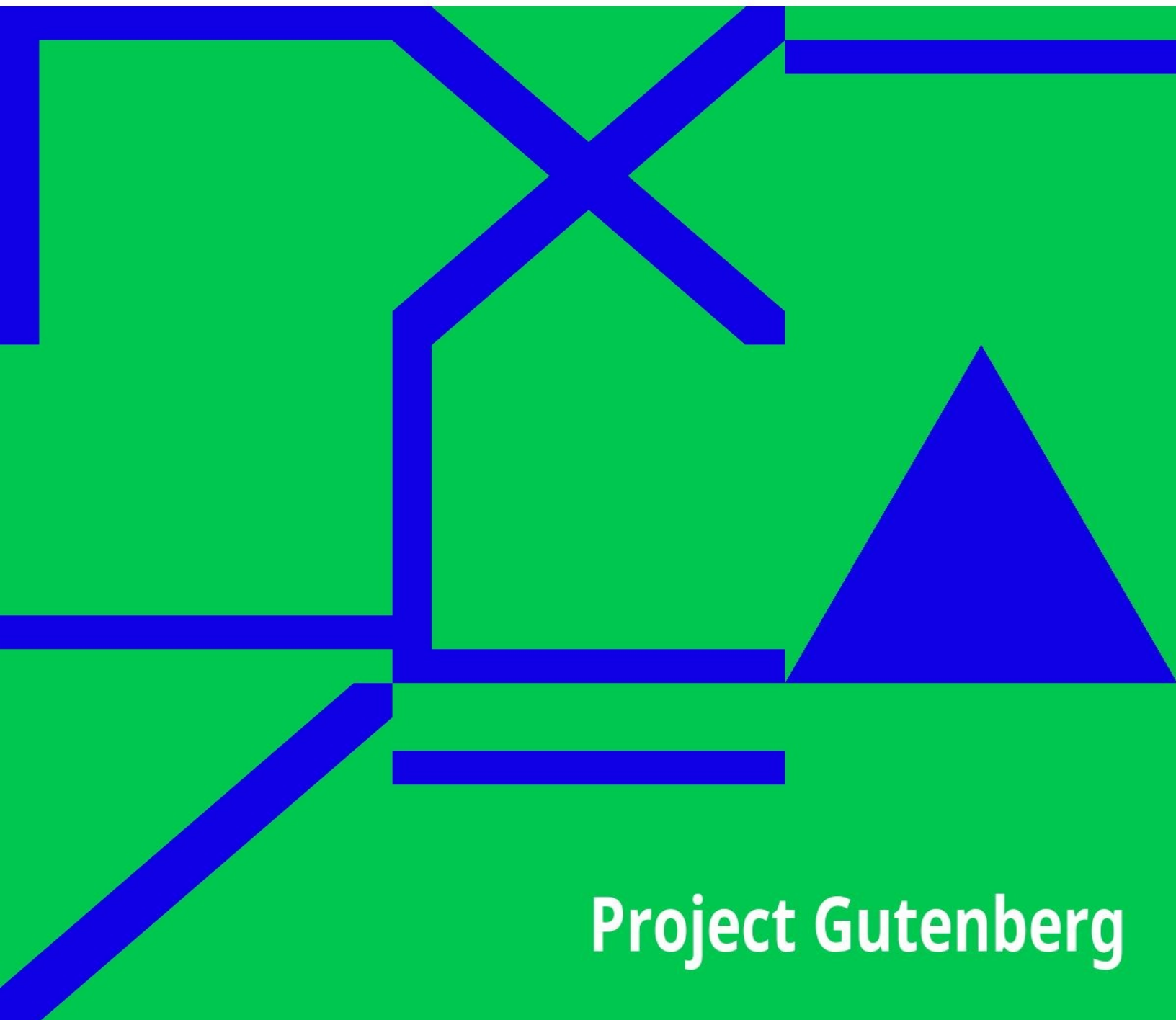


Overland Red

A Romance of the Moonstone Cañon Trail

Henry Herbert Knibbs



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Overland Red

A ROMANCE OF THE MOONSTONE CAÑON TRAIL

(page 123) OVERLAND LIMITED!
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Overland Red
A ROMANCE
OF THE MOONSTONE CAÑON
TRAIL
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
ANTON FISCHER
NEW YORK
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To I. J. K.



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The Road

Through the San Fernando Valley, toward the hills of Calabasas runs that old road, El Camino Real of the early Mission days.

And now replicas of old Mission bells, each suspended in solitary dignity from a rusted iron rod, mark intervals along the dusty way, once a narrow trail worn by the patient feet of that gentle and great padre, Junípero Serra,—a trail from the San Gabriel Valley to the shores of Monterey. A narrow trail then, but, even then, to him it was broad in its potential significance of the dawn of Grace upon the mountain shores of Heaven's lost garden, California.

Not far from one iron-posted bell in the valley, El Camino Real falters, to find, eventually, a lazy way round the low foothills, as though reluctant to lift its winding length over the sharp pitch of the Canajo Pass, beyond.

Near this lone bell another road, an offspring of old El Camino Real, runs quickly from its gray and patient sire. Branching south in hurried turns and multiple windings it climbs the rolling hills, ever dodging the rude-piled masses of rock, with scattered brush between, but forever aspiring courageously through the mountain sage and sunshine toward its ultimate green rest in the shadowy hills.

In the sweet sage is the drone of bees, like the hum of a far city. The thinning, acrid air is tinged with the faint fragrance of sunburnt shrubs and grasses.

With the sinuous avoidings of a baffled snake the road turns and turns upon itself until its earlier promise of high adventuring seems doubtful. As often as not it climbs a semi-barren dun stretch of sunbaked earth dotted with stubby cacti—passes these dwarfed grotesques, and attempts the narrowing crest of the cañon-wall, to swing abruptly back to the cacti again, gaining but little in its upward trend.

Impatient, it finally plunges dizzily round a sharp, outstanding angle of rock and down into the unexpected enchantment of Moonstone Cañon. Here the gaunt cliffs rise to great wild gardens, draped with soft rose and poignant red amid drowsy undertones of gray and green and gold. Dots of vivid colors flame and fade and pass to ledges of dank, vineclad rock and drifts of shale, as the road

climbs again.

At the next turn are the indistinct voices of water, commingling in a monotone—and the road ceases to be, as the cool silver of a mountain stream cuts through it, with seemingly inconsequential meanderings, but with the soft arrogance of a power too great to be denied. And the indistinct voices, left behind, fade to unimaginable sounds as the stream patters down its gravelly course, contented beyond measure with its own adventuring.

Patiently the road takes up its way, moving in easier sweeps through a widening valley, but forever climbing.

Again and again, fetlock deep across it runs the stream, gently persistent and forever murmuring its happy soliloquies.

Here and there the road passes quickly through a blot of shade,—a group of wide-spreading live-oaks,—and reappears, gray-white and hot in the sun.

And then, its high ambition fulfilled, the road recovers from its last climbing sweep round the base of a shouldering hill and runs straight and smooth to its ultimate green rest in the shade of the sycamores. Beyond these two huge-limbed warders of the mountain ranch gate, there is a flower-bordered way, but it is the road no longer.

The mountain ranch takes its name from the cañon below. It is the Moonstone Ranch, the home of Louise, whose ancestors, the Lacharmes, grew roses in old France.

Among the many riders to and from the ranch, there is one, a great, two-fisted, high-complexioned man, whose genial presence is ever welcome. He answers to many names. To the youngsters he is "Uncle Jack,"—usually with an exclamation. To some of the older folk he is "Mr. Summers," or "Jack." Again, the foreman of the Moonstone Ranch seldom calls him anything more dignified than "Red." Louise does sometimes call him—quite affectionately—"Overland."



Overland Red



Overland Red

CHAPTER I

THE PROSPECTOR

For five years he had journeyed back and forth between the little desert station on the Mojave and the range to the north. The townspeople paid scant attention to him. He was simply another "desert rat" obsessed with the idea that gold was to be found in those northern hills. He bought supplies and paid grudgingly. No one knew his name.

The prospector was much younger than he appeared to be. The desert sun had dried his sinews and warped his shoulders. The desert wind had scrawled thin lines of age upon his face. The desert solitude had stooped him with its awesome burden of brooding silence.

Slowly his mind had been squeezed dry of all human interest save the recurrent memory of a child's face—that, and the poignant memory of the child's mother. For ten years he had been trying to forget. The last five years on the desert had dimmed the woman's visioned face as the child came more often between him and the memory of the mother, in his dreams.

Then there were voices, the voices of strange spirits that winged through the dusk of the outlands and hovered round his fire at night.

One voice, soft, insistent, ravished his imagination with visions of illimitable power and peace and rest. "Gold! Lost gold!" it would whisper as he sat by the meager flame. Then he would tremble and draw nearer the warmth. "Where?" he would ask, tempting the darkness as a child, fearfully certain of a reply.

Then another voice, cadenced like the soft rush of waves up the sand, would murmur, "Somewhere away! Somewhere away! Somewhere away!" And in the indefiniteness of that answer he found an inexplicable joy. The vagueness of "Somewhere away" was as vast with pregnant possibilities as his desert. His was the eternity of hope, boundless and splendid in its extravagant promises. Drunk with the wine of dreams, he knew himself to be a monarch, a monarch

uncrowned and unattended, yet always with his feet upon the wide threshold of his kingdom.

Then would come the biting chill of night, the manifold rays of stars and silence, silence reft of winds, yet alive with the tense immobility of the crouching beast, waiting ... waiting....

The desert, impassively withering him to the shell of a man, or wracking him terribly in heat or in storm and cold, still cajoled him day and night with promises, whispered, vague and intoxicating as the perfume of a woman's hair.

Finally the desert flung wide the secret portals of her treasure-house and gave royally like a courtesan of kings.

The man, his dream all but fulfilled, found the taste of awakening bitter on his lips. He counted his years of toil and cursed as he viewed his shrunken hands, claw-like, scarred, crippled.

He felt the weight of his years and dreaded their accumulated burdens. He realized that the dream was all—its fulfillment nothing. He knew himself to be a thing to be pointed at; yet he longed for the sound of human voices, for the touch of human hands, for the living sweetness of his child's face. The sirens of the invisible night no longer whispered to him. He was utterly alone. He had entered his kingdom. Viewed from afar it had seemed a vast pleasure-dome of infinite enchantment. He found Success, as it ever shall be, a veritable desert, grudging man foothold, yet luring him from one aspiration to another, only to consume his years in dust.

A narrow cañon held his secret. He had wandered into it, panned a little black sand, and found color. Finally he discovered the fountainhead of the hoarded yellow particles that spell Power. There in the fastness of those steep, purgatorial walls was the hermitage of the two voices—voices that no longer whispered of hope, but left him in the utter loneliness of possession and its birthright, Fear.

He cried aloud for the companionship of men—and glanced fearfully round lest man had heard him call.

He again journeyed to the town beside the railroad, bought supplies and vanished, a ragged wraith, on the horizon.

Back in the cañon he set about his labors, finding a numbing solace in toil.

But at night he would think of the child's face. He had said to those with whom he had left the child that he would return with a fortune. They knew he went away to forget. They did not expect him to return. That had been ten years ago. He had written twice. Then he had drifted, always promising the inner voice that urged him that he would find gold for her, his child, that she might ever think kindly of him. So he tried to buy himself—with promises. Once he had been a man of his hands, a man who stood straight and faced the sun. Now the people of the desert town eyed him askance. He heard them say he was mad—that the desert had "got him." They were wrong. The desert and its secret was his—a sullen paramour, but *his* nevertheless. Had she not given him of her very heart?

He viewed his shrunken body, knew that he stooped and shuffled, realized that he had paid the inevitable, the inexorable price for the secret. His wine of dreams had evaporated.... He sifted the coarse gold between his fingers, letting it fall back into the pan. Was it for *this* that he had wasted his soul?

In the desert town men began to notice the regularity of his comings and goings. Two or three of them foregathered in the saloon and commented on it.

"He packed some dynamite last trip," asserted one.

There was a silence. The round clock behind the bar ticked loudly, ominously.

"Then he's struck it at last," said another.

"Mebby," commented the first speaker.

The third man nodded. Then came silence again and the absolute ticking of the clock. Presently from outside in the white heat of the road came the rush of hoofs and an abrupt stop. A spurred and booted rider, his swarthy face gray with dust, strode in, nodded to the group and called for whiskey.

"Which way did he go, Saunders?" asked one.

"North, as usual," said the rider.

"Let's set down," suggested the third man.

They shuffled to a table. The bartender brought glasses and a bottle. Then, uninvited, he pulled up a chair and sat with them. The rider looked at him pointedly.

"Oh, I'm in on this," asserted the bartender. "Daugherty is the Wells-Fargo man here. He won't talk to nobody but me—about *business*."

"What's that got to do with it?" queried the rider.

"Just what you'd notice, Saunders. Listen! The rat left a bag of dust in the Company's safe last trip. Daugherty says its worth mebbly five hundred. He says the rat's goin' to bring in some more. Do I come in?"

"You're on," said the rider. "Now, see here, boys, we got to find out if he's filed on it yet, and what his name is, and then—"

"Mebby we'd better find out *where* it is first," suggested one.

"And then jump him?" queried the rider over his glass.

"And then jump him," chorused the group. "He's out there alone. It's easy." And each poured himself a drink, for which, strangely enough, no one offered to pay, and for which the bartender evidently forgot to collect.

Meanwhile the prospector toiled through the drought of that summer hoarding the little yellow flakes that he washed from the gravel in the cañon.



CHAPTER II

WATER

All round him for miles each way the water-holes had gone dry. The little cañon stream still wound down its shaded course, disappearing in a patch of sand at the cañon's mouth, so the prospector felt secure. None had ridden out to look for him through that furnace of burning sand that stretched between the hills and the desert town.

The stream dwindled slowly, imperceptibly.

One morning the prospector noticed it, and immediately explored the creek clear to its source—a spurt of water springing from the roof of a grotto in the cliff. Such a supply, evidently from the rocky heart of the range itself, would be inexhaustible.

A week later he awoke to find the creek-bed dry save in a few depressions among the rocks. He again visited the grotto. The place was damp and cool, glistening with beads of moisture, but the flow from the roof-crevice had ceased. Still he thought there must be plenty of water beneath the rocks of the stream-bed. He would dig for it.

Another week, and he became uneasy. The stream had disappeared as though poured into a colossal crevice. A few feet below the gravel he struck solid rock. He tried dynamite unsuccessfully. Then he hoarded the drippings from the grotto crevice till he had filled his canteen. Carefully he stowed his gold in a chamois pouch and prepared to leave the cañon. His burro had strayed during the week of drought—was probably dead beside some dry water-hole.

The prospector set out to cross the range in the light of the stars.

Fearful that he might be seen, panic warped his reasoning. He planned to journey south along the foothills, until opposite the desert town and then cross over to it. If he approached from such a direction, no one would guess his original starting-

place. He knew of an unfailing water-hole two days' journey from the cañon. This water-hole was far out of his way, but his canteen supply would more than last till he reached it.

Then Fate, the fate that had dogged his every step since first he ventured into the solitudes, closed up and crept at his heels. He became more morose and strangely fearful. His vision, refined by the wasting of his body, created shadows that lay about his feet like stagnant pools, shadows where no shadows should be.

Ominous was his fall as he crossed an arroyo. The canteen, slung over his shoulder, struck a sharp point of rock that started one of the seams. The leak was infinitesimal. The felt cover of the canteen absorbed the drip, which evaporated. When he arrived at the water-hole, *that* was dry. His canteen felt strangely light. He could not remember having used so much water. He changed his plan. He struck straight from the hills toward the railroad. He knew that eventually he would, as he journeyed west, cross it, perhaps near a water-tank.

Toward the blinding afternoon of that day he saw strange lakes and pools spread out upon the distant sand and inverted mountain ranges stretching to the horizon.

Fate crept closer to his heels, waiting with the dumb patience of the desert to claim the struggling, impotent puppet whose little day was all but spent.

He stumbled across the blazing bars of steel that marked the railroad. His empty canteen clattered on the ties as he fell. He got to his knees and dragged himself from the track. He laughed, for he had thwarted Fate this once; he would not be run over by the train. He lay limp, wasted, scarcely breathing.

Serenely Fate crouched near him, patient, impassive....

He heard a man speak and another answer. He felt an arm beneath his head, and water.... Water!

He drank, and all at once his strength flamed up. It was not water they gave him; it was merely the taste of it—a mockery. He wanted more ... all!

He lurched to his feet, struggling with a bearded giant that held him from his desire—to drink until he could drink no more—to die drinking the water they had taken from him even as they gave it. He fought blindly. Fate, disdaining further patience, arose and flung itself about his feet. He stumbled. A flash wiped all things from his vision and the long night came swiftly.



CHAPTER III

RAGGED ROMANCE

At the wide gate of the mountain ranch stood the girl. Her black saddle-pony Boyar fretted to be away. Glancing back through the cavernous shade of the live-oaks, the girl hesitated before opening the gate. A little breeze, wayfaring through Moonstone Cañon and on up to the mountain ranch, touched the girl's cheek and she breathed deeply of its cool fragrance.

The wide gate swung open, and Louise Lacharme, curbing Black Boyar, rode out of the shadows into the hot light of the morning, singing as she rode.

Against the soft gray of the cañon wall flamed a crimson flower like a pomegranate bud. Across the road ran the cool mountain stream. Away and away toward the empty sky the ragged edges of the cliffs were etched sharply upon the blue.

The road ran swiftly round the eastern wall of the cañon. Louise, as fragrantly bright as morning sunshine on golden flowers, laughed as the pony's lithe bound tore the silver of the ford to swirling beads and blade-like flashes.

On the rise beyond, the girl drew rein at the beginning of the Old Meadow Trail, a hidden trail that led to a mountain meadow of ripe grasses, groups of trees, and the enchantment of seclusion.

The pony shouldered through the breast-high greasewood and picked his steps along the edge of the hill. The twigs and branches lisped and clattered against the carved leather tapaderos that hooded the stirrups. The warm sun awoke the wild fragrance of sage and mountain soil. Little lizards of the stones raced from Black Boyar's tread, becoming rigid on the sides of rocks, clinging at odd angles with heads slanted, like delicate Orient carvings in dull brass.

The girl's eyes, the color of sea-water in the sun, were leveled toward the distant hills across the San Fernando Valley. From her fingers dangled the long bridle-

reins. Her lips were gently parted. Her gaze was the gaze of one who dreams in the daylight. And close in the hidden meadow crouched Romance, Romance ragged, unkempt, jocular....

Boyar first scented the wood-smoke. Louise noticed his forward-standing ears and his fidgeting. Immediately before her was the low rounded rock, a throne of dreams that she had graced before. From down the slope and almost hidden by the bulk of the rock, a little wand of smoke stood up in the windless air, to break at last into tiny shreds and curls of nothingness.

"It can't be much of a fire yet!" exclaimed Louise, forever watchful, as are all the hill-folk, for that dread, ungovernable red monster of destruction, a mountain fire. "It can't be much of a fire yet."

The pony Boyar, delicately scenting something more than wood-smoke, snorted and swerved. Louise dismounted and stepped hurriedly round the shoulder of the rock. A bristle-bearded face confronted her. "No, it ain't much of a fire yet, but our hired girl she joined a movin'-picture outfit, so us two he-things are doin' the best we can chasin' a breakfast." And the tramp, Overland Red, ragged, unkempt, jocular, rose from his knees beside a tiny blaze. He pulled a bleak flop of felt from his tangled hair in an over-accentuated bow of welcome.

"We offer you the freedom of the city, ma'am. Welcome to our midst, and kindly excuse appearances this morning. Our trunks got delayed in New York."

Unsmilingly the girl's level gray eyes studied the tramp's face. Then her glance swept him swiftly from bared head to rundown heel. "I was just making up my mind whether I'd stay and talk with you, or ask you to put out your fire and go somewhere else. But I think you are all right. Please put on your hat."

THE GIRL'S LEVEL GRAY EYES STUDIED THE TRAMP'S FACE
THE GIRL'S LEVEL GRAY EYES STUDIED THE TRAMP'S FACE

Overland Red's self-assurance shrunk a little. The girl's eyes were direct and fearless, yet not altogether unfriendly. He thought that deep within them dwelt a smile.

"You got my map all right," he said, a trifle more respectfully. "'Course we'll douse the fire when we duck out of here. But what do you think of Collie here, my pal? Is he all right?"

"Oh, he's only a boy," said Louise, glancing casually at the youth crouched above the fire.

The boy, a slim lad of sixteen or thereabout, flushed beneath the battered brim of his black felt hat. He watched the tomato-can coffee-pot intently. Louise could not see his face.

"Yes, Miss. *I'm* all right and so is he." And a humorous wistfulness crept into the tramp's eyes. "He's what you might call a changeling."

"Changeling?"

"Uhuh! Always changin' around from place to place—when you're young. Ain't that it?"

"Oh! And when you are older?" she queried, smiling.

Overland Red frowned. "Oh, then you're just a tramp, a Willie, a Bo, a Hobo."

He saw the girl's eyes harden a little. He spoke quickly, and, she imagined, truthfully. "I worked ten years for one outfit once, without a change. And I never knowed what it was to do a day's work out of the saddle. You know what that means."

"Cattle? Mexico?"

Overland Red grinned. "Say! You was born in California, wasn't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"'Cause Mexico has been about the only place a puncher could work that long without doin' day labor on foot half the year. Yes, I been there. 'Course, now, I'm doin' high finance, and givin' advice to the young, and livin' on my income. And say, when it comes to real brain work, I'm the Most Exhausted Baked High Potentate, but I wouldn't do no mineral labor for nobody. If I can't work in the saddle, I don't work—that's all."

"Mineral labor? What, mining?" asked Louise.

"No, not mining. Jest mineral labor like Japs, or section-hands, or coachmen with bugs on their hats. Ain't the papers always speakin' of that kind as minerals?"

"Don't you mean menials?"

"Well, yes. It's all the same, anyway. I never do no hair-splittin' on words. Bein' a pote myself, it ain't necessary."

"A—a poet! Really?"

"Really and truly, and carry one and add five. I've roped a lot of po'try in my time, Miss. Say, are we campin' on your land?"

"No. This is government land, from here to our line up above—the Moonstone Rancho."

"The Moonstone Rancho?" queried Overland Red, breaking a twig and feeding the fire.

"Yes. It's named after the cañon. But don't let me keep you from breakfast."

"Breakfast, eh? That's right! I almost forgot it, talkin' to you. Collie's got the coffee to boilin'. No, *you* ain't keepin' us from our breakfast any that you'd notice. It would take a whole reg'ment of Rurales to keep us from a breakfast if we seen one runnin' around loose without its pa or ma."

Louise Lacharme did not smile. This was too real. Here was adventure with no raconteur's glamour, no bookish gloss. Here was Romance. Romance unshaven, illiterate, with its coat off making coffee in a smoke-blackened tomato-can, but Romance nevertheless. That this romance should touch her life, Louise had not the faintest dream. She was alone ... but, pshaw! Boyar was grazing near, and besides, she was not really afraid of the men. She thought she rather liked them, or, more particularly, the boisterous one who had said his name was Overland Red.

The tramp gazed at her a moment before he lifted the tomato-can from the embers. "We know you won't join us, but we're goin' to give you the invite just the same. And we mean it. Ma'am, if you'll be so kind as to draw up your chair, us gents'll eat."

"Thank you!" said Louise, and Overland's face brightened at the good-fellowship in her voice. "Thank you both, but I've had breakfast."

She gazed at the solitary, bubbling, tomato-can coffee-pot of "second-edition" coffee. There was nothing else to grace the board, or rather rock. "I'll be right back," she said. "I'll just take off Boyar's bridle. Here, Boy!" she called. "You'll

be able to eat better."

And she ran to the pony. From a saddle-pocket she took her own lunch of sandwiches and ripe olives wrapped in oiled paper. She delayed her return to loosen the forward cincha of the saddle and to find the little stock of cigarette-papers and tobacco that she carried for any chance rider of the Moonstone who might be without them.

Collie, the boy tramp, glanced up at Overland Red. "I guess she's gone," he said regretfully.

"You're nutty, Collie. She ain't the kind to sneak off after sayin' she's comin' back. I know a hoss and a real woman when I see 'em. I was raised in the West, myself."

The boy Collie was young, sensitive, and he had not been "raised in the West." He frowned. "Yes, you was raised in the West, and what you got to show for it?"

"Well, hear the kid!" exclaimed Overland. "Out of the mouth of babes and saplings! What have I got to show? What have I—! Wha—? Oh, you go chase a snake! I know a good hoss and a good woman when I see 'em, and I seen both together this morning."

"But what do *she* want with us bos?" asked the boy.

"S-s-h-h! Why, she's interested in me romantic past, of course. Ain't I the 'cute little gopher when it comes to the ladies? Fan me, Collie, and slow music and a beer for one. I'm some lady's-man, sister!"

"You're a bo, the same as me," said the boy.

"S-s-h-h! For the love of Pete, don't you handle that word 'bo' so careless. It's loaded. It has a jarrin' effect on ears unattenuated—er—meanin' ears that ain't keyed up to it, as the pote says. She's comin' back. Fold your napkin. Don't look so blame hungry! Ain't you got any style?"

"She's the prettiest girl I ever seen," said the boy, hastily swallowing his share of the hot, insipid coffee.

"Pretty?" whispered Overland, as Louise approached. "She's thoroughbred. Did you see them eyes? Afraid of nothin', and smilin' at what might dast to scare her. Not foolish, either. She's wise. And she's kind and laughin', and not ashamed to

talk to us. That's thoroughbred."

Round the rock came Louise, the neat package of sandwiches in one hand. In the other was the tobacco and cigarette-papers. "I'm going to have my luncheon," she said. "If you won't object, I'll take a sandwich. There, I have mine. The rest are for you."

"We had our breakfast," said Overland quickly, "when you was talkin' to your pony."

Louise glanced at the empty tomato-can. "Well, I'll excuse you for not waiting for me, but I shall not excuse you from having luncheon with me. I made these sandwiches myself. Have one. They're really good."

"Oh!" groaned Overland, grimacing. "If I could curry up my language smooth, like that, I—I guess I'd get deaf listenin' to myself talk. You said that speech like takin' two turns round the bandstand tryin' to catch yourself, and then climbin' a post and steppin' on your own shoulders so you could see the parade down the street. Do you get that?" And he sighed heavily. "Say! These here sandwiches is great!"

"Will you have one?" asked Louise, gracefully proffering the olives.

"Seein' it's you. Thanks. I always take two. The second one for a chaser to kill the taste of the first. It's the only way to eat 'em—if you know where to stop. They do taste like somethin' you done and are sorry for afterwards, don't they?"

"Were you ever sorry for anything?" asked the boy, feeling a little piqued that he had been left out of the conversation.

"I was raised in the West, myself," growled the tramp, scowling. "But that's a good pony you got, Miss. That your saddle too?"

"Yes."

"You rope any?"

"A little. How did you know?"

"Rawhide cover to the saddle-horn is wore with a rope," said Overland, helping himself to a second sandwich.

Then the tramp and the girl, oblivious to everything else, discussed rawhide

riatas as compared with the regular three-strand stock rope, or lariat,—center-fire, three quarter, and double rigs, swell forks and old Visalia trees, spade bits and "U" curbs,—neither willing, even lightly, to admit the other's superiority of chosen rig.

The boy Collie listened intently and a trifle jealously. Overland Red and the girl had found a common ground of interest that excluded him utterly. The boy itched for an excuse to make the girl speak to him, even look at him.

The sandwiches gone, Louise proffered Overland tobacco and papers. Actual tears stood in the ex-cowboy's eyes. "Smoke! Me?" he exclaimed. "I was dyin' for it. I'd do time for you!"

Then in that boyish spirit that never quite leaves the range-rider, Overland Red took the tobacco and papers and cleverly rolled a cigarette with one hand. In the other he held his battered felt hat. His eyes had a far-away look as he reached forward and lighted his cigarette at the fire. "I was settin' on a crazy bronc', holdin' his head up so he couldn't go to buckin'—outside a little old adobe down in Yuma, Arizona, then," he explained, glancing at the girl. "Did you ever drift away complete, like that, jest from some little old trick to make you dream?"



CHAPTER IV

"ANY ROAD, AT ANY TIME, FOR ANYWHERE"

The boy Collie took the empty tomato-can and went for water with which to put out the fire.

Louise and Overland Red gazed silently at the youthful figure crossing the meadow. The same thought was in both their hearts—that the boy's chance in life was still ahead of him. Something of this was in the girl's level gray eyes as she asked, "Why did you come up here, so far from the town and the railroad?"

"We generally don't," replied Overland Red. "We ain't broke. Collie's got some money. We got out of grub from comin' up here. We come up to see the scenery. I ain't kiddin'; we sure did! 'Course, speakin' in general, a free lunch looks better to me any day than the Yosemite—but that's because I need the lunch. You got to be fed up to it to enjoy scenery. Now, on the road we're lookin' at lots of it every day, but we ain't seein' much. But give me a good feed and turn me loose in the Big Show Pasture where the Bridal Veil is weepin' jealous of the Cathedral Spires, and the Big Trees is too big to be jealous of anything, where Adam would 'a' felt old the day he was born—jest take off my hobbles and turn me out to graze *there*, and *feed*, and say, lady, I scorn the idea of doin' *anything* but decomposin' my feelin's and smokin' and writin' po'try. I been there! There's where I writ the song called 'Beat It, Bo.' Mebby you heard of it."

"No, I should like to hear it."

The fire steamed and spluttered as Collie extinguished it. Overland Red handed the tobacco and papers to him.

"About comin' up this here trail?" he resumed as the boy stretched beside them on the warm earth. "Well, Miss, it was four years ago that I picked up Collie here at Albuquerque. His pa died sudden and left the kid to find out what a hard map this ole world is. We been across, from Frisco to New York, twice since then, and from Seattle to San Diego on the side, and 'most everywhere in California, it

bein' my native State and the best of the lot. You see, Collie, he's gettin' what you might call a liberated education, full of big ideas—no dinky stuff. Yes, I picked him up at Albuquerque, a half-starved, skinny little cuss that was cryin' and beggin' me to get him out of there."

"Albuquerque?" queried Louise.

"Uhuh. Later, comin' acrost the Mojave, we got thrun off a freight by mistake for a couple of sewin'-machines that we was ridin' with to Barstow, so the tickets on the crates said. That was near Daggett, by a water-tank. It was hotter than settin' on a stove in Death Valley at 12 o'clock Sunday noon. We beat it for the next town, afoot. Collie commenced to give out. He was pretty tender and not strong. I lugged him some and he walked some. He was talkin' of green grass and cucumbers in the ice-box and ice-cream and home and the Maumee River, and a whole lot of things you can't find in the desert. Well, I got him to his feet next mornin'. We had some trouble, and was detained a spell in Barstow after that. They couldn't prove nothin', so they let us go. Then Collie got to talkin' again about a California road that wiggled up a hill and through a cañon, and had one of these here ole Mission bells where it lit off for the sky-ranch. Funny, for he was never in California then. Mebby it was the old post-card he got at Albuquerque. You see his pa bought it for him 'cause he wanted it. He was only a kid then. Collie, he says it's the only thing his pa ever did buy for him, and so he kept it till it was about wore out from lookin' at it. But considerin' how his pa acted, I guess that was about all Collie needed to remember him by. Anyhow, he dreamed of that road, and told me so much about it that I got to lookin' for it too. I knowed of the old El Camino Real and the bells, so we kept our eye peeled for that particular dream road, kind of for fun. We found her yesterday."

"What, this? The road to our ranch?"

"Uhuh. Collie, he said so the minute we got in that cañon, Moonstone Cañon, you said. We're restin' up and enjoyin' the scenery. We need the rest, for only last week we resigned from doin' a stunt in a movin'-picture outfit. They wanted somebody to do native sons. We said we didn't have them kind of clothes, but the foreman of the outfit says we'd do fine jest as we was. It was fierce—and, believe me, lady, I been through some! I been through some!

"They was two others in checker clothes and dip-lid caps, and they *wasn't* native sons. They acted like sons of—I'd hate to tell you what, Miss—to the chief dollie in the show. They stole her beau and tied him to the S. P. tracks; kind of loose,

though. She didn't seem to care. She jest stood around chewin' gum and rollin' her lamps at the head guy. Then the movin'-picture express, which was a retired switch-engine hooked onto a Swede observation car, backs down on Adolphus, and we was to rush up like—pretty fast, and save his life.

"She was a sassy little chicken with blond feathers and a three-quarter rig skirt. She had a regular strawberry-ice-cream-soda complexion, and her eyes looked like a couple of glass alleys with electric lights in 'em. I wondered if she took 'em out at night to go to sleep or only switched off the current. Anyhow, up she rides in a big reddish kind of automobile and twists her hands round her wrists and looks up the track and down the track and sees us and says, 'Oh, w'ich way has he went? W'ich way did Disgustus Adolphus beat it to?' And chewin' gum right on top of that, too. It was tough on us, Miss, but we needed the money.

"'Bout the eighteenth time she comes coughin' up in that old one-lung machine, —to get her expression right, so the boss kept hollerin',—why, I gets sick and tired. If there's anything *doin'*, why, I'm game, but such monkeyin'! There was that picture-machine idiot workin' the crank as if he was shellin' a thicket-full of Injuns with a Gatling, and his fool cap turned round with the lid down the back of his neck, and me and Collie, the only sensible-actin' ones of the lot, because we was actin' natural, jest restin'. I got sick and tired. The next time up coughs that crippled-up automobile with the mumps on its front tire, and she says, 'Where, oh, where has he went?' I ups and says, 'Crazy, Miss, and can you blame him?'

"She didn't see no joke in that, so the boss he fired us. He wasn't goin' to pay us at that, but I picks up the little picture-machine box and I swings her up over the track kind of suggestive like. 'One!' said I. 'Do we get our money?'

"'Drop that machine!' says he, rushin' up to me.

"'I'm a-goin' to,' says I, 'good and hard. Think again, while I count. Do we get our money?'

"'You get pinched!' says he.

"'Two,' says I, and I swings the box up by the legs.

"'Hole on!' yells the boss. 'Pay the mutt, Jimmy, and, for Gord sake, get that machine before he ruins the best reel we made yet!'

"We got paid."

"But the bell and Moonstone Cañon?" questioned Louise, glancing back at Boyar grazing down the meadow.

"Sure! Well, we flopped near here that night—"

"Flopped?"

"Uhuh. Let's see, you ain't hep to that, are you? Why, we crawled to the hay, hit the feathers, pounded our ear—er—went to bed! That's what it used to be. Well, in the morning, me and Collie got some sardines and crackers to the store and a little coffee. It was goin' over there that we seen the bell and the road and the whole works. I got kind of interested myself in that cañon. I never saw so many moonstones layin' right on top the gravel, and I been in Mex., too. We liked it and we stayed over last night, expectin' to be gone by now."

"And when you leave here?" queried Louise.

"Same old thing," replied Overland cheerfully. "I know the ropes. Collie works by spells. Oh, we're livin', and that's all you need to do in California."

"And that is all—now that you have found the road?"

"Oh, the road is like all of them dreams," said Overland. "Such things are good for keepin' people interested in somethin' till it's done, that's all. It was fun at first, lookin' up every arroyo and slit in the hills, till we found it. Same as them marriages on the desert, after that."

"Marriages?"

"Uhuh. Seein' water what ain't there, like."

"Oh, mirages!" And Louise laughed joyfully.

"I don't see no joke," said Overland, aggrieved.

"I really beg your pardon."

"That's all right, Miss. But what would you call it?"

"Oh, an illusion, a mirage, something that seems to be, but that is not."

"I don't see where it's got anything on marriages, then, do you? But I ain't generally peppermistic. I believe in folks and things, although I'm old enough to know better."

"I'm glad you believe in folks," said Louise. "So do I."

"It's account of bein' a pote, I guess," sighed the tramp. "'Course I ain't a professional. They got to have a license. I never took out one, not havin' the money. Anyway, if I did have enough money for a regular license, I'd start a saloon and live respectable."

"Won't you quote something?" And the girl smiled bewitchingly. "Boyar and I must go soon. It's getting hot."

"I'm mighty sorry you're goin', Miss. You're real California stock. Knowed it the minute I set eyes on you. Besides, you passed us the smokes."

"Red, you shut up!"

Overland turned a blue, astonished eye on Collie. "Why, kiddo, what's bitin' you?"

"Because the lady give us the makings don't say *she* smokes, does it?"

Overland grunted. "Because you're foolish with the heat, don't say I am, does it? Them sandwiches has gone to your head, Chico. Who said she did smoke?"

Louise, grave-eyed, watched the two men, Overland sullen and scowling, Collie fierce and flaming.

"We ain't used to—to real ladies," apologized Overland. "We could do better if we practiced up."

"Of course!" said Louise, smiling. "But the poetry."

"U-m-m, yes. The po'try. What'll I give her, Collie?"

"I don't care," replied the boy. "You might try 'Casey Jones.' It's better'n anything *you* ever wrote."

"That? I guess not! That ain't her style. I mean one of my *own*—somethin' *good*."

"Oh, I don't know. 'Toledo Blake,'" mumbled Collie.

"Nope! But I guess the 'Grand Old Privilege' will do for a starter."

"Oh, good!" And Louise clapped her hands. "The title is splendid. Is the poem original?"

The tramp bowed a trifle haughtily. "Original? Me life's work, lady." And he awkwardly essayed to button a buttonless coat, coughed, waved his half-consumed cigarette toward the skies, and began:—

"Folks say we got no morals—that they all fell in the soup;
And no conscience—so the would-be goodies say;
And I guess our good intentions *did* jest up and flew the coop,
While we stood around and watched 'em fade away.

"But there's one thing that we're lovin' more than money, grub, or booze,
Or even decent folks that speaks us fair;
And that's the Grand Old Privilege to chuck our luck and choose,
Any road at any time for any where."

And Overland, his hand above his heart, bowed effusively.

"I like 'would-be goodies,'" said Louise. "Sounds just like a mussy, sticky cookie that's too sweet. And 'Any road at any time for any where—' I think that is real."

Overland puffed his chest and cleared his throat. "I can't help it, Miss. Born that way. Cut my first tooth on a book of pomes ma got for a premium with Mustang Liniment."

"Well, thank you." And Louise nodded gayly. "Keep the tobacco and papers to remember me by. I must go."

"We don't need them to remember you by," said Overland gallantly. Then the smile suddenly left his face.

Down the Old Meadow Trail, unseen by the girl and the boy, rode a single horseman, and something at his hip glinted in the sun. Overland's hand went to his own hip. Then he shrugged his shoulders, and slowly recovered himself. "What's the use?" he muttered.

But there was that in his tone which brought Collie's head up. The lad pushed back his battered felt hat and ran his fingers through his wavy black hair, perplexedly. "What's the matter, Red? What's the matter?"

"Nothin'. Jest thinkin'." Yet the tramp's eyes narrowed as he glanced furtively past the girl to where Boyar, the black pony, grazed in the meadow.

Louise, puzzled by something familiar in the boy's upturned, questioning face,

raised one gauntleted hand to her lips. "Why, you're the boy I saw, out on the desert, two years ago. Weren't you lying by a water-tank when our train stopped and a man was kneeling beside you pouring water on your face? Aren't you that boy?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Collie, getting to his feet. "Red told me about *you*, too."

"Yes, it's her," muttered Overland, nodding to himself.

"And you chucked a rose out of the window to us?" said the boy. "Overland said *she* did."

"Yes. It's her, the Rose-Lady Girl," said Overland. "Some of the folks in the train laughed when I picked up the rose. I remember. Some one else says, 'They're only tramps.' I recollect that, too."

"But those men were arrested at Barstow, for murder, Uncle Walter said."

Again Overland Red nodded. "They was, Miss. But they couldn't prove nothin', so they let us go."

"We always was goin' to say thanks to the girl with the rose if we ever seen her," said the boy Collie. "We ain't had such a lot of roses give to us."

"So we says it now," said Overland quickly. "Or mebbby we wouldn't never have another chance." Then he slowly rolled another cigarette.

Just then the black pony Boyar nickered. He recognized a friend entering the meadow.

Overland lighted his cigarette. As he straightened up, Louise was surprised to see him thrust both hands above his head while he continued smoking placidly. "Excuse me, Miss," he said, turning the cigarette round with his lips; "but the gent behind you with the gun has got the drop on me. I guess he's waitin' for you to step out of range."

Louise turned swiftly. Dick Tenlow, deputy sheriff, nodded good-morning to her, but kept his gun trained on the tramp.

"Just step out from behind that rock," said Tenlow, addressing Overland.

"Don't know as I will," replied the tramp. "You're no gentleman; you didn't say 'please.'"

"Come on! No bluff like that goes here," said the deputy.

"Can't you see I ain't finished smokin' yet?" queried Overland.

"Come on! Step along!"

"No way to address a gent, you Johnny. Say, I'll tell you *now* before you fall down and shoot yourself. Do you think you got me because you rode up while I was talkin' to a lady, and butted into polite conversation like a drunk Swede at a dance? Say, you think I'd 'a' ever let you got this far if there hadn't been a lady present? Why, you little nickle-plated, rubber-eared policeman, I was doin' the double roll with a pair of Colts .45's when you was learnin' the taste of milk!"

"That'll be about all for *you*," said the sheriff, grinning.

"No, it ain't. You ain't takin' me serious, and there's where you're makin' your mistake. I'm touchy about some things, Mr. Pussy-foot. I could 'a' got you three times while you was ridin' down that trail, and I wouldn't 'a' had to stop talkin' to do it. And you with that little old gun out before you even seen me!"

"Why didn't you, then?" asked Tenlow, restraining his anger; for Louise, in spite of herself, had smiled at Overland's somewhat picturesque resentment. "Why didn't you, then?"

"Huh!" snorted Overland scornfully. "Do you suppose I'd start anything with a *lady* around? That ain't my style. You're a kid. You'll get hurt some day."

Deputy Tenlow scowled. He was a big man, slow of tongue, ordinarily genial, and proverbially stupid. He knew the tramp was endeavoring to anger him. The deputy turned to Louise. "Sorry, Miss Lacharme, but I got to take him."

"There's really nothing to hinder, is there?" Louise asked sweetly.



CHAPTER V

"CAN HE RIDE?"

The tramp glanced up, addressing the deputy. "Yes, even now there is something to hinder, if I was to get busy." Then he coolly dropped his arms and leaned against the rock with one leg crossed before the other in a manner sometimes supposed to reflect social ease and elegance. "But I'm game to take what's comin'. If you'll just stick me up and extract the .38 automatic I'm packin' on my hip,—and, believe me, she's a bad Gat. when she's in action,—why, I'll feel lots better. The little gun might get to shootin' by herself, and then somebody would get hurt sure. You see, I'm givin' you all the chance you want to take me without gettin' mussed up. I'm nervous about firearms, anyhow."

Deputy Dick Tenlow advanced and secured the gun.

"Now," said Overland Red, heaving a sigh; "now, I ain't ashamed to look a gun in the face. You see, Miss," he added, turning to address the girl, "I was sheriff of Abilene once, in the ole red-eye, rumpus days. I have planted some citizens in my time. You see, I kind of owe the ones I did plant a silent apology for lettin' this here chicken-rancher get me so easy."

"You talk big," said Tenlow, laughing. "Who was you when you was sheriff of Abilene, eh?"

"Jack Summers, sometimes called Red Jack Summers," replied Overland quietly, and he looked the deputy in the eye.

"Jack Summers!"

Overland nodded. "Take it or leave it. You'll find out some day. And now you got some excuse for packin' a gun round these here peaceful hills and valleys the rest of your life. You took Jack Summers, and there ain't goin' to be a funeral."

Something about the tramp's manner inclined the deputy to believe that he had spoken truth. "All right," said Tenlow; "just step ahead. Don't try the brush or I'll

drop you."

"Course you would," said Overland, stepping ahead of the deputy's pony. "But the bunch you're takin' orders from don't want me dead; they want me alive. I ain't no good all shot up. You ought to know that."

"I know there's a thousand dollars reward for you. I need the money."

Overland Red grinned. "It's against me morals to bet—with kids. But I'll put up that little automatic you frisked off me, against the thousand you expect to get, that you don't even get a long-range smell of that money. Are you on?"

Tenlow motioned the other to step ahead.

"I'm bettin' my little gun to a thousand dollars less than nothin'. Ain't you game? I'm givin' you the long end."

"Never mind," growled Tenlow. "You can talk later."

The boy Collie, recovering from his surprise at the arrest, stepped up to the sheriff. "Where do I come in?" he asked. "You can't pinch Red without me. I was with him that time the guy croaked out on the Mojave. Red didn't kill him. They let us go once. What you doin' pinchin' us again? How do *you* know—"

"Hold on, Collie; don't get careless," said Overland. "He don't know nothin'. He's followin' orders. The game's up."

Louise whistled Boyar to her and bridled him. The little group ahead seemed to be waiting for her. She led the pony toward the trail. "Did he do it?" she asked as she caught up with Collie.

"No," he muttered. "Red's the squarest pal on earth. Red tried to save the guy—out there on the desert. Gave him all the water we had, pretty near. He dassent to give him all, for because he was afraid it would kill him. The guy fell and hit his head on the rail. Red said he was dyin' on his feet, anyway. Then Red lugged me clean to that tank where you seen us from the train. I was all in. I guess Red saved my life. He didn't tell you that."

"Is he—was he really a cowboy? Can he ride?" asked Louise.

"Can he ride? Say, I seen him ride Cyclone once and get first money for ridin' the worst buckin' bronc' at the rodeo, over to Tucson. Well, I guess!"

"Boyar, my pony, is the fastest pony in the hills," said Louise pensively.

"What you givin' us?" said the boy, glancing at her sharply.

"Nothing. I was merely imagining something."

"Red's square," asserted the boy.

"Sheriff Tenlow is a splendid shot," murmured Louise, with apparent irrelevance.

They had crossed the meadow. Ahead of the sheriff walked Overland, his slouch gone, his head carried high. Collie noted this unusual alertness of poise and wondered.

"Don't try the brush," cautioned Tenlow, also aware of Overland's alertness.

"When I leave here, I'll ride. Sabe?" And Overland stepped briskly to the trail, turning his back squarely on the alert and puzzled sheriff.

"He's been raised in these hills," muttered the tramp. "He knows the trails. I don't. But—I'd like to show that little Rose-Lady Girl some real ridin' once. She's a sport. I'd ride into hell and rake out the fire for her.... I hate to—to do it—but I guess I got to."

"Step up there," said Tenlow. "What you talkin' about, anyhow?"

"Angels," replied Overland. "I see 'em once in a while." And he glanced back. He saw Collie talking to the girl, who stood by her pony, the reins dangling lightly from her outstretched hand.

"Snake!" screamed Overland Red, leaping backward and flinging up his arms, directly in the face of the deputy's pony. The horse reared. Overland, crouching, sprang under its belly, striking it as he went. Again the pony reared, nearly throwing the deputy.

"Overland Limited!" shouted the tramp, dashing toward Boyar. With a spring he was in the saddle and had slipped the quirt from the saddle-horn to his wrist. He would need that quirt, as he had no spurs.

Round swung Tenlow, cursing. Black Boyar shot across the meadow, the quirt falling at each jump. The tramp glanced back. Tenlow's right hand went up and his gun roared once, twice....

The boy Collie, white and gasping, threw himself in front of Tenlow's horse. The deputy spurred the pony over him and swept down the meadow.

Louise, angered in that the boy had snatched Boyar's reins from her as Overland shouted, relented as she saw the instant bravery in the lad's endeavor to stop Tenlow's horse. She stooped over him. He rose stiffly.

"Oh! I thought you were hurt!" she exclaimed.

"Nope! I guess not. I was scared, I guess. Let's watch 'em, Miss!" And forgetful of his bruised and shaken body, he limped to the edge of the meadow, followed by Louise. "There they go!" he cried. "Red's 'way ahead. The sheriff gent can't shoot again—he's too busy ridin'."

"Boyar! Boyar! Good horse! Good horse!" cried the girl as the black pony flashed across the steep slope of the ragged mountain side like a winged thing. "Boyar! Boyar!"

She shivered as the loose shale, ploughed by the pony's flying hoofs, slithered down the slope at every plunge.

"Can he ride?" shouted Collie, wild tears of joy in his eyes.

Suddenly Overland, glancing back, saw Tenlow stop and raise his arm. The tramp cowboy swung Black Boyar half-round, and driving his unspurred heels into the pony's ribs, put him straight down the terrific slope of the mountain at a run.

Tenlow's gun cracked. A spray of dust rose instantly ahead of Boyar.

"Look! Look!" cried Louise. The deputy, angered out of his usual judgment, spurred his horse directly down the footless shale that the tramp had ridden across diagonally. "Look! He can't—The horse—! Oh!" she groaned as Tenlow's pony stumbled and all but pitched headlong. "The other man—knew better than that—" she gasped, turning to the boy. "He waited—till he struck rock and brush before he turned Boyar."

"Can he ride?" shouted Collie, grinning. But the grin died to a gasp. A burst of shale and dust shot up from the hillside. They saw the flash of the cinchas on the belly of Tenlow's horse as the dauntless pony stumbled and dove headlong down the slope, rolling over and over, to stop finally—a patch of brown, shapeless, quivering.

Below, Overland Red had curbed Boyar and was gazing up at a spot of black on the hillside—Dick Tenlow, motionless, silent. His sombrero lay several yards down the slope.

"Oh! The horse!" cried Louise, chokingly, with her hand to her breast.

As for Dick Tenlow, lying halfway down the hillside, stunned and shattered, she had but a secondary sympathy. He had sacrificed a gallant and willing beast to his anger. The tramp, riding a strange pony over desperately perilous and unfamiliar ground, had used judgment. "Your friend is a man!" she said, turning to the boy. "But Dick Tenlow is hurt—perhaps killed. He went under the horse when it fell."

"I guess it's up to us to see if the sheriff gent is done for, at that," said the boy. "Mebby we can do something."

"You'll get arrested, now," said the girl. "If Dick Tenlow is alive, you'll have to go for help. If he isn't...."

"I'll go, all right. I ain't afraid. I didn't do anything. I guess I'll stick around till Red shows up again, anyhow."

"You're a stranger here. I should go as soon as you have sent help," said the girl.

"Mebby I better. I'll help get him up the hill and in the shade. Then I'll beat it for the doc. If I don't come back after that," he said slowly, flushing, "it ain't because I'm scared of anything I done."

Far down in the valley Boyar's sweating sides glistened in the sun. An arm was raised in a gesture of farewell as the tramp swung the pony toward the town. Much to her surprise, Louise found herself waving a vigorous adieu to the distant figure.

The tramp Overland, realizing that the deputy was badly injured, told the first person he met about the accident, advising him to get help at once for the deputy. Then he turned the pony toward the foothills. In a clump of greasewood he dismounted, and, leaving the reins hanging to the saddle-horn, struck Black Boyar on the flank. The horse leaped toward the Moonstone Trail. The tramp disappeared in the brush.

CHAPTER VI

ADVOCATE EXTRAORDINARY

Louise Lacharme, more beautiful than roses, strolled across the vine-shadowed porch of the big ranch-house and sat on the porch rail opposite her uncle. His clear blue eyes twinkled approval as he gazed at her.

Walter Stone was fifty, but the fifty of the hard-riding optimist of the great outdoors. The smooth tan of his cheeks contrasted oddly with the silver of his close-cropped hair. He appeared as a young man prematurely gray.

"How is Boyar?" he asked, smiling a little as Louise, sitting sideways on the porch-rail, swung her foot back and forth quickly.

"Oh, Boy is all right. The tramp turned him loose in the valley. Boy came home."

"It was a clever bit of riding, to get the best of Tenlow on his own range. Was Dick very badly hurt?" queried Walter Stone.

"Yes, his collar-bone was broken and he was crushed and terribly bruised. His horse was killed. When I was down, day before yesterday, the doctor said Dick would be all right in time."

"How about this boy, the tramp boy they arrested?"

"Oh," said Louise, "that was a shame! He stayed and helped the doctor put Dick in the buggy and rode with him to town. Mr. Tenlow was unconscious, and the boy had to go to hold him. Then the boy explained it all at the store, and they arrested him anyway, as a suspicious character. I should have let him go. When Mr. Tenlow became conscious and they told him they had the boy, he said to keep him in the calaboose; that that was where he belonged."

"And you want me to see what I can do for this boy?"

"I didn't say so." And Louise tilted her chin.

"Now, sweetheart, don't quibble. It isn't like you."

The gray silk-clad ankle flashed back and forth. "Really, Uncle Walter, you could have done something for the boy without making me say that I wanted you to. You're always doing something nice—helping people that are in trouble. You don't usually have to be asked."

"Perhaps I like to be asked—by—Louise."

"You're just flattering me, I know! But uncle, if you had seen the boy jump in front of Mr. Tenlow's horse when Dick shot at the tramp,—and afterwards when the boy helped me with Dick and stuck right to him clear to his house,—why, you couldn't help but admire him. Then they arrested him—for what? It's a shame! I told him to run when I saw the doctor's buggy coming."

"Yes, Louise; the boy may be brave and likable enough, but how are we to know what he really is? I don't like to take the risk. I don't like to meddle in such affairs."

"Uncle Walter! Risk! And the risks you used to take when you were a young man. Oh, Aunty Eleanor has told me all about your riding bronchos and the Panamint—and lots of things. I won't tell you all, for you'd be flattered to pieces, and I want you in one whole lump to-day."

"Only for to-day, Louise?"

"Oh, maybe for to-morrow, and to-morrow and to-morrow. But, uncle, only last week you said at breakfast that the present system of arrest and imprisonment was all wrong. That was because they arrested that editor who was a friend of yours. But now, when you have a chance to prove that you were in earnest, you don't seem a bit interested."

"Did I really say all that, sweetness?"

"Now *you* are quibbling. And does 'sweetness,' mean me, or what you said at breakfast? Because you said 'the whole damn system'; and there were two ladies at the table. Of course, that was before breakfast. After breakfast you picked a rose for aunty, and kissed me."

Walter Stone laughed heartily. "But I do take a great deal of interest in anything that interests you."

Louise slipped lithely from the porch-rail and swung up on the broad arm of his chair, snuggling against him impetuously. "I know you do, uncle. I just love you! I'll stop teasing."

"I surrender. I'm a pretty fair soldier at long range, but this"—and his arm went round her affectionately—"this is utter defeat. I strike my colors. Then, you always give in so gracefully."

"To you, perhaps, Uncle Walter. But I haven't given in this time. I'm just as interested as ever."

"And you think they are the men we saw out on the Mojave by the water-tank?"

"Oh, I know it! They remembered the rose. They spoke of it right away, before I did."

"Yes, Louise. And you remember, too, that they were arrested at Barstow—for murder, the conductor said?"

"That's just it! The boy Collie says the tramp Overland Red didn't kill the man. He was trying to save him and gave him water. If you could only hear what the boy says about it—"

"I don't suppose it would do any harm," said the rancher. "I dislike to use my influence. You know, I practically control Dick Tenlow's place at the elections."

"That's just why he should be willing to let the boy go," said Louise quickly.

"No, sweetheart. That's just why I shouldn't ask Dick to do anything of the kind. But I see I'm in for it. You have already interested your Aunt Eleanor. She spoke to me about the boy last night."

"Aunt Eleanor is a dear. I didn't really ask her to speak to you."

"No," he said, laughing. "Of course not. You're too clever for that. You simply sow your poppy-seed and leave it alone. The poppies come up fast enough."

Louise laughed softly. "You're pretending to criticize and you're really flattering,—deliberately,—aren't you, Uncle Walter?"

"Flattering? And you?"

"Because Aunt Eleanor said you could be simply irresistible when you wanted to be. I think so, too. Especially when you are on a horse."

"Naturally. I always did feel more confident in the saddle. I could, if need arose, ride away like the chap in Bobby Burns's verse, you remember—

"He gave his bridle-rein a shake,
And turned him on the shore,
With, 'Farewell, forever more, my dear,
Farewell, forever more.'"

"But you didn't, uncle. Auntie said she used to be almost afraid that you'd ride away with her, like Lochinvar."

"Yes." And Walter Stone sighed deeply.

"Oh, Uncle Walter! That sounded full of regrets and things."

"It was. It is. I'm fifty."

"It isn't fifty. It's a lack of exercise. And you wouldn't be half so fine-looking if you were fat. I *always* sigh when I don't know what to do. Then I just saddle Boy and ride. And I'll *never* let myself get fat."

"A vow is a vow—at sixteen."

"Now I *know* you need exercise. You're getting reminiscent, and that's a sign of torpid liver."

Walter Stone laughed till the tears came. "Exercise!" he exclaimed. "Ah! I begin to divine a subtle method in your doctrine of health. Ah, ha! I look well on a horse! I need exercise! It's a very satisfactory ride from here to town and back. Incidentally, Louise, I smell a rat. I used to be able to hold my own."

"It isn't my fault if you don't now," said Louise, snuggling in his arm.

"That's unworthy of you!" he growled, his arm tightening round her slim young figure. "Tell me, sweetheart; how is it that you can be so thoroughly practical and so unfathomably romantic in the same breath? You have deliberately shattered me to bits that you might mould me nearer to your heart's desire. And your heart's desire, just now, is to help an unknown, a tramp, out of jail."

Louise pouted. "You say 'just now' as though my heart's desires weren't very serious matters as a rule. You *know* you wouldn't be half so happy if I didn't tease you for something at least once a week. I remember once I didn't ask you

for anything for a whole week, and you went and asked Aunty Eleanor if I were ill. Besides, the boy *needs* help, whether he did anything wrong or not. Can't you understand?"

"That's utopian, Louise, but it isn't generally practicable."

"Then make it individually practicable, uncle—just this time. Pshaw! I don't believe you're half-trying to argue. Why, when Boyar bucked you off that time and ran into the barb-wire, then *he* didn't need doctoring for that awful cut on his shoulder, because he had done wrong."

"That is no parallel, Louise. Boyar didn't know any better. And this boy is not sick or injured."

"How do you know that? He's down in that terribly hot, smelly jail. If he did get sick, who would know it?"

"And Boyar isn't a human being. He can't reason."

"Oh, Uncle Walter! I thought you knew horses better than that. Boyar can reason much better than most people."

"The proof being that he prefers you to any one else?"

"No," replied Louise, smiling mischievously. "That isn't Boyar's *reason*; it's his affection. That's different."

"Yes, quite different," said Walter Stone. "Is this boy good-looking?" And the rancher fumbled in his pocket for a cigar.

Louise slipped from the arm of his chair and stood opposite him, her lips pouted teasingly, the young face glowing with mischief and fun. "Am I?" she asked, curtsy-ing and twinkling. "'Cause if you're going to ride down to the valley to see the boy just because Beautiful asked you, Beautiful will go alone. But if you come because *I* want you,"—and Louise smiled bewitchingly,—"*why*, Beautiful will come too, and sing for you—perhaps."

"My heart, my service, and my future are at your feet, Señorita Louisa, my mouse. Are your eyes gray or green this morning?"

"Both," replied Louise quickly. "Green for spunk and gray for love. That's what Aunty Eleanor says."

"Come a little nearer. Let me see. No, they are quite gray now."

"'Cause why?" she cooed, and stooping, kissed him with warm, careless affection. "You always ask me about my eyes when you want me to kiss you. Of course, when you want to kiss *me*, why, you just come and take 'em."

"My esteemed privilege, sweetheart. I am your caballero."

"Did Aunty Eleanor?" said Louise.

But Walter Stone rose and straightened his shoulders. "That will do, mouse. I can't have any jealousy between my sweethearts."

"Never! And, Uncle Walter, do you want to ride Major or Rally? Rally and Boyar get along better together. I'll saddle Boy in a jiffy."

To ride some ten miles in the blazing sun of midsummer requires a kind of anticipatory fortitude, at fifty, especially when one's own vine and fig tree is cool and fragrant, embowered in blue flowers and graced by, let us say, Louise. And a cigar is always at its best when half-smoked. But when Louise came blithely leading the two saddle-ponies, Black Boyar and the big pinto Rally, Walter Stone shook an odd twenty years from his broad shoulders and swung into the saddle briskly.

From the shade of the great sycamore warders of the wide gate, he waved a gauntleted salute to Aunt Eleanor, who stood on the porch, drawing a leaf of the graceful moon-vine through her slender fingers. She nodded a smiling farewell.

Louise and her uncle rode as two lovers, their ponies close together. The girl swayed to Boyar's quick, swinging walk. Walter Stone sat the strong, tireless Rally with solid ease.

The girl, laughing happily at her triumph, leaned toward her escort teasingly, singing fragments of old Spanish love-songs, or talking with eager lips and sparkling eyes. Of a sudden she would assume a demureness, utterly bewitching in its veiled and perfect mimicry. Quite seriously he would set about to overcome this delightful mood of hers with extravagant vows of lifelong love and servitude, as though he were in truth her chosen caballero and she his Señorita of the Rose.

And as they played at love-making, hidden graces of the girl's sweet nature

unfolded to him, and deep in his heart he wondered, and found life good, and Youth still unspoiled by the years, and Louise a veritable enchantress of infinite moods, each one adorable. Golden-haired, gray-eyed, quick with sympathy, sweetly subtle and subtly sweet was Louise.... And one must worship Youth and Beauty and Love, even with their passing bitter on one's lips.

But to Walter Stone no such bitterness had come, this soldierly, wise caballero escorting his adorable señorita on an errand of mercy. His was the heart of Youth, eternal and undaunted Youth. And Beauty was hers, of the spirit as well as of the flesh. And Love....

"Why, Louise! There are tears on your lashes, my colleen!"

"But I am singing, uncle." And she smiled through her tears.

"Sweetheart?"

"Yes, Uncle Walter?"

"What is it? Tell me."

"I wish I could. I don't know. I think I'm getting to be grown up—just like a woman. It—it makes me—think of lots of things. Let's ride." And her silver spurs flashed.

Boyar, taken quite by surprise, grunted as he leaped down the Moonstone Trail. He resented this undeserved punishment by plunging sideways across the road. Again came the flash of the silver spurs, and Walter Stone heard Louise disciplining the pony.

"Just a woman. Just like a woman," murmured the rancher. "Now, Boyar, and some others of us, will never quite understand what that means." And with rein and voice he lifted the pinto Rally to a lope.



CHAPTER VII

THE GIRL WHO GLANCED BACK

At the crossroads in the valley stood the local jail, or "coop," as it was more descriptively called. Unpainted, isolated, its solitary ugliness lacked even the squalid dignity commonly associated with the word "jail." The sun pelted down upon its bleached, unshaded roof and sides. The burning air ran over its warped shingles like a kind of colorless fire.

The boy Collie, half-dreaming in the suffocating heat of the place, started to his feet as the door swung open. He had heard horses coming. They had stopped. He could hardly realize that the sunlight was swimming through the close dusk of the place. But the girl of Moonstone Cañon, reining Boyar round, was real, and she smiled and nodded a greeting.

"This is Mr. Stone, my uncle," she said. "He wants to talk with you."

With a glance that noted each unlovely detail of the place, the broken iron bed, the cracked pitcher, and the unspeakable blankets, Louise touched her pony and was gone.

Collie rubbed his eyes, blinking in the sun as he stood gazing after her.

Walter Stone, standing near the doorway, noted the lad's clear, healthy skin, his well-shaped head with its tumble of wavy black hair, and the luminous dark eyes. He felt an instant sympathy for the boy, a sympathy that he masked with a business-like brusqueness. "Well, young man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come outside. It's vile in there."

Stone led his pony to the north side of the "coop."

Collie followed.

Away to the west he saw the hazy peaks. A lake of burning air pulsed above the flat, hot floor of the valley. Over there lay the hills and the shade and the road.... Somewhere beyond was Overland, his friend, penniless, hunted, hungry....

"She brung you?" queried the boy.

"Yes. I have seen Tenlow, the sheriff. He is willing to let you go at my request. What do you intend doing, now that you are free?"

"I don' know. Find Red, I guess."

Walter Stone nodded. "What then?"

"Oh, stick it out with Red. They'll be after him sure now. Red's my pal."

"What has he done to get the police after him?"

"Nothin'. It's the bunch."

"The bunch?"

"Uhuh. Them guys out on the Mojave. But say, are you workin' me to get next to Red and get him pinched again?"

"No. You don't have to answer me. This man Red is nothing to me, one way or the other. He took Miss Lacharme's pony, but she has overlooked that. I thought, perhaps, you might care to explain your position. Perhaps you had rather not. You may go now if you wish."

"Is that straight?"

"Yes."

For several tense seconds the lad gazed at his questioner. Finally his gaze shifted to the hills. "I guess you're straight," he said presently. "I guess she wouldn't have you for a relation if you wasn't straight."

The elder man laughed. "That's right—she wouldn't, young man."

"How's the sheriff guy?" asked the boy.

"He's getting along well enough. What made you ask?"

"Oh, nothin'. I hate to see any guy get hurt."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. I begin to think you are a bigger man than he is."

"Me?" And Collie flushed, misunderstanding the other's drift. "I guess you're kiddin'."

"No, I mean it. Mr. Tenlow still seemed pretty hot about your share in this—er—enterprise. You seem to have no hard feelings against him."

"Huh! He shouldn't to be sore at *me*. I didn't spur no horse onto him and ride him down like a dog. I guess Red would 'a' killed him if he'd seen it. Say, nobody got Red, did they?"

"I haven't heard of it. How did this man Red come to pick you up? You're pretty young to be tramping."

"Cross your heart you ain't tryin' to queer Red? You ain't tryin' to put the Injun sign on us, are you?"

"No. I have heard all about the Mojave affair—the prospector that died on the track—and the arrest of Overland Red at Barstow. You told my niece that this Overland Red was 'square.' How did you come to be mixed up in it?"

"I guess I'll have to tell you the whole thing, straight. Red always said that to tell the truth was just as good as lyin', because nobody would believe us, anyway. And if a fella gets caught tellin' the truth, why, he's that much to the good."

"Well, I shall try and believe you this time," said Stone. "Miss Lacharme thinks you're honest."

"A guy couldn't lie to her!" said the boy.

"Then just consider me her representative," said Stone, smiling.

Collie squatted in the meager shade of the "coop."

Walter Stone, dropping the pony's reins, came and sat beside the lad. There was something in the older man's presence, an unspoken assurance of comradeship and sincerity that annulled the boy's tendency to reticence about himself. He began hesitatingly, "My dad was a drinkin' man. Ma died, and he got worse at it. I was a kid and didn't care, for he never done nothin' to me. We lived back East, over a pawnbroker's on Main Street. One day pa come home with a timetable. He sat up 'most all night readin' it. Every time I woke up, he was readin' it and talkin' to himself. That was after ma died.

"In the mornin', when I was gettin' dressed, he come over and says to take the needle he had and stick it through the timetable anywhere. I was scared he was goin' to have the jimmies. But I took the needle—it had black thread in it—and stuck it through the timetable. He opened the page and laughed awful loud and queer. Albuquerque was where the needle went in. He couldn't say the name right, but he kept lookin' at it.

"Then he went out and was gone all day and all night. When he come back he showed me a whole wad of money. I says, 'Where did you get it?' He got mad and tells me to shut up.

"That day we got on a train. I says, 'Where are we goin'?' and he says to never mind, and did I want some peanuts.

"We kept ridin' and ridin' in the same car, and eatin' bananas and san'wiches and sleepin' settin' up at nights. I was just about sick when we come to Albuquerque. You see, that was where the needle went through the timetable, and dad said we would get off there. He got awful drunk that night.

"Next day he said he was goin' to quit liquor and make a fresh start. I knowed he wouldn't, 'cause he always said that next mornin'. But I guess he tried to quit. I don't know.

"One night he didn't come back to the room where we was stayin' upstairs over the saloon. They found him 'way down the track next day, all cut to pieces by the train."

The boy paused, reached forward, and plucked a withered stem of grass which he wound round and round his finger.

Walter Stone sat looking across the valley.

"I guess his money was all gone," resumed the boy. "Anyhow, 'bout a year after, Overland Red comes along. He comes to the saloon where I was stayin',—they give me a job cleanin' out every day,—and he got to talkin' a lot of stuff about scenery and livin' the simple life, and all that guff. The bartender got to jawin' with him, and I laughed, and the bartender hits me a lick side the head. Red, he hits the bartender a lick side of *his* head—and the bartender don't get up right away. 'I'll learn him to hit kids,' said Red. 'If you learn him to hit 'em as hard as that,' I says to Red, 'then it will be all off with me the next time.'

"Does he hit you very often?" said Red.

"Whenever he feels like it,' I told him.

"Red laughed and said to come on. I was sick of there, so I run away with Red. We tried it on a freight and got put off. Red had some water in a canteen he swiped. It was lucky for us he did. We kept walkin' and goin' nights, and mebbly ridin' on freights in the daytime if we could. One day, a long time after that, we was crossin' the desert again. We got put off a freight that time, too. We was walkin' along when we found a guy layin' beside the track. Red said he wasn't dead, but was dyin'. We give him some water. Then he kind of come to and wanted to drink it all. Red said, 'No.' Then the guy got kind of crazy. He got up and grabbed Red. I was scared.

"Red, he passed me the canteen and told me to keep it away from the guy because more water would kill him. Then the guy went for Red. 'He's dyin' on his feet,' said Red. 'It's his last flash.' And he tried to hold the guy quiet, talkin' decent to him all the time. They was staggerin' around when the guy tripped backwards over the rail. His head hit on the other rail and Red fell on top of him. Anyway, the guy was dead."

Walter Stone shifted his position, turning to gaze at the boy's white face. "Yes—go on," he said quietly.

"Red was for searchin' the guy, but I says to come on before we got caught. Red, he laughed kind of queer, and asked me, 'Caught at what?' Then I said, 'I dunno,' but I was scared.

"Anyway, he went through the dead guy's clothes and found some papers and old letters and a little leather bag with a whole lot of gold-dust in it. Red said mebbly five hundred dollars!"

"Gold-dust?"

"Uhuh! Then Red was scared. He buried the bag and the papers 'way out in the sand and made a mark on the ties to find it by."

"Did you find out the dead man's name?" asked Stone, glancing curiously at the boy.

"Nope. We just beat it for the next station. I was feelin' sick. I give out, and Red, he lugged me to the next water-tank. He was pourin' water on me when the Limited come along and stopped, and *she* throwed the rose to us. Red told me about it after. You wouldn't go back on a pal like that, would you?"

"No, I don't know that I should."

"That's me!" said the boy. "Then they went to work and pinched us at Barstow. Said we killed the guy because his head was smashed in where he hit the rails. They tried to make Red say that he robbed the guy after killin' him. But Red told everything, except he didn't tell about the letters and the gold-dust. They tried to make me say it, but I dassent. I knowed they would fix Red sure if I did, and he told me not to tell about the gold if they did pinch us."

"They let you go—after the police examination. Then how is it that the authorities are after you again?"

"It's the bunch," replied the boy. "Them guys out there knowed the dead guy had a mine or a ledge or somethin' where he got the gold. Nobody was wise to where. They told at the jail how he used to come in once in a while and send his dust to Los Angeles by the express company. All them guys like the sheriff and the station agent and all the people in that town are workin' tryin' to find out where the gold come from. They think because Red and me is tramps that they can make us tell and arrest us whenever they like. But even Red don't know, unless it's in the papers he hid in the sand."

"That sounds like a pretty straight story," said Stone. "So you intend to stick to this man Red?"

"Sure! Would you quit him now, when they're after him worst?"

"They will get him finally."

"Mebby. But Red's pretty slick at a getaway. If they do pinch him again, that's where I come in. I'm the only witness and the only friend he's got."

"Of course. But don't you see, my boy, that your way of living is so much against you that you couldn't really help him? A man's naked word is worth just what his friends and neighbors will allow him for it, and no more."

"But ain't a guy got no rights in this country?"

"Certainly he has. But he has to prove that he is entitled to them, by his way of living."

"Then he's got to go to church, and work, and live decent, or he don't get a square deal, hey?"

"But why shouldn't he do that much?"

Collie did not answer. Instead, he inspected his questioner critically from head to foot. "I guess you're right," he said finally. "I've heard folks talk like that before, but I never took no stock. They kind of said it because they knowed it. I guess you say it because you mean it."

"Of course I do," said Stone heartily. "Well, here comes my niece with the mail. See! Over there is El Camino Real, running north. My ranch is up *there*, in the hills. My foreman's name is Williams. If you should ask him for work, I believe he might give you something to do. I heard him say he needed a man, not long ago."

Walter Stone cinched up the saddle and mounted his pony. The boy's eyes shone as he gazed at the strong, soldierly figure. Ah, to look like that, and ride a horse like that!

Boyar, the black pony, clattered up and stopped. "Hello, folks!" said Louise, purposely including the boy in her greeting.

Collie flushed happily. Then a bitterness grew in his heart as he thought of his friend Overland, hunted from town to town by the same law that protected these people—an unjust law that they observed and fostered.

"Well?" said Stone.

Collie's gaze was on the ground. "I don' know," he muttered. "I don' know."

"Well, good luck to you!" And the ponies swung into that philosophical lope of the Western horse who knows his journey's length.

The figures of the riders grew smaller. Still the boy stood in the road, watching them. Undecided, he gazed. Then came an answer to his stubborn self-questioning. Louise glanced back—glanced back for an instant in mute sympathy with his loneliness.

Slowly the boy turned and entered the jail. He folded his coat over his arm, stepped outside, and closed the door.

Before him stretched the hot gray level of El Camino Real, the road to the beyond. From it branched a narrower road, reaching up into the southern hills,—on, up to the mysterious Moonstone Cañon with its singing stream and its

gracious shade. Somewhere beyond, higher, and in the shadowy fastness of the great ranges lay the Moonstone Ranch ... her home.

"I guess, steppin' up smart, I'll be there just about in time for supper," said the boy. And whistling cheerily, he set his feet toward the south and the Moonstone Trail.



CHAPTER VIII

THE TEST

After a week of weeding in the vegetable garden, Collie was put to work repairing fence. There were many miles of it, inclosing some twenty thousand acres of grazing-land, and the cross-fencing of the oat, alfalfa, fruit, and vegetable acreage. The fence was forever in need of repair. The heavy winter rains, torrential in the mountains, often washed away entire hillsides, leaving a dozen or so staggering posts held together by the wires, tangled and sagging. Cattle frequently pulled loosened posts from the earth by kneeling under the wire and working through, oblivious to the barbs. Again, "stock gone a little loco" would often charge straight through the rigid and ripping wire barriers as though their strands were of thread. Posts would split in the sun, and staples would drop out, leaving sagging spaces which cattle never failed to find and take advantage of. Trees uprooted by the rain and wind would often fall across the fence.

Altogether, the maintaining of a serviceable fence-line on a well-ordered ranch necessitates eternal vigilance.

The Moonstone Rancho was well ordered under the direct supervision of Walter Stone's foreman, "Brand" Williams. Williams was a Wyoming cowman of the old school; taciturn, lean, sinewy.

Some ten years before, Williams, seeking employment, had ridden over the range with Stone. Returning, the cowman remarked disconsolately, "I like your stock, and I'll tie to you. But, say, it's only playin' at ranchin' on twenty thousand fenced. I was raised in Wyoming."

"All right," Stone had replied. "Play hard and we'll get along first-rate."

Every inch of Brand Williams's six feet was steeped in the astringent of experience. He played hard and prospered, as did his employer.

Collie stood awaiting the foreman's instructions.

"Ever mend fence?" asked Williams.

"Nope."

"Good. Then you can learn right. Go rope a cayuse—get some staples and that leetle axe in my office, and go to it. There's plenty fence."

The "Go rope a cayuse" momentarily staggered the boy, but he went silently to the corral, secured a riata, and by puzzling the playful ponies by his amateur tactics he finally entangled "Baldy," a white-faced cow-pony of peaceful mien but uncertain disposition.

Williams, watching the performance, lazily rolled a straw-paper cigarette.

Snubbed to the post, bridled and saddled awkwardly, Baldy gave no outward sign of his malignant inward intent of getting rid of the lad the minute he mounted.

Williams slowly drew a match across his sleeve from elbow to wrist, ending with a flame that was extremely convenient to his cigarette. He wasted no effort at anything. He was a man who never met a yawn halfway, but only gave in to it when actually obliged to. Collie climbed into the saddle and started for the corral gate. He arrived there far ahead of the horse. He got to his feet and brushed his knees. The pony was humping round the corral with marvelous agility for so old a horse.

"He never did like a left-handed man," said Williams gravely. "Next time get on him from the *other* side, and see if he don't behave. Hold on; don't be in a hurry. Let him throw a few more jumps, then he'll quit for to-day most likely. And say, son, if he does take to buckin' with you again, don't choke that saddle to death hangin' on to the horn. Set up straight, lean a little back, and clinch your knees. You'll get piled, anyhow, but you might as well start right."

The boy approached the horse again, secured the dangling reins, and again mounted. Baldy was as demure as a spinster in church. He actually looked pious.

Collie urged the pony toward the gate. Baldy reared.

"A spade bit ain't made to pull teeth with, although you can," said Williams. "Baldy's old, but his teeth are all good yet. Just easy now. Ride in your saddle, not on your reins. That's it! And say, kid, I would 'a' got them staples and that axe before crawlin' the hoss, eh?"

Collie flushed. He dismounted and walked to the foreman's office. When he returned to the corral, the horse was gone. Williams still sat on the corral bars smoking and gazing earnestly at nothing.

Round the corner of the stable Collie saw the pony, his nose peacefully submerged in the water-trough, but his eye wide and vigilant. The boy ran toward him. Baldy snorted and, wheeling, ran back into the corral, circled it with an expression which said plainly, "Let us play a little game of tag, in which, my young friend, you shall always be 'It.'"

Again Collie tried to rope the pony.

"Want any help?" asked Williams, as he slid from the corral bars to the ground.

"Nope." And Collie disentangled his legs from an amazing contortion of the riata and tried to whirl the loop as he had seen the cowmen whirl it.

"Hold on, son!" said Williams. "You mean right, but don't go to rope him with the saddle on. If you looped that horn, he, like as not, would yank you clean to Calabasas before you got your feet out of that mess of rope you're standin' in. Anyway, you ain't goin' to Calabasas; you're due up the other way."

Collie was learning things rapidly, and, better still, he was learning in a way that would cause him to remember.

Williams spoke sharply to the pony. Baldy stopped and eyed the foreman with vapid inquisitiveness. "Now, son, I got three things to tell you," and the foreman gathered up the reins. "First—keep on keepin' your mouth shut and tendin' to business. It pays. Second—always drop your reins over a hoss's head when you get off, whether he's trained that way or not. And last—always figure a hoss thinks he knows more than you do. Sometimes he does. Sometimes he don't. Then he won't fool you so frequent, for you'll be watchin' him. I wouldn't 'a' said that much, only you're a tenderfoot from the East, I hear. If you was a tenderfoot from the West, you would 'a' had to take your own medicine."

Collie's shoulder was lame from his fall and was becoming stiff, but he grinned cheerfully, and said nothing, which pleased Williams.

The foreman leveled his slow, keen eyes at him for a minute. "You'll find a spring under the live-oaks by the third cross-fence north. Reckon you'll get there about noon. Keep your eye peeled for fire. I thought I seen somebody up there as I come across from the corral early this mornin'. We come close to burnin' out

here once, account of a hobo's fire. Understand, if you ketch anybody cantelopin' around *a-foot*, you just ride 'em off the range pronto. That's all."

As Collie rode away through the morning sunshine, Williams loafed across the corral, roped and saddled a white-eyed pinto, and, spurring up a narrow cañon west of the ranch buildings, disappeared round a turn of the shady trail. As the foreman rode, he alternately talked to the pony and himself.

"Tramp, eh?" he said, addressing the pony. "What do you say, Sarko? Nothin', eh? Same as me.... Overland Red's kid pal, eh? Huh! I knowed Jack Summers, Red Jack Summers, down in Sonora in '83. Mexico was some open country then. Jack was a white pardner, too. Went to the bad, account of that Chola girl that he was courtin' goin' wrong.... Funny how the boss come to pick up that kid. Thinks there's somethin' in him. O' course they is. But what? Eh, Sarko, what? You say nothin', same as me.... Here, you! That's a lizard, you fool hoss. Never seen one before, so you're try in' to catch it by jumpin' through your bridle after it, eh? Never seen one before, oh, no! Don't like that, eh? Well, you quit, and I will. Exactly. It's me, and my ole Spanish spurs. I'm listenin'.... Nothin' to say?... Uhuh! I reckon little Louise had somethin' to do with gettin' the kid the job. Well, if *she* likes him, I got to. Guess I'd love a snake if she said to. Yes, I'm listenin' to myself ..." And the taciturn foreman's hard, weathered face wrinkled in a smile. "I'm listenin' ... None of the boys know Red's camped up by the spring. I do. Red used to be a damn white Injun in the old days. I'll give the kid a chance to put him wise for old times. And I'll find out if the kid means business or not ... which is some help to know how to handle him later."

Williams picketed his pony in the meadow above the third cross-fence. Loafing down the slope toward the spring, he noticed the faint smoke of a fire. Farther down the line fence, he could see Collie in the distance, riding slowly toward the three live-oaks. The foreman found a convenient seat on a ledge, rolled another of his eternal cigarettes, and watched the boy approach from below.

Collie had already dismounted three times that morning; twice to mend fence, and once more involuntarily. He determined, with a mighty vow to the bow-legged god of all horseflesh, to learn to stay on a broncho or die learning.

The boy had a native fondness for animals, and he had already thought of buying a pony with his first few months' wages. But the vision of his erstwhile companion Overland, perhaps imprisoned and hopeless in the grip of the "bunch," annulled that desire. He would save every cent for that emergency.

Arrived at the spring, both boy and horse drank gratefully, for the day was hot. Then Collie noticed the thin smoke coming through the trees and strode toward it.

"It ain't much of a fire yet," said Overland. "Our hired girl—" and he grinned through a two-weeks' tangle of red beard. "Oh, but ain't he the 'cute little workin'-man with his little ole hoss and his garments of toil."

"Oh, Red!" exclaimed the boy.

"Me sure! I been hidin' in my whiskers so long I didn't know if you'd know me."

"I been thinking about you every day."

"Uhuh. So have I. I reckon some others has, too. Say, what you been doin' lately, studyin' law or learnin' the piano? I been lookin' for you for a week. It's the first day I seen you out on the range."

"I was working in the garden first. Then they put me at this, this mornin'."

"Uhuh. Well, Col, that there getaway of mine is in all the papers. 'Tramp Cowboy Steals Horse and Escapes.' Say, did she yip about my borrowin' the cayuse?"

"She was mad at first. But your fancy ridin' kind of made her forget. I told her you was square, Red."

"Huh! I guess she could tell that herself."

"But, Red, I'm not kidding. I told her uncle about the bunch and the guy on the desert."

"Did he believe it?"

"I guess so. He ain't said much. But he gives me the chance to make good. He must have believed somethin'."

"Well, stick to it, Collie. You never was cut out for a genuine towerist like me, anyhow. It ain't in your blood."

"What you goin' to do now, Red?"

"Me? Listen! There's gold out there, somewhere. I'm broke now. I need some dough. I got ideas. Ten dollars does it. I get a new set of clothes and get shaved

and me hair trimmed close. Then I commence me good work in Main Street, in Los. Down on North Main is where I catch the gent from the East who will fall for anything that wears a Stetson and some outdoors complexion. I tell all about my ledge in the Mojave and get staked to go out and prospect. It's bein' done every day—it and the other fella."

"But, Red—"

"Hold on, kid. I ain't goin' to bunk nobody. This here's square. I need financin'—a burro and a grubstake and me for the big dry spot. Ship the outfit to the desert town, and then hit it along the rails to where we hid it. If the papers we hid is any good, me to locate the ledge. Anyhow, there's a good five hundred in the poke, and that's better than a kick in the pants."

"You'll get pinched sure, Red."

"Nix, kiddo. Not out there. Money talks. 'Course it ain't makin' any distressin' sounds around here jest now, but, say, got the makin's?"

"I ain't smoked since I been here, Red."

"Excuse me, Miss Collie. What denomination did you say?"

"Straight, Red. I'm savin' my money."

"What do they pay you for settin' on that cayuse?"

"Fifteen a month, and board, and the horse to ride."

"Don't mention the hoss, pal. Jest make motions with your hands when you mean him. Talkin' is apt to wake him up."

"He pitched me twice."

"Just havin' bad dreams, that's all," said Overland, grinning. "Fifteen a month and found ain't bad for a bum, is it?"

"Cut that out, Red. I ain't no bum."

"Ex-cuse me. There I gone and laminated your feelin's again. Why in hell don't you blush, or drop your little ole lace handkerchief, or fix your back hair, so I can remember I'm talkin' to a lady? It ain't manners, this here impersonatin' you're a boy like that."

"Quit your kiddin', Red. Mebby you think it was easy to cut out the old stuff, and everybody on the ranch on to what I used to be. I was cryin' the first night. I was lonesome for you."

Overland's eyelids flickered. He grinned. "Uhuh! I could hear you clean over in the Simi Valley. I was thinkin' of comin' right back, only—"

"Oh, if you think I'm lyin to you—"

Overland thrust up a soiled palm. "Nix; you never did yet. How much coin can you rustle?"

"I got that eight-and-a-half I had when we was pinched. It's down to the bunk-house."

"Well, bring it up here to-morrow mornin'. And, say, swipe a sogun for me. I near froze last night."

Collie's brows drew together. "I'll bring the money, sure! but I can't swipe no blanket, even for you. The boss thinks I'm square, and so does she. I'll bring tobacco and papers. Got any grub?"

"Well, some. I ain't exactly livin' on sagebrush and scenery yet. I been trainin' some chickens to do the Texas Tommy. Every one that learns to do it in one lesson gets presented with a large hot fryin'-pan. Surprisin' how them chickens is fond of dancin'. I reckon I learned six of 'em since I seen you last. But don't forget the eight rollers and four bits. I need ten, but eight-fifty will do. I'll have to leave out the silk pejammies and the rosewater this trip. But kickie pants is good enough for me to sleep in. How's that sheriff gent?"

"Busted his collar-bone and killed his horse."

"I'm sad for the hoss. How do you like livin' decent?"

"Fine, Red! I wish you would—"

"Hold on, Collie, not me! I'm gettin' too old, too plumb old and disgusted with this vale of steers to change and tie down to short grass. Now you're near enough to the age of that little Louise girl to make life interestin'."

"Who said anything about her?"

"Whoa, Chico! Back up. You're steppin' on your bridle. Don't go 'way mad."

Why, I said somethin' about her, that's who. You got any idea of hobblin' my talk?"

"No. But—"

"Oh, you can't flim your ole pal, nohow. You're just commencin' life on what that little Louise lady thinks you ought to be. And you will be it some day, if you keep straight. So will I."

"You?" Collie was unable to associate a reconstructive idea with Overland's mode of life.

"Say! Just as if I never knowed a good woman. Say, I could actooly give up smokin' for her, if I had to hire some guy to do it for me. That's what I think of her. When I get me plush rags and the dizzy lid, I'll call around in me private caboose and take you both for a little ride."

For a moment the boy gazed away to where the silver of the Southern Pacific rails glinted in the valley. Overland Red's presence brought back poignantly the long, lazy days of loafing and the wide, starry nights of wayside fire, tobacco, and talk. There was a charm in the free life of the road—that long gray road that never ended—never ended in the quiet shade of a mountain ranch or in the rose-bordered pathway to a valley cottage. The long gray road held out no promise of rest for worn and aged folk. After all, its only freedom was the freedom of eternal wandering ... until one could adventure no longer ... and then? Better to tread the harder path of duty.

The boy's black eyes were lifted pleadingly. "Red," he said hesitatingly. "Red, I got to tell you to camp the other side of that line fence till I come to-morrow."

Overland understood instantly that the lad was but following general instructions. He loved the boy, and so, perversely, worked upon his feelings. "Oh, the *other* side? Ex-cuse me, chief, for intrudin' on this here resavation. Sorry I'm crowdin' you so."

"Now, Red, wait—"

"Wait? What, for you to insult your ole pal again by tellin' him he might drink all the water in this here spring, mebbly, or infloence the morals of the cattle, or steal the wire off the fence? Huh! I thought I was your *pal*?"

"Oh, Red, quit kiddin'. Don't you see I got orders? I got orders."

"You're gettin' civilized fast, all right. The first thing civilization does is to projooce hobos and bums. Then she turns up her nose because hobos and bums ain't civilized. Did you ever see a ma cat get mad because one of her kittens was born with sore eyes? I guess not. Cats has got sense. Now, what if I don't indignify myself to the extent of crawlin' under that line fence?"

"'Course I'll bring you the coin in the mornin'. But if you don't go now, why, I got to quit this job. I got to play square to him."

"So it's orders or me, eh?"

"Yes, Red, and I want to use you right, and be square, too."

Overland Red's beard hid the quiver of his lips as he asked huskily: "And you would be comin' back on the road with your ole pal again? You would give up the job and the chance of a smile from that little Rose-Lady Girl and flew the coop with me again if I said the word?"

"Sure I would. You come first and the job comes second; but—but I want to keep the job."

Overland's keen blue eyes filled with instant emotion. "Oh, you go chase a snake up your sleeve. Do you think I'd bust your chances of makin' good here? Do you reckon I'd let a line fence stand between me and you, speakin' poetical? Say, I'll go camp in that sheriff gent's front yard if it'll do any good to you, or before I'll see you in bad with the little Rose Girl!"

"Please, Red; I mean it."

"So do I. I'll fade quicker than spit on a hot stove. Don't forget to-morrow mornin'. Some day I'll put you hep to how to ride. You better get to your fence job."

Brand Williams watched the man and the boy as they walked along the line-fence trail together. Collie leading the pony, the man talking and gesticulating earnestly. Finally they shook hands. The tramp crawled under the fence. The boy mounted Baldy and rode away.

Williams, catching up his own horse, spurred quickly across the ridge above the spring that the boy might not see him.



CHAPTER IX

A CELESTIAL ENTERPRISE

Broad avenues of feathery pepper trees, long driveways between shadowy rows of the soldierly eucalyptus, wide lawns and gigantic palms of the southern isles, weaving pampas grass, gay as the plumes of romance, jasmine, orange-bloom, and roses everywhere. Over all is the eternal sunshine and noon breeze of the sea, graciously cooling. Roundabout is a girdle of far hills.

Some old Spanish padre named it "Nuestra Señora Reina de Los Angeles," making melody that still lures with its ancient charm. A city for angels, verily. A city of angels? Verily; some fallen, indeed, for there is much nefarious trafficking in real estate, but all in all the majority of souls in Los Angeles are celestial bound, treading upon sunbeams in their pilgrimage.

The plaza, round which the new town roars from dawn to dusk, is still haunted by a crumbling old adobe, while near it droop dusty pepper trees that seem to whisper to each other endlessly—"Mañana! Mañana!" Whisper as did those swarthy vaqueros and the young, lithe, low-voiced señoritas who strolled across the plaza in the dusk of by-gone days. "Mañana! Mañana!—To-morrow! To-morrow!"

And the to-morrows have come and gone as did those Spanish lovers, riding up through the sunshine on their silver-bitted pinto ponies and riding out at dusk with tinkling spur-chains into that long to-morrow that has shrouded the ancient plaza in listless dreams. Mexicans in black sombreros and blue overalls still prowl from cantina to cantina, but the gay vaquero and his señorita are no more.

Overland Red, a harsh note in the somnolence of the place, stepped buoyantly across the square. And here, if ever, Overland was at home.

A swarthy, fat Mexican shaved him while a lean old rurale of Overland's earlier acquaintance obligingly accepted some pesos with which to drink the señor's health, and other pesos with which to purchase certain clothing for the señor.

The retired rurale drove a relentless bargain with a countryman, returning with certain picturesque garments that Overland donned in the back room of the little circus-blue barber shop.

The tramp had worthily determined to hold wise and remunerative converse with the first Easterner that "looked good to him." He would make half-truths do double duty. He needed money to purchase a burro, packs, canteen, pick, shovel, dynamite, and provisions. He intended to repay the investor by money-order from some desert town as soon as he found the hidden gold. This unusual and worthy intention lent Overland added assurance, and he needed it. Fortune, goddess evanishing and coy, was with him for once. If he could but dodge the plain-clothes men long enough to outfit and get away....

The "Mojave Bar," on North Main Street of the City of Angels was all but empty. Upon it the lassitude of early afternoon lay heavily. The spider-legged music-racks of the Mexican string orchestra, the empty platform chairs, the deserted side-tables along the pictured wall, the huge cactus scrawled over with pin-etched initials,—all the impedimenta of the saloon seemed to slumber.

The white-coated proprietor, with elbows on the bar, gazed listlessly at a Remington night-scene—a desert nocturne with a shadowy adobe against the blue-black night, a glimmer of lamplight through a doorway, and in the golden pathway a pony and rider and the red flash of pistol shots.

Opposite the bartender, at a table against the wall, sat a young man, clad in cool gray. He smoked a cigarette, and occasionally sipped from a tall glass. He was slender, clean-cut, high-colored, an undeniable patrician. In his mild gray eyes, deep down, gleamed a latent humor, an interior twinkling not apparent to the multitude.

Sweeney Orcutt, the saloon-keeper, noticed this reserve characteristic now for the first time, as the young man turned toward him. Sweeney was a retired plain-clothes man with a record, and a bank account. It was said that he knew every crook from Los Angeles to New York. Be it added, to his credit, that he kept his own counsel—attending to his own business on both sides of the bar.

"Do they ever do those things now?" queried the young man, nodding toward the picture.

Sweeney Orcutt smiled a thin-lipped smile. "Not much. Sometimes in Texas or Mexico. I seen the day when they did."

The young man lazily crossed his legs. "Nice and cool here," he remarked presently.

"Been in town long?" asked Sweeney.

"No, only a few days."

"I was goin' to say there's a good show over on Spring Street—movin'-pictures of the best ridin' and buckin' and ropin' I seen yet."

"Yes? Is there any one in town who is not working for the movies?"

Again Sweeney Orcutt smiled his thin-lipped smile. "Yes, I guess there is. I might scare up one or two I used to know who is workin' the transients, which ain't exactly workin' *for* the movies."

"I should like to meet some character who is really doing something in earnest; that is, some cowboy, miner, prospector, teamster,—one of those twenty-mule-team kind, you know,—or any such chap. Why, even the real estate men that have been up to my hotel seem to be acting a part. One expects every minute to see one of them pull a gun and hold up a fellow. No doubt they mean business."

"Bank on that," said Orcutt dryly.

"You see," continued the young man, "I have too much time on my hands just now. The doctors tell me to rest, and I've been doing nothing else all my life. It's pretty monotonous. I've tried to get interested in some of the chaps on North Main Street, and around the plaza. I've offered to buy them drinks and all that, but they seem to shy off. I suppose they think I'm a detective or something of that kind."

"More like, a newspaper man after a story. Hello, there! Now, what's doin'?"

Outside near the curb a crowd had collected. A traffic officer was talking to the driver of an automobile. As Sweeney Orcutt strolled toward the doorway, Overland Red, clean-shaven, clothed in new corduroys and high lace boots, and a sombrero aslant on his stiff red hair, dove into the saloon and called for a "bucket of suds."

"Close—shave—Red—" whispered Orcutt.

"Had me Orcutt, likewise," replied the tramp. "Say, Sweeney, stall off the Dick out there. I think he piped me as I blew in, but I ain't sure. He'll be pokin' in here

in a minute. If he sees me talkin',—to the guy there, for instance,—and you give him a steer, he won't look too close. Sabe?" And Overland drank, observing the Easterner at the table over the top of his glass.

"They got that guy Overland Red mugged in every station from here to Chicago," whispered Orcutt. "Paper says he put it over a desert rat up near Barstow. Did you hear about it?"

"Some," replied Overland sententiously.

"And did you hear about his last get-away on one of the Moonstone Rancho ponies? Some class to that!"

"I read somethin' about it," replied Overland.

"Well, Red, if you won't tumble, all I got to say is, beat it. You're worth a thousand bucks to any fly-cop that nips you in this town. I'm handin' you a little dope that you can slide out on and not get stuck."

"Thanks, Sweeney. Well, I'll ring you up from Kalamazoo."

"Kalamazoo? In them clothes?"

"Sure. There's a law against travelin' naked in some States. Where you been grazin' lately?"

"In the bull-pasture; and say, Red, it's gettin' warm there, for some."

"Well, I guess I'll beat it," said Overland.

"Take a slant at the door first."

Overland turned leisurely. In the doorway stood the traffic officer. He glanced from Orcutt to the two men near the table. "Hello, Sweeney!" he called, glancing a second time at Overland.

"Hello!" answered Sweeney, strolling to the end of the bar. "Somebody speedin'?"

"Yes. Say, who's the guy, the big one?"

"Him? Oh, that's Billy Sample, the fella that does the desert stuff for the General Film Company. The kid is his pardner who acts the tenderfoot. They 're waitin' for the machine now to take 'em out to Glendale. Got some stunt to pull off this

afternoon, so Billy was tellin' me. They're about half-stewed now. They make me sick."

"Thought I saw the big guy out on the street a minute ago," said the officer, hesitating. "There's a card out for a fella that looks like him. I guess—"

"He thought it was his machine comin'," said Orcutt. "He run out to see. It's a wonder how them movie actors can make up to look like most anybody. Why, I been in your line of business, as you know, and I been fooled lots of times. Makes a fella feel like he don't know where he's at with the town full of them movin'-picture actors."

"Well, so long, Sweeney." And the traffic officer, a little afraid of being laughed at by the famous ex-officer, Sweeney Orcutt, departed, just a thousand dollars poorer than he might have been had he had the courage of his convictions.

Overland and Orcutt exchanged glances. Orcutt's glance rested meaningly, for an instant, on the Easterner at the table. Overland grinned. Orcutt spoke to the young Easterner, who immediately rose to his feet and bowed.

"You was lookin' for somebody that's the real thing, you said. This here's my friend Jack Summers. He used to be sheriff of Abilene once. He ain't workin' for a movin'-picture outfit and he won't borrow your watch. Mebby he has a little business deal to put up to you and mebby not. Take my word for it, he's straight."

"I'm William Winthrop, back East. 'Billy' will do here. I'm a tenderfoot, but I'm not exactly a fool. I observed the delicacy with which you engineered the recent exodus of the policeman. I'm interested."

"Sounds like plush to me," said Overland. "I got a little time—not much. You're correct about the cop. I got a pretty good thing out in the Mojave—gold—"

Winthrop laughed. "You aren't losing any time, are you?"

"You wouldn't neither if you was in my boots," said Overland, grinning cheerfully.

"Oh, Red's all right," said Orcutt. "What'll you gents have?"

"Seein' I'm all right, Sweeney, I'll take five dollars in small change. I need the coin for entertainin' purposes, I'll pay you in the mornin'."

"You got me that time," said Orcutt. "Here's the coin."

"Shall we sit down here?" asked Winthrop, indicating one of the tables.

"Sure! Now this ain't no frame-up. No, I'll set where I can watch Sweeney. He's like to steal his own cash-register if you don't watch him." And Winthrop noticed that his companion faced the door. He also noticed, as the man's coat brushed against a chair as he sat down, that that same coat covered a shiny black shoulder holster in which gleamed the worn butt of an automatic pistol.

"My real name is Jack Summers," began Overland Red. "Some folks took to callin' me 'Overland Red,' seein' as I been some towerist in my time."

"Great!" murmured the Easterner. "'Overland Red!' That name has me hypnotized."

"You was sayin'?" queried Overland.

"Beg your pardon. Nothing worth while. I haven't been so happy for a year. Let me explain. I have a little money, pretty well invested. I also have lungs, I believe. The doctors don't quite agree about that, however. The last one gave me six months to live. That was a year ago. I owe him an apology and six months. I'm not afraid, exactly, and I'm certainly not glad. But I want to forget it. That's all. Go ahead about that desert and the gold. I'm listening."

CHAPTER X

"PERFECTLY HARMLESS LITTLE OLE TENDERFOOT"

William Stanley Winthrop woke next morning with a vague impression of having lost something. He gazed indolently at the sunlight filtering through the curtains of his sleeping-room. Beyond the archway to the adjoining room of his suite, a ray of sunshine lay like living gold upon the soft, rich-hued fabric of the carpet.

"Gold!" he murmured. "Mojave Desert! Overland Red! Lost gold! No, it isn't the two hundred dollars I invested in the rascal's story, for it was worth the money. I never spent four happier hours in my life, at fifty dollars an hour. The best of it is he actually made me believe him. I think he believed himself."

Winthrop sat up in bed, yawning. "I think black coffee will be about all, this morning," he murmured, as he dressed leisurely.

He was tying a fastidiously correct bow on his tan oxford when he happened to glance out of the window. It was early, altogether too early, he reflected, to appear in the breakfast-room of the hotel. Winthrop's indefinite soliloquy melted into the rapt silence of imagination. Below on the smooth black pavement pattered two laden burros. On their packs hung dusty, weatherworn canteens, a pick and shovel, and a rifle in its soiled and frayed scabbard. The sturdy, shaggy burros followed a little, lean old man, whose flop-brimmed hat, faded shirt, and battered boots told a tale of the outlands, whispered of sun-swept immensities, of sage and cacti, sand and silence. Winthrop drew a long breath. Such an adventurer was the Overland Red he had talked with the evening previous. The tramp had mentioned a town far out on the desert. Winthrop sauntered down to the deserted office and secured a timetable.

When the east-bound express left Los Angeles the following morning, Winthrop was aboard, uncomfortably installed in the private drawing-room of a sleeper. He had cheerfully paid the double fare that he might have the entire space to himself, and he needed it. Around him, on the floor, in the seats, in the racks, and

on the hooks were innumerable packages, bags, and bundles.

"Very eccentric. He must be rich," whispered the wife of a dry-goods merchant from Keokuk, as her husband pushed her ahead of him past the door of the drawing-room.

"Just plain hog!" said the dry-goods merchant. "A man that'll pay double fare to have the whole earth to himself when other folks has to be packed into a berth and suffocate! The conductor said he paid double to Chicago to get that compartment, and he's only goin' out in the desert a little ways. I'd 'a' took it myself."

"Well, we could hardly afford it, anyway," said the woman pleasantly. "We've had such a good time I don't mind sleeping in a berth, Hiram."

They crowded on and finally found their seats.

Winthrop smiled to himself. He liked the woman's voice.

He lighted a cigarette and gazed wistfully, even despairingly, at the "outfit" which surrounded him. He sighed. "Awful accumulation of plunder. Wonder what I'll do with it?"

As the train climbed the grade beyond San Bernardino, he grew restless. Flinging down his cigarette, he began unwrapping his belongings. Out came blankets, extra clothing, a rifle, canteens of several patterns, two pack-saddles, a coil of rope, a pair of high lace boots,—hobnailed, heavy, and unserviceable,—a pocket compass, a hunting-knife, a patent filter, two halters, two galvanized pails, a small, compact, silk tent, an axe, a fishing-rod, a rubber cup, a box of cigars, a bottle of brandy, several neckerchiefs, a cartridge-belt, a Colts revolver of large and aggressive caliber, cartridges, a prospector's pick, a shovel, a medicine-case, a new safety razor, a looking-glass, a clinic thermometer, and a copy of "Robinson Crusoe."

He pondered over the agglomeration of articles pensively. "He was a good salesman," he said, smiling. "I'll be either a juggler or a strong man before I'm through with these things. I think I'll begin now and re-pack. I'll make one glorious bundle of it. That's the ticket!"

Winthrop went to work, whistling cheerfully. He spread the blanket and rearranged his possessions, finally rolling them up into an uncertain bundle which he roped with the weird skill of the amateur packer. He tried to lift the

bundle to the opposite seat. He decided to leave it on the floor.

Over the grade and on the level of the desert the train gathered speed. The shimmering spaces revolved slowly, to meet the rushing track ahead. Hour after hour sat Winthrop, reading and occasionally glancing out across the desert. His was the wildest of wild-goose chases. A stranger had told him of a mysterious ledge of gold somewhere out on the desert, and the stranger had named a desert town—the town toward which Winthrop was journeying. Would the eccentric Overland Red be there? Winthrop hoped so. He wanted to believe that this Ulysses of the outlands had spoken truth. He imagined vividly Overland Red's surprise when one William Stanley Winthrop, late of New York, should appear, equipped to the chin and eager to participate in the hunt for the lost gold. Then again, the prospector might not care to be burdened with the companionship of a tenderfoot. Still, the uncertainty of his welcome lent zest to Winthrop's enterprise. He closed the door of his drawing-room and wound through a mahogany maze toward the dining-car.

Next morning, as the train slowed down for the desert town, Winthrop was in the vestibule, peering out anxiously. It did not occur to him that Overland Red knew nothing of his coming, or that the other would be waiting on the station platform if he did. The tramp had not the faintest desire to make himself conspicuous. Some of Winthrop's enthusiasm had evaporated during the hot night in the sleeper.

"Thank you very much," called the lady from Keokuk, Iowa.

"Don't mention it," said Winthrop, disembarking behind the porter with his "plunder." Then, as the Pullman slid away, Winthrop deliberately and gracefully threw a kiss to the dry-goods merchant's wife. "Nice little woman," he reflected. "Too nice to associate with that grampus. Well, I hope they'll enjoy the rest of the trip in the drawing-room. I'm glad I was able to arrange it."

He watched the train crawl down the track. He wondered how long he would be able to distinguish the pattern of the brasswork on the observation car-rail.

Out of the empty distance came the *click, clink, clank* of hammers and shovels as the section-men, a mile down the track, stepped into work behind the train.

"Prospectin'?" queried a lank individual, slouching up to Winthrop.

"A little," said Winthrop. "It's pretty dry work."

"Uhuh. It's goin' to be hot about noon."

"I suppose so. Will you kindly give me a hand with this monstrosity," said Winthrop, indicating the pack. "The agent seems to be busy."

"Sure! She ain't roped very tight."

Which proved to be true. The bundle, with a kind of animate indifference, slowly sagged, opened, and things began to trickle from it in its journey across the platform. Among the things was the bottle of brandy. The lank individual picked this up tenderly and set it to one side. Winthrop noticed his solicitude, and smiled.

"We can rope 'em up again," said the lank one, suddenly becoming enthusiastic. "My name's Jim Hicks. I'm constable here."

"I see. Well, I'm William Winthrop, from Los Angeles. I'm a naturalist. Will you accept a cigar?"

"Thanks. You want to pack this here bottle, too?"

"Not right away. Whew! It is getting hot."

"Goin' up to the hotel?" queried the constable.

Winthrop glanced along the street. The hotel did not look inviting. "I don't know. I'd like to get in the shade somewhere."

"There's old Fernando's 'dobe down the track under them pepper trees. He's a friend of mine. He ain't to home to-day. Mebby you'd like to set down there and wait for your friend."

"My friend?"

"Why, ain't you waitin' for anybody? You ain't goin' to tackle that bug-huntin' trip alone, be you? It's dangerous out there for a tenderfoot. Now I have took folks out, and brought 'em back all right,—gone as far as them hills over there, and that's a good jag from here,—and I only charge four dollars a day and grub."

"I thought you said you were constable?"

"So I be. Takin' parties across the desert is on the side. How far you figurin' on goin'?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet. Say we go down as far as the adobe you spoke about, as a beginning. Perhaps we can arrange terms."

"I'm on, pard," said the constable.

Under the pepper trees shading Fernando's adobe sat Winthrop and the constable. The brandy-bottle was half empty and a box of cigars was open beside it on the bench. The afternoon shadows were lengthening. The constable had been discursive, voluminous, in his entertaining. Time was as nothing. He borrowed generously of to-morrow and even the next day. He became suddenly quite fond of this quiet, gentlemanly chap opposite him, who said little, but seemed to be a prince of good fellows.

"S this way," said the constable, leaning forward and waving his cigar. "You're fren' of mine—sure thing. 'S af'ernoon now, but I was plumb fooled this mornin'. Y' know i's af'ernoon now. Thought you was the guy I'm lookin' for. H'overlan' Red—bum—tram'. Wire from Loshangeles to upperan' him if he shows up here. See?"

"You're not quite clear to me," replied Winthrop. "But never mind about apprehending any one. Let's talk about this glorious prospect of sand, silence, and solitude. I feel like a fallen angel. Never mind about arresting anybody. Life is too short. Let's talk of roses."

"Roshes! Huh!" sniggered the constable. "You're kin' of sof, ain't you? Roshes nothin'! I'm goin' talk 'bout business. It's business, my business to talk 'bout it, see? 'T ain't your business. You c'n lissen, an' when I get through, then you c'n talk roshes."

"But what is your business?" asked Winthrop, with an indifference that he did not feel.

"S-s-s-h-h! I'm cons'able. Tha's on the quiet. Thousand dollars rewar' f'r th' appr'enshun of 'Verlan' Red. Thought you was him—hic—hee! hee!"

"Please don't laugh like that. It hurts my feelings," said Winthrop. "It is bad enough to be taken for a—er—tramp."

"Nobody's feelin's—pologishe. 'Course you ain' him! You're jus' a li'l' ole ten'erfoot—perfec'ly harmless li'l' ole ten'erfoot."

"Thanks. May I ask you to have another?"

"Nope. 'Nough's 'nough. 'S time f'r dinner."

"Nearly. Well, if you flatly refuse to drink my health, I'll have to drink it alone, and that's rather egotistical, isn't it?"

"Never. B' Gosh! You're sport. Funny li'l' ole ten'erfoot—perf'ly harmless. Sure, I'll drink all th' health you got, 'n then go home—dinner."

"One will be sufficient, I think," said Winthrop.

"Sufficen' wha'?" And the constable leered cunningly.

"To drown all pangs. Well, here's pleasant dreams."

Far down the line came the faint thrill of wheels and the distant, clear-cut blast of a locomotive. The local freight from Los Angeles was whistling for the "block."

Winthrop glanced at his watch, then at the constable. "What train is that?" asked the Easterner.

The constable's eyelids drooped, then opened languidly. "Railro' train, 'f course." And he slid forward to his elbow and thence to the bench. Presently he snored.

Winthrop strolled toward the approaching train. "Pretty stiff session," he commented. "Now if happy chance should bring Overland Red on this freight, with his burro and outfit; I'll have one reason to offer for wanting to go with him. I've probably saved him some annoyance, indirectly, but rather effectively, I think."

The great oil-burning locomotive roared in, casting heat-waves that smelled of steam, iron, and mechanical energy. The hot air sickened Winthrop.

A car was cut out and shunted to a siding. Then the engine, pausing to drink a gargantuan draught at the tank, simmered away in the dusk, clanking across the switch-points. A figure leaped from the freight-car to the ground. Then out came a burro and several bundles. The figure strode to the station and filled two canteens. Winthrop walked toward the burro. When he of the burro and canteens returned, he found Winthrop stroking the little animal's nose.

"What the—! How the—! Who lost you out here?" asked Overland.

Winthrop spoke rapidly and to the point. "Express this morning. Lonesome again. Thought I'd make a change. My outfit is over at the station. Don't say 'No' before you hear me. You're going to need me—tenderfeet and all."

"But you can't—"

"Wait. The local constable has a wire from the Los Angeles police to look out for you. Perhaps you got this far because you're traveling in a freight-car. No doubt all the passenger trains have been watched all along the line. The constable has been my—er—my guest since morning. He is asleep now. I had to do it. He told me, after either the sixth or seventh glass, I forget which, that he was looking for you. Come on over to the station and inspect my outfit, please. I think we had better vanish."

Overland breathed once, deeply. "Lead me to it!" he exclaimed. "You got my number. I guess you're some lame chicken, eh? No? I'll never call you a tenderfoot as long as I live. Shake!"

The inspection of the outfit was brief. "Take the Colts and the cartridges, and the blankets and the rope. T' hell with the rest."



CHAPTER XI

DESERT LAW

Away out in the night of stars and silence plodded the patient burro, and beside him shuffled Overland Red and Billy Winthrop.

"We'll fool 'em," said Overland. "Keep joggin'. We'll be over the range before mornin'. Then let 'em find us."

Winthrop, staggering along, felt his moral stamina crumbling within him. "I don't know—about that. Perhaps I'll be a drag to the expedition. I'm pretty tired."

Overland, experienced in the remorse that follows liquor on an empty stomach, swore vigorously and picturesquely. "You'll stick! Do you suppose I'd shake you now after you overcomin' a genuine nickel-plated desert constable? Nix. That ain't my style. You believed me when I said I was comin' to this particular town. It's worth somethin' to have a fella around that believes a fella once in a while. But what I want to know is, why you done up the constable so offhand like, not knowin' whether I'd show up here or not?"

"Why?" And Winthrop smiled wanly. "Because I'm a perfectly harmless little old tenderfoot." And his voice caught as he tried to laugh.

An hour of plodding through the dusk, two hours, and they were at a water-hole near the northern hills. Overland unroped one of the packs, made a fire, and presently had some hot coffee for his companion, who was pretty well used up. Nature was taking inexorable toll for his conquest of the constable.

"You take it easy and don't worry," said Overland.

Winthrop raised on his elbow and gazed at the tiny fire. "Tiger, tiger burning bright!" he quoted.

"This here coffee'll fix you right," responded Overland Red, grinning. "Didn't know I was a pote, did you? Now if I was a doc, I'd give you a shot in the arm

that would put you to sleep. Seein' I ain't, it's coffee for yours."

"Do you think they will follow us?" Winthrop asked presently.

"As sure as snakes," said Overland. "And this here water-hole is the first place they'll strike for. They'll wait till mornin' to find our trail."

"When they do find it?"

"I'll show 'em a Mexican trick with a hole in it. You go to sleep, pardner."

The moon rolled down to the rim of the world. The infinitesimal mountain peaks rose slowly along the lower edge of the flat silver shield, black and growing bolder in outline and size as they blotted half, three quarters, finally all of the burnished radiance. Then along the edge of the far range ran an instant delicate light, a light that melted into space and was gone, leaving a palpitating glory of myriad summer stars.

The little fire died down. The barren outland wastes slumbered in the charitable dusk of night.

Overland, cross-legged on his blanket, smoked moodily. His thoughts drifted out on the tide of silence to Moonstone Cañon and Collie and the Rose Girl, Louise Lacharme. For them he planned impossibly. Of them he dreamed absurd dreams.

Out of the flotsam of his pondering came memories of other nights such as this, desert nights on the border ranges of old Mexico—that lost world of his adventurous youth. Mingled with his waking dreams were the sounds of many familiar names—Sonora, Trevino, Nueva Laredo, Nava, San José, Las Cruces, Nogales, Yuma, San Antonio,—each a burning ember of memory that glowed and faded while the music of silver strings and singing girls pulsed rhythmically in the stillness—to break at last into the querulous wailing of a lone coyote. Winthrop stirred restlessly and muttered.

All at once the tramp realized that this easygoing young Easterner, wealthy, unused to hardship, delicate of health, had his battle to fight, as well. "I've knowed 'em to get over it," reflected Overland. "She's high and dry up here on the desert, and I reckon to go where it's higher. He's game, but he's desp'rate. He's tryin' to dodge the verdict, which can't be did. Well, if excitement will help any, I guess he's ridin' the right range. If he's got to pass over, he might as well go quick. Mebby he's the best kind of a pal for this deal, after all."

Overland looked across at the muffled form. "Pardner!" he called. Winthrop did not answer.

"Well, it saves explainin'," muttered the tramp, and he rose quietly. He gathered the few camp-utensils together, rolled his blankets, brushed sand over the embers of the fire, and groped stealthily toward the burro. He roped the pack, glancing back toward the water-hole occasionally. Winthrop slept heavily.

"Guess I'll go back and get that gun," muttered Overland. "I might need two; anyway, he might wake up and plug his old friend the constable before he knowed it. I ain't givin' a whoop for the constable, but I don't want to see the kid get in wrong."

Then Overland, wily and resourceful in border tactics, led the burro round the camp in a wide circle, from which he branched toward the hills to the north. For two hours he journeyed across the starlit emptiness. Arriving at a narrow cañon in the foothills, he picketed the burro. Then he sat down. Why not continue with his pack and provisions? He could camp in the fastness of the mountain country and explore it alone. He would run less risk of capture. Winthrop was not strong. The Easterner meant well enough, but this was the desert.

The blue of the eastern horizon grew shallower, changing to a cold thin gray which warmed slowly to the straw color of tempering steel. The tramp, watching the sky, shook his clenched fist at the dawn. "You, up there!" he growled. "You didn't give me a square deal when I was down and out that time—in Sonora. I had to crawl to it alone. But I'll show you that I'm bigger than you. I'm goin' back to the tenderfoot and see him through if I swing pole-high for it."

It was light when the tramp had arrived at the water-hole. He crept behind a sharp dip in the hummocks. The crest of his hiding-place was covered with brush. It was a natural rifle-pit affording him seclusion and shelter.

With the sun came the faint thud of hoofs as two riders came warily up to the water-hole. One dismounted and stooped over Winthrop. The other sat his horse, silent, vigilant, saturnine.

"Say, where's your pal, that there Overland Red guy?" asked the constable, shaking Winthrop awake and glaring at him with a bleared and baleful eye.

The man on the horse frowned, considering, in the light of his experience as a successful and still living two-gun man, that such tactics were rather crude.

The Easterner sat up, coughed and blinked in the dawn. "Where is what? Why, good-morning! You're up early." And his eye swept the empty camp. So Overland Red had deserted him, after all. He might have expected as much. "I haven't any 'pal,' as you can see. I'm out here studying insect life, as I told you I would be, yesterday. You needn't shake me any more. I'm awake. I can't say that I'm exactly pleased with my first specimen."

"Oh! I'm a specimen, am I? I'm a insect, hey? Well, you're crooked, and you just talk up quick or the calaboose for yours!"

"No. I beg your pardon—but, no. You are in no condition, this morning, to talk with a gentleman. However, you are my guest. Have a cigar?"

The horseman's eyes twinkled. He admired the young Easterner's coolness. Not so the constable.

"See here, you swindlin' tin-horn shell-shover, you cough up where Overland Red is or there'll be somethin' doin'. You doped that booze yesterday, but you can't throw no bluff like that to-day."

"I did what? Please talk slowly."

"You doped that booze you—"

Much to the constable's surprise he found himself sitting on Winthrop's blankets and one of his eyes felt as though some one had begun to stitch it up quickly with coarse thread.

Winthrop, smiling serenely, nodded. "Sorry to have to do it. I know I don't look like that kind, and I'm not, but I happen to know how."

The constable got to his feet.

"I didn't doctor the brandy, as you intimated," said Winthrop. "And you needn't finger that belt of yours. I haven't a gun with me, and I believe it is not the thing for one man to use a gun on another when the—er—victim happens to be unarmed."

The horseman, who had courage, admired Winthrop's attitude. He rode between them. "Cut it out, Hicks," he said. "You're actin' locoed. Guess you're carryin' your load yet. I'll talk to the kid. We 're losing time. See here, stranger...."

Overland, watching and listening from his hiding-place, grinned as the constable

sullenly mounted his horse.

Winthrop politely but firmly declined to acknowledge that he had had a companion. Overland was pleased and the riders were baffled by the young man's subtle evasion of answering them directly.

"Size of it is, you're stung," said the man who had questioned Winthrop last. "He's lit out, now he's done you."

To this the Easterner made no reply.

The horsemen rode away, following the circle of burro tracks toward the hills. Winthrop watched them, wondering what had become of his companion. He could hardly believe that the tramp had deserted him, yet the evidence was pretty plain. Even his revolver was gone, and his belt and cartridges. Winthrop yawned. He was hungry. There was no food. But there was water. He walked toward the water-hole.

"Stand still—and listen," said a voice.

Winthrop jumped back, startled and trembling. The voice seemed to come from the water-hole at his feet.

"Over here—this way," the voice said.

Winthrop smiled. If it were a disembodied spirit talking, it was no other than the spirit of Overland Red. The accent was unmistakable. The Easterner glanced round and observed a peculiar something behind the brush edging the rise beyond the water-hole.

"It's me," said Overland, still concealed. "Thought I quit you, eh? Are them fellas out of sight yet?"

"No. They're still in sight. They are too far to see anything, though."

"And you can see them all right, son? That don't figure out correct."

Winthrop laughed. "That's so. Where's the burro?"

"He's hid—right in plain sight up a little arroyo."

"Won't they find him, and confiscate him and the things?"

"Not on your life! 'T ain't exactly healthy, even for constables, to go round

confiscatin' outfits they don't know who's connected with. They can't say for sure that burro and stuff is mine. They'll look it over and leave it right there."

"But why did you come all the way back here?" asked Winthrop.

"Seein' they's lots of time, I'll explain. If I had kep' on goin', they would 'a' trailed me, and mebbby got a crack at me in them hills. They are two to one, and they could get me at night. Now they'll either give it up, or spot my back tracks and find me here. That's all."

"Perhaps that won't be all," ventured Winthrop, walking toward the ridge where Overland lay concealed.

The tramp grinned up at him. "Mebby not, pardner. You was tellin' Sweeney Orcutt back in Los Angeles that you wanted to get up against the real thing. I reckon you bought the right ticket this trip."

"Will they—will there be any shooting?" asked the Easterner.

"Not if I can help it," replied Overland. "I borrowed your gun on the chance of it. 'Course, if they get sassy, why, they's no tellin' what will happen. I'm mighty touchy about some things. But listen! I'm actin' as your travelin' insurance agent, pro temperly, as the pote says, which means keepin' your temper. If they do spot me, and get foolish enough to think that I got time to listen to any arguments against my rights as a free and unbranded citizen of the big range, why, you drop and roll behind the first sand-hill that is a foot high. After the smoke blows away, I'll be dee-lighted to accept your congratulations."

"I guess you mean business," said Winthrop, becoming serious. "I'm game, but isn't there any other way out of it?"

"Not for me, son. What chance would I have with the whole desert town to swear against me? They're after the gold, and they reckon to scare me into tellin' where it is. I'm after that same gold, and I don't reckon to be bluffed off by a couple of pikers like them."

"The dark one, the man on the bay horse, seemed to be a pretty capable-looking individual," said Winthrop.

"Glad you noticed that. You're improvin'. He is a capable gent. He's a old two-gun man. Did you see how he had his guns tied down low so they would pull quick. Nothin' fancy about him, but he's good leather. The other one don't

count."

"What shall I do when they come back?"

"You jest go to studyin' bugs or rattlesnakes or tarantulas or somethin'. Make a bluff at it. If they ask you anything, answer 'em nice and polite, *and so I can hear*. A whole pile depends on my keepin' up with the talk. I'll figure from what they say, or don't say."

"They seem to be turning. They've stopped. One of them is down on the ground looking at something. Now he's up again. They're riding back," said Winthrop.

"They cut my back trail," said Overland, snuggling down behind the brush. "You go and set down by the water-hole and find a bug to study."

"Are you going to fight?"

"Not if it can be helped. Otherwise—till me wires are down and me lamps are out. She's desert law out here. They seems to be some chance for a argument about who's goin' to be judge. I'm out for the job myself. I reckon to throw about fifteen votes—they's six in your gun and nine in the automatic. The election is like to be interestin' and close."

"I wish I could help," said the Easterner.

"You can—by keepin' your nerve," replied Overland. Then he rolled a cigarette and lay smoking and gazing at the sky. Winthrop watched the approaching horsemen. Presently he got up and sauntered to the water-hole.

The tramp lay curled like a snake behind the mound. He drew Winthrop's gun from its holster and inspected it, shaking his head as he slid it back again. "She's new and will pull stiff. That means she'll throw to the right. Well, I got the little Gat. to open up the show with."

William Stanley Winthrop, despite his resolution, found that his hands trembled and that his heart beat chokingly. He wanted to shout, to run out toward the horsemen, to do anything rather than sit stupidly silent by the water-hole.

The two riders loped up. The constable dismounted. "Nothin' doin'," he said, stooping to drink.

"No. Nothing doing," echoed the man on horseback.

"That," muttered Overland Red, squirming a little higher behind the bushes, "was intended for me. I know that tone. It means there's a hell of a lot doin'. Well, I'm good and ready." And he lifted both of his red, hairy hands to the edge of the hole and both his hands were "filled."

About then the man on the pony began to ride out from the water-hole in a wide circle. The constable came from the spring. Overland noticed that he kept Winthrop between himself and the sage on the ridge. "That settles it," Overland swiftly concluded. "They're on. I'm right sad to have to do it."

The heavy, space-blunted report of the circling horseman's gun—and Overland calmly spat out the sand that flitted across his lips. The rider had ventured a shot and had ridden behind a ridge instantly.

Winthrop exclaimed at these strange tactics.

"He seen a jack run in there," explained the constable, leering.

"This here's gettin' interestin'," mumbled Overland as the constable unholstered his gun and sauntered toward the ridge. "I got to get the gent on the cayuse. The other one don't count."

The rider had appeared from behind the ridge. Slowly Overland raised his right hand. Then the old fighting soul of Jack Summers, sheriff of Abilene, rebelled. "No! Dam' if I'll ambush any white man." And he leaped to his feet. "Overland Limited!" he shouted, and with his battle-cry came the quick tattoo of shots. The horseman wavered, doubled up, and pitched forward to the sand.

Overland Red dropped and rolled to one side as the constable's gun boomed ineffectually. The tramp lay still.

A clatter of empty stirrups, the swish of a horse galloping past, and silence.

Slowly the constable approached Overland's prostrate figure. "Time's up for you!" he said, covering the tramp with his gun.

"Water!" groaned Overland.

"Water, eh? Well, crawl to it, you rat!"

Winthrop, his heart thumping wildly, followed the constable. So this was desert law? No word of warning or inquiry, but a hail of shots, a riderless horse,—two men stretched upon the sand and the burning sun swinging in a cloudless circle

above the desolate silence.

"You seem to kind of recognize your friend now," sneered the constable.

That was too much for Winthrop's overstrung nerves. His pulses roared in his ears. With a leap he seized the constable's gun and twisted at it with both hands. There was an explosion, and Winthrop grinned savagely, still struggling. With insane strength he finally tore the gun from the other's grasp. "You're the only coward in this affair," he gasped, as he levelled the gun at the constable. That officer, reading danger in Winthrop's eye, discreetly threw up his hands.

"Good!" exclaimed Overland, sitting up suddenly. "That was risky, but it worked out all right. I had a better plan. You go set down, Billy. I'll see this gent safe toward home."

Winthrop laughed hysterically. "Why, you—you—you're a joke!" he cried. "I thought—"

"So did the little man with the pie-pan pinned on his shirt," said Overland. "You keep his gun. I got to see how bad the other gent's hit."

An hour later the constable of the desert town led his pony toward the railroad. On the pony was his companion, with both arms bandaged. He leaned forward brokenly, swaying and cursing. "I'll—get him, if it takes—a thousand years," he muttered.

"I reckon it'll take all of that," growled the constable. "You can have all you want of his game, Saunders,—I'm through."

Out by the water-hole, Overland turned to Winthrop. "I'm glad you enjoyed the performance," he said, grinning. "We've opened the pot and the best man rakes her down. She's desert law from now to the finish."



CHAPTER XII

"FOOL'S LUCK"

Gaunt, unshaven, weary, Winthrop rested on the crest of the northern range. Overland, looking for water, toiled on down the slope with the little burro. Winthrop rose stiffly and shuffled down the rocks. Near the foot of the range he saw the burro just disappearing round a bend in a cañon. When he came up with Overland, the tramp had a fire going and had pitched the tent. The cañon opened out to a level green meadow, through which ran a small stream. They had come a long day's journey from the water-hole on the other side of the range. They were safe from ordinary pursuit. That evening beside the fire, Overland Red told again the story of the dead prospector, the gold, and the buried papers. In his troubled slumbers the Easterner dreamed of pacing along the track counting the ties, and eventually digging in the sand, digging until his very soul ached with the futility of his labor. Waking, he never lost faith in the certainty of finding the place. He now knew the tramp well enough to appreciate that the other had not risked his own life and nearly killed one of his pursuers through sheer bravado, or fear, or personal hatred. Something more potent was beneath the tramp's motives—some incentive that was almost a religion. So far, Winthrop was correct. He erred, however, in supposing Overland to be obsessed with a mania for gold for its own sake. The erstwhile sheriff of Abilene had dreamed a dream about an adopted waif and a beautiful young girl. The dream was big. Its fulfillment would require much money. There was more of the poet in Overland Red than his best friend had ever imagined.

Three days they rested in the wild seclusion of the cañon. The silence, the solemnity of the place, fascinated Winthrop. The tiny stream, cold and clear, the vegetation, in a region otherwise barren-gray and burning,—the arid Mojave with its blistering heat, the trees, the painted rocks,—ochre, copper, bronze, red, gray, and dim lilac in the distances,—the gracious shade, the little burro, half ludicrous, half pathetic in its stolid acceptance of circumstances,—all had a charm for him that soothed and satisfied his restlessness.

Meanwhile the indefatigable Overland spun yarn after yarn of the road and range, and rolled innumerable cigarettes with one hand, much to Winthrop's amusement.

The third morning Winthrop had awakened feeling so completely refreshed that he begged Overland to allow him to make an attempt to find the hidden papers and the little bag of gold. Overland demurred at first, fearing that the Easterner would become lost or stricken with the heat. Throughout the day Winthrop argued stubbornly that he ran no risk of capture, while Overland did. He asserted that he could easily find the water-hole, which was no difficult task, and from there he could go by compass straight out to the tracks. Overland had told him that somewhere near a little culvert beneath the track was the marked tie indicating the hiding-place of the dead prospector's things. It would mean a journey of a day and a night, traveling pretty continuously.

Finally Overland agreed to Winthrop's plan to make the attempt the following day.

At the foot of the range Overland gave his companion a canteen and a piece of gunnysack wrapped round some hardtack and jerked beef.

"Don't I need my gun this time?" queried Winthrop.

"Nope, Billy. 'Cause why? You don't generally kill a little gopher or a little owl that's settin' up tendin' to his business, because you ain't scared of them. But you will go off of the trail to kill a rattler, a side-winder, because he's able to kill you if he takes a notion. Correct. Now a tenderfoot totin' a gun is dangerouser than any rattler that ever hugged hisself to sleep in the sun—and most fellas travelin' the desert knows it. Why, I'm plumb scared of a gun-totin' tenderfoot, myself. Not havin' a gun will be your best recommend, generally speakin'. Stick to the bugs, Billy; stick to the bugs."

"Well, you ought to know."

"I got seven puckers in my hide to prove what I say. Six of 'em were put there by plumb amachooors in the gun line; fellas I never took pains to draw on quick, never suspectin' nothin'. The other, number seven, was put there by a gent that meant business. He died of a kind of lead poisonin' right immediate."

They shook hands, the battered, sunburned adventurer, rough-bearded, broad-chested, genial with robust health, and the slender, almost delicately fashioned

Easterner, who had forgotten that there were such things as lungs, or doctors,—for the time being.

"Say, Billy, you need a shave," commented Overland, as the other turned to begin his journey across the desert.

Winthrop grinned. "You need—er—decapitating," he retorted, glancing back. Then he faced the south and strode away.

Overland, ascending the range, paused halfway up. "Decap-itating," he muttered. "Huh! That's a new one on me. De-cap—Let's see! Somethin' to do with a fella's hat, I reckon. It's easy to run a word down and hole it if you got brains. Mebby Billy meant for me to get a new one. Well, the constable's friend only put one hole in her—she's a pretty good hat yet."

Overland found his slow way back to the hidden cañon. He felt a little lonely as he thought of Collie. He gave the burro some scraps of camp bread, knowing that the little animal would not stray so long as he was fed, even a little, each day.

It was while he was scouring the fry-pan that he noticed the black sand across the stream. Leisurely he rose and scooped a panful of the sand and gravel and began washing it, more as a pastime than with an idea of finding gold. Slowly he oscillated the whispering sand, slopping the water out until he had panned the lot. He spread his bandanna on a smooth rock and gently emptied the residue of the washing on it. "Color—but thin," he said. "Let's try her again."

He moved farther upstream—this time with one of his regular pans. He became absorbed in his experiment. He washed panful after panful, slowly, carefully, collectedly. Suddenly he stood up, swore softly, and flung the half-washed dirt of the last pan on the rocks. "I'm a nut!" he exclaimed. "This livin' in civilization has been puttin' my intellec' to the bad. Too much Eastern sassiety." And with this inexplicable self-arraignment he stooped at the tent-door, buckled on his gun, and started upstream. He glanced from side to side of the steep and narrowing walls as he advanced slowly. He passed places where the stream disappeared in the sand to find some subterranean channel and reappear below again. Rounding an angle of the cliff, he dropped to his knees and examined some tiny parallel scratches on a rounded rock—the marks made by a boot-heel that had slipped. For an hour he toiled over the rocks on up the diminishing stream. "Gettin' thin," he muttered, gazing at the silver thread of water rippling

over the pebbles. A few feet ahead the cliffs met at the bottom in a sharp-edged "V," not over a foot apart in the stream-bed, but widening above. Overland scrambled through. On the other side of the opening he straightened up, breathing hard. His hand crept to his hip. On a sandy level a few yards ahead of him stood a ragged and faded canvas tent, its flap wavering idly in a breath of wind. In front of the tent was the rain-washed charcoal of an old fire. A rusted pan, a pick, and the worn stub of a shovel lay near the stream. A box marked "Dynamite" was half-filled with odds and ends of empty tins, cooking-utensils, and among the things was a glass fruit-jar half filled with matches.

Slowly Overland's hand dropped to his side. He stepped forward, stooped, and peered into the tent. "Thought so," he said laughing queerly. Save for a pair of old quilts and an old corduroy coat, the place was empty.

"Fool's luck," muttered Overland. "Wonder the Gophertown outfit didn't find him and fix him. But come to think of it, they ain't so anxious to cross over to this side of the range and get too close to a real town, and get run in or shot up. Fool's luck," he reiterated, coolly rolling a cigarette and gazing about with a critical eye. "They's another trail into this cañon that the prospector knowed. I got to find it. Billy'll be some interested."



CHAPTER XIII

THE RETURN

Overland Red lay concealed in an arroyo at the foot of the range. He could overlook the desert without being seen. It was the afternoon of the day following Winthrop's departure.

Since discovering the dead prospector's camp and all that it meant, the tramp was doubly vigilant. He tried to believe that his anxiety was for his own safety rather than for Winthrop's. He finally gave up that idea, grumbling something about becoming "plumb soft in his feelin's since he took to associatin' with sassiety folks." However, had Winthrop been of the West and seasoned in its more rugged ways, Overland would have thought little of the young man's share in recent events. While he knew that Winthrop looked upon their venture as nothing more than a rather keenly exciting game, Overland realized also that the Easterner had played the game royally. Perhaps the fact that Winthrop's health was not of the best appealed to some hidden sentiment in the tramp's peculiar nature. In any event, Overland Red found himself strangely solicitous for his companion's return.

Far in the south a speck moved, almost imperceptibly. The tramp's keen eyes told him that this was no horseman. He rolled a cigarette and lay back in the shade of a boulder. "He's a couple of points off his course, but he can't miss the range," he reflected.

Desiring to assure himself that no horseman followed Winthrop, Overland Red made no sign that might help the other to find the trail over the range. The rim of Winthrop's hat became distinguishable; then the white lacing of his boots. Nearer, Overland saw that his face was drawn and set with lines of fatigue.

No riders appeared on the horizon. Overland stepped out from behind the rock. "Well, how did you make it?" he called.

Winthrop came forward wearily "No luck at all."

"Couldn't find it, eh?"

"I counted every tie between the tank and that little ditch under the track. The entire stretch has been relaid with new ties."

Overland whistled. Then he grinned. "You had a good healthy walk, anyhow," he observed.

"It doesn't seem to worry you much," said Winthrop.

"Nope. Now you're back, it don't. I reckon you done your dam'dest as the song says. Angels can do no less. Buck up, Billy! You 're limper'n a second-hand porous-plaster. Here, take a shot at this. That will stiffen your knees some. Did you meet up with anybody?"

"Not a soul. I thought I should freeze last night, though. I didn't imagine the desert could get so cold."

"Livin' out here on the old dry spot will either kill you or cure you. That's one reason I let you go look for them things. The harder you hit the trail, and can stand it, the quicker you'll get built up." Then Overland, realizing that his companion was worse than tired, that he was dispirited, became as wily as the proverbial serpent. His method, however, could hardly be compared with the dove's conciliatory cooing. "You sure are a bum scout," he began.

Winthrop flushed, but was silent.

"Bet a banana you didn't even leave the track and look for it."

"No, I didn't. Where could I have begun?"

Overland ignored the question. "I'm hungrier than a gorilla. Just send a wireless to them feet of your'n. We got some climbin' to do afore dark."

"I'd just as soon camp here. Go up to-morrow," said Winthrop.

"So'd I if it wasn't for bein' scared some of the hills would mosey off before I got back." And Overland set a brisk pace up the mountain, talking as he climbed. Winthrop could do nothing but listen. He was breathless.

"Or that cañon," continued Overland. "She might not be there if we stayed away all night. Besides, I'm scared to leave *it* alone by itself."

"Leave what?" gasped Winthrop.

"It. The find I made while you was out surveyin' the Santa Fé. I was feared you'd get nervous prosecution if I told you all to once, so I breaks it easy like."

"What was it?"

"Nothin' but a tent in the cañon we're campin' in. But, Billy, when you find a tent and some minin' tools and other signs of trouble 'way up some lonesome old slot in the hills, you want to get ready for a surprise. Mebby it'll be nothin' but some old clothes and bones. Mebby it'll be them and somethin' else. I didn't find the bones, but I found the somethin' else, coarse, and fair dribblin' thick in the dirt. It's there and rich, Billy, rich!"

Overland Red turned and paused as Winthrop leaned against a rock.

"It's the—the real thing?" queried the Easterner.

"The real thing, pardner. Now what do you think of that for highbrow stuff?"

"Meaning that you stumbled on the secret?"

"If you want to say it that way, yes. Just like fallin' into a sewer and findin' a gold watch where you lit."

"Then it's all true? We've found the gold? You really believed we should, and for that matter, so did I. I can't say why. I rather felt that we should."

"I guess I'm some class when it comes to findin' the incubator that hatches them little yella babies with the come-and-find-me eyes."

Winthrop straightened his tired shoulders. "You seem to think that you're pretty clever," he said, laughing. "But in the elegant and expressive diction of the late—the late Overland Red Summers, 'I think you're a bum scout.'" And they shook hands, laughing as they turned to climb the trail.

Near the crest, Overland again paused. "Say, Billy, you said the 'late' Overland Red Summers. You took particular noise to make me hear that word 'late.' Have you got any objections to explainin' that there idea? I been examinin' the works of that word 'late,' and it don't tick right to me. 'Late' means 'planted,' don't it?"

"Sometimes. It may also mean behind time. Do you remember that I said, a day or two ago, that I shouldn't be surprised if the lost gold were in the very cañon where we camped? I claim precedence of divination, auto-suggestion, and right

of eminent domain. I shall not waive my prerogative."

"I never owned one," said Overland. "But afore I'll let you come any style over me, I'll have one made with a silk linin' and di'monds in the buttons, jest as soon as the claim gets to payin' good. Say, pardner, it's *free* gold, and *coarse*. I wisht Collie was here—the little cuss."

"Collie?"

"Uhuh. The kid I was tellin' you about, that I adopted back in Albuquerque. He's got a share in this here deal, by rights. He invested his eight rollers and four bits in the chances of my findin' the stuff. It was all the coin he had at the time. You see, I was campin' up on the Moonstone for a change of air, and Collie and me had a meetin' of the board of dissectors. The board votes unanimous to invest the paid-in capital in a suit of new jeans for the president, which was me. I got 'em on now. You see, I had to be dollied up to look the part so I could catch a come-on and get me grubstake."

"I see," said Winthrop, his gray eyes twinkling. "And I was the come-on?"

"Well," said Overland, scratching his head, "mebby you *was*, but you ain't no more. If she pans out anything like I expect, you'll be standin' up so clost to bein' rich that if she was a bronc' you'd get kicked sure."

They rested for a few minutes, both gazing down on the evening desert. The reflected light, strong and clear, drew abrupt, keen-edged contrasts between the black, triangular shadows of the peaks and the gray of the range. Something elusive, awesome, unreal was in the air about them. The rugged mountain-side with its chaos of riven boulders, its forest of splintered rocky spires, silver cold in the twilight, its impassive bulk looming so large, yet a mere segment in the circling range, was as a day-dream of some ancient Valhalla, clothed in the mystic glory of ever-changing light, and crowned with slumbering clouds.

Winthrop sighed as he again faced the range. Overland heard and smiled. "You said it all," he muttered. "You said it all then."

"You're something of a poet, aren't you?" queried Winthrop.

"You bet! I'm some artist, too. A lady I was figurin' on acceptin' a invite to dinner with, once,—one of them rich kind that always wants to get their money's worth out of anything they do for a poor guy,—happened to come out on the back steps where I was holdin' kind of a coroner's request over a lettuce san'wich. 'My man,'

she says, 'I have always been interested to know if you—er—tramps ever think of anything else but food and lodging and loafing. Nothing personal, I assure you. Merely a general interest in social conditions which you seem so well fitted to explode from experience. For instance, now, what are your favorite colors?'

"I couldn't see what that had to do with it, and I got kind of mad. A lettuce san'wich ain't encouragin' to confidence, so I up and says, 'What are me favorite colors, lady? Well, speakin' from experience, they is *ham* and *eggs*.'

"She took a tumble to herself and sent me out some of the best—and a bottle of Red Cross beer with it."

On up the slope they toiled, Winthrop half-forgetting his weariness in thinking of Overland's sprightly experiences with what he termed "the hard ole map—this here world."

At the summit they paused again to rest.

"That was the time," began Overland, "when I writ that there pome called 'Heart Throbs of a Hobo.' Listen!"

"Oh, my stummick is jest akein'
For a little bite of bacon,
A slice of bread, a little mug of brew.
I'm tired of seein' scenery,
Jest lead me to a beanery,
Where there's something more than only air to chew."

"The last line sounds like a sneeze," said Winthrop, laughing.

"Speakin' of sneeze," said Overland, "makes me think you ain't coughed so much lately, Billy."

"I had a pretty bad time yesterday morning," replied Winthrop.

"Well, you'll get cured and stay cured, up here," said Overland, hugely optimistic.

"Of course," rejoined Winthrop, smiling. "It's such hard work to breathe up here that I have to keep alive to attend to it."

"That's her! Them little old bellowsus of your'n 'll get exercise—not pumpin' off the effects of booze an' cigarettes, neither, but from pumpin' in clean thin air with

a edge to it. Them little old germs will all get dizzy and lose their holt."

"That's getting rather deep into personalities," said Winthrop. "But I think you're correct. I could eat a whole side of bacon, raw."

And he followed Overland silently across the range and down into the cool depths of the hidden cañon, where the tramp, ever watchful of the younger man's health, slipped from his coat and made Winthrop put it on, despite the latter's protest that he was hot and sweating.



CHAPTER XIV

"CALL IT THE 'ROSE GIRL'"

"What are you going to do with those things?" asked Winthrop. "Not burn them?"

"Yep; every strap and tie-string," replied Overland, gathering together the dead prospector's few effects. "Cause why? Well, Billy, if this claim ain't filed on,—and I reckon it ain't,—why, we files on her as the original locators. Nobody gets wise to anything and it saves the chance of gettin' jumped. The bunch over there would make it interestin' for us if they knowed we was goin' to file on it. They'd put up a fight by law, and mebbby one not by law. Sabe?"

"I think so. Going to burn that little—er—cradle arrangement, too?"

"Yep. Sorry, 'cause it's wood, and wood is wood here. That little rocker is a cradle all right for rockin' them yella babies in and then out. The hand that rocks that cradle hard enough rules the world, as the pote says."

"So this is how gold is mined?" queried Winthrop, examining the crude rocker and the few rusted tools.

"One way. Pan, cradle, or sluice for free gold. They's about four other ways. This here's our way."

"Is it a rich claim?"

"Tolerable. I panned some up the branch. She runs about two dollars a pan."

"Is that all?"

Overland smiled as he poked a smouldering corner of blanket into the fire. "It is and it ain't. I reckon you could pan fifty pans a day. That's a hundred dollars. Then I could do that much and the cookin', too. That's another hundred. Two hundred dollars a day ain't bad wages for two guys. It ought to keep us in grub and postage stamps and some chewin'-gum once in a while."

"Two hundred a day!" And Winthrop whistled. "That doesn't seem much in New York—on the street, but out here—right out of the ground. Why, that's twelve hundred a week."

"Nope—not exactly. She's a rich one, and bein' so rich at the start she'll peter out fast, I take it. I know these here kind. When we come to the end of the cañon we're at the end, that's all. Besides, she's so rich we won't work six days every week. If she was half as good, mebby we would. You never done much fancy pick-handle exercise, did you?"

"No, but I'm going to. This beats signing checks all to pieces."

"Never got cramps that way myself," grunted Overland. "But I have from swingin' a pick. Your back'll be so blame stiff in about three days that you'll wish you never seen a pan or a shovel. Then you'll get over the fever and settle down sensible. Three of us could do a heap better than two. I wish Collie was on the job."

"I'm willing," said Winthrop.

"Course you are, but you get your half of this as agreed. Collie's share comes out of my half. I'm playin' this hand over the table, in plain sight."

Winthrop glanced quickly at Overland's inscrutable face. "Suppose I should tell you that my income, each week, is about equal to what we expect to get from this claim?"

"Makes no difference," growled Overland. "It wasn't your money that stood off the constable—and later out in the desert. It was *you*. They's some places left on this old map yet where a man is jest what his two fists and his head is worth. This here Mojave is one of 'em. Are you squeak to that?"

"I understand," said Winthrop.

They worked steadily until evening. They staked out their respective and adjoining claims, dropped the rusted tools in a bottomless crevice, and removed the last shred and vestige of a previous occupancy.

"This here's been too easy," said Overland, as he sliced bacon for the evening meal. "When things comes as easy as this, you want to watch out for a change in the weather. We ain't through with the bunch yet."

The Easterner, making the evening fire, nodded. "How are we to get provisions?" he asked.

"First, I was thinkin' of packin' 'em in from Gophertown, over yonder. She's about thirty miles from here, across the alkali. 'T aint a regular town, but they got grub. But if we got to comin' in regular, they'd smell gold quicker than bees findin' orange-blossoms. They got my number, likewise."

"How's that?"

"They know I been standin' out on the edge ever since I had a little fuss with some folks over at Yuma, quite a spell ago."

"Won't you tell me about it?"

"Sure! They was three parties interested—me and another gent and a hoss. I guess the hoss is still alive."

Winthrop laughed. "That's a pretty brief epic," he said.

"Uhuh. It was. But I reckon we got to hit the breeze out of here right soon. Here, le' me take that fry-pan a minute. It's this way. Me and you's located this claim. Now we go and file. But first we got to get some dough. I got a scheme. I'm thinkin' of gettin' a dude outfit—long-tailed coat and checker pants and a elevated lid with a shine to it. Then you and me to the State House and file on this here claim. You stay right in them kickie clothes and that puncher hat. We file, see? The gents supportin' the bars and store corners will be so interested in seein' me do you for your pile that they'll forget to remember who I am, like I would be in me natural jeans. They'll size me for a phoney promoter excavatin' your pocketbook. It's a chance—but we got to take it."

"That's all very weird and wonderful," said Winthrop, "and not so very flattering to me, but I am game. I'll furnish the expense money."

After the evening meal they drew nearer the fire and smoked in the chill silence. The flames threw strange dancing shadows on the opposite cliff.

Winthrop, mindful of Overland's advice, slipped on his coat as the night deepened. "About your adopting a disguise," he began; "I should think you would look well enough clean-shaven and dressed in some stylish, rough tweed. You have fine shoulders and—"

"Hold on, Billy! I'm a livin' statoo, I know. But listen! I got to go the limit to look the part. You can't iron the hoof-marks of hell and Texas out of my mug in a hundred years. The old desert and the border towns and the bottle burned 'em in to stay. Them kind of looks don't go with business clothes. I got to look fly—jest like I didn't know no better."

"Perhaps you are right. You seem to make a go of everything you tackle."

"Yep! Some things I made go so fast I ain't caught up with 'em yet. You know I used to wonder if a fella's face would ever come smooth again in heaven. That was a spell ago. I ain't been worryin' about it none lately."

"How old are you?"

"Me? I'm huggin' thirty-five clost. But not so clost I can't hear thirty-six lopin' up right smart."

"Only thirty-five!" exclaimed Winthrop. Then quickly, "Oh, I beg your pardon."

"That's nothin'", said Overland genially. "It ain't the 'thirty-five' that makes me feel sore—it's the 'only.' You said it all then. But believe me, pardner, the thirty-five have been all red chips."

"Well, you have *lived*," sighed Winthrop.

"And come clost to forgettin' to, once or twice. Anyhow,—speakin' of heaven,—I'd jest as soon take my chances with this here mug of mine, what shows I earned all I got, as with one of them there dead-fish faces I seen on some guys that never done nothin' better or worse than get up for breakfast."

Winthrop smiled. "Yes. And you believe in a heaven, then?"

"From mornin' till night. And then more than ever. Not your kind of a heaven, or mebbby any other guy's. But as sure as you're goin' to crease them new boots by settin' too clost to the fire, there's somethin' up there windin' up the works regular and seein' that she ticks right, and once in a while chuckin' out old wheels and puttin' in new ones. Jest take a look at them stars! Do you reckon they're runnin' right on time and not jumpin' the track and dodgin' each other that slick—jest because they was throwed out of a star-factory promiscus like a shovel of gravel? No, sir! Each one is doin' its stunt because the other one is—same as folks. Sure, there's somethin' runnin' the big works; but whether me or you is goin' to get a look-in,—goin' to be let in on it,—why, that's different."

Winthrop drew back from the fire and crossed his legs. He leaned forward, gazing at the flames. From the viewless distance came the howl of coyotes.

"They're tryin' to figure it out—same as us," said Overland, poking a half-burned root into the fire. "And they're gettin' about as far along at it, too. Like most folks does in a crowd—jest howlin' all together. Mebby it sounds good to 'em. I don' know."

"I'm somewhat of a scoffer, I think," said Winthrop presently.

"Most lungers is," was Overland's cheerful comment. "They're sore on their luck. They ain't really sore at the big works. They only think so. I've knowed lots of 'em that way."

"To-night,—here in this cañon,—with the stars and the desert so near, you almost persuade me that there is something."

"Hold on, Billy! You're grazin' on the wrong side of the range if you think I'm preachin'. My God! I hate preachin' worse than I could hate hell if I thought they was one. My little old ideas is mine. I roped 'em and branded 'em and I'm breakin' 'em in to ride to suit me. I ain't askin' nobody to risk gettin' throwed ridin' any of my stock. Sabe?"

"But a chap may peek through the fence and watch, mayn't he?"

"Sure! Mebby you're breakin' some stock of your own like that. If you are, any little old rig I got is yours."

"Thank you. And I'm not joking. Perhaps I'll get the right grip on things later. I've been used to town and the pace. I've always had money, but I never felt really clean, inside and out, until now. I never before burned my bridges and went it under my own flag."

Overland nodded sagely. "Uhuh. It's the air. Your feelin' clean and religious-like is nacheral up here. Don't worry if it feels queer to you at first—you'll get used to it. Why, I quit cussin', myself, when everything seems so dum' quiet. Sounds like the whole works had stopped to listen to a fella. Swearin' ain't so hefty then. Sort of outdoor stage fright, I reckon. Say, do you believe preachin' ever did much good?"

"Sometimes I've thought it did."

"I seen a case once," began Overland reminiscently. "It was Toledo Blake. He was a kind of bum middleweight scrapper when he was workin' at it. When he wasn't trainin' he was a kind of locoed heavyweight—stewed most of the time. It was one winter night in Toledo. Me and him went into one of them 'Come-In-Stranger' rescue joints. 'Course, they was singin' hymns and prayin' in there, but it was warmer than outside, so we stayed.

"After a while up jumps the foreman of that gospel outfit. His foretop was long, and he wore it over one ear like a hoss's when the wind is blowin'.

"He commenced wrong, I guess. He points down the room to where me and Toledo was settin', and he hollers, 'Go to the ant, you slugger! Consider her game and get hep to it,' or somethin' similar.

"That word 'slugger' kind of jarred Toledo. He jumps up kind of mad. 'Mebby I am a slugger, and mebbby I ain't, but you needn't to get personal about it. Anyhow, I ain't got no aunt.'

"'The text,' says the hoss-faced guy on the platform, 'the text, my brother, is semaphorical.'

"Toledo couldn't understand that, so I whispers, 'Set down, you mutt! Semaphore is a sign ain't it? Well, he's givin' you the sign talk. Set down and listen.'

"Toledo, he hadn't had a drink for a week, and he was naturally feelin' kind of ugly. 'All right,' he growls at the preacher guy. 'All right. I pass.'

"'Ah, my brother!' says the hoss-faced guy. 'I see the spirits is at work.' That kind of got Toledo's goat.

"'Your dope is *bum*,' says Toledo. 'I ain't had a drink for a week. First you tell a fella to go see his aunt, when she's been planted for ten years. Then—'

"'Listen, brother!' says the preacher guy. 'I referred to ants—little, industrious critters that are examples of thrift to the idle, the indignant, the—'

"'Hold on!' says Toledo. 'Do you mean red ants or black ants?' And I seen that a spark had touched Toledo's brainbox and that he was wrastlin' with somethin' that felt like thinkin'.

"'Either, my brother,' says the hoss-faced guy, smilin' clear up to his back teeth.

"'Well, you're drawin' your dope from the wrong can,' says Toledo, shufflin' for

the door. 'Because,' says he, turnin' in the doorway, 'because, how in hell is a fella goin' to find any ants with two feet of snow on the ground?'

"And then Toledo and me went out. It was a mighty cold night."

Overland Red rolled a cigarette, pausing in his narrative to see whether Winthrop, who sat with bowed head, was asleep or not.

Winthrop glanced up. "I'm awake," he said, smiling. "Very much awake. I can see it all—you two, down on your luck, and the snow freezing and melting on the bottoms of your trousers. And the stuffy little rescue mission with a few weary faces and many empty chairs; the 'preacher guy,' as you call him, earnest, and ignorant, and altogether wrong in trying to reason with Toledo Blake's empty stomach."

"That's it!" concurred Overland. "A empty stomach is a plumb unreasonable thing. But the preacher guy done some good, at that. He set Toledo Blake to thinkin' which was somethin' new and original for Toledo."

"It was nex' spring Toledo and me was travelin' out this way, inspectin' the road-bed of the Santa Fé, when we runs onto a big red-ant's nest in the sand alongside of the track. Toledo, he squats down and looks. The first thing he sees was a leetle pa ant grab up a piece of crust twice his size and commence sweatin' and puffin' to drag it home to the kids."

"'The leetle cuss!' says Toledo. 'He's some strong on the lift!' And Toledo, he takes the piece of crust from the pa ant and sticks it at the top of the hole, thinkin' to help the pa ant along. But the pa ant, he hustles right up and grabs the crust and waves her around his head a couple of times to show how strong he is, and then starts back to where he found the crust. Down he plumps it—gives it a h'ist or two and then grabs it up. He waves it around in his mitts and wobbles off toward the hole again. Independent? Well, mostly!"

"Toledo, he said nothin', but his eyes was pokin' out of his head tryin' to think. You never see a man sweat so tryin' to get both hands onto a idea at once. His dome was kind of flat, but he could handle one idea, in single harness, at a time."

"Anyhow, the next town we strikes, Toledo, he quits me and gets a sort of chambermaid's job tidyin' up around a little old boiler-factory and machine-shop; pilin' scrap-iron and pig-iron and little things like that. And he stuck, too."

"A couple of years after that I was beatin' it on a rattler goin' west, and I drops

off at that town. About the first thing I seen was Toledo comin' down the street. Alongside of him was a woman carry in' a kid in her arms, and another one grazin' along close behind. And Toledo had a loaf of bread under his arm.

"This here is Mrs. Blake,' says Toledo, kind of nervous.

"I am glad she is,' says I. 'Toledo, you're doin' well. Don't know nothin' about the leetle colt in the blanket, but the yearlin' is built right. He's got good hocks and first-class action.'

"Mrs. Toledo, she kind of sniffed superior, but said nothin'. You know that kind of sayin' nothin' which is waitin' for you to move on.

"Won't you come up to the shack and have grub?' says Toledo, hopin' I'd say 'No.'

"Nope,' says I. 'Obliged jest the same. I see you got hep to the ant all right.'

"I'll let you know I'm nobody's aunt!' says Mrs. Toledo, yankin' the yearlin' off his hoofs and settin' him down again. For a fact, she thunk I was alludin' to her.

"Of course not, madam,' says I, polite, and liftin' me lid. 'And I judge somebody's in luck at that.'

"I guess it was her not used to bein' spoke and acted polite to that got her goat. Mebby she smelt somethin' sarcastic. I dunno. Anyhow, she was a longhorn with a bad eye. 'Go on, you chicken-lifter!' she says.

"Bein' no hand to sass a lady, I said nothin' more to *her*. But I hands Toledo a jolt for bein' ashamed of his old pal.

"Well, so long,' says I, kind of offhand and easy. 'So long. I'll tell Lucy when I see her that you was run over by a freight and killed. Then she can take out them papers and marry Mike Brannigan that's been waitin' in the hopes you'd pass over. You remember Mike, the cop on Cherry Street. You oughta. He's pinched you often enough. 'Course you do. Well, so long. Little Johnny was lookin' fine the last I seen of him. He's gettin' more like his pa every day. But I got to beat it.'"

Overland Red leaned back and puffed a great cloud of smoke from a fresh cigarette.

"Who was Lucy?" asked Winthrop.

"Search me!" replied Overland. "They wasn't any Lucy or nobody like that. But I'd like to 'a' stayed to hear Toledo explain that to Mrs. Toledo, though. She was a hard map to talk to."

"I suppose there's a moral attached to that, or, more properly, embodied in that story. But it is good enough in itself without disemboweling it for the moral."

"You can't always go by ants, neither," said Overland.

Winthrop nodded. His eyes were filled with the awe of great distances and innumerable stars. "Gold!" he whispered presently, as one whispers in dreams. "Gold! Everywhere! In the sun—in the starlight—in the flowers—in the flame. In wine, in a girl's hair.... Gold! Mystery.... Power ... and as impotent as Fate." Winthrop's head lifted suddenly. "What shall we call the mine?" he asked.

Overland Red started, as though struck from ambush. "How did you guess?" he queried.

"Guess what?"

"That I was thinkin' about the claim?"

"I didn't guess it. I was dreaming. Suddenly I asked a question, without knowing that I was speaking."

"Mebby I was bearin' down so hard on the same idea that you kind of felt the strain."

"Possibly. That's not unusual. What *shall* we call it?"

"Wha—I was thinkin' of callin' it the 'Rose Girl' after a girl Collie and me knows up Moonstone Cañon way."

"It's rather a good name," said Winthrop. "Is the girl pretty?"

"Pretty? Gosh! That ain't the word. Her real name is Louise Lacharme, and, believe me, Billy, she's all that her name sounds like, and then some."



CHAPTER XV

SILENT SAUNDERS

One after another, in the course of the two years following Collie's arrival, the old riders of the Moonstone Rancho drifted away. There remained but Brand Williams the foreman, Collie, and the sturdy, hard-riding Miguel, a young Spanish vaquero who was devoted to but two things in life, his splendid pinto pony, and the Moonstone Ranch.

The others had been lured to the new oil-fields up north—to the excitement of Goldfield, or to Mexico City, where even more excitement promised. In their stead came new men—Bud Light, Parson Long, Billy Dime, and one Silent Saunders.

Louise became acquainted with the new men while riding with her uncle. She was his constant companion in the hills. One by one the new arrivals became devoted to her. Her sincere interest in the ranch work pleased them, and naturally, for it was their work. Walter Stone was also pleased with his niece's interest in the detail of the ranch work. She was as a daughter to him. Some day the property would be hers.

Fully conscious, from within herself, of her dependence upon her uncle, Louise managed to be of inestimable service. She performed her self-allotted tasks without ostentation. She had that rare quality of stimulating enthusiasm among the men—enthusiasm for their work and pride in giving faithful and energetic service—pride in accomplishing a little more each day than was asked or expected of them. Louise's youth, her beauty, her sincerity, and, above all, her absolute simplicity of manner commanded admiration and respect among the hard-riding Moonstone boys. She was, to them, a "lady," yet a lady they could understand. Hers was a gentle tyranny. A request from her was deemed a great compliment by its recipient.

All of them, with the exception of Collie, openly praised her horsemanship, her quiet daring, her uniform kindness. Her beauty had ceased to be commented

upon. It was accepted by them as one accepts the fragrant beauty of a rose, naturally, silently, gratefully.

Collie had gained in height and breadth of shoulder. He no longer needed instruction in managing broncho stock. He loved the life of the hills; the cool, invigorating mornings, the keen wind of the noon peaks, the placidity of the evening as the stars multiplied in the peaceful sky.

He became that rare quantity among cowmen, a rider who handled and mastered unbroken horses without brutality. This counted heavily for him both with Louise and Walter Stone. Men new to the range laughed at his method of "gentling" horses. Later their laughter stilled to envious desire. Lacking his invariable patience, his consistent magnetism, they finally resumed their old methods, and earned dominance by sheer strength of arm—"main strength and awkwardness," as Williams put it.

"It's easy—for him," commented Brand Williams, discussing Collie's almost uncanny quelling of a vicious, unbitted mustang. "It's easy. You fellas expect a boss to buck and bite and kick and buffalo you generally. *He* don't. He don't expect anything like that, and he don't let 'em learn how."

"Can you work it that way?" asked Billy Dime.

"Nope. I learned the other way and the bosses knows it. I always had to sweat. He's born to it natural, like a good cow-pony is."

And Collie looked upon his work as a game—a game that had to be played hard and well, but a game, nevertheless. Incidentally he thought often of Overland Red. He had searched the papers diligently for a year, before he received the first letter from Overland. The news it contained set Collie to thinking seriously of leaving the Moonstone Rancho and joining his old companion in this new venture of gold-digging which, as Overland took pains to explain, was "paying big." But there was Louise.... They were great friends. They had even ridden to town together and attended the little white church in the eucalyptus grove.... He thought of their ride homeward late that Sunday afternoon....

Once and once only had Overland's name been mentioned in the bunk-house. Saunders, discussing horses and riders in general, listened to Collie's account of Overland's escape from the deputy, Tenlow. Then he spoke slightly of the feat, claiming that any man who had ever ridden range could do as much, with

the right pony.

Brand Williams tried to change the subject, for shrewd reasons of his own, but Collie flamed up instantly. "I got a little saved up," he said; "mebby eight hundred. She's yours if you dast to walk a horse, comin' or goin', over that drift that Red took on the jump. Are you game?"

"I'm not on the bet," replied Saunders. "So Overland Red is a friend of yours, eh?"

"Overland Red could ride where you dassent to walk and drag a halter," asserted Collie. Then he relapsed to silence, a little ashamed in that he had been trapped into showing temper.

Williams the taciturn astonished the bunk-house by adding: "The kid is right. Red could outride most men. I was his pal once, down in Sonora. There ain't a better two-gun artist livin'." And the lean foreman looked pointedly at Saunders.

Saunders smiled evilly. He had reason to believe that Williams had spoken the truth.

A few weeks later, Williams, returning unexpectedly to the bunk-house, found Saunders changing his shirt preparatory to a ride to town. The rest of the boys were already on their way to the Oro Rancho across the valley. Williams saw two puckered scars, each above the elbow on Saunders's bared arms.

"That was dam' good shootin'," said the foreman, indicating the other's scarred arms.

"Fair," said Saunders gruffly.

"Takes a gun-artist to put a man out of business that way and not finish him," said Williams, smiling.

"Cholo mix-up," said Saunders.

"And shootin' from the ground, at that," continued Williams. "And at a fella on a horse. Easy to see that, for the both holes are slantin' up. The shootin' was done from below."

Saunders flushed. He was about to speak when Williams interrupted him. "Makes me think of some of Overland Red's—that is, old Red Jack Summers's

fancy work. I don' know why," he drawled, and turning he left the bunk-house.

Collie, returning from a visit to the Oro Rancho that evening, was met by Williams. The latter was on foot.

"Drop into my shack after dark," said the foreman. Then he stepped back into the bushes as the other men rode up.

The foreman's interview with Collie that evening was brief. It left a lot to the imagination. "You said too much about Overland Red the other night, when you was talkin' to Silent Saunders," said Williams. "He's tryin' to find out somethin'. I don't know what he's after. Keep your eye peeled and your teeth on the bit. That's all."



CHAPTER XVI

BLUNDER

"Oh, he's built all right, and he comes of good stock," said Brand Williams, nodding toward a bay colt that stood steaming in the sun.

It had rained the night before—an unexpected shower and the last of the winter rains. Now that the snow had left the hills, the young stock, some thirty-odd year-old colts had been turned into the north range. Collie and Williams had ridden over to look at the colts; Williams as a matter of duty, Collie because he was interested and liked Williams's society.

The colt, shaking itself, turned and nipped at its shoulder and switched its tail.

"He's stayed fat, too," continued Williams. "But look at him! He's bitin' and switchin' because he's wet. Thinks it's fly-time a'ready. He's jest a four-legged horse-hide blunder. I know his kind."

Collie, dismounting and unbuttoning his slicker, rolled it and tied it to the saddle. "I guess you're right, Brand. Last week I was over this way. He had his head through the corral bars at the bottom and he couldn't get loose. He was happy, though. He must have been there quite a spell, for he ate about half a bale of hay. I got him loose and he tried his darndest to kick my head off."

"Uhuh," grunted the foreman. "Reckon it's the last rain we'll get this year. Now would you look at that! He's the limit!"

The colt, sniffing curiously at a crotch in the live-oak against which he had been rubbing, had stepped into the low fork of the tree. Perhaps he had some vague notion to rub both his sides at once as an economy of effort. His front feet had slipped on the wet ground. He went down, wedged fast. He struggled and kicked. He nickered plaintively, and rolled his terror-stricken eyes toward the cowmen in wild appeal.

"And like all of his kind, hoss and human," said Williams, dismounting, "he's

askin' for help in a voice that sounds like it was our fault that he's in trouble. He's the limit!"

With much labor they finally released the colt, who expressed prompt gratitude by launching a swift and vicious kick at Collie.

"He's feeling good enough," said that youth, coolly picking up his hat that had dropped as he dodged.

"Yes. All he needs is a couple of punchers and a hoss-doctor and a policeman to ride round with him and keep him out of trouble. He's no account; never will be," growled Williams.

"I don't know, Brand. He's a mighty likely-looking and interesting specimen. He's different. I kind of like him."

"Well, I don't. I ain't got time. He's always goin' to manufacture trouble, when he don't come by it natural. He's got a kind eye, but no brains behind it."

They mounted and rode up the hill, looking for breaks in the fences and counting the colts, some of whom, luxuriously lazy in the heat of the sun, stood with lowered heads, drowsing. Others, scattered about the hillsides and in the arroyos, grazed nippingly at the sparse bunch-grass, moving quickly from clump to clump.

The "blunder" colt seemed to find his own imbecilities sufficiently entertaining, for he grazed alone.

The foreman's inspection terminated with the repairing of a break in the fence inclosing the spring-hole, a small area of bog-land dotted with hummocks of lush grass. Between the hummocks was a slimy, black ooze that covered the bones of more than one unfortunate animal. The heavy, ripe grass lent an appearance of stability, of solidity, to the treacherous footing.

Williams and Collie reinforced the sagging posts with props of fallen limbs and stones carried from the trail below. They piled brush where the wire had parted, filling the opening with an almost impassable barrier of twisted branches. Until the last rain, the spring-hole fence had appeared solid—but one night of rain in the California hills can work unimaginable changes in trail, stream-bed, or fence line.

"Get after that fence first thing in the morning," said Williams as he unsaddled

the pinto that afternoon. "I noticed the blunder colt followed us up to the spring. If there's any way of gettin' bogged, he'll find it, or invent a new way for himself."

The blunder colt's mischief-making amounted to absolute genius. There was much of the enterprising puppy in his nature and in his methods. The impulse which seemed to direct the extremely uneven tenor of his way would have resolved itself orally into: "Do it—and then see what happens!" He was not vicious, but brainlessly joyful in his mischief.

As the foreman and Collie disappeared beyond the crest of the hill, the colt, who had watched them with absurdly stupid intensity, lowered his head and nibbled indifferently at the grass along the edge of the spring-hole fence. He approached the break and sniffed at the props and network of branches. This was interesting! And a very carelessly constructed piece of fence, indeed! He would investigate. The blunder colt was never too hungry to cease grazing and turn toward adventure.

He nosed one of the props. He leaned against it heavily, deliberately, and rubbed himself. Verily "His eye had all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming"—of unalloyed mischief.

The prop creaked, finally became loosened, and fell. The colt sprang back awkwardly, snorting in indignant surprise. "The very idea!" he would have said, even as he would have chewed gum and have worn a perpetual tear in his trousers had he been human.

With stiff stealthiness he approached the break again, pretending a hesitancy that he enjoyed immensely. He reached under the lower wire, neck outstretched, and nibbled at a bunch of ripe grass. There was plenty of grass within easier reach, but he wanted the unattainable. A barb caught in his mane. He jerked his head up. The barb pricked his neck. He jerked harder. Another prop became loosened. Then he strode away, this time with calm indifference. He pretended to graze, but his eye roved back to the break. His attitude expressed a sly alertness—something of the quiet vigilance a grazing horse betrays when one approaches with a bridle. He drew nearer the fence again. With head over the top wire he gazed longingly at the clumps of grass on the hummocks scattered over the muck of the overflow. His shoulder needed scratching. With drooping head, eyes half-closed, and lower lip pendant, he rubbed against the loosened post. The post sagged and wobbled. Whether it was deliberate intent, or just natural "horse"

predominating his actions, it would be difficult to determine. Finally the post gave way and fell. The colt drew back and contemplated the opening with a vacuous eye. It was not interesting now. No, indeed! He wandered away.

But in the dusk of that evening, when a chill dew sparkled along the edges of the bog, he came, a clumsy shadow and grazed among the hummocks. Slowly he worked toward the treachery of black ooze that shone in the starlight. He sank to his fetlocks. He drew his feet up one after another, still progressing toward the centre of the bog, and sinking deeper at each step. He became stricken with fear as he sank to his hocks. He plunged and snorted. The bog held him with a soft, detaining grip—and drew him slowly down. He nickered, and finally screamed in absolute terror. Up to his heaving belly the black mud crept. He flung himself sideways. Exhausted, he lay with neck and head outstretched. Again he struggled, his eyes wild and protruding with the blood pressure of his straining. Then the chill of night crept over him. He became quiet—shivered a little, and nickered faintly.

In the willows a little owl called pensively.

The morning light, streaming across the hills, spread like raw gold over the bog. Collie whistled as he rode down the trail, and beat his gloved hands to keep warm. He heard a plaintive whinny and a bubbling gasp. He leaped from his pony, the coiled riata in his hand as he touched the ground.

The blunder colt, neck outstretched, was still above the ooze. His eyes were bloodshot, as their white rims showed. His nose quivered and twisted with his quick, irregular breathing.

It was a "two-man job," but Collie knew that the colt would probably be gone before he could ride back and return with help. He swung the riata, then hesitated. To noose the colt's neck would only result in strangling it when he pulled. He found a branch large enough to stiffen the brush near the break. Swiftly he built a shaky footing and crept out toward the colt. By shoving the riata under the colt's belly with a forked stick, and fishing the loose end up on the other side, he managed to get a loop round the animal's hind quarters. He mounted his own horse and took a turn of the riata round the saddle-horn.

His pony set its feet and leaned to the work. Slowly the colt was drawn to solid ground.

He was a pitiful object as he lay panting and shivering, plastered with mud and black slime, and almost dead from shock and chill. Collie spread his slicker over him and rode up the hill at a trot. The blunder colt raised its head a little, then dropped it and lay motionless.

When Collie and Billy Dime returned with gunnysacks and an old blanket, the sun had warmed the air. The mud on the colt's side and neck had begun to dry.

Billy Dime commented briefly. "He's a goner. He's froze clean to his heart. Why didn't you leave him where he was?"

Collie spread the gunnysacks on a level beneath a live-oak, beneath which they dragged the colt and covered him with the blanket. They gave him whiskey with water that they heated at a little fire of brush. The colt lifted its head, endeavoring spasmodically to get to its feet.

"He's wearin' hisself out. He ain't got much farther to go," said Billy Dime, mounting and turning his pony. "Come on, kid. If he's alive to-morrow mornin'—good enough."

"I think I'll stay awhile," said Collie. "Brand says he isn't worth saving, but—I kind of like the cuss. He's different."

"Correct, nurse, he is. You can telephone me if the patient shows signs of bitin' you. Keep tabs on his pulse—give him his whiskey regular, but don't by no means allow him to set up in bed and smoke. I'll call again nex' year. So long, sweetness."

"You go plump!" laughed Collie.

And Billy Dime rode over the hill singing a dolefully cheerful ditty about burying some one on the "lo-o-ne prairie." To him a horse was merely something useful, so long as it could go. When it couldn't go, he got another that could.

Collie replenished the smoking fire, scraped some of the mud from the colt's thick, winter coat, and heated a half-dozen large stones.

His brother cowmen would have laughed at these "tender ministrations," and Collie himself smiled as he recalled Billy Dime's parting directions.

Collie placed the heated stones round the shivering animal, re-dried the blanket

at the fire, and covered the pitifully weak and panting creature. The colt's restless lifting of its head he overcame by sitting near it and stroking its muzzle with a soothing hand.

Time and again he rose to re-heat the stones and replenish the fire. The colt's breathing became less irregular. He gave it more of the hot whiskey and water.

Then he mended the fence. He had brought an axe with him and a supply of staples.

Toward mid-afternoon he became hungry and solaced himself with a cigarette.

Again the blunder colt became restless, showing a desire to rise, but for lack of strength the desire ended with a swaying and tossing of its head.

Evening came quickly. The air grew bitingly chill. Collie wished that one of the boys would bring him something to eat. The foreman surely knew where he was. Collie could imagine the boys joking about him over their evening "chuck."

With the darkness he drew on his slicker and squatted by the fire. He fell asleep. He awoke shivering, to find the embers dull. The stars were intensely brilliant and large.

Once during the evening he made up his mind to return to the ranch-house, but a stubborn determination to save the colt, despite the ridicule he knew he would elicit, held him to his task. Should he leave, the colt might become chilled again and die. Then he *would* be open to ridicule. Collie reasoned that he must finish the task as he had begun it—thoroughly.

Again he heated the stones, warmed the blanket, and gave "Blunder," as he now called him affectionately, some hot whiskey. Then he built a larger fire, wrapped himself in his saddle-blankets, and, with feet to the blaze, slept. His own pony grazed at large, dragging a rope.

Habit brought Collie awake early. The fire had gone out. He was stiff with cold. Arising, he glanced at the heap beneath the blanket ringed with stones. "Time to eat!" he cried lustily, and whipped the blanket from the mud-encrusted Blunder. The colt raised its head, struggled, put out one stiff fore leg, and then the other. Collie grabbed the animal's tail and heaved. Blunder humped himself—and was on his feet, wobbling, dizzy-eyed, scandalously "mussed up"—but alive!

"Whoop-ee!" shouted Collie as the colt staggered a pace or two trying his

questionable strength. "Gee! But I'm hungry!"

The Blunder, a mere caricature of a horse in pose and outward seeming, gazed at his rescuer with stupid eyes. He had not the faintest idea what all the joy was about, but something deep in his horse nature told him that the boisterous youth was his friend. Timidly he approached Collie, wagged his head up and down experimentally, as if trying his neck hinges, and reached out and nuzzled the young man's hand, nipping playfully at his fingers.

Collie was dumbfounded. "He's thankin' me—the little cuss! Why, you rubber-kneed, water-eyed mud turtle you! I didn't know you had that much sense."

The youth did not hear the regular beat of hoofs as Williams loped up, until the colt, stilt-legged, emitted a weak nicker. Collie turned.

Williams smiled grimly. "Knew you'd stick," he said.

He gazed at the revived colt, the circle of stones, and the blanket. He made no comment.

Collie caught up his pony and mounted. As they rode over the hill together, Williams, turning in the saddle, laughed and pointed down toward the arroyo.

The blunder colt, apparently overjoyed to be alive, had ambled awkwardly up to one of his mates who stood stolidly waiting for the sun to warm him. The other colt, unused to the Blunder's society and perhaps unfavorably impressed by his dissipated appearance, received this friendly overture with a pair of punishing hoofs. Blunder staggered and fell, but scrambled to his feet again, astonished, indignant, highly offended.

"If you was to drive that blunder colt up to horse-heaven and he knew it *was* horse-heaven, you'd have to turn him around and back him in. Then I reckon he'd bust the corral tryin' to get out again."

Collie grinned. "Well, I wouldn't this morning—if there was anything to eat there, even hay."

"Well, you don't get your breakfast at the chuck-house *this* morning," said Williams gruffly.

"I don't, eh? Since when?"

Williams again turned in his saddle, observing Collie for a minute before he

spoke. "I see you're smilin', so I'll tell you. Since when? Well, since about two hours ago, when Miss Louise come steppin' over to the bunk-house and asks where you are. Billy Dime ups and tells her you was sick-nursin' the blunder colt. She didn't smile, but turned to me and asked me. I told her about what was doin'. I seen she had it in for somebody. It was me. 'Brand,' she says, quiet-like, 'is it customary on the Moonstone for lunch or dinner to be taken to the men that are staying out from camp?'

"'Yes, ma'am,' says I.

"And the plumb hell of it was," continued Williams, "she didn't say another word. I wisht she had. I feel like a little less than nothin' shot full of holes this lovely mornin'."

Collie rode on silently.

"Why don't you say somethin'?" queried Williams.

"I was waiting for the rest of it," said Collie.

Williams laughed. "I guess you ain't such a fool, at that, with your nussin' stock and settin' up nights with 'em. Miss Louise says to tell you to come right up to the house,—the *house*, you understand,—and get your breakfast with them. They said they was goin' to wait for you. I guess that ain't throwin' it into the rest of us some. Keep it up, Collie kid, keep it up, and you'll be payin' us all wages some day."

CHAPTER XVII

GUESTS

A month had passed since the rescue of the blunder colt. The air was warm and clear, the sky intensely blue. Moonstone Cañon grew fragrant with budding flowers. The little lizards came from their winter crevices and clung to the sun-warmed stones. A covey of young quail fluttered along the hillside under the stately surveillance of the mother bird. Wild cats prowled boldly on the southern slopes. Cotton-tails huddled beneath the greasewood brush and nibbled at the grasses. The cañon stream ran clear again now that the storm-washed silt had settled. On the peaks the high winds were cold and cutting, but on the slopes and in the valleys the earth was moist and warm.

Louise, humming a song, rode slowly along the Moonstone Cañon Trail. At the "double turn" in the cañon, where dwelt Echo and her myrmidons, Louise rode more slowly.

"Dreaming Fance, the cobbler's son, took his tools and laces,
Wrought her shoes of scarlet dye, shoes as pale as snow.
They shall lead her wild-rose feet all the faëry paces,
Danced along the road of love, the road such feet should go."

She sang slowly, pausing after each line that the echoes might not blur.

"Danced along ... along ... the road ... of love, the road ... of love ... of love," sang the echoes.

Louise smiled dreamily. Then the clatter of Boyar's shod hoofs rang and reëchoed, finally to hush in the gravel of the ford beyond.

Why Louise thought of Collie just then, it would be difficult to imagine. Still, she had, ever since his night's vigil with the blunder colt, caught herself noting little details associated with him and his work. He brushed his teeth. Not all of the other men did. He did not chew tobacco. Despite his lack of early training, he

was naturally neat. He disliked filth instinctively. His bits, spurs, and trappings shone. He had learned to shoe his string of ponies—an art that is fast becoming lost among present-day cowmen. With little comment but faithful zeal he copied Brand Williams. This, of course, flattered the taciturn cowman, who unobtrusively arranged Collie's work so that it might bring the younger man before the notice of Walter Stone, and incidentally Louise. Of course, Louise was not aware of this.

The girl no longer sang as she rode, but dreamed, with unseeing eyes on the trail ahead—dreamed such dreams as one may put aside easily until, perchance, the dream converges toward reality which cannot be so lightly put aside.

Brand Williams had his own ideas of romance; ideas pretty well submerged in the depths of hardy experience, but existing, nevertheless, and as immovable as the bed of the sea. He badgered Collie whenever he chanced to have seen him with the Rose Girl, and smiling inwardly at the young man's indignation, he would straightway arrange that Collie should ride to town, for, say, a few pounds of staples wanted in a hurry, when he knew that the buckboard would be going to town on the morrow, and also that there were plenty of staples in the storeroom.

Something of the kind was afoot, or rather a-saddle, as Louise rode down the Moonstone Trail, for beyond the turn and the rippling ford she saw a lithe, blue-shirted figure that she knew.

Louise would not have admitted even to herself that she urged Boyar. Nevertheless the reins tightened and slackened gently. Boyar swung into his easy lope. It pleased the girl that Collie, turning in his saddle at the sound of hoofs, waved a salute, but did not check his horse. He had never presumed on her frank friendship and "taken things for granted." He kept his place always. He was polite, a little reticent, and very much in love with Louise. Louise did not pretend to herself that she was not aware of it. She was all the more pleased that Collie should act so admirably. She had loaned him books, some of which he had read faithfully and intelligently. In secret he had kissed her name written on the flyleaf of each of them. He really rather adored Louise than loved her, and he builded well, for his adoration (unintimate as adoration must ever be until perchance it touches earth and is translated into love) was of that blithe and inspiring quality that lifts a man above his natural self and shapes the lips to song and the heart to unselfish service. He knew himself to be good-looking and not altogether a barbarian. No morbid hopelessness clouded his broad horizon. He knew himself and cherished his strength and his optimism. He ate slowly,

which is no insignificant item on the credit side of the big book of Success.

Collie lifted his broad-brimmed hat as Louise rode up. His face was flushed. His lips were smiling, but his dark eyes were steady and grave.

"Morning, Collie! Boyar is just bound to lope. He never can bear to have a horse ahead of him."

"He don't have to, very often," said Collie.

"Of course, there are Kentucky saddle-horses that could beat him. But they are not cow-ponies."

"No. And they couldn't beat him if they had to do his work in the hills. About a week of the trails would kill a thoroughbred."

"Boyar is very conceited, aren't you, Boy?" And she patted the sleek arch of his neck.

"I don't blame him," said Collie, his eyes twinkling.

"Going all the way to town?" asked Louise.

"Yes. Brand wants some things from the store."

"I'm going to the station. We expect a telegram from some friends. Maybe they'll be there themselves. I hope not, though. They said they were coming to-morrow, but would telegraph if they started sooner. We would have to get Price's team and buckboard—and I'd be ashamed to ride behind his horses, especially with my—my friend from the East."

"Boyar and this here buckskin colt would make a pretty fair team," ventured Collie, smiling to himself.

"To drive? Heavens, Collie, no! They've neither of them been in harness."

"I was just imagining," said Collie.

"Of course!" exclaimed Louise, laughing. "I understand. Why, I must be late. There's the train for the north just leaving the station. I expected to be there in case the Marshalls did come to-day. But they said they'd telegraph."

"I can see three folks on the platform," said Collie. "One is the agent; see his cap shine? Then there's a man and a woman."

"If it's Anne, she'll never forgive me. She's so—formal about things. It can't be the Marshalls, though."

"We can ride," suggested Collie. And the two ponies leaped forward. A little trail of dust followed them across the valley.

At the station Louise found her guests, young Dr. Marshall and his wife; also the telegram announcing the day they would arrive.

"I'm sorry," began Louise; but the Marshalls silenced her with hearty "Oh, pshaws!" and "No matters!" with an incidental hug from Anne.

"Why, you have changed so, Anne!" exclaimed Louise. "What *have* you been doing? You used to be so terribly formal, and now you're actually hugging me in public!"

"The 'public' has just departed, Miss Lacharme, with your pony, I believe. He rides well—the tall dark chap that came with you."

"Oh, Collie. He's gone for the buckboard, of course. Stupid of me not to drive down. We really didn't expect you until to-morrow, but you'll forgive us all, won't you? You can see now how telegrams are handled at these stations."

Anne Marshall, a brown-eyed, rather stately and pleasingly slender girl, smiled and shook her head. "I don't know. I may, if you will promise to introduce me to that fascinating young cowboy that rode away with your horse. I used to dream of such men."

Young Dr. Marshall coughed. The girls laughed.

"Oh, Collie?" said Louise. "Of course, you will meet him. He's our right-hand man. Uncle Walter says he couldn't get along without him and Aunty Eleanor just thinks he is perfect."

"And Louise?" queried Anne Marshall.

"Same," said Louise non-committally. "I don't see why he took Boyar with him to the store, though."

The Marshalls and Louise paced slowly up and down the station platform, chatting about the East and Louise's last visit there, before Anne was married. Presently they were interrupted by a wild clatter of hoofs and the grind and

screech of a hastily applied brake. The borrowed buckboard, strong, light, two-seated, and built for service, had arrived dramatically. Collie leaned back, the reins wrapped round his wrists, and his foot pressing the brake home. In the harness stood, or rather gyrated, Boyar and Collie's own pony Apache. It is enough to say that neither of them had ever been in harness before. The ponies were trying to get rid of the appended vehicle through any possible means. Louise gasped.

"Price's team is out—over to the Oro Ranch. I knew you wanted a team in a hurry—" said Collie.

"It looks quite like a team in a hurry," commented Dr. Marshall. "Your man is a good driver?"

"Splendid!" said Louise. "Come on, Anne. You always said you wanted to ride behind some real Western horses. Here they are."

"Why, this is just—just—bully!" whispered the stately Anne Marshall. "And isn't he a striking figure?"

"Yes," assented Louise, who was just the least bit uncertain as to the outcome of Collie's hasty assembling of untutored harness material. "It is just 'bully.' Where in the world did you unearth that word, Anne?"



CHAPTER XVIII

A RED EPISODE

Dr. Marshall's offhand designation of the buckboard as "a team in a hurry" was prophetic, even unto the end.

What Boyar could not accomplish in the way of equine gymnastics in harness, Apache, Collie's pony, could.

Louise was a little fearful for her guests, yet she had confidence in the driver. The Marshalls apparently saw nothing more than a pair of very spirited "real Western horses like one reads about, you know," until Dr. Marshall, slowly coming out of a kind of anticipatory haze, as Boyar stood on his hind feet and tried to face the buckboard, recognized the black horse as Louise's saddle animal. He took a firmer grip on the seat and looked at Collie. The young man seemed to be enjoying himself. There wasn't a line of worry on his clean-cut face.

"Pretty lively," said the doctor.

Collie, with his foot on the brake and both arms rigid, nodded. Moonstone Cañon Trail was not a boulevard. He was not to be lured into conversation. He was giving his whole mind and all of his magnetism to the team.

Boyar and Apache took advantage of every turn, pitch, steep descent, and ford to display the demoniacal ingenuity inspired by their outraged feelings. They were splendid, obedient saddle-animals. But to be buckled and strapped in irritating harness, and hitched to that four-wheeled disgrace, a buckboard!...

Anne Marshall chatted happily with Louise, punctuating her lively chatter with subdued little cries of delight as some new turn in the trail opened on a vista unimaginably beautiful, especially to her Eastern eyes.

Young Dr. Marshall, in the front seat with Collie, braced his feet and smiled. *He* had had experience, in an East-Side ambulance, but then that had been over level

streets. He glanced over the edge of the cañon road and his smile faded a little. It faded entirely as the front wheel sheared off a generous shovelful of earth from a sharp upright angle of the hill as the team took the turn at a gallop. The young physician had a sense of humor, which is the next best thing to courage, although he had plenty of his kind of courage also. He brushed the earth from his lap.

"The road needs widening there, anyway," commented Collie, as though apologizing.

"I have my—er—repair kit with me," said the genial doctor. "I'm a surgeon."

Collie nodded, but kept his eyes rigidly on the horses. Evidently this immaculate, of the white collar and cuffs and the stylish gray tweeds, had "sand."

"They're a little fussy—but I know 'em," said Collie, as Boyar, apparently terror-stricken at a manzanita that he had passed hundreds of times, reared, his fore feet pawing space and the traces dangerously slack. Louise bit her lower lip and quickly called Anne's attention to a spot of vivid color on the hillside. To Dr. Marshall's surprise, Collie struck Apache, who was behaving, smartly with the whip. Apache leaped forward, bringing Boyar down to his feet again. The doctor would have been inclined to strike Boyar for misbehaving. He saw Collie's wisdom and smiled. To have punished Boyar when already on his hind feet would have been folly.

At the top of the next grade the lathering, restive ponies finally settled to a stubborn trot. "Mad clean through," said Collie.

"I should say they were behaving well enough," said the doctor, not as much as an opinion as to relieve his tense nerves in speech.

"When a bronc' gets to acting ladylike, then is the time to look out," said Collie. "Boyar and Apache have never been in harness before. Seems kind of queer to 'em."

"What! Never been—Why! Huh! For Heaven's sake, don't let Mrs. Marshall hear that."

Walter Stone and his wife made the Marshalls feel at home immediately. Walter Stone had known Dr. Marshall's father, and he found in the son a pleasant living recollection of his old friend. Aunt Eleanor and Louise had visited with Anne

when they were East. She was Anne Winthrop then, and Louise and she had found much in common to enjoy in shopping and sightseeing. Their one regret was that Louise would have to return to the West before her marriage to the young Dr. Marshall they all admired so much. There had been vague promises of coming West after "things were settled," as Anne put it. Which was merely another way of saying, "After we are married and have become enough used to each other to really enjoy a long trip West."

The Marshalls had arrived with three years of happiness behind them, and apparently with an æon or so of happiness to look forward to, for they were quiet, unassuming young folks, with plenty of money and no desire whatever to make people aware of it.

The host brought cigars and an extra steamer-chair to the wide veranda. "It's much cooler out here. We'll smoke while the girls tell each other all about it."

"I *should* like to sit on something solid for a few minutes," said the doctor. "It was a most amazing drive."

"We're pretty well used to the cañon," said Stone. "Yet I can see how it would strike an Easterner."

"Indeed it did, Mr. Stone. There is a thrill in every turn of it, for me. I shall dream of it."

"Were you delayed at the station?" queried Stone.

"We wired," said the doctor. "It seems that the telegram was not delivered. Miss Lacharme explained that messages have to wait until called for, unless money is wired for delivering them."

"That is a fact, Doctor. Splendid system, isn't it?"

"I am really sorry that we put Miss Lacharme to so much trouble. She had to scare up a team on the instant."

"Price, the storekeeper, brought you up, didn't he?"

"I don't think so. Miss Louise called him 'Collie,' I believe. He'd make a splendid army surgeon, that young man! He has nerves like tempered steel wire, and I never saw such cool strength."

"Oh, that's nothing. Any one could drive Price's horses."

The doctor smiled. "The young man confided to me that their names were 'Boyar' and 'Apache,' I believe. They both lived up to the last one's name."

"Well, I'll be—Here, have a fresh cigar! I want to smoke on that. Hu-m-m! Did that young pirate drive those saddle-animals—drive 'em from the station to this rancho—Whew! I congratulate you, Doctor. You'll never be killed in a runaway. He's a good horseman, but—Well, I'll talk to *him*."

"Pardon me if I ask you not to, Stone. The girls enjoyed it immensely. So did I. I believe the driver did. He never once lost his smile."

"Collie is usually pretty level-headed," said Walter Stone. "He must have been put to it for horses. Price's team must have been out."

"He's more than level-headed," asserted Dr. Marshall. "He's magnetic. I could feel confidence radiating from him like sunshine from a brick wall."

"I think he'll amount to something, myself. Everything he tackles he tackles earnestly. He doesn't leave loose ends to be picked up by some one else later. I've had a reason to watch him specially. Three years ago he was tramping it with a 'pal.' A boy tramp. Now see what he's grown to be."

"A *tramp*! No!"

"Fact. He's done pretty well for himself since he's been with us. He had a hard time of it before that."

"I served my apprenticeship in the slums," said Dr. Marshall. "East-Side hospital. I think that I can also appreciate what you have done for him."

"Thank you, Doctor,—but the credit belongs with the boy. Hello! Here are our girls again." And Walter Stone and the doctor rose on the instant.

"I think I shall call you Uncle Walter," said Anne Marshall, who had not met Walter Stone until then.

"I'm unworthy," said the rancher, his eyes twinkling. "And I don't want to be relegated to the 'uncle' class so soon."

"*Thanksawfully*," said Louise.

"Jealous, mouse?"

"Indeed, no. I'm not Mrs. Marshall's husband."

"I have already congratulated the doctor," said Walter Stone, bowing.

"Doctor," said Anne, in her most formal manner. "You're antique. Why don't you say something bright?"

"I do, every time I call you Anne. I really must go in and brush up a bit, as you suggest. You'll excuse me, I'm sure."

"Yes, indeed,—almost with pleasure. And, Doctor, *don't* wear your fountain-pen in your white vest pocket. You're not on duty, now."

In the shadows of the mountain evening they congregated on the veranda and chatted about the East, the West, and incidentally about the proposed picnic they were to enjoy a few days later, when "boots and saddles" would be the order of the day. "And the trails are not bad, Anne," said Louise. "When you get used to them, you'll forget all about them, but your pony won't. He'll be just as deliberate and anxious about your safety, and his, at the end of the week as he was at the beginning."

"Imagine! A week of riding about these mountains! How Billy would have enjoyed it, Doctor."

"Yes. But I believe he is having a pretty good time where he is."

"We wish he could be here, Anne," said Louise. "I've never met your brother. He's always been away when I have been East."

"Which has been his misfortune," said Dr. Marshall.

"He writes such beautiful letters about the desert and his mining claim,—that's his latest fad,—and says he's much stronger. But I believe they all say that—when they have his trouble, you know."

"From Billy's last letter, I should say he was in pretty fair shape," said the doctor. "He's living outdoors and at a good altitude, somewhere on the desert. He's making money. He posts his letters at a town called 'Dagget,' in this State."

"Up above San Berdoo," said Walter Stone. And he straightway drifted into reverie, gazing at the bright end of his cigar until it faded in the darkness.

"Hello!" exclaimed Dr. Marshall, leaning forward. "Sounds like the exhaust of a pretty heavy car. I didn't imagine any one would drive that cañon road after

dark."

"Unusual," said Stone, getting to his feet. "Some one in a hurry. I'll turn on the porch-light and defy the mosquitoes."

With a leonine roar and a succeeding clatter of empty cylinders, an immense racing-car stopped at the gate below. The powerful headlight shot a widening pathway through the night. Voices came indistinctly from the vicinity of the machine. Before Walter Stone had reached the bottom step of the porch, a huge figure appeared from out the shadows. In the radiance of the porch-light stood a wonderfully attired stranger. Frock coat, silk hat, patent leathers, striped trousers, and pearl gaiters, a white vest, and a noticeable watch-chain adorned the driver of the automobile. He stood for a minute, blinking in the light. Then he swept his hat from his head with muscular grace. "Excuse me for intrudin'," he said. "I seen this glim and headed for it. Is Mr. Walter Stone at lee-sure?"

"I'm Walter Stone," said the rancher, somewhat mystified.

"My name's Summers, Jack Summers, proprietor of the Rose Girl Mine." And Overland Red, erstwhile sheriff of Abilene, cowboy, tramp, prospector, gunman, and many other interesting things, proffered a highly engraved calling-card. Again he bowed profoundly, his hat in his hand, a white carnation in his buttonhole and rapture in his heart. He had seen Louise again—Louise, leaning forward, staring at him incredulously. Wouldn't the Rose Girl be surprised? She was.

"I can't say that I quite understand—" began Stone.

"Why, it's the man who borrowed my pony!" exclaimed Louise.

"Correct, Miss. I—I come to thank you for lendin' me the cayuse that time."

Walter Stone simply had to laugh. "Come up and rest after your trip up the cañon. Of course, you want to see Collie. He told me about your finding the claim. Says you have given him a quarter-interest. I'm glad you're doing well."

"I took a little run in to Los to get some new tires. The desert eats 'em up pretty fast. The Guzzuh, she cast her off hind shoe the other day. I was scared she'd go lame. Bein' up this way, I thought I'd roll up and see Collie."

"The 'Guzzuh'?" queried Stone. "You rode up, then?"

"Nope. The Guzzuh is me little old racin'-car. I christened her that right after I got so as I could climb on to her without her pitchin' me off. She's some bronc' she is."

Overland Red, despite his outward regeneration, was Overland Red still, only a little more so. His overwhelming apparel accentuated his peculiarities, his humorous gestures, his silent self-consciousness. But there was something big, forceful, and wholesouled about the man, something that attracted despite his incongruities.

Anne Marshall was at once—as she told Louise later—"desperately interested." Dr. Marshall saw in Overland a new and exceedingly virile type. Even gentle Aunt Eleanor received the irrepressible with unmistakable welcome. She had heard much of his history from Collie. Overland was as irresistible as the morning sun. While endeavoring earnestly to "do the genteel," as he had assured Winthrop he would when he left him to make this visit, Overland had literally taken them by storm.

Young Dr. Marshall studied him, racking his memory for a name. Presently he turned to his wife. "What was Billy's partner's name—the miner? I've forgotten."

"A Mr. Summers, I believe. Yes, I'm sure. Jack Summers, Billy called him in his letters."

"Just a minute," said the doctor, turning to Overland, who sat, huge-limbed, smiling, red-visaged, happy. "Pardon me. You said Mr. Jack Summers, I believe? Do you happen to know a Mr. Winthrop, Billy Winthrop?"

"Me? What, Billy? Billy Winthrop? Say, is this me? I inhaled a whole lot of gasoline comin' up that grade, but I ain't feelin' dizzy. Billy Winthrop? Why—" And his exclamation subsided as he asked cautiously, "Did you know him?"

"I am his sister," said Anne Marshall.

Overland was dumbfounded. "His sister," he muttered. "The one he writ to in New York. Huh! Yes, me and Billy's pardners."

"Is he—is he better?" asked Anne hesitatingly.

"Better! Say, lady, excuse me if I tell you he's gettin' so blame frisky that he's got me scared. Why, I left him settin' on a rock eatin' a sardine san'wich with one hand and shootin' holes in all the tin cans in sight with the other. 'So long, Red!'

he hollers as I lit out with the burro to cross the range. 'So long, and don't let your feet slip.' And *Pom!* goes the .45 that he was jugglin' and another tin can passed over. He takes a bite from the san'wich and then, *Pom!* goes the gun again and another tin can bites the dust, jest as free and easy as if he wasn't keepin' guard over thirty or forty thousand dollars' worth of gold-dust and trouble, and jest as if he ain't got no lungs at all."

"Billy must have changed a little," ventured Dr. Marshall, smiling.

"Changed? Excuse me, ladies. But when I first turned my lamps on him in Los, I says to myself if there wasn't a fella with one foot in the grave and the other on a banana-peel, I was mistook. And listen! He come out to the Mojave with me. He jest almost cried to come. I was scared it was vi'lets and 'Gather at the River,' without the melodeum, for him. But you never see a fella get such a chest! Search me if I knows where he got it from, for he wasn't much bigger around in the works than a mosquito when I took him up there. And eat! My Gosh, he can eat! And a complexion like a Yaqui. And he can sleep longer and harder and louder than a corral of gradin' mules on Saturday night! 'Course he's slim yet, but it's the kind of slim like rawhide that you could hobble a elephant with. And, say, he's a pardner on your life! Believe me, and I'm listenin' to myself, too."

"His lungs are better, then?"

"Lungs? He ain't got none. They're belluses—prime California skirtin' leather off the back. Lady, that kid is a wonder."

"I'm awfully glad Billy is better. He *must* be, judging from what you tell me."

"I wisht I'd 'a' had him runnin' the 'Guzzuh' instead of that little chicken-breasted chaffer they three-shelled on to me in Los Angeles. I hired him because they said I 'd better take him along until I was some better acquainted with the machine. The Guzzuh ain't no ordinary bronc'."

"The 'Guzzuh'?" queried Dr. Marshall.

"Uhuh. That's what I christened her. She's a racer. She's sixty hoss-power, and sometimes I reckon I could handle sixty hosses easier to once than I could her. We was lopin' along out in the desert, 'bout fifty miles an hour by the leetle clock on the dashboard, when all of a sudden she lays back her ears and she bucks. I leans back and keeps her head up, but it ain't no use. She gives a jump or two and says '*Guzzuh!*' jest like that, and quits. I climbs out and looked her over. She

sure was balky. I was glad she said *somethin'*, if it was only 'Guzzuh,' instead of quittin' on me silent and scornful. Sounded like she was apologizin' for stoppin' up like that. I felt of her chest and she was pretty much het up. When she cooled off, I started her easy—sort of grazin' along pretendin' we wasn't goin' to lope again. When she got her second wind I give her her head, and she let out and loped clean into the desert town, without makin' a stumble or castin' a shoe. Paid three thousand for her in Los. She is guaranteed to do eighty miles on the level, and she does a whole lot of other things that ain't jest on the level. She'd climb a back fence if you spoke right to her. A sand-storm ain't got nothin' on her when she gets her back up."

"Your car must be unique," suggested Walter Stone.

"Nope. She ain't a 'Yew-neck.' I forget her brand. I ain't had her very long. But I can run her now better than that little two-dollar-and-a-half excuse they lent me in Los. He loses his nerve comin' up the cañon there. You see the Guzzuh got to friskin' round the turns on her hind feet. So I gives him a box of candy to keep him quiet and takes the reins myself. I got my foot in the wrong stirrup on the start—was chokin' off her wind instead of feedin' her. Then I got my foot on the giddap-dingus and we come. The speed-clock's limit is ninety miles an hour and we busted the speed clock comin' down that last grade. But we're here."

Dr. Marshall and Walter Stone gazed at each other. They laughed. Overland smiled condescendingly. Anne Marshall had recourse to her handkerchief, but Louise did not smile.

"Does Billy ever drive your car?" asked Anne Marshall presently.

"He drives her in the desert and in the hills some. He drove her into a sand-hill once clean up to her withers. When he came back,—he kind of went ahead a spell to look over the ground, so he says,—he apologizes to her like a gent. Oh, he likes her more 'n I do. Bruck two searchlights at one hundred dollars a glim, but that's nothin'. Oh, yes, Billy's got good nerve."

Overland shifted his foot to his other knee and leaned back luxuriously, puffing fluently at his cigar.

"Billy did get to feelin' kind of down, a spell back. He had a argument with a Gophertown gent about our claim. I wasn't there at the time, but when I come back, I tied up Billy's leg—"

"Goodness! His leg?" exclaimed Anne.

"Yes, ma'am. The Gophertown gent snuck up and tried to stick Billy up when Billy was readin' po'try—some of mine. Billy didn't scare so easy. He reaches for his gun. Anyhow, the Gophertown gent's bullet hit a rock, and shied up and stung Billy in the leg. Billy never misses a tin can now'days, and the gent was bigger than a can. We never seen nothin' of him again."

"Gracious, it's perfectly awful!" cried Anne.

"Yes, lady. That's what Billy said. He said he didn't object to gettin' shot at, but he did object to gettin' hit, especially when he was readin' po'try. Said it kind of bruck his strand of thought. That guy was no gent."

Walter Stone again glanced at Dr. Marshall. Aunt Eleanor rose, bidding the men good-night. Louise and Mrs. Marshall followed somewhat reluctantly. Stone disappeared to return with cigars, whiskey and seltzer, which he placed at Overland's elbow. "My friend Dr. Marshall is an Easterner," he said.

Overland waved a comprehending hand, lit another cigar, and settled back. "Now I can take the hobbles off and talk nacheral. When you gents want me to stop, just say 'Guzzuh.'"



CHAPTER XIX

"TO CUT MY TRAIL LIKE THAT!"

Overland Red was concluding his last yarn, a most amazing account of "The night the Plancher boys shot up Abilene."

It was exactly two o'clock by Dr. Marshall's watch.

"Both my guns was choked up with burnt powder. I reached down and borrowed two guns off a gent what wasn't usin' his jest then. Next day I was elected sheriff unanimous. They was seven of us left standin'. That was back in '98." Overland yawned and stood up.

"The boys are all asleep now," said Walter Stone. "We have plenty of room here. You'll not object to taking one of the guest-rooms as you find it, I'm sure."

"For better or for worse, as the pote says." And Overland grinned. "But I got to put that little chaffer to roost somewhere."

"That's so."

"I'll go wake him up." And Overland strode to the racing-car. The "chaffer" had departed for parts unknown.

"I guess he was scared at that last grade," said Overland, returning to the house. "He's gone. He must 'a' been scared, to beat it back down the road afoot."

"Perhaps he has gone to the stables," said Stone. "Well, we'll take care of you here. You can see Collie in the morning."

Overland, closing the door of the spacious, cool guest-room, glanced about curiously. What was it made the place seem so different from even the most expensive hotel suites? The furniture was very plain. The decorations were soft-toned and simple. "It's—it's because the Rose Girl lives here, I guess," he soliloquized. "Now this kind of a roost would jest suit Billy, but it makes me feel like walkin' on eggs. This here grazin' is too good for me."

He undressed slowly, folding his unaccustomed garments with great care. He placed his automatic pistol on the chair by the bed. Then he crept beneath the sheets, forgetting to turn out the light. "Huh! Gettin' absent-minded like the old perfessor what picked up a hairbrush instead of a lookin'-glass to see if he needed shavin'. He was dum' near scared to death to see how his beard was growin'." And Overland chuckled as he turned out the lights.

He could not go to sleep at once. He missed the desert night—the spaces and the stars. "I left here in a hurry once," he muttered. "'Bout three years ago. Then I was kiddin' Collie about wearin' silk pejammies. Now I got 'em—got 'em on, by thunder! Don't know as I feel any heftier in the intellec'. And I can't show 'em to nobody. What's the good of havin' 'em if nobody knows it? But I can hang 'em on the bedpost in the mornin', careless like, jest like I was raised to it. Them pejammies cost four dollars a leg. Some class...." And he drifted to sleep.

After breakfast Dr. Marshall, who had taken a fancy to Overland, strolled with him over to the bunk-house. Most of the men were on the range. Collie was assembling bits and bridles, saddles, cinchas, and spurs, to complete an equipment for the proposed camping trip in the hills. He was astounded at Overland's appearance. However, he had absorbed Western ideals rapidly. He was sincerely glad, overjoyed, to see his old friend, but he showed little of it in voice and manner. He shook hands with a brief, "How, Red!" and went on with his work.

Dr. Marshall, after expressing interest in the equipment, excused himself and wandered over to the corrals, where he admired the horses.

"Where did you get 'em?" queried Collie, adjusting the length of a pair of stirrup-leathers.

"These?" And Overland spread his coat-tails and ruffled. "Why, out of the old Mojave. Dug 'em up with a little pick and shovel."

"You said in your letter you found the claim."

"Uhuh. Almost fell over it before I did, though. We never found the other things, by the track. New ties. No mark. Say, that Billy Winthrop I writ about is the brother of them folks stayin' here! What do you think!"

"Wish I was out there with you fellows," said Collie.

"You're doin' pretty good right here, kiddo. The boss don't think you're the worst

that ever came acrost, and I expect the ladies can put up with havin' you on the same ranch by the way they talk. Got a hoss of your own yet?"

"Nope. I got my eye on one, though. Say, Red, this is the best place to work. The boss is fine. I'm getting forty a month now, and savin' it. The boys are all right, too. Brand Williams, the foreman—"

"Brand who?"

"Williams. He came from Wyoming."

"Well, this here's gettin' like a story and not like real livin'. Why, I knowed old Brand in Mex. in the old days when a hoss and a gun was about all a guy needed to set up housekeepin'. We was pals. So he's foreman here, eh? Well, you follow his trail close about cattle or hosses and you'll win out."

"I been doing that," said Collie. "The other day he told me to keep my eye on one of the boys. Silent Saunders, he's called. Kind of funny. I don't know anything about Saunders."

"Well, you bank on it. Stack 'em up chin-high on it, Collie, if Brand says that. He knows some-thin' or he would never talk. Brand is a particular friend of yours?"

"You bet!"

"Well, tie to him. What he says is better than fine gold as the pote says. I reckon coarse gold suits me better, outside of po'try. How does the Saunders insect wear his clothes?"

"He's kind of lame in one arm and—here he comes now. You can see for yourself. The one on that pinto."

As Saunders rode past the two men, he turned in his saddle. Despite Overland's finery he recognized him at once.

Overland's gaze never left the other's hands. "Mornin'," said Overland, nodding. "Ain't you grazin' pretty far this side of Gophertown?"

"Who the hell are you talkin' to?" Saunders asked venomously, and his eyes narrowed.

Overland grinned, and carelessly shifted the lapel of his coat from beneath which peeped the butt of his automatic pistol. Collie felt his scalp tightening. There was

something tense and suggestive in the air.

"I'm talkin' to a fella that ought to know better than to get sassy to me," said Overland, "or to cut my trail like that."

Saunders rode on.

"Seen him before?" asked Collie.

"Yep. Twice—over the end of a gun. He come visitin' me and Billy at a water-hole out in the dry spot. We got to exchangin' opinions. Two of mine he ain't forgot, I guess."

"Saunders is branded above the elbows on both arms," said Collie. "He's been shot up pretty bad."

"You don't tell! Wonder how that happened. Mebby he was practicin' the double roll and got careless. Now, I wonder!"

"He's one of the 'bunch'?" said Collie, suddenly awake to the situation. "Come on over to the bunk-house where we can talk, Red. I'll introduce you regular to Silent."

"All right. Here, you walk on the other side. I'm left-handed when I shake with him."

But Saunders was not at the bunk-house. Instead he had ridden on down to the gate and out upon the Moonstone Trail. He had become acquainted with Deputy Tenlow. He would make things interesting for the man who had "winged" him out in the desert.

"I smell somethin' burnin'," said Overland significantly. "The Saunders man has got somethin' up his sleeve. He didn't turn his pony into the corral, did he?"

"No."

"All right. Now, about them papers and your part of this here claim ..."

For an hour they talked about the claim, Winthrop, Collie's prospects, and their favorite topic, the Rose Girl. They were speaking of her when she appeared at the bunk-house door.

"Good-morning, Mr. Summers. Mrs. Marshall wished to know if you would tell her more about her brother—when you have visited with Collie. She was afraid

you might leave without her seeing you again."

"I was thinkin' about that myself," replied Overland. "Yes, Miss, I'll be right over direct."

Louise nodded, smiled, and was gone.

"Say, Red, you better go quick, in the machine," said Collie, fearful that Saunders was up to mischief.

"Grand idea, that," said Overland, calmly brushing his hat. "But Tenlow and Saunders—that you're thinkin' about—ain't neither of 'em goin' to ride up too close to me again. They are goin' to lay for me down the cañon. They'll string a riata across the road and hold up the car, most likely. They know I can't get out of here any other road."

"Then what will you do?"

"Me? Why, me and the Guzzuh'll go down the trail jest as slow and easy as a baby-buggy pushed by a girl that's waitin' in the park for her beau."

"You'll ditch the machine and get all broke up," ventured Collie.

"I am havin' too good a time to last, I know, seein' the Rose Girl again and you and visitin' the folks up to the house. Well, if it's my turn, I ain't kickin'. Sorry Brand ain't here. I'd like to see him. Here's a little old map I drewed of the hills, and how to get to the claim in case I get detained for speedin'. Get Brand, if anything happens. He's a steady old boat and he'll tell you what to do."

"But, Red, you don't think—?"

"Not when it hurts me dome," interrupted Overland. "I got a hunch I'll see you again before long. So long, Chico. I got to shine some of the rust off my talk and entertain the ladies. You might get into my class, too, some day, if you knowed anything except hoss-wrastlin' and cow-punchin'," he added affectionately.

And Overland departed, sublimely content and not in the least disturbed by future possibilities. "He's the great kid!" he kept repeating to himself. "He's the same kid—solid clean through.... Good-morning, ladies. Now about Billy—er—Mr. Winthrop; why, as I was say-in' last night.... No, thanks, I'll set facin' the road. Sun? Why, lady, I'm sun-cured, myself."



CHAPTER XX

THE LED HORSE

Anne Marshall had stepped from the porch to the living-room. Overland Red was alone with Louise.

Facing her quickly, his easy banter gone, his blue eyes intense, untroubled, magnetic, he drew a deep breath. "They're waiting for me down the cañon, about now," he said, and his tone explained his speech.

Louise frowned slightly, studying his face. "That is unfortunate, just now," she said slowly.

"Or most any time—for the other fella," responded Overland cheerfully.

The girl gazed at the toe of her slipper. "I know you didn't speak because you were afraid. What do you intend?"

"If I ain't oversteppin' the rules in invitin' you—why, I was goin' to say, 'Miss Lacharme, wouldn't you like to take a little buggy-ride in the Guzzuh, nice and slow. She's awful easy ridin' if you don't rein her too strong.'"

"I don't know," said Louise pensively. "Your car can only hold two?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I couldn't run away and leave Mrs. Marshall. Of course, you would go on—after—after we were in the valley. How could I get back?"

"That's so!" exclaimed Overland, with some subtlety, pretending he had not thought of that contingency. "'Course Collie could ride down ahead with a spare hoss. You see the sheriff gent and Saunders—"

"Saunders? Our man Saunders?"

"Uhuh. Me and him ain't friends exactly. I figure he's rode down to tell the

Tenlow man that I'm up here."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, Miss. I don't make no mistakes about him."

"Then one of our men has gone to get the deputy to arrest you, and you are our guest."

"Thanks, Miss, for sayin' that. It's worth gettin' pinched to be *your* guest."

"I did intend to ride down for the mail. Boyar needs exercising."

"So does the Guzzuh, Miss. It's queer how she acts when she ain't been worked every day."

"I don't believe Anne would care to come, in the machine. I'll ask her." And Louise stepped to the living-room.

Collie, who had been watching anxiously from the corrals, came across the yard to the veranda. He was dressed for riding, and he had a gun on his hip. Overland scowled. "You little idiot," he said, "when your Uncle Jack's brains get ossified, just give the sad news to the press. You're jest itchin' to get in a muss and get plugged. I ain't. I figure to ride down the Moonstone Trail, steerin' the Guzzuh with one hand and smellin' a bunch of roses in the other. Watch my smoke. Now, beat it!"

Louise, coming blithely from the living-room, nodded to Overland. Her pensiveness had departed. Her cheeks were flushed. "Oh, Collie! Saddle Boyar—" she began, but Overland coughed disapprovingly. He did not wish Tenlow and Saunders to suspect that the led horse was for Louise.

"Or—no. Saddle Sarko," said Louise, at once aware of Overland's plan. "And have him at the foot of the hill for me as soon as you can."

"Yes, Miss Louise." And Collie departed for the corrals wonderingly. Overland was too much for him.

They had luncheon and allowed Collie two hours to arrive at the valley level with the led pony. After luncheon Louise appeared in riding-skirt and boots. "Mr. Summers is going to take me for a ride in his new car," she said. "Don't worry, aunty. He is going to drive slowly. He finds that he has to leave unexpectedly."

"I'm sorry you are going without seeing Mr. Stone and Dr. Marshall again," said Aunt Eleanor. "You'll be careful, won't you?"

"So am I, ma'am.—Yes, I'll run slow."

"But how will you come back?" queried Anne.

"Collie has gone ahead with a spare pony. Good-bye, aunty."

"I can't thank you enough for all that you have done for Billy. I am so glad he's well and strong again. We never could manage him. Good-bye, and tell Billy he *must* come over and see us right away."

"You'll drive carefully?" queried Aunt Eleanor again.

"Jest like I was goin' to get pinched," said Overland, bowing.

As Collie rode down the last pitch, leading the restive Sarko, Dick Tenlow stepped from the brush. "'Morning, Collie. Out for a little pasear?"

"Shouldn't wonder, Dick."

"Horses are lookin' good. Feed good on the hills yet?"

"Pretty good."

"I hear you got company up to the Moonstone."

"Yep. Eastern folks, doctor and his wife." And Collie looked the deputy hard in the eye.

"Oh, that was their machine I heard coughin' up the cañon last night, eh?"

"I didn't ask them about that," replied Collie.

"You're improvin' since you first come into these hills," said Tenlow, with some sarcasm.

"I'm holdin' down a better job than I did then," said Collie good-naturedly.

"Well, I ain't. I'm holdin' the same job, which you will recollect. It ain't much of a job, but it's good to requisition that cayuse you're leadin'."

"What you kiddin' about?"

"Straight goods," said Tenlow, reaching for Sarko's reins. "Just hand over your end of that tie-rope."

"I guess not, Dick. You're on the wrong trail. What do you think I am?"

"Same as I always thought."

"Then you want to change your opinion of me," said Collie, relinquishing the tie-rope. "I ain't breaking the law, but you are going to hear more about this."

"I'll risk that. You can ride right along, pronto."

"And you keep Sarko? I guess not! I'll stick."

"You can't throw no bluff this morning," said Tenlow, irritated by the youth's persistence. "I guess you know what I mean."

"You got the horse, but I don't leave here without him," said Collie stubbornly. And there was an underlying assurance about Collie's attitude that perplexed the deputy, who was satisfied that the led horse was for Overland Red's use.

Saunders, hiding back in the brush, cursed Tenlow's stupidity. To have let Collie go on and have followed him under cover would have been the only sensible plan. Rapidly approximating the outcome of this muddle, Saunders untied his pony and rode back toward the ranch, taking an unused and densely covered bridle-trail.

From up in the cañon came the thunder of the racing-car. Far above them Tenlow and Collie could see it creeping round a turn in the road. It disappeared in a dip, to reappear almost instantly, gliding swiftly down the long slant toward the valley. The staccato drumming of the exhaust echoed along the hillside. Overland's silk hat shone bravely in the sun. Beside the outlaw was the figure of a woman. Tenlow foresaw complications and muttered profanely.

Down the next ditch rolled the car, rocking to the unevenness of the mountain road. Overland opened the throttle, the machine shot forward, and in a few seconds drew up abreast of the deputy.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Summers," said Louise, stepping from the car. "How are you, Mr. Tenlow."

"How'do, Miss Lacharme."

"Good-bye, Mr. Summers. I enjoyed the ride very much."

"Just a minute—" began the deputy.

"Where's my pony, Collie? He didn't get away, did he?"

"No, ma'am. Mr. Tenlow 'requisitioned' him. Thought I'd wait till you came along so I could explain."

"Requisitioned my pony! What do you mean?"

"It's this way, Miss Lacharme. That man there in the machine is wanted. He—"

"What has that to do with my pony, please?"

"I guess you know who he is. I figured he was layin' to get away on that pony."

"You want to go back to school, pardner, and learn to figure correct," said Overland, his foot on the accelerator pedal of the throbbing car. "One minus one is nothin'."

"Hold on there!" cried Tenlow, striding forward. Louise stood between the deputy and the car.

"My horse, please," she said quietly. As she spoke the car roared, jumped forward, and shot down the smooth grade of the valley road.

"Now, Mr. Tenlow, I wish you would explain this to me. And then to Uncle Walter. I sent one of our men with a horse. He was to wait for me here. What right have you to interfere with him?"

"I guess I got as much right as you have to interfere with me," said Tenlow sullenly.

"Hold on there!" cried Collie, jumping forward.

"Collie, I'll talk with him."

"Take my horse, Miss Louise," said Collie, flushing.

"No, indeed. I'll ride Sarko."

"I'll get him," said Collie.

"No. Mr. Tenlow will get him, I am sure."

"A woman can make any deal look smooth—if she is interested," said Tenlow, turning toward the brush. He came out leading the pony.

"Thank you. Collie, you may get the mail, please."

Collie stood watching her as she rode away. Then with much deliberation he tied his own pony Apache to a clump of greasewood. He unbuckled his belt and flung it, with gun and holster, to the ground.

"Now," he said, his face blazing white with suppressed anger. "I'm going to make you eat that speech about any woman making things look smooth—*if she's interested.*"

"You go on home or I'll break you in two," said Tenlow.

Collie's reply was a flail-like blow between Tenlow's eyes. The deputy staggered, gritted his teeth, and flung himself at the younger man. The fight was unequal from the beginning. Apache snorted and circled as the bushes crashed and crackled.

A few minutes later, Tenlow strode from the brush leading his pony. He wiped the blood and sweat from his face and spat viciously.

Louise, riding homeward slowly, heard a horse coming behind her. She reined Sarko and waited. Collie saw no way out of it, so he rode up, grinning from a bruised and battered face.

"Why, Collie!"

The young man grinned again. His lips were swollen and one eye was nearly closed.

Dismounting, Louise stepped to the ford. "Oh, I'm sorry!" she cried. "Your face is terribly bruised. And your eye—" She could not help smiling at Collie's ludicrous appearance.

"I took a fall," he mumbled blandly. "Apache here is tricky at times."

Louise's gaze was direct and reproachful. "Here, let me bathe your face. Stoop down, like that. You don't look so badly, now that the dirt is off. Surely you didn't fall on your eye?"

Collie tried to laugh, but the effort was not very successful.

Tenderly she bathed his bruised face. Her nearness, her touch, made him forget the pain. Suddenly he seized her hand and kissed it, leaving a stain of blood where his lips had touched. She was thrilled with a mingled feeling of pride and shame—pride in that he had fought because of her, as she knew well enough, and shame at the brutality of the affair which she understood as clearly as though she had witnessed it. She was too honest to make herself believe she was not flattered, in a way, but she made Collie think otherwise.

He evaded her direct questioning stubbornly. Finally she asked whether Mr. Tenlow "had taken a fall," or not.

"Sure he did!" replied Collie. "A couple or three years ago—tryin' to outride Overland Red. Don't you remember?"

"Collie, you're a regular hypocrite."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And you look—frightful."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're not a bit ashamed."

"Yes, ma'am, I am."

"Don't say 'Yes, ma'am' all the time. You don't seem to be ashamed. Why should you be, though. Because you were fighting?"

"No, Miss Louise. Because I got licked."

Louise mounted Sarko and rode beside Collie silently. Presently she touched his arm. "But did you?" she asked, her eyes grave and her tone conveying a subtle question above the mere letter.

"No! By thunder!" he exclaimed. "Not in a hundred years!"

"Well, get some raw meat from the cook. I'll give your explanation to Dr. and Mrs. Marshall, for you will have to be ready for the trip to-morrow. You will have to think of a better explanation for the boys."

While riding homeward, Louise dropped her glove. Collie was afoot instantly

and picked it up. "Can I keep it?" he said.

The girl looked curiously at him for a moment. "No, I think not, Collie," she said gently.

Collie rode up to the corrals that afternoon whistling as blithely as he could considering his injuries. He continued to whistle as he unsaddled Apache.

At the bunk-house Brand Williams looked at him once, and bent double with silent laughter. The boys badgered him unmercifully. "Fell off a hoss!—Go tell that to the chink!—Who stepped on your face, kid?—Been ridin' on your map, eh?—Where *was* the wreck?—Who sewed up your eye?"

"S-s-h-h, fellas," said Miguel, grinning. "If you make all that noise, how you going to hear the tune he is whistling, hey?"

Collie glanced at Saunders, who had said nothing. "Got anything to offer on the subject, Silent?" he asked.

"Nope. I take mine out in thinkin'."

"You're going to have a chance to do a whole lot more of it before long," said Collie; and he said it with a suggestiveness that did not escape the taciturn foreman, Brand Williams.



CHAPTER XXI

BORROWED PLUMES

"He speaks of a pretty round sum," said Walter Stone, returning the letter that Collie had asked him to read. "I don't know but that the land you speak of is a good investment. You were thinking of raising stock—horses?"

"Yes, sir. The Oro people are making good at it. The land north of you is good grazing-land and good water. Of course, I got to wait for a while. Red says in the letter that my share of the claim so far is five thousand. That wouldn't go far on that piece of land, but I've saved some, too."

"You might make a payment to hold the land," said Stone.

"I don't like that way. I want to buy it all at once."

Walter Stone smiled. Collie was ambitious, and rather inexperienced. "So you think you will leave us and go to mining until you have made enough more to buy it outright?"

"Yes, sir. I don't want you to think I ain't satisfied here. I like it here."

"I know you do, Collie. Well, think it over. Prospecting is gambling. It is sometimes magnificent gambling. Miss Lacharme's father was a prospector. We have never heard from him since he went out on the desert. But that has nothing to do with it. If I didn't believe you'd make a first-rate citizen, I shouldn't hesitate a minute about your going. I'd rather see you ranching it. We need solid men here in California. There are so many remittance-men, invalids, idlers, speculators, and unbalanced enthusiasts that do more harm than good, that we need a few *new* landmarks. We need a few new cornerstones and keystones to stiffen the structure that is building so fast. I realize that we must build from the ground up—not hang out tents from the trees. That day is past."

"It's a big thing—to be stuck on California more than getting rich," said Collie.

"Yes. The State of California is a bank—a new bank. The more depositors we have, the stronger we shall be—provided our depositors have faith in us. We have their good will now. We need solid, two-handed men who can take hold and prove that investment in our State is profitable."

"You bet!" exclaimed Collie, catching some of the older man's enthusiasm. Then he added with less enthusiasm: "But how about such things as the Jap ranchers dumping carloads of onions in the rivers and melons in the ocean, by the ton, and every one cut so it can't be used by poor folks? If Eastern people got on to that they would shy off pretty quick."

"Yes," said the rancher, frowning. "It's true enough that such things do happen. I've known of boatloads of fish being dumped back in the ocean because the middlemen wouldn't give the fishermen a living price. In western Canada thousands of bushels of grain have been burned on the ground because the Eastern market was down and the railroads would not make a rate that would allow a profit to the farmer. Such things are not local to California. California is in the limelight just now and such things are naturally prominent."

"It looks awful bad for good fruit and vegetables and fish to be thrown away when folks have to pay ten cents for a loaf of bread no bigger than a watch-charm," said Collie.

"It is bad. Crookedness in real estate transactions is bad. We don't want to waste our time, however, in feeling worried about it. What we want to do is to show the other fellow that *our* work is successful and straight."

"Yes, sir. A fellow has got to believe in something. I guess believing in his own State is the best."

"Of course. Now, about your leaving us. I had rather you would stay until the Marshalls go. Louise and Mrs. Stone depend on you so much."

"Sure I will! You see, Red don't say to come, in his letter, but he sent the check for three hundred if I did want to come. There's no hurry."

"All right. Hello, Louise! Dinner waiting?"

"Yes, Uncle Walter. How are you, Collie?" And Louise nodded to him. "What are you two hatching? You seem so serious."

"Plans for the ultimate glory of the State," said Stone.

"Ultimate?"

"Yes. We've been going beneath the surface of things a little. Collie expects to go even deeper, so he tells me."

Collie walked slowly toward the bunk-house. Halfway there he took Overland's check from the letter and studied it. He put it back into his pocket. As he passed the corrals, Apache nickered in a friendly way. "Haven't got a thing for you," said Collie. "Not a bite. We're not goin' to town to-day. To-morrow, maybe, for there'll be doings at the Oro Rancho and we'll be there—we'll be there!"

With a run and a spring the young man leaped the gate and trotted into the bunk-house.

Brand Williams was solemnly shaving. He turned a lathered face toward Collie whose abrupt entrance had all but caused the foreman to sacrifice his left ear. "Well," he drawled, "who is dead?"

"You mean, Who is alive? I guess. Say, Brand, what do you think that Yuma horse over at the Oro is worth?"

"That dam' outlaw? Ain't worth the trouble of mentioning."

"But, oh, Brand, she's built right! I tell you! Short-coupled, and them legs and withers! They ain't a pony in the valley can touch her. And only three years old!"

"Nor a man neither," said Williams.

"She's been scared to death because the fellows was scared of her and started in wrong."

"So'll the man be that tries to ride her. Say, I seen that copper-colored, china-eyed, she-son of a Kansas cyclone put Bull O'Toole so far to the bad once that his return ticket expired long before he got back. I tell you, kid, she's *outlaw*. She's got the disposition of a Comanche with a streak of lightnin' on a drunk throwed in. You keep off that hoss!"

"Maybe," said Collie. "But I notice you put me to breakin' about all the stock on this ranch that you can't handle yourself."

Which was true. Williams shaved and perspired in silence.

"Let's see," he said presently, emerging from the wash-basin. "When's that

barbecue comin' off?"

"To-morrow. As if you didn't know!"

"Sunday, eh? Well, you might as well get killed on a Sunday as any other day. I suppose your askin' about that hoss means you are thinkin' of ridin' her, eh?"

"I was thinkin' of it. They are putting her up as a chance for the man that can. She has put three of their boys to the bad. Matt Gleason, the Oro foreman, says he'll give her to any Moonstoner that can stay on her two minutes."

"He said 'Moonstoner' particular?" queried Williams.

"He did. To me. I was over tryin' to buy her."

"You're plumb loco. So he said any *Moonstoner* eh? Any Moonstoner. By crip, I've a notion—Let's see, there's Miguel—he's too swift. Billy Dime might make it if he didn't get too much red-eye in him first. Bud ain't steady enough—and it wouldn't look right if I was the only rider here to take a chance. I dunno."

"What you gaspin' about?" queried Collie.

"Nothin', kid. You can get hosses ready for all the ladies for to-morrow mornin' at six sharp. Sabe? I got orders to send you over with 'em. Mebby you're some proud now, eh? Well, don't fall off Apache pertendin' you're so polite you can't spit."

"What you sore about, Brand?"

"I was thinkin' what a slashin' string of riders we got. Here a little old ranch like the Oro says they'll give a hoss to any Moonstoner what kin stay on him for two minutes. It's plumb sickenin'. Kids! Jest kids, on this ranch."

"That so? Say, Brand, you ain't got rid of so much English talk at once since I been here. You ought to talk more. You keep too quiet. Talking sociable will help to take the wrinkles out of your neck."

"You talk so much you'll never live to get any."

"Say, Brand."

"Uhuh."

"Will you lend me the Chola spurs and that swell quirt old Miguel plaited for

you, and your Mexican bridle, just for to-morrow?"

"So that's what you been lovin' up to me for, eh?"

"Lovin' up to you, you darned old—darned old—*dude*, you."

"Hold on! You said it! Take the spurs! Take the quirt! Take the bridle! Take the hat and gloves with the silk roses on! Anybody that's got nerve enough to call *me* a *dude* can take anything I got. Say, you don't want to borrow a pair of *pants*, do you?"

Honors were about even when Collie left the bunk-house, his arms laden with the foreman's finery. He colored to his hair as he saw Louise coming toward him. He fumbled at the gate, opened it, and stood aside for her to pass. As she smiled and thanked him, he heard his name called.

"Hey!" shouted Williams, coming suddenly from the bunk-house. "Hey, Collie! You went away without them pants! I'll lend 'em to you—"

Collie, his face flaming, strode down the trail, the blood drumming in his ears.



CHAPTER XXII

THE YUMA COLT

The Oro Rancho sent out word that the fiftieth year of its existence would be celebrated with an old-fashioned Spanish barbecue. The invitation was general, including every one within a radius of fifty miles.

Added to the natural interest in good things to eat and drink was that of witnessing the pony races. Each rancher would bring, casually, almost accidentally, as it were, one pony that represented its owner's idea of speed and quality. No set programme offered, which made the races all the more interesting in that they were genuine.

The Oro Ranch had long ago established and proudly maintained a reputation for breeding the best saddle-and work-stock in Southern California. In fact, the ranch survived the competition of the automobile chiefly because it was the only important stock-raising ranch in the southland.

Good feeling went even so far as to include the sheep-ranchers of the old Spanish Grant, by special invitation.

It was the delight and pride of native Californians to ride their best saddle-horses on such occasions. True, motor-cars came from the city and from the farthest homes, but locally saddle-horses of all sizes and kinds were in evidence. Sleek bays with "Kentucky" written in every rippling muscle, single-footed in beside heavy mountain ponies, well boned, broad of knee, strong of flank, and docile; lean mustangs of the valley, short-coupled buckskins with the endurance of live rawhide; Mexican pintos, restless and gay in carved leather, and silver trappings; scrawny stolid cayuses that looked half-starved, but that could out-eat and out-last many a better-built horse; they all came, and their riders were immediately made welcome.

Under the trees, along the corrals and fences, in and around the stables, stood the ponies, heads tossing, bits jingling, stamping, thoroughly alive to the importance

of the festive occasion, and filling the eye with an unforgettable picture—a living vignette of the old days of the range and riata.

Mrs. Stone, Mrs. Marshall, Louise, Dr. Marshall, and Walter Stone were among the earlier arrivals. A half-dozen men sprang to take their horses as they rode up, but Collie gathered the bridle-reins and led the ponies to the shade of the pepper trees. Then he wandered over to the corrals. His eyes glowed as he watched the sleek ponies dodging, wheeling, circling like a battalion, and led by a smooth-coated, copper-hued mare, young, lithe, straight-limbed, and as beautifully rounded as a Grecian bronze. He moistened his lips as he watched her. He pushed back his hat, felt for tobacco and papers, and rolled a cigarette. This was the renowned "Yuma colt," the outlaw. He wanted her. She was a horse in a thousand.

In some strange way he was conscious that Louise stood beside him, before he turned and raised his sombrero.

"More beautiful than strong men or beautiful women," said Louise.

"That's so, Miss Louise. Because they just live natural and act natural. And that copper-colored mare,—she's only a colt yet,—there's a horse a man would be willing to work seven years for like the man in the Bible did for his wife."

Louise smiled. "Would you work seven years for her?" she asked.

"I would, if I had to," he said enthusiastically.

"Of course, because you really love horses, don't you?"

"Better than anything else. Of course, there are mean ones. But a real good horse comes close to making an ordinary man feel ashamed of himself. Why, see what a horse will do! He will go anywhere—work all day and all night if he has to—run till he breaks his heart to save a fellow's life, and always be a friend. A horse never acts like eight hours was his day's work. He is willing at any time and all the time—and self-respectin' and clean. I reckon a knowin' horse just plumb loves a man that is good to him."

Louise, her gray eyes wide and pensive, gazed at the young cowboy. "How old is the colt?" she asked.

"They say three years. But she's older than that in brains. She is leading older horses than her."

"Then if you worked seven years for her, she would be ten years old before you owned her."

"You caught me there. I didn't think of that."

"Uncle Walter says she is outlaw. I believe she could be tamed. Boyar was pretty wild before he was broken to ride."

"If you want that pony, Miss Louise, she's yours. I guess I could break her."

"They won't sell her. No, I was only romancing. Isn't she beautiful! She seems to be almost listening to us. What a head and what a quick, intelligent eye! Oh, you wonderful horse!" And laughing, Louise threw a kiss to the Yuma colt. "I must go. I came over to see the horses before the crowd arrived."

Collie stood hat in hand watching Louise as she strolled toward the ranch-house. He saw her stop and pat Boyar.

"I kind of wish I was a horse myself," he said whimsically. "Either the black or the outlaw. She treats them both fine."

Brand Williams, Bud Light, Parson Long, Billy Dime, and Miguel rode up, talking, joking, laughing.

"Fall to the kid!" said Miguel, indicating Collie. "I guess I'm scalded if he ain't nailed to the fence. He's just eating his head off thinking about the Yuma horse he dassent ride. No? Eh, Collie?"

"Hello, Miguel. Nope. I'm taking lessons in tendin' to my own business—like them." And Collie nodded toward the horses.

"Ain't he purty?" said Billy Dime. "All fussed up and walkin' round like a new rooster introducin' hisself to a set of strange hens. Oh, pshaw!"

"And you're making a noise like one of the hens trying to get the notice of the new rooster, I guess."

"Well, seem' I got the notice, come on over and I'll show you where they keep the ice—with things on it," said Billy Dime.

The Moonstone riders dismounted, slapped the dust from their shirts and trousers, and ambled over toward the refreshments.

The little group, happy, talkative, pledged each other and the Moonstone Ranch

generously.

Brand Williams, close to Collie, nudged him. "If you are thinkin' of takin' a fall out of the outlaw cayuse, don't hit this stuff much," he said. And Collie nodded.

The Moonstoners would one and all back Boyar for a place in the finals of the pony races, despite the Mexican "outfit" that already mingled with them making bets on their favorite pinto.

"Who's ridin' Boyar?" queried Bud Light.

"In the races? Why, Miguel here," said Williams, slapping the Mexican on the shoulder. "He don't weigh much, but he's some glue-on-a-sliver when it comes to racin' tricks. The other Mexicans are after our pesos this time. Last year we skinned 'em so bad with Boyar takin' first that some of 'em had to wait till dark to go home."

Collie, listening, felt his heart pump faster. He turned away for an instant that his fellows might not see the disappointment in his face. He had hoped to ride Boyar to victory.

"Miss Louise could get more out of Boyar in a race than even Miguel here," said Billy Dime.

"I dunno," said Williams. "She give me orders that Miguel was to ride Boyar if they was any racin'."

So Louise herself had chosen Miguel to ride the pony. Collie grew unreasonably jealous. Once more and again he pledged the Moonstone Rancho in a brimming cup. Then he wandered over to the Mexican ponies, inspecting them casually.

A Mexican youth, handsome, dark, smiling, offered to bet with him on the result of the races. Collie declined, but gained his point. He learned the Mexican's choice for first place, a lean, wiry buckskin with a goat head and a wicked eye, but with wonderful flanks and withers. Collie meditated. As a result he placed something like fifty dollars in bets with various ranchers, naming the Mexican horse for first place. Word went round that the Moonstone Kid was betting against his own horse.

Later Brand Williams accosted him. "What you fell up against?" he asked sternly. "What made you jar yourself loose like that?"

"It's horses with me to-day—not home-sweet-home, Brand. Bet you a pair of specs—and you need 'em—to a bag of peanuts that the Chola cayuse runs first."

"Your brains is afloat, son. You better cut out the booze."

Unexpectedly Collie encountered Louise as he went to look after his own horses.

"I hear that you intend to ride the outlaw Yuma. Is it so?"

Collie nodded.

"I had rather you didn't," said Louise.

"Why?" asked Collie, tactlessly.

Louise did not answer, and Collie strode off feeling angry with himself and more than ever determined to risk breaking his neck to win the outlaw.

Boyar, the Moonstone pony, ran second in the finals. The buckskin of the Mexicans won first place. Collie collected his winnings indifferently. He grew ashamed of himself, realizing that a foolish and unwarrantable jealousy had led him into a species of disloyalty. He was a Moonstone rider. He had bet against the Moonstone pony, and *her* pony. He was about to ask one of the other boys to see to the horses when a tumult in the corrals drew his attention. He strolled over to the crowd, finding a place for himself on the corral bars.

Mat Gleason, superintendent of the Oro Ranch, loafed, his back against a post. Two men with ropes were following the roan pony round the corral. Presently a riata flipped out and fell. Inch by inch the outlaw was worked to the snubbing-post. One of the Oro riders seized the pony's ear in his teeth and, flinging his legs round her neck, hung, weighing her head down. There was the flash of teeth, a grunting tug at the cinchas, a cloud of dust, and Jasper Lane, foreman of the Oro outfit, was in the saddle. The cloud of dust, following the roan pony, grew denser. Above the dun cloud a sombrero swung to and fro fanning the outlaw's ears. Jasper Lane had essayed to ride the Yuma colt once before. His broken shoulder had set nicely, in fact, better than Bull O'Toole's leg which had been broken when the outlaw fell on him. Billy Squires, a young Montana puncher working for the Oro people, still carried his arm in a sling. All in all, the assembled company, as Brand Williams mildly put it, "were beginning to take notice of that copper-colored she-son of a cyclone."

Jasper Lane plied spurs and quirt. The visiting cowmen shrilled their delight.

The pony was broncho from the end of her long, switching tail to the tip of her pink muzzle.

Following a quick tattoo of hoofs on the baked earth came a flash like the trout's leap for the fly—a curving plunge—the sound as of a breaking willow branch, and then palpitating silence.

The dun cloud of dust settled, disclosing the foam-flecked, sweat-blackened colt, oddly beautiful in her poised immobility. Near her lay Jasper Lane, face downward. The pony sniffed at his crumpled sombrero.

"That horse is plumb gentle," said Collie. "Look at her!"

"Crazy with the heat," commented Billy Dime, jerking his thumb toward Collie.

Tall, slim, slow of movement, Collie slipped from the corral bars and secured the dangling reins. Across the utter silence came the whistle of a viewless hawk. The cowmen awakened from their momentary apathy. Two of them carried Jasper Lane toward the ranch-house. Some one laughed.

Gleason, the superintendent, gazed at the outlaw pony and fingered his belt. "That's the fourth!" he said slowly and distinctly. "She ain't worth it."

"The fourth Oro rider," said a voice. "You ain't countin' any Moonstone riders."

"Ain't seen any to count," retorted Gleason, and there was a general laugh.

Strangely enough, the outlaw pony followed Collie quietly as he led her toward Gleason, "The boys say there's a bet up that nobody can stick on her two minutes. She's the bet. Is that right?" said Collie.

"What you goin' to do?" queried Gleason, and some of the Oro boys laughed.

"I don't know yet," said Collie. "Maybe I'll take her back to the Moonstone with me."

Miguel of the Moonstone removed his sombrero and gravely passed it. "Flowers for the Collie kid," he said solemnly.

Collie, grave, alert, a little white beneath his tan, called for Williams to hold the pony. Then the younger man, talking to her meanwhile, slipped off the bridle and adjusted a hackamore in its place. He tightened the cinchas. The men had ceased joking. Evidently the kid meant business. Next he removed his spurs and flung

them, with his quirt, in a corner.

"Just defending yourself, eh, Yuma girl?" he said. "They cut all the sense out of you with a horse-killin' bit and rip you with the spurs, and expect you to behave."

"He'll be teachin' her to say her prayers next," observed Bud Light. "He's gettin' a spell on her now."

"He'll need all *his* for himself," said Pars Long.

The pony, still nervously resenting the memory of the mouth-crushing spade-bit, and the tearing rowels, flinched and sidled away as Collie tried to mount. Her glossy ears were flattened and the rims of her eyes showed white.

"Jump!" whispered Williams. "And don't rough her. Mebby you'll win out."

And even as Collie's hand touched the saddle-horn, Williams sprang back and climbed the corral bars.

With a leap the Moonstone rider was in the saddle. The pony shook her head as he reined her round toward the corral gate. The men stared. Gleason swore. Billy Dime began to croon a range ditty about "Picking little Posies on the Golden Shore." The roan's sleek, sweating sides quivered.

"Here's where she goes to it," said Williams.

"Whoop! Let 'er buck!" shouted the crowd.

Rebellion swelled in the pony's rippling muscles. She waited, fore feet braced, for the first sting of the quirt, the first rip of the spurs, to turn herself into a hellish thing of plunging destruction.

Collie, leaning forward, patted her neck. "Come on, sis. Come on, Yuma girl. You're just a little hummingbird. You ain't a real horse."

With a leap the pony reared. Still there came no sting of spur or quirt. She dropped to her feet. Collie had cleverly consumed a minute of the allotted time.

"One minute!" called Williams, holding the watch.

"Why, that ain't ridin'," grumbled an Oro man.

"See you later," said Williams, and several of his companions looked at him

strangely. The foreman's eyes were fixed on the watch.

Collie had also heard, and he dug his unspurred heels into the pony's sides. She leaped straight for the corral gate and freedom. With a patter of hoofs, stiff-legged, she jolted toward the plain. The men dropped from the bars and ran toward the gate, all, except Williams, who turned, blinking in the sun, his watch in his hand.

A few short jumps, a fish-like swirl sideways, and still Collie held his seat. He eased the hackamore a little. He was breathing hard. The horse took up the slack with a vicious plunge, head downward. The boy's face grew white. He felt something warm trickling down his mouth and chin. He threw back his head and gripped with his knees.

"They're off!" halloed a puncher.

"Only one of 'em—so far," said Williams. "One minute and thirty seconds."

Then, like a bolt of copper light, the pony shot forward at a run.

On the ranch-house veranda sat Walter Stone conversing with his host, where several girls, bright-faced and gowned in cool white, were talking and laughing.

The pony headed straight for the veranda. The laughing group jumped to their feet. Collie, using both hands, swung the hackamore across the outlaw's neck and tugged.

She stopped with a jolt that all but unseated him. Walter Stone rose. "It's one of my boys," he said. And he noticed that a little stream of red was trickling from Collie's mouth and nostrils.

His head was snapped back and then forward at every plunge. Still he gripped the saddle with rigid knees. The outlaw bucked again, and flung herself viciously sideways, turning completely round. Collie pitched drunkenly as the horse came down again and again. His eyes were blurred and his brain grew numb. Faintly he heard Brand Williams cry, "Two minutes! Moonstone wins!" Then came a cheer. His gripping knees relaxed. He reeled and all around him the air grew streaked with slivers of piercing fire. He pitched headforemost at the feet of the group on the veranda.

In a flash Louise Lacharme was beside him, kneeling and supporting his head. "Water!" she cried, wiping his face with her handkerchief.

Boot-heels gritted on the parched earth and spurs jingled as the men came running.

The pony, with hackamore dangling, raced across the plain toward the hills.

"This'll do jest as well," said Williams, pouring a mouthful of whiskey between Collie's lips. Then the taciturn foreman lifted the youth to his feet. Collie dragged along, stepping shakily. "Dam' little fool!" said Williams affectionately. "You ain't satisfied to get killed where you belong, but you got to go and splatter yourself all over the front yard in front of the ladies. You with your bloody nose and your face shot plumb full of gravel. If you knowed how you looked when she piled you—"

"I know how she looked," said Collie. "That's good enough for me. Did I make it?"

"The bronc' is yours," said Williams. "Bud and Miguel just rode out after her."

Then Williams did an unaccountable thing. He hunted among the crowd till he found the man who had said, "Why, that ain't ridin'." He asked the man quietly if he had made such a remark. The other replied that he had. Then Williams promptly knocked him down, with all the wiry strength of his six feet of bone and muscle. "Take that home and look at it," he remarked, walking away.

Through the dusk of the evening the Moonstone boys jingled homeward, the horses climbing the trail briskly. Two of them worked the outlaw up the hill, each with a rope on her and each exceedingly busy. Collie was too stiff and sore to help them.

Miguel, hilarious in that he had ridden Boyar to second place, and so upheld the Moonstone honor, sang many strange and wonderful songs and baited Collie between-whiles. Proud of their companion's conquest of the outlaw colt, the Moonstone boys made light of it proportionately.

"Did you see him reclinin' on that Yuma grasshopper," said Bud Light, "and pertendin' he was ridin' a hoss?"

"And then," added Billy Dime, "he gets so het up and proud that he rides right over to the ladies, and 'flop' he goes like swattin' a frog with a shingle. He rides about five rods on the cayuse and then five more on his map. Collie's sure tough. How's your mug, kid?"

"It never felt so bad as yours looks naturally," responded Collie, puffing at a cigarette with swollen lips. "But I ain't jealous."

"Now, ain't you?" queried Williams, who had ridden silently beside him. "Well, now, I was plumb mistook! I kind of thought you was."



CHAPTER XXIII

SILENT SAUNDERS SPEAKS

Meanwhile Collie kept a vigilant eye on Silent Saunders. The other, somewhat sullenly but efficiently, attended to his work. Collie's vigilance was rewarded unexpectedly and rather disagreeably.

One day, as he stood stroking Black Boyar's neck, he happened to glance across the yard. Saunders was saddling one of the horses in the corral. Louise, astride Boyar, spoke to Collie of some detail of the ranch work, purposely prolonging the conversation. Something of the Collie of the Oro barbecue had vanished. In its stead was an inexplicable but positive quality of masterfulness, apparent in poise and manner.

Louise, because she knew him so well, was puzzled and curious. She could not account for the change. She was frankly interested in him in spite of, or perhaps because of, his early misfortunes. Instinctively she felt that he had gained a moral confidence in himself. His physical excellence and ability had always been manifest. This morning, his grave, dark eyes, upturned to her face as he caressed Boyar, were disconcertingly straightforward. He seemed to be drinking his fill of her beauty. His quick smile, still boyish, and altogether irresistible, flashed as she spoke humorously of his conquest of the outlaw colt Yuma.

"I learned more—ridin' that cayuse for two minutes—than I ever expect to learn again in that time."

Remembering that she had been first to reach him when he was thrown, the fresh bloom of her cheeks deepened. Her eyelids drooped for an instant. "One can learn a great deal quickly, sometimes," she said. Then added, for he had smiled again,— "About horses."

"And folks." He spoke quietly and lifted her gauntleted hand, touching it lightly with his lips. So swift, so unexpected had been his homage that she did not realize it until it was irrevocably paid.

"Why, Collie!"

"Because you wasn't ashamed to help a guy in front of the others."

"Please don't say 'guy.' And why should I be ashamed to help any of our boys?" she said, laughing. She had quite recovered herself.

"Course you wouldn't be. But this is a kind of 'good-bye,' too. I was going to ask you to mail this letter to Overland Red. I told him in it that I was coming."

"We are sorry that you are leaving," said Louise. "Uncle Walter said you had spoken to him."

"It isn't the money. I could wait. But I don't feel like taking all that money and not doing anything for it. I guess Red needs me, too. Brand says I'm a fool to quit here now. Mebby I am. I like it here; the work and everything."

Saunders, watching them, saw Collie give Louise a letter. He saw her tuck it in her waist and rein Boyar round toward the gate.

As Collie came toward the corrals he noticed that Saunders had saddled the pinto Rally. He was a little surprised. Rally was Walter Stone's favorite saddle-horse and used by none but him. He knew his employer was absent. Perhaps Saunders had instructions to bring Rally to the station.

Collie paid no further attention to Saunders until the latter came from his quarters with a coat and a blanket-roll which he tied to the saddle. Then Collie became interested. He left the road and climbed the hill back of the corrals. He watched Saunders astride the pinto as he opened the gate and spurred through without closing it. That was a little unusual.

"I feel almost like taking a cayuse and following him," muttered Collie. "But, no. What for, anyway?"

On a rise far below was Black Boyar, loping along easily. Collie saw him stop and turn into the Old Meadow Trail. He watched for Saunders to appear on the road below the ranch. Presently out from the shoulder of a hill leaped Rally. Saunders was plying quirt and spur. The pinto was doing his best.

"Something's wrong. I'll just take a chance." And Collie ran to the corral and roped the Yuma colt. He saddled her, led her a few steps that she might become used to the feel of the cinchas, and then mounted. He turned the pony up the hill

and sat watching the pinto on the road below. He saw Saunders draw rein and dismount, apparently searching the road for something. Then he saw him mount quickly and disappear on the Old Meadow Trail.

Collie whirled the pony round and down the hill. Through the gateway he thundered. The steel-sinewed flanks stiffened and relaxed rhythmically as the hillside flew past. The Yuma colt, half-wild, ran with great leaps that ate into space. They swept through the first ford. A thin sheet of water spread on either side of them. The outlaw fought the curb all the way up the hill beyond. Pebbles clattered from her hoofs and spun skyward as she raced along the level of the hilltop.

Down the next grade the pony swung, taking the turns with short leaps. On the crest Collie checked her. The road beyond, clear to the valley, was empty.

He examined the tracks entering the Old Meadow Trail. He had not been mistaken. Saunders had ridden in. Mounting, Collie spurred through the greasewood, trusting to the pony's natural activity and sure-footedness.



Louise, sitting on the dream-rock in the old meadow, gazed out across the valley. Black Boyar stood near with trailing bridle-reins.

Despite herself the girl kept recalling Collie's face as he had talked with her at the ranch. Admiration she had known before and many times—adoration never, until that morning.

For a long time she dreamed. The shadows of the greasewood lengthened. The air grew cooler. Louise ended her soliloquy by saying aloud: "He's a nice boy, though. I do hope he will keep as he is."

Boyar, lifting his head, nickered and was answered by Rally, entering the meadow. Silent Saunders rode up hurriedly.

"Why, Saunders,—what is it? That's Rally! Were you going to meet Uncle Walter?"

"No, Miss. I'm in a hurry. Just hand over that letter that young Collie give to you at the ranch. I want it. I mean business."

"You want the letter? What do you mean? What right have you—"

"No right. Only I want it. I don't want to make trouble."

"You! A Western man, and speak that way to a woman! Saunders, I'm ashamed to think you ever worked for us."

"Oh, I know you got nerve. But I'm in a hurry. Hand it over. Then you can call me anything you like."

"I shall not hand it over."

"All right. I got to have it."

The girl, her gray eyes blazing with indignation, backed away as he strode toward her. "You'd dare, would you?" And as Saunders laughed she cut him across the face with her quirt.

His face, streaked with the red welt of the rawhide, grew white as he controlled his anger. He leaped at her and had his hands on her when she struck him again with all her strength. He staggered back, his hand to his eyes.

A wild rush of hoofs, a shock, a crash, and he was beneath the plunging feet of the Yuma colt. The pony flashed past, her head jerking up. Louise saw Collie leap to the ground and come running back.

Saunders, rolling to his side, reached for his holster, when he saw that in Collie's hand which precluded further argument.

"Don't get up!" said Collie quietly. "I never killed a man—but I'm going to, quick, if you lift a finger."

Saunders kept still. Collie stepped round behind him. "Now, get up, slow," he commanded.

When Saunders was on his feet, Collie reached forward and secured his gun.

"I'll send your check to the store," said Louise, addressing Saunders. "I shall tell Mr. Stone that I discharged you. I don't believe I had better tell the men about this."

"Beat it, Saunders," said Collie, laughing. "You are leaving here afoot, which suits me fine. Red would be plumb happy to know it."

"Red's goin' to walk into my lead some of these days."

"That's some day. This is to-day," said Collie.

Saunders, turning, gazed covetously at the pinto Rally. Collie saw, and smiled. "I missed twice. The third trick is goin' to be mine. Don't you forget that, Mister Kid," said Saunders.

"Oh, you here yet?" said Collie; and he was not a little gratified to notice that Saunders limped as he struck off down the trail.



CHAPTER XXIV

"LIKE SUNSHINE"

Louise drew off her gauntlets and tossed them on the rock. Collie saw the print of Saunders's fingers on her wrist and forearm. "I ought to 'a' made him kneel down and ask you to let him live!" he said.

"I was afraid—at first. Then I was just angry. It was sickening to see the marks grow red and swell on his face. I hit him as hard as I could, but I'm not sorry."

"Sorry?" growled Collie. "He takes your brand with him. He didn't get the letter. I got to thank you a whole lot for that."

"But how did he know I had it? What did he want with the letter?"

"He saw me give it to you. He's one of the bunch, the Mojave bunch that's been trailing Red all over the country. When Red disappeared up in those desert hills, I reckon Saunders must have got hold of a paper and read about the get-away here at the Moonstone. He just naturally came over here and got a job to see if he couldn't trace Red."

"You are thinking of joining Mr. Summers at the claim?"

"Yes. The Eastern folks are gone now. I hate to go. But I got to get busy and make some money. A fellow hasn't much of a show without money these days."

Louise was silent. She sat gazing across the valley.

Collie approached her hesitatingly. "I just got to say it—after all that's happened. Seems that I could, now."

Louise paled and flushed. "Oh, Collie!" she cried entreatingly. "We have been such good friends. Please don't spoil it all!"

"I know I am a fool," he said, "or I was going to be. But please to take Boyar and go. I'll bring Rally. I was wrong to think you would listen a little."

But Louise remained sitting upon the rock as though she had not heard him. Slowly he stepped toward her, his spurs jingling musically. He caught up one of her gloves and turned it over and over in his fingers with a kind of clumsy reverence. "It's mighty little—and there's the shape of your hand in it, just like it bends when you hold the reins. It seems like a thing almost too good for me to touch, because it means *you*. I know you won't laugh at me, either."

Louise turned toward him. "No. I understand," she said.

"Here was where Red and I first saw you to know who you was. I used to hate folks that wore good clothes. I thought they was all the same, you and all that kind. But, no, it ain't so. You looked back once, when you were riding away from the jail that time. I was going to look for Red and not go to work at the Moonstone. I saw you look back. That settled it. I was proud to think you cared even anything for a tramp. I was mighty lonesome then. Since, I got to thinking I'd be somebody some day. But I can see where I stand. I'm a puncher, working for the Moonstone. You kind of liked me because I had hard luck when I was a kid. But that made me *love* you. It ain't wrong, I guess, to love something you can't ever reach up to. It ain't wrong to keep on loving, only it's awful lonesome not to ever tell you about it."

"I'm sorry, Collie," said Louise gently.

"Please don't you be sorry. Why, I'm glad! Maybe you don't think it is the best thing in the world to love a girl. I ain't asking anything but to just go on loving you. Seems like a man wants the girl he loves to know it, even if that is just all. You said I love horses. I do. But loving you started me loving horses. Red said once that I was just living like what I thought you wanted me to be. Red's wise when he takes his time to it. But now I'm living the way I think I want to. I won't ask you to say you care. I guess you don't—that way. But if I ever get rich—then —"

"Collie, you must not think I am different from any other girl. I'm just as selfish and stubborn as I can be. I almost feel ashamed to have you think of me as you do. Let's be sensible about it. You know I like you. I'm glad you care—for—what you think I am."

"That's it. You are always so kind to a fellow that it makes me feel mean to speak like I have. You listened—and I am pretty glad of that."

He turned and caught Boyar's bridle. Mounting he caught up Yuma and Rally.

Slowly Collie and the girl rode the trail to the level of the summit. Slowly they dropped down the descent into Moonstone Cañon. The letter, Overland Red, Silent Saunders, were forgotten. Side by side plodded the pony Yuma and Black Boyar. Rally followed. The trees on the western edge of the cañon threw long, shadowy bars of dusk across the road. Quail called from the hillside. Other quail answered plaintively from a distance. Alternate warmth and coolness swam in the air and touched the riders' faces.

At a bend in the road the ponies crowded together. Collie's hand accidentally brushed against the girl's and she drew away. He glanced up quickly. She was gazing straight ahead at the distant peaks. He felt strangely pleased that she had drawn away from him when his hand touched hers. Some instinct told him that their old friendship had given place to something else—something as yet too vague to describe. She was not angry with him, he knew. Her face was troubled. He gazed at her as they rode and his heart yearned for her tenderly. Life had suddenly assumed a tensivity that silenced them. The little lizards of the stones scurried away from either side of the road. One after another, with sprightly steps, a covey of mountain quail crossed the road before them, leaving little starlike tracks in the dust. Though homeward bound the ponies plodded with lowered heads. Moonstone Cañon, always wonderful in its wild, rugged beauty, seemed as a place of dreams, only real as it echoed the tread of the ponies. The cañon stream chattered, murmured, quarreled round a rock-strewn bend, laughed at itself, and passed, singing a cool-voiced melody.

They rode through a vale of enchantment, only known to Youth and Love. Her gray eyes were misty and troubled. His eyes were heavy with unuttered longing. His heart pounded until it almost choked him. He bit his lips that he might keep silent.

The glint of the slanting sunlight on her hair, the turn of her wrist as she held the reins, her apparent unconsciousness of all outward things enthralled him. A spell hung round him like a mist, blinding and baffling all clearer thought. And because Louise knew his heart, knew that his homage was not of books, but of his very self, she lingered in the dream whose thread she might have snapped with a word, a gesture.

Generously the girl blamed herself that she had been the one to cause him sorrow. She could not give herself to him, be his wife as she knew he wished her to be. Yet she liked him more than she cared to admit. He had fought for her once and taken his punishment with a grin. She felt joy in his homage, and yet

she felt humility. In what way, she asked herself, was she better, cleaner of heart, kinder or cleverer than Collie? Why should people make distinctions as to birth, or breeding, or wealth, when character and physical excellence meant so much more?

"Collie!" she whispered, and the touch of her fingers on his arm was as the touch of fire,—*"Collie!"*

She drew one of her little gray gauntlets from her belt. "Here," she said, and the word was a caress.

But he put the proffered token away from him with a trembling hand. "Don't!" he cried. "I tried not to want you! I did try! This morning—before I told you—I could have knelt and prayed to your glove. But now, Louise, Louise Lacharme, I can't. That glove would burn me and drive me wild to come back to you."

"To come back to you ...?" The words sung themselves through her consciousness. "Come back to you...." He was going away. "You care so much?" she asked. There was a new light in her eyes. Her face was almost colorless. So she had looked when Saunders threatened her. She swayed in the saddle. Collie's arm was about her. She raised one arm and flung it round his neck, drawing his face down to her trembling lips. Then she drew away, her face burning.

Across the end of the cañon a vagrant sunbeam ran like a bridge of faëry gold. It pelted the gray wall with a million particles of mellow fire. It flickered, flashed anew, and faded. The ponies drew apart. The colt Yuma grew restless.

"Good-bye," murmured Louise.

"Like the sunshine," he said, pointing to the cliff.

"It is gone," she whispered, shivering a little as the shadows drew down.

"It will shine again," he said, smiling.

Without a word she touched Black Boyar with the spurs. A stone clattered down as he leaped forward, and she was gone.

Collie curbed the colt Yuma, who would have followed. "No, little hummingbird," he said whimsically. "We aren't so used to heaven that we can ride out of it quite so fast."



Next morning, with blanket and slicker rolled behind his saddle, he rode down the Moonstone Cañon Trail. At the foot of the range he turned eastward, a new world before him. The far hills, hiding the desert beyond, bulked large and mysterious.

Louise had not been present when he bade good-bye to his Moonstone friends.



CHAPTER XXV

IN THE SHADOW OF THE HILLS

The afternoon of the third day out from the Moonstone Ranch, Collie picketed the roan pony Yuma near a water-hole in the desert. He spread his saddle-blankets, rolled a cigarette, and smoked. Presently he rose and took some food from a saddle-pocket.

The pony, unused to the desert, fretted and sniffed at the sagebrush with evident disgust. Collie had given her water, but there was no grazing.

After he had eaten he studied the rough map that Overland had given him. There, to the south, was the desert town. He had passed that, as directed, skirting it widely. There to the east were the hills. Somewhere behind them was the hidden cañon and Overland Red.

Stiff and tired from his long ride, he stretched himself for a short rest. He dozed. Something touched his foot. It was the riata with which he had picketed the pony. He meant to travel again that night. He would sleep a little while. The horse, circling the picket, would be sure to awaken him again.

He slept heavily. The Yuma colt stood with rounded nostrils sniffing the night air. The pony faced in the direction of the distant town. She knew that another horse and rider were coming toward her through the darkness. They were far off, but coming.

For a long time she stood stamping impatiently at intervals. Finally she grew restive. The oncoming horse had stopped. That other animal, the man, had dismounted and was coming toward her on foot. She could not see through the starlit blanket of night, but she knew.

The man-thing drew a little nearer. The pony swerved as if about to run, but hesitated, ears flattened, curious, half-belligerent.



That afternoon Silent Saunders, riding along the border of the desert town, had seen a strange horse and rider far out—away from the road and evidently heading for the water-hole. Saunders rode into town, borrowed a pair of field-glasses, and rode out again. He at once recognized the roan pony as the Oro outlaw, but the rider? He was not so sure. He would investigate.

The fact that he saw no glimmer of fire as he now approached the water-hole made him doubly cautious. Nearer, he crouched behind a bush. He threw a pebble at the pony. She circled the picket, awakening Collie, who spoke to her sleepily. Saunders crept back toward his horse. He knew *that* voice. He would track the young rider to the range and beyond—to the gold. He rode back to town through the night, entered the saloon, and beckoned to a belated lounge.

Shivering in the morning starlight, Collie arose and saddled the pony. He rode in the general direction of the range. The blurred shadow of the foothills seemed stationary. His horse was not moving forward—simply walking a gigantic treadmill of black space that revolved beneath him. The hills drew no nearer than did the constellations above them.

Suddenly the shadows of the hills pushed back. Almost instantly he faced the quick rise of the range. Out of the silence came the slithering step of some one walking in the sand. The darkness seemed to expand.

Overland Red stood before him, silent, alert, anxious. "You, Chico?" he asked.

"Sure. Hello, Red."

"Anybody see you come across yesterday?"

"Not that I know of. I kept away from the town."

"Your hoss shod?"

"Yes. All around. Why?"

"Nothin'. I'm sufferin' glad to see you again. When we get on top of the hills, you take the left trail and keep on down. You can't miss the cañon. I'll leave you here. I got to stay here a spell to see that nothin' else comes up but the sun this mornin'."

"All right, Red. Your pardner down there?"

"Yep. Whistle when you get up to the meadow in the cañon. Billy'll be lookin'

for you."

"Any trouble lately?"

"Nope. But Billy's got a hunch, though. He says he feels it in the air."

At the crest Collie rode on down the winding trail, or rather way, for no regular trail existed. At the foot of the range he turned to the right and entered the narrow cañon, following the stream until he came to the meadow, where he picketed the pony.

He continued on up the cañon on foot. When he arrived at the camp, Overland was there waiting. Winthrop and he greeted Collie cordially. "Short cut," explained Overland, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "No hoss trail, though. Too steep."

Faint dawn lights were shifting along the cañon walls as they had breakfast. As the morning sunlight spread to their camp Collie's natural curiosity in regard to Overland's pardner was satisfied. He saw a straight, slender figure, in flannel shirt and khaki. The gray eyes were peculiarly keen and humorous. Winthrop was not a little like his sister Anne in poise and coloring. The hands were nervously slender and aristocratic, albeit roughened and scarred by toil. There was a suggestion of dash and go about Winthrop that appealed to Collie. Even in repose the Easterner seemed to be alert. Undoubtedly he would make a good companion in any circumstance.

"There's spare blankets in the tent. Roll in for a snooze, Collie. Billy and me'll pack your saddle and stuff up here later."

"I guess I will. You might sponge Yuma's back a little, Red. She's brought me close to two hundred miles in the last three days."

"Sure, Bo! I'll brush her teeth and manicure her toe-nails if you say the word. I guess that hoss has kind of made a hit with you."

Collie yawned. "Mebby. But it isn't in it with the hit she'll make with you if you try to take up her feet. She's half-sister to a shot of dynamite. I'm only telling you so she won't kick your fool head off."

"You talk like most a full-size man," said Overland.

Down at the meadow, Overland looked at the colt and shook his head. "He is

correct," he said succinctly. "That hoss don't welcome handlin' worth a bean."

Winthrop's silence rather stirred Overland's sensitive pride in his horsemanship. "'Course I broke and rode hundreds like her, down in Mex. But then I was paid for doin' it. It was my business then. Now, minin' and educatin' Collie is my business, and a busted neck wouldn't help any."

Winthrop realized for the first time that Overland's supreme interest in life was Collie's welfare. Heretofore the paternal note had not been evident. Winthrop had imagined them chums, friends, tramps together. They were more than that. Overland considered Collie an adopted son.

The Easterner glanced at Overland's broad shoulders stooped beneath the weight of the heavy stock saddle. Something in the man's humorous simplicity, his entire willingness to serve those whom he liked and his stiff indifference to all others, appealed to Winthrop. So this flotsam of the range, this erstwhile tramp, this paradox of coarseness and sentiment, had an object in life? A laudable object: that of serving with his sincerest effort the boy friend he had picked up on the desert, a castaway.

As they toiled up the stream toward the camp, Winthrop recalled their former chats by the night-fire. Now he began to see the drift of Overland's then frequent references to Collie. And there was a girl,—mentioned by Overland almost reverently,—the Rose Girl, Louise Lacharme, of whom Anne Marshall had written much in eulogy to him. And Winthrop himself?

His swift introspection left him aware that of them all he alone seemed to lack a definite aim. Making money—mining—was still to him a game, interesting and healthful, but play. To Overland it was life. Winthrop saw himself as he was. His improved health scoffed at the idea of becoming sentimental about it. He laughed, and Overland, turning, regarded him with bushy, interrogative brows.

"Nothing," said Winthrop.

"Ain't you feelin' good lately, Billy?"

"I'm all right."

"Glad of that. It's good to forget you got such a thing as health if you want to keep it. If you get to lookin' for it, like as not you'll find it's gone."

"I'm looking for something entirely different. Something you have—something

that I never possessed."

"I don't know anything I got that you haven't 'less it's that new Stetson I got in Los. You can have her, Billy, and welcome. Your lid *is* gettin' on the bum."

"Not that," laughed Winthrop. "Something you keep under it."

"'T ain't me hair. I'm plumb sure of that."

"No."

"Mebby you're jealous of some of me highbrow ideas?"

"Add an 'I' and you have it."

"I-d-e-a-l-s. Oh, ideals, eh? Never owned none except that little electric do-diddle-um of the Guzzuh what makes the spark to keep the machinery goin'. That's called the 'Ideal.'"

"The spark to keep the machinery going—that's it," said Winthrop.

At the camp he prepared to make his trip to the Moonstone Ranch. He read his sister's letter over and over again. Finally he sauntered up the cañon to where Overland was at work. "I'll lend a hand," he said, in answer to Overland's questioning face. "I don't believe I'll go before to-morrow night. It is hardly right to leave the minute my new pardner arrives. I want to talk with him."

Overland nodded. "Guess you're right. It won't hurt to keep in the shadow of the hills for a day or two. Can't tell who might 'a' spotted Collie ridin' out this way."



That afternoon, toward evening, Collie arose, refreshed, and eager to inspect the claim. He could hear the faint click of pick and shovel up the cañon. He stretched himself, drank from the stream, and sauntered toward the meadow. He would see to his pony first.

He found the horse had been picketed afresh by Overland when he had come for the saddle. He was returning toward camp when he heard a slight noise behind him—the noise a man's boot makes stepping on a pebble that turns beneath his weight.

Collie wheeled quickly, saw nothing unusual, and turned again toward the camp. Then he hesitated. He would look down the cañon. He realized that he was

unarmed. Then he grew ashamed of his hesitancy. He picked his way down the stream. A buzzard circled far above the cliffs. The air hummed with invisible bees in the rank wild clover. He peered past the next bend. A short distance below stood a riderless horse. The bridle was trailing. For an instant Collie did not realize the significance of the animal waiting patiently for its rider. Then, like the flash of a speeding film, he saw it all—his pony's tracks up the cañon—the rider who had undoubtedly seen him crossing to the water-hole, and who had waited until daylight to follow the tracks; who had dismounted, and was probably in ambush watching him. He summoned all his reserve courage. Turning away, he remarked, distinctly, naturally, casually, "Thought I heard something. Must have been the water."

He walked slowly back to the notch in the cañon walls. Stepping through it, he continued on up the stream. A few paces beyond the notch, and a face appeared in the cleft rock, watching him. The watcher seemed in doubt. Collie's action had been natural enough. Had he seen the horse? The hidden face grew crafty. The eyes grew cold. The watcher tapped the side of the cliff with his revolver butt. The noise was slight, but in that place of sensitive echoes, loud enough to be heard a long way up the cañon. Then it was that Collie made a courageous but terrible mistake. He heard the sound, and seemed to realize that it was made intentionally—to attract his attention. Yet he was not sure. He kept on, ignoring the sound. Had he not suspected some one was in the cañon, to have glanced back would have been the most natural thing in the world. The watcher realized this. He knew that the other had heard him—suspected his presence, and was making a daring bluff.

"Got to stop that," muttered the watcher, and he raised his hand.

The imprisoned report rolled and reëchoed like mountain thunder. Collie threw up his arms and lurched forward.

Below in the cañon clattered the hoofs of the speeding horse. The rider, still holding his six-gun, muzzle up, glanced back. "I didn't care partic'lar about gettin' *him*, but gettin' the kid hits the red-head between the eyes. I guess I'm about even now." And Silent Saunders holstered his gun, swung out of the cañon, and spurred down the mountain, not toward the desert town, but toward Gophertown, some thirty miles to the north. He had found the claim. The desert town folk he had used to good advantage. They had paid his expenses while he trailed Overland and Collie. They had even guaranteed him protection from the law—such as it was on the Mojave. He had every reason to be grateful to them,

but he was just a step or two above them in criminal artistry. He had been a "killer." Like the lone wolf that calls the pack to the hunt, he turned instinctively to Gophertown, a settlement in the hills not unknown to a few of the authorities, but unmolested by them. The atmosphere of Gophertown was not conducive to long life.



CHAPTER XXVI

SPECIAL

Overland, leaning on his shovel, drew his sleeve across his forehead. "Reckon I'll go down and wake Collie. He'll sleep his head off and feel worse 'n thunder."

"I'll go," said Winthrop, throwing aside a pan of dirt with a fine disregard of its eventual value. "I want some tobacco, anyway."

"Fetch a couple of sticks of dynamite along, Billy. I'll put in one more shot for to-night."

A distant, reverberating report caused the two men to jerk into attitudes of tense surprise.

"What the hell!" exclaimed Overland, running toward the tent. "That wasn't the kid. Collie's only packin' a automatic, and here it is."

He stopped in the tent-door, grabbed up the gun and belt, and ran down the cañon, Winthrop following breathlessly. Near the notch he paused, motioning Winthrop to one side. "Mebby it was to draw us on. You keep there, Billy. I'll poke ahead."

But Overland did not go far. He almost stumbled over the prone figure of Collie. With a cry he tore his handkerchief from his throat and plugged the wound. "Clean through," he said, getting to his feet. "Get the whiskey."

"Shan't I help you carry him?" queried Winthrop.

Overland shook his head. "Get the whiskey and get a fire goin'. I'll bring him."

"Will he—live?" asked Winthrop, hesitating.

"I reckon not, Billy. He was plugged from behind—close—and clean through. Here's the slug."

Then Overland picked up the limp form. So this was the end of all his planning and his toil? He cursed himself for having urged Collie to come to the desert. He strode carefully, bent with the weight of that shattered body. He felt that he had lost more than the visible Collie; that he had lost the inspiration, the ideal, the grip on hope that had held him toward the goal of good endeavor. His old-time recklessness swept down upon him like the tides, submerging his better self. Yet he held steadily to one idea. He would do all that he could to save Collie's life. Failing in that ... there would be a red reckoning. After that he would not care what came.

Already he had planned to send Winthrop, in his big car, for a doctor. The car was at the desert town, where a liveryman accepted a royal monthly toll in advance to care for it.

At the tent Overland laid Collie on the blankets, bathed and bandaged the wound, and watched his low pulse quicken to the stimulant that he gave him in small doses.

"It's the shock as much as the wound," said Overland. "He got it close, and from behind—*from behind* do you hear?"

Winthrop, startled by the other's intensity, stammered: "What shall I do? What shall I do?"

Overland bit his nails and scowled. "You will ride to town. Collie's hoss is here. Take the Guzzuh and burn the road for Los and get a doctor. Not a pill doctor, but a knife man. Bring the car clean back here to the range. To hell with the chances."

Winthrop slipped into his coat and filled a canteen.

"If that horse throws me—" he began.

"You got to ride. You *got* to, understand? I dassent leave him."

Down in the meadow Overland saddled the pony Yuma. He mounted and she had her "spell" of bucking. "Now, take her and ride," said Overland. "After you hit the level, let her out and hang on. If any one tries to stick you up this time—why, jest nacherally *plug* 'em. Sabe?"

Winthrop nodded.

Two hours later a wild-eyed, sweating pony tore through the desert town at a run. Her rider slid to the ground as the liveryman grabbed the pony's bridle.

"Take—care—of her," gasped Winthrop. "I want—the machine."

"Anybody hurt?"

"Yes. Who did that?"

Winthrop stood with mouth open and eyes staring. The tires of the big machine were flat.

"I dunno. I watched her every day. I sleep here nights. Las' Sunday I was over to Daggett."

"And left no one in charge?"

"The boy was here."

"Well—the job is done. Take care of the horse. I'll be back in a minute."

At the station Winthrop wired for a special car and engine. He gave his check for the amount necessary and went back to the stable. He was working at the damaged tires when the agent appeared. "Special's at the Junction now. Be here in five minutes."

Winthrop climbed to the engine-cab. "I'll give you ten dollars for every minute you cut from the regular passenger schedule," he said.

The engineer nodded. "Get back on the plush and hang on," was his brief acknowledgment.

It was dark when the surgeon, drying his hands, came from the cañon stream to the tent. "That's about all I can do now," he said, slipping into his coat.

Overland, who was sitting on a box beside the tent, stood up and stretched himself. "Is he goin' to make it?" he asked.

"I can't say. He is young, in good condition, and strong. If you will get me some blankets, I'll turn in. Call me in about two hours."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE RIDERS

Several days passed before the surgeon would express a definite opinion.

Collie lay, hollow-cheeked and ghastly, in the dim interior of the tent. His eyes were wide and fixed. Overland came in. Collie recognized him and tried to smile. Overland backed out of the tent and strode away growling. The tears were running down his unshaven cheeks. He did not return until later in the day. Then he asked the surgeon that oft-repeated question.

"I don't see how he can recover," said the surgeon quietly. "Of course there's a slim chance. Don't build on it, though."

"If there's a chance, I reckon he will freeze to it," said Overland. "From what he was ramblin' about when he was off his head, I reckon he's got somethin' more to live for than just himself."

"Has he any relatives?" queried the surgeon.

"Nope. Except me. But he was expectin' to have, I guess. And I tell you what, Doc, she's worth gettin' shot up for."

"Too bad! Too bad," muttered the surgeon.

"What's too bad, eh?"

The other shook his head. "If there is any one that he would care to see, or that would care to see him, you had better write at once."

Overland was stunned. The doctor's word had been given at last, and it was not a word of hope.

Overland Red bowed to the doctor's opinion, but his heart was unconquerable. He wrote a long letter to his old-time friend, Brand Williams, of the Moonstone Ranch. The letter was curiously worded. It did not mention Louise Lacharme,

nor Mrs. Stone, nor the rancher. It was, in the main, about Mexico and the "old days"; no hint of Collie's accident was in the page until the very end. The letter concluded with "But you needn't think you owe me anything for that. I was glad to put him to the hush because we was pals them days. Collie was shot by Saunders. The doctor says he will die most likely. He was shot in the back. It would go bad with Saunders if the Moonstone boys ever heard of this."

The letter dispatched by Winthrop, Overland Red took courage. He felt that he himself was holding Collie's life from sinking. His huge optimism would not admit that his friend *could* die.

He was leaning back against a rock near the notch and gazing at the slanting moonlight that spread across the somber canyon walls. A week had gone since he mailed his letter to Brand Williams, of the Moonstone, and Collie was still alive. Overland shifted his position, standing beside him the Winchester that had lain across his knees, and pulling his sombrero over his eyes. The notch made an excellent background for an object over the sights of a rifle, even at night, so long as the moon shone. Gophertown riders would never venture that far up the cañon with horses. They would tether their ponies at the entrance and come afoot and under cover. Still, they would have to pass the notch in any event.

Thus it was that when, some few minutes later, Overland heard the faint jingle of rein-chains, he grinned. It was celestial music to him.

The sound came again, nearer the notch, and clearer. He remained motionless gazing at the shadowy opening.

Slowly a shaft of moonlight drew down toward the notch, silvering its ragged edges. Lower the light slid until it revealed the opening and in it the figure of a horseman. In the white light Overland could see the quirt dangling from the other's wrist. The horseman's wide belt glittered.

"Brand!" called Overland Red softly. The opposite wall took up the name hesitatingly and tossed it back.

"Brand!" whispered the echoes that drifted to the darkened corners of the cliff and were lost in voiceless murmurings.

"Brand your own stock," came the answer, low and distinct.

Overland laughed. It was their old-time pun upon the foreman's name. He got to

his feet and approached. "It does me good," he said, extending his hand.

"How is Collie?" asked Williams, dismounting.

Overland heaved great sigh. "He's floatin' somewhere between here and the far shore. Mebby he's tryin' to pull through. The doc says the kid don't seem to care whether he does or not. Did—the little Rose Girl—tell you anything to—to say to him?"

"When I was leavin' she come out to the gate," said Williams. "She didn't say much. She only hands me this, and kind of whispered, 'Give him this. He will understand.'"

And Williams drew a small gray gauntlet from his shirt. Overland took the glove and tucked it in his pocket.

"Anything doing?" asked Williams.

"Nope. They're overdue to jump us if shootin' Collie was any sign."

"Like old times," said Williams.

"Like old times," echoed Overland. "No trouble findin' your way across?"

"Easy. Followed them automobile tracks clear to the range. We fed up at the town. The boys gets kind of restless—"

"Boys? Ain't you alone?"

"Hell, no!" replied Williams disgustedly. "I wish I was! I got four pigeon-toed, bow-legged, bat-eared Moonstoners down in that meadow, just itchin' mad to cut loose. And they ain't sayin' a word, which is suspicious. Worryin' across the old dry spot the last three days has kind of het 'em up. And then hearin' about Collie...."

"How'd you come to have so much comp'ny?" queried Overland.

"I was plumb fool enough to read that letter of yours to 'em. They all like Collie first-rate. Better than I calculated on. The boss talked turkey to 'em, but he had to let 'em come. He did everything he could to hold 'em, knowin' what was in the wind."

"And they quit?"

"Quit? Every red-eyed bat of 'em. Bud and Pars and Billy and Miguel. Told the boss they quit, because me bein' foreman they would do as I says, but if they quit I wasn't their foreman any longer, and they would do as they dum please. They had the nerve to tell me that I could come along if I was wishful."

"Kind of bad for Stone, eh?"

"The Price boys are holdin' down the ranch. You see, Jack, it hit us kind of hard, Collie ridin' away one mornin', and next thing your letter that he was down and pretty nigh out. The boys didn't just like that."

Overland nodded. "Well, Brand, I guess I'll step down and look 'em over."

"Only one thing, Jack. I feel kind of responsible for them boys, even if I ain't their foreman just now. Don't you go to spielin' to 'em and get 'em thinkin' foolish. They're about ready to shoot up a town, if necessary."

"Been hittin' the booze any?"

"Some. But not bad."

"All right. I don't want to say only 'How!' and thank 'em for Collie. If I say more than three words after that, you can have my hat."

"It don't take three words, sometimes," said Williams, somewhat ambiguously.

"Leave it to me," said Overland, still more ambiguously.

Ringed round their little fire in the meadow sat or lay the Moonstone riders. While crossing the desert Williams had sketched a few of the red episodes in Overland's early career. These pleased the riders mightily. They were anxious to meet Red Jack Summers. When Williams did introduce him, they were rather silent, asking after Collie in monosyllables. They seemed strangely reticent.

Both Williams and Overland felt an inexplicable tensy in the situation.

Miguel, the young Mexican vaquero, broke silence. "How long you call it to this Gophertown place, I think?"

"Thirty miles," said Overland.

"Walkin' backwards—like Miguel's talk," said Billy Dime.

"That's easy," said Bud Light.

"What's easy?" questioned Williams.

"Walkin' backwards," replied the facetious Bud.

"If you don't step on your neck," said Pars Long.

"I'm gettin' cold feet," asserted Bud Light after a silence.

"That disease is ketchin'," said Billy Dime.

"I know it. I been sleepin' next to you," retorted Bud.

Brand Williams glanced across the fire at Overland, who smiled inscrutably. The undercurrent was unfathomable to Williams, though he guessed its main drift.

Suddenly Pars Long glanced at the foreman. "Brand," he said quietly, "we expect you didn't read all of that letter from your friend here. You said Collie was shot. You didn't say how, which ain't natural. We been talkin' about it. Where was he hit?"

Overland saw his chance and grasped it with both hands. "In the back," he said slowly, and with great intensity.

Followed a silence in which the stamping of the tethered horses and the whisper of the fire were the only sounds.

Presently Miguel ran his fingers through his glossy black hair. "In the back!" he exclaimed. "And you needn't to tell that he was run away, neither."

"In the back?" echoed Billy Dime.

Overland and Williams exchanged glances. "You done it now," said Williams.

"Cordin' to agreement," said Overland.

"Make it a wireless," said Billy Dime. "We ain't listenin', anyhow."

"Only thirty miles. What do you say, Brand?"

"Nothin'."

"As usual," ejaculated Dime.

"I say about three to-morrow morning," ventured Pars Long. "Light will be good about nine. We can do the thirty by nine. A fella would be able to ride round town then without fallin' over anything."

"What you fellas gettin' at?" queried Williams.

"Gophertown," replied Dime. "You want to come along?"

"Is it settled?" asked the foreman.

The group nodded.

"Well, boys, it would 'a' been *my* way of evenin' up for a pal."

"Then you're comin', too?"

"Do you think I'm packin' these here two guns and this belt jest to reduce my shape?" queried Williams in a rather hurt tone.

"Whoop-ee for Brand!" they chorused, and the tethered ponies shied and circled.

"I never rode out *lookin'* for trouble," said Williams. "And I never shied from lookin' *at* it when it come *my* way."

"Who said anything about trouble?" queried Billy Dime innocently. "I'm *dry*. I want a *drink*. I'm goin' over to Gophertown to get it. I'll treat the bunch."

"Which bunch?"

"Any and all—come stand up and down it."

"We'll be there when you call our numbers, sister. You comin'?" asked Pars Long, nodding toward Overland.

"Me? Nope.... I'm goin'. I'm goin' to ask you boys to kindly allow me the privilege of gettin' my drink first and by my lonesome. There will be a gent there with sore eyes. He got sore eyes waitin' and watchin' for me to call. I expect to cure him of his eye trouble. After that you will be as welcome as Mary's little lamb—fried."

"Bur-rie me not on the lo-o-ne prai-ree," sang Bud Light.

"Not while you got the fastest hoss in the outfit," said Williams.

"Collie's hoss is here," said Overland. "I'm ridin' her this trip. I kind of like the

idea of usin' his hoss on this here errand of mercy."

"Three—to-morrow mornin'!" called Billy Dime, as Overland disappeared in the shadows.

Brand Williams, the taciturn, the silent, stepped from the fire and strode across the meadow. He paused opposite the Yuma colt and gazed at her in the moonlight. He jerked up his chin and laughed noiselessly. "Two-gun Jack Summers on that red Yuma hoss, ridin' into Gophertown with both hands filled and lookin' for trouble.... God! He was bad enough when he was dodgin' trouble. Well, I'm glad I'm livin' to see it. I was commencin' to think they wasn't any more *men* left in the country. I'm forty-seven year old. To-morrow I'll be twenty again ... or nothin'."

CHAPTER XXVIII

GOPHERTOWN

Some towns "nestle" on the plain. Others, more aspiring, "roost" in the hills. Gophertown squatted on the desert at the very edge of a range of barren foothills. Its principal street was not much more than a bridle-trail that led past eleven ramshackle cabins, derelicts of the old mining days when Gophertown knew gold.

The population of Gophertown was of an itinerant order. This was not always due to internecine disputes. Frequently a citizen became overbold and visited his old haunts instead of remaining safely, even if monotonously, at home. Train robbery was a sure passport to Gophertown's protection. Man-killing lent an added distinction to an applicant for hurried admission. Cattle-and horse-thieving were mere industries not to be confounded with these higher professions.

Overland Red had once wintered in Gophertown. Immediately previous to his arrival in Gophertown he had been obliged to maintain, in an unofficial capacity, his former prestige as sheriff of Abilene. The town of Abilene had sympathized with him heartily, but had advised him to absent himself indefinitely and within the hour.

The general store and saloon of the old mining camp still stood at the corner of the town facing the desert. A bleached and faded sign once read, "Palace Emporium." The letters now seemed to be shrinking from public gaze—vanishing into the wood as though ashamed of themselves. The wording of the sign had been frequently and indifferently punctuated. Each succeeding marksman had exploded his own theory, and passed on.

Liquor was still to be obtained at the general store. Provisions were occasionally teamed in and were made up of peculiarly conglomerate lots. There were no women in Gophertown. There was little local gossip. There was no regular watch kept on the outlands. Gophertown felt secure in itself. Each man was his

own argus. He was expected to know his enemies by instinct. He was expected, as a usual thing, to settle his disputes single-handed.

Silent Saunders was in the general store and saloon. He was disgusted in that he had been unable to induce the citizens to ride out with him and clean up Overland Red's claim. Overland had once been of them, even if briefly. He had been popular, especially as he was then the quickest man with a gun they had ever honored with their patronage. Also, the Gophertown folk had recently received a warning letter from the superintendent of a transcontinental railroad. They were not interested in Saunders's proposal.

Saunders, coming from the saloon, was not a little surprised to see a band of horsemen far out on the desert. He felt that their presence in his vicinity had something to do with himself. He counted the horses. There were six of them. He knew instantly that the riders were cowmen, although he could not distinguish one from another. He beckoned to the saloon-keeper.

"We could 'a' stopped that," he said, pointing toward the desert.

"Big bunch. One—two—three—six of 'em. *Big* bunch to come visitin' here."

Saunders gestured toward the cañon behind Gophertown.

The saloon-keeper shook his head. "Don't think most of our boys will be back this week. Brandin' that bunch of new stock. Takes time to do it right."

"Well, here comes Parks and Santa Fé Smith," said Saunders. "That makes four of us."

"Mebby—and mebbly not," said the saloon-keeper. "That depends. Depends on the party that's callin' and who they're callin' *on*."

"There's Sago—just ridin' the ledge trail. That's five."

"Lige and Joe Kennedy are up at the corrals," said the saloon-keeper. "They would hate to miss anything like this."

"Mebby they won't, if that bunch gets past us," said Saunders.

"Seen the time when you could handle them alone, didn't you, Si?"

"Yes, and I can now."

"Nix, Si. Your gun arms ain't what they was sence Overland Red winged you."

"How in hell do you know he did?"

"I could tell you more. But come on in and have one on the house. If I was you, I'd set with my back to the door and be taking a drink. Red Summers never shot a man in the back yet. If he's playin' for *you*, why, that gives you a chance to pull a gun."

"How about you?" queried Saunders.

"Me? None of my business. I'm here to push the booze."

"And you'll do your collectin' with a gun, or go broke, if it's Red Summers and his friends."

"Tryin' to scare me because you are?" asked the bartender.

"Red helped Kennedy out of a mix once. Kennedy is his friend."

"But Joe ain't here. What's gettin' into you? How do you know it is Red, anyway? You act queer."

"I got a hunch," said Saunders.

"Then you want to go into action quick, for when a gunman gets a hunch that he knows who is trailin' him, it's a bad sign."

Saunders drummed on the table with his fingers. The drink of liquor had restored his nerve. Perhaps the riders were not coming to visit him, after all. He rose and stepped to the door. The oncoming horses were near enough for him to distinguish the roan outlaw Yuma—Collie's horse. Her rider's figure was only too familiar. Saunders fingered his belt. Unbuckling it, he stepped back into the barroom and laid the two-holstered guns and the belt on the table.

Parks, from up in the cañon, rode up, tied his pony, and strolled to the bar, nodding to Saunders. Following him came Santa Fé Smith, a bow-legged individual in sweater and blue jeans. He nodded to Saunders. Presently Sago, the Inyo County outlaw, came in, wheezing and perspiring. Saunders stepped to the bar and called for "one all around."

As they drank two more ponies clattered up and 'Lige and Joe Kennedy joined the group at the bar. "Hutch and Simpson are comin' afoot," said Joe Kennedy.

"That leaves Wagner and the Chink to hear from," said the saloon-keeper.

"Wagner's sick. I don't know where the Chink is. Everybody seems to 'a' got up in time for dinner, this mornin', eh?" And big Joe Kennedy laughed. "This here bar is right popular jest now."

"Goin' to be more popular," said the saloon-keeper.

"That so?" exclaimed several, facetiously.

"Ask Saunders there," said the saloon-keeper.

"Friends of yours, Silent?"

"Yes. Friends of mine."

"Whole six of 'em, eh?"

"Whole six of 'em."

"Well, we won't butt in. We'll give you lots of room."

Saunders said nothing. He paid for the liquor, and, stepping to the table, sat with his back to the doorway. In front of him lay his guns, placed handily, but with studied carelessness. He leaned naturally on one elbow, as though half asleep. His hat was tilted over his brows.

From outside came the jingle of spurs and rein-chains and the distant sound of voices. Saunders began leisurely to roll a cigarette. He laid a few matches on the table. Several of the men at the bar grinned knowingly.

Then came the gritting of heels on the hardpacked trail and Overland Red stood in the doorway. "Mornin', gents—and Saunders," he said, glancing at the figure seated back toward him.

"Hello, Red!" exclaimed Joe Kennedy. "Out early, ain't you. Have a drink."

"Not out too early. Hello, Lusk!"

"How, Red," said the saloon-keeper.

"Where's your friends. Ask 'em in," said Kennedy.

"Shall I ask 'em in, Saunders?" queried Overland, his voice edged with a double meaning.

"Not on my account," said Saunders over his shoulder.

"All right. Let's have a drink, boys."

Even "Go-Light" Sago, the vilest of the Gophertown crew, admired Overland's coolness in turning his back on Saunders and facing the bar.

For a second Saunders's fingers twitched. He glanced up.

Joe Kennedy was looking at him over his glass of whiskey. "Ain't you drinkin', Silent?" he asked.

"With some folks," said Saunders.

Overland whirled round. "Have a drink with me, then."

Saunders laughed.

"Then you don't smoke either, while I'm here," said Overland, his hand on his hip.

"That so?"

"Yes, that's so! When you try to pull that old bluff of a match-game on me, wait till I'm a hundred and four years old, Silent. That gun-trick died of old age. Think up a new one."

"Ain't you talkin' a little loud for polite sassiety?" questioned Sago, addressing Overland.

"Seein' you're the only one that thinks so, I reckon not," said Overland.

"Then," said Sago, moving slightly from the bar, "Saunders smokes."

It was an open declaration of war. Sago, the Inyo County outlaw, sided with Saunders.

According to the ethics of gunmen, Saunders was not armed. He was not "packing iron." His weapons lay on the table within reach, but he knew Overland would not precipitate matters by shooting him down where he sat. He glanced at Sago. The other winked.

"Then I smoke," said Saunders, and reached for a match. He shot from the hip, swinging his guns sideways. The stutter of Overland's automatics mingled with

the roar of Saunders's heavy Colts.

Sago, jumping clear, pulled his gun. Kennedy clutched his arm. Saunders slid from his chair, coughed horribly, and wilted to the floor. Overland backed toward the door, both guns leveled.

Sago, jerking his arm free, threw two shots at Overland, who replied with a rippling tattoo of the automatics. The Inyo County outlaw sank to his hands and knees. Then Overland leaped through the doorway. The Moonstone riders spurred toward the saloon, thinking that the quarrel had provoked too many guns. Overland tried to stop them, but they were hot for fight.

"It's a clean up!" yelled Parks, running out of the saloon and mounting his horse. "You framed it, you red-headed son—" He got no further. Brand Williams, thundering down at the head of the Moonstone riders, threw a level shot that cut through Parks, who wavered, but managed to wheel his horse and fire at Overland Red. Then the outlaw slid from the saddle clawing at it as he fell.

The Gophertown men poured from the saloon, and, seizing their ponies, circled round to the back of the building, firing as they retreated.

Miguel spurred his big pinto in among them and emptied his gun. He rode out at a lope, reloading. The front of his flannel shirt was shot away, but he was not aware of it.

Billy Dime coolly sat his horse and "drew fine" at each shot, till a leaden slug drilled his gun-arm. He swore profusely, and wisely spurred out of range.

"I got one!" cried Miguel, swinging shut the cylinder of his gun. "I go get another one."

"Give 'em my com-pli-ments," said Dime, winding a handkerchief round his arm and knotting it with one hand and his teeth.

Williams, keeping under cover, fired slowly and with great precision. Overland Red, utterly unable to manage the Yuma colt under fire, rode up to Williams. "Let's call it off, Brand. I got my man. They was no need of the rest of it. How did it start, anyhow?"

"That's about what the kid said when he let go the wagon on top of the hill. I counted five Gophers down. Billy's hit, and Miguel's goin' to be, the dam' little fool. Look at him!"

The Gophertown men were drawing away toward the cañon. They turned occasionally to throw a shot at Miguel and Pars Long, who followed them.

Bud Light sat his horse, gazing solemnly at the stump of his gun-finger. His shirt was spattered with blood.

Suddenly Williams raised a shrill call. The Moonstone boys wheeled their ponies and rode toward him. Williams pointed up the cañon. Down it rode a group of men who seemed to be undecided in their movements. They would spur forward and then check and circle, apparently waiting for their friends to come up to them. "It's the rest of the Gophertown outfit. We might as well beat it," said Williams. "This here thing's gettin' too popular all to once."

"Did that guy get you?" asked Williams, nodding to Overland.

"Not what you'd notice," replied Overland. "We'll take a drink on the house. She ain't so tidy as she was."

"Neither is the guy behind the bar," said Bud Light, pointing with the stub of his finger to Lusk's face. The saloon-keeper had been hit between the eyes by a chance bullet.

"He's where he belongs," said Williams. "So is this one." And Williams touched Saunders's body with his boot. "Let's drink and vamoose."

"Here's to the kid!" cried Overland, strangely white and shaky.

"Here's hoping!" chorused the Moonstone riders.

IT'S A CLEAN-UP
IT'S A CLEAN-UP

CHAPTER XXIX

TOLL

None of the Moonstone boys had supposed that Overland Red was hit. He rode joyfully and even began a poem to the occasion. Williams was first to notice that Overland's speech was growing thick and that his free hand clasped the saddle-horn.

The others, riding a little to the rear, burst suddenly into boisterous laughter. "What you think, Brand?" called Pars Long. "Bud's jest been countin' his fingers and he says there is one missin'. He ain't sure yet, but he's countin' hard. He has to skip when he comes to number one on his right mitt. Says he can't get started to count, that way."

"Some lucky it ain't his head," replied Williams.

"His head? Bud would never miss that. But his pore little ole finger, layin' calm and cold back there. A very sad business, brethren."

"I paid twelve sweaty plunks for her in Los and look at her!" cried Pars Long, doffing his sombrero. The high crown was literally shot to pieces. "I guess I am some wise guy. You fellas kidded me about sportin' an extra high lid. Come on, Chico, they're laughin' at us!"

"If they'd 'a' shot the crown off clean down to your ears, you'd never noticed it," grumbled Billy Dime.

"Mebby I am a flat-headed chicken, Billy, but I got both wings yet," retorted Long.

Billy Dime looked down at the blood-soaked sleeve of his right arm. "The fella that did it is eatin' grass now," he muttered.

"Now, what's the matter with Miguel? Discovered any bullets nestin' in your manly buzzum, Miguel?"

"I think no. But I lose something," replied Miguel, smiling.

"That so?"

"I did have the tobacco and papers here," he said, and he put his hand on his chest. "Now I look and the pocket and some of the shirt is not there—and my tobacco is gone, and the little papers."

"Is that all? Sad. I thought you'd lost a railroad or a steamship or something. Cheer up! Things might be better."

"I think I like to smoke," said Miguel, quite seriously. "I will ride back and get some tobacco and some more papers."

"That ain't all you'll get. Here, smoke up. You look fine in that peek-a-boo shirt. Never knowed you had such a good shape. What size gloves do you wear, pet?" And Pars Long passed tobacco and papers to Miguel, who rolled a cigarette and smoked contentedly.

"Billy, you look sick," said Bud Light.

"Oh, no! I want to go to a dance, right away. Whoa!"

They drew rein. Williams, dismounting, was bending over his companion Overland, who had suddenly slipped from the saddle.

"Where's he punctured?" queried Bud Light.

Williams examined the prostrate man. "Kind of low down, and in the side. 'T ain't bad, but it's bad enough. Got any whiskey?"

"You bet! I got a pocket-gun here. Swiped it in the saloon." And Pars Long handed a flask to Williams.

The riders, standing round the fallen man, watched Williams as he bound up the wound, which was bleeding slowly. The whiskey partially revived Overland. He managed finally to cling to the saddle, supported by Williams.

"She's thirty hot miles to camp. Red won't last out," said Long.

"I say he does," said Bud Light. "Did you see them puckers in his hide? I counted seven. He ain't made to be stopped by a gun."

"Mebby he ain't stopped, but he's slowed up considerable. Did you see the two

guys he got? Saunders was pretty nigh cut in two and the other one by the bar had four holes in him. I counted 'em, to quit thinkin' of my arm. Them automatics is fierce!"

"He would never 'a' got out if he'd been packin' a regular old six-gun," said Bud Light. "*Both* them guys were throwin' lead at him."

"How do you know? You wasn't there."

"Easy. He went in to get Saunders. He gets him. The other one takes a hand. He got *him*. *We* didn't do any shootin' inside."

"Guess that's right. But how about the barkeep?"

"Oh, he just got in the way. He was drilled between the lamps. In a mix like that who's goin' to take time to draw fine?"

"Did you see Brand lift the Gophertown guy out of his saddle—the one that was shootin' at Red in front of the joint? Brand threw a forty-five into him, and comin' on the jump, too. The Gopher humped up like he'd been horned by the Santa Fé Limited. Now what's the dope?"

Overland Red had again fallen from his horse. Williams beckoned to Long. "Take the Yuma colt, Pars, and fan it for the cañon. Send the doc back, and you stay with that young Winthrop and look after Collie. Your hoss is quieter for Red, anyway. Tell the doc to bring his tools along. I reckon we'll camp over there near the hills till to-morrow."

"Who was it got me?" questioned Overland as he was revived a second time.

"I don't know," replied Williams. "The only distinguishin' brand on him was one I put there. It ain't worryin' him now."

"Like old times," said Overland, trying to smile.

"Like old times," echoed Williams.

"I guess it was Parks," murmured Overland. "He had plenty of chance. I wasn't after him."

Slowly the group of horsemen rode across the desert. The afternoon sun made queer shadows of them and their mounts. Billy Dime rode bent forward. His face

was white and beaded with sweat. Overland, on Long's pony, was supported by Miguel and Brand Williams. Pars Long had disappeared in the shadows of the range.

Billy Dime's eyes grew strangely bright. He laughed, gazing at the foreman's back. "The whole damn fuss was wrong, *wrong*, I tell you! We had no *business* shootin' up that town."

"But it was considerable pleasure," said Bud Light. "You're off your bean, Billy. I guess you forget what they did to Collie."

Billy Dime leered. The fever from his wound was working through his blood. "Don't pretend to me, Bud Light, that you come on this little pasear on account of *Collie*. It was *her* eyes that said to go. You know that. She never said words, but her *eyes* said to go—and to kill! Do you get that? That's what a woman can do to a man, without sayin' a word. And what did Collie ever do for me? Look at that arm. *Look* at it! What did Collie ever do for me to get shot up this way?" And Billy Dime began to weep. "I killed two of 'em—two of 'em. I saw 'em drop. I was drawin' fine—*fine*, I tell you, and I couldn't miss."

Bud Light rode forward to Williams. "Billy's gone off his crust. He's ravin' back there, Brand."

Williams drew Long's flask from his saddle-pocket. "Give him a shot of this. Take some yourself. Miguel and I don't need any. Hold on—I'll give Red a shot first. When it gets to workin', you yip and ride for the hills. We'll all ride—*ride*, you understand? It'll be a dry camp, and a hard flash, but we'll make it."



CHAPTER XXX

TWO ROSES

One morning, some three weeks after the invasion of Gophertown, Bud Light, Billy Dime, and Brand Williams appeared at the Moonstone Ranch office.

Quite casually they had dismounted, and jingling up had asked for Walter Stone. Upon his appearance the younger men applied individually for their old places. The room smelled of cigarette smoke and antiseptics. Quite as though nothing unusual had happened the rancher reinstated them.

"Have a good time, boys?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Very good time. Better than we expected," replied Billy Dime. Bud Light nodded.

Stone looked hard at Billy Dime's bandaged arm. "Miguel and Parson Long have a good time also?"

"Stayed to help Overland Red work the claim. Overland Red got hurt a little, doin' somethin'. He's all right now."

"None of the Moonstone boys were injured?"

"Nope. Not a one of us," replied Dime blandly.

Walter Stone's eyes twinkled, but he did not smile. "We will call it a vacation this time, with pay. Tell Williams to step in here, please." And the rancher dismissed his embarrassed and happy punchers with a gesture.

The interview with Williams was not so brief. "The boys came out of it all right?" asked Stone, shaking hands with his old foreman.

"Yes, sir."

"How did you manage that?"

"Didn't. They did."

"Any one—er—of the other side have an accident?"

"Saunders—and six gents got hurt pretty bad."

"Whew! Our boys were lucky."

"It was nothin' but luck that they ain't all back there now—on the sand. You see, the Gophertown outfit are all what you'd call good with a gun, but it was kind of a surprise, the spreadin' of the thing from Red's little private deal to a six-hand game. We sure was lucky."

"And Collie?"

Williams shook his head. "I don't know. We thought he had crossed over. Seems he took a new holt. The doc and Winthrop brung him to Los in the automobile. He's at the hospital. But they say he don't pick up any since he come there."

"All right, Brand. I think that is all."

"How about my name goin' back on the books?" asked Williams.

"It hasn't been off the books. You know, Louise attends to the time-sheet."

Williams nodded. "I expect Miguel and Parson Long will be sniffin' around lookin' for a job before long. They agreed to stay with Red till he got on his feet again. But they told him they would go just as soon as he was all right, for you couldn't run your ranch without 'em."

Walter Stone smiled broadly. "You're foreman, Brand."

"They was fightin' just as much for the name of the old Moonstone as for Collie, or for fun," said Williams.

"I know it. But I don't believe in such methods. That sort of thing is about done with," said Stone.

"I was readin' about the old days in the Panamint, not long ago," said Williams, gazing at a corner of the office. "I—they was a list of names of the ranchers that cleaned up the rustlers over there, back in '86. It was interestin'—some of them names."

Walter Stone coughed and turned in his chair. He gazed out of the window.

Finally he faced Williams again. "We had to do it," he said, smiling.

Williams nodded. They understood each other.

The Marshalls, delighted with Los Angeles, had taken apartments in the city. Dr. Marshall, at the urgent request of Walter Stone, had called at the hospital to see Collie. The wound had healed slowly. Collie gained no strength. He seemed indifferent as to whether he recovered or not. Dr. Marshall, consulting with the surgeon, agreed that the young man's recovery was still doubtful. His vitality was extremely low. His usual optimism had stagnated.

Later, when Walter Stone, Mrs. Stone, and Louise visited the hospital, Collie had smiled wanly and said but little, thanking them for their visit with a word.

Louise returned home, heartsick and haunted by Collie's eyes that had seemed so listless, so indifferent, so weary. She had hoped to cheer him. His indifference affected her more than his actual physical condition, which seemed to be the cause of it. Louise recognized in herself a species of selfishness in feeling as she did. Like most folk of superabundant health she was unable to realize the possibilities of sickness. She longed for his companionship. She had not dared to ask herself whether or not she loved him. She was glad that he should love her—and yet she was not altogether happy. She had sent him her token, the little gray riding-gauntlet. He had in no way acknowledged it.

The sentiment incident to Collie's almost fatal misfortune did not blind her in the least. She told herself frankly that she missed him. At the ranch he had been with her much. From her he had gleaned of books and people. The actual advantage to him was not in the quantity of knowledge he had gained, but in the quality and direction suggested by her attitude toward all things. The advantage to her in his companionship had been the joy of giving, of shaping his thought, of seeing him slowly and unconsciously differentiate himself—stand apart from his fellows as something she had helped to create. This much of him she possessed through conscious effort.

Then to have seen him in the hospital, helpless, seemingly beyond any noticeable influence of her presence, stirred in her a kind of maternal jealousy. Straightway she visited Anne Marshall, who kissed her, held her at arms' length, saw the soft rose glow in her face, and spoke to the point, albeit in parables. Dr. Marshall had been very poor—a doctor in the slums—just before *they* were married. People had *said* things and had *looked* things, which was even worse.

They subtly intimated that the doctor was marrying her for her money. She was the happiest woman in the world. She thought Collie was the manliest and most striking figure she had ever seen.

To all of which Louise listened quietly, blushing a little. "And he is wealthy," concluded Anne. "For so young a man, he is wealthy. The Rose Girl Mining Company, Incorporated, my dear, pays well. Collie is one of the three largest stockholders. You see, Billy and Overland Red have decided to turn the claim into a corporation."

"Don't you contradict your—your theory a little, Anne?" asked Louise.

"No, indeed! It doesn't matter in the least who has the money, so long as the man is the right one."

And Louise was silent, and a bit happier.

The little parcel that came to the hospital, directed to Collie, was from Overland. It was accompanied by a vividly worded note and a small, stained, and wrinkled glove, at once familiar.

Overland's note explained the delay in forwarding the glove. "It's some mussed up," he wrote, "because I had it in my shirt when I was hit. I was some mussed up likewise, or I would not 'a' forgot it so long. The little Rose Girl sent it to you by Brand when she thinks you was going to cross over on the last sunset limited. And I am feeling Fine, thanks. Do not rite to me if it gives you cramps.—Youres verry fathefully, Jack."

Collie turned the gauntlet over in his trembling fingers. His eyes glowed. He called the nurse, telling her he was hungry.

Anne Marshall's visits were always refreshing. Well-gowned, cool, fragrant, she came, next afternoon, to Collie's bedside.

"You *must* get well," she said, smiling. "The doctor will be terribly disappointed if you don't. Isn't that coldly encouraging? What a thing to say!"

"I don't want to disappoint anybody," said Collie.

"Well, you will if you don't get better right away, sir! I wish I could do something to help. I can only sympathize and encourage the doctor."

"I know he's doing a whole lot for me. I think mebby you could help—a little—

if you wanted to."

"Gracious! As though I didn't! Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"It only came yesterday," said Collie, tremulously drawing the gauntlet from beneath his pillow.

Anne Marshall gazed at the soiled and wrinkled glove with unenlightened eyes. Then her quick smile flashed. "Oh! Now I know! So that is the talisman? Came yesterday? No wonder you seem brighter."

Collie's answering smile was irresistible. "It isn't just the glove—but would you—I mean, if you was like me—without being educated or anything—" He hesitated, breathing deeply.

But Anne Marshall understood him instantly, and answered his shyly questioning eyes.

"Indeed, I should. If I had half your chance, I shouldn't waste a minute in claiming the mate to that glove. One glove is of absolutely no use, you know."

"This one was—pretty much," sighed Collie. "I was feeling like letting go inside and not trying to—to stay any longer, just before it came."

"S-s-s-h! Don't even think of that. Some one called on me a few days ago. You are a very fortunate young man."

Anne Marshall's ambiguity was not altogether displeasing to Collie, in that it was not altogether unintelligible.

William Stanley Winthrop, sojourning briefly but fashionably in Los Angeles, appeared at the hospital in immaculate outing flannels. It was several weeks after his sister's last visit there. Winthrop took the convalescent Collie to the Moonstone Rancho in his car.

Bud Light and Billy Dime accidentally met the car in the valley and accompanied it vigorously through Moonstone Cañon.

Aunt Eleanor and Walter Stone were at the gate. Collie was helped to the house and immediately taken to the guest-room. He was much fatigued with the journey. The question in his eyes was answered by Aunt Eleanor. "Louise rode over to the north range to-day. She should be back now."

Winthrop scarce needed an introduction. He was Anne Marshall's brother. That was sufficient for the host and hostess. He was made welcome—as he was wherever he went. He had heard a great deal, from his sister, of the Stones, and their beautiful niece, Louise Lacharme. He was enthusiastic about the Moonstone Cañon. He grew even more enthusiastic after meeting Louise.

She came riding her black pony Boyar down the afternoon hillside—a picture that he never forgot. Her gray sombrero hung on the saddle-horn. Her gloves were tucked in her belt. She had loosened the neck of her blouse and rolled back her sleeves, at the spring above, to bathe her face and arms in the chill overflow. Her hair shone with a soft golden radiance that was ethereal in the flicker of afternoon sunlight through the live-oaks. From her golden head to the tip of her small riding-boot she was a harmony of vigor and grace, of exquisite coloring and infinite charm.

Her naturalness of manner, her direct simplicity, was almost, if not quite, her greatest attraction, and a quality which Winthrop fully appreciated.

"I have been quite curious about you, Mr. Winthrop," she said. "You are quite like Anne. I adore Anne. Shall we turn Boyar into the corral?"

If William Stanley Winthrop had had any idea of making an impression, he forgot it. The impression Louise was unconsciously making straightway absorbed his attention.

"Yes, indeed! Turn him into the corral—turn him into *anything*, Miss Lacharme. You have the magic. Make another admirer of him."

"Thank you, Mr. Winthrop. But Boyar could hardly be improved."

"You trained him, didn't you?" queried Winthrop.

Louise laughed. "Yes. But he was well-bred to begin with."

Winthrop ejaculated a mental "Ouch!" Simplicity did not necessarily mean stupidity.

"Do you enjoy mining—the real work—out there in the desert, Mr. Winthrop?"

"I could enjoy anything in company with Overland."

"Of course. Do you think people who have lots of money are apt to be cynical?" she asked.

"Not more so than people without money. But what splendid animals!" he exclaimed as they approached the corral.

"Uncle Walter and I are very fond of them," she said, turning Boyar into the inclosure.

"Do you know, Miss Lacharme, I like horses and dogs and cats, and I just revel in burros. But animals don't seem to like me. They're rather indifferent to me. I wonder if it is a matter of health, or magnetism, or something of that sort?"

"Oh, no! But it is difficult to explain. Even if you are very fond of animals it doesn't follow that they will like you. That seems rather cold, doesn't it? It's almost unfair."

"Yes, if one considers it seriously."

"Don't you?"

Winthrop gazed at her for a second before replying. "I see I must tell you the truth," he said lightly. "You compel it. It *does* hurt me to have anything or any one that I care for indifferent to me. Perhaps it's because I realize that I am giving affection and selfishly want 'value returned,' so to speak. Pardon me for becoming serious."

"Surely! But I thank you, too. See Boyar roll! He's happy. No, he doesn't roll because his back itches. You see, he's sweaty where the saddle covered him. Before he rolled, you noticed that he deliberately found a dusty spot. The dust dries the sweat and he doesn't take cold. That's the real explanation."

"I knew it couldn't be through happiness at leaving you," said Winthrop.

"If you are determined to keep it up," said Louise mischievously, "all right. But be careful, sir! I enjoy it. It's been dull—dreadfully dull since Anne and the doctor left. May I have your knife?"

A belated crimson Colombe rose nodded beneath the guest-room window. Louise cut the stem and pinned the flower in the lapel of Winthrop's white flannel coat. He gazed at her intent on her task.

"There!" she said, with a light touch of her supple fingers. "That will do." And slowly her gray eyes lifted to his.

The color flooded to his face. His eyes became momentarily brilliant. He drew a

deep breath. "You told me to be careful. I shall be," he said, bowing slightly. "Please say something. Your silent attack was a little too—too successful."

"Truce?" she queried, laughing.

"Never!" replied Winthrop. "Even as our rather mutual and distinctly illustrious friend Overland says, 'Not till me wires are all down and me lights are out.'"

Collie, standing at the open French window just above them, drew back. Quite naturally, being a young man in love, he misinterpreted all that he had seen and heard. Louise had been away the day he was expected to return to the ranch. She had come back. She was seemingly satisfied with Winthrop's society. She was even more than satisfied; she was flirting with him. An unreasonable, bucolic jealousy, partly due to his condition, overcame Collie's usual serenity. His invalidism magnified the whole affair to absurd proportions.

Perhaps it was the intensity of his gaze that caused Louise to glance up. His expression startled her. His eyes were burning. His face was unnaturally white. He met her glance, but gave no sign of recognition—a rudeness that he regretted even while he manifested it.

Louise turned away proudly, calling Winthrop's attention to a huge garden-seat beneath the live-oaks. "We have dinner out there quite often," she said, her eyes glowing. "Would you care to rest a while after your ride?"

"A jug of wine—a loaf of bread—" he quoted.

"But it isn't a wilderness. And dinner won't be ready for an hour yet. Don't you think a wilderness would have been utterly stupid with his 'thou' beside him singing everlastingly? Now please don't say, 'It would depend on the *thou*.'"

"Do you sing, Miss Lacharme?"

"A little."

"Please, then,—a little. Then I'll answer your question."

"I had rather not, just now."

"My answer would be the same in either case. This is living, after the desert and its loneliness. I discovered one thing out there, however,—myself. It was a surprise. My 'way-back ancestors must have been pirates."

"Mine—grew roses—in southern France."

"I am glad they eventually came to America," he said.

"Are you so fond of candy, Mr. Winthrop?"

"No."

"Neither am I."

"I'm glad they came, just the same. I simply can't help it."

"Overland—Mr. Summers—doesn't take life very seriously, does he?" asked Louise.

"Not as seriously as life has taken him, at odd times."

"You brought Collie in your car, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"He's much better?"

"Yes. But he's pretty shaky yet. He's a little queer, in fact. As we came up the cañon he asked me to stop the car by the cliff, near this end,—that place where the sunlight comes through a kind of notch in the west. I thought he was tired of the motion of the car, so we stopped and he lay back looking at the cliff. Pretty soon the sun shot a long ray past us and it fairly splattered gold on the cañon wall. Then the shaft of sunlight went out. 'It will shine again,' he said, as if I didn't know that. Collie's a pretty sick man."

Later Winthrop and Louise joined the others at the veranda. Louise excused herself. She searched a long time before she found another rose. This time it was a Colombe bud, full, red, and beautiful. She stepped to Collie's window. "Boy!" she called softly.

White and trembling, he stood in the long window looking down at her. "I'm glad you are home again," she said.

He nodded, and glanced away.

"Boy!" she called again. "Catch." And she tossed the rose. He caught it and pressed it to his lips.



CHAPTER XXXI

NIGHT

Evening, placidly content with the warm silence, departed lingeringly. Belated insects still buzzed in the wayside foliage. A bee, overtaken in his busy pilfering by the obliterating dusk, hung on a nodding mountain flower, unfearful above the cañon's emptiness. An occasional bird ventured a boldly questioning note that lingered unfinished in the silence of indecision. Across the road hopped a young rabbit, a little rounded shadow that melted into the blur of the sage. A cold white fire, spreading behind the purple-edged ranges, enriched their somber panoply with illusive enchantments, ever changing as the dim effulgence drifted from peak to peak. Shadows grew luminous and were gone. In their stead wooded valleys and wide cañons unfolded to the magic of the moon. There was no world but night and imagination.

With many rustlings the quail huddled in the live-oaks, complaining querulously until the darkness silenced them.

The warm, acrid fragrance of the hills was drawn intermittently across the cooler level of the shadowy road. A little owl, softly reiterating his cadences of rue, made loneliness as a thing tangible, a thing groping in the dusk with velvet hands.

Then came that hush of rest, that pause of preparation, as though night hesitated to awaken her countless myrmidons. With the lisping of invisible leaves the Great Master's music-book unfolded. That low, orchestral "F"—the dominant note of all nature's melodies—sounded in timorous unison—an experimental murmuring. Repeated in higher octaves, it swelled to shrill confidence, then a hundred, then myriad invisibles chanted to their beloved night or gossiped of the mystery of stars.

Then Night crept from the deep, cool cañons to the starlit peaks and knelt with her sister hill-folk, Silence and Solitude; knelt, listening with bowed head to that ancient antiphony of thankfulness and praise; then rose and faced the western

sea.

Boyar, the black pony, shook his head with a silvery jingling of rein-chains. His sleek flanks glistened in the moonlight. Louise curbed him gently with hand and voice as he stepped through the wide gateway of the ranch.

He paced lightly across the first shallow ford. Then the narrowing walls of the cañon echoed his clean-cut steps—a patter of phantom hoof-beats following him, stride for stride. Down the long, ever-winding road they swung.

Louise, impelled to dreams by the languorous warm night and Boyar's easy stride up the steep, touched his neck with the rein and turned him into the Old Meadow Trail.

The tall, slender stems of the yucca and infrequent clumps of dwarfed cacti cast clear-edged shadows on the bare, moonlit ground. Boyar, sniffing, suddenly swung up and pivoted, his fore feet hanging over sheer black emptiness. Louise leaned forward, reining him round. Even before his fore feet touched the trail again, she heard the sibilant *bur-r-ing* of the cold, uncoiling thing as it slid down the blind shadows of the hillside.

"I shan't believe in omens," she murmured.

She reassured the trembling Boyar, who fretted sideways and snorted as he passed the spot where the snake had been coiled in the trail.

At the edge of the Old Meadow the girl dismounted, allowing Boyar to graze at will.

She climbed to the low rounded rock, her erstwhile throne of dreams, where she sat with knees gathered to her in her clasped hands. The pony paused in his grazing to lift his head and look at her with gently wondering eyes.

The utter solitude of the place, far above the viewless valley, allowed her thought a horizon impossible at the Moonstone Rancho. Alone she faced the grave question of making an unalterable choice. Collie had asked her to marry him. She had evaded direct reply to his direct question. She knew of no good reason why she should marry him. She knew of no better reason why she should not. She thought she was content with being loved. She was, for the moment.

The Old Meadow, that had once before revealed a sprightly and ragged romance, slumbered in the southern night; slumbered to awaken to the hushed tread of

men and strange whisperings.

Down in the valley the coyotes called dismally, with that infinite shrill sadness of wild things that hunger, and in their wailing pulsed the eternal and unanswerable "Why?" challenging the peaceful stars. Something in their questioning cry impelled Louise to lift her hands to the night. "What is it? What is it up there—behind everything—that never, never answers?"

The moon was lost somewhere behind the ragged peaks. The night grew deeper. The Old Meadow, shadowed by the range above it, grew dark, impenetrable, a place without boundary or breadth or depth.

"Got a match, kid?"

Louise raised her head. Some one was afoot on the Old Meadow Trail. She could hear the whisper of dried grasses against the boots of the men as another voice replied, "Sure! Here you are." And Louise knew that Collie was one of the men.

About to call, she hesitated, strangely curious as to who the other man might be, and why Collie and he should foregather in the Old Meadow, at night.

"Never mind," mumbled the first speaker; "I thought I wanted to smoke, but I don't. I want to talk first—about the Rose Girl."

Louise tried to call out, but she was interrupted by Overland's voice. The two men had stopped at the lower side of the great rock. She could hear them plainly, although she could not see them.

"Collie—we're busted. We're done, Chico. I ain't said nothin' to Billy yet. He's got money, anyway. This here only hits you and me."

"What do you mean, Red?"

"I mean that the Rose Girl Mining Company, Incorporated, Jack Summers, President and General Manager, don't belong to us and never did. We been sellin' stock that ain't ours and never was."

"How's that?"

"I was goin' to write. But I ain't no hand to write about business. Writin' po'try is bad enough. You recollect them papers and that dust Billy tried to find, out there by the track?"

"Yes."

"Well, I found it all. Since the company is workin' the claim now and I didn't have so much to do, I got to thinkin' of them papers. I went out there, paced her off down the track, guessed at about where it was, and found 'em."

"Found them?"

"Yes, sir. There was that little bag almost atop of the sand, account of wind and rain. Then there was a record of the claim, our claim. It's been filed on before. We made a mistake and filed on the wrong section. When me and Billy went to file, I noticed the clerk said something about havin' neighbors on the claim next, but I was scared of answerin' too many questions, so I give him some cigars and beat it."

"Who owns our claim, then?"

"That's the queer part of it. You know the guy we give the water to—the one that died out there. *He* owns the claim, or he did. It belongs by rights to his girl now. His name was André Lacharme."

"Lacharme!"

"Yes, Louise's pa. Recollect your boss tellin' us as how the Rose Girl's daddy was missin' out in the Mojave? Then they was a letter—old and 'most wore out—from Walter Stone himself. It was to him—her pa—tellin' him about the little Louise baby and askin' him to come to the Moonstone and take a job and quit prospectin'. That's where we stand."

Louise, breathless, listened and could not believe that she was real, that this was not a dream. André Lacharme! Her father!

"I seen a lawyer about it," resumed Overland. "He said it was plain enough that the claim belonged to the dead prospector or his girl, now. You see, we worked the claim and kep' up the work accordin' to law. What we made ain't ours, but I'm mighty glad it's hers. 'Course, we earned what dust we dug, all right. Now I'm leavin' it up to you. Do we tell her or do we say nothin', and go on gettin' rich?"

"Why do you put it up to me?" asked Collie.

"Because, kid, you got the most to lose. Your chance is about gone with the Rose

Girl if you let go the gold. Sabe? The little Rose Girl is wise. She don't give two cents for money—but she ain't foolish enough to marry a puncher that's workin' for wages on her uncle's ranch. And when she gets all me and Billy made and your share, she'll be rich. That won't be no time for you to go courtin' *her*. It ain't that you ain't good enough for any girl. But now'days things is different. You got to have money."

"Do you think Louise would take the money?" asked Collie.

"I don't know. But that ain't it. We either give it up—or we don't. What do you say?"

"Why—to tell Louise, of course. I meant that right along. You ought to know that."

"You givin' it up because you had some fuss with her, or anything like that?"

"No, Red. I say tell her, because it's square. Did she stop to ask questions when I was in trouble? No. She went to work to help me, quick. I guess we care more for her than a whole carload of gold."

"Well, I guess. Once I wouldn't 'a' stopped to worry about whose gold it was. But knowin' the Rose Girl,—knowin' what she *is*,—why, it's makin' me soft in me morals."

"What do we do now, Red?"

"I'm goin' to beat it. Back to the dusty for mine."

"You don't have to do that, Red."

"That's just why I'm a-doin' it. I like to do what I like."

"Quitting now seems like saying, 'I'm whipped,'" said Collie. "Quitting after giving up our money to her looks like we were sore—even if we do it and smile. She would feel bad, Red. She'd think she drove us off."

"No, I reckon not. She'll see that I always been a good daddy to you and put you right in this case. It was all right when you had a chance. It ain't now. It ain't fair to her, neither, because she's like to stick to any promises she might 'a' made you."

"Why don't you ask Stone for a job?" said Collie.

"What? Me? After bein' President of the Rose Girl Mining Company, in—Say! They's no halfway house for me. It's all or nothin'. Why, I don't even own the Guzzuh. Could you stand it to see her every day, and you just a puncher workin' for the Moonstone. She would smile and treat you *fine*, and you'd be eatin' your own heart out for her."

"No, I couldn't," said Collie slowly. "Red, I guess you're right."

Collie's perspective was distorted through sudden disappointment. The old life of the road ... the vague to-morrows of indolence ... the sprightly companionship of Overland Red, inventive, eloquent....

"Red, if I come with you, it's because I can't stand seeing her—after everything that has happened. It is square to her, too, I guess."

"I ain't askin' you, Collie, but there's nothin' like ramblin' to make you forget. It's got hard work beat to a mush, because when you're ramblin' you're 'most always hungry. Listen! Love is when you ain't satisfied. So is a empty stomach. A fella's got to eat. Do you get that?"

"Yes. But, Red, you said you loved a woman once. You didn't forget."

"No, kid. I didn't. Once I didn't do nothin' else but remember. I got over that. It's only accidental to circumstances pertainin' to the fact that I remember now. You never seen *me* cry in my soup, did you?"

"But you're different."

"That's the blat every yearlin' makes till he grows up and finds out he's a cow jest like his ma. I ain't different inside. And bleedin' inside is dangerouser than bleedin' outside. Listen! Remember the little fire beside the track, when we was 'way up in the big hills? Remember the curve, like a snake unwindin' where she run round the hill, and nothin' beyond but space and the sun drippin' red in the ocean? Remember the chicken we swiped and et that night? And then the smokes and lookin' up at the stars? Remember that? Listen!

"It's beat it, bo, while your feet are mates,
And we'll see the whole United States.
With a smoke and a pal and a fire at night,
And up again in the mornin' bright,
With nothin' but road and sky in sight
And nothin' to do but go.

"Then, beat it, bo, while the walkin' 's good;
And the birds on the wires is sawin' wood.
If to-day ain't the finest for you and me,
There's always to-morrow, that's goin' to be.
And the day after that is a-comin'. See!
And nothin' to do but go.

"I'm the ramblin' son with the nervous feet,
That never was made for a steady beat.
I had many a job for a little spell;
I been on the bum, and I've hit it swell.
But there's only one road to Fare-ye-well,
And nothin' to do but go."

"With nothing to do but go," whispered Collie. "Red, we've always been friends?"

"You bet your return ticket!"

"And we are always going to be," said Collie. "I guess that settles it. I—I wish Saunders—had—finished me."

Louise, numb from sitting still so long, moved slightly.

"What's that?" exclaimed Collie.

"Jest some of your little old ideas changin' cars," replied Overland. "You'll get used to it."

"No; I heard something."

"You'll be seein' things next. Got a match? I'm jest dyin' for a smoke. Remember when she give us the makin's and you got hot at me?"

Overland cupped the flame in his hands and lighted his cigarette. The soft glow of the match spread in the windless air, penetrating the darkness. For an instant, a breath, Overland saw a startled face gazing down at him; the white face of the Rose Girl!

"Great Snakes!" he cried, stepping back as the flame expired.

"What's the matter, Red?"

"Nothin'. I was just thinkin'. I burned my mitt. Come on, Collie. Brand'll find a bunk for me to-night, I reckon. We'll tell the boss and the Rose Girl all about it to-morrow."



CHAPTER XXXII

MORNING

"Something's goin' to happen," stated Brand Williams.

"How's that?" queried Bud Light.

"See them two bosses—the Yuma colt and Boyar—?"

"Uhuh."

"Well, Boyar's been standin' there since daylight, saddled. Nobody rides him but Miss Louise."

"It's mighty early, but I don't see nothin' strange about the rest of it."

"Wait a minute, Bud. Did you see Collie this mornin'? Was he all fixed up with his hair jest so, and his bandanna jest so, and his new sombrero and his silver spurs, and them new chaps, lookin' mighty important? He saddles Yuma and ties her over there. While he was eatin', the Boyar hoss trails his bridle over to where Yuma is tied. There they stand visitin' like two old soldiers on crutches instead of two mighty quick-actin' cayuses. Now that Yuma hoss has kicked the fancy linin' out of every cayuse that dast come nigh her. They 're *all* scared of her. She's makin' an exception this mornin'. She's plumb friendly with Boyar. That signifies! Hosses can see farther in the dark than folks."

"Signifies what?"

"Well, after all the talk I jest wasted on you, it signifies that you're too thick-headed, Buddy, to waste any more on. I can learn you to *spell* if you wanta take lessons."

"You're dreamin', Brand. Wake up! As to spellin'—I'm spellin' right now while the fo'man is entertainin' me."

"Thanks for callin' my attention to it. You can take your hoss and ride over to the

Three Oaks. There's some fence down, over at the North Spring. I ain't dreamin' about that."

Bud Light departed, swearing to himself. He disliked mending fence. Williams knew it. The cheerful Bud, "Reckoned he ought to 'a' known better than to try to ride the old man into the fence. Next time he would listen—and mebbly learn something."

Louise, drawing on her gauntlets, came down the broad steps of the ranch-house. The November air was crisp with the tang of early morning.

She was puzzled at finding Boyar and Yuma together. She noticed Boyar had trailed his bridle across the yard—an unusual thing for him to do, considering his training. Louise spoke to the Yuma colt, who sniffed at her gloved hand. The girl wondered why Collie had saddled Yuma. He usually rode one of the ranch horses to work. She wanted to talk with him—to reason with him; for her knowledge of the previous night's disclosures worried and distressed her. She thought Collie's half promise to Overland Red to turn to their old life had been too easily made. Her pride in him was touched. She was hurt, and not a little angry. She saw the flaw in his ultimate decision to sacrifice himself and his prospects through a too stringent and quixotic interpretation of his duty. To go back to the old life again—a tramp!

But Collie was not to be seen. However, Louise never hesitated long. Deliberately she untied the Yuma colt and swung into the saddle. Black Boyar seemed to realize something unusual in her preference. He fretted as the roan pony leaped sideways toward the gate.

Louise knew that Collie would follow her. She was riding his pony, the Yuma colt, and he would be fearful for the rider's safety.

Collie, coming from the bunk-house, glanced up and saw Black Boyar standing alone where his own pony had stood. This was not an invitation; this was daring him to follow.

He rode into the cañon, half conscious of Yuma's tracks ahead of him. He rode past the tracks as they swerved toward a grassy level near the stream.

"Collie!"

Louise stood beside the sweating Yuma, patting the pony's neck. Collie raised his sombrero formally.

Louise was bareheaded. The clear morning sunlight enhanced her rich coloring. Against the misty gray of the cañon wall, her head in profile, as she stood beside the horse, was as delicately beautiful as that vision that imagination knows full well but may seldom realize.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Collie, don't! Say anything but that. You look awfully glum. Surely not because I took Yuma."

"No. Only I was afraid for you."

"So you followed at break-neck speed to rescue the timorous, the despairing, and-so-forth?"

"I can't joke like that this morning."

"Why? I'm here, safe enough. Had breakfast?"

"Yes. I wanted to see you about something, Louise."

"All right. But you are so unnaturally tall and severe and judicial sitting there on Boyar. You look almost funereal. Please get down. Roll a cigarette and act natural. I'm not going to scold you, sir."

"I wish you would."

"Why? What have you been doing that makes you look so ashamed of yourself. Tell me!"

"I didn't know I was."

"You don't act naturally. Is there something about me that is different? Is that it?"

"No. I wish you was different, sometimes."

"You do?"

"No," he said gently. "I don't wish you were different. I want to remember you like you are."

"To *remember* me?"

"Yes," he whispered, "to remember you."

He seemed to see regret, astonishment, questioning, gentle reproof, even a hint of amusement in her eyes. But her expression changed instantly. "I think you have something to remember me by; something you asked me for once, long ago. I sent it to you. You have never spoken of it—acknowledged it. I can't quite forgive that."

"Your glove. I know. I got it here." And he touched his breast. "I thought you would understand."

"I do. But, Collie, a girl always likes to be told that she is understood, even when she knows it."

"I was going to write about getting your glove, at the hospital. I guess I was too tired."

"At the hospital?"

"Yes. Red sent it to me. Brand gave it to him to give to me—that time."

"Oh!" And Louise felt like retracting a little; but sweetly perverse, she obeyed sheer instinct. "Collie, do you realize that I have already asked you to dismount? Shall I have to ask you again? Do you realize that I am standing while you are sitting your horse?"

"I am begging your pardon, Louise."

The girl nodded brightly, smiling as she noticed the little scar on his chin—a wound that she had made him blush for when she had admonished him for fighting with Dick Tenlow.

She watched the rise and fall of the muscles of his arm, beneath his flannel shirt, as he lighted his cigarette. How broad-chested and strong and wholesome he seemed in the morning sunlight! There was an untamed grace about his movements, his gestures, which, together with his absolute unconsciousness of self, pleased and attracted her.

"Yuma is a little wild, but she is a fine saddle-pony. I'm really jealous for Boyar's prestige."

"I was afraid for you to ride her," said Collie.

"She behaves beautifully."

"Would you take her as a kind of present from me?" he asked.

"Give Yuma to me? I thought you loved her?"

"I do. That's why I want you to have her."

"He would give you away," said Louise, stroking Yuma's neck. "Give you away just as you're learning to trust him and perhaps even like him a little—and he says he loves you! Let's run away from him, Hummingbird!"

"I think I could stand it if you would just be mean once," said Collie.

"Stand what, Collie?"

He had been watching her shapely hand and supple, rounded wrist as she stroked the pony's neck. Swiftly she turned from the horse and faced him. "What, Collie?" There was laughter in her eyes, a laughter that challenged more than his serious mood. Her lips were smiling. Her chin was tilted provocingly.

His eyes grew wide with unspoken love, unuttered longing. He delighted in the delicious curve of her cheek, and of her arm resting on the saddle. Her poise had an inexplicable suggestion of royal courage, as though she were battling for more than her lips could utter. In her absence he had adored her. Now he forgot all that he had meant to tell her in the sensuous delight of her mere presence. But even that was not enough. He dropped the pony's reins and strode toward her. Louise paled even as he drew near, but he saw nothing but her eyes and her lips, lips that curved wistfully, provoking tenderness and love. For an instant Louise held her heart aloof.

"Let me just worship you—a little while—a little while," he whispered.

"Only a little while?" she breathed; and the soft rose glowed in her cheeks.

"Just forever," he said.

And Louise Lacharme, more beautiful than the morning, Louise, his most gracious señorita, his Madonna of the Rose, lifted her arms to him. Her lips quivered like a child's, tremulous with longing to tell him silently, as his lips found hers, all that her heart was giving and all the wealth of love it yet should give.

Gently his hands clasped her golden head. His whole being thrilled as he touched her hair, her cheeks, her lips. "Oh, Collie! Collie! Love me always," she

whispered. And she drew him down to her breast and caressed his cheek, sighing and murmuring little endearments and sweet, broken words of love.

Moonstone Cañon, coldly beautiful, echoed the hoof-beats of the ponies as they walked homeward.

Louise turned in the saddle. "Collie," she said with an indescribable gesture of appeal, "you will always take care of me, won't you?"

"My Rose Girl! Why do you say that?"

"I was thinking of my father."

Louise saw his lips stiffen and his chin lift. "Louise, I had no right, just now,—I haven't any right—I'm poor. The claim wasn't ours."

"I didn't mean that," she said, smiling wistfully. "But you will always care for me, won't you? I don't care one bit about the claim. It has made trouble and sorrow enough. I can't remember my father. I can hardly think of him as my father. But it is horrible to think of his dying for water because he cared so much for gold."

"But how did you know?"

"I know," she answered gravely. "And I know that you are a very, very foolish boy, not to trust your friends more than you do. Did you suppose you would be happier or better in leaving Moonstone Rancho? Did you suppose I would be happier? Collie, you have so much to learn."

"I guess that's so," he sighed. Then his eyes brightened with his old-time mischief. "Couldn't you begin now to teach me a little—like back there in the cañon?"

And being of a decisive habit of mind, he rode close to Louise and claimed immediate and delicious instruction.

"But how *did* you know?" he asked again—"about the claim and your father and me?"

"A secret that I share with Overland," she replied.

CAN'T I HAVE ANOTHER ONE, ROSE GIRL?
CAN'T I HAVE ANOTHER ONE, ROSE GIRL?

"So he told you! When? Not last night. He was asleep when I came away this morning."

"So he is here, then?"

"Louise, you're joking. Didn't Red talk to you?"

"No."

"And you know all about it already?" He looked at her curiously for a moment. "Did you know that I said I was going to leave the Moonstone?"

"Why?"

"For the same reason that I can't now—you. Red and Billy Winthrop and I don't own a cent's worth of the claim now. I don't even own what's in the bank. All I got is Yuma."

"You gave Yuma to me, Collie."

"I sure did. I haven't even her. But I've got you. Oh, Louise! I can't believe it. I could just shout. Can't I have another one, Rose Girl?"

"Must I teach you not to ask?" said Louise.

Collie took her other meaning as she made a little mouth at him. "Not after this," he said, and gave apt proof that he meant it.

"More than a whole carload of gold?" she asked, gazing at him.

"You know *that*, too?"

"Collie?"

"What is it?"

"Promise that you won't speak to any one about the claim, or the desert, or my father until I say you may."

"Of course I promise."

"Nor about ourselves, until I tell you to."

"Never—if it will make you happy."

Overland Red, sitting on a boulder beside the road, stooped and gathered up a handful of pebbles. Then, for lack of other interest, he invented a game of ancient and honorable origin. "She loves me," he said tossing away a pebble. "She loves me not." And up spun another pebble. So he continued until the pebbles were gone. "She loves me not," he muttered lugubriously. Then his face brightened. "Of course she don't. She loves *him*. That's what I was tryin' to get at, anyway."

He fumbled at a huge bunch of little red flowers called "Hummingbird's Trumpets." He arranged the hastily constructed bouquet to suit him. Then he laid it on the rock.

"Accordin' to the latest book on good table-manners, or 'How to Be Happy Though Dressed Up,' this here bouquet is the proper thing. They'll think I'm some wiz' when I step out and present these here hummin'birds' bugles. Huh! I seen the two bosses gone, and I gets wise direct. But I got to brace up. Wonder what she'll think about me—after hearin' what I said last night at the Old Meadow? Gee! I wonder what I did say? Did I cuss much? I forget. H-m-m. Good-mornin', folks! I—er—This here—Them hummin'birds' bugles—flowers—Happy day—Collie, what's wrong with you? What you laughin' at?"

"You, of course. Where did you get the posies?"

"Picked 'em along the Golden Shore. Just got back."

"You do look scared, Red."

"Seein' you're gettin' personal—*you* needn't to think because *you* just been there that I never will."

"Say, Overland—I—we—" began Collie.

"I knowed it! I won't say a word to nobody."

Collie glanced at Louise. She nodded. Then she gave Overland her hand. He seized it and stood looking into her sweet gray eyes. "Little Rose Girl," he said quietly, "you always was the best and kindest and beautifullest we ever knowed. It ain't the first time you give your hand to help them that ain't fit to touch it. If

there *is* any Golden Shore, I guess me and Collie will be there just because we knowed you down here and couldn't stay around, nohow, where you wasn't. And, believe me, if he don't treat you from now on like you was a plumb angel, I'll—I'll ride him off the big range and into space quicker'n shootin' stars! These here flowers is for you—not for that long-legged grasshopper ridin' your hoss there. I should think Boyar would be plumb ashamed."

"Then Collie can walk," said Louise promptly. "Collie, will you please let Mr. Summers take Boyar? I want to talk with the President of—of my mine a little while."

"Don't faint, Chico," said Overland, swinging into the saddle. "I always was the 'cute little gopher with the ladies. You watch *us* ride up this trail if you want to see a pair that *can* ride."

Collie shook his fist at the grinning Overland, who had turned as he rode away. "You want to learn to act quick when a lady asks you," called Overland. "You didn't get off this hoss any too spry."

Then Collie stooped and picked up a little red flower that had dropped from the boisterous one's offering.



CHAPTER XXXIII

A SPEECH

The Marshalls and Billy Winthrop came in their car. The ride through the cañon had been pleasant. They were talking about Overland. They had been discussing the rearrangement of a great many things since the news of Louise's heritage had become known.

"You had better close the muffler, Billy. You are frightening that pony!"

"That's the Yuma colt," said Winthrop. "Overland is riding her."

"Overland?"

"Yes. He's coming to meet us."

Plunging through the crackling greasewood at the side of the road, the Yuma colt leaped toward the car. In broad sombrero, blue silk neckerchief, blue flannel shirt, and silver-studded leather chaps, was a strangely familiar figure. The great silver spurs rang musically as the pony reared. The figure gave easily to the wild plunging of the horse, yet was as firm as iron in the saddle.

Anne drew a deep breath. It was not the grotesque, frock-coated Overland of a recent visit, nor was it the ragged, unkempt vision Louise had conjured up for her in relating the Old Meadow story. In fact, it was not Overland Red at all, but Jack Summers, the range-rider of the old red Abilene days. He was clean-shaven, vigorous, splendidly strong, and confident. In the saddle, bedecked in his showy trappings, surrounded by his friends, Jack Summers had found his youth again, and the past was as a closed book, for the nonce.

"I'm the boss's envy extraordinary," said Overland, by way of greeting. "Walt said something else, too, about bein' a potentiary, but I reckon *that* was a joke."

"Good-morning! Don't get down! Glad to see you again!"

But Overland was in the road, hat in hand, and Yuma's bridle-reins over one arm.

"'Mornin', Billy! 'Mornin', Doctor! You run right up to the house. I left the gate open."

Then Overland rode back, following them. Later he reappeared, minus spurs and chaps, but still clad in the garb of the range-rider. He was as proud and happy as a boy. He seemed to have dropped ten years from his shoulders. And he was strangely unlike his old boisterous self withal.

The noon sun crept through the moon-vine. Out on the wide veranda was the long table. They were a happy group at luncheon there. Even the taciturn Brand Williams had been persuaded to come. His native picturesqueness was rather effaced by a black, characterless suit of "store clothes."

Walter Stone, at the conclusion of the luncheon, asked Overland to make a speech. Nothing daunted, Overland rose briskly.

"I expect you're lookin' for me to fall off the roof of the cannery into the tomato-vat and make a large red splash. Not me. I got somethin' to say. Now the difference in droppin' a egg on the kitchen floor and breakin' it calm-like, in a saucer, ain't only the muss on the floor. You save the egg. Just recent I come nigh to losin' my whole basket. You all know who saved 'em. Not namin' any names, the same person, by jest bein' herself, and kind to everybody, put me wise to the fact that money and clothes ain't all that goes to make a man. And, at the same time, speakin' kind of orthodoxal, money and clothes has a whole lot to do with makin' a man. I just got hep to that idea recent.

"Speakin' of clothes leads me to remark that I got a new outfit up at the bunk-house. It's a automobilein' outfit. Billy says it's the correc' thing. He helped me pick it out. Which leads Billy into this here thing, too. He said to break the news gentle, and not scare anybody to death and not get 'em to thinkin' that somebody was hurt or anything like that, so I'm breakin' it to you easy. Me and Billy is goin' away. We're goin' in the Guzzuh—'God save the mush,' as the pote says. We are the Overland Red Towerist and Observation Company, Unlimited. We are goin'

"'Round the world and back again;
Heel and toe in sun and rain'—

as another pote says. Only we ride. I ain't got nothin' to say about gettin' married, or happy days, or any of that ordinary kind of stuff. I want to drink the health of my friends. I got so many and such good ones that I dassent to incriminate any

particular one; so I say, lookin' at your faces like roses and lilies and—and faces, I say,—

"Here's to California, the darling of the West,
A blessin' on those livin' here—
And God help all the rest."

Overland sat down amid applause. He located his tobacco and papers, rolled a cigarette with one hand, and gazed across the hills. Glancing up, he saw Louise looking at him. He smiled. "I was settin' on a crazy bronc' holdin' his head up so he couldn't go to buckin'—outside a little old adobe down in Yuma, Arizona, then. Did you ever drift away like that, just from some little old trick to make you dream?"

At a nod from Aunt Eleanor they all rose.

Louise stepped from her end of the table to where Overland stood gazing out across the hills. She touched him lightly on the arm. He turned and looked at her unseeingly. His eyes were filled with the dreams of his youth, dreams that had not come true ... and yet.... He gazed down into her face. His expression changed. His eyes grew misty with happiness. He realized how many friends he had and how loyal and excellent they were. And of all that he had gained his greatest treasure was his love for Louise—for Louise Lacharme, the little Rose Girl of his dreams. That love lay buried deep in his rugged heart. She would never know of it. No one should ever know—not even Collie.

Louise, in an ecstasy of affection and pity that she could not understand, suddenly flung her arms around Overland's neck and kissed him full on the lips.

More than he had ever dared to dream had come true.

THE END

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