wild impulse to overtake him and dissuade him from his purpose took possession of the girl. But the thought of Microby in the power of Bethune, and of the sorrowing face of poor Watts stayed her. She saw her husband hitch his belt forward and swiftly look to his six-gun, and as the sound of galloping hoofs grew fainter, she watched his diminishing figure until it was swallowed up in the distance.

Impulsively she stretched out her arms to him: "Good luck to you, my knight!" she called, but the words ended in a sob, and she turned her horse and, with a vast happiness in her heart, rode back toward the town.

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