

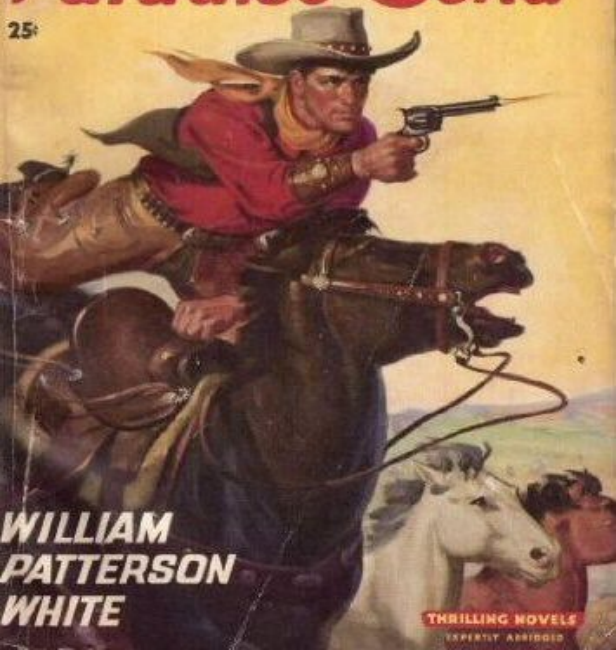
HIS SMOKING SIXES SMASHED A DEADLY RUSTLER COMBINE

AND

18

***GUNS** of Paradise Bend*

25¢



**WILLIAM
PATTERSON
WHITE**

THRILLING NOVELS

EXPERTLY ABRIDGED

The Project Gutenberg EBook of Paradise Bend, by William Patterson White

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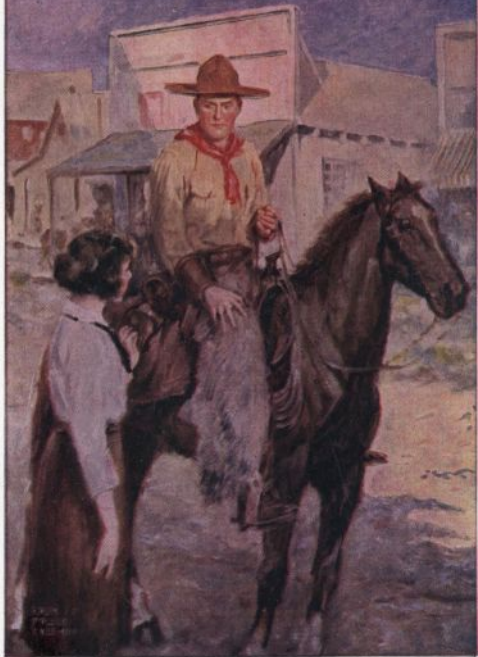
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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PARADISE BEND ***

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*“‘Tom!’ she breathed. ‘Tom! you do think I
betrayed you after all . . . ’”*

"Tom!" she breathed. 'Tom! you do think I betrayed you after all..."

PARADISE BEND

BY

WILLIAM PATTERSON WHITE

Author of

"Hidden Trails," "The Owner of the Lazy D," "Lynch Lawyers."

FRONTISPIECE BY

RALPH PALLER COLEMAN

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**TO MY CAPE MAY COUSINS
DOROTHY, BESS, AND MARION**

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PARADISE BEND

CHAPTER I

TOM LOUDON

"And don't forget that ribbon!" called Kate Saltoun from the ranch-house door. "And don't lose the sample!"

"I won't!" shouted Tom Loudon, turning in his saddle. "I'll get her just like you said! Don't you worry any!"

He waved his hat to Kate, faced about, and put his horse to a lope.

"Is it likely now I'd forget?" he muttered. "We'd do more'n that for her, wouldn't we, fellah?"

The horse, a long-legged chestnut named Ranger, turned back one ear. He was accustomed to being questioned, was Ranger. Tom Loudon loved him. He had bought him a five-year-old from the 88 ranch the year before, and he would allow no one save Kate Saltoun to ride him. For the sun and the moon, in the estimation of Tom Loudon, rose and set in the black eyes of Kate Saltoun, the exceedingly handsome daughter of John T. Saltoun, the owner of the great Bar S ranch.

This day Loudon was riding into Farewell for the ranch mail, and Kate had commissioned him to do an errand for her. To serve his lady was joy to

Loudon. He did not believe that she was aware of his state of mind. A flirt was Kate, and a charming one. She played with a man as a cat plays with a mouse. At which pleasant sport Kate was an adept. But Loudon realized nothing of all this. Shrewd and penetrative in his business, where Kate was concerned he saw nothing but the obvious.

Where the trail snaked over Indian Ridge, ten miles from the ranch house, Loudon pulled up in front of a lone pine tree. On the trunk of the pine a notice was tacked. Which notice set forth briefly that two hundred dollars' reward was offered for the person or persons of the unknown miscreant or miscreants who were depleting the herds of the Bar S and the Cross-in-a-box outfits. It was signed by Sheriff Block.

Who the miscreants were no one knew with certainty. But strange tales were told of the 88 punchers. It was whispered that they carried running-irons on their saddles. Certainly they displayed, when riding the range, a marked aversion to the company of men from the other ranches.

The remains of small fires had been found time and again in draws bordering the 88 range, and once a fire-marked cinch-ring had been picked up. As the jimmy and bunch of skeleton keys in a man's pocket so are the running-iron and the extra cinch-ring under a puncher's saddle-skirts. They indicate a criminal tendency; specifically, in the latter case, a whole-hearted willingness to brand the cattle of one's neighbour.

Loudon read the notice of reward, slow contempt curling his lips.

"Signs," he said, gently. "Signs——! What we need is Vigilantes—Vigilantes an' a bale o' rope!"

He turned in his saddle and looked back over the way he had come. Fifty miles to the south the Frying Pan Mountains lay in a cool, blue, tumbling line.

From where Loudon sat on his horse to the Frying Pans stretched the rolling range, cut by a thin, kinked strip of cottonwoods marking the course of a wandering river, pockmarked with draws and shallow basins, blotched with clumps of pine and tamarack, and humped with knolls and sprawling hills. The meandering stream was the Lazy, and all the land in sight, and beyond for that matter, was the famous Lazy River country held by three great ranches, the Cross-in-a-box, the Bar S, and the 88.

Of these the 88 was the largest and the farthest west of the three, its eastern line running along the high-bluffed banks of the Falling Horse, which emptied into the Lazy some ten miles from the 88 ranch house. East of the 88 lay the Bar S, and east of the Bar S was the Cross-in-a-box. The two latter ranches owned the better grazing, the more broken country lying within the borders of the 88 ranch.

Beyond the 88 range, across the Falling Horse, were the Three Sisters Mountains, a wild and jumbled tangle of peaks and narrow valleys where the hunter and the bear and the mountain lion lived and had their beings. East of the Lazy River country lay the Double Diamond A and the Hog-pen outfits; north and south stretched other ranches, but all the ranges ended where the Three Sisters began.

Loudon swung his gaze westward, then slowly his eyes slid around and fastened on the little brown dots that were the ranch buildings of the Bar S. He shook his head gently and sighed helplessly.

He was thinking partly of Kate and partly of her father, the gray old man who owned the Bar S and would believe nothing evil of his neighbours, the hard-riding 88 boys. Loudon was morally certain that forty cows within the last three months had transferred their allegiance from Bar S to 88, and he had hinted as much to Mr. Saltoun. But the latter had laughed him to scorn and insisted that only a few cows had been taken and that the lifting was the work

of independent rustlers, or perhaps of one of the other ranches. Nevertheless, in response to the repeated urging of his foreman, Bill Rainey, Mr. Saltoun had joined with the Cross-in-a-box in offering a reward for the rustlers.

Loudon was well aware of the reason for Mr. Saltoun's fatuous blindness. That reason was Sam Blakely, the 88 manager, who came often to the Bar S ranch and spent many hours in the company of Kate. Mr. Saltoun did not believe that a dog would bite the hand that fed him. But it all depends on the breed of dog. And Blakely was the wrong breed.

"He shore is a pup," Loudon said, softly, "an' yellow at that. He'd steal the moccasins off a dead Injun. An' Block would help him, the cow-thief."

Then, being young, Loudon practised the road-agent's spin on the notice of reward tacked on the pine tree, and planted three accurate bullets in the same spot.

"Here, you! What yuh doin'?" rasped a grating voice in Loudon's immediate rear.

Loudon turned an unhurried head. Ten yards distant a tall man, black-bearded, of a disagreeable cast of countenance, was leaning forward across an outcrop.

"I asked yuh what yuh was doin'?" repeated the peevish individual, glaring at Loudon.

"I heard yuh the first time, Sheriff," replied Loudon, placidly. "I was just figurin' whether to tell yuh I was shoein' a horse or catchin' butterflies. Which answer would yuh like best?"

"Yuh think yo're mighty funny, Tom Loudon, but I tell yuh flat if yuh don't go slow 'round here I'll find a quick way o' knockin' yore horns off."

"Yuh don't say. When yuh goin' to begin?"

Loudon beamed upon the sheriff, his gun held with studied carelessness. Sheriff Block walked from behind his breastwork, his eyes watchful, his thumbs carefully hooked in the armholes of his vest.

"That notice ain't no target," he grunted, halting beside the pine tree.

"It is now," remarked Loudon, genially.

"It won't be no more."

"O' course not, Sheriff. I wouldn't think o' shootin' at it if you say no. It's a right pretty piece o' readin'. Did yuh write it all yoreself?"

The sheriff's eyes became suddenly blank and fixed. His right thumb slowly unhooked.

"I only fired three shots," observed Loudon, the muzzle of his six-shooter bearing on the pit of the sheriff's stomach.

The sheriff's right thumb rehooked itself hurriedly. His frame relaxed.

"Yuh shouldn't get mad over a joke," continued Loudon. "It's plumb foolish. Been hidin' behind that rock long?"

"I wasn't hidin' behind it. I was down in the draw, an' I seen you a-readin' the notice, an' I come up."

Loudon's gray eyes twinkled. He knew that the sheriff lied. He knew that Block had heard his comments on Blakely and his own worshipful person, but evidently the sheriff did not consider this an opportune time for taking umbrage.

"So yuh come up, did yuh? Guess yuh thought it was one o' the rustlers

driftin' in to see what reward was out for him, didn't yuh? But don't get downhearted. Maybe one'll come siffin' along yet. Why don't yuh camp here, Sheriff? It'll be easier than ridin' the range for 'em, an' a heap healthier. Now, Sheriff, remember what I said about gettin' red-headed. Say, between friends, an' I won't tell even the little hoss, who do you guess is doin' the rustlin'?"

"If I knowed," growled the sheriff, "his name'd be wrote on the notice."

"Would it? I was just wonderin'. Habit I got."

"Don't you fret none about them rustlers. I'll get 'em if it takes ten years."

"Make it twenty, Sheriff. They'll keep right on electin' yuh."

"Do yuh mean to say the rustlers elected me?" exploded the sheriff.

"O' course not," chided Loudon, gently. "Now what made yuh think I meant that?"

"Well, yuh said——" began the sheriff.

"I said 'they,'" interrupted Loudon. "You said 'rustlers'. Stay in the saddle, Sheriff. You'll stub your toe sometime if yuh keep on a-travellin' one jump ahead o' the hoss."

"Yo're —— smart for a cow-punch."

"It is a cinch to fool most of 'em, ain't it—especially when yo're a sheriff?"

Loudon's eyes were wide open and child-like in their gray blandness. But the sheriff did not mistake his man. Block knew that if his hand dropped, a bullet would neatly perforate his abdomen. The sheriff was not a coward, but he had sense enough not to force an issue. He could afford to wait.

"I'll see yuh again," said the sheriff, harshly, and strode diagonally down the slope.

Loudon watched him until he vanished among the pines a hundred yards below. Then Loudon touched his horse with the spur and rode on, chin on shoulder, hands busy reloading his six-shooter. Three minutes later Loudon saw the sheriff, mounted on his big black stallion, issue from the wood. The great horse scrambled up the hillside, gained the trail, and headed south.

"Bet he's goin' to the 88," said Loudon. "I'd give ten dollars to know what Block was roostin' behind that rock for. Gawd! I shore would admire to be Sheriff o' Fort Creek County for thirty days!"

Eleven miles from Indian Ridge he topped a rise and saw below him Farewell's straggly street, flanked by several false-fronted saloons, two stores, one hotel leaning slightly askew, and a few unkempt houses, the whole encircled by the twinkling pickets of innumerable bottles and tin cans.

He rode along the street, fetlock-deep in dust, and stopped at the hotel corral. Freeing Ranger of the saddle and bridle, he opened the gate and slapped the chestnut on the hip.

"Go on in, fellah," said Loudon. "Yore dinner's a-comin'."

He walked around to the front of the hotel. Under the wooden awning a beefy, red-faced citizen was dozing in a chair tilted back against the wall. Loudon tapped the snoring individual on the shoulder. The sleeper awoke gaspingly, his eyes winking. The chair settled on four legs with a crash.

"Howdy, Bill," said Loudon, gravely.

"Howdy, Tom," gurgled the other.

"Hoss in the corral an' me here, Bill. Feeds for two."

"Sure. We've done et, but you go in an' holler for Lize. She'll fix you up."

The fat landlord waddled stableward and Loudon entered the hotel. A partition that did not reach the ceiling divided the sleeping apartments from the dining room. Carelessly hanging over the partition were two shirts and someone's chaps.

The whole floor slanted, for, as has been said, the hotel leaned sidewise. The long table in the dining room, covered with cracked and scaling oilcloth, was held unsteadily upright by three legs and a cracker box.

Loudon, quite untouched by this scene of shiftlessness, hooked out a chair with his foot, dropped his hat on the floor, and sat down.

"Oh, Mis' Lainey!" he called.

A female voice, somewhat softened by distance and a closed door, instantly began to make oration to the effect that if any lazy chunker of a puncher thought he was to eat any food he was very much mistaken.

The door banged open. A slatternly, scrawny woman appeared in the doorway. She was still talking. But the clacking tongue changed its tone abruptly.

"Oh, it's you, Tom Loudon!" exclaimed the lean woman. "How are yuh, anyway? I'm shore glad to see yuh. I thought yuh was one o' them rousy fellers, an' I wouldn't rustle no more chuck this noon for the likes o' them, not if they was starvin' an' their tongues was hangin' out a foot. But yo're different, an' I ain't never forgot the time you rode thirty mile for a doc when my young one

was due to cash. No, you bet I ain't! Now don't you say nothin'. You jest set right patient a short spell an' I'll rustle——"

The door swung shut, and the remainder of the sentence was lost in a muffled din of pans. Loudon winked at the closed door and grinned.

He had known the waspish Mrs. Lainey and her paunchy husband since that day when, newly come to the Lazy River country, he had met them, their buckboard wrecked by a runaway and their one child apparently dying of internal injuries. Though Loudon always minimized what he had done, Mrs. Lainey and her husband did not. And they were not folk whose memories are short.

In less than twenty minutes Mrs. Lainey brought in a steak, fried potatoes, and coffee. The steak was fairly tough, so were the potatoes, and the coffee required a copious quantity of condensed milk to render it drinkable. But Loudon ate with a rider's appetite. Mrs. Lainey, arms folded in her apron, leaned against the doorjamb, and regaled him with the news of Farewell.

"Injun Joe got drunk las' week an' tried to hogtie Riley's bear. It wasn't hardly worth while buryin' Joe, but they done it. Mis' Stonestreet has a new baby. This one makes the twelfth. Yep, day before yestiddy. Charley's so proud over it he ain't been sober since. Slep' in the waterin'-trough las' night, so he did, an' this mornin' he was drunk as ever. But he never did do things by halves, that Charley Stonestreet. Ain't the heat awful? Yep, it's worse'n that. Did yuh hear about——"

Poor, good-hearted Mrs. Lainey. With her, speech was a disease. Loudon ate as hurriedly as he could, and fled to the sidewalk. Bill Lainey, who had fallen asleep again, roused sufficiently to accept six bits.

"Mighty drowsy weather, Tom," he mumbled.

"It must be," said Loudon. "So long."

Leaving the sleepy Lainey to resume his favourite occupation, Loudon walked away. Save Lainey, no human beings were visible on the glaring street. In front of the Palace Saloon two cow-ponies drooped. Near the postoffice stood another, bearing on its hip the Cross-in-a-box brand.

From the door of the postoffice issued the loud and cheerful tones of a voice whose owner was well pleased with the world at large.

"Guess I'll get that ribbon first," said Loudon to himself, and promptly walked behind the postoffice.

He had recognized the cheerful voice. It was that of his friend, Johnny Ramsay, who punched cows for the Cross-in-a-box outfit. And not for a month's pay would Loudon have had Johnny Ramsay see him purchasing yards of red ribbon. Ramsay's sense of humour was too well developed.

When four houses intervened between himself and the postoffice Loudon returned to the street and entered the Blue Pigeon Store. Compared with most Western frontier stores the Blue Pigeon was compactly neat. A broad counter fenced off three sides of the store proper.

Behind the counter lines of packed shelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling. Between the counter and the shelves knotted ropes, a long arm's-length apart, depended from the rafters. Above the canvas-curtained doorway in the rear hung the model of a black-hulled, slim-sparred clipper.

At the jingle of Loudon's spurs on the floor the canvas curtain was pushed aside, and the proprietor shuffled and thumped, for his left leg was of wood, into the store. He was a red-headed man, was Mike Flynn, the proprietor, barrel-chested, hairy-armed, and even the backs of his ham-like hands were tattooed.

"Good aff'noon to yuh, Tom," said Mike Flynn. "'Tis a fine day—hot, mabbe, but I've seen worse in the Horse Latitudes. An' what is it the day?"

"Red ribbon, Mike," replied Loudon, devoutly thankful that no other customer was in the store.

Mike glanced at the sample in Tom Loudon's hand.

"Shore, an' I have that same, width an' all," he said, and forthwith seizing one of the knotted ropes he pulled himself hand over hand to the top shelf.

Hanging by one hand he fumbled a moment, then lowered himself to the floor.

"An' here yuh are!" he exclaimed. "The finest ribbon that ever come West. Matches the bit yuh have like a twin brother. One dollar two bits a yard."

"I'll take five yards."

"Won't yuh be needin' a new necktie now?" inquired Mike Flynn, expertly measuring off the ribbon. "I've a fine lot in—grane ones, an' blue ones, an' purple ones wit' white spots, an' some black ones wit' red an' yaller figgers, not to spake o' some yaller ones wit' v'let horseshoes. Very fancy, thim last. God be with the ould days! Time was when I'd not have touched yaller save wit' me foot, but 'tis so long since I've hove a brick at an Orangeman that the ould feelin' ain't near so strong as it was. An' here's the ribbon, Tom. About them neckties now. They're worth seein'. One minute an' I'll delight yore eyes."

Rapidly Mike Flynn stumped around to the other side of the room, pulled down several long boxes and deftly laid them, covers off, on the counter. Loudon did need a new necktie. What man in love does not? He passed over the yellow ones with violet horseshoes so strongly recommended by Mike Flynn, and bought one of green silk.

"Yo're a lad after me own heart, Tom Loudon," said Mike Flynn, wrapping the necktie. "Grane's best when all's said an' done. The colour of ould Ireland, God bless her. An' here comes Johnny Ramsay."

Loudon hastily stuffed his purchases inside his flannel shirt, and in a careless tone asked for a box of forty-five calibre cartridges. He turned just in time to ward off the wild rush of Johnny Ramsay, who endeavoured to seize him by the belt and waltz him round the store.

"Wow! Wow!" yelled Johnny. "How's Tommy? How's the boy? Allemane left, you old bronc buster!"

"Quit it, you idjit!" bawled Loudon, the crushing of ribbon and necktie being imminent.

Ramsay stepped back and prodded Loudon's breast with an inquiring finger.

"Paddin'," he said, solemnly. "Tryin' to give yoreself a chest, ain't yuh, you old bean-pole? Ouch!"

For Loudon had dug a hard knuckle into his friend's left side, and it was Ramsay's turn to yell. From behind the counter Mike Flynn beamed upon them. He liked them well, these careless youngsters of the range, and their antics were a source of never-ending amusement.

Entered then a tall, lean man with black hair, and a face the good looks of which were somewhat marred by a thin-lipped mouth and sharp, sinister eyes. But for all that Sam Blakely, the manager of the 88 ranch, was a very handsome man. He nodded to the three, his lips parting over white teeth, and asked Mike Flynn for a rope.

"Here's yore cartridges, Tom," called Mike, and turned to the rear of the

store.

Loudon picked up his box of cartridges, stuffing them into a pocket in his chaps.

"Let's irrigate," he said to Ramsay.

"In a minute," replied his friend. "I want some cartridges my own self."

The two sat down on the counter to wait. Blakely strolled across to the open boxes of neckties.

"Cravats," he sneered, fingering them.

"An' —— fine ones!" exclaimed Mike Flynn, slamming down the coil of rope on the counter. "Thim yaller ones wit' v'let spots now, yuh couldn't beat 'em in New York. An' the grand grane ones. Ain't they the little beauts? I just sold one to Tom Loudon."

"Green shore does suit some people," said the 88 manager, coldly.

Loudon felt Johnny Ramsay stiffen beside him. But Loudon merely smiled a slow, pleasant smile.

"Hirin' any new men, Sam?" he inquired, softly, his right hand cuddling close to his belt.

"What do yuh want to know for?" demanded Blakely, wheeling.

"Why, yuh see, I was thinkin' o' quittin' the Bar S, an' I'd sort o' like to get with a good, progressive outfit, one that don't miss any chances."

Loudon's voice was clear and incisive. Each word fell with the precision of a pebble falling into a well. Mike Flynn backed swiftly out of range.

"What do yuh mean by that?" demanded Blakely, his gaze level.

"What I said," replied Loudon, staring into the other's sinister black eyes. "I shore do hate to translate my words."

For a long minute the two men gazed steadily at each other. Neither made a move. Blakely's hand hung at his side. Loudon's hand had not yet touched his gun-butt. But Blakely could not know that, for Loudon's crossed knees concealed the position of his hand.

Loudon was giving Blakely an even chance. He knew that Blakely was quick on the draw, but he believed that he himself was quicker. Blakely evidently thought, so too, for suddenly he grunted and turned his back on Loudon.

"What's that?" inquired Blakely, pointing a finger at one end of the rope.

"What—oh, that!" exclaimed Mike. "Sure, that's what a seaman calls whippin'. The holdfast was missin', an' the rope was beginnin' to unlay, so I whipped the end of it. 'Twill keep the rope from frayin' out, do yuh mind. An' it's the last rope I have in stock, too."

Loudon, watching Blakely's hands, saw that what Mike Flynn called whipping was whip-cord lapped tightly a dozen turns or so round the end of the rope. Blakely, without another word, paid for the rope, picked it up, and departed, head high, sublimely indifferent to the presence of Loudon. Mike Flynn heaved a heartfelt sigh of relief.

"Praise be!" he ejaculated. "I'd thought to lose a customer a minute back." Then, recollecting himself, he added quickly, "What was that yuh said about cartridges, Johnny?"

CHAPTER II

AT THE BAR S

"That's a good-lookin' goat," observed cheerful Johnny Ramsay, watching Loudon throw the saddle on the long-legged chestnut. "All he needs is horns an' a *maa-a-a*."

"What particular tune can you play on it?" retorted Loudon, passing the cinch-strap.

"On what?" inquired Ramsay, incautiously.

"On that four-legged accordeon yo're straddlin'."

"I wouldn't say nothin' about no accordeons—not if I was abusin' a poor billy by cinchin' a hull on his back. Honest, Tommy, don't yuh like ridin' a hoss? 'Fraid he'll throw yuh or somethin'?"

"Don't yuh worry none about this little cayuse. He's all hoss, he is, an' if yuh don't mind, Johnny, I'd be a heap obliged if yuh'd follow behind when we ride out o' town. Somebody might see us together an' take yuh for a friend o' mine, an' that wouldn't do nohow."

"Please, mister," whined Johnny Ramsay, "let me go with yuh. I know where there's a pile o' nice tomatter cans for the goat's supper. Red Rose tomatter cans, too. There's more nourishment in them kind than there is in the Blue Star brand. Hey, quit!"

Loudon had suddenly flipped a broken horseshoe at the hindquarters of Ramsay's pony, that surprised animal going into the air immediately. When Ramsay had quieted his wild-eyed mount, the two friends rode away together.

"I wonder why Blakely didn't go to it," remarked Ramsay, when Farewell lay behind them.

"Dunno," said Loudon. "He wasn't afraid, yuh can gamble on that."

"I ain't none so shore. He's bad plumb through, Blakely is. An' he's a killer, by his eyes. I guess it was just the extra shade he wanted, an' the extra shade wasn't there. You'd 'a' got him, Tom."

"Shore! But don't yuh make no mistake about Blakely bein' a coward. He ain't. He's seen trouble, an' seen it in the smoke."

"You mean Skinner Jack. Well, Jack wasn't slow with a gun, but the other two was Injuns, an' they only had Winchesters, an' Blakely he had a Sharp's. So yuh can't tally the war-whoops. An' I did hear how Skinner Jack was drunk when he called Blakely a liar."

"I doubt it. Skinner could always hold his red-eye. More likely his gun caught."

"Anyway, Tommy, you'd better not go cavortin' about on the skyline too plenteous. It wouldn't bother Blakely none to bushwhack yuh."

"Oh, he wouldn't do that. He ain't the bushwhackin' kind."

"Oh, ain't he? Now just because he ain't never done nothin' like that, it don't prove he won't. He's got a killer's eyes, I tell yuh, an' drillin' yuh would tickle him to death. Yuh run a blazer on him, an' he quit cold. Other gents seen the play. He won't never forget that. He'll down yuh on the square, or what looks

like an even break, if he can. But if he can't he'll down yuh anyway."

"Rustlers ramblin' over yore way any?" inquired Loudon in a meaning tone.

Johnny Ramsay struck his saddle-horn a resounding thwack with his open palm.

"If we could only get him that way!" he exclaimed. "But he's slicker'n axle-grease."

"The 88 will brand one calf too many some day. Hell's delight! What do they do with 'em? Yuh ride the range an' yuh ride the range an' yuh don't find no cows with unhealed brands. I seen twelve, though, with the 88 brand that looked like some gent had been addin' to Bar S with a runnin'-iron. But the brands was all healed up. Anyway, we've lost forty cows, an' I dunno how many calves."

"They'll turn up again."

"Shore—carryin' the 88 brand. My idea is that them rustlers brand 'em an' then hold 'em in some blind cañon over near the Fallin' Horse till the burns heal up, an' then they throw 'em loose on the range again. If the cows do drift across to the Bar S, what's the dif? They got the 88 brand."

"That sounds good. Why don't yuh take a little wander 'round the scenery near the Fallin' Horse?"

"I have; I didn't see nothin'. But they got 'em hid somewhere all right. One day I runs across Marvin, an' I had a job losin' him. He stuck to me closer'n tar all day. He was worried some, I seen that."

"Goin' back?"

"Till I find their cache, I am."

"That's another reason for makin' Blakely so friendly. He knows yuh won't stop lookin'. Ain't it the devil an' all? The measly Sheriff just squats down on his hunkers an' does nothin' while we lose cows in car-lots. An' when our cows go, we kiss 'em good-bye. They never come back—not even with their brand altered. Yuh can't change Cross-in-a-box to 88."

"With the Bar S it's a cinch. But the boss won't use another brand. Not him. He'll stick to Bar S till he ain't got a cow to run the iron on."

"Oh, it's a great system the 88 outfit are workin'! An' with Sheriff Block an' most all o' Marysville an' Farewell their friends it's a hard game to buck. Talk o' law! There ain't none in Fort Creek County."

"The only play is Vigilantes, an' it can't come to them till there's proof. We all know Blakely an' the 88 bunch are up to their hocks in this rustlin' deal, but we can't prove it."

"There's the worst o' bein' straight," complained Johnny Ramsay. "Yuh know some tinhorn is a-grabbin' all yuh own. Yo're certain shore who the gent is, but yuh can't hop out an' bust him without yuh catch him a-grabbin' or else a-wearin' yore pet pants."

"That's whatever," agreed Loudon.

Five miles out of Farewell, where the trail forked, one branch leading southeast to the Cross-in-a-box, the other to the Bar S, Loudon checked his horse.

"Keep a-goin'," said Johnny Ramsay. "I'm travellin' with you a spell. I'm kind o' sick o' that old trail. I've rode it so frequent I know all the rocks an' the cotton-woods by their first names."

Which explanation Loudon did not accept at its face value. He understood perfectly why Ramsay continued to ride with him. Ramsay believed that Blakely would endeavour to drop Loudon from ambush, and it is well known that a gentleman lying in wait for another will often stay his hand when his intended victim is accompanied. Neither Loudon nor Ramsay made any mention of the true inwardness of his thoughts. They had been friends for a long time.

Climbing the long slope of Indian Ridge, they scanned the trail warily. But nowhere did the hoofprints of Blakely's horse leave the dust of the trail. On the reverse slope of the ridge they picked up the larger hoofprints of Block's horse. Fair and plain the two sets of marks led southward.

"Wonder who the other gent was," hazarded Ramsay.

"Block," said Loudon, "I met him this mornin'. I was puttin' holes in his notice, an' he didn't like it none."

"Did he chatter much?"

"He talked a few, but nothin' to hurt."

"The tinhorn!" laughed Ramsay. "Bet he's goin' to the 88."

"It's some likely. We'll know when we reach Long Coulee."

They reached Long Coulee, where the trail to the 88 swung westward, as the sun was dropping behind the far-away peaks of the Three Sisters Mountains. Loudon slipped his feet from the stirrups and stretched luxuriously. But he did not feel luxurious.

As he had expected, Block had turned into the 88 trail, but as he had not expected Blakely had ridden straight on toward the Bar S. Which latter event was disquieting, not that Loudon feared an act of violence on the part of

Blakely, but because Kate's evening would be preempted by his enemy.

Loudon keenly desired to talk to Kate that evening. He had a great many things to tell her, and now the coming of Blakely spoiled it all.

"The nerve o' some folks," remarked Johnny Ramsay, eying the tracks of Blakely's horse with disfavour. "Better tell old Salt to lock up the silver an' the cuckoo clock. No offence now, Tommy, but if I was you, I'd sleep in the corral to-night. Blakely might take a fancy to the goat."

"I shore hope he does," grinned Loudon. "It would ease the strain some."

"Make it complete, old beanpole, when you do call the turn. Well, I got to be skippin'. Give my love to old Salt. So long."

"So long."

Johnny Ramsay picked up his reins, wheeled his pony, and fox-trotted away. He felt that further accompanying of Loudon was unnecessary. The danger of an ambush was past. Riding with Loudon had taken Ramsay some fifteen miles out of his way, and twenty-five long miles lay between his pony's nose and the corral bars of the Cross-in-a-box ranch. But Ramsay wasted not a thought on his lengthened journey. He would have ridden cheerfully across the territory and back again in order to benefit a friend.

"Come on, fellah," said Loudon, when Ramsay had gone.

The chestnut moved off at a walk. Loudon did not hurry him. He took out his papers and tobacco and rolled a cigarette with neatness and despatch. Tilting back his head, he blew the first lungful of smoke straight up into the air.

"It wouldn't be right for her to marry him," he observed. "She shore is one pretty girl. I wonder now if I have got any chance. She's rich, an' I ain't, but I

shore do love her a lot. Kate Loudon—that's a right nice-soundin' name."

He lowered his head and smoked silently for several minutes. The horse, reins on his neck, swung along steadily.

"Ranger fellah," said Loudon, "she'd ought to be willin' to wait till we make a stake, oughtn't she now? That's right. Wiggle one ear for yes. You know, don't yuh, old tiger-eye?"

When the lights of the ranch sparked across the flat, Ranger pointed his ears, lifted his head, and broke into a foxtrot. Passing the ranch house, on his way to the corral, Loudon heard the merry tinkle of a guitar. Through an open window Loudon saw the squat figure of Mr. Saltoun bent over a desk. On the porch, in the corner where the hammock hung, flickered the glowing tip of a cigarette. With a double thrum of swept strings the guitar-player in the hammock swung from "The Kerry Dance" into "Loch Lomond."

Loudon swore under his breath, and rode on.

Jimmy, the cook, and Chuck Morgan, one of the punchers, were lying in their bunks squabbling over the respective merits of Texas and New Mexico when Loudon entered the bunkhouse. Both men immediately ceased wrangling and demanded letters.

"I ain't read 'em all yet," replied Loudon, dropping his saddle and bridle in a corner. "Wait till to-morrow."

"Jimmy's expectin' one from a red-headed gal," grinned Chuck Morgan. "He's been restless all day. 'Will she write?' says he, 'an' I wonder if she's sick or somethin'.' Don't you worry none, cookie. Them red-headed gals live forever. They're tough, same as a yaller hoss."

"You shut up!" exclaimed Jimmy. "Who'd write to you, you frazzled end of a

misspent life? D'jever look at yoreself in the glass? You! Huh! Gimme my letter, Tommy."

"Letter? What letter? I didn't say there was a letter for yuh."

"Well, ain't there?"

"You gimme somethin' to eat, an' then we'll talk about letters."

"You got a nerve!" roared the cook, indignantly. "Comin' rollickin' in 'round midnight an' want yore chuck! Well, there it is"—indicating Chuck Morgan—"go eat it."

"You fry him an' I will. I'll gamble he wouldn't taste any worse than them steaks you've been dishin' out lately."

"You punchers gimme a pain," growled the cook, swinging his legs out of the bunk. "Always eatin', eatin'. I never seen nothin' like it nohow."

"He's sore 'cause Buff put a li'l dead snake in his bunk," explained Chuck Morgan placidly. "Just a li'l snake—not more'n three foot long at the outside. He shore is the most fault-fandin' feller, that Jimmy is."

"There ain't anythin' for yuh, Chuck," said Loudon. "Here's yore letter, Jimmy."

The cook seized the grimy missive and retreated to his kitchen. Twenty minutes later Loudon was eating supper. He ate leisurely. He was in no hurry to go up to the ranch house.

"Got the makin's!" Chuck Morgan's voice was a roar.

"Be careful," said Loudon, turning a slow head. "Yo're liable to strain yore throat, an' for a fellah talkin' as much as you do, that would shore be a

calamity."

"It shore would," agreed Morgan. "I only asked yuh for the makin's three times before I hollered."

"Holler first next time," advised Loudon, tossing paper and tobacco across to Morgan. "Have yuh got matches? Perhaps yuh'd like me to roll yuh a pill an' then light it for yuh?"

"Oh, that ain't necessary; none whatever. I got matches. They're all I got left. This aff'noon Jimmy says 'gimme a pipeful,' an' I wants to say right here that any jigger that'll smoke a pipe will herd sheep. 'Gimme a load,' says Jimmy. 'Shore,' says I, an' Jimmy bulges up holdin' the father of all corncobs in his hand. I forks over my bag, an' Jimmy wades in to fill the pipe. But that pipe don't fill up for a plugged nickel.

"He upends my bag, shakes her empty, an' hands her back. 'Thanks,' says Jimmy. 'That's all right,' I says, 'keep the bag, too. It'll fit in right handy to mend yore shirt with, maybe.' Come to find out, that pipe o' Jimmy's hadn't no bottom in her, an' all the tobacco run through an' into a bag Jimmy was holdin' underneath. A reg'lar Injun trick, that is. Yuh can't tell me Jimmy ain't been a squaw-man. Digger Injuns, too, I'll bet."

Jimmy, leaning against the door-jamb, laughed uproariously.

"Yah," he yelped. "I'll teach yuh to steal my socks, I will. I'd just washed a whole pair an' I was a-dryin' 'em behind the house, an' along comes Chuck an' gloms both of 'em, the hawg."

Leaving the two wrangling it out between them, Loudon pushed back his chair and went to the door. For a time he stood looking out into the night. Then he went to his saddle, picked up the bag containing the mail for Mr. Saltoun, and left the bunkhouse.

On the way to the ranch house he took out of his shirt the parcel of ribbon and smoothed it out. Skirting the house on the side farthest from the porch corner where sat Kate and Blakely, Loudon entered the kitchen and walked through the dining room to the open doorway of the office. Mr. Saltoun half turned at Loudon's entrance.

"Hello," said Mr. Saltoun, screwing up his eyes. "I was just wonderin' when you'd pull in."

"Lo," returned Loudon. "Here's the mail, an' here's a package for Miss Kate."

There was a rush of skirts, and handsome, black-haired Kate Saltoun, her dark eyes dancing, stood in the doorway.

"Did you get my ribbon, Tom?" cried she, and pounced on the flat parcel before Loudon could reply.

She smiled and glowed and held the ribbon under her olive chin, exclaimed over it and thanked Loudon all in a breath. Her father beamed upon her. He loved this handsome girl of his.

"Come out on the porch, Tom," said Kate, "when you're through with father. Mr. Blakely's here. Thank you again for bringing my ribbon."

Kate swished away, and Mr. Saltoun's beaming expression vanished also. Mr. Saltoun was not especially keen. He rarely saw anything save the obvious, but for several weeks he had been under the impression that Kate and this tall, lean puncher with the gray eyes were too friendly.

And here was Kate, while entertaining the 88 manager, inviting Loudon to join her on the porch. Mr. Saltoun was ambitious for his daughter. He had not the remotest intention of receiving into his family a forty-dollar-a-month

cowhand. He would have relished firing Loudon. But the latter was a valuable man. He was the best rider and roper in the outfit. Good cowboys do not drift in on the heels of every vagrant breeze.

Mr. Saltoun resolved to keep an eye on Loudon and arrange matters so that Kate and the puncher should meet seldom, if at all. He knew better than to speak to his daughter. That would precipitate matters.

By long experience Mr. Saltoun had learned that opposition always stiffened Kate's determination. From babyhood her father had spoiled her. Consequently the Kate of twenty-three was hopelessly intractable.

Mr. Saltoun drummed on the desk-top with a pencil. Loudon shifted his feet. He had mumbled a non-committal reply to Kate's invitation. Not for a great deal would he have joined the pair on the porch. But Mr. Saltoun did not know that.

"Chuck tells me," said Mr. Saltoun, suddenly, "that he jerked five cows out o' that mud-hole on Pack-saddle Creek near Box Hill. Yeah, that one. Tomorrow I want yuh to ride along Pack-saddle an' take a look at them other two holes between Box Hill an' Fishtail Coolee. If yuh see any cows driffin' west, head 'em east. When that —— barb-wire comes—if it ever does, an' I ordered it a month ago—you an' Chuck can fence them three mud-holes. Better get an early start, Tom."

"All right," said Loudon, and made an unhurried withdrawal—by way of the kitchen.

Once in the open air Loudon smiled a slow smile. He had correctly divined the tenor of his employer's thoughts. Before he reached the bunkhouse Loudon had resolved to propose to Kate Saltoun within forty-eight hours.

CHAPTER III

SHOTS ON PACK-SADDLE

"I woke up one momin' on the old Chisolm trail,
Rope in my hand an' a cow by the tail.
Crippled my hoss, I don't know how,
Ropin' at the horns of a 2-U cow."

Thus sang Loudon, carrying saddle and bridle to the corral in the blue light of dawn. Chuck Morgan was before him at the corral, and wrestling with a fractious gray pony.

"Whoa! yuh son of sin!" yelled Morgan, wrenching the pony's ear. "Stand still, or I'll cave in yore slats!"

"Kick him again," advised Loudon, flicking the end of his rope across the back of a yellow beast with a black mane and tail.

The yellow horse stopped trotting instantly. He was rope-broke. It was unnecessary to "fasten," thanks to Loudon's training.

"They say yuh oughtn't to exercise right after eatin'," continued Loudon, genially. "An' yo're mussin' up this nice corral, too, Chuck."

"I'll muss up this nice little gray devil!" gasped Chuck. "When I git on him I'll plow the hide offen him. —— his soul! He's half mule."

"He takes yuh for a relative!" called Jimmy, who had come up unobserved. "Relatives never do git along nohow!"

Jimmy fled, pursued by pebbles. The panting and outraged Chuck returned to his task of passing the rear cinch. Still swearing, he joined Loudon at the gate. The two rode away together.

"That sorrel o' Blakely's," observed Chuck, his fingers busy with paper and tobacco, "is shore as pretty as a little red wagon."

"Yeah," mumbled Loudon.

"I was noticin' him this mornin'," continued Chuck Morgan. "He's got the cleanest set o' legs I ever seen."

"This mornin'," said Loudon, slowly, "Where'd yuh see Blakely's sorrel this mornin'?"

"In the little corral. He's in there with the Old Man's string."

Loudon pulled his hat forward and started methodically to roll a cigarette. So Blakely had spent the night at the ranch. This was the first time he had ever stayed overnight.

What did it mean? Calling on Kate was one thing, but spending the night was quite another.

With the fatuous reasoning of a man deeply in love, Loudon refused to believe that Blakely could be sailing closer to the wind of Kate's affections than he himself. Yet there remained the fact of Blakely's extended visit.

"We've been losin' right smart o' cows lately," remarked Chuck Morgan.

"What's the use o' talkin'?" exclaimed Loudon, bitterly. "The Old Man says

we ain't, an' he's the boss."

"He won't say so after the round-up. He'll sweat blood then. If I could only catch one of 'em at it. Just one. But them thievin' 88 boys are plumb wise. An' the Old Man thinks they're little he-angels with four wings apiece."

"Yuh can't tell *him* nothin'. He knows."

"An' Blakely comes an' sets around, an' the Old Man laps up all he says like a cat, an' Blakely grins behind his teeth. I'd shore like to know his opinion o' the Old Man."

"An' us."

"An' us. Shore. The Old Man can't be expected to know as much as us. You can gamble an' go the limit Blakely has us sized up for sheep-woolly baa-lams."

Morgan made a gesture of exasperation.

"We will be sheep," exclaimed Loudon, "if we don't pick up somethin' against the 88 before the round-up! We're full-sized, two-legged men, ain't we? Got eyes, ain't we? There ain't nothin' the matter with our hands, is there? Yet them 88 boys put it all over our shirt. Blakely's right. We're related plumb close to sheep, an' blind sheep at that."

"Them 88 boys have all the luck," grunted Chuck Morgan. "But their luck will shore break if I see any of 'em a-foolin' with our cows. So long."

Chuck Morgan rode off eastward. His business was with the cattle near Cow Creek, which stream was one of the two dividing the Bar S range from that of the Cross-in-a-box. Loudon, his eyes continually sliding from side to side, loped onward. An hour later he forded the Lazy River, and rode along the

bank to the mouth of Pack-saddle Creek.

The course he was following was not the shortest route to the two mud-holes between Box Hill and Fishtail Coulee. But south of the Lazy the western line of the Bar S was marked by Pack-saddle Creek, and Loudon's intention was to ride along the creek from mouth to source.

There had been no rain for a month. If any cows had been driven across the stream he would know it. Twice before he had ridden the line of the creek, but his labours had not been rewarded. Yet Loudon did not despair. His was a hopeful soul.

Occasionally, as he rode, he saw cows. Here and there on the bank were cloven hoofprints, showing where cattle had come down to drink. But none of them had crossed since the rain. And there were no marks of ponies' feet.

At the mud-hole near Box Hill a lone cow stood belly-deep, stolidly awaiting death.

"Yuh poor idjit," commented Loudon, and loosed his rope from the saddle-horn.

The loop settled around the cow's horns. The yellow pony, cunningly holding his body sidewise that the saddle might not be pulled over his tail, strained with all four legs.

"C'mon, Lemons!" encouraged Loudon. "C'mon, boy! Yuh old yellow lump o' bones! Heave! Head or cow, she's got to come!"

Thus adjured the pony strove mightily. The cow also exerted itself. Slowly the tenacious grip of the mud was broken. With a suck and a plop the cow surged free. It stood, shaking its head.

Swiftly Loudon disengaged his rope, slapped the cow with the end of it, and urged the brute inland.

Having chased the cow a full half-mile he returned to the mud-hole and dismounted. For he had observed that upon a rock ledge above the mud-hole which he wished to inspect more closely. What he had noted was a long scratch across the face of the broad flat ledge of rock. But for his having been drawn in close to the ledge by the presence of the cow in the mud-hole, this single scratch would undoubtedly have escaped his attention.

Loudon leaned over and scrutinized the scratch. It was about a foot long, a quarter of an inch broad at one end, tapering roughly to a point. Ordinarily such a mark would have interested Loudon not at all, but under the circumstances it might mean much. The side-slip of a horse's iron-shod hoof had made it. This was plain enough. It was evident, too, that the horse had been ridden. A riderless horse does not slip on gently sloping rocks.

Other barely visible abrasions showed that the horse had entered the water. Why had someone elected to cross at this point? Pack-saddle Creek was fordable in many places. Below the mud-hole four feet and less was the depth. But opposite the rock ledge was a scour-hole fully ten feet deep shallowing to eight in the middle of the stream. Here was no crossing for an honest man in his senses. But for one of questionable purpose, anxious to conceal his trail as much as possible, no better could be chosen.

"Good thing his hoss slipped," said Loudon, and returned to the waiting Lemons.

Mounting his horse he forded the creek and rode slowly along the bank. Opposite the lower end of the ledge he found that which he sought. In the narrow belt of bare ground between the water's edge and the grass were the tracks of several cows and one pony. Straight up from the water the trail led, and vanished abruptly when it reached the grass.

"Five cows," said Loudon. "Nothin' mean about that jigger."

He bent down to examine the tracks more closely, and as he stooped a rifle cracked faintly, and a bullet whisped over his bowed back.

Loudon jammed home both spurs, and jumped Lemons forward. Plying his quirt, he looked over his shoulder.

A puff of smoke suddenly appeared above a rock a quarter of a mile downstream and on the other side of the creek. The bullet tucked into the ground close beside the pony's drumming hoofs.

Loudon jerked his Winchester from its scabbard under his leg, turned in the saddle, and fired five shots as rapidly as he could work the lever. He did not expect to score a hit, but earnestly hoped to shake the hidden marksman's aim. He succeeded but lamely.

The enemy's third shot cut through his shirt under the left armpit, missing the flesh by a hair's-breadth. Loudon raced over the lip of a swell just as a fourth shot ripped through his hat.

Hot and angry, Loudon jerked Lemons to a halt half-way down the reverse slope. Leaving his horse tied to the ground he ran back and lay down below the crest. He removed his hat and wriggled forward to the top.

Cautiously lifting his head he surveyed the position of his unknown opponent. A half-mile distant, on the Bar S side of the Pack-saddle, was the rock which sheltered the marksman. A small dark dot appeared above it.

Taking a long aim Loudon fired at the dot. As he jerked down the lever to reload, a gray smoke-puff mushroomed out at the lower right-hand corner of the rock, and a violent shock at the elbow numbed his right hand.

Loudon rolled swiftly backward, sat up, and stared wonderingly at his two hands. One held his Winchester, but gripped in the cramped fingers of the right hand was the bent and broken lever of the rifle. The bullet of the sharp-shooting citizen had struck the lever squarely on the upper end, snapped the pin, torn loose the lever, and hopelessly damaged the loading mechanism.

"That jigger can shore handle a gun," remarked Loudon. "If this ain't one lovely fix for a Christian! Winchester no good, only a six-shooter, an' a fully-organized miracle-worker a-layin' for my hide. I'm a-goin' somewhere, an' I'm goin' right now."

He dropped the broken lever and rubbed his numbed fingers till sensation returned. Then he put on his hat and hurried down to his horse.

He jammed the rifle into the scabbard, mounted, and rode swiftly southward, taking great pains to keep to the low ground.

A mile farther on he forded the creek and gained the shelter of an outflung shoulder of Box Hill.

Near the top Loudon tied Lemons to a tree and went forward on foot. Cautiously as an Indian, Loudon traversed the flat top of the hill and squatted down in a bunch of tall grass between two pines. From this vantage-point his field of view was wide. The rock ledge and the mud-hole were in plain sight. So was the rock from which he had been fired upon. It was a long mile distant, and it lay near the crest of a low hog's-back close to the creek.

"He's got his hoss down behind the swell," muttered Loudon. "Wish this hill was higher."

Loudon pondered the advisability of climbing a tree. He wished very much to obtain a view of the depression behind the hog's-back. He finally decided to remain where he was. It was just possible that the hostile stranger might be

provided with field glasses. In which case tree-climbing would invite more bullets, and the shooting of the enemy was too nearly accurate for comfort.

Loudon settled himself comfortably in his bunch of grass and watched intently. Fifteen or twenty minutes later what was apparently a part of the rock detached itself and disappeared behind the crest of the hog's-back.

Soon the tiny figure of a mounted man came into view on the flat beyond. Horse and rider moved rapidly across the level ground and vanished behind a knoll. When the rider reappeared he was not more than nine hundred yards distant and galloping hard on a course paralleling the base of the hill.

"Good eye," chuckled Loudon. "Goin' to surround me. I'd admire to hear what he says when he finds out I ain't behind that swell."

The stranger splashed across the creek and raced toward some high ground in the rear of Loudon's old position.

Now that the enemy had headed westward there was nothing to be gained by further delay.

Loudon had plenty of courage, but one requires more than bravery and a six-shooter with which to pursue and successfully combat a gentleman armed with a Winchester.

Hastily retreating to his horse, Loudon scrambled into the saddle, galloped across the hilltop and rode down the eastern slope at a speed exceedingly perilous to his horse's legs. But the yellow horse somehow contrived to keep his footing and reached the bottom with no damage other than skinned hocks.

Once on level ground Loudon headed southward, and Lemons, that yellow bundle of nerves and steel wire, stretched out his neck and galloped with all the heart that was in him.

Loudon's destination was a line-camp twelve miles down the creek. This camp was the temporary abode of two Bar S punchers, who were riding the country south of Fishtail Coulee. Loudon knew that both men had taken their Winchesters with them when they left the ranch, and he hoped to find one of the rifles in the dugout.

With a rifle under his leg Loudon felt that the odds would be even, in spite of the fact that the enemy had an uncanny mastery of the long firearm. Loudon's favourite weapon was the six-shooter, and he was at his best with it. A rifle in his hands was not the arm of precision it became when Johnny Ramsay squinted along the sights. For Johnny was an expert.

"Keep a-travellin', little hoss, keep a-travellin'," encouraged Loudon. "Split the breeze. That's the boy!"

Loudon had more than one reason for being anxious to join issue with the man who had attacked him. At nine hundred yards one cannot recognize faces or figures, but one can distinguish the colour of a horse, and Loudon's antagonist rode a sorrel. Chuck Morgan had said that Blakely's horse was a sorrel.

Loudon sighted the dugout that was Pack-saddle line-camp in a trifle less than an hour. He saw with elation that two hobbled ponies were grazing near by. A fresh mount would quicken the return trip. Loudon's elation collapsed like a pricked bubble when he entered the dugout and found neither of the rifles.

He swore a little, and smoked a sullen cigarette. Then he unsaddled the weary Lemons and saddled the more vicious of the two hobbled ponies. Subjugating this animal, a most excellent pitcher, worked off a deal of Loudon's ill-temper. Even so, it was in no cheerful frame of mind that he rode away to

inspect the two mud-holes between Fishtail Coulee and Box Hill.

To be beaten is not a pleasant state of affairs. Not only had he been beaten, but he had been caught by the old Indian fighter's trick of the empty hat. That was what galled Loudon. To be lured into betraying his position by such an ancient snare! And he had prided himself on being an adroit fighting man! The fact that he had come within a finger's breadth of paying with his life for his mistake did not lessen the smart, rather it aggravated it.

Late in the afternoon he returned to the line-camp. Hockling and Red Kane, the two punchers, had not yet ridden in. So Loudon sliced bacon and set the coffee on to boil. Half an hour after sunset Hockling and Kane galloped up and fell upon Loudon with joy. Neither relished the labour, insignificant as it was, of cooking.

"Company," remarked Red Kane, a forkful of bacon poised in the air.

The far-away patter of hoofs swelled to a drumming crescendo. Then inside the circle of firelight a pony slid to a halt, and the voice of cheerful Johnny Ramsay bawled a greeting.

"That's right, Tom!" shouted the irrepressible Johnny. "Always have chuck ready for yore uncle. He likes his meals hot. This is shore real gayful. I wasn't expectin' to find any folks here."

"I s'pose not," said Red Kane. "You was figurin' on romancin' in while we was away an' stockin' up on *our* grub. I know you. Hock, you better cache the extra bacon an' dobies. Don't let Johnny see 'em."

"Well, o' course," observed Ramsay, superciliously, "I've got the appetite of youth an' a feller with teeth. I don't have to get my nourishment out of soup."

"He must mean you, Hock," said Red Kane, calmly. "You've done lost

eight."

"The rest of'em all hit," asserted Hockling, grinning. "But what Johnny wants with teeth, I dunno. By rights he'd ought to stick to milk. Meat ain't healthy for young ones. Ain't we got a nursin'-bottle kickin' round some'ers, Red?"

"Shore, Red owns one," drawled Loudon. "I seen him buyin' one once over to Farewell at Mike Flynn's."

"O' course," said Johnny, heaping his plate with bacon and beans. "I remember now I seen him, too. Said he was buyin' it for a friend. Why not admit yo're married, Red?"

"Yuh know I bought it for Mis' Shaner o' the Three Bars!" shouted the indignant Kane. "She done asked me to get it for her. It was for her baby to drink out of."

"Yuh don't mean it," said Johnny, seriously. "For a baby, yuh say. Well now, if that ain't surprisin'. I always thought nursin'-bottles was to drive nails with."

In this wise the meal progressed pleasantly enough. After supper, when the four were sprawled comfortably on their saddle-blankets, Loudon launched his bombshell.

"Had a small brush this mornin'," remarked Loudon, "with a gent over by the mud-hole north o' Box Hill."

The three others sat up, gaping expectantly.

"Djuh get him?" demanded Johnny Ramsay, his blue eyes glittering in the firelight.

Loudon shook his head. He raised his left arm, revealing the rent in his shirt. Then he removed his hat and stuck his finger through the hole in the crown.

"Souvenirs," said Loudon. "He busted the lever off my Winchester an' gormed up the action."

"An' he got away?" queried Red Kane.

"The last I seen of him he was workin' in behind where he thought I was."

"Where was you?"

"I was watchin' him from the top o' Box Hill. What did yuh think I'd be doin'? Waitin' for him to surround me an' plug me full o' holes? I come here some hurried after he crossed the creek. I was hopin' you'd have left a rifle behind."

"Wish't we had," lamented Hockling. "Say, you was lucky to pull out of it without reapin' no lead."

"I'll gamble you started the fraycas, Tommy," said Johnny Ramsay.

"Not this trip. I was lookin' at some mighty interestin' cow an' pony tracks opposite the rock ledge when this gent cuts down on me an' misses by two inches."

"Tracks?"

"Yep. Some sport drove five cows on to the ledge an' chased 'em over the creek. That's how they work the trick. They throw the cows across where there's hard ground or rocks on our side. 'Course the rustlers didn't count none on us nosyin' along the opposite bank."

"Ain't they the pups!" ejaculated Hockling.

"They're wise owls," commented Johnny Ramsay. "Say, Tom, did this

shootin' party look anyways familiar?"

"The colour of his hoss was—some," replied Loudon. "Blakely was at the ranch last night, an' his hoss was a sorrel."

"What did I tell yuh?" exclaimed Johnny Ramsay. "What did I tell yuh? That Blakely tinhorn is one bad actor."

"I ain't none shore it was him. There's herds o' sorrel cayuses."

"Shore there are, but there's only one Blakely. Oh, it was him all right."

"Whoever it was, I'm goin' to wander over onto the 88 range to-morrow, if Red or Hock'll lend me a Winchester."

"Take mine," said Hockling. "Red's throws off a little."

"She does," admitted Red Kane, "but my cartridges don't. I'll give yuh a hull box."

Followed then much profane comment relative to the 88 ranch and the crass stupidity of Mr. Saltoun.

"I see yo're packin' a Winchester," said Loudon to Johnny Ramsay, when Hockling and Red had turned in.

"Hunter's trip," explained Johnny, his eyes twinkling. "Jack Richie's got his own ideas about this rustlin', so he sent me over to scamper round the 88 range an' see what I could see. I guess I'll travel with you a spell."

"Fine!" said Loudon. "Fine. I was wishin' for company. If we're jumped we'd ought to be able to give 'em a right pleasant little surprise."

Johnny Ramsay rolled a cigarette and gazed in silence at the dying fire for

some minutes. Loudon, his hands clasped behind his head, stared upward at the star-dusted heavens. But he saw neither the stars nor the soft blackness. He saw Kate and Blakely, and thick-headed Mr. Saltoun bending over his desk, and he was wondering how it all would end.

"Say," said Johnny Ramsay, suddenly, "this here hold-up cut down on yuh from behind a rock, didn't he?"

"Shore did," replied Loudon.

"Which side did he fire from?"

"Why, the hind side."

"I ain't tryin' to be funny. Was it the left side or the right side?"

"The right side," Loudon replied, after a moment's thought.

"Yore right side?"

"Yep."

"That would make it his left side. Did yuh ever stop to think, Tom, that Blakely shoots a Colt right-handed an' a Winchester left-handed?"

Loudon swore sharply.

"Now, how did I come to forget that!" he exclaimed. "O' course he does."

"Guess Mr. Blakely's elected," said Johnny Ramsay. "Seems likely."

Early next morning Loudon and Ramsay rode northward along the bank of the Pack-saddle. They visited first the boulder a quarter of a mile below the mud-hole. Here they found empty cartridge shells, and the marks of boot-heels.

They forded the creek at the ledge above the mud-hole, where the cows had been driven across, and started westward. They were careful to ride the

low ground at first, but early in the afternoon they climbed the rocky slope of Little Bear Mountain. From the top they surveyed the surrounding country. They saw the splendid stretches of the range specked here and there with dots that were cows, but they saw no riders.

They rode down the mountainside and turned into a wide draw, where pines and tamaracks grew slimly. At the head of the draw, where it sloped abruptly upward, was a brushless wood of tall cedars, and here, as they rode in among the trees, a calf bawled suddenly.

They rode toward the sound and came upon a dead cow. At the cow's side stood a lonely calf. At sight of the men the calf fled lumberingly. Ramsay unstrapped his rope and gave his horse the spur. Loudon dismounted and examined the dead cow. When Ramsay returned with the calf, Loudon was squatting on his heels, rolling a cigarette.

"There y'are," observed Loudon, waving his free hand toward the cow. "There's evidence for yuh. Ears slit with the 88 mark, an' the 88 brand over the old Bar S. Leg broke, an' a hole in her head. She ain't been dead more'n a day. What do you reckon?"

"That the 88 are damn fools. Why didn't they skin her?"

"Too lazy, I guess. That calf's branded an' earmarked all complete. Never was branded before, neither."

"Shore. An' the brand's about two days old. Just look at it. Raw yet."

"Same date as its ma's. They done some slick work with a wet blanket on that cow, but the Bar S is plain underneath. Give the cow a month, if she'd lived, an' yuh'd never know but what she was born 88."

"Oh, they're slick, the pups!" exclaimed Johnny Ramsay.

"The Old Man ought to see this. When Old Salt throws his eyes on that brandin' I'll gamble he'll change his views some."

"You bet he will. Better start now."

"All right. Let's get a-goin'."

"One's enough. You go, Tommy. I'll stay an' caper around. I might run onto somethin'. Yuh can't tell."

"I'd kind o' like to have yuh here when I get back."

"Don't worry none. From what I know o' Old Salt you an' him won't be here before to-morrow mornin'! I'll be here then."

"All right. I'll slide instanter. So long, Johnny."

CHAPTER IV

THE SKINNED CATTLE

"This is a devil of a time to haul a man out o' bed," complained Mr. Saltoun, stuffing the tail of his nightshirt into his trousers. "C'mon in the office," he added, grumpily.

Mr. Saltoun, while Loudon talked, never took his eyes from the puncher's face. Incredulity and anger warred in his expression.

"What do you reckon?" the owner inquired in a low tone, when Loudon fell silent.

"Why, it's plain enough," said Loudon, impatiently. "The rustlers were night-drivin' them cows when one of 'em busted her leg. So they shot her, an' the calf got away an' come back after the rustlers had gone on. They must 'a' been night-drivin', 'cause if it had been daytime they'd 'a' rounded up the calf. Night-drivin' shows they were in a hurry to put a heap o' range between themselves an' the Bar S. They were headin' straight for the Fallin' Horse an' the Three Sisters."

"I see all that. I'm still askin' what do you reckon?"

"Meanin'?"

"Who-all's doin' it?"

"I ain't changed my opinion any. If the rustlers don't ride for the 88, then they're related mighty close."

"You can't prove it," denied Mr. Saltoun.

"I know I can't. But it stands to reason that two or three rustlers workin' for themselves wouldn't drift cows west—right across the 88 range. They'd drift 'em north toward Farewell, or south toward the Fryin' Pans. Findin' that cow an' calf on the 88 range is pretty near as strong as findin' a man ridin' off on yore hoss."

"Pretty near ain't quite."

"I ain't sayin' anythin' more."

"You've got a grudge against the 88, Tom. Just because a left-handed sport on a sorrel cuts down on yuh it don't follow that Blakely is the sport. Yuh hadn't

ought to think so, Tom. Why, Blakely stayed here the night before yuh started for Pack-saddle. He didn't leave till eight o'clock in the mornin', an' then he headed for the 88. It ain't likely he'd slope over to the creek an' shoot you up. Why, that's plumb foolish, Tom. Blakely's white, an' he's a friend o' mine."

Mr. Saltoun gazed distressedly at Loudon. The puncher stared straight before him, his expression wooden. He had said all that he intended to say.

"Well, Tom," continued the owner, "I don't enjoy losin' cows any more than the next feller. We've got to stop this rustlin' somehow. In the mornin' I'll ride over with yuh an' have a look at that cow. Tell Chuck Morgan I want him to come along. Now you get some sleep, an' forget about the 88. They ain't in on this deal, take my word for it."

It was a silent trio that departed in the pale light of the new day. Chuck Morgan endeavoured to draw Loudon into conversation but gave it up after the first attempt. The heavy silence remained unbroken till they reached the mouth of the wide draw beyond Little Bear Mountain.

"There's a hoss," said Loudon, suddenly.

A quarter of a mile away grazed a saddled pony. Loudon galloped forward.

The animal made no attempt to escape. It stood quietly while Loudon rode up and gathered in the reins dragging between its feet. The full *canten*as were in place. The quirt hung on the horn. The rope had not been unstrapped. The slicker was tied behind the cantle. Under the left fender the Winchester was in its scabbard. All on the saddle was as it should be.

"Whose hoss?" inquired Mr. Saltoun, who had followed more slowly.

"Ramsay's," replied the laconic Loudon, and started up the draw at a lope, leading the riderless pony.

Loudon's eyes searched the ground ahead and on both sides. He instinctively felt that some ill had befallen Johnny Ramsay. His intuition was not at fault.

When the three had ridden nearly to the head of the draw, where the trees grew thickly, Loudon saw, at the base of a leaning pine, the crumpled body of Johnny Ramsay.

Loudon dropped from the saddle and ran to his friend. Ramsay lay on his back, his left arm across his chest, his right arm extended, fingers gripping the butt of his six-shooter. His face and neck and left arm were red with blood. His appearance was sufficiently ghastly and death-like, but his flesh was warm.

Respiration was imperceptible, however, and Loudon tore open Ramsay's shirt and pressed his ear above the heart. It was beating, but the beat was pitifully slow and faint.

Loudon set to work. Chuck Morgan was despatched to find water, and Mr. Saltoun found himself taking and obeying orders from one of his own cowpunchers.

An hour later Ramsay, his wounds washed and bandaged, began to mutter, but his words were unintelligible. Within half an hour he was raving in delirium. Chuck Morgan had departed, bound for the Bar S, and Loudon and Mr. Saltoun sat back on their heels and watched their moaning patient.

"It's a whipsaw whether he'll pull through or not," remarked the bromidic Mr. Saltoun.

"He's got to pull through," declared Loudon, grimly. "He ain't goin' to die. Don't think it for a minute."

"I dunno. He's got three holes in him."

"Two. Neck an' arm, an' the bone ain't touched. That graze on the head ain't nothin'. It looks bad, but it only scraped the skin. His neck's the worst. A half inch over an' he'd 'a' bled to death. Yuh can't rub out Johnny so easy. There's a heap o' life in him."

"His heart's goin' better now," said Mr. Saltoun.

Loudon nodded, his gray eyes fixed on the bandaged head of his friend. Conversation languished, and Mr. Saltoun began to roll and smoke cigarettes. After a time Loudon rose.

"He'll do till the wagon comes," he said. "Let's go over an' take a squint at that cow."

Loudon led Mr. Saltoun to the spot where lay the dead cow. When the puncher came in sight of the dead animal he halted abruptly and observed that he would be damned.

Mr. Saltoun whistled. The cow had been thoroughly skinned. Beside the cow lay the calf, shot through the head. And from the little body every vestige of hide had been stripped.

"I guess that settles the cat-hop," said Mr. Saltoun, and began comprehensively to curse all rustlers and their works.

It was not the skinning that disturbed Mr. Saltoun. It was the sight of his defunct property. The fact that he was losing cows had struck home at last. Inform a man that he is losing property, and he may or may not become concerned, but show him that same property rendered valueless, and he will become very much concerned. Ocular proof is a wonderful galvanizer. Yet, in the case of Mr. Saltoun, it was not quite wonderful enough.

"Oh, they're slick!" exclaimed Loudon, bitterly. "They don't forget nothin'!

No wonder Blakely's a manager!"

Mr. Saltoun ceased swearing abruptly.

"Yo're wrong, Tom," he reproved. "The 88's got nothin' to do with it. I know they ain't, an' that's enough. I'm the loser, not you, an' I'm the one to do the howlin'. An' I don't want to hear any more about the 88 or Blakely."

Loudon turned his back on Mr. Saltoun and returned to the wounded man. The cowboy yearned to take his employer by the collar and kick him into a reasonable frame of mind. Such blindness was maddening.

Mr. Saltoun heaped fuel on the fire of Loudon's anger by remarking that the rustlers undoubtedly hailed from the Frying-Pan Mountains. Loudon, writhing internally, was on the point of relieving his pent-up feelings when his eye glimpsed a horseman on the high ground above the draw. The puncher reached for his Winchester, but he laid the rifle down when the rider changed direction and came toward them.

"Block, ain't it?" inquired Mr. Saltoun.

Loudon nodded. His eyes narrowed to slits, his lips set in a straight line. The sheriff rode up and halted, his little eyes shifting from side to side. He spoke to Mr. Saltoun, nodded to Loudon, and then stared at the wounded man.

"Got a rustler, I see," he observed dryly, his lips crinkled in a sneering smile.

"Yuh see wrong—as usual," said Loudon. "Some friend o' yores shot Johnny."

"Friend o' mine? Who?" queried the sheriff, his manner one of mild interest.

"Wish I knew. Thought yuh might be able to tell me. Ain't that what yuh come here for?"

"Ramsay's shot—that's all we know," interposed Mr. Saltoun, hastily. "An' there's a cow an' calf o' mine over yonder. Skinned, both of 'em."

"An' the cow had been branded through a wet blanket," said Loudon, not to be fobbed off. "The Bar S was underneath an' the 88 was on top. Johnny an' me found the dead cow an' the live calf yesterday. I left Johnny here an' rode in to the Bar S. When we got here we found Johnny shot an' the cow an' calf skinned. What do you guess?"

"I don't guess nothin'," replied the sheriff. "But it shore looks as if rustlers had been mighty busy."

"Don't it?" said Loudon with huge sarcasm. "I guess, now——"

"Say, look here, Sheriff," interrupted Mr. Saltoun, anxious to preserve peace, "I ain't makin' no charges against anybody. But this rustlin' has got to stop. I can't afford to lose any more cows. Do somethin'. Yo're sheriff."

"Do somethin'!" exclaimed the Sheriff. "Well, I like that! What can I do? I can't be in forty places at once. Yuh talk like I knowed just where the rustlers hang out."

"Yuh probably do," said Loudon, eyes watchful, his right hand ready.

"Keep out of this, Tom," ordered Mr. Saltoun, turning on Loudon with sharp authority. "I'll say what's to be said."

"Show me the rustlers," said the sheriff, electing to disregard Loudon's outburst. "Show me the rustlers, an' I'll do the rest."

At which remark the seething Loudon could control himself no longer.

"You'll do the rest!" he rapped out in a harsh and grating voice. "I guess yuh

will! If yuh was worth a —— yuh'd get 'em without bein' shown! How much do they pay yuh for leavin' 'em alone?"

The sheriff did not remove his hands from the saddle-horn. For Loudon had jerked out his six-shooter, and the long barrel was in line with the third button of the officer's shirt.

"Yuh got the drop," grunted the sheriff, his little eyes venomous, "an' I ain't goin' up agin a sure thing."

"You can gamble yuh ain't. I'd shore admire to blow yuh apart. You git, an' git now."

The sheriff hesitated. Loudon's finger dragged on the trigger. Slowly the sheriff picked up his reins, wheeled his horse, and loped away.

"What did yuh do that for?" demanded Mr. Saltoun, disturbed and angry.

Loudon, his eye- corners puckered, stared at the owner of the Bar S. The cowboy's gaze was curious, speculative, and it greatly lacked respect. Instead of replying to Mr. Saltoun's question, Loudon sheathed his six-shooter, squatted down on his heels and began to roll a cigarette.

"I asked yuh what yuh did that for?" reiterated blundering Mr. Saltoun.

Again Loudon favoured his employer with that curious and speculative stare.

"I'll tell yuh," Loudon said, gently. "I talked to Block because it's about time someone did. He's in with the rustlers—Blakely an' that bunch. If you wasn't blinder'n a flock of bats you'd see it, too."

"You can't talk to me this way!" cried the furious Mr. Saltoun.

"I'm doin' it," observed Loudon, placidly.

"Yo're fired!"

"Not by a jugful I ain't. I quit ten minutes ago."

"You——" began Mr. Saltoun.

"Don't," advised Loudon, his lips parting in a mirthless smile.

Mr. Saltoun didn't. He withdrew to a little distance and sat down. After a time he took out his pocket-knife and began to play mumblety-peg. Mr. Saltoun's emotions had been violently churned. He required time to readjust himself. But with his customary stubbornness he held to the belief that Blakely and the 88 were innocent of evil-doing.

Until Chuck Morgan and the wagon arrived early in the morning, Loudon and his former employer did not exchange a word.

CHAPTER V

THEIR OWN DECEIVINGS

Johnny Ramsay was put to bed in the Bar S ranch house. Kate Saltoun promptly installed herself as nurse. Loudon, paid off by the now regretful Mr. Saltoun, took six hours' sleep and then rode away on Ranger to notify the Cross-in-a-box of Ramsay's wounding.

An angry man was Richie, manager of the Cross-in-a-box, when he heard

what Loudon had to say.

The following day Loudon and Richie rode to the Bar S. On Loudon's mentioning that he was riding no longer for the Bar S, Richie immediately hired him. He knew a good man, did Jack Richie of the Cross-in-a-box.

When they arrived at the Bar S they found Johnny Ramsay conscious, but very weak. His weakness was not surprising. He had lost a great deal of blood. He grinned wanly at Loudon and Richie.

"You musn't stay long," announced Miss Saltoun, firmly, smoothing the bed-covering.

"We won't, ma'am," said Richie. "Who shot yuh, Johnny?"

"I dunno," replied the patient. "I was just a-climbin' aboard my hoss when I heard a shot behind me an' I felt a pain in my neck. I pulled my six-shooter an' whirled, an' I got in one shot at a gent on a hoss. He fired before I did, an' it seems to me there was another shot off to the left. Anyway, the lead got me on the side of the head an' that's all I know."

"Who was the gent on the hoss?" Loudon asked.

"I dunno, Tom. I hadn't more'n whirled when he fired, an' the smoke hid his face. It all come so quick. I fired blind. Yuh see the chunk in my neck kind o' dizzied me, an' that rap on the head comin' on top of it, why, I wouldn't 'a' knowed my own brother ten feet away. I'm all right now. In a couple o' weeks I'll be ridin' the range again."

"Shore yuh will," said Loudon. "An' the sooner the quicker. You've got a good nurse."

"I shore have," smiled Johnny, gazing with adoring eyes at Kate Saltoun.

"That will be about all," remarked Miss Saltoun. "He's talked enough for one day. Get out now, the both of you, and don't fall over anything and make a noise. I'm not going to have my patient disturbed."

Loudon went down to the bunkhouse for his dinner. After the meal, while waiting for Richie, who was lingering with Mr. Saltoun, he strove to obtain a word with Kate. But she informed him that she could not leave her patient.

"See you later," said Miss Saltoun. "You mustn't bother me now."

And she shooed him out and closed the door. Loudon returned to the bunkhouse and sat down on the bench near the kitchen. Soon Jimmy appeared with a pan of potatoes and waxed loquacious as was his habit.

"Who plugged Johnny? That's what I'd like to know," wondered Jimmy. "Here! leave them Hogans be! They're to eat, not to jerk at the windmill. I never seen such a kid as you. Yo're worse than Chuck Morgan, an' he's just a natural-born fool. Oh, all right. I ain't a-goin' to talk to yuh if yuh can't act decent."

Jimmy picked up his pan of potatoes and withdrew with dignity. The grin faded from Loudon's mouth, and he gazed worriedly at the ground between his feet.

What would Kate say to him? Would she be willing to wait? She had certainly encouraged him, but—— Premonitory and unpleasant shivers crawled up and down Loudon's spinal column. Proposing was a strange and novel business with him. He had never done such a thing before. He felt as one feels who is about to step forth into the unknown. For he was earnestly and honestly very much in love. It is only your philanderer who enters upon a proposal with cold judgment and a calm heart.

Half an hour later Loudon saw Kate at the kitchen window. He was up in an

instant and hurrying toward the kitchen door. Kate was busy at the stove when he entered. Over her shoulder she flung him a charming smile, stirred the contents of a saucepan a moment longer, then clicked on the cover and faced him.

"Kate," said Loudon, "I'm quittin' the Bar S."

"Quitting? Oh, why?" Miss Saltoun's tone was sweetly regretful.

"Lot o' reasons. I'm ridin' for the Cross-in-a-box now."

He took a step forward and seized her hand. It lay in his, limp, unresponsive. Of which lack of sympathetic warmth he was too absorbed to be conscious.

"Kate," he pursued, "I ain't got nothin' now but my forty a month. But I shore love yuh a lot. Will yuh wait for me till I make enough for the two of us? Look at me, Kate. I won't always be a punch. I'll make money, an' if I know yo're a-waitin' for me, I'll make it all the faster."

According to recognized precedent Kate should have fallen into his arms. But she did nothing of the kind. She disengaged her fingers and drew back a step, ingenuous surprise written large on her countenance. Pure art, of course, and she did it remarkably well.

"Why, Tom," she breathed, "I wasn't expecting this. I didn't dream, I——"

"That's all right," Loudon broke in. "I'm tellin' yuh I love yuh, honey. Will yuh wait for me? Yuh don't have to say yuh love me. I'll take a chance on yore lovin' me later. Just say yuh'll wait, will yuh, honey?"

"Oh, Tom, I can't!"

"Yuh can't! Why not? Don't love anybody else, do yuh?"

"Oh, I can't, Tom," evaded Kate. "I don't think I could ever love you. I like you—oh, a great deal. You're a dear boy, Tommy, but—you can't make yourself love any one."

"Yuh won't have to make yoreself. I'll make yuh love me. Just give me a chance, honey. That's all I want. I'd be good to yuh, Kate, an' I'd spend my time tryin' to make yuh happy. We'd get along. I know we would. Say yes. Give me a chance."

Kate returned to the table and leaned against it, arms at her sides, her hands gripping the table-edge. It was a pose calculated to display her figure to advantage. She had practised it frequently. Kate Saltoun was running true to form.

"Tom," she said, her voice low and appealing, "Tom, I never had any idea you loved me. And I'm awfully sorry I can't love you. Truly, I am. But we can be friends, can't we?"

"Friends! Friends!" The words were like a curse.

"Why not?"

Loudon, head lowered, looked at her under his eyebrows.

"Then it all didn't mean nothin'?" He spoke with an effort.

"All? All what? What do you mean?"

"Yuh know what I mean. You've been awful nice to me. Yuh always acted like yuh enjoyed havin' me around. An' I thought yuh liked me—a little. An' it didn't mean nothin' 'cept we can be friends. Friends!"

Again the word sounded like a curse. Loudon turned his head and stared

unseeingly out of the window. He raised his hand and pushed his hair back from his forehead. A great misery was in his heart. Kate, for once in her life swayed by honest impulse, stepped forward and laid a hand on his arm.

"Don't take it so hard, Tom," she begged.

Loudon's eyes slid around and gazed down into her face. Kate was a remarkably handsome girl, but she had never appeared so alluring as she did at that moment.

Loudon stared at the vivid dark eyes, the parted lips, and the tilted chin. Her warm breath fanned his neck. The moment was tense, fraught with possibilities, and—Kate smiled. Even a bloodless cucumber would have been provoked. And Loudon was far from being a cucumber.

His long arms swept out and about her body, and he crushed her gasping against his chest. Once, twice, three times he kissed her mouth, then, his grasp relaxing, she wrenched herself free and staggered back against the table. Panting, hands clenched at her throat, she faced him. Loudon stood swaying, his great frame trembling.

"Kate! Oh, Kate!" he cried, and stretched out his arms.

But Kate groped her dazed way around the table. Physically and mentally, she had been severely shocked. To meet a tornado where one had expected a summer breeze is rather shattering to one's poise. Quite so. Kate suffered. Then, out of the chaos of her emotions, erupted wild anger.

"You! You!" she hissed. "How dare you kiss me! Ugh-h! I could kill you!"

She drew the back of her hand across her mouth and snapped her hand downward with precisely the same snap and jerk that a Mexican bartender employs when he flips the pulque from his fingers.

"Do you know I'm engaged to Sam Blakely? What do you think he'll do when he finds this out? Do you understand? I'm going to marry Sam Blakely!"

This facer cooled Loudon as nothing else could have done. Outwardly, at least, he became calm.

"I didn't understand, but I do now," he said, stooping to recover his hat. "If you'd told me that in the first place it would have saved trouble."

"You'd have been afraid to kiss me then!" she taunted.

"Not afraid," he corrected, gently. "I wouldn't 'a' wanted to. I ain't kissin' another man's girl."

"No, I guess not! The nerve of you! Think I'd marry an ignorant puncher!"

"Yuh shore ain't goin' to marry this one, but yuh are goin' to marry a cow thief!"

"A—a what?"

"A cow thief, a rustler, a sport who ain't particular whose cows he brands."

"You lie!"

"Yuh'll find out in time I'm tellin' the truth. I guess now I know more about Sam Blakely than you do, an' I tell yuh he's a rustler."

"Kate! Oh, Kate!" called a voice outside.

Kate sped through the doorway. Loudon, his lips set in a straight line, followed her quickly. There, not five yards from the kitchen door, Sam Blakely sat his horse. The eyes of the 88 manager went from Kate to Loudon and back to Kate.

"What's the excitement?" inquired Blakely, easily.

Kate levelled her forefinger at Loudon.

"He says," she gulped, "he says you're a rustler."

Blakely's hand swept downward. His six-shooter had barely cleared the edge of the holster when Loudon's gun flashed from the hip, and Blakely's weapon spun through the air and fell ten feet distant.

With a grunt of pain, Blakely, using his left hand, whipped a derringer from under his vest.

Again Loudon fired.

Blakely reeled, the derringer spat harmlessly upward, and then Blakely, as his frightened horse reared and plunged, pitched backward out of the saddle and dropped heavily to the ground. Immediately the horse ran away.

Kate, with a sharp cry, flung herself at the prostrate Blakely.

"You've killed him!" she wailed. "Sam—Sam—speak to me!"

But Sam was past speech. He had struck head first and was consequently senseless.

Come running then Jimmy from the bunkhouse, Chuck Morgan from the corrals, Mr. Saltoun and Richie from the office.

"He's dead! He's dead!" was the burden of Kate's shrill cries.

"Let's see if he is," said the practical Richie, dropping on his knees at Blakely's side. "He didn't tumble like a dead man. Just a shake, ma'am, while I

look at him. I can't see nothin' with you a-layin' all over him this-a-way. Yo're gettin' all over blood, too. There, now! She's done fainted. That's right, Salt. You take care of her."

The capable Richie made a rapid examination. He looked up, hands on knees, his white teeth gleaming under his brown moustache.

"He's all right," he said, cheerfully. "Heart's a-tickin' like a alarm-clock. Hole in his shoulder. Missed the bones. Bullet went right on through."

At this juncture Kate recovered consciousness and struggled upright in her father's arms.

"He shot first!" she cried, pointing at Loudon. "He didn't give him a chance!"

"You'll excuse me, ma'am," said Richie, his tone good-humoured, but his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. "You'll excuse me for contradictin' yuh, but I happened to be lookin' through the office window an' I seen the whole thing. Sam went after his gun before Tom made a move."

Blakely moved feebly, groaned, and opened his eyes. His gaze fell on Loudon, and his eyes turned venomous.

"You got me," he gritted, his lips drawn back, "but I'll get you when Marvin and Rudd ride in. They've got the proof with 'em, you rustler!"

After which cryptic utterance Blakely closed his mouth tightly and contented himself with glaring. Richie the unconcerned rose to his feet and dusted his knees.

"Take his legs, Chuck," directed Richie. "Gimme a hand, will yuh, Jimmy? Easy now. That's it. Where'll we put him, Salt?"

Mr. Saltoun and his now sobbing daughter followed them into the ranch

house. Loudon remained where he was. When the others had disappeared Loudon clicked out the cylinder of his six-shooter, ejected the two spent shells and slipped in fresh cartridges.

"When Marvin an' Rudd ride in," he wondered. "Got the proof with 'em too, huh. It looks as if Blakely was goin' to a lot o' trouble on my account."

Loudon walked swiftly behind the bunkhouse and passed on to the corrals. From the top of the corral fence he intended watching for the coming of Marvin and Rudd. In this business he was somewhat delayed by the discovery of Blakely's horse whickering at the gate of the corral.

"I ain't got nothin' against you," said Loudon, "but yuh shore have queer taste in owners."

Forthwith he stripped off saddle and bridle and turned the animal into the corral. As he closed the gate his glance fell on the dropped saddle. The coiled rope had fallen away from the horn, and there was revealed in the swell-fork a neat round hole. He squatted down more closely at the neat hole.

"That happened lately," he said, fingering the edges of the hole. "I thought so," he added, as an inserted little finger encountered a smooth, slightly concave surface.

He took out his knife and dug industriously. After three minutes' work a somewhat mushroomed forty-five-calibre bullet lay in the palm of his hand.

"O' course Johnny Ramsay ain't the only sport packin' a forty-five," he said, softly. "But Johnny did mention firin' one shot at a party on a hoss. It's possible he hit the swell-fork. Yep, it's a heap possible."

Then Loudon dropped the bullet into a pocket of his chaps and climbed to the top of the corral fence.

A mile distant, on the slope of a swell, two men were riding toward the ranch house. The horsemen were driving before them a cow and a calf. Loudon climbed down and took position behind the mule corral. From this vantage-point he could observe unseen all that might develop.

The riders, Marvin, the 88 range boss, and Rudd, a puncher, passed within forty feet of the mule corral. The cow and the calf walked heavily, as if they had been driven a long distance, and Loudon perceived that they had been newly branded 8x8. The brand was not one that he recognized.

"Crossed Dumbbell or Eight times Eight," he grinned. "Take yore choice. I wonder if that brand's the proof Blakely was talkin' about. Marvin an' Rudd shore do look serious."

He cautiously edged round the corral and halted behind the corner of the bunkhouse. Marvin and Rudd were holding the cow and calf near the ranch house door. The two men lounged in their saddles. Marvin rolled a cigarette. Then in the doorway appeared Mr. Saltoun.

"Howdy, Mr. Saltoun," said Marvin. "Sam got in yet?"

"He's in there," replied Mr. Saltoun, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "He's shot."

"Who done it?"

"Tom Loudon,"

"Where is he?"

"Throw up yore hands!" rapped out the gentleman in question.

Loudon had approached unobserved and was standing some twenty feet in the rear of Marvin and Rudd. At Loudon's sharp command Rudd's hands shot skyward instantly.

"I'm waitin'," cautioned Loudon.

Marvin's fingers slowly uncoiled from the butt of his six-shooter and draggingly he followed his comrade's example.

"Now we can all be happy," remarked Loudon, nodding amiably to the perturbed Mr. Saltoun. "I won't shoot unless they shove me. They can talk just as comfortable with their hands up, an' it'll be a lot safer all round. Was the state o' Sam's health all yuh wanted to know, Marvin? No, don't either of yuh turn 'round. Just keep yore eyes clamped on the windmill. About Sam, now, Marvin. Richie says he'll pull through. Anythin' else?"

"You bet there is!" exploded the furious range-boss. "You —— rustler, you branded a cow an' a calf o' ours yest'day!"

"Shore," agreed Loudon, politely, "an' I held up the Farewell stage, stole thirty-eight horses, an' robbed the Marysville bank the day before. Yuh don't want to forget all them little details, Marvin. It's a shore sign yo're gettin' aged when yuh do. Well, well, a cow an' a calf yuh say. Only the two, huh? It don't look natural somehow. I never brand less'n twenty-four at a clip."

Over the shoulders of the agitated Mr. Saltoun peered the faces of avidly interested Richie, Chuck Morgan, and Jimmy the cook. None of these three allowed a sign of his true feeling to appear on his face.

The two 88 men were red with shame and anger. Their lips moved with wicked words. Arms stretched heavenward, their gaze religiously fixed on the windmill, they presented a ridiculous appearance, and they knew it. Loudon, the dominant figure in the scene, spread his legs and smiled sardonically.

"Go on, Marvin," he said, after a moment, "yo're cussin' a lot, but yuh ain't sayin' nothin'. Let's hear the rest o' that interestin' story o' the 88 cow an' her little daughter."

"You branded the both of 'em," stubbornly reiterated Marvin. "We seen yuh—Sam, Rudd here, an' me, we seen yuh."

"Yuh seen me!" exclaimed Loudon. "Yuh seen me! You was close enough to see me, an' yuh didn't try to stop me! Well, you shore are the poorest liar in the territory."

"If I had my hands down yuh wouldn't call me that!"

"If yuh had yore hands down yuh'd be dead. I'm tryin' to save yore life. C'mon, speak the rest o' yore little piece. Yuh got as far as the brandin'. When did it all happen?"

"Gents," said Marvin, "this sport is a rustler. There ain't no two ways about it. Day before yest'day, just before sundown, over near the Sink, the three of us seen Loudon workin' round a hog-tied cow an' calf. We was three, maybe four miles away. We seen him through field glasses. We hit the ground for the Sink, but when we got there all we found was the cow an' calf, branded as yuh see 'em now. Loudon had sloped."

"Near the Sink," observed Loudon. "In the middle of it?"

"I've quit talkin'," replied Marvin.

Richie stepped past Mr. Saltoun and stood in front of Marvin and Rudd.

"You've done made a right serious charge agin one o' my men," remarked Richie, addressing Marvin. "If he did brand them cattle, he'll be stretched. But it ain't all clear to me yet. This here Crossed Dumbbell brand now—see it on any

other cattle besides these two, Marvin?"

"No," said Marvin, shaking his head.

"Well," continued Richie, "why didn't yuh come here right off instead o' waitin' two days?"

"We was busy."

"Didn't go back to the 88 ranch house before comin' here, did yuh?"

"No."

"Or stop at any o' yore line-camps?"

"No, we didn't. We come here soon as we could make it."

"What part o' the Sink was Loudon workin' in?"

"The north side."

"Near the edge, o' course?"

"No, he was nearer the middle."

"Nearer the middle, was he? An' yuh seen him at a distance o' three or four miles. Yuh must have good eyesight, because if you seen Loudon workin' in the middle o' the Sink an' you was standin' where yuh say yuh was, yuh looked through about two miles an' a half o' solid earth. The middle o' the Sink is two hundred feet below the level o' the surrounding country, an' there ain't no high land anywhere near it. Unless yo're standin' right on the edge yuh can't see nothin' in the bottom, an' the Sink is only about a mile from rim to rim. I guess now yo're mistaken, Marvin."

"I ain't none shore he was plumb in the middle," grudgingly admitted Marvin. "Maybe he was kind o' near the north rim. But what's the difference?" he added, brazenly. "We seen him."

"Where are the field glasses?" astutely questioned Richie.

"Left 'em at our Lazy River line-camp," promptly replied Marvin.

"Now ain't that funny, Marvin. Yuh told me not three minutes ago yuh didn't stop at any o' yore line-camps."

"I mean we—I gave 'em to Shorty Simms. He's at the Lazy River line-camp, an' he took 'em there."

"Why did yuh give 'em to Shorty?" persisted Richie.

"Look here, Richie!" blazed Marvin, "this ain't no court, an' I don't have to answer yore questions."

"Yuh'll have to answer plenty of questions," retorted Richie, "before I'll see Loudon stretched."

"I tell yuh he's a rustler!" shouted the mulish Marvin. "He's startin' a herd o' his own, an' he's usin' the Dumbbell brand. We seen him brandin' that stock! That's enough for you or any one else to know, an' I tell yuh flat the 88 is out to stretch Tom Loudon the first chance it gets!"

"Well, o' course, you know best," said Richie, "but I wouldn't do nothin' rash, Marvin. I just wouldn't go off at half-cock if I was you."

"No," chipped in Loudon, briskly. "I wouldn't set my heart on it, Marvin, old hoss. I ain't countin' none on dyin' yet awhile. I've got a heap o' little matters to attend to before I cash, an' yuh can see how hangin' me would disarrange all my plans. Take yore decorated cow an' calf now an' pull yore freight, an' *don't*

look back."

When Marvin and Rudd were gone Richie hooked his thumb in his belt and looked with twinkling eyes at Loudon and the men in the doorway.

"I guess that settles the cat-hop," said Jack Richie.

CHAPTER VI

PESTILENT FELLOWS

Before his departure Loudon visited Blakely.

"Found a bullet-hole in yore saddle," said Loudon without preliminary. "Kind o' looks as if Johnny come near bustin' yore mainspring. I ain't told Johnny—yet. Johnny bein' an impulsive sport he might ventilate yuh plenty first time he met yuh. Johnny's square. He ain't shootin' anybody unless he's pretty near certain the other party is a-layin' for him, an' that bullet I dug out o' yore swell-fork shore makes it look bad for yuh.

"Yuh needn't look so sour. I got good news for yuh. Yo're goin' to marry Kate. Well an' good. I wouldn't enjoy downin' her husband unless I'm crowded. I could 'a' killed yuh a while back, an' I shot wide on purpose. Next time—but don't let there be any next time. Just you keep away from me an' Johnny. I'm leavin' the Lazy River country anyway, but I tell yuh, Sam Blakely, if Johnny Ramsay is bushwhacked by the 88 I'll come back an' get yuh first card out o' the box. Kate's husband or not yuh'll go shoutin' home.

Understand?"

"So yo're leavin' this country," bristled Blakely. "Yuh'd better. I'll shoot yuh on sight!"

"Shore yuh feel that way about it?" queried Loudon with suspicious gentleness.

"I say what I mean as a rule. I'll shoot yuh on sight you —— rustler."

"All right. Because o' Kate I was willin' to keep paws off, but if yo're a-honin' to play the hand out, I'll give yuh every chance. You've got to get well complete first. Take three months. That ought to be time enough. Three months from to-day I'll ride in to Farewell. If yo're still feelin' fighty be in town when I hit it."

"I'll be there," Blakely assured him.

When Loudon had bidden Johnny Ramsay good-bye, he went out and mounted Ranger and rode away with Jack Richie.

"I'm goin' away from here, Jack," said Loudon, after Richie had discussed in profane detail the 88's endeavour to discredit him.

"I thought yuh was goin' to work for me?" exclaimed Richie in surprise.

"I was, but somethin's happened since then. I'm kind o' sick o' the Lazy River country. I need a change."

"Well, you know best. But——"

"I know what yo're thinkin'. If I go now the 88 will think I've quit cold. Let 'em think it. I don't care. But I'll be back. I made an appointment with Blakely to meet him in Farewell three months from to-day."

"That's good hearin'. But I'm shore sorry you ain't goin' to ride for me."

"So'm I."

"Stay over to-night anyway. Yuh ain't in any howlin' rush to get away, are yuh?"

"No, I ain't so hurried. I dunno where I'll head—north, maybe."

"If yo're goin' north, why don't yuh try Scotty Mackenzie? He owns the Flyin' M horse ranch over beyond Paradise Bend. There's three or four good cow ranches near the Bend—the Seven Lazy Seven, the Wagon-wheel, the Two Bar, an' the T V U."

"Maybe I will hit the Bend."

"If yuh do," pursued Richie, "yuh might stop an' say howdy at Cap'n Burr's. He married my sister, Burr did, an' all yuh got to do is say yuh know me, an' they'll give yuh the house. I guess, though, yuh know Cap'n Burr yoreself."

"Shore I do. It was the Cap'n who put me on to buyin' Ranger here. He kept tellin' me about this amazin' good cayuse over at the 88, an' finally I went over, liked his looks, an' bought him. The Cap'n was at the 88 the day I took the hoss away. He'd just freighted in a bunch o' stuff Blakely'd ordered. Cap'n Burr does a powerful lot o' business."

"Don't he now. Yuh wouldn't think tin-peddlin' would pay so well. Oh, him an' his little old team o' blues shore glom onto the coin."

When Loudon rode into Farewell on the following day he saw half-a-dozen 88 cow-ponies hitched to the rail in front of the Palace Saloon.

"Now that's cheerful," said Loudon. "For a peaceable feller I shore do tie in with trouble a heap."

He turned aside at the hotel and tapped the landlord awake. At sight of Loudon Bill Lainey's eyes opened to their fullest extent and his red face turned purple with excitement.

"Say," huskily whispered Lainey, "Shorty Simms, Rudd, Dakota Riley, an' three more o' the 88 boys are in town. They're tankin' up down in the Palace. Rudd's yowlin' round how he's goin' to drill yuh. He's a heap peevish, Rudd is. I guess now yuh must 'a' riled him somehow, Tom."

"I guess maybe I did, Bill. I'll take a little walk down to the Palace after I eat. Thanks for the warnin'. Feed the little hoss, will yuh, Bill?"

"Shore. Go on in an' holler for Lize."

While Loudon was eating, a wiry, brisk little man with a white beard entered the dining room.

"How are yuh, Cap'n?" grinned Loudon.

Captain Burr, surprise and embarrassment in his steel-blue eyes, advanced and gripped Loudon's hand.

"Loudon! By ——, suh!" he exclaimed. "This is indeed a pleasuh!"

The tin-peddler slid into a chair and cleared his throat several times.

"I feah, suh," he said, shamefacedly, "that I have trespassed on youah prese'ves. Had I known that you were in town I would have stayed my hand."

"Why? What?" queried Loudon.

"Well, suh, I'll tell you the whole story. It's sho't. Twenty minutes ago I ente'ed the Palace Saloon. While drinking at the bah I could not help but overheah the conve'sation of half-a-dozen 88 cowboys. One of them, a man named Rudd, mentioned youah name and called you a rustlah.

"You, Tom, are my friend, and, since I was unaware that you were in town, I felt that I could not stand idly by. I info'med this Rudd person that traducing the absent was not the act of a gentleman. I also called him a —— scoundrel and a lih to boot. He took exception to my wo'ds and, I was fo'ced to shoot him.

"You unde'stand, Tom, that I acted in complete good faith. I believed you to be at the Bah S. Otherwise, I should have repo'ted the mattah to you. Of co'se, I would have stood at youah back while you shot the rascal. His ruffianly friends ah not to be trusted."

"Don't apologize, Cap'n," said Loudon, and he reached across the table and shook hands again.

Captain Burr appeared to be greatly comforted at Loudon's ready acceptance of his explanation, and he attacked his beef and beans with appetite.

The captain was a good deal of a mystery to the folk with whom he came in contact. His mode of speech and his table manners were not those of ordinary men. But he was a man, with all that the name implies, and as such they had learned to accept him. I employ "learned" advisedly. Certain unthinking individuals had, when the captain was a comparative stranger in that region, commented upon his traits and received a prompt and thorough chastening.

Captain Burr gained thereby an enviable reputation. In reality there was no mystery attached to the old tin-peddler. He had simply been born a gentleman.

"Did Rudd die?" inquired Loudon in a tone of studied casualness, when he had finished his meal.

"He did not," replied the Captain. "Unless blood-poisoning sets in he will live to be hung. My bullet broke his arm. He rode away with his comrades five minutes later. No doubt he was in some pain, but the rogue was suffering much less than he deserved. I realize that I should have killed him, of course, but as I grow older I find myself becoming soft-hearted. Time was—but one must not dwell in the past. These beans are excellent, Tom."

"They are. Pullin' out soon?"

"At once. I'm bound north. I intend to visit all the ranches between here and Paradise Bend. I hope to be home in two weeks. Are you travelling my way?"

"Yep. I guess I'm bound for the Bend, too."

"Then I will ask you to deliver a letter to my wife. I missed the Bend stage by two hours to-day, and there is no other for three days."

Loudon took the letter and placed it carefully in the inside pocket of his vest.

While Captain Burr was harnessing his team, a job in which the tin-peddler always refused assistance, Loudon rode down the street with the intention of buying tobacco at the Blue Pigeon Store. In front of the Happy Heart Saloon, opposite the Palace Dance Hall, stood Sheriff Block and five citizens.

As Loudon rode past the sheriff made a low-voiced remark and laughed loudly. Instantly the five citizens burst into cackles. For Block, besides being sheriff, owned both the Palace and the Happy Heart. Hence most of Farewell's inhabitants took their cue from him.

The cackling in front of the Happy Heart grated on Loudon's feelings as

well as his ear-drums. He knew that the sheriff, kindly soul, was holding him up to ridicule. Kate's refusal of him had made Loudon somewhat reckless. He had intended having it out with Rudd, but Captain Burr had forestalled him there. Here, however, was the sheriff of the county, another enemy. Loudon turned his horse.

Promptly the five friends oozed in various directions. Sheriff Block, a lonely figure, held his ground.

"I hear yo're lookin' for me," announced Loudon, a laughing devil in his gray eyes.

"Who told yuh?" queried the sheriff, puzzled. He had expected something totally different.

"Who told me? Oh, several little birds. So I want to find out about it. I wouldn't like to put yuh to any trouble—such as huntin' me up, for instance."

"That's good o' yuh. But I ain't lookin' for yuh, not yet."

"I'm right glad to hear that. Them little birds must 'a' lied. Powerful lot o' lyin' goin' on in the world, ain't there?"

"I dunno nothin' about it," mumbled the sheriff, who was becoming more and more puzzled at the apparently aimless words of the puncher.

"Don't yuh?" grinned Loudon. "That's shore hard to believe."

The sheriff warily refused to take offence, and mumbled unintelligibly.

"Forget that afternoon in the draw west o' Little Bear Mountain?" relentlessly pursued Loudon. "We had some words—remember? Yuh said somethin' about me havin' the drop. I ain't got the drop now. My hands are on the horn. Yore's are hooked in yore belt. But I'll lay yuh two to one I bust yuh plumb centre

before yuh can pull. Take me up?"

Loudon's lips were smiling, but his eyes stared with a disconcerting gray chilliness into the small black eyes of Sheriff Block. The officer's eyelids wavered, winked, and Block shifted his gaze to Loudon's chin.

"I ain't startin' no gun-play for nothin'," said Block with finality.

Loudon held up a ten-dollar gold piece.

"Two to one," he urged.

But the sheriff perceived that the hand holding the gold piece was Loudon's left hand, and he could not quite screw his courage to the sticking-point. Block was ordinarily brave enough, but he was bad, and as a rule there is at least one individual whom the bad man fears. And Block feared Loudon.

The sheriff's mean and vicious spirit writhed within him. He hated Loudon, hated him for his cocksureness, for his easy fearlessness. He would have sold his soul to the devil in return for the ability to reach for his gun. The sheriff licked his lips.

Loudon, still smiling, continued to hold aloft the gold piece. The onlookers—half of Farewell by this time—awaited the outcome in tense silence.

Suddenly the sheriff shook his shoulders, spat on the sidewalk, wheeled, and entered the Happy Heart.

Loudon flipped the gold piece into the air, caught it, and returned it to his vest-pocket. Without a glance at the keenly disappointed populace, he turned Ranger and loped to the Blue Pigeon Store.

When he emerged, followed by the bawled "Good lucks!" of the proprietor,

Captain Burr was waiting. The tin-peddler's face was grave but his steel-blue eyes were twinkling with suppressed merriment.

"Well, suh——" chuckled the captain, when they were out of earshot of the Farewell citizens—"well, suh, you ce'tainly talked to that sheriff. Lord, Tom, it made me laugh. I didn't know that Block was so lacking in honah and spo'ting spirit. I fully expected to witness quite a ruction."

"I wasn't lookin' for a fight," disclaimed Loudon. "I knowed Block wouldn't pull. It was safe as takin' pie from a baby."

"I'm not so shuah," doubted Captain Burr. "Any reptile is mighty unce'tain. And this reptile had friends. I was watching them. My Spenceh seven-shooteh was ready fo' action. You Rob't E. Lee hoss, pick up youah feet! Well, I'm glad it ended peacefully. My wife and daughteh, as I may have mentioned, do not approve of fighting. They cannot realize how necessa'y it becomes at times. It would be well, I think, when you reach the Bend, to refrain from mentioning my little disagreement with Rudd. My family might heah of it, and—but you unde'stand, don't you, Tom?"

"Course, I do, Cap'n," heartily concurred Loudon. "I won't say a word."

"Thank you."

Captain Burr fell silent. Suddenly he began to laugh.

"Po' Farewell," he chuckled. "Theah will be some powdeh bu'nt befo' the day is out."

"How?"

"Block. His pride has had a fall. Quite a few saw the tumble. An o'dina'y man would tuck his tail between his legs and go elsewheah. But the sheriff is not

an o'dina'y man. He's too mean. In order to reinstate himself in the affections of the townspeople he will feel compelled to shoot one of them. Mahk my wo'ds, theah will be trouble in the smoke fo' Farewell."

"It can stand it. Outside o' Mike Flynn, an' Bill Lainey an' his wife, there ain't a decent two-legged party in the whole place."

Captain Burr nodded and turned an appreciative eye on Ranger.

"That chestnut hoss ce'tainly does please me," he said. "I wish I'd bought him myself. I do indeed."

CHAPTER VII

PARADISE BEND

Where the Dogsoldier River doubles on itself between Baldy Mountain and the Government Hills sprawls the little town of Paradise Bend. Larger than Farewell, it boasted of two stores, a Wells Fargo office, two dance halls, and five saloons. The inevitable picket line of empty bottles and tin cans encircled it, and its main street and three cross streets were made unlovely by the familiar false fronts and waveringly misspelt signs.

Loudon stared at the prospect with a pessimistic eye. Solitude—he had parted with Captain Burr the previous day—and the introspection engendered thereby had rendered him gloomy. The sulky devil that had prompted him to seek a quarrel with Sheriff Block abode with him still. Sullenly he checked his

horse in front of the Chicago Store.

"Mornin'," said Loudon, addressing a dilapidated ancient sitting on a cracker box. "Can yuh tell me where Cap'n Burr lives?"

"Howdy, stranger?" replied the elderly person, eying with extreme disfavour the 88 brand on Ranger's hip. "I shore can. Ride on down past the Three Card, turn to the left, an' keep a-goin'. It's the last house."

Loudon nodded and continued on his way. The ancient followed him with alert eyes.

When Loudon drew abreast of the Three Card Saloon a man issued from the doorway, glimpsed Ranger's brand, and immediately hastened into the street and greeted Loudon after the fashion of an old friend.

"C'mon an' licker," invited the man, as Loudon checked his horse.

"Now that's what I call meetin' yuh with a brass band," remarked Loudon. "Do yuh always make a stranger to home this-away?"

"Always," grinned the other. "I'm the reception committee."

"I'm trailin' yuh," said Loudon, dismounting.

He flung the reins over Ranger's head and followed the cordial individual into the saloon. While they stood at the bar Loudon took stock of the other man.

He was a good-looking young fellow, strong-chinned, straight-mouthed, with brown hair and eyes. His expression was winning, too winning, and there was a certain knowing look in his eye that did not appeal to Loudon. The latter drank his whisky slowly, his brain busily searching for the key to the other man's conduct.

"Gambler, I guess," he concluded. "I must look like ready money. Here's where one tinhorn gets fooled."

After commenting at some length on the extraordinary dryness of the season, Loudon's bottle-acquaintance, under cover of the loud-voiced conversation of three punchers at the other end of the bar, said in a low tone:

"Couldn't Sam come?"

Loudon stared. The other noted his mystification, and mistook it.

"I'm Pete O'Leary," he continued. "It's all right."

"Shore it is," conceded the puzzled Loudon. "My name's Loudon. Have another."

The knowing look in Pete O'Leary's eyes was displaced by one of distrust. He drank abstractedly, mumbled an excuse about having to see a man, and departed.

Loudon bought half-a-dozen cigars, stuffed five into the pocket of his shirt, lit the sixth, and went out to his horse. Puffing strongly, he mounted and turned into the street designated by the dilapidated ancient. As he loped past the corner he glanced over his shoulder. He noted that not only was Pete O'Leary watching him from the window of a dance hall, but that the tattered old person, leaning against a hitching rail, was observing him also.

"I might be a hoss-thief or somethin'," muttered Loudon with a frown. "This shore is a queer village o' prairie dogs. The cigar's good, anyway." Then, his horse having covered a hundred yards in the interval, he quoted, "Couldn't Sam come?" an', 'I'm Pete O'Leary.' Sam, Sam, who's Sam? Now if Johnny Ramsay was here he'd have it all figured out in no time."

"Why, Mr. Loudon! Oh, wait! Do wait!"

Loudon turned his head. In the doorway of a house stood a plump young woman waving a frantic dish-cloth. Ranger, hard held, slid to a halt, turned on a nickel, and shot back to the beckoning young woman.

"Well, ma'am," said Loudon, removing his hat.

"Don't you remember me?" coquettishly pouted the plump lady.

Loudon remembered her perfectly. She was Mrs. Mace, wife of Jim Mace, a citizen of Paradise Bend. He had met her the year before when she was visiting Kate Saltoun at the Bar S. He had not once thought of Mrs. Mace since her departure from the ranch, and of course he had completely forgotten that she lived in Paradise Bend. If he had recalled the fact, he would have sought the Burrs' residence by some other route. One of Kate's friends was the last person on earth he cared to meet.

"Shore, I remember yuh, Mrs. Mace," said Loudon, gravely. "I'm right glad to see yuh," he added, heavily polite.

"Are you?" said the lady somewhat sharply. "Try to look happy then. I ain't a grizzly, an' I don't bite folks. I won't stop you more'n a second."

"Why, ma'am, I am glad to see yuh," protested Loudon, "an' I ain't in no hurry, honest."

"That's all right. I ain't offended. Say, how's Kate an' her pa?"

"Fine when I saw 'em last. Kate's as pretty as ever."

"She ought to be. She ain't married. Matrimony shore does rough up a

woman's figure an' face. Lord, I'm a good thirty pounds heavier than I was when I saw you last. Say, do you know if Kate got that dress pattern I sent her last month?"

"I dunno, ma'am. I didn't hear her say."

"I s'pose not. I guess you two had more important things to talk about. Say, how are you an' Kate gettin' along, anyway?"

"Why, all right, I guess."

Loudon felt extremely unhappy. Mrs. Mace's keen gaze was embarrassing. So was her next utterance.

"Well, I guess I'll write to Kate," remarked the lady, "an' find out about that dress pattern. She always was a poor writer, but she'd ought to have sent me a thank-you anyway, an' me her best friend. I'll tell her I saw yuh, Mr. Loudon."

"Don't tell her on my account," said Loudon. Then, realizing his mistake, he continued hurriedly, "Shore, tell her. She'd enjoy hearin', o' course."

"Don't tell me you two haven't been quarrellin'," chided Mrs. Mace, shaking a fat forefinger at Loudon. "You'd ought to be ashamed of yourselves, rowin' this way."

"Why, ma'am, yo're mistaken. Me quarrel? I guess not! But I got to be goin'. Good-bye, ma'am. I'll see yuh again."

Loudon, raging, loped away. Meeting one of Kate's friends was bad enough in itself. For the friend wantonly to flick him on the raw was intolerable.

Loudon began to believe that women were put into the world for the purpose of annoying men. But when he had dismounted in front of the best house on the street, and the door had been opened in response to his knock, he

changed his mind, for a brown-haired young girl with a very pleasant smile was looking at him inquiringly.

"Is this where Captain Burr lives?" queried Loudon.

"Yes," replied the girl, her smile broadening.

"Then here's a letter for Mis' Burr. The Cap'n asked me to bring it up for him."

"A letter for me?" exclaimed a sharp voice, and the speaker, a tall, angular, harsh-featured woman, appeared at the girl's side with the suddenness of a Jack-in-the-box. "From Benjamin?" continued the harsh-featured woman, uttering her words with the rapidity of a machine-gun's fire. "How is he? When d'you see him last? When's he comin' home?"

"Heavens, Ma!" laughed the girl, before Loudon could make any reply. "Give the poor man a chance to breathe."

"You got to excuse me, stranger," said Mrs. Burr. "But I'm always so worried about Benjamin when he's travellin'. He's so venturesome. But come in, stranger. Come in an' rest yore hat. Dinner's 'most ready."

"Why, thank yuh, ma'am," stuttered the embarrassed Loudon. "But I guess I'll go to the hotel."

"I guess yuh won't!" snapped Mrs. Burr. "I never let one o' my husband's friends 'cept Scotty Mackenzie eat at the hotel yet, an' I ain't goin' to begin now. You'll just come right inside an' tell me all about Benjamin while yo're eatin'. That your hoss? Well, the corral's behind the house. Dorothy, you go with the gentleman an' see that he don't stampede."

Loudon, brick-red beneath his tan, seized Ranger's bridle and followed Miss

Burr to the corral. While he was unsaddling he looked up and caught her eying him amusedly. He grinned and she laughed outright.

"I'm glad you didn't stampede," she said, her brown eyes twinkling. "Mother would have been heart-broken if you had. Whenever any of Dad's friends are in town they never think of eating at the hotel—except Scotty Mackenzie. Scotty stubbornly refuses to dine with us. He says mother's cooking takes away his appetite for what he calls ranch grub. Mother is really a wonderful cook. You'll see."

In this manner was the ice broken, and Loudon's sullen gloom had gone from him by the time he entered the Burr kitchen. On the Turkey-red tablecloth a broiled steak, surrounded by roasted potatoes, reposed on a platter. Flanking the platter were a bowl of peas and a large dish of sliced beets adrip with butter sauce. Loudon's eyes opened wide in amazement. Never in all his life had he beheld such an appetizing array of edibles.

"Looks good, don't it?" beamed Mrs. Burr.

It was wonderful how her smile transformed her forbidding features. To Loudon she appeared as a benevolent angel. He could only nod dumbly.

"Set now, an' don't be afraid o' the victuals," continued Mrs. Burr, filling the coffee-cups. "It all has to be et, an' I shore do hate to chuck out good grub. Lord, it makes me feel fine to cook for a man again! What did you say yore name is, Mister? ... Loudon, o' course; I never can catch a name the first time. I always got to hear it twice. Dorothy, you reach over an' dish out them peas an' beets. Take that piece of steak next the bone, Mister Loudon. Like gravy on yore 'taters? Most do. My man does, special. Here's a spoon. Dorothy, pass the bread."

Everything tasted even better than it looked. Loudon ate a second piece of dried-apple pie, and had a fourth cup of coffee to top off with. To the puncher

it had been a marvellous dinner. No wonder Scotty Mackenzie demurred at dining with the Burrs. After one such meal sowbelly and Miners Delights would be as bootsole and buckshot.

"You can smoke right here," said Mrs. Burr, after Loudon had refused a fifth cup of coffee. "Shove yore chair back agin' the wall, hook up yore feet, an' be happy while Dorothy an' I wash the dishes. I like to see a man comfortable, I do. So you know my brother. Well, well, ain't the world a small place? How're Jack an' the Cross-in-a-box makin' out? He never thinks to write, Jack Richie don't, the lazy rascalion. Wait till I set eyes on him. I'll tell him a thing or two."

Loudon, in no haste to find Scotty Mackenzie, was smoking his fifth cigarette when the dilapidated ancient of the cracker box stuck his head in the door.

"Howdy, Mis' Burr?" said the ancient. "Howdy, Dorothy?"

"Lo, Scotty," chorused the two women. "Let me make yuh acquainted with Mr. Loudon, Scotty," continued Mrs. Burr. "Mr. Loudon, shake hands with Mr. Mackenzie."

Loudon gripped hands with the ragged ancient. In the latter's bright blue eyes was no friendliness.

He acknowledged the introduction with careful politeness, and sat down on a chair in a corner. Having deftly rolled a cigarette, he flipped the match through the doorway, tilted back his chair, remarked that the weather was powerful dry, and relapsed into silence. He took no further part in the conversation.

At the end of the kitchen, between the windows, hung a small mirror. Loudon, idly watching the two women as they moved about resetting the table, happened to glance at the mirror. In it he saw reflected the face of Scotty Mackenzie.

The features were twisted into an almost demoniac expression of hate. Slowly Loudon turned his head. Mackenzie, his eyes on the floor, was smoking, his expression one of serene well-being.

"He don't like me any," decided Loudon, and pondered the advisability of asking Mackenzie for a job.

It was not Mackenzie's lack of friendliness that gave Loudon pause. It was the man's appearance. Even for the West, where attire does not make the man, Mackenzie had not an inspiring presence. His trousers showed several patches and a rip or two. His vest was in a worse state than his trousers. His blue flannel shirt had turned green in spots, and the left sleeve had once belonged to a red flannel undershirt. Two holes yawned in the corner of his floppy-brimmed hat, and his boots, run over at the heels, would have shamed a tramp.

That this economically garbed individual could prove a good employer seemed doubtful. Yet he had been recommended by Jack Richie.

Mackenzie suddenly mumbled that he guessed he'd better be going, and rose to his feet. Loudon followed him into the street. Mackenzie halted and half-turned as Loudon caught up with him. Loudon noted that the ancient's hand was closer to his gun-butt than politeness and the circumstances warranted.

"Hirin' any men?" inquired Loudon.

"I might," replied Mackenzie, the pupils of his blue eyes shrunk to pin-points. "Who, for instance?"

"Me for one."

Mackenzie continued to stare. Loudon, who never lowered his eyes to any man, steadily returned the ancient's gaze.

"Yo're hired," said Mackenzie, suddenly. "Git yore hoss. I'll meet yuh at the corner o' Main Street."

Mackenzie walked rapidly away, and Loudon returned to the house of the Burrs. He took his leave of the two engaging women, the elder of whom pressed him repeatedly to come again, and went out to the corral.

While Loudon awaited his employer's arrival at the corner of Main Street he saw Pete O'Leary emerge from the doorway of the Three Card Saloon and walk toward him. But the young man of the knowing brown eye did not cross the street. He nodded to Loudon and swung round the corner.

The Lazy River man shifted sidewise in the saddle and followed him with his eyes. Pete O'Leary interested Loudon. Folk that are mysterious will bear watching, and O'Leary's manner during his conversation with Loudon had been perplexingly vague.

"Now I wonder where that nice-lookin' young fella is goin'?" debated Loudon. "Burrs', for a plugged nickel! Yep, there he goes in the door. Well, Mis' Burr ain't a fool, but if I owned a good-lookin' daughter, that Pete O'Leary ain't just the right brand o' party I'd want should come a-skirmishin' round."

Loudon's mental soliloquy was cut short by the arrival of Mackenzie. The ancient's appalling disregard for his personal appearance did not extend to his mount and saddlery. His horse was a handsome bay. The saddle he sat in was a Billings swell-fork tree, with a silver horn, silver conchas, carved leather skirts and cantle, and snowflake leather strings. The bridle was a split-ear, with a nose-band even more marvellously carved than the saddle, and it sported a blue steel bit, silver inlaid, and eighteen-inch rein-chains. The most exacting dandy in cowland could not have obtained better equipment.

Beyond a momentless sentence or two Mackenzie said nothing as he and his new hand rode out into the valley of the Dogsoldier. He maintained his silence till Loudon, muttering that his cinches required tightening, checked Ranger and dismounted.

"Throw up yore hands!" was the harsh order that fell on Loudon's astonished ears.

Hands above his head, Loudon turned slowly and stared into the muzzle of a well-kept six-shooter. Behind the gun gleamed the frosty blue eyes of Scotty Mackenzie.

"Got anythin' to say before I leave yuh?" inquired Mackenzie.

"That depends on how yuh leave me," countered Loudon. "If yo're just aimin' to say, 'So long,' yuh can't go too quick. Yo're a mite too abrupt to suit me. But if yore intention is hostile, then I got a whole lot to say."

"Hostile it is, young feller. Trot out yore speech."

"That's handsome enough for a dog. First, I'd shore admire to know why yo're hostile."

"You know."

"I don't yet," denied Loudon.

Scotty Mackenzie stared woodenly. His features betrayed no hint of his purpose. He might have been gazing at a cow or a calf or the kitchen stove. Nevertheless Loudon realized that the amazing old man was within a whisper of pulling trigger.

"Yuh see," observed Loudon, forcing his lips to smile pleasantly, "it ain't the goin' away I mind so much—it's the not knowin' why. I get off to fix cinches, an' yuh throw down on me. I ain't done nothin' to yuh—I ain't never seen yuh before, an' I don't believe I've ever met up with any o' yore relations, so——"

"Yo're from the 88," interrupted Mackenzie. "That's enough!"

"Bein' from the 88," said Loudon, "is shore a bad recommend for any man. But it just happens I'm from the Bar S. I never have rode for the 88, an' I don't think I ever will."

"What are yuh doin' with a 88 hoss?" pursued the unrelenting Mackenzie.

"88 hoss? Why, that little hoss is my hoss. I bought him from the 88."

"The brand ain't vented."

"I know it ain't. At the time I bought him I didn't expect to have to tell the story o' my life to every old bushwhacker in the territory, or I shore would 'a' had that brand vented."

The six-shooter in Mackenzie's hand remained steady. In his chill blue eyes was no flicker of indecision. Loudon was still smiling, but he felt that his end was near.

"Say," said Loudon, "when you've done left me, I wish yuh'd send my hoss an' saddle to Johnny Ramsay o' the Cross in-a-box. Johnny's at the Bar S now—got a few holes in him. But you send the hoss to Jack Richie an' tell him to keep him for Johnny till he comes back. Don't mind doin' that, do yuh? Ain't aimin' to keep the cayuse, are yuh?"

"Do you know Johnny Ramsay?" queried Mackenzie.

"Ought to. Johnny an' me've been friends for years."

"Know Jack Richie?"

"Know him 'most as well as I do Johnny. An' I know Cap'n Burr, too. Didn't yuh see me there at his house?"

"The Cap'n knows lots o' folks, an' it ain't hard to scrape acquaintance with a couple o' soft-hearted women."

"I brought up a letter from Cap'n Burr to his wife. You ask her."

"Oh, shore. Yuh might 'a' carried a letter an' still be what I take yuh for."

"Now we're back where we started. What do yuh take me for?"

Mackenzie made no reply. Again there fell between the two men that spirit-breaking silence. It endured a full five minutes, to be broken finally by Mackenzie.

"Git aboard yore hoss," said the ranch-owner. "An' don't go after no gun."

"I'd rather draw what's comin' to me on the ground," objected Loudon. "It ain't so far to fall."

"Ain't nothin' comin' to yuh yet. Git aboard, go on to the ranch, an' tell my foreman, Doubleday, I sent yuh, an' that I won't be back yet awhile."

"I ain't so shore I want to work for yuh now."

"There ain't no two ways about it. You'll either give me yore word to go on to the ranch an' stay there till I come, or yuh'll stay right here. After I come back yuh can quit if yuh like."

"That's a harp with another tune entirely. I'll go yuh."

Loudon turned to his horse and swung into the saddle.

"Keep a-goin' along this trail," directed Mackenzie, his six-shooter still covering Loudon. "It's about eight mile to the ranch."

Loudon did not look back as he rode away.

CHAPTER VIII

THE AMAZING MACKENZIE

Doubleday, a squat man with a sharp nose and a sharper eye, evinced no surprise at his employer's message. He merely swore resignedly on learning that Mackenzie had not sent in the mail by Loudon, and in the same breath thanked his Maker that a new man had arrived.

The advent of Loudon was most opportune, according to Doubleday. For, one "Lanky" having taken a wife and removed to the Sweet River Agency, the Flying M was a man short.

"Turn yore hoss into the big corral," said Doubleday, when he had sufficiently condemned the foolishness of Lanky, "an' take yore saddle over to the bunkhouse. There's three empty bunks. Help yoreself. Then c'mon over to the little corral an' bring yore rope. Got an outlaw stallion with a cut hind leg, an' it's a two-man job."

Loudon found favour in the eyes of Doubleday. The former Bar S puncher did his work easily and well. He proved a better roper than Doubleday, and he was the equal in horsemanship of "Telescope" Laguerre, the half-breed buster.

With Laguerre, Loudon struck up an instant friendship. Telescope—which name was the natural transformation undergone by Telesphore in a Western climate—was a long lean man, with the straight black hair and the swarthy complexion of his Indian mother and the mobile features and facile speech and gestures of his French father. When Loudon had been at the Flying M three days Telescope suggested that they ride to town in the evening.

"Wee! go to de dance hall," said Laguerre. "Fine woman dere. We wee! dance a leetle, we wee! dreerk de w'iskey, un we wee! have de good tam. By gar, I not been to town for two mont. Wat your say, Tom?"

"T'd shore enjoy goin' along, Telescope, but I can't," replied Loudon, mindful of his promise to Scotty Mackenzie.

"Dat ees all right," said the large-hearted half-breed. "She ees my treat. I have more as one hundred dollar, un by gar! I wan' for to spen' eet. You are my frien'. You help me for spen' eet. We wee! burn up de dance hall."

"Oh, I'm not broke," said Loudon. "I'll go with yuh another time."

Laguerre, being wise in his generation, forbore to insist, and rode to town alone. The cook predicted a three-day orgy.

"Rats!" said Doubleday. "Yuh don't know Telescope. He never gets drunk. He can't. He sops it up an' he sops it up, an' it don't bother him a mite. Wish I had his gift. Why, I've seen him tuck away a quart o' killer inside o' three hours, an' then hop out with his rope an' fasten on a hoss any leg you tell him. He's a walkin' miracle, Telescope is, an' he'll be back in the mornin'."

Loudon, oiling his saddle in front of the bunkhouse, glanced casually at the cook standing in the doorway, and wondered for the twentieth time where he had seen the man before. On his arrival at the Flying M, Loudon had sensed that, in a vague way, the cook's face was familiar. First impressions had taken no concrete form. He could not remember where or under what circumstances he had seen the cook. But that he had seen him, he was certain.

The cook's name was Rufe Cutting. Which name, however, was not enlightening. Idly speculating, Loudon went on with his work. The cook returned to the kitchen.

Laguerre bore out the statement of Doubleday. He returned while the men were saddling in the morning. He did not appear in the least degree wearied. Hurriedly changing his saddle to a fresh horse, he rode away with Loudon.

"By gar!" exclaimed Laguerre. "I have de fine tam I dance, I dreenk de w'iskey, un I play de pokair wit' Pete O'Leary un two odder men un I tak' deir money. I ween ffeefy dollar. By gar! I am glad I go to town, me."

"Yuh shore ought to be," said Loudon. "Fifty dollars. That's right good hearin'."

"Pete O'Leary she wan' for know 'bout you," continued Laguerre.

"Pete O'Leary asked about me! What did he say, huh?"

"Oh, she not say eet plain. She walk een de watair. But I have been de scout; I have leeve wit' Enjun; I know w'at ees een ees head. She talk 'bout Lanky quittin' de Flyin' M, un she wan' for know have Scotty hired new man. She say she see Scotty ride out wit' you, un she know you name. But I not say much. I tell Pete O'Leary to ask Scotty 'bout hees business, un I not say eef you work for de Flyin' M or not. For I tink mabbeso Pete O'Leary she ees not frien' to you."

"Well, he ain't strictly hostile anyway," said Loudon, and he forthwith told Laguerre of his meeting with Pete O'Leary and of the latter's strange actions.

"Dat ees varree fonny," commented Laguerre. "Pete O'Leary she was expectin' de frien' or de message mabbee. But dat ees not so fonny as hees askin' 'bout you so moch. She worry 'bout you, un dat ees fonny. Why she worry eef she hones' man? I tell you, my frien', I do not trus' dat Pete O'Leary. I would watch heem. I would watch heem varree sharp."

"Oh, I don't believe it means anythin'," doubted Loudon. "But I'll keep an

eye skinned for him."

"You better, my frien', or mabbeso some tam she skeen you."

A week later Mackenzie returned. That evening, after supper, Doubleday told Loudon that Scotty wanted to see him. Mackenzie, chair tilted, feet propped on the table, his hands clasped behind his head, was staring up at the ceiling when Loudon entered the office. The chair descended on four legs with a crash, and the ancient arose briskly.

"Stranger," said Mackenzie, his blue eyes no longer frosty, "I was mistaken. Yo're a gent an' a white man, an' I ain't holdin' out nothin'. Shake."

Loudon grinned and shook hands. He was satisfied with the other's apology.

"That's all right," said the puncher. "I knowed yuh mistook me for somebody else. But I'd shore admire to know, if it ain't private, who yuh thought I was."

"I don't mind tellin' yuh. I ain't ever talked about it much. Dunno why. No reason why I shouldn't. Sit down, Loudon, an' I'll tell yuh. When I first seen yuh there in Main Street that 88 brand on yore hoss made me suspicious.

"Sam Blakely o' the 88 an' me ain't friends. We had a run-in some eight years ago over at Virginia City, an' I kind o' left Sam the worse for wear. I heard later how Sam was yellin' 'round that he'd get even. Knowin' Sam, I believed it. An' when I seen you ridin' a 88 hoss, I says to myself, 'Here's Sam done gone an' hired a party to do the gettin' even.' When yuh wanted to ride for me, I was shore of it.

"So when you got down to fix yore cinches I expected to be plugged the next second, an' I throwed down on yuh. Yore askin' me to send yore hoss an'

saddle to Johnny Ramsay was what stopped me. I knowed if Johnny was a friend o' yores you was all right. So I sent yuh on, an' I trailed yuh clear to the ranch. If you'd turned back I'd 'a' downed yuh. But yuh didn't turn back.

"Well, after I seen yuh talkin' to Doubleday—— Shore; yuh know that little hill about half-a-mile south? I was on top of it with a pair of field glasses——after I seen yuh talkin' to Doubleday, I moseyed south again to the Cross-in-a-box."

"Two hundred miles!" exclaimed Loudon.

"About that," said Mackenzie, easily, quite as if a four-hundred-mile ride in ten days were an afternoon jaunt. "Yuh see, I wanted to talk to Jack Richie. Didn't want to go to the Bar S if I could help it. Me an' Saltoun never did pull together. He thinks I'm a fool, an' I know he's crazy.

"Well, I talked with Jack, an' he explained everythin'. Said who yuh was an' how yuh'd bought yore hoss from the 88 an' how yuh'd creased Sam Blakely, an' all. That was fine work. Too bad yuh didn't down him for good. He's a varmint. Worse'n a rattler. Yuh'd ought to 'a' plugged Marvin, too, after him tryin' to make yuh out a rustler that-away. A sport like that'll stand shootin' any day. What's the matter?"

For Loudon was amazedly staring at Mackenzie.

"Four hundred miles both ways," said the puncher, "to see whether a forty-five-dollar-a-month hand was tellin' the truth!"

"Yuh was more than a hand," rejoined Mackenzie, with a slight smile. "Yuh was opportunity, with a big O. Yuh see, when yuh asked for a job I needed a man. I needed him bad. I was shore yuh was out to down me. But when yuh said yuh knowed Johnny an' I changed my mind about droppin' yuh, it come to me, provided you was straight, that you was just the feller for me. You was sent to me, like. You was Opportunity, see?"

"An' I ain't never passed up an opportunity that I ain't been sorry. I'm kind o' superstitious thataway now, an' I'll go out o' my way to grab what I think looks like an opportunity. I knowed I couldn't rest easy till I found out somethin' about yuh. So I done it. An' I'm—— glad I done it.

"Doubleday tells me yo're the best roper he ever seen, an' yo're a wonder with the stallions. A good man with stallions is somethin' I've wished for ever since I owned the Flyin' M. I never had him till you come. Opportunity! I guess yuh was, an' then a few. Now I don't know whether yuh care about stayin', but I shore hope yuh will. I'll see that yuh don't regret it."

"Shore I'll stay," said Loudon. "Them stallions is where I live."

"Then fifty-five a month goes for you from now on."

In this auspicious fashion began Loudon's life at the Flying M. Yet Loudon was not precisely happy. The cheerfulness induced by the whole-hearted Burrs had been but temporary. He brooded over his wrongs, and that is bad for a man. Like all men who believe themselves hard hit, he did not realize that there are a great many lonesome ladies in the world, any one of whom will make a man utterly happy.

One young woman had proved to be an arrant flirt, therefore all young women were flirts, and beauty was a snare and a delusion. So reasoned Loudon. Surrendering almost wholly to his mood, he rarely took part in the general conversation in the bunkhouse. The men wondered at his aloofness, but none essayed to draw him out. His smoldering gray eyes forbade any such familiarity. When riding the range with Laguerre, however, Loudon would emerge from his shell, and a strong friendship swiftly grew up between the two.

One day, nearly two weeks after Mackenzie's return from the Cross-in-a-box, Loudon was in the blacksmith shop making a set of shoes for Ranger when Pete O'Leary rode up to the doorway and peered in.

"Hello," said O'Leary, cheerily. "How's tricks?"

"Comin' in bunches," replied Loudon, shortly, and he blew the bellows vigorously.

"That's good. Hot, ain't it? Well, I got to be weavin' along. So long."

Loudon walked to the doorway and watched O'Leary till he disappeared among the cottonwoods fringing the bank of the Dogsoldier.

"Now I'd admire to know," he wondered, "if Pete O'Leary stopped here just to ask how tricks was. He kind o' looked at yore brand, too, fellah," he added, addressing Ranger.

Thoughtfully he returned to his work. Five minutes later he whacked his knee and whistled. Comprehension had at last come to him. He marvelled that it had not come sooner.

"Now, why didn't I think o' that quicker?" he muttered. "It was that 88 brand on Ranger's hip that made Scotty suspicious. So it was that brand must 'a' made O'Leary freeze to me when I sifted into the Bend. 'Couldn't Sam come?' Sam Blakely o' the 88! An' I never seen it till just now."

The moves of an enemy are always interesting. Even more thoughtfully than before, Loudon pumped the handle of the bellows. Why was Blakely coming to Paradise Bend? To settle his score with Scotty Mackenzie? Loudon doubted it. A newly engaged man does not, as a rule, jeopardize his future happiness by reopening old issues.

Whatever the precise nature of Blakely's purpose might be, it was dark and Machiavellian in the main. O'Leary's peculiar actions in the Three Card Saloon evinced as much.

"I don't see how it could have anythin' to do with me," puzzled Loudon. "Sam couldn't 'a' knowed I was comin' to the Bend. I didn't know myself till just before I started. Yet here's O'Leary askin' Telescope about me an' skirmishin' over to see if I am at the Flyin' M. It shore is a heap mysterious."

Loudon decided to talk it over with Scotty Mackenzie.

CHAPTER IX

AUTHORS OF CONFUSION

When Loudon went to the office that evening he found Doubleday alone. "Scotty's gone," said Doubleday, in response to Loudon's question. "He's traipsin' over to the Seven Lazy Seven. Wants to get rid o' some of our no-account stock."

"When'll he be back?"

"Dunno. He may take in the Two Bar, Wagonwheel, T V U, an' the Double Diamond K before he comes back, He might stay away a week, or three weeks, or a month. Yuh can't keep tabs on Scotty. I tried to once, but I give it up long ago."

Loudon did not take the garrulous Doubleday into his confidence. Nor did

he mention the matter to Laguerre. The half-breed had seen O'Leary ride up to the blacksmith shop, and his Gallic curiosity was aroused to the full.

"My frien'," said Laguerre, when Loudon and he were mending a break in the corral fence the following day, "my frien', I wan' for tell you somethin'. Somethin' mabbeso you not see. Yes'erday O'Leary she come to de ranch; she go to de blacksmith shop. I see heem before she go to de blacksmith shop. I see heem affair. Before she see you dere een de shop hees face was de face of de man who ees not satisfy, who ees hunt for somethin'. Wen I see heem affair, she look satisfy. She has foun' w'at she hunt for. Are you me?"

Loudon nodded.

"O'Leary's takin' a heap o' trouble on my account," he said, slowly.

"More dan I t'ought she would," vouchsafed Laguerre. "I tell you, Tom, she have not de good feelin' for you. Were ees dat damn hammair gone?"

Three weeks later, Loudon and Laguerre were lazily enjoying the cool of the evening outside the door of the bunkhouse when Doubleday came striding toward them. In one hand the foreman waved a letter. He appeared to be annoyed. He was.

"Tom, Scotty wants yuh to meet him at the Bend Tuesday—that's to-morrow," said Doubleday, crossly. "Yuh'll find him at the Three Card. —— it to ——! An' I wanted you an' Telescope to ride the north range to-morrow! Which that Scotty Mackenzie is shore the most unexpected gent! Says he wants yuh to ride yore own hoss. Dunno what he wants yuh for. He don't say. Just says meet him."

Doubleday departed, swearing.

"Pore old Doubleday," drawled a bristle-haired youth named Swing Tunstall.

"He gets a heap displeased with Scotty sometimes."

"Scotty ain't just regular in his ways," commented Giant Morton, a dwarfish man with tremendously long arms. "Scotty wasn't goin' beyond the Wagonwheel, if he got that far, an' his letter was mailed in Rocket, fifty miles south. I brought her in from the Bend this aft'noon, an' I noticed the postmark special."

"He wears the raggedest clo'es I ever seen," said the cook. "An' he's got money, too."

"Money!" exclaimed Morton. "He's lousy with money. Wish I had it. Do yuh know what I'd do? I'd buy me a seventeen-hand hoss an' a saloon."

"I wouldn't," said Loudon, winking at Laguerre. "I'd have a *hacienda* down in old Mexico, an' I'd hire half-a-dozen good-lookin' *señoritas* with black hair an' blue eyes to play tunes for me on banjos, an' I'd hire cookie here to come an' wake me up every mornin' at five o'clock just so's I could have the pleasure o' heavin' him out o' the window an' goin' back to sleep."

By which it may be seen that the moody Loudon was becoming more human. His remarks irritated the cook, who rather fancied himself. He allowed himself to be the more provoked because of a growing belief that Loudon's habitually retiring and inoffensive manner denoted a lack of mettle. Which mental attitude was shared by none of the others.

At Loudon's careless words the cook bounced up from his seat on the doorsill and assumed a crouching position in front of Loudon.

"Yuh couldn't throw nothin'!" yapped the man of pots and pans. "Yuh couldn't throw a fit, let alone me! An' I want yuh to understand I can throw any bowlegged misfit that ever wore hair pants!"

"What did yuh throw 'em with—yore mouth?" inquired Loudon, gently.

The Lazy River man had not moved from his seat on the washbench. His arms remained folded across his chest. He smiled pleasantly at the irate cook.

"I throwed 'em like I'm goin' to throw you!" frothed the hot-tempered one. "That is," he added, sneeringly, "if yuh ain't afraid."

The bristle-haired Tunstall sprang between the two.

"Don't mind him, Loudon!" he cried. "He's only a fool idjit, but he's a good cook, an' losin' him would be a calamity. He don't never pack no gun neither."

"I can see he ain't heeled," said Loudon, calmly. "But he shore talks just like a regular man, don't he?"

"Regular man!" bellowed the cook. "Why——"

The sentence ended in a gurgle. For Tunstall, Morton, and Laguerre had hurled themselves upon the cook and gagged him with the crown of a hat.

"Ain't yuh got no sense at all?" growled Morton.

"Tsall right," grinned Loudon, rising to his feet. "I understand. Turn yore bull loose."

The three doubtfully released the cook. That misguided man promptly lowered his head, spread wide his arms, and charged at Loudon. The puncher sidestepped neatly and gave the cook's head a smart downward shove with the palm of his hand. The cook's face plowed the earth.

Spitting dirt and gravel he scrambled up and plunged madly at his elusive adversary. This time Loudon did not budge.

Even as the cook gripped him round the waist Loudon leaned forward along the cook's back, seized the slack of his trousers, and up-ended him. The cook's hold was broken, and again his head collided violently with the ground. He fell in a huddle, but arose instantly, his stubborn spirit unshaken. Now he did not rush. He approached the puncher warily.

Swaying on his high heels Loudon waited. Then run, with a pantherlike leap, he flung himself forward, drove both arms beneath those of the cook and clipped him round the body. The cook strove for a strangle-hold, but Loudon forestalled the attempt by hooking his chin over his opponent's shoulder. Legs apart, Loudon lifted and squeezed.

Gradually, as Loudon put forth all his great strength, the breath of the cook was expelled from his cracking chest in gasps and wheezes. His muscles relaxed, his face became distorted, empurpled.

Loudon released his grip. The cook fell limply and lay on his back, arms outspread, his crushed lungs fighting for air. In the struggle his shirt had been ripped across, and now his chest and one shoulder were exposed. Loudon, gazing down at the prostrate man, started slightly, then stooped and looked more closely at the broad triangle of breast.

Abruptly Loudon turned away and resumed his seat on the bench. After a time the cook rolled over, staggered to his feet, and reeled into the bunkhouse without a word.

No one commented on the wrestling-match. Swing Tunstall started a cheerful reminiscence of his last trip to the Bend. Laguerre rose and passed silently round the corner of the bunkhouse. Loudon, chin on hand, stared off into the distance.

Suddenly, within the bunkhouse, there was the thump of feet followed in quick succession by a thud and a grunt. Out through the doorway the cook

tumbled headlong, fell flat, and lay motionless, his nose in the dirt, his boot-toes on the doorsill. One outflung hand still clutched the butt of a six-shooter. From a gash on the back of his head the blood oozed slowly.

Issued then Laguerre from the doorway. The half-breed was in his stocking feet. He wrenched the gun from the cook's fingers, stuffed the weapon into the waistband of his trousers, and squatted down on his heels.

None of the onlookers had moved. Gravely they regarded Laguerre and the cook. Loudon realized that he had narrowly escaped being shot in the back. A farce had developed into melodrama.

At this juncture Doubleday strolled leisurely out of the office. At sight of the fallen man and the serious group at the bunkhouse he quickened his steps.

"Who done it?" demanded Doubleday, severely, for he believed the cook to be dead.

"I heet heem on de head wit' my gun," explained Laguerre. "Loudon she t'row de cook. De cook she geet varree mad un go een de bunkhouse. I t'ink mabbeso she do somethin' un I go roun' de bunkhouse, tak' off my boots, un crawl een de side window. De cook she was jus' run for door wit' hees gun een hees han'. I stop heem."

Complacently Laguerre gazed upon the still unconscious cook.

"The kyote!" exclaimed Doubleday. "That's what comes o' not havin' any sense o' humour! —— his soul! Now I got to fire him. Trouble! Trouble! Nothin' but ——"

The discouraged foreman slumped down beside Loudon and rolled a cigarette with vicious energy.

Some ten minutes later the cook stirred, rolled over, and sat up. He stared with dull eyes at the men on the bench. Stupidly he fingered the cut at the back of his head. As deadened senses revived and memory returned, his back stiffened, and defiance blazed up in his eyes.

"Telescope," said Loudon, "I'd take it as a favour if yuh'd give him his gun—an' his cartridges."

The cook lost his defiant look when the half-breed complied with Loudon's request. Helplessly he eyed the gun a moment, then, struck with a bright idea, he wagged his right wrist and grimaced as if with pain. Gingerly he rubbed the wrist-bone.

"Sprained my wrist," he stated brazenly. "Can't shoot with my left hand nohow. If I could, I'd shore enjoy finishin' up. Helluva note this is! I start for to shoot it out with a gent, an' one o' you sports whangs me over the head an' lays me out. I'd admire to know which one o' yuh done it."

"I done eet," Laguerre informed him, his white teeth flashing under his black mustache.

"I'll remember yuh," said the cook with dignity. "I'll remember you too," he added looking at Loudon. "Doubleday, I'd like my time. I ain't a-goin' to cook for this bunch no longer. An' if it's all the same to you I'll take a hoss for part o' my pay."

"Well, by ——!" exclaimed Doubleday, hugely annoyed at being thus forestalled. "You've got a nerve. You ought to be hung!"

"Any gent does who works for the Flying M," countered the cook. "But I'm quittin'. Do I get the hoss!"

"Yuh bet yuh do. An' yo're hittin' the trail to-night."

"The sooner the quicker."

Within half an hour Rufe Cutting, erstwhile cook at the Flying M, a bandage under his hat, mounted his horse and rode away toward Paradise Bend. As he vanished in the gathering dusk, Swing Tunstall laughed harshly.

"All yaller an' a yard wide!" observed Giant Morton, and spat contemptuously.

Loudon made no comment. He was working out a puzzle, and he was making very little headway.

In the morning he saddled Ranger and started for the Bend. He followed the trail for a mile or two, then, fording the Dogsoldier, he struck across the flats where a few of Mackenzie's horses grazed. He did not turn his horse's head toward Paradise Bend till the Dogsoldier was well out of rifle-range. Loudon's caution was pardonable. Rufe Cutting knew that he was to ride to the Bend, and Rufe had a rifle. Loudon had marked him tying it in his saddle-strings.

It was quite within the bounds of possibility that the cunning Rufe was at that very moment lying in wait somewhere among the cottonwoods on the bank of the Dogsoldier, for the trail in many places swung close to the creek. Decidedly, the trail was no fit route for any one at odds with a citizen of the Cutting stamp.

Loudon, when he drew near the Bend, circled back to the creek and entered the town by the Farewell trail.

He dismounted in front of the Three Card, anchored Ranger to the ground, and went into the saloon. Several men were standing at the bar. They ceased talking at his entrance.

Loudon leaned both elbows on the bar and demanded liquor. He sensed a certain tenseness, a vague chill in the atmosphere. The bartender, his eyes looking anywhere but at Loudon, served him hastily. The bartender seemed nervous. Bottle and glass rattled as he placed them on the bar.

"Scotty Mackenzie come in yet?" inquired Loudon of the bartender, setting down his empty glass.

"N-no," quavered the bartender, shrilly. "I ain't seen him."

Loudon stared at the bartender. What was the matter with the man? His face was the colour of gray wrapping-paper. Loudon turned and glanced along the bar at the other customers. Two of them were regarding him, a rapt fascination in their expressions. Swiftly the two men averted their eyes.

Loudon hesitated an instant, then he wheeled and walked out of the saloon. As he crossed the sidewalk he noticed a group of men standing near by. He stooped to pick up his reins. When he straightened there was a sudden rustle and a whisk in his rear. Something settled over his shoulders and drew taut, pinning his arms to his sides.

"What in——" swore Loudon, and began to struggle furiously.

He was at once jerked over on his back. He fell heavily. The shock partially stunned him. Dazedly he gazed upward into a ring of faces. The features of all save one were blurred. And that face was the face of Block, the Sheriff of Fort Creek County.

Loudon felt a tugging at his belt and knew that one was removing his six-shooter. He was pulled upright, his hands were wrenched together, and before he was aware of what was taking place, his wrists were in handcuffs. Now his faculties returned with a rush.

"What seems to be the trouble, anyway?" he demanded of the crowd in general.

"It seems yo're a hoss thief," replied a brown-bearded man wearing a star on the left lapel of his vest.

"Who says so?"

"This gent." The brown-bearded man pointed at Block.

"It's no good talkin', Loudon," said Block, grinning after the fashion of the cat which has just eaten the canary. "I know yuh. Yuh stole that hoss yo're ridin' from the 88 ranch. There's the brand to prove it. But that ain't all. Yuh was caught rustlin' 88 cows. Yuh branded 'em Crossed Dumbbell. An' yuh got away by shootin' Sam Blakely, an' holdin' up Marvin an' Rudd. I don't guess yuh'll get away now in a hurry."

"Where's yore warrant?"

"Don't need no warrant."

"That's right," corroborated the brown-bearded man with the star. "Yuh don't need no warrant for a hoss-thief an' a rustler. I tell yuh, stranger, yo're lucky to be still alive. I'm doin' yuh a favour by lettin' yuh go south with Sheriff Block. By rights yuh'd ought to be lynched instanter."

"Yuh don't say," said Loudon, gently. "Who are yuh, anyway?"

"Oh, I'm only the marshal here at the Bend," replied with sarcasm the brown-bearded man. "My name's Smith—Dan Smith. Yuh might 'a' heard o' me."

"Shore, I've heard o' yuh, an' I'd understood yuh was a party with sense an' not in the habit o' believin' everythin' yuh hear. Now——"

"Yuh understood right," said the marshal, drily. "I'm listenin' to yuh now, an' I don't believe everythin' I hear."

"Yo're believin' Block, an' he's the biggest liar in Fort Creek County, an' that's sayin' quite it lot, seein' as how the 88 outfit belongs in Fort Creek. Now I never branded no 88 cows. The 88, because they knowed I knowed they'd been brandin' other folks' cattle, went an' branded a cow an' a calf o' their own with the Crossed Dumbbell an' then tried to throw the blame on me. But the trick didn't pan out. They couldn't prove it nohow. Jack Richie o' the Cross-in-a-box can tell yuh I didn't rustle them cattle."

"I thought yuh was workin' for the Bar S," put in the marshal.

"I was, but I quit."

"Then why wouldn't Saltoun o' the Bar S know all about it? What did yuh say Jack Richie for?"

The marshal drooped a wise eyelid. He considered himself a most astute cross-examiner.

"I said Jack Richie because he was there at the Bar S when Marvin an' Rudd drove in the cow an' the calf. It was him proved I couldn't 'a' branded them cattle like they said I did."

"Why wouldn't Saltoun o' the Bar S speak for yuh?" inquired the marshal.

"He would, I guess," replied Loudon. "Old Salt an' me don't just hitch, but he's square. He'd tell yuh about it."

"He won't tell me. The Bar S an' the Cross-in-a-box are more'n two hundred miles south. I ain't ridin' that far to get yore pedigree. No, yuh can just bet I ain't. This gent here, Sheriff Block, will take yuh south. If it's like yuh say it

is, then yuh needn't worry none. Yuh'll have yore witnesses an' all right there."

"Don't yuh understand? I'll never see none o' my friends. The 88 outfit will lynch me soon as ever I hit Farewell. I tell yuh I know too much about 'em. They want me out o' the way."

Before the marshal could reply there was a bustle in the crowd, and a high-pitched feminine voice inquired what evil was being visited upon Mr. Loudon. An instant later Mrs. Burr, barearmed and perspiring, unceremoniously pushed Block to one side and confronted the marshal.

"What yuh doin' to him?" she demanded, with a quick jerk of her head toward Loudon.

"Why, Mis' Burr, ma'am," replied the marshal, "he's a hoss thief, an' he's goin' south to Farewell."

"He ain't goin' to Farewell," retorted Mrs. Burr, "an' he ain't a hoss thief. Who says so?"

"I do, ma'am," said Block, stepping forward. "He's a hoss thief, an'——"

"Hoss thief yoreself!" snapped Mrs. Burr, wheeling on Block so fiercely that the sheriff gave ground involuntarily. "The more I look at yuh the more yuh look like a hoss thief an' a rustler an' a road agent. You shut up, Dan Smith! I always guessed yuh was an idjit, an' now I know it! This man, Mr. Tom Loudon, is a friend o' my husband's. I know him well, an' if yuh think yo're goin' to string him up for a hoss thief yo're mistaken."

"But, ma'am," explained the unhappy marshal, "we ain't a-goin' to string him up. This gent, Sheriff Block, is takin' him south. He'll get justice down there, Mis' Burr."

"Will he? If the folks down there are as witless as you are he won't. Justice! Yuh make me plumb weary! Did yuh ask to see this Block man's warrant? Answer me! Did you?"

"He ain't got no warrant," replied the marshal in a small voice.

"Ain't got no warrant!" screamed Mrs. Burr. "Ain't got no warrant, an' yo're lettin' him take away a party on just his say-so! Dan Smith, since when have yuh allowed a stranger to come in an' tell you what to do? What right has this Block man from Fort Creek County to try an' run Paradise Bend, I'd like to know?"

"I ain't tryin' to run the Bend," defended Block. "I wouldn't think o' such a thing. But I want this hoss thief, an' I mean to have him."

The words had barely passed Block's teeth when Loudon's self-control broke. With an inarticulate howl of rage he sprang at Block and drove the iron manacles into the sheriff's face.

Down went Block with Loudon on top of him. Twice, three times, before Dan Smith and two others pulled him up and away, Loudon smashed the handcuffs home. It was a bloody-faced, teeth-spitting sheriff that got slowly to his feet.

"By ——!" gibbered Block. "By ——! I'll down you here an' now!"

A tall man with square features tapped the raving sheriff on the shoulder.

"Don't cuss no more before a lady," advised the square-featured man. "An' don't go draggin' at no gun. This ain't Fort Creek County. Yo're in Paradise Bend, an' I just guess yuh won't beef any sport with his hands tied. This goes as it lays."

From the crowd came murmurs of approval. Public opinion was changing front. Mrs. Burr smiled serenely.

"Yo're a real gent, Jim Mace," she said, addressing the square-featured man. "I always knowed you'd protect a defenseless female. Dan Smith," she continued, turning to the marshal, "unlock them handcuffs."

Dan Smith hesitated. Then Block spoiled his own case. He seized Loudon by the shoulders. Loudon promptly kicked him in the skins [Transcriber's note: shins?] and endeavoured to repeat his former assault with the handcuffs. But the two men holding him wrestled him backward.

"Do I get him?" bellowed Block, rabid with pain, for Loudon had kicked him with all his strength. "Do I get him, or are yuh goin' to let a woman tell yuh what to do?"

Jim Mace stepped close to the sheriff.

"Stranger," said Mace, sharply, "you've done chattered enough. In yore own partic'lar hog-waller yuh may be a full-size toad, but up here yo're half o' nothin'. Understand?"

The sheriff looked about him wildly. The Paradise Benders, cold, unfriendly, some openly hostile, stared back. Wrought up though he was, the sheriff had wit enough to perceive that he was treading close to the edge of a volcano. The sheriff subsided.

"Dan," said Mace, "it's come to a show-down. It's the word o' Mis' Burr agin' Block's. There's only one answer. If I was you I'd unlock them handcuffs."

"Yo're right, Jim," agreed the marshal. "I will."

"Gimme my gun," demanded Loudon, when his hands were free.

"In a minute," parried the marshal. "Sheriff, if I was you I'd hit the trail. Yore popularity ain't more'n deuce-high just now."

"I'll go," glowered Block. "But I'll be back. An' when I come I'll have a warrant. I reckon the Sheriff o' Sunset will honour it, even if you won't."

"Bring on yore warrant," retorted the marshal.

The rumble of wheels and thud of hoofs attracted Loudon's attention. Over the heads of the crowd he saw the high sides of a tarpaulin-covered wagon and, sitting on the driver's seat, Captain Benjamin Burr and Scotty Mackenzie.

"Hi, Cap'n Burr. Hi, Scotty!" shouted Loudon.

"Where are they?" exclaimed Mrs. Burr, her harsh features lighting up. "Oh, there they are! You Benjamin Burr, come right in here this instant. Yore wife wants yore help!"

Captain Burr swayed back on the reins. Dragging a sawed-off shotgun he hopped to the ground, Scotty Mackenzie at his heels. The crowd made way for them. Captain Burr swept his hat off and bowed ceremoniously to his wife.

"My love," said he, "in what way may I assist you?"

"That party," sniffed Mrs. Burr, levelling a long forefinger at the wretched Block, "comes up an' accuses Mr. Tom Loudon here o' bein' a rustler an' a hoss thief. Says he's been brandin' 88 cows an' that he stole that chestnut hoss yonder."

The sawed-off shotgun, an eight-gauge Greener, covered Block's belt buckle.

"Suh, you lie," said Burr, simply.

"What did I tell all you folks?" cried Mrs. Burr, triumphantly.

Block made no attempt to draw. He folded his arms and glared ferociously. He found glaring difficult, for he knew that he did not look in the least ferocious.

"I'm doin' my duty," he said, sullenly.

"Gentlemen all, I'd like some show in this," pleaded Loudon. "Just gimme back my gun, an' me an' Block'll shoot it out."

"Wait a shake," said Scotty, sliding between Loudon and Block. "Let me get the straight of this. You accuse Loudon here of brandin' 88 cattle?"

"Shore," insisted the stubborn Block, "an' he stole that chestnut hoss he's ridin', too. Just look at the 88 brand. It's plain as day."

"Suh," burst out Burr, "I happened to be at the 88 ranch the day my friend Tom Loudon bought that chestnut hoss. I saw him pay Blakely. Everybody in Fo't Creek County knows that Tom Loudon has owned that hoss fo' upwa'ds of a yeah. You know it, you rascal! Don't attempt to deny it!"

To this sweeping assertion Block made no reply.

"I guess now that settles half the cat-hop," said Scotty. "The other half I know somethin' about myself. Jack Richie o' the Cross-in-a-box told me. It was thisaway——"

And Scotty related the tale of Marvin and Rudd and the Crossed Dumbbell cow and calf.

"Now what yuh got to say?" Scotty demanded of Block when the story was told.

"What can I do?" snapped Block. "It's a whole town agin' one man. I'll get a

warrant, an' yuh can gamble on that. If I thought I'd get a square deal, I'd admire to shoot it out."

"Gimme my gun," begged Loudon. "Gimme it, or lend me one, somebody. He wants to shoot it out."

"No," said Scotty, firmly, "it's gone beyond shootin'. Block knowed you was innocent. He couldn't help knowin' it. He tried to work such a sneakin', low-down trick that killin' don't seem to fit somehow. He'd ought to be rode on a rail or buried up to his neck or somethin'."

"Tar an' feather him," suggested Mrs. Burr.

"We ain't got no tar," said Jim Mace, "an' there ain't a chicken in the place."

"There's molasses an' goose-hair quilts in the Chicago Store," said Mrs. Burr, helpfully. "What more do yuh want?"

Molasses and feathers! Here was an extravagant jape! Block's hand swept downward. But no smooth revolver-butt met his clutching fingers. A far-seeing soul had, in the confusion, adroitly removed the sheriff's six-shooter.

In all seriousness the men of Paradise Bend set about their work. They saw no humour in the shriekingly grotesque business. Sheriff Block essayed to struggle. But Scotty and other leading citizens attached themselves to his arms and legs and pulled him down and sat upon him.

When one came running with a five-gallon jug of molasses Block, uttering strange cries, was spread-eagled. From his forehead to his feet the molasses was thickly applied. When the front of him had been thoroughly daubed, he was rolled over upon a ripped-up quilt—this so that none of the molasses might be wasted—and a fresh jug was brought into play.

Dripping like a buckwheat cake, writhing in an agony of shame, Block was rolled up in the quilt. Then the quilt was torn away and men showered upon him the contents of other quilts. The Paradise Benders used up ten gallons of molasses and three quilts on Block, and they made a complete job. Awful was the wreck that staggered down the street.

Somehow the sheriff contrived to reach the stable where he had left his horse, and somehow—for his movements were the movements of one far gone in drink—he threw on the saddle and passed the cinch-straps. Mounting with difficulty, he rode away. None offered to molest him further.

CHAPTER X

THE HORSE THIEF

Loudon, who had taken no part in the feathering, watched the departure of the sheriff with brooding eyes. He did not agree with Scotty Mackenzie and the citizens of the Bend. In his estimation the punishment had not been sufficiently drastic. Alive and in possession of all his faculties the sheriff was a great power for evil. He would seek revenge.

Loudon swore softly. He was far from being a bloodthirsty man, but he regarded the killing of Block as a duty. And he did not believe in putting off till some future date what could be accomplished to-day.

"It's quite a list," he said to himself. "Block, Rufe Cutting, Blakely, an' the whole 88 outfit. An' they won't be happy till they get me. It kind o' looks as if

Blakely ain't expectin' to keep our little engagement in Farewell. Block wouldn't 'a' come up here without Blakely sent him."

Thoughts of Blakely quite naturally induced thoughts of Pete O'Leary. Where was O'Leary? Loudon recollected that he had not seen O'Leary in the crowd. He looked up and down the street. O'Leary was nowhere in sight. His absence was a small thing in itself, but it might signify a guilty conscience. Loudon wondered.

That disreputable person, Scotty Mackenzie, approached, leading his horse.

"Tom," said Scotty, his blue eyes twinkling, "don't look so downhearted. He wasn't worth shootin'."

"I dunno, Scotty," replied Loudon. "It'll come to it some day, or I miss my guess."

"Yuh'll miss it while yo're workin' for me. Block won't never come to the Bend again, an' yuh can go the limit on that. D'juh get the mail?"

"I ain't been to the post office. Didn't have time. I've been right busy ever since I sifted in."

"I'll get it then. Cap'n Burr wants yuh to eat dinner at his house. I'll drift round later. Better finish up what yuh come to town for before yuh eat."

"I come to town to meet you."

"To meet me!" exclaimed Scotty. "Now look here, Tom, do I look like I need a gardeen?"

"Didn't yuh write to Doubleday," said the bewildered Loudon, "tellin' him to send me in to meet yuh here to-day an' for me to ride my own hoss?"

"What are yuh talkin' about? Me write Doubleday! I should say not!"

"Well, all I know is Doubleday got a letter from yuh, an' it was mailed in Rocket."

"Mailed in Rocket! Why, I never was in Rocket! It's just luck me bein' here to-day. If I hadn't met Ben Burr down at the Wagonwheel I wouldn't 'a' come for another couple o' days, mebbe."

"It's damn funny. That letter from Rocket is no dream."

"I hope Doubleday saves the letter. Well, you go on an' eat. See yuh later."

Loudon swung into the saddle and galloped to the house of Captain Burr. On the doorsill Dorothy Burr and Pete O'Leary sat side by side. As Loudon dismounted Miss Bunrose to meet him.

"Oh, Mr. Loudon!" she exclaimed, "I've just heard about your frightful experience. I wish I'd been there. I'd have enjoyed seeing them plaster up that brute of a sheriff."

"He did look kind o' odd," said Loudon. "Yore ma shore saved my life."

"Wasn't it luck Ma was down street? I usually go myself, but this morning Mr. O'Leary came, so Ma went. We didn't know there was anything going on till Ma came back and told us, and then it was all over. My! I'd like to have seen Ma talking to that stupid Dan Smith. The big idiot! Ma's mad yet. Oh, I forgot. Have you met Mr. O'Leary?"

"I know him," said Loudon rather ungraciously, and nodded to the gentleman in question. "I guess I'll put the little hoss in the corral."

"Yes, do. Pa's out there. Dinner'll be ready soon."

Miss Burr returned to the doorsill, and Loudon led away Ranger. So Pete O'Leary had been spending the morning at the Burrs'! It would be interesting to know why the engaging O'Leary had chosen to call upon that particular morning. Was it because he did not wish to identify himself in any way with Sheriff Block? Was it the guilty conscience?

"Well, suh," smiled Captain Burr, who was kneeling at the feet of one of his horses, "well, suh, it went against the grain to let that scoundrel go in peace, didn't it?"

Loudon smiled grimly.

"I appreciate youah feelings in the matteh, Tom," continued the Captain. "Such a puhson should not be allowed to live. My impulse was to shoot him, but I stayed my hand. As I may have mentioned befo', I am growing soft-heahted. That's right, Tom, cuss away. If Block were otheh than he is, he would shoot himself. No gentleman would care to live afteh being tah'd and feath'ed. But Block will writhe onwa'd like the snake he is till he is crushed once fo' all.

"Do you remembek what I said the day you made him quit right in the street in Fa'ewell? Well, suh, in o'deh to regain the respect of the town he did kill a man—an inoffensive strangeh."

"Yuh might know it. He'll be a reg'lar 'Billy the Kid' before a great while."

"Not quite. The Lincoln County young man was a wa'-eagle. Block's a buzza'd. Tom, I'm afraid this Jeffe'son Davis hoss is developing a wind-puff."

Loudon made no reply. He was watching an approaching rider. The horseman passed by without a glance toward the corral and loped on into town.

Now the road in front of the Burr house was the beginning of the trail to the

Flying M ranch, and the mounted man was none other than Rufe Cutting. It was evident to Loudon that he had not underestimated the cook. He resolved to seek out his would-be bushwhacker immediately.

Loudon looked quickly down at the Captain. If Burr had perceived Loudon's absorption he gave no sign. He merely requested Loudon's opinion of the slight swelling on Jefferson Davis's near fore.

"Yuh've got to excuse me, Cap'n," said Loudon, hastily. "I've got a little business to attend to before I eat."

"Need any help?" inquired Burr, reaching for his Greener.

"No, thanks," replied Loudon, swiftly resaddling Ranger.

"Dinner!" called Mrs. Burr, sticking her head out of the kitchen door a moment later. "Why, where's Tom Loudon?"

"He's gone away," grumbled her husband, regretfully eying his shotgun.

"Well, of all things! Just as dinner's ready! Don't he know he's eatin' here? Will he be gone long?"

"He may not be away twenty minutes, and then, on the otheh hand, he may neveh retuhn."

"Never return! What are you talkin' about, Benjamin Burr?"

"Wait and see, my love, wait and see," rejoined the Captain, and went in to dinner.

Loudon, meanwhile, had galloped down to the corner of Main Street. Rufe

Cutting was not in sight. But his horse was standing among the horses in front of the Jacks Up Saloon. Loudon rode across the street and dismounted behind a freighter's wagon near the Chicago Store, where he could not be observed from the windows of the Jacks Up. Then he walked briskly up the street and entered the saloon.

Rufe Cutting, his scratched features cast in sullen lines, was drinking at the bar. So were several other men. A knot of citizens in Cutting's immediate rear were discussing the events of the morning. Two faro tables were crowded. The Jacks Up was in full blast. With the place crowded a gun-play was apt to result in damage to the bystanders.

However, the choice lay with Cutting. Loudon would allow the first move.

With this intention, Loudon edged up to the bar and called for a drink. At the sound of his voice Cutting turned a slow head. There were two men in between, but they were not standing close to the bar.

Loudon, watching Cutting out of his eye-corners, picked up his glass with his left hand. Even as he did so, panic seized Cutting. His fingers closed on his own full glass and he hurled it at Loudon's head.

Involuntarily Loudon dodged. When he recovered himself his gun was out.

The bartender promptly vanished under the bar. Men skipped and dodged and flung themselves over tables and chairs in their anxiety to give Loudon a clear line of fire. But Cutting had disappeared.

Two swearing men sprawling under an open rear window told the story. In his fear-stricken efforts to escape Cutting had knocked them both down.

Loudon and the two men, one of whom was Jim Mace and the other Dan Smith, went through the window almost simultaneously. Both sashes went with

them to a brave accompaniment of crackling glass.

Loudon landed on his knees, and was in time for a snapshot at a leg sliding over a windowsill of the house next door. Before Loudon could rise Mace and the marshal tumbled over him. The three fell in a tangle and rolled among tin cans and bottles for a space of time. When at last, red-faced and almost breathless, they rushed the house next door they were stopped by an angry woman brandishing a frying-pan.

"You drunk hunkers can't come through here!" screamed the irate lady. "If you an' yore fool friends want to play tag yuh can play her in the street! What do yuh mean by bustin' into folks' houses an' wakin' my baby up? You idjits! She'll be bawlin' her brains out all day now!"

"We're after a hold-up!" cried Loudon with great presence of mind.

It had the desired effect.

"Why didn't yuh say so at first? Come right in."

Through the house and out of the front door they dashed. Drifting clouds of dust marked Cutting's line of flight. He was a quarter of a mile distant, spurring for the ford of the Dogsoldier and the Farewell trail. The marshal fired a futile shot. Loudon laughed and holstered his six-shooter.

"Look at him go!" he chuckled. "Scared stiff."

"Get yore hosses!" commanded the marshal. "Don't stand here gassin'! We'll go after him right away!"

"Oh, let him go," drawled Loudon. "He ain't worth chasin'."

"But he's a road agent, ain't he?" said Jim Mace.

"No, I just said he was," grinned Loudon. "He ain't nothin' but a right good cook, so far as I know."

"Ain't he done nothin'?" inquired the perplexed marshal.

"Only jerked a glass of whisky at me," replied Loudon. "Yuh see, I ain't right popular with him."

"From the way he's splittin' the breeze," said Jim Mace, "it looks like he don't care for yore society none."

"I'd ought to go after him," grunted the marshal, vengefully, tenderly feeling a skinned elbow. "I don't mind a reg'lar gun-play, but this here chuckin' glasses round promiscuous an' bumpin' folks over ain't right. It's agin' law an' order. He'd ought to be arrested. The calaboose has been empty for a week, too."

Loudon left Jim Mace and Dan Smith explaining matters to the gathering crowd, and walked back to where he had left his horse. Ranger was not behind the freighter's wagon. Loudon ran into the Chicago Store.

"Shore," said the proprietor. "I seen a feller climbin' aboard that hoss a few minutes ago. Seemed in a hurry, too. What? Yore hoss!"

The proprietor ducked under the counter for his spurs and his rifle, and Loudon hurried out. Cutting's mount, the bay he had bought from Doubleday, was of course standing where he had been left among the other horses. Loudon threw the dropped reins over the bay's head and swung up.

"He's a hoss thief!" he shouted to Dan Smith and Jim Mace. "He got away on my hoss!"

Quirting and spurring, Loudon tore down the street. Before the horse's hoofs splattered the water of the ford the proprietor of the Chicago Store and

the marshal were galloping in his wake. Jim Mace and a score of others followed at intervals. A horse was not stolen in Paradise Bend every day. The inhabitants were bent on making the most of their opportunity.

The bay was a good horse, but Ranger was the better, and Loudon knew it—knew, too that, unless Ranger fell down, Cutting would escape.

"Ranger's good for all day," groaned Loudon. "All day an' not strain himself a little bit."

As the bay flashed across the top of a rise two miles beyond the Dogsoldier, Loudon glimpsed two specks four miles ahead.

"Block! He's with Block!" exclaimed Loudon, and drove in the spurs.

The bay leaped madly forward and rocketed down the long slope. A high-lipped swell concealed the two specks, and for a long ten minutes Loudon rode between the sides of the draw. The bay charged at the high-lipped swell with undiminished vigour. He was doing his level best, but his gait was tied in. It bore not the remotest resemblance to Ranger's free-swinging stride. When Loudon reached the crest of the swell the specks had vanished.

He put the reins between his teeth and drew the Winchester from the scabbard under his left leg. He threw down the lever a trifle. There was a cartridge in the chamber.

The loading gate resisted the pressure of his thumb. There was at least one cartridge in the magazine, but by the weight of the rifle he judged it to be fully loaded. Loudon returned the Winchester to its scabbard and slowed the willing little bay to a lope.

"Yo're all right, old hoss," he said, "but yuh can't never catch that hoss o' mine. Not in a million years. We just got to wait till he stops."

Rufe Cutting could have devised no better revenge than the stealing of Loudon's horse. Since Loudon had owned Ranger no one save himself and Kate Saltoun had ridden him. Ranger's legs were frequently hand-rubbed. Ranger was curried. With his fingers—no true horseman would dream of using the comb of commerce—Loudon frequently combed Ranger's mane and tail. When a horse in the cow country is curried and combed, that horse is a highly valued horse. Johnny Ramsay accused Loudon of wrapping Ranger in blankets when the air was chilly, and of taking his temperature on all occasions. Undoubtedly Loudon was somewhat of a crank where Ranger was concerned.

And now the inconceivable had come to pass. Ranger had been stolen—stolen almost under the very nose of his master. Loudon did not swear. His feeling was too deeply grim for that. But he promised himself an accounting—a very full accounting.

Loudon rode onward at a steady lope. Before him stretched the dusty ribbon of trail. Blank and bare it led between the low hills and lifted over the ridges. He saw no more specks ahead. The quarry had outdistanced him.

Fifteen miles out of Paradise Bend he heard a faint shout in his rear. He looked over his shoulder. A half mile distant two men were galloping toward him. One of them waved an arm half red, half blue.

"Scotty," muttered Loudon, and checked his horse.

The two clattered up, their horses' out-blown nostrils whistling. One of the men was the owner of the Flying M. The other was the proprietor of the Chicago Store.

"Seen him?" demanded Scotty.

"Once," replied Loudon. "He's ridin' with Block now, but they pulled away from me. I ain't seen 'em for over a hour."

"They're stickin' to the trail," grunted the store proprietor, who rejoiced in the name of Ragsdale, glancing at the hoof-marks in the dust.

"C'mon!" snapped Scotty Mackenzie.

Three miles farther on Ragsdale's mount began to falter.

"He's done," growled Ragsdale. "Give 'em one for me."

Ragsdale halted. Loudon and Scotty Mackenzie rode on.

"Where did yuh get that bay?" queried Scotty, eying the Flying M brand on the bay's hip.

"It was his—Cutting's," replied Loudon.

"Cutting's? Djuh mean Rufe Cutting is the hoss thief?"

"Shore! I clean forgot yuh didn't know about Cutting's quittin' his job."

Loudon explained the manner of the cook's departure and his subsequent actions to Mackenzie.

"An'," said Loudon, in conclusion, "I seen that feller at the 88 that time I bought my hoss from Blakely."

"Yuh did! Are yuh shore?"

"Shore as yo're a day old. I was walkin' past the bunkhouse with Blakely, an' this fellah was out in front with his shirt off a-washin' himself, an' I seen a eagle tattooed on his chest in blue, an' underneath a heart with a R on one side an' a T on the other. Just before yore cook pulled his freight his shirt got tore, an' I seen his chest, an' there was the eagle an' the heart an' the two letters R an

"I. I knowed when I first laid eyes on him up here at the Flyin' M that I'd seen him some'ers, but I couldn't place him till I seen the tattoo-work. It all come back to me then."

"What was his name at the 88?"

"I never knowed. I never cut his trail again down there. He wasn't one o' the reg'lar outfit. I know all o' them."

"Did Cap'n Burr see him?"

"No, he didn't. I remember now, when the Cap'n come this fellah wasn't in sight, an' he didn't show up again while we was there. Cap'n Burr left when I did."

"Cutting worked for me nigh onto a year. He's always earned his pay. Never done nothin' out of the way."

"I dunno what it means. It's all a heap mysterious—special mysterious when yuh come to think o' what O'Leary asked me when I first hit the Bend. 'Couldn't Sam come?' says O'Leary to me. Busts out into the street to say it, too, right after I'd asked yuh the way to Cap'n Burr's house."

"I remember," said Scotty, thoughtfully. "I seen him talkin' to yuh. I thought yuh knowed him. I wonder who he took yuh for?"

"One o' Blakely's outfit, o' course," replied Loudon. "It was that 88 brand o' Ranger's done the trick for him like it done for you. 'Couldn't Sam come?' says he. Then he says, 'It's all right. I'm Pete O'Leary!' When he seen I didn't understand him none, he got gun-shy immediate an' wandered. An' he didn't forget me a little bit. Telescope told me that he'd been tryin' to find out if you'd hired me. One day he come out to the ranch an' stopped just long enough to say howdy. Wanted to make shore I was there, see? What do yuh make of it?"

"Nothin'—yet. We got to wait an' see what happens."

"Seein' what happens may be expensive. I tell yuh flat, Scotty, Sam Blakely has got somethin' under the table for yuh. He's aimin' to put a crimp in yuh. Yuh can go the limit on that."

"There ain't nothin' certain about it."

"O' course there ain't. Sam ain't goin' to give himself away. I wish you'd let me Injun 'round some an' see what's up. I think, maybe, yuh'll save money if yuh do."

"Well, I dunno——" hesitated Scotty.

"O' course," said Loudon, quickly, "Blakely's got it in for me. But whatever he's cookin' up for you he thought of before I ever rode north. My comin' north has sort of upset his plans. He knows I know all about him, an' he wants to shut my mouth before he turns his bull loose."

"Yo're goin' to meet him in Farewell, ain't yuh? Seems to me Richie said somethin' about it."

"Shore I am, but what's that got to do with it?"

"Why, maybe that's the reason he wants yuh out of the way. He may not hanker after shootin' it out with yuh."

"No, Sam Blakely ain't afraid," denied Loudon. "He wouldn't object any to meetin' me in Farewell if that was all there was to it. No, what's worryin' him is me bein' here at the Flying M. An' it's worryin' him a lot, or he'd never 'a' sent Block two hundred miles."

"Well, I dunno. Yuh may be right, Tom, but I don't just guess Sam Blakely

will try to put any crimps in me. He knows it would come kind o' high. Of course it's mighty puzzlin'. I don't understand it none. One thing, Blakely shore tried his best to get yuh down on the Lazy River, an' that's why it looks to me like Block was sent to put in the last licks."

"He was, but not the way yuh think. I could gas my head off about Blakely up here in the Bend, an' it wouldn't matter a —— so long as he was down on the Lazy. But if he left the Lazy an' come projeckin' up to the Bend, then what I'd be sayin' would count a lot. See now?"

"I see," admitted Scotty.

"Well, gimme a chance to find out what he's up to."

"No, Tom, there's too much to do at the ranch. I can't let yuh go. Yo're too good a man. I need yuh right at home. We'll wait an' see what happens. Then we'll know what to do."

"It may be too late then," grumbled Loudon.

"If it is, then blame me. I'm the one to lose, anyway."

"Yuh shore are."

Oh, the denseness of ranch owners! Was Scotty Mackenzie to turn out another Saltoun?

"It's a blind trail," observed Scotty, picking up the tangled thread of their discourse. "Some things kind o' fit when yuh look at 'em one way, an' then again they don't when yuh look at 'em another. Cutting don't fit, none whatever. All the time he worked for me, he only went to town twice, an' the last time was six months ago. O'Leary never come to see him, so if somethin's up like yuh say there is, Rufe's out of it. But that won't help him none now. He'll go out if we

ever come up with him."

"If we do," supplemented Loudon.

"My idea exactly. That hoss o' yores can shore wriggle along, an' he had a big start."

"I'm goin' through to Rocket anyhow."

"Me, too."

Till the latter half of the afternoon they kept the ponies loping. Then, slowing to a walk, they risked a short-cut and did not strike the trail again till the sun was setting.

"Still keepin' together," announced Loudon, after one look at the trail.

"An' still hittin' the high places," said Scotty. "Them two cayuses shore have bottom. Cutting knowed a good hoss all right."

CHAPTER XI

ROCKET

The two men reached Rocket before midnight and rode up to the door of the combination saloon and hotel. While Scotty hammered on the planks with his fist, Loudon uttered stentorian yells. Rocket, male and female, awoke, poked their heads out of the windows and shrilly demanded information.

"Hoss thief!" bawled Loudon. "He's ridin' a long-legged chestnut with a white spot on his nose! Fellah with him on a black horse! The sport on the black may or may not be dressed like a bird, accordin' to whether he's washed himself! Have yuh seen 'em?"

Rocket with one voice assured Loudon that he was drunk, and advised the watering-trough.

"I ain't foolin'," expostulated Loudon. "The gent on the black cayuse, which his name is Block, Sheriff o' Fort Creek County, was tarred an' feathered in Paradise Bend this afternoon."

Partisan Rocket cheered, and, in the same breath, grieved that neither of the

fugitives had been seen and clamoured to know details of the tarring and feathering. Rocket was in Sunset County, and it was delightful to hear that Fort Creek, in the person of its sheriff, had been insulted.

Loudon, sitting at ease on his weary, drooping-headed pony, told the tale. He carefully refrained, however, from mentioning his own leading part in the affair. Rocket received the story with howls of mirth. Later, the male portion stuffed its nightshirts into trousers, pulled on boots, and gathered three deep around Loudon and Scotty while the two devoured cold beef and beans in the dining room of the hotel.

"Glad to see yo're feelin' better over yore hoss," observed Scotty, when the last Rocketer had departed.

"Oh, I made 'em laugh," said Loudon, dismally. "But it didn't make me feel like laughin' myself a little bit. I feel just as bad as ever—worse if anythin'. Why, Scotty, that hoss could do everythin' but talk."

"Shore," said Scotty, hastily, "but we can't do nothin' now. We've done all we could. They didn't come through Rocket, that's certain. They've done turned off some'ers. We can't trail 'em to-night, an' by to-morrow they'll be forty mile off. There's no use in keepin' it up."

Scotty looked anxiously at Loudon. The latter made no reply. He was staring at the lamp on the table, his expression bitter in the extreme.

"Tell yuh what," hazarded Scotty. "Yuh can have that bay yo're ridin'. He ain't like yore reg'lar hoss, but he's a good pony. Look at the way he went to-day. Got bottom, that hoss has. Go till the Gulf o' Mexico freezes solid."

"That's right good o' yuh, Scotty, but I couldn't take him off yuh thataway. I might buy him some day."

"The offer goes as it lays. Yuh don't have to buy him. He's yores whenever yuh want him. Well, what are yuh figurin' on doin'?"

"It's no use chasin' 'em any more now. I know that. Might as well wander back where we come from. Later, two or three weeks maybe, I'm goin' south."

"Goin' south!" Scotty was aghast. He did not wish to lose his best man.

"Yep. Goin' south. Don't expect to find Cutting first off. But I'll find Block, an' I guess he'll know somethin' about friend Cutting. I'd go instanter, only I want to give Block time to get back an' get settled before I pay him a call. I tell yuh, Scotty, I want that hoss o' mine, an' I'll get him back if it takes me the rest o' my life!"

"You gents want beds?" inquired the landlord, suddenly appearing in the doorway.

"Shore," replied Scotty. "Two of 'em."

"Say, who's the postmaster here?" Loudon asked.

"Me," was the landlord's weary reply.

"A couple o' days ago," said Loudon, "a letter addressed to John Doubleday in Paradise Bend was mailed here. Remember who mailed it?"

"Couldn't say, stranger," yawned the landlord. "Oh, shore," he added, as Loudon looked incredulous, "I could tell yuh everybody else what mailed mail for the last month. But that one letter I couldn't. I didn't see the man, woman, child, or Injun what mailed it. Three days ago when I got up in the mornin' an' went outside to wash my face I done found that letter an' two bits a-layin' on the door-step. That's all. Just a letter an' two bits. I clamps on a stamp an' sends her along when the up-stage pulls in."

"Any parties from the Bend in town that day, or the day before?"

"Nary a party as I knows of—but then I ain't got eyes all over me. Some sport might 'a' slid through an' me not know it."

"I ain't askin' questions just to make talk," said Loudon, sharply. "So if yuh ain't got no real serious objections I'll ask a couple more."

"No need to get het, stranger," soothed the landlord. "No need to get het. Ask away."

"Any strangers been in town lately?"

"Two, to-day. They're the only strangers I've seen for quite a spell, an' they're upstairs now. Lady an' gent they are, travellin' separate. Goin' to the Bend, I reckon. Yest'day the off hind wheel o' the stage dished down at Lew's Gully, an' she come in on three wheels an' half a cottonwood. Passengers had to stay over till Whisky Jim rustled him a new wheel. Whisky'll pull out in the mornin'."

"Who's the gent?"

"Drummer. Dunno his name."

"Didn't Block—you know, Sheriff Block o' Fort Creek—didn't he stop here a day or two ago? He must 'a' come through Rocket."

"Shore he did. But he ain't no stranger. I see him as many as two or three times a year. Shore he come through Rocket. He had a drink here day before yest'day. Goin' to the Bend, he said."

"Well, if he stops on his way back tell him Tom Loudon was askin' for him. Old friend o' mine, the sheriff is. Just tell him yuh know me, an' he'll set 'em up

for the whole town.'

"I expect," grinned the landlord. "Was you wantin' beds, gents?"

"That's us," grunted Scotty. "Me, I'm asleep from the neck down. Show me that bed, Mister."

Loudon, sitting on the edge of his sway-backed cot, pulled off his boots, dropped them clattering on the floor, and looked across at Scotty Mackenzie.

"Block didn't send that letter—or write it," he said, sliding his long body under the blanket.

"How do yuh know?" came in muffled tones from Scotty.

"He ain't got the brains. No sir, some gent in Paradise Bend sent that letter, an' I think I know his name."

"Who is he?" Scotty was plainly striving to keep awake, and making a poor job of it.

"I'll tell yuh after we get back to the Bend."

Next morning, while the east was yet lemon and gray, the thunderous clamour of a beaten dish-pan reverberated through the hotel. The hideous din ceased abruptly, and the voice of the landlord became audible.

"Yuh half-witted idjit! Don't yuh know better'n to beat that pan when there's a lady in the house? Dish-pans is for common folks, an' don't yuh forget it! Now you hump yoreself upstairs an' bang on her door right gentle an' tell her the stage is due to pull out in a hour."

"Must be a real lady," commented Loudon, when a door at the other end of the corridor had been duly rapped upon.

"Must be," said Scotty in a singularly joyless tone. "Yuh couldn't hear what she said to the feller. Reg'lar female ladies always talk so yuh got to ask 'em to say it again, they carry fancy-coloured umbrellas when the sun shines, an' they pack their gold specs on the end of a stick. They watch yuh eat, too. I know 'em. Yuh bet I do.

"I met a pair of 'em once when they was visitin' at the Seven Lazy Seven. They made me so nervous a-lookin' at me that I cut the roof o' my mouth three times with my knife. Reg'lar ladies don't make me feel to home nohow. I'm goin' down now an' eat before this one scampers in an' spoils my appetite."

So saying, Scotty almost ran from the room, buckling on his cartridge-belt as he went.

The drummer was at the table when the two Flying M men sat down. An impressive person was the drummer. He was known in his own circle as a "perfectly elegant dresser." If the tightest of tight-fitting suits, the gaudiest of shirts, the highest of collars, an explosive cravat, two watch-chains, a bartender's curl, and a perpetual leer made for elegance, that drummer was elegant to a degree.

The three had nearly finished breakfast when there came a tapping of quick heels on the stairs. Scotty Mackenzie groaned. The drummer hastily patted his curl and broadened his leer. Loudon raised his eyes and gasped audibly. His knife and fork rattled on the plate. For the woman entering the room was Kate Saltoun.

"Good morning, Tom," said Kate, brightly, quite as if she and he, the best of friends, had parted the previous evening.

The nonplussed Loudon mumbled unintelligibly, but accomplished a passable greeting by the time Kate had seated herself directly opposite. The drummer glanced contemptuously at Loudon, and, with a flourish and a killing ogle, handed the bread to Kate. Miss Saltoun helped herself, nodded casual thanks, and bestowed a ravishing smile on Loudon.

"I'm awfully glad to see you again, Tom," she declared, buttering her bread. "It's just like old times, isn't it?"

Could this smiling young girl be Kate Saltoun? Was this the Kate that had called him names and broken his heart and driven him from the Lazy River? Loudon furtively pinched himself. The pinch hurt.

It was not all a dream then. Kate Saltoun, in the flesh, and separated from him by not more than four feet of scaly oilcloth, was actually smiling at him. Words failed Loudon. He could do nothing but gaze.

Scotty, fearful of an introduction, oozed from the table. The drummer, unused to being ignored, fidgeted. He cleared his throat raucously. He would show this dumb person in chaps how a gentleman comports himself in the presence of a lady. It was the drummer's first trip West.

"Beautiful day, Miss, beautiful," he smirked, tilting back in his chair, and rattling his watch-chains. "We should have a quick trip to Paradise Bend. Our driver, I understand, has procured another wheel, and——"

The full-voiced utterance died abruptly.

For Kate had looked imploringly at Loudon, and Loudon had swung about to face the drummer. For the first time in his life the drummer realized how cold, how utterly daunting, a pair of human eyes could be.

"You through?" demanded Loudon.

The drummer endured that disconcerting stare while a man might draw three breaths. Then his eyelids quivered, dropped, and a curious mottled pallor overspread his countenance. He glanced up, met again that disconcerting stare, and quickly looked elsewhere.

"You through?" repeated Loudon.

"I—I don't know as that's any of your business," said the drummer, faintly.

"Git out," ordered Loudon.

"Why, look here! By what right——"

"Git out." Loudon had not raised his voice.

The drummer glanced at Miss Saltoun. She was crumbling her bread and looking over his head with an air of intense boredom. So far as she was concerned, he had ceased to exist. And she had been so friendly and companionable on the long ride from Farewell.

"You've done kept me waitin' some time," suggested Loudon, softly.

Awkwardly, for he found his knees strangely weak, the drummer rose. With a lame attempt at jauntness he pulled down his vest, shot his cuffs, and teetered from the room. He made his way to the bar and called for whisky. His nerves were rather upset.

"Jake's put yore stuff in the stage," announced the landlord, who was also the bartender.

"Then Jake can take my bags out again," said the drummer, disagreeably. "I'm staying over till to-morrow."

"Well, hotel-keepers can't afford to be particular," the landlord said, unsmilingly. "But yuh'll have to unload yore truck yore own self."

The drummer would have enjoyed cursing the landlord. But the latter had the same peculiar look about the eyes that Loudon had. The drummer went out into the street, thinking evil thoughts of these unamiable Westerners.

Kate, when the drummer left the room, smiled sweetly upon Loudon. It was his reward for ridding her of a pest. She did not know that Loudon's prime reason for squelching the drummer was practically the same reason that impels the average man, on receiving an unpleasant surprise, to throw things at the cat.

"How's Johnny Ramsay gettin' along?" inquired Loudon.

"He has completely recovered," Kate replied. "He went back to the Cross-in-a-box four days ago."

"That's good. I'm glad to hear it."

Paying no further attention to Kate, Loudon calmly proceeded to finish his breakfast. Kate began to find the silence painful.

"Why, Tom," said she, "aren't you even a little bit glad to see me?"

"Why should I be glad?" parried Loudon.

"You're not very polite, Tom. You—you make me feel very badly. Why, oh, why do you persist in making it so hard for me?"

Kate's voice was pitched low, and there was a running sob in it. But Loudon was not in the least affected.

"Last time I seen yuh," Loudon stated, deliberately, "yuh told me flat yuh never wanted to see me again. Yuh was engaged to Sam Blakely, too. I don't understand yuh a little bit."

"Perhaps you will when I explain. You see, I am no longer engaged to Mr. Blakely."

"Yo're lucky."

"I think so myself. Under the circumstances, can't we be friends again? I didn't mean what I said, boy. Truly I didn't."

Loudon was looking at Kate, but he did not see her as she sat there in her chair, her black eyes imploring. Instead, he saw her as she appeared that day in the kitchen of the Bar S, when she wiped his kiss from her mouth and ordered him to leave her.

"Yo're too many for me," he said at last. "I dunno what yo're drivin' at. But if yuh want to be friends, why, I'm the last fellah in the world to be yore enemy. Yuh know I never have exactly disliked yuh, Kate. Well, I got to be weavin' along. Glad to have seen yuh, Kate. I'll see yuh later, maybe."

"Of course you will, Tom. I'll be at Li's—Mrs. Mace, you know, at the Bend. You will come and see me, won't you?"

"Shore I will, an' glad to."

Loudon dropped the lady's hand as if it had been a hot iron, and departed. He had no intention of going near the house of Mrs. Mace. He never wanted to see Kate Saltoun again.

In the street he found Scotty nervously awaiting him.

"Git yore hoss," said Scotty, "an' let's git out o' here."

"What's all the hurry?" queried Loudon.

"That female girl in the hotel. She'll be out in a minute, an' then yuh'll have to introduce me."

"She's Kate Saltoun, Scotty."

"Old Salt's daughter! It don't sound possible. An' him with a face like a grizzly. She's shorely four aces, Tom, an' as pretty as a little red wagon. But I ain't aimin' to make her acquaintance, an' yuh can gamble on that."

Happily for Scotty's peace of mind he and Loudon left Rocket twenty minutes ahead of the stage.

The drummer watched the departure of the stage with brooding eyes. When the dust in the street had settled he had another drink at the bar and ensconced himself in a corner of the barroom where he could glower unobserved at the landlord.

The latter had gone to the corral, but the drummer was still sitting in his chair, when, toward noon, two men entered. They were unprepossessing individuals, both of them, though one, the tall man with the black beard, had obviously just washed himself thoroughly. Even his clothing had been scrubbed.

The drummer sniffed inquiringly. What was that elusive odour—that strange smell or rather mixture of smells? The drummer sniffed again.

"Got a cold?" growled the black-bearded man.

"No," said the drummer, sulkily.

"Then don't snuffle. I don't like snuffin', I don't. It makes me jumpy, snufflin' does. Breathe through yore mouth if yuh got to."

The look which the black-avised individual bent upon the drummer was not reassuring. The wretched drummer shrank into himself and took care to breathe in an inoffensive manner. The black-bearded man was extremely sensitive about that odour, for it emanated from his own person and habiliments. Tobacco smoke had no effect upon it. It clung after the fashion of loving relations. Strong soap, scorched molasses, and singed feathers, had given birth to that odour. No wonder he was sensitive!

His companion, whose face bore numerous scratches, stared round the barroom.

"Where's the barkeep?" he grunted.

"Don't need no barkeep," announced the black-bearded man, and started to walk round the bar.

"Don't yuh?" inquired the voice of the landlord. "Yuh got another guess comin'. Yuh can't run no blazers in this shack, Block, an' that goes."

The eyes of the black-bearded man glowed evilly. He stopped in his tracks, his raised hand halted in the act of reaching for a bottle. He stared at the landlord standing in the doorway. The landlord stared back, his thumbs hooked in his belt.

"Get us a drink then," snarled Block, and he joined his friend in front of the bar.

"That's what I'm here for," rejoined the landlord, cheerfully. "I don't care who I serve. Why, I give that a drink awhile ago." He flicked a contemptuous thumb at the drummer.

"Hurry up!" admonished Block.

"No hurry," chirruped the landlord insultingly. "I never was in a hurry, an' I ain't goin' to begin now. What'll yuh have—milk?"

"Say," exclaimed the man with the scratched face, "are you lookin' for trouble?"

"Stranger," replied the landlord, turning a pair of calm brown eyes on his questioner—"stranger, a gent don't never look for trouble. It comes to him unexpected-like. But none ain't comin' to me to-day. Soon as I seen you two tin horns in here I told a friend o' mine. He's a-watchin' yuh from the window right now."

Block and his friend involuntarily turned their heads. Framed in the open window were the head and shoulders of a man. In his hands was a sawed-off shotgun. The blunt muzzle gaped ominously at them.

"Well, by Gawd!" began the scratch-faced man.

"Shut up!" said Block. "These folks seem scared of us. No use fussin'. We'll just licker an' git."

"Them's the words I like to hear," observed the landlord, slapping bottle and glasses on the bar. "Yuh can't pull out too quick to suit me, Block. I know about yore goin's-on down in Farewell—rubbin' out harmless strangers. Yuh may be a sheriff an' all that, but yore office don't travel a foot in Sunset County."

"Yuh talk big," growled Block. "Yuh needn't think yuh can bluff me. If I feel like takin' this town apart, I'll do it."

"Shore, just like yuh took the Bend apart. Got the molasses out o' yore system yet?"

Block's eyes were fairly murderous. The landlord grinned.

"That shotgun's double-barrelled," he observed. "Buckshot in each barrel."

Block gulped his whisky. The scratch-faced man had finished his drink and was placidly rolling a cigarette.

"Never did like to quarrel," he remarked, "special not with a shotgun. Mister"—to the landlord—"have any gents from the Bend rode in to-day—or yesterday?"

"Lookin' for friends?" queried the landlord.

"Shore!"

"I thought so. Well, I can't tell yuh. Yuh see, I ain't right well acquainted hereabouts. I dunno everybody. There might somebody 'a' come through, an' then again there mightn't. I seed a Injun yest'day, though. Looked like a Digger. Might he be yore partic'lar friend?" An exquisite solicitude was in the landlord's tone.

The other refused to take offence. He smiled wryly. When he spoke, his words were without rancour.

"I can't claim the Injun. I was thinkin' of a sport named Loudon. Know him?"

"I told yuh I didn't know many people round here."

"I was just a-wonderin'. I was kind o' anxious to see Loudon."

"Well, I dunno nothin' about him."

"There was a man here named Loudon," piped up the drummer, perceiving

an opportunity of annoying the landlord. "He stayed here all night. Another man was with him, a very dirty old character named Mackenzie. I think Scotty was his first name."

"Which way did they go?" demanded Block.

"They rode away toward Paradise Bend."

"That drummer can lie faster'n a hoss can trot," drawled the landlord.

"You know they stayed here all night," said the drummer with a flash of spirit. "I had breakfast with them."

The landlord walked swiftly to the drummer, who quailed.

"Yo're lyin'!" announced the landlord. "Say so. Say yo're lyin', yuh pup, or I'll pull yore neck in half."

"I'm lyin'!" cried the drummer, hastily. "I'm lyin'."

"There wasn't nobody here but you, was there?" inquired the landlord.

"N-no."

"I guess that's enough. You see how reliable this sport is, gents. Can't believe a word he says."

Block turned toward the door. The scratch-faced man winked at his own reflection in the mirror behind the bar and stuck his tongue in his cheek.

"C'mon," said Block.

The sheriff and his friend went out into the street. The landlord followed, his expression one of pleasurable anticipation. Four citizens of Rocket, grouped on

the sidewalk, glumly watched the two men as they swung into their saddles and loped away. The landlord's face fell.

"Say," he demanded, "why didn't yuh arrest him?"

"Couldn't be did," replied the largest of the quartette, who wore a marshal's star on his vest. "Loudon said his hoss was a chestnut, white spot on nose, didn't he? One o' them two cayuses was a black, but the other was a bald-face pinto. Nothin' like a chestnut."

"But Loudon done said the hoss thief was ridin' with Sheriff Block."

"That's all true enough, an' the party a-ridin' off with Block may be a hoss thief, but if he is, he ain't ridin' Loudon's hoss. An' Loudon's hoss is the only one we know about. Got to go by the hoss, Dave."

"Why, looky here, Sim, Loudon described the feller right plain. That's Rufe Cutting a-ridin' away there with Block, or I'm a Dutchman."

"He may be," returned the marshal, equably, "an' if Loudon was here an' could identify him I'd grab him too quick. But unless he's ridin' a chestnut hoss with a white spot on his nose I can't arrest him without a warrant. An' there ain't no warrant. See how it is, Dave?"

"Oh, I see all right," mourned the landlord, "an' it makes me sick. Soon as I seen 'em come in my place I says to myself, 'Here's that hoss thief.' All I thought of was that Loudon said the sport was with Block. It makes me sick. It shore does. After me a-cookin' it all up with you to arrest him! C'mon in an' have somethin', an' watch me give that drummer the prettiest lickin' he ever had in his life."

CHAPTER XII

SCOTTY ADVISES

When Loudon and Scotty reached Paradise Bend, they separated, Scotty going to the Burrs', while Loudon strolled leisurely about the streets. Loudon visited all the saloons and drew into conversation the bartenders and other prominent citizens. In less than an hour he met Scotty behind the Burr corral.

"Five days ago an' early in the mornin'," said Loudon, "a Seven Lazy Seven boy met O'Leary ridin' the trail to the Flyin' M. O'Leary told him, an' it wasn't none necessary, that he was goin' to Sucker Creek. That's away north a good eighty mile.

"Well, that same day in the evenin' a freighter, camped on the trail half-way between the Bend and Rocket, seen O'Leary a-peltin' south. The freighter only got a flash at him by the light of his fire, but he knowed him all right, an' he hollered a howdy. O'Leary never notices. Just leans over his horn an' keeps a-foggin' right along. There yuh have it—the Flyin' M trail in the mornin', an' twenty-five mile south o' the Bend in the evenin'. Now who mailed that letter?"

"It looks like O'Leary," admitted Scotty. "But what yuh goin' to do about it? Yuh can't do nothin', Tom. I tell yuh, yuh got to wait. Now don't yuh go projeckin' round O'Leary an' kick up any fuss. It won't do no good, an' yuh might reap some lead. Yo're needed at the ranch, Tom. Just you keep that in mind."

"Don't fret. I ain't goin' to say nothin' to O'Leary—yet. I'll give him plenty o' rope to hang himself with. But I wish you'd let me Injun round some, Scotty.

Gimme two weeks, now. Yuh won't regret it."

"Now, Tom, there yuh go again. I need yuh to home, I tell yuh."

"Oh, all right; have it yore own way. But if yuh won't gimme the two weeks now, I'll take 'em later on my own account. I aim to get my hoss back."

"We'll talk about that later," said Scotty. "You go on in an' see Dorothy. Y'ought to be ashamed o' yoreself—stickin' out here when there's a pretty little girl like that in the house."

"Thought yuh didn't like ladies any."

"Depends on the lady. There's brands an' brands, Tom. But that little girl o' the Cap'n's—well, say, she always makes a gent feel right to home. Wish I was younger. Yes, sir, I shore wish I didn't have so many rings on my horns. I'd have you boys runnin' in circles, I would. Go on in now, Tom, an' if yuh work it right Mis' Burr'll ask yuh to grub."

Loudon went.

"Just in time for supper," was Mrs. Burr's greeting. "Dorothy's out front. Pete O'Leary's here again. He's stayin' to supper, too. Thank Heaven, I'll have a crowd for once. I do enjoy seein' folks eat. Say, Tom," she added, lowering her voice, "is O'Leary a friend o' yores?"

"I know his name, Mis' Burr," said Loudon, "an' that's about all."

"Well, I was just wonderin'. I dunno whether to like that fellah or not. He strikes me as bein' conceited a lot. He always acts to me like he thought every girl he knowed was in love with him. He's good-lookin' an' all that, but I don't cotton to his eyes. They look as if they was holdin' somethin' back all the time. See what I mean? Like he was sayin' one thing an' thinkin' another."

"I see," Loudon nodded. He understood perfectly.

"He ain't never hung round Dorothy till lately. But yuh can't say nothin', I s'pose. Still—oh, well, no use chatterin' about it."

Loudon wondered whether Scotty had known O'Leary was in the house when he urged Loudon to go in and see Dorothy. The presence of O'Leary did not forecast an enjoyable meal.

"I just come in for a drink, Mis' Burr," said Loudon. "I wish I could stay for supper. Thank yuh kindly, all the same, but I got to see a man down street."

"Huh," grunted Mrs. Burr, skeptically. "Yuh don't like O'Leary neither, do yuh?"

"I didn't say nothin' about that, ma'am."

"No, o' course not. Yuh can't fool me, Tom Loudon. There's cool water in that covered pail. Say, it's too bad about that hoss o' yores. Scotty told me yuh didn't have no luck in Rocket. It shore is too bad. He was a right good hoss."

"He is a good hoss, ma'am. He ain't a goner yet, by a jugful. I'll get him back."

"I hope so, an' I hope yuh lynch the thief, or shoot him anyway. He hadn't ought to live a minute. The Flyin' M cook, too. Yuh can't hardly believe it."

Loudon got his drink and departed. As he rode past the house he saw Dorothy and O'Leary sitting on the doorstep. Dorothy waved her hand and smiled. O'Leary positively beamed. Had Loudon been his oldest friend O'Leary's greeting could not have been more cordial.

"Now I'd like to know," thought Loudon, as he rode down the street, "what

license he's got to be so cheerful. Is it 'cause I ain't stayin' to supper, or is it 'cause he's got some other card up his sleeve?"

"Why didn't you stay to supper?" chuckled Scotty, when Loudon dropped into the chair next him at the hotel dining-table.

"I couldn't stand it to be away from you so long," retorted Loudon, and helped himself generously to the butter.

"I kind o' thought it might be that way. Try them pickles. They taste like they'd been used for tannin' saddles."

Night had not yet fallen when Loudon and Scotty started for the Flying M. As they passed the house of Big Jim Mace, Scotty groaned.

"Here comes that female girl o' Old Salt's," he whispered, perturbedly. "She's headin' our way. She's a-callin' to yuh, Tom! She's a-callin' to yuh! I'm goin' on. I'll wait for yuh on the trail."

There was no disregarding Kate Saltoun. She had even stepped out into the street in her efforts to attract Loudon's attention. Scotty loped onward, and Loudon twisted his horse toward the sidewalk.

"Well," said Kate, smiling up at him, "you are a nice one! I believe you'd have passed right by without speaking if I hadn't called to you. Come on in and see Mrs. Mace and me. Jim's down street, and we want someone to talk to."

"Just someone?"

Loudon could have bitten his tongue off for uttering this flirty remark. But for the life of him he could not help saying it.

Kate smiled.

"Someone would probably do for Lil," she said, "but I want you. I've an awful lot to tell you, Tom."

"I can't, Kate. Honest, I'd like to come in an' see yuh a lot. I shore would. But I got to ride out to the ranch with Scotty Mackenzie."

"Is that funny old person with the parti-coloured sleeve Scotty Mackenzie? I've heard Dad speak of him. They never liked each other, I believe. Bring him over, I'd like to meet him. Then he can talk to Lil."

"That'd be fine, but yuh see Scotty's in a hurry to get back to the ranch. I'm afraid we couldn't manage it nohow."

Kate's face fell. Loudon glanced up and saw Dorothy Burr and Pete O'Leary approaching. Interest, polite in Dorothy's case, speculative in O'Leary's, was manifest in their expressions. Kate moved closer to Loudon and laid a hand on the neck of his horse.

"Tom," she whispered, "I just heard what Block tried to do. Lil told me. You don't believe I had anything to do with it, do you?"

"Why, no, o' course I don't."

"Are you sure?"

"Why, Kate, I know you couldn't do a thing like that. Don't yuh think any more about it."

"I believe you do, just the same. Tom, no matter how much I disliked a person I wouldn't betray him."

"I believe yuh. Honest, I do."

Dorothy and O'Leary passing at this juncture, Loudon lifted his hat. Kate

turned and looked after the pair. When her eyes once more met Loudon's there was a faint trouble in their black depths.

"Who are they?" she queried.

"Cap'n Burr's daughter an' Pete O'Leary."

"Oh." There was deep meaning in that "oh."

"She lives up yonder a ways. Mis' Mace knows her, I guess."

"How nice! Perhaps I shall meet her. I should like to, really. Tell me, do you know her well?"

"Not very well. Yuh see, I ain't in town such a lot. Say, Kate, did Mis' Mace write an' tell yuh I was up here at the Bend?"

"Yes, I believe she did." Kate's tone was ingenuous. But the quick upward fling of her eyes was not.

"Did yuh tell yore father an' the boys?"

"Why, I don't remember, Tom. I might have. Very possibly I did. Why?"

"I was just a-wonderin'."

"You mean——" gasped Kate, her eyes widening with genuine horror.

At first, misinterpreting the trend of his questioning, she had believed him brazenly fishing. Now she understood the significance underlying his words. She wanted to scream. But half the street was watching them. Underlip caught between her teeth, she sucked in her breath. Piteously her eyes searched Loudon's face.

"Tom!" she breathed. "Tom! You do think I betrayed you after all. Oh, Tom, Tom!"

It was Loudon's turn to be distressed.

"Yo're on the wrong trail, Kate," he soothed. "I know yuh didn't tell Block or the 88 outfit. But if the Bar S boys knowed I was up here it could easy get around. Richie o' the Cross-in-a-box an' Cap'n Burr knowed, too. They might 'a' let it out. I'm sorry I asked yuh if it makes yuh feel that way."

"Oh, I see it now. I must have told. And it was my telling that sent Block up here. Tom, if he had taken you south and—and anything had happened, it—it would have killed me. Life just wouldn't have been worth living any longer."

Was ever mortal man in a similar predicament? Here was a beautiful woman baring her heart to him in broad daylight on a public thoroughfare. Cold prickles raced madly up and down Loudon's spine. What could he say? He had a wild impulse to whirl his horse and gallop after Scotty. Obviously this was the safer course to follow. Weakly he temporized.

"Kate, do yuh know what yo're sayin'?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't I say it? I love you, don't you know that? There, it's out! I suppose I ought to be ashamed of myself, but I'm not. I'm glad."

Throughout the latter part of the conversation Kate had barely spoken above a whisper, but to Loudon it seemed that she fairly shouted. He was positive that all the town had heard. His dismayed eyes slid round. He half-expected to see Mrs. Mace and her neighbours craning their necks with their hands cupped round their ears. But Mrs. Mace was not visible, and the score of people in view were not displaying undue interest. Loudon breathed more easily.

"Yuh—yuh——" he stammered, his face beet-red. "Yuh hadn't ought to 'a' said that."

"Why not?" she demanded, coolly. "It's true."

Her self-possession was extraordinary. She was not even blushing. This was a Kate that Loudon did not know. In the face of her bald assertion he could not tell her that matters had completely changed; that he loved her no longer. No, not that. He realized his disadvantage acutely, and squirmed. Kate looked expectant. He must say something, and quickly, too, or she would propose to him on the spot.

"I—I got to be goin'!" he exclaimed, desperately. "Scotty's waitin' for me. Gug-gug-good-bye."

"Good-bye, Tom," said Kate, with a radiant smile. "I'll see you some other time."

"Some other time!" groaned Loudon, as he galloped down the street. "Some other time! She will, too. An' what'll I do? What'll I do? I don't like her any more. I don't like her a little bit. This is shore one helluva of a fix!"

"What did she do to yuh?" inquired Scotty, when Loudon joined him.

"Do to me! What do you mean?"

"Yuh look like yuh'd just missed being hugged to death by a b'ar. No offence, Tom, but yuh sure do look a heap shivery."

"It's them pickles I had for supper, Scotty. I knowed they'd make me sick."

"They was rich, for a fact."

They loped in silence for a half-hour.

"Scotty," said Loudon, suddenly, "if anybody comes out to the ranch a-lookin' for me, tell 'em I've pulled my freight yuh dunno where."

"Anybody?" Scotty quirked an eyebrow.

"Anybody—man, woman, or child."

"Well, say, look here, Tom!" exclaimed Scotty in alarm. "Yuh don't mean to say that Miss Saltoun girl is a-comin' out to the Flyin' M."

"I dunno. I hope not."

"Which I hope not, too. She's so good-lookin' she scares me, she does. I don't want to go nowheres near her, an' I won't, neither. No, sirree. If she ever comes a-traipsin' out to the ranch yuh can do yore own talkin'."

"Aw, keep yore shirt on. I guess now she won't come."

"I'll bet she's a-aimin' to, or yuh wouldn't 'a' said what yuh did. Yuh can't fool me, Tom. She'll come, an' she'll bring Jim Mace's wife along for a chaperon, an' they'll most likely stay for two meals, an' I'll have to grub in the corral. Great note this is! Druv out o' my own home by a couple o' female women!

"Laugh! It's awful funny! I never could abide Mis' Mace, either. She's always talkin', talkin'. Talk the hide off a cow, an' not half try. How Jim stands her I can't see nohow. If she was my woman I'd feed her wolf-pizen, or take it myself."

"I guess now yuh never was married, was yuh, Scotty?"

"Me married! Well, I guess not! Come mighty close to it once. I must 'a' been crazy or drunk, or somethin'—anyway, when I was a young feller over

east in Macpherson, Kansas, me an' Sue Shimmers had it all fixed for hitchin' up together. Nice girl, Sue was. Good cook, a heap energetic, an' right pretty in the face. The day before the weddin' Sue cuts stick an' elopes with Tug Wilson, the blacksmith.

"I felt bad for mighty nigh a week, but I've been a heap joyous ever since. Yes, sir, Sue developed a lot after marriage. Why, if Tug took so much as one finger of old Jordan Sue'd wallop him with a axe-handle. Poor old Tug used to chew up so many cloves he got dyspepsy. Between the axe-handle an' the dyspepsy Tug had all he could swing to keep alive. I've never stopped bein' grateful to Tug Wilson. He saved my life. Yes, sir, as a rule, females is bad medicine."

"How about Mis' Burr an' her daughter?"

"I said as a general rule. Like I told yuh once before, Mis' Burr an' Dorothy are real ladies, all silk an' several yards wide. A gent can talk to them just like folks. An' Dorothy can have my ranch an' every cayuse on it, includin' my mules, any time she wants. Nothin's too good for that little girl."

"She's shore a winner."

"She's all o' that. Now there's a girl that'll make a ace-high wife. She wouldn't use no axe-handle. She'd understand a gent's failin's, she would, an' she'd break him off 'em so nice an' easy he wouldn't know nothin' about it. Yes, sir, the party that gets Dorothy Burr needn't worry none 'bout bein' happy."

"I guess now there ain't no party real shore-enough fit to make her a husband."

"There ain't. No, sir, yuh can bet there ain't. But she'll marry some no-account tinhorn—they kind always does. Say, why don't you make up to her?"

"Well, I would," said Loudon, gravely, "only yuh see it wouldn't be proper. I ain't a no-account tinhorn."

"You ain't, but O'Leary is."

"It ain't gone as far as that!"

"Yuh never can tell how far anythin's gone with a woman. Yuh never can tell nothin' about her till it happens. She's a heap unexpected, a female is. Now I don't say as Dorothy'd marry yuh, Tom. Yuh may not be her kind o' feller at all. But yo're a sight better'n Pete O'Leary."

"Thanks," said Loudon, dryly.

"Then again," rushed on Scotty, deeply engrossed in his subject, "it ain't no ways necessary for yuh to marry her. All yuh got to do is give O'Leary the run. Chase him off—see? I've been thinkin' some serious o' doin' it myself, but I'd have to beef him, an' that wouldn't suit Dorothy. A lady don't like it none to have her admirers shot up. It only makes her more set to have 'em. But you, Tom, could go about it in a nice, refined way, an' get Dorothy to likin' yuh better'n she does O'Leary, an' there yuh are. No blood's spilt, an' the lady is saved."

"But s'pose she didn't cotton to me for a cent?"

"Yuh got to risk that, o' course. But you can win out over O'Leary, I'll gamble on that."

"But why am I elected? Why me at all?"

"Well, say, yuh'd ought to be ashamed o' yoreself, raisin' objections thisaway. Here I am, tryin' to help out as nice a little girl as ever breathed, an' yuh got to kick. Selfish, I call it. Can't yuh see I'm tryin' to do you a good turn,

too? There's gratitude for yuh! Well, it's like I always said: Old folks is never appreciated, no matter what they do. Yes, sir, I might 'a' saved my breath. Dorothy, she talked just like you do, only worse."

"What—why, you ain't been talkin' about this to Dor—Miss Burr, have yuh?" demanded Loudon in horror.

"Why, shore I did," said Scotty, placidly. "I feel like a father to her, so why not? I didn't say much. I just told her O'Leary was a pup an' a sheepman an' not fit for her to wipe her feet on, an' why didn't she take a shine to some other gent for a change? She says, 'Who, for instance?' An' I says, 'Tom Loudon,' an' that's as far as I got. She goes up in the air like a pony, instanter."

"Which I should say she might. You had yore nerve, ringin' me into it! Ain't yuh got no sense at all?"

"Lots. Yo're the witless one. If yuh had any brains yuh'd take my advice."

"I can't now, even if I wanted to."

"Shore yuh can. She spoke to yuh all right this aff'noon, didn't she?"

"Yes, but——"

"Well, I'd given her my opinion o' things just about twenty minutes before yuh met me at the corral. So, yuh see, she wasn't mad at you. She wasn't really mad at me. I seen the twinkle in her eye all the time she was givin' me fits. Why, look here, Tom, when she says, 'Who, for instance?' I couldn't think o' nobody but you. It was impulse, it was, an' impulses are always right. Wouldn't be impulses if they wasn't."

"So there y'are. Yuh don't have to marry each other if yuh don't want to. Shore not. But yuh'd ought to give each other a whirl anyway. Yuh might hit it

off amazin'. I'm bettin' yuh will, I don't care what either o' yuh say."

Loudon, divided between anger and horrified amazement, was speechless. Scotty Mackenzie was more than astounding. He was hopelessly impossible.

"Well," remarked Loudon, when he was able to speak, "yuh sure are three kings an' an ace when it comes to other people's business. Some day, Scotty, yuh'll go bulgin' into the affairs o' some party who don't understand yore funny little ways, an' he'll hang yore hide on the fence."

"I s'pose likely," said Scotty, glumly. "It shore is a ungrateful world. But," he added, brightening, "yuh'll do what I say, won't yuh, Tom? I tell yuh I know best. I've sort o' cottoned to yuh ever since I found out who yuh was an' all, an' I always did like Dorothy Burr. Here's you, an' there she is. Why, it's Providence, Tom, Providence; an' nobody has a right to fly in the face o' Providence. Yuh won't never have no luck if yuh do. I ask yuh like a friend, Tom—an' I hadn't ought to have to ask yuh, not with such a good-looker as Dorothy—I ask yuh like a friend to go see this little girl, an'——"

"An' prove yo're right," interrupted Loudon.

"Well, yes. Though I know I'm right, an' I tell yuh plain if you two don't hook up for keeps yuh'll be sorry. Yes, sir, yuh will. Now don't say nothin', Tom. Just think it over, an' if yuh want any help come to me."

"Yuh make me sick. Yuh shore do."

"Think it over. Think it over."

"Think nothin' over! I ain't in love with Miss Burr, an' I ain't a-goin' to be. Yuh can gamble on that, old-timer. As a woman-wrangler I'm a good hoss an' cowman, an' hereafter from now on I'm a-stickin' to what I know best."

Loudon relapsed into sulky silence. Yet for the life of him he could not be wholly angry with Scotty Mackenzie. No one could. Scotty was Scotty, and, where another man would have been shot, Scotty went scatheless.

"Slick!" said Scotty, ten minutes after arriving at the Flying M; "Slick, I guess yes. The feller that wrote that letter knowed my writin' better'n I do myself. Don't blame yuh a mite, Doubleday, for bein' fooled. Don't blame yuh a mite.

"I'll fix this trick for good and all. Hereafter I don't write no more letters to yuh, see? Then if our forgin' brother takes his pen in hand again it won't do him no good.... What? No, I'm too sleepy. You go down an' ask Loudon. He was the centre o' curiosity, an' he knows more about that riot at the Bend than I do."

When Doubleday had gone Scotty Mackenzie did not act like a person overcome by sleep. He lit a cigarette, slid down in his chair, and put his feet on the desk.

"Yo're a great man, Scotty," he chuckled. "Yes, sir, I dunno as I ever seen yore like. I didn't know yuh was such a deeplomat. No, sir, I shore didn't."

But Mr. Mackenzie did not realize that Loudon in his statements regarding possible affection for Miss Dorothy Burr meant exactly what he said.

On the corral fence Loudon sat with Telescope Laguerre and related his adventures. The half-breed hearkened sympathetically. Occasionally he removed the cigarette from his lips in order to swear.

"And," said Loudon in conclusion, "I'm goin' south after the little hoss in two or three weeks."

"Queet?"

"Yep."

"I queet, too. I go wit' you."

"What for? No need o' you losin' yore job, too."

"—— de job! I been here long tam—two, t'ree year. I wan' for move along un see w'at happen een de worl'. Een you' beesness, two gun ees better dan only wan. Are you me?"

"Oh, I'm you all right enough. I'll be glad to have yuh with me, Telescope, but——"

"Den dat ees settle'," interrupted Telescope, his eyes glittering in the glow of his cigarette. "Wen you go, I go, un togedder we weel geet de leetle hoss. Ah, my frien', eet ees de luck I have you to go wit'. I been knowin' for week now I mus' go soon."

"Gettin' restless?"

Telescope nodded, his eyes fixed on the far-away line of saw-toothed mountains black against the stars. When he spoke, his voice had altered.

"Tom, de ole tam have come back to me, un w'en de old tam do dat I can not stay. I mus'—— My frien', have you evair love a woman?"

"Once I did."

"Den you weel understan'. Wan tam, fifteen year ago, I have woman. I have odder woman now un den—five, six mabbe, but dey was Enjun un breed. Dees woman she was not Enjun. She was Française, un we was marry un leeve over on de Sweetwatair Rivière near de Medicine Mountain.

"Well, we was happy, she un me, un I was hunt de buffalo for Ole Man

Rantoul. Rantoul she have de post dere on de Sweetwatair. Dere was odder men keel de buffalo for Rantoul, un wan of dese men she see my wife Marie w'en she go wit' me to de post. Dees man she yong man name' Taylor—Pony George dey call heem, 'cause she was all tam bust de pony.

"Well, wan tam I go 'way two—t'ree week, mabbe. I come home een de afternoon. No leetle dog she play 'roun' de log-house. No smoke from de chimeny. No Marie she stan' at de door.

"I go queeck to de house. Leetle dog lie dead in front de door. Door shut. I go een. I fin' Marie—I fin' Marie!" A wild, fierce note crept into the low monotone. "I fin' my Marie on de floor. She varree weak, but she can talk leetle. She tell me w'at happen. Two day before I geet back Pony George come to de log-house. Pony George she try for mak' de love to my wife. Marie she go for rifle. Pony George geet de rifle firs'. Dog try for bite heem. Pony George keeck de dog out un shoot heem.

"My wife she grab de knife. She fight. But Pony George strong man. Get cut leetle, but not bad. He—he—well, I can do nothin' for my wife. Nex' day she die.

"I ride to de post of Ole Man Rantoul. Pony George not dere. Rantoul say Pony George go 'way t'ree day before—not come back. I go after Pony George. I not fin' heem. I go sout' to de Nation. I go to Dakota. I go all de way from Canaday to de Rio Grande. Five year I heet de trail, but I never fin' Pony George.

"Now I work on de ranch, but always I can not stay. W'en de ole tam come back I mus' go. Well, my frien', some day I fin' Pony George, un w'en dat day come I weel hang hees hair on my bridle. Ah, I weel keel dat man—keel heem slow, so she weel have plenty tam for see hees deat' before she die."

Abruptly Telescope Laguerre slipped down to the ground and vanished in

the darkness.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DANCE

A week later, while the outfit was eating supper, Swing Tunstall burst yelling into the bunkhouse. He flung his hat on the floor and thudded into his seat.

"Dance!" he whooped, hammering on the table with his knife and fork. "Dance! Big dance! Down at the Bend. Next week. Saturday night. They're a-goin' to have it in the hotel. Hooray!"

"Pass him the beans, quick!" shouted Doubleday. "Get him to eatin' before the roof pulls loose. When djuh say it was, Swing?"

"Saturday night, next week. Butter, butter, who's got the grease? An' the canned cow. That's the stuffy. Say, that's gonna be a reg'lar elephant of a dance, that is. They's a new girl in town—I seen her. She's stayin' at Mis' Mace's, an' she's as pretty as a royal flush. Miss Kate Saltoun her name is, an' she's from the Bar S down on the Lazy River."

"We'll all go," announced Doubleday.

"You bet we will," said Giant Morton. "Swing, where's that necktie o' mine yuh borried last week?—yes, the red one. You know the one I mean. You wanted it so's yuh could make a hit with that hash-slinger at the hotel. Can't fool me, yuh old tarrapin. Where is it?"

"I'll git it for yuh later," gurgled Tunstall, his mouth full. "I don't guess I lost it. Ca'm yoreself. Giant, ca'm yoreself. What's a necktie?"

"Don't guess yuh've lost it! Well, I like that! I paid a dollar six bits for that necktie down at the Chicago Store. There ain't another like it in the territory. Ragsdale said so himself. You gimme that necktie or I'll pizen yore bronc."

"Goin' to de Bend to-morrow?" inquired Telescope of Loudon, when they were riding the range the day before the dance.

"I don't guess so. I don't feel just like dancin'. Don't enjoy it like I used to. Gettin' old, I guess."

"I'm goin', but not to de dance een de hotel. I'm goin' to de dance hall, un I weel play de pokair, too. Ah, I weel have de good tam. W'y not you come wit' me?"

"Maybe I will. See how I feel to-morrow. I'm goin' to pull my freight next week sometime. Got an engagement in Farewell in five weeks or so, an' I want to find the little hoss before then."

"We'll fin' heem, you un me. I am ready any tam you say."

That evening Scotty Mackenzie halted Loudon on his way to the bunkhouse.

"Goin' to the dance, Tom?" queried Scotty.

"I'm goin' to the Bend, but no dance in mine."

"Say, you make me sick! Dorothy'll be at that dance, an' yuh'll hurt her feelin's if yuh don't go. She'll think yuh don't want to dance with her or somethin'."

"I can't help what she thinks, can I? I don't have to go to that dance."

"Yuh don't have to, o' course not, but yuh got to think o' other folks. Why, only day before yesterday when I was at the Bend she was askin' after yuh, an' I told her yuh'd shore see her at the dance."

"Yuh did, did yuh? All right, I'm goin' to the Bend to-morrow with the rest o' the boys, but I've got a little poker game in mind. The dance is barred, Scotty."

"Oh, all right. Have it yore own way. I'm only tryin' to help yuh out. Say, Tom, y'ain't still thinkin' o' goin' away, are yuh? Yuh can have that bay like I said, an' another pony, too, if yuh like. Yuh see, I want yuh to stay here at the Flyin' M. I'm hard up for men now, an'——"

"Say," interrupted Loudon, on whom a great light had suddenly dawned, "say, is that why yo're so anxious to have me go see Miss Burr, huh? So I'll fall in love with her, an' stay here, huh? Is that it?"

"Why, Tom, o' course not," denied Scotty, indignantly. "I wasn't thinkin' o' such a thing."

"I ain't none so shore, Scotty. It sounds just like yuh."

"Well, it ain't like me nohow. Yo're wrong, Tom, all wrong as usual. Suit yoreself about the dance, suit yoreself. I got nothin' more to say. Here's a letter come for yuh to-day."

Scotty handed the letter to Loudon and departed, offended dignity in the set of his shoulders. The pose was assumed, and Loudon knew it. When next they met, Scotty would reopen his favourite issue as usual.

"Now how did he guess it?" wondered Scotty, gloomily, kicking the pebbles on his way to the office. "How did he guess the truth, I'd like to know? An' he's

goin' away after all! The best man in the outfit! I got to do somethin', that's a cinch."

Poor Scotty! So must Machiavelli have felt when one of his dearest schemes was upset by some clever Florentine.

Left alone, Loudon tore open the letter. It ran:

Dere frend lowden Id uv rote sooner only Ive been sick fele bad stil sene things fur a weak but I can rite now anyhow. Wel, after you an Mackenzy lef in the afternoon Block an the uther fellar rid in. I noed the uther fellar what stole yore hoss cause he looked just like you sed hed look but the hoss he was ridin wasnt yore hoss he was sumbuddy elses hoss I dunno whoos yet. Wen I sene Block an him I had it all fixed up with the marshul to arest the uther fellar but the hoss wasnt youm it was a bawlfaced pinto so the marshal couldnt arest him without a warrant. Block an him rode away on the trail to Farewel. Block tride to find out bout you an Scotty and that drummer told him how you an Scotty had rid back to the Bend. Wel, I knoked the drummer down an stepped on his face an throwed him into the waterin-troff an kiked him three times roun the house. I'm lookin out for yore hoss wen I see him I'll let you noe hopin this fines you like it leeves me yore frien Dave Sinclair.

Dave Sinclair was the landlord of the hotel in Rocket. Loudon re-read the letter and swore whole-heartedly. To miss Rufe Cutting by a few hours! Riding a bald-faced pinto, was he? What had he done with Ranger? Loudon went to the bunkhouse in a brown study.

Scotty alone of the Flying M outfit elected to remain at the ranch the night of the dance. All the others raced into town before sunset. At the ford of the Dogsoldier they met the Seven Lazy Seven boys from beyond the Government Hills. Doubleday greeted Dawson, the Seven Lazy Seven foreman, with a long wolf-howl. Whooping and yelling, the riders squattered across the creek and

poured into Paradise Bend, the wild-eyed ponies rocketing like jack-rabbits.

It was an expansive evening in the Bend. The corrals were full of ponies bearing on their hips the brands of the Two Bar, TVU, Double Diamond K, Wagonwheel, and half-a-dozen other ranches. In the hotel corral where the Flying M outfit unsaddled, Loudon saw horses belonging to the Barred O and the T up-and-down, which ranches were a score of miles southwest of Rocket.

The men of the various outfits circulated rapidly from saloon to saloon. By midnight many would be drunk. But there were several hours before midnight.

Loudon and Telescope left their comrades lining up at the hotel bar and gravitated to the Three Card. Here they found Jim Mace and Marshal Dan Smith, who hailed them both with marked cordiality. They drank together, and Jim Mace suggested a little game. Telescope's eyes began to gleam, and Loudon perceived that his friend was lost to him for that evening. Loudon was in no mood for poker, so the three prevailed upon a gentleman from the Barred O to make a fourth, and retired to an empty table in the corner of the room. Loudon remained standing at the bar, regarding the rows of bottles on the shelves and gloomily pondering the exigencies of life.

"Cards no good," he reflected. "Dancin' the same. Nothin' goes good no more. Even lickie don't taste like it used to. Guess I better have another an' make shore."

He had another. After a time he felt better, and decided to look in at the dance. From the open windows of the hotel issued sounds of revelry—the shuffle and pound of boot-leather and the inspiring strains of the "Arkansaw Traveller" played by two fiddlers sitting on a table.

Loudon, his hat pulled forward, leaned his chest against a windowsill and peered over the fat shoulders of Mrs. Ragsdale and a freighter's wife, who were enjoying the festivities with such zest that the chairs they sat in were on the

point of collapse.

Kate Saltoun and Dorothy Burr were dancing in the same set. Dawson of the Seven Lazy Seven was Kate's partner, and Pete O'Leary swung Dorothy. Loudon was struck by the fact that Kate was not smiling. Her movements, likewise, lacked a certain springiness which was one of her salient characteristics.

"Somebody must 'a' stepped on her toe," decided Loudon. "Bet she don't dance with Dawson again."

She didn't. Marshal Dan Smith, perspiring and painfully conscious of a hard shirt and a forest-fire necktie, was her next partner. Loudon wondered why he had not hitherto perceived the marked resemblance between Dan Smith and a jack-rabbit. He found himself speculating on Kate's reasons for breaking her engagement. As he looked at Kate, her extreme beauty, contrasted with that of the other girls in the room, was striking.

"Kate is certainly a heap good-looker."

Mrs. Ragsdale and the freighter's wife turned sharply and stared open-mouthed at Loudon. Not till then did that young man realize that he had voiced aloud his estimate of Kate Saltoun. He fled hurriedly, his skin prickling all over, and dived into the kindly darkness behind the corral.

"Now I have done it!" he mourned, bitterly, squatting on the ground. "Those old tongue-wagglers heard me, an' they'll tell her. I seen it in their faces. What'll she think o' me. Luck! There ain't no such thing. If all the rocks was tobacco an' all the grass cigarette-papers, I'd be there without a match."

From the hotel drifted thinly the lilt of "Buffalo Girls." A bevy of convivial beings in the street were bawling "The Days of Forty-Nine." Across the discordant riot of sound cut the sudden clipping drum of a galloping pony.

"Injuns!" shouted a voice. "Injuns!"

Loudon sprang up and dashed around the corral. In the flare of light from the hotel doorway a dusty man sat a dustier horse. The man was hatless, his dark hair was matted with dirt and sweat, and his eyes were wild.

"Injuns!" cried the dusty man. "Injuns on Hatchet Creek! I want help!"

In thirty seconds there was a fair-sized group surrounding the horseman. In a minute and a half the group had become a crowd. Up bustled Marshal Dan Smith followed by Telescope Laguerre, Jim Mace, and the gentleman from the Barred O. Loudon, first on the scene, was jammed against the rider's stirrup.

"Gents," the dusty man was saying, "my three pardners are a-standin' off the war-whoops in a shack over by Johnson's Peak on Hatchet Creek. There's more'n a hundred o' them feather-dusters an' they'll have my pardners' hair if yuh don't come a-runnin'."

"Johnson's Peak!" exclaimed Jim Mace. "That's fifty mile away!"

"All o' that," assented the dusty man, wearily, without turning his head. "For God's sake, gents, do somethin', can't yuh? An' gimme a fresh hoss."

Already three quarters of his hearers were streaking homeward for their Winchesters and saddles. The men from the ranches were the last to move away. No need for them to hurry. The few who had brought rifles to the Bend had left them with their saddles at the various corrals.

Within half an hour the dusty man, mounted on one of the marshal's ponies, was heading a posse composed of every available man in Paradise Bend. Only the marshal and two men who were sick remained behind.

The posse, a column of black and bobbing shapes in the starlight, loped

steadily. Many of the ponies had travelled twenty and thirty miles that day, and there were fifty more to pass under their hoofs. The average cow-horse is a hardy brute and can perform miracles of work when called upon. Secure in this knowledge, the riders fully intended to ride out their mounts to the last gasp.

Doubleday and Dawson rode stirrup to stirrup with the man from Hatchet Creek. Tailing these three were Loudon, Telescope Laguerre, the Barred O puncher, and Jim Mace.

"How'd yuh get through, stranger?" queried Doubleday.

"I dunno," said the dusty man. "I jus' did. I had to. It was make or break. Them war-whoops chased me quite a spell."

"You was lucky," observed Dawson.

"Yo're whistlin' I was. We was all lucky when it comes to that. We was at the shack eatin' dinner when they jumped us. S'pose we'd been down the creek where our claims is at, huh?"

"Yo're hair would shore be decoratin' a Injun bridle," admitted Dawson. "But I didn't know there was gold on Hatchet Creek."

"We got four claims," said the dusty man, shortly.

"Gettin' much?"

"We ain't millionaires yet."

"No, I guess not," whispered Jim Mace to Loudon. "I'll gamble that gravel don't assay a nickel a ton. Been all through them hills, I have. I know Hatchet like I do the Dogsoldier. There's no gold there."

"This prospector party says different," muttered Loudon.

"You'll see," sniffed Jim Mace. "Gold on the Hatchet! He's loco! You'll see."

"It's a good thing, stranger," Dawson was saying, "yuh hit the Bend when we was havin' a dance. There ain't more'n fifty or sixty men a-livin' reg'lar in the place."

"Well," said the dusty man, "I did think o' headin' for Fort Yardley. But them feather-dusters was in between, so it was the Bend or nothin'. Oh, I knowed I was takin' chances, what with no ranches in between, an' the little hoss liable to go lame on me an' all. It's a long ride, gents. Say, seems like we're a-crawlin' an' a-crawlin' an' gittin' nowheres."

"We're a-gittin' some'ers right lively," corrected Doubleday. "If yore pardners have plenty o' cartridges they'll be a-holdin' out all right when we git there. Don't yuh fret none, stranger."

"I ain't—only—only—well, gents, there was a roarin' passel o' them Injuns."

"Shore, shore, but we'll strike the Hatchet near Tepee Mountain 'round sun-up, an' from Tepee to Johnson's Peak ain't more'n twenty miles—less, if anythin'."

In the keen light of dawn the pyramidal bulk of Tepee Mountain loomed not six miles ahead. When the sun rose the posse had skirted its base and was riding along the bank of Hatchet Creek.

And now the dusty man began to display signs of a great nervousness. He fidgeted in his saddle, examined and tried the lever action of his rifle, and gloomily repeated many times that he believed the posse would arrive too late. As they passed above a cut bank, the dusty man, riding near the edge, dropped his Winchester. The piece slipped over the edge and splashed into the water fifteen feet below. Swearing, the dusty man rode back to where the bank was

lower and dismounted.

"Don't wait for me!" he shouted, wading upstream. "I'll catch up."

The posse rode onward. Some of the horses were staggering with fatigue. All of them were jaded and dripping with sweat. Suddenly Telescope Laguerre rode from the line and vaulted out of his saddle. He landed on his hands and knees and remained in that position, his head thrust forward, his eyes blazing with excitement.

"What's eatin' Telescope?" demanded Doubleday.

"Tom! Tom! Come here! Queeck!" shouted the half-breed.

"Say!" snorted Doubleday. "What is this, anyway? Do you fellers know there's some Injuns up here a piece?"

But Loudon had joined Telescope and neither of the two gave the slightest heed to the outraged Doubleday.

"Look!" exclaimed Laguerre, as the tail of the column passed. "Look! Yore hoss she come out o' de wood here! See!"

"My hoss! You mean Ranger?" Loudon stared, thunderstruck, at the hoofmarks of two horses.

"Yore hoss, Ranger! Ah, once I see de hoss-track I know heem again! Las' tam you shoe de hoss you shoe heem all 'roun'. Dees ees hees track. No man was ride heem. She was de led hoss. Feller ride odder hoss. See! Dey come out de wood un go dees way."

Telescope waved a hand over the way they had come.

"How old are the tracks?" queried Loudon, breathlessly.

"Mabbeso four day. No use follow dem. We lose 'em on de hard groun'."

"Telescope, I got an idea somethin's wrong. I dunno what, but these tracks comin' in here thisaway, an' that fellah with the Injun story—I guess now they hitch somehow. I tell yuh I dunno how"—as Telescope opened his mouth to speak—"an' I may be wrong, but I'm goin' back after that party from Hatchet Creek."

Loudon swung into his saddle and spurred his mount. The animal responded gamely, but a pitifully slow lope was the best speed it could shake out of its weary legs. Laguerre's pony was in worse case. The short halt had stiffened his knees slightly and he stumbled at every other step. The two men lolloped jerkily downstream. Rounding a sharp bend, they came in sight of the cut bank where the dusty stranger had dropped his gun. Neither man nor horse was visible.

"By gar!" exclaimed Laguerre. "By gar!"

Just then his horse stumbled for the last time, fell on its knees, and rolled over on its side. Laguerre flung himself clear and bounced to his feet. The pony struggled up, but Laguerre did not remount. He dragged his rifle from the scabbard and ran forward on foot to rejoin his comrade. Loudon was leaning over the saddlehorn examining the spot where the dusty man had left his horse.

"Ground's kind o' hard," said Loudon, "but it looks like he'd headed for that flat."

"He go dere all right!" exclaimed Laguerre, excitedly. "Come on, Tom!"

Running awkwardly, for cow-country boots are not fashioned for rapid locomotion, Laguerre led the way toward a broad meadow fifty yards away. Once in the meadow the trail was easier to follow. The meadow was at least a quarter-mile wide, and woods bordered it on three sides.

The trail led straight across it, and on into the forest. The trees did not grow thickly, and Laguerre, his eyes on the ground, threaded his way in and out between the trunks at an ankle-straining trot. He had excellent wind, had Telescope Laguerre. Loudon was forced to employ spurs and quirt in order to keep up with him.

Four hundred yards deep in the forest they saw ahead an opening in the trees. A minute later they charged into a large meadow. In the middle of the meadow was an ancient shack, doorless, the roof fallen in, flanked by a corral which gave evidence of having been recently repaired.

"Somethin' movin' in that corral," said Loudon, and dragged out his gun.

Then, in half a watch-tick, a man on a chestnut horse flashed across the open space between the corral and the shack. Loudon and Laguerre swung to one side, but the man did not immediately reappear on the other side of the shack. A few steps farther and they saw him. He was riding directly away from them and was within fifty yards of the forest.

The fugitive was a long two hundred yards distant, but they recognized his back without any difficulty. He was the dusty man from Hatchet Creek, and his horse was Loudon's Ranger.

"Look out for the hoss!" cried Loudon, as Laguerre flung up his rifle.

The rifle cracked spitefully once and again. The rider, with a derisive yell, disappeared among the trees. Laguerre dropped his rifle-butt, and began to utter strange and awful oaths in a polyglot of French and English. Loudon sheathed his six-shooter, kicked his feet out of the stirrups, and calmly rolled a cigarette.

"No use a-cussin', Telescope," he observed. "He's done gone."

Pht-bang! a rifle spat from the distant wood. Loudon's horse gave a convulsive sidewise leap, dropped with a groan and rolled half over, pinning Loudon to the ground. Laguerre, flat on his stomach, was firing at the thinning smoke-cloud under the trees. But there were no more shots from the forest.

"Say, Telescope," called Loudon, "when yuh get plumb through would yuh mind pullin' this cayuse off o' my legs?"

Still cursing, Laguerre levered up the body of the dead pony with the barrel of his rifle, and Loudon wriggled free. He endeavoured to stand on his feet, but sat down abruptly.

"What's de matter?" inquired Laguerre. "Bullet hit you, too?"

"No," replied Loudon, gingerly feeling his right ankle, "my foot feels funny."

"Mabbeso de leg broke," suggested Laguerre. "Mabbeso dat feller she try anudder shot. Better you be behin' de log-house."

He picked up his rifle, helped Loudon to stand erect, and passed an arm around his waist. So, hopping on one foot, Loudon reached the shelter of the shack wall. Laguerre eased him to the ground and skipped nimbly down past the corral.

"Mabbeso I geet dat feller," he called over his shoulder. "Be back soon."

Laguerre returned in five minutes.

"Dat feller she geet clean away," he said, disconsolately. "Nevair touch heem. By gar! Eef I not have run so hard, I shoot better. Geet heem shore den."

"Pull my boot off, will yuh, Telescope?" requested Loudon, extending his leg.

Laguerre pulled. Loudon gritted his teeth. The pain was sharp, nauseating.

"It's no good," said Loudon, thickly. "Got to cut the boot off."

Laguerre whipped out his knife and slit the leather from instep to top. Gently he removed the boot. Loudon peeled off the sock. The ankle was badly swollen.

"Wiggle de toe," commanded Laguerre.

Loudon wriggled his toes and was able to move his ankle slightly, not without a deal of pain, however. He noted with thankfulness that the pain was continuous, and not stabbing as it is when a bone is involved.

"Bone's all right," he observed, cheerfully. "Only a sprain, I guess."

"Dat ees good," said Laguerre. "I geet de odder hoss."

He strode to the dead horse and stripped off saddle and bridle.

"Say," said Loudon, "I can do that while yo're goin' for the hoss. We'll have to leave 'em here, anyway."

"No, not dees treep, my frien'," Laguerre said, carrying saddle and bridle toward the corral. "Dat feller she leave Dan Smeet's hoss on de odder side de corral. Hoss she pretty tire', but she carry you all right."

On his hands and knees Loudon crawled to the corral and peered between the bars. The corral was a large one. Till recently the grass had grown thickly within it. But that grass had been nibbled to the roots, and the marks of shod hoofs were everywhere. From a spring near the shack a small stream ran through one corner of the corral.

"Slick," said Loudon. "Couldn't have been better, could it?"

"No eet could not," agreed Laguerre. "She feex up dees ole corral fine. Dat Ranger hoss she been here mabbeso four day. She have de grass. She have de watair. She all ready fresh w'en dat feller she come. Un how can we follow wit' de tire' pony? Oh, she have eet figure all out. For w'y? Can you tell me dat, Tom?"

"I dunno. It shore is too many for me."

He painfully made his way to the spring, drank, and then soaked his sprained ankle in the icy stream till Laguerre came to help him into the saddle.

On the bank of the Hatchet they found Laguerre's pony lying where it had fallen. The animal was not dead. It was sound asleep.

"Hear dat?" said Laguerre, late in the afternoon.

Loudon listened. From afar off came a buzzing murmur. It grew louder and louder.

"The boys are some het up," observed Loudon.

The posse straggled into view. The boys were "het up." They were all talking

at once. Evidently they had been talking for some time, and they were full of their subject. At sight of Loudon and his bootless leg the clamour stilled.

"Hit bad, Tom?" called Doubleday.

"Hoss fell on me," explained Loudon. "Yuh don't have to say nothin', Doubleday," he added, as the foreman dismounted beside him. "I know just what happened."

"Oh, yuh do, do yuh?" snorted Doubleday, wrathfully. "I might 'a' knowed there was somethin' up when that gent an' you fellers didn't catch up. An' us ridin' our heads off from hell to breakfast! Why, we'd be combin' this country yet only we met some o' the cavalry from Fort Yardley an' they said there ain't been an Injun off the reservation for a month. They shore give us the laugh.——! That's his hoss! Did yuh get him?"

"We did not. The fellah got away nice as yuh please on my hoss Ranger——yep, the hoss Rufe Cutting stole in the Bend. Gimme the makin's, somebody, an' I'll tell yuh what happened."

CHAPTER XIV

A DETERMINED WOMAN

A long, ragged line of dirty, tired men, and sweat-caked, drooping-headed horses, the posse rode into Paradise Bend in the afternoon of the following day. The men were quiet. Silently they dispersed to the various corrals. Loudon, his

right leg dangling free, had suffered increasingly during the long ride. By the time the Bend was reached the pain in his ankle was torturing. At the hotel corral Laguerre and Doubleday helped him to dismount.

"Yuh got to go to bed awhile, Tom," pronounced Doubleday. "Grab my shoulder."

"Where was you thinkin' o' takin' him?" demanded the exceedingly cross voice of Mrs. Burr.

"The hotel, ma'am," replied Doubleday, taking off his hat.

Mrs. Burr marched forward and halted in front of the trio. She stuck her arms akimbo and glared at Doubleday.

"The hotel!" she snapped. "The hotel! An' my house close by! What's the matter with you, John Doubleday? My land, it's a good thing I seen you three a-comin' in here. I just knowed yuh was aimin' to put him in the hotel. Yuh'll do nothin' o' the kind. Yuh hear me! I ain't goin' to have no friend o' mine with a game leg a-roostin' in this hotel. The beds are bad, an' the grub's worse. What's the matter, Tom? Shot?"

"It's only a sprain, ma'am," said Loudon. "An' I guess if yuh don't mind, I'll go to the hotel. I couldn't think o' troublin' yuh, ma'am. Thank yuh a lot, but I couldn't, honest."

"Oh, yuh couldn't, couldn't yuh? My land, ain't yuh uppity all of a sudden? Yuh don't know what yo're talkin' about. Men never do nohow an' a sick man don't, special. Yo're a-comin' to my house, an' I'm a-goin' to put yuh to bed an' cure that sprained ankle. Yuh can just bet I am. John Doubleday, you h'ist him aboard that pony right away quick an' fetch him round instanter. If he ain't outside my door in five minutes I'll come back an' know the reason why. Hurry now. I'm goin' ahead an' get some hot water ready."

Twenty minutes later Loudon was sitting in the Burr kitchen. He was smoking a cigarette and soaking his sprained ankle in a bucket of hot water. At the kitchen table stood Mrs. Burr shaking up a bottle of horse liniment.

"What's this John Doubleday tells me about yore ride no'th bein' a joke?" asked Mrs. Burr.

"I dunno no more'n Doubleday," replied Loudon. "It's all beyond me."

"It's shore a heap funny. No feather-dusters, no miner folks a-standin' 'em off, an' that gent who brought the news runnin' off thataway an' shootin' at yuh an' all. It must mean somethin', though. A feller wouldn't do all that just for a real joke. It's too much."

"I wish I knew what it meant, ma'am."

"Well, it's a queer world, full o' queer folks an' queerer doin's," observed the lady, holding the bottle against the light. "Anyhow, this here liniment will fix yuh up fine as frog's hair. Now yuh must just lift yore foot out an' I'll dry it. Shut up! Who's running this, I'd like to know? Land sakes, why shouldn't I dry yore ankle? Shut up, I tell yuh.

"My fathers, Tom, you men make me plumb tired! Idjits, the lot o' yuh. No more sense than so many fool hens. What yuh all need is wives to think for yuh, tell yuh what to do, an' all that. There now, it's dry. Where's that cloth? Hold the foot still while I wrap it 'round. Now this liniment's a-goin' to burn. But the burnin's healin'. The harder it burns the quicker yuh'll get well. Shore!

"As I was sayin', Tom, yuh'd ought to get married. Do yuh good. Make yuh steadier—give yuh a new interest in life, an' all that. Ever think of it, Tom?"

Mrs. Burr rose to her feet and beamed down upon Loudon. That young man was beginning to feel strangely weak. First Scotty, and now Mrs. Burr!

What was the matter with everybody? Scotty, of course, was an eccentric. But for Mrs. Burr brazenly to hurl her daughter at his head was incomprehensible. Loudon, red to the ears, mustered a weak smile.

"I dunno, ma'am," he gulped, uncomfortably. "I—I hadn't thought of it, I guess."

"Well, yuh'd ought to think of it. An' if yuh know what's best for yuh, yuh will think of it—hard. I tell yuh flat, Tom, a single man ain't no-account. He don't gather no moss, but he does collect bad habits. Now a wife she stops all this rattlin' round a-diggin' up what St. Peter will ask yuh questions about. Yessir, a good wife keeps yuh up to the bit an' a-headin' the right way."

Nervously Loudon began to roll another cigarette. He hoped that Mrs. Burr had finished. His hope was vain.

"Well, now, Tom, ain't I right?" she demanded.

"Shore, ma'am, shore, plumb right," Loudon hastened to assure her.

"Course I am. I knowed yuh'd see it that way. Why don't yuh do it?"

"Do it?"

"Yuh know perfectly well what I mean. Ask a girl to marry yuh."

"Any girl?"

"Not just any girl. If yuh was to ask me I could tell yuh who right quick. But I suppose that wouldn't do."

Loudon was devoutly thankful that the lady possessed some sense of propriety.

"We-e-ell, ma'am," he said, slowly, "no girl would have me."

"Did yuh ever ask one?" This with a shrewd cock of the eyebrow.

"I did once."

"An' she give yuh the mitten, huh? More fool she. Listen to me: when a hoss bucks yuh off, what do yuh do? Give up, or climb aboard again?"

"That's different."

"Tain't a bit different. Girl or hoss, a man shouldn't ever give up. Y'asked a girl once, didn't yuh? Yuh said yuh did. Well, ask her again. Land sakes alive, give her a chance to change her mind!"

Good heavens! Did Mrs. Burr mean Kate Saltoun? Impossible. But was it impossible? Of late, the seemingly impossible had had an uncanny habit of coming to pass. Loudon shivered. He was quite positive that he did not love Kate. The longer he considered the matter the more fully convinced he became that he did not wish to marry any one. Which was natural. Bid a man fall in love with a girl and he will at once begin to find fault with her.

"She—she wouldn't have me," dissembled Loudon. "It's no use talkin', ma'am, I'm what the fellah in the book calls a shore-enough blighted being. It makes me feel terrible, ma'am, but yuh can't do nothin'. Nobody can. I just got to bear it, I guess."

He sighed enormously, but there was a twinkle in the gray eyes.

"Yo're laughin'!" exclaimed Mrs. Burr, severely. "I'd like to shake yuh, I would. It ain't for nothin' that man an' mule begin with the same letter. Stubborn! My land o' livin', a girl's feelin's ain't nothin' to yuh! What do you care, yuh great big good-for-nothin' lummo!"

"Now, ma'am," chided Loudon, grinning, "yo're gettin' real excited."

"Who wouldn't? Here I am——"

"Say," interrupted Loudon, "when it comes to that, here I am gettin' fifty-five dollars a month. However can I get married, even if anybody'd have me, with silk dresses at five dollars a yard?"

"Silk dresses! What d'yuh mean by that?"

"Why, ma'am, I wouldn't let my wife wear nothin' but silk dresses mornin', noon, an' night. Nothin' would be too good for my wife. So yuh see how it is. I dassent think o' marriage."

Words failed Mrs. Burr. It was probably the first time that they had failed her. She gasped, gasped again, then stamped to the stove and furiously rattled the frying-pan.

"Well," she suddenly remarked, "wherever can that girl o' mine be? Gallivantin' 'round with that O'Leary feller just when I want her to go to the store. Now look here, Tom, you set right still till I come back, do yuh hear? No projeckin' 'round on that ankle. I'll get Ben to put yuh to bed after supper."

"He needn't bother," said Loudon, hastily. "I can get into bed my own self. I ain't a invalid."

"Yo're just what I say yuh are. If yuh make any fuss I'll put yuh to bed myself. So you watch out."

The masterful lady departed. Loudon, undisturbed by her threat, gazed after her with admiration.

"She's a whizzer," he said under his breath. "Got a heart like all outdoors."

But that ankle ain't as bad as she makes out. Bet I can hop to the door an' back just as easy."

So, because he had been forbidden to budge, Loudon hoisted himself out of the chair, balanced on one leg, and hopped across the room. Holding himself upright by the door-jambs he peered out cautiously. He wished to assure himself that Mrs. Burr was well on her way to the store before proceeding farther on his travels around the kitchen.

Mrs. Burr was not in sight. Surely she could not have reached the corner so soon. Vaguely disturbed, Loudon kept one eye cocked down the street. His vigilance was rewarded by the emergence from the Mace doorway of both Mrs. Burr and Kate Saltoun. Mrs. Burr went on toward Main Street. Kate turned in his direction.

"Good Lord!" gurgled Loudon, despairingly. "She's a-comin' here!"

In a panic he turned, slipped, overbalanced, and his whole weight ground down hard on his sprained ankle. The most excruciating pain shot through his whole being. Then he toppled down in a dead faint.

When he recovered consciousness Kate's arm was around his shoulders, and Kate's voice was saying, "Drink this." Through a mist he saw Kate's face and her dark eyes with a pucker of worry between them.

"Drink this," repeated Kate, and Loudon drank from the glass she held to his lips.

The whisky cleared away the mist and injected new life into his veins. Ashamed of his weakness, he muttered hasty thanks, and essayed to rise.

"Don't move!" Kate commanded, sharply. "Hold still till I pull that chair over here."

"I can get up all right, Kate. I ain't hurt."

"No, of course not. You've just shown how much you aren't hurt. Do as I say."

Kate pulled the chair toward her and was helping Loudon into it when Mrs Burr entered. That she had gone to the store was doubtful. At least, she was empty-handed.

"My land!" exclaimed Mrs. Burr, running to Kate's assistance. "What's the matter? Tom, did yuh get up after I told yuh not to?"

Loudon mumbled unintelligibly.

"I found him in a dead faint on the floor," was the illumining remark of Kate.

"Oh, yuh did, did yuh? I might 'a' knowed it! Can't do nothin' yo're told, can yuh, Tom? I'll bet yuh twisted that ankle again! My fathers, yuh make me tired! Bet yuh it's all swelled up now worse'n ever. Lemme look."

Expertly Mrs. Burr stripped the wrappings from Loudon's ankle.

"Thought so!" she grunted, and took the dishpan from its hook.

"Is it very bad?" queried Kate.

"Not near so bad as he's tryin' to make it with his hoppin' 'round. Land alive! He'll be lucky if it ain't lame the rest of his life. Now, Tom, I'm goin' to use hotter water'n I did before. Yuh deserve to have that foot good an' scalded, yuh do. I'll get the swellin' down, too, if I have to parboil yuh. Don't yuh make no mistake about that. Say, I don't see how steppin' on this here could 'a' made yuh faint, unless—— Say, Tom, when did yuh eat last?"

"Why, ma'am, I don't—well, I guess it was yesterday some time."

Kate uttered a soft exclamation.

"Yesterday some time!" cried Mrs. Burr, hurrying to the stove. "Yesterday mornin' too, I'll bet. I might 'a' knowed it. You fellers didn't take much grub with yuh when yuh went north. An' I never thought to ask when yuh et last. A sprained ankle, a fifty-mile ride, an' nothin' to eat on top of it. No wonder yuh fainted. Yuh poor feller. An' here I been a-callin' yuh all kinds o' names. We won't wait for Dorothy. I'll have somethin' to eat for yuh in a minute."

"No hurry, ma'am," remarked Loudon. "I ain't a bit hungry."

"Kate," said Mrs. Burr, paying him no attention, "cut some bread, will yuh, an' start feedin' him. The butter's yonder."

Fifteen minutes later Loudon was sitting at the table devouring steak and potatoes. He was hungry. With great satisfaction Mrs. Burr watched him tuck away the food.

"There," she announced, filling his coffee cup for the second time, "I guess that'll hold yuh for awhile. I'll just set the coffeepot back on the stove an' Kate can give yuh some more when yuh want it. I'm goin' down street a minute."

When Mrs. Burr had gone Kate sat down opposite Loudon and locked her fingers under her chin. Loudon steadfastly kept his eyes glued to his plate. Confound the girl! Why must she pursue him in this brazen fashion? Couldn't she realize—but apparently she realized nothing save the importance of her own desires. Man-like, Loudon hardened his heart. Curiously enough, the strictly impersonal tone of Kate's opening remark gave him a distinct feeling of annoyance.

"Isn't Mrs. Burr great?" said Kate.

"Shore," mumbled Loudon.

"And Dorothy, too. I like her an awful lot. She came over to Lil's this morning, and we sewed and gossiped, and had a perfectly lovely time. She—Dorothy, I mean—showed me a new stitch—but, of course, you aren't interested in embroidery. Tell me, how do you like the new job?"

"All right."

"I'm glad. Is Mr. Mackenzie a good boss?"

"Fine. Couldn't beat him—that is—er—yore dad always treated me white."

"I know," nodded Kate, her black eyes twinkling. "Don't apologize. I quarrel with Dad myself sometimes. Tom," she added, her expression sobering, "have you had any news from Farewell lately?"

"Ain't heard a word since I left. Why?"

"I received a letter from Dad to-day. He says there's a warrant for rustling out for you."

"That's good hearin'," said Loudon, cheerfully. "I'm one popular jigger in the Lazy River country. They just can't get along without me, can they?"

"Apparently not. Dad told me to tell you. Listen, it isn't generally known in Farewell or anywhere else in Fort Creek County, for that matter, that a warrant is out for you. It was issued by Judge Allison in Marysville. Block's keeping it as dark as possible."

"Goin' to spring it on me when I ain't lookin', I suppose. He won't try fetchin' no warrant up here, that's a cinch."

"Hardly. I always hated that man."

"I never liked him a whole lot, neither. Say, how did yore dad hear about that warrant?"

"He didn't say, but I imagine somebody in Marysville wrote him. He has friends there, you know."

"I didn't know, but I'm shore glad he has. Next time yuh write yuh might thank yore dad for me."

"I will, of course. I'm awfully glad you're safe up here, Tom. All the straight people in the Lazy River country know you didn't have any hand in the branding of those Crossed Dumbbell cattle, but that doesn't help much when Block and his friends are in the majority."

"Yo're right, it don't; but I got to go to Farewell anyway in about five weeks."

"What?" Kate's eyes widened with something very like fear.

"Shore," nodded Loudon. "I got a little business to attend to that can't be put off."

"Put it off," begged Kate, stretching out a pleading hand. "Put it off, Tom. You mustn't—you can't go back to Farewell now. Some day everything will be all right again, and then you can go back. But not now, Tom. Your life is much more important than any silly business. Please wait."

"Can't be did," said Loudon with finality. "I just got to go, an' that's all there is to it."

"But, Tom," cried Kate, "don't you understand? They'll—they'll h-hang you."

"They'll have to catch me first. 'Tain't legal otherwise."

"Oh, how can you make fun? I could cry. I could, indeed. I will, too, in a minute—only, you are fooling, aren't you? You don't really intend to go back."

"I never fool. Dunno how. I'm goin' back, an' if Farewell gets gay, why, I'll just naturally rope that village o' tinhorns an' scatter it over a full section o' land. That'll cure 'em o' gettin' out warrants for peaceable folks, won't it now?"

CHAPTER XV

A HIDDEN TRAIL

A pounding at his door woke Loudon in the morning.

"Lo," he called, sleepily.

"Time for yore dinner!" shouted Mrs. Burr through the panels. "It's noon."

"I'll get right up."

"Yuh will not. Yuh'll stay right where yuh are. I'm comin' in."

She entered, bearing a basin and towels.

"There," she said, setting the basin on the chair at the bedside. "There, yuh can wash yore own face. Hungry?"

"Some," he sputtered through streaming water.

"That's good. I got a nice steak an' 'taters an' gravy an' hot bread, an' there's a friend wants to see yuh."

"Who?"

"Swing Tunstall. He just rode in from the Flyin' M. I'm goin' out there this afternoon. Dunno how long I'll be gone. But yuh'll be all right. I done asked Lil Mace to come over here an' live while I'm away. Lil an' Kate an' Dorothy'll look after yuh. An' mind yuh, do what they tell yuh, or I'll make it hot for yuh when I come back."

"What's the matter? Anythin' happened at the ranch?"

"Oh, nothin' much—over a hundred head o' hosses run off, an' Scotty's got two bullets in him."

"What!"

"Yep. That's why I'm goin' out. Got to look after Scotty. Swing says he ain't hurt bad, an' Scotty is tougher'n back-leather, but still there'd ought to be a woman there, so I'm elected. No, I can't give yuh no details. Ain't got time. Swing will tell yuh all he knows. Good-bye, an' don't forget what I said 'bout mindin' them three girls, Tom."

She picked up the basin and hastened from the room, leaving the door open. Through the doorway Loudon could see a section of the kitchen and Kate and Dorothy busy at the stove. But the objects in view did not register any impressions on his shocked brain. Scotty shot! A hundred horses stolen! Here was a grim matter indeed, one requiring instant action, and he was laid up with a sprained ankle! Very arbitrary ladies, the three Fates. Heartily, but under his breath, for Dorothy was coming, Loudon cursed his luck.

"Well, invalid," smiled Dorothy, "here's your dinner. Shall I feed you, or perhaps you'd prefer Mrs. Mace or Kate? How about it?"

"I only sprained my ankle," said Loudon, red to the ears.

He was wearing one of the Captain's nightgowns. The middle-aged scrutiny of the mother had not quickened him to the fact that the garment was much too small for him, but under the eyes of the daughter he became burningly self-conscious. The knowledge that Scotty had advised Dorothy to fall in love with him did not lessen the agony of the moment.

"I'll put it on this chair," said tactful Dorothy, partly fathoming the cause of Loudon's distress. "Would you like to see Mr. Tunstall?"

"Shore I would. I didn't know he was here at the house."

"He's camping on the doorstep. I'll send him in. Isn't it awful about Scotty Mackenzie? And all those horses, too. Nothing as bad as this ever happened in Sunset County before."

"It won't happen again. Not right away, yuh can bet on that."

Dorothy withdrew, and Swing Tunstall entered. The bristle-haired young man shut the door, grinned toothfully at Loudon, and sat down cross-legged on the floor.

"Howdy, Swing," said Loudon, "why ain't yuh chasin' the hoss thieves?"

"Cause," replied Tunstall, "Doubleday sent me in to tell the sheriff an' get a doc for Scotty. The doc's on his way, an' the sheriff's due in to-day from Rocket. All the outfit, 'cept Doubleday an' Giant Morton, are cavortin' over the hills an' far away a-sniffin' to pick up the trail."

"When did it happen?"

"Well, as near as we could make out, after siftin' out Scotty's cuss-words an' gettin' down to hard-rock, Scotty was shot 'bout eight or nine o'clock in the evenin'."

"How?"

"Says he heard a racket in the stallion corral. No more'n he slips out of the office when he's plugged twice—once in the left leg, an' a deep graze on his head. The head shot is what knocked him out. He said he didn't come to till after midnight. He drug himself into the office an' tied himself up the best he could an' lived offen airtights till we pulled in. He didn't even know any hosses had been run off till after we got back."

"I s'pose he was shot the evenin' of the dance?"

"Shore. Oh, ain't it lovely? While we're chasin' imaginary feather-dusters, the Flyin' M hosses are vanishin'. It shore was a slick trick. The gent that thought up that plan for getting' every two-legged man in the country out of the way is a wizard. I'd admire to see him, I would. I'll bet he's all head."

"He ain't exactly a fool," admitted Loudon, thinking of Sam Blakely.

Certainly the manner in which the horse-stealing had been carried out bore the ear-marks of 88 methods.

"They had two days' start," observed Swing Tunstall. "Time to ride to Old Mexico almost."

"Telescope's a good tracker," said Loudon, and began to eat his dinner.

"None better. But even Telescope can't do wonders. By the trail the hoss-band headed east. Them hosses was over a hundred, maybe a hundred an' fifty,

miles away by the time our outfit got started. In a hundred an' fifty miles o' country yuh'll find lots o' hard ground an' maybe a rainstorm."

"Rain ain't none likely at this time o' year."

"It ain't likely, but hoss thieves with a two-day start are in luck at the go-off. An' luck comes in bunches. If they's any rain wanderin' 'round foot-free an' fancy-loose these gents will get it. An' then where's Telescope an' his trackin'?"

When Tunstall had departed in search of diversion and to buy cartridges, Loudon locked his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. In his mind he turned over the events of the past few days. He was sure that Sam Blakely and the 88 outfit were the prime movers in the shooting of Scotty and the stealing of Scotty's horses.

Yet, save that the exceeding cleverness of procedure smacked of Blakely, there were no grounds for suspecting the 88 men. Blakely and his gang were not the only cunning horse thieves in the territory. There were dozens of others free and unhung. Nevertheless, Loudon's instinct fastened the guilt on the 88.

"I'm shore," he muttered, "certain shore. But there ain't nothin' to go by. Not a thing. An' yuh can't prove nothin' lyin' on yore back with a bumped ankle."

Half an hour later the entrance of Kate Saltoun interrupted his gloomy reflections.

"Feeling worse, Tom?" she inquired, her expression anxious.

"Me? Oh, not a little bit. I feel just like a flock o' birds with yaller wings."

"You needn't be snippy. I know how your ankle must pain you, but——"

"It ain't the ankle, Kate. That feels fine, only I know I can't stand on it. It's

what I'm thinkin' about. I was wonderin' 'bout Scotty an' all."

"If I sit with you, would—would you like to talk?" said she with a hesitant smile, the slow red mounting to her cheeks.

"If it wouldn't bother yuh too much."

"I'll be right back."

Kate took away the dishes, and Loudon, who had pulled the blankets up to his chin at her entry, snuggled deeper into the bed and wished himself elsewhere.

"What else could I say?" he asked himself, dismally, "Lord A'mighty, I wish she'd keep away from me."

Kate returned quickly, carried the chair to the foot of the bed, and sat down. She crossed one leg over the other and clasped her hands in her lap. Silence ensued for a brief space of time.

"Well," said Kate, leadingly.

"I was just a-wonderin' about this hoss deal," began Loudon. "I think——"

"I know what you intended saying," Kate observed, calmly. "You see in it the fine Italian hand of Blakely."

"You always could talk high, wide, and handsome," said Loudon, admiringly. "How djuh guess it?"

"I know Sam Blakely. That's enough. He'd hesitate at nothing, no matter how vile or wicked it might be. Oh, don't look so eager. I can't prove it. It's my instinct, that's all. I hate him—hate him—hate him!"

Kate covered her face with her hands.

"They'll hear yuh in the kitchen," cautioned Loudon in a whisper.

Kate lowered her hands and looked at him wearily. When she spoke her voice was perfectly composed.

"No, they won't. Dorothy's over at Lil's. Don't worry, though. I sha'n't lose control of myself. Something came over me then. I won't do it again."

"Well, you think like I do, but I can't prove nothin', neither. Never have been able to prove nothin' against the 88. Say, does yore dad still believe like he used to about them cows?"

"The Crossed——"

"No, *his* cows. Them cows that disappeared now an' then."

"I believe he does. He never talks much, you know, and it's sometimes hard for me to tell what he thinks. But I don't believe he suspects the 88. He was very angry when I broke the engagement. I wouldn't give him my reason, and he stormed and stamped around, and quarrelled with me all the time. That's partly why I came up here to visit Lil Mace."

"If we could only wake up Fort Creek County—but them fellahs, most of 'em, are for the 88, an' them that ain't have to take it out in thinkin' a lot. Now if we could cinch this hoss-stealin' on the 88 it would help a lot down in Fort Creek County. The honest folks down there would have somethin' to go on, an' they'd paint for war immediate, an' with the boys from up here it would be a cinch. We'd go over the 88 outfit like a landslide. An' here I am throwed an' hog-tied. Say——" Loudon's mouth opened wide. His eyes shone. In his excitement he raised himself on his elbow—"I got it! I got it!"

"What?" Kate leaned toward him, lips parted.

"It ain't possible that dance was just luck," said Loudon, rapidly. "It couldn't just 'a' happened all hunky-dory so that fellah from Hatchet Creek would find all the boys in town. Not by a jugful it couldn't! It was set for that night a-purpose. Now who started the ball a-rollin' for that dance?"

He gazed triumphantly at Kate. Her eyes sparkled.

"I'll try and find out for you," she said.

"Howdy, folks?"

It was Pete O'Leary who spoke, and he was standing beside the kitchen table looking in on them. Loudon's mouth tightened. How much of their conversation had O'Leary heard?

"Good afternoon, Mr. O'Leary," said Kate, rising and advancing to the doorway. "Looking for Dorothy, aren't you? Oh, I know you are. You'll find her down at Mrs. Mace's.... Yes, it's a beautiful day, beautiful. Good afternoon, Mr. O'Leary, good afternoon."

In the face of this Pete O'Leary departed. Kate went into the kitchen. In a few minutes she returned, laughing.

"He didn't go into Lil's," she said. "He went on toward Main Street. I watched him. He's a nervy individual. Dorothy doesn't like him, and I don't, either."

"I wonder if he did come to see Dorothy, or——"

"He came to see me."

"You!" Loudon's surprise was patent.

"Yes, isn't it charming? Turned him out in quick fashion, didn't I? The pest! Dorothy said he clung to her like glue till I came. He's deserted her for me ever since the dance. She baked me a cake. Said it was a reward. She'd never been able to get rid of him. But I'm afraid Dorothy's too tender-hearted. I don't mind being rude. Why, what's the matter?"

"I was just a-wonderin' how much that fellah heard?"

"Oh, nothing," said Kate, carelessly. "We weren't talking loudly, were we? Does it make any difference?"

"It shore does. O'Leary's in with the 88, or I'm a Dutchman."

"He is!"

"Shore," Loudon nodded. "I got proof o' that, anyhow."

"Heavens! If he heard what we were saying he'll warn Blakely and the rest. And we can't stop him! We can't stop him!"

"Not yet we can't. I can't, special."

Kate stared steadily at Loudon.

"Tom," said she, after a silence, "if Pete O'Leary is Blakely's friend then Pete O'Leary got up that dance."

"Oh, I'm bright!" groaned Loudon. "I must be losin' my mind. There it was, plain as the brand on a hoss, an' I never seen it. O' course it was him."

"I'll soon find out," Kate exclaimed, briskly. "I'll ask Lil and Dorothy and Mrs. Ragsdale and Mrs. Dan Smith. They'll know. Do you mind being left alone for a while?"

"Not a bit—I mean——"

"Now never mind. I know perfectly well what you mean. Here, I'll put your gun where you can reach it. If you want anything, shoot."

She plumped his pillow, patted and pulled the blankets to smoothness, and was off.

"Ain't it amazin'?" marvelled Loudon. "Now if anybody had told me that I could talk friendly again with Kate Saltoun, I'd 'a' called him a liar. I shore would."

Ten minutes later plump Mrs. Mace entered and interrupted a flow of very bitter reflections on Pete O'Leary.

"Well, Mister Man, how's the ankle?" inquired Mrs. Mace, brightly. "Now don't look so glum. Kate'll be back before a great while."

"I wasn't thinkin' o' her," was Loudon's ungallant retort.

"Yuh'd ought to. I guess yuh was, too. Yuh needn't be bashful with me. I'm Kate's best friend. An' I want to tell you right now I'm awful glad the pair of yuh got over yore mad. It don't pay to quarrel. I never do, not even when Jim Mace comes in all mud without wipin' his feet. Lord, what trials you men are! I don't really know how we poor women get along sometimes, I don't indeed. Want a drink o' water? Yuh can't have nothin' else. Mis' Burr said yuh couldn't."

"Then I guess that goes as it lays. But I ain't thirsty, an' I don't need nothin'. Honest."

"Yes, yuh do," contradicted Mrs. Mace, gazing critically at him. "Yuh need yore hair brushed. It's all mussed, an' invalids should look neat. Don't start in to sputter. I sha'n't brush yore hair, but I'll tell Kate she's no great shakes for a

nurse. Now I think of it, Kate's hair was mussed up some, too. H'm-m-m. What yuh gettin' red about? No call to blush that I can see. Oh, you men!"

With a significant wink Mrs. Mace whisked kittenishly into the kitchen. Loudon could hear her lifting stove-lids. He perspired freely. The lady's weighty bantering had raised his temperature.

What a world! Scotty urged him to make love to Dorothy. Mrs. Burr advised him to set matters right with Kate. While Mrs. Mace had everything settled. Between the three of them and his other troubles he believed he would go mad.

CHAPTER XVI

KATE IS HELPFUL

At six o'clock Kate returned.

"It took me longer than I expected," she whispered, Dorothy and Mrs. Mace being in the kitchen. "It's just as we thought. Our friend, Mr. O'Leary, was back of the dance. He suggested it to Mrs. Ragsdale, and she got it up.

"I don't believe O'Leary heard any of our conversation. He met me down street and smirked and grinned and tried to invite himself up to see me to-night. But I settled him. I said I'd be busy for the next two weeks. Look here, Tom, don't look so worried. If he heard what we said, don't you suppose he'd leave town immediately? Of course he would. He wouldn't dare stay."

"I ain't so shore about that. He's no fool, Pete O'Leary ain't. He knows there ain't no real evidence against him. We only got suspicions, that's all. Enough for us, all right, but nothin' like enough to land him. No, he wouldn't vamoose right now. That'd give him away. He'll stay an' bluff it through as long as he can. Then, again, if he pulls out he ain't no good to the 88 no more. He's needed up here to let 'em know how things are pannin' out. Say, yuh didn't let them ladies suspicion what yuh was after, did yuh?"

"Of course not. I have a little sense. I made my inquiries quite casually in the course of conversation. Don't fret, they won't have a thing to gossip about."

"That's good. I might 'a' knowed yuh'd be careful."

With a start he realized that he was commending her, actually commending the girl who had once informed him in withering accents that she would never marry an ignorant puncher. Here she was pathetically anxious to execute his every wish. Apparently she had stopped flirting, too.

As she flitted between his room and the kitchen he looked at her out of amazed eyes. Measuring her by her one-time frivolous and coquettish actions, the new Kate was rather astonishing. Man-like, Loudon began to suspect some trap. The lady was too good to be true.

"Bet she's tollin' me on," he told himself. "I'll ask her again, an' then pop'll go the weasel. No, sirree, I know when I'm well off. As a friend, so long as she acts thisaway, she's ace-high, but I'll bet after marriage she'd develop tempers an' things like that Sue Shimmers girl Scotty told me about. Shore she would. Not a doubt of it. Yessir, single cussedness for Tom Loudon from now on henceforward. I'll gamble an' go the limit, it's got double blessedness backed clean off the table."

Lying in bed was not doing Tom Loudon a bit of good. He was fast becoming priggishly cynical. Which attitude of mind may have been natural, but

was certainly abominably ungallant.

Long after the others in the house were asleep Loudon lay awake. His brain was busy fashioning plans for the undoing of the 88 outfit. It suddenly struck him that the guileful O'Leary undoubtedly wrote letters. A knowledge of the addresses on those letters was of paramount importance. It would wonderfully simplify matters.

The storekeeper, Ragsdale, was the Bend postmaster. Loudon knew that Ragsdale was not given to idle chatter. He resolved to take Ragsdale into his confidence.

In the morning after breakfast, Kate, first making sure that Mrs. Mace and Dorothy were out of earshot, stooped over the bed.

"Tom," she said, "don't you think I'd better find out whether O'Leary writes any letters and, if he does, to whom he writes them?"

Loudon stared at her in astonishment.

"Huh—how did yuh think o' that?" he blurted out.

"I don't know. It came to me last night. It's a good idea, don't you think?"

"Shore, it's a good idea. I was thinkin' the same thing myself. But don't yuh bother. I'll find out soon's I'm able to get around."

"Don't be silly. You'll be on your back ten days at the least. O'Leary may write several in the meantime, and the sooner we know about it the better. Now I can find out very easily. Mrs. Ragsdale, the prying soul, reads the addresses on every letter coming in or going out. None ever escapes her eagle eye. And she's a great gossip. I've only seen her half-a-dozen times, but nevertheless she's managed to give me detailed histories of the private lives of

most of the inhabitants. She enjoys talking to me because I never interrupt, so you see how simple it will be."

"But I don't like to use you thisaway," objected Loudon. "Yuh've done enough, too much, as it is."

"Nonsense! It will be great fun turning Mrs. Ragsdale's tattlings into useful information. Tattle! Why, she even told me how much you approved of me at the dance. According to her story you came and shouted your opinion into her ear. Did you?"

"I knowed it!" groaned Loudon. "I knowed she'd tell! I only said——"

"Never mind getting red. I didn't mind a bit. I hoped you did like me. I wanted you to."

Here was thin ice. Loudon, pink about the ears, squirmed inwardly.

"I—I," he stuttered, then, with a rush, "yo're doin' too much, I tell yuh. I'll see about these letters when I get up."

"No, you won't. I want to, and I'm going to. It's settled and you needn't argue. I'll go to the postoffice right away. After dinner I'll tell you all about it."

"Wait a minute!" cried Loudon, but Kate was gone.

Loudon had little time to reflect on feminine wilfulness, for Mrs. Mace insisted on spending the morning with him. Dorothy helped her spend it. The buzz of their chatter was lulling. Loudon dozed off and slept till Mrs. Mace awakened him at noon.

"Nice way to treat two ladies," sniffed Mrs. Mace. "Nice way, I must say. Here we come in to entertain yuh while Kate's away and yuh fall asleep, so yuh do. Bet yuh wouldn't have fell asleep if Kate had been here. No, I guess not.

You'd have been chipper enough—grinnin' and smilin' all over yore face. But yuh can't even be polite to Dorothy and me."

"Why, ma'am, I——"

"Oh, never mind makin' excuses. We understand. It's all right. Say"—Mrs. Mace stooped down and guarded one side of her mouth with her hand—"say, when's the weddin' comin' off?"

"Weddin'? What weddin'?"

"Oh, yes, I wonder what weddin'. I do, indeed. Well, of course yuh don't have to tell if yuh don't want to. I'll ask Kate. Dorothy"—she straightened and called over her shoulder—"you can bring in Mr. Loudon's dinner. He's decided to stay awake long enough to eat it."

He ate his dinner alone, but he did not enjoy it. For, in the kitchen, Dorothy and Mrs. Mace with painful thoroughness discussed all the weddings they had ever seen and made divers thinly veiled remarks concerning a certain marriage that would probably take place in the fall.

"Say," called Loudon, when he could endure their chatter no longer, "say, would yuh mind closin' that door? I got a headache."

Silence in the kitchen for a brief space of time. Then, in a small demure voice, Mrs. Mace said:

"What was that? I didn't quite catch it."

With elaborate politeness Loudon repeated his request.

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Mace, "the door must be left open. Mis' Burr said so. A sick-room needs lots of fresh air. I wouldn't dare close the door. Mis' Burr

wouldn't like it."

"She'd scalp us if we closed it during the day," observed Dorothy.

The wretched Loudon could almost see the wink which accompanied this statement.

"But he's got a headache," said Mrs. Mace. "We'd ought to do somethin' for that. Can't allow him to have a headache, Dorothy. You get the towels an' I'll get some cold water. We'll bathe his head for him. That'll fix him up."

"It ain't as bad as all that," denied Loudon. "It's goin' away already. An' I don't want my head bathed nohow. An' I ain't goin' to have it bathed, an' that's flat!"

At this juncture Kate entered the kitchen, announcing that she was starved. Dorothy and Mrs. Mace, both talking at once, asserted that Loudon had a violent headache and would not allow them to alleviate his suffering; that he had been a most troublesome patient and had kept them busy attending to his manifold desires.

"Don't you believe 'em!" cried Loudon. "I ain't done a thing. They been pesterin' me all mornin'. Won't let me sleep or nothin'."

"There! Listen to him!" exclaimed Mrs. Mace. "We did our level best to please, an' that's all the thanks we get. C'mon, Dorothy, let's go over to my house. We ain't wanted now. Yore dinner's in the oven, Kate. He's had his. Hope you'll have better luck managin' him than we did. I'd sooner wrangle forty hosses than one sick man."

The slam of the kitchen door put a period to her remarks. Kate entered Loudon's room, a pucker of concern between her eyebrows.

"Have you really a headache?" she inquired.

"Of course I haven't. But they was botherin' me—oh, I dunno, makin' fool remarks an' all like that. Say, did yuh find out anythin'?"

"Not much of any value, I'm afraid. But you're the better judge of that. Pete O'Leary writes to only one person—William Archer of Marysville. O'Leary writes to him once a week usually, but for the last month he's written twice a week, and this week he mailed four letters to Marysville."

"Archer—Archer," mused Loudon. "I can't think just now of anybody o' that name in Marysville. But that town ain't such a great way from the 88 ranch house—not more'n thirty mile at the most. Archer, whoever he is, could easy keep in touch with—with——"

"Don't boggle so over that man's name. You don't hurt my feelings in the least by mentioning Sam Blakely. Yes, he could keep in touch with Blakely very easily. I learned, too, that O'Leary receives letters about as frequently as he mails them. They are all in the same handwriting, and they are all postmarked Marysville. One came for him this morning. Mrs. Ragsdale let me see it, but the handwriting was strange to me. If it had been Blakely's I'd have recognized it. I'll keep in with Mrs. Ragsdale. I'll visit her every time a mail arrives."

"No, it ain't necessary. It's enough to know he writes to Marysville. First thing to do is see Archer, an' find out some of his habits. He's the link between Pete O'Leary an' the 88, that's a cinch."

"Then I really did learn something of value. I am glad. I was afraid it wouldn't be worth a very great deal, and I do so want to help you."

"Well, yuh shore have, Kate. Nobody could 'a' helped me any better. But don't do no more. There ain't no reason why you should. It ain't a woman's job anyhow."

"Oh, you've said that before. I intend to help you all I can. I'm as interested as you are in the ultimate crushing of the 88 outfit."

"Yes, but——"

"We won't discuss it, please. How does the ankle feel?"

"It's comin' along fine. I want to get up right now."

"Day after to-morrow you can get dressed if you like and sit out in the kitchen for a while. Oh, I know how hard it is to lie in bed, but one can't hurry a sprain. You have a lot of hard work ahead, and you must be in shape to go through with it. Listen, how would it be if I wrote to Mr. Richie of the Cross-in-a-box and asked him to find out about this Archer man?"

"No, I'd rather manage that myself. I'll go to Marysville."

"You can't! Why, the judge who issued that warrant for you lives there! You insist on going to Farewell, and that's madness. But visiting Marysville would be worse."

"Oh, no, it wouldn't. Nobody knows me there. I was never in the place in my life. It'll be a lot safer than Farewell."

"B-but I'm afraid! I know something will happen to you! I know it! I know it!"

"Nothin'll happen," said Loudon, acutely conscious that the situation was getting out of hand.

Presently his worst fears were realized. Kate, genuine misery in her dark eyes, stared at him silently. Her hands were gripped together so that the knuckles showed white. Suddenly she turned side wise, flung an elbow over the

back of the chair and buried her face in her hands. She began to cry softly.

"Oh!" she wailed, her shoulders shaking. "Oh, I love you so! I love you so! And you don't care—you don't care a bit!"

Sobs racked her whole body. She completely lost control of herself and burst into a storm of passionate weeping. To Loudon it seemed that this state of affairs endured for an age, but not more than five minutes elapsed before Kate swayed to her feet and stumbled from the room. She did not close the door, and Loudon could hear her muffled gasps as she strove with her distress.

At that moment it seemed to him that the girl who had called him an ignorant puncher was a wraith of the dim and misty past. Certainly the present Kate Saltoun was a different person. She no longer flirted, she was plainly sorry for what she had done, and apparently she loved him utterly.

No man can remain unmoved while a beautiful woman weeps for love of him. Loudon was moved. He was impelled to call to her, to tell her to come to him. But he hesitated. He was not at all sure that his feeling was any emotion other than pity. He had spent miserable weeks schooling himself to forget his love and her. Now he did not know his own mind, and he could not decide what to do. While he lay hesitating he heard the scraping of a chair being pushed back, the sound of her feet crossing the floor, and the slam of the kitchen door.

Half an hour later Mrs. Mace came in like a whirlwind. She halted in the doorway and surveyed Loudon with unfriendly eyes. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but closed it without uttering a word, flounced back into the kitchen and shut his door. Almost immediately she opened it.

"Want anythin'?" she inquired, ungraciously.

"No, thank yuh just the same," replied the mystified Loudon.

Mrs. Mace closed the door without comment. It was not opened again till Dorothy brought in his supper. She inquired politely after his health, but he could see that she was displeased with him.

"What's the matter with everybody?" he asked. "What makes Mis' Mace look at me like I was poison, an' what makes you look as if yuh had a pain?"

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," said Dorothy, severely, and marched out, her back stiff as a rifle-barrel.

"I've done somethin' desperate, whatever it is," he said, addressing the closed door. "I shore have. I might 'a' come to like that Dorothy girl real well—sometime maybe. But I never will now, an' that's no merry jest."

Gloomily he ate his supper. When Dorothy entered to take away the dishes he demanded to know why he should be ashamed of himself.

"Because you should!" she snapped. "I'm not going to bandy words with you! Just wait till mother comes home—just you wait!"

After which ominous utterance she departed. Loudon scratched his head and thought long and deeply.

"Now I'd like to know what I've done," he mused. "Mis' Mace don't like me a little bit, an' that Dorothy girl talks an' acts like I'd poisoned a well or scalped a dozen babies. It's one too many for me. But I'll know about it when Mis' Burr gets home, will I? That's fine, that is. I'll bet she'll explain till the cows come home. Why didn't I go to that hotel? I will as soon's I'm able. This house ain't no place for a peace-lovin' man."

He was rather relieved that Kate no longer came near him. It saved trouble. He did not quite know what he would say to Kate at their next meeting. What could he say? What, indeed? He pondered the question till he fell asleep, having

arrived at no conclusion.

Next morning Jim Mace came to see him. Loudon besought Jim to help him move to the hotel.

"What's the matter?" said the surprised Jim. "Don't my wife an' Dorothy treat yuh right?"

"Shore they do, but I don't want to bother 'em no more. I'll be better off where I can cuss when I feel like it."

"Mis' Burr won't like it none, yore goin' off thisaway."

"I can't help that—I want to go."

"An' my wife won't like it, neither. Lordy, Tom, yuh don't know my wife. She'd hit the ceilin' if I was to tote yuh down to the hotel."

"Say," exclaimed Loudon, "can't a married man do nothin' without askin' his wife?"

"Not if he knows what's healthy," replied Jim Mace, warmly. "I tell yuh, Tom, yuh'll jump through a hoop if yore wife says so. Oh, yuh can laugh all yo're a mind to. Wait till yo're married, an' yuh'll see what I mean."

"I'll wait, yuh can gamble on that. Will yuh help me or do I have to walk there on my hands?"

"I won't help yuh a step. Yuh don't know what yo're askin', Tom. Honest, I'm sorry, but I wouldn't dare help yuh without Lil said I could. Fix it up with her an' I will."

When Jim had gone Loudon swore soulfully, and thought with amazement of the manner in which Jim was under his wife's thumb. If that was the effect of

marriage upon a man he wanted none of it. He had no desire to be tied to any one's apron-strings. He wished to be able to call his soul his own. Marriage—bah!

"I want my clothes," he announced to Mrs. Mace at noon.

"Oh, yuh do, do yuh?" cried the lady. "Well, yuh can just want, so yuh can! Yuh won't get 'em, an' that's flat! An' Jim Mace nor nobody else ain't goin' to help yuh down to that hotel. Yo're a-goin' to stick right here. Jim told me yuh wanted to go, an' what I told him was a-plenty. Here yuh stay till yuh go back to the ranch."

"But I want to get up. I'm gettin' plumb weary o' stayin' in bed."

"It won't hurt yuh a bit. You'll have lots o' time to think over yore sins."

"I'll get up anyhow."

"You just try it! I'd shore admire to see yuh try it! You ain't goin' to play any fool tricks with that ankle if I have to get Jim an' a few o' the boys to hogtie yuh. Tell yuh what I will do. To-morrow, if you'll give me yore word not to leave the house till Mis' Burr or I say you can, I'll give yuh yore clothes an' you can sit in the kitchen."

"I suppose I'll have to," grumbled Loudon.

"You shore will if yuh want to get up," stated the uncompromising lady.

"All right. I give yuh my word. Lemme get up now. The ankle feels fine."

"To-morrow, to-morrow—not one second sooner."

CHAPTER XVII

MRS. BURR RELIEVES HER MIND

Loudon, sitting comfortably in a big chair, his lame ankle supported on an upturned cracker-box, gazed at the world without through the frame of the kitchen doorway. Leaving his bed had raised his spirits appreciably. He rolled and smoked cigarettes and practised the road-agent's spin in pleasant anticipation of the day when he would ride away on his occasions.

He wondered what luck Telescope and the boys were having. Since Swing Tunstall's visit no news had come from the Flying M. Humanly, if selfishly, he hoped that the trailing would meet with no success till he was able to take a hand. His altruism was not proof against his exceedingly lively desire to share in the downfall of the 88 outfit.

He essayed to draw Mrs. Mace and Dorothy into conversation, but both ladies were grumpy, and he gave it up in disgust. He found himself listening for Kate's footstep. Awkward as their meeting undoubtedly would be, his dread of it was wearing off.

But Kate Saltoun did not appear. Loudon was too stubborn to make inquiries, and Mrs. Mace and Dorothy vouchsafed no information. In fact, save to squabble with him, they rarely opened their mouths in his presence.

A week later Loudon, a home-made crutch under his armpit, was able to hobble about a little. Within two weeks he discarded the crutch and, having obtained permission from Mrs. Mace, limped to the corral and overhauled his saddle. That afternoon Mrs. Burr returned. Loudon saw her first and crab-

footed to the other side of the corral. The precise nature of his sin was not clear to him, but Dorothy's words had been disquieting. And now "mother" was home.

Like a disobedient small boy Loudon wished to put off the interview as long as possible. But there was no escape for him. Mrs. Burr marched out to the corral and cornered him.

"How's Scotty?" inquired Loudon, affecting an ease of manner he was far from feeling.

"Scotty's doin' very well," said Mrs. Burr, eying him grimly. "He don't need me no more. That's why I'm here. Young man, I ain't pleased with yuh. I ain't a bit pleased with yuh."

"Why, ma'am, I dunno what yuh mean."

"Yuh will before I'm through. Gimme that saddle-blanket to set on. There! Now, Mister Man, I'm goin' to talk to yuh like I was yore mother, an' I expect yuh to take it that way."

"Shore, ma'am, fly at it. I'm a-listenin'."

"Do yuh remember a certain evenin' down at the Bar S when yuh'd just rid in from Farewell with the mail an' some ribbon for Kate Saltoun?"

Loudon nodded.

"Well, Kate asked yuh to come out on the porch, an' yuh didn't come. Yes, Sam Blakely was there. Yore not comin' at her invite riled Kate. She allowed yuh didn't give a hoot for her, an' when Blakely proposed she took him. She was hoppin' mad with you, an' she was bound to teach yuh a lesson.

"No, don't interrupt. Wait till I'm through, an' yuh can talk all yo're a mind to.

Before that evenin' it'd been nip an' tuck between you an' Sam Blakely. An' you was slow. My fathers! you was slow about speakin' yore little piece! Tom, a girl don't like for a man to keep his mouth shut. If he loves her, let him say so. An' you didn't say so.

"Then again, Kate was flattered by Blakely's attention. What girl wouldn't be? Tom, yuh've got to remember a girl's mind ain't built like a man's. She don't reason the same way. She can't. Then, again, every girl is a coquette. Take the homeliest slabsided critter in creation, an' at heart she's just as much of a coquette as a she-angel with a pretty figger. They can't help it. It's born in 'em like their teeth are.

"An' you men don't take that into account. You think the girl you admire ain't got no right to look at nobody but you, an' that she's got to be all ready to fall into yore arms when you say the word. An' if she don't do these things yuh rise up in the air like a mean pony an' go cavortin' off sayin', 'Drat the women!' I know yuh. Yo're all alike."

"But, ma'am, I——"

"No time for 'T's' now. Like I says before, yuh can talk later. Well, here's Kate Saltoun—pretty as all git-out, an' assayin' twelve ounces o' real woman to the pound, troy. Naturally, like I says, she's a coquette an' don't know her own mind about the boys. None of 'em don't. I didn't. Well, times Kate knows she loves you, an' times she thinks she loves Blakely."

"How did she know I loved her? I hadn't said a word about it."

"My fathers! don't yuh s'pose a woman knows when a man loves her? He doesn't have to tell her. She knows. Well, as I was sayin', she's a-waverin' this way an' that, an' then along comes that evenin' you don't go out on the porch, an' she kind o' guesses she loves Blakely an' she takes that party. Mind yuh, she thought she loves him. Kate's honest. She couldn't lie to herself."

"She did when she said I drew first," said Loudon in a low voice. "I can't get over that, somehow."

"Tom, at the time you an' Blakely was cuttin' down on each other Kate was excited. She couldn't 'a' seen things straight. She told me she thought yuh drew first. I believe her—why can't you?"

"But I didn't draw first."

"I know yuh didn't, but I believe Kate when she says she thought you did draw first. That's what I mean. Under the circumstances, yuh'd ought to believe her, too. But never mind about that now. You cut stick an' come here to the Bend. An' Kate begun to find out there was somethin' missin'. Somehow, the Bar S without you didn't seem like the Bar S. Before yuh lit out she'd gotten used to havin' yuh around.

"Yuh don't miss a saddle, Tom, till yuh have to ride bareback. Same way with Kate. She missed yuh, an' as every day went by she missed yuh more an' more. Then it come to her. She knowed the man she loved, an' that feller was you, yuh big, thick-skulled lummo! Oh, if you was fifteen years younger I'd lay yuh over my knee an' wear out a quirt on yuh for bein' a fool! I never could abide a fool. But yuh'll know somethin' before I get through."

"Don't mind me, ma'am."

"I don't—not a bit! I like you, an' I just love that Kate girl, or I wouldn't be a-settin' here now. Well, when Kate knowed her own mind at last, she gave Blakely back his ring, an' that settled him. She wanted you back, an' the only way she could think of to get yuh back was to go after yuh. So she done it. An' you had to fight with her an' drive her away! She just couldn't wait for the stage. She done hired a buckboard an' drove back to the Bar S. She made Dorothy an' Lil promise not to tell yuh she'd gone. They told me. She wouldn't tell 'em

what had happened between you two. But she was cryin' when she left, so don't tell me yuh didn't fight with her.

"Lil an' Dorothy guessed it right away, an' they're mad at yuh, you bet. Yuh've busted Kate's heart, that's what yuh've done. Now ain't yuh ashamed o' yoreself? Don't yuh think yuh didn't act just right? Don't yuh think yuh might 'a' been just a little bit forgivin' when you could see the girl loved yuh with all her heart?"

"She said she'd never marry a ignorant puncher."

"I know. She told me about that time in the Bar S kitchen. Don't yuh understand—can't yuh get it through yore head that happened *before* she woke up to the fact that you was the only feller on earth?"

"Did she tell yuh all this?"

"She did. Poor little girl, she come to me one evenin', an' she was all wrought up. I seen somethin' was the matter, an' I knowed it would do her a heap o' good to get it off her chest, an' I got it out of her little by little. She was sobbin' like a young one before she was through, an' I was a-holdin' her in my arms, an' I was cryin' some myself. She made me promise not to let on to you, but I ain't a-goin' to set by an' see her hurt when a word or two from me can set things straight. It's the first time I ever broke my word, but I don't care. I aim to help her all I can."

"Say, did she tell yuh what Blakely done?"

"No. What did he do?"

"I dunno. She hates him worse'n poison now. He's done somethin', but she wouldn't tell me what."

"He's been botherin' her likely, the skunk! You'd ought to crawl his hump first chance yuh get."

"Maybe I will."

"Looky here. I ain't quite through. What did you'n her fight about?"

"Nothin', ma'am. Honest. I'm there in bed, an' all of a sudden she busts out cryin' an' says she loves me, an' then she goes into the kitchen an' pretty soon she goes out—an' she never does come back. Then in comes Mis' Mace an' she acts mighty unpleasant, an' Dorothy acts the same, an' I believe I'd rather been at the hotel, considerin'."

"I s'pose yuh just lay there like a bump on a log after Kate told yuh she loved yuh."

"Well, ma'am, I—I—what could I do, ma'am? I couldn't get up."

"Yuh might 'a' spoken."

"I couldn't think o' nothin' to say, ma'am," pleaded Loudon.

"Well, yuh poor tongue-tied galoot! Yuh don't deserve no luck, yuh don't! Well, I've said my say. I've done all I could. Yuh got to do the rest yore own self. But if yuh don't go an' do it like a man, then I'm disappointed in yuh."

"Did Kate tell Mis' Mace an' yore daughter what she told you?"

"No, she didn't. She only told me."

"Then they took an awful lot for granted. They acted like Kate an' me was in love with each other."

"Well, my land! They could see Kate cared for yuh. Anybody with half an eye could see that. Naturally they didn't s'pose yuh was actin' like a complete idjit. What yuh goin' to do?"

"I dunno."

"Yuh dunno! Yuh dunno! An' Kate all but goes on her knees to tell yuh how sorry she is for what she done! Not only that, but she says she loves yuh besides! An' all yuh can say is yuh dunno. My land! I can't say what I think o' yuh."

"But I dunno, I tell yuh, Mis' Burr. I wish I'd stayed in Fort Creek County. This here town o' Paradise Bend is shore a hot-house o' matchmakers. First Scotty—then you—then Mis' Mace. Fine lot o' Cupids, you are. Can't let a fellah alone. Any one would think I couldn't manage my own affairs."

"Yuh can't. In a case like this yuh need help."

"I'm gettin' it."

"Which I hope it does yuh some good. Now I ain't a-goin' to say another word. I've told yuh just exactly what yuh needed to be told. Do what yuh think best. How's the ankle gettin' along?"

"Can't bear my full weight on it yet."

"No, nor yuh won't for a few days. In a week yuh can go out to the ranch if yuh like. Scotty wants to see yuh but he said special yuh wasn't to think o' comin' till yuh was all right. Oh, shore, yuh'd like to lope right off an' have the ankle go back on yuh an' be no good at all while the rest o' the boys are out in the hills. Don't worry, I'll tend to yore interests—an' Scotty's. I'll see that yuh don't go."

"I wasn't thinkin' o' goin', ma'am," hastily disclaimed Loudon. "Are Telescope an' the outfit havin' any luck?"

"Not a smidgen. The boys got in just before I left. They trailed the hoss-band over a hundred miles an' then lost the trail near Miner Mountain. A rainstorm did that trick, an' they couldn't pick up the trail again nohow."

"Swing Tunstall was right. He said if there was a rainstorm round, them rustlers would locate it."

"They did."

"The outfit ain't quit, has it?"

"They're a-goin' out again. Scotty says he won't quit till he finds his hosses."

Loudon spent the following week in unobtrusive shadowing of Pete O'Leary. But not once did that young man leave the confines of Paradise Bend. The fellow spent all of his time loafing in the vicinity of the Burr house or playing poker at the Three Card. He may have known that he was being watched. For Loudon's methods were not those of a Pinkerton shadow.

When the time came for Loudon to depart, Mrs. Burr followed him out to the corral.

"Tom," said she, when his horse was saddled, "Tom, I like you an' Kate. I like yuh both an awful lot. I'd shore enjoy seein' yuh both happy. Forgive her, Tom, an' yuh will be happy. I'm an old woman, but I've seen a lot o' life, an' it's taught me that love is the biggest thing in the world. If yuh got it yuh don't need nothin' else. Don't throw it away. Don't. Now don't forget to remember me to that old reprobate, Scotty Mackenzie, an' tell him me an' Dorothy are comin' out to see him in a couple o' days."

The new Flying M cook, a citizen of the Bend, greeted Loudon with fervour.

"Thank Gawd yuh've come!" he exclaimed. "That there Scotty is shore the—— invalid I ever seen! Forty times a day reg'lar he r'ars an' sw'ars 'cause yuh ain't arrove yet, an' forty times a day he does likewise for fear yuh'll come before yore ankle's all right. Yo're the bright apple of his eye, Tom. How yuh done it, I don't see. I can't please his R'yal Highness in a million years."

"Oh, it's a cinch when yuh know how," grinned Loudon. "Where's the outfit?"

"Most of 'em are out with Telescope. Doubleday an' Swing Tunstall are drivin' a bunch o' hosses over to the north range. Mister Mackenzie is a-settin' up in the office doin' like I said."

Loudon went at once to the office. Scotty, propped in an armchair, evinced no sign of the restlessness mentioned by the cook. He shook hands calmly and smiled cheerfully.

"Glad to see yuh," he said. "Set down an' be happy. How's the peg? All right, huh? That's good. Me? Oh, I'm pullin' through like a greased fish. I'll be poppin' round jovial an' free in another week or so. About them rustlers, now. I think——"

"Say, Scotty," interrupted Loudon, eagerly, "I got a small jag o' news. I

dunno what yore plans are, but I'll gamble what I got to say'll make a difference."

"Let her flicker."

For half an hour Loudon spoke rapidly. At the end of his recital the eyes of Scotty Mackenzie were cold and hard and very bright.

"What's yore plan?" he queried.

"Go to Farewell an' Marysville. What I find out in them two places will show me what to do next. I'm goin' to Farewell anyhow on my own hook."

"If I say no, would yuh quit me now?"

"T'd have to. I got business with a certain party in Farewell. After I'd finished up I'd come back o' course—if yuh still wanted me."

"Well, I don't say no. I think yuh've hit it. I knowed yuh was Opportunity with a big O when I hired yuh. Yuh've proved it. Fly at it, Tom, an' prove it some more. Get the evidence, an' I'll do the rest. We'll wipe out the 88 ranch, hide, hoof, an' taller. There ain't a ranch in Sunset County that won't help. We can count in the Cross-in-a-box, the Double Diamond A, an' the Hawgpen, in the Lazy River country, too. Oh, we'll fix 'em. How many o' the boys do yuh want? I don't begrudge 'em to yuh, but go as light as yuh can. I still got quite a few hosses left to wrangle."

"Gimme Telescope."

"Is he enough? I can spare another—two if I got to."

"Well, yuh see, I was countin' on borrowin' Johnny Ramsay from Jack Richie, an' there's Chuck Morgan o' the Bar S. I guess I can get him."

"Get him, an' I'll give him a job after it's all over. Wish I could get Johnny Ramsay, too, but he'd never quit Richie. Well, yuh shore done noble in findin' out that truck about Pete O'Leary."

"Yuh've got to thank Miss Saltoun for that. She done it all."

"Her! Old Salt's daughter! Say, I take it all back. She can come out here whenever she wants. I'll be proud to shake her hand, I will. Well, I did hope it'd be Dorothy, but now I suppose it's Miss Saltoun. Dunno's I blame yuh. Dunno's I blame yuh."

"As usual, you're a-barkin' up the wrong stump. I'm gun-shy of all women, an' I don't want to talk about 'em."

"Oh, all right, all right," said Scotty, hastily. "How soon can yuh start?"

"Right now, soon's I get another hoss."

"Take Brown Jug. He'll tote yuh from hell to breakfast an' never feel it. Yuh'll find the outfit som'ers over north o' Miner Mountain, I guess. Tell Telescope I want him to go with yuh, an' the rest of 'em are to come home on the jump. Doubleday an' Swing have got their hands full twenty times over. First thing I know there won't be a cayuse left on the ranch."

Two days later Loudon and Laguerre rode into Rocket and spent the night at the hotel. The landlord, Dave Sinclair, had an interesting tale to tell.

"Yest'day," said Dave, "Lanky Bob finds Jim Hallaway's body in a gully near the Bend trail. Jim had been shot in the back, an' he'd been dead quite a while. Jim an' his brother Tom have a little ranch near the Twin Peaks, an' Tom hadn't missed him none 'cause Jim, when he left the ranch, expected to be gone a month."

"Come to find out, Jim had been ridin' a bald-face pinto. Accordin' to Tom's description that pinto was the livin' image of the one that friend o' Block's was ridin' the day they come into my place a-lookin' for information. The sheriff's got a warrant out for that Cutting gent."

"Hope he gets him," said Loudon; "but he won't. He's got too big a start. I'd shore admire to know what he done with my hoss."

"You hoss brak hees laig," stated Laguerre. "Sartain shore dat what happen."

"I guess yo're right," glumly agreed Loudon. "He wouldn't change Ranger for no bald-face pinto less'n the chestnut was out o' whack for keeps."

CHAPTER XVIII

A MURDER AND A KILLING

Loudon and Laguerre did not ride directly to Farewell. The three months Loudon had given Blakely would not be up for five days. The two men spent the intervening time in the country between the Farewell trail and the Dogsoldier River. Of their quarry they found no trace.

Not at all disheartened, however, they rode into Farewell on the morning of the day set for the meeting. As usual, Bill Lainey was dozing in front of his hotel. They put their horses in the corral, and awakened Lainey.

"Shake hands with Mr. Laguerre, Bill," said Loudon, "an' tell me what yuh

know."

"Glad to know yuh, Mr. Laguerre," wheezed the fat man. "I only know one thing, Tom, an' that is, Farewell ain't no place for you. I've heard how there's a warrant out for yuh."

"Is Block in town?"

"Not just now. He rid out yest'day. But he may be back any time. The Sheriff o' Sunset's here. He's lookin' for Rufe Cutting. Seems Rufe's been jumpin' sideways up north—killed a feller or somethin'. The Sunset Sheriff allows Rufe drifted south in company with Block. Block, he says he never seen Cutting. Looked like a shootin' for a minute, but Block he passed it off, an' left town 'bout a hour later."

"Well, the Sheriff o' Sunset don't want me," observed Loudon, "an' he's a good fellah, anyway. Guess I'll stick here to-day. Maybe Block'll come back an' make it amusin'. See anythin' of our friend, Mr. Sam Blakely?"

"Sam don't never drift in no more," replied Lainey. "Ain't seen him since I dunno when. Some o' the boys do now an' then, but even they don't come like they useter. Why, last Monday, when Rudd an' Shorty Simms sifted in, was the first time in three weeks that any o' the 88 boys had been in town. Shorty said they was powerful busy at the ranch."

"That's good. It's probably the first time they ever was busy. See yuh later, Bill. S'long."

"So long."

"I'll bet they was busy them three weeks," said Loudon, as he and Laguerre walked away. "The evidence is beginnin' to show itself, ain't it?"

"You bet," assented Laguerre, his eyes shining.

Most of the citizens they met regarded Loudon with noncommittal eyes, but a few of the glances were frankly unfriendly. The two men entered the Happy Heart Saloon, there being sounds of revelry within.

On a table sat the Sheriff of Sunset County. He was heartily applauding the efforts of a perspiring gentleman who was dancing a jig. Loudon perceived that the sheriff, while not precisely drunk, was yet not sober. His gestures were free and his language freer.

There were at least a score of men in the saloon, and they were all Block's close friends. They muttered among themselves at Loudon's entrance. The story of Block's tarring and feathering had lost nothing in transmission.

Loudon and Laguerre made their way to the far end of the bar and ordered drinks. With the wall at their backs they were reasonably secure from treachery. The Sheriff of Sunset nodded to the two men from the Bend and continued to shout encouragement to the jigging citizen. Finally, the dancer succumbed to exhaustion. The sheriff slid from the table.

"Well, I got to be wrigglin' along," he said. "See yuh later."

"Not yet, Sheriff, not yet," protested a tall man with wolfish features. "Have another drink first. Just one. Step up, gents, step up. Name yore poison."

"No, not another one," said the sheriff, but his tone lacked conviction.

He had another, two in fact. Again he started for the door. But the wolf-faced man barred the way.

"Sheriff," he wheedled, "what yuh say to a little game? Just one little game. Only one. Yuh can't be in such a all-fired hurry yuh can't stop for just one."

"I got to get Rufe Cutting," said the sheriff. "I ain't got no time for poker."

"Now, looky here, Sheriff," coaxed the tempter, "yuh'll stand just as much show o' gettin' Rufe right here in Farewell as yuh will anywhere else. What's the use o' ridin' the range an' workin' yoreself to death, when yuh can stay here cool and comfortable?"

"Aw, shut up! I'm a-goin'."

"Well, o' course, if yo're broke——"

"I ain't broke. What do——"

"No offence, Sheriff. No harm meant. None whatever."

"I'll play yuh one game an' that's all. C'mon."

The sheriff played more than one game, for he won the first. He continued to win. He thought no more of Rufe Cutting. And he sat with his back toward the doorway. Which position is the most eminently unsafe of any that an officer of the law may assume. Once, during that time, Laguerre suggested to Loudon that they go elsewhere. But Loudon had whispered:

"Wait. There's somethin' crooked here."

So they waited, Loudon watching for he knew not what piece of evil, Laguerre mystified but thoroughly prepared for eventualities. It was noticeable that, excepting the card-players, the men in the room were afflicted with a strange restlessness. They moved aimlessly about; they hitched their chairs to new positions; they conversed by fits and starts; they threw frequent glances toward the doorway.

Suddenly it happened.

A squat-bodied man with bat ears appeared on the threshold. As at a signal, the three men playing with the sheriff flung themselves down on the floor. The hand of the squat-bodied man shot up and forward. A revolver cracked twice, and the Sheriff of Sunset County quietly crumpled across the card-table.

Through the swirling smoke of the discharge two red streaks flashed as the six-shooters of Loudon and Laguerre barked in unison. The squat-bodied man fell forward on his face.

Head and shoulders on the floor of the saloon, his legs on the sidewalk, he lay motionless. Side by side, the souls of the sheriff and his murderer sped homeward.

The habitués of the Happy Heart unhurriedly deserted their points of vantage against the wall, on the floor, or behind the bar, and gathered about the corpse of the squat-bodied man. They gazed upon the body for a brief space of time, then, one by one, they stepped carefully over it and departed.

"Gents," squeaked the perturbed bartender, "would yuh mind goin' out in the street? I—I'm goin' to close up."

"It's only the mornin'," said Loudon. "Why close up?"

"I'm sick. I got indigestion right bad," the bartender explained.

Indeed, the bartender looked quite ill. His complexion had turned a pasty yellow and his teeth were clicking together.

"Yuh look right bad," agreed Loudon. "But yo're mistaken about closin' up. Yo're a-goin' to keep open. Telescope, let's get the sheriff spread out right."

They pushed two tables together. Then they lifted the sheriff's body and laid it on the tables. They unbuckled the spurs, straightened the limbs, covered the

still face with the neck handkerchief, and put the hat over the gaping wound in the chest where the bullets had come out. When they had done all that they could they needed a drink. The shivering bartender served them.

"For Gawd's sake, gents!" he pleaded. "Block'll be here in a minute! Go out in the street, won't yuh?"

"Block'll be here," repeated Loudon. "How do yuh know he'll be here?"

The bartender began to stutter. His complexion became yellower. Loudon turned to Laguerre.

"Talks funny, don't he?" he observed. "Can't say nothin' but 'I.'"

Reaching across the bar, he seized the bartender by the shoulder.

"Say, fellah," he continued, "how do yuh know so much about Block?"

"I—I—I——" sputtered the bartender.

"I thought Block had left town. How do yuh know he's back?"

The bartender changed his tune.

"Ow! Ow!" he yelled. "Yo're hurtin' me! My shoulder! Ow!"

"I'll hurt yuh worse if yuh don't spit out what yuh know about Block an' his doin's."

"He—he—oh, I can't! I can't!" wailed the bartender.

"Block shore has you an' the rest o' these prairie-dogs buffaloed. I just guess yes. Well, yuh needn't tell me. I'm a pretty good guesser myself. Telescope, let's you'n me go call on Block."

"I am you," said Laguerre, and slid through a rear window. Loudon followed. They hastened along the rear of the line of houses and crouched beneath the windowsill of a small two-room shack at the end of the street. There were sounds of a hot discussion in progress in the front room.

"Guess he's home!" whispered Loudon. "Might as well go in."

Gently they opened the back door, and very quietly they tiptoed across the floor of the back room to a closed door.

"We've got to hurry," a voice was saying.

"Shore," said the voice of Sheriff Block. "You three cover 'em through the back window when me an' the rest come in the front door. Yuh know there won't be no fuss if yore fingers slip on the trigger. I'd rather bury a man any day than arrest him."

With a quick motion Loudon flung open the door.

"Nds up!" cried he, sharply, covering the roomful.

Ten pairs of hands clawed upward. There were eleven men in the room. Every one of the lot, save the eleventh man, had the impression that the six-shooters of Loudon and Laguerre bore upon him personally.

The eleventh citizen, being nearest the door and possessing a gambler's spirit, attempted to reach the street. He reached it—on his face. For Loudon had driven an accurate bullet through the fleshy part of his thigh.

"The next fellah," harshly announced Loudon, "who makes any fool breaks will get it halfway beneath his mind an' his mouth. There's a party in the corner, him with the funny face—he ain't displayin' enough enthusiasm in reachin' for the ceilin'. If he don't elevate his flippers right smart an' sudden, he won't have no

trouble at all in reachin' the stars."

The biceps of the gentleman of the face immediately cuddled his ears. The ten men were now painfully rigid. They said nothing. They did not even think to swear. They knew what they deserved and they dreaded their deserts.

"Telescope," observed Loudon, softly, "s'pose yuh go round an' unbuckle their belts. Better go through 'em, too. They might carry shoulder-holsters under their shirts. Take the hono'ble Mister Sheriff Block first. That's right. Now, Mister Sheriff, go an' stand in that corner, face to the side wall, an' keep a-lookin' right at the wall, too. I wouldn't turn my head none, neither. Yuh see, I don't guess there'd be no fuss made if my finger should slip on the trigger. It's a heap easier to bury a man than arrest him, ain't it?"

Loudon laughed without mirth. Block's nine friends, murder in their eyes, stared at Loudon. He stared back, his lips drawn to a white line.

"Yo're a healthy lot o' killers," commented he.

The last belt and six-shooter thudded on the floor just as Loudon perceived that the wounded citizen in the street was endeavouring to crawl away.

"Telescope," he said, "I guess now the party in the street would feel a heap easier in here with all his friends."

Telescope marched out into the street and removed the wounded man's gun. Then he seized him by the collar, dragged him into the shack, and dumped him in a corner. Meanwhile, Loudon had lined up the nine beltless citizens beside Block against the side wall. They stood, stomachs pressed against the planks, a prey to violent emotions.

"Yuh can rest yore hands against the wall," said Loudon, kindly, "an' that's just all yuh can do."

"Gimme a drink!" gasped the wounded man.

Telescope scooped up a dipperful from the bucket under the table. When the man had drunk, Telescope proceeded to cut away his trouser-leg and wash and expertly bandage the wound. His work of mercy finished, the efficient Telescope took post near the doorway where he could watch the street.

Loudon seated himself on the edge of the table and rolled a cigarette one-handed. A silence, marred only by the flurried breathing of the stuck-up gentlemen, fell upon the room.

"Block," said Loudon, suddenly, "where's Blakely?"

Block maintained his attitude of silent protest. Loudon gently repeated his question. Block made no reply.

Bang-g! Block convulsively shrank to one side. The line of citizens shook. Smoke curled lazily from the muzzle of Loudon's six-shooter.

"Block," observed Loudon, serenely, "get back in position. That's right. Next time, instead o' shadin' yore ear I'll graze it. Now where's Blakely?"

"I dunno," replied Block in a choked tone of voice.

"Well, maybe yuh don't, maybe yuh don't. Ain't he at the ranch no more?"

"I ain't been to no ranch."

"I didn't say yuh had, did I?" mildly reproved Loudon. "But now that yuh've brought it up, where did yuh pick up Shorty Simms?"

"What do yuh mean?"

"Oh, I'll explain to yuh. I always do that. Habit I got. Yuh see, Block,

yest'day after you an' the Sheriff o' Sunset had a few words yuh left town. To-day in comes Shorty Simms an' kills the sheriff—shoots him in the back, which is natural for a killer like Shorty.

"Well, Block, between the time of yore ridin' away yest'day an' the murder o' the sheriff to-day a fellah on a hoss like yores would just about have time to ride to the 88 ranch an' back. O' course the fellah wouldn't have time for pickin' posies on the way, but he could make it by steady ridin'. Think hard now, Block, think hard. Ain't it just possible yuh rid over to the 88?"

"No, —— yuh, I didn't!"

"No? Well, now, ain't that curious? I shore thought yuh did. Telescope, I think I see a couple o' hosses in Block's corral. Would yuh mind ridin' herd on this bunch while I go out an' look at 'em?"

Loudon went out into the street. Far down the street a group of men had gathered. Otherwise the street was deserted. Even Bill Lainey had disappeared.

Loudon stopped and stared at the distant figures. They made no hostile motions, but appeared to hold converse with each other. One detached himself from the group and came toward Loudon. He saw that it was his friend, Mike Flynn, the one-legged proprietor of the Blue Pigeon Store. The red-headed Irishman, his mouth a-grin from ear to ear, halted in front of Loudon and stretched out his hamlike paw.

"H'are yuh, Tom, me lad," he said, giving Loudon's hand a terrific grip. "I'm glad to see yuh, an' that's the truth. Others are not so glad, I'm thinkin'." He peered through the doorway. "I thought so. 'T's all right, Tommy, me an' me friends is with yuh heart an' soul. Though Farewell don't look it they's a few solid min like meself in the place who are all for law an' order an' a peaceful life. But they ain't enough of us, djuh see, to get all we want to once.

"Still, we can do somethin', so, Tommy, me lad, go as far as yuh like with Block an' his constituents yuh got inside. Put 'em over the jumps. Me an' me frinds will see that they's no attemp'ts made at a riscue. We will that. Be aisy. If yuh have a chance come to the Blue Pigeon. Not a word. Not a word. I know yu're busy."

Mike Flynn returned whence he came. Loudon was considerably relieved by what the Irishman had said. For only ten of the men who had been in the Happy Heart were in Block's shack, and the absence of the others had given him much food for thought. He hastened to inspect the horses in the corral. Within three minutes he had resumed his seat on Block's table.

"Course I ain't doubtin' yore word, Block," he observed, "but one o' them hosses is yore black, an' the other hoss is a gray pony branded 88 an' packin' a saddle with Shorty Simms's name stamped on the front o' the cantle. Both hosses look like they'd been rode fast an' far. Well, Shorty's dead, anyway. You yellow pup, yuh didn't have nerve enough to shoot it out with the sheriff yore own self! Yuh had to go get one o' Blakely's killers to do yore dirty work for yuh."

"Wat you say, Tom?" queried Laguerre. "Keel heem un tak hees hair, huh?"

"It'd shore improve him a lot. I got a plan, Telescope. Just wait a shake. Block, where's Rufe Cutting an' what happened to my hoss Ranger?"

"I dunno nothin' about Cutting," mumbled Block.

Instantly Loudon's six-shooter cracked. With a yelp of pain Block leaped a yard high and clapped a hand to his head.

"Up with them hands!" rapped out Loudon. "Up with 'em!"

Block, shaking like a cedar branch in a breeze, obeyed. From a ragged gash

in the Darwinian tubercle of his right ear blood trickled down his neck.

"Block," said Loudon in his gentlest tone, "I wish yuh'd give me some information about Rufe. I'll ask yuh again, an' this time if yuh don't answer I'll ventilate yore left ear, an' I'll use one o' these guns on the floor here. Yuh got to make allowances for ragged work. I won't know the gun like I do my own, an' I may make more of a shot than I mean to. Yuh can't tell."

He drew a six-shooter from one of the dropped holsters, and cocked it.

"Where's Rufe Cutting an' my hoss Ranger?" continued Loudon.

"I dunno! I tell yuh I dunno!" squealed the desperate sheriff.

One of the two guns in Loudon's hands spoke twice. Block fell to his knees, his hands gripping his head.

"Get up!" shouted Loudon. "Get up! It's only yore ear again. I used my own gun after all!"

Then, both what he had undergone at the hands of Block and the loss of his pet suddenly overwhelming him, he leaped at the crouching sheriff and kicked him.

"You —— murderer!" he gritted through his teeth.

"Where's my hoss? Where is he? —— yore soul! What did Rufe do to him? Tell me, or by —— I'll beat yuh to death here an' now!"

And with his wire-bound Mexican quirt Loudon proceeded savagely to lash the sheriff. Loudon was a strong man. He struck with all his might. The double thongs bit through vest and flannel shirt and raised raw welts on the flesh.

The sheriff writhed around and flung himself blindly at his torturer. But

Loudon kicked the sheriff in the chest and hurled him, a groaning heap, into his corner. Nor did he cease to thrash him with the quirt. Between blows he bawled demands for news of his horse. Loudon felt sure that Ranger was dead, but he wished to clinch the fact.

"He's gone! Oh, my Gawd! He's gone south!" screamed Block, unable to withhold utterance another second.

Loudon held the quirt poised over his shoulder.

"Yuh mean Rufe Cutting?" he inquired.

"Both of 'em! Rufe an' the hoss! They're both gone!"

"Yuh mean Rufe has took my hoss away?"

"Yes! Yes! Don't hit me with that again."

Loudon did not know whether to believe the sheriff. It was more than possible that Block was lying to escape further punishment. Loudon stared at him. He made an ugly picture lying there on the floor, his face a network of red welts. His shirt was dabbled and stained with the blood from his wounded ears.

"I was goin' to give yuh a chance," said Loudon, slowly. "I was aimin' to give yuh yore gun an' let yuh shoot it out with me. But I can't do that now. Yuh ain't in no shape for shootin'. It'd be like murder to down yuh, an' I ain't goin' to practise murder even on a dog like you. I'm kind o' sorry I feel that way about it. Yuh don't deserve to live a minute."

"You keel heem," put in Laguerre. "She try for keel you een de Ben'. Or I keel heem. I don't care. So she die, dat's enough."

"Can't be did, Telescope."

"I tell you, my frien', you let heem go, she mak plenty trouble."

"We've got to risk that. Yuh can't murder a man, Telescope. Yuh just can't."

Laguerre shrugged expressive shoulders and said no more. It was Loudon's business. He was boss of the round-up.

"Yuh see how it is, Block," observed Loudon. "I can't down yuh now, but next time we meet it's shoot on sight. Next time yuh see Blakely tell him I expected to meet him here in Farewell. I don't guess he'll come now. Still, on the off chance that he does, me an' my friend will stay till sunset. Telescope, I feel sort o' empty. Guess I'll go in the back room an' rustle some chuck."

While Loudon and Laguerre were eating, the sheriff fainted. The strain of standing upright combined with the rough handling he had received had proved too much for him. Laguerre threw the contents of the water bucket over the sheriff.

When the sheriff recovered consciousness Loudon gave the nine citizens permission to sit on the floor. And they sat down stiffly.

Slowly the long hours passed. Occasionally Loudon walked to the door and looked up and down the street. Apparently Farewell dozed.

But it was far from being asleep. Here and there, leaning against the house walls in attitudes of ease, were men. These men were posted in pairs, and Loudon saw Mike Flynn stumping from one couple to another. One pair was posted across the street from the sheriff's shack. The first time Loudon appeared in the doorway these two nodded, and one waved his arm in friendly fashion. There were only twelve in all of these sentinels, but their positions had been chosen with strategic wisdom. Any attempt at a rescue would be disastrous to the rescuers.

"Well," said Loudon when the sun was near its setting, "we might as well be movin', Telescope."

"Mabbeso our hosses been rustle'," suggested Laguerre.

"If they are we'll get 'em back. Our friends here'll fix that up O.K."

The friends glared sullenly. They wanted blood, and lots of it. They had been stuck up and reviled, two of them had been wounded, and their self-respect had been grievously shattered. Vengeance would be very sweet. They wished for it with all the power of very evil hearts.

Loudon gathered up all the cartridge-belts and six-shooters and strung them together. He slung the bundle over his shoulder and addressed his captives.

"You fellahs stand on yore feet. Yo're goin' down street with us. Telescope, I'll wait for 'em outside. Send 'em out, will yuh."

Loudon stepped into the street. One by one the men came out and were lined up two by two in the middle of the street.

The last man was the sheriff. He did not shamble, and he did not keep his eyes on the ground in the manner of a broken man. It was evident that the virtue which passed with him for courage had returned. Even as Captain Burr had remarked, Sheriff Block was not as other men. He was a snake. Nothing but the bullet that killed him could have any effect upon his reptilian nature. This Loudon realized to the full.

"I'm watchin' yuh, Block," he said. "My hand ain't none shaky yet, even if I have been holdin' a gun on yuh all day."

Block shot him a venomous side glance and then looked straight ahead.

"Git along, boys," ordered Loudon. "We'll be right behind yuh."

With Loudon and Laguerre marching on the right and left flank rear respectively the procession trailed down the street till it arrived opposite Bill Lainey's hotel. There, in obedience to Loudon's sharp command, it halted. While Laguerre guarded the prisoners Loudon went to the corral. He found Lainey sitting on a wagon-box beside the gate, a double-barrelled shotgun across his knees. Lainey was excessively wide awake.

"Did somebody come a-lookin' in at our hosses?" drawled Loudon.

"Somebody did," wheezed Lainey. "Somebody near had both of 'em out the gate, but I had this Greener handy, an he faded. By ——! I'd shore admire to see any tin-horn rustle hosses out o' my corral. They're fed an' watered, Tom, an' my wife's done——"

"Yes, Mr. Loudon," interrupted Mrs. Lainey, sticking her lean head out of the kitchen window. "I knowed yuh wouldn't have no time to eat, so I just rolled up some canned tomatters an' canned peaches an' some beans an' some bacon an' a little jerked beef in yore slickers. Ain't it hot? My land! I'm most roasted to death. How'd yuh like it up no'th?"

"Fine, Mis' Lainey, fine," replied Loudon. "I'm obliged to yuh, ma'am. I hope next time I'm in town I won't be so rushed an' I'll have time to stay awhile an' eat a reg'lar dinner. I tell yuh, ma'am, I ain't forgot yore cookin'."

"Aw, you go 'long!" Mrs. Lainey giggled with pleasure and withdrew her head.

"Bill," said Loudon, "yo're a jim-hickey, an' I won't forget it. Let's see—four feeds, two dinners. How much?"

"Nothin', Tom, nothin' a-tall. Not this trip. It's on the house. This is the first time I ever had a real chance to pay yuh back for what yuh done for my kid.

Don't say nothin', now. Tom, I kind o' guess Farewell is due to roll over soon. Me an' Mike Flynn an' Piney Jackson, the blacksmith, an' a few o' the boys are gettin' a heap tired o' Block an' his little ways."

"I thought Piney was a friend o' Block's."

"He was, but Block ain't paid for his last eight shoein's, an' Piney can't collect, an' now he ain't got a bit o' use for the sheriff. Some day soon there's goin' to be a battle. Downin' the Sheriff o' Sunset just about put the hat on the climax. Folks'll take us for a gang o' murderers. Well, I'm ready. Got this Greener an' a bufler gun an' four hundred cartridges. Oh, I'm ready, you bet!"

Loudon, leading the two horses, rejoined his comrade. The animals were fractious, yet Loudon and Laguerre swung into their saddles without losing for an instant the magic of the drop.

"We got here without no trouble," Loudon observed in a loud tone. "We're goin' back the way we came. We'll hope that nobody turns loose any artillery from the sidewalk. If they do you fellahs won't live a minute."

No shots disturbed the almost pastoral peace of Farewell as prisoners and guards retraced their steps. Opposite the sheriff's shack the convoy began to lag.

"Keep a-goin'," admonished Loudon. "We don't like to part with yuh just yet."

The prisoners were driven to where a tall spruce grew beside the Paradise Bend trail, three miles from Farewell.

"Yuh can stop here," said Loudon. "We'll drop yore guns an' belts a couple o' miles farther on. We're goin' back to the Bend, an' we'll tell the boys what a rattlin' reception yuh give me an' my friend. If yuh see Sam Blakely, Block,

don't forget to tell him I was a heap disappointed not to find him to-day. So long, sports, yo're the easiest bunch o' longhorns I ever seen."

Loudon laughed in the sheriff's blood-caked face, and set spurs to his horse.

"How far we go, huh?" queried Laguerre, when a fold in the ground concealed the tall spruce.

"About four mile. There's a draw runnin' southeast. We'll ride down that. We'd ought to be at the Cross-in-a-box round two o'clock. We could turn off right after we dump this assortment o' cannons. They won't follow us to see whether I told 'em the truth or not. They'll just keep right on believin' we're a-headin' for the Bend hot-foot."

"I guess dey weel. Say, my frien', why deed'n you geet dat warran' from de sher'f un mak heem eat eet? I would, me."

"I don't want to let on I know anythin' about the warrant. Block wants to spring it nice an' easy. All right—let him."

Between two and three in the morning they dismounted in front of the Cross-in-a-box ranch house. Loudon pushed open the front door and walked in. He closed the door and set his back against it.

"Hey, Jack!" he called. "Wake up!"

"Who's there?" came in the incisive voice of Richie, accompanied by a double click.

"It's me—Tom Loudon. I want to see yuh a minute."

"That's good hearin'. I'll be right out. Light the lamp, will yuh, Tom?"

Tousle-headed Jack Richie brisked into the dim circle of lamplight and

gripped his friend's hand. He was unfeignedly glad to see Loudon.

"C'mon where it's light," invited Richie. "What yuh standin' by the door for? I'll turn the lamp up."

"No, yuh won't. Don't touch the lamp, Jack. There's plenty o' light for my business. I'm standin' here 'cause I don't want nobody to know I come here to-night—nobody but you an' Ramsay."

"I see," said Richie. "Want a hoss?"

"No, ours'll do. Yeah, I've got a friend with me. I can't bring him in. Got to be movin' right quick. I just stopped to know could I borrow Johnny Ramsay for a while. It's on account o' the 88 outfit."

"Yuh shore can. The 88, huh? Well, I wish yuh luck. When yuh need any more help, let me know."

"Thanks, Jack. I knowed I could count on yuh."

"I'll get Johnny right away."

"No, to-morrow 'll do. There's somethin' I want Johnny to do first. I'd like him to ride over to the Bar S an' tell Chuck Morgan that if he feels like makin' a change there's a job waitin' for him at the Flyin' M. I hate to take one of his men away from Old Salt, but it's root hog or die. I need another man, an' Chuck'll just fill the bill."

"Lemme fix it up. I can borrow Chuck for yuh. Old Salt'll listen to me. No, I won't have to tell him nothin' about yore business. Leave it to me."

"All right. That's better'n takin' Chuck away from him. Yuh needn't mention no name, but yuh can guarantee to Old Salt that Chuck's wages will be paid while he's off, o' course. Yuh can tell Chuck on the side that Scotty Mackenzie

will do the payin'."

"Scotty, huh? I did hear how he lost a bunch o' hosses. How many—two hundred, wasn't it?"

"One hundred. But that's enough."

"Yuh don't suspect the 88, do yuh? Why, the Flyin' M is two hundred mile north."

"What's two hundred mile to the 88? An' didn't Scotty ride it just to find out whether I was straight or a murderer?"

"He shore did," laughed Richie. "Yuh couldn't blame the old jigger, though. That 88 brand on yore hoss was misleadin' some."

"That hoss o' mine's been stole. Yep, lifted right in the street in Paradise Bend. Rufe Cutting done it."

"I don't remember him. Is he anybody special besides a hoss thief?"

"Friend o' Blakely's. Block says Rufe's drifted south—him an' the hoss. But Block may be lyin'. Yuh can't tell."

"Did the sheriff give yuh that information free of charge?"

"Not so yuh could notice it. I got it out of him with a quirt, an' I had to drill both his ears, he was that stubborn."

"Drilled both his ears. Well! Well! Yuh'd ought to have killed him."

"I know it. He went an' got Shorty Simms to kill the Sheriff o' Sunset."

"What?"

"Shore. It was thisaway."

Loudon related the circumstances of the sheriff's murder.

"An'," he said in conclusion, "Sunset ain't a-goin' to take it kindly."

"Which I should say not! His friends'll paint for war, that's a cinch. This country's gettin' worse an' worse!"

"No, only the people are, an' maybe we can get some of 'em to change. But I been here too long already. We're ridin' to Marysville, Jack, an' we aim to stay there a couple o' days. Tell Johnny an' Chuck to meet us there, an' tell 'em not to bawl out my name when they see me. It'd be just like the two of 'em to yell her out so yuh could hear it over in the next county. An' I've got plenty of reasons for wishin' to be private."

"Don't worry none. They'll keep their mouths shut. I'll fix that up. I wish yuh luck, Tom. I shore hope yuh get the 88 an' get 'em good. I ain't lost no more cows lately, but I don't like 'em any better for that."

"I wish I could make Old Salt see the light," Loudon grumbled.

"I kind o' think he's comin' round. I seen him a week ago, an' he didn't talk real friendly 'bout the 88. But then, he might have had a bellyache at the time. Old Salt's kind o' odd. Yuh can't always tell what he's thinkin' inside."

CHAPTER XIX

MARYSVILLE

Judge Allison, portly and forty, sat on the porch of the Sunrise Hotel in Marysville. The judicial hands were clasped over the judicial stomach, and the judicial mind was at peace with all mankind. However, a six-shooter in a shoulder-holster nudged the judicial ribs beneath each arm-pit. For mankind is peevish and prone to hold grudges, and in order to secure an uninterrupted term on the bench a judge must be prepared for eventualities.

Tied to the hitching-rail in front of the hotel was a good-looking sorrel horse. It bore the Barred Twin Diamond brand. Judge Allison had bought the horse that very morning. He had bought him from the keeper of the dance hall, Mr. William Archer, who, it seemed, had five others for sale.

Judge Allison was delighted with his bargain. He knew a horse when he saw one, and he felt that he had gotten the best of Archer in the deal. True, as Archer had said, the sorrel was a little footsore, but two or three weeks of light work would cure that.

"Yes," mused the Judge, "a good animal. Sixteen hands high if he's an inch, and I'll bet he can run rings round any cow-pony in the community. By Jove, here come two unusually fine animals!"

Which last remark was called forth by the approach of two big rangy horses, a bay and a gray. The riders, very dusty, both of them, were hard-looking characters. A week's growth of stubble does not add to the appearance of any one. They were tall, lean men, these two, and one of them was exceedingly swarthy.

They dismounted at the hitching-rail, tossed the reins over their horses' heads, and went into the bar. Both, as they passed, glanced casually at the Judge's sorrel.

"Flying Diamond A," said the judge to himself, eying the strangers' mounts. "I don't believe I ever heard of that outfit. It must be a southwestern ranch."

Judge Allison had never heard of his sorrel's brand, the Barred Twin Diamond, either. But then the Judge knew Mr. William Archer, or thought he did, and to question the authenticity of the brand had not entered his head.

The two tall, lean riders would have been greatly pleased had they known of the ease with which the Judge read the brands on their horses' hips. It was a tribute to their skill in hair-branding. Pocket-knives in their hands, they had spent hours in a broiling hot draw altering the Flying M to the Flying Diamond A.

On paper it is ridiculously simple. Merely prolong upward, till they meet, the outer arms of the Flying M, and there you have it, a perfectly good Flying Diamond A. But it is quite another story when one's paper is the hide of a nervous horse which frantically objects to having its hair pinched out.

The strangers happened to be sitting on the porch when the Judge rode homeward on his sore-footed purchase. They noted how tenderly the Barred Twin Diamond sorrel walked, and promptly retired to the bar and made a fast friend of the bartender.

That afternoon the younger of the two hard-looking characters, the gray-eyed man, became exceedingly intoxicated and quarrelled with his swarthy friend who remained quite sober. The friend endeavoured to get him to bed—they had taken a room at the hotel—but the drunken one ran away. For a gentleman overcome by drink he ran remarkably well.

He was discovered an hour later in Mr. Archer's corral, making hysterical endeavours to climb the fence, and bawling that he was being detained against his will and would presently make a sieve of the individual who had hidden the gate. To which end he flourished a six-shooter.

Mr. Archer opened the gate and invited the tippler to come out. But this he refused to do, and offered to fight Mr. Archer rough-and-tumble or with knives on a blanket.

Mr. Archer, with an eye to future patronage, did not send for the marshal. He sent for the man's friend. When the swarthy one appeared, the other immediately sheathed his six-shooter, burst into maudlin tears, and fell on his neck. Weeping bitterly, he was led away to the hotel and to bed.

"I've seen drunks," observed a plump dance-hall girl, "but I never seen one as full as he is that could walk so good. His lick only seems to hit him from the belt up."

"Oh, there's drunks an' drunks," sagely replied Mr. Archer. "When yo're as old as I am, Clarice, yuh won't wonder at nothin' a drunk does."

When the two strangers were in their room with the door shut the younger one lay down on his cot and stuffed the end of a blanket into his mouth. His whole big frame shook with uproarious mirth. He kicked the cot with his boot-toes and bounced up and down. His friend laughed silently.

"Telescope," whispered the man on the bed, when he could open his mouth without yelling, "Telescope, I got it all. They's five hosses in that corral o' Archer's, all of 'em sore-footed an' all branded Barred Twin Diamond. It's done mighty slick, too. Yuh can't hardly tell it ain't the real thing. An' one of 'em, a black with two white stockings, I can swear to like I can to that sorrel the bartender said the Judge bought. I've rode 'em both."

"Sleeck work," breathed Laguerre. "I kin sw'ar to dat sorrel, too. I know heem, me. He ees six year old, un dat red one I see een de corral, I know heem. I bust heem a t'ree-year old. He ees five now. But de odders I not so shore."

"It don't matter. They're all Scotty's horses. That's a cinch."

"I won'er eef de rest back een de heel. W'at you t'ink?"

"No, they ain't. Why, look here, Telescope, them six sorefoots tell the story. If the rustlers was holdin' the band in the hills they'd 'a' kept the six. But they didn't. They turned 'em over to Archer. That shows they was drivin' 'em, an' drivin' 'em some'ers near here. Well, the railroad ain't more'n fifty mile south. Farewell's about sixty mile north. If them rustlers got the band this far their best move would be to keep right on to the railroad an' ship the hosses east or west. An' I'll gamble that's what they've done."

Loudon gazed triumphantly at Laguerre. The latter nodded.

"You are right, you bet," he said, his eyes beginning to glitter. "I hope dem two odder boys geet a move on."

"They ought to pull in to-morrow. To-night, when I'm all sober again, we'll go down to the dance hall an' find out if Archer's made any little out-o'-town trips lately. Telescope, I'm shore enjoyin' this. To-morrow I'm goin' to make the acquaintance o' the Judge an' see what he thinks o' this rustler Loudon who goes spreadin' the Crossed Dumbbell brand up an' down the land. Yes, sir, I got to shake hands with Judge Allison."

Again mirth overcame him, and he had recourse to the blanket.

"I wouldn' go see dat Judge," advised Laguerre, with a dubious shake of the head. "She may not be de damfool. She might have you' face describe', huh. She might see onder de w'iskair. You leave heem 'lone, my frien'."

But Loudon remained firm in his resolve.

Mr. Archer was a good business man. His two fiddlers were excellent, and

his girls were prettier than the average cow-town dance-hall women. Consequently, Mr. Archer's place was popular. When Loudon and Laguerre entered, four full sets were thumping through a polka on the dancing floor, and in the back room two gamblers sat behind their boxes, players two deep bordering the tables.

After a drink at the bar the two watched the faro games awhile. Then Laguerre captured a good-looking brunette and whirled with her into a wild waltz. Loudon singled out a plump little blonde in a short red skirt and a shockingly inadequate waist and invited her to drink with him.

"I seen yuh this mornin'," she confided, planting both elbows on the table. "Yuh shore was packin' a awful load. I wondered how yuh walked at all."

"Oh, I can always walk," said Loudon, modestly. "Liquor never does affect my legs none—only my head an' my arms."

"Different here, dearie. When I'm full it hits me all over. I just go blah. Yuh got to carry me. I can't walk nohow. But I don't tank up much. Bill Archer don't like it. Say, honey, what djuh say to a dance? Don't yuh feel like a waltz or somethin'?"

"I'd rather sit here an' talk to yuh. Besides, my ankle's strained some. Dancin' won't do it no good."

"That's right. Well, buy me another drink then. I want to get forty checks to-night if I can."

"Help yoreself. The bridle's off to you, Mary Jane."

"Call me Clarice. That's my name. Ain't it got a real refined sound? I got it out of a book. The herowine was called that. She drowned herself. Gee, I cried over that book! Read it six times, too. Here's luck, stranger."

"An' lots of it, Ethel. Have another."

"Just for that yuh don't have to call me Clarice. Yuh can call me anythin' yuh like 'cept Maggie. A floozie named that stole ninety-five dollars an' four bits an' a gold watch offen me once. I ain't liked the name since. Well, drown sorrow."

"An' drown her deep. Say, I kind o' like this town. It suits me down to the ground. How's the cattle 'round here?"

"Nothin' to brag of. They's only a few little ranches. They's gold in the Dry Mountains over east a ways. Placers, the claims are. Bill Archer's got a claim some'ers west in the foot-hills o' the Fryin' Pans. He works it quite a lot, but he ain't never had no luck with it yet. Leastwise, he says he ain't."

"Has he been out to it lately?" asked Loudon, carelessly.

The girl did not immediately reply. She stared fixedly into his eyes.

"Stranger," she said, her voice low and hard, "stranger, what do yuh want to know for?"

"Oh, I was just a-wonderin'. Not that I really want to know. I was just talkin'."

"Yuh seem to enjoy talkin' quite a lot."

"I do. Habit I got."

"Well, what do yuh want to know about Bill Archer for?"

"I don't. Say, can't I make a natural remark without yore jumpin' sideways?"

"Remarks is all right. It's yore questions ain't. Stranger, for a feller who's just makin' talk yore eyes are a heap too interested. I been in this business too long

a time not to be able to read a gent's eyes. Yo're a-huntin' for somethin', you are."

"I'm a-huntin' a job—that's all. What do yuh take me for, anyway?"

"I dunno how to take yuh. I——"

"Oh, have another drink an' forget it."

"Shore I'll have another drink, but I dunno as I—— Oh, well, yo're all right, o' course. I'm gettin' foolish, I guess."

Her words did not carry conviction, and certainly she did not cease to watch Loudon with furtive keenness. He strove by means of many drinks and a steady flow of conversation to dispel her suspicions. The girl played up to perfection, yet, when he bade her good-night, it was with the assured belief that she and Archer would have a little talk within five minutes.

The bar was nearly empty when Loudon and Laguerre entered the hotel. Two drunken punchers were sleeping on the floor, a mongrel under a table was vigorously hunting for fleas, and the bartender was languidly arranging bottles on the shelves. Loudon ordered drinks and treated the bartender.

"Any chance o' pickin' up a stake in the Dry Mountains?" hazarded Loudon.

"How?" queried the bartender.

"Placer minin'."

"Well, gents, if yuh don't care how hard yuh work for five dollars a day, the Dry Mountains is the place. I never had no use for a long-tailed shovel myself."

"I heard how them stream-beds was rich."

"Don't yuh believe it, gents. If they was, there wouldn't be no Marysville 'round here. It'd be all over in the Dry Mountains. No, gents, it's like I says. Yuh can get the colour all right enough, but yuh won't make more'n five a day on an average. Who wants to rock a cradle for that?"

"Now ain't that a fright?" complained Loudon. "Chucked up our jobs with the Flyin' Diamond A 'cause we heard how there was gold in the Dry Mountains, an' come all the way up here for nothin'. It shore does beat the devil!"

"It does, stranger, it does. Have one on the house, gents."

"Say," said Loudon, when the liquor was poured, "say, how about east in the foothills o' the Fryin' Pans? Any gold there?"

"Stranger, them Fryin' Pans has been prospected from hell to breakfast an' they ain't showed the colour yet. Take my word for it, gents, an' leave the Fryin' Pans alone. Bill Archer's got a claim some'ers over that way an' he goes traipsin' out to it every so often. Stays quite a while, Bill does, sometimes. Don't know why. He don't never get nothin'."

"How do yuh know?"

"Stranger, I know them hills. I've prospected that country myself. There's no gold in it."

"Maybe Bill Archer don't agree with yuh."

"Likely he don't. He's a hopeful cuss as ever was. Why, gents, only about ten days ago he got back from a two weeks' trip to his claim. A month ago he was gone maybe a week. An' it goes on like that. Why, I'll bet Bill Archer spends mighty nigh four months in every year out on his claim. There's perseverance for yuh, if nothin' else."

The two friends agreed that it was indeed perseverance and retired to their room.

"We've got Archer pretty nigh hog-tied," murmured Loudon as he pulled off his trousers.

"You bet," whispered Laguerre. "Archer she ees w'at you call de fence, huh? De odder feller dey run off de pony un de cow, un Archer she sell dem. Eet ees plain, yes."

"Plain! I guess so. It'll be a cinch."

It might appear cinch-like, but there were more dips and twists in the trail ahead than Loudon and Laguerre dreamed of.

In the morning Loudon strolled down the street and entered the dance hall. Mr. Archer was behind the bar, and he greeted Loudon with grave politeness.

There was nothing in Archer's manner to indicate that Clarice had talked. In perfect amity the two men drank together, and Loudon took his departure. His visit to the dance hall had one result. The depth of Mr. Archer's character had been indicated, if not revealed. Loudon had hoped that he was a hasty person, one given to exploding at half-cock. Such an individual is less difficult to contend with than one that bides his time.

Loudon, not wholly easy in his mind, went in search of Judge Allison. He found him in the Sweet Dreams Saloon telling a funny story to the bartender. The Judge was an approachable person. Loudon had no difficulty in scraping an acquaintance with him. Half-an-hour's conversation disclosed the fact that the Judge's hobby was the horse. Loudon talked horse and its diseases till he felt that his brain was in danger of developing a spavin.

Judge Allison warmed to the young man. Here was a fellow that knew

horses. By Jove, yes! Reluctantly the Judge admitted to himself that Loudon's knowledge of breeding secrets far exceeded his own. In a land where horses are usually bred haphazard such an individual is rare.

The Judge took Loudon home with him in order to pursue his favourite subject to its lair. Which lair was the Judge's office, where, cheek by jowl with "Coke upon Littleton" and Blackstone's ponderous volumes, were books on the horse—war, work, and race.

"It's astonishing, sir," pronounced the Judge, when his negro had brought in a sweating jug of what the Judge called cocktails, "truly astonishing what vile poison is served across our bars. And I say 'vile' with feeling. Why, until I imported my own brands from the East my stomach was perpetually out of order. I very nearly died. Have another? No? Later, then. Well, sir, my name is Allison, Henry B. Allison, Judge of this district. What may I call you, sir?"

"Franklin, Judge, Ben Franklin," replied Loudon, giving the name he had given the landlord of the hotel.

"Any relation of Poor Richard?" twinkled the Judge.

"Who was he?" queried Loudon, blankly.

"A great man, a very great man. He's dead at present."

"He would be. Fella never is appreciated till he shuffles off."

"We live in an unappreciative world, Mr. Franklin. I know. I ought to. A judge is never appreciated, that is, not pleasantly. Why, last year I sentenced Tom Durry for beating his wife, and Mrs. Tom endeavoured to shoot me the day after Tom was sent away. The mental processes of a woman are incomprehensible. Have another cocktail?"

"No more, thanks, Judge. I've had a-plenty. Them cocktail jiggers ain't strong or nothin'. Oh, no! Two or three more of 'em an' I'd go right out an' push the house over. I'm feelin' fine now. Don't want to feel a bit better. Ever go huntin', Judge?"

"No, I don't. I used to. Why?"

"I was just a-wonderin'. Yuh see, me an' my friend are thinkin' o' prospectin' the Fryin' Pans, an' we was a-wonderin' how the game was. Don't want to pack much grub if we can help it."

"The Frying Pans! Why, Bill Archer has a claim there. Never gets anything out of it, though. Works it hard enough, too, or he used to at any rate. Odd. About three weeks ago he told me he was riding out to give it another whirl. Last week, Tuesday, to be exact, I was riding about twenty miles south of here and I met Bill Archer riding north. He seemed quite surprised to meet me. I guess he doesn't work that claim as much as he says."

"That's the way we come north—through that country east of the Blossom trail."

"Oh, I was west of the Blossom trail—fully ten miles west. What? Going already? Why, I haven't had time to ask you about that extraordinary case of ringbone you ran across in Texas. Wait. I'll get a book. I want to show you something."

It was fully an hour before Loudon could tear himself away from Judge Allison. As he crossed the street, a buckboard drawn by two sweating, dust-caked ponies rattled past him and stopped in front of the Judge's office. The driver was a woman swathed in a shapeless duster, her face hidden by a heavy veil, and a wide-brimmed Stetson tied sunbonnet-fashion over her ears. At first glance she was not attractive, and Loudon, absorbed in his own affairs, did not look twice.

"Find out anythin'?" inquired Laguerre, when Loudon met him at the hotel corral.

"I found out that when Archer came back from that claim in the Fryin' Pans he come from the direction o' the railroad. The Judge met him twenty mile south an' ten mile west o' the trail to Blossom. Blossom is almost due south o' here. The next station west is Damson. We'll go to Damson first. C'mon an' eat."

The long table in the dining room was almost deserted. At one end sat Archer and a lanky person in chaps. Loudon caught the lanky gentleman casting sidelong glances in his direction. Archer did not look up from his plate. It was the first meal at which they had met either the dance-hall keeper or his tall friend.

"I wonder," mused Loudon. "I wonder."

After dinner Loudon inquired of the bartender whether it was Archer's custom to eat at the hotel.

"First time he ever ate here to my knowledge," said the bartender. "He's got a home an' a Injun woman to cook."

"It's the little tumble-weeds show how the wind blows," thought Loudon to himself, and sat down in a corner of the barroom and pondered deeply.

A few minutes later he removed his cartridge-belt, hung it on the back of his chair, and composed himself ostensibly to doze. His three-quarter shut eyes, however, missed nothing that went on in the barroom.

Archer and his lanky friend entered and draped themselves over the bar. Loudon, after a brief space of time, arose, stretched, and yawningly stumbled upstairs. He lay down on his cot and smoked one cigarette after another, his

eyes on the ceiling.

Laguerre wandered in, and Loudon uttered cogent sentences in a whisper. Laguerre grinned delightedly. His perverted sense of humour was aroused. Loudon did not smile. What he believed to be impending gave him no pleasure.

"Guess I'll go down," announced Loudon, when an hour had elapsed. "No sense in delayin' too long."

"No," said Laguerre, "no sense een dat."

He followed his friend downstairs.

"Seems to me I took it off in here," Loudon flung back over his shoulder, as though in response to a question. "Shore, there it is."

He walked across the barroom to where his cartridge-belt and six-shooter hung on the back of a chair. He buckled on the belt, Archer and his lanky friend watching him the while.

"How about a little game, gents?" suggested Archer.

In a flash Loudon saw again the barroom of the Happy Heart and the Sheriff of Sunset County surrounded by Block's friends. The wolf-faced man had employed almost those very words. Loudon smiled cheerfully.

"Why, shore," he said, "I'm with yuh. I left my coin upstairs. I'll be right down."

He hurried up to his room, closed the door, and set his back against it. Drawing his six-shooter he flipped out the cylinder. No circle of brass heads and copper primers met his eye. His weapon had been unloaded.

"Fell plumb into it," he muttered without exultation. "The —— murderers!"

He tried the action. Nothing wrong there. Only the cartridges had been juggled. He reloaded hastily from a fresh box of cartridges. He would not trust those in his belt. Heaven only knew how far ahead the gentleman who tampered with his gun had looked.

When Loudon returned to the barroom, Laguerre and the other two men were sitting at a battered little table. The vacant chair was opposite Archer's lanky friend, and the man sitting in that chair would have his back to the door.

"I don't like to sit with my back to the door," stated Loudon.

"Some don't," said the lanky man, shuffling the cards.

"Meanin'?" Loudon cocked an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Oh, nothin'."

"Shore?"

"Positive, stranger, positive."

"That's good. Change seats, will yuh?"

The lanky citizen hesitated. Loudon remained standing, his gray eyes cold and hard. Then slowly the other man arose, circled the table, and sat down. Loudon slid into the vacated chair.

The lanky man dealt. Loudon watched the deft fingers—fingers too deft for the excessively crude exhibition of cheating that occurred almost instantly. To Archer the dealer dealt from the bottom of the pack, and did it clumsily. Hardly the veriest tyro would have so openly bungled the performance. For all that, however, it was done so that Loudon, and not Laguerre, saw the action.

"Where I come from," observed Loudon, softly, "we don't deal from the bottom of the pack."

"Do you say I'm a-dealin' from the bottom of the pack?" loudly demanded the lanky man.

"Just that," replied Loudon, his thumbs hooked in the armholes of his vest.

"Yo're a liar!" roared the lanky one, and reached for his gun.

Archer fell over backwards. Laguerre thrust his chair to one side and leaped the other way.

No one saw Loudon's arm move. Yet, when the lanky man's fingers closed on the butt of his gun, Loudon's six-shooter was in his hand.

The lanky man's six-shooter was half drawn when Loudon's gun spat flame and smoke. The lanky's one's fingers slipped their grip, and his arm jerked backward. Lips writhing with pain, for his right elbow was smashed to bits, the lanky man thrust his left hand under his vest.

"Don't," cautioned Loudon.

The lanky man's hand came slowly away—empty. White as chalk, his left hand clenched round the biceps of his wounded arm, the lanky man swayed to his feet and staggered into the street.

Archer arose awkwardly. His expression was so utterly nonplussed that it would have been laughable had not the situation been so tragic. A thread of gray smoke spiraled upward from the muzzle of Loudon's slanting six-shooter. Laguerre, balanced on his toes, watched the doorway.

Loudon stared at Archer. The latter moved from behind the table and halted. He removed his hat and scratched his head, his eyes on the trail of red

blots leading to the door.

"——!" exclaimed Archer, suddenly, raising his head. "This here kind o' puts a crimp in our game, don't it?"

"That depends on how bad yuh want to play," retorted Loudon. "I'm ready—I'm always ready to learn new tricks."

"I don't just feel like poker now," hedged Archer, ignoring the insult. "I reckon I'll see yuh later maybe."

"Don't strain yoreself reckonin'," advised Loudon.

"I won't. So long, gents."

With an airy wave of his head Bill Archer left the barroom.

Inch by inch the head of the bartender uprose from behind the breastwork of the bar. The barrel of a sawed-off shotgun rose with the head. When Loudon holstered his six-shooter the bartender replaced the sawed-off shotgun on the hooks behind the bar.

"Well, sir, gents," remarked the bartender with an audible sigh of relief, "which I'm never so glad in my life when Skinny Maxson don't pull that derringer. She's a .41 that derringer is, the bar's right in the line o' fire—it ain't none too thick—an' Skinny always shoots wide with a derringer. Gents, the drinks are on the house. What'll yuh have?"

"Yo're a Christian," grinned Loudon. "Is Skinny Maxson anythin' special 'round here?"

"He's a friend o' Bill Archer's," replied the bartender, "an' he's got—I mean he had a reputation. I knowed he was lightning on the draw till I seen you—I

mean till I didn't see yuh pull yore gun. Mr. Franklin, that was shore the best exhibition o' quick drawin' I ever seen, an' I used to work in Dodge City. Good thing yuh was some swift. Skinny don't shoot a six-gun like he does a derringer. No, not for a minute he don't! But look out for Skinny's brother Luke. He's got a worse temper'n Skinny, an' he's a better shot. This nickin' o' Skinny is a heap likely to make him paint for war. He's out o' town just now."

A clatter of running feet was heard in the street. Through the doorway bounded a stocky citizen, blood in his eye, and a shotgun in his hand.

"Where's the —— shot Skinny!" he howled.

"Luke!" cried the bartender, and dived beneath the bar.

"Stranger, I wouldn't do nothin' rash," observed Loudon, squinting along the barrel of his six-shooter. "Drop that shotgun, an' drop her quick."

Loudon's tone was soft, but its menace was not lost on the wild-eyed man. His shotgun thudded on the floor.

"By Gar!" exclaimed Laguerre. "Eet ees——"

"Shut up!" roared Loudon. "I'm seein' just what yo're seein', but there's no call to blat it out!"

For the wild-eyed man was the same individual who had brought the tale of the Hatchet Creek Indian uprising to Farewell. But there was no recognition in the man's eyes, which was not remarkable. Loudon and Laguerre, on that occasion, had been but units in a crowd, and even when they exchanged shots with the fellow the range was too long for features to be noted. Besides, the thick growth of stubble on their faces effectually concealed their identity from any one who did not know them well.

"I'd kind o' elevate my hands, Brother Luke," suggested Loudon. "That's right. Yuh look more ornamental thataway. An' don't shake so much. You ain't half as mad as yo're tryin' to make out. If you was real hot you'd 'a' took a chance an' unhooked that shotgun when yuh come in. Brother Luke, yo're a false alarm—like Skinny."

"Lemme pick up my shotgun, an' I'll show yuh!" clamoured Luke Maxson.

whom the purring voice was driving to a frenzy.

"Yuh lost yore best chance, an' chances don't travel in pairs—like brothers."

"Do somethin'! Do somethin'!" chattered Luke.

"No hurry. Don't get het, Brother Luke. If I was to do somethin' yore valuable an' good-lookin' carcass would be damaged. An' I just ain't got the heart to shoot more than one man a day."

Laguerre laughed outright. From behind the bar came the sound of a snicker hastily stifled.

"You let me go," yapped Luke Maxson, "an' I'll down yuh first chance I git!"

"Good argument against lettin' yuh go."

At the window flanking the door appeared the plump face and shoulders of Judge Allison.

"Why don't yuh do somethin', —— yuh?" yelled Luke Maxson. "I'm gettin' tired holdin' my arms up!"

"Well," said Loudon, "as I told yuh before, though yuh can't seem to get it through yore thick head, it's a mighty boggy ford. I feel just like the fellah swingin' on the wildcat's tail. I want to let go, but I can't. If I was shore none o' yore measly friends would shoot me in the back, I'd let yuh go get yore Winchester an' shoot it out with me in the street at a hundred yards. But the chance o' yore friends bustin' in shore dazzles me."

"None of'em won't move a finger!" Luke hastened to assure Loudon.

The latter looked doubtful. The Judge coughed gently and rubbed his clean-shaven chin.

"Mr. Franklin," said Judge Allison, "should you care to try conclusions with Mr. Maxson in the street, pray accept my assurances that no one will interfere. I speak unofficially, of course. Furthermore, in a wholly unofficial capacity I shall oversee proceedings from the sidewalk. If any one should be so ill-advised as to—— But no one will, no one will."

"You hear what the Judge says?" Loudon cocked an eyebrow at Luke Maxson.

"Shore, shore," said that worthy, feverishly. "Lemme pick up my shotgun, an' in five minutes I'll be back in the middle o' Main Street a-waitin' for yuh."

"Five minutes is too long," observed Loudon. "Make it three. An' yuh needn't touch that shotgun. Yuh can get it later—if yo're able."

"Yo're shore in a hurry!" sneered Luke.

"I always am with a coward an' a liar an' a low-down, baby-robbin' road-agent."

At these words rage almost overwhelmed Luke Maxson. Only the long barrel of that steady six-shooter aimed at his abdomen prevented him from hurling himself barehanded upon his tormentor.

"One moment, gentlemen!" exclaimed the Judge. "In the interest of fair play permit me to settle one or two necessary preliminaries. The street runs approximately north and south so the sun will not favour either of you. Mr. Maxson will take his stand in the middle of the street opposite the dance hall. Mr. Franklin will also post himself in the middle of the street but opposite the hotel. The hotel and dance hall are about a hundred yards apart. I shall be on the sidewalk midway between the two places. At a shot from my revolver you gentlemen will commence firing. And may God have mercy on your souls."

Gentlemen, the three minutes start immediately."

"Git," ordered Loudon.

Luke Maxson fled. The Judge vanished from the window. Loudon hurried upstairs for his rifle. In the street could be heard the voice of Judge Allison booming instructions to the passersby to remove themselves and their ponies from the range of fire.

"Geet heem, by Gar!" enjoined Laguerre, clicking a cartridge into the chamber of his own rifle. "Geet heem! You got to geet heem! I'm behin' you, me! I trus' dat judge feller, but I trus' myself more. Eef anybody jump sideway at you, I geet heem."

"I'll get him," muttered Loudon. "Don't worry none, Telescope. He'll get it like his brother."

"No, no, Tom, no fancy shootin' at de elbow," exclaimed Laguerre in alarm. "Geet hees hair."

"You just wait. C'mon."

CHAPTER XX

THE RAILROAD CORRAL

Loudon stepped out into the street. Laguerre stationed himself on the sidewalk twenty yards in Loudon's rear. Every window and doorway giving a

view of the scene of hostilities was crowded with spectators. On the sidewalk, fifty yards from the hotel, stood Judge Allison, watch in hand.

Loudon stood, one leg thrust slightly forward, his eyes on the dance-hall door, and his cocked rifle in the hollow of his left arm.

Not for an instant did he fear the outcome. His self-confidence was supreme. Oddly enough, his mind refused to dwell on the impending duel. He could think of nothing save the most trivial subjects till Luke Maxson stepped out of the dance-hall doorway.

Then a prickling twitched the skin between Loudon's shoulders, and he experienced a curious species of exhilaration. It reminded him of a long-ago evening in Fort Worth when he had drunk a bottle of champagne. The exhilaration vanished in a breath. Remained a calculating coldness and the pleasing knowledge that Luke Maxson was still excited.

Bang! The Judge's six-shooter spoke. Instantly the upper half of Maxson's figure was hidden by a cloud of smoke.

Loudon worked his Winchester so rapidly that the reports sounded like the roll of an alarm-clock. At his sixth shot, simultaneously with a blow on his left foot that jarred his leg to the knee, he saw Luke Maxson drop his rifle and fall forward on his hands and knees.

Then Maxson jerked his body sidewise and sat up, his back toward Loudon, his hands clutching his legs.

Loudon lowered the hammer of his Winchester and gazed down at his numbed foot. Most of the high heel of his boot had been torn away. Which was the sole result of his opponent's marksmanship. Walking with a decided list to port he unhurriedly crossed to the hotel.

"Gimme a drink!" he called to the bartender. "An' have one yoreself."

"Forgeet me, huh?" chuckled Laguerre, hard on his friend's heels. "Mak' eet t'ree, meestair."

"Say, Tom," Laguerre said, when they were alone. "W'y deed you tell me to shut up, huh?"

"Don't yuh see, Telescope?" replied Loudon. "Here's Bill Archer a heap suspicious of us already. He's guessed we're from the Bend, but if we don't recognize Luke Maxson he won't know what to think. Anyway, I'm gamblin' he won't canter right off an' blat out to the 88 that two fellahs are on their trail. Instead o' doin' that it's likely he'll trail us when we pull our freight, an' try to make shore just what our game is. It's our job to keep him puzzled till everythin's cinched. Then he can do what he likes. It won't make a bit of difference."

"You are right," nodded Laguerre. "You t'ink sleecker dan me dees tam. But w'y you not keel de man, huh?"

"Cause, dead an' buried, he can't be identified. Gripp'd up in bed he'll make a fine Exhibit A for our outfit."

"You was tak' a beeg chance."

"Oh, not so big. He was mad when he came into the saloon, an' I made him a heap madder before I got through talkin' to him. Yuh can't shoot good when yo're mad."

And Loudon grinned at Laguerre.

"You old sun-of-a-gun!" said his friend, admiringly.

That hearty soul, Judge Allison, brought the news half an hour after the

shooting that Luke Maxson was far from being badly wounded. There were, it seemed, three bullets in Luke's right leg and two in his left. And the left leg was broken.

At this last Loudon brightened visibly. He had feared that his adversary had merely sustained flesh wounds. A broken leg, however, would confine the amiable Luke to his bed for a period of weeks, which, for the proper furtherance of Loudon's plans, was greatly to be desired.

Loudon began to fear for the safety of Judge Allison. Marysville was not apt to take kindly the Judge's rather open espousal of the stranger's cause. And Loudon liked Judge Allison. He felt that the Judge was honest; that he had been duped by Block and Archer and the others of their stripe; that, his eyes once opened to the true state of affairs, the Judge would not hesitate to show the malefactors the error of their ways.

In time Loudon intended to take the Judge into his confidence, but that time was not yet. In the meantime, no evil must come to Judge Allison. Loudon took the Judge aside.

"Yore Honour," said he, "ain't yuh just a little too friendly to me an' my friend? We don't have to live here, but you do."

The Judge did not immediately make reply. He put his head on one side and looked at Loudon under his eyebrows.

"In so far as I may," said the Judge at last, "I do what pleases me. Even so, no man in the possession of his senses performs any act without good reason. Regarding my reason for what little I did, I can at present say, '*Cherchez la femme.*' Ah, here comes the stage! I must go to the postoffice. Come to my office in about fifteen minutes, Mr. Franklin, and remember, '*Cherchez la femme.*'"

Loudon stared in perplexity after the retreating figure.

"*Shershay la fam*," he repeated. "Now I'd like to know what that means. *Shershay la fam*. Don't sound like Injun talk. An' he wants to see me in fifteen minutes, does he? Maybe, now, he'll bear watchin' after all."

At the time appointed Loudon entered the Judge's office. The Judge, smoking a long cigar, his feet on the table, waved Loudon to a chair. Loudon unobtrusively hitched his six-shooter into easy drawing position as he sat down. He watched the Judge like a cat. The Judge smiled.

"Friend," he said, "you may relax. It's quite too hot to look for trouble where none is. My intentions are of the friendliest. Quite recently there have come to my ears several important bits of information. Among other interesting facts, I am told that Sheriff Block has sworn in twelve deputies for the purpose of arresting one Thomas Loudon, lately employed by the Bar S ranch, but working at present for the Flying M in Sunset County.

"The man Loudon is alleged to have committed divers crimes, ranging in their heinousness from rustling and assault with murderous intent, to simple assault and battery. Thomas Loudon is supposed to have returned to the Flying M, but the worthy sheriff has in some manner gained the impression that the fugitive is still within the confines of Fort Creek County. Hence the dozen deputies."

The Judge paused. Loudon leaned back in his chair, crossed one leg over the other, and rolled a cigarette. He realized now that Judge Allison was unreservedly his friend.

"It is only a question of time," continued the Judge, "when a batch of these deputies will ride into Marysville. If Thomas Loudon were in Marysville at present, and if I were in his boots, I should saddle my horse and seek refuge in parts unknown—for a time at least. I understand that Thomas Loudon is taking

steps in a certain matter that will, if he is successful, criminally involve large and powerful interests. If Thomas Loudon is a man of parts and wisdom he will take his steps with all speed.

"Evidence is evidence, and the more there is of it, and the stronger it is, and the sooner it is brought forward, the better. For the better information of Thomas Loudon, I will say that, under the laws of this territory, a warrant issued by any judge may be withdrawn by that judge at his discretion. For instance, should Thomas Loudon present evidence tending to discredit the individuals swearing out the warrant against him, said warrant would stand an excellent chance of being immediately annulled. Do I make myself clear?"

"Couldn't be clearer," Loudon said, staring up at the ceiling. "I'll bet Tom Loudon would be a heap grateful to yuh if he could 'a' heard what yuh had to say."

"Doubtless—doubtless. I trust some day to make the gentleman's acquaintance. As I was saying, these deputies may arrive at any time. I do not believe they will come before to-morrow at the earliest. Yet one can never tell. Parts unknown are the best health resorts on earth at times like these."

"Yo're shore whistlin', Judge. I guess we'll pull our freight this afternoon or to-night."

When Loudon informed Laguerre in the privacy of their room of what the Judge had said, the swarthy man slapped his leg and laughed aloud.

"By Gar!" he exclaimed. "By Gar! Dat ees damn fonny!" Then, in a lower tone, he added, "She shore one good feller. Wat was dose word she say—dose fonny word you not know w'at dey mean?"

"Shershay la fam."

"*Cherchez la femme*, huh? Dat ees *Français*. Un it mean, 'Fin' de woman."

"Find the woman! I'd like to know what findin' the woman's got to do with it."

"I dunno. But dat's w'at de word mean, all right. W'at I wan' for know ees how de Judge she know so much 'bout you. She issue de warran', un now she not follow eet up. I do not understan', me."

"Me neither. Lend me yore knife, Telescope, will yuh? Yores is sharper'n mine, an' I got to cut some leather offen my chaps an' make me a new heel. I'll prob'ly have time to make me a whole new pair o' boots an' a saddle before Johnny an' Chuck drift in. Which they're the slowest pair of bandits livin'. We'll give 'em till daylight to-morrow."

Marysville, whatever opinions it may have held concerning the shooting affray, did not openly disapprove. No one came forward to take up the quarrel of the Maxson brothers.

As to Archer, he sat alone in front of his dance hall. Loudon perceived, in the course of a casual stroll, that the man wore his spurs, and that two of the horses in the corral were saddled and bridled. He also noted that the five Barred Twin Diamond horses were still in the corral. He dropped in at the Judge's office.

"Judge," said Loudon, "it just struck me that somebody might want to buy that sorrel hoss o' yores. Yuh see, I've taken quite a fancy to that hoss. I might want to buy him myself some day. Would yuh mind hangin' on to him till I come back from where I'm goin'?"

"So that's how the wind blows?" the Judge said, disgustedly. "I might have known it, too. He was so cheap. Well, Mr. Franklin, you may rest assured that

the sorrel horse remains in my possession until your return. Confound it all, I hate to part with him! He's a good horse."

"He's all that. But maybe, now, yore keepin' him could be arranged if you like him so much. I might not want him so bad after all."

"Corruption, corruption!" exclaimed Judge Allison, violently winking his right eye. "Would you bribe the bench, Mr. Franklin? No, not another word, sir. We are drawing a trifle ahead of our subject. Let me impress upon you the necessity for prompt action. I should make my departure before sunset, if I were you."

"Deputies?"

"As to them, I cannot say," said the Judge, shaking his head, "but I am of the opinion that Marysville will not be a health resort to-night. The wicked walk in the darkness, you know, and not half-an-hour ago I heard something that makes me quite positive that the said evildoers will endeavour to walk to some purpose this evening. I was on the point of sending you warning when you came in."

"Now that's right friendly of yuh, Judge. Me an' my friend won't forget it. But ain't there just some chance o' these here evildoers a-comin' to see you?"

"I have a friend or two here myself. I told you this morning that I stand in no danger. I have had no reason to change my opinion."

"All right, you know best. I guess Telescope an' me'll pull our freight instanter. We won't wait for my friends. When they come would yuh mind tellin' 'em we've gone to Damson?"

"I shall be delighted. Who are your friends?"

"Johnny Ramsay o' the Cross-in-a-box an' Chuck Morgan o' the Bar S."

"Chuck Morgan.' Well do I know the gentleman. I fined him twenty-five dollars last fall for riding his horse into Billy West's saloon, roping the stove, and trying to drag it through the doorway."

"That's Chuck all over! But he didn't tell the Bar S nothin' about a fine."

"The Bar S! What are you talking about? You're from the southern ranges, and I'd advise you not to forget it."

"I won't again," Loudon grinned. "So long, Judge, an' we're obliged to yuh for——"

"For nothing! For nothing! And don't forget that either. Now good-bye and good luck."

Loudon and Laguerre, having paid their bill, left the hotel by the back way. A pale little man, one of the dance-hall fiddlers, was flirting with the cook at the kitchen doorway. When the two men appeared, carrying their saddles and rifles, the pale one glided swiftly around the corner of the house.

"See that?" muttered Loudon, cinching up rapidly.

Laguerre nodded.

"—— 'em!" he whispered. "Hope dey follow! By Gar! I do, me!"

"No use tryin' to slide out past the corral now," said Loudon. "We might as well use Main Street."

They were glad of their decision. They rode into Main Street just in time to see Archer and a companion turning the corner of the dance hall. The Flying M men headed northward. The other two turned their horses' heads to the south.

Where Main Street became the trail, Loudon and Laguerre swung eastward and loped steadily for several miles. When their shadows were long in front of them they climbed the reverse slope of a little hill.

Picketing their horses below the crest they lay down behind an outcrop and watched the back trail. Within thirty minutes appeared two dots on a ridge three miles distant.

"Just like wolves, ain't they?" chuckled Loudon, and wriggled backward.

"We weel bushwhack dem here, huh?" growled Laguerre. "Eet ees de good plass. Dey weel pass on our trail not two hundred yard away. We geet dem easy."

"No, not yet, Telescope," said Loudon. "It ain't necessary, anyhow. We'll ride on till it gets dark. Then we'll light a fire an' vamose, an' leave them holdin' the bag."

"Dat ees all right," Laguerre said, "but keelin' ees better. W'y not? No one weel know. Un eef dey do, w'at mattair? Dey are de teenhorn. We weel have dat all prove'. I say, keel dem, me."

Unconsciously Laguerre fingered the handle of his skinning-knife. Loudon laughed.

"C'mon," he said. "There'll be enough o' killin' before this job's over."

Grumbling, for to him an ambush was such a ridiculously simple method of disposing of two enemies, Laguerre followed his comrade. They rode till night came on. Then, in the middle of a mile-wide flat, where cottonwoods grew beside a tiny creek, they dismounted and loosened cinches.

Hobbled, their bridles off, the horses grazed. Laguerre, still protesting, made

the fire. He built it cunningly, after the Indian manner, with an arrangement of sticks to leeward, so that it would burn slowly and for a long time.

"Dere," said Laguerre, as the flames bit and took hold, "dat weel fool dem. But I t'ink de Winchestair be de bes' t'ing, me."

Loudon laughed as he swung into the saddle. Inwardly he quite agreed with Laguerre in the matter of an ambush. Enemies should be crushed as expeditiously and with as little danger to one's self as possible. Yet Loudon was too humanly normal to practise the doctrine in all its ruthlessness. To do that one must be either a great general or a savage. Laguerre was not abnormal, but he was half Indian, and at times he became wholly one. This was one of the times.

For three miles the two men rode in the creek water, then, guided by the stars, they headed southwest. Toward midnight they came upon a well-marked trail. They knew it could be none other than the trail to Blossom, and they turned into it. Under the spell of the horses' steady walk-along Laguerre became reminiscent.

"De ole tam, dey are wit' me now, my frien'," he observed, "but I do not feel varree bad, me. I am on de move. Un soon dere weel be beeg fight. I have been de scout, I have leeve wit' Enjun, I have hunt all t'ing', un I tell you, Tom, dere ees nothin' like huntin' de man. Dat mak' me feel fine.

"By Gar! w'en I was young man een Blackfoot camp, I was go ovaire to de Assiniboine, un I run off seex pony un geet two scalp. Dat mak' me beeg man wit' de Blackfoot. Dey say my medicine was good, un eet was good, by Gar! Eet was de Winchestair. De Assiniboine w'at chase me was surprise'. Dey not know de Winchestair den. Deir gun all single-shot."

And Laguerre laughed at this recollection of aboriginal amazement. Loudon made no comment. The laughter died in a grunt. The harsh voice resumed:

"By Gar! I bless de luck dat Scotty sen' me wit' you. I mean for queet un go 'way wit' you like I tol' you, un w'en dem horse t'ief run off de pony, I know I can not queet. I can not leave Scotty like dat. She ees good frien' to me. But now I go 'way like I wan', un I work for Scotty, too. I am almost satisfy. But at de las' I weel go 'way. De ole tam, dey weel mak' me. I mus' fin' Pony George before de en'."

"Maybe he's dead," suggested Loudon, moved to cheer up his friend.

"No, she ees not dead. She 'live yet. I can not tell you how I know. I not know how myself, me. But I know. Somew'ere she wait teel I come. Un I weel come. I weel come. Den, w'en hees hair ees on my bridle, I weel be complete satisfy, un I weel work on de ranch steady. I not care w'at happen den."

Laguerre fell silent. His reminiscent mood passed on to his comrade. Since leaving the Bend the days had been so crowded that Loudon had had no time to think of anything save the work in hand. But now the tension had slackened, the old days came back to Loudon, and he thought of the girl he had once loved.

He saw her as he used to see her on their rides together along the Lazy River; he saw her swinging in the hammock on the porch of the Bar S ranch house; he saw her smiling at him from the doorway of the room in the Burr house; and he saw her dark eyes with the hurt look in them, her shaking shoulders when she turned sidewise in the chair and wept, her blindly swaying figure when she stumbled from the room. All these things he saw on the screen of his mind.

Apparently she loved him. But was the semblance the reality? It was all very well for Mrs. Burr to talk about coquettes. Kate Saltoun had played with him, had led him on to propose, and then at the end had with contumely and scorn refused him. His sense of injury had so developed that his brain had come to

dwell more on the contumely and the scorn than it did on the refusal. Mankind is apt to lose sight of the main issue and to magnify minor events till at last the latter completely overshadow the former.

"It ain't possible," reasoned Loudon, "to care for a girl that called yuh a ignorant puncher. Some day she might get mad an' call yuh that again, an' then where'd yuh be? Wouldn't yuh look nice with a wife that knowed she was better'n you an' told yuh so whenever she felt like it?"

"Well, ain't she better'n you?" queried the honest voice of Inner Consciousness.

"She's lots better," admitted Innate Stubbornness. "But she wants to keep still about it."

"An' she's shore a razzle-dazzler in looks, ain't she?" persisted Inner Consciousness. "An' her ways have changed a lot. An' she acts like she likes yuh. Lately yuh been kind o' missin' her some yoreself, ain't yuh? Ain't yuh, huh? Be kind o' nice to have her round right along, wouldn't it? Shore it would. Which bein' so, don't yuh guess Mis' Burr knows what she's talkin' about? Why can't yuh have sense an' take the lady's advice?"

"I won't be drove," insisted Innate Stubbornness. "I won't be drove, an' that's whatever."

Inner Consciousness immediately curled up and went to sleep. It had recognized the futility of arguing with Innate Stubbornness. Loudon wondered why he could no longer think connectedly. He gave up trying.

When day broke, the two men left the trail and rode southward. They were tired, but they did not dare halt. In the middle of the afternoon, emerging from a draw, they saw the rails of the Great Western Railroad a hundred yards ahead. They rode westward along the line and reached Damson an hour later.

Two saloons, a blacksmith shop, three houses, the station, and a water-tank, all huddling on the flanks of a railroad corral, made up the town of Damson. It was an unlovely place, and, to complete the effect, a dust-devil received them with open arms.

"Looks like that corral had been used lately," observed Loudon between coughs.

"Bunch o' pony stay dere tree-four day, two week ago, mabbeso," qualified Laguerre.

They dismounted and entered the cracked and peeling station. The agent, a pale, flat-chested young man, responded readily to Loudon's inquiries.

"Surely," he said, "about two weeks ago"—riffing duplicate way-bills—"yep, on the seventeenth, Bill Archer shipped ninety-five head Barred Twin Diamond hosses to Cram an' Docket in Piegan City. The two Maxson boys an' a feller they called Rudd was with Archer. Nope, no trouble at all. Eastbound? She's five hours late. Due maybe in an hour an' a half if she don't lose some more. Yep, I'll set the board against her."

When Mr. Cram, senior member of the great horse-dealing firm of Cram & Docket, came down to his office in the morning, Tom Loudon was sitting on the office-steps, an expression of keenest satisfaction on his sunburnt, cinder-grimed face. He had spent the greater part of the preceding two hours strolling among the corrals of Cram & Docket. Mr. Cram acknowledged by a curt nod the greeting of Loudon.

"I have all the men I can use," began Mr. Cram, gruffly, "and——"

"T'sall right," interrupted Loudon. "I ain't needin' a job this mornin'. I just

thought I'd tell yuh that there's ninety-five head o' stolen hosses in number eight corral."

"Wha-what?" gasped Mr. Cram.

"Hurts, don't it? Shouldn't wonder. Yes, sir, them ninety-five Barred Twin Diamonds yuh bought offen Bill Archer o' Marysville an' shipped from Damson was all stole from Scotty Mackenzie's Flying M ranch up north near Paradise Bend, in the Dogsoldier valley."

"Why—why—I don't understand," stuttered Mr. Cram. "I don't believe a word of it."

Mr. Cram became suddenly aware of the exceeding chilliness in a pair of gray eyes.

"Meanin' how?" queried Loudon, softly.

"Well, of course, I believe you're acting in good faith, but—— Oh, come inside."

"No need. My train's due in thirty minutes. Scotty Mackenzie an' his foreman Doubleday will come down here an' prove ownership in about a week or so."

"But I've just sold that bunch to a firm in Omaha!"

"Yuh won't ship 'em. Yuh see, I thought o' yore sellin' 'em, an' I woke up Judge Curran at six o'clock an' got him to issue a injunction against yore shippin' 'em. So I guess yuh'll keep 'em till Scotty comes. Yep, I guess yuh will, Mr. Cram. See, here comes the marshal now. Looks like that white paper he's got might be the injunction, don't it?"

CHAPTER XXI

THE JUDGE'S OFFICE

Loudon dropped off the train at Danson into the arms of Johnny Ramsay and Chuck Morgan. Bawling "Pop goes the weasel" they fell upon him, and the three danced upon the platform till a board broke and Chuck Morgan fell down.

Then, in company with the more sedate Laguerre, they jingled across the street to one of the saloons. An hour later they were riding northward, and Loudon was telling Johnny and Chuck what had occurred.

"O' course, just my luck!" complained Johnny. "All done, an' I don't have a look-in. It's all the fault o' that criminal Chuck Morgan. He's out on Cow Creek, an' I have to comb the range for him."

"Yuh act like I done it a-purpose!" barked Chuck. "O' course I knowed yuh was comin'! That's why I went out there. Think I'm a mind-reader?"

"Yuh wouldn't know a mind if yuh seen one," retorted Johnny. "How could yuh, not ownin' such a thing yoreself? Hey! Don't kick my cayuse! He's a orphan. Go on, Tom, tell us some more about Archer."

The four men did not push their mounts. There was no necessity for haste, and they spent the following afternoon playing cards in a draw five miles out of Marysville. When the sun had set, they rode onward.

Separating at the edge of the town, that their arrival might be unremarked, they met in the rear of Judge Allison's corral. Alone, Loudon approached the house on foot. There was a light in the office. He rapped on the door.

"Come in," called the Judge.

Loudon pushed open the door. For an instant he glimpsed the fat figure of the Judge and beyond him the surprised faces of Archer and Sheriff Block, and then Archer's hand flung sidewise and knocked over the lamp. Loudon's gun was out, but he did not dare fire for fear of hitting the Judge.

Bang! A tongue of flame spat past Loudon's chin. Burning powder-grains singed his neck. A hard object smote him violently in the pit of the stomach and knocked the wind out of him. Loudon fell flat on his back. He was dimly conscious that somebody, in leaping over him, stepped on his face, and that a horse had broken into the Judge's office and was kicking the furniture to pieces.

"Whatsa matter? Whatsa matter?" demanded Johnny Ramsay, stooping over the prostrate Loudon. "Who plugged yuh?"

"Ah—ugh—ugh—I—ca—ugh—can't—ugh—can't b-b-breathe!" gasped Loudon.

Johnny began to tear open his friend's shirt.

"Where's he hit?" queried Chuck Morgan, anxiously.

Laguerre squatted down and struck a match. None of the three paid the slightest attention to the terrific uproar in the office of the Judge.

Smash! A table skittered across the room and brought up against the wall.

Thud! Bump! Crash! A chair was resolved into its component parts. The horse lay down on his back and rolled to the accompaniment of falling books,

pictures, and finally the bookcase.

Loudon suddenly regained his breath and, to the astonishment of his comrades who believed him to be seriously wounded, scrambled to his feet and plunged through the doorway into the office. Apparently the horse had gathered a friend unto himself and both animals were striving to kick their way through the wall.

Loudon felt his way across the wreckage and laid hold of a waving leg. He worked his way up that leg, and was kicked three times in the process, but at last his clawing fingers found a throat—a too fat throat. Loudon, realizing his mistake, groped purposefully for thirty seconds, and then closed his hands round another neck and exerted pressure. The tumult stilled.

"Thank you, friend," huskily breathed the Judge's voice. "Choke him some more, but don't quite strangle him."

The Judge wriggled to his feet, and Loudon choked his squirming victim almost into unconsciousness. A match crackled and flared. By its flickering light were revealed Loudon kneeling on Archer's chest, Archer himself purple in the face, the Judge, naked to the waist and panting like a mogul's air-pump, and in the background the intensely interested faces of Loudon's three friends.

Loudon eased the pressure of his fingers, and Archer breathed again. Eyes rolling in fright, the Judge's negro peered around the door-jamb. His master ordered him to fetch a lamp.

"Did the sheriff bring any deputies with him?" inquired Loudon, hopefully.

"Not a deputy," replied the Judge.

"That's tough. Well, maybe we'll find 'em later. No use chasin' the sheriff anyhow."

When the lamp arrived, Loudon introduced his friends. The Judge shook hands cordially, and recalled himself to Chuck Morgan's memory in a way to make that gentleman grin. One could not help but like Judge Allison even if he did fine one on occasion. His pink nakedness covered by a new frock coat, the Judge sat down on the overturned bookcase.

Came a knock then at the door, and the voice of the marshal requesting news of the Judge's welfare. The marshal entered and gazed about him with incurious eyes.

"I thought mebbe yuh was plugged or somethin', Judge," announced the marshal. "Need me?"

"No, Jim," replied the Judge. "A gun went off by accident, and I and my friends have been taking a little exercise. Have you see the sheriff anywhere in the vicinity?"

"I seen him leavin' the vicinity as fast as his hoss could carry him. If he keeps on a-goin' at the rate he was travellin' an' don't stop nowheres he'd ought to be in Canada inside o' two days. Some o' yore friends is outside, Judge. I'll just go tell 'em it's all right. If yuh want me later I'll be right across the street."

The marshal departed to allay popular anxiety. The Judge smiled. Archer raised himself on one elbow.

"No use feelin' for yore gun," said Loudon. "I've got it."

"Well, I'd like to know what yuh wrastled with me for, Judge," complained Archer. "You an' me's always been friends."

"Friendship ceases when any friend upsets my reading-lamp," countered the Judge. "You might have set the house in a blaze. It struck me, you know, that you might possibly leave without explaining your action. Hence my attempt at

forcible restraint. I had no other reason, of course. What other reason could I have?"

Archer looked his unbelief. The Judge winked at Loudon.

"Judge," said Loudon, "in the corrals o' Cram an' Docket in Piegan City are ninety-five head o' Barred Twin Diamond hosses, all stole from the Flyin' M ranch up near Paradise Bend. Them hosses was shipped from Damson by Bill Archer here, the two Maxson boys, an' Rudd o' the 88.

"The five hosses in Archer's corral an' the one he sold you was in the stolen bunch, too. My friend, Telescope Laguerre, an' I can swear to a few of 'em, an' any expert could tell yuh the brand was altered from the Flyin' M. How about it, Archer?"

"Nothin' to say," replied Archer, defiantly.

"This is a serious charge," murmured Judge Allison. "Do you wish me to issue warrants for Archer and the others, Mr. Franklin?"

"Issue all the —— warrants yo're a mind to!" cried Archer. "I ain't talkin'!"

"Now look here," said Loudon. "Turn yore tongue loose an' it won't go so hard with yuh. We know who's behind yuh. What's the use o' yore swingin' for them? Have sense, man. There's enough evidence against yuh to lynch yuh forty times."

"Bring on yore bale o' rope," snarled Archer. "I ain't worryin' none. If yuh know who's behind me, what's the use o' askin' me anythin'?"

The contumacious Archer had the rights of the matter, and Loudon realized it.

"We'd ought to lynch him," declared Johnny Ramsay with conviction.

"Not in Marysville, young man," said the Judge. "Having, as it were, been the means of preventing Archer's escape, I can not allow him to be hung without due process of law. I shall be delighted to commit him to the calaboose. Archer, you confounded rascal, I shall attach your dance hall until I recover the price of that horse you sold me! I thought you were a friend of mine, and you make me a receiver of stolen property. The best animal I ever bought, too. Damit, sir! I shall try you separately for each horse!"

"He might mebbe escape or somethin'," dubiously suggested Chuck Morgan.

"Chuck, the individuals whom I commit do not escape," the Judge said, severely. "And in the case of Archer I shall take particular pains to see that he does not break jail. Have no doubts on that score."

He broke off and cursed Archer with wholly unjudicial fervour.

"Damit!" he continued. "If I hadn't known that the rascal wanted the horse in order to conceal evidence, I'd have sold it back to him to-night. The five Barred Twin Diamond horses in his corral are no longer there. They vanished yesterday. But the sorrel won't vanish. He'll stay right in my corral till wanted. Gentlemen, last night someone endeavoured to steal him. Luckily, I was watching and with a couple of shots I drove off the would-be thief.

"To-night Archer and the sheriff came to me and wished to buy the animal. I refused, and they were endeavouring to persuade me when you entered, Mr. Franklin. By the way, if you run across Thomas Loudon, you might tell him that the warrant issued for him has been quashed. Tell him that I hope to meet him in the not-too-distant future. Understand—in the future? I shall see that the Maxson boys are put under arrest, and a warrant issued for Rudd."

"No need of issuin' one for him," said Loudon.

"Probably not. Still, the legal formalities must be observed."

"Shore, you've got the right idea, Judge. Well, I guess we might as well be weavin' along. So long, Judge."

"So long, Mr. Franklin. So long, gentlemen. On your way out I wish you'd request the marshal to step in."

"Wat ees next?" inquired Laguerre, when the four were in the saddle.

"Somebody's got to go north an' notify Scotty," replied Loudon. "You an' I'll scamper round the Lazy River country an' see what we can dig up."

"I know just what's comin'!" exclaimed Johnny Ramsay, disgustedly. "Chuck an' me are elected to travel while you an' Telescope have all the fun. Yo're glommin' all the excitement. It ain't right."

"Don't fret none, Johnny-jump-up," grinned Loudon. "Yuh'll have all the excitement on the map when yuh come back with Scotty Mackenzie an' the Flyin' M outfit. What do yuh s'pose'll happen when we go bulgin' out to the 88 to grab Rudd? Yuh don't think there won't be a battle, do yuh?"

"There'll be a skirmish, anyway, before we get back," complained Johnny, "or I don't know you."

"I can't help that, can I? If some 88 sport tries to ventilate me an' Telescope we can't wait for you fellahs. So that's the how of it. You an' Chuck slide up to the Flyin' M, an' when yuh come back yuh'll find Telescope an' me waitin' for yuh at the Cross-in-a-box. See?"

"Oh, I see all right," grunted Chuck Morgan. "I see yo're a hawg, Tom. All yuh needs is bristles. Tell yuh what, send Johnny, an' let me stay with you. Don't need two fellers to carry one little message."

"Not on yore life!" cried the indignant Johnny. "Send Chuck by himself. I don't wanna go. I never did like the climate up on the Dogsoldier nohow. It ain't healthy, an' it'll make me sick or somethin'. An' I ain't a-goin' to risk my valuable health for no man. No, sir, little Johnny Ramsay ain't goin' to."

"When yuh see Scotty," said Loudon, totally unmindful of Johnny's tirade, "tell him to bring four or five o' the boys from the Bend besides the reg'lar outfit. He'll want to leave a couple at the ranch. With us four that'll be fifteen or sixteen men."

"We're elected all right, Chuck," said Johnny, mournfully.

"An' don't get rambunctious an' ride through Farewell," pursued Loudon. "Ride round it—ride 'way round it."

"An' be sure an' wrap up our tootsies good an' warm every night," contributed Chuck Morgan.

"An' take our soothin' sirup before each meal," added Johnny Ramsay. "Lend us yore teethin' ring, Tom. I done forgot mine, an' I'm plumb shore that careless infant, Chuck, has lost his."

CHAPTER XXII

UNDER THE RIDGE

At day's end, some forty-eight hours after parting with Johnny Ramsay and

Chuck Morgan, Loudon and Laguerre rode up to the Bar S line-camp on Pack-saddle Creek. Hockling and Red Kane were unsaddling.

"Hello, rustler!" bawled Red Kane. "Don't yuh know no better'n to come fussin' round me when I'm broke? There's two hundred dollars reward for yuh."

"Howdy, Red," said Loudon, grinning. "Hello, Hock. Shake hands with my friend, Mr. Laguerre. Telescope, these here bandits are Mr. Hockling an' Mr. Kane—Red for short. Boys, did I hear yuh say two hundred? Well, that shore makes me plumb ashamed. A thousand ain't none too much for a road-agent like me."

"Yo're right it ain't," laughed Hockling. "But say, Tom, no jokin', yesterday Red an' me cut the trail o' six deputies—yeah, some o' that Farewell crowd—an' they was a-huntin' for yuh. It was them told us about the reward."

"Where'd yuh meet 'em?" questioned Loudon.

"Down on the Lazy. They was ridin' east."

"Headin' for the Cross-in-a-box likely."

"Dunno as they'll go that far. From what they said I guess now they think yo're either on this range or holin' out in the Fryin' Pans. Red asked 'em didn't they need some more men—said six gents didn't seem none too plenteous for the job. They got kind o' mad, but they managed to hawg-tie their tempers. I dunno why."

"No, yuh don't!" chuckled Red Kane. "Why, gents, Hock had his Winchester across his horn an' was a-coverin' 'em the whole time. Quarrelsome feller, that Hock. Just as soon shoot yuh as say howdy."

"I never did like that Farewell gang," Hockling explained, shamefacedly.

"They always remind me o' kyotes, rattlers, an' such. Anyway, Tom, the outfit's with yuh. If them fellers jump yuh, Farewell will see some fun. Speakin' o' fun, Farewell ain't knucklin' to Block any too much lately. Mike Flynn an' Buck Simpson had words the other day, an' Buck got fourteen buckshot in his leg. He was lucky he didn't lose his foot. Buck bein' a plumb favouryte o' the sheriff, Block come bulgin' down to arrest Mike, an' Mike he stood off the sheriff with a Winchester, an' cussed him to hellenback, an' the sheriff didn't arrest him. Now Mike's friends take turns livin' with him, an' keepin' guard while he sleeps. Dunno how it'll end. Be a blowoff mighty soon, I guess."

"You bet," concurred Loudon. "Seen anythin' o' Marvin or Rudd lately?"

"Seen Rudd down near Box Hill two days ago. He was over on our side the creek. Said he was huntin' strays. I knowed he was lyin', an' I watched him from the top o' Box Hill till he went back."

"Yeah," cried Red Kane, busy at the cooking-fire, "Hock come in that night a-cussin' an' a-swearin' 'cause Rudd hadn't given him a chance to finish what Cap'n Burr started. Talked real brutal 'bout Rudd, Hock did. Me, I like the 88 outfit. They're real gentle little woolly lambs, an' some day when I ain't got nothin' else to do I'm goin' over there with a rifle an' make 'em a heap gentler."

"Yuh'll have the chance before a great while," Loudon said, seriously.

"Is it them cows we lost?" inquired Hockling, eagerly.

"I can't tell yuh yet awhile," replied Loudon. "Just keep yore mouths shut an' be ready."

"Them's the pleasantest words I've heard in years," stated Red Kane. "Grub pile, folks. Come an' get it."

Loudon and Laguerre spent the night at the line-camp. In the morning they

recrossed the creek. They rode with Winchesters across their laps, and they took advantage of every bit of cover the broken country afforded. Occasionally they halted, and one or the other went forward on foot and spied out from ridge-crest or knoll-top the line of advance.

By ten o'clock they had worked south to the foot of a plateau-like ridge opposite Box Hill and about a mile from the creek. For the tenth time that morning Loudon dismounted. He sweated up the incline, panted across the broad flat top of the ridge, and plumped himself down behind an outcrop on the edge of the reverse slope. He took off his hat, poked his head past the ragged corner of the rock, and peered down into a wide-bottomed draw.

What he saw was sufficiently amazing. Halfway down the reverse slope, where a stunted pine grew beside a boulder, a man lay on his stomach. Loudon could see only his legs. The branches of the pine concealed the upper half of his body. At the bottom of the slope, outlined against a thicket of red sumac, Kate Saltoun, mounted on a black horse, was talking to the puncher Rudd.

The duplicity of woman! Loudon's first thought was that Kate was at her old-time tricks—flirting again. His second was that she was aiding the 88 in their nefarious practices.

What did it mean? Loudon, his eyes hard as gray flint, edged noiselessly backward, and sat up behind the outcrop. He signalled Laguerre by placing two fingers on his lips, pointing over his shoulder, and holding up one finger twice.

Then Loudon flattened his body at the corner of the outcrop, shoved his rule forward, and covered Rudd. Forefinger on trigger, thumb ready to cock the hammer, he waited.

He could not hear what the two by the sumac bushes were saying. They were fully a hundred yards distant. But it was evident by the way Kate leaned

forward and tapped her saddle-horn that she was very much in earnest. Frequently Rudd shook his head.

Loudon heard a faint rustle at his side. He turned his head. Laguerre was crawling into position.

"Dunno who that sport under the pine is," whispered Loudon. "You take him anyhow, an' I'll take Rudd. Get 'em both without a shot. It's a cinch."

Suddenly, after a decidedly emphatic shake of Rudd's head, Kate's figure straightened, and she struck her saddle-horn a sharp blow with the flat of her hand. It was an action characteristic of Kate. She always employed it when annoyed.

Loudon smiled grimly. With an impatient tug Kate pulled a white object from her saddle-pocket and flung it at Rudd. Then she wheeled her horse on his hindlegs, jumped him ahead, and set off at a tearing run.

Rudd stooped to pick up the fallen white object, and Loudon opened his mouth to bawl a command when he was forestalled by the watcher under the pine.

"Hands up!" came in the unmistakable bellow of Marvin, the 88 range-boss.

Rudd stood up, his hands above his head. The white object lay at his feet. Kate had halted her horse at Marvin's shout. She turned in her saddle and looked back.

"Keep a-goin', lady!" yelled Marvin. "You've done enough, you have! Now you wander, an' be quick about it!"

"Shut up, Marvin!" called Loudon. "You always did talk too much! Keep yore paws up, Rudd! This ain't nothin' like a rescue for yuh!"

"You know dat feller under de tree?" demanded Laguerre.

"Not the way you mean, Telescope," replied Loudon, without removing his eyes from Rudd. "He's one o' Blakely's gang—their range-boss."

"Geet up on you han's un knees, you feller," instantly ordered Laguerre, "un move back slow."

Loudon and Laguerre, covering their men, moved down the slope. The 88 puncher took his defeat well. The light-blue eyes above the snub nose met Loudon's stare serenely.

"Yo're a whizzer," observed Rudd. "I wouldn't play poker with yuh for a clay farm in Arkinsaw. Yo're too lucky."

"It's a habit I've got," said Loudon. "Now if I was you, Rudd, I'd lower my left hand nice an' easy, an' I'd sort o' work my gun-belt down till it slid over my knees, an' I could step out of it."

Rudd complied with this suggestion, and obeyed Loudon's request that he step rearward a few feet and turn his back. Loudon laid down his rifle and drew his six-shooter. With his left hand he scooped the belt to one side and picked up the white object. His eyes told him that it was a lady's knotted handkerchief, and his fingers that three twenty-dollar gold pieces were contained therein. Loudon could not have been more astounded if Rudd had suddenly sprouted two horns and a tail.

"Good-bye one small drunk an' a new saddle," remarked Rudd, hearing the clinking of the gold.

"You —— sneak!" snarled Marvin, approaching under convoy of Laguerre. "I wondered what yuh wanted yore money for this mornin'. I've been watchin' yuh for the last two weeks. I seen yuh a-comin' back from the Bar S range

three days ago. Tryin' to sell us out, huh?"

"Yo're a liar," retorted Rudd, calmly. "I ain't tellin' nothin' I know. Not that I know nothin' nohow."

"By ——, gents!" exclaimed Marvin. "I ask yuh as a favour to just gimme ten minutes barehanded with that tin-horn! Yuh can do what you like with me after."

"We will anyway," said Loudon.

"What is this—a sewin' circle?" Rudd inquired, contemptuously. "T'd as soon die o' snakebite as be talked to death."

"Well, if I was you, Tom Loudon," sneered Marvin, "T'd try to find out just what Rudd means by meetin' Old Salt's girl. There may be more to it than——"

"Come round in front here, Marvin," commanded Loudon. "Come all the way round. That's it. Telescope, will yuh kindly keep an eye on the other party? Now, Marvin, get down on yore knees. Down, yuh yellow pup! Yo're a-crowdin' the Gates Ajar so close yuh can hear 'em creak. Marvin, say, 'I'm ashamed o' myself, an' I take it back, an' I didn't mean nothin' nohow.' Say it out real loud."

Slowly, his face a mask of venomous hate, Marvin repeated the words.

"Get up, an' face round," continued Loudon. "No, not so close to Rudd. About five yards to his right, so yuh won't be tempted."

For the past two minutes Loudon had been aware of Kate's approach. But he did not turn his head even when she halted her horse almost beside him.

"What do you intend doing with these men, Tom?" she inquired, a perceptible pause between the last two words of the sentence.

"Take 'em to the Cross-in-a-box," replied Loudon, without looking at her. "They'll hang—in time."

"May I have a few words alone with you?"

"Shore, ma'am, shore. I guess two won't be too many to watch, Telescope."

He walked at Kate's stirrup till they were out of earshot. Then he turned and looked up into her face in silence. She gazed at him with a curious, questioning look in her black eyes.

She had become thinner since their last meeting. But her lips were as red as ever. She had lost none of her beauty. Loudon raised his hand. In the open palm was the knotted bit of linen containing the gold pieces.

"Here's yore handkerchief," said he.

Kate made no move to take it. Instead, she continued to look at him, a crooked little smile on her lips. Loudon was the first to lower his gaze. His arm dropped to his side.

"You are trying to be disagreeable," said Kate, "and you succeed in being foolish. The money belongs to that man. He earned it, and it's his."

"It won't do him any good," muttered Loudon.

"That depends on how he spends it."

"He'll never live to spend it."

"You're mistaken. You will let him go."

"That's likely, that is!"

"It's quite likely. In fact, it's a certainty. You will let Rudd go."

"Djuh know he's a hoss thief? Do yuh? I've got proof. He's one o' the bunch stole Scotty's hosses. An' yuh want me to let him go?"

"I want you to let him go."

"Well, I won't."

"Listen, Tom, listen to me, please. And take off that horrid, stubborn expression. You look exactly like a sulky child. There, that's much better. Don't smile if it hurts you, grumpy. There, I knew it would come. Oh, it's gone again. Well, anyhow, you haven't forgotten how to smile, and that's a blessing."

"I hate to hurry yuh, but——"

"I know what a bore it is to be compelled to listen to me, but you'll have to endure the ordeal. Listen, if it hadn't been for me Rudd wouldn't have been here to-day, and you wouldn't have caught him."

"We'd have caught him later."

"Perhaps you wouldn't. At any rate, he'd probably have had a chance to make a fight. As it is, he was caught like a rat in a trap. And if it wasn't for me he wouldn't be in the trap."

"Marvin would 'a' got him if we didn't."

"Marvin has nothing to do with it. The fact remains that I am to blame for the capture of Rudd."

"We're much obliged to yuh."

"That isn't worthy of you, Tom"

"I beg yore pardon. I was too quick."

"Granted. You were. Since I am to blame, I can do no less than see that he goes free."

"It's no use a-talkin'. He don't go free."

"He will—if I have to keep you here till doomsday. Listen, did you remark the sublime manner in which Marvin jumped at conclusions? You did. Exactly."

"I knowed he was wrong, o' course."

"Oh, you did. How did you know?"

"Well—I—knowed you."

To Loudon's astonishment Kate burst into shrill laughter.

"For this certificate of good character I thank you," said she, wiping her eyes. "Heavens, if you hadn't made me laugh I'd have gone off into hysterics! What odd minds you men have. Upon my word, I—but no matter. Marvin has no grounds for saying that Rudd tried to sell out the 88. I ought to know. I did my best to pump him, but I couldn't get a word out of him. He is a clam. I worked so hard, too. It made me frightfully angry."

"So that was it! I know yuh was mad about somethin' when yuh banged yore horn thataway an' throwed that handkerchief at him. But—but—say, what was the money for, anyhow?"

"That I cannot tell you. I am endeavouring at the present moment to point out the difference between Marvin and Rudd. Marvin thought—various things, while Rudd, with good reason for believing that I had betrayed him—it really had a suspicious look about it, you know—uttered no word of reproach."

"Well, just 'cause he acts like a white man, is that any reason for lettin' him go?"

"It is my reason for standing by him."

"Well, you've stood by him. Yuh can't do more. An' it ain't done a bit of good."

"If you knew what he did you'd let him go."

"I do know. That's why I'm freezin' to him."

"If you knew what he did for—for me," patiently persisted Kate, "you'd let him go."

"What did he do for you?"

"I can't tell you. Take my word for it, can't you?"

"How can I? He's a hoss thief."

"Listen, he was leaving this country. He's quitting the 88 for good. If he had gOTTen away he'd never have troubled again the Lazy or Dogsoldier ranches. What, then, will you gain by hanging him?"

"It's the law, Kate—the law of the range. You know that."

"Law! Piecrust! If I told you that Rudd had saved my life at the risk of his own would you let him go?"

"An' he took money for that?" Disgust was rampant in Loudon's tone.

"The taking part is neither here nor there. Remains the fact of his saving my life—at the risk of his own, remember. Now will you let him go? Oh, it's no use

asking him," she added, quickly, as Loudon half turned. "He'd probably deny it."

"Oh, what's the use, Kate?" exclaimed Loudon, impatiently. "If Rudd had stolen my hoss or done somethin' special to me I'd let him go to oblige yuh, but it's Scotty has the say. His hosses was stole. An' I'm workin' for Scotty. Can't yuh see how it is?"

"I see that you intend to deny my request," Kate said, her black eyes fixed unwaveringly on Loudon's gray ones.

"I've got to."

"Very well. But suppose we have Rudd come here a moment. I'd like you to hear what he has to say. Oh, I'll make him talk."

"But——"

"Good heavens! You're not going to refuse me this little favour, are you? Rudd's a prisoner. He can't get away. Call him over, and afterward if you intend to hold him there's nothing to prevent you."

Loudon shouted to Laguerre. Rudd, his arms still elevated, walked toward them slowly. Loudon kept him covered. Kate dismounted, leaving the reins on her horse's neck.

"Tom," said she, "give me that money, please. I'd like to give it to him myself."

Loudon handed her the handkerchief. Kate took it and leaned against her horse's shoulder. One arm was flung across the saddle. Rudd halted in front of Loudon. Kate, holding the horse by the bit, stepped forward and stood beside Loudon.

"Here he is," said Loudon. "What——"

With surprising agility Kate whirled, seized Loudon's gun hand in a desperate grip and jammed her thumb down between the hammer and the firing-pin. Her left arm encircled his waist, and her head was twisted sideways under his chin.

"Run!" she panted. "My horse! The money's in the saddle-pocket!"

Kate hardly needed to speak. Rudd had leaped the instant Loudon's six-shooter was deflected. Before the word "saddle-pocket" had passed Kate's lips Rudd was in the black's saddle, and the animal was thundering away at a furious gallop.

Loudon, straining to break the girl's hold without hurting her, failed lamentably. The two struggling figures swayed to and fro, Kate, her teeth set, hanging on like a bulldog. Loudon's muscles suddenly relaxed.

"All right," he said, "he's out o' range."

Kate loosened her hold on his waist and endeavoured to draw back. But her right hand was fast.

"You pulled the trigger, Tom," said she, calmly. "My thumb's caught."

Loudon raised the hammer, and the hand fell away. The tender flesh of the thumb was cruelly torn. The blood dripped on the grass. Loudon holstered his six-shooter.

"Gimme yore hand," ordered Loudon, roughly.

He lifted her hand, placed her thumb to his lips, and sucked the wound clean. Kate watched him in silence. When the edges of the torn flesh were

white and puckery Loudon cut away part of Kate's sleeve and made a bandage of the fabric.

"Guess yuh'll be all right now," he said. "But yuh hadn't ought to 'a' done a fool trick like that. Yuh might 'a' got lockjaw."

"Thank you," Kate said, white-lipped. "Why—why don't you give me fits for—for helping him to escape?"

"It's done," Loudon replied, simply. "Yuh had yore reasons, I guess."

"Yes, I had my reasons." Kate's tone was lifeless.

Without another word they walked back to where Laguerre stood beside the sumac bushes. The half-breed's face was impassive, but there was a slight twinkle in his eye as he threw a quick look at Kate.

"You'll be leavin' us now, Miss Saltoun," observed Loudon, coldly. "I'll get yuh Rudd's pony."

Silently he led forward Rudd's rawboned cayuse and held him while Kate mounted. She settled her feet in the stirrups and picked up the reins. She met Loudon's gaze bravely, but her eyes were shining with unshed tears. Kate slid her tongue across the edges of her dry lips. She tried to speak, but could not. She bowed her head and touched her horse with the spur.

"Where's yore hoss, Marvin?" inquired Loudon.

"Over behind the ridge in a gully," replied Marvin. "What yuh goin' to do with me?"

"Hang yuh—in time."

"What for?"

"For bein' too active, Marvin, an' for pickin' the wrong friends. Yuh see, Marvin, we've caught Bill Archer an' the Maxson boys, an' the hosses are waitin' for Scotty in Cram an' Docket's corrals in Piegan City. Shorty Simms has cashed. Rudd's wandered, an' now we've caught you. We're sort o' whittlin' yuh down like. When Scotty comes we'll get the rest o' yuh. Yuh see, Marvin, yuh hadn't ought to 'a' used Bill Archer. He talks when he's drunk."

To this statement Marvin immediately attributed the most sinister meaning even as Loudon intended he should. Wherein he had failed with Archer, Loudon hoped to succeed with Marvin. The latter, given time to consider impending death might, if promised immunity, talk freely.

"Where we goin' now?" Marvin inquired, uneasily.

"To the Cross-in-a-box," replied Loudon, strapping on Rudd's cartridge-belt—Laguerre was wearing Marvin's. "I want Jack Richie to see yuh. An' don't get talkative about how Rudd got away. I tell yuh flat if yuh open yore mouth about that lady yuh'll be committin' suicide."

"Dat ees right," declared Laguerre, staring fixedly at the range-boss. "Only you un Rudd was here. I see nobody else."

"You hear, Marvin," Loudon said, grimly. "Now stick yore hands behind yore back. I'm goin' to tie 'em up."

Marvin swore—and obeyed.

"Don't tie 'em so tight," he entreated.

"Yo're too slippery to take chances on," retorted Loudon. "Seen the sheriff lately?"

"Ain't seen him for a month."

"Yo're a cheerful liar. Still it don't matter much. He'll be gathered in with the rest o' you murderers when the time comes. They say hangin's an easy death—like drownin'. Djever think of it, Marvin?"

That luckless wight swore again. Black gloom rode his soul.

"All set," announced Loudon. "C'mon."

The three plodded up the slope of the ridge. When Loudon's head rose above the crest he saw to his intense disgust that six horsemen were picturesquely grouped about Brown Jug and the gray. The six were staring in various directions. Two were gazing directly at the three on the ridge. Loudon and Laguerre, forgetting their charge for the moment, flung themselves down.

Promptly the six men tumbled out of their saddles and began to work their Winchesters. Loudon, aiming with care, sent an accurate bullet through a man's leg. Laguerre dropped a horse.

Then Loudon, mindful of the prisoner, looked over his shoulder. Marvin, running like a frightened goat, was half-way to the shelter of the sumacs.

"Blow —— out of'em, Telescope!" cried Loudon. "I got to get Marvin!"

He rolled a few yards down the slope and knelt on one knee. He dropped two bullets in quick succession in front of Marvin's flying feet.

"C'mon back!" he shouted. "The next one goes plumb centre!"

Marvin halted. He returned slowly. Loudon, watching him, became aware that Laguerre's rifle was silent. He glanced quickly around. Laguerre, with his skinning-knife, was picking frantically at a jammed cartridge. At his feet lay Marvin's rifle, the lever half down, and the bullet end of a cartridge protruding from the breech. Both rifles had jammed at the crucial moment.

"Take mine," said Loudon, and tossed his rifle to Laguerre. "Tsall right, Marvin," he continued in a shout, "Keep a-comin'. I can reach yuh with a Colt! What yuh cussin' about, Telescope? Mine jam, too?"

"Dem feller pull out," growled Laguerre. "While I was try for feex my Winchestair dey spleet un go two way. Dey behin' de nex' heel now. Dey tak our pony too, —— 'em."

"Set us afoot, huh? That's nice. Couldn't have a better place to surround us in, neither. No cover this side. Let's cross the draw. There's somethin' that looks like rocks over there."

Driving Marvin ahead of them they crossed the draw at a brisk trot and climbed the opposite slope. Loudon had not been mistaken. There were rocks on the ground beyond. From the edge of the draw the land fell away in a three-mile sweep to the foot of a low hill. Loudon grinned.

"They can't Injun up on us from this side," he said. "We'll stand 'em off all right."

Swiftly they filled in with rocks the space between two fair-sized boulders. Then they tied the wretched Marvin's ankles and rolled him over on his face behind their tiny breastwork.

"I don't think any lead'll come through," said Loudon, cheerfully. "It looks pretty solid. But it would shore be a joke if one o' yore friend's bullets should sift through yuh, Marvin, now wouldn't it?"

Leaving Marvin to discover, if Providence so willed, the point of the joke, Loudon picked up his rifle and lay down behind the smallest boulder. Laguerre, lying on his side, was working at his jammed breech action. He worried the shell out at last, and took his place.

Loudon saw Laguerre put a small pebble in his mouth, and he frowned. Not till then had he realized that he was thirsty. He followed Laguerre's example. Pack-saddle Creek was close by, and it might as well have been distant a hundred miles. The thought made Loudon twice as thirsty, in spite of the pebble rolling under his tongue. Far down the draw, on Loudon's side of the breastwork, two riders appeared.

"Two of 'em in sight, Telescope," said Loudon. "See any?"

"Me, no. What dey do, dem two?"

"They're crossin' the draw. Now they're climbin' up. They think we're still where we was. Hope they come right along."

The two riders galloped toward the boulders. Loudon and Laguerre, flattening their bodies, squeezed close to the rock. When the galloping pair were three quarters of a mile distant they halted.

"They don't just like the looks o' these rocks," observed Loudon. "Well, they give us credit o' havin' sense, anyway."

The two horsemen began to circle. Loudon settled himself and squinted along his sights. His finger dragged on the trigger. It was a long shot, and he missed. The two men immediately separated. One rode back over the way they had come. The other galloped out a mile and a half, then turned and rode parallel to the draw. Opposite the rear of the breastwork he halted.

"How they do think of everythin'," remarked Loudon. "But if they guess we can't get away to-night they can guess again. I dunno what we'll do with Marvin. Yo're puttin' us to a heap o' trouble, you are, Mister Range-Boss. Say, while I think of it, have yuh branded anymore Crossed Dumbbell cows?"

Marvin was silent. The mocking voice continued:

"That was shore well thought of, Marvin, but yuh was whirlin' too wide a loop. Instead o' tryin' to make me out a rustler yuh'd ought to 'a' shot me in the back like yuh did the Sheriff o' Sunset."

"I didn't kill him," grunted the stung Marvin.

"I know yuh didn't. When I said you I meant yore outfit. Shorty Simms pulled the trigger."

"Nothin' to do with me."

"Maybe not. We'll see."

"Yuh can't prove nothin'."

"Keep on a-thinkin' so if it helps yuh any. Yuh'd ought to know, Marvin, that in any gang o' thieves there's always one squealer, sometimes two. In this case,

one's enough, but we don't object to another."

"Oh, ——!" grunted Marvin. "Yuh give me a pain."

"I expect. Yuh see, Marvin, a while back yuh accused Rudd o' sellin' yuh out. Them words have a right innocent sound, ain't they now? Shore they have. Why, yuh blind fool, do yuh s'pose we'd be a-freezin' to yuh this way if we didn't have yuh dead to rights?"

Marvin lay very still. He almost appeared not to breathe.

"Yuh ain't got out o' this hole yet," he muttered.

"We will, don't yuh worry none about that. An' we'll take yuh with us—wherever we go. Think it all over, Marvin. I may have something' to say to yuh later."

Crack! A rifle spoke on the opposite ridge, and a bullet glanced off Loudon's boulder with a discordant whistle. *Crack! Crack! Crack!* Long 45-90 bullets struck the breast-work with sharp splintering sounds, or ripped overhead, humming shrilly.

"Let's work the old game on 'em," suggested Loudon. "There's room for two my side."

Laguerre crawled over and lay down beside Loudon. The latter had aligned several large rocks beside his boulder. Between these rocks the two thrust the barrels of their rifles. One would fire. On the heels of the shot an opposing rifle would spit back. Then the other would fire into the gray of the smoke-cloud.

It is an old trick, well known to the Indian fighters. Loudon and Laguerre employed it for half an hour. Then the enemy bethought themselves of it, and Laguerre returned to the other end of the breastwork with a hole in his hat and

his vest neatly ripped down the back.

The five deputies kept up a dropping fire. But the two behind the breastwork replied infrequently. Ammunition must be conserved. They anticipated brisk work after nightfall. They waited, vigorously chewing pebbles, and becoming thirstier by the minute. The boulders radiated heat like ovens.

The afternoon lengthened. It was nearing five o'clock when Loudon suddenly raised his head.

"Where was that rifle?" he inquired, sharply.

"Ovair yondair—not on de ridge," replied Laguerre.

"That's what I thought. Maybe—there she goes again. Two of'em."

The rifles on the ridge snarled angrily. But no bullets struck the breastwork. The barking of the deputies' rifles became irregular, drifted southward, then ceased altogether. A few minutes later five horsemen and a led horse crossed the draw a mile to the south.

"Two of'em hit bad," declared Loudon.

"Yuh bet yuh," said Laguerre. "See dat! One of'em tumble off."

"They're gettin' him aboard again. Takin' our hosses along, the skunks! There goes our friend out yonder."

The man who had been watching the rear of the breast-work galloped to meet his friends. Five minutes later they all disappeared behind one of the western hills.

"Hey, you fellers!" bawled a voice from the shelter of the ridge across the valley. "Where are yuh, anyway?"

"That's Red Kane," laughed Loudon, and stood up. "Here we are!" he yelled. "C'mon over! We're all right. Not a scratch!"

Red Kane and Hockling, leading three horses, appeared on the crest of the ridge.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SMOKE OF CONFLICT

"Found him hid right pretty in a gully," said Hockling, indicating the extra horse.

"Yore hoss, Marvin?" queried Loudon.

Marvin nodded surlily. He had had his share of the water in the rescuers' canteens, but he was no happier.

"It's shore providential, yore happenin' down this way," said Loudon. "We'll do as much for you some day."

"Yo're welcome, but it ain't none providential, Tom," denied Hockling. "Me an' Red was fixin' the corral fence at the camp when up come Kate Saltoun on the jump an' says how yuh was standin' off six men opposite Box Hill. 'It's them deputies!' shouts Red, an' ropes a hoss immediate. Well, we come along, the three of us, an' that's all. It was long range, but I think I drilled one deputy. Red creased one, too."

"Yuh bet I did!" cried Red Kane. "I seen his arm flop when I fired."

"What's that about the three o' yuh comin' along?" said Loudon.

"Why, Kate, she was with us. She changed her saddle to one of our fresh hosses. She wouldn't quit nohow till she heard yuh say yuh was all right. Then she started off home. Funny, she was ridin' a 88 pony when she struck the line-camp."

"That's odd, but it don't matter none. I'll—I'll see Kate later."

"Shore," said Hockling, wondering at the lack of warmth in Loudon's tone. But Western etiquette forbids the questioning of another's motives.

"Say," remarked Red, hastening to break the awkward silence, "say, won't Block feel happy when he finds we've done ventilated his deputies?"

"Yeah," replied Loudon, "an' the funny part of it is, they ain't got no right to arrest me. That warrant has been pulled in."

"Yuh shore forgot to mention that last night," Hockling said, disgustedly. "Here Red an' me have been pattin' ourselves on the back for runnin' a blazer on the law. An' now, come to find out, them deputies was in the wrong, an' so we only give 'em what was comin' to 'em, anyway."

"Well, you've got a nerve, you have!" exclaimed the indignant Loudon. "Do yuh think I'm goin' round dodgin' warrants so you two jiggers can run blazers on the sheriff?"

He made a swift movement.

"Leggo my legs!" yelled Hockling. "I got on my new pants, an' I don't want the seat tore out! Hey, yuh idjit! Leggo!"

When order was restored and Hockling was tenderly feeling his precious trousers, Loudon suggested that Red, the lightest man, take Marvin's fresh pony and ride to the line-camp for food and two horses.

"Yuh'll have yore work cut out," said Red as he mounted, "to ride them ponies bareback. We ain't even got a extra bridle."

"Don't worry none," Loudon said. "We'll make bridles an' Injun surcingles out o' Marvin's rope, an' we'll toss for his saddle."

"How you feel, Tom?" inquired Laguerre, stretched at ease on a cot in the Cross-in-a-box ranch house.

"Whittled to the chin," replied Loudon. "Which that pony's ridgpole could give odds to a knife-blade on bein' sharp. We might 'a' knowed Marvin would win the toss. His own saddle, too."

"Eet ees de las' piece o' luck she weel have for varree long tam"

"I ain't so shore about that. There's no real evidence to show that Marvin's a rustler. 'Ceptin' Rudd, yuh can't connect any of the 88 outfit with the hoss stealin'. I know they done it. I always knowed Sam Blakely was at the bottom of it, an' I can't prove it yet. Here's you an' I rode from hell to breakfast an' back, an' all we've got to show for it is Archer an' the Maxson boys—an' the hosses, o' course. Unless I find out somethin' more soon an' sudden, I've got to take off Marvin's hobbles. My bluff about Bill Archer's blabbin' ain't workin' with Marvin. He's worried, an' he shows it, but he's standin' pat. I spent a solid hour with him to-night, an' all he does is cuss an' beef about what'll happen when Blakely finds out his range-boss has been kidnapped. It makes me sick!"

Laguerre nodded sympathetically.

"Yuh can't tell me," continued Loudon, "that them Marysville sports was the only ones in the hoss-stealin' deal. If they was, then why was Pete O'Leary expectin' Sam Blakely the day I struck the Bend, an' why was Rufe Cutting planted in the cook's job at the Flyin' M? It all points—so far. An' the rustlin' o' the Bar S an' Cross-in-a-box cattle—there's another mystery. Oh, it's a great life, this here detective business!"

"Tell you w'at, Tom," Laguerre suggested, hopefully, "you un me, huh, we weel bushwhack dees Blak'lee feller. W'at you say?"

"Can't be did, Telescope. We've got to get him the right way, so the folks o' Sunset an' Fort Creek'll know just why he went. That goes for his outfit an' Block an' his deputies, too. They're all in it up to their belts. They've made Fort Creek County what it is—a place where a straight gent has to watch himself an' what's around him all the time. Shorty Simms killed the Sheriff o' Sunset, but Blakely an' the 88 made the killin' possible. Oh, what's the use? I'm goin' to sleep."

But Loudon did not go to sleep at once. He had too much on his mind. From Blakely and the 88 his perplexed thoughts shifted to Kate Saltoun and the sinful ease with which she had made a fool of him; he had trusted her, and she had betrayed him. The daughter of a ranchman, she had flouted the law of the range. Given the thief money, too. It was almost incredible.

Idiot that he was, to believe for an instant that she loved him! Knowing her of old, it served him right, he told himself. He thanked Heaven that he did not love her, had not loved her since that day in the Bar S kitchen.

Quite naturally then, since he was so absolutely sure of himself and his emotions, he wondered how Rudd had had the luck to save Kate's life. He wished that it had been himself, in order that he might have made some small return for services rendered.

She had done a great deal for him at the Bend. She had simplified a most complex situation by bringing to his assistance Hockling and Red Kane. He undoubtedly owed a lot to Kate. Nevertheless, he assured himself that her conduct in the matter of Rudd's escape had squared the account. Of course it had. And he was glad of it. For, under the circumstances, he would never have to see her again. The Spinning Sister heard, and smiled—and Loudon fell asleep.

"Hey, Tom! Wake up!"

It was Jack Richie's voice that shouted, and it was Jack Richie's hand that shook Loudon awake.

"Whatsa matter?" Loudon opened sleepy eyes.

"Yore hoss is outside. Yore hoss, Ranger, an'——"

Jack Richie was almost overset by the blanket-shedding cyclone that whirled out of bed and through the doorway. In front of the ranch house stood Ranger, surrounded by Richie's amazed and conjecturing cowboys. The horse raised his wise head, cocked his ears, and nickered softly at Loudon's approach.

"It's him," grinned Loudon. "It's the little hoss. Well, fellah, you old tiger-eye!"

He rubbed the white spot on Ranger's nose. The horse nipped his fingers with soft lips.

"Found him tied to the post out back o' the wagon shed," volunteered the cook. "I thought I was seein' things."

"Funny he didn't whinner," said Loudon.

"There was a flour-sack over his head," explained the cook. "Here it is."

"That don't tell me nothin'," Loudon said. "Everybody uses Triple X. An' that hackamore could be just anybody's, too. Whoever brought him shore walked in the water."

"It ain't likely possible now," observed Jack Richie, "that Rufe Cutting could 'a' got religion or somethin'."

"It's possible, but it ain't likely," said Loudon. "Well, fellah, c'mon an' get yuh a drink, an' then for the big feed. Yo're gone off a good forty pounds since yuh quit me."

Later, Loudon, in company with Laguerre, visited the post where Ranger had been tied. Laguerre closely scrutinized the ground in the vicinity.

"Hoss she been tied up six-seven hour," observed Laguerre.

"It's 'bout half-past five now. That makes it ten or eleven when he was brought in."

"Bout dat. Feller lead heem een. Hard to read de sign on de grass, but eet look lak de feller not walk good een hees boot—dey too beeg, mabbeso. Come 'long. We weel see w'ere feller she leave hees hoss."

They followed the trail a hundred yards, and then Laguerre knelt down, his eyes searching the grass. He picked up a small stone and held it up. The stone was sharp-cornered. It was stained a dark red.

"Feller she treep un fall on hees han's un knees," explained Laguerre. "Lef han' heet de leetle rock, un geet cut some. Han' bleed on eet."

Laguerre rose, tossed away the stone, and proceeded to follow the trail. He

led the way to a tall pine some three hundred yards distant from the ranch house. Even Loudon's unpractised eyes told him that a horse had stood beneath the pine.

"Here feller she climb een de saddle un go 'way," said Laguerre. "No use follow de trail any more."

They returned to the ranch house, Loudon wondering greatly as to the identity of the mysterious philanthropist. In Cow Land a stolen horse is not returned except under compulsion. While they were at dinner the cook stuck his head through the doorway.

"Bunch o' riders a-comin' from the north," he announced, "an' they're a-comin' some swift."

"Scotty!" exclaimed Loudon, and ran to the window.

"It may be the sheriff," said Jack Richie, hastening to provide himself with a Winchester.

"It's Scotty," Loudon said. "I can tell him a mile off. He's wearin' the same shirt, red sleeve an' all."

The horsemen, some thirty men, rode up at an easy lope. Besides Scotty, Loudon recognized Doubleday, Johnny Ramsay, Chuck Morgan, Swing Tunstall, Giant Morton, Ragsdale, and many others.

"He's brought the whole ranch an' half the Bend," chuckled Loudon, and then swore gently, because he suddenly remembered that there was no evidence against Blakely.

With thirty men the 88 could be shown the error of its ways most effectually. And now the thirty could not be used. What a waste of good material!

The band of horsemen, bawling greetings to the group in the doorway, jingled to a halt. Loudon stepped forward and shook Scotty's proffered hand.

"Yuh've sure done fine," said Scotty. "Yuh've filled out just what I said 'bout opportunity with a big O. I ain't forgettin' it, neither. Besides Rudd now, did yuh run across anythin' touchin' Sam Blakely?"

"Not a thing," Loudon replied, "an it's no use a-goin' out to the 88 lookin' for Rudd. He's sloped. My fault he got away, too."

"That's tough, but it don't matter a heap. Yuh found the hosses an' three o' the thieves, anyway."

"Yeah, but they ain't enough. We'd ought to get 'em all, an' as far's I can see there ain't no chance o' gettin' 'em all."

"Don't yuh care. What yuh've done suits me. I'm satisfied."

"I ain't," said Loudon, "but I s'pose I've got to be. It makes me sick! Lot o' work gone for nothin'. We grabbed the 88 range-boss on the off-chance he'd chatter, but he won't say a word. He's tied up in Jack Richie's storeroom right now."

"Blakely's range-boss, huh? Well, yuh can't hang him without proof, Tom."

"I know that. Got to turn him loose, o' course. Did yuh see anythin' o' Block or Blakely or that gang when yuh come through Farewell?"

"We didn't strike Farewell. We rode here the shortest way. Why—what's the matter?"

For Loudon had ripped out an amazed oath.

"Yore rope!" exclaimed Loudon. "Where did yuh get that rope?"

"Oh, Doubleday found it down by the little corral the mornin' after him an' the boys rode in from the Bend—after them hosses was stole."

"Why didn't yuh tell me about it then? That rope was all I needed. Say, Johnny, djever see this rope before?"

Loudon held up the end of the rope. The holdfast was missing, and the end had been lapped with many turns of whip-cord. Johnny squinted at the rope's end. Jack Richie and the others crowded in.

"Yeah," said Johnny Ramsay, "now I think of it, you an' me was in Mike Flynn's store in Farewell when Sam Blakely bought him that rope with the whip-cord on the end. That was the day you bought a green necktie. Shore, I remember. Blakely he asked Mike what that whip-cord was, an' Mike called it whippin'."

"That's what he did," declared Loudon. "I noticed this whippin' jigger special, an' I can swear to it on a stack o' Bibles a mile high. It's the same rope all right enough."

Scotty observed that he would be consigned to everlasting damnation. Ropes, he had supposed, were all alike.

"I knowed that rope must 'a' belonged to one o' the rustlers," said Scotty, "but it was such a little thing that I'd forgot all about it by the time you got back to the ranch, Tom. Blakely's rope! It's shore amazin'."

"It sort o' settles the cat-hop, don't it?" said Loudon.

"Kind o'," Scotty said, his frosty blue eyes gleaming. "We'll wander over to the 88 right away. I guess now we'll leave Marvin tied up yet awhile. We'll attend to him later. Can yuh give us fresh hosses, Jack?"

"Can I?" exclaimed Jack Richie. "Watch me. I guess me an' a few o' the boys will ride along with yuh. Just to see fair play like."

"Say, Scotty," Loudon said, while the fresh horses were being roped, "I hope Pete O'Leary didn't see you an' the bunch leavin' the Bend."

"He didn't," replied Scotty. "O'Leary ain't with us no more—No, not that way. He's alive yet so far as I know. But he pulled his freight some sudden 'bout two weeks ago. Dunno why."

"Maybe we'll see his smilin' face again pretty soon," Loudon observed, significantly.

"Then here's hopin' it'll be in bad company," said Scotty Mackenzie.

An hour later the band, now numbering forty-two men, started for the 88 ranch. They rode northwest, intending to pass through Farewell, for it was quite possible that Brown Jug and the gray had been taken into town.

As they neared the town a rattle of shots came down the wind. With one accord the forty-two drove the spurs into their mounts.

At the top of the slight rise above the little town they halted. The windows of Bill Laine's hotel and Piney Jackson's blacksmith shop were banked in drifting smoke through which red tongues of flame flashed at intervals. From the cover of boulders, wagon-bodies, the hotel corral, and the Happy Heart Saloon, rule-working citizens were pouring lead into the two places. Farther up the street several Winchesters in the Blue Pigeon Store were replying to the fire from the opposite houses and from a barn in the rear of the store.

"Sheriff Block an' his outfit are lockin' horns with some friends o' mine, I guess," observed Loudon.

"That ain't no way for a sheriff to act," said Scotty. "Let's go down an' tell him so. Friends o' Tom's, boys."

Loudon was already galloping down the slope. In his wake scattered hoofbeats became a thuttering drum. Men whooping and yelling, wild-eyed horses straining every muscle, the charge swept down upon the besiegers of Lainey's Hotel and Jackson's blacksmith shop.

The sheriff's friends broke like a covey of quail. The rifles in the hotel and blacksmith shop chattered like mad. Loudon headed toward the hotel corral to whose shelter two men had retreated. But there was no one there when he reached it.

He rode past the corral and galloped along the rear of the buildings fronting on the street. Twice he was shot at, one bullet nicking his horse's hip. But he contrived to reach the other end of the town unwounded, raced across the street, and dismounted behind the sheriff's corral. His feet had barely touched the ground when Johnny Ramsay, Laguerre, and Chuck Morgan joined him.

"Yuh idjit!" cried Johnny. "Don't yuh know no better'n that? Don't yuh suppose they can hit yuh at twenty yards? Yuh wasn't that far away from the backs of them houses. Ain't yuh got no sense at all?"

"Well, they didn't hit me, an' I notice three other idjits didn't have no better sense. Duck!"

Loudon jerked Johnny down just as a bullet gashed the side of a post above his head. Johnny ceased talking and ran hurriedly to where Chuck Morgan was kneeling behind a corner of the corral. Loudon joined Laguerre at the other corner.

The four were in an excellent position. The corral commanded the rear and one side of the sheriff's shack, the rear of the Happy Heart Saloon, and one

side of the barn in the rear of the Blue Pigeon Store.

A man ran out of the barn. Laguerre's rifle cracked. The man stumbled, dropped, dragged himself to his hands and knees, and then huddled down slackly. Laguerre pumped in another cartridge. The staccato din at the other end of town was increasing. The heavy roars of several buffalo guns punctuated the steady crackling of the Winchesters' whip-like reports. Loudon smiled a slow smile and cuddled his rifle-butt against his shoulder. The world was coming his way at last.

"That sheriff wouldn't 'a' built his corral so solid," observed Loudon, "if he'd looked ahead."

"You bet he wouldn'," said Laguerre. "Dees log ees fine. No bullet come troo dem. Bineby we geet Meestair Block, mebbeso."

"He may be down in the Happy Heart. There ain't been a shot from the shack yet. He's in town all right though. His hoss and seven others are in the corral"—Loudon peered through a crack in the logs—"I can't see the brands. They're turned the wrong way."

"Dere ees a lot o' pony een dat corral down dere," said Laguerre.

"That's behind the Happy Heart Saloon. Lord help 'em if they try to slide out on 'em."

Zing-g-g! A bullet ricocheted from a near-by boulder and hummed above Loudon's hat.

"That came from the barn," said Loudon, firing at a gray smoke-cloud high up on the side of the structure. "They've knocked a hole in a board, I guess. Yep"—as the thinning smoke revealed a black opening—"they have."

Shooting carefully and without haste, Loudon and Laguerre rendered firing from that hole in the barn a case of suicide. From their corner Johnny Ramsay and Chuck Morgan alternately drove questing bullets into the barn and the rear of the Happy Heart Saloon.

The firing from the barn slackened. That from the Happy Heart redoubled in vigour. The glass window-sashes began to fall in tinkling rain on the ground.

"The boys must 'a' gotten into the houses across the street," said Loudon. "They're a-firin' right through the saloon."

"She weel be dark een two hour," Laguerre remarked, irrelevantly.

"I know it. We'll have to finish up before then or they'll getaway. Plug any, Johnny?"

"One," was the laconic reply of that expert with a rifle.

"He didn't, neither!" denied Chuck Morgan. "I got him. Johnny was loadin' his rifle at the time the feller cashed. Johnny couldn't hit a flock o' barn doors flyin' low—not with his rifle."

"Oh, couldn't I, huh?" yapped Johnny Ramsay. "Well, if I hadn't 'a' got him you'd be a-lyin' there right quiet an' peaceful with yore hat over yore face. I hit what I aim at. I ain't been shootin' holes in boards like some people."

At this juncture the door of the Happy Heart opened a crack, and Johnny and Chuck forgot their argument at once. The door closed abruptly, the wood near the knob gashed and scarred by several bullets.

"This is gettin' monotonous," said Loudon. "I thought there'd be action this side an' there ain't a bit. The barn has gone to sleep. I'm goin' into the sheriff's shack. I'll bet it's empty."

"Dey geet you from the barn, mabbeso," Laguerre suggested.

"No, they won't—not if yuh keep 'em away from that hole."

Loudon laid his rifle down, pulled his hat firmly over his ears, and raced toward the shack, jerking out his revolvers as he ran. He reached the door of the shack without a shot having been fired at him.

Fully aware that death might be awaiting his entry, he drove his shoulder against the door and burst it open. He sprang across the doorsill and halted, balancing on the balls of his feet.

Save for the loud ticking of an alarm clock there was no sound in the shack. The door of the front room stood open. Through the doorway Loudon glimpsed a broken chair, and beside it, where the floor sagged, a pool of blood. Loudon walked into the front room.

His eyes beheld a scene of the wildest disorder. There had been a fierce fight in that front room. On his back on the floor, his legs under the table, lay Sheriff Block, his black beard reddened with blood from a wound in the cheek. One hand gripped the butt of a six-shooter and the other clutched the breast of his flannel shirt. There were two bullet-holes in the sheriff's chest.

Across the base of the closed front door lay the body of Rufe Cutting. He had been literally cut to pieces. Only his face was unmarked. Otherwise he was a ghastly object. From beneath his body oozy runlets of blood had centred in the pool beside the chair.

Propped up against the side wall, his legs outstretched, sat a stranger. Blood spotted and stained the floor about him. He had been shot in the legs and the chest. Across his knees lay a Winchester. Beside him a long knife, red from hilt to point, was stuck upright in the floor. The stranger's chin was on his breast, a bloody froth flecked his lips. So positive was Loudon that the stranger was

dead, that, when the man jerked his head upright, he jumped a full yard backward. Weakly the wounded man plucked at his Winchester, his dull eyes fixed on Loudon. The latter ran to his side.

"It's all right, stranger," cried Loudon, "I'm a friend."

At this assurance the stranger ceased in his effort to raise his rifle.

"Water," he muttered, faintly, "water."

In a corner stood a bucket and a tin dipper. Loudon scooped up a dipperful and held it to the man's lips. He drank chokingly, and half the water spilled out on his shirt.

"Stranger," muttered the wounded man, "I'm goin' away from here in a hurry. Pull off my boots, will yuh?"

Loudon complied with the request. The removal of the boots must have cruelly hurt the wounded legs, but the man did not even groan.

"That's better," muttered the man, when the boots were off. "I was hopin' I wouldn't have to cash with 'em on. Who's yore friend?"

Loudon whirled, for his nerves were on edge, and Laguerre, who had entered without a sound, only saved himself from death by a cat-like leap to one side. As it was, Loudon's bullet missed him by the veriest fraction of an inch. Loudon shamefacedly holstered his weapon.

"My fault," said Laguerre, calmly. "Nex' time eet ees bes' I speak firs', yes. Who ees de man?"

"I dunno. Who are yuh, stranger?"

"Did yuh kill him?" queried the stranger, his eyes beginning to film over.

"No, he's a friend, too. Can't yuh tell yore name?"

"I'm Tom Hallaway," was the thickly uttered response. "Rufe Cutting killed my brother Jim an' stole his pinto hoss. Block was with Cutting, an' helped him. I got 'em both. I said I'd cut Rufe's heart out—an' I sure—done it. Gimme a—drink."

But before the water came Tom Hallaway's head fell forward, and he died.

"Look here," said Laguerre, who had looked out of the window opposite Tom Hallaway.

Loudon went to the window. Beneath it two dead men were sprawled. Their stiffened fingers clutched six-shooters.

"They drilled him through the window," said Loudon, "an' he got 'em both."

Laguerre nodded solemnly.

"Brave man, dat Tom Hallaway," said Telescope Laguerre.

CHAPTER XXIV

BEFORE THE DAWN

The window through which Tom Hallaway had been shot faced the open country. The other two windows in the room flanked the front door. The

thoughtful Laguerre had brought Loudon's rifle in with him, and the two men squatted down behind the windows. Their view of Main Street was excellent. They could see almost the whole width of the street from one end of the town to the other.

Far down the street the windows of Lainey's Hotel were smoking like the gunports of an old-time line-o'-battle-ship. The men in the hotel seemed to be devoting all their attention to the Happy Heart and the houses between it and Piney Jackson's blacksmith shop.

Directly opposite the Happy Heart was a small store from which three or four men were directing a heavy fire at the saloon. Next to the store were four empty corrals, and then came some twenty houses, the twentieth opposite the sheriff's shack. Of these houses all save the three nearest the corrals were silent. The folk in these three were carrying on a duel: with the defenders of the Blue Pigeon Store, whose fire had slackened somewhat.

"I hope they haven't got Mike," said Loudon, and drove a bullet close above a window-sill of the middle house of the three. "He's a good fellah." Another bullet nicked the window-sill. "This can't go on forever." Again a bullet shaved the window-sill. "Somethin's going' to pop some soon."

Something did pop. The firing from the Happy Heart culminated in a terrific volley, and then ceased abruptly.

"That's funny," commented Loudon. "It can't—— They're sliding out!"

Which latter remark was called forth by a sudden outburst of firing from the corral where Johnny and Chuck were stationed. Loudon and Laguerre ran out the back way. The former's surmise was correct.

The Happy Heart defenders had broken cover and reached the big corral behind the saloon. Four of them were down in front of the corral gate. They

would never pull trigger again. But the others, in number a score or more, had reached their horses and were pouring out of the gate in the far side of the corral.

Loudon perceived that the two riders in the lead were mounted on Brown Jug and the gray. These two kept together. The remaining fugitives wisely fled separately and in many directions.

Loudon and Laguerre did not fire. The range was a long six hundred yards; too long for accurate shooting when the target is astride a racing horse. Imbued with the same idea they ran to their horses, flipped the reins over their heads, and jammed their Winchesters into the scabbards. Both ponies were galloping at full speed when the two were settled in their saddles.

"We can not catch dem!" cried Laguerre ten minutes later.

"We'll try, anyhow," replied Loudon, standing up in the stirrups to ease his horse, and wishing that he had ridden Ranger.

Half an hour later it became obvious that pursuit was useless. Brown Jug and the gray had the legs of the pursuer's horses. The sun was setting, too. Loudon and Laguerre pulled in their panting mounts.

"Here comes Johnny an' Chuck," said Loudon.

"Could yuh tell who they was?" demanded Johnny, breathlessly.

"They kept their backs to us," Loudon replied, drily, "an' they didn't leave any cards."

"Ain't got no manners at all," said Johnny Ramsay. "They're headin' northwest, an' they shore ought to get there. C'mon back, I'm dry."

"They was seven 88 ponies in Block's corral," said Chuck Morgan. "Let's

hurry. Maybe we can get the owners yet."

"If they ain't already been got," said Johnny Ramsay.

"Seven 88 ponies," repeated Loudon. "I seen 'em in the corral, but I couldn't see the brand. Seven. That means seven o' the outfit was in Farewell, an' more'n seven, maybe. I don't believe Blakely was there. He's been mighty cautious lately. Well, anyhow, countin' seven at Farewell, there'd ought to be eight more at the four line-camps. Rudd's quit, an' Marvin is hogtied, an' Shorty Simms is dead. Accordin' to my figurin', that makes eighteen."

"Yo're well educated, Mr. Loudon," said Johnny Ramsay.

"Correct. Well, then, unless Blakely has hired a bunch o' new men, which ain't likely, then eighteen from twenty-five leaves seven."

"First class in 'rithmetic will take the front seats," remarked Chuck, solemnly. "The little boys mustn't sit with the little girls. Attention, children, an' I'll interduce our new teacher, Mr. Thomas Loudon, a well-known—— Hi! you leave my cayuse alone, Tom! I'm the only gent he allows to spur him. Damitall, he's goin' to buck, an' I'm all het up, anyhow. Oh, ——! I knowed it!"

"Chuck ought to ride pitchers for a livin'," commented Loudon. "Ain't he graceful? Go yuh ten, Telescope, he pulls leather."

Chuck returned to them ten minutes later. He sidled his now thoroughly chastened pony in between Ramsay and Laguerre.

"I'll have nothin' more to do with that long-legged feller on the left o' the line," Chuck announced to the world at large. "He'd just as soon break a friend's neck as not. He ain't got no feelin's whatever. 'Rithmetic's done locoed him."

"As I was sayin' before I was interrupted," said Loudon, grinning, "eighteen from twenty-five leaves seven. There oughtn't to be more'n seven men at the 88 ranch house an' they won't be expectin' callers. There's four of us. What's the answer?"

"Dat ees fine," Laguerre said. "We weel geet dere before Scotty un de odders come. I say we go."

"Me, too," said Johnny Ramsay.

"But no more 'rithmetic!" Chuck Morgan cried in mock alarm. "It shore makes my head ache, 'rithmetic does."

They swung away from Farewell and entered a long draw, dark with the purple shadows of the twilight.

"Wasn't there nobody at all in Block's shack?" queried Johnny Ramsay, rolling a cigarette one-handed.

"Three," replied Loudon.

"Huh!" Johnny Ramsay was startled.

"Two was dead an' the third was dyin'," explained Loudon. "He cashed before we come out. His name was Tom Hallaway. You remember about Cutting stealin' my hoss. Well, him an' Block turned up in Rocket, an' Cutting was ridin' a blaze-face pinto. Come to find out, the pinto belonged to a fellah named Jim Hallaway, an' Jim was found murdered. The way I figure it: Cutting knowed better'n to ride in on my hoss, so he killed Jim an' took his pony, leavin' my hoss back in the hills some'ers. Later he went back after Ranger, an' sloped with the pair.

"This Tom Hallaway was Jim's brother. The two dead men in the shack was

the sheriff an' Cutting. Yeah, Rufe Cutting. It'd been better for him if he'd gone south like the sheriff said he did. Rufe was carved up tremendous, an' Block had been plugged three times. Hallaway got 'em both. Two o' the Farewell boys got him though—through the window. But they didn't live long enough to tell about it. He got them plumb centre. Yep, four was Hallaway's tally. He shore paid 'em in full for killin' Jim."

"Which I should say as much," murmured Chuck Morgan, admiringly. "He was some man!"

"An' he had to die," said Loudon. "All on account o' them measly skunks. Well, by the time Scotty an' that crowd get through with Farewell a Sunday-school won't be in it with the town."

"Yo're whistlin'," said Johnny Ramsay.

The four pushed their mounts almost to the limit of their strength. At three in the morning they dismounted in a grove of singing pines. The 88 ranch buildings were a bare quarter-mile distant.

They tied their horses and went forward on foot. Their plan was to enter the ranch house and take Blakely prisoner while he slept. It was a sufficiently foolhardy proceeding, for Blakely was known to be a light sleeper. And there might be more than seven men in the bunkhouse. If the scheme miscarried, and Blakely should give the alarm—— But the four men wasted little thought on that contingency.

Silently they approached the dark blots that were the ranch buildings. Foot by foot they edged along between the two corrals.

At the blacksmith shop they halted. To the right, and fifty or sixty yards away, was the bunkhouse. In front of them stretched the square shape of the ranch house. Loudon sat down and pulled off his boots. The others followed his

example.

"I'm goin' down to the bunkhouse first," Loudon whispered. "I can tell by the snores, maybe, how many we've got to count in."

Loudon slid silently toward the bunkhouse. In ten minutes he was back.

"Not a snore," he whispered. "I listened at each window. There ain't a sound in that bunkhouse. If the boys are gone, then Blakely's gone. There's only one window open in the ranch house. I didn't hear nothin' there, either."

Leaving Johnny on guard at the back door, Loudon and the others tiptoed around the ranch house. They leaned their rifles against the wall beside the door and Loudon laid his hand on the latch. Slowly he lifted the latch and slowly, very slowly, so that it would not creak, he pushed the door open. Once inside they halted, nerves a-stretch, and ears straining to catch the slightest sound. But there was no sound.

Loudon knew that there were three rooms, an office, and a wide hall in the ranch house, but where Blakely was in the habit of sleeping he did not know. While Laguerre and Chuck Morgan remained in the hall, Loudon felt his way from room to room.

Still hearing no sound he grew bolder and struck a match. He found himself in the office. In company with the others he visited every room in turn. Each was empty. In one room the flickering matchlight revealed a bed. The blankets were tumbled. An alarm clock hanging on a nail above the bed had stopped at half-past two.

"Blakely left yesterday, all right," said Loudon. "It takes a day an' a half for them clocks to run down. Guess he must 'a' been at Farewell after all."

"Maybe some o'the boys got him," Chuck said, hopefully.

"No such luck."

The match went out, and Loudon scratched another, intending to light a lamp.

"Put out that light!" came in a hoarse whisper from the back door.
"Somebody's a-comin'."

Loudon crushed the match between his fingers and hurried to the back door. Laguerre and Chuck crowded against him.

"Listen!" commanded Johnny Ramsay.

"Sounds like two horses," said Loudon.

"Comin' the way we come," growled Loudon.

The hoof-beats, at first a mere ripple of distant sound, grew louder rapidly.

"If they're comin' here, they'll come in the ranch house, shore," said Loudon.
"They're only two, so they must be a couple o' the 88. We'll take 'em alive. Telescope, you an' Chuck take this door, an' Johnny an' I'll take the front. If they come yore way bend yore guns over their heads. Don't shoot till yuh know who they are for shore. It's just possible they may be friends."

Loudon and Johnny Ramsay ran through the hall, brought in the rifles, and closed the front door. Side by side they waited. The door was poorly hung. Through the cracks they could hear quite plainly the drum of the galloping horses' feet. Suddenly a horse neighed shrilly.

"Our hosses in the grove!" breathed Loudon. "I forgot 'em, an'——"

But the approaching horsemen did not halt. As they came closer Loudon

heard one call to the other and the latter make a reply, but the words were unintelligible. They were still talking when they pulled up in front of the ranch-house door.

"I tell yuh I don't like that whinnerin'!" one man was insisting, angrily. "Maybe, now——"

"Gittin' scared, huh!" sneered the other. "It's just some o' our hosses strayed. They often go over in that bunch o' pines. You take the hosses down to the corral, Pete, an' change the saddles, an' I'll rustle us some grub an' the cartridges. Skip now!"

The speaker lifted the door latch. The door crashed open. A boot scuffed the doorsill. The heavy barrel of Loudon's six-shooter smashed down across hat and hair with a crunch.

Even as the man dropped, Loudon, taking no chances, flung his arms around the falling body and went down with it. Johnny Ramsay, drawing his own conclusions as to the friendliness of the man with the horses, sprang through the doorway, his six-shooter spitting. In mid-leap he checked and fell flat, his six-shooter flying from his hand. He was up in an instant and feeling about for his gun. Panting and swearing, for in his ears was the tuckle-tuck-tuckle-tuck of a furiously ridden horse, he found his six-shooter at last.

"Deed you heet heem?" called Laguerre from the doorway.

"I did not," replied Johnny. "Leastwise he didn't wait to tell me. If I hadn't tripped over somebody's feet an' lost my gun in the shuffle, I'd have got him all right. He wasn't five yards away. By the time I got hold o' the gun he was over the hills an' far away, so far as hittin' him was concerned. He left the other sport's hoss, though."

Johnny went up to the horse, a big light-coloured animal, and flung its

dragging rein over a post near the door. The horse stood quietly, legs spread, breathing heavily.

"Hey!" bawled Loudon. "Somebody gimme a match! I can't find mine, an' I want to look at Blakely!"

"So eet ees Blakely," said Laguerre. "I deed not know."

"Shore," Loudon said, "I knowed both voices instanter. The other party was that Paradise Bender named Pete O'Leary. Ain't anybody got a match?"

Johnny Ramsay pulled a match out of his hat-band and scratched it. He held the flame above the face of the unconscious man on the floor.

"It's Blakely. No mistake about that," said Loudon in a tone of great satisfaction.

A guttural exclamation from Laguerre drew Loudon's eyes to the half-breed. Laguerre was bending forward, his eyes fixed in a terrible glare on the face of Blakely. Laguerre's lips writhed open. His teeth were bared to the gum. His countenance was a mask of relentless hate.

"Pony George!" almost whispered Laguerre. "At las'!"

The match went out.

"Gimme them matches!" exclaimed Loudon, harshly.

He went into the office, found a lamp and lit it. He carried it into the hall and placed it on a chair. Laguerre had squatted down on his heels. His eyes, now mere slits, were still fixed on Blakely. Johnny Ramsay and Chuck Morgan covertly watched Laguerre. They did not understand. Laguerre's head pivoted suddenly.

"Dat man ees mine," he said, staring at Loudon.

"Of course. Yuh don't need to say nothin' more, Telescope."

"I weel tell why. Dese odders mus' know. My frien's," the swarthy face with the terrible eyes turned toward Chuck and Johnny, "my frien's, long tam ago, ovair eas' on de Sweetwatair, I know dees man. She was not call Blakely den. Hees name was Taylor—Pony George, dey call heem. Pony George she keel my wife, my leetle Marie. Feeffteen year I have hunt Pony George. Now I have foun' heem. Un I weel keel heem, me."

Johnny and Chuck nodded gravely. The primitive code of the broken lands is bluntly simple. Vengeance was Laguerre's.

CHAPTER XXV

TRAIL'S END

"Shoot me! Hang me! I don't care. Only don't turn me over to that devil there. He'll torture me! For God's sake, don't do it! I'll confess! I'll tell yuh all I ever done. I an' my outfit's been rustling them cows from the Bar S an' the Cross-in-a-box. We've done it for years!

"We used to hold the cows in a blind cañon south o' Smoky Peak till the brands healed. There's more'n a hundred cows there now! They're Hawg Pen an' Cross-in-a-box an' Bar S cows! An' we rustled Scotty Mackenzie's hosses while Skinny Maxson o' Marysville toled yuh away up to Hatchet Creek, an'

'twas me shot Scotty. I'd 'a' done for him only I thought he was dead. An' I sent Rufe Cutting to the Flying M so he could help us when the time come! Pete O'Leary the same way! He was with me to-night. Djuh get him?"

"No, we didn't," replied Loudon. "It's no use a-takin' on thisaway. We trailed the hosses to Piegan City, an' Archer an' the Maxson boys are under arrest. Yuh see how it is. We know all about you an' yore gang. We can't do nothin' for yuh."

"But yuh don't know all I done myself!" Blakely pursued, wildly. "I tell yuh, I'd ought to be hung! I'd ought to be hung ten times over. It was me shot Johnny Ramsay that time he found the dead Bar S cow an' her calf on our range. An' I tried to get you, Loudon, when yuh was snuffin' 'round that ledge on Pack-saddle where we used to throw the cows across. An' I thought up that scheme for makin' yuh out a rustler with them Crossed Dumbbell cows. I done it, I tell yuh! Can't yuh understand? Hang me! Oh, please hang me, gents!"

Blakely, fairly gibbering with fear, crawled on his knees toward Loudon. Blakely's hands were bound behind his back. The drying blood from the scalp wound, inflicted by the barrel of Loudon's six-shooter, had stiffened his black hair into upstanding matted masses. He was a wretched spectacle.

"Loudon! Loudon!" shrunk Blakely. "It was me swore out that warrant for yuh for stealin' the chestnut I sold yuh. I sent the sheriff up the Bend after yuh, an' I'd 'a' hanged yuu sure as —— if I'd ever laid hands on yuh. Now hang me! Hang me quick, an' get it over with!"

"Telescope!" exclaimed Loudon, "I guess we'll go down to the corrals."

When Blakely perceived that there was no hope for him, that his was to be no easy death, he went frantic. Hysteria seized him. He sobbed, laughed, and uttered the most blood-chilling screams, his body thrashing about like a shark in its death-throes.

Laguerre, sitting cross-legged on the floor, had been whetting his skinning-knife on his boot-leg for the past half-hour. Now he held up the knife and thumbed the broad blade.

Loudon and the others, their eyes lowered, passed out of the ranch house into the pale light of dawn. The morning star blazed diamond-bright above the lemon-yellow splendour in the east. A little wind blew past their faces. The air was fresh with the promise of the new day. They drew long, grateful breaths and looked from under their eyebrows at each other.

"I feel sick," Johnny Ramsay said, frankly.

The horse which Johnny had tied to the post had been lying down. It rose with a heave and a plunge and stood blowing and cracking its nostrils.

"Well, if there ain't Telescope's gray," announced Loudon. "So the fellahs we chased out o' Farewell was Blakely an' O'Leary after all. They shore picked the best hosses in the corral when they took Brown Jug an' the gray. No wonder we couldn't catch 'em."

"Yo're right," Johnny and Chuck chorused, loudly.

"Life's a funny thing," Loudon rambled on, speaking quite rapidly. "Here we run our legs off after them two fellahs, an' they turn 'round an' come back to us all prompt an' unexpected. I guess I'll water that hoss an' take his saddle off."

He turned back. The others crawled up on the corral fence.

"Wish I'd thought o' the hoss," grumbled Johnny. "I want somethin' to do."

With shaking fingers he rolled a cigarette and spilled most of the tobacco. The clamour within the ranch house suddenly became louder.

"He shore takes it hard," muttered Chuck Morgan, repressing a shudder with difficulty.

Loudon slid around the corner of the ranch house and joined them on the top rail.

"Thought yuh was goin' to water the hoss," said Chuck.

"Telescope's goin' to use him," said Loudon, and endeavoured to whistle "The Zebra Dun."

"I'm kind o' glad to know who did plug me that time," remarked Johnny.

"I've always knowed who done it," Loudon said. "I dug a forty-five bullet out o' Blakely's swell-fork the day we had the run-in at the Bar S."

"Why didn't yuh tell me?" demanded Johnny.

"The bullet wasn't proof, when yuh come right down to it. No use o' yore lockin' horns with Blakely, anyway. It wouldn't 'a' done no good."

"Well, it don't—— Hellenblazes! Hear him yell!"

Loudon began to swear under his breath. A door banged suddenly. Blakely's insane shrieking abruptly stilled. Soon the three men heard the trample of the gray's feet. Then, beyond the ranch house, appeared Laguerre. He was mounted. Face downward across his lap lay Blakely, gagged with his own holster and silk neckerchief.

Riding at a walk, Laguerre headed toward the grove of singing pines where they had left their horses. When Brown Jug and his double burden disappeared among the trees Loudon drew a long breath.

"I ain't in a bit of a hurry for my hoss," he declared.

"Which I should say not!" Johnny Ramsay exclaimed with fervour.

The sun was an hour high when Laguerre loped out of the grove. He was leading their four horses. They watched him with morbid fascination.

Laguerre rode up to the corral and halted. The gray, hard held, shook his head. On the right cheek-piece of the horse's bridle a black-haired scalp flapped soggily. And Laguerre looked up at the three men on the top rail of the corral.

"No use hangin' round here no more," said Loudon, slipping to the ground. "Might as well mosey over to that blind cañon south of Smoky Peak an' see if them cattle really are there."

Three days later Loudon and his comrades, their horses drooping-headed and heavy-legged, rode into Farewell. Signs of the late skirmish were plentiful. There was not a whole pane of glass in any of the buildings which had served as forts; and doors, facades, and window casings were pock-marked with bullet-holes.

Bill Lainey, consistent always, was dozing under the wooden awning of his hotel. Awakened, the hotelkeeper solemnly shook hands all around, and wheezed that it was a fine day.

"Yeah," said Loudon, "the air round these parts does seem clearer a lot. An' there ain't so many folks on the street, either."

"There won't be for a while," declared Bill Lainey. "We buried twenty-three gents day before yesterday, hanged twelve up the road a piece, an' Scotty an' Jack Richie an' that crowd rubbed out nine o' the boys that slid out o' the

Happy Heart over by Dead Horse Spring."

"How many got away?" inquired Johnny Ramsay.

"Bout twenty—twenty-four maybe," replied the hotel-keeper. "I dunno for shore. But anyhow the 88 outfit is shot full o' holes. Eleven of 'em cashed here in town, an' seven was got outside o' town. The rest made it safe, I guess."

"Was they all here before the riot?" queried Loudon.

"Every last one of 'em, 'ceptin' Rudd an' Marvin. They come in a-huntin' trouble. They've been sore 'count o' Mike Flynn's sassin' the sheriff an' darin' him an' the 88 to lock horns with him. Well, there was a gent in town that day, dunno who he was, but anyhow when Rufe Cutting went into the sheriff's shack the stranger went in, too. Oh, you seen the inside o' the shack, did yuh? Well, it was what the stranger done started things a-rollin'. Two o' the deputies plugged him through the window, an' the rest of us wouldn't stand no such actions as that, so we started. Good thing you gents an' Jack Richie an' the others happened along when yuh did."

"Any of our boys get it?"

"Long Riley an' Masters o' the Cross-in-a-box went out here in town, an' three fellers, Newhall an' Lane o' Paradise Bend, an' Morton o' the Flyin' M, in the battle at Dead Horse. Our tally was more. We lost seven of our best citizens. Four of 'em died right here in my hotel—two in the dinin' room, one at the door, an' one in the kitchen. There's quite a jag o' gents nicked an' creased, but the doc says they'll pull through all right."

"But look here, Bill, has Rufe Cutting been holin' out over at the 88 right along?"

"I dunno how long he's been there, Tom, but anyway he rid in with half-a-

dozen o' the 88 'bout two weeks ago, an' he was with 'em when they all come in for their battle."

"Do yuh remember what Rufe rode for a hoss the first time he come in?"

"Bald-face pinto—both times."

"I was wonderin'," Loudon said. "Yuh see, Bill, Rufe stole my hoss, Ranger, up in Paradise Bend, an' the mornin' o' the fight here the little hoss turns up at the Cross-in-a-box. It ain't none likely Rufe brought him. I'm tryin' to figger out the mystery."

Bill Lainey's fat body shook with laughter. He gripped his sides and panted for breath.

"That explains it," he wheezed, "It was yore hoss that the 88 was fussin' round after."

"What are yuh talkin' about?" demanded Loudon.

"Why, it's thisaway, Tom. When Blakely an' his gang come in they scampered round a-pokin' into every corral in town. Said one o' their hosses had been stole five days before, an' they was out to find the pony an' the thief. I didn't pay no attention, 'cept to see they didn't take one o' my hosses by mistake. Yuh see, I allowed they was lyin' all along an' just huntin' any old excuse to unhook their artillery. Yore hoss! Well, if that ain't rich!"

"It must 'a' been my hoss," averred Loudon, solemnly. "I guess now Rufe might have been anxious to get him back—some."

"Yeah," cut in Johnny Ramsay, "but who stole him from the 88? Guess the mystery's thicker'n ever, Tom."

"Looks like it," agreed Loudon. "Scotty or any of 'em in town now, Bill?"

"Scotty ain't. Him an' the Flyin' M bunch have rode south—Danson, I heard Mike Flynn say. Jack Richie's around some'ers. Here he comes now!"

"Which I'd admire to know where you fellers went," exclaimed Jack Richie, his expression radiating relief. "I was bettin' yuh'd been bushwhacked, but Scotty he said no, yuh was more likely bushwhackin' somebody else, an' yuh'd all turn up like plugged dollars bimeby. By the looks of that led horse Scotty had yuh sized up right. Who'd yuh gather in?"

"Blakely," Loudon replied, quietly.

At this juncture Richie perceived the scalp on the gray's bridle.

"I see," said Jack Richie. "Run across any one else?"

"Fellah named O'Leary—yuh don't know him. He got away. We was at the 88 at the time. Before—before Blakely went he confessed to a whole raft o' stuff. We followed up part o' what he said, an' over in a blind cañon south o' Smoky Peak in the Three Sisters we found a hundred an' twenty Bar S, Hawg Pen, an' Cross-in-a-box cows. Some o' the brands was almost healed up, but there was enough that wasn't to tell where they come from. There wasn't nobody with 'em."

"Smoky Peak, huh? Hoofs shaved down or burnt, I s'pose?"

"Shore," replied Loudon. "They won't be able to travel under two weeks."

"Did yuh tell Old Salt the joyful news—about the cattle?"

"I'll send him word."

"He's down at Mike Flynn's now. Go an' make him happy. But first c'mon in an' irrigate. If we don't do it right away, Johnny'll faint. His tongue's hangin' out

a foot."

"I'll see yuh later. Guess I'd better tell Old Salt first."

Loudon did not feel particularly cheerful as he walked down the street. His work was done—and well done. His enemies were either no more or journeying swiftly elsewhere. There was peace for honest men in Fort Creek County at last. But there was no peace in Loudon's soul. He was learning for the second time that forgetfulness comes not easily.

In front of the Blue Pigeon Store a buckboard was standing. The rangy vehicle and its team of ponies struck a chord in Loudon's memory. He had seen them recently. Where? Idly speculating he entered the Blue Pigeon. Mr. Saltoun, leaning over the counter, was talking to Mike Flynn.

"Ahoy, Tom!" bawled Mike Flynn, thrusting forward his immense, freckled paw. "Tis a sight for sore eyes yuh are. Glory be, but I thought yuh kilt!"

Mr. Saltoun's greeting was less enthusiastic, but it was friendly. Loudon sat down on the counter and swung his spurred heels.

"About them cattle now," he said, slowly, his eyes fixed on Mr. Saltoun's face. "Yuh remember I told yuh the 88 was rustlin' 'em?"

Mr. Saltoun nodded.

"I remember," he said.

"Them cows," Loudon said, distinctly, "are in a blind cañon south o' Smoky Peak, along with Hawg Pen an' Cross-in-a-box cattle. That is, most of 'em are there. The rest yuh'll have to pick out o' the 88 herds, I guess."

Mr. Saltoun's capitulation was instant and handsome.

"You was right!" he exclaimed, warmly, holding out his hand. "You was right all along. I shore had the 88 sized up wrong, an"—vigorously pumping Loudon's hand—"any time yuh want a job there's one at the Bar S for yuh. Er—my range-boss is quittin' next month. What do yuh say to his job?"

"Now that's right good hearin'," replied Loudon, "but I guess I'll stick with the Flyin' M awhile. Thank yuh just as much."

"Oh, that's all right. Any time yuh feel like makin' a change, why, yuh know where to come. Well, I got to be goin'. Say, Mike, don't forget to order them collars for my buckboard harness."

"I shore won't. So long."

Loudon followed Mr. Saltoun into the street.

"Somethin' new, ain't it?" queried Loudon, flicking a thumb at the buckboard.

"Yep," said Mr. Saltoun, gathering up the reins. "Bought team an' all a month ago from Shaner o' the Three Bars. Got 'em cheap, too. Judge Allison was after 'em, but I got 'em. Huh? What did yuh say?"

"I didn't say nothin'. Somethin' stuck in my throat."

"Well, so long, take care o' yoreself."

Loudon stood on the sidewalk gazing after the dwindling buckboard. The mention of Judge Allison had supplied the missing link in the chain of memory. He had seen that buckboard, driven by a woman, stop in front of Judge Allison's house in Marysville, and it had been considerably less than a month ago. Hence, at the time, the buckboard must have been the property of Mr. Saltoun. And Kate was the only woman at the Bar S ranch. The driver must

have been Kate Saltoun. Why should Kate call on Judge Allison?

"*Shershay la fam*," the Judge had remarked in explanation of his rather bald espousal of Loudon's cause. "Find the woman." Did the Judge mean Kate, and was it because of Kate's visit that he had become Loudon's friend? It did not seem possible, yet, if Kate actually had pleaded for him it was on a par with her actions in Paradise Bend.

Loudon, pondering the matter, stood quite still, utterly oblivious to his surroundings. The sudden creak of wheels, a familiar tinny clatter, and a cry of "Howdy, Tom!" brought him out of his reverie with a jerk.

He looked up. Ten feet distant, Captain Burr, on the seat of his peddler's wagon, regarded him with kindly eyes.

"Wool-gatherin', Tom?" said the lean little man, wagglng his white beard. "I'm surprised."

"I was just a-wonderin'," Loudon said, forcing a smile, "whether we was goin' to have rain or not."

"I shouldn't wondeh," Captain Burr remarked, gravely staring up into the cloudless blue. "I've just come in from the Bah S," he continued, abruptly. "Miss Kate has two right soah hands. Right soah, they ah. I sold the young lady some salve."

"Sore hands," repeated Loudon, stupidly. "Why, I—I heard her thumb was tore pretty bad, but—but I didn't know both of'em was hurt."

"Yes, the young lady's right thumb has quite a gash, and the palm of her left hand is cut all the way across. She cut it on a rock!"

"Cut it on a rock?"

"On a rock! She was comin' out o' the house, she said, an' she tripped on the doorsill an' fell. Fell pretty heavy, Her hand was sho' cut quite a lot."

"Lemme get this straight. Yuh say she cut her left hand, an' on a rock?"

"Yes, Tom," said Captain Burr, gently, "that's the how of it."

Without a word Loudon turned and fled. Five minutes later, mounted on Bill Lainey's toughest horse, he was galloping out of Farewell. Two miles out he passed Mr. Saltoun. The latter called to him but received no response save a hand-wave.

"Well," observed Mr. Saltoun, "if he's changed his mind about that job, he's shore actin' mighty odd."

Within two hours after leaving Farewell Loudon halted his staggering pony in front of the Bar S ranch house. In the hammock on the porch sat Kate Saltoun. Her face was rather white, and there were dark shadows beneath her black eyes.

Loudon sucked in his breath sharply at the sight of the poor, bandaged hands. Kate sat motionless, her gaze level, her face without expression. Loudon felt like a stranger.

"Kate," he began, "Kate——" and stopped.

"Well," said Kate at last, dropping her eyes.

Released from the spell of that chill stare, Loudon found his tongue.

"I come to have a little talk with yuh," he said. "Yuh see, I've been findin' out things lately. You drove over to Marysville an' talked to Judge Allison on my account, didn't yuh?"

"Who told you?" Kate did not raise her head.

"Nobody told me. But I ain't a fool. I seen the Bar S buckboard in Marysville, an' a woman was drivin', an' the judge said, '*Shershay la fam,*' meanin' 'Find the woman.' Well, yo're the woman all right. I know yuh are. An' that cut left hand yuh didn't get by trippin' over the doorsill like yuh told Cap'n Burr. Yuh got it by fallin' on a rock back o' the Cross-in-a-box ranch house after yuh'd tied Ranger to the post. Yuh can't tell me different.

"Yore cut hand, an' yore knowin' that I'd be at the Cross-in-a-box, an' the way it was done an' all, makes it certain. Yuh gave me my hoss back. An' yuh paid Rudd to get him for yuh. Ranger was at the 88 all right. An' yuh couldn't 'a' got hold o' him 'cept through somebody like Rudd. No wonder yuh stuck by Rudd! It was the only thing yuh could do, 'specially when he'd saved yore life, too."

"He didn't save my life. I thought if I told you that he had, you might let him go. I lied. I'd have told any number of lies to save him. He was a horse thief, and he and Marvin tried to prove you a rustler, but he trusted me. You wouldn't take my word when I asked you to, but Rudd did when he brought me Ranger and I didn't have the full amount I'd promised him. I told him that I'd bring the money three days later in the draw where the sumac bushes grow, and he believed me and he led Ranger all the way to that lonesome spruce grove on Cow Creek where I wanted to keep the horse till I could return him to you. After that I couldn't desert Rudd. I couldn't have lived with myself if I had."

"I know. I should 'a' took yore word, but—well, anyhow, I should 'a' took it an' let it go at that. I owe everythin' to yuh. Yuh took care o' me in Paradise Bend. Yuh worked for me, an' it was yore doin' that, that made findin' Scotty's hosses almost a cinch. Yuh went an' got Hockling an' Red when the deputies jumped us over near Pack-saddle.

"Yuh done it all, you did, an' I'm here to tell yuh I'm a dog, an' I ain't fit to

saddle yore hoss. I can't thank yuh. Thanks don't mean nothin' 'side o' what yuh done for me. But—but how much besides the sixty did yuh pay Rudd? I can settle that, anyhow."

"It doesn't matter in the least," said Kate, her eyes still on the floor.

"It does matter. It matters a lot. I've got to know. I can't——"

"Listen," interrupted Kate, flinging up her head and meeting his gaze squarely, "I'm going to tell you something. Once upon a time you told me you loved me. I treated you very badly. Later I was sorry, and I did everything in my power to make amends. I even told you I loved you. I loved you with all my heart and soul and body. I could have made you happy as no other woman on earth could have made you happy. Well, that's over. I've learned my lesson."

"Kate! Kate! I do love yuh—I do! I do!"

Loudon's hat was under his feet. His long body was trembling.

"You do, do you?" said Kate, her voice icy. "Then perhaps I can make you suffer as you made me suffer. I don't believe I can, but I'll try. I don't love you! Do you understand? I don't love you!"

"Then—then why did yuh go to the Judge? Why did yuh get my hoss? Why——"

"Why? Because I wanted you, if such a thing were possible, to go through life in my debt. You won't forget me now. And I'm glad—glad!"

"Then why did yuh walk in the water if yuh wanted me to know I owed yuh so much? Why did yuh wear boots too big for yuh to make me think it was a man brought Ranger to the Cross-in-a-box? Why did yuh go to Marysville all wrapped up, so nobody'd know yuh? What yuh say don't hang together."

"Doesn't it? I'm sorry. You'd have found out about the Judge and Ranger before a great while. I'd have seen to it that you did. I merely didn't care to have you know about these things at the time."

"I guess I understand," Loudon muttered. "I'll—I'll send yuh Ranger. Yuh've done bought him. He's yores. I'll go now."

"Oh, don't bother about Ranger—— Look out!"

So engrossed had been the two that neither had heard the gallop of an approaching horse till it shot around the corner of the house and was almost upon them. As Kate shrieked her warning she sprang from the hammock and flung herself in front of Loudon. For the man on the horse was Pete O'Leary, and he was apparently aiming a six-shooter at Loudon.

"You —— spy!" yelled O'Leary.

Even as O'Leary's six-shooter cracked, Loudon swept Kate to one side and fired from the hip. O'Leary swayed, dropped his gun, then pitched forward over his saddle-horn. Loudon ran to him. As he reached O'Leary the latter rolled over on his back.

"Teach her to spy on my letters!" he gasped. "If it hadn't been for her I——"

He choked and died.

Loudon thrust his sixshooter into its holster and turned. Kate, her lips colourless, her eyes dilated, was clinging to one of the porch uprights. Loudon crossed the intervening space in two leaps.

"Where yuh hit?" he cried.

"I'm not hit," she replied, shakily. "But—but did he—did you—are you hurt?"

"I ain't even creased. Now you go in the house an' stay. Here come Jimmie an' Rainey. We'll take care o' what's out here."

Obediently Kate went into the house.

Half an hour later, in the living room, Loudon found her. She rose from her chair at his entrance and faced him in silence. The cold, defiant expression had vanished from her face. In its stead was the look of a frightened child. Loudon halted within a yard of her.

"Kate," said he, "yuh can say what yuh like about yore reasons for goin' to Judge Allison an' takin' that night ride to the Cross-in-a-box, an' I've got to believe yuh. But if yuh don't love me why did yuh jump in front o' me when

O'Leary fired?"

"I thought he was going to shoot you," she replied, forcing herself to meet his eyes. "I—I didn't know I was the one till I heard him say so."

"Yuh thought he was goin' to drop me, an' yuh jumped in front o' me; why?"

Kate's face was upturned. Her lips parted. Her body swayed toward him.

"Take me!" she cried. "Oh, take me!"

*

"Why did yuh say what yuh did about wantin' to make me suffer when yuh loved me all the time?"

"I couldn't help it. I thought I'd lost you, and then you came, and—and then I wanted to hurt you, and I did. I don't know what I'd have done if you'd gone away. For I do love you, boy!"

Loudon held her close as the dark head snuggled against his shoulder.

"I know," said he, soberly.

"I guess I've always loved you," murmured Kate, "I must have. I—I hate myself when I think of—of Blakely. I found out what he was while he was lying here wounded. He was delirious and he spoke of a woman, another man's wife, named Marie, down on the Sweetwater. Oh, it was awful—what he said. I can't tell you. It—it woke me up. Then I knew what I had lost when you left the ranch. You'll never leave me again, will you?"

"Of course I won't!"

It was a large wedding for the Lazy River country.

Scotty Mackenzie privately informed Jack Richie that he didn't know, the marriage might turn out all right, but Kate was such a good-looker, and he'd always mistrusted good-lookers himself.

Scotty's pessimism was pardonable. He had lost a good employee, while Mr. Saltoun was the gainer by an excellent range-boss.

THE END

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