

The PLOW WOMAN

BY
ELEANOR
GATES



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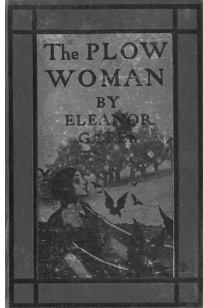
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THE PLOW-WOMAN

BY

ELEANOR GATES

Author of The Biography of a Prairie Girl



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To
Robert Underwood Johnson, Esq.

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THE PLOW-WOMAN

CHAPTER I

IN THE FURROW

The coulée was a long, scarlet gash in the brown level of the Dakota prairie, for the sumach, dyed by the frosts of the early autumn, covered its sides like a cloth whose upper folds were thrown far over the brinks of the winding ravine and, southward, half-way to the new cottonwood shack of the Lancasters. Near it, a dark band against the flaming shrub, stretched the plowed strip, narrow, but widening with each slow circuit of the team as the virgin, grass-grown land was turned by the mould-board to prepare for the corn-planting of the coming spring.

The sun, just risen, shone coldly upon the plain, and a wind, bearing with it a hint of raw weather and whirling snow, swept down the Missouri valley from the north, marshalling in its front hosts of gabbling ducks and honking geese that were taking noisy flight from a region soon to be buried and already bleak. Yet with all the chill in the air, Ben and Betty, the mules, steamed as they toiled to and fro, and lolled out their tongues with the warmth of their work and the effort of keeping straight in the furrow; and Dallas, following in their wake with the reins about her shoulders and the horns of the plow in a steady grasp, took off her slouch hat at the turnings to bare her damp forehead, drew the sleeve of her close-fitting jersey across her face every few moments, and, at last, to aid her in making better progress, as well as to cool her ankles, brought the bottom of her skirt through the waistband, front and back, and walked in her red flannel petticoat. As she travelled, she looked skyward occasionally with a troubled face, and, resting but seldom, urged the team forward. Clear weather and sunshine would not long continue, and the first field on the claim

must be turned up and well harrowed before the opening of winter.

"Come, Ben, come," she called coaxingly to the nigh mule. "If you don't dig in now, how d' you expect to have anything to eat *next* winter? Betty, Betty, don't let Ben do it all; I'm talking to you, too. Come along, come along."

Ben and Betty, lean, and grey with age, bent willingly to their labour at the sound of her voice. Their harnesses creaked a monotonous complaint with their renewed efforts, the colter came whining behind them. As Dallas gently slapped the lines along their backs, now and then, to emphasise her commands, clouds of dust, which had been gathered as mud in the buffalo-wallow where they went each evening to roll, ascended and were blown away. Faithfully they pulled, not even lifting an eyelid or flapping an ear in protest when Simon, the stray yearling bull that had adopted the claim as its home and tagged Dallas everywhere, bellowed about their straining legs or loitered at their very noses and impeded their way.

Plowing was strange work to the patient mules and to the girl who was guiding them. To her, the level prairie, rank with goldenrod, pink-flowered smartweed, and purple aster, was a land of wondrous growth. For twenty years her home had been an arid *mesa* far to the south, where her father captained the caretakers of a spur railroad track. The most western station-house in Texas, standing amid thorny mesquite, was her birthplace and that of her sister Marylyn; the grey plateau across which the embankment led was their playground; there they grew to womanhood under the careful guidance of their frail, Northern-born mother.

And then two casualties, coming close upon each other, had suddenly changed their life. Their father was brought home one night so maimed and crushed by the wheels of a flat-car that he could never hope to take up his work again; and while he lay, bandaged and broken, fighting to keep the soul in his crippled body, their mother

bravely yielded her life to a lingering illness.

Many months later, when Evan Lancaster's wounds were at last healed, Ben and Betty were unhitched from a dirt-laden scraper on the siding and put before a white-topped prairie-schooner. Then the old section-boss, with his crutches beside him and his daughters seated in the all but empty box behind, said a husky farewell to the men crowding around the wagon, and started the mules along the road that led northward beside the rails.

He gave no backward glance at the wind-battered house where he had brought an ailing bride; instead, eager to leave that plain of flying sand and scanty grasses, he drove the team rapidly forward, bound for a country where there were wells, and not water-cars, where rain fell oftener, and where food, both for man and beast, could be gotten easily from the earth. But Dallas, seated in the schooner's bed, her weeping sister held soothingly against her breast, watched, dry-eyed, as a mound by a giant mesquite faded slowly from her sight, and saw her girlhood's home give way, as a lighthouse sinks behind a speeding vessel, until only its grey-sprinkled roof showed through the scattered trees. Then, after pillowing Marylyn's head on a Navajo blanket beside the swashing water cask, she climbed forward to the driver's seat and took the reins from her father.

It was April, and when the *mesa* was left far to rearward, a world almost forgotten by the crippled section-boss burst in new, green loveliness upon his desert children. Towering pines and spreading oaks, lush grass strewn with blossoms, clear-running streams and gay-feathered birds replaced thirsty vegetation, salt lakes, and hovering vultures. They travelled slowly, each day bringing some fresh delight to ear and eye, until one evening in the waning Dakota summer they camped beside a great crooked split in the prairie, on a flat peninsula made by a sweeping westward bend of the muddy Missouri.

Across the river from their stopping-place, where an amber sun

was going down, the horizon was near. High bluffs, like a huge wind-break, stood upon the plain, leaving at their feet only enough space for the whitewashed frame buildings of Fort Brannon. But to the east, the paralleling bluffs lay at a distance, and broke their ridge-back far up the scarlet coulée; from where, southward, stretched a wide gap—ten broad and gently undulating miles—that ended at the slough-studded base of Medicine Mountain. Evan Lancaster, as he stood bareheaded under the unclouded sky, looked about him upon acres heavy with tangled grass and weeds; and pleased with the evident richness of the untouched ground, and with the sheltered situation of the claim on the bend, swore that the white-topped schooner, with its travel-stained crew of three, had found on the yellow billows of that northern prairie its permanent moorings at last.

The felling and hewing of cottonwoods for the shack had occupied the first few weeks that followed, citizen carpenters from Brannon doing the heavy cutting and lifting. But when the little house stood, its square log room and dirt floor open to the sun, Dallas performed her part of the building, and thatched the hip-roof with coarse grass from a meadow. Next, the well was dug; and the barn built as a lean-to, for the Lancasters knew little, but had heard much, about the blizzards of the territory. Then, while the elder girl covered the slanting rafters over Ben and Betty's stall, the section-boss hauled a scanty stock of hay and provisions from Clark's, a cattle-camp and settlement to the northeast. And finally, when shack and barn were alike done, Dallas put the mules to the end of an oak beam and took up the task of plowing.

Now she was winding at a black mat that was gradually growing upon the brown carpet of the prairie. Up and down she walked, her whiplash trailing behind her like a lively snake, her hands striving to guide the cleaving share she followed, a look of deep content, despite all fear for bad weather, upon her sun-browned face.

But while, working the morning hours slowly away, she gave full

attention to the nodding mules and the young bull straggling at their head, she did not stop to watch the flocks winging by above her, or to look off to where the plains fell away from the pale azure line of the sky. So she failed to see, at the middle of the long forenoon, a group of dark figures that came into sight to the eastward and moved slowly forward in the direction of the bend.

Toward noon, however, the furrows were turned less regularly. Ben and Betty were so tired that they no longer drew evenly, but wavered from side to side. Again and again the off mule jerked the share out of the sod; each time Dallas patiently circled the team and steered it back into place again, for her arms were not strong enough to swing the plow on the whiffletrees. And each time Simon caught sight of her red flannel petticoat, and, faint, half-awakened objections stirring beneath his sprouting horns, came back to challenge the goading colour and butt her crossly in the skirts.

Just before dinner-time, and half-way of the plowed strip, going east, Dallas suddenly lifted her shoulders to tighten the slack of the reins, let go the horns and brought the mules to a stand. And then, as they halted with lowered heads, she caught sight of the distant figures between her and the horizon, recognising them as men, mounted and on foot, with wagons hanging at their rear.

She stepped to the head of the team and shaded her eyes for a moment. As she did so, a part of the advancing body detached itself and approached more swiftly, only to retreat again; and the sun, climbing toward the centre of the sky, flashed back upon bright objects carried at the front of the group.

"Soldiers for Brannon, I reckon," she said aloud to Simon, who had given over his butting and was thoughtfully sniffing the air. "Still," she added, "they're coming slow for soldiers."

Simon rubbed a red shoulder against her arm confidently and gave a defiant, sideways toss of the head.

"You know, don't you?" Dallas said, scratching the star in his curly forehead. "Well, I would, too, if I had your nose." She glanced at the mules and noted their lack of fright. "They're not Indians anyhow," she went on, "so I guess we'll do some more plowing."

When the sun was so high that Simon's shadow made but a small splotch upon the ground under him, Dallas again stopped to look toward the east. The men and horses had travelled only a short distance, and were halted for their noon rest. Close to the wagons, the smoke of burning grass-twists was curling up from under the midday meal.

"They ain't soldiers," she said decisively; "if they was, they'd go on to the ferry. And what *can* they be, headed this way?" She took off her hat and swung it at her father to attract his attention, then pointed toward the men and teams.

Lancaster was sitting before the shack, his crutches across his knees. Seeing her signal, he got up and hobbled hastily around the corner, from where he blinked into the gap. And, unable to make out anything but a blurred collection of moving things, he called Marylyn from her dinner-getting.

"Come an' see w'at y' c'n make out off thar on th' prairie, Mar'lyn," he cried. "Ef it's antelope, bring out th' Sharps."

Marylyn hurried to him and followed the direction of his gaze. "Why, it's men, pa," she said.

"Certainly, it's men," he agreed pettishly. "But w'at *kin'* o' men? *Thet's* w'at Ah kain't see."

Marylyn shook her head. Then, as she bent her look inquiringly toward the far-away camp, a horseman suddenly left it and started on a gallop toward them. "One's coming this way fast!" she exclaimed, and rushed back into the shack for her bonnet.

Lancaster and his younger daughter commented excitedly as the

riders approached. One troop of cavalry had remained at Brannon throughout the summer to give protection to the wives and children of officers and enlisted men. The remaining troops belonging at the fort were away on Indian service. They were to return soon, and the section-boss believed he saw in the nearing traveller the herald of the home-coming force. Marylyn, however, was just as certain that Indians were about to surround them, and hastily brought out the gun. But Dallas wasted no time in conjectures. She touched up Ben and Betty and finished her round of the plowed land. Not till the stranger was close did she stop at the eastern end of the field and wait, leaning on the cross-bar.

He came forward in a sharp canter, keeping a regular tap upon the flanks of his mount with the end of a lariat. His careless seat in the saddle and the fact that he wore no spurs told Dallas that he was not a trooper, though across the lessening distance now between them his dress of blue shirt, dark breeches and high boots, crowned by a wide, soft hat, was not unlike a campaign uniform. At his approach, Ben and Betty became lazily interested and raised their long ears to the front; Simon advanced a little and took a determined stand beside Dallas, who hung her lines on the plow-handles and prepared to greet the horseman.

The instant he reached her, he halted abruptly beside the mules and bared his head. "Good-morning," he said with cheery politeness; but his swift glance over team, plow, and girl showed a surprise that was almost pity.

She saw his look, and the colour swept up under the tan of her face. "How d' y' do," she answered.

"I'm John Lounsbury from Clark's," he began. "I've been supplying that crowd back there with feed and grub for a couple of weeks." He nodded toward the distant men and horses. "May I ask—I—I didn't know any women folks had settled——"

She faced him squarely for a moment, and he met her eyes. They were grey, with tawny flecks, wide-open, clear and comprehending. "My father's Evan Lancaster," she explained.

"Lancaster—oh, he's traded at my store."

"That's him over there with Marylyn."

Lounsbury turned in his saddle and looked toward the shack. "Marylyn?" he said. "What a pretty name! Sounds like *Maryland*. How'd she——" He paused questioningly.

"Mother's name was Mary Lynn," she answered, her voice lowered. "So she just put it together."

"And yours?"

"Mine's Dallas. I was born in Texas."

He leaned back against his high cantle and smiled. "I could 'a' guessed *that*," he declared.

Again she coloured sensitively, and hastened to swing the team around until Betty stood in the furrow. "My father's coming," she said.

Instantly Lounsbury was all regret, for he saw that she had misunderstood him. "You don't *look* Texas," he said earnestly. "It's just the name. And—and I think Dallas is pretty, too."

The implied jest on her native State did not do away with her displeasure. She nodded gravely and, turning, put the lines about her shoulders. The mules started.

"Now I've got you down on me," he said penitently. "Honest, I didn't mean——"

She paid no heed.

He clapped on his hat, whipped his horse and followed alongside, waiting for her to look up. Opposite the shack, Lancaster and his other daughter were standing by the furrow. Here she drew rein. "This

is Marylyn," she said, as the storekeeper leaned to grasp her father's hand.

Lounsbury again lifted his hat and looked down, long and admiringly, upon the younger girl. Her fair hair, framing in soft waves a pale, oval face, and her blue eyes, watching him in some confusion, were strongly in contrast with the straight, heavy braids—brown, and showing burnished tints in the light—and the unwavering eyes of her sister. Looking at her, he was reminded of girls he had seen beyond the Alleghanies—girls who knew little, or no, toil, and who jealously guarded their beauty from sun and wind. Answering Lancaster's blunt questions, that followed close upon each other, he paid her prettiness constant and wondering homage; and she, noting the attention, retreated a little and was quiet and abashed.

"Who's you' party?" the elder man demanded, indicating the distant camp with one crutch, and leaning heavily upon the other.

"Surveyors," replied Lounsbury.

"Surveyors!" There was alarm in Lancaster's tone. He suddenly recalled how, slighting Dallas' advice, he had delayed a trip to the land-office for the purpose of filing on the claim. "W'at they doin'?"

"Something right in your line, sir. They're laying out a railroad."

"A railroad? You don' say! How'll it come?"

"Why, right this way."

Lancaster caught the other by the bootstrap. "Shore?" he asked.

"Sure," repeated Lounsbury; "sure as death and taxes. It's bound to run somewhere between the coulée and Medicine Mountain, and it'll stop—at least for a few years—at the Missouri. With those sloughs in the way at the south end of the gap, it can't reach the river without coming over your land. First thing you know, you'll have stores and saloons around your house. There's going to be a town on the Bend,

sir."

The elder man scanned the younger's face. Lounsbury was smiling half teasingly, yet undoubtedly he was in earnest.

"W'y, Lawd!" breathed the section-boss, realising the whole import of the news. A railroad would mean immeasurable good fortune to the trio of settlers who, like young prairie-chickens that fear to leave the side of their mother, had chosen quarter-sections near the guarding fort. And to him, penniless, with motherless girls, it meant——

"The ferrying's so good right here," went on the storekeeper. "Why, it's a ten-to-one shot the track'll end on your claim."

With one accord all looked across the level quarter, where the new green was creeping in after the late rains.

"A railroad! An' a town!" The section-boss pulled at his grizzled goatee. "They'll make this piece worth a heap!"

"They will," agreed Lounsbury. "But road or no road, seems to me you've got about the cream of this side of the river."

"You' right," said Lancaster. But the girls were silent, except that Dallas gave a sigh, deep and full of happiness.

Lounsbury glanced at her. "You like the place, don't you?" he asked; "even if——" He suddenly paused. Her palms were open and half turned upward. Across each lay a crimson stripe—the mark of the plow-handle.

For the second time she read his meaning. "Yes, I like the prairie," she answered, "if I do have to plow." And she stepped from the furrow to the unturned sod.

As she stood there, Lounsbury caught the clear outline of her firmly drawn face. Beside her, Marylyn, slight and colourless, was for the moment eclipsed. The hat of the elder girl was brushed back, displaying a forehead upon which shone the very spirit of the

unshackled. Her hands, large, yet not too large for the splendid figure of which they were the instruments, were clasped upon her breast. Watching her, it seemed to Lounsbury that she must have sprung as she was from the plains one day—grave, full-grown and gallant.

Her father's voice broke in harshly. "Ah didn' want she should plow," he protested. "Ah figgered t' git someone on tick, but seems like Dallas, she——"

"We like it here," she interrupted, "because the air 's so cool, and there's lots of grass." Then after bending to gather a purple flower, she stepped back to the plow.

"You're planning to stay, then," said Lounsbury.

"Stay!" burst forth the section-boss. "Don' it look like it?"

Lounsbury made no reply, only smiled genially.

"Maybe y' reckon we-all ain't safe?" continued Lancaster. "Wal, th' nesters 'roun' Fort Sully's safe 'nough."

The storekeeper pointed across the river to where a flag was flying at the centre of the post quadrangle. "You're in sight of that," he said simply.

The other snorted. Then, stifling a retort, he searched Lounsbury's face with his milky-blue eyes. "Ah'd like t' ast w'y y' didn' tell me 'bout th' track when Ah seen y' las'," he observed suspiciously.

The storekeeper gave a hearty laugh. "And why didn't you say you had daughters?" he demanded.

Instantly a change came over the elder man. He darkened angrily. His breath shortened, as if he had been running. Visible trembling seized him, body and limbs.

Mystified, Lounsbury turned to Dallas, and saw that her eyes were fastened upon her father imploringly. "No, no, dad," he heard her whisper; "no, no."

The storekeeper hastened to speak. "Joking aside," he said, "the reason is this: The railroad company wants the right kind of people to settle on the land along the survey. It doesn't want men who'd file just to get a price. So the story hasn't leaked much."

Lancaster was fumbling at his crutches. "Ah see, Ah see," he said sulkily. Then, with an attempt at being courteous, "Come up t' th' shack, Lounsb'ry. Y' brung good news; y' got t' hev you' dinner."

"I ate back there," said Lounsbury, dismounting; "but I'll stop off for a while, just the same." As he slipped the reins over his horse's head, Marylyn remembered the meal she had abandoned and started homeward. The storekeeper, leading his mount, strode away beside her.

Dallas clucked to the mules.

"Ain't you comin'?" called her father. "W'y, my gal, you worked 'nough this mornin'."

"I'll keep at it just a little longer," she answered.

"We don' hear ev'ry day that we live on a town site with a railroad a-comin'," Lancaster said, following her a few steps. "Better come."

Dallas did not reply. When she was some rods farther on, her father called to her again.

"Come, Dallas," he urged, "an' stop plowin' up th' streets."

She shook her head, slapped the reins along Ben and Betty's dusty backs and leaned guidingly on the handles of the plow. And as she travelled slowly riverward, Simon trotted close behind, tossing his stubby horns at the red of her underskirt and bawling wearily.

CHAPTER II

A TRIP AND TROUBLE AHEAD

Before Dallas reached the end of her furrow she knew that, for at least some days to come, her work on the plowed strip must cease. Far and wide, frontiersmen may have heard of the railroad's coming, and their first move would be, perhaps had been, a rush to the land-office to file upon quarter-sections touching the survey. And so, no hour dared be wasted before her father started on his long-deferred trip. The claim on the peninsula—the claim which the storekeeper had named as the terminus of the proposed line, as the probable site for a new town—must at once be legally theirs.

When the mules were turned eastward again, Dallas brought them up for a breathing spell and, going apart a little distance, sat down, her knees between her hands. A short space of time had made incredible changes in their plans, in the possibilities of their prairie home. Before the cutting of the last two sods, there had stretched ahead only a succession of uneventful years, whose milestones would be the growing record of beeves and bushels. But now—she could not have credited her senses had it not been for a glimpse of Lounsbury's horse, industriously cropping beside the lean-to.

She looked across at the shack, squatting on a gentle rise at the centre of the claim as if it had fled there for refuge out of the grassy sea whose dry waves lapped up to its very door. Its two small windows, looking riverward, the narrow door of warped lumber between, and the shock roof of meadow-grass held down by stones, gave it the appearance of a grotesque human head that was peering from out the plain. As Dallas, for the first time, noted the curious resemblance, the shack seemed to smile back at her—a wise,

reassuring smile.

A moment later the north wind hooded the sky with clouds, putting the bend in gloom. She got to her feet and hastened toward the plow. So brief had been her meeting with the storekeeper that, immediately following it, his features had escaped her. Now she recalled them, and thought she recalled that, when he had accosted her, they had worn a mocking expression. What if her father, in his sudden excitement and concern, should tell Lounsbury that the claim was not yet filed upon! should confide in this stranger, who might then take advantage of the ignorance, age and crippled condition of the section-boss! Hurriedly, she unhitched Ben and Betty, hung their bridles on the hames, and turned the team loose to graze. Then she started homeward, with Simon close upon her heels, and as she crossed the cloud-darkened claim, she glanced again at the shack. Its windows were in shadow, its door almost obscured. There was a smirk on its twisted face.

But when, entering the house, she met Lounsbury's kind, level look, the distrust she had felt unconsciously vanished.

He was seated astride a bench to the left of the fireplace, his hat flung down in front of him, his shoulders against the wall, his booted legs thrust out restfully across the floor. Dallas, seeing him out of the saddle for the first time, was struck by his splendid length, next by his heaviness—a round, but muscular, heaviness that she had never noted in a Texan. Leaning back with folded arms, he showed, however, despite his weight and rotundity, the pliance and the litheness of the Westerner. His hair was dark and thick and worn in a careless part, his throat was bronzed above the lacings of his shirt, his face clean-shaven, somewhat square—yet full—and set with blue eyes that showed an abiding glint of merriment.

If Dallas, as she crossed the sill, formed, with the swift keenness of the plainswoman, a new and truer estimate of Lounsbury, he, saluting cordially, failed not to measure her. The dirt-floored shack, partitioned

by Navajo blankets and furnished with unplanned benches, was a background totally unsuited to Marylyn's delicate beauty; but for the elder daughter of the section-boss, its very rude simplicity seemed strangely fine and fitting.

Many women had come under the storekeeper's notice during his frontier life: Roughly reared women of pure ways who toiled and bore with the patience of beasts; the women of the army, matching, in dress and habits, those he had known as a boy; and, last of all, the kind that always follows in the track of soldier, scout and gambler. Yet never before on the sundown side of the Mississippi had he seen one who possessed, along with the reserve a lonely bringing-up enjoins, the dignity and poise that are counted the fruits of civilisation.

"It's good blood," he said to himself, "and"—with a glance at the section-boss—"it's from the mother's side."

Lancaster, at that moment, was truly anything but a picture of repose. His season of delight over the morning's news had been brief, and was now succeeded by thorough disquiet. He hobbled to and fro, from the hearth, where hung a pail of fragrant coffee, to the farther front window. Lounsbury remarked his evident worry and, not understanding it, bent down inquiringly toward Marylyn.

She was seated on a buffalo robe before the fire, zealously tending the coffee. As she felt the storekeeper's look upon her, she glanced up, and, meeting his eyes, something other than the firelight swept her throat, neck and brow with crimson touch.

"There's no fretting in that quarter," was Lounsbury's mental comment. He turned on the bench to face Dallas.

She was standing quietly beside the warped door, her arms hanging tensely at her side, her chin up, her eyes gazing straight at him. And in them, as well as in her whole attitude, Lounsbury read determination and anxiety.

"What's the matter, I wonder," he thought. He leaned toward her, resting an elbow on the bench. "You're getting ready for spring seeding, Miss Lancaster," he said.

"Yes."

The section-boss giggled nervously. "Ef th' town was right here, it would n' make no difference t' Dallas. Ah'll bet she'll spen' th' winter shellin' cawn fer plantin', an' pickin' cockle outen th' wheat." He fell to tugging at his goatee.

Again there was silence. Then, with a deep breath, Dallas straightened to speak. It was borne to her of a sudden that they were in need—of one in whom they might confide, of one from whom good advice might come; she felt impelled to tell this stalwart young man, whose eyes read kindness and whose face read right, who seemed to bear them nothing but good-will, that they had not filed the claim. And then——

The fire crackled cosily, the blackened pail steamed from the cross-piece. Lounsbury spread out his hands before the blaze. "I wish I lived on a quarter, like you folks," he said. "I hate the dickering in a store. Been at it ten years. Was in the fur business, at first—bought from the Indians and the skin-hunters up and down. Well, the country got into my blood. You get the West, you know, and it's the only disease out here that you can't shake. So I've stayed, and I guess I'll keep a-staying. But sometimes I get a notion to throw my stores up and go into the cow business or farming."

Dallas sank back, checked, not by Lounsbury's words, but by her father. The section-boss, one hand behind a hairy ear, was glowering at the storekeeper. "Eh, what?" he asked suspiciously.

"I say I've a notion to take up some land," repeated Lounsbury. "Right east of you wouldn't be a bad idea. The soil's wonderful hereabouts. No stumps, no stones, and the loam's thick. Look in the coulée—you can see there how far it is to the clay. That's why she

wore down so deep——"

"Thet arroyo?"

"Yes. I believe I'll just pick out a quarter near it. Could plant a store anyway, when the track comes."

"Yas, certainly," said Lancaster. He passed Dallas, giving her a helpless, apprehensive stare. "But, shucks! Ah wouldn' be in sech a tarmel hurry, ef Ah was you. Spring's plenty o' time."

Lounsbury swung round sharply. "Spring!" he exclaimed in amazement. "I hope that hasn't been your plan, sir. A man can't file too soon."

Dallas leaned toward Lounsbury again, and her lips parted. But a quick, peremptory gesture from her father interrupted. "Mar'lyn," he cried, his eyes warning the elder girl, "look out fer thet coffee; it's a-bilin' over."

And Dallas saw that her father did not trust the storekeeper—perhaps feared him—and that he did not wish his own neglect to be known.

But a hint of the state of affairs at the shack had already entered Lounsbury's mind. As Marylyn rose to pour the coffee, he quickly changed the subject. "Fort 's a quiet place, these days," he observed, accepting a cup. "Wonder when the troops'll be back."

The section-boss sipped at his saucer. "Ah don' carry on no dealin's with Yankee soldier trash," he answered curtly. "They keep the side o' th' river, an' we-all keep ourn."

Lounsbury laughed. "Well," he said, "you'll find when the redskins get nasty that the army blue looks pretty good."

The other shrugged.

The storekeeper tapped the holster hanging upon a thigh. "I carry a pop-gun regular." He set down the cup, pulled at his boot-legs and

arose.

"Ah reckon Ah c'n hol' my own, sah." Lancaster's pride was touched.

"No doubt of it," assured the younger man, preparing to go. "I hope," he continued, "that you'll call on me at any time—if you need more provisions, say."

Lancaster did not misunderstand the offer of credit. "Thank y'," he replied stiffly, "but we certainly got 'nough t' las' through."

Lounsbury remembered how small—compared with the orders of other wintering settlers—was the Lancaster stock; and thought, too, how likely it was that every passerby would be fed with true Southern hospitality, thus diminishing the supply. But he refrained from making any further suggestion. He bade the family good-by, lingering a little at parting beside the younger girl.

"Miss Marylyn," he said, "before another winter you'll be the belle of the town of Lancaster."

She put her hand in his bashfully.

"And, Miss Dallas?" His voice entreated a little.

"I hope you'll be the biggest storekeeper," she said.

To Lounsbury's surprise, he saw a trace of fun lurking in her eye. "Ah! you've forgiven me!" he declared triumphantly.

But she made no answer as she turned away.

The next moment he was galloping toward the coulée crossing.

Marylyn watched him go. When, having disappeared into the ravine, he came into sight again on the farther side, he turned in his saddle and saw her. He took off his hat and waved it. She answered with a farewell signal, and stood, looking after him, until distance dwarfed horse and rider to a dot.

On the storekeeper's departure, the shack became a scene of action. Lancaster gave over walking the floor and collected bedding for a journey. Marylyn was called in to prepare a box of food for her father—potatoes from the coals of the fireplace, cured pig-meat from the souse-barrel, bread, and a jug of coffee. While Dallas caught the mules, gave them some grain and a rubbing-down with straw wisps and greased the wagon wheels. All being made ready, the section-boss took leave of his daughters, urging them to keep within the next day when the surveyors came up, and to deny his going. Then, with Ben and Betty at a smart trot, he set off for Bismarck and the land-office.

When he was gone, the squat shack on the bend became vigilant. Ceaselessly its eyes covered the stretch of road between ferry-landing and coulée—ceaselessly, though Dallas alone kept watch for wayfarers. Not until night fell, and the cloud-masked moon disappeared behind the western bluffs, were small blankets pinned into place across the windows, and the peering shock head made sightless.

But even with the house darkened, the early supper eaten and Marylyn asleep in her bed before the hearth, the elder girl still kept on the alert. A nervousness born of loneliness had taken possession of her. If the doorlatch rattled, she raised herself, listening. If Simon rubbed himself against the warm outer stones of the fireplace, she sprang up, a startled sentinel, with wide eyes and clenched hands.

But an hour passed. The wind lulled. Simon lay down. She fell to thinking of the storekeeper. She felt surer than ever, now, that he did not covet the bend. Setting aside the fact that he had brought them good news, she was glad he had come. It gave them a neighbour. And, yes, she forgave him the smile that had provoked her resentment. After all, the name Dallas did sound Texas.

With morning, and the rising of the sun, she was up and doing the few chores about lean-to and shack. But when the surveyors arrived,

making short work of their last few miles, she and Marylyn shut themselves in and escaped being seen. The engineers gone toward Clark's, Dallas again took up her watch.

Twice before night she was rewarded. The mail-sergeant passed, bringing a batch of letters to a grateful post; and, late in the afternoon, an Indian runner came into sight from up the Missouri. Scorning to use the ferry, he dropped into the river, where the coulée emptied, and swam across.

The arrival of the scout Dallas associated instinctively with the expected return of the troopers, and felt a relief that she would not have cared to confess to her father. The unusual bustle that marked the next three days at Brannon seemed to justify her belief. Below the barracks, on the level bottom-land, men were busy erecting a strange structure. Tall cottonwoods were hauled from the river and set on end in the sandy ground. As time passed, these came to form a tight, circular pen.

The night of the third day there was activity on the other bank of the Missouri. Unknown to shack and fort, the squalid line of shanty saloons that stretched itself like a waiting serpent along a high bench opposite the new stockade, sprang into sudden life. Two wagons filled with men and barrels crossed the bend and emptied themselves into the dilapidated buildings. And far into the early hours, loud laughter, the click of chips and the clink of glasses disturbed the quiet of the night. At dawn, an officer, standing, field-glass in hand, on the gallery at headquarters, saw two wagons drawn up in front of Shanty Town and called down a curse upon the heads of the sleeping revellers.

"Just see there!" he exclaimed. "Some vermin got wind of the paymaster's coming and are here to fleece the men."

A lieutenant sauntered up, putting out his hand for the glasses. "There wasn't a soul in those huts yesterday," he said.

"No, of course not," sputtered the other. "The devils stayed at Clark's till the punchers got back from Kansas City. Now, they're on hand to keep our guard-house and hospital full. By gad! if I commanded here, I'd have the whole street fired."

"Well," said the lieutenant, "the men have a way of disciplining that kind, themselves. Some day, when a favourite is cut in a brawl or cheated at cards, they'll shoot up the place. If there's anything left, it'll move on."

"It won't do any harm to keep an eye on Shanty Town, all the same," declared his companion, fiercely. "Remember the man that ran it last year? Slick, by gad! Why, the paymaster might just as well have stopped over there—he and his ilk got every cent! He wasn't a 'bad' man, mind you—not brave enough for that, but keen-nosed as a moose, conceited as an Indian——"

"What was his name?"

"Oh, Dick or Vic Something-or-other, I don't know what. He's a bragging renegade, anyway."

Unaware of a reconnoitre, the occupants of the line of shanties slumbered serenely on; and not until noon did high plumes of smoke, straight as the flag-pole on the parade-ground, announce, to the secretly delighted troopers at Brannon, their tardy rising.

Dallas, too, saw the busy chimneys. But while watching them intently from an open window, her attention was attracted, all at once, in the opposite direction. She heard, coming out of the coulée, a chorus of shrill talking, like the pow-wow of a flock of prairie-chickens. Then, a horse snorted, and there was a low rumble of wheels. Thinking that it was her father, she leaned into sight. As she did so a team came scrambling over the scarlet brink, dragging a wagon full of men and women.

As the horses gained the level prairie, their driver laid aside a huge

black-snake whip with which he had been soundly whacking them, and looked about. The next moment, Dallas saw him rein in his team and spring to his feet. He was looking toward the shack, and he raised his whip-hand menacingly.

"Look at that! Look at that!" he cried wildly, his voice carrying through the clear air.

All looked where he pointed, and someone in the back of the wagon cursed.

"What d' you call *that* for luck?" yelled the man, shaking his mitted fist. "If Nick knew that!"

Dallas could not hear the mingled answers of his companion.

"Well, I call it damned——"

A woman reached up and pulled him into his seat. There was another shrill chorus, the man whacked the horses till they reared, and the wagon went rumbling on.

Dallas watched it until it disappeared into the cut at the landing. Then she sank upon a bench. For a long time she sat, dumb and immovable, her eyes on the floor. When, finally, she got up, she felt about her, as if overcome by blindness.

Marylyn had not seen or heard the threatening wagon-driver. Seated comfortably on the robe by the fire, she strung beads and hummed contentedly.

Dallas started toward her—stopped—then moved slowly back to the window, where she took up her watch.

Late that night she sprang from fitful, troubled sleep to hear Simon lowing and moving about restlessly. A few moments afterward, there came a mule's long bray from below the shack, followed by the voice of the section-boss, urging on the team. She found her long cloak and hastened out.

She could not wait for the wagon to stop before calling anxiously to her father. "Did you file?" she asked, walking beside Betty.

Lancaster did not answer, but scolded feebly, as if worn with his long trip. "W'y d' y' fret a man 'fore he c'n git down an' into th' house?" he demanded. "Ah'm plumb fruz t' death, an' hungry."

She helped him over the wheel and through the door. Then she went back and, in feverish haste, stabled the mules. On entering the shack, now dimly lighted by a fire, she did not need to repeat her question. She read the answer in her father's face.

"No use," Lancaster told her, raising wet, tired eyes to hers. "Th' claim was gone 'fore ever we got here—filed on las' July." He lay down, muttering in a delirium of grief and physical weariness.

The fire, made only of dry grass, began to die, the room to darken. Dallas' face shadowed with it. She was thinking of the level quarter that was to have blossomed under her eager hands; that was to have brought comfort to Marylyn and her crippled father. And now the land was gone from them, had never been theirs—they were only squatters.

Any hour, a nameless man—perhaps he who had gone by that day—might descend upon them and——

The bail of a bubbling pot slipped down the bar that held it, and the vessel clattered upon the hearth. She started as if a gun had exploded at her elbow.

CHAPTER III

DALLAS MAKES A FRIEND

"Y-a-a-as," drawled Lancaster, reflectively, gnawing the while at a fresh slab of tobacco, "we jes' nat'all mavericked this claim."

A fortnight had passed since his return from the land-office. In that time, his fear had slowly vanished, his confidence returned. And he had begun to show streaks of the bravado that, in his stronger days, made him an efficient section-boss. Rosy dreams, even, beset his brain—dreams upon which Marylyn, despising her father's meaner structures (and kept in ignorance of what might, at any moment, raze them), piled many a rainbow palace. For, to the younger girl, certain calico-covered books on the mantel had invested the events of the fortnight just gone with a delightful tinge of romance.

Dallas, however, took a sensible view of their situation. She pointed out that the man who had made an entry for the land would, in all probability, return; and that if he did not, five years, at least, would pass before the railroad reached them. Meanwhile, the quarter-section should be properly filed upon for possession and farmed for a living. Now, as she brushed the hearth clean with the wing of a duck, she listened quietly to her father's confident boasting.

"It's this way, m' gal:" he said—he compassed a goodly quid and shifted it dexterously into the sagging pocket of a cheek—"Inside o' six months after a man files, he's got t' dig a dugout er put up a shanty. He's got t' do a leetle farm-work, an' sleep on his claim. When thet six months is up, ef he ain't done no buildin' er farmin', th' claim's abandoned, an' th' first man comin' along c'n hev it.

"In *this* case, th' gent in question ain't built, dug er farmed. Ef he

was t' show up an' want this quarter, he could git it by payin' fer our improvements. Ah reckon we'd hev t' sell an' pull our freight. But ef he was t' show up an' *not* pay like a' honest man, they'd—they'd—wal, they'd likely be a *leetle* disagreement."

Dallas shook her head. "If he comes before his six months is up and improves, we got to go. That would be the only square thing. Ain't it so?"

"Wal—wal——" began Lancaster, lamely.

"It is," she said. "He filed on the quarter, and we had no right to settle——"

"We *hev* settled, an' th' lan' 's goin' t' be worth money," broke in her father.

She put up her hand. "We got to go, if he comes. But"—she arose wearily—"if he didn't offer pay for our improvements, how *could* we go, or get through the winter, or build again next spring? Our money's gone."

"Look a-here, Dallas," began her father, crossly, "they ain't no use t' worry th' way you do. Winter is clost. It ain't likely th' man'll come along this late. An' ef he don' show up pretty soon, he ain't got a chanst. 'Cause, when his six months is gone, Ah'll make another trip t' Bismarck, contes' his entry, hev it cancelled an' file. *Then*, we's safe."

She silenced him, for Marylyn was entering, and quit the shack. Outside, before the warped door, she paused.

"He's always so sure of himself. But he can't do anything. And Marylyn—Oh, I *wish* there was someone with us, now—someone that'd help us if anything—went wrong."

Of a sudden, looking down at her hands, her eyes fell upon the crimson stripes left across her palms by the plow. And, in fancy, a horseman was riding swiftly toward her from the east, again, while

she leaned on the cross-brace and waited.

"Twenty miles," she said thoughtfully; "twenty miles." And turned the marks under.

Sun-baked, deep of rut and straight as the flight of a crow, lay the road that led northeast from the swift, shoally ford of the Missouri to the cattle-camp at Clark's. It began at the rough planking upon which the rickety ferry-boat, wheezing like some asthmatic monster, discharged its load of soldiers or citizens, and ran up through the deep cut in the steep, caving river-bank. From there, over the western end of the Lancaster quarter, across the coulée under a hub-depth of muddy backwater—at the only point where the sumach-grown sides sloped gradually—it took its level, unswerving way.

Twice only in its course did it touch the ravine curving along near by it—once, six miles from the ferry-landing, where, on the limbs of a cluster of giant cottonwoods that grew in the bottom of the gully, a score of Indian dead were lashed, their tobacco-pipes, jerked beef and guns under the blanket wrappings that hid them; and, again, at Murphy's Throat, four miles farther up, where the coulée narrowed until a man, standing in its bed with arms outstretched, could place the tips of his fingers against either rocky wall. Beyond the Throat, the crack in the plains grew wider and shallower, veered out to the eastward, and, at last, came to an abrupt end in a high meadow below the distant river-bluffs.

For decades the road had been a buffalo-trail, a foot wide and half as deep, that, in the dry season, guided the herds in single file from the caking meadow to the distant waters of the Missouri; then the travee poles of Indian tribes gave it the semblance of a wagon track, the centre of which was worn bare by the hoofs of laden ponies and the feet of trudging squaws; and, finally, the lumbering carts of traders, the Studebakers of settlers, and those heavier wagons that roll in the

rear of marching men, made of the track a plain and hardened highway.

Down it, that morning, approaching to the accompaniment of loud talking, the tramping of horses, the cracking of whips and the jingling of spurs, came a long procession. Yet so absorbed was Dallas in her plowing that not until the head of its column was close upon her and there was barely time to go to the bridles of the frightened mules did she see it.

A tanned, unkempt officer led the way, with baying foxhounds running about him. On either hand rode his staff, and his scouts—Arickaree Indians, in patched breeches and dusty blankets. And behind, full-bearded, all military look gone from their boots, hats and uniforms, came the cavalry, riding two and two, and flying torn and faded guidons.

Dallas had no chance to view the front of the command, for the mules claimed all her attention by hauling back on their bits. But now they quieted a little, and she was free to watch the dozen or so musicians who came next, mounted, with their brass instruments in hand. She saw that these men were nudging one another, and directing at her glances which were bold and amused.

Something of her father's hatred of soldiers stirred her. She grew defiant; yet only for a moment. The musicians trotted by, and now Indians were passing—men, women and children, whose stolid faces disclosed no hint of grief or hatred for their captivity. The braves, twenty in number, formed the head of the band, and kept no order of march as they spurred forward their ragged, foot-sore ponies. Their Springfield rifles, knives and tomahawks had been taken from them, but they still carried their once gay lances, and shields of buffalo-hide covered with rude pictures of the chase and battle. But though on other occasions these would have betokened the free warrior, they now only emphasised by contrast the blankets that trailed ingloriously from their wearers' shoulders to the ground and the drooping feathers

of the conquered chiefs.

A war-priest, whose string of bears' claws, triple feathers, charms and bag plainly betokened the medicine-man, headed the tribe. He was seated upon a gaudily decorated saddle; the nose-band, front and cheek-pieces of his horse's bridle were thickly studded with brass nails; bright pom-poms of coloured wool swung from the curb and the throat-latch; and the nag's tail was stiffly braided with strips of woollen—scarlet and yellow and blue. Close beside him rode two stately braves of high rank, their mounts as richly caparisoned, their buckskin shirts gorgeous with bead and porcupine-quill embroidery, otter-skin head-dresses upon their hair. Like their leader, the dusky faces of the two Indians and of those forming the rest of the party were hideously painted, showing that all had but recently been upon the warpath.

The other half of the redskin company was more squalid. A score of spotted, sway-backed ponies crept along, bearing and, at the same time, dragging, heavy loads. Each saddle held a squaw and one or more small children—the squaw with a cocoon-like papoose strapped to her back. And at the tail of each horse, surrounded by limping Indian dogs, came a travee laden with a wounded or aged Indian, or heaped with cooking utensils, blankets and buffalo-skins.

One woman of all the squaws rode a pony that had not a double burden. She was dressed in buckskin and bright calico, and sat upon a blanket that almost covered her horse. Her hair was braided neatly, her dark cheeks were daubed with carmine. She kept a rigid seat as she passed Dallas, and her black eyes answered the other's kindly look with one full of sullen pride. Beside her hobbled an aged hag across whose wrinkled mouth and chin was a deep and livid scar.

When the Indians were past, more troopers followed. After them trundled a half-dozen light field-pieces, the wagon-train, and ambulances filled with sick or wounded soldiers, all under the conduct

of a rear-guard. Soon, the entire cavalcade was gone, and had halted on the river-bank to wait the ferry. Dallas was alone again, listening to the faint strains of the band which, from the cut, was gallantly announcing the return from the long campaign.

At the door of the shack, Lancaster and his younger daughter were watching the portage, piecemeal, of the troops. But Dallas, starting the team again, saw father and sister suddenly turn from the landing to look and point toward the coulée. Glancing that way, too, she saw the object of their interest. Over the brink into sight was toiling a strange figure, bent and almost hidden under an unwieldy load.

She moved aside in some trepidation to await the creature's advance. Upon its back, as it tottered along, was a score of pots and pans, tied together, and topped by a sack of buffalo-chips that, at each slow step, rolled first to one hand and then to the other. Yet with all the difficulty of balancing the fuel-sack and preventing its falling to the ground, the straggler did not fail to keep in place a drab face covering.

The mules stood perfectly quiet until the figure was near. Then they became uneasy for the second time, and shied back upon the plow, tangling their harness.

The effect of this was startling. The sack of chips came tumbling off the pots and pans, spilling upon the roadway. The tin things followed with a crash. And, with a grunt, the bent figure retreated a few steps and uncovered its face.

In very amazement Dallas let go the mules. The creature facing her was young and pitifully thin. About a face dripping with perspiration fell a mop of tangled hair. Under a tattered mourning blanket, a bulging calico waist disclosed, through many rents, a lean and bony chest. And below the leather strap that belted both the sombre blanket and the waist, hung limply the shreds of a fringed buckskin petticoat. The straggler was an Indian—a male—yet, despite his sex,

he wore, not a brave's dress, but the filthy, degrading garb of a squaw!

He watched Dallas with cowed, questioning eyes, strangely soft and un-Indian in their expression. After a moment, seeing that he was ill, as well as unarmed, she ceased to feel afraid of him.

"How," she said, in greeting.

He made no reply, only continued to watch her steadily.

"How," she repeated, and smiled.

His eyes instantly brightened.

"You sick?" she asked, moving her head sorrowfully in pantomime.

For answer, he shambled closer and held up first one naked foot and then the other, like a suffering hound. Dallas saw that they were sore from stone bruises and bleeding from cactus wounds.

"Oh, you're hurt!" she cried.

The Indian nodded, and at once made her a dumb appeal. Lowering himself stiffly until he was seated upon the dead grass before her, he pointed eloquently into his wide-open mouth.

Dallas understood. "Hungry," she said.

He nodded again.

She had never heard a scoffing white declare that the red man is, above all, a beggar, so she did not delay answering his mute petition. She stooped to examine again the cuts and bruises on his feet. Then, "Wait till I come back," she bade him, and his vigorous nod assured her that he understood what she said. She hurried away to the shack.

She tarried only long enough to tell her father of the straggler and to hear his objections at her "fussin'" with a "no-'count Injun." Returning, she found her charge patiently waiting for her. As she came up, he was facing the ford, where, amid cursing, shouting and trumpet

blares, some troopers were trying to induce the balky ambulance mules to go aboard the boat. But when she handed him a crockery plate heaped with boiled potatoes, cold meat and pancakes, and a piece of suet wound in a soft white cloth, he became indifferent to the lively doings at the landing and began to eat as if famished.

He made such rapid headway that, before Dallas realised it, the food was gone, the plate scraped clean and the suet direly threatened. He gave her a puzzled look as she put forth a hand objectingly.

"No, no," she said. And while she tore the soft cloth into strips, she put the fat out of reach by slipping it into a skirt pocket.

The bandages ready, she knelt before him and tenderly swathed his wounds.

"There!" she said, as she finished. "Now, you'd better hurry. The soldiers are almost over, and you'll be too late to get across dry."

He scrambled up, but, ignoring her advice, put one hand through a rent in his squaw's waist and began to search for something. Presently, he brought forth a package done up in dirty muslin, and slowly unfastened it. A folded paper as soiled as its wrapper fell out. It was worn through much handling and covered with pencilled words. He handed it to Dallas.

At first, she could not decipher it. But after studying it carefully and placing together several detached bits she was able to make it out. It was written scrawlingly and in a trembling hand.

"The bearer of this [it read] the good chief, Red Moon, I commend to the gentleness and mercy of every God-fearing man and woman. Once, out of the weakness of the flesh, he wept under the tortures of a sun-dance. Since then he has been abused, starved, and spat upon. Yet, hearing from me of Christ, His suffering, and His command to forgive, he has put down his desire to revenge his wrongs in blood, and goes on his way, labouring and enduring in silence. May God be gracious to whomsoever aids this least one among us."

Here the letter ended, but underneath was the signature—so fingered, however, that Dallas could spell out only the word "David"—and a blurred postscript which said:

"I have christened him Charles, and taught him English, but since his punishment he has never——"

The remainder of the paper was illegible.

When Dallas gave it back to the Indian, he wrapped it up carefully and returned it to his bosom. Then he gathered up the scattered chips, lifted his double load to his shoulders, drew his sombre blanket close about him, and shambled slowly away.

"Poor thing!" said Dallas, in compassion.

He stopped to look back.

"Good-by," she said as he went on; "good-by."

When he reached the river-bank, he turned again. The frost-blighted cottonwoods that bordered the Missouri were behind him, gleaming as yellowly as if, during the short, hot summer, their leafy branches had caught and imprisoned all the sunshine. Against that belt of brilliant colour stood out his spare, burdened frame.

Watching, she saw his gaunt face slowly relax in a friendly grin.

CHAPTER IV

MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Snow fell on the very heels of the cavalry. Scarcely were the Indians safe in the stockade and the troopers once more in barracks, when some first flakes, like down plucked by the wind from the breasts of the southward-hastening wild-fowl, came floating out of the sky. Soon the long sumach leaves on the coulée edge were drooping under a crystalline weight, the black plowed strip was blending with the unplowed prairie, and the shock head of the cottonwood shack was donning a spotless night-cap. And so heavy and ceaseless was the downfall that, at supper-time, the sweet trumpet notes of "retreat" were wafted out from Brannon across a covered plain.

When morning dawned, the heavens were cloudless, and the laggard sun, as it rose, shone with blinding glory upon peaceful miles. Nowhere was a sign of wallow, path or road, and the coulée yawned, white-lipped. Even the Missouri was not unchanged. For, away to the northwest, there had been a mighty rainstorm, and the murky river tumbled by in waves that were angry and swollen.

Since his early boyhood, the section-boss had not known snow. Before the previous day, Dallas and Marylyn had never seen it. It was with exclamations of delight, therefore, that, crowding together in the doorway, the three first caught sight of the glistening drifts.

"Pa, it's like a Christmas card," cried the younger girl. And, bareheaded, she ran out to frolic before the shack.

To Dallas, the scene had a deeper meaning. Here was what would discourage and block anyone who had put off necessary improvements! And this would last long after the expiration of that six

months! "I guess there'll be no building or plowing *now*," she said to her father, happily.

He, fully as relieved, returned a confident assent.

A little later, Old Michael, the ferryman, drove by, breaking a track along the blotted road. His ancient corduroys, known to every riverman from Bismarck to Baton Rouge, were hidden beneath layers of overcoats. Through the wool cap pulled down to his collar, two wide holes gave him outlook; a third, and smaller aperture, was filled by the stem of a corn-cob pipe. He was headed for the cattle-camp, the lines over a four-in-hand hitched to three empty wagons, a third team tied to the tailboard of the hindmost box.

On the arrival of the saloon gang, the pilot had left his steamboat in the hands of his two helpers and made his way to Shanty Town. There, in a shingle hut, perched atop a whisky cask, and kicking its rotund belly complacently with his heels, he had wet a throat, long dry, from the amber depths beneath him.

With each succeeding glass, his obligations had grown apace. Nevertheless, for a lifetime of rough service had brought about an immunity that belied his Celtic blood, his brain remained clear, his step steady and his eye unbleared. Thus it happened that when, cut off from grazing, it was necessary for the Shanty Town teams to be returned at once to Clark's, Old Michael was on hand and in condition to take them, and, by so doing, wipe out his drinking-account.

As he came opposite the shack, Marylyn was still running about in the snow, while Dallas was sweeping out some long, narrow drifts that had sifted in through window-and door-cracks. Squinting across at them, he recalled, all at once, a heated conversation that had taken place at Shanty Town the afternoon of the southward departure of a Dodge City courier. And he shook his head sorrowfully.

"Ye'll have yer han's fule before long," he advised aloud, "or it's me that's not good at guessin'." And, lifting the front of his cap, he

sympathetically blew the purple bump that served him for a nose till it rang through the crisp air like a throaty bugle.

Farther on, as he sat pondering deeply and letting the leaders choose their course, a horseman came cantering toward him, and drew rein beside his wheel. It was Lounsbury, buried to the ears in a buffalo coat.

"Sure, it's somethin' important, John, that's a-bringin' ye out t'-day," cried Old Michael, roguishly, his brogue disclosing his identity. "It's ayther tillegrams or l-a-a-ydies."

The storekeeper coloured under his visor. "It's nay-ther," he mocked laughingly.

"None o' yer shillyshallin'," warned the ferryman, giving the other a playful whack with his gad. "Oi kin rade ye loike a buke."

"You can't read a book," declared Lounsbury. "But I'll tell you: I'm going to the Lancasters'."

Old Michael nodded, with a sly wink through the portholes of his mask. "Oi knowed it!" he said. Then, after fishing out a tobacco-bag from under his many coats and lighting the corn-cob in the protecting bowl of his palms, "In that case, man, Oi got somethin' t' say t' ye."

He leaned over the wheel confidentially, and Lounsbury bent toward him, so that the smoke of the pipe fed the storekeeper's nostrils. They talked for a half-hour, the one relating his story, the other putting in quick questions. At the end of their conversation, Lounsbury held out his hand.

"If their letter brings him, Mike," he said, "don't you fail to let me know."

"Aye, aye," promised the pilot, earnestly.

They parted. Old Michael continued his way with an easy mind. But Lounsbury was troubled. Instead of carrying—as on his former visit—

good news to the little family on the bend, he must now be the bearer of evil.

And when, having stalled his horse with Ben and Betty, he entered the cottonwood shack, his heart smote him still more. For, secretly, he had hoped that he was to tell them what they already knew. But it seemed precisely the reverse. There was nothing in the appearance and actions of the Lancasters that suggested anxiety. The section-boss, though his manner was not without a certain reserve (as if he half believed something was about to be wormed out of him), greeted Lounsbury good-naturedly enough. Marylyn hurried up in a timid flutter to take his cap and coat. While, facing him from the hearth-side, her hair coiled upon her head like a crown, her grey eyes bright, her cheeks glowing, was a new Dallas.

"Well, how've you all been?" asked Lounsbury, accepting a bench.

"Oh, spright 'nough," answered the section-boss. "But it's cold, it's cold. Keeps me tremblin' like a guilty nigger."

"You'll get over that," assured the other, rubbing the blood into his hands. "It's natural for you to be soft as chalk-rock the first winter—you've been living South."

"Ah reckon," agreed Lancaster. He sat down beside the younger man, eyeing him closely. "How d' y' come t' git away fr'm business?" he queried.

"Well, you see," Lounsbury answered, "I've got an A 1 man in my Bismarck store, and at Clark's there's nothing to do week days, hardly. So I just took some tobacco to Skinny's, where the boys could get at it, and loped down here." Then, playfully, "But I don't see much happening in these parts." He stretched toward a window. "The town of Lancaster ain't growing very fast."

Dallas, seated on a bench with Marylyn, looked across at him smilingly. "I'm glad of it," she declared. "We ain't used to towns."

"You folks've never lived in one?"

"No—we never even *been* in one."

He puckered his forehead. "Funny," he said. "Somehow, I always think of you two as town girls."

"Aw, shucks!" exclaimed Lancaster, scowling.

But Dallas was leaning forward, interested. "That's on account of our teachers," she said. "There was a school-house up the track, in Texas, and we went to it on the hand-car. Every year we had a different teacher, and all of 'em came from big Eastern places like New Orleans or St. Louis. So—so you see, we kinda got towny from our school-ma'ams."

"One had a gold tooth," put in Marylyn. Her eyes, wide with recollection, were fixed upon Lounsbury.

"But you passed through cities coming north," argued the storekeeper.

"N-n-no," said Dallas, slowly; "we—we skirted 'em."

"What a pity!" He turned to the section-boss.

"Pity!" echoed the latter. "Huh! You save you' pity. My gals is better off ef they don' meet no town hoodlums."

It had been "soldier trash" before; now, it was "town hoodlums." Lounsbury wondered why *he* had been allowed a second call. He glanced at the girls. There was a sudden shadow on each young face. He changed to the fire, and looked hard at it. How cut off they were! Where was their happiness—except in their home? And could he tell them even that was threatened?

"Not by a long shot!" he vowed. "I'll trust Old Michael."

He set himself to being agreeable, and especially toward the section-boss. He told of the Norwegian at Medicine Mountain, and of

the old man who lived with wife and children at the "little bend" up the river; he admired the Navajo blankets, and explained their symbolic figures of men, animals and suns; he leaned back, clasping a knee, and branched into comical stories.

The little shack awoke to unaccustomed merriment. Lancaster warmed to the storekeeper's genial attentions, and burst into frequent guffaws; Dallas and Marylyn followed his every word, breaking in, from time to time, with little gleeful laughs.

But in the midst of it, there came from outside a startling interruption: Shouts, and a loud, pistol-like cracking, powdery swirls over the windows, a frightened lowing, and heavy thumps against the shack.

The noise without produced a change within. Incredibly agile, Lancaster got to a pane. While Dallas, springing up, screened Marylyn, and waited, as if in suspense.

Dark bulks now shot past, pursued by mounted men. And very soon the herd was gone, and all was again quiet. Then followed a moment that was full of embarrassment. Keenly, Lounsbury looked from father to daughter, the one striving to assume an easy air, the other incapable of hiding alarm. All at once, he felt certain they shared Old Michael's information. He determined to tell them that he, too, knew what and whom they feared.

"Expecting someone, Miss Dallas?" he asked tentatively.

The section-boss hastened to answer. "Expectin' nothin'," he snapped. Then, to cut short any further questioning, "Dallas, y' clean forgot them mules t'-day. Lawd help us! y' goin' t' let 'em starve?"

Lounsbury sat quiet, realising that the team was but a pretext. The elder girl found her cloak, picked up a bucket and left the room. Marylyn shrank into the dusk at the hearth-side. Lancaster was hobbling up and down, his crutch-ends digging at the packed dirt of

the floor.

The storekeeper, putting aside his determination, went on as though he had not noticed the other's attitude. "The storm was hard on the stock last night. They must 'a' drifted thirty miles with it. Our loss is big, likely. The punchers'll bunch everything on four hoofs and drive 'em into the coulée. Cows'll be out of the wind there, and live or browse till the ground clears."

But as he was talking, the section-boss made himself ready for the cold; before he had finished, the elder man had disappeared.

Lounsbury was thoroughly provoked at the treatment shown him—he was hurt at the plain lack of faith. Again, he considered what course to pursue. Granted the family knew all he could tell them, what would be gained by forcing the fact of his knowledge upon them? Nothing—unless it were more suspicion against himself. And if they were in ignorance—well, it was better than premature care. As before, he decided to remain silent and depend upon the pilot.

He glanced at Marylyn. On her father's departure, she had moved out of the shadow. Now, she was sitting bolt upright, with fingers touching the bench at either side. Her lips were half parted. She was watching Lounsbury wonderingly.

The moment their eyes met, her own fell. She reached to the mantel for a beaded belt, and began work upon it precipitately.

"What is the prairie princess doing?" he asked.

"Making something." She held the belt by one hand to let it slip through the other.

He reached for it. "My! it's pretty! Wish you'd make me a watch-fob like that."

She flushed and dimpled. "I'd like to," she said.

"I'll wear it as an amulet." He gave her back the belt, and their

hands touched.

She started nervously.

"Why, Miss Marylyn!" he said gently. "You afraid of me?"

"No." It was whispered.

"Well, you mustn't be." His tone was one that might have been used to a child. "Since I rode here a month ago, I've thought of you folks a lot. I'd like to do a real good turn for you. Perhaps it's because you girls seem so lonely——"

"We're not lonely," she declared. "The Fort's near, and we can hear the band. And pa says there'll be three or four steamers go by next summer."

The storekeeper mentally kicked himself. "The idea of suggesting a thing like that," he growled inwardly, "when she hadn't even thought of it! John Lounsbury, you've got about as much sense as a fool mud-hen."

"And," on Marylyn, "there's the ladies at Fort Brannon. If pa ——" She hesitated.

Lounsbury shook his head, smiling. "Well, I wouldn't count on *them*, if I were you," he advised, remembering certain experiences of Bismarck belles. "Those women over there are as clannish as crows."

"Yes?" plaintively. She went at her beads again.

"As I was saying," he began once more, "I've thought of you folks a lot. Seemed as if I just had to come down to-day. And I brought you something. See here!" He dived into the side pockets of his coat and pulled out two books.

"O-o-oh!" breathed Marylyn. "Books!"

"All I had, but maybe you'll like 'em. They're love stories."

The shadow beyond the firelight claimed her again.

From the lean-to came the sound of Lancaster's voice. It was shrill with anger. A great sadness came over the storekeeper. "I wish I could come down often and look after things," he said. "You need another man around."

There was a short silence. Then, "Dallas likes the work outside," she answered, very low, "and driving Ben and Betty up and down."

He nodded. "But you?"

"I like to stay in and sew."

"Stay in and sew," he mused. "That takes me back to the States. My dear mother sits by the fire and sews. Ah!"—with big-brotherly tenderness—"I hope you'll never have to do anything harder."

"Dallas won't let me work outside. She says she's the man."

Dallas—the man! Somehow it stung him. And then he heard the elder girl pushing an armful of hay before the eager noses of the mules. He got up quickly. "She is tending to those beasts!" he exclaimed. "Why, if I'd 'a' thought——"

She rose also, a wavering figure in the half light.

He picked up hat and coat, then halted. If he offered his help in the lean-to, what would be his reception? He felt utterly hampered, and began twirling his thumbs like a bashful cowboy. Moreover, Lancaster had been gone a good while. Was his absence a hint for his visitor to go?

The storekeeper went up to Marylyn. "Good-by," he said. "I must be hiking along."

She put a trembling hand in his.

The latch clicked behind them, and the section-boss entered. Again the younger girl started, and consciously.

Lancaster banged the door and looked them over. "Huh!" he snorted meaningly. So—he had misled himself with the idea that Lounsbury had come to pry into the matter of the claim. And all the while, underneath, the storekeeper had had another object!

He jerked at a bench, dropped upon it and flung his crutches down.

The other saw the look and heard the sniff. He believed they arose from the fact that he was still there. "Just going, Lancaster," he said. "So long."

"S' long."

"Good-by, Miss Marylyn. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year." He gave her a hearty smile.

"Good-by." She opened the door for him.

John Lounsbury passed out, regretting that he had been unwelcome; indignant that the section-boss had misjudged his interest in the ownership of the claim. But he would have been astounded if he had known the real nature of the false impression he was leaving with Evan Lancaster; or had read the thoughts of the younger girl, country-reared, unused to the little courtesies of speech and action. For there were two who had misunderstood him that day.

CHAPTER V

THE DESPISED

Squaw Charley crouched, dull-eyed, among the dogs. The dark folds of his blanket were drawn tight over his tattered waist. Close around his feet, which were shod in old and cracking moccasins, was tucked his fringed skirt. An empty grain-sack covered his head and shielded his face from the wind. As an icy gust now and then filtered in through the chinks of the stockade wall and swept him, he swayed gently back and forth; while the tailless curs snuggling against him whined in sympathy and fought for a warmer place. For the kennel roof of shingles, put up in one corner of the enclosure as a protection for the pack, had served only, during the week that followed the storm, to prevent the pale beams of the winter sun from reaching the pariah and his dumb companions.

Presently the flap of a near-by lodge was flung aside. An Indian woman emerged and threw a handful of bones toward the shelter. At once Squaw Charley awoke to action. Shedding sack and blanket, he scrambled forward with the half-starved, yelping beasts to snatch his portion.

His bone picked clean of its little, the pariah resumed his crouching seat once more; and the pack closed quietly about him, licking his face and the hands that had cuffed them as, with much turning and shivering, they settled down to sleep.

A warrior stalked proudly past, ignoring both his disgraced brother and the sentries that paced the high board walk at the wall's top. Two Indian lads approached, chattering to each other over the heart-shaped horn tops they were swinging on buckskin strings, and tarried

a moment to scoff. Squaw Charley paid no heed to either brave or boys. His face was hidden, his eyes shut. He seemed, like the dogs, to be sleeping.

Of a sudden there came a shrill summons from a distant wigwam, and the pariah sprang up eagerly. Afraid-of-a-Fawn stood in the tepee opening, her evil face with its deep scar thrust forward to look about.

"Skunk!" she shrieked, as he hurried toward her, and her long, black teeth snapped together; "a fire!" Then she spat to cleanse her mouth.

Squaw Charley hastened back to the shingle roof for an armful of fuel. Returning, he entered the wigwam and knelt beneath the smoke-hole. And while he arranged the sticks carefully upon a twist of grass, the aged crone hovered, hawk-like, over him, ready with fist or foot for any lack of haste, or failure with the fire. Not until, with flint and steel, he lighted a strip of spongy wood and thrust it under the dry hay, and a flame leaped up and caught the soot on a hanging kettle, did she leave him and go on a quest for breakfast rations.

The pariah had not dared to lift his eyes from his task while the hag was watching. But now he stole a swift glance toward the back of the lodge, where the maid, Brown Mink, was reclining, and his dull eyes, like the fuel at his knees, leaped into sudden flame. But, with the deftness of a woman, he kept on putting bits of wood into the mounting blaze.

Brown Mink did not look his way. She lay on a slanting frame of saplings held together by a network of thongs. The gay blanket on which she had ridden during the march was folded under her. A buffalo-robe was spread over her bead-wrought leggins and shoes, its hairy side under, its tanned face, which was gaudily painted, uppermost. Festoonings of beads fell from her neck to the top of her richly embroidered skirt, and heavy ear-drops of gilt pushed through

the purple-black masses of her hair.

Squaw Charley fed his sight gladly with her loveliness, thankful that she, who once had looked upon him kindly, did not now turn to see his squalor. The blaze was thawing his chilled limbs and fast warming him, the brass pot was singing merrily. He kept his hands gratefully near it, and as, from time to time, the girl held up her arms admiringly to let the firelight shine upon her bracelets and pinchbeck rings, he watched her furtively from half-closed eyes.

But not for long. Afraid-of-a-Fawn soon returned with meat and meal and, cursing, ordered him away.

"Off, Ojibway coward," she cried; "to the dogs. But see that there is wood for to-night's cooking and tomorrow's."

The pariah gave the fire under the kettle a last touch, and slunk out hastily into the snow. The hag pursued him, moving backward and pulling after her the partly dressed hide of a black-tailed deer.

"Make it ready for the cutting-board," she bade, and threw the piece of hard stone for the fleshing so that it split the pariah's cheek.

Squaw Charley took up the hide and dug in the snow for the stone.

A young warrior was lingering at the lodge flap, blowing spirals of kinnikinick. He burst into a laugh. "Ho! ho!" he taunted. "The squaw of a squaw drudges to-day. Ho! ho!"

The crone joined in the laugh. Then, "Standing Buffalo may enter," she said, and respectfully led the way into the wigwam.

The pariah heard, yet did not pause. But when, among the dogs again, he cleaned at the deer hide with short, swift strokes, a light once more flamed up in his dull eyes—a light unlike the one that had burned in them at Brown Mink's fireside.

He was still working diligently, the sack over his head as before,

when, about the middle hour of the day, Lieutenant Fraser entered the sliding-panel of the stockade and began to go rapidly from lodge to lodge, as if in search of someone. Seeing the intruder, the dogs about Squaw Charley bounded up, hair bristling and teeth bared.

The outcast laid aside his rubbing-stone and strove to quiet them. But the sudden commotion under the roof had already attracted the young officer. Stooping, he caught a glimpse of The Squaw.

"Oh, there you are!" he exclaimed, and motioned for him to come forth.

When the Indian appeared, the deer-skin in his arms, Lieutenant Fraser pointed toward the entrance. "You come with me," he said, with a gesture in the sign language.

Squaw Charley moved slowly along with him. No one was in sight in the enclosure—no one seemed even to be looking on. But, opposite Brown Mink's lodge, the old woman dashed out, seized the hide with a scream of rage and dashed back again. The next moment, Charley passed through the sliding-panel and took up his march to headquarters.

"So this is your last wild pet, eh, Robert?" said Colonel Cummings, as they entered. He backed up to his stove and surveyed Squaw Charley good-naturedly. "Let me see, now: You've run the scale from a devil's darning-needle to a baby wolf. Next thing, I suppose, you'll be introducing us to a youngish rattlesnake."

Lieutenant Fraser rumbled his hair sheepishly. "But you ought to see the way they're treating him—banging him around as if he were a dog."

"Hm. He certainly doesn't look strong."

"They work him to death, Colonel."

The commanding officer laughed. "A redskin, working, must be a

sight for sore eyes!"

"But they don't feed him, sir."

The outcast, wrapped close in his blanket, lifted his pinched face to them.

"How'd it happen I didn't notice this fellow during the march?" inquired the colonel, a trifle suspiciously.

"He was with the squaws when there was anything to do; but when we were on the move, he fell to the rear."

"Didn't try to get away?"

"No; just straggled along."

"Ah. Do you know whether or not he took part in the fight the day we captured them?"

At the question, a swift change came over Squaw Charley. He retreated a little, and bent his head until his chin rested upon his breast.

Lieutenant Fraser threw out his arm in mute reply. No feathers, no paint, no gaudy shirt or bonnet marked the Indian as a warrior.

The elder man approached the silent, shrinking figure not unkindly. "And what do you want me to do for him, Robert?" he asked.

Lieutenant Fraser sprang forward eagerly, his face shining. "He's so quiet and willing, sir—so ready to do anything he's told. I'd be grateful if you thought you could trust him outside the stockade. He could get the odds and ends from the bachelor's mess."

"I'll be hanged! Robert," cried his superior, annoyed. "Most men, just out of West Point, have an eye to killing redskins, not coddling 'em."

The other crimsoned. "I'm sorry you look at it that way, Colonel," he said. "I'm ready to punish or kill in the case of bad ones. But—you'll

pardon my saying it—I don't see that it's the duty of an officer to harm a good one."

Squaw Charley raised his head, and shifted timidly from foot to foot.

"Well, Robert," replied Colonel Cummings, quietly, "you still have the Eastern view of the Indian question. However, let me ask you this. Has this man a story, and what is it? For all you know, he may deserve being 'banged around.'"

Lieutenant Fraser was shaking his head in answer, when swift came one from the pariah. He searched in his bosom, under the tattered waist, drew out the rag-wound paper and handed it to the commanding officer.

Very carefully the latter read it, his interest growing with every line. Finally, giving it over to the lieutenant, he smiled at Squaw Charley.

"That tells the tale," he said. "I knew the man that wrote that when I was with Sibley in Minnesota, the summer after the massacre. He's a man that writes the truth. He talks the truth, too, and I wish I had him here, now, so that he could interpret for me."

"Why, sir!" exclaimed the younger man, "it says this chap knows English!"

"By all the gods! Of *course* it does. Robert, I'll make him my interpreter." The colonel strode up and down in his excitement, pausing only to contend with the other for the paper. "Red Moon," he said at last, motioning the pariah forward, "do you know what I am saying to you?"

Squaw Charley nodded.

"Good! good! This is fortunate. Now we can have a talk with these Sioux." He addressed the Indian again. "And you speak English?" he asked.

There was a second grave nod.

"You shall be my interpreter, Red Moon. You shall have a log house near the scouts, and the Great Father at Washington will pay you. You shall have double rations for yourself and your squaw, and more, if you have papooses. What do you say to that?"

Squaw Charley had not taken his eyes from the other's face for an instant while he was talking. Now, for answer, he shook his head slowly and sadly from side to side.

"Don't want to?" cried the colonel.

"I'll tell you, sir," interposed Lieutenant Fraser, studying the paper, "I don't believe he ever speaks. You'll notice that it says here: '*but he has never.*' I can't be sure, but I think the next word is '*spoken.*'"

"Vow of silence?"

"Something of the kind. Captain Oliver has been telling me about these bucks that are degraded; and I don't believe that, even if this fellow spoke, the rest of the tribe would treat with us through him."

"That's probably true."

"They've made a squaw of him, sir."

Deep humiliation instantly showed in the pariah's eyes and posture. He looked at Lieutenant Fraser imploringly, and drew his blanket still more closely about him. Then, as, with a sign, he was bidden to put it off, he suddenly let it drop to the floor.

"Great Scott!" cried the colonel. "He's *dressed* like one!"

"His punishment, sir. And he won't be taken back as a warrior till he does some big deed."

"What does that paper say again? '*Out of the weakness of the flesh he wept under the tortures of the sun-dance.*' So *that's* the cause of his trouble! What did they do to you, Red Moon?"

To reply, Squaw Charley quickly divested himself of the calico waist and turned about. And Colonel Cummings, uttering his horror, traced with tender finger the ragged, ghastly seams that lined the pariah's back.

"Muscles torn loose," he said. "Not old wounds, either." As Squaw Charley resumed waist and blanket, he looked on pityingly.

"I'll give him his freedom," he said, when the outcast stood ready to depart. "He can come and go in the post as he likes. Robert, see that the adjutant understands my order. Now, let him get something to eat in the kitchen."

When Squaw Charley's hunger had disappeared before the enforced, and rather nervous, generosity of Colonel Cummings' black cook, and Lieutenant Fraser had left him, he hurried away from headquarters. Making his way to the sentry line north of Brannon, he gathered firewood along the Missouri until dark.

The lantern had been out for an hour in the cottonwood shack. Father and daughters were asleep. But, at the end of that time, Dallas was suddenly awakened by the sound of loud stamping and rending in the lean-to. Ben and Betty, roused by the fear of something, were plunging and pulling back on their halter-ropes. Startled, her heart beating wildly, the elder girl crept softly to the warped door.

Her father and sister still slept, undisturbed by the noise in the stable, which now quieted as abruptly as it had begun. Dallas heard the team begin to feed again. And from outside the shack there came only a faint rustle. Was it the uncovered meadow-grass of the eaves as the wind brushed gently through it? Or the whisper of moccasins on snow?

Later, when The Squaw entered the sliding panel of the stockade,

he crept noiselessly toward the shingle roof. But he was not to gain it unseen. Afraid-of-a-Fawn, who had been looking about for him, hailed him savagely as he neared.

"Wood for the morning fire," she demanded.

By the light streaming out of a near-by lodge she saw that Squaw Charley was looking at her defiantly. She set upon him, cursing and kicking, and drove him before her to the shelter.

"The pig!" she cried. "Running free since the sun was at the centre of the sky, and yet not a stick! May a thousand devils take the coward! He quakes like an aspen!"

Squaw Charley was indeed trembling, but only with the cold, and soon, under the shingle roof, the snuggling dogs would warm him. Blows and abuse counted nothing this night. He was fed; freedom was his; and he had paid a debt of gratitude.

CHAPTER VI

FROM DODGE CITY

"Dad, what's the day after to-morrow?"

Evan Lancaster pursed out his mouth and thoughtfully contemplated his elder daughter.

"Ah c'd figger it out," he declared after a puzzled silence, "ef Ah had th' almanac." He hunted about, found the pamphlet and began to study the December page. "Trouble is," he said at last, "Ah don' know no day t' figger fr'm—Ah los' track 'way back yonder at th' fore part o' th' month. 'Sides, Ah kain't say whether this is Tuesday er Wednesday er Thursday. Mar'lyn, d' you remember w'at day o' th' week it is?"

Marylyn left the farther window and walked slowly forward. As she halted beside her sister, the latter put an arm about her tenderly and drew her close. A change had recently come over the younger girl—a change that Dallas had not failed to see, yet had utterly failed to understand. Marylyn still performed her few tasks about the house, but with absent-minded carelessness. Her work done, she took up the long-neglected vigil at the windows, spending many quiet, and seemingly purposeless, hours there—all unmindful that the beaded belt lay dusty and unfinished on a shelf. Only by fits and starts was the shack enlivened by her happy chatter. At all other times, she was wistful and distraught. Now, as she answered her father, a faltering light crept into her eyes.

"The last time Mr. Lounsbury was here," she said, hesitatingly, "it was the 6th, and to-day is——"

"Ah c'n git it," the section-boss interrupted. After a moment's tallying on his fingers, he sat back and clapped his knees in

excitement. "W'y, Dallas!" he cried, "th' day after t'-morrow's the end o' thet man's six months!"

Dallas released Marylyn. "Yes," she said, watching the younger girl wander back mechanically to the post she had forsaken; "and to-morrow you ought to start for Bismarck. Maybe it wouldn't matter if you waited a while before going; but as long as the weather's good, I think you ought to go right off."

"Ah reckon," he replied, but not heartily.

And so, once more preparations for a trip were made. That night, when all was ready, and Dallas and her father, having given the team a late feed, were leaving the stable together, she spoke to him of her sister.

"There's just one thing that worries me about your leaving," she said. "I don't know if you've noticed it or not, but Marylyn don't seem to be feeling good."

"Y' think mebbe she takes after her ma?" ventured the section-boss.

Dallas nodded.

"No, no," he said, "she favours me, an' they's no need t' fret. They's nothin' th' matter with her—jus' off her oats a leetle, thet's all."

The developments of the next morning swept every thought from Dallas' mind save those concerning the journey. For, when it came time to harness the mules, she found that Ben had unaccountably gone lame. Whether his mate had kicked him, or whether he had sprained a leg while exercising the previous afternoon, she did not know. But it was plain that, as far as he went, the miles between quarter-section and land-office were impossible. At once, Dallas suggested that Betty be driven single to a small pung that had been built for water-hauling when the well froze up. Accordingly, the mule was put before the sleigh. Failure resulted. Though both Dallas and

her father alternately coaxed and scolded, Betty, with characteristic stubbornness, refused to budge a rod from the lean-to without Ben.

Dallas was in despair. "She won't go, she won't go," she said. "We've got to think of some other way."

"Yestiddy," observed the section-boss, as he unfastened the tugs. "y' said it wouldn' matter ef Ah didn' go now." He was somewhat complacent over the outcome of the hitch-up.

"I don't feel that way now," asserted Dallas.

"Thet ol' man up at th' leetle ben' has hosses," he volunteered when they were again within the shack.

"He took 'em to Clark's two months ago, and walked back."

"Wal, how 'bout th' Norwegian over by th' Mountain?"

"He keeps oxen. If a blizzard came up, they'd never lead you out of it." Then she was moved to make a suggestion which she felt certain, however, would only be denounced. "There are hundreds of horses and mules at Brannon. I could ask there for a team."

Instantly Lancaster's ire was roused. "Thet's all Ah want t' hear fr'm you 'bout them damned Yankees," he said hotly. "An' Ah want y' t' remember it."

"But you're wrong, dad."

"Eh?" He turned upon her in amazed disgust.

"You're wrong," she repeated gently. "We oughtn't to treat the soldiers as if they was enemies. Some day we'll be in danger here ____"

"Bosh!"

"And then we'll have to take their help."

He began to hobble up and down, working himself into a white

heat. "'S long as Ah live on this claim," he said, "Ah'll never go t' Brannon fer anythin', an' they'll be no trottin' back an' forth. Thet ornery trash over thar is th' same, most of it, thet fought th' South, jus' a few years ago. Ah kain't forget thet. An' not *one* of 'em'll ever set a foot in this house."

After more hobbling, he burst forth again. "Ah tell y', Dallas, Ah won't *hev'* you gals meetin' them no-'count soldiers——"

She smiled at him. "We don't want to meet any soldiers," she answered. "But there are women at the Fort—women like mother. It seems a shame we can't know them."

"Y' mother raised y' t' be's fine a lady as any of 'em over thar!"

"Maybe that's true. If it is, then they'd like us, wouldn't they? and we could have friends. I'm not thinking about myself—just about Marylyn."

"You gals got each other. Meetin' th' women at Brannon means meetin' th' men. *An' Ah won't hev it!*" His voice rose almost to a shout.

"I'll never speak to you about it again," she said. And her quiet acceptance mollified him.

"M' gal, y' kain't think how Ah feel about them Yanks," he went on tremulously. "An' Ah want y' t' promise me thet whether Ah'm 'live er dead, y' 'll allus keep on you' own side of th' river."

She glanced up at him quickly. "Do you mean that, daddy?" she asked, using the name he had borne in her babyhood.

"Ah *do!* Ah do!"

"Then I promise." Her tone was sorrowful.

"Mar'lyn?"

The younger girl faced about slowly.

"D' *you* promise?"

"Promise?" she repeated. "Yes,—I—I promise."

Dallas knew that the trip to the land-office was impossible unless Lounsbury should chance along—which was unlikely, some weeks having passed since his last visit. Undoubtedly were he to come, he would help them. But would her father allow her to ask the storekeeper's aid? Probably not.

"I'll tell Charley about it to-night," she said finally. "We just *got* to find a way."

"What c'n *he* do?" retorted her father. "Far's him's gitting a team's concerned, we-all might's well look fer someone t' come right outen th' sky."

Her determination to ask advice of the pariah was a natural one. The morning that succeeded the night of the mules' terror, she had awakened to find a reassuring explanation for their fear: In the growing light, as the trumpet sounded reveille from the fort, she sprang up and looked out expectantly. On the top of a drift in front of the door was a bundle of sticks! A hard crust had formed during the night; and moccasin tracks, leading up to the wood, and then pointing away again, were cast in it with frozen clearness.

"That poor Indian!" she had exclaimed, in grateful relief.

Not once after his summoning before Colonel Cummings had The Squaw forgotten daily to leave firewood at the shack. The evening of his second trip across the Missouri, Dallas had lain in wait for him, secreted under the dismantled schooner, which she had drawn into place beside the door. And as, bringing his offering, he crossed the snow softly and approached, the terrified mules again announced his coming, and she hailed him.

"Come on, come near," she had called; "I want to see you."

Eager to prove his good intent, he had hastened forward; and she, just as eager to show her thankfulness, had led him into the house.

There, with the distrustful eye of the section-boss upon him, and with Marylyn watching in trepidation from a distance, he had eaten and drunk at Dallas' bidding.

At the very moment when Dallas decided to confide in him, Squaw Charley was not unmindful of her. Where the river-bluffs back of Brannon shoved their dark shoulders through the snow, the wind having swept their tops clean of the last downfall, he was working away like a muskrat. To and fro, he went, searching diligently for buffalo-chips. A sack followed him on a rope tied to his leather belt, so that he could beat his hands against his breast as he covered every square rod of dead, curly grass on the uplands. The bag crammed to the top, he took off his blanket and, despite the cold, began to fill it also. For he knew, and fully as well as they who watched the thermometer hanging just outside the entrance at headquarters, that the night would require much fuel.

As he hunted along the bare ridge, something more than the frigid gusts that whipped the skirt about his lean shanks urged him to finish his gathering and go riverward. In the little snug cabin out on the prairie a cheery welcome awaited him; before the glowing coals in the stone fireplace he could warm his shaking legs; there was good food for his empty stomach. But, better than all else, there a kindly face always smiled a greeting.

The blanket piled so high with chips that its weight balanced the grain-sack, he prepared to start riverward. But first, prompted by an old habit, he climbed to a high point of bluff near by, and, standing where lookouts had maintained a post before severe weather compelled their withdrawal, carefully scanned the white horizon. To the west, from where—the band in the stockade boasted—warriors of their tribe would come in the spring to make a rescue; to the north, on either side of the ice-bound Missouri; to the east, in the wide gap between the distant ranges of hills, he saw no creature moving. But facing southward, his hands shading his eyes carefully from the glare,

he spied, on the eastern bank, and at not a great distance, the approach of a familiar milk-white horse, drawing a heavy pung.

The stooping pariah was transformed by the sight. He threw up his arms with an inarticulate cry, and sprang away down the slope to his sack and blanket. Seizing them, he made for the level ground north of the barracks, descended to the ice, swiftly crossed and dragged the fuel up to the cottonwoods. Then he started down the river, taking long leaps.

The upper part of the improvised sleigh that was tilting its way across the drifts like a skiff on angry water, was the green box of an ordinary farm-wagon, set on runners. The wheels of the vehicle lay on some hay in the rear of the box. On the broad wooden seat was a man, facing rearward to get the wind at his back. He was almost concealed by quilts, his arms being wrapped close to his body, and the milk-white horse was taking his leisurely way unguided. Above the man, and nailed so loosely to the wagon-seat that it wavered a little from side to side and kept up a squeaking, was a tall board cross, rude and unpainted.

When he came close to the sleigh, Squaw Charley caught the sound of singing, and stopped. The traveller was comforting his lonely way with a sacred hymn, the words of which, scattered by the wind, reached the Indian in broken, but martial, phrases.

*"Onward, Christian soldiers,
Marching ... war,
... the cross of Jesus
... on before."*

Again Squaw Charley spurred himself into long leaps. And behind Shanty Town, on the open prairie, he brought the horse to a halt.

Once more he gave his wordless cry—a cry like the shrill hail of a mute. It brought the man face about. Another second, answering, he stood up, shook off the quilts to free his arms, reached down and caught the pariah to his breast.

Tall and spare, he was, and aged; over his shoulders flowed long, white hair; a beard as white fell to his waist; his sharp eyes were shaded by heavy brows; he wore a coat of coarse cloth that touched his feet, and about his head was wound a nubia; as, with face upraised, he embraced the Indian, he was a stately, venerable figure.

"God be praised!" he said over and over. Then he held Squaw Charley away from him a moment to look him up and down. "I feared some harm had come to you—that your people had behaved so cruelly to you that you had died. But you are well. Yet how thin! Ah! I am so glad to see you once more!"

He held him close again, murmuring a blessing. When he released him, it was to make room for him on the seat, and wrap him up in a thick, soft quilt. All the while the benevolent old face was shining with happiness, and tears were streaming down the wrinkled cheeks.

Squaw Charley, too, was overcome. His black eyes were no longer sad and lowered. They glowed softly, almost adoringly, as he watched his friend.

"David Bond had not forgotten you, Charles," the old man said, as he clucked to the white horse. "I was at Dodge City—that wickedest town of the plains—when news came of the capture of your village. At

once I started, for I knew that my duty lay here, here with your poor people, who will not realise how foolish and puny is their warfare. I did not come alone," he added, casting a look behind; "a white man accompanied me—a man so full of evil and blasphemy that I quake for the safety of his miserable soul. He has walked most of the distance, for he is warmer walking, and there are scarce enough quilts for two."

They looked back. A mile to the rear, trailed a solitary man.

Squaw Charley made a quick, questioning sign.

"His name is Matthews," replied David Bond; "and his mission, I fear, is a bad one. All the way he has urged my poor Shadrach on and on, so that we have hardly had time to rest and eat. And all the day, as he rides or tramps, he mutters to himself. When I ask him what he is saying, he replies, 'You'll find out quick enough!' and curses more vilely than before."

The pung was now opposite the stockade. Looking across the river, David Bond got his first view of the high-walled prison with its ever-moving and wary guards.

He pulled up his horse. "Alas!" he exclaimed mournfully, "how misguided they are—white and red men alike!"

The pung slid on until the cut in the river-bank was reached. Again the old man reined. "I cannot cross the river while the ice is so smooth. Shadrach could not keep his feet. And I will not leave him behind. But where can I stop on this side?"

Glancing to the left, he saw the line of saloons. "There, Charles," he said. "I shall drive there and ask for shelter."

He turned the white horse into the cut. As they approached the shanties, a woman's voice was heard, raised in ribald song.

"God sends David Bond whither he is most needed," the old man

murmured fervently.

A shingle sign was nailed over the door of the first building. On it, in bold, uneven letters, were the words: *The Trooper's Delight*. David Bond climbed down and knocked.

There was a moment of dead silence within; then, sounds as if several persons were moving about on tiptoe; again, silence. The old man knocked louder. After a short wait, the door was thrown wide. A thick-set man, whose eyes squinted at cross purposes over his flat, turned-up nose, filled the entrance.

"What in the devil do you want?" he demanded roughly, when he saw David Bond. But his seeming anger illy concealed his relief that it was not an officered guard, searching for recreant soldiers.

"I wish for nothing in the name of the devil," was the simple answer. "But in the name of God, I ask for a roof."

"That buck with you?" The squint-eyed man shut the door behind him as he pointed at Squaw Charley.

"No; he lives in the stockade yonder."

"Oh! He's the one that goes prowlin' 'round here day an' night, sneakin' an' stealin'!"

"He may prowl," said David Bond, stoutly, "but he does not steal. He is a good, honest Indian."

The keeper of The Trooper's Delight laughed immoderately. "Get out! Who ever heerd tell of a' honest Injun? Say!"—tauntingly—"where'd you an' your broom-tail come from, anyhow?"

"From Dodge City."

"Dodge City!" the man cried. "Then maybe you seen my brother there, or heerd if he' comin'. Nick Matthews is his name——"

David Bond lifted one hand and opened his mouth to answer. But

the words stopped at his lips. For, from the top of the high bank behind the line of shanties, there came a shout. Looking up, the squint-eyed man, David Bond, and The Squaw saw a face peering down upon them.

"Hello!" came the voice again. "Hello, Babe! Hello, gran'pa! you beat me here, didn't y'? Look out! I'm a-comin'!"

And amid a little avalanche of snow, icicles, dirt and stones that frightened the milk-white horse so that he all but overturned the pung, Nick Matthews tobogganed down the bank on his overcoat and landed beside them on the shelf.

"Short cut," he said, as he got up and shook out the coat. "Well, Babe, old socks, how's things goin'? How"—he threw his thumb back over his shoulder toward the east—"how 'bout over there? What news y' got?"

Squaw Charley followed the direction of the pointing.

"You ain't come a minnit too soon," declared Babe. "Only just a day or two left of your six months, an' they——" The two moved toward the shanty, whispering together.

David Bond called to the brothers appealingly. "May I put up here?" he asked. "Have you a vacant building that I may share with Shadrach? I have hay and food of my own."

Nick Matthews came back. He had a putty-coloured face upon which his blonde eyebrows failed to show; but he summoned a look that was as near to a scowl as possible. "Look a-here, gran'pa," he said, "d' *you* think I'm goin' t' let you sponge offen my frien's? Not by a long shot! Hain't I come all the way fr'm Dodge City t' keep th' redskins fr'm takin' your scalp? What *more* d' y' want?" He gave a laugh in which there was no humour, disclosing small teeth, ranged close, and like the first set of a child's.

David Bond did not quail. "You have accepted my hospitality for a

month," he said. "I ask nothing that is not justly mine."

Matthews snapped his fingers derisively. "We can't have you here t' snoop an' spy," he declared. "Git!" As he turned to enter the shanty, he came face to face with the Indian. "What's this?" Then, noting the squaw skirt, "Gran'pa, who's your lady frien'?"

Hate flashed across the pariah's face, like forked lightning on a dark sky.

"One of Sitting Bull's warriors," answered David Bond; "and a good man."

"Uncapapa, eh?" said Matthews. "I savvy their lingo." He plucked at Squaw Charley's dress. "Our warrior wears fine garments," he jeered, speaking in the Indian tongue. Then, with another laugh, he followed his brother into the shanty and banged the door.

David Bond took his horse's bridle. "We must find hospitality elsewhere, Shadrach," he said resignedly. And he headed the pung up the river. As he got back into the wagon-box, he looked round for Squaw Charley.

The pariah was standing close to the shanty, his head held forward, as if he were watching to spring, his hands opening and clenching angrily.

"Charles!" pleaded the old man, reproachfully. "Remember—do good to them that wish you evil, and love them that hate."

The Indian dropped his arm meekly and shuffled over to the pung. But when David Bond again drew him on to the seat, his lips moved silently, and until the cut was reached and Shadrach pulled them out upon the prairie once more, he continued to glower back at the line of saloons.

"It will be a terrible night," the other said, as they came to a standstill beside the cottonwoods. "It is getting late. I suppose I must

try to cross the river."

The pariah was recalled from his backward glances. Rising, he extended an arm to direct David Bond's attention. And the old man, rising also, made out the squat shack of the Lancasters, almost hidden from sight by drifts. With a fervent prayer of thanksgiving, he touched up Shadrach and steered him toward it, pausing only long enough for the Indian to load the chip-sack and the filled blanket on top of the wheels and hay.

"If this lonely house will give me shelter and welcome," vowed David Bond, urging his horse on, "it will find me grateful."

Squaw Charley made no answering sign. Bundled again in the soft quilt, he sat in the wagon-box, brooding. For he had divined, with the instinct of the savage, that if the shack on the rise before them would find a faithful friend in him who sat beneath the wavering cross, it was threatened by the presence of a dangerous foe—the man just come to the shanty saloon by the river.

CHAPTER VII

OUT OF THE SKY

When four distinct raps—Squaw Charley's familiar signal—sounded upon the outer battens of the warped door, Dallas drew back the iron bolt eagerly, caught the lantern that lighted the dim room from its high nail above the hearth, and held it over her head. Then, standing in the opening, with the icy wind fluttering the wide flame till it leaped and smoked in its socket, she met, not the faltering eyes of the faithful Indian, but the piercing gaze of aged David Bond.

She fell back and let the lantern drop to her waist. There she held it, her fingers trembling despite her effort to appear calm. Many days and nights she had waited expectantly for the man who, by voice and fist, had displayed an enmity toward them; she had pictured his arrival, or that of his emissary, and planned what she would say and do. Now, certain that he had come at last—after she had long ceased to watch for him—and reading justice and fearlessness in the stern visage before her, she was dumb and helpless.

Her father's voice, rising from the hearth-side, brought her to action. "Wal! wal!" he was saying, "don' keep th' door open all night."

With a defiant step forward, and as if to bar intrusion, she spread out her arms. "You're here," she said in a low tone.

Dallas's words did not penetrate the head-covering worn by David Bond; and the fire having died down for lack of fuel, the interior of the shack was so dark that he could see only her gesture. He thought her alone and frightened.

"Have no fear, daughter," he begged. "I will go somewhere else. But the ice is so——"

His gentle address surprised and disarmed her. She advanced relentlessly as her father came up behind.

"W'y—a stranger?" cried the section-boss.

She stopped him. "Yes, but we wouldn't turn a dog away to-night, dad." She motioned David Bond to enter.

As he crossed the sill, Dallas, for the first time, caught a glimpse of the white horse and the pung, and saw Squaw Charley lifting his load of chips from the wagon-box.

"You came together?" she asked.

"Charley pointed out your house to me," was the answer.

A sudden hope came to her. "Maybe I made a mistake," she said. "Tell me, who are you?"

"David Bond—an evangelist by the grace of God."

She lifted the lantern, so that he could see the others. "My father and my sister," she said. Then she put the light on the table, retired to a corner and suddenly sank down.

Squaw Charley, having brought in and emptied the sack and blanket, fed the blaze and crouched at one side of the fireplace. Evan and Marylyn were across from him, intently examining the features and dress of the traveller. It was Dallas who, eased, yet shaken, remembered to be hospitable.

"Come, Charley," she said, rising, "we'll put the horse up. No, no," as their guest would have accompanied her, "we won't need help. The mules are used to Charley, now, and Simon's pretty ugly to strangers." She started out. "Marylyn," she said, from the door, "you take Mr. Bond's coat." Then, to the evangelist, "I'm glad it's you, and not—somebody—else." A rare smile crossed her face.

The aged man, divested of his long ulster, advanced and, with

fatherly tenderness, lightly touched her braids.

"I was a stranger, and ye took me in," he quoted solemnly.

Dallas lingered a moment, arrested by the picture: Lancaster was leaning forward from his seat in unaccustomed silence; Marylyn sat beside him, the nubia thrown across her arm; nearer was the Indian, his copper-coloured face marvellously softened; and, before them all, stood the evangelist, priestly, patriarchal.

When Dallas and Squaw Charley were gone, the section-boss and his younger daughter were, for a space, tongue-tied through a lack of something to say. Soon, however, David Bond broke the quiet to assure Lancaster of his gratitude. And thereafter the two men talked freely.

"You need not fear any trouble with my horse," the evangelist said, as Dallas was heard bidding Simon keep to his side of the stall. "Shadrach is a gentle beast."

At the name, the section-boss cocked his head like an inquiring bird. "M-m, Shadrach," he began in important reflection; "y' call y' hoss Shadrach. Ah seem t' hev heerd thet name before."

Marylyn raised to her father a quick, warning finger. "It's in the Bible, pa," she whispered.

"Heh?"

"It's in the Bible."

"Don' y' think Ah know?" Evan poked the fire cheerfully. He was fairly started in a conversation. "Thet Shadrach was a prophet, ef Ah recall it jes' right," he said tentatively.

The evangelist shot him a sorrowful glance.

"No, pa," whispered Marylyn again. "He was put in a furnace. Remember the furnace, pa?"

"With th' lions!" cried the section-boss. "Certainly Ah do."

"Oh, pa, *that* isn't the story."

Evan stroked his moustache. "Ah'm kinda offen th' trail, honey, ain't Ah?" he said aside. Then, to cover his mistake and forestall any embarrassing explanation, he poked the fire again and resolutely began: "Pahson, how'd y' come t' name you' hoss Shadrach?"

"He had been christened Spooks," began the evangelist as if repeating an oft-told tale, "because his last owner mistook him, one night, for a ghost. I could not bear to call the faithful animal by that name, and, day after day, thought over all the names I had ever heard, striving to find one suitable. That summer something happened that decided for me. Spooks and I awoke to find ourselves surrounded by a prairie fire. And I, having hitched up and then gotten down into the bottom of the wagon, my good horse was forced to meet the wall of flame alone. He came out unscorched. I knew at once what his name should be. Henceforth, I called him Shadrach."

The light of returning knowledge—of blessed total recall—illuminated the face of the listening section-boss. He gave the fire a glad poke that sent the burning chips to every side, thrust out his chest proudly and pinned the other with a triumphant eye. "Wal, how 'bout Meshach and Abednego?" he demanded.

David Bond studied a moment, knitting his brows until their heavy archings met in a single hoary line. "I take their place," he said at last, with dignity.

Following supper, which Dallas prepared, all gathered before the cheery blaze. There, the evangelist, anxious over the welfare of the people among whom he had preached and taught, promptly began to question Squaw Charley.

"You have not told me of your capture," he said, "or of the fight that came before it. Were you taken in the north—in the country of the

White Mother—or in Dakota?"

The Indian nodded.

"Dakota?"

Swiftly, the pariah's whole aspect altered. A moment before, satisfied as to food, happy and comfortable, he had squatted down in his blanket. But, now, his shoulders bent, his chin sank to his breast, his eyes grew dull and sullen.

"Were you in the Mauvaises Terres?" queried the evangelist.

Squaw Charley shook his head.

"On the Powder?"

There was a silent assent.

"The soldiers pursued; maybe they surprised you—which?"

To answer, the Indian rose slowly. With one of Lancaster's crutches he raked out some ashes and levelled them upon the hearth-stones. Next, across them, stooping and using a finger, he drew a varying line that showed the trend of a stream. Far up toward its source, in a bend, he placed bits of bread from the table to indicate the lodges of his tribesmen. Slivers from a stick showed that the tepees had been set thickly in a grove of tall cottonwoods. White beans, from a filled pan on the floor near by him, stood for the warriors that had fought. His fingers moved more quickly as, by means of a handful of corn that Dallas had put in his leather pouch, he planted the United States troops on three sides of the Indian campground, and moved them forward to the attack.

Adroitly he manœuvred the opposing forces, with advancing here and retreating there, groans when the white men felt the fight too keenly, low whoops to picture an Indian gain, little puffs of the breath to betoken flying bullets. The onlookers saw the battle as it had raged about the tepees. And the flickering lantern, as Squaw Charley moved

it in a semicircle, told them that the firing began at daybreak and continued until dark.

All at once he changed the picture. Twelve beans were rapidly counted out and laid in rows, and he mourned softly over these to show that they were slain warriors. Five kernels of corn—a line of pale-faced dead—were placed beside the bean rows. This done, he covered the lantern with the grain-sack and leaned back against the logs.

"Aye, aye," cried David Bond, sadly. "Twelve braves and five troopers perished! Seventeen souls went to their Maker to mark the greed of the white man and the yearning to harry off the red! Why do the Indians not stay in peace and quiet upon the lands set apart for them, and not go abroad stealing and slaughtering? Why do my own people not give back to their brothers the country that is rightly theirs?"

Once more Squaw Charley stooped forward and, resting his weight on one hand, traced the return march of the troopers to a crossing of the Missouri, where the command had buried its dead; from there he drew the route southward, to the ferry and Fort Brannon. Here, he stuck the splinters in a circle to picture the stockade below the barracks. At last, rising, he drew his blanket close about him, put the grain-sack over his tangled hair and, with a parting look toward Dallas and the evangelist, went slowly out.

Perfect quiet followed the pariah's going. His recital of the conflict, dumb though it was, had powerfully stirred the little audience. For, as he had proceeded with his crude mimicry, the imagination of the others had filled in the scenes he could not sketch.

The section-boss spoke first. Not incapable of feeling, yet disliking to show emotion because it might be counted a weakness, he hastened to clear the air. "Say, Dallas," he drawled, with a survey of the battle-field, "he ought t' had some red Mexican beans fer his

injun." But the remark failed to appeal.

David Bond made a shake-down for himself beside Lancaster's bunk, using an armful of hay and the robes and quilts from his pung. However, the fact that he needed rest, or that his couch was ready, did not tempt him from the fire. Long after his host disappeared behind the swinging Navajo blankets, he sat by the hearth. And Dallas stayed with him, Marylyn's sleepy head pillowed in her lap.

The elder girl felt strangely drawn to him. He returned the interest he inspired. Like Lounsbury, he marked the unusual character of this woman of the far frontier. But he saw further than had the younger man: With her father and sister, she was all firmness and strength, as if she held herself to be the mainstay of the family; yet, now and then, unwittingly, she betrayed qualities that were distinctly opposite. Like Lounsbury, too, when he touched upon the subject of her life it was to inquire if she had spent any of its years in a town. He felt certain that she had not; at the same time, his belief was curiously contradicted by her bearing.

"I'll always live on the plains," she said, having told him of the *mesa* and their migration north; "if I left 'em for a while, I'd learn things I don't know now; and when I came back, maybe I wouldn't be satisfied with the shack, or with dad and Marylyn."

"Child, where did you get that thought?" he asked, astonished.

"I don't know—only my mother would 'a' been happy in Texas if she'd been born there. But she wasn't, and she wanted her old home till she died."

She wanted her old home till she died—it was only a sentence, yet the quiet pathos of it bared to him the tragedy of that mother's exile.

"Never a great city, daughter," he advised. "Stay here, menaced by Indians, among rough men and women, with storms and toil besetting you, but never go to a great city. It is close and dirty and paved, and in

it no man may fill his lungs with pure air, or touch his feet to God's green earth."

"In cities," questioned Dallas, but in a low tone, as if she wished no one to overhear; "in cities, do—do the women dress like me?" She raised herself a little, though without disturbing Marylyn, so that he might see her plain, collarless waist and straight, scant skirt.

He gave her a smile—a smile as rare and transforming as her own. She had allowed him a glimpse of her suppressed girlishness. "Would that they did, my daughter," he answered.

"I mean in cities like—like—Bismarck," she said, a trifle consciously.

"Perhaps—some—eh—let me see." He was perplexed. He saw the eager light in her face; saw that, for some reason, she was striving to compare herself with the women of the settled districts—and to learn from him the very things she had feared might bring dissatisfaction with her life. He did not wish to teach discontent. He would not tell an untruth. So he created a diversion by taking up his ulster and searching in a capacious pocket.

"But they—they—don't plow."

David Bond brought forth a limp and battered Bible. "No," he said; "no, they—they don't plow."

"Ah!" She looked into the fire. Of a sudden, two memories had returned—one, of the passing musicians, with their nudging and insolent smirks; the other, of a man who had leaned back in his saddle and laughed—after all, perhaps, *not* at her name.

"I—I suppose they're more like Marylyn," she faltered.

The evangelist adjusted his silver-bowed spectacles and smiled down at her. "And if they are, would it worry you, daughter?"

She shook her head slowly, and looked away.

He turned his back, so that both lantern-and firelight could reach his pages, and, opening the Book at random, began to read. The chapter done, he turned round and glanced at her again. Her face was still averted.

He rose to retire. She put Marylyn gently aside and rose with him.

Then, and not till then, did Dallas think of their dilemma of the morning. The evangelist's coming and their talk together had caused her entirely to forget about the trip to the land-office. However, swift on its remembrance, came a comforting certainty in David Bond's sympathy and aid. At once she told him of the necessity of her father's going.

"Shadrach and I will start with him to-morrow," was his ready response. He put out a hand to part the Navajo blankets. But an unshaped thought made him pause. "You will be alone."

"Why, we're not afraid."

"Brave girl!" he said. Her confident answer drove away the moment's vague uneasiness without its having taken the form or the connection he might have given it.

"Good-night," she called softly.

"Good-night, daughter," he answered, and the swinging blankets met behind him.

CHAPTER VIII

BEFORE THE WARPED DOOR

The section-boss was thoroughly surprised and not altogether delighted at being roused early the following morning with the news that he could start at once for Bismarck. As Dallas' voice penetrated the partition, he returned the only reply his ice-bound moustache and goatee would permit—a muffled growl. She did not hear it, yet she knew how he felt. The previous day, though a casual observer might have been misled by his garrulous fretting over Ben's lameness, she was quick to note, and with a pang, that, secretly, he was relieved. But her pain at his laxity and indifference was not unmixed with pity. For to her crippled father, whose crutches, in the snow, hindered rather than helped him, she guessed how long and lonely and bitter cold seemed the way to the land-office.

Yet it was something more than these aspects of the journey that caused Lancaster to view it unfavourably. He knew that in another thirty-six hours, when the original applicant's half-year was up, he, and not the other, would have the clearer right to the quarter-section. Therefore, he regarded the proposed declaration of abandonment, the cancelling of the old entry and the filing of a new, as forms which need not be gone through with hurriedly (since the first claimant had undoubtedly disappeared for good and all), but which might be attended to quite as well the coming spring, when the roads would be open and the days warm. Confident of his perfect security on the peninsula, and possessed by a sneaking, but denied, abhorrence for rush and discomfort, he rejoiced at delay. So, having left his snug bed to fumble about in the dark for his clothes, and, these donned, having loosed his speech before the grateful blaze in the fireplace, he did not

argue fatigue or freezing as an excuse for procrastination; he passed over these rather too briefly and enlarged upon his safe status as a settler.

"All bosh," he asserted as he watched Dallas and Marylyn busy with preparations for breakfast. "A hull regiment of soldiers couldn' put us offen this lan', t' say nothin' of a man thet ain't done a thing on it sence he took it up. Ah might *jes'* as well stay home."

But he found that Dallas was firm on the question of his going—"haidstrong," he termed it—and would not even pause for a discussion. She had risen early to feed the occupants of the lean-to—Shadrach in particular; next, with a promise of rest later on, she had awaked Marylyn. Formerly, the younger girl would have persisted in questioning her about the proposed journey, and in knowing its purpose. Now, however, her interest in it, like that in most things, was so small that she appeared totally indifferent, and went about her work silently. Despite the fact that this somewhat revived Dallas' anxiety over her sister, the elder girl felt freshly strengthened in spirit. In all her twenty years of life no other morning had, like this one, promised her so much happiness.

When the evangelist emerged and, after a sojourn in front of the hearth, joined the family at table, Lancaster pined to ask him what he thought of their braving the elements foolishly. Not that the section-boss esteemed his aged guest. On the contrary, Dallas' evident interest in the stranger had stirred the unnatural jealousy in her father's wizen brain. Already, he hated David Bond, and had set him down for a crank. But Dallas needed a lesson. It was all very well for her to do the outside duties as if she were a man; that did not privilege her to ride roughshod over his opinions, or to rule affairs in general with a heavy hand. However, he found no opportunity for questions. She, reading impatience and mutiny in her father's every glance, kept up throughout the meal an unwonted flow of talk.

"Dad," she said, covering his plate with a crisp hot-cake for the

dozenth time, "I haven't told Mr. Bond all about the claim—all the reasons why we want him to take you to Bismarck;"—the section-boss grunted at the "we"—"so you please tell him as you're going along. And don't let your coat get unbuttoned, or your ears froze. I heated some big rocks for the bottom of the sleigh and some little ones for your pockets. You'll both weigh so much that Shadrach can't run away if he wants to, and you can't fall out into a drift."

Not a word from the others checked her cheery stream of comment. However, breakfast past, and Dallas in the lean-to, David Bond managed to make a declaration. It was when he saw Lancaster take down the Sharps from its pegs by the mantel. "That should stay behind," he said, touching the rifle. "We are leaving your helpless girls alone. At least they should have something for defence."

Lancaster instantly agreed, observing to himself that the evangelist, after all, had some common sense. "Shore," he replied, "Ah'll put th' gun back an' we'll take yourn."

But he was corrected with severity. "I carry no weapons, sir," said David Bond. "I stand for peace."

"Then th' gun goes," declared the section-boss. "The gals was alone before 'thout it. They was no snow on th' groun' then, an' a heap more chance of someone comin'. They ain't no danger. An' ef Ah take th' gun, mebbe Ah c'n git a deer on th' way back. We need th' meat."

The evangelist considered a moment. "Very well," he said; "but I would advise differently."

"Aw, shucks!" retorted the other, struggling with his coat.

A moment later, his irritation was increased. At the same time the visitor unknowingly covered himself forever with suspicion. Through the frosty air and the darkness rang out the first trumpet blast from Brannon. And, as if totally unconscious of the action, David Bond reached up and bared his head.

"I love that summons," he said; "it bids our good lads wake and do their duty."

Lancaster was not unmindful of the courtesy due a guest. But any reference to patriotism was offensive, and he had been particularly provoked. So, behind the broad shoulders of the other he disdainfully turned up his nose.

They were off at last, with Marylyn watching them from a window, and Dallas walking alongside for a few rods to say good-by and to pat Shadrach's bony, white flanks encouragingly. Morning was stealing up the dun east, yet overhead the stars were shining. And their near radiance, reflected upon the snow, coupled with the light of the slowly growing dawn, made it possible for the girls to follow the travellers' straight course for miles. But long after Marylyn left the window, the elder girl remained outside. The dun of the east was painted out with uprushing waves of pink. The stars sank back into the heavens, grew smaller and dimmer, and, one by one, disappeared. Finally, a yellow rind, haloed in mist, was thrust above the level of the prairie. As Dallas greeted it, the distant ridge of a snow-drift, rose-tinged like the sky, hid the crawling speck that was the pung.

On his arrival behind David Bond, Nick Matthews had found that full pockets were plentiful among the soldiery, and had promptly gone about emptying them. Soon after entering The Trooper's Delight, he sat down to a chip-piled table. His quarry surrounded him. And there he stayed throughout the long night, wide-awake, sharp-witted, unwearied, adding to his heap of coloured discs honestly and otherwise. Not until reveille, a clarion warning, sent his fellow-players scurrying back across the river, did he put his cards one side and throw himself down. For, though a confirmed night-hawk, he needed a short nap to prepare for some business that lay before him.

"Babe," a direct contrast to his brother, being thick-necked, stumpy

and dark, had not failed to garner his share of the rich harvest. From his station behind the long counter, which was made of four heavy planks supported on barrels at either end, he had poured strange mixtures into beer mugs and exchanged them for good government coin. When he was not performing his part as bartender, he was scraping illy timed tunes upon a fiddle.

It was he who was left in charge when, shortly after noon, his brother awoke, swallowed some whisky and armed himself with a brace of pistols. Then, with no word to the few loungers in the saloon, the latter set out, following the road that led up the river to the ferry-landing. At the cut, he climbed the bank at a leisurely pace and continued his way eastward, making straight across the snow toward the squat shack of the Lancasters.

His approach was instantly marked. Marylyn was once more at her post, studying the square of landscape framed by a window. When he made a quick figure on that landscape, she saw him, and called to Dallas.

"Here's someone coming," she announced, inwardly glad at the possibility of diversion.

Dallas hurriedly joined her. "Who can it be?" she asked.

The door was unbolted, the other window not fastened. Yet so far were her thoughts from molestation that she left them so.

"Going to ask him in?" questioned Marylyn.

"Not till I find out who he is."

They fell silent, conjecturing.

When Matthews reached the drift before the shack, he halted and signalled for them to open their window. That attitude toward them—clearly he did not expect a welcome—at once roused Dallas' suspicion.

"Marylyn," she said, making as if to obey their visitor, "draw the bolt of the door."

The younger girl, quick to be alarmed, instantly did as she was told, and Dallas then shoved the sash aside. Both girls looked from the opening.

With all Matthews' hostile intent, it must be said that the moment found him disconcerted. He had learned on arriving that the section-boss had two daughters. The news did not alter his determination one whit. Had anyone suggested such a thing, he would have been moved to laughter. But now he noted the prettiness of the younger girl, and a certain conceited desire to appear chivalrous, which had earned him the title of "Lady-Killer" among his associates, made him involuntarily spruce. He smiled ingratiatingly, and prepared to launch into flowery speech when—he met Dallas' grave, steady eyes, and suddenly found himself at a loss for words.

"How d' do, Miss?" he said at last.

"How d' y' do?" she returned. In spite of herself her voice trembled.

That did not escape Matthews. He shamed his momentary embarrassment and resolutely grappled the matter that had brought him. "I want t' see your old man," he said. It was a demand.

"Dad can't see you to-day," she answered with ready caution. She thought it best to keep from him, whoever he was, the knowledge of her father's absence.

"Huh!" ejaculated Matthews, in an ugly tone. He came a few paces nearer. "I got t' see him, jus' th' same."

"But you can't."

"Ain't he t' home?"

Marylyn pressed close to her sister. "Tell him yes," she begged nervously.

Dallas hesitated. Then she answered. "He's not home. Will you please come again—some other time?"

The gambler chuckled. "My *dear* young lady," he said, his tone the extreme of insolence, "I can't come no other time. Th' business I got t' do has got t' be done t'-day. I might as well tell you that my name's Matthews—Nick Matthews. This claim you're on is mine, an' I mean t' have it. What's more, I mean t' have it t'-day."

"Ah!" Dallas was thinking fast. At her shoulder, aware all at once that they were in danger, was Marylyn, clinging in pitiful terror.

"Yes," added Matthews, as if that clinched the matter.

Dallas looked at him without speaking.

"I jus' come from Dodge City," he went on. "My intention is t' live on my land all winter. I'm *very* sorry"—this ironically—"your old man took th' trouble to build on it. He ought t' inquired about th' claim before he done that. But—long's it's all one with *my* plans fer improvin'—I don't see's I ought t' *kick*." He chuckled again, and spat.

"I know, and so does dad," said Dallas, "that a man filed upon this quarter-section in July. We didn't find it out, though, till long after we built this house. We know his six months is almost up, too. But if you're him, and even if you've got back only a few hours before it's up, I'm willing, and I think dad'll be, for you to have the claim. But you must pay for what we've done on it."

"I never ast y' t' do anything on it."

"That's so. But the law says——"

"Aw, th' law be damned! I don't pay a cent!"

"Then I know dad won't leave."

"Oh, you *do*."

"Yes," very quietly.

"Well, let me tell y', my dear, that you're *dead* wrong. You're goin' t' git your duds an' grub t'gether right now; in half a' hour, you leave this cabin."

At this, Marylyn began to sob.

"Come, get a move on," ordered Matthews, threateningly. He knew that if he wished to regain the land, there would be no time better than the present. He began to walk up and down, flinging his arms about to start the circulation.

Dallas turned to comfort Marylyn, putting an arm about her protectingly. "Hush!" she said. "Keep quiet, honey."

"Oh, let's go! let's go!" wailed the younger girl.

Matthews came forward again, and took out his watch, a large, open-faced timepiece hung to a braided buckskin chain. "Now, look a-here," he said peremptorily; "I don't want no more funny business. This claim's mine. Your old man ain't got a solitary right to it. So you got t' go. I'll give you *jus' ten minutes*." With this, he resumed his pacing, comforting his beat with occasional draughts from a flask.

Dallas strove hard to collect herself. "I can't do anything till dad comes," she called to him, finally. "You want us to leave. Why, we haven't got any place to go; and it's cold——"

"Guess I know *that*," interrupted Matthews. "I'm almost friz."

"And you've got no right to ask us to go till you've paid for this house and the well—and—and my plowing."

"I pay fer nothin' I don't see, and fer no hole in th' ground," he said. "And as far 's a place to go is concerned"—this with a leer—"there's Shanty Town. Why, the boys'd be tickled t' death t' see y'. Then there's allus room at the Fort when there's good-lookin' gals in the fambly."

Dallas understood the insult. Her grey eyes flamed in her greyer face. She slammed the window.

Matthews came near, so that his face all but touched the glass. "Oh, that don't do no good, my dear," he said, raising his voice. "When I get ready, I'll come in."

Marylyn had stilled her weeping to listen to him. Now, pallid with fear, she threw herself upon her sister and again burst forth.

Dallas put her swiftly aside. The face that had been grey was now a tense white. Her eyes were blazing. She sprang to the gun rack and put up her arms.

But the pegs were empty!

CHAPTER IX

A HAND IN THE FUN

"What under the shining sun!" exclaimed Lounsbury, spilling ground coffee into his boot-tops. He strode to the front of the store, the tin scoop in his hand still held recklessly upside down. A pung was passing the grocery—a green pung drawn by a milk-white horse. On its quilt-padded seat were two men. Above them, as they slowly proceeded, sagged a high board cross.

Lounsbury glanced inquiringly about him. His neighbours were also watching the strange sight. At the windows of the bunk-house opposite, and at the openings of other buildings near, were many faces, wide with good-natured grins. As Lounsbury turned to the travellers again his own mouth curved in a smile.

But, all at once, he sobered. The pung was now so far away that the backs of the men were presented to him; and between them, projecting at a slant over the seat, were the curved tops of a pair of crutches.

Jocular opinions of the passers-by were being freely exchanged back and forth; he paid no heed to them. The scoop dropped from his hand and clattered upon the floor; he let it lay. Silent and troubled, unaware of the demands of an insistent customer, he looked after the departing sleigh.

At last, he acted. Without waiting even to put on his cap, he started at a run up the street. His race, bareheaded, increased the laughter of those who were still watching. They yelled to him boisterously: "Sic 'em, Bud!" "Sell 'em somethin', John!" "Drag 'em back an' skin 'em!" But the storekeeper was deaf. Each yard made him more certain of

the identity of one traveller; his thoughts, as he pursued, were of him. He gained rapidly on the pung. At the edge of the camp, in the trough of a drift, he stopped it.

Lancaster spoke first, for Lounsbury was too spent. "Wal? wal?" he said crabbedly.

"Excuse me," panted the other, giving, in his eagerness, only a glance at David Bond, "excuse me, but I see you're headed from home. I wondered—I thought maybe I could do a turn for the young ladies while you're gone."

For a moment the section-boss did not reply. He was still smarting over Dallas' generalship, and, if anything, was more disgusted and rebellious than when he left the shack. So, in the brief pause, he gave ready ear to the whispering of the yellow harpy. His lids lowered. His lip curled.

"You understand, I'm sure," Lounsbury hastened to say. "I thought they might be alone, that——"

"Thank y'," answered Lancaster, snapping out each word; "thank y', they *is* alone. An' you'll oblige me a damn sight by leavin' 'em thet way." He settled himself in his seat. "Git ap!" he said to Shadrach. The pung slipped slowly on.

Lounsbury was too taken aback either to follow or to retreat. For a while, he stayed where he was, busily coining forcible phrases for the relief of his mind. As he retraced his steps, the few who saw him were discreetly silent. For the camp knew that there were rare moments when it was best to give him a wide berth.

The interview in the trough of the drift was so brief that David Bond was shut out of it. But had it been longer—had he been given a chance to speak—the result might have been the same. The section-boss had been mute all the way to Clark's. The fact that Dallas had told him to relate the story of the claim was the strongest reason for

his not doing so. David Bond, therefore, was left in ignorance, and had no means of connecting the evil companion of his journey north with the fortunes of the Lancasters. So, as they left Lounsbury behind, he even found some censure in his heart for the storekeeper.

"You were quite right," he said, flicking Shadrach gently. "That young man should pay no visit to your daughters while you are absent. Yet,"—he could not refrain from putting a reproof where it seemed due—"yet, I regret your manner of addressing him, your oath——"

Lancaster glared. "Oh, you' gran'mother's tortoise-shell cat!" he said wrathfully. For several hours thereafter he added nothing to this.

Back in his store, Lounsbury was mixing brown sugar with white, oolong tea with a green variety, and putting thread in the pickle-barrel. Simultaneously, he was torturing himself: Had the section-boss left home with no danger threatening? But—the green pung was undoubtedly bound for Bismarck. What was it that had suddenly made him see the necessity of attending to the claim? Along with this came self-arraignment: After all, he should have told Lancaster that a man who claimed the quarter-section on the peninsula had been called from Dodge City. Lounsbury had been certain that Matthews could not reach Fort Brannon before the spring. But it had never occurred to him that the section-boss would leave his girls alone! Now, he vowed that if any harm befell Dallas and Marylyn, he had only himself to blame.

He buckled on his pistol-belt and padlocked the door. "I don't care whether the old man likes it or not," he declared aloud, "I'm going down there."

As he swung through the camp on his way to the corral, he saw one of Old Michael's helpers coming toward him, picking his steps in the slush. The man motioned, and held out a white something. It was an envelope, grimy and unaddressed.

Lounsbury ripped it open and pulled out a written sheet.

"der mr lunsbery [ran the note] mathuse com las nite in a quere outfit with a krazy preecher the preecher i think is at the landcasters but the other sunuvagun is her i hav a i on him prity kold wether river sollid."

It was partly through the generous employment of his imagination that the storekeeper was able to make out the scrawl, which, though not signed, he knew to be the pilot's. That same imagination enabled him to bring up numberless disturbing—almost terrible—pictures.

The astonished helper gazed after him as he went tearing away in the direction of the horse-herd. "By jingo!" he grumbled; "twenty miles—and he didn't even say treat!"

Soon Lounsbury's favorite saddler, urged on by a quirt, was kicking up a path across the crusted drifts that Shadrach had so recently surmounted. As the storekeeper cantered swiftly forward, a new question presented itself to him: Was the "preacher" in league with Matthews, and so was carrying the section-boss out of the way? He decided negatively. He had given only a glance to Lancaster's companion, but that, together with the passing glimpse from the store, had shown him a venerable man whose piercing eyes held a pious light. He was no scoundrel confederate. He was plainly but a brave, perhaps a fanatic and foolhardy, apostle in the wilderness, and his calling had kept Matthews from confiding in him.

While Lounsbury thus alternately tortured and eased his mind, he had passed the sombre clump of cottonwoods where the Indian dead were lashed, and was fast covering the miles that lay between the burial boughs and Fort Brannon.

When the ten minutes he had allotted were past, Matthews made a great show of putting away his watch and took a last pull at the whisky flask. The bottle disposed of, he walked down the drift to the warped

door and rapped a staccato. No answer was returned. Again, he rapped, and more imperatively than before. Again, no answer. He pushed back his hat and applied an ear to the hole through which had hung the lifting-string of the latch. Then he heard long, unfrequent sobs, like those of a child who, though almost asleep, is yet sorrowing. Between the sobs, punctuating them fiercely, sounded the prolonged sucking-in of breath.

"Might as well stop y' bawlin' an' squallin'," he called through the latch-hole. "Time's up!"

Getting no reply, as before, he altered his tactics. First, shading his face with his slim fingers, he looked in. He could not see the girls. Dallas was close to the door and beyond the limit of his vision. So was Marylyn, who, helpless with fright, half knelt, half lay, against her sister. What he could see was—from the south window—the gaudy Navajo blankets forming two partitions of Lancaster's bedroom, and, nearer, two partly filled sacks, some harnesses and the seat of a wagon. The other window afforded a better view. "Looks mighty comfortable," he said as he contemplated it. There was a hearth with its dying fire; in front of it were circling benches and a thick buffalo-skin rug; above was a mantel, piled with calico-covered books; a freshly scrubbed table stood in the farther corner beneath a dish-cupboard, which was made of a dry goods box; to the left of this—high up on the log wall—were a couple of pegs.

It was these that finally riveted Matthews' attention and brought him to a temporary halt. "Got th' gun down!" he exclaimed. On finding that Lancaster was gone, he had decided not to produce a weapon. Now, however, he quickly felt for one and dropped on all fours. "That biggest gal 'd no more mind pumpin' lead into me than nothin'," he declared, wagging his head wisely. "I could tell that by the shine in her eyes." He crawled around the corner.

Behind the lean-to, he came to several conclusions: It would be useless to try to get in by either window; both were high and small; the

best spot for an attack was the door. Unless he was hard pressed, he must not shoot; women were concerned, and the fort or Clark's might be stirred to unreasonable retaliation in their name; for example, there was that poor devil of a cow-puncher at Dodge who had been riddled simply for slapping his wife.... Obviously, the shack must be occupied without the shedding of blood. But what of his safety? "I'll jus' have 't chance it," he said, and hunted for something to use as a battering-ram.

Not a pole, not even a piece of board, could he find. A scarcity of fuel before Squaw Charley began furnishing it had led to the burning of every odd bit of timber. Disgruntled, but not discouraged, Matthews crawled back to the front of the cabin and closely examined the door. "I thought so!" he declared joyfully when he was done. Rain and snow had swelled the thick boards of which it was built. But through the narrow cracks between these, he saw that the transverse pieces on the inside, like the four without, were only slender battens. "If I can git some of them cleats off," he said, "I can bust in."

With a horn-handle knife he pried up the end of a batten until he could get his fingers beneath it. Then he pulled, and it came away. A light strip from side to side marked where it had been. Three times more he pried and pulled, and the outer transverse pieces lay on the snow. For the rest of his job Matthews had to depend on his shoulders.

Putting his knife in his pocket, he backed to the top of the nearest drift. There he gathered himself together and, with a defiant grunt, hurled himself headlong at the door. As it bent with the force of the impact, a shriek rang out. Well satisfied, Matthews retreated and flung himself forward a second time. The door cracked ominously; the inside bolt rattled in its sockets. Anticipating a speedy entrance, Matthews warmed to his task. And each time he fell upon the barrier, a weak moan from within swelled to a cry of mortal terror.

And then—a few feet behind him, a voice interrupted—a well-modulated voice, in an amused, ironical tone. "Well," it said slowly, "I hope you're enjoying yourself."

Matthews whirled and reached for a weapon. He was too late. As he swung it forward, the single eye of a revolver held his. Beyond was Lounsbury.

A queer tremor ran around the storekeeper's mouth. His nostrils swelled, and he wrinkled his forehead. "Sorry," he said drily, "but it's my bead."

Sheer surprise, together with a lack of breath, made the other dumb.

"Drop your gun," bade Lounsbury.

Matthews' right hand loosed its hold. His revolver fell, and slid, spinning, to the bottom of the drift.

"Now I know all you want to say," said Lounsbury. "That this claim is yours, that your six months ain't up, that Lancaster's jumped it, and so on. But that won't excuse what you've tried to do—break into this house while these young women are alone. Besides, you haven't the ghost of a right to this land. So you'll oblige me by keeping off it from now on."

Matthews found his tongue. "Who in hell are you?" he demanded coolly.

"Who am I?" repeated the storekeeper, smiling down the revolver barrel. "Why, I'm St. George, and you're the dragon." He raised his voice. "Miss Lancaster!" he called. "Miss Lancaster!"

A face appeared at a window, then a second. There were more cries, but not of fear. The sash was pushed open. Dallas and Marylyn, the younger girl still clinging to the elder, looked out.

"It's all right," said the storekeeper, not taking his eyes from the

enemy. "I'm here."

Dallas could not answer. But Marylyn, though exhausted, was fully alive to their rescue. Her eyes, wide and tearful, were fixed upon Lounsbury.

"Oh, we're afraid!" she cried plaintively; "pa's gone, and we're afraid!"

"You needn't be, any more," he said reassuringly.

Matthews, under his breath, was cursing the self-contained man in the saddle. Enraged at the storekeeper's interference, hot with disappointment, he saw himself stood up like a tenderfoot. But his caution prevailed. A certain expression in Lounsbury's eyes, a certain square set to his jaw—the very cues that guided the cattle-camp—made him cautious.

"Look a-here," he said to Lounsbury, assuming a conciliatory manner. "Let's talk as one gent to another. These ladies is your friends. So far, so good. But I has my rights, and I can prove that I slep' on this quarter-section three times and——"

Lounsbury's face darkened. He was lightly ironical no longer. He urged his mount forward. "Don't argue with me, you infernal blackguard," he said. "You can prove anything you want to by a lot of perjuring, thieving land-grabbers. Don't I know 'em! If you filed on this claim you were hired to do it. You hadn't an idea of settling, or building a home. You did it for speculating purposes—nothing else. And the law, I happen to know, is dead against that. You're a shark. But your game won't work. These folks are going to stay in this shack and on this Bend. *And you be mighty careful you don't make 'em any trouble!*"

"I'll git a Bismarck lawyer," declared Matthews.

"Yes, and we'll tar and feather the shyster. What's more, I'll head a bunch of Clark's boys, and we'll wipe Shanty Town off the face of the

earth."

Matthews raised his shoulders and put his tongue in his cheek. "You're mighty interested in these ladies, seems t' me," he said insinuatingly.

The slur did not escape the storekeeper. It determined him to parley no further. "Hoist your hands!" he commanded.

Matthews obeyed. His fingers were twitching.

The next command was curt. "Mosey!"

The other moved away. When he was beyond pistol range, he produced his second revolver and waved it above his head. "You jus' wait!" he shouted. "You jus' wait! I'll fix y'!"

Lounsbury returned him a mocking salute.

CHAPTER X

AN APPEAL TO HEADQUARTERS

As Matthews ceased his threatening and strode on, a new fear came over Dallas. She leaned toward Lounsbury from the window. "What does he mean by 'fixing you'?" she asked hoarsely.

The storekeeper was still watching riverward, and he answered without turning his head. "He means it's a case of shoot on sight," he said.

"Then you mustn't go near him—you must go back to Clark's. Promise me you will! I can take care of Marylyn till dad comes. If you got hurt——"

Lounsbury threw one leg over the pommel and sat sideways for a while, buckling and unbuckling his reins. When he spoke, it was very gently, and again he did not look at her. "Hadn't you better wrap up a little?" he suggested. "It's cold."

She put a coat about Marylyn. "It ain't right for you to make our quarrel yours. You mustn't. I wouldn't have you hurt on our account for anything." Her eyes beseeched him.

He glanced at her. "It's worth a lot to know you feel that way," he said slowly. "But—I'm afraid I can't do what you want. It's *your* safety that counts with me."

Marylyn's face had been hidden, to shut out the dread sight of Matthews. Now she lifted it. She said nothing. But as if suddenly smitten by a painful thought, she turned from Dallas to Lounsbury,

from Lounsbury to Dallas, questioningly, doubtfully. She drew to one side a few steps, and stood alone.

The movement escaped the others. The storekeeper had slipped from his saddle to pick up Matthews' revolver. And the elder girl, against whom was setting in a tide of reaction, was struggling for composure. She put out a trembling hand for the weapon.

"Got a rifle, too, haven't you?" he asked.

"No. Dad took it."

"Good Heavens! I'm glad I didn't know that coming down!"

"How'd you happen to come?"

"I saw the sleigh go by, and was sure something had scared your father about the claim. So I didn't wait to black my boots."

"Oh, it was a comfort to hear you," she said.

"Was it?" eagerly. He stepped toward her; then drew back. "Well,"—with a feeble attempt at humour—"I'd rather be a comfort than a wet blanket." He had remembered that evil eyes were watching; that his least move might subject Lancaster's daughters to the coarse comment of Shanty Town. He dared not even remain out of his saddle. He mounted.

"Oh, you're going to leave us!" exclaimed Marylyn. She began to cry helplessly.

"But I'll be on the lookout every second," he declared. "Miss Dallas,"—he urged his horse up to the window—"don't think I'm idiot enough to try to do up that saloon gang down there single-handed. If I go to Shanty Town, it'll be because I have to. I won't go alone if I can help it. First of all, I intend to see the Colonel over there, and lay this matter before him."

"But dad——" she began.

"Got to do it, whether your father likes it or not. We're dealing with a cutthroat. He knows this land's worth money."

"Yes——"

"And you can't tell what he'll do." He bent to her. "That scoundrel scared you," he said regretfully. "You're ready to drop. Oh, yes, you are! And it's my fault. I knew he might come any day—that he'd make trouble. But I didn't believe he'd get here so soon, I——"

"I'd given him up," she said.

"You! You *did* know, then!"

"Quite a while ago."

"Knew what?" asked Marylyn, stopping her tears. Then, certain that there was some awful secret behind it all, and that it was being kept from her, she began to cry again.

Dallas soothed her, and explained.

"Do you know when Matthews' six months is up?" Lounsbury inquired.

"To-night, at twelve."

"To-night! Well, we've got to keep him off. He may try to establish residence in a wickie-up."

"But hasn't he a right? Can't he——"

"He hasn't, and he can't. And if he comes this way after midnight, I'll fix *him* for trespassing!" He laughed.

"I wish you wouldn't go to the Fort, though. You've heard dad—you know how he feels."

"I wouldn't go if I didn't have to. But the temperature's falling. By sundown, they'll begin changing the sentries at Brannon every hour. No one man could stay out even half the night. And this shack has to

be guarded till morning. I must get someone to relieve me."

"I suppose you're right," she said reluctantly.

He brought the horse about. "Is there anything I can do before I go?" he asked.

"No. We've got everything but wood, and Charley brings us that."

"Charley," repeated Lounsbury. "Who's Charley?"

She told him.

He seemed relieved. "I'll look that Indian up," he said, and raised his hand to his cap.

From the road, he looked round. Despite the distance, he could see that the girls were where he had left them, and Marylyn's head was once more pressed against her sister. The sight made him writhe in his saddle, and wish he were as old as the river-bluffs themselves, that he might go back and protect them. As he descended to the ice their two faces rose before him: One, pretty and pale, with the soft roundness of a child's, the blue eyes filled with all a child's terror and entreaty; the other, pale, too,—though upon it there still lingered the brown of the summer sun—but firm of outline, its crown a heavy coil of braids, its centre, eyes that were brave, steadfast, compelling.

The first picture blurred in remembering the second. "God bless her!" he murmured. "To think she knew all the time, and never cheeped!"

At the shack, Dallas, too, was pondering—over a strange contrariety: Their home was in danger, perhaps their very lives. Yet the day had fulfilled its promise of the morning—it was the happiest in her life!

The ramshackle ferry-boat was firmly wedged in a dry-dock of ice

on the western side of the Missouri. As Lounsbury passed it, with his horse following pluckily in spread-eagle fashion, he shouted for Old Michael. But long before the river had floored, when it was edging and covering only in the least swift places, the pilot had made his final crossing, run the wheezy steamer, nose-in, against the bank, and deserted her. So the storekeeper received no answering halloo. He was disappointed. It was desirable to embroil as few as possible in the Lancaster dispute. Old Michael, already a factor, was needed to act the picket—to fire a warning signal if Matthews left Shanty Town.

A substitute was found at the stables. The storekeeper, as he rushed away after disposing of his mount, came upon Lieutenant Fraser, busily roaching his own riding-animal, a flighty buckskin cayuse that no one else cared to handle, and that was affectionately known in barracks as the "She-devil." The men had met before, around the billiard-table at the sutler's, and Lounsbury had set the young officer down for a chivalrous, but rather chicken-hearted, youngster, who had chosen his profession unwisely. So, his story told, the storekeeper was altogether surprised at Fraser's spirited enthusiasm and quick response.

"I've nothing to do, old man," he said, as they went toward the parade-ground. "I can help as well as not. So just take your time. I'll watch for you."

"I hardly think our man'll show his nose before dark. But I can't leave the way open——"

"Don't fret."

They parted at the flag-pole, the West Pointer going down to the river, and Lounsbury hurrying off in the opposite direction.

Colonel Cummings' entry and reception-room were crowded when the storekeeper entered. A score of officers were standing about in little groups, talking excitedly. But Lounsbury was too anxious and distraught to notice anything unusual. He hurried up to a tall, sad-

facéd man whose moustache, thin and coarse, drooped sheer over his mouth, giving him the look of a martyred walrus.

"Can I see the K. O., Captain Oliver?" he asked. "It's important."

"I'll find out," answered the captain. "But I don't believe you can. He's up to his ears." He disappeared into the next room.

Lounsbury bowed to several officers, though he scarcely saw them. He heard Oliver's low voice, evidently announcing him, then the colonel's.

"Yes, bring him in," cried the latter. "Maybe he'll know."

The storekeeper entered without waiting. Colonel Cummings stood in the centre of the room. It was the room known as his library, in compliment to a row of dog-eared volumes that had somehow survived many a wet bivouac and rough march. But it resembled a museum. In the corners, on the walls beneath the bulky heads of buffalo and the branching antlers of elk, there were swords, tomahawks, bows and arrows, strings of glass wampum, cartridge belts, Indian bonnets, drums and shields, and a miscellany of warlike odds and ends. To-day, the room was further littered by maps, which covered the table, the benches, and the whole length of an army cot. Over one of these hung the colonel, making imaginary journeys with the end of a dead cigar.

He turned swiftly to Lounsbury, and caught him by the shoulders. "John," he said, before the other could speak, "I need an interpreter. You've been about here for years—do you know one?"

"There's Soggy, that Phil Kearney fellow——"

The colonel gave a grunt of disgust. "In jail at Omaha," he said. "Played cards with a galoot who had some aces in his boot-tops. Plugged him."

"What's the matter with your Rees?"

"That's just it! You see, that bunch of Sioux out there"—he jerked his head toward the stockade—"helped in a bit of treachery two summers ago. Rounded up some friendly Rees at a dance and scalped 'em. So—there's poison for you! In this business on hand I couldn't trust even my head scout." He began pacing the floor. "Anyway, sign language, when there are terms to be made and kept isn't worth a hang!"

"I wish I could suggest a man," said Lounsbury. "Fact is, Colonel, I'm terribly worried myself. I came to ask you for help in some trouble ____"

The old soldier threw up his hands. "Trouble!" he cried. "Why I'm simply daft with it! Look at that!" He pointed to the farthest side of the room.

It was dimly lighted there. Lounsbury stepped forward and peered down—then recoiled, as startled as if he had happened upon something dead. On the floor was a man—a man whose back was bent rounding, and whose arms and legs were hugged up against his abdomen and chest. Torso and limbs were alike, frightfully shrunken; the hands, mere claws. Lounsbury could not see the face. But the hair was uncovered, and it was the hair that made him "goose-flesh" from head to heel. It was white—not the white of old age, with glancing tints of silver or yellow—but the dead white of an agony that had withered it to the roots. Circling it, and separating the scalp from the face and neck, ran a narrow fringe that was still brown, as if, changing in a night, it had lacked full time for completion.

Lounsbury could not take his eyes from the huddled shape. Colonel Cummings paused beside him. "This morning," he said, speaking in an undertone, "a sentry signalled from beyond the barracks. Two or three men took guns and ran out. They found this. His clothes were stiff with ice. He was almost frozen, though he had been travelling steadily. He was utterly worn out, and was crawling forward on his hands and knees." The ragged sleeves and trousers, stained darker

from the wounds on elbows and knees, were mute testimony. "He couldn't see," continued the colonel. "He was snow-blind. They laid him out on a drift and rubbed him. The surgeon did the rest. He begged to see me. They brought him in, and he told his story. It's an old one—you've heard it. But it's always new, too. This is Frank Jamieson, a young——"

As he heard his name, the man stirred, straightened his legs and let fall his arms. He looked up.

"Young!" gasped Lounsbury. "Good God!" The face was aged like the hair!

Jamieson struggled weakly to his feet, using the wall to brace him.

Colonel Cummings hastened across and lent the support of an arm. "No, no," he protested. "You mustn't talk. You're too weak."

But Jamieson did not heed. "You an interpreter?" he asked in a rasping whisper.

"You're too weak——"

"No, I ain't; no, I ain't. If he'll go with us, I'm strong enough—why, I shovelled snow on the special to Bismarck—that's how they let me ride—and skating home I didn't stop to rest——"

"Yes, yes, my boy, we know."

"I walked and walked—straps broke—I forgot to tell you—that's why I had to. But it didn't do any good—it didn't do any good! When I got there——" As if to shut out some terrible sight, he screened his eyes with one palsied hand, and sank back limply into Colonel Cummings' arms. Lounsbury swept the cot clean of maps, and they laid him there.

"His father was dead," said the commanding officer; "dead—and naked, scalped, mutilated, full of arrows and rifle balls. The house and barns were burned."

"Any women?"

"Two—gone."

Jamieson put out his arms. "My mother!" he cried imploringly. "My poor little mother!"

Lounsbury knelt beside him, feeling shaken and half sick.

"If I could only 'a' been there! But I was 'way off at St. Paul. I knew something was wrong when the letters stopped."

"But you must buck up, Jamieson," said the colonel, "so you can help us."

"I will, oh, I will."

"How'd you get down here?" asked Lounsbury.

"I didn't eat for a long time. I was crazy. The snow blinded me, and I was hungry. But I didn't leave the river—I knew enough for that—they found me."

"You think the women are alive, Colonel?" asked the storekeeper.

"Undoubtedly, and with the other half of the very band we've got here—somewhere up in the Big Horn country." He took a turn up and down the room.

"May I ask your plan?"

"We are in fine shape to talk terms to the captors. I'll send a command to them, demanding the women. If they are not surrendered, I'll hang four of the redskins I've got here, Lame Foot, the medicine-man, and Chiefs Standing Buffalo, Canada John, and Shoot-at-the-Tree—all ringleaders. Then the rest of the band will be put on a reservation. If the Jamieson women are alive, and they send 'em in, I won't hang the chiefs."

"When'll the command start?"

"Three hours after we get an interpreter. I've sent word up to Custer

at Lincoln. But the delay! Think what it means to those women!"

"It was about two women that I wished to speak," said Lounsbury. He felt apologetic, however, the one danger was so trifling beside the other.

Colonel Cummings listened. "Those girls had better come here," he said, as the storekeeper finished. "Then they'd be safe enough. I remember seeing one of 'em the day we got back. She was a fine-looking young woman."

"There are two arguments against their coming, sir. For legal reasons, it's best they should not vacate the shack or leave the claim."

"I see."

"And, again, the father is—well, he's rather sore about the war."

"You don't say!"

"So, if you could give me a couple of men to take my place now and then during the night—the situation is temporary, you see, the father'll be back in a few days."

"There are very strong reasons against my acting in the matter. I'm here to keep an eye on Indians. The settlers are expected to go to the civil authorities when they have quarrels. Now, I'd like to mix up with Shanty Town, for instance. Our guard-room is jammed with men who've been drugged over there with vile whisky. Yet I can't. I can only punish my men."

"I know that's so."

"Of course, I shan't see defenceless women suffer——"

Lounsbury was piqued. "Not altogether defenceless, Colonel. But I can't stay at the shack——"

"True, true. Why not ask Mrs. Martin, Major Appleton's sister, to go over. Then you might guard from the barn, if they have one."

"That's a splendid suggestion, sir. It would solve the difficulty."

"I'd be glad to speak to Mrs. Martin about it." He thought a moment, passing a hand over his clean-shaven face. "You'd have to be relieved even then, John, I should think."

"Not at all."

"But you might. In that case——" He drew Lounsbury close, and spoke with his lips to the storekeeper's ear. "But you understand," he said aloud as he concluded, "that I know nothing about it. If I hear of it, I shall be very displeased, *very*."

Lounsbury was wringing his hand, and ready to bolt.

"All the same, John, I wish the civil authorities could get at the man."

"I wish so, too." He leaned over Jamieson.

"Good luck!" said Colonel Cummings, going back to his maps.

"Thank you."

And just at that moment, as Lounsbury swung round on his heel, there rang out from the river a single pistol-shot. It echoed sharply against the barracks and went dying away upon the bluffs.

CHAPTER XI

A LITTLE STRATEGY

Fraser's shot drew many eyes to the river. For, in the winter time, any occurrence, however trifling, could get the instant attention of the lonely garrison. Troopers in various stages of dress came tumbling out upon the long porch at barracks; others looked from the many windows of the big frame structure; the washer-women and their hopefuls blocked the doorways of "Clothes-Pin Row"; officers everywhere—at headquarters, at the sutler's, in their homes—and their wives and families, up and down the "Line," remarked the signal. But when Lounsbury brought up beside Fraser, and the two seemed to be occupying themselves with nothing in particular, the onlookers laid the shot to an over-venturesome water-rat, and so withdrew from their points of vantage.

"What is it?" was the storekeeper's first breathless demand.

The young officer, hands on hips, nodded straight ahead. "You see those willows just below the cut?" he asked. "Well, there's a queer, black bunch in 'em."

"Yes. Is it a man?"

"I think so."

"Moved?"

"Not yet."

"Come on, then. Maybe he's aiming for the coulée mouth, so's to sneak up to the Lancasters' from behind."

They charged away across the mile of ice.

"If it's Matthews, why didn't he wing me as I went by," panted Lounsbury.

"Look, look!" cried Fraser. "Now, he's moving!"

They stopped to loosen their revolvers, after which they started again, cautiously.

The tops of the willows were shaking. Presently, they spread outward, and the "black bunch" lengthened. Then it emerged, and was resolved into a blanketed Indian.

"Charley!" exclaimed the officer. As he spoke, the outcast, shouldering a bundle of sticks, began to climb the cut.

The two men looked at each other and burst into a laugh.

"Fraser," said Lounsbury, "did you ever hear of the fellow that stalked a deer all day and then found it was a speck on his glasses?"

"That's one on me," admitted the lieutenant, sheepishly. "I knew nobody had come out of that door—but you see we were in the stable a while."

"Charley,—that squaw Indian they told me about, eh? Pretty good to them."

"Yes. From what I understand, they're pretty good to him."

They followed leisurely, and took up a stand in the cottonwoods above the landing to discuss the situation. At the very outset, Lounsbury determined not to speak of the plan that included Mrs. Martin's aid, the rebuff he had suffered from the section-boss having decided him against it.

"By George!" he said regretfully, "I wish when I had Matthews covered that I'd just marched him up the coulée and on to Clark's."

"Good idea; too bad you didn't."

"But I'll tell you this: I'm not going to stay out here all night just to

shoo him off. I've a good mind to happen in down there, sort him out, and do the marching act anyhow."

"Now, look here," reminded Fraser; "that wouldn't do. You don't want to kill Matthews, and you don't want to be killed. It'd be one or the other if you poked your nose in there."

"What *do* you advise?"

"Lie low till you see a good opportunity. I think the chap'll come out."

"But suppose he doesn't?"

"You'll have to stay here, that's all. I'll divide the watch with you."

"Oh, I don't like to ask you to do that, old man. We ought to be able to think up some kind of a scheme."

The sun was fast declining. Soon it disappeared behind the river-bluffs, when the boom of the evening-gun swelled the last note of "retreat."

Fraser sighed. The trumpet had suggested a certain dire possibility.

"I don't care for the cold," he declared, "but—but"—ruefully—"do you suppose the K. O.'ll give me more than a month in quarters for this? There's that dance at the Major's next week; I'd like awfully to go. If I'm under arrest, I can't. And who'll feed my horse and my rattlesnakes!"

"Some sassy sergeant'll shoot your fiend of a nag," said the storekeeper, "and the rattlers'll be requested to devour one another. When that's over, I'll break it gently to you (and you must be mum) that the K. O. is disciplining you simply to keep his face. He knows—suggested it himself—that I'm to be helped out by some of you fellows."

"Well, that's better!" returned Fraser, relieved. And while they walked back and forth, he launched into a defence of his pets.

"Fiend of a nag," he quoted. "Why, Buckskin's a tactician; knows what the trumpet says better than I do."

Night settled swiftly. Despite Lounsbury's prophecy, the temperature was not unbearable. The wind died with the glow in the west, leaving the air so still that, to the watchers among the trees, sounds from Brannon mingled distinctly with the near laughter and talk of Shanty Town. No moon rose. Only a few stars burned their faint way through the quickly hidden rents of the sheltering cloud-covering that, knitting here, breaking there, again, overlapping in soft folds before an urgent sky breeze, swagged low above the ground.

With darkness, the two left the grove for the ledge upon which was Shanty Town, and stationed themselves where they could still see whoever went in or out of The Trooper's Delight. Matthews did not appear. Numerous men in uniform did. They made noisy exits, and went brawling along to other shanties; they skulked out of the willows, flitted across the bit of snow-cruised beach below the saloons, and scrambled up to hurry in.

When two hours or more had gone by, the storekeeper grew impatient. He walked back and halted in the inky shadow of the wall down which Nick Matthews had tobogganed. From there, he pointed to a shaft of light that was falling upon the north side of the second shanty in the street. It was from an uncurtained, south opening in the first.

"You see that?" asked Lounsbury. "Well, I'm going over there to look in. How do we know he hasn't given us the slip, someway?"

"Let's be careful," said the lieutenant. "A proper amount of caution isn't cowardice. If you're seen, the whole pack'll set on you."

"I *will* be careful, but I'm not going to——"

"That's all very nice, only you must consider the stripe of man you're dealing with——"

"I can roll a gun, Fraser."

"But, Jupiter! This chap isn't going to fight you in the open. He'll use Indian tactics—fact is, he was raised among 'em."

"*What's that?*" asked Lounsbury.

"Raised among 'em, I said—with the Sioux."

"Speaks the tongue, then?" For some reason, the storekeeper seemed strangely agitated.

"Why, yes."

At that, Lounsbury was off, making straight for the entrance of the building they had been watching.

Fraser went tearing after, and not far from the door managed to stop him.

"For Heaven's sake!" he gasped. "What's struck you?"

"Fraser," said Lounsbury, "did you hear that the Colonel wanted an interpreter?"

"Why—why—great Scott!"

"Exactly—great Scott!" The storekeeper set off again.

"Hold on." Fraser caught his arm. "Your scheme's all right, but you can't impress the man. He's got to go of his own accord."

"Hm! that's so."

"What you suppose he'll say if you rush in there and ask him to please go away on this long trip and leave your friends serenely in possession of the land?"

"I wouldn't say 'please'—but you're right. Let's take a look through that window."

Fraser assented. Shoulder to shoulder, they tiptoed forward and,

keeping out of the shaft of light, viewed the scene within.

It was a busy one, and well bore out the inviting legend of the shingle sign. Along the plank bar, "the troopers" were thickly ranged, smacking their lips in "delight" over greasy glasses. Beyond them was a squint-eyed man who trotted untiringly to and fro, mixing and pouring. Nearer was the stove, its angular barrel and widespread legs giving it the appearance of some horrid, fire-belching animal.

An unbroken circle of men surrounded it, hats on, rawhide-bottomed chairs tilted back to an easy slant. From their pipes and cigars smoke rose steadily and hung, a blue mist, against the sloping rafters of the roof.

There was little talking in the circle. Two or three were asleep, their heads sagging on their necks with maudlin looseness. The others spoke infrequently, but often let down their chairs while they spat in the sand-box under the stove, or screwed about in the direction of the gaming-table. Among these was Old Michael. He sat nearest the door, a checkerboard balanced on his knees, his black stub pipe in its toothy vise. And when he was not feeding the stove's flaming maw with broken boxes, barrel-staves and green wood, his blowzy countenance was suspended over the pasteboards he was thumbing in a game of solitaire.

The two outside went under the shaft of light and peeped into the rear of the room. There was Matthews, one of five at a square table. A cigar-box partly filled with coin and chips was before him. In front of the other players were other chip-piles. About the five, hanging over them, almost pressing upon them, were a number of troopers. Two or three were idle onlookers. But the majority were following with excited interest every turn of the cards.

"Wretches being plucked of their good six months' pay," whispered Fraser.

"Looks like they're in for all night," Lounsbury returned.

But the officer was pinching him. "Sh! See there!"

A half-drunken trooper was interrupting the game. He had reeled forward to the table, and seemed to be addressing himself to Matthews, who, as he answered, glanced up indifferently. The trooper continued, emphasising his words by raising a clenched fist and striking the board a blow.

The chip-piles toppled. He turned to those about, gesticulating. A few surrounded him, evidently bent on leading him toward the door. Others appeared to be continuing the dispute with Matthews. But as the disturber was pushed out, they gradually subsided.

"I've got an idea," announced the storekeeper. And he disappeared around a corner.

When he returned he was leading the trooper and talking low to him. All three retired to the shadow of the wall.

Here there was a colloquy. First, Lounsbury held forth; next, the trooper, protestingly. When the lieutenant broke in, two phrases were frequently repeated—"to the guard-house," and "won't if you will."

At last the three went back to the window.

"Remember," cautioned the storekeeper, "we don't want all these shebangs stirred up."

"Needn't worry," said Fraser. "Just listen to that rumpus down street."

The disjointed music of a wheezy accordion was rending the night. With it sounded the regular stamp of feet.

Now, the trooper rounded the corner. A moment and, through the window, Lounsbury and the officer saw him enter the door.

He slipped down to a seat beside Old Michael. There he stayed for a while. Whenever a brother trooper looked his way, he called him up

by the crooking of a finger and whispered to him. Before long a knot of men had again surrounded him. But this time their attention was all for the table at the rear of the room.

There the game was going on. Matthews' chip-pile showed where the winnings were gravitating. In the dim light there was a strained look on the faces of the players.

Deal after deal passed. Finally, one of the five, having no more disks before him, pushed back his chair and got up.

As he stood, dazed and dismayed, the trooper who had been ejected appeared at his side, clapped him upon the back and spoke. At their elbows was the knot that had gathered at the stove.

The next moment the trooper turned to the table and snatched the pack of cards from Matthews' hand. He held up one, pointing at its back; snapped it down; pointed at a second, then scattered the pack in the air.

Lounsbury and Fraser whipped round the corner and in through the door.

An uproar greeted them—"Cheat!" "Clean him out!"

"Do him like Soggy did!" Before them was a jostle of blue backs. Across these, on the farther side of the plank bar, they saw Matthews, facing the crowd. His left hand held the cigar-box against his chest, his right was up and empty.

"Hold on, boys!" It was Lounsbury.

As if he had caught a cue, the foremost trooper—he who had been the disturbing element—repeated the cry, and directed the eyes of his comrades to the door.

There was a sudden lull. The men in blue wavered. Here and there, a revolver was covertly returned to place.

Lounsbury pushed forward to the stove, Fraser beside him. "Hold

on, boys," he said again, and pointed at Matthews; "hold on—I've got a message for that man."

The lull became a dead silence. To the troopers, the sight of shoulder-straps was discomfiting. For the officer at once became the personification of the guard-room, chilly, poorly bedded, and worse provisioned, of all places the one to be dreaded in raw weather. To Matthews, the interruption was welcome. His right hand slowly lowered to join its mate.

"I'm going to ask you to call your little differences with that gentleman off," continued Lounsbury.

Matthews fairly blinked. The storekeeper's voice was soft, confidential, ingratiating.

"Mr. Fraser and I have come to say that Mr. Matthews is wanted to serve as interpreter for Colonel Cummings."

"Interpreter?" queried Matthews.

A bullet-head made itself visible from behind a barrel. "Don't let him bluff y', Nick," called a voice.

The other looked round. "Shut y' fly-trap, Babe," he commanded.

"Thank you," said Lounsbury, pleasantly, "interpreter is right. Two white women are held as captives in an Uncapapa camp somewhere west of here. It's been learned that you understand and speak the tongue. So, we present Colonel Cummings' compliments. He would like very much to have a talk with you at Brannon."

It was a solution to Matthews. "Yes? Yes?" he said approvingly; then hesitated in suspicion as he measured the storekeeper.

"Oh, I guess I don't want to be no interpreter," he said.

Lounsbury smiled. "Just as you say, just as you say. Boys,"—cheerily—"sorry if I cut in at the wrong time. Don't let us stop your fun. Mr. Fraser is not here *officially*."

A murmur ran around. The disturbing trooper advanced toward Matthews aggressively.

Up went Matthews' hand again. "Jus' a minute," he said.

The trooper quieted.

Matthews turned to Fraser, mustering an expression of importance.

"Lieutenant," he said, "you give me your word this is so—that there ain't no put-up job about it?"

"Put-up job?" Fraser reddened, keeping a straight face with difficulty. "I give my word," he said solemnly, "that you're wanted as interpreter, and that I'll conduct you safely to headquarters."

Matthews put down the cigar-box and saluted.

"Word of an officer," he said, "is different. And if I can do anythin'—long's it's ladies——"

He reached to a shelf for his hat.

CHAPTER XII

A CONFESSION

That night, after Squaw Charley had come and gone, Dallas returned from the lean-to, where she had fed and bedded Simon and the team, to find Marylyn lying before the hearth, her face flushed and wet with tears. Instantly, all concern, the elder girl knelt beside her.

"Marylyn," she begged, smoothing the soft, unbraided hair spread out upon the robe, "Marylyn, what's the matter?"

A long sob.

"Why, dear baby, don't you fret. We're going to be all right. Dad'll soon be back, Mr. Lounsbury's watching, and we won't lose the little home."

"Oh, it ain't that, it ain't that," weeping harder than before; "I'm so unhappy!"

It was an answer that smote Dallas to the heart. Some trouble, heretofore concealed, was threatening her sister's peace of mind. And she had not discovered it in time, had not prevented it, had not shielded her as she ought.

"Marylyn, honey, tell me what's the matter."

The younger girl crept closer, screening her eyes.

Dallas lifted her into her arms. Her cheek was feverish, her hands were dry and hot.

Sudden terror seized the elder girl—the old terror that had fastened upon her through all the years of her mother's failing.

"Marylyn," she said huskily, "do you feel that—that you're not as well as you was? are you afraid you'll be sick like—mother?"

There was an answering shake of the head.

Dallas pressed her close, murmuring her thankfulness, whispering broken endearments. "Oh, Dal's so glad! She couldn't stand it if her baby sister was to suffer. Oh, honey-heart! honey-heart!"

But Marylyn was not comforted.

"Listen," bade Dallas. "In all your life have you ever asked me to do anything that I didn't do? or to give you anything that I didn't give you if I could? And now something's fretting you. I can't think what it is. But you got to tell me, and I'll help you out."

"No, no!"

"I don't care what it is, I won't blame you; if it's something wrong,—why, it couldn't be,—I'll forgive you. You know that, Marylyn."

Again, "No, no," but with less resistance.

"Tell me," said Dallas, firmly.

Marylyn looked up. "You'll hate me if I do," she faltered.

The elder girl laughed fondly. "As if I could!"

"You promise not to tell pa?"

"Course, I promise."

"Oh, Dallas!" She buried her face in her hands. "It's—it's that I—
like him! *I like him!*"

A moment of perplexity. Then, gradually, it dawned upon the elder girl whom the other meant. In very surprise her arms loosened their hold.

"You *do* hate me," Marylyn said plaintively.

"No, honey, no—why should I hate you?" Her words were earnest. But her voice—something had changed it. And she felt a strange hurt, a vague hurt that seemed to have no cause.

Marylyn raised herself on an elbow. "He liked me—once," she said. "He showed it, just as *plain*. It was right here, that day the cattle went by."

Dallas got up. She had begun to tremble visibly; her breath was coming short, as if she had been running.

But the younger girl did not notice. "He stayed away so long," she went on. "Then, to-day when he came—you remember, Dallas,—he just said a word or two to me, and laughed at me because I was afraid. And—and I saw that I was wrong, and I—I saw—he liked—*you*."

"*Me!*" Dallas turned. She felt the blood come driving into her face. She felt that strange hurt ease—and go in a rush of joyful feeling. Then, she understood the cause of it—and why she had trembled—why that day had been the happiest of her life.

Of a sudden she became conscious that Marylyn's eyes were upon her with a look of pathetic reproach. She began to laugh.

"Nonsense! honey," she said. "Don't be silly! Me! Why, he'd never like a great big gawk like me!"

"But—but——"

"Me, with my red hair—you know it is kinda red—and my face, sunburned as a' Indian—hands all calloused like—like a man's." She turned back to the dusk through the window. "Oh, no, not me."

"But you looked so funny just now."

"Did I? Did I?" Dallas stammered out her reason: "Well—well, that was because—because I thought you was going to say it was a soldier." She laughed—nervously. "But it was Mr. Lounsbury you

meant, honey, wasn't it?"

The suspicion that had troubled the mind of the younger girl was allayed. "Why, Dallas, how could you think such a thing about me! Like a soldier? My, no! It was Mr. Lounsbury—but he don't like me."

She got up and went to the foot of her father's bunk. When she reappeared, she was carrying the soap-box that held her belongings. On the robe once more, she took out and held up to the light of the fire two books and a strip of beaded cloth.

The elder left the window and stood beside her.

"These are what he gave me," went on Marylyn, putting forward the books. "And this"—she showed the beadwork—"he asked me to make for him. But to-day," mournfully, "he didn't even speak of it."

Dallas leaned down and touched her lips to the other's hair. "Baby sister, what did you expect him to do? Hold up a man with one hand and—and reach out for a present with the other?"

Marylyn put away the box. "Anyway, he don't like me."

"Like you? Why, he couldn't help it. There isn't a sweeter, prettier girl on the prairies than my little house-keeper."

"He called me the prairie princess," declared Marylyn, but with lingering doubt.

"Now, that shows," said the elder girl. "Don't you worry another second. When he comes again, you'll see."

So Dallas soothed and comforted her until she fell asleep, when she lifted her to her father's bed and covered her carefully. Then she drew aside a swinging blanket to let the firelight shine through—and saw that there were still tears on her sister's face.

CHAPTER XIII

A PROPOSAL AND A PROMISE

The medicine lodge of the Indians stood just within the sliding-panel of the stockade. Thirty poles, their tops lashed together so as to leave a smoke-hole, their bases spread to form a generous circle, supported a covering of tanned buffalo hides seamed with buckskin thongs. Here, barely an hour after Matthews' arrival at Fort Brannon, Squaw Charley entered hastily and thrust some red coals under a stick-pile at the centre of the lodge. And at once, by the flickering light of his fire, the warriors of the band entered the low entrance and seated themselves in a semicircle.

When Colonel Cummings learned that an interpreter had been found, he promptly ordered the completion of preparations for the Jamieson expedition, and the calling of a council, unsatisfactory, but necessary. The redskins jailed in the stockade must know both the object of the trip and his terms, so that they, realising their peril, would reveal the whereabouts of the winter camp of the hostiles.

His interview with Matthews threatened a change in his plans. The latter, having listened to the story of the captured women and to the scheme for their rescue, astonished the commanding officer by declining absolutely to take the proposed journey.

"I'd like t' be obligin'," he said, "but I can't go. I didn't know there was goin' t' be any travellin'. There's business that'll keep me here."

"Why, man!" cried the colonel, "I've made you a good offer."

"I ain't a-savin' v' didn't," was the curt answer.

Colonel Cummings knew to what "business" he referred; but realised that a discussion of it would not aid in bringing the desired consent. He pretended to guess at reasons for the refusal.

"There's scarcely a possibility of trouble during the journey," he said. "Indians don't like to fight in the snow, especially when their families are with them and their war-ponies are feeding on cottonwood bark. Besides, their head chief will be sharp enough to see that he'll have to treat and not fight if he wants to save the necks of his favourites. Then, as far as the safety and comfort of my men are concerned, everything is being done. Better reconsider, Matthews."

"Can't do it."

Colonel Cummings left his library, where he had been talking, and sought Lounsbury's advice. The two held a short, whispered conversation in the entry.

"Let me have a few words with him," said the storekeeper. Matthews' balking was not altogether a surprise. Nevertheless, it was a keen disappointment. He had hoped to be able to send Squaw Charley across the river soon with good news. "Let me see him. Maybe I can bring him around."

They entered the library.

"Matthews," began Lounsbury, "you might as well go along. If you stay, you can't get a hold o' that claim." He looked at the colonel's clock. "It's midnight. Your six months are up. If you did have a chance, it's gone. Possession's nine points in law, and Lancaster's up at Bismarck nailing the tenth."

If the storekeeper's blunt assertions were of any particular interest to the other, he failed to show it. He occupied himself with finding a cigar, cutting it carefully, and lighting it at the stove. Then he turned about to Colonel Cummings, his glance, as it travelled, utterly ignoring Lounsbury.

"Not to mention the risks you run with the boys," added the storekeeper easily, amused by the play of indifference.

"Oh, I guess Shanty Town can take keer of itself," observed Matthews, sending up smoke rings.

Lounsbury walked out.

There was but one thing left for Colonel Cummings to do: Ask this man to interpret in the Medicine Lodge, that at least the Indians might learn their position. Knowing it, they might be prevailed upon to select one of their own number to accompany the expedition and repeat the terms. The commanding officer, rather provoked at Lounsbury, who, he thought, had harmed, and not helped, his cause, immediately suggested this course to Matthews.

"I can parley-voo for you there, all right," agreed Matthews, patronisingly. "But how you goin'?"

"You and I, alone."

Matthews stared. "Carry any guns?" he asked.

"Not when I go into the stockade. The Indians are without weapons. And I like to show them that I trust them."

The other laughed. "You go t' tell some redskins that they's goin' t' be strung up, and y' don't take no gun. Well! not for *me*, Colonel!"

"Then, we'll have a guard."

"O. K. I'm with you."

A scout who understood the sign language was despatched to the stockade. And by the time the braves were settled down before the blaze, Colonel Cummings, Matthews, and a detail of armed men were before the aperture of the Medicine Lodge.

The soldiers waited outside the big wigwam, where they made themselves comfortable by moving up and down. Their commanding

officer and the interpreter went in. At their appearance, the warriors rose gravely, shook hands, and motioned the white men to take seats upon a robe placed at Lame Foot's left hand. The air in the place was already beginning to thicken with kinnikinick and fire smoke; the mingled smell of tobacco and skins made it nauseating. Colonel Cummings would gladly have hurried his errand. But Indian etiquette forbade haste. He was forced to contain himself and let the council proceed with customary and exasperating slowness.

The first step was the pipe. A young Sioux applied a burning splinter to a sandstone bowl and handed the long stem to the medicine-man. His nostrils filled, he gave the pipe to Colonel Cummings, from whom, in turn, it passed to Matthews, Standing Buffalo, Canada John, and thence along the curving line of warriors. When all had smoked, the bowl was once more filled and lighted, and once more it was sent from hand to hand. Not until this ceremony had been repeated many times did the council come to speech.

But neither the commanding officer nor his interpreter made the first address. Though the braves guessed that something unusual had brought about an assembly at this hour, and though their curiosity on the subject was childishly live, they surpassed their captor in patience. Stolidly they looked on while Lame Foot rose to his feet.

The war-priest was not the figure that had led the band south after the battle; not the haughty, stately brave that the sentimentalist loves to picture. He was feathered and streaked as before. A stone mallet hung from his belt. But he wore no string of bears' claws. They had gone the way of the sutler, which was a tasty way, strewn with bright-labelled, but aged, canned goods. And as for his embroidered shirt, it was much soiled and worn, and he had so gained in weight—through plentiful food and lack of exercise—that he pressed out upon it deplorably with a bulging paunch.

Pompously, but using no gestures or inflections, he began a rambling, lengthy account of his past deeds of valour. From these he

finally swerved to the recital of his people's wrongs. He climaxed, after an interminable amount of talking, with a boast that awakened the hearty approbation of his sloven fellows. "We but wait for the winter to go," he said, "for in the spring we shall have freedom. Our brothers, who are sly as foxes and swift as hawks, will sweep down upon the pony soldiers and slay them."

He sat down amid a chorus of "Ho! Hos!" The semicircle moved and bent and nodded. It was plain that he had expressed a common belief.

There was one Indian not of the council to whom his words meant more than freedom. That Indian was Squaw Charley. A moment after Colonel Cummings' arrival, the pariah had crept noiselessly into the lodge and lain down in the shadows. From there, careful all the while to be quiet and to keep himself well screened, he listened to Lam Foot. But when the chief came to his bragging conclusion, Squaw Charley forgot his own degradation for a moment, and forgot to fear discovery. Was a battle indeed coming! New hope all at once!—the hope that he would have the opportunity, long desired, of getting away from the squaws, the old men, and the mocking children, and going with the warriors. Once with them, even in the rôle of cook or drudge, the chance might come to do a brave act, such an act as would reinstate him. Perhaps he could wound an enemy, and count coup upon him; perhaps he could face bullets or arrows to rescue a brother

His dull eyes glinted like cut beads. In very excitement, he raised his bent, spare body.

Hearing the movement, Lam Foot glared round, and his eyes fell upon the outcast.

"Woo!" he cried. "A squaw in the council-lodge! Woo!"

There was a general turning, and those nearest the pariah made peremptory gestures.

A second Charley stood uncertainly. Then the look of one accused came into his face. He tottered backward, through the lodge opening, and out into the snow.

The council continued.

A dozen warriors followed the war-priest in speech-making. Each of them said no more than he. To Colonel Cummings' disgust, each one said no less. Added to the tediousness of it all were Matthews' interpretations. Toward three o'clock, however, the prime object of the meeting was reached.

When the commanding officer at last rose, he was in no mood to mince matters. He used few words, but they were forcible. He asked the interpreter to repeat them precisely.

They had their effect. While Matthews was doing this, the colonel did not glance away from the council-fire, yet he knew that in the semicircle there was genuine consternation. Grunts, startled, angry, threatening, ran up and down the line. Those warriors named for possible execution alone were silent.

Presently, one of the others spoke. "If we tell you where to go, how do we know the white chief will not fall upon the winter camp of our brothers as Custer, The Long-Hair, fell upon Black Kettle's?"

"I am not going with the pony soldiers," Matthews hastened to say. "Across the Muddy Water, where the road passes, is a wide piece of land which has been stolen from me."

One of the four condemned glanced up. It was Lamé Foot. "By The Plow-Woman?" he asked.

"By her father. I shall stay until that land is mine again. One of you must ask your chief that he give up the pale-face squaws."

Canada John answered him. "A brave can but take the words of the white chief. That is not well. One of a double tongue must go."

"The white chief has but one," said Matthews, and tapped his own chest.

A silence followed.

"The journey begins when the sun is little," he added, and sat down.

"Will not the white chief wait until spring?" asked Lame Foot whose guile made up for his physical defect.

The others studied Colonel Cummings' face as the question was put to him. They saw the purpose—postponement, which might bring freedom for them, and also a retention of the captive women.

The colonel's answer did not need interpreting. "No!" he said, and struck his knees with his open palms.

"Why should two squaws matter?" asked Shoot-at-the-Tree. "Are there not many everywhere? We will give the white chief some of our ponies."

"Your ponies floated, belly up, down the river moons ago," said Matthews.

Twenty pairs of eyes sparkled with hate. That was news indeed!

Lame Foot spoke again. There was a mathematical phase of the terms which troubled him. "Why should four die for two?" he demanded. "Among the whites, has a squaw the value of two soldiers?"

Matthews answered gravely that it was so. The brave snorted contemptuously.

Canada John shook his head. "Thus comes much evil because we shot the pinto buffalo."

At that point, the hoof-sheaths that trimmed a rope near the entrance rattled. The semicircle craned their necks. A plump hand was pulling aside the flap of the lodge. Then, through the low aperture

and into the light of the fire stepped an Indian woman. She flung back a head-shawl and faced red man and white. A murmur came from the braves. It was Brown Mink.

As with the men of the band, plentiful food and no exercise had worked wonders with her. She was less slender and more solid than formerly. Her full cheeks shone like the bulging sides of a copper kettle. But her spirit was little changed. She waited no invitation to speak. She paused for no words. In her earnestness, she leaned forward a little.

"Brown Mink is young," she said. "She is but an unfledged crane walking in strange waters. But she speaks with the voice of her father, your mighty chief that was. Canada John talks straight. One of a double tongue must go. The white chief is very angry, so that he plucks the hairs from his hands. The squaws must be brought back, or four braves will be choked by ropes. But who can make things smooth? Only The Double-Tongue. Promise him much—promise to help him drive the thief from his land."

Matthews straightened up.

She put out one arm and measured a small length upon it. "When our warriors come, thus short a space will it take to rid the land," she said. And was gone before any could answer.

There was a long "Ho-o-o!" of assent.

"What's this all about?" asked Colonel Cummings.

"She wants me t' go," said Matthews.

"Well, so do I."

The Indians conferred among themselves. Suddenly, as if they had reached a decision, they fell silent and settled back. Lame Foot spoke.

"In the Moon of Wild Strawberries," he said, "the sun is warm and

the grass is growing." He turned to the interpreter. "Ask our brothers to send the women then, *and follow them*. We shall go free; and as we go, we shall free the land."

"But if your brothers cannot come?" said Matthews.

Lame Foot answered. "The white chief will send us to Standing Rock Agency. From there, braves will go out to hunt—and arrows fly silently. There are some of two tips. These bite like the rattlesnake ____"

Matthews rubbed his chin. He knew that what Lounsbury had told him in the colonel's library was true. All legal and moral claims to the valuable town site across the river were gone. He could secure the Bend now only by underhand means. And here were those who would do what he dared not.

"They make a cunning wound," continued Lame Foot, "and no one finds the arrow."

Colonel Cummings was growing impatient. "Interpret, interpret," he ordered.

"They think it's all up with 'em if I don't go," said Matthews. He looked down thoughtfully. The trip would be a comparatively short one, and offered good reward. Whatever happened, if the Indians kept their word with him, he would have both the pay and the land.

"Will they tell me where the camp is?" asked the Colonel.

Matthews met his eye. "Ye-e-e-s," he answered. "If I go." He addressed the warriors: "If your promise is a promise——"

An old chief caught his arm. "We are not liars," he said.

"It is a task for a child," added Lane Foot.

"Enough," answered Matthews. To Colonel Cummings he said, "I'm your man, sir."

"Good!"

Then the interpreter and the Indians, with the commanding officer unwittingly taking a part, sealed their compact in a pipe of peace.

CHAPTER XIV

ANOTHER PROMISE

The green pung was ten miles or more beyond Clark's before the section-boss recovered appreciably from his long sulk. "What d' y' s'pose Lounsbury reckoned could happen t' my gals?" he demanded of David Bond.

The evangelist shook the reins at Shadrach. "A storm, cold, want," he replied. "There are many evils that might befall two young women alone in a shanty on the prairie."

"Wal, nothin' 's ever happened t' 'em before," declared Lancaster. But he whistled to stay a change in good fortune, and rapped the wood of the wagon-box with his bare knuckles.

David Bond busied himself with urging on his horse. "God will watch over them," he said devoutly. "'Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.'"

The section-boss sniffed. Sure of the safe trend of his affairs, he was in a mood to scoff at any religious allusion. Reverence, with him, was entirely a matter of urgent physical need. He had called to his Maker but twice in his life: once, when an ugly-tempered peon threatened him with a spade; again, when, falling from his swiftly moving flat-car, he felt the heavy wheels grinding him, flesh and bone.

"Storm kain't tech th' shack," he said proudly. "She 's built like a ship, t' stan' any win'. She's warm, too, an' thet Injun, he brings us plenty of wood. An' they's grub 'nough t' las'."

The evangelist was politely attentive.

"They's jes' one man thet might come botherin' 'em," Lancaster

went on. "But 'tain't likely he'll see these parts before spring. An' Ah don' b'lieve he'll come then."

David Bond set his brows together. The previous night an unshaped thought had made him pause a second before leaving Dallas. Now, that thought became a suspicion—a suspicion of the real truth. "A man?" he said questioningly; "a man?"

Being thus prompted on the subject of the claim, Lancaster was willing to proceed, for he had no feeling that he was obeying Dallas. "Ah'm speakin' of a man thet filed on my section in July," he said. "His six months is up t'-day. So Ah reckon he'll hev t' work a new piece of track. For Ah inten' t' hang on t' thet quarter—it's goin' t' be worth a pile."

The evangelist threw him a swift glance. "What is the name of that man?" he asked.

"Ah dunno. Ah clean gone an' f'got it. Ah ought t' wrote it down——"

"Would you know it if you heard it?"

"W'y, yes—'twas some ornery name."

"Was it—was it Matthews?"

Complete bewilderment spoke from Lancaster's wide-open eyes and mouth. He whirled about upon the evangelist and seized the reins. Shadrach came to a squatting stop, his ears turning round to catch a command. "Thet's it! Thet's it!" cried the section-boss. "An' how d' *you* know?"

The two men looked at each other in silence. Lancaster's face was dark with distrust; David Bond's, pale with alarm.

"How?" exclaimed the latter, when his tongue at last answered his will; "how? Because Matthews came north with me yesterday!"

If Shadrach possessed the sense his master claimed for him, he must have concluded then and there that the human beings in the

pung had gone stark mad. For after some excited shouting, the one to the other, they brought him square about and sent him scurrying back toward Brannon.

They did not retrace their way, but steered due south, thus saving the few miles that could take them again through Clark's. Shadrach approved the change in direction, which pointed to a snug corner beside the friendly bull-calf, and fairly skimmed the hard snow. He had already gone forty long miles since morning. Yet, undaunted, he took up the return with good zest, holding a smart pace unwearily. He breathed deep, and his long Roman nose—thrust out on a line with his rocking back—smoked like an eager charger's.

In the first half-hour that followed the evangelist's disquieting admission, he listened to a wild, profane tirade: against himself, for having failed to speak of Matthews; against Dallas, for being in such a tarmal hurry; against Lounsbury on general principles. The section-boss found only one person wholly exempt from blame—himself. So he cursed, he threatened, he wrung his hands, he grabbed a crutch, and, leaning forward, poked the straining flanks of the white horse.

"Gentle, gentle," admonished David Bond. "He goes fastest who goes steadily. I have driven Shadrach ninety miles in twenty-two hours. And if we are patient with him now, he will get us home by reveille."

But Lancaster only groaned ungratefully and continued to ply the crutch.

On they went. As the short day ended and darkness came, they steered farther to the left, for there was a possible danger of pitching over the river-bank. When they approached the coulée, the same peril again met them. Shadrach, however, insured them against accident. He struck his own trail, and knew it. At once, he quickened his speed, pulling the reins taut. Behind him, his master, though utterly wearied, kept awake to watch their course and commend him kindly. Not so

the section-boss. His anger finally spent, he put up his crutch and made himself comfortable. Then, swaying as the pung swayed, he slept.

Far away at Fort Brannon the council was at an end. Lanterns were whisking to and fro like giant lightning-bugs about the long garrison granary and the quartermaster and commissary storehouse, where wagons were being loaded with tents, ammunition, rations, and forage—enough for sixty days. The library window at headquarters was bright: Colonel Cummings and a surgeon were respectively commanding and persuading young Jamieson to await his mother and sister at the post. Nick Matthews, attended by a watchful sergeant, was having his hair cut by the citizen barber. While Lounsbury, too joyfully excited to sleep, was in the sutler's billiard-room, giving Fraser, who was about to depart with the expedition, a sympathetic history of the Lancasters—a history in which Marylyn was shrewdly made the dainty central figure.

At five o'clock, everything being in readiness, a livelier activity prevailed. The out-going troop was routed from bed and fortified with a hot breakfast. By six, "boots and saddles" had sounded. And, soon, the detachment—protected from the cold by blanket-coats, and with black cutties burning down the whole length of its double line—was leading the wagon-train at a good jog toward the west.

The men went gladly, accepting the long ride as a welcome relief to the stagnation of a garrison winter. To them, the possible dangers of the trip were a mere matter of course, though Guy V. Henry's march of a twelvemonth before—a terrible march from Fort Robinson into the Black Hills—was fresh in their memory. Captain Oliver commanded, B Troop being his own. He was a brave man, but one who let his heart influence his better judgment, who was neither as acute as a soldier should be nor as cautious. Yet his commanding officer selected him for the duty—the choice insured his remaining behind when the campaign of the coming summer opened; when there would

arrive from the "States" a certain loyal little wife and her seven babies.

An hour after the cavalry clattered out of Brannon, faithful Shadrach limped home. The approach of the pung did not frighten Dallas. For, long before it crossed the coulée, as she walked noiselessly to and fro across the dirt floor, she heard her father's voice urging the white horse on. She did not understand the quick return, but prepared for it by building up the fire and swinging the coffee-pail into place.

The old men heard her story before they stepped from the sleigh. The evangelist, as he listened, thanked his God for Lounsbury. The section-boss, on the contrary, was made so angry by the recital of Matthews' attack that he called down every manner of punishment upon the latter, and revelled in multiple plans for a sweet revenge.

"Jes' let thet scalawag call again," he cried, shaking a crutch toward Shanty Town. "Ah ain't much on my laigs these days, but Ah'm right good yet with my pistol arm!"

"Without *His* arm——" began David Bond.

A wondering cry from Dallas stopped him. He turned to see her pointing at the northern sky.

A strange, wild light was creeping up from the horizon and tinting the heavens. A filmy veil was mounting the zenith, and swinging gently. Swiftly the glory grew. The veil became a curtain of rainbow colouring, edged with royal purple and faint red, and lined, here with orange, there with green, again with delicate pink.

Changes followed. Green, gold, and blue lightning darted from plain to sky, trailing fainter colours that danced elfishly; and the sheet of living flame took form. It became a huge clenched fist, resting upright upon the lighted prairie. About it, in a sky made darker by contrast, gleamed the scattered stars. Then, one by one, quivering fingers of light shot forth from the fist. Until, at length, over the little shack was

outspread, palm downward, a shimmering giant hand.

To the evangelist, watching the aurora with upturned face, the hand was deified. "It is a divine manifestation!" he whispered reverently. "It brings a message: '*Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day.*'"

CHAPTER XV

NECESSITY

While David Bond and Dallas were taking Shadrach from the pung, a boot crunched the snow behind them. They turned. And there was Lounsbury, fairly bursting to tell his good news.

When he had told it, he was anxious to get away again, for by a quick retreat the two girls might be saved the knowledge of the Clark episode, and he, a very probable second insult. But the evangelist, having no wish to tattle about Lancaster, yet hoping that the elder girl would learn what her father had done and administer a deserved rebuke, urged him in.

The storekeeper did not consent to enter the shack, however, until Dallas added her invitation; and then he went reluctantly. He was accustomed to courtesy there on the frontier. The plains-bred men that he knew instinctively took him at his real valuation, and treated him accordingly; the men of a more conventional strata (the professional men of Bismarck, and those who officered at the posts up and down the river) freely bestowed their friendship upon him; the lawless element respected him, too, and showed that respect by letting him severely alone. He shrank from placing himself where a man like Lancaster—crippled, old, and therefore beyond disciplining—could have the chance to repeat an affront. And he shrank at the thought of a clash—it meant pain for two helpless women. Nevertheless, he yielded.

The streamers were gone from the sky by then. They had faded as quickly as they had come. Once more, under a dome of cobalt, the river flowed black between its fringe of trees, and the prairie stretched

white and still.

A bright fire and a singing coffee-pail welcomed the three as the door swung wide, and the section-boss, who was urging Marylyn to "rustle some grub," turned with a testy word. But he fell silent when he saw Lounsbury, and edged into the dusky shelter of the hearth-side.

The storekeeper nodded to him, shook hands absently with the younger girl, and took a bench. His face looked less full than usual, and was lighted by no hearty smiles.

Little was said until breakfast was ready—a quick breakfast of bacon, pone, and coffee. The three men warmed themselves. The girls moved between fireplace and table. But when the plates were set and the coffee poured, David Bond asked for the story of Matthews' doings, of the affair at the saloon, the meeting with Colonel Cummings, and the council. Dallas and Marylyn heard it from where they stood together before the blaze. Lancaster heard it,—though he pretended not to,—eating and drinking the while with angry smacks.

Lounsbury paid no attention to the section-boss. In fact, before his recital was done, he had forgotten him. He talked quietly and without boasting, his face now turned to David Bond, now to the girls.

"And you think," said the evangelist, when the story was finished, "you think that Matthews will drop his claim to the Bend?"

Lounsbury arose, as if to go, and for the first time since his entrance looked squarely at Lancaster. "This is what I think:" he answered, "in Dakota, if a man jumps land that hasn't been improved, all he's got to do is to hang on to it; don't have to rattle with any fine points of law. This far west of stuffed chairs, there's a whole lot in public sentiment." He crossed the room and picked up coat and cap.

"Of course," added David Bond, "following the law would strengthen the case."

"Of course."

The section-boss adjusted his crutches and stood up. "You-all seem t' be settlin' it 'thout any o' my lip," he said, and laughed mockingly.

"We have your interests at heart," replied the storekeeper.

Lancaster ground his teeth. Now that all danger was past, he felt no gratitude for the routing of Matthews and the strategy at The Trooper's Delight. He could only feel that his authority in his own home was threatened. He turned his back.

Lounsbury glanced at the girls. They were watching their father appealingly.

"*I should* say," went on Lounsbury, "that we have the interests of your daughters at heart." His hand reached for the latch.

"Mr. Lounsbury!" Dallas made a swift step toward him.

Now, the section-boss came about. Lounsbury was reminded of the day on the plowed strip. For he saw that Lancaster was all a-tremble, and panting as if spent with a hard run. "M' gall!" he cried sternly.

Dallas stepped back and touched her father's arm. And her remonstrance was the remonstrance of that other day. "No, no, dad," she cautioned in a low voice; "no, no."

Lancaster's breast heaved. He swallowed with an effort, and scowled from one to another of the four.

David Bond came forward, addressing Lounsbury. "Will you tell me your name?" he asked. "I want to remember you. You are not a soldier. Do you belong at Clark's——"

"Did y' size him up fer a cow-punch?" broke in Lancaster. "Huh! Wal, *Ah* never did."

Lounsbury's face dyed to a deep scarlet. "No?" he said. "And why?"

Again the section-boss gave a shrill, mocking laugh. "Too fat an' too mouthy," he answered.

For an instant Lounsbury wavered. In that instant the deep scarlet faded, his eyes opened, his nostrils spread.

"Pa! pa!" It was Marylyn, half-weeping.

Lounsbury's cool voice cleared the air. "I'm a Bismarck man," he said to the evangelist. "I've got a store there. My name is John Lounsbury." He held out his hand to Dallas.

She advanced again and took it. "Oh, thank you! thank you!" she breathed.

"Bismarck man." It was Lancaster once more. "Wal, w'y the devil don' y' stay thar?"

Lounsbury took no notice of him. "I'll be hoofing it," he said to Dallas. "But if I can do anything—you understand." And went out.

David Bond's keen eyes studied the elder girl. He expected an outburst of anger and blame. He was surprised when, without speaking, she brought the benches to the fire and set about clearing the table. Lancaster seated himself and sucked moodily at his pipe. Marylyn flitted behind him, to disappear through the swinging blankets. The evangelist walked up and down.

It was not long before the silence told on the section-boss and forced him to talk. "Ef you-all got anythin' t' say," he snarled presently, "y' might as well spit it out."

No one answered.

"Ah got jes' *this* t' say," he continued, "Ah ain't goin' t' hev no lubber o' a storekeep slaverin' aroun' my gals!"

Again no one answered. But David Bond, as he watched Dallas questioningly, determined to be silent no longer. He paused in his walk. "My friend," he said solemnly, "you talk like a madman. For

shame!"

Dallas stood stock still, her eyes warning him. But it was too late.

Her father snickered, drew on his pipe once or twice, and then grinned up at the evangelist. "It's gittin' light outdoors," he said significantly. "Ah reckon y' could cross th' river."

And so David Bond and the white horse went the way of Lounsbury.

Nearly an hour passed before the section-boss addressed Dallas. "Wal? wal? wal?"

She was wrapping up to do the morning chores. "Just as well, I guess, dad," she said wearily. "The meal and bacon's pretty low. I've been cooking out of the seed-sacks lately."

"Th' meal an' bacon's got t' las'," he answered. "Use th' seed ef y' want t', an' don' give thet Injun so much. We shan't ast tick o' no lallygaggin', do-a-grapevine-twist dandy."

Dallas sighed, found Marylyn to kiss her, and gratefully breasted the chill air beyond the door.

His dismissal from the shack brought no hardship upon David Bond. He found an old acquaintance in Colonel Cummings, who joyfully greeted him as interpreter in the absence of Matthews. He found familiar faces among the hostages, whose sullen reserve in his presence he laid to their imprisonment. At barracks, the enlisted men chaffed him mischievously, christened him "Methuselah," and installed him as "official doom sealer" of the post. But when he passed them by to give every hour of his days and nights to young Jamieson—young Jamieson, battling with all his might against collapse—the men ceased chaffing, and listened to him with respect. A crank on religion was one thing, a man with one eye on the Bible and his sleeves rolled up for hard duty was another. The troopers cared little for sermonising, but they honoured service. Then, it was Jamieson for whom the evangelist was caring. And Jamieson held

the very heartstrings of the garrison.

As for Lounsbury, Brannon entertained him no less gladly. His was the rare good-humour that enlivens every occasion. He practised at target-shooting with the enlisted men; he played billiards with the officers; he dined; made up sleigh rides; lent himself to theatricals; furnished a fourth at cards, and, at the frequent dances, led out homely and pretty alike.

To David Bond it seemed as if the storekeeper were indifferent to his own dismissal from the shack. But one morning the evangelist accidentally came upon the younger man. He was watching the Bend through a telescope, and his face was anxious and troubled.

"Lancaster hasn't started for the land-office again," he said. Then, after a moment's silence, "I've just about decided to go Bismarck-way myself to-day. When you can, will you let me know how they are over there?"

"Charles will keep me posted," answered the evangelist, "and I shall send you any news by the mail sleigh."

"Thank you," said Lounsbury, simply. "Good-by." And at the noon mess he was missing.

At the shack, the days were numbered slowly, for all their scant hours of light. Sleep consumed most of the time. The rest was taken by the meals, the chores and the effort of keeping warm. The line of calico-covered books helped to vary the monotony. So did the visits of Squaw Charley. But these were becoming more brief now. Not that Lancaster made them unpleasant—Charley was necessary to him—but that the Indian was always in a fever to be gone. Since the council, his eyes were less downcast, his face was less stolid.

One day brought a totally unexpected visitor, whom Lancaster recognised with some misgivings as the United States land-agent at Bismarck. The section-boss was soon reassured, however. The

agent said that, having business near Brannon, and remembering that Lancaster wished to file an entry on the bend when the first claimant's six months were up, he had come by. In the case of a man who was hurt, he said, the law allowed such a course. The section-boss, thus saved the arduous trip, signed the necessary papers with a jubilant mark.

Then came Old Michael for a time or two. It seemed at first as if he were to be a favourite. He could adapt himself with all the art of his race. And before Lancaster he was intensely Southern in his views, whipping the North in many a broguey strife. Until—it befell through a slip of the tongue—a slip that sent him packing off. For he boasted how, in '62, his freckled hands had helped in piloting the Federals to Island Number 10!

It was an outcome that gave Dallas little concern. Marylyn was her worry. The younger girl was listless, pale and moody. Now and then, Dallas believed she saw a look of actual suffering in her eyes. Once, awakening in the night, she heard her sob.

Marylyn was unhappy, and the thought made the elder girl desperate. This led her to a plan: Lounsbury must be asked to forgive their father and come again—must be told of Marylyn's confession!

Soon afterward a second worry presented itself, one fully as serious. The provisions were dwindling, the seed-sacks shrinking fast, and, estranged from Lounsbury, they had nowhere to ask credit but at the Fort.

When Dallas spoke of it to her father, he chuckled. "Wal, we got Simon, ain't we?" he said.

That same night, Marylyn put down her fork and stared across the table at her sister. "Why, Dallas, you don't eat!" she complained.

Dallas laughed. "I don't work, honey," she answered.

The question of fuel entered next, and became a grave one. So far,

the weather had been fairly mild for the place and the season. Now, it took a more rigorous turn. The bitter cold was intensified by a stiff wind. Snow began to fall, and the wind, growing, drove the flakes level, so that they cut the face like filings of steel. Charley's trips became uncertain, then impossible. The work of getting out hay for the stock was a desperate tax. It was so difficult that Dallas dared not spare a straw for the fireplace, and Ben and Betty's manger had to be drawn upon for wood. When this source of supply failed, the benches were sacrificed one by one, the cupboard was torn down, and the bunk and part of the table were split into kindling.

The family slept shoulder to shoulder before the hearth, with the brave-coloured blankets of the partition for extra covering. Lancaster and the younger girl stayed in bed all of the twenty-four hours. Dallas got up only long enough to tend the animals and prepare food. But a day came when she could not make her way to the lean-to, and when the warped door could not be opened in the teeth of the raging storm. Toward noon, she cooked some food, however. The seed sacks were empty; there was no rice and no flour. While the blizzard howled without, and Simon and the mules called pitifully for their fodder and drink, she broke up what was left of the table. Over its blaze the last smitch of bacon went to savour the last pint of beans.

After the meal Dallas read aloud. Lying down, she held her book in one hand until her fingers were blue with cold, then changed to the other. Father and sister drowsed, and she put the story aside to study over the predicament in which she felt herself at fault. Counting on blizzards, but knowing nothing of their duration, she had determined to say little about their needs until those needs pressed. When, she knew, her father would see their extremity. The extremity had come. Yet, willing or unwilling, Lancaster was cut off from seeking help.

That day closed in fearful cold. The wind was become a furious gale. Sturdily, the log house withstood it. Only the roof seemed threatened. With each great blast, it lifted a little, as if on the point of

whirling away. But when darkness came, even the roof settled into quiet. For the drifts that had been piling up gradually to the north and west of the shack, sealing the windows and the door, had risen to the grassy eaves and overflowed them, and so weighted the thatch.

Next morning, long before Marylyn and her father wakened, Dallas roused. The room was in dusk, and its air was so cold that it seemed fairly to singe the skin. She could not read. Presently, Marylyn turned. The elder girl hastened to soothe her. Then, their father yawned. Dallas feigned sleep.

But the evil moment could not be put off. Lancaster propped himself on an elbow and called to her. He was hungry.

Very quietly, Dallas told him that there was no food.

He grunted, arose and lighted the lantern. "You dish the snow on the floor," he commanded. "We'll need it for drink."

"What're *you* going to do?" she asked, hastening to obey. Her voice was lowered apprehensively.

He was wrapping some clothes over his shoes. "Butcher Simon," he said curtly.

Her face became a white spot in the gloom.

"Critter'll be tough, like's not," went on her father. "But y' c'n poun' the meat."

After a long wait, she spoke. "You can't reach him," she declared, half triumphantly.

"Yas, Ah c'n," he answered. "Ah c'n chop through with the hatchet." He was between the fireplace and a corner, feeling over the logs with his hands.

She ran to him. "Oh, how can you think of it?" she demanded huskily. "Simon's so friendly and—came to us for a home. How can you kill him! Maybe *you* could eat him, but *I* couldn't. It'd just choke

me!"

"Oh, ain't we sof!" sneered her father. He was fumbling about near the bunk, as if hunting something. "Mebbe y' 'd like Ah should kill a mule! Ha! ha! No mule-meat fer *me*. Ah'll give thet bull a tunk 'tween th' eyes, an' we'll hev steak."

She stood in the dim light, one arm crooked up to cover her face. Presently, Marylyn moaned; then, Dallas lowered her arm and looked down at her sister. "One of the mules *would* be easier," she said bitterly. But remembering the brown eyes of the team, and the long, grey-whiskered noses, she covered her face again.

"Ah don' keer w'at y' say," declared her father. "We'll hev steak." He selected a log and began to hack at it.

Shuddering, she sank to her knees, one hand reached out to touch Marylyn. "Maybe Charley'll come, honey," she whispered hopefully. "Maybe, maybe!"

And now it seemed as if she heard something outside. She crept to the door. Around the latch was a little space. She put her ear to it, and the icy air blew against her cheek. There it was again! The shriek of the gale.

She went back to the bed.

Hack! hack! hack! Then muttered curses. And again the sound of chopping.

When she could bear it no longer, she got up and stumbled over to her father. "*Dad*," she said, "if I break up the mantel and fix something, will you stop?"

He sat back on his feet, puffing crossly. "Light a fire," he said. "Use these chips. Ah'll res'." He threw down the hatchet and crawled under the blankets. He was glad of the interruption, for the duty ahead was assuming an ugly guise.

Dallas had filled the coffee-pail with snow. Now, she gathered up the chips, lit them, and pried up the wide board of the mantel. This she split with the hatchet.

"What you going to make?" asked Marylyn, from the bed.

"Pepper-tea, honey. It'll warm you up."

"Oh, I'm glad. Ma made some once."

Pepper-tea it was. When the snow had melted and the water was boiling hot, Dallas added pepper and salt. Then she spread a cloth and turned the wheat and corn sacks out upon it. She got a handful of flour. With this she thickened the water. Three cups were setting upon the floor. She took the coffee-pail over, poured into two, and handed them to her father and Marylyn.

"Don't spill a drop," she cautioned.

"You got some?" queried Marylyn, sitting up.

Dallas went back to the other cup. "Well, what do you think I'm doing?" she asked, and lifted it to her lips.

Soon, the three were lying shoulder to shoulder again, the section-boss drawing a little added comfort from his pipe. Before long, he was asleep; Marylyn, too. When Dallas got up cautiously and brewed a cup of peppered water for herself. The hot draught relieved the pangs of her hunger. She lay down again.

Hours later, she was awakened by hearing faint squeals directly overhead. Hastily, she lit the lantern and took down the Sharps; then, stepped directly under the sounds and poked the rifle's muzzle into the hay of the roof. Above, storm-driven and crowding one another against the stones of the chimney, were some pigs!

In her eagerness, she trembled so violently that she became unsteady on her feet. It lost her the opportunity of firing. For, as she waited, trying to get a blind aim, the squeals suddenly died out. The

pigs had gone over toward the edge of the lean-to.

When next she awoke,—awoke from a dream of well-spread tables, she could not guess how much time had passed, or whether it was day or night. The shack was pitch dark. Of one thing she could be sure: The storm had not abated, so there was no hope of aid.

She knew something must be done. Simon and the team wrung her heart with their pleas. Beside her, Marylyn was turning with fretful complaints. The younger girl rolled her head from side to side constantly, and moistened her lips. Dallas chopped up the rifle rack and made a fire of it; then plied Marylyn with more of the pepper-tea. The section-boss refused to partake. The first cup, he said, had burned him. Tobacco was better solace.

Dallas did not taste the tea, either. A fearful nausea beset her. Her heart went like a trip-hammer. She wrapped up, turning her back to the blaze. Oddly enough her father did not make a second attack on the log. His perique went far toward helping him fight the gnawing of hunger. He could afford, having to endure little pain, to let the hours bring Dallas to the point where she would ask the life of the bull. He knew where she was most vulnerable. When Marylyn turned from the tea that now partially eased her hunger, and began a demand for food, Simon would die.

It came sooner than the section-boss expected. His lethargic sleep was broken by Dallas' shaking him. As he opened his eyes, she thrust the hatchet into his hands.

"Dad," she said hurriedly. "Get up. You got to do it. For Marylyn—for Marylyn."

To him, it was a real victory. He wrenched a quid from his tobacco-slab, grasped the hatchet handle and arose. Dallas had lighted the lantern once more. Now she pinned one of the smaller blankets over his shoulders. When he put on his hat and knelt before the chopped-out place in the east wall, she wrapped a second blanket about his

feet and legs.

"Go 'long, go 'long," he said, not unkindly. "Keep you'self warm." Then the *hack, hack, hack* began again.

She did not watch him, but donned the long cloak over her jersey, kissed Marylyn and paced up and down the shack. For every step there was a blow of the hatchet.

"Poor Simon! Poor Simon!" she whispered to herself. The bull was lowing again.

At last the sound of the hatchet became unbearable. She gave a quick glance around the room, then, crossing to her father, pulled at his arm. "If you kill Simon, there's no wood to do any cooking," she said. "Better wait, dad—hour or two, *please!*"

He twisted from under her hand, and scowled up. "Shucks!" he answered. "Here's chips 'nough fer a fire." And swung the hatchet with fresh zeal.

She lingered a moment, smiling grimly. It was only a play for time. She knew very well that there would be timber when her father reached Simon's stall.

Lancaster was making fast progress. The log upon which he worked was dry from the heat of the hearth. It splintered like weathered pine. A section of it was soon cut away so far that a final blow with the hatchet head drove it in. It rolled to the noses of the mules. Lancaster thrust his head through the hole.

Between the scantlings that penned Simon into his part of the lean-to, the section-boss spied two glowing eyes. They watched him, then the door, then him again. "*M-m-m-m!*" came a deep protest, as the bull blew and pawed at the dirt floor.

The section-boss drew back nervously. "Simon's actin' funny," he said. "He's locoed, or he's smelt a mice."

He got no answer. Dallas was in the corner farthest from him, crowded against the logs. Her arms were raised. Her head rested between them.

Lancaster grunted disgustedly, and fell to chopping again. The opening in the wall was not quite wide enough up and down for his body. He enlarged it by cutting away at the lower side. Finally satisfied with its size, he unpinned the shoulder blanket, freed his feet, and crawled through.

And now Dallas looked round, fastening her eyes upon the dark hole beyond the hearth. Beside it, the lantern burned with a sickly flame. "It's murder! It's murder! It's *murder*!" she breathed.

Marylyn tossed, moaning. Dallas ran to her. There she stayed, eyes and ears buried in the bed-clothes.

Within the lean-to, a curious parley was being held. Lancaster was standing, hatchet in hand, at the bar of Simon's pen. Behind him was the stable door, before him, just out of reach, the bull. Simon was not pawing now. His fore feet were spread wide, his nose touched the ground between them. He was alternately mooing and blowing, and his angry eyes were fixed, not on the section-boss, but on the bottom of the door.

"Simon, Simon," said Lancaster, in a wheedling tone. He could scarcely see the animal, for the eastern window was snowed shut. The bull made no move. Presently, the old man shoved the single bar aside and hopped forward a step or two, his gaze fixed on the star between those glowing eyes.

Still the bull did not move.

"So, Simon," purred the section-boss. He gave another hop forward, and raised the hatchet. "So, Simon, nice Simon!"

"Wo-o-o-ah!"

It was a roar that fairly shook the lean-to. Simon flung up his head.

Fearful for his safety, Lancaster dodged to the left, stumbled, overturned, and went down with a cry. "Dallas—help!"

A cry answered him. The mules reared. Then, out of the gloom plunged a red bulk, head lowered, tail straight. There was a second roar, a crash, as the stable door flew outward, an in-rush of frigid air, and the swirling sound of wind and sleet. And Simon, leaping something that was lying at the entrance, shot on into the blizzard.

Early morning of the next day, as the Lancasters were enjoying a breakfast of roasted pork, cooked by a scantling of Simon's manger, they heard the storm renew its fury in strange noises that were like the human voice. The warped door creaked, the latch rattled.

They paid little attention to it, being fairly content with the strange good fortune that had left a fat frozen pig in the snow outside the lean-to. The stable had been nailed tight again, and there were enough scantlings in it to last out three or four days. Marylyn was better, having rallied swiftly on a diet of rich broth. Even Ben and Betty were not unhappy, for they were greedily consuming the hay of the bedticks.

"Sam Patch's shore bustin' loose," observed the section-boss, selecting a second juicy rib and salting it from end to end. The salt spilled. He flickered a pinch over one shoulder.

Boof! boof! boof! bang! came the muffled sounds from without.

"The harder it howls now the sooner it'll get over it," answered Dallas, piling on more wood.

Lancaster lit his pipe. "Danged glad Ah got t'baccy."

Hey! hey! yelled the storm.

Marylyn looked up from a book. "Sounds as if men are outside," she said. "Listen!"

They listened, straining their ears.

Something thumped the warped door. They started up. A moment, and a thread of light came through the gap above the latch.

"They is!" cried the section-boss.

A cheer replied. A sharp command was sung out to them. "Keep back! Out of the way!"

Again the door was thumped; then great pressure was put upon it. It opened, letting in a half-dozen men and a wide path of warm sunlight.

"Hurrah! hurrah!" "Folks, you snowed in?" "Thank God, you're all right." "The basket, boys, the basket."

"W'y, Lawd!" cried the section-boss, winking against the light; "ain't they no blizzard?"

A trooper with a chevroned sleeve saluted them. His air was jaunty. His face beamed. "There *was*, sir, last night," he said gaily, "but there hain't none now. Clear has ha bell, sir."

"Y' fr'm th' Post?" demanded Lancaster, trying to look severe.

He of the chevrons waved his companions out. "Hi'm from Hingland, sir," he answered. "Sergeant Kippis his my name. Will you 'ave some 'soldier's coffee,' sir?"

Dallas hurried past him and into the newly dug tunnel. Overhead was a serene sky. Between shack and river lay a dazzling mile of drifts. And midway, brisket deep, but advancing resolutely, and bugling at every floundering step, was Simon!

CHAPTER XVI

BACK FROM THE WINTER CAMP

"Well, Captain?" It was partly a greeting full of relief, partly an eager inquiry, as Colonel Cummings came hurrying out of his library to meet Oliver in the entry.

The latter straightened a little, but hesitated deprecatingly before taking the colonel's hand. "I've nothing to report but failure, sir," he said.

The stinging wind that had blown the command home into barracks, and scourged the humped shoulders of the men and the thin flanks of their mounts, had cut the flesh over the captain's high cheek-bones until it was red and raw. The lower part of his face was hidden under a growth that matched his drooping moustache. On his forehead and about his eyes, the skin was a dark sallow, marked by a lattice of deep lines—lines of worry and weariness.

"Nothing to report but failure," he repeated, and let the orderly pull off his stiffened overcoat.

"The troop?" asked Colonel Cummings, anxiously.

"All safe." The other hung his cap on a nail, his belt upon his overcoat.

"Thank Heaven! That storm—I was afraid. Where did it catch you?"

"On the Knife. We put up with some half-breeds. It was hard on the horses, but a rest for the men."

The colonel led the way into the library.

On his entrance, a figure in the dusk behind the stove sprang up with a questioning cry. It was young Jamieson.

"Easy, easy, for God's sake!" begged the captain. He put out one arm as if to ward off a blow.

Jamieson brought up. He saw the look of defeat in Oliver's bloodshot eyes, and his voice quaked, his body shuddered in mortal terror of what he was to hear.

"It's bad news, but not as bad as it might be," began the captain. Colonel Cummings offered him a chair. He dropped into it. "It is said that your mother and sister are alive, and will be delivered up to us in the spring, provided there are no executions here. But—I didn't see them, and I don't know where they are."

Jamieson coughed down a heart-broken protest, and, as if stunned, tottered weakly toward the stove.

Colonel Cummings knotted his hands together. "Where's Matthews?" he asked.

He was answered by the slamming of the outside door, and by a voice in the entry; a moment later, there was a sharp tattoo on the library door. The colonel opened it and answered the interpreter's salute.

With Matthews seated on the army cot, and the commanding officer pacing to and fro, Captain Oliver made his report. He stood at the window, his arms folded, his eyes following his superior.

"We located the camp easily," he said. "The directions given by the hostages were exact. But that is about the only thing that did come easily. The rest was all procrastination.

"At noon, on the tenth day out, we saw, ahead of us on a ridge, a single Indian. I selected four men to make a swift detour, thinking that

perhaps they would discover a hunting-party just over the crest. But the slope beyond was unoccupied, and there were only the marks of one pair of moccasins. I concluded that the solitary brave was scouting, and I was right.

"A few miles farther, we sighted a half-dozen Indians. They were watching us from a hill. I called a halt. Then I took two men and Mr. Matthews and made forward. We carried a truce flag. They let us come within talking distance. They knew, I am sure, why we were there. But they asked no questions—just told us that the command was expected to advance no farther than a grove that lay a little ahead, to our right. I assented to that, and said I wished a conference with their head-chief. They promised me an answer later on, and at once withdrew to a rise a mile behind. There they stayed until, after a careful reconnoitre, we entered the grove.

"Late that afternoon, Mr. Matthews and I again rode forward to speak to a trio of warriors. One of them, a big, bony fellow in a splendid bonnet, asked what we wanted. The interpreter told him. The Indian said that the head-chief was very sick, and that he could not leave his lodge. He told us we might accompany them to the village, which lay a few miles farther up. Of course I rejected the proposal.

"Well, I saw there was no use to haggle in that fashion. I ordered the interpreter to go into particulars. He proceeded to state your terms."

At this point in the narrative, Colonel Cummings stood still. Captain Oliver advanced toward him a step, and met his eyes in a curious, helpless way.

"It was queer," he continued, "but what Mr. Matthews told them didn't seem to scare them any."

"Oh, it didn't!" cried the colonel, angrily, and once more began to pace.

"No, they grinned at him, and chattered together. Then they rode

away. When dark came on, fearing treachery, we left the grove for a sheltered place farther down. Our scouts then set out for the Indian village, going across the river, and far around to the right. On their return, they said that the Sioux camp numbered several hundred wigwams. While just above was a village of Dog Soldiers.

"The night passed quietly. In the morning, a single brave came riding toward us. He stopped beyond rifle-reach. I sent the interpreter out. He returned to say that the chief promised him fair treatment if he would come alone. I took it that the camp was anxious for a little entertainment, and that one white was to furnish it. I didn't consider this second proposal a minute—it was worse than foolish, I thought. But"—he looked toward the cot—"Mr. Matthews didn't agree with me. He went. It was a magnificent bit of courage, sir."

The colonel wheeled. "By Jupiter!" he exclaimed. "*You did that?*"

Matthews smiled and crossed his legs awkwardly. "Oh, it wa'n't nothin'," he said, forbearing to glance up. "I savvy Injuns, you know. I— I was willin' to take the chances."

Colonel Cummings looked down. After a moment, and without changing the position of his body, he turned his face slowly in Oliver's direction. The eyes of the two officers met, and flashed messages of doubt.

When the commanding officer looked at the interpreter again, it was on his lips to say, "But you were afraid to enter the stockade with me." He checked himself, however, and, instead, reached for Matthews' hand. "It ~~was~~ a magnificent bit of courage," he agreed. "Tell us what happened."

Matthews fingered the blanket on the cot. "I seen the chief," he said, "and told him what you told me to tell him. When I got it all out, he says to me, 'The white women ain't here; they're with the Wyomin' band, and the Wyomin' band's up in Canada. Now,' he says, 'the band'll come south in the spring. So tell Colonel Cummin's, if he don't

do no hangin', I'll send the white women home then."

A low groan came from behind the stove. Young Jamieson came out, his features distorted with grief and shining with tears. "Think of it! think of it! Not till spring! Are they well? How are they treating them?"

"Oh,—so-so," said Matthews, significantly.

Young Jamieson understood. He went back to his seat, sobbing with the hysterical weakness of a sick man. "He's bungled the business, Colonel," he said bitterly. "Oh, God! If you had only let *me* go!"

"Yes, yes, my dear boy," answered the other, soothingly. "But please remember that you couldn't have talked with them. The conference would have been carried on through Mr. Matthews just the same."

There was a silence, broken only by Jamieson's weeping.

"Is that—all?" asked Colonel Cummings, at last, addressing himself to the interpreter.

"Yes, sir."

Shortly afterward, when he was gone, the two officers left the library for the reception-room, and discussed the expedition in low tones.

"I have a feeling, Colonel, that our interpreter wasn't fair in this thing," was Captain Oliver's first confidence. They were standing at a front window, watching Matthews cross the parade-ground to the barber-shop.

"The same thought occurred to me."

"And yet—it doesn't seem possible——"

"Oh, if Bond had only come sooner!"

"Bond! He here?"

"Yes—just half a day too late."

While they were talking, Matthews was losing his tow beard and moustache and a good length of hair. This over, and his supper eaten, he reappeared at headquarters, and went with Colonel Cummings to the stockade.

Much to his chagrin, he found the evangelist there, ready to be present at the interview with the hostages. But the Indians understood his predicament, and accepted the speech he made for the little it was worth. It was a speech that, repeated by David Bond, set Colonel Cummings' last suspicion at rest.

Lounsbury arrived at Fort Brannon the next day, appearing in time for breakfast. His early advent, which he explained away nonchalantly, was the cause of some good-natured teasing.

"Say, Lounsbury," observed one officer, "I thought you were keeping a store."

"Get out!" he retorted. "I'm down here to see that you fellows do something for the good money Uncle Sam pays you."

"Why, don't you know?" said Major Appleton. "John's here to sell the sutler some sandy sugar."

"That's right!" agreed the storekeeper. "And I'm going to put up a plant to make brown sugar out of the Muddy."

Lounsbury could afford to laugh with them, not being the only butt of the jokers. Fraser suffered, too. For a tattling private, who had spent the night at Shanty Town, let it out to a corporal, who told it to a sergeant, who told it to a cub of a second-lieutenant, who told it to every officer in post (with the single exception of the "K. O.") that Fraser—the good, the discreet, the unimpeachable—had played poker with Matthews at The Trooper's Delight from taps to "revelly," and lost his last dollar!

The tale had leaked by the hour of Lounsbury's arrival. When the storekeeper heard it, together with the embellishments it carried by reason of its having so often changed hands, he first gave Fraser a grip to show his gratitude, and then sat back and enjoyed the fun. Fraser, sorely tried by the taunts of his brother-officers, repaid Lounsbury with glances of wounded reproof.

"Blame it all! old man," he cried, when he could get a quiet word with the other, "why didn't you help me out? You're a nice one! Letting these chaps think I'm a sport! When you know——"

But Lounsbury only laughed the harder. And was among the first to dub the lieutenant "a sad devil."

The storekeeper did have business with the sutler, though not the kind suggested by the major. For, after being closeted with that worthy a half-hour, Squaw Charley was despatched to the Lancasters' with a basket, and a note which read:

"Mr. Evan Lancaster, Dear Sir—Owing to the fact that a lot of B troop's surplus rations in the way of beans, butter, bacon, flour, salt, pepper, dried apples, prunes, rice, vinegar, molasses, etc., etc., are piling up on my hands, I wish to dispose of same in some way at once and at any sacrifice. Would it be possible for you to relieve me of some of these goods and pay me back next summer out of your garden? Also hope you can find room for a table, benches, and extra lumber on same terms. If you can do this, you will greatly oblige,

"Yours very truly,

"James Madison Blakely,

"Sutler, Fort Brannon, Dakota Terr.

"P. S. Enclosed find samples which please keep if satisfactory. J. M. B."

When Squaw Charley returned from the shack, he bore an empty basket, and the following reply:

"Dear Sir—Thank you. We would like to do what you said if you will please chalk it down. We will pay next summer, and maybe before. I will keep count too.

"Dallas Lancaster."

It was Lounsbury who took possession of the note. He smiled over it, and put it carefully away in his innermost pocket.

And now there remained one other thing to do. He dropped into the billiard-room and commenced playing, occasionally going to a window that commanded the river. When, after a game or two, he saw a man approaching from Shanty Town, he put up his cue, sauntered opportunely out, and met the interpreter.

"Well, Matthews," was his greeting.

"Well?"

"I just wanted to be sure that you know Lancaster's got that tenth point I spoke about cinched."

"Yes?"

"And that what I said before you went away still goes. You hear?"

"I ain't deaf," said Matthews, non-committal.

"That's all." And Lounsbury went back to his billiards.

The interpreter continued on to the stockade, where he was more fortunate in the delivery of the true message he had brought.

"The white women were not at the winter camp," he said, "so they could not be sent. But your brothers promise to come to save you. Watch for signals from Medicine Mountain."

CHAPTER XVII

THE AWAKENING

That year, in the northland, winter encroached greedily upon spring. The latter end of March, the weather did not moderate. Instead, the wide valley became a channel for winds that were weighted with numbing sleet. Then, April returned angrily, bringing cold rains and blows to check all vegetation.

But April half gone, a tardy thaw set in. The icy covering of the river split into whirling blocks, the snow grew soft and bally, the crust rotted and picked up. Soon the tempering sun drove the drifts from south exposures. When a freshet coursed down the coulée, and the low spots on the prairie filled until they were broad ponds, around which the migrating wild-fowl alighted with joyous cries. Now eaves dripped musically; slushy wagon ruts ran like miniature Missouris, and were travelled by horny frogs; prairie-cocks made each dawning weirdly noisy, and far and near, where showed the welcome green, blue-eyed anemones sprang bravely and tossed their fuzzy heads in the sharp air.

Throughout this season, the shack had but one visitor—The Squaw. He brought fuel, and once a week a basket of supplies from "B Troop." Occasionally, he came swinging a brant by the neck, or carrying a saddle of fresh venison. But though his manner was as friendly as ever, and he seemed no less grateful and devoted, he was always strangely worried and distraught. The evangelist called by once or twice, when storms or the rushing icepack in the river did not prevent his crossing. As for Lounsbury, he traversed the bend often on his way to Brannon and, if he saw a face at a window, waved his hand in pleasant greeting. But he kept to the road.

Since the morning of the aurora, the little family had ceased to speak of him. That silence was neither demanded by the section-boss nor agreed upon by the three. On Lancaster's part, it grew out of the sneaking consciousness of the ingratitude he did not regret; on the part of Marylyn, it arose from two causes: a sense of girlish shame at having confessed her attachment, and a fear that her father would discover it. With Dallas, consideration for the feelings of her sister made her shrink from mentioning Lounsbury. Yet there was another reason, and one no less delicate—she, as well, had a secret to guard.

But in the mind of the elder girl, the thought of Marylyn's happiness was the uppermost. There were dread moments when it seemed to her as if that happiness were to be shattered.

During all the past weeks, Marylyn had carefully harboured her fancies about Lounsbury. Certain of the calico-covered books on the mantel had no little part in this. Their stories of undying affection—of bold men, lorn maidens, and the cruel villains who gloried in severing them—helped her to fit her little circle into proper rôles. She loved, and must crush out her passion. Lounsbury, whom she loved, had been sent away by her father. And she lived up to the play consistently. She saw the storekeeper anguished over his banishment; saw depths of meaning in the good-natured salutes he gave the shack. With herself, she accepted loneliness as a sign of deeper suffering. She was tortured by self-pity, by the doubt she had flung at Dallas, by the firm belief that her heart was hopelessly fettered. Gazing into a piece of looking-glass that served her for a mirror, she marked with sorrowful pride her transparent skin and lustreless eye. She sighed as she watched from the windows. Patiently, she listened for footsteps, her face half turned to the door.

And yet what she took so tragically was nothing but failing health. What was not a fact the night of her admission to Dallas, was almost come to pass. The few days of great cold and hunger in February,

coupled with long confinement in the dirt-floored house, were having their effect. She was on the verge of illness.

Lancaster, whenever he noticed her dejection, was inclined to pooh-pooh it. "She looks as ef she'd jes' been slapped," he declared, "an' is expectin' another lammin' any minnit. Ef she'd cry, she'd shore weep lemon-juice." Again, he reckoned that she had picked up "some notion." Jealous and suspicious as he was, however, he got no nearer to the truth.

But Dallas—she was misled far more than either Marylyn or their father. She fought away from the idea that her sister might be breaking physically, and tenderly as a mother yearned over her. Anxious-eyed, she noted the pallor of the childlike face, the melancholy expression that had come to be habitual. She fretted over the spareness of the younger girl, who ate only when she was urged. If, sated with sleep, Marylyn moved in the night, Dallas aroused on the instant and hovered beside her.

At last, thoroughly alarmed, the elder girl determined to follow out the idea that had occurred to her in mid-winter. What did it matter how hard and hateful the duty would be? What did her own hidden feelings matter? She would appeal to Lounsbury in her sister's behalf.

But time passed without bringing her the opportunity, and it was borne in upon her finally that Lounsbury meant to remain away, perhaps until he was bidden to come. Undaunted, she made plans to waylay him on the coulée road. Resting the Sharps across her arm, she set out, morning or afternoon, on a long jaunt.

But Lounsbury was not met. On one such ramble, however, an incident occurred that was far-reaching, if not fatal, in its results. She was going, homeward slowly, when she saw, approaching, an ambulance from Brannon, drawn by a four-mule team. She started timidly aside; then paused. The vehicle was filled with ladies. A half-dozen, who were talking and laughing merrily, occupied the

lengthwise seats of the carriage. One sat beside the driver. Dallas put herself in their path, and waited.

How often she had watched these same ladies canter out of post on their horseback rides, officers attending them; or seen them make a rollicking walking-party to the bluff-top. And she had pictured how, some day, they would be ferried to the bend. They could not have heard how her father talked. If they had they would not blame her. If they passed her, they would smile and bow—maybe stop to speak!

She was all aglow, now. The ambulance rolled near. It was closed on its sides, and the women within could not see her. The woman on the seat—pretty, slender, daintily clad—did. Dallas leaned forward eagerly, face flushed, eyes shining.

The woman also leaned forward, and looked Dallas up and down, searchingly, coldly. Her lips were set in a sneer. Her eyes frowned. Then, the ambulance bowled smartly along, the driver catching at a leader with his whip.

"Who's that, Mrs. Cummings?" The women in the rear of the vehicle were peering out.

Mrs. Cummings answered over her shoulder. "Why, it's The Plow-Woman."

There were "Ohs" and "Ahs"—and laughter.

The girl by the roadside heard. Slighted, rebuffed, wounded to the quick, she stumbled homeward, her sight blinded by tears.

She did not wait for Lounsbury again. Once she thought of writing him, of summoning him through a note given Squaw Charley. But recalling her father's treatment of the storekeeper, she questioned if the latter would heed her message. She felt herself isolated. But no hint of her bitterness was allowed to reach Marylyn. The younger girl knew only bright words, and unceasing, unselfish care.

For one thing Dallas was deeply thankful: Matthews did not trouble the shack. David Bond had told her that when the troops left for the summer campaign, the interpreter would ride with them, the evangelist being retained at the fort to fill the other's place. The latter declared that, by the pilot's report, Lounsbury's name made Matthews "lay back his ears," but that he no longer stormed about losing the claim.

And now came the warm days—days in swift, sweet contrast to those just gone. Sun and shower banded the sky with triple arcs of promise. The robins arrived, a plump and saucy crew. Bent-bill curlews stalked about, uttering wild and mellow calls. The dwellers of the ground threw up fresh dirt around their burrows. The marsh violets opened pale lilac cups. And the very logs of the shack put forth ambitious sprigs, so that, from the front, the grotesque head displayed a bristle of green whisker. The prairie was awake—blood and soil and sap.

Ben and Betty showed their high spirits with comical sporting. The mules frolicked together, pitching hind quarters, rearing to box and nipping at Simon. Fully as gay was he, though his shaggy flanks were gaunt. He played at goring them, or frisked in ungainly circles. Occasionally, however, he gave signs of ill-humour, lowered his broad horns threateningly, even at Dallas, pawed up the new grown grass, and charged to and fro on the bend, his voice lifted in hoarse challenge.

On the little family, the light, the warmth, and added duties wrought a good effect. Lancaster's grumbling lessened, and he helped to plant some boxes with cabbage and tomato seed that the "sutler" supplied. Marylyn, coaxed out for an hour or two daily, rewarded Dallas with smiles. Her appetite grew (rather to her chagrin). And when she held the looking-glass before her, she saw a faint colour in her cheeks.

To Dallas, the spring brought renewed courage—and a vague longing. With the first mild evenings, she took to venturing out,

wrapped in her long cloak, for a lonely walk. In her love of the gloaming, she was like a wild thing. From birth, the twilights of the *mesa* had proved irresistible. When she was a child they soothed her little troubles; in womanhood, if sorrow pressed heavily, they brought her strength. The half light, the soft air, and the lack of sound were balm to her spirit.

Nightly she strayed up the coulée, eastward, south, or toward the river; until, early in May, a second incident occurred and interrupted her rambles. She had walked as far as the swale that was part way to the Missouri. There she was startled into a sudden halt. From a point ahead of her and to the left, sounded a gun shot.

She sank down cautiously, and stayed close to the ground, her fingers steadying her, her breath suspended. There was no moon, and the stars were obscured by clouds. The cottonwoods were a black, shapeless mass. She watched them.

No answering shot rang out. But, after a long wait, a reply came from the grove. It was a laugh, loud and taunting.

She stayed crouched, and presently saw a small black object leave the big blackness of the trees and advance. Frightened, she arose and retraced her steps, glancing behind her as she went. At the shack, having found the latch-string, she backed into the room.

Her father and sister were asleep. Next morning, on a plea of not wishing to alarm them, she refrained from telling of the shot. It may have been a hunter, she reasoned, or a drunken trooper, or one of the Shanty Town gang. But the laugh—it rang in her ears.

Several twilights passed, then she ventured out again. A lip of moon was dropping down an unclouded sky; the stars hung low and white. And when she neared the swale, she saw, a good distance before her, that small black object separate itself from the grove again and move forward.

She stopped. She was not frightened now. She knew who it was. And when she saw his arms come up, and caught the glint of metal, she called out to him: "Don't! *don't!* It's me!"

There was a muttered exclamation, and the arms fell. "Miss Dallas," he cried, and sprang forward.

"I—I was sure it was you," she admitted tremulously. "And you've been guarding here all the time!"

Lounsbury was panting. "Suppose I'd fired?" he said. "I had a mind to. Crimini!"

"You'd 'a' missed, likely."

"Maybe not. You see, I thought, well—that Matthews or that precious brother of his, they might get to bothering you folks. Anyway, ain't it dangerous for you to be out here late like this?"

"It is for you. You get shot at—keeping guard on us."

He thumped the swale impatiently with the butt of his gun.

"Oh, it *was* you," she persisted, gravely enough; "that is why I came to-night."

"Ah! You mean that I can help you, Miss Dallas. Tell me—tell me, what can I do?"

"Don't let Matthews kill you."

Lounsbury laid down his gun. When he straightened, he stepped to her side. "Me?" he said. "Well, I'm a match for him. You ain't. But what else?"

She moved aside, averting her face.

"There is something, Miss Dallas?"

"Y-e-e-s."

He saw she was disconcerted, and strove to put her at ease. "Do

you know," he said, "you're so tall in that coat, you almost look like a 'heap big chief.'"

She did not hear him. She was not listening. The wished-for opportunity was come. She was trying desperately to rally a speech. "You—you ain't been 'round of late," she began at last. "I hope——" But she could not finish,

"No," he said slowly. He rammed his hands into his trouser pockets. "I haven't been around lately. But—I didn't think you'd notice it." He darted a glance at her.

"Was it dad?" she asked. "Did you think——"

"Yes, it was your father. I thought he went out of his way to be—well, kinda short, you know. I was only trying t' be decent."

"Dad's funny," she said reflectively. "Whenever we get to a chuck-hole, where all of us ought to pull t'gether, he goes slack on the tugs. He's like Ben that way. So I have t' go up to him, stroke his mane, fix his curb, and let some cool air under his collar. After while, he gives a *haw-hee-haw* and goes on."

Lounsbury did not laugh. "He balked when it came to me," he said soberly. "And it hurt. Afterward—I kinda got it into my head that none of you wanted me."

She looked straight at him. "But one did—*one did*," she whispered, choking.

He pulled his hands free of his pockets. "One—one," he said huskily. "Who?"

And now everything was clear to her. She knew just what to say. She had no feelings of self; the duty was not hateful, nor embarrassing. "Who?" she repeated. "Don't you know, Mr. Lounsbury? Why, Marylyn."

"Marylyn," he echoed as if in a puzzle; "Marylyn. You're joking!"

She caught a shade of reproach in that, and misunderstood it. "I reckon you won't like her so well now," she said.

"Like her so well? I don't know what you mean."

"She—she likes you," stammered Dallas.

Still he was puzzled. "I *supposed* she didn't hate me."

"But now you know."

There was no mistaking her. Utterly dumfounded, he could not trust an immediate answer. "I see, I see," he said finally.

"And you'll like her just the same?"

He drew a deep breath. His eyes were on her face, trying to read it in the dimness. Then, "I am not a cub boy, Miss Dallas."

"You won't stay away," she persisted. "You'll come."

"If I'm judging right, I mustn't. I'm—I'm sorry."

"Sorry!—just sorry."

He strode back and forth a few times. "Why—why, Miss Dallas, you must understand that a man can't—when a girl—Well, it'd be low for me to talk about it, that's all—out and out *low*."

Something stirred her powerfully then—something she combated, and concealed from him by a touch of apparent anger. "There's nothing low about it," she said. "A man ought to be proud. Oh," as he was about to reply, "you don't know how she's felt. She's been sick over it, white and sad, and at night she'd cry."

He winced.

"And you're just sorry!"

"When did you find this out?"

"That day you drove Matthews away. She told me."

He walked about again. "I can't see why she does," he mused pathetically. "I can't remember doing anything."

"But you've been so good to us—even after the way dad acted—guarded out here, and sent that land-office man down from Bismarck——"

He made a protesting gesture. "Pshaw!"

"Oh, yes, you did. And why? *Why?*—if you don't care——"

A long silence followed. During it she watched him, her very attitude imploring, while he continued to pace.

All at once he stopped determinedly. "There's a reason," he said, "why I can't do what you ask: Come to see Marylyn, and—and all that."

"Dad? Ah, he's got to think like me."

"No; not your father."

"Maybe"—the bitterness of Mrs. Cummings' slight impelled it—"maybe you don't think she's good enough."

"Dallas! No! No!" He put out a hand to her.

She retreated.

"There's a reason." He let his arm fall. "And it is fair and square. I'm proud of it, too, and you must hear it." His tone was significant, tender.

No hint of his meaning suggested itself to her. "Then I want to know it," she said.

"I didn't intend to tell you," he began, "at least for a while. When I was at the shack last I made up my mind it wouldn't do any good. I said to myself, 'You keep quiet.' But"—he plucked off his hat and sent it whirling to the gun—"I guess you'll have to know now. Dallas, the reason—is you."

"Me?" The question was a cry.

Lounsbury waited, standing very still before her. Then reaching out again, he touched her hand. "You," he said quietly.

Again she retreated.

"Please don't go," he begged. "I want to tell you more. And I want you to say you believe me. You *must* believe me."

There was another long silence. Presently he went back and picked up his hat and gun. "I know just where it puts you," he said. "But, just the same, I love you."

He was certain now that he had earned her displeasure. When he spoke again, it was as one who accepts a sad finality. "I love you, and I want you. I hoped you might think a little of me some day. For I believe I could make you happy. So it was disappointing to find out that you hadn't thought of me that way; that you were figuring on seeing me take Marylyn.

"I never had much idea of marrying. But when I saw you that first time, when you came in through the door, you remember—why, then, I began to think. Couldn't help it." He put on his hat and lifted the gun to his shoulder. "I even wrote mother about you," he said.

He was unprepared for the answer she gave him, for it was an answer. Without speaking, she buried her face in the curve of her arm, and, as if seized with an ague, began to tremble.

"Dallas," he whispered tenderly. "Oh, my dear girl! I'm so glad! so *glad*! You will—you do?"

But he found himself pleading into space.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SMOKING MOUNTAIN

Medicine Mountain was a volcano. Out of its rocky summit and into the quiet air of the May morning was rising a straight, blue column of smoke.

A flag wigwagged from the southern lookout station to herald the phenomenon, and in a moment the post was agog. Keen-sighted scouts hurried to points of vantage, where they studied the mounting plume. Far-reaching glasses were trained amid lively surmise from the galleries fronting the parade. While at barracks, blocking the windows and thronging the porch, the eager troopers gossiped and craned.

But in the stockade interest reached its highest pitch. Braves, squaws, and children were strung along the upper end of the enclosure, breathlessly watching the vapour-thread. Each swarthy face had dropped the mask of listlessness; each figure was rooted. Not an eye forsook a straight line to the belching mountain-top.

For full three minutes, the distant fire sent up a steady pillar. Then, fort and stockade saw that pillar suddenly wobble, as if caught in the vagaries of a fitful breeze—saw it wobble, thicken, break, and disappear; when the butte again stood, a jagged tooth, against the sky. Above it, innocently white, floated a hand's breadth of cloud.

And now the trumpet rang. Obeying it, two detachments mounted. One spurred away down-river, keeping close in the lee of the bluffs. The other boarded the ferry and was landed at the cut north of Shanty Town, from where it made toward the Norwegian's. Behind, an envious, but feverishly happy, garrison set about putting an extra

polish on its arms. The grass was too short for a war-pony. Active duty had not been expected within the month. Yet the time of dreary waiting was up at last. For here, within striking distance, were the hostile reds!

The warriors in the stockade knew better. Like so many whipped dogs, they were scattered to cover, there to hide their bitter chagrin. No war-party was come to harry Brannon, to lure the troopers into battle, to free the captive village. A lone Indian—the looked-for messenger—had fanned that signal-fire on the mountain. And, by a wave of his blanket, he had told them evil news!

To Colonel Cummings, the seeming early boldness of the enemy gave an inkling of what might be expected later on—in the summer—when there would be good grazing, and a smaller force at the post. Already he feared for the safety of the settlers living within sight of the garrison flag. The detachment landed at the cut was ordered to warn two of them. The third was Evan Lancaster. To him the commanding officer sent David Bond.

But it was Dallas whom the evangelist sought. He found her at work upon the plowed strip, cross-dragging it in preparation for the planting of the corn. As she drove up and down, she walked hatless in the sun. Her hair was down, and hung forward in two braids. She wore the snug jersey that had been her mother's. Her skirt was tucked up, back and front, to be out of the way. It disclosed no red flannel petticoat, however.

Not far away was Simon, a starling riding him to gobble the greenheads as they bit. The bull was revolving sulkily on his picket-rope, and shedding his long winter coat upon the new grass. In deference to his inborn dislike, Dallas was wearing an underskirt of blue.

Though the evangelist had never seen her trudging behind the mules, he had often spoken of it pityingly. Yet, as he came toward her

now, he felt only an unbounded pride—in her unselfishness, and in her brave efforts to wrest a living from the soil.

"A splendid Ruth," he murmured, advancing, "a splendid Ruth, toiling in the fields!"

Seeing him, she gave a swift, troubled glance at the shack. Then, avoiding his eyes, and without speaking, she pulled up Ben and Betty and held out a hand.

When he took it, the pride of a moment before changed to compassion. He remembered that he must tell her what would alarm. For in her face he saw the traces of many a sleepless night, and of a sapping worry.

"Daughter, you are ill!" he declared, and kept a tight hold on her fingers.

"No, there ain't anything the matter with me. Only"—still avoiding his eyes, she turned to survey the harrowed land—"only, I'm some put out. This sod——"

"Never mind the sod," he said gravely. "I want to ask—did you see the mountain?" He loosed her fingers, and pointed an arm to the south.

She laughed, following his pointing. "Yes, I did. Looks as if claims are getting scarce, don't it? When a nester has to file up there!"

Midway between shack and butte was an ox-team that had been travelling to and fro across a quarter-section since dawn. The team was now at a stand, and their driver was slouching against his plow. Beyond him were several galloping dots.

"And you saw the cavalry?" said David Bond.

She assented.

"One word will tell you what it means, Dallas. It's Indians!"

She showed no sign of disquiet. Presently, when she had thought over the announcement, she turned round to him, frankly meeting his gaze for the first time. "That's funny," she said. "Why, last year, all the way up from Texas, there wasn't an Indian bothered us!"

"Last summer, before you came, the soldiers at Brannon did not dare go more than a mile outside the lines to hunt. It will be the same this summer. There is that stockade full of prisoners, and four of them are condemned to be hanged. Before long the Indians will be circling the post."

She looked away at the ox-team. They were being taken from the plow and put to a wagon.

Then, again, she turned squarely. "What about Shanty Town?" she said with meaning.

He understood. "Shanty Town goes when the troops go. But"—hesitatingly—"Matthews does not. He will stay at Brannon to act as interpreter."

"He will!" she said, and coloured.

He coloured, too, feeling himself reproved. But from under the wide, battered felt that had supplanted the nubia, his eyes shone with no resentment, only fatherly tenderness.

"You wonder why I do not remain," he began, "so that Matthews could be sent away. I shall tell you."

She let the reins fall to the drag. "That isn't it," she answered quickly. "We have no right to ask you to do anything after the way dad treated you. But the Colonel sent you over to tell us to look out. Didn't he? And he keeps a man over there—pays him to stay—and that man is a sight worse than an Indian!"

"I could have that man dismissed," he said slowly. "Please let me tell you why I don't. In the first place, the Indians are beginning to act

badly—very badly. They are invading Crow territory, and stealing from peaceful bands. They are molesting whites wherever they can find them, and murdering. So we can judge that there will be hard fighting. For the troops will seek to pay them up.

"Oh, Dallas, how I pray to see trouble stop! I am going to the Indians. I know their leaders—have known them for ten years or more. I shall ask them to consider the good of their squaws and children and property, and ask them to accept reservation life. If they won't, I shall beg a few of them to come in with me and at least talk treaty.

"That is the first reason for my going. The second is the Jamiesons. If I find those poor women, and tell their captors that the four chiefs here are in danger, I know mother and daughter will be handed over to me——"

"You're right! You can save them!"

"God bless you for saying that! It won't be pleasant with Matthews here——"

"But you must go. Never mind about Matthews."

"I cannot go without being satisfied that you and Marylyn will be safe. The Colonel said——"

"The Colonel," she interrupted. Then, half resentfully, "Did the women folk send any word?"

He was mildly surprised. "N-n-no," he answered, "they didn't, but ——"

She laughed, and picked up the reins.

"Well, dad'll never leave this quarter," she said decisively, "if *that's* what the Colonel wants."

The evangelist shook his head. "'Thou dwellest in the midst of a rebellious house,'" he quoted sadly. "Now, if you come to the Fort to live——"

"Matthews could move into the shack."

"Hardly that, with the backing you have. The boys at the post would never see Matthews take your home. Believe me, as long as you and your father care to live here, you can. Public opinion over there"—he pointed to Brannon—"is strong in your favour. And there is Lounsbury, too. Why, that man is helpless."

She averted her face.

"So you will lose nothing by coming to the Fort," he persisted, "while you may save a great deal—your lives!"

"Dad will never go to the Fort. He hates 'em like poison."

"Yes—yes—he's foolish and stiffnecked. For such is punishment meted out. See!" The ox-team was travelling toward them, prodded by the driver.

They stood in silence for a while.

"Then, go to Bismarck," urged David Bond, finally. "Stay there until the autumn."

"Live on what?" she asked.

From a hind pocket he slowly brought forth a narrow buckskin pouch, tied with a thong. He opened it, and emptied a handful of coins upon a palm. "This is only a little," he said apologetically. "But it will help. And—you must think first of your safety."

"I can't take it," she said, her voice all gentleness. "Even if I did—what about next winter? I must stay and raise things. Don't you see?"

"At Bismarck you would have a double market, Dallas. There is Fort Lincoln, and the town."

"I'd—I'd have to plow new ground," she went on. "And—we'd have to build again, and dig another well——"

"There are men in Bismarck who——"

Suddenly she lowered her voice and stepped nearer. "That's just the reason dad wouldn't go there," she said. "We'd be close to town. We'd have to meet folks. Here, he keeps away from the Fort, and you, and Mr. Lounsbury—everyone but Charley."

"Oh—oh—oh," breathed the evangelist, helplessly.

"Now, you know. It's no use. I don't complain. But, he's fastened to the Bend with a diamond hitch!"

"Now, I know!" David Bond exclaimed.

A halloo sounded from the shack. Facing that way they saw the section-boss. He was standing just outside the door, balanced on one crutch. The other he was thrusting angrily at the ground.

"You see!" said Dallas. "You see! And he can't help it. Poor dad!"

The evangelist groaned and held out a hand. "Dear girl," he said, "it is good-by. God keep you all, and God help me! I see truly that you are tied; that I can do no good. The Colonel will surely take care that you are protected. Lounsbury and Charles will watch. I must go with that comforting knowledge. My love to Marylyn—Good-by."

She steadied her voice to answer. "I watch," she said. "I don't sleep well, so it's easy. If they heard a gun at Brannon——"

He raised his hand to bless her. Then, without speaking again, walked slowly away. She unhooked the tugs and headed the mules for home.

"Wal," called her father, sarcastically, as she approached, "what's thet ol' sniffer want? Is day aft' t'morrow th' en' o' th' world?"

She ignored his questions, and told him of the warning.

Instantly, his anger rose. Planting himself before her, he shook a finger close to her face. "So th' Kunnel's tryin' t' skeer us, is he?" he

demanded. "Tryin' t' git us t' come in an' leave th' Ben'. Wal!—ain't we right under his nose? Kain't he watch out fer us? W'at's he here fer? W'at's he paid fer?"

Then, riding in on the tide of his wrath, came dark suspicion. "An' w'at's he so crazy t' git us away fer?" he queried. "Yah! yah! Ah'd like t' know—Ah do know! He's got the low-down card-sharp of a Matthews fer his interpreter. He knows the card-sharp wants this lan'. *That's his game! An' he kain't fool me!*"

"Maybe, maybe," said Dallas, leaving him to stand beside Marylyn. "But, of course, dad, we mustn't forget that he's warned the other folks on this side, too."

Her father glared at her. "You takin' his part, *ain't y'?*" he said. "M-m-m! how's thet? Are *you* so all-fired anxious t' git t' Brannon?"

"No, dad, I'll never go to Brannon. Never! never! If I did, you, my father, oughtn't t' misunderstand it."

He quailed before her vehemence, and hobbled shamefacedly toward the door. "O' course, if th' Injuns come——" he began.

"They won't." She drew Marylyn to her. "And if they do, a shot'll bring help."

He was in the doorway, now. "W'y," he cried, "here's thet fool Norwegian goin' t' th' landin'. Wal, he is pritty shy on sand!"

"We'll be killed if the Indians come, Dallas." It was Marylyn, whispering up fearfully to her sister.

"We'll be careful, honey. Keep away from the coulée after this. Walk toward Brannon, always."

Dallas spent the afternoon out of doors, where everything spoke of peace. Not even a hand's breadth of cloud floated upon the sky. The air was warm, and fragrant with the new growth. Magpies chattered by. The bobolinks sent up their hearty song.

When she left off work, she saw the settler from the "little bend" drive by with his wife and children. Going home, she found her father cleaning and caressing the Sharps. But in her ability to sense danger, as in her love of the gloaming, Dallas was like a wild thing. And she felt not the slightest disquiet.

CHAPTER XIX

AL BRADEN OF SIOUX FALLS

Midway of the even, broad expanse between shack and gap stood an A-tent, very new, very white, and very generous in dimension. Like a giant mushroom, it had cropped forth during the night. About it stretched the untouched prairie, all purpling over with morning-glories.

The tent opened toward the river, and was flanked on one side by a pile of short pickets, their tops dipped the colour of the canvas, their bases nicely sharpened for the plotting out of ground. Near by, thrown flat, was a wide board sign, which read, in staring blue letters:

"AL BRADEN, REAL ESTATE."

It was well on toward noon before the tent showed life. Then there emerged from it a bulky man of middle age, who dusted at his high boots as he came, stretched, drawing his long coat snug, and settled an elaborate vest. He completed his costume by donning a black hat that was of wool, and floppy. Then, thumbs tucked in armholes, he strolled away toward the Lancasters'.

The section-boss and his daughters were lined up on the warm side of the lean-to, shading their faces from the sun. When the comer was so near that they could see he was strange to them, Lancaster gave a peremptory wag of the head, and the two girls disappeared around a corner. Their father stayed on watch, his jaws working nervously with the ever-present chew.

The burly man advanced upon the lean-to. "Mornin', mornin'," was his greeting. He made several swinging bows at Lancaster, and took him in shrewdly from eyes that were round and close-set.

The section-boss grunted.

"*Lovely* day," observed the other, with a bland smile. He changed his tack a little, as if he were going by.

Lancaster hobbled along with him. "Y-a-a-s," he drawled. "Right good. Some cool."

The stranger agreed by another series of swinging bows. "You got a nice place here—nice place," he continued affably. He loosened one thumb with a jerk.

"Nice 'nough."

The man halted in front of the shack and looked it over. "You're a Southern gentleman," said he, "by your talk."

"Ah am." Lancaster spoke with unfriendly rising inflection.

"Well, well." A hand was extended—a fat hand, where sparkled a diamond. "Say, now, this is lovely, lovely. I'm a Southerner myself, sir. Put it there!"

The section-boss hesitated. So far, Dakota had offered him no compatriot. He could scarce believe that one stood before him now. A second, then he gave a pleased grin. "Howdy," he said. "Hope y' goin' t' settle hereabout."

They shook heartily.

"Settle due east of you, sir," was the answer. "My name's Braden—*A/* Braden. I'm from Sioux Falls."

"Won't y' come in?"

"Tickled t' death!"

They entered the shack, Lancaster leading. Dallas and Marylyn glanced up in surprise from the fireplace, and arose hastily.

"M' gals," said the section-boss, motioning their visitor to a bench.

Braden took it, with more swinging bows, and a sweep of his floppy headgear. "Glad t' meet you," he smiled, "Miss-a-a-a-Miss——"

"Lancaster's they name," prompted the section-boss, all good nature.

"—Lancaster. Glad t' meet you both."

Dallas nodded, and drew her sister away to the wagon-seat in the corner.

"Jes' fr'm th' Falls, Ah think y' said," began their father, hunting his tobacco plug along the mantel.

"Yep."

"Um. Any—any news fr'm down thet way 'bout this part o' th' country?"

Braden fell to admiring his ring. "No, sir, no. Didn't hear nothin' particular."

The section-boss fidgeted. "S'pose y' know they's some talk 'bout a railroad comin' this way," he said carelessly.

"Don't go much on that talk. Ten years, twenty years—maybe. Too early yet."

Lancaster's face lengthened. He blinked in dismay.

"My idea," went on Braden, "is cows. Goin' t' be a lot of money in 'em, sure as you're alive. Hear Clark's made a good thing of his'n."

"Cows!" said Lancaster, in disgust. "Cows don' help a country; don' raise th' price o' lan'."

"Cows or no cows, your place here's worth a nice little sum," protested the other, condescendingly; "hunderd, anyway."

Lancaster stared. "Hunderd!" he cried. "You got th' grass staggers. *Five* hunderd."

Braden pursed his lips, his thumbs in his armpits again. "Three hundred and fifty, say," he compromised. "*I'd* be willin' t' give you *that*."

A moment since, the section-boss had been downcast. Now, he guffawed. "*Would y'?*" he asked; "*would y'?*" There was a sage gleam in his eye.

"I would."

Lancaster sucked his teeth importantly. "Y' couldn' hev it a cent short o' seven hundred an' fifty," he declared.

"You'll never get it, sir, *never*. Five hundred's a spankin' figger."

"Bah!"

"Telling you what's what. There's thousands of acres around here just as good as your'n any day in the week. But you got this end of the ford. That makes a little difference."

"Makes 'bout fifteen hundred dollars' difference."

It was Braden's turn to laugh. "My friend, you'll hist to two thousand pretty soon," he warned; and arose. "Better take five hundred and fifty when it's offered." He flung out his hands as if he were feeding hens.

Lancaster got up with him, righteously angry. "Say, *you* ain't no South'ner," he cried. "Jes' a slick Yank. Ah c'n see through you like winda-pane!"

Braden laughed again, tapping the shoulder of the section-boss. "You ain't wise," he confided. "Farmin' out here with cows around means fences. But hang on if you want to. It's your land." He ended this with a jovial slap, and made for the door. From it, he could see the girls. He gave them a magnificent bow. "Mornin', mornin'," he said, and walked out.

Lancaster went back to the hearth, fairly weak with delight. Dallas

and Marylyn joined him. "W'at d' y' think!" gurgled their father. "Say, he ain't got th' sense he ought 'a' been born with!"

"Don't like him," Dallas declared.

"Pig eyes," suggested Marylyn.

At that the section-boss calmed. "Wal," he said, "he's as good anyhow as slop-over soldiers."

Meanwhile, Braden was on his way to The Trooper's Delight, his face glum, his step quick, his arms cutting the air like propellers. When he lumbered into it, he creaked up to the plank bar and helped himself to a finger of whisky. Then he propped himself on an elbow and stood scowling into the rear of the room.

From the gaming-table sounded the raillery of a dozen men. Matthews was there, heels up, hat tipped back, a cigar set between his little teeth.

"What y' givin' us," cried one of his companions. "You're drunk, Nick—plumb drunk."

Braden listened, turning away. An advertisement of brandy hung from a shelf on the far side of the bar. He toyed with his goblet, his eyes fixed on the gaudy, fly-specked picture.

"I *ain't* drunk," Matthews declared. "I *never* been drunk. My stomick ain't big 'nough to hold the *reequissit* amount."

There was more laughter. The interpreter, well pleased with himself, surveyed his audience, pointing the cigar, now up, now down, so that its glowing end threatened to burn his shirt collar, or, tilting skyward, all but singed what there was of a tow eyebrow.

"And that ain't the best part of the story," he went on. "As I was sayin', not a darned pound of ice was left in Boston. Well, what d' y' think my old man does? He rents the fastest coast-steamer he can find. Then, he goes 'way up north in the Atlantic and lays-to with his

weather eye open. Day or two, long comes a' iceberg big as a house. And by——, he hitches to it, and Boston gits ice!"

And now, like a ponderous bobcat descending upon its prey, Braden stole soft-footed across the room. "Nick!" he said. His jaws came together with the click of a steel trap.

Matthews lowered his heels. "Jumpin' buffalo!" he cried in amazement. "Al Braden! Where'd *you* come from?" He took the other's hand, at the same time pulling him slowly toward the door. Away from the crowd, they brought up.

"Well, *you're* a nice one!" was Braden's answer. "You're a *nice* one! Lettin' that Bend slip through your fingers!"

All the interpreter's cocksureness was gone. He threw the cigar into the sand-box under the stove, and looked on the verge of following it.

"Say, *you* talk of fleecin'," taunted Braden. "Why, you been skinned clean's a whistle! And by a' old fool dufer from Texas!"

"I was at Dodge when he come," snarled Matthews, finding his voice.

"What you go streakin' off to Dodge for, after the tip I give?"

"Well, no one here was talkin' railroad. So I, well, I——"

Braden addressed the ceiling, his fat hands outspread. "No one here was talkin' railroad, no one here was talkin' railroad?" he mimicked.

"—So I didn't put much stock in your letter."

"You didn't, eh?" Braden searched a coat-pocket, found a newspaper clipping and thrust it under Matthews' nose. "Well, read that."

"Read it yourself," said Matthews. "You know blamed well——"

Braden interrupted him by beginning. He lowered his voice, and

intoned, giving the interpreter a glance designed to wilt him with the words that called for stress:

"The proposed line will open up a country of rich *grasses* and *ground* and of unexcelled *hunting*. The Indians, while still troublesome beyond the *Missouri*, are rapidly being brought to see the advisability of remaining on the *reservations*, and little more annoyance on their *part* may be *apprehended*. Fort Brannon, he declares, is in the hands of several hundred brave *fighting* men and may be looked upon as a place of certain *refuge* in case of an *outbreak*. The soldiers are proving to be such a menace to those Indians who will not agree to reservation *life*, that whole bands of the more savage redskins are leaving for the *Bad Lands* and the *rougher* country farther *west*. No Indian war-parties have been seen east of the big river for *some time*. Already there is an increasing *interest* in *land* along the *survey*. And it is believed that when the last *ties* of the *new line* are *laid* there will be *few unclaimed quarter-sections* between the *Big Sioux* and the *Missouri*.'

"There!" Braden wound up. "And gradin' begun already at the Mississippi."

"The h—I you say!"

"Believe me now, won't you? Didn't they have a bank*quit* with champagney? All the State big-bugs, head *surveyor*, and so on?"

"Too bad!"

"That's what I say. And I'll say more. Of course, we was to go pardners on this thing. So far, so good. But here you ain't did your half. And you can't kick if I deal from now on with old man Lancaster."

Matthews understood. "By——, I done my best," he cried. "Y' can't come any of that on *me*, Braden."

"Keep on your shirt, Nick, keep on your shirt. I looked into this thing at Bismarck, and, under the law, you ain't got one right. Lancaster

owns that Bend. And if I pay him out of my own money, why ain't it square?"

The interpreter hung his head.

"Of course," Braden went on, "I'd rather divvy. I can see he's one of them greedy old ducks that's hard to talk money with. Maybe you can think up how to get the land back."

Matthews leaned close. "I had a scheme,"—he nodded south in the direction of Medicine Mountain—"but the reds can't come. I had t' go slow. There's women in th' fambly. Nat'lly, all the men up and down the Muddy want t' see Lancaster stay. There's been a dude fr'm Bismarck here, off and on—tony cuss, sleeps between sheets, nice about his paws as a cat. He's been ready t' tattle or roll a gun."

Braden sniffed. "What trick's he played?"

Matthews evaded the question. "I seen one of the Clark outfit," he continued, "and tried t' git him t' bother old limpy. Says I, 'They's stealin' your slow-elk down there.' Wasn't any use. 'Thunderation!' says the cow-punch. 'You mean that bull? He was a yearlin' when he come to 'em. That's maverick age.'"

Braden sneered. "Such a kid!" he murmured. "Why didn't you lay low, and not go butting down their door? Why didn't you lose the old man and snub up one of the girls—marry her? Big one's a rip-snortin' beauty; pert, by jingo! as a prairie-dog."

"She'd send me a-flyin'," urged Matthews. "But th' little one——"

"Sure! You're a good-looker—handsome. If you'd fix yourself up some."

"If I could git rid of the old man! If I could! Aw! come t' think, what I got that lout of a brother for? *Easy*—with Indians to lay it on. Blaze the way for 'Babe'—he's a saphead—but he knows enough to follow a spotted line."

"Go careful."

"I'll try t' scare 'em off."

"Huh! folks that ain't afraid to come this far in a schooner, Indians or no Indians, ain't likely to stampede at one white."

"You don't know how I mean."

"Go ahead. No use our brayin' like starved jackasses. *Do* somethin'. You was a fool to ever let 'em winter."

Matthews clenched his fists. "Well," he said, "they won't winter *again!*"

CHAPTER XX

A CHARGE

David Bond was on his knees in the bed of his wagon, beneath the high board cross. Before him he held an open Bible. But he was not reading. His head was uncovered. His beard was lifted. His eyes closed in prayer. Beside him knelt Squaw Charley, with hands pressed together, as if reverent; with shoulders bent lower than their wont; with shifting, downward look. North of the barracks, on the road that led from the steamer-landing, the two had met in the early hours to say good-by.

Swift on the first hint of coming trouble, the evangelist had made ready for his long journey to the west. Shadrach was shod, his master fitting the plates to the shaggy hoofs. The runners were taken from the green box and replaced by the red wheels. Canned food, salted meat, hardtack, and forage were boxed or sacked at the sutler's. The harness was greased. A new nail was driven home through the base of the sagging cross.

During these preparations, the post joined in an effort to damp the aged preacher's hopes and to check his going. He was needed at Brannon, they said, so that the regiment could be rid of Matthews. His belief that he could talk peace terms to the hostiles was ludicrous. As for the Jamieson women, they were dead, or they would have been returned long since to save the four condemned from hanging. And his own life was to be uselessly endangered. Already, out upon the prairie, Indian scouts were keeping watch. He might be able, though alone and unarmed, to pass them and reach the coulées beyond. But he would only fall into the murderous clutches of the savages swarming there.

David Bond smiled when they argued. His faith was as firm as the bluffs that ramparted the fort, and his old heart was unafraid. With him, against the rest, ranged two men—Robert Fraser and young Jamieson. They believed, as he did, that, knowing the tongue, and having friends among the Sioux, he would be in no peril; that, by now, the captive mother and daughter were on American ground again and would be given over to his care more readily than to another's; that the arrival of troops before the enemy's camp would be fraught with risk for the defenceless two; and that an attempt to take them by force would be their death-signal.

Colonel Cummings was harrowed by Jamieson's months of anguish and illness, and angered by the indifference and dawdling of the captors in the face of his demand and threat. His heart was set upon punishment, now, not treaty. He felt that he was being played with. And he longed to find the red Sioux and thrash them soundly. A word about the evangelist's trip put him out of patience. He regarded it as futile and rash. Yet he did not forbid it—he dared not. For there was Jamieson's old-young face and whitening head; and a hidden spark of hope that would not die.

He owed it to his conscience and position, however, to discourage David Bond. "There will be sharp fighting this summer," he told him. "A hundred good men like you couldn't stop it. The cause lies too deep, and it is too well founded. In the matter of the women, you will also fail. They did not come as the price of four chiefs. Will they come because you ask for them politely? They won't. And you will be slaughtered."

"Then I shall die in a noble cause," answered the preacher, simply. "The Indians know me. I am their friend. I have spent my life with them, taught them, advised, converted. What is all my labour worth, Colonel, if I cannot go among them in times of distress?"

"Worth this," said the colonel, "that you should know when to use

your common sense. I tell you, you will meet with treachery. Friend, or no friend, this year the Indians are hunting scalps."

"I put my trust in God," murmured David Bond.

"Don't put your trust in redskins," retorted Cummings, crossly. Whereupon he tramped away.

"Waste of breath—nothing else," he declared to his wife. "I'm clean put out with the old fellow. He's daft on going. Now, why doesn't he stay here, instead of sticking his throat to the knife? There's plenty to do. But, no. Off he must rush on a wild-goose chase. Well, he'll have one, mark that! He's either ripe for an insane asylum or he's a religious adventurer—and I'm hanged if I know which!"

It was the bluster that covers an aching wound; that is a vent for outraged helplessness. And David Bond understood.

When he asked leave to address the stockade, the commanding officer willingly consented. The attitude of the hostages on that occasion startled and disturbed the whole post. For the evangelist might as well have harangued the cottonwood grove across the river. He asked the braves for messages to their brothers. By way of reply, they got up, one after the other, from where he had found them, grouped in the sun before the council-tent, and strolled insolently to their lodges. Soon he was discoursing to empty space, and to a line of squaws who threw him malignant glances and jeered at him. He left, surprised, saddened, but unshaken.

Impudence, bold hatred, and defiance—these were following the smoke from Medicine Mountain. They formed a cue that pointed to one fact: The prisoners were disappointed. They had been expecting, not peace and reservation life, but freedom and battle.

David Bond felt a double need for his quick departure and his services among the gathering war-bands. He hastened his few remaining tasks and set the day for the start. Now, the day was come.

His farewells had been said at the shack and at headquarters. Breakfast over and Shadrach put to the shafts, he would take his way up the river. But first there must be laid upon Squaw Charley a final and a solemn charge.

The prayer finished, he put out a hand and touched the Indian. Then he opened his tear-blurred eyes and looked at him, his face softening and working. The Squaw did not budge. His palms were still pressed tight. He blinked at the wagon-bed.

"Charles," said the evangelist, earnestly, "you and I love the little family over yonder. They have been good and kind. I want you to watch over them while I am gone, and be faithful to them. The father is crippled and weak, and he has no friends. Charles, you must be a friend to him, and to the girls. No matter what happens, do not fail them. There will be another guarding. Guard with him. Something may call him away; someone may kill him. Take his place. If danger comes, tell of it at the Fort. Do you promise, Charles? do you promise?" He leaned forward, entreating.

The outcast moved from side to side uneasily.

"Promise, promise," said David Bond. "You must give up anything for them, even your life. Remember that—even your life. I have told you often, and you have not forgot: 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'"

Again the Indian moved uneasily.

"For his friends," repeated the evangelist. "Ah! they have been your friends!" He put his fingers beneath The Squaw's chin and lifted it. The two looked long into each other's eyes. Then they arose and parted.

Later, when the last buckle of Shadrach's harness was fixed, David Bond climbed to the seat and took up the reins. A score of troopers about the head of the white horse stepped aside and formed a little

lane. Here and there, a man reached up. Here and there, too, were awkward attempts at wit. "Hope y' 've made yer will, parson," called one. "Look out them locks o' yourn don't go t' trick out some big buck," admonished a second. "Good-by," cried a third, saluting with great formality; "tell ol' St. Peter he'll git a bunch of us some time this summer."

To all, the evangelist returned his blessing.

The interpreter shoved forward through the growing crowd and made a show of friendliness. "Gran'pa," he said, "you're pritty game, all right. Most old war-hosses like you'd be stayin' home and enjoyin' their pension."

David Bond threw up his head resentfully. "Pension," he said, and shot a searching look into Matthews' face. "I am not a man who sells his principles for money. What I give to my country, I give free."

The crowd cheered him, swinging their caps.

Then there was a hush. A shrunken figure was hurrying up, stretching out thin hands to detain him. No one scoffed now. But one stout trooper put an arm about Jamieson to steady him while he talked.

"Mr. Bond, the Colonel thinks I oughtn't to go with you. He wants me to wait for the ambulance. But he's fooling—he's fooling. He means me to stay behind, and I know it. So I've come to say that I look to you to find mother and Alice. Tell them to hurry. For I can't stand this—long." The grey head dropped to the trooper's shoulder.

"Jamieson," said the evangelist, "if God spares my life I shall meet your mother and sister. I shall cheer them and help them. I believe I shall save them. If they are given to me, I shall come straight back. Do not go with the command. Stay behind, Jamieson. I'll bring them to you."

"I'll stay, then. I believe——"

The preacher smiled down, and to every side. Then he clucked to Shadrach. The tugs straightened. The wagon rolled slowly out of the post.

The sunlight shone upon the green box and the red wheels, and upon the staunch old driver, who never once looked back. Above him, emblem of the sublime Martyr, sagged the high board cross.

CHAPTER XXI

A MEETING BY THE FORD

Under the cottonwoods that shadowed the landing-place, the clematis trailed its tufts of fluffy grey; a cluster of wind-flowers nodded, winking their showy blue eyes; birds whisked about to fetch straws and scraps for their building; and the grass, bright green, but stubby, wore a changing spatterwork of sun and leaf.

Marylyn let drop her bonnet and the cow-horn that hung by a thong to her wrist. Then, with folded hands, she looked up and around her, sniffing the warm air in delight. The Texas home had never offered such a lovely retreat. There, the arid *mesa* had grown thorny mesquite, scraggled cypress, or stunted live-oak for a shade; sand had whirled ceaselessly before a high, hot wind; no flowers had bloomed but the pale toadflax and the prickly-pear; and beside the salt lakes of that almost waterless waste had nested only the vulture.

But this! It was like the blossom-strewn plain that burst upon them as, desert-wearied, they travelled into Central Texas; like the glimpses of April woodland in the Upper and Lower Cross Timbers. It made generous return for the long, merciless winter; more—in one glance, in one breath, it swept away a whole winter of hateful memories!

She caught up bonnet and horn and chose a seat close to the river. Before her was a gap in the knotted grapevine heaps that clung along the brink of the bank; through it, veiled only by some tendrils that swung wishfully across, lay a wedge-like vista of muddy water, bottom-land, bluff, and sky. The mid-morning sun glinted upon the treacherous current, upon the wet grass of the bottom-land, upon the

green-brown bluff and the Gatling at its top, upon the far, curving azure of the sky. Against the dazzle, her blue eyes winked harder than the breeze-tossed anemones; stretching out upon her back, she rested them in the shifting canopy of foliage.

A startled kingbird flashed past her, coming from a tree by the cut. She got up, and saw a man in uniform standing near. He was a young man, with a flushed face and wildly rumpled hair. In one hand he held a tasselled hat; in the other, a rifle. He leaned forward from behind a bull-berry bush, and his look was guiltily eager and admiring.

As startled as the kingbird, she grasped the cow-horn and lifted it to her lips.

But she did not blow a warning. The uniform retreated in cowardly haste, the tasselled hat lowered, and the eyes beseeched.

A moment. Then, the man smiled and shook his hat at her roguishly. "A-ah!" he said—in the tone of one who has made a discovery—"I didn't know before that a fairy lives in this grove!"

Marylyn glanced over a shoulder. "Does there?" she questioned, half whispering.

He took a forward step. "There does," he answered solemnly. "It's Goldenhair, as well as I can make out. But where on earth are the bears?"

Instantly, she had her bonnet. "My! my!" she said. "*Bears!* Indians is bad enough." She peered into the long heaps of tangled grapevine.

"Oh, now!" he exclaimed self-accusingly. He whipped a knee with the hat. "Now, I've gone and scared you! Say, honest! There isn't a bear in a hundred miles—I'd stake my stupid head on it."

"But Golden——" she began.

"Goldenhair?" He smiled again, by way of entreaty. "Why, Goldenhair is—you."

She clapped on her bonnet in a little flurry, pulling it down to hide the last yellow wisp.

Misunderstanding the action, he began to plead. "Oh, don't go; *please* don't go! I've wanted to meet you for months and months. I've heard so much about you—Lounsbury's told me."

She gave him a quick look from under the bonnet's rim. "Mr. Lounsbury," she repeated, and stiffened her lips.

"Yes."

"He don't know much about me, I reckon. He ain't been to see us for 'months and months.'" She began to dig at the ground with the toe of a shoe.

"Well—well——" he floundered, "he's been awful rushed, lately—needed at Clark's—there now. I promised to—to tend to his business here for him. But he told me about you, just the same, and about your sister, too. Say, but she is a brick!"

She gave him another look, slightly resentful, but inquiring. "What's a 'brick'?" she demanded.

"It's a person that's all grit," he answered earnestly.

"That's Dallas," she agreed.

He passaged in cavalry fashion until he was between her and the shack. Then he assumed a front that was cautiously humble. "Lounsbury's had the best of it," he complained. "He's known you right from the start. And this is the first chance I've ever had to know you."

She stopped toeing. "But I don't know you," she returned. "Mr. Lounsbury's never told me——"

"Well, I'll tell you: I'm Robert Fraser, from the Fort. That's really all there is to say about me. You see, I've only been in one fight—that was last fall—and I've never even killed an Indian."

She pulled nervously at her bonnet-strings. "You're a soldier," she said. "And pa—pa'd be mad as a hornet if he knew I'd spoke to you."

Fraser took another step forward. "Pa won't know," he declared.

"Promise you won't tell?" she asked, blushing consciously.

He cast about him as if to find a proper token for his vow. "I promise," he answered, hat on heart; "I promise by the Great Horn Spoon!"

"You're the first I—I ever talked to," she faltered.

"That's good!"

"No, it's bad. Because I promised pa once that I wouldn't ever have anything to do with a soldier. And now I'm breaking my word."

"But he's dead wrong——"

"That's what Dallas says."

"Does she? Bless her heart! Then, why don't you both desert and come over to the enemy?"

"Pa says you *are* enemy."

"We were," he corrected soberly. "But the war is over now."

"Maybe it is," she said, wistful, "but pa is still a-fighting."

"And Goldenhair's drafted when she'd rather have peace. Too bad!" He motioned her to the seat by the gap.

"I can't, I mustn't," she said, and moved a little toward the shack.

"Then I'll go," he said firmly. "I didn't mean to drive you out of here." He also moved—toward the landing-place.

At that, she assented, fearful of hurting his feelings. But she could think of nothing to say, and pulled thoughtfully at the grass.

He studied the farther bluff-top and its warding gun.

"Peace," he repeated after a time. "It's a thing we're not likely to have this summer. And you folks must let us watch out for you, no matter how much you dislike us. The Indians are out and getting ready. They say there isn't a young brave left on any of the reservations up this way. They're all hunting—and we know what that means. They're collecting and arming for battle. Our troops go to find them at daybreak. See!" He bent forward, pointing.

Below the stockade, on a level stretch showing yellow with mustard, where grain had been unshipped the year before, stood long, grey-tented rows.

"They've moved out of barracks and gone into temporary camp."

"That land man back there's moved and gone, too." She waited. Then, "Are—are you going?"

He shook his head. "I'm scheduled to stay. It was a disappointment; but I expected it. I've an idea B Troop won't be idle though."

Her brow knit. "Indians?" she asked.

"Your being on this side of the river assures you folks safety," he hastened to say. "And they shan't get to you while B Troop's in post."

"All the same, I wish pa'd let Dallas take us away."

"If Indians show up, you'll all come to the Fort. And I'd like that."

"No. Pa wouldn't let us. He'd die first."

"And so maybe I shan't see you again—unless you come here some day. Do you think that you can?" He bent to see her face. The bonnet framed it quaintly.

"It's—it's a nice place," she asserted.

He held out his hand to her. "I shall come," he said gently. "But now I've got to go."

She gave him her hand. He got to his feet still holding it, and helped

her to rise.

"Good-by," she said bashfully, drawing away.

He freed her hand. "You don't know how glad I am that we've met," he said, "you don't know. It's been pretty lonesome for me since I came out. And you are a taste of—of the old life. You're like one of those prairie-flowers that have escaped from the gardens back home. You sweeten the Western air, Miss Marylyn."

She hung the cow-horn to her wrist and turned away. Overhead the heart-shaped leaves were trembling to the rush of the river. Her heart trembled with them, and her voice. "We ain't Eastern," she said, wistful again. "I was born down yonder in the mesquite, I——" She paused, glancing back at him.

He stood as she had seen him first. His face was flushed, his uncovered hair was rumpled. In one hand he held his rifle, in the other his tasselled hat. And his eyes were eager, admiring. "No, you're not Eastern," he said; "you were born down in the mesquite. But remember this, Miss Marylyn—it's the deepest woods that grow the sweetest violets."

She went on, out of the grove. He lingered to watch her. Beyond the coulée road, she caught sight of some dandelions and, gathering her apron into a generous pouch, started to pick a mess. Her bonnet fell off. She tied it by a string to her braid. Then, flitting here and there, as she spied new clusters, she began an old Texas bunk-house song:

*"We saw the Indians coming,
We heard them give a yell.
My feelings at that moment
No mortal tongue could tell."*

Her step was light. Her cheek was pink. Her eyes were happy. The corners of her mouth were turned upward smilingly. About her warbled the blackbirds. She mingled her tune with theirs.

CHAPTER XXII

A FIRST WARNING

Piercing its shrill way through the heavy mist that hung above the Missouri, came a strange, new trumpet-call from Brannon. The opening notes, reiterated and smooth-flowing, were unlike the first sprightly lilt of reveille. As Dallas stilled the squeaking of the well-pulley to listen, they fell upon her ear disquietly.

The summons ended. From behind, her father's voice called to her querulously. "Seem t' be changin' they mornin' toot over thar," he said. "Ah wonder ef it means anythin' *particular*."

"I think the soldiers are going," she answered.

"Th' hull passel?" he demanded; then, with a grunt, "Wal, good riddance o' bad rubbish."

Later on, as Dallas circled the shack with the plow, turning up a wide strip as a protection against fires, she found that the reason she had given for the trumpet's varying was the true one. The sun, dispersing the fog, had unshrouded the river and unveiled the barracks and the bluffs. When she saw that, of the canvas row below the stockade not a tent remained, and the campground lay deserted. While from it, heading northward through the post to the faint music of the band, moved an imposing column of cavalry. Arms and equipment flashed gallantly in the sun. Horses curveted. Handkerchiefs fluttered good-bys from the galleries of the Line. Up Clothes-Pin Row, the wives and babies of troopers waited in little groups. At the quarters of the scouts sounded the melancholy beat of a tom-tom. Accompanying it, and contrasting with it weirdly, was a plaintive cadence—the monotonous lament of Indian women.

The column wound on its way, at its rear the heavy-rolling, white-covered wagon-train. The band had ceased to play. The groups that had been waving farewells sorrowfully dispersed. The tom-tom was still, and no wail of squaws was borne across the river. Then, Dallas again started up Ben and Betty.

And now a sudden fit of depression came over her. The dew sparkled on the grass, the air was soft, the breeze caressing, the sun was warm on her shoulders. Yet with all the brightness on every hand, a sense of uneasiness would not be shaken off.

She found herself reining often to look toward Clark's. Midway of the eastern ridge was a long, buff blotch—the crossing of the coulée road. Would a horse and rider pass across that spot to-day? Probably not. A wave of loneliness and of undeserved injury swept her, welling the tears to her eyes.

She was halted close to the corn-land when cheery singing reached her. Marylyn had left the shack and was going riverward, dawdling with studied slowness.

*"We saw the Indians coming,
We heard them give a yell,
My feelings at that moment
No mortal tongue could tell.*

*We heard the bugle sounding,
The Captain gave command—
'To arms! to arms! my comrades,
And by your ponies stand!"*

*We fought there full nine hours
Before the strife was o'er.
Such sight of dead and wounded
I ne'er had seen before—*

*Five hundred noble Rangers
As ever saw the West
Were buried by their comrades,
May peaceful be their rest!"*

Dallas shivered. The song suggested a cruel end for the gay troopers who had just gone forth. "Marylyn!" she called.

The younger paused to look back.

"Be careful, honey. Keep in sight."

Marylyn nodded, threw a kiss, and strolled on.

All day, Dallas tried to work away her troublesome thoughts. When she had known that an Indian was signalling from Medicine Mountain, she had felt no fear. Why was she growing fearful now? For it was fear—not any mere nervousness, or sadness over the marching of the troops. It was even more: There was a haunting feeling that something was going to happen! There was a terrible certainty weighing upon her—a certainty of coming harm!

Toward night, she began to watch about her—southward, to the shanty of the Norwegian; eastward, to where the tent of the Sioux Falls man had been; west, where the setting sun touched the sentinel guns on the bluffs; along the coulée, where the darkness always crept first.

She found herself examining the tops of distant rises. Medicine Mountain showed a dark speck at its summit,—had she ever noticed that before? Other peaks looked unfamiliar—were they the lookouts of savage spies? And north, far beyond the "little bend" was the smoke of a camp-fire. In fancy, she saw the one who had lighted it—a warrior with vindictive, painted face, who peered at the squat shack on the bend as he fanned and smothered the flame.

Night was at hand. The plover were wailing; the sad-voiced pewits called; one by one, the frogs began a lonesome chant. A light had sprung up in the shack. She glanced that way. And the window eyes of the log-house seemed to leer at her.

A warm supper, Marylyn's bright face, her father's placid retorts—all these did not suffice to drive away her forebodings. What was there in the coming night?

All her instinct spoke for caution. The lantern was shaken out before the table was cleared. Her father and sister early sought their beds. She only lay down in her clothes. The hours passed in a strange suspense. She listened to her father's deep breathing, to the mules, when they wandered into their stalls, to the snap of Simon's long brush as he whipped at the mosquitoes. Her eyes kept searching the black corners of the room, and the pale squares of the windows. Her ears were alert for every sound.

She fell to thinking of Squaw Charley. He had not come for his supper, or brought them the daily basket. Was he growing indifferent—to them?

It was when she could no longer keep awake that her thoughts assumed even a terrible shape. She dreamed, and in her dream a head came through the dirt floor close to her bed. It was covered by a war-bonnet of feathers. Beside it, thrust up by lissome fingers—fingers white and strangely familiar—was a tomahawk.

Soon, she made out a face—Matthews'. She squirmed, striving to summon her father. A flame flickered up in the fireplace. The face changed from white to red, and Charley danced before her. She squirmed again; the face faded——

She found herself sitting bolt upright. Her hands were clenched defensively, her teeth were shut so tight that her jaws ached. She was staring, wide-eyed, at the door.

The shack was no longer in darkness. Morning was come, and its light made everything clear. She sprang up and lifted the latch, then fell back, her stiffened lips framing a cry.

Before the shack, driven deep into the nearest bit of unpacked ground, was a sapling, new-cut and stripped clean of the bark. From its top, flying pennon-like in the wind, was a scarlet square. And at one corner of this, dangling to and fro in horrid suggestiveness, swung a shrivelled patch that held a lock of hair.



CHAPTER XXIII

AND WHAT FOLLOWED IT

Rifle in hand, forgetful of crutches, bewildered by sleep, the section-boss came diving through the blanket partition to answer her call. "Wha's matter? Wha's matter?" he demanded thickly, rubbing hard at his eyes to unclog their sight.

Dallas leaned in the doorway, facing out. Her shoulders were bent forward heavily, as if she, too, were only half awake. Her head was rested against a casing. She lifted it when she felt him beside her. "Well, dad," she answered grimly, "it's Indians, this time, and—I reckon they got us stampeded." She smiled a little, ruefully, and pointed.

Winking into the light, Lancaster followed her pointing, and saw the pole. Up jerked his chin, as if from a blow on the goatee. He stared wildly. His jaw dropped. "W'y, Lawd!" he breathed perplexedly, and his chest heaved beneath the grey flannel of his shirt. Slowly he hobbled forward in his bare feet, using the gun for a prop. Before the pole, he halted, and began tousling his grizzled crown with trembling fingers. Overhead, the scalp-weighted rag swung to and fro in the breeze, waving him its sinister salute.

Gradually, his brain cleared, and into it there trickled a hint of the pole's meaning and purpose. He stopped ruffling his hair, and caught up the Sharps in both hands. Then, all at once, the trickle swelled to a foaming torrent of suspicion, that carried him close to the truth. Maddened, cursing, he dropped the gun and fell upon the sapling, pried it furiously from the sod, and smashed it into a dozen bits.

To Dallas, watching him in silence, the destruction of the pole was

a sore reminder. For, better than ever before, she realised that her father could only accomplish the hasty, childish things; that beyond these, he was powerless. Without a doubt, she must ask elsewhere for aid.

As he came limping and raging back to her, she hurried forward to relieve him of the rifle and to guide his crippled feet. "Dad, I think it's about time we had a' understanding at the Fort," she said quietly, and took him by an arm.

He brought up short and wrung himself out of her grasp. "Th' Fort! th' Fort! th' Fort!" he repeated in a frenzy. "Lawd-a-mighty, Dallas, y' make me sick!"

"It's Indians," she replied steadily. "They're coming too near to be comfortable. We got to have help."

He raised his fists and shook them. "Help an' fiddlesticks!" he blustered. "*Thet* ain't no Injuns! It's thet Shanty Town blackleg a-tryin' t' skeer us. Go look at th' groun'—go look at th' groun', Ah say. See if they's moccasin tracks thereabout. Ah bet y' won't fin' any!" He turned back to the scattered splinters, pulling Dallas after him.

Together they got down, examining with care. As he had said, there were no prints of an Indian shoe in the soft earth. But mingling with the round, faint marks of his own naked heel were those—more plainly stamped—of a large boot. They led up to the spot from the nearest point on the river; and back upon themselves toward the same point.

"W'at'd Ah tell y'?" demanded the section-boss, almost triumphantly. His voice quavered, however, and he gulped. "It's thet scalawag, an' he wanted us t' know it! Ain't ev'ry Injun in fifty mile shet up tight in yon corral? Ev'ry one 'cept Charley—an' this ain't the job o' *thet* blamed fool. No, siree! An' then, th' mules didn' make no row las' night. They'd a shore snorted if it was Injuns——"

"I guess that's so," agreed Dallas, hastily, and made him a warning

sign. Marylyn was moving about inside, and calling.

But he was beyond thought for another. "Bosh! bosh!" he cried. "She's got t' stop bein' coddled an' know w'at's w'at. *You* got t' stop talkin' Fort. Ah'm goin' t' ketch that low-down skunk 'thout no soldiers. An' *Ah'll* pepper his ugly hide! *Ah'll* make him spit blood like a broncho-buster. Th' *idee* o' his havin' th' gall!" He rammed the Sharps into its rack and laughed immoderately.

"Oh, pa!" expostulated Marylyn, in a startled whisper, and flew to Dallas. Her face, still pink from slumber, paled a little. She laid it against her sister. Long ago, she had seen her father roused to the same pitch. The sight had terrified her, and blunted some earlier and tenderer memories.

"You git you' clothes on," he ordered roughly, "an' rustle us some breakfas'."

She retreated, ready for tears.

Dallas walked up to him, gave him his crutches, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Dad," she said firmly, "don't take out your mad on Marylyn. Keep it all for—him." She nodded south toward Brannon. "That's where it belongs."

"Dallas, you plumb disgus' me," he retorted. "Talkin' soldier, when y' know Matthews could buy th' hull kit an' boodle with a swig o' whisky!" He arraigned the Fort with a crutch.

"What do you think of doing, dad?"

"Ah'll fin' out where that cuss was las' night—Charley'll help me, y' see——"

"And then?"

"Ah'll see that—that Oliver knows o' this, that he keeps a' eye on that dog-goned——"

"But it'll be easier just to go straight to the Captain; not I, but *you*——"

"Yes, do pa," urged Marylyn. "Oh, Dallas, what's happened?"

The elder girl told of the pole and the bookmarks, treating them lightly. Then she came back to her father. To find that her argument of a moment before, for all its short-cut logic, had set him utterly against the plan he had himself proposed. And now he was for no man's help, but for a vengeance wreaked with his own gun. Hurling a final defy toward Shanty Town, he disappeared behind the partition.

No breakfast was eaten that morning. The section-boss was too angry to taste of food, Marylyn was too frightened, and Dallas had no time. For she was busy with the mules, currying them and putting them before the wagon. "Can't help what you think about it this time," she said when her father asked her where she was going; "I've made up my mind that if you won't say the Fort, why then I'll have to drive to Clark's for Mr. Lounsbury. We don't know for sure what that pole meant. We must ask."

"Aw, you ain't got a smitch o' pride," he taunted jealously. "Goin' t' Lounsbury. Wal! Wal! You think a heap o' him, don' y'? More 'n you do o' you' father! Thet sticks out like a sore finger."

"No," she answered simply. "I'm putting my pride in my pocket, dad. I'm going to Mr. Lounsbury because I care so much for you, and for Marylyn. And I want to say something—I hate to say it—you've almost discouraged me about Brannon lately. We came here to raise stuff to sell over there. But I can't see how we can sell over there if we won't even speak to a soul. It looks as if we're going to give all that up—as if a lot of my work is for nothing."

It was a new thought for the section-boss. And while Dallas disappeared behind Betty, he pondered it with hanging head. She came around soon to hitch Ben's tugs, when her father looked up shamefacedly. "Ah'll tell y', Dallas," he said, by way of compromise,

"ef Lounsbury don't come back with y'——"

"He will," assured Dallas, stoutly.

"W'y, we'll go t' th' Fort, as you say."

"All right, dad," she replied, giving his back a pat.

He began to hobble up and down. "You ain't scairt t' go?" he ventured at last. "Ain't afeerd o' nothin'?"

"No; and I'm going on my own hook, remember. It's not your fault."

"Y' kain't think o' no other way——"

She paused in front of him. "Can you?" she asked.

He could have sworn; but there was something in her face that forbade it. "No—no," he said explosively, and so matched her determination with his hot stubbornness.

He left her, and taking the rifle and all the ammunition there was, seated himself on a bench placed just outside the door. There he was—a pitiful sentinel—as she circled the shack and reined.

And now another question was presented: Should Marylyn stay or go? Dallas was for her remaining, so that, in case of need, help could be summoned—from somewhere. Marylyn sided with her. And it was long afterward, when many things were made clear, before the elder girl understood her sister's action—one that seemed so contrary to what the younger one felt. But their father opposed them both, and vehemently.

Dallas upon the wagon-seat, prepared for her long drive, had softened and touched him. She bore herself so bravely. She was so respectful, and concerned.

"You take Mar'lyn," he insisted, "an' th' pistol. Ah c'n git along fine by myself. Charley'll be comin', an' Ah'll hang on t' him. Ah reckon, between us, we'll be O. K. 'Sides, y' know, Ah got a weasel's tail."

The mention of Charley won Dallas to her father's view. He would not be alone all day, for the outcast would surely appear. On the other hand, she longed to have Marylyn with her, where she could shield her from cross words and possible harm. "We'll have Mr. Lounsbury with us coming home," she said.

At that, Marylyn waxed still more eager to remain. And it took some pleading to overcome her reluctance, and to bring about her consent. Finally, however, the two girls drove away.

Before she started the team, Dallas climbed down to say good-by. In all their lives, few caresses had ever passed between father and daughter, and those had been during her babyhood. But now, moved by a common impulse, each reached out at parting to clasp the other. And there were tears in the eyes of both.

As the wagon trundled out of ear-shot, that one of the trio least consulted in the affairs of the shack was hard beset by a temptation: to tell Dallas about Lieutenant Fraser and his earnest, oft-repeated promise of protection. But Marylyn hesitated, afraid to speak—no less afraid of her sister than of her father. She realised that if she mentioned the officer, she would have to admit their meetings. And such a confession would undoubtedly result in an end to those meetings and, perhaps, in severe blaming. Yet—it would also cut short the drive to Clark's. And what might not be awaiting them on that journey? Still, there were only two likely dangers: Indians and the interpreter. "But Mr. Fraser says this upper side of the river's safe," she remembered. As to Matthews, he would not be lingering beside the road to waylay them. Her fears for her own safety were thus argued down.

There was yet her father's safety to consider. Well, her gallant new friend would look to that. "He'll be across again this afternoon," she thought, "and he'll watch the house careful. He couldn't do any more if he knew about the pole." So, her conscience satisfied, she decided to keep her own counsel. That decision cost her abundant grief and

penitence in the months to come.

While Marylyn was busy with her troublesome problem, a similar one was running in Dallas' brain, where it called for calculation. Would Matthews threaten the shack that day? It was scarcely probable. Night offered the best hours for an attack. Therefore, the wagon must return before night. But could Ben and Betty make Clark's and the return trip before then? So far, they had never done it. The previous summer, the drive was begun at dawn, when dawn was at three o'clock. "We'll just have to hike along," she said aloud to Marylyn.

Into the coulée slid the wagon, its long tongue in the air, the loose tugs hitting the mules in the hock. When the team had scrambled up the farther side, Dallas put them to a trot by a flick of the black-snake. Then she bent forward over the dashboard, her eyes fixed eagerly on that distant brown blotch at the eastern ridge-top. But Marylyn, as they drew away, looked regretfully backward—to where a clump of tall cottonwoods, shaking their heart-shaped leaves in the wind, dappled a flower-studded stretch below the coulée mouth.

Rod by rod the mules climbed the gently sloping prairie. The morning was perfect, and belied, in its beauty, even a suggestion of lurking harm. The air, crystal-clear and exhilarating, brought far things magically near to the eye. On every hand shimmered the springing grass, now, a pale emerald with the wind brushing it, again, in the still places, a darker green, and yet again—under the ravine's fringing willows, where the deer nibbled—a cool black. Out of it, the meadow-larks showed their good-luck waistcoats and rippled their tunes; out of it, countless wild roses smiled up pinkly to the sun.

But all the loveliness of the new day only mocked at the lonely girls in the wagon. To them, the grey sands of their desert home, the blistering "northers," the brassy skies, were, unconsciously, synonymous of safety and peace. More than once, as they pressed on, the old, red-painted section-house rose before them, a very

haven.

Behind, the squat shack was gradually lessening in size. A jutting corner had already shut from view its crippled sentry.

There was little conversation. Marylyn, for a time, could not dismiss the subject that had confronted her at the start. Finally, however, she put it aside impatiently, and let herself drift on a pleasant current. And Dallas—her thoughts were also harried. For as her home dropped, mile by mile, in the distance, and she was forced to meet the question of what she would say and do when she arrived at Clark's, her feelings underwent a marvellous change. It had been easy enough, in the excitement following her discovery, to contemplate a meeting with Lounsbury. But that excitement having dwindled not a little, the idea of seeing him and of talking to him mounted in proportional importance. She saw herself drawing up before his store, or standing just within as she related her story. She saw his face, the blue eyes, full of fun—and she had not met him since that evening! Her heart began to thump with her picturing, its poundings playing up to her throat and down again. Want of food was giving her a sensation of weakness and sinking. But this seemed also to be the result of mental, and not physical, suffering. She was torn by a desire to retreat.

Then darted through her mind the remembrance of Marylyn's midnight confidence. It was a blow on a wound. She glanced at her sister entreatingly. And what she fancied she read in the other's eyes instantly altered the desire to turn—made her send the mules forward at a better pace. Marylyn was sitting stiffly upright, bracing herself with her hands. Her head was up, her look was eager and fixed. There was a smile on her parted lips.

"She's happy about seeing him," thought Dallas, and was overwhelmed by a sense of her own guilt.

A diversion soon came in a horrid guise. The road touched the coulée again, bringing close the giant cottonwoods, where the Sioux

dead were lashed; and the girls, glancing toward the trees, suddenly caught a glimpse of long, wrapped bodies.

Marylyn edged toward her sister. "Oh, I hope it'll be light when we get here coming back," she whispered, shuddering.

"We won't be alone," answered Dallas, reassuringly.

The coulée was deep and dark at that point, and full of queer shadows. From the boughs that cradled the braves came uncanny flutterings, as the wind shook loosened scraps of the sleepers' covering. The dead seemed to be moving restlessly upon their bier-boards, and waving an imploring summons to be freed of the thongs that bound them. Overhead was full cause for fear. Floating on motionless wing, with bare necks craning hungrily, circled black watchers.

"They say," whispered Marylyn, watching nervously behind, "they say the Indians are scared to come near these trees, never do till one of 'em dies. I don't wonder. It gives me the shivers just to see that bunch."

Dallas drew the whip across Betty. "A dead Indian's not dangerous," she said, smiling. And forgot to ask Marylyn where she had heard the tale.

Six miles were gone. But the way ahead was still long, the brown blotch at the ridge-top was still only a blotch. And the team was fast tiring. When Murphy's Throat was reached, Dallas drove out to the left, watered the thirsty pair at a slough, and ate with Marylyn the long-deferred breakfast. After that they went at a better pace for a time. Soon, however, the road became steeper, and Betty slacked up. The sun was high, now, and unpleasantly warm. So the wise old mule merely humped her back as Dallas applied the lash, and doggedly refused to increase her speed.

It was noon when the wagon approached the summit. It did not rest

there a moment. Behind was spread out a wonderful landscape. The Missouri threaded it quarteringly, the western bluffs walled its farther edge to the sky. Its eastern boundary was the ridge over which the wagon was rolling. From this undulating line, the verdant land slipped down and down and down—to the fantastic turnings of the river. But the girls, peering back upon it, through a haze that was softly blue were wholly indifferent to its beauty. They sought, and in vain, for a remote dot that might be the shack—the shack they had left at the end of that unswerving road.

And now they went forward again. The scene on the farther side of the summit was newer than that on the other, but did not rival it. Short coulées had eaten the bluff slopes into flutings, and spilled small rivulets upon the plain. Yet, barring these, and a lake that sparkled, a round sapphire, on the right, there was superb uniformity. Not a stream, not a butte, not even a nubbin of rock varied the view. And not a head of cattle! To the south moved a score of yellow animals—antelope. But these and a village of saucy prairie-dogs were the only signs of life. The land dropped away by imperceptible degrees. As imperceptibly, it melted into a mellow sky.

Dallas and Marylyn were each intent upon Clark's, lying far ahead, and to the left, a dun-coloured line which seemed scarcely to get nearer as the time went. But after an hour, their patience was rewarded. When the dun-coloured line resolved itself into two, and they saw the cow-camp: A narrow street flanked by low shanties of canvas and board.

Again, Dallas and Marylyn were absorbed, each with a mental conflict. The younger got fidgety, then petulant, and began to complain of thirst. For once, the elder girl showed scant sympathy. She was hurriedly planning some new speeches.

At the southern end of the camp, their destination was made plain to them by a sign reading, "General Merchandise." It was nailed along the hip of a large building that stood midway of the street. Looking to

neither side, they made straight for it.

When the team came to a stand before the store, the girls saw to their surprise that the door was shut. They waited. A minute passed. No one came out. Then, Dallas climbed down and knocked. There was no answer. She waited again. Finally, she tried the knob. It resisted her effort. From within came the rattle of a chain.

"It's locked!" She went back to Marylyn. The two looked at each other. Over the younger's face swept a flush of relief. But Dallas had forgotten her dread of seeing Lounsbury in a keen disappointment at finding him gone. She glanced anxiously up and down the street.

It was deserted and still. Dallas climbed back to the seat. "Maybe he's at the Fort," she said encouragingly. "We'll drive home quick. There's a lot of it down-hill." She clucked to the team.

At that moment the door of a near-by shanty opened. A man came out, waving a letter. "Say! hello!" he bawled; "don't you want your mail?"

Dallas checked the mules.

"I got a letter for you," he went on. It was Al Braden of Sioux Falls.

Dallas gave Marylyn the reins and reached for the letter, noting that the real-estate man did not doff the floppy hat, or make any swinging bows.

"A letter?"

"Yep, from Lounsbury. I told him I was going to lope back down to the Bend—but I didn't." He snickered.

"Where's he gone?" she asked, slitting the envelope with a shaking hand.

"Dunno," answered Braden. He was leaning on a wheel now, surveying Ben and Betty with a critical, and somewhat disdainful, eye. For each was hanging upon three legs to rest a fourth. Presently, he

glanced up at Marylyn, and his eye lit impudently. "Dunno," he repeated. "You're his girl. *You* ought to know."

But Dallas did not hear him. She was scanning a page, closely written and addressed to herself.

"A telegram has come calling me home [ran the letter]. It says my mother is ill—'seriously ill'—and I am afraid it's put that way to hide something worse. It is the only thing that could take me out of Dakota now. But I am not leaving you unprotected. Before I left Brannon, I arranged to have Matthews watched every hour of the day and night. And he is the only thing that might make you trouble. For if the Indians get nasty, I know Oliver will insist on bringing you in. Still, I shall worry terribly till I get back. I wish I could write all I would like to. But it would be what I have already told you—you will understand."

Thus, it ended.

Dallas thrust it into the pocket of her skirt, took the reins and lifted the black-snake. Ben saw the threatening movement from behind his bridle blinds. He sprang forward. The wheel rolled from under Braden's elbow.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he growled. "Ain't you going to say ta-ta?" He strode along at the tailboard, smirking up at the two in an attempt to be friendly. "Maybe you'd like company going home," he said. "Lonely trip for girls, 'specially when they ain't got a gun." He gave Marylyn a bold wink.

"Thank you," replied Dallas, shortly. "We don't want company—and we *have* got a gun." She lifted the pistol from the seat.

Braden fell behind. "Stop and drink some beer, anyway," he called. "Got some in here. You mustn't be mad at me because Johnnie's mamma sent for him. Come on back."

To this, no answer was made. Dallas gave the team a few smart cuts. The wagon rumbled out of the street.

And now began the return journey. Five hours had been consumed in reaching Clark's. Ten minutes had been wasted there. Another five would be passed at the first clear water. But allowing for the team's

faster gait when they were headed for home, and for twelve miles of downgrade, they should not take more than four hours to reach the bend. Twilight would be settling then.

Dallas figured the return thus—but it was soon plain to her that sunset would find them miles from the shack. Poor feed, with the plowing and the harrowing, had thinned the mules. After the first spurt they paid no heed to the whip, and fairly crawled. Marylyn, tired, gave way to passionate complaining. Dallas folded a blanket in the bottom of the wagon and coaxed her sister to lie down upon it, her face shielded by the seat. To further dishearten the elder girl, Ben and Betty showed signs of sore-footedness. Guided out upon the grass, they travelled better.

It took three precious hours to gain the summit. The afternoon was then far gone. Across the wide valley, dark clouds were piling upon the western range; they added to its height, and augured the day's early closing. When the Throat gaped alongside, the fleecy horizon had rolled still higher, and beneath it the setting sun showed through like a harvest moon, blood-red.

Swiftly the day withdrew and the stars came out. Then, the breeze lulled, and a mist rose from the coulée's wooded bottom. From it came the tremulous call of an owl. Dallas slipped to her feet and wielded the black-snake vigorously.

The mules shot forward for a wagon-length. The sudden jolt awakened Marylyn. She got to her knees—and there were the cottonwoods with the laden boughs!

"Spunky little sister," encouraged the elder girl, and helped the other to the seat.

The road was so dark, now, that it took on the aspect of a standing man, who was no sooner overridden than he rose again in the lead. This was a beginning for all manner of fears. Dallas fought her own. But she could not conquer them. For they enlarged enormously, and

changed to a premonition that ran riot.

Listening and watching, she had suffered the previous night. Yet that suffering was nothing compared to the agony that stole into her heart and held it—till she forgot Marylyn's presence. She seemed to see a figure skulking through the dusk about the shack; it entered the lean-to and crouched in hiding. She saw it come forth again, keeping close to the logs. Its eyes shone in the dark!

Her father was beside the door, where she had left him. He was gazing straight ahead, as if he expected the enemy to approach only from the front; as if he had no thought of treachery. His figure was relaxed wearily. His face was drawn. But his eyes—like the other's—were strangely luminous.

Ah!—the figure was creeping toward him—noiselessly—step by step!

"Go in! Go in! *Daddy!*"

The cry was torn from her, though she strove to keep it back. The strain of the past night and day was telling. Frantically, she begged Ben and Betty to hasten. Knowing home was not far, they obeyed her voice, and, presently, were setting back in their collars to block the descent of the wagon; were splashing through the backwater at the coulée-crossing, and jerking their load out upon the level. Eastward, the shack stood out dimly in the starlight. They made for it at a trot.

But all at once they stopped, and began stepping this way and that, as if ready to leap the tongue. Dallas and Marylyn recoiled, forsaking the seat for the shelter of the box.

There was a moment's wait, in a stillness as vast as the prairie. The mules, sidled to the left, shifted their long ears nervously. The girls listened, the younger shielded by the elder's arms.

Then, across the bend, from the deserted houses of Shanty Town, sounded the long, soul-chilling howl of a dog.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SPIRIT OF THE FRONTIER

A broken crutch lying close to the shack on the river side, a blood-spattered pane in the window just above, a rifle ball, embedded deep at a gun's length beyond the pane—these were the traces that, on the following morning, gave an inkling of a deadly clash.

Squaw Charley found them, when the day was yet so young that no human eyes, save those of an Indian, could have used its scanty light. Four raps upon the warped door had brought no answer. Loudly repeated, they had set the wooden latch to shaking lonesomely. Mistrustful, he had entered and groped about the dark room. Table and benches were in place. The blankets hung before the bunk. To one side, rolled up neatly, was the mattress upon which Dallas and Marylyn slept. But nothing else met his expectant hand and foot. Next, he had visited the lean-to, where he felt his way carefully from stall to stall, discovering no occupant. Then, he had gone out to pry around the yard. And lit upon the marks that told of the struggle.

The absence of the wagon was a clue. He stole along the out-going tracks, between which, small, circular and clearly stamped, were the hoof-prints of two mules. Near the coulée-crossing, the tracks ran into others, and fresher ones, that diverged sharply into the corn. The hoof-prints between these pointed eastward. He forsook the out-going and turned back across the field.

At first, the course of the wagon puzzled. After veering north until the canyon yawned, the team had made along the brink, keeping

perilously near it; farther on, at the upper end of the plowed strip, the direction abruptly changed. The mules had swung out to the right upon the open prairie, travelling straight for the middle of the gap. So far they had gone at a furious gallop. Now, however, they slowed to a walk. When the course no longer puzzled. To and fro, it wended, this way for a few feet, then, the other—proof that Ben and Betty had fed.

The Squaw halted. The horizon was faintly yellow. Upon it was a moving black object, which presently took the clearer form of a wagon and span. He set off, his loose hair whipping at his back. The team was also travelling rapidly. Behind was a reddish follower that lowed in protest of the speed.

When the mules came by, Dallas was standing at the dashboard, plying the lash. Her face was ashen, her eyes were hollow. She did not see the Indian, for her gaze was upon the shack. He swung himself into the rattling box. There lay Marylyn, still in the grasp of the stupor that had bound them, brain and body, through the night.

Before the mules brought up at the lean-to, Dallas was over a wheel and tottering in quest of her father. Out of the shack, as she searched it, sounded her plaintive cry: "Daddy! daddy! where are you? Oh, Daddy! *daddy!* come back!"

Squaw Charley, bringing Marylyn in, found the elder girl kneeling behind the partition, her arms thrown out to grasp the vacant bunk.

He put his load down gently; then, unbidden, rushed through the door for Brannon.

When Captain Oliver arrived, with Fraser, a surgeon and a detachment of mounted men, Dallas was seated in the doorway, rocking Marylyn against her breast. She looked up, dry-eyed, as he hurried to her.

"What'd they do it for?" she asked him, brokenly. "How could they hurt you, dad? Oh, the land wasn't worth it! the land wasn't worth it!"

Something to quicken life in Marylyn was the first thought. Then, food and drink were given the girls. Meanwhile, the troopers were sent out under Fraser to range the bend and beat the coulée.

Oliver stayed. But to his questions, Dallas, her reason tottering like her steps, could only return others that were heartrending:

"He'll come back, won't he? They wouldn't kill him? Oh, you don't think he's dead?"

"We'll find him," said the captain. He was pitiful in his regret. This tragedy was striking home to him as even the Jamieson failure had not. His long, sad face was more like a walrus' than ever.

"Mr. Bond said we'd have good luck here," she went on despairingly. "But there *was* danger by night, wasn't there? There *was* danger!"

"She's knocked silly," Oliver murmured to the surgeon. "The child doesn't know what she's saying."

"You're right. Clean blunted," was the answer. "But I'll straighten 'em both out by noon."

A long halloo summoned the captain to the door. A group of men were gathered in the swale between the shack and Shanty Town. Fraser was among them. Oliver signalled, and the young officer wheeled and came galloping in.

"What is it?"

"Old man's gun, discharged, out there in the grass——"

"Yes?"

"And two sets of footprints coming and going across that bit of low ground. One set looks about two days old, and was made by boots. Other is newer, and made by moccasins."

"Ah!"

"There's something strange about these last: Coming this way, the marks are so light you can hardly see 'em; going back, they're sunk way down."

"Carried a load, eh?"

"It looks like it." Oliver mounted, and they rode off to the swale.

Noon was past when the captain called at the shack again. He found the surgeon gone, but his promise fulfilled: Food and medicine had gone far to revive his patients physically; tears had mercifully combined with returning strength to right their minds.

This time, the elder girl met Oliver with no incoherence, but with brave quiet. All her self-command had returned. She asked him in, and showed a tender forethought for Marylyn by sending her out into the sunshine and the garden before she listened to what he had to tell. When he was done, she began her story with the finding of the pole.

"Redskins!" he exclaimed.

"Boot-marks were around it, though," she said.

"You are sure? I wish your father had asked my advice. I feel as if I had come short in my duty."

"Please don't," she entreated. "You see, we thought we could tend to it—long's we knew who it was."

He turned astonished eyes upon her. "Knew!" he exclaimed. "Well, for Heaven's sake out with it, then!"

"Matthews—he wanted the land."

"The interpreter! But last night's tracks were made by moccasins. There's one Indian free——"

She let him get no further. "It's not Charley," she declared. "Matthews meant us to think it was Indians. Moccasins are easy to get."

"That's true." He frowned. "Hm!—Well, I shall inquire into his whereabouts during the last two days." And the captain fell to studying the figures on the Navajos.

Outside, Lieutenant Fraser was passing the shack. He rode on to the cornfield, where he flung himself off his horse.

"Marylyn! Marylyn!" he said tremblingly. "You poor girl! I'm so sorry—What can I say? It's my fault."

She lifted a scared face to his. "No, it's mine," she answered; "if I'd told Dallas about you, we'd never 'a' gone to Clark's——"

"Thank goodness you did! But if your father had known about me—if I could have come to the house. I must after this. We'll tell your sister about us now. Come on."

She shrank back in sudden fright. "No, no. Don't you see? She'd think it was awful I didn't say something yesterday!"

"Why didn't you, Marylyn?"

She looked down. "You don't know Dallas. She don't like soldiers any more'n pa. She said so, and she'd——"

"Oh, I think she does," he argued. "Now, let's try her—let's make a clean breast of it."

Her hands came out in wild imploring. "You won't, you won't, you *won't*," she begged. "Don't you understand?—my keeping still was just as if I'd killed pa! Oh, it was! So I *can't* tell—*now*!"

"Marylyn——"

"Promise you won't, oh, promise you won't!" And she went down, crumpling into a little, miserable heap.

Quickly, he lifted her. "Well, we won't tell her then, not if you don't want to—but we'll have to some day."

"Some day—maybe—but *not now*."

"All right, then—not now." He led her from garden to coulée and back again, trying to comfort her all the while as best he could.

"You see, Marylyn," he said, "you're wrong about its being your fault. It's mine. I promised Lounsbury I'd look after you folks."

She stopped short. "Did you tell him about you and me?"

"No."

"Oh." She was relieved. "You mustn't, either. Not him, or anyone."

"I don't see how I can ever look Lounsbury in the face again," he said bitterly.

Whereupon, she straightway began to comfort him.

At the shack, Oliver and Dallas had arrived at the question of future safety.

"I must insist," the captain was saying, "upon your coming to live at the Fort. I cannot spare a permanent guard for this side of the river—a scouting party up and down once a day is about the best I could do. We have our hands full already."

"Live at the Fort——" Her lips tightened a little. She got up to walk. She was thinking of the cold stares, the "Ahs," the "Ohs," and the laughter of the post ladies in their bowling ambulance; the nudges and the grins of the passing musicians; and "There's allus room at the Fort when there's good-lookin' gals in the fambly."

She shook her head.

"You love your sister," he reminded. "Think of her."

"I *am* thinking of her. I'd go to the Fort if there was danger. But—answer me honest—outside of what's happened here, do you think there's really any danger?"

"From Indians, you mean? Well, I'll tell you—this *was* a complete

surprise, a shock to me. Because so far we haven't seen a sign of the hostiles beyond that signal in the spring. North of here, at Lincoln, they've shown themselves. But they're largely concentrated in the northwest, to meet the troops."

"Then, there's no danger from Indians."

"Still, there might be, and I want you to come. Frankly, I've omitted to tell you of one disquieting report that has reached us. After the recent battle on the Rosebud, one of the warriors of Crazy Horse was captured by General Crook. The prisoner said that within a day's ride to the west of here, our—and your—aged friend——"

She stopped him, lifting her hands to her face. "Not him!" she whispered; "not *him*! Oh, he was so good to us, Captain!"

Oliver sighed. "I fear it's so—yet it's only a report."

Some time went by. Meanwhile, she walked about the room in silence. Her lips were trembling.

"You'll come?" he said.

"When you're sure"—she spoke with difficulty—"the Indians are going to make trouble, I will. But—but I think I'd rather stay. I made dad a promise once—I'd hate to break it—*now*."

"Your father didn't like us, I understand. I'm sorry. And of course you feel that you should keep your promise to him. Well, I can send a convoy with you to Bismarck."

"We haven't a cent. You see, I'm counting a heap on my garden."

"Oh, we would get something together for you."

She flinched. "No, I wouldn't like that. And dad'd hate it worse than if I broke the promise. Besides, I'm going to pay back B Troop."

"B Troop! My troop? What do you owe B Troop?"

"Why, B Troop's been sending us its surplus rations."

"You sure?"

"Well, the sutler said so."

"I think there's a mistake. B Troop has had no surplus rations."

"Had no——" she began, amazed.

"Must have been the sutler's own stuff."

"But he wrote——" From between the leaves of a book on the mantel, she produced a folded paper.

"Or someone else's," went on Oliver.

She had been about to hand him Blakely's letter. Now, as if struck by an idea, she put it back into the book. When she turned, her eyes were swimming.

"It likely *was* 'someone else,'" she said.

"God bless you anyway! To think of such a thing in the midst of your worry! Even if you did owe B Troop, it would vote you its full rations, and be proud to go hungry. Please think again about Bismarck for the summer."

"I can't give up the claim, Captain. I want to know what happened—I want to be here if—if dad comes back."

"But aren't you forgetting that, Indians or no Indians, there's danger from this secret enemy?"

"Secret enemy," she echoed; "secret enemy. Go to Bismarck is just the thing he wants to see us do. You heard what he did in the winter? Well, he came again yesterday. He saw the wagon leave, and he thought it was a good chance to move in."

"Move in?" rejoined Oliver. "If that was all, why did he bother about moccasins?"

"You're right," she cried. "He meant to kill!"

And now as if some great hidden spring of feeling had been touched, she came round upon the officer, defiant, resolute and undaunted.

"Maybe I'd 'a' gone before—I'd go this minute for Indians. But that man!—he's had his price for this claim, he's had his price! Now, the Bend belongs to *me*—and I'm going to stay."

The captain bent toward her. "Too risky, too risky, Miss Lancaster," he advised, "unless we get the man. For how could you ever do any outside work——"

Dallas interrupted, intrepid spirit ringing in her voice.

"Get him or not, I'll stick it out all the same. And my outside work—I'll plow and I'll plant just like I used to. But *this* time, I'll do it with a gun!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE INQUIRY

A Ree scout scoured every foot of ground leading up to the shack. He trailed the mules, The Squaw, the troopers. He followed those moccasin prints that came across the draw and went again. He found the last behind the lean-to, along the side nearest the coulée, on the back-fire strip in front. And declared they had been made by a white man.

Two circumstances pointed strongly to the truth of this: The body had been carried away in the direction of Shanty Town; a white man would have taken so much trouble, not an Indian, who would have left his handiwork for all to see. And again, when Shanty Town was searched, one of the huts was found to contain evidence of late occupancy—scraps of food that were not yet stale, and, in a rusty stove, fresh coals. But though the coulée, the road, the prairie and the timber edging the river were all faithfully scanned, one thing concerning the murderer's doings remained a mystery. At Shanty Town, the traces of him began and ended. But how had he reached Shanty Town?

Old Michael furnished the clue of time. He related how he had heard the crack of a gun to the eastward the previous evening, "about th' ind av th' furst dog-watch."

Captain Oliver stayed until the last rod had been travelled and the last stone turned. Then, he was ferried to Brannon. On landing, he went at once to the wife of his colonel, who had vacated her home when the command left and was now living with Mrs. Martin at Major Appleton's.

"Mrs. Cummings," he said, "the old man on the Bend is missing. It looks like murder. His two girls are left, orphaned and heart-broken. They need a woman's comfort, ma'am. Will you not go to them, and will you find a woman to stay with them for a few nights?"

"Oh, how very sad!" exclaimed that lady; then, turned away as if suddenly perplexed. "I—I—really don't care to go myself," she went on, when she had given his request a moment's thought. "I know these country people—so touchy and taciturn, always ready to think one is patronising them."

"One usually is," retorted the captain, sharply. "Then, I must ask somebody else?"

"One of the troopers' wives would probably be glad to go."

"You are evidently quite mistaken regarding these young women," declared Oliver, with some heat. "Mrs. Oliver will think differently."

"Really, I haven't thought of them," she answered petulantly. "But why, may I ask, don't they come to the post?"

"They prefer to stay in their own little home. In their present trouble and grief, it is particularly dear to them—would be to anyone."

"I think it odd, Captain, that they should choose to stay over there alone. Can—can they be—eh—quite nice?"

"Madame," replied Oliver, sternly, "they wish to do what would please their father; they wish to be independent."

"Ah!" Mrs. Cummings threw up her head.

"And let me say that I heartily commend them," Oliver fairly roared. "They are made of the stuff of our forefathers, who pushed their way into the wilderness. Their spirit is the spirit of the frontier." With which, bowing and fuming, the captain stamped out.

Mrs. Oliver, a motherly chunk of a woman, thought very "differently." Work and babies she consigned to a thrifty trooper's wife and, in a

jiffy, pinned on a bonnet that had stood various seasons. "I'll be back in the morning," she said, with a kiss for each of the seven. Then, stuffing a tidbit or two into the wide pockets of a duster, she hastened away.

Captain Oliver, meanwhile, had cleared the front room of his progeny and summoned the surgeon, Lieutenant Fraser and Matthews.

Matthews came last. As he entered, the three men were struck by a curious change in him. He was erect and somewhat soldierly in his bearing; he had let his hair grow until it rested upon the handkerchief knotted about his throat; while his dress now aped that of the more picturesque scouts, yet was still half military. Buckskin trousers, down which, at the outer seams, was a dripping of fringe, were tucked into high boots. Over his red flannel shirt he wore a tunic or blouse, also of buckskin, fringed the length of the arms, and belted at the waist like a hunting-shirt. A vest no longer concealed his revolvers; his weapons were at his side, like a trooper's. In one gauntleted hand, he held a wide, grey hat.

"You want to see me, Cap'n?" he asked, meeting that officer's look squarely.

"Yes," answered Oliver, shortly. "I demand an exact account of your time for the past thirty-six hours, beginning with the evening after the departure of the command. I need not tell you why I ask this, and I make no apology for asking. There are reasons for your wanting that old man over there out of the way. You attacked his house in the winter during his absence, when two defenceless women were at home to repel your attack. That lays you open to mistrust. I may add that Lancaster's eldest girl regards you as her father's murderer."

As Oliver talked, his woe-begone face had grown fierce and dark. Now, he arose, lifting clenched fists. "Murder," he cried; "under my very nose, and against a household that I had sworn to guard. Speak,

Matthews, *speak!*"

Matthews screwed up his mouth thoughtfully and looked into space. "Beginning the ev'ning after the command left?" he said. "Let me see. Why, I ain't crossed since the Colonel left."

"Account for your time," repeated Oliver.

"I messed at Blakely's that night. Afterward, me and Kippis had a little game."

"What game?"

"Cards."

"Ah!" At once, Oliver sent for the sutler and the sergeant, and, waiting for them, tramped up and down. When the men came, he halted and with pointed finger asked Matthews to repeat his story. The interpreter did so.

"And how long did that game last?" demanded Oliver.

Without looking in Kippis' direction, the interpreter answered. "Till revelly," he said.

Fraser grunted, the surgeon smiled broadly. But the captain frowned.

"Of that, later," he said significantly. "Kippis?"

The sergeant stepped forward. "Hit's hall true, sir," he faltered. It was Kippis' misfortune always to look more guilty than he was. With Oliver's angry gaze upon him, he flushed redder than fire.

The captain was only half satisfied. He turned to the sutler. "And *you*, Blakeley?"

The sutler had a round, jolly figure—a figure that was a living advertisement of the fat-producing quality of his edible wares. At Oliver's question that figure gave a startled bounce, like a kernel of corn on a hot grid. "True, sir, true," he vowed huskily, and coughed in

apprehension behind a plump hand.

The captain looked keenly from man to man. "Very well," he said. Those twelve hours accounted for, Matthews was shown innocent of planting the pole. "Tell me what you did yesterday from revelly on."

"Slept till stables."

"I know that's so," said Fraser.

"After that?" Oliver asked.

"I goes into the stockade. Little Thief was carving his bride."

The captain glanced at Fraser. The latter nodded back.

"I remember," said Oliver, slowly. "Then——?"

"Cards till revelly."

The listening officers laughed.

But there was no softening of the captain's face. "Who played with you?"

Matthews indicated the sutler and the sergeant by a sideways move of the head. "Them two," he answered.

"Blakely?"

"True—true." And Blakely gave another bounce.

"Sergeant?"

"True's far's *Hi* know, sir."

The thirty-six hours were now covered. Oliver sat down. "That'll do. I want The Squaw and the men who have been on duty at the stockade since the command left. Matthews, you may go."

Matthews bowed, Blakely and the sergeant saluted, and the three withdrew. Outside, beyond hearing, they exchanged congratulatory shakes of the hand.

"My! but the dander!" breathed the relieved sutler, rolling his apple-round head. "I was that scairt!"

"Make you happreciate the K. Ho. w'en you got 'im," returned Kippis, sagely.

Matthews shrugged his shoulders pityingly. But he had nothing to say.

The three gone, Oliver had turned to those with him. "A complete alibi," he said.

"I knew it," said Fraser. "But I wanted you to get it first hand."

"You knew?"

"Yes, sir. And I hope you'll be easy on Kippis. He and Blakely have been helping me keep tab on Matthews to prevent the very thing that's happened."

An hour later, a second group of men gathered in the captain's front room. These were the troopers for whom the commanding officer had asked. With them came Squaw Charley, quaking in his tatters, flinching at every look. As Oliver appeared, the wretched Indian was half-dragged, half-pushed before him.

The examination was short. The sentries who had tramped the high board walk vouched for The Squaw's constant presence in the stockade throughout the whole of the required time. The guards at the sliding-panel lent corroboration. From sun-up till taps of the previous day, Charley had fleshed at the hide of an elk, the scarred fury, Afraid-of-a-Fawn, hanging over him the while. Both nights, from taps on, he had watched outside the lodge occupied by the hag and an Indian girl.

Captain Oliver crossed to the bend to tell Dallas his results. "Matthews has witnesses who know where he was every minute of the time," he said. "Undoubtedly he had no active part in this affair."

"He knows about it, though," she answered.

"That would be hard to prove."

Before he went, the captain proposed certain defensive improvements for the shack. She accepted them gratefully. Later, a carpenter nailed thick cleats across the warped door, and the post blacksmith put heavy lashes of iron over the eyes of the shack.

At nightfall, a detachment landed on the east bank, divided, and went on a scout in opposite directions. It was only part of Oliver's plan of guarding, for he did one thing more—spoke plainly to Matthews in regard to the bend.

"I advise you to relinquish all claim to the Lancaster place," he said. "I shall allow no warring on girls."

Matthews gave his promise.

During the first few days that followed, Marylyn's heart beat pendulum-like between grief and dread. It was grief when, in a moment of forgetfulness, she found that she had set the table for three; or when, missing her father sorely—for in the past year he had been much with her—she spoke of him to Dallas. At such times, with sweet impartiality, she mourned him as sincerely as she had mourned her mother. But at night, when the detachment came back from its scouting, she felt a terrible dread—dread lest the hunt had been successful, and the troopers should ride across the prairie to the shack door, bearing something solemnly home.

Those first days past, however, the sharp edge of her sorrow, together with her fears, wore gradually away. She had the elastic spirit of eighteen. And she was impatient of this new heartache, which possessed none of the romantic qualities of the old. A doubt of her father's death, fostered by Dallas, grew until it became a conviction. He had been taken away, or he had fled; he would return. Meanwhile, though nothing could have induced her to leave the shack after dark, it

fretted her sorely, that, in the daytime, she was not permitted to go as far as the grove.

That restriction was the only hardship that the elder girl allowed the younger to bear. Dallas believed that their father had come to mortal harm. But she never shared that belief with Marylyn.

"We got to keep a stiff upper lip, baby sister," she would say, with an encouraging pat. And her smile was always hopeful and cheering.

Mrs. Oliver came daily, and spent her time with Marylyn. She did not feel that Dallas needed buoying—Dallas, quiet, self-poised, and staunch. Yet, all the while, the elder girl was growing wan under the strain. For, having given generously of her strength, there was no one from whom, in turn, she might take. And so her thoughts came often to be of the one who had faithfully watched over them, how faithfully, shown by the fact that catastrophe had followed swift upon his leaving. And in her heart she cried out for him.

The tragedy on the bend furnished a nine days' wonder for Brannon. But the garrison felt little grief over it. Lancaster had earned their dislike by insults open and veiled, and by his determination to cut his family off from every friendly influence. The enlisted men were even inclined to treat his disappearance facetiously. When they heard about the pole, they declared that in his fright over it, he had fired a shot, cut a finger, broken a crutch—and "lit out." One wag announced that the section-boss was mired in some alkali mud-hole; another, that he had been bitten by a polecat; a third composed some doggerel lines in which Lancaster was described as having gone "over the range." Notwithstanding this, the troopers had deep sympathy for the bereaved girls.

Oliver, never too popular, they scored roundly for his treatment of Matthews, and vowed to the latter that he had ample grounds for walking off and leaving the whole "shooting-match." But Matthews gently chided them, reminding them that any moment an interpreter

might be badly needed. Furthermore, he said, he would disregard the unfairness shown him, for he knew his duty.

Brannon was still asking Who? and Why? and How? in the Lancaster affair when Squaw Charley discovered and showed to Captain Oliver the testimony that had in some way escaped the scout. Under a willow clump on the beach before Shanty Town, was a well-defined mark in the sand, V-shaped, long, and quite deep. It was the mark left by the prow of a boat that had been pulled out of the water and hidden at the river's edge. It was almost certain proof of the route taken, going and coming, by Lancaster's assailant.

But no absolute facts were unearthed. As the days slipped by, this cruel one became apparent: the section-boss, with his wild outbursts of anger, his implacable hatreds, his suspicions, and his tantrums of jealousy—was gone.

CHAPTER XXVI

BACKSLIDING

Across the sky, a pale shining ribbon, stretched the Milky Way. The braves in the stockade were watching it, their faces reverently upturned. They sat before their lodges in silent knots of two or three; or stood apart here and there, shrouded in summer sheets of dressed cow skin, and motionless as statues. When they moved, it was to draw heavily upon a pipestone bowl and waft the incense of kinnikinick toward the glimmering strip overhead—the sacred road that leads the Sioux to the Happy Hunting Grounds.

One moon had passed since the signal smoke arose on Medicine Mountain. In that time, though they had fasted and prayed, not a crumb of hope had come to feed their languishing spirits. Truly, it seemed as if the pied buffalo were bringing them more than a generous share of ill-luck. The interpreter told them only evil news: That all but sixty of the pony soldiers had gone to hunt and kill Indians. As for the distant peak, from it had curled up no news at all!

They gambled no more. They spoke no more of the captive white women. The four condemned brooded in their wigwams, with eyes gloomy, with hair unkempt. Among the squaws, hot discontent was working. They greeted even those who brought them rations with black looks and menacing gestures. And all—warriors as well as squaws—got up with the sun and paced along the log walls like prisoned animals, wearing a deep rut into the earth.

Throughout the winter they had been contented enough with their lot. In no other winter had they enjoyed such freedom from labour and care, such health, comfort, and abundant food. But now—the grass

was grazing high. The new leaves were opening. The willows were in bud. The wild fowl were back, and nesting by river and slough. In lonely ravines, the antelope kids were bleating—proof that it was the killing season of the prong-horn. And here the village was yet shut in a pen—like pigs!

Soon—it might be any day—the four chiefs would be dragged out to die by the rope. If the rest were sent away, would it not be to some reservation? And if, by chance, they got free? Their ponies were gone. Where could they get others? Then it would be late in the summer, perhaps. On what would their women and children live? There would be no dried meat for pemmican; no caches of roots or berries; no packed fish; no smoked tongue; no backfat—nothing. And all would go hungry.

The post saw how terrible was the ferment among the hostage crew. And following David Bond's last visit to the stockade, had used extra precautions. The officers' families never entered the sliding panel now, but climbed a ladder and viewed the Indians from the safe height of the board walk. An armed escort went with the rations on issue days. The sentry beats were halved, and the number of watchers thus doubled. And every night a detail entered and rigidly searched each lodge, to see that no brave was trying, after the fashion of the badger, to burrow a way out. Squaw Charley alone was exempt from any new ruling, for he came and went when he chose.

Yet he had changed in no less degree than his brothers, though in a different way. The word from Medicine Mountain had been a blow to quiver under. For months the outcast whose loyalty The Plow-Woman boasted, had been slipping from his old-time fealty to her, made false by his dream of winning back his rank. In a moment he had seen his chance for honour wiped out. Before him again there lay only woman's work, curses, beatings, and a life with the dogs—even worse: to see her whom he coveted going to Standing Buffalo!

He could bear the curses and the cruelty. He could sit quiet under

the ridicule that outraged the childish vanity of his kind. He could thirst. He could starve. But, returning to the roof one night, he had prowled yearningly past her lodge. And had come upon her and her new lover, standing cheek to cheek, close wrapped in a single blanket.

And so this night, while the warriors watched the sacred track upon the sky, he made his way to the river. For there he meant to plead the God of David Bond, that He send him a chance for valour—a chance to slay. Out in the starlight, therefore, he fell upon his knees.

But before his simple mind had framed his petition, there entered a thought that puzzled and alarmed. He pondered upon it. The God of David Bond was a God of Peace, Who frowned in awful anger upon fighting and bloodshed. The preacher had said so. Had taught "Thou shalt not kill!" Had taught that no answers were vouchsafed to wicked prayers; but punishments, instead. *How then could a prayer of that kind be sent to Him!*

The outcast was dismayed.

Then came a happier idea. The God of David Bond being a God of peace, why trouble His ear? Why not pray this one prayer for blood to the Great Spirit he had served before—the Great Spirit who marked out the destinies of the Dakotas, who was ever strongest in times of war?

Hurriedly The Squaw got to his feet and ran to the edge of the bank, where there were climbing lengths of grapevine. Degraded, he might not use tobacco for a rite. But the Great Spirit would understand. In the dark, his hands felt for and found a dry stalk. He snapped off a finger-length of it.

A second to take flint and steel from his buckskin pouch. Another to light the bit of vine. Then——

But he did not sit upon the ground with crossed legs. Neither did he pull upon the vine. He let it go out, instead. And sank hesitatingly to

his knees. For, again, he had remembered!

David Bond had said: "The red man's god is poor and stingy. He lets his people want and starve. He lets enemies triumph over them, and destroy. But the God of the white man is rich and good. See how generously He gives to those who serve Him! Yet—lest you anger Him—have none other. Because He is a jealous God!"

He might not pray to either then! He lifted despairing eyes—and saw above him, divinely luminous, that sacred path, glittering white with the hastening spirits of the dead.

He put a ragged sleeve across his eyes to shut out the sight. It brought a picture he longed to forget—the terrible picture of his downfall:

It was a spring day, and the Uncapapas, to make ready for battle, were dancing the great sun-dance. He was the chief Moon Dog then, haughty as any, brave as the next, given to warfare and the shedding of blood. In the great tent, it was he who led.

He was naked, save for a loin-cloth. Coup-sticks were braided in his hair. Eagle feathers trailed from his scalp-lock. The skin of his body was hidden beneath devices.

He signified a wish to suffer wounding, to have willow wands run through the flesh of his back. Standing Buffalo was dancing beside him. And it was that warrior's knife which leaped from its beaded sheath to do the cutting.

And then the wounds weakened the chief Moon Dog. The wands tore his flesh past all power to endure. And he knew nothing. But when the squaws brought him to life again, they told him that, like a squaw, he had pleaded for mercy—and wept!

For this he was branded, spat upon, cast out, and cursed. For this he had gone hungry, scoured kettles, and herded with the dogs.

David Bond had come, telling him of One Who was bruised, reviled, and nailed to a tree. That One was the God of the white man. Broken in spirit, The Squaw had accepted Him.

Yet—what had the new God done for him? Was his work lighter? No! Was the food not the cast-off's still, fouled by the touch and the tongues of others and by the dirt of the pen? Yes. If the new God was good, *why had He not saved the evangelist?*

The soul of Squaw Charley tottered.

Hark!

Overhead, a high-sailing crane bugled. But to the outcast, the lonely night-cry seemed supernatural, a hail from one of the departed!

He uncovered his eyes and looked up. Above him stretched the pale, shining ribbon of the Milky Way.

Again the crane sounded its rousing, guttural cry. He shook himself, as if to free his body from a chain.

Once more he took out flint and steel and lit the bit of grapevine. Then, he sank to the prairie, where he crossed his legs like a brave. Now, with deep breath, he drew upon the stem. His nostrils filled, he tipped back his head; and from them, upward to the path, sent wreath upon wreath of adoring smoke.

CHAPTER XXVII

SIMON PLAYS A PART

One morning in early July, Matthews came swaggering into the post barber-shop, his air that of a man who is mightily pleased with himself. "Bill," said he, as he flung off blouse and hat, "wish you'd mow down this stubble of mine."

The barber set about stropping a razor. "Don't want your mane trimmed?" he inquired. "Strikes me—eh—it's pretty long."

The interpreter loosened the collar of his shirt and took a chair. "Never you mind about my mane," he answered. "It's just as long's I want it. You turn loose on my chin." He leaned back to elevate a pair of bright-topped boots.

The other directed his gaze upon the sharpening blade. "Do you happen t' know Portugee?" he asked humbly. "One of the boys is loony on a gal at Bismarck that he ain't writ to for a year. She's Portugee——"

Matthews gave a dismissing wave of the hand. "I savvy English and most Injun," he said; "none of them fancy languages, though. I been to school only a week in my hull life. That was down in Omyha, and one week was plenty." At the remembrance, he shook with silent laughter. "That week, as I say, was 'nough for *me*. The teacher—she was a lady, mind y!—tries to tell me that it's the same blamed sun we see comin' up every mornin'. 'Look a-here, now,' I says; 'don't we git a new moon onct in a while? Then, what's the matter with havin' a change of sun?' Well, that plumb stumped her. She shut up."

The barber was now ready for operations, so Matthews adjusted his shoulders, closed his pink-lidded eyes, and followed the suit of his

nonplussed teacher.

"Bill" felt there was something in the wind, and longed to question Matthews, yet dared not. The interpreter, formerly so feared, and even disliked, by the enlisted men, was now regarded in B Troop as a generally misunderstood and maligned individual—this in consequence of the Lancaster inquiry. Hence, he was playing the rôle of injured innocence, and seriously taking himself for a popular hero. He was more cocksure and conceited than ever before, and more prone to brag and bully. Scraping diligently away, the barber shuddered at the thought of even letting the razor slip.

Kippis was less respectful. He entered when Matthews was rising, all redolent of bay-rum, and surveyed the latter in mock amaze. "My, ho, my!" he cried. "Hain't we bloomin' fine!"

Matthews wriggled those faint lines upon his glistening forehead that served for eyebrows. "You go soak your head," he retorted.

"And no gun hon 'is 'ip," went on the sergeant. "But w'y, ho, w'y does 'e wear red shirts?"

The interpreter spraddled out his legs. "Folks git rich mindin' their own business," he said meaningly.

Kippis could not forego a last jibe. "Person'd *halmost* think you's goin' sparkin'," he declared.

Matthews gave a start, and his keen eyes shot a searching glance at the sergeant's smiling countenance. What he read there reassured him. The other was bantering without a notion that he approached the truth. The interpreter shrugged and stalked out. Within the hour, he was on his way to the Lancasters'.

He did not go to the shack, however. From the cottonwoods, he spied Dallas at work in the corn, so he directed his steps thither. She did not see him. Her back was toward the river, and the sun was glinting on her swinging hoe. Beyond her, on a picket-rope, was

Simon, the bull. He was travelling in a restless circle, and sending lonesome blasts across the deserted prairie. He, alone, saw the interpreter, and paused in his rounds, head raised and eyes bulging inquiringly.

Dallas weeded on, unconscious of a visitor. The corn was shoulder-high now, and bearded. Its long leaves swayed and whispered covering the sound of Matthews' approach. But when he was yet some rods off, a flock of ground-sparrows rose before him with startled twitters. At that, she looked back. The next instant, she had caught up the Sharps.

Matthews halted and lifted his hat, displaying hair pasted down to a silky smoothness. "I ain't got no gun," he said quietly. "I jus' come for to have a talk."

She made no answer.

The interpreter shifted from foot to foot and mopped his forehead. "I allus been sorry for what I done las' winter," he went on. "I was a blame fool to come scarin' you gals—ought to knowed better. But, you see, when I started, nobody told me there was women folks over here."

Dallas took a deep breath.

"I wanted to tell you," continued Matthews. "And—and I wanted to say I feel sorry about you' losin' your pa. Now he's dead, I wouldn't take this here land if you come to me and says, 'Nick, it's yourn.' That's jus' the way I feel—yes, ma'am. I savvy how to treat a lady, Miss Lancaster, gentlemanly and honourable."

"You talk nice," commented the girl.

His look faltered from hers. He gave his hard laugh. "You're a little out of temper," he said soothingly. "*That's* natural, though. You had a lot of trouble."

"My trouble's all owing to you," she answered passionately. "And I'll thank you to go—*right now*."

He put out a hand in expostulation. "Jus' a minute," he begged. "You done me wrong, but I don't hold it ag'in you. Jus' believe I didn't hurt your pa. And I admire you and your sister—sure I do. By golly! You're blamed sandy!"

"You take big chances to come here."

"Now, Miss Lancaster!" His chin sank. He wagged his head dolefully. Then, whether from warmth, or a desire to display the glories of his raiment, he took off his blouse.

As he talked, in a half-whine that was meant to be placating, Simon suddenly became a more interested spectator. He began to revolve again, and at the very end of his rope, slipping around with tigerish gracefulness; or, the rope taut, he halted as near as possible to the two in the corn, stamped one forefoot angrily and shook his curly head. There, a bold affront, was that blot of glaring scarlet. It awoke in him a long-slumbering lust for fight.

But the interpreter did not remark the bull. After repeated praise and condolence, he had arrived at the main object of his visit.

"I got a proposition to make you," he was saying, the while he cooled himself with his hat. "It's jus' this, and it puts a' end to the hull row. You and me will forgit what's past and done. Eh?" He paused impressively, and threw out an arm toward the shack. Smoke was curling out of the chimney. A slender figure was flitting to and fro within the open door. "And if I come to see the little one, maybe it'll be O. K.?" To make himself clearer, he touched a hand to his mouth and wafted toward the house a smacking kiss.

Sudden fury seized Dallas. Her lips moved.

A few rods away was another as furious, one whose eyes were as red as the interpreter's. Simon was pawing with alternate hoofs, and

tossing dirt and grass into the air. With each stroke he gave a sullen rumble.

"Now," proceeded Matthews, speaking from one side of his mouth, "you and me wouldn't jibe." He giggled with a feeble attempt at mirth. "But your sister, she's a nice little gal. And she'd like me. I'm——"

He got no further, nor was Dallas given time to reply. A resonant blare rang through the lanes of corn. Then came the sound of trotting. They turned, to behold Simon advancing. He had jerked up the picket-pin!

Matthews saw his peril. With a curse of alarm he dropped coat and hat and made for the coulée.

But to no use. The sight of that fleeing red maddened the bull. His feet stretched to a gallop, his broad horns lowered until his muzzle touched the grass, his tail sprang out to the level of his curly back. With the picket-rope hissing across his flanks, and with no eye for his mistress, he bore down upon the hapless Matthews.

"Shoot him! Shoot——" screamed Matthews. The bull was at his heels. With quick thought, he side-stepped.

It gave him a brief respite. But, since Simon went on for a space and then wheeled, it also cut him off from the coulée. He tore toward the shack, now. After him, tether whipping among the stalks, charged the bull. Again the interpreter side-stepped, just in time, and with the dexterity of a matador. But Simon was more alert, and came about like a cow-pony, emitting terrible bellows. Matthews fled toward Dallas. His face was a sickly green; his hair was loosened and waved backward in the sun.

"Simon!" cried Dallas, as the two went by.

Matthews was winded, and when the bull's hot breath fanned his back for the third time, he resorted to strategy. Once more stepping aside, and escaping the sharp horns by less than a foot, he followed,

and, in desperation, seized Simon by the tail.

And now the bull's anger was suddenly changed to fear; his desire to horn that scarlet thing became a desire to get rid of it. With a bawl of terror he darted this way and that, trying to shake himself free, and swinging Matthews clear of the ground. This method failed. At once he adopted new tactics. Bellowing, he raced away through the corn dragging the interpreter astride of the stalks, plowing up the earth with him, rolling him feet-first or sidelong down the rows. But like grim death, and with raucous oaths, Matthews hung on.

Out of the corn to the coulée road, they went—when Simon saw the grove at the landing. Among those trees many a pestering buffalo-fly had been outwitted; there, where grapevines tangled, many a mosquito had been rubbed away. Quick as a flash, Simon made for the cut, with Matthews coming breathlessly after.

The interpreter thanked his stars for the bull's manoeuvre. The grove would give him shelter; he could dodge behind a friendly trunk, or shin one to safety. He——

Simon had stopped to indulge in more whiplash waltzing, and the arm-weary Matthews could scarcely keep his hold. "*Ma-a-aw! Ma-a-aw!*" roared the bull. Then, discouraged, he shot forward again.

But now fright consumed him, and he lost thought of scratching free of his tormentor. His red eyes were popping from his curly face. His mouth was wide. His tongue lolled. With great jumps, he sped straight through the grove.

It was all too swift for calculation. Matthews was conscious only of a great wind, of an invisible power that bound him to that bull's tail, of a dull roar in the ears, a blur in the eyes——

Simon leaped the hedge of fruit-hung grapevines, poised for a second on the brink of the river's caving bank—his feet together, his neck stretched. Then, the red of him disappeared. And, after it, the

more vivid tuft at the end of his tail.



CHAPTER XXVIII

A CHANGE IN PLAN

It was Old Michael who fished the interpreter from his unwelcome bath. Choking with rage and spewing muddy water, Matthews was hauled into the stern of a pirogue. There, while the pilot rowed slowly to the Brannon shore, he stretched his sorry, bedrabbled figure—a figure in striking contrast to that of an hour before. His handkerchief hung upon one ear, his red shirt clung, his buckskin trousers, dark and slick from their sousing, bellied with water let in at the band; his bright-topped boots spurted like pump-nozzles, his pale hair straggled and dripped into his eyes.

When the boat touched at the steamer-side, he raised himself to look back. Simon was leisurely ascending the cut, and reaching to left and right for tender wisps of vine. Matthews gave his hard laugh. "I'll make meat of *you*," he promised savagely. Then he turned to Michael.

The Irishman was leaning back, steadying his craft against the bank with one hand, holding his stub pipe out in the other. His blowzy face was blowzier than ever. Down it, from his closed lids, ran the teardrops, chasing one another into the black-notched cavern of his mouth.

Here was a culprit handy to the moment's anger. Matthews arose in his squashing boots. "You lop-eared son-of-a-gun, who you laughin' at?" he demanded.

The cavern widened till the face was split in two. "W-w-w-ah!" gasped the pilot.

"Maybe you think it was funny," said the interpreter, with suave heat. Cunning deviltry distorted his features. And, stepping forward in the boat, he kicked Michael on a bunion.

Pain sobered the pilot. With a roar of "Howley smoke!" he swung his paddle aloft.

The interpreter was too quick for him. Like a frightened muskrat, he sought the water, floundered to a solid footing, and waded out. "You *will* monkey with a buzz-saw!" he taunted. "*Jus' wait.*"

Clinging to his injured foot, Old Michael rocked himself and cursed. But not for long. He was soon rambling toward the barracks. "For," he argued, "there's more 'n wan way t' kill a cat."

In a frontier post, news flies with the dust in the air. Soon the story of Matthews and the bull had spread to every soul at Brannon. The Line chatted it from gallery to gallery. Clothes-Pin Row digested it in hilarious groups. At barracks, it set the men to swapping yarns. "I knowed a feller onct that was goin' past a bull-pen," declared one trooper, "and he had a pail of cherries, and I'll be darned if——" "But, say! Down home, one time," put in a second, "there was a vaquero with a red sash that was stoopin' to fix a flank girth, and——" "Why, that ain't a two-spot to what happened in Kansas a year ago this summer. The purtiest gal I ever seen—you know them Kansas gals can be purty—she had a wig that'd keep your hands warm in January. Well——"

When, however, the surgeon recounted the story at the bachelors' noon mess, mirth over it was noticeably lacking. To the little circle of officers there was nothing comical in the fact that a man from the post had molested the girls so recently orphaned. And all save Fraser vowed stormily that Matthews would be called to account. The young lieutenant said nothing.

Before the meal ended, the interpreter came in. He had changed his clothes and restored his hair to its pristine smoothness. He gave

the group his usual bob and smile.

Cold stares answered him—from all but one, who fairly bounded from his chair. It was Fraser, face red, shoulders working under the blue of his uniform. He planted himself before Matthews.

"You damned blackguard!" he gasped.

The other looked highly amused. "What's got into *your* craw, sonny?" he inquired.

"You damned blackguard!" repeated Fraser. And struck out.

An amazed and delighted mess room looked on. For Fraser, the tender-hearted, Fraser, the pink-cheeked "mamma's darling," was battering the interpreter hammer and tongs!

From the doorway the captain's voice interrupted the battle, and the two men were pulled apart. Matthews fell to wiping at his stained lips, which had magically puffed to proportions suggesting those of the colonel's black cook. While the lieutenant was panting, and struggling wildly to get free.

Oliver thrust the latter behind him and addressed the interpreter. "I'm not stopping this boy because I don't think you need a sound thrashing," he said. "I'd like to see you walloped within an inch of your life. But I can't have this kind of thing going on."

"I wasn't goin' to tech them gals," lisped Matthews. "I ain't no city tough."

"We shan't need *your* services at Brannon any longer. You light out."

After that, mess went merrily on. "Didn't know you had it in you, Fraser," marvelled one officer. "By crackey!" added a second. "How you *can* slug!" The surgeon sighed. "No one has ever understood Robert," said he, "but women, critters, and kids."

And now Matthews' blood was up, and under his sloping forehead the grey-matter was bubbling and boiling like the soup in the sutler's pot. He hurled out terrible oaths—against the shack, against Captain Oliver, against Fraser, against the old pilot. Dallas Lancaster had made a cheap spectacle of him; the commanding officer had ordered him to leave Brannon; the "unlicked calf" of a lieutenant had whipped him out of hand; and the man most ready to guzzle his liquor had gone through the barracks a-blabbing.

He hurried to his room to pack his belongings. "I'll fix 'em, I'll fix 'em," he raged. "I'll git even with the hull crowd."

He halted at a window and looked across the Missouri at the little shack. "When the reds go to the reservation, that'll do for *you*," he said. "But—how can I soak them damned shoulder-straps?"

It was then that a change in his plan came to his mind. Why wait until the Indians were sent, if——

The more he thought of the change, the better he liked it. "One deal, and everybody fixed. Land'll be mine, and there'll be some court-martialin'."

He determined to get into the stockade for a last talk with the hostages. If they approved what he proposed, he would promise them his services. Yes, he would. The value of the quarter-section had made him fight for the Bend. But this was a horse of another colour. His pride had been outraged—for that he would have his quits.

His conduct earlier in the day, and the fight at the sutler's, gave place, that afternoon, to other and more direful news. A steamer touched on its way down the river and told of the Custer massacre. Not a trooper at Brannon but had lost a friend; not an officer but had lost several. Gloom settled upon the post, and Matthews was forgotten.

He took advantage of that. Before an order went out to prevent him,

he went through the wicket of the sliding-panel and gathered around him the four chiefs named in Cummings' ultimatum. They were more sullen, unhappy, and discouraged than ever. A few words, and he had them breathless with interest

"You must look to me alone for freedom now," he said. "There has been a great battle in the Valley of the Greasy Grass. Custer, the Long Hair, met Sitting Bull and his allies. And Custer and all his men are dead."

"Ho, hos," of joy greeted the announcement.

"Yet this is not good for you. There will be other battles. Your brothers will have no time to come and rescue you. Even your friends, the Scarred-Arms, will not help. For it is said that the Cheyenne warriors are gone to join the Sioux——"

"What of the two white squaws that were captured?" asked Shoot-at-the-Tree anxiously. "And what of us—is there danger?"

"The women are still with your people. And who knows what may happen soon? So I come to speak of your delivery. I shall get you free—you shall free my land."

"But our women," suggested Standing Buffalo, his eye straying toward a tent at the stockade's centre; "they go free, too?"

"That is impossible. But what does it matter? When you are gone, your women and children will be cared for—put upon a reservation. From there, you can steal them back."

"But how can we get free?" inquired Lame Foot. "Tell us quickly."

Matthews drew the four chiefs' heads together and whispered to them.

After a time, all rose.

"Shall we have guns?" inquired Canada John.

"No—bows and arrows. I can get them, and hide them in my board lodge across the river."

Lame Foot pouted. "Our brothers who are fighting have fine new rifles from Standing Rock."

"Rifles I cannot get," said Matthews.

"But," said Standing Buffalo, "if we cross to your lodge and get our bows and arrows, will not the pony soldiers follow in their smoking-canoe?"

"Bah!" retorted the interpreter. "Am I like a pig for sense? The smoking-canoe shall be gone."

The chiefs nodded.

"I must go," added Matthews. "There is no time for the pipe. Remember, if you are discovered trying to escape, I know nothing of it. Then, I shall try another plan. And keep everything from The Squaw. He is a friend to the pony soldiers. He may tattle."

"And your reward," said Canada John, softly: "It is that The Plow-Woman and her sister shall be——"

Matthews put a finger to his lips. "You will free my land," he said.

"When the night comes?" whispered Lame Foot. They pressed about Matthews, taking his hands.

"When the night comes," he answered, "you will know by a sign. Let a warrior keep watch. For it shall come when the moon dies. It shall be the call of a mourning dove."

CHAPTER XXIX

LOUNSBURY'S RETURN

Bismarck nearing at last! Since dawn, Lounsbury's head had been poked from a window of the forward car. Now, he followed it with a wedge of shoulder, and muttered a fervent "Thank God!" His face was blackened by the breath of the engine, his hair was roughed by the tugging wind. So that he bore not a trace of the past month's careful grooming. Outside of Chicago, he had shed his Eastern garb for blue flannel shirt, dark breeches, and tall boots. Again he was a frontiersman.

A brakeman entered to call out the final stop. Cramped bulks, here and there, slowly unwound their sleepy lengths and gazed around. A slim recruit in a front seat, who was outward-bound to fight Indians, wakened with a protesting oath. Other occupants of the car grudgingly put away their card packs, but cheerfully clapped on their hats. A long, hot journey was done.

But Lounsbury, when he drew in his head and shoulder, delayed his preparations to alight. He reached down to a boot-leg and fished out a letter, one paragraph of which he carefully re-read.

"As I say, if you look for that rascal, you'll find the right man. He was here, for Charley saw him. 'Who was it?' I asked the Indian. What do you think he did—he crossed his fingers on his nose!"

Lounsbury took a deep breath. "It's likely," he said aloud. "It don't take courage to kill a cripple."

The wheels were yet turning when Lounsbury swung off. His looped belt had been buckled on, and once more his revolver hung handily upon his thigh. As he tossed his satchel to the ticket-agent, he gave

the ".45" a swift look over. Then, with the expression that the Clark outfit respected showing through the grime of the train, he started on a tour of saloons.

In a square-fronted groggery, his hunt ended. An assortment of adventurers packed the place—mule-skinners, soldiers, gamblers, settlers. Among them was a sprinkle of women. He pushed his way through the crowd until he reached the bar. There, officiating in pink shirt-sleeves, was the "Babe."

A moment Lounsbury faced him in silence, his cheeks puffing and his chest swelling in an effort at self-control. Then, dropping his hand to the ".45," he gave a jerk of the head. "Come out," he ordered.

The "Babe's" squint eyes made separate inspections of the room. He was in the act of pouring from a bottle to a glass. Now, as he held them before him, they tinkled together.

His customer backed away to the door, where it was cooler. The women cluttered at the farther bar-end. The other loungers rotated to a position behind Lounsbury, and waited, all a-grin.

He came loafing out, the sweat standing in huge beads upon his nose. Lounsbury advanced to him, playing a tattoo along the bar with his left hand.

"Babe," he said quietly, "the train goes back Chicago-way in the morning."

The other blinked and gulped. "W'y, w'y——" he began.

"You take it," continued Lounsbury. "Your family's getting darned unpopular here."

The "Babe's" diverging orbs popped from his face and again played from side to side.

"Y-e-e-s," drawled Lounsbury. He ripped open the other's vest. Two pistols were displayed, snuggling head to head. He plucked them out

and kicked them across the room. "The morning train," he repeated. "So long."

"Babe" gave a weak nod. Lounsbury walked out. "Howdy, boys, howdy," he said pleasantly as he went. The admiring crowd returned his salute, and rotated back to the bar.

He wasted no further time, but hurried to his store, a saddle-roofed building farther along the street. Before it paced a Fort Lincoln officer. Lounsbury stopped him for news.

"You ought to be chuck full of it," returned the officer, pumping the storekeeper's arm; "just in from New York."

"The redskins?"

"Daytime sortie on us yesterday."

"Pretty sassy. How about Brannon?"

"Nothing since old Lancaster——"

"I heard that—Fraser wrote me." Lounsbury gritted his teeth.

"And our poor Custer?"

"Ah, poor Custer! The East's talking about nothing else."

"Awful! awful!" The officer turned away to hide the twitching of his face.

"Going to Lincoln now?" asked Lounsbury.

"Not right away."

"Then, I'm off."

"For Lincoln?"

"No, for Brannon."

"*Brannon!* Alone? Lounsbury! Why, the Indians——"

"I'm going, just the same." He hailed a neighbour to bargain for a

cayuse of reputed wind and speed. In another half-hour he was ready.

He rode as light as possible. Behind the cantle, rolled in a poncho, he tied some hardtack, jerked beef, and brandy. His revolver was reinforced by a Henry, which he carried in a holster under his leg. For the ".45," he took fifty rounds. A second fifty, designed for the rifle, occupied the loops of his belt. Thus armed and provisioned, he jogged out of town.

Good fortune made the journey almost uneventful. He saw but one Indian, who loped into sight from a wooded bottom, and turned tail when Lounsbury levelled his gun. Twice only did he come upon signs of savages. Toward the middle of the first night, he passed a pile of glowing embers, where food had been cooked and eaten; and fifty miles lower down, the next afternoon, as he dismounted at a rivulet, the cayuse shied from an antelope kid that had dragged itself to the water for a last drink. There was an arrow through its neck, and the little body was still limber.

Just before dawn, the second morning, he turned with the river, crossed the coulée, and reined upon the yellowing bend. To his left, a black dot, stood the shack. Three smaller dots were near it—Simon and the mule team. South, on the opposite bank, were the low, whitewashed buildings of Fort Brannon. He bared his dust-powdered head in thanksgiving.

The cayuse was warm and dripping. He rode to Shanty Town, loosened the cinch, and led the animal up and down before the deserted huts. When it stopped blowing and reached for grass, he picketed it on a lariat north of The Trooper's Delight. Then he descended to the landing. The light was growing. Already he had been seen from the post. On his hallooing, a small boat shoved off toward him, dancing its way against the current. Old Michael was not in it, only his citizen helpers. Fearing their tittle-tattle, Lounsbury curbed his impatience to ask about the shack. Landed, he made for the "Bach" quarters on the Line.

Fraser was not up. To his "Come in," Lounsbury entered. They shook hands without a word, and the storekeeper sat down on the edge of the bed.

After a while, the lieutenant reached out to put a hand on the other's knee.

"Lounsbury," he said, "I feel like a criminal. But I never dreamed anything would go wrong if I kept track of Matthews."

"Why, we both thought that, Fraser. You're not to blame any more than I am."

"Oh, if I'd only——"

"But we can't spend any time kicking ourselves. After this there mustn't be a loophole. Besides watching Matthews, we must——"

"Matthews isn't here."

"What!"

"Kicked out. We don't know where he is." Rapidly, Fraser related the story of Simon's gallantry.

There was another piece of news of lesser importance: An Indian girl named Brown Mink was seriously ill. Her wigwam had been moved to the western curve of the stockade, where the ground was clear, and been changed from tepee-shape to the form of a walled wickie-up. Mrs. Cummings, touched with pity, had sent her a comfortable bed, while Captain Oliver, touched no less, and pleased by the good-humour of his prisoners, had ordered that, during the daily search of the enclosure, the tent of the sick girl be left entirely undisturbed.

The young officer omitted to tell of his share in the interpreter's departure, and was distracted over an accident that had befallen him. On visiting his wild pets the previous evening, he had found that a box containing reptiles had been broken open, somehow, and that all his

rattlesnakes were gone!

With the first call for the trumpeters, Lounsbury routed the sutler in a quest for breakfast. Then, once more he sought the river. There was no waiting for men to row him. He found the small boat, headed for the beach below Shanty Town, mounted the cayuse, and climbed the steep road to the prairie. Before him, on a green stretch between river and shack, he saw Dallas.

She was cutting grass in that same swale across which, a month before, had been tracked the deep-planted, laboured footprints. As she mowed, she moved forward slowly, the bent snathe describing a regular half-circle, the long, curved blade clearing a fragrant path. Her hat was off, and lay at a distance behind her, where it floated, boat-like, on some blue-stem tops. Still farther behind was Simon, cropping industriously, and keeping a furtive watch upon his mistress out of the corner of one fiery brown eye.

Lounsbury spurred his horse to a run. She saw him coming, but not knowing him, kept her scythe on the swing. When he had covered the greater part of the way, however, she stopped work, retreated to her hat, and put it on. Then, from beside it, she picked up the Sharps.

He saw that, and his jaw squared. The blood darkened his face, too, as if the sight shamed him. He spurred faster, reined so sharply that the horse slid upon its fetlocks, and swung off.

"Dallas!" he cried. It was not a greeting, but a plea.

The moment was one long dreamed of, yearned for. A woman less genuine might have met it without a show of feeling. She—outspoken and simple—could not. Her eyes swam. Dropping the gun, she clasped his hand greedily.

"I knew you'd get back quick as you could," she said, choking.

For a long moment they stood thus, hand-in-hand, looking at each other. She saw that he was changed. The glint of merriment was gone

from his eyes. His forehead bore new lines. His mouth had lost its boyishness. With her, the past four weeks had also left their mark. The old look of high purpose was on her face. But she was older and graver, and wore the new expression that Oliver had seen.

She spoke first. "Your mother?" she faltered inquiringly, and withdrew a step.

"My mother—is gone," he said slowly. Then, after a pause, "I came right after that; didn't stop to settle things. I can go back to the States later. But if I'd been here sooner—it mightn't 'a' happened——"

She checked him gently. "Now, you got enough to worry you without us. We wouldn't go to the Fort or Bismarck. And that was the whole trouble." To excuse her father, and to take the blame herself, she told him of the refusal of David Bond's money, and of Mrs. Cummings' slight.

"You see," she explained earnestly, by way of putting the best possible colour to the latter episode, "you see, they think over there that we're trash. So they're bound to let us alone. It ain't that they haven't good manners——"

It was Lounsbury's turn to interrupt. He was tramping about. "Manners!" he said violently; "manners! what's manners to do with it? There's a lot that's good manners—and cursed bad heart!"

She took up the scythe, brought a whetstone from the depths of a pocket and ran it down the blade thoughtfully.

"I'm going to look into this whole business from first to last," he went on more quietly. "I'll spend the next few days investigating. You got my letter?"

"We went to Clark's for you, and got it there." She added that she had feared Braden, and spoke of his slack courtesy.

"Oh, well," he said, partly in apology for the real-estate agent, "if a

man out here don't take off his hat to a girl, that means nothing."

"It wasn't the hat," she answered, and described Braden's further conduct.

Lounsbury blazed up again. "I'll see about that, too," he declared. "He must be another sample of imported manners."

They heard the cheery grinding of a coffee-mill. As if struck by a thought, she looked toward the shack.

"It's about time for me to go in," she said, a little flurried. Then, "Won't—won't you come, too, and take a snack with us? Marylyn'd like to see you."

"Marylyn!" He had read her meaning. "Why, Dallas, you don't meant to say that you—that she still——"

"Yes," very low.

"Well,"—Lounsbury was determined now,— "there's got to be some kind of an understanding. I told you how I felt, and you ran away from me. You shan't do it this time. I'll go to the house, and I'll tell Marylyn just how things are. I *will*."

"Oh, my baby sister!" she murmured.

Instantly, he was all gentleness. "No—no, I won't tell her," he said. "But I'm sick and tired of being tied this way, hand and foot. It was your father first. And now *this* again—Dallas!"

She could not answer him.

"I won't tell her. I'll wait till—till you do. But, you see that I can't go to the house. And I suppose I oughtn't to stay here any longer, for her to see. But I'm coming back here to-night—at taps."

She shook her head. "Marylyn would be alone," she said hastily. "So—so I can't."

"You will, I know you will. She'll be asleep."

"No—no——"

"At taps, Dallas." He touched the hand that held the scythe upright. She thought all at once how worn he was, and white. Another moment, he had mounted and was cantering off.

Left alone, she dreaded going into breakfast, expecting a hurtful silence, or passionate protests, perhaps tears. And she tried to find it in her heart to blame Lounsbury for not accompanying her.

But Marylyn welcomed her with a question or two, exclaimed sorrowfully at the news of Lounsbury's mother, and, when the elder girl explained that the storekeeper had been too busy to come to the shack, returned a faint smile.

"The brave baby!" thought Dallas.

But Marylyn was puzzling over Lounsbury's true reason for staying away—now when their father was not there to object. He had told Dallas he was busy. That, however, was only a pretext. Finally she concluded that Fraser, in spite of his promise, had made a confidant of the storekeeper, and that the latter had seen the hopelessness of his affection for her.

"I'm glad," she said to herself. "Now, I won't have to tell him."

Lounsbury pursued a feverish investigation that day, and found no one who cared to quibble with him. From the captain, never jealous of his dignity, to the roly-poly sutler, there was a very outburst of facts. As they came, he received them with pitchfork sharpness, examined them and tossed them aside, which led a wag to remark that the storekeeper was kin to Simon. Yet, when "retreat" sounded, he admitted himself hedged in by indisputable testimony. Lancaster's death was beyond easy solving. If Matthews were guilty, he was not the principal, only an accessory, to the crime. Nevertheless, could the storekeeper have come face to face with the interpreter that day, scores would have been settled.

To Dallas, laying the blue-stem of the swale, the hours of the morning went slowly. Yet how warm and golden they seemed! how tuneful the birds! how cottony-white the clouds that flecked the sky! how pleasant the long, hushing sound of the scythe! And all the while, she thrilled with expectancy, and the minutes hung upon each other, as if loath to pass.

The very keenness of her joy brought a swift revulsion. At dinner, with Marylyn sitting across from her, she began to see more clearly. She realised she had been dreaming; that for her there was only self-denial. She ate nothing, but drank her dipper thirstily, as if to wash away a parch in her throat. Back in the swale again, the scythe was swung less steadily, but with more strength, so that its sharp tip often hacked up the ground. She pulled her hat over her eyes, forbore glancing toward the fort—and fought. A thousand times she vowed she would not meet Lounsbury that night. To give herself a better whip-hand, she called up pictures of Marylyn—Marylyn, the baby, all dimples and lisping demands for "Dals!" Marylyn, the child, slender, yellow-haired, pale; Marylyn, entering womanhood, still dependent, and, in her frailty, her pensiveness, more dear than ever before.

Then, with the sun beating upon her, with her temples streaming and throbbing under the heat and the strain, Dallas' spirit began to flag. Had she not always borne a hard load? suffered discomforts? There were the women of the post—they knew little toil or privation. The brunt of her mother's loss, her father's taking, had fallen upon her. Was she always to have only sorrow? Now, when happiness came her way—a happiness that another might not have—must she be denied it? Disheartened, dizzy, she left the swale for the shade of the nearest trees.

It was the hottest part of the day, and the life of the prairie seemed at a standstill. No breeze stirred the high cottonwoods; the corn blades were quiet; the birds, song-less; the frogs, hid. Resting on the fading green, looking out upon the silent reaches, she grew calm.

Then she remembered her sister's confession. Again, in fancy, she was leaning down in the light of a winter fire, looking into a tear-stained face. She felt humiliation for her own weakness, and for thoughts disloyal to Marylyn.

"When I see him again, I'll make him promise to come and visit her," she said. "Oh, he must! he *must!*" At last, renewed in spirit, she returned bravely to her work.

But the afternoon was not without its tormenting thoughts. And she, who feared no physical danger, quailed before a temptation that was overwhelming.

When the shack pointed a stubby finger toward the east, and the mules, with Simon in tag, came trailing home from their grazing, Marylyn called her. Near the door, there wafted out the good smell of corn-pone and roasting fowl. She drew up the well-bucket, hand over hand, and washed in its generous leak.

Within, the night wind was changing and sweetening the air. As the younger girl bustled about, the elder put on a fresher dress, and smoothed and plaited her hair. Again, that strange elation! She was almost glad.

"Supper!" sang out Marylyn.

Dallas started consciously. She was standing at a window, holding before her the broken bit of looking-glass.

CHAPTER XXX

THE TRYST

The thrashers were singing to the moon. Out of the gaping coulée came their chorus, loud, rich, and artfully melodised. It mingled, as it were, with the scent that the wind fanned from the sumach blossoms, yellowish-green. Moon, music, perfume—and lovers were to meet.

The trysting-place lay in billows of frosty white, like the satin dress of a bride. Lounsbury measured it impatiently, with anxious eyes turned to the shack. At the last trumpet-strain from the fort, Dallas approached it on swift foot, her shadow flitting before.

When he saw her—a slender figure—he leaped forward, eager, grateful. She saw him, and halted, raising defensive hands.

"Dallas! Dallas!" He stretched out his arms to her.

"No, no—no, no."

As well try to stem the Missouri. He caught her close and held her. He pressed his cheek tenderly to hers. She yielded, murmuring to him. Thus—for a space that was matchlessly sweet. When, without releasing her, he lifted his head, and lifted hers by a smoothing caress of her hair. Then he searched her face long and hungrily.

"Oh, Dallas, you *do* care," he said finally, and his voice was deep with joy.

She did not deny—only, "Just makes things worse," she whispered miserably.

Gently he let her go. "But I love you," he answered.

Her eyes were grave. They seemed to blame him.

"I love you," he repeated.

She was too just to forget her own lack of strength. Her eyes clouded with sadness, and brimmed. "I hate myself for coming," she said fiercely.

"We love each other. That isn't a crime," he declared.

"For you, it isn't. But it is for me. Because—it'll hurt Marylyn. Oh, you don't understand—I can't take her happiness. I can't! I can't!"

"It's not your fault that I love you, Dallas."

"What happens next *is*."

He shook his head—smiling.

She raised her chin, as if striving to master herself. "I knew all day that I'd come," she said steadily. "I'd 'a' come if I—died for it!"

"Ah, my dearest!" He put his hands upon her shoulders, drawing her near again.

She stepped back determinedly. "Let me tell you," she begged. "Please, I knew I'd come. So I made up my mind I'd do what was white—ask you to visit Marylyn, and talk to her. If you would, if you *only* would, why, at last, you couldn't help liking her!"

Again he smiled at her, shaking his head. "I love *you*, not Marylyn."

"You're a good man," she said. "You wouldn't like to see me do anything that wasn't right square. You wouldn't—think much of me if I did. I'll do wrong if—if I take you from her."

"I wouldn't have you do anything wrong," he declared stoutly. "You never could. But, dear, Marylyn is a child yet. She's too young to know her own mind. And we're taking her more seriously than she takes herself."

"You don't know how sick and down in the mouth she's been. Just

before father—went, she got a little better. After that, for a while, she was bad again. But I could see it wasn't all about father. There's something else. She's changed so—never talks much, just sits and looks and looks——" She turned away.

"I'm—I'm all she's got," she went on. "All her life I've tended her, just as if I was her mother. I fed her and dressed her. When she hurt herself, she came to me. Now, she's hurt worse than she's ever been, and she's come to me about it. I'm bound to help her."

"I happened to be the first man she got to know this side of Texas. She'd forget me in a week if she met someone else. If she don't meet someone else, I'm afraid she'll have to be hurt."

Dallas straightened proudly. "I'll never hurt her," she said.

"Nor I, if I can help it. She needn't know about us, just yet."

"I won't lie to her, either."

"Not lie, dear. But you won't refuse to come out here——"

"I do! I do! I'll never come again."

"Ah, Dallas, why should we deny ourselves that much? Why keep apart? I've lost the last dear one I had. You've lost your father, you're alone with your little sister. Come to me."

"You'd take me away?" she asked. "You'd have me give up the claim? To forget what happened?"

"God help me—no! I ask you to share your life with me, your work, your revenge, everything."

"Not yet——"

"I can't bear to see you and Marylyn staying here alone. And I can't stay near enough to protect you as I ought. Matthews is sly. If I meet him, I'll kill him, as I would a wolf. Then, he'll be out of the way. But—suppose he gets ahead of me? does you harm? Your staying here

seems all the more terrible to me since I've been East. The idea of your having just Charley to guard, of your plowing and planting and cutting hay——"

She laughed. "Outside work is fine," she said. "Better than cooking over a hot stove or breaking your back over a tub. Men have the best half of things—the air and the sky and the horses. I don't complain. I like my work. Let it make me like a man."

"It couldn't. I don't mean that. You're the womanliest woman I've ever known."

"I don't want you to ever think different."

"Never will. And I don't ask you to chain yourself up in a house. There's a big future in the cow business. We'd take my share of the Clark herd—you'd ride with me—we'd be partners."

"Wait—wait." Temptation was dragging sorely at her heart. She glanced homeward. Behind her, the tall grass was running with the wind. She longed to run with it. Yet——

"I'll wait and wait," he said; "long as you ask, if it's years."

She retreated a few steps. "I must go now. Don't think I don't know what you've done for us—the sutler, and all that. I'll remember it. But I got to go—good-by."

"Good-night, not good-by," he answered. "Can't I come this far and help you to-morrow with the hay?"

"No, no."

"Let me send a couple of men, then."

"I'll do it alone. I'd rather. It's all in but this little bit."

"But please go slow. Don't wear yourself out, Dallas."

"If my work was all!" she said sorrowfully.

"If you would come here, now and then, to me, dear——"

"I'll never come again. This once, I couldn't help it. Oh, I tried and tried! But next time I can. I'll think of Marylyn. Why, I'd give my life to make her happy!"

"But your love—that goes where it pleases."

"You won't come to see her?"

"It wouldn't help. But I'll be here every night."

She retreated again. He did not attempt to follow.

"Good-night," she said.

"Good-night, good-night."

The moon was drifting up the eastern sky, and, as she went, her shadow pursued her. He watched until it blended with the shadow of the shack. Then, walked far to the left, and laid out a beat that half circled the squat building.

"There's just one man I got to look out for," he said aloud. "It'd be different if I had to worry about Indians."

That moment, across the river, in the lodge of Standing Buffalo, the young chieftain was bending over an uncovered box, holding in one hand the shaft of an arrow, on the end of which was a piece of freshly killed dog; in the other hand he held a willow wand, sharpened. Beneath him, crawling and coiling and singing, were Lieutenant Fraser's rattlers.

The Indian kept the shaft to one side while he diligently prodded the reptiles with the willow. When he had enraged them so that they began to strike blindly at each other and at themselves, he lowered the shaft and let them drive their fangs into the meat. And when they were spent with their anger and springing, he covered the box and held up the flesh, which had turned from red to green, and was dripping dark with venom. Then, into it, he began thrusting the points

of a quiver of arrows.



CHAPTER XXXI

BY THE LIGHT OF A MATCH

A smudge was burning at the centre of the stockade. In its lee, to be safe from the swarms of pestering mosquitoes, sat the hostage braves. Their pipe-smoke blended with the smoke of the fire. Their loud gibberish was broken only when shrieks of laughter followed a sally of wit. Their black eyes sparkled. Their white teeth flashed.

Before them were their sons, now romping with the favoured dogs of the pack; now gathering to watch a wrestling-match between a chosen couple; again, lining the way while several raced down the enclosure.

The squaws and girls were also outside the lodges, the July night being hot. They cackled together to the windward side of the lordly males, and did not approach except to throw more wet sticks upon the smoulder.

The outcast watched the jollity from his dark corner, and marvelled at it. For were there not two tragedies threatening, either of which should, properly, lay hard upon the hearts of the village?

One was the nearing execution of the four condemned. Two sleeps ago, on the arrival of a runner from the absent cavalry, a wood-wagon had hauled several loads of lumber to the site of the pony corral. From that lumber—it was said openly, and he had told it in sign-language to the braves, was to be built—a *scaffold*!

The other tragedy hovered in the illness of Brown Mink. Since her lodge had been placed against the upper curve of the pen, there had been much singing, conjuring, dancing and beating of drums. But to no purpose. Daily, she wasted. She was dying!

He was not allowed to see her, to tend her fire or clean her kettle. When, on her removal, he had dared to stop at her tent-flap with a string of pike, Afraid-of-a-Fawn swooped down upon him, her long tushes clicking and frothing, snatched the wall-eyes from his hold and belaboured him with them. He had not gone back. But, in secret, he grieved over Brown Mink's suffering. And often he petitioned in her behalf, and lifted his worshipping vine toward the Milky Way.

In his sorrow, his shoulders were bent lower than ever, his ebon eyes were more doglike. Yet, he still dreamed of reinstatement, for he saw (though he could not understand it) that the warriors were again counting on escape!

They were unkempt no longer, but wore their hair neatly braided and well-greased. They ate sparingly, and only twice a day. They almost forswore water. And by covert exercise they trained away their flesh. Standing Buffalo and his haughty comrades did not waddle now under a weight of fat. As on the day of their capture, they were lank and stately.

Rejoicing in their hopes, he, too, had not been without preparation. A rusty knife found in a rubbish heap by the river had been polished by thrusting it repeatedly into the dirt. In spare moments, he made himself a sinew-backed bow, and practised many hours with it. He spent no time in the lean-to—his guard there had ceased. The necessity for food did not take him to the shack—his arrows brought down game which he cooked. At any time, with a sharp stick, he could root up his fill of wild turnips. He knew where ripe berries loaded the bushes, and where the plums reddened in the thickets. And how could he chance staying out of the stockade after midnight, when any dawn might find his brothers free?

Thoughts of Brown Mink alone took his mind from his dream. He yearned to see her again, to mark how far disease had ravaged, to show her that though all others were indifferent, he was not. And he

had determined to tell her farewell—to tell her that he would win back his lost rank. For this, he would even break his vow of silence!

The end that he might gain her side hinged upon two things: His reaching her wickie-up unseen, and the absence of the crone. These he hoped for now, as he peered from his corner.

Despite the smudge he could see whatever went on in the stockade, for the sky was clear, and the stars hung low. Before long his patience was rewarded by a gradual quieting about the grouped wigwams. As the smoke thinned for lack of fuel, the mosquitoes drove the braves, to their beds. The squaws dispersed to attend them. The children, tired with play, straggled after. The lengthening night brought a welcome coolness with it. So a sentry soon roared a command from the board walk. Then the only hostage that was left arose slowly, stretched himself, and disappeared.

The dwindling pack were the last to lie down. Some wolves were challenging saucily from the coulée mouth. The dogs answered them in long-drawn wails. Finally the wolves took off up the river, and the dogs scratched about to find a moist spot and nestled down. There was silence now, except when a cur, dreaming of the chase, yapped in his troubled sleep.

Squaw Charley crawled from under the roof and along the high wall, being careful to mark the whereabouts of the brave that was always on the watch. Above him paced the sentries. But these did not see him because he kept in the shadow. Foot by foot he went, making toward Brown Mink's tent.

At last he was so near to it that, reaching out an arm, he could touch the base of a supporting pole. He drew back then, and squatted, his eyes on the entrance. Thus, upwards of an hour went by. The time passed quickly, for it was good to be near the beloved!

Crouched within the shelter of skins was another who waited—the hag. She was looking down the stockade through a narrow slit. When

she judged that the sentries were growing less vigilant, she stood up. The outcast heard the crack of her old joints. A moment, and she stepped out stealthily and scanned the rim of the pen. Against the sky, the figure of each sentry was plainly outlined. None was near. Softly, she padded for the lodge of Standing Buffalo.

The pariah leaped up now, and took a swift step. But as his fingers closed upon the edge of the tent-flap, a whispered summons made him pause and glance around. There was a whispered reply, followed by steps as swift as his own. He sank, rolling himself into a ball. He was not a second too quick. Afraid-of-a-Fawn returned, with the chief at her heel.

Again the outcast waited, and jealously. Those within also waited, for a sentry was passing just above. Presently he was gone, and Charley leaned forward and put his ear against the tent, when he heard the scratch of a match.

It did not light, and there was a teasing laugh. The outcast sat up like a startled gopher, one hand to his breast, one out before him. Again, a scratch. A tiny flame flickered. Too amazed for fear, Charley put his eye to the slit.

Both hands came up to drive back a cry. At the rear of the wickie-up, the skins were pulled aside to reveal the stockade wall. Of this two logs showed—hollowed out so completely at the base that they were mere shells!

Before these logs, all kneeling, were the hag, Standing Buffalo and Brown Mink. The chief held the match; the old woman, a knife; the girl was empty-handed. But she was not ill—not wasted—not dying! She was full-figured. Her face was round. Her cheeks and lips were as bright as the dab of paint at the part in her hair—as crimson with health as a gorgeous cactus-flower!

The match went out. Squaw Charley dropped back to the wall's shadow. His heart was pounding madly with a twofold joy: The hacked

logs assured freedom for his brothers, for himself, fighting and rank. And she was still to be won!

"The work is over," said a man's voice.

"And when comes the call of a dove?" asked a maid's.

"Perhaps when the moon dies."

"Who can tell?" It was the growl of the crone. "The Double-Tongue has run to hole like a fox."

Once more there was silence. A sentry, as he neared, was humming an unconscious warning. When he was gone again, there was more talk. But it was low-toned, and Charley could not hear. He did not wait longer. Slipping away a rod, he dropped on all fours.

When Standing Buffalo emerged and looked to see if he might safely return, he observed that in the enclosure nothing moved but a dog, which was going toward the shingle roof. So, composedly drawing his sheet of cow's hide about him, he strode to his lodge.

Until daybreak, two Indians did not join the others in their rest. The one sat harking for the call of a mourning-dove. The other sat cross-legged beside the smudge; and as a splinter new and then revived the fire, he wafted prayers of thanksgiving to the Great Spirit on its upward-rising smoke.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE EVE OF OTHER THINGS

The wide valley was brown, with green splotches and tracings for slough and stream. The distant ranges were grey. The sky showed the misty blue of the dog-days. Far off to the north and west, black streaks edged the horizon, where smoke rolled up from prairie-fires.

Brannon was quiet to the point of lethargy. Guard was mounted, and daily dress-parade held ceremoniously. The trumpet blew its unvarying round of commands. There was no hunting, and no field duty beyond the scouting of the eastern shore. The hoarse salute of an upward-plying steamer roused the garrison to life one morning. But the interruption lasted barely half an hour. Then the steamer, her pilot-house screened by sheet iron, and her decks aswarm with infantry, rounded a bend in the river and went coughing away out of sight. Once again, interest centred at the site of the pony corral, where a platform was slowly building.

Life at the shack was even less eventful. For Dallas, it was a season of idleness. The pumpkins and the melons were swelling; the tasselled corn wanted weeks before it would ripen; the field and garden were free of weeds. With no work to do, alone except for her sister, the elder girl had ample time to worry.

Marylyn saw that she was dispirited, and increased in tenderness toward her, following her about with eyes that entreated, yet were not sad. At breakfast she spitted the choicest cuts for Dallas. In the noon heat, she was at her elbow with a dipper of ginger-beer. And supper coaxed the elder girl's failing appetite by offerings of tasty stew, white flour dumplings and pone. As for herself, Marylyn needed neither

urging nor tidbits. She ate heartily. Her sleep was a rest for both body and mind. Every afternoon she strolled across the bend to the cottonwoods. The butterflies fared beside her. Overhead, between sun and earth, hung legions of grasshoppers, like a haze. Underfoot, bluebell and sunflower nodded. And the grove was a place for dreams!

And Dallas—was a wild thing that cannot tell of its wound.

She uttered no complaint, even to Simon. The outburst that followed Lounsbury's return was her first and last. She questioned now if her suffering justified a lament. In this, she resembled her mother. A woman, coming to the section-house one torrid day, remarked wonderingly that Mrs. Lancaster gave "nary a whimper." The latter looked up with a smile. "I don't think I'm sick enough," she said. "Other people, worse off, have a right to groan." Dallas, certain that Marylyn's heartache was the keener, would not be behindhand in restraint. And her sister's happiness, forethought, and desire to please, all drove the thrust of penitence to the hilt, and turned the knife in that secret wound.

She found no solace in Marylyn's friends of the calico covers. Her thoughts were too tempestuous for that. They were like milling cattle. Around and around they tore, mingling and warring, but stilling in the end to follow the only course—self-denial. Once so rebellious, she was growing meek at last—meek and full of contrition. She was coming to dwell more too, on the lessons that the evangelist had taught her: She was coming to think of leaning where David Bond had leaned—she, who had always been a prop.

There was the old terror that had stalked beside her down to her mother's death. She had fought her way with it, and the conflict had given her strength. There was the jealousy that had smirched her sister-love. She had fought it, too, and bitterly, scorning it because she knew it for a hateful inheritance. Now was come a third misery, and the worst. She saw herself as a traitor. This was not mere

reproach. It was the torture of a stricken conscience.

Her face grew thin, her hand unsteady, her eyes wore a hunted look. At night, hers were the scalding tears that dampened the pillow.

And so the days went by. Whatever pangs of remorse, whatever longing she endured, she remained faithful to the resolution that she would not give way to temptation again. But every night brought the lonely watcher to the swale.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE END OF A DREAM

The dark of the moon was come.

All that day the sun had baked, and the steady south blow had been like the draught of an oven. As evening came, brushing a glory of red from the sky, the wind quickened, instead of lulling, and fetched up clouds that rested on the ridge-tops and roofed the wide valley. Through these not a star showed. But now and then, for an instant, the post sprang into sight out of the blackness to the weird play of the heat-lightning.

In the stockade there was perfect quiet—a quiet tense with excitement. Secrecy forbade any strong-heart songs and dances. Caution advised against mosquito fires. And suspense did away with drumming, shrill laughter, and feast-shout. The aged men, the women, and the children kept close within their lodges, where they whispered and nodded, nose to nose. The warriors stayed outside, preserving their calm with kinnikinick. In the dark, the open bowls of their scattered pipes were so many ruddy glow-worms.

From the pitchy shelter of the shingle roof, Squaw Charley looked out. He sat on his heels, about him the few mangy dogs that had not found the dinner-pot. One of these stirred. Half rising, he gave it a kick, just as one of his brothers might have done. Then he squatted again, and through the ragged strands of his bang, his black eyes sparkled eagerly. For, of late, every warrior's lodge had seen secret flesh-painting; under every warrior's blanket were hidden gaudy tracings of vermillion, scarlet, orange, and blue; and was he not painted, too!

He had sought in an ash-pile for coals; found a beef bone and snapped it for marrow; next, taken from his worn pouch a lump of red earth. He had rubbed the coals to powder in a square of rag, after which he had mixed the powder and the grease to make a paste. Then, he had pulled off his mourning blanket and his squaw's shirt, and bared his body to the waist.

Vermilion, orange, scarlet, and blue—these colours had been laid in stripes, circles, and figures upon the braves. They were colours that he, an outcast, might not use. But there was one poor privilege in flesh-painting that even he could claim. Kneeling again in clout and squaw's skirt, he had smeared the black and red in rude signs upon his chest. The braves, his brothers, had painted themselves for battle. But he, the pariah, had painted himself in the colours of death.

Suddenly he forsook the roof for the shadow of the log wall. There he waited. Two warriors had left the lodge of Brown Mink and were crossing the pen. He knew them. The shorter was Canada John, the eldest of the four condemned. The other was a Sioux who had been captured that day and cast into prison at sunset. He was a giant in stature, wore full war paint and dress, and a belt that testified his valour. For it hung thick with scalps, some jetty and coarse,—taken from heads of his own kind,—some brown or fair, with the softness that belongs to the hair of white women and little children. The two were talking low together. Presently, as they strolled near, the outcast heard the deep murmur of their voices; then their words. He leaned toward them, all ears.

"How many sleeps before the dove calls?" It was the bass of the stranger.

"Perhaps only another," answered Canada John.

There was a great laugh, like the cry of a full-fed loon. "Surely Big Ox stays not long! But how can my friends be sure that The Double-Tongue will have horses ready?"

"He claims a reward."

"Ho! Ho! and what?"

Canada John halted close to Squaw Charley. "There is a cottonwood lodge beyond the river," he said. "It should belong to The Double-Tongue. He is kept out. An old pale-face and his two daughters seized it in the Moon of Wild Cherries, and they would not go."

"An old man, you say?"

"But he hunts the white buffalo. Only the daughters are there."

"Are they young?"

"Young and sleek. One is called The Plow-Woman. She is tall, and she watches like the antelope. The younger has hair like the grass when it is withered."

"They live alone?"

"The Squaw guards——"

"Wuff!"

"And The Man-who-buys-Skins. May he be struck by the zigzag fire!"

"Who is to have the women?"

Canada John scratched his nose. "The Medicine-Giver says, 'He that first reaches them.'"

Big Ox shook his head in doubt. "The swiftest may yet fail to keep."

"Should any pursue, the women will be killed. The soldiers will think them bit by rattlesnakes."

Again Big Ox burst forth with laughter.

"Sh!"

A hammer clicked from the stockade top. A sentry began to bawl angrily.

"Git, you pup-eaters," he ordered, and slanted his gun to them. Casting dignity aside, they ducked into the nearest lodge.

Squaw Charley dragged himself back to the shingle roof. There he fell prone, resting his forehead against the ribs of a dog. The strength was gone from his body, the light from his eyes. The wind of that other's nostrils had blasted him. He was like the scattering ash-heaps of the evening smudges, where the last bit of fuel was crumbled, and the last red coal was dead.

Long, he stayed upon his face. When the first numbness was past, and his brain was rallying slowly, a very scourge of sorrow visited him—sorrow for the fate of the shack, where he had warmed himself so often, relieved his hunger, and known a kindly smile. With sorrow came remorse. He had not done his part for the little home. He had not guarded as he ought. And he had helped by bringing rattlesnakes—which he had been told were to be used for medicine—in the plot for its destruction. When sorrow and remorse had their turn, a stronger passion gnawed and racked him. It was the yearning for reinstatement.

Dwelling upon this, he became two Indians, and one of him opposed the other. They travelled separate trails—trails that bent different ways, like the horns of a buffalo. The trail to the right was a warpath. It led him behind his brothers, through the hole in the stockade. For a while he loitered, loath to share in the work on the Bend. Afterward, he joined them. They were free, and crazy with their freedom. He matched his strength with theirs; dared where they faltered; won—won——

But there was no hope for The Plow-Woman!

He was back on the other trail, and it led to the gallery where Oliver's hammock swung. The outcast made swift motions with his

hands. He was hustled along with the guard. The sliding-panel opened. The tent-flaps of Brown Mink's lodge were lifted. He was caught in a mad onrush; he was howled at; spat upon. Finally, a bruised, exiled traitor, more despised, if possible, than before, he fled skulking away.

And here was no hope for his honour!

He was back at the parting of the trails, one man again, helpless before the knowledge that safety for the shack meant the wiping out forever of his dream of becoming a brave.

When the pack deserted him, his forehead thumped the ground. Lame Foot's woman threw him a bone, hitting him fairly on the shoulder. The blow went unheeded, and he gave no thought to the pickings. The dogs, returning, fought over him. He only clawed the earth in an effort to lie flat. The bone yielded to the strongest and fiercest, the other curs leaped about him, licking at his hair. Now he did not kick them.

Of a sudden, he remembered David Bond. He got feebly to his knees, covering his face from the dogs. The evangelist had laid a charge upon him: No matter what came, he was to think first of the shack. He had accepted it before he knew it would clash with his own purpose. Was he held to the promise now? David Bond was dead. If he were not obeyed, he could never come back to punish.

But he had said to give up all—even life. He had given his own life for the stolen white women. What he preached he had followed. "Greater love," he had said, "hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

It was a queer saying. If a brave went down when a tribe met another in battle, then a friend of the dead *took* a life for that life. To *give* a life—it was different, and foolish! Was it not even cowardly for one to expect another to die for him? And yet——

He found himself upon his feet, listening. Across the stockade he saw the ruddy glow-worms of the scattered pipes dancing in the dark. But a moment later, when blinding flashes lit up the huge pen, the hostages were sitting as before, their faces lowered moodily.

Still he listened. And it came again, from the direction of the river—the long, sad, cooing call of a dove.

CHAPTER XXXIV

FIRE AND ESCAPE

With the third mourning of the dove, a figure left the lodge of Canada John and shuffled to the sliding-panel, where it knocked. In tardy answer, the wicket was pushed aside a little and a lantern was held up.

"Hey, Charley!" said a friendly voice. A white face peered into a red one, noting the uneven bang and the handkerchief tied over the head like a squaw's.

The Indian blinked at the light and showed his teeth in a grin.

Cursing, though not unkindly, the guard pushed the wicket wide. "Don't y' come botherin' me any more t'-night," he counselled, as a black blanket and a ragged skirt wriggled through.

The Indian grinned again, and did not seek to elude the lantern. Released, he shuffled away, going straight for the post. But the stockade left a few rods to the rear, he changed his course, and made toward the river. Close to its edge, he halted, and mocked the signal.

The call was repeated softly. Then call and echo neared by degrees, until the Indian and the interpreter were touching hands.

There was no need for words. The night's work was planned. They started cautiously upstream. Before long they were behind the stables, ready for the second step. It was one that devolved upon Matthews. For it he carried a long knife, single-edged, keen, and slightly curved, like a sabre.

First he tiptoed to the near-by repair-shop, where the stable-guard

and two herders were gathered about a lantern, relieving their irksome hours with cheese, hardtack, and various tall bottles that had once adorned the shelves of The Trooper's Delight. Unseen, the interpreter looked in upon the group.

Tied in twos outside the long barn were six horses, the mounts of the guard. Each of the animals was bridled and saddled. Matthews went from pair to pair of the horses, stealing along carefully. When he was done with the six, he disappeared inside. Down the rows of stalls his work was surer and more swift. What noise he made was drowned by the rush of the river.

Now Indian and white ally continued upstream. Beyond the northern sentry-line, and beyond the sod huts of the scouts, they spied the first sign of the horse-herd they sought—a herd composed of the sutler's spike-team, a four-in-hand used on the wood-wagon, Lieutenant Fraser's "Buckskin," and a dozen or fifteen second-choice mounts belonging to absent officers. That sign was a spark on the ground a long way ahead. They knew it for the lantern of the remaining herder.

Matthews turned aside toward the landing. "We meet here," he whispered.

The Indian grunted an assent, and made off in the direction of the distant park.

When he came back, some time had passed. A flash of lightning disclosed him to Matthews, who saw that the other was wiping at his face with his skirt.

"How did it go, Canada John?" asked the interpreter.

Canada John laughed. "The herder was glad to see The Squaw," he answered. "But he fought like a badger."

"Here is the small boat. When you have finished on this side, remember The Man-who-buys-Skins is on the other. He will be glad to see The Squaw, too."

"Have you the oil?"

"Yes." The interpreter felt for the other's hand and gave him a can. They parted for the second time.

Canada John now started for the post. As he went, he pulled dry grass until his arms were full. Arrived beside the barracks, he began to pile the grass against the pine wall.

In the blackness, Brannon lay peaceful. From the Line tinkled the soft notes of a guitar. The bray of a commissary mule answered a mule-bray from the bend. The sentries were announcing their cheery "All's well!"

The interpreter had reached the herd, where he was taking the rope hobbles from the forelegs of several horses. This done, he climbed into a herder's saddle and headed the band slowly up the bottom-land. Nearly all the animals had seen long service, so they went tamely enough. Where the road along the bank turned west to cross the bluffs through a break, they took it, and were soon over the ridge and out upon the prairie. There Matthews started them south. Finally, a mile or more below the line of the stockade, he completed his wide detour by driving them due east. Beside the Missouri, he rounded them up and brought them to a stand.

He tied the horse he had ridden to some willows. Next, having unwound several rope-lengths from about his waist, he began to catch and tie others of the bunch. He had rope for only ten. The hobbles fastened three more. The remaining horses were gentle—all but the one belonging to Fraser. Wily and uncertain of temper, nervous because of the lightning, the dun-colored cayuse would not let Matthews secure her. Each time waiting until the coaxing voice was close and the outstretched hand almost touched, "Buckskin" whirled with a flirt of her heels and a toss of her head and capered off. Matthews, swearing in English and Uncapapa, tried every device he knew, and failed.

He dared not waste another minute. Quickly, he wound some grass into a twist, lit it and waved it back and forth above his head three times. After which, as a precaution, he took a flask from his hind-pocket and, going from horse to horse of the string, to the hobbled three, and to the half-dozen that were standing loose, rubbed their muzzles with the liquor. But again he was unable to touch the "She devil." In a fury, he threw the empty flask at her.

From his hiding-place beside the barracks, the Indian in squaw's dress saw the signal-torch of the interpreter. At once, he sneaked from side to side to listen. Then he took a wisp of grass, bound round it a strip of oily cloth and, kneeling beside the bundle farthest from the river, set a match to it. Instantly flames leaped up. He ran to other grass-piles, lighting them one by one.

The next moment, an amazed sentry, who was pacing his beat by the scouts' huts, saw the growing bonfires and called out in alarm to another. Before the latter could reply the end of the barracks was burning. Both sentries fired their guns. The sergeant of the guard answered with revolver shots. The Gatlings spoke from the lookouts. A trumpet shrilled the fire-alarm. From the sutler's sounded the clang of the mess-gong.

In the midst of the tumult, one spot—the stockade—kept strangely quiet. Its guards were collected at the sliding-panel, from where, not daring to leave, they watched the growing blaze. So intent were they upon the sight that they took no heed of their prisoners. Therefore, no one knew or hindered when the Indian braves, led by Standing Buffalo, and noiseless as shadows, filed into Brown Mink's wickie-up, crawled through the breach in the log wall, and sped away into the shielding dark.

Behind, the squaws and children were gathered, with the Indian girl walking boldly among them. Of a sudden they parted. From under the shingle roof there was a sound of struggling—a thump, as a body hit

the ground—an old woman's squeal of rage. Then, into the faint glare reflected from the fire, came a stooping figure in squaw's dress, that sped through the scattering crowd, shot into Brown Mink's tent—and was gone.

Across the prairie, Matthews was following after the flighty cayuse; not trying to catch her, only striving to get her out of the way. "Buckskin" was wilful, however, and as often as the angry interpreter drove her off, came circling saucily back—to halt in the path of the coming braves. The string by the willows, the hobbled horses and the gentle free ones, were frightened by her into stamping about. But the whisky biting their noses killed the hated scent that was nearing. Not so with the cayuse. She caught it. For a moment she waited, head high, ears a-quiver, nostrils spread. Matthews warned the Indians. They did not hear. As they raced on, the mare gave a snort of terror, wheeled, and launched herself full against the end animal of the string.

The tethered horses set back upon their ropes, trampling each other and pulling themselves free. The gentle ones, thoroughly scared, went flinging away with them. While the hobbled, with no cow-pony respect for rope, made up a mad, plunging rear.

Consternation seized the Sioux. They were without boats, without weapons, without horses. They cursed. They threatened Matthews.

"Cross! cross!" he cried. "Your bows are in my wood lodge. The soldiers have no horses, and no boats. They cannot swim the river. You will be safe."

There was no other way.

"Wind-swift, my brothers," bade Lame Foot.

The Indians rushed back to where hammers had been ringing for days past. They tore away boards of the scaffold. Then, returning to the river, they dropped in.

Matthews called after them. "Remember your promise," he said;

"and do not drink the water-that-burns in my lodge."

There was no answer.

And now the interpreter took thought for himself. At sundown he had lusted for the night's doing. But the heart was gone out of him. Even before the stampede, the whole affair had assumed monster proportions. He had begun to think of the murdered, and of the maiming, and had wished himself well out of it. Now, with no horse to carry him across to safety, there seemed to face him only discovery and punishment.

"Well, they drove me to it," he complained. "This wouldn't 'a' happened if they'd give me a square deal." He was wrenching with all his might at a section of the scaffold platform. "I wanted to be decent, and they treated me like a dog."

With this, he ran down the river bank and launched his frail raft. "Anyhow," he said, "I'll git out o' this jus' as fast as water'll take me!"

CHAPTER XXXV

THE LAST WARNING

Thrown down by a sounding-board of inky clouds, the alarm shots at Brannon, the shouting, the reports of the Gatlings, and the trumpet-calls fell sharp and clear upon the shack. Dallas, watching into the blackness from her bench by the door, was up and armed on the instant, and leaning far over the sill, as if to see the better through the dark. Soon she made out something—a glimmer—that, in the beginning, was redder than the flare of the lightning, fainter, and more fixed; but which, growing as the din grew, swiftly deepened in colour, spread wide, and rose, throwing into relief the intervening grove of cottonwoods, and the form of a man who was racing riverward from the swale. He disappeared, swelling the distant clamour with a cry—a dread cry she had never heard before—of "Fire!"

She shut the door behind her and waited a moment. She was no longer merely watchful. She was uncertain and troubled.

Presently she went in and bent over Marylyn, touching her gently, and speaking low to save her a fright. "Honey, dear, honey. Hop up and see what's happ'ning at the Fort."

The younger girl scrambled to her feet, putting out nervous hands to her sister. Dallas quieted her. And they stood together in the door.

And, now, across the Missouri, the guns and trumpets suddenly stilled, and the shouting lessened. While the glow rapidly thickened into a roaring press of flame, before which darted the troopers, like flies in the light of a lamp.

"My! my!" whispered Marylyn, her voice quavering with sorrow and awe. She found her clothes and, keeping in line with the door, began

to dress.

"Looks pretty bad," said Dallas, soberly. The silencing of the guns augured well, however; and she added thankfully, "It could be a lot worse, though."

"I'll put on my shoes, and we can go down a ways, so's to see close. Shall I, Dal——"

"Sh!" Dallas was leaning out again, her head lowered as if to listen. All at once she turned and, kneeling, felt about on the floor for her cartridge-belt. "Yes, yes," she answered; "put 'em on—quick!"

"Are we going down to watch?"

"No."

The barracks and the stables were high, cherry-hued pyres, terrible enough to the eye, with their tops crooking northward in the wind. To Dallas' ear, they were far more terrible, telling of awful suffering—hinting of direful intent. For the nearer pyre sent proof of a sacrifice. She could hear the screams of a horse.

The belt found, she stepped back to the door. "Hurry, hurry," she said. The old iron resolve never to desert the shack was fusing in the heat of a panic. Her unfailing instinct was hardening a new one, that ruled for immediate flight.

Marylyn was working with her shoe-thongs, not stopping to thread them, only to wind and tie them around her ankles. She heard her sister exclaim. Then she was seized and brought forward by a trembling hand. "Marylyn! Marylyn! The boat! She's going!"

They looked, and saw a black-funnelled bulk floating across the watery strip mantled by the blaze.

"Maybe they thought it'd burn," suggested Marylyn. "See, there's sparks flying that way."

Dallas leaned back against the door. "I guess—that's it," she said

slowly. Then after a moment, "But why didn't they bring her straight across? There's no place to tie up downstream."

"Why, there's fire breaking out all over now," cried the younger girl, forgetting to be afraid in her wonder and excitement. "See! One of the little houses is caught!"

It was the first cabin of Clothes-Pin Row. Two or three men were near it. At that distance they seemed gaily posturing to each other in a dance.

"If anything *is* wrong," Dallas said, "Mr. Lounsbury'll come back."

"Mr. Lounsbury!" repeated Marylyn. "Was he here?"

"On this side, by the grove. I saw him start for the Fort."

And so their going was delayed.

Nevertheless, Dallas' sense of coming danger was acute; and when, before long, she heard the trumpet again, and saw the troopers fall away from the pyres, leaving the flames to their work, she lit the lantern and held it to where were stored her treasures—a lock of her mother's hair, her father's pipe, the letter she had received from Lounsbury.

"You take the cartridge-belt," she called to Marylyn.

The other obeyed.

"Ready?" said Dallas, and lifted the lantern to shake it.

She got no reply. Instead, gasping in alarm, Marylyn came headlong to her, pinioning her arms with wildly clinging ones. "Dallas! oh, help——"

Outside there was a sound of rapid running. Dallas flung herself against the door, driving it shut. A second, and a weight was hurled against the outer battens. Then came four raps.

"Don't open! don't!" cried Marylyn. "Maybe it ain't Charley!"

But Dallas, undoubting, swung the door back, and into the room leaped a stooping figure.

It ~~was~~ The Squaw.

He crouched, and moved his head from side to side, as if expecting a blow or a bullet from behind. His right hand held a bow his left, a bundle of arrows. With these he beckoned violently, shaking the water from his tattered clothes and pointing over his shoulder to the west.

"We're coming, Charley. Dearie, stand up. Now, *now!*" Marylyn was dragged to her feet. The light was quenched. The outcast faced about. And the three headed for the river, with The Squaw leading at a trot.

As they crossed the plowed land rimming the yard, sleepy birds fluttered up in front of them with startled cheeps and a whistle of wings. They swerved to find the shack road, along which the way was freer and more quiet, and the pace easy. Charley glanced back now and then to see if they were close; or, halted them, when they listened, holding their breath.

They paused for the last time near the river end of the corn, and close to the coulée crossing. From there Dallas saw that the pyres were lower, and that other buildings of the Row were ablaze; the roof of a scout hut, too; and the prairie, over which travelled widening crescents of gold. But the fire was the only thing that was moving. For not a single man was in sight.

Charley was not watching toward Brannon, only along the nearer bank, to the south.

Of a sudden, as their eyes followed his, a gun-shot rang out from the cottonwood grove.

"Mr. Lounsbury!" cried Dallas, starting forward.

"No—he's gone——"

That moment they saw between them and the landing the silhouette of a figure.

It was not Lounsbury's; it was too short and thick-set for his. Moreover, it seemed to be casting aside clothes as it ran.

Like one, The Squaw and Marylyn bolted for the coulée. Dallas hesitated—then followed. Near the brink, they missed the steep road, and went slipping, sliding, and rolling down the sumach-grown side. Then they struck the bristling bottom—righted—turned their feet up it—and fled.

CHAPTER XXXVI

SOME UNEXPECTED DISCOVERIES

His face as blanched as a dead man's, his voice pealing out above the babel like a bell, Oliver stood to windward of the double furnace, giving quick orders on right and left.

"Two men there on the Major's quarters—Let the guard-house go—Use your blanket, Flaherty, use your *blanket*—Sergeant," as Kippis passed close by, "clear the Row and bring 'em all down here. Don't let 'em stop for anything—Boys, *boys!* turn out those horses!"

A trooper rushed up and leaned, yelling, to his captain's ear. "They won't go, sir; they're hamstrung!"

With a command, the captain fairly threw the man toward a point where help was needed and seized upon his first lieutenant. "Fraser, there's a hell-hound loose in this post to-night!"

"I know, Captain. The fire started in a dozen spots."

"It's that damned Indian of yours. I'll have him shot on sight!"

Fraser was leaving. He looked back, his face all horror and smut. "Charley?" he cried. "Never!"

Once more Oliver gave tongue, and directions were sent to the stockade and to the Line. A signal light communicated with the lookouts on the bluffs.

Kippis was already fulfilling his charge. Through a gap in the northward-sweeping prairie-fire—a gap fought out and kept open by

a line of men—were coming the women of Clothes-Pin Row, each carrying a child and dragging a second by the hand. Behind them scuttled the papoose-cumbered squaws from the scouts' huts. At their rear trudged the sergeant, also weighted, and jaunty no longer, but leaving red stains where his naked feet touched the hot and smouldering ground.

"To headquarters!" shouted the captain, at the foremost laundress in the rout. Then he turned to his trumpeter. A moment after, the fires and the perishing horses were deserted, and the troopers, weapons in hand, ran out upon the parade-ground, obeying a call to arms.

Oliver led them. As he approached the flagstaff, the voice of a woman hailed him from the gallery of the nearest house. He sprang that way, and was up the steps at a bound.

Mrs. Cummings, who had sought refuge in her own home, met him at the top. "The Colonel's library is stripped!"

So it was. One hurried look by the light of a lamp showed that not a bow, not an arrow remained on the walls.

But there was no time for exclaiming or conjecturing. Oliver rushed back to the gallery and bade all the women and children collect and keep within quarters. Around it, under Sergeant Kippis, he stationed a cordon. Next, and while the house was being thoroughly wet down the ammunition stores were drawn upon, and extra guns and cartridges were carried into the long reception-room, where the women could assist in reloading. Barely three minutes had passed since Oliver sent his messengers. But headquarters was fixed to withstand an assault and to protect its inmates. And now, still ignorant of what had befallen, he ordered the remainder of his men into line.

At this point, with the detachment about to move, a volley of rifle shots sounded from the stockade—another—and another. Then up went a great hubbub: "The Indians! The Indians!"

Oliver started his troopers double-quick across the square. At the hospital one of the stockade guard stopped them.

"The Indians?" croaked Oliver.

"Gone!"

The troopers took up the cry: "Gone! The Indians are gone!"

Oliver turned them back.

They met a second man, black-faced, staggering, frenzied with alarm. It was Fraser. He caught at the captain's ragged sleeve.

"Shot—other side—they're over there—those girls!—those girls——" His breath failed him.

Again mingled cries went up from the troopers: "The shack, boys!" "They'll kill them girls!" "God!"

Oliver saw the need. "To the ferry," he commanded.

Like one man, they bounded headlong across the parade, through the red smoke pouring from barracks and stables, and on—only to come short upon a boatless landing, where they crowded upon each other and cursed.

Fraser was half-crazed. Oliver took him forcibly in hand. No man of them all, even if not burdened with a gun, could stem the river's current.

"There's one chance yet," he said, "the night-herd." He turned to his trumpeter. "Sound the recall, and *keep* a-sounding it!"

Again and again, the familiar strain rang out. All looked northward to where they knew the herd had been, to where the long curves of the prairie-fire were still moving.

But the minutes went, and there was no answering beat of hoofs. Where were the herders? Why did they not obey?

Again—again—and again!

Then, to the south, a reply! Above the spiteful crackling of the tindery buildings, out of the thinning dark, came a clear, eager neigh!

That way the troopers rushed. Gathering at the flagstaff they saw, by the light of the burning piles, a single horse come galloping toward them from the direction of the stockade. Her dun neck was arched like a charger's. As she swung proudly into an imaginary line, the men greeted her with a cheer.

That greeting was echoed. Until now, the Indians had been quiet—as quiet as a flock of scurrying grouse. But the river was between them and their enemy, and they felt secure from pursuit. Moreover, whisky was working. They were boisterous with it. Casting caution aside when they heard that cheer, they answered with defiant whoops.

The cheers of the troopers changed to anguished groans. One, wildly repeating a girl's name, sprang toward the waiting "Buckskin." From headquarters came the sobbing of women, the whimpering of frightened children. And then, nearer and nearer, a dull pounding that swelled into the steady *plud, plud* of unshod hoofs.

Once more a cheer went up. A moment, and a cavalcade swept in—a riderless cavalcade, with ropes dangling. It was the night-herd, the discarded, second-choice mounts of the regiment's officers, a motley band that had served their country through more than one enlistment, and that, hearing the familiar summons—some limping, some hobbling—had followed the dun cayuse to answer it.

Now, nooses were twisted about the noses of the horses. The troopers mounted. The trumpet sounded the advance.

Again came whoops from across the Missouri. They were farther away than the first.

"They're travellin'!" shrilled a voice.

"Go up—go up for the crossing," Oliver ordered. "Fraser! Fraser!"

But the buckskin mare, with her master, far in advance of the twenty others, was already plunging down the bank and into a black, roily whirl.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE FLIGHT TO MURPHY'S THROAT

For all that the way was hard, rough with stones and choked by a tangle of rank growth, the three in the coulée made fast progress over the first two miles. Charley led. After him came Marylyn, to whom the loathed split in the plain was become a place of refuge. In the rear, covering her sister against possible attack, followed Dallas.

As they went, now running, now falling into a quick walk, then running again, nettles stung their ankles; gooseberry branches tore their swinging hands; willows lashed their faces. But terror calloused, and they knew no hurts. Marylyn stepped on something soft and moving—she only increased her pace. On, on, they sped, stumbling blindly, gasping with open mouth—yet persevering.

The strain told first on the younger girl. So far, her strength had been unnatural—born of the terror that made her unconscious of any wound. It did not long endure. Before three miles had been travelled, as she sank in a shallow pool to wet her lips, it utterly failed her. She could not rise, and pleaded faintly for rest.

"Just a minute, Dallas, please—I can't go—my side hurts."

Dallas helped her through a hindering weave of pond-weeds and lilies, and laid her upon some marsh-grass beyond. Meanwhile, Charley stole back a short distance. But the respite was brief, for he returned straightway and twitched at their dresses, when the elder girl lifted the younger to her feet, whispering encouragement.

"Try again, honey. You got your breath. Try again."

Once more they pressed forward. The lightning had ceased. With a last grumble, and a scatter of drops, the clouds were pulling apart. Here and there a few stars shone. These thinned the darkness considerably, and, at a point where the coulée shallowed, Dallas was able dimly to see the toiling shapes ahead. Marylyn was wavering.

"Spunky little sister!" urged the elder girl. Lifting the rifle to her left shoulder, she came alongside to give the support of an arm.

"Where's the cartridge belt?" she whispered.

"Heavy,"—panted the other—"dropped it."

And now despite Dallas' aid, Marylyn straggled weakly. Another mile, and with scarcely a sigh of warning, she sank again, exhausted.

"Charley," called Dallas. The Squaw joined them. "You take one arm—that's it." She took the other. Thus they proceeded.

Marylyn was almost a dead weight. When the channel was clogged with rocks, she could not put one jaded foot before the other, and was fairly dragged. On clear sandy stretches she did better. Complete collapse was near, however; her head was swinging upon her breast; she prattled brokenly.

Finally Dallas stopped. "Hide—hide," she counselled between breaths, "a dark place——"

Ignoring the advice, the outcast thrust his bow and arrows into her hands; then squatting before Marylyn, he seized her wrist, drew her, limp and half-dead, upon his back, and staggered on.

"Hold to Charley, dear," begged Dallas. "He's carrying you pick-a-back."

The younger girl murmured gratefully, and locked her hands beneath The Squaw's chin. This left his arms free to part a path through the thickets of burweed and plantain that choked the defile,

and, for fully a half-hour, he kept a good jog. But, well worn and hampered as he was, he began then to wobble.

Dallas gave him the weapons and received Marylyn upon her own shoulders. Notwithstanding the long way, her vigour remained splendid. And when there came a tendency to lag, she fought it stoutly. Not until her limbs refused their service, did she drop down.

Under her wild rye made a cool, stiff couch. She reached through it and dug her fingers into the wet earth. Marylyn toppled over back and lay beside her, prone. Charley leaned on an elbow, breathing hard, watching——

When, far behind, down the shadowy crack through which they had come, sounded wild whoops.

They scrambled up, terror-stricken. Like hunted deer, they whipped away again, knowing that, in their wake, instead of the one man they had seen, was a horde!

Once more, though after brave effort, it was Marylyn who compelled a halt. Dallas strove to rouse her. "Try a little longer, honey. Come on, come on." But the other only sobbed hysterically, until Charley put his hand upon her mouth.

"Can't we crawl out?" demanded Dallas. "Quick, they'll pass."

The Squaw shook his head, coming close that she might see his answer.

"No use?"

He shook his head again and signed that their pursuers had horses.

It was a moment of supreme despair. She laid her arms upon her knees, her face upon her arms. Their puny human power had failed. Where else could they look for succour? Would Lounsbury or the troopers come—in time?

Then, tearfully, prayerfully, in this utmost need, she raised her eyes to the sky. "It's not for me," she faltered; "it's for Marylyn."

That upward glance was not in vain. In front of her, lifting their plume-like tops against the heavens, she saw the clump of burial trees. Instantly she took heart, for her quick brain devised a plan—to hide in the cottonwoods!

But all three might not stay, for, however much the Sioux avoided the laden boughs, they would stop to search them if there were not those ahead to draw them past. And *one* of those ahead must be a woman.

So she decided. Bending to her sister, she lifted her to a sitting position. "Honey," she said firmly, "you see the big trees there? The Indians are afraid of 'em—remember? They'll go by. We'll put you up on a limb, and you keep quiet. You'll be safe. We'll go on—for help."

"Yes—yes—Dallas, only—I can't walk."

"Charley!" The elder girl bade him assist. Without understanding fully, he obeyed. Together they carried Marylyn toward the cottonwoods, out of which several lank, grey bodies shifted into view and shot away. Dallas chose a tree that grew close to the steep bank. Here, in the narrow space between trunk and rooty wall, she ordered Charley to get down on all fours. Then, taking Marylyn upon her shoulders as before, and steadying herself with both hands, she stood on The Squaw's back. Little by little, bracing with legs and arms, he raised his load. Marylyn was now below a thick branch. By reaching up, and summoning the remnant of her strength, she was able to clasp it, to put a foot over, to get astride.

"Lie down," continued Dallas; "they won't stop; don't speak."

Hurriedly, she and Charley resumed their way up the wolf-haunted bottom, over rocks, through puddles, into pigmy forests of cherry and plum. But now, careless of lost time, Dallas ran with backward looks

and frequent haltings, giving strict heed to the whereabouts of those behind.

They had travelled a good distance when she judged that the savages were nearing the burial-place, that the time for her ruse was come. Letting the outcast go on, she paused for breath; then lifted her voice—and sent back through the night, a long, inviting call.

Down the wind came instant answer; a great howl of glee. And as if her presence ahead was unexpected, as if it tempted to a better speed, a jargon of cries swelled hideously, and drew on.

"She's safe!" shouted Dallas, exultantly; "Charley, she's safe!"

Another yowl from a score of throats.

And now began a race.

From the start it was unequal, and the gain on the side of the pursuers. For the biting poison that had made the Indians bold to the point of open defiance was now stirring them into fleeter going. They kept up a constant jabbering. They broke into short, puffy whoops. And gradually, but surely, the rods decreased between quarry and pack.

The sweat dreening from their faces, The Squaw and Dallas strained forward. But now of the two, one could scarcely keep a walk. Her strength was ebbing to the final drop.

"Charley—Charley—I'm tired!"

The outcast stumbled back to help her.

A little while, and she whispered again. "Can't go—stop—can't ____"

Every breath was sawing at her sore lungs. She tottered, pitched forward, and went down.

It was then that Charley pointed to the front, and as if to a vantage-

place. Dallas looked, and saw, at the end of sheer walls, an oblong opening of greyish light. She hailed it dumbly. There was where the coulée narrowed until a man, standing in its bed with arms outstretched, could place the tips of his fingers against either rocky wall. There a last stand might be made. The Throat!

One helping the other, they dragged themselves on and into the opening.

The time had narrowed. Close behind, crashing through a thicket, were the warriors, announcing themselves with shrill whoops.

Dallas waited, propped against a stone. The words of the old Texas song began to run in her mind:

*"We saw the Indians coming,
We heard them give a yell,
My feelings at that moment
No mortal tongue could tell."*

She was spent. She had no hope of being spared from death. Yet she was strangely calm and unafraid.

"Marylyn'll be happy," she said. "I know John Lounsbury well enough for that."

She became conscious of thirst. A branch of wild roses, shining with raindrops, bobbed above her. She bent the flowers to her mouth, one by one, and sucked their moisture.

She looked to the front again, across the spreading meadow. She heard the cheeps of awakening birds, and small movements in trees and grass. The grey of the sky was turning to pink. There was a lifting fore-glow in the east.

"See, Charley," she said, "there'll be good light to fight in. But—but there's just one charge."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

FRASER HEARS A CALL

As each man of the rescuing party splashed out upon the sandy beach before Shanty Town, he headed for the open level. There was no waiting for commands, no attempt at order; only the sound of laboured breathing, of frantic urging, of the plying of heel and fist. Butchery threatened, and a wasted moment might be the one that could have stayed the knife.

Crossing the Bend, the company was strung to a long, bedrabbled line. It was slow going. Already the horses had stood hard usage—the detour with Matthews, the return, and the severely trying swim. Fraser, given the lead, still kept it, dinging hoarse persuasion into "Buckskin's" flattened ears.

So far, the troopers had kept silent through fear for the girls' safety—fear that the hostages, if aware of pursuit, would wreak instant death. But now, as their lieutenant advanced to the shack, the men behind, while trying their utmost to gain, sent forward yell upon yell to startle the Indians into dropping their captives and seeking cover.

No whoops replied, but from the doorway, unheard, the voice of a man, "Oliver—Oliver!—here!"

As the line swung up, and by, in a circle, Fraser, weapon in hand, was down and pressing forward.

He found Lounsbury, seated on the sill, from which he rose unsteadily.

"Lounsbury! Lounsbury!"

"Quick—the coulée! They went that way—Give me a lift!"

His hand was wet. Fraser caught him about the waist.

"Oh, you're wounded!"

"Yes,—glancing blow. But I tied it up."

"Lounsbury? Wounded?" It was Oliver.

"Up the coulée, Captain! Give me a horse."

The captain turned, shouting orders. The other tried to follow, Fraser supporting him.

"Here, somebody, a horse for Lounsbury."

A third man dismounted—Jamieson. He put a rope in Fraser's hand.

"Take my horse," he said. "I'll stay. Ride like the devil, Lounsbury, and soak 'em one for me!"

They helped the storekeeper mount. The command had gone. He and Fraser followed.

Half the troopers were travelling the farther brink, half the near. The two caught up with the latter detachment.

Progress was slow. The men were tired from the fire-fighting. The horses were all but blown.

Nevertheless, not a moment's halt was taken until, after six wearisome miles, the troopers came opposite the cottonwoods where the Indian dead were lashed.

By now the darkness had lifted considerably, and a scout, who was riding the southern side, advised a hunt for tracks.

No tracks were found on the near brink. The horses moved forward again, Oliver and Fraser waiting behind to hear from the opposite side.

"Anything over there?" called the captain, and they fell silent for the

reply.

All at once, as they waited, Fraser began peering down into the coulée. "What's that?" he whispered. "What's that? Hark!"

"What?"

Just then came a shout: "No tracks, Captain."

Oliver kicked his boots into his horse's side. "Come on, come on," he said, and went hurrying after his men.

"But, Captain——" Fraser was holding back. "There was a cry. I heard——"

"Come on, Fraser." Oliver's horse broke into a trot.

"Captain!"

A third time Oliver called sharply. Behind he heard the cayuse following.

Farther along, however, he turned to address his lieutenant—and saw that "Buckskin" carried no rider.

CHAPTER XXXIX

STANDING AT BAY

And now through the dusk of the coulée the Indians advanced toward the Throat. Single file, they came, their leader a stalwart brave who ran unsteadily.

But, of a sudden, they brought up and retreated, tripping back upon one another over rubble and boulder, and giving out startled oaths. Then they halted, a score of dim, crowding figures.

Beyond the Throat showed a patch of sky, swiftly brightening with the dawn. Against that patch, thrust up by a ragged arm, was a twirling gun.

There was a parley, while the oaths became a jumble of protests, haranguing, and threats.

Presently Standing Buffalo could be heard above the rest. "They are only women. Let us take them and be on!"

At this, all started forward, but warily. As sudden as before, they stopped.

Against the light, for a second time, a ragged arm had shot up. Now at its top was a sinew-backed bow.

The Indians were amazed. One of their kind defending the women? They snorted in rage.

As they jostled, stretching this way and that, the arm began slowly to brandish the bow, and in a manner to announce that the holder desired single combat.

Standing Buffalo went forward in a bound. "I clear the way," he

cried vaultingly to his brothers; to the one before, "Who fears? Come out." He loosened the arrows in his quiver.

The challenger came—a stooping figure in squaw's dress.

The sight of him fairly rooted the young chief. "The Squaw!" His voice was furious.

Behind, a great laugh went up. And, as though there was no longer a need either to respect or fear the signals of the one who barred their path, the whole band charged.

A little to one side of The Squaw, a gun spoke—right into their midst. A brave screamed, catching at his thigh. The others wavered and fell back beyond rifle reach, taking him with them.

The stooping figure in squaw's dress signed once more for single combat.

Lame Foot addressed his brothers. "We delay too long," he cautioned. "Standing Buffalo, go forward and slay the she-skunk, and let us hasten."

Standing Buffalo waved his bow aloft. "I do so," he promised. "But you, Medicine-Giver, must hold me clean of shame for fighting a squaw!" Then, to the outcast, "Come out, coffee-cooler, and die." He halved the distance between him and the Throat.

Squaw Charley approached him watchfully, setting a shaft in place. His face seemed all eyes—eyes burning with a fierce joy. Standing Buffalo fitted an arrow. Both raised their bows.

Behind the chief came calls of derision and execration. Behind the outcast came a voice, clear and steady: "Careful, Charley, *careful*."

To and fro, the contestants were stealing, noiselessly, on the alert, each striving to get the other in a favourable light.

A minute, another—then Standing Buffalo bent his knees, drew and shot. But the arrow veered a trifle from its intended course.

The Squaw drew. The cord sang. The shaft whistled to its mark.

It drove the chief backward a few paces like a wounded buck. Then, stopping himself with effort, he lurched forward again. As he came, he raised his bow and sent a second arrow that cut the bushes on the canyon side.

The shaft was his last. His face went suddenly livid, his eyeballs started; drivelling, he clutched at the air—tipped down to his hands—touched—let go his weapon—half-rose—pivoted on a heel, and slipped in a heap to the stones.

A wordless cry broke from the lips of The Squaw. He sped across the coulée-bottom to the side of the dead chief. There he struck the fallen man a blow upon the bare knee, snatched from his head an eagle feather, daubed it across the flowing wound, and thrust it dripping red into his own hair.

Then, as he had not done in years, he straightened. Then he cast from him the foul rags of his squaw's dress. And in clout and the colours of death, he stood forth—a warrior!

"I count a coup—Red Moon!" he cried.

Howls—from a watching band that had been struck dumb.

"A coup, I—Red Moon. Come on, you dogs—you that called me dog. Come on, you squaws that called me squaw. Come on, and a warrior will fight you, one by one!"

Before him, more howls, and a bluster of Uncapapa. Behind the voice again: "Charley! Charley!"

And now Red Moon leaped back to resume his stand. With his turning, the band drew after, sending a shower of arrows.

At the Throat he faced them again.

"Braves!" he laughed mockingly. "*Dogs*—that fight like dogs, a

pack against one!"

Now he shot, swift and unerringly. Here one flattened; there, another; a third broke his jaw upon a stone. Till from their midst flew the missile of Big Ox, hard-driven, straight. Quivering, it buried its deadly point in Red Moon's breast.

Deafening whoops echoed in the narrow canyon, drowning the hoof-beats of a nearing horse.

Red Moon answered them. He was swaying to and fro, like a cypress limb in a great wind. He lifted his face to the sky until his crimson scalp-feather drooped; flung back his hair, and clapped palm to mouth in a war-cry.

Then his bow flew from his hand as his arms spread out—spread out as if seeking something upon which to lean. He sank to his knees, chanting the death-song of the Sioux.

"Charley! Charley!" It was a wail.

Not his voice, but another's, answered: "Dallas! Where are you?"

The Indians heard the call. Catching up wounded and dead, they fell back.

Dallas, shielded no longer, yet forgetful of danger and self, ran forward to where Red Moon knelt. Even as she reached him, he could kneel no longer. He toppled sideways, then straightened upon his back.

But now the band was coming back toward Dallas, on their way to the Throat. Their purpose was thwarted. Before Dallas was reached, a man blocked the narrow passage, and two revolvers, barking a staccato, spread panic among them. They turned to the walls, looking for a place to scale. From there came tramping and shouts, and they saw, over them, at either side, a line of downward-pointing guns!

Huddling together, the centre of a complete surround, wounded and

unwounded cast aside their bows and flung up their hands in the peace sign.

"Give 'em hell, boys!" screamed a trooper.

But the trumpet interfered.

Close to the Throat was a group that had neither eyes nor ears for the capture. Here was the warrior, Red Moon, calm-faced, bearing his agony bravely, choking back even a murmur of pain. Over him were Lounsbury and Dallas, bent for a final look and word.

"Dear old fellow," murmured Lounsbury. "You gave 'em a good fight to-day. You saved her."

The surgeon was beside them now, hastily examining. The shaft was not in the wound; it had fallen. But the poisoned barb remained. He shook his head.

"No use, John," he whispered, and tiptoed away.

Lounsbury leaned farther down. "Charley," he said, "you're going now, old man. Say good-by to us."

The Indian moved one hand feebly.

Lounsbury understood. He lifted and shook it gently. "Brave Red Moon," he said.

The savagery was all gone from the Indian's eyes; they were wonderfully soft and un-Indian in their expression. He seemed, all at once, to be thinking of something far off. And his look was adoring.

Dallas could not speak to him, but she, too, shook him gently by the hand.

He settled his head upon Lounsbury's arm, as a child might have done. Then he looked up at Dallas. "Friend—friend," he whispered softly, smiled, and with the touch of the sun on his upturned face, he slept.

CHAPTER XL

SOME ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

Lounsbury was stretched in the hammock on Captain Oliver's gallery, his bandaged head on a pillow, his left arm resting in a sling. Leaping about, almost upon him, and imperilling the stout ropes that swung the hammock, were five of the captain's seven.

Twenty-four hours were gone since, having lashed four Indian dead among the branches of the burial trees, troopers, Sioux, and rescued had returned to a post that was half in ashes. Now, guards tramped the high board walk as before, keeping strict watch of their sulky prisoners; the ramshackle ferry-boat, dragged away from the bar that had halted her, was tied up at her landing again; across the upper end of the parade, grey tents had replaced the barracks; while, farther on, teams and scrapers were clearing away smoking ruins and dumping them into the river; squaws were thatching the roofs of the scouts' shanties; and hammers were ringing on new structures for Clothes-Pin Row. With cool enterprise, Brannon was hastening toward recovery.

There was other mending that was less rapid: In the stockade, where one nursed an arrow, another a bullet, wound; in the garrison hospital, where Kippis and a comrade stumped about on swathed feet; and on the Oliver gallery, where Lounsbury lay, his face not the usual fulness, and a trifle white.

The storekeeper, however, was lending entertainment, as hospitality and his popularity demanded.

"The idea of you little apes asking for stories," he was saying to his audience, "when such popping good ones are happening right under your nose!"

Felicia was the youngest of the seven. She gave back at him, prancing up and down insistently. "But we don't want stories of things around here," she cried wilfully. "We want lords and ladies, and you *gim* 'em to us."

"Lords and ladies," sniffed Lounsbury. "Well, Felicia, stop that jumping-jack business and I'll begin."

A chorus of delight—then, the five disposed themselves, the boys (there were two) astride the storekeeper; the girls draping the swinging net at either side.

"Once upon a time," commenced Lounsbury, "in the middle of a gre-a-a-t, wi-i-i-de, fla-a-a-t country——"

"Now," interrupted James, who came next to Felicia. His inflection was rising and suspicious.

"Now," chimed in the others. They, too, did not fancy such familiar topography.

"Look here," said the narrator, "don't get it into your precious noddles that this Territory's the only flat country under the sun. There are other spots upon this green earth where you can see hundreds of miles in any direction."

"Go on, then, go on!"

"Well, this was such a place—great, wide, flat place. The lord lived there. He was called the Lord Harry—got his name from the way he acted; he was always making forced marches——"

Again suspicion, which Lounsbury ignored.

"And violent demands. Oo! my shin!" (This to James, whose heels were curled up under him.) "Violent demands, I said. And so he had

the cheek—um—the impudence to love, to *love*—" He shut his eyes in silent rhapsody.

"What uz her name?"

"Ah!" Lounsbury threw up his well hand helplessly. "No name was splendid enough for her—not one. But he called her—for want of a better, mind you—he called her the Rose of the South."

"Bully! bully!" accompanied by the clapping of hands.

The door from the entry opened. Dallas came slowly out.

"Go on," urged Felicia, "'Rose of the South?'"

But Lounsbury was looking at Dallas. "Rose of the South," he repeated, a queer tremor running around his mouth; "as far south as—as Texas."

Dallas seemed about to turn.

Lounsbury hurried to put the well hand behind his ear. "Felicia," he said, "didn't I hear your mother call?"

Felicia rocked herself from foot to foot. "Oh, you go *on*," she said overbearingly, "or you might fall out of the hammock."

But the spell was broken. Her sisters had pounced upon Dallas. The boys, getting a whiff from regions down the hall, had made off. She followed, with backward demands for "the rest of it" later on, and carried the last of the five with her.

Lounsbury sat up and put out his hand. The fun was gone from his eyes.

"Dallas, you've had your talk," he said quietly, but with a hint of anxiety. "I know it's all right; it's *got* to be."

She came part way to him, and stood where morning-glory vines climbed a lattice. "Marylyn's just been telling me," she answered. She

raised her head, very intent upon the flagstaff. The light through the vines touched the outline of her face—a firm outline, cut by a flying wisp of hair.

"Dear?" he questioned.

She glanced down at him, smiling through tears. "All the time, they liked each other," she said happily. "He calls her Marylyn, and she calls him Robert."

He got up and went to her. "When I saw him there in the road by that cottonwood bunch, lugging her along so careful, looking so scared—and the way he held her on Buckskin!" He caught her hand.

"There's one thing that hurts," she answered. "That it kept you out there watching, and I didn't even go to you—but I—I——"

"You were doing the white thing by that little sister. That makes it all the sweeter."

"She was afraid I'd scold," still through tears.

"*You* scold!"

"I would. I felt different about soldiers—then."

He took a deep breath. "They're handy to have around," he said.

"She's afraid Mr. Fraser'll find out what she said about you."

"He won't. He might get a notion she didn't know her own mind yet! He might—well, as Kippis says, 'E's bloomin' 'ot-'eaded,' the little beggar!"

"She don't know I told you. It'd bother her if——"

"That's between you and me, Dallas." He drew her near.

"Yes."

"Yes, *John*," promptly.

"Yes, John."

The morning-glory vines on the lattice reached up and out; brushed by the wind, they made a sheltering veil. He drew her closer. He lifted her face to his by a smoothing caress of her hair. He kissed her.

"My dearest! My splendid girl!"

He shook his head roguishly at her. "So wild, she was, with the bit in her teeth. And now—she eats right out of my hand."

Then, roguish no longer, he lifted her two hands, turned them—palms up—and touched them with his lips.

"Ah, dear, there must be no more going-it-alone. I want to take care of you after this. We won't wait, will we?"

"No."

"Just the minute a minister can be reached?"

"Yes."

"I've a mind to bribe Mike into taking us up to Bismarck after breakfast!"

"You're too sick." Her face was grave, her eyes watched him anxiously. "All night I thought about you: How I went running off when I heard that shot. Oh, suppose, *suppose*——"

"I'll be over this in a day. And I know you went because you had to. Don't I know you weren't afraid? Don't I know why you left Marylyn behind at the trees? Dallas—you're a wife for a man out here!"

She coloured under his praise.

"There'll be other things coming up to fight," he went on. "That's the beauty of this West—it keeps you busy. But we'll be together to make the fight. I don't ask anything more."

After a time, they walked to the top of the steps.

Across the river, at the centre of the yellow bend, it stood—the squat shack.

"Dear little home!" she said.

"You wouldn't like to leave it. You can go to Bismarck, you know, or East, or anywhere."

"I'd rather stay."

"We'll stay—right over there. Then, when the town comes, and it gets too populous—if you like, and if Marylyn's not at this post—we'll go farther up, to open country again."

"We'll take your share of the Clark herd," she said.

"I've got a *fine* little saddle-mare for you," he said.

Somebody entered the parlour behind them—two somebodies, hand in hand.

"Dallas," called one, meekly.

"Lounsbury," hailed the other.

The storekeeper went in, Dallas with him. "Bless your sweet hearts," he said when he faced the couple. "Marylyn, you rested? Fraser, you look idiotically happy."

"I'm not alone," retorted the lieutenant. "I'd hate to describe you this minute, your face beaming through all that lint."

"Save yourself the trouble, here, before my future wife."

Fraser turned to Marylyn. "Phew! But we're important! Listen to him!"

"Dallas wants to get back to the shack. Can a' ordinary, everyday trooper look after the finest two-year-old and the finest team in Dakota? Not by a long shot! And I'm not going to let her go alone," soberly, "after what's happened. Can't take any more chances."

Fraser sobered too. "Nothing to fear any more," he said. "When Mike's men were getting the boat off, down below, they found—him."

A moment's silence.

"They think he tried to cross and couldn't. There he was, tangled up in some willows, poor devil."

"That ought to explain some things to the Captain," said Lounsbury, in a low voice.

"Yes. And it will satisfy the K. O., I'm pretty sure. An officer's not to be blamed so much for things going wrong when the traitor's practically within the lines. The K. O. himself could have had that fire."

"Well, Dallas." Lounsbury was cheery again. "You and Marylyn own the Bend, sure enough."

There was a knock at the door. Then, with a great show of backing and coughing, young Jamieson appeared.

"Frank," said Lounsbury, "quit your nonsense and tell us about the other side. Did the scout find anything?"

"Yes, he did," answered Jamieson; "and what proves how smart the whole plot was. What do you think? Well, just above where you met that Indian, they found an outfit—black blanket and a ragged skirt ____"

A quiet fell. Dallas turned away to the windows. Lounsbury followed her, comforting.

Presently, he returned, clearing his voice. "They copied Charley's clothes," he said. "I guessed that. As the Indian came up to me, I spoke. But when he answered, I knew—just a second too late. He gave me a terrible lick, but I caught it on my arm and came back with the gun. Don't know how I ever reached the shack."

"Mr. Lo peeled in the grove and scampered," said Fraser.

"We saw him," said Marylyn, "and I ran."

"He's the only red that got free."

"But, all the same, I plugged him," declared Lounsbury. "And I'll bet he's packing a pound of buckshot. Who was it, do you know?"

"Canada John."

Again the door opened, and Oliver appeared. His long face was distressfully haggard; about his temples and across his forehead, what had been merely lines before were now deep grooves. Yet the fierce, baffled look that had been in his eyes since the escape was entirely gone. He smiled at the group most tenderly, and his moustache wiggled in a most incomprehensible fashion.

He closed the door and waited, his hand on the knob.

Jamieson stepped forward. "Captain," he said with mock injury, "these people"—he indicated the others—"do not mark the flight of the minutes. I don't wonder—it's natural. But I, sir, I—having been asked to breakfast by Mrs. Oliver—*do*. Is—is breakfast ready?"

"Breakfast is ready," Oliver answered. His voice was unsteady.

"Thank goodness for that!"

There was the sound of a faint cheer outside; then someone went rushing up the plank walk before the house. The captain closed the windows.

"We shall give thanks for many things to-day," he said significantly.

Fraser started, and his eyelids fluttered what his face strove to control.

"What's all that outside?" It was Marylyn, innocently.

But Oliver gave a quick sign, pulling nervously at his moustache.

"Frank," he began, "a—a friend is coming home to us this

morning."

"A-a-ah!" It was near a groan.

"Wait—wait," firmly. "Give yourself a moment to guess. But—guess something *good*."

Jamieson moved like a man in pain. "You mean, you mean——" he whispered. "Oh, Captain, I've waited and waited."

"Bravely—we all know that. And there's reward for you."

Behind Jamieson, the others were leaning forward, hopeful, fearful—in a fever of emotions.

The cheering outside had grown. More people were running up the walk—children, men, bareheaded women.

"Jamieson," said the captain, "you'll be very calm?"

Jamieson relaxed, faltering forward. "I'll try! I'll try!" he promised.

Lounsbury caught him. "Tell him, Oliver," he begged.

The captain turned the knob, took Jamieson by a wrist and led him out through the entry.

On the gallery was a second group. It whispered. It laughed. It cried. It looked north to where the road came down from the landing.

"Easy now, easy," cautioned Oliver. He patted Jamieson, led him down the steps, and faced him up the Line.

"There, my dear boy," he said.

On the upper edge of the parade-ground, the men of B Troop were surrounding some travellers, caps in air. With their cheers mingled wild shouts. And one of them was singing the lines of a song, fervent, loud and martial:

*"Glory, glory, Hallelujah!
Glory, glory, Hallelujah!"*

For a moment, as one who questions his own sight and hearing, Jamieson gazed before him. Then, he flung up his arms and sprang forward with a great cry:

"Mother! mother! *Alice!*"

Down the Line they had taken up the singing. And to it, the troopers dividing, the travellers came into full view.

There was a wagon, with red wheels, a green box, and drawn by a milk-white horse. On its seat were two women, who clung to each other as they looked about. Above them a cross of rude boards stood straight up into the sunlight of the morning. And beside the cross, driving, sat a man—an aged man—white-haired, priestly, patriarchal.

CHAPTER XLI

TAPS

The parlour at Captain Oliver's was a homelike place: The black tarred paper that covered its walls was fairly hidden from sight by selected illustrations cut out of leading weeklies—these illustrations being arranged with a nice eye to convenience, right side up, the small-sized pictures low down, the larger ones higher. There was a fireplace which, it being summertime, had a screening brown-paper skirt that fell to the hearth. Above this, along the mantel, was another skirt, made of a newspaper, short and pouty, and scissored at the lower edge into an elaborate saw-tooth design. The mantel was further adorned by certain assorted belongings in the way of a doll, a kite, an empty bank, a racquet, books, and the like, all cast into their various positions by the seven small Olivers. On either side of the fireplace were bracket-lamps. Across the room was the inevitable army cot, spread with wolf skins. There were chairs—two of them—wrought from sugar barrels. There was a table, quite as ingeniously formed. And, completing the whole, the long curtains over the windows—curtains magnificently flowered, and made from a dress-pattern gift (the captain's) that Mrs. Oliver, ever a woman of resource, had artfully diverted to another purpose.

To-night, the parlour was more homelike than usual—and festive. For a family party filled it. Here was the hostess, carrying a huge iced cake, and taking account of the seven's behaviour; the seven themselves, eager, though somewhat repressed, and doing full justice to their portions; their father, thankful, as he passed the coffee, that so much good had come out of some misfortune; Frank Jamieson, mother and sister on either arm; Marylyn Lancaster, looking dimpled

consciousness; close upon her every move, a certain young lieutenant, who cast longing glances toward the half-lighted gallery; the surgeon, ungratefully relegated to a corner, but solacing himself in his cup; David Bond, his wrinkled old face a benediction; and, lastly, Dallas and John.

Lounsbury was his former self, save for the plaster-strips that had supplanted the bandages. Everywhere at once he put the grip of two men into his well arm, smiling upon all like the very genius of happiness.

And Dallas—Mrs. Oliver had offered to sew her a plain white dress for the occasion. But she had chosen—since her John must of necessity come in his wonted attire—to appear in the simple frock she had worn the night they met in the swale. Above it, her hair was braided and coiled upon her head like a crown. Her cheeks were a glowing red. Her eyes shone.

All was bedlam: Tongues clattered; cups rattled; laughter rose and fell; the seven, having no chairs, sat in a line under the leadership of Felicia and kicked their heels on the floor.

Then—interrupting—a knock, loud, peremptory.

The company stilled. Jamieson opened.

There stood a jolly figure—the sutler's—apple-round head and all.

"Well, Blakely?" asked the captain.

Blakely hung his weight on a foot and, coughing behind his plump hand, bobbed his answer: "Steam's up, sir."

Lounsbury had the centre of the floor. He kept it, reaching out to bring Dallas beside him. They stood while the others crowded up to give them well wishes and to tell them good-night.

Last of all came David Bond. "My daughter, my son," he said, "God bless you!"

Lounsbury slipped Dallas' hand into his arm. Then the door opened for them, and they went out—together.

"John is a good man," said the evangelist, "and will make a good husband," He was seated with Fraser on the gallery, watching a light in midstream dance its way through the dark.

Fraser sighed happily. "She's a dear girl," he murmured, looking back to where the lamp was moving about in Oliver's spare room. "She'd make a wife for a prince."

Presently he roused himself with another sigh. "You ought to see the way we fixed up the shack," he said. "White kick-up curtains on the windows—that was Mrs. Oliver's idea; rose-berries all over the mantel—Marylyn did that; I stuffed the fireplace full of sumach; then, Michael sprinkled and swept out, and we covered the floor with Navajo blankets."

"Little place looked cosey."

"Cosey as could be."

A little while, and Fraser sprang up. "They're there!" he cried. "See? see? They're home!"

Far away on the bend, the eyes of the shack were bright.

"And you, Mr. Fraser?" asked the evangelist.

"Marylyn and I will wait for the Colonel. Won't be long, now. Shall you be here?"

"I think not. The Indians go to Standing Rock next week. I go with them."

"Poor Charley!" said Fraser, huskily. "He won't go, poor old chap!"

"Hardly poor, Mr. Fraser." There was a triumphant ring in David Bond's voice. "Few men gain as much as he by death."

"I know. Even the Captain's proud of him now."

They fell silent.

Now from the tent rows that replaced the barracks, rang out the trumpet, sounding the day's last call. The two turned their heads to listen.

The call ended. The faint, wavering notes of the echo died away upon river and bluff.

They turned back to the shack again—and saw its light go flickering out.

THE END

Transcriber's Note

Some inconsistent hyphenation and spelling in the original document has been preserved.

Typographical errors corrected in the text:

Page 24 disappeareed changed to disappeared

Page 59 work changed to word
Page 80 Mehach changed to
Meshach
Page 130 resistance changed to
resistance
Page 136 removed extra word "is"
Page 315 Bix changed to Big
Page 345 branish changed to
brandish

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