MAX BRAND'S

BEST WESTERN STORIES

Volume III

Edited, with an Introduction by
William F. Nolan

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Here are seven newly collected classics of the Old West – novelettes and short stories – that make this book a welcome companion to *Max Brand's Best Western Stories, Volumes I and II.* Set in the still untamed wilderness, on ranches, and in bordertowns, these tales contain the furious action and the wild adventures that have attracted a wide audience. The book opens with "Reata's Peril Trek," a rousing short novel about a drifter who fought with a rawhide lariat instead of a six-gun, an indomitable stranger facing the dangers of man and nature.

"Crazy Rhythm" shows how deadly poker games can be, and reveals here what happened to one survivor. "Dust Storm" places a small-time rancher between two

(continued on back flap)

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William F. Nolan

DODD, MEAD & COMPANY
NEW YORK

The stories in this volume were originally published in the following magazines: *Western Story Magazine* ("Reata's Peril Trek," "A Lucky Dog," "The Third Bullet"); *Argosy* ("Crazy Rhythm"); *Blue Book* ("Half a Partner"); *Collier's* ("Dust Storm"); *American Magazine* ("The Sun Stood Still").

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To Professor William Bloodworth,
of East Carolina University,
who has demonstrated a unique
understanding of Max Brand's West

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Bob is a good man, a fine writer, and a valued friend.

This series would not exist without him.

Additional thanks to Jane Faust Easton (also much valued in my life), Margaret Norton, of Dodd, Mead, Brandt and Brandt, and the Faust Estate.

And a tip of the sombrero to the ghost of Max Brand!

W.F.N.

Introduction

Western fans will, I am sure, welcome this new volume of Max Brand's best, just as I welcomed the opportunity to edit it.

The seven stories gathered here were originally printed in pulp and slick paper magazines under a variety of pen names—John Frederick, Hugh Owen, George Owen Baxter and Max Brand—but they are all distinctly the work of Frederick Schiller Faust, the legendary Western giant whose popularity with world readers continues after more than half a century.

The hard-charging Max Brand style is in strong evidence here in these classic novelettes and short stories. The action is furious and colorful: High-noon shootouts, canyon avalanches, blinding snowstorms, cabin rescues, full-gallop cross country chases, wild gambling, bucking horses, daring holdups, bare-knuckle brawls, and knife attacks in the night. All here and more—from the hand of a true master of frontier fiction.

There are three basic elements present in nearly every Faust Western: A great hero, a great horse and a great villain. Yet, in his best work, they are seldom predictable; Faust provided seemingly endless variation and surprise.

His inventive imagination produced work that stands head and shoulders above the formula fiction ground out by many of his countless pulp-Western contemporaries.

Consider the seven "heroes" of these newly-assembled tales: Reata is an ex-pickpocket and drifter...Geary is a convict just out of prison and looking for a way to go straight...Hagger is a cheap "yegg" from New York, an outright crook and holdup man...Edson is a miner ...Lindsay and Ballantine are hard-working ranchers... and 18-year-old Bill Turner is a raw California farmhand. None conforms to the role of mythic gunfighter, yet all are ultimately heroic.

Consider the horses these heroes ride. Perhaps the greatest of them is Ballantine's black stallion, Overland, but Reata's roan mare Sue is scrawny and ugly-headed, and Lindsay's 15-year-old gelding Mustard is tired and used up.

And the great villains? Kincaid, of "The Third Bullet," is bested by a rancher-turned-gunman...the legendary La Farge, of "Reata's Peril Trek," turns out to be stupid and luckless. Only the "king of rats," Pop Dickerman, Reata's longtime foe, qualifies as a fully impressive villain, a figure of pure evil. Yet, even here, Faust avoids a direct physical confrontation between Dickerman and Reata.

Max Brand, therefore, was always capable of offbeat, unexpected characterizations, and of fresh plot twists—offering solid proof that he was, indeed, the King of the Action Western.

Readers will find the king in top form here in these swift and surprising tales of Western adventure.

Another worthy addition to Max Brand's shelf of classics.

William F. Nolan
Agoura Hills, California

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Reata's Peril Trek

This rousing action novelette, written "by George Owen Baxter" in the spring of 1934, was among Faust's end contributions to Western Story Magazine, *and marked the final use of his Baxter byline after fourteen years in the famous Street and Smith pulp. Reata, who fought with a rawhide lariat instead of a six-shooter, was the last original series hero Faust created for* WSM. *(His earlier adventures have been featured in two Max Brand novels,* Rawhide Justice *and* Rider of the High Hills.)

To combat the basic goodness of Reata, Faust created one of his most memorable characters, the rat-like junk peddler, Pop Dickerman, a veritable Mephistopheles of the Old West. His dark presence invests the series with a sense of mythic evil, and no matter how far Reata rides he cannot seem to escape the reaching hands of Pop Dickerman.

In desperation, Reata "sells his soul," striking a bargain with the old peddler that is, quite literally, a Faustian deal with the devil.

Frederick Faust himself was subtly paralleling what he considered the sale of his own creative talent to the pulps. In 1932 (a year before "Reata's Peril Trek" was written) Faust informed his agent that he intended to strike a long-term bargain with a major pulp magazine

editor: "My idea is to sell the pulp paper rights to my soul," Faust declared. "He's interested in large ideas, and my 'pulp paper soul' is a large idea as ideas go in this business."

By 1935, however, Faust had managed to "escape into the slick paper markets," and three years later he all but abandoned magazine work to write for Hollywood (where he created Dr. Kildare for MGM in 1938.)

One of Faust's main strengths as a popular storyteller was his remarkable ability to involve his readers wholly in whatever action he described. A case in point is the awesomely powerful avalanche he creates to launch "Reata's Peril Trek." On the run from the forces of Dickerman, Reata faces a fall of living rock that stuns his senses. As readers, we are thrust directly into the heart of this roaring maelstrom. And once the action begins in this story it never lets up.

Max Brand at his thundering best.

As Reata crossed the side of the mountain, he did not look up toward the height. He simply knew that there was no cover in that direction from which a rifleman could get a good bead on him, and below him there was a long flume of danger which took all of his attention, a flat-bottomed valley with walls as straight and polished as though they had been chiseled out by hand. Perhaps a glacier with a few hundred thousand years on its hands had done the stone cutting. But when Reata entered that canyon, he knew that he was entering the mouth of peril.

The agents of "Pop" Dickerman might be lying somewhere up there on the rocks, safely ensconced, with repeating rifles, ready to blow him into the next world.

Already they had turned him twice during his desperate effort to break away from the country which was under the actual domination of the junk peddler. Reata had been halfway through Glassman Pass when a storm of bullets

hailed about him. He owed his escape to the warning which his dog, little Rags, managed to give him at the last instant. That and the thickness of the twilight saved his body, though there were half a dozen bullet holes through his clothes.

Again, when he was above timberline, in the white wilderness of the Ginger Mountains, forms had risen at him out of the thickness of a storm, and he had fled as he could, with Sue, the roan mare, stumbling and sliding and slithering over the impossible terrain. The wise, fuzzy head of little Rags had given the first warning of that danger, too.

Reata thought of this as he patted the head of the dog riding with him in front of the saddle. But, staring down into the narrows of the canyon beneath him, the brown face of Reata clouded with trouble. In just such a place the hired devils of Dickerman might be waiting. But even before he came to a definite decision, the urging of his blood told him that he would take the chance and try to pass through the gorge.

Presently he was descending into it over the difficult terrain, letting Sue take her own way, because he knew that he could trust that ugly head of hers at the end of that long ewe neck. With her skinny sides and her upthrusting hip bones and long-lipped face, she looked like a small camel, but brains and legs and heart make the horse, and Reata knew that she had all of these.

He was well inside the walls of the canyon, therefore, without ever glancing up toward the danger that might come to him down the slope. It was Rags, again, who saw the thing, and snarled and shuddered in a sudden terror that made Reata look back.

Rising behind him was one of those Devil's Slides which one finds here and there among heavily eroded moun-

tains. This was not a smooth slope of gravel and sand, but rather an accumulation of broken boulders which graduated, toward the top, into a smaller drift of rock and pebbles.

What Reata saw at first he took to be a wisp of white cloud caught against the forehead of the mountain. But after a moment a faint rumbling, like wheels over a bridge in the distance, told him what was happening. There was no thunderhead above the horizon from which that noise could be pouring across the sky. It must proceed from the white fluff far up the mountain, and now, as he watched, he saw the dust cloud grow, and before and beneath it there was a movement as though a herd of horses were rushing down the slope, forms leaping and rolling and bounding recklessly down with increasing speed.

For perhaps a pair of centuries, that slope had remained there, growing more and more unstable, crumbled to the point of dissolution, and now, at the exact moment when he was trapped inside the walls of the canyon at the base of the slide, the whole mountainside was dissolving and rushing down at him!

He turned the head of the mare, thinking for a moment that he could ride her out of the canyon walls to safer ground above, but he saw instantly that there was no time. She was as swift as a bird, almost, but against her was matched the speed of a flung stone. The great forefront of the slide was already spreading wide and growing in enormous bulk. It was a wave that gathered head and power until it thrust up boulders that weighed tons, and caught them again in a carelessly back-tossed hand, and hurled them forward once more with redoubled speed.

No, he could not escape by retracing his way.

The good mare, pricking her ears, bravely faced that danger, ready to run straight toward it in spite of her instinct, so perfect was her trust in the brain of her master,

but Reata swung her about again and sent her shooting down the ravine.

Could he distance the slide, which was sure to lose momentum as it struck the floor of the valley? No, for the floor was sharply inclined downward. Like a flume it had seemed to him, even from a distance above it; it was even more like a flume now that he was inclosed between its walls, and he knew that when the avalanche struck the ravine, it would shoot far forward, for a mile or more, perhaps, like a wave that beats on the slant of the shore and slides suddenly far up the sands. In that forward dashing of the landslide, he would be caught and overwhelmed and buried.

There was only one possibility, and that was to find some way up the side of the canyon.

Over to his right he was suddenly aware of a crevice the sides of which were like two broken flights of steps. It seemed that nothing could mount it—and yet he had to try!

Instantly he had the mare at the bottom of that giant's stairway, and, flinging himself out of the saddle, he began the upward climb, only pausing to snatch little Rags from the saddle.

Perched on the shoulder of his master, the tiny mongrel barked furiously, throwing his challenge at the overwhelming mass of rocks that now roared down the mountain. Reata, with a side glance, could see the vast wave rushing. Behind it was a flying mist that towered into the sky, and from that boiling mist he saw great birds fleeing, sliding down the limitless arches of heaven while the man, like a poor, scurrying little ant, clambered up the steps, the broken ways, the difficult inclines of the ravine crevice.

The mare? She was following, incredible to say. Like a mountain goat, she was leaping from side to side, and

always up. Her long training among the uplands helped her now, and that wise brain of hers, and, above all, the sense that she could always do whatever her master asked. So she came up, striving mightily, and Reata barely kept above her.

He saw, from the corner of his eye, how the landslide spread wider and caught a huge fold of virgin pine forest, a mighty growth, and mowed it down with a stroke, and tossed up the big trees like playthings among the leaping fury of the boulders.

Then the thundering tumult reached the mouth of the valley and plunged into it. The senses of Reata were overwhelmed. No longer striving to climb, he clung close to the rock, for the immense reverberations of the slide threatened to break his eardrums; the mere weight of sound stifled him, squeezed the breath from his body. And against his face he felt the warmth of little Rags pressing, while the small dog shook with terror.

All in an instant the danger was flooding on him. Huge stones, flung out before the advancing wave, streaked through the air and landed far away down the ravine. A ten-ton boulder smote the opposite side of the crevice in which he was climbing, and smashed out a great chunk of living rock.

But none of those flying particles, dangerous as fragments of an exploding shell, touched the three breathing creatures in the crevasse.

The huge forefront of the slide now swept past the crevice. The end of the world would be like this; a wave with its roots in the abyss and its tongue licking heaven might carry in its front such vast and entangled living shapes as those which Reata thought he was in the heart of this maelstrom.

Missiles of incredible size cleft the air, which hummed with their passage. Into the bottom of the crevice flooded the destruction, and piled up almost to the feet of Reata

where he stood on a narrow ledge, overwhelmed. The mare was beside him. Terror bowed her knees, and she pressed her head against the breast of her master. He threw his arms about that ugly head and held hard. He and the dog and the roan mare, they seemed one blood and spirit in the storm.

Then Reata was aware that the uproar had lessened; it was traveling forward. The blue walls of the sky seemed to be repeating the thunder in vast, vague echoes.

Then there was stillness. Miles and miles of quiet began to roll in on Reata. He could breathe again. Weighty stones occasionally settled downward, embedding themselves with grinding sounds, like the crunching of bones. Still the echoes flew, but fewer and fewer, and thinner and thinner.

The thick dust cloud was ripped apart by the wind. Huge white billows lifted and sprawled across the sky, and were gone from the face of the blue. And still the quiet poured in upon the shuddering soul of Reata.

He could not find the taste and relish of life for a moment. In body and spirit he was still crushed, and now, peering around the edge of battered rock which had shunted away from the three of them the hurling dangers of the avalanche, he saw the side of the mountain laid bare, all virgin, shining rock. In the midst of it, something leaped and glittered. It was a spring which had been given birth out of the breast of the cliff. The small waters of it would soak down through the boulders of the ravine. Gradually they would form as a running stream, and that little rivulet, partnered by infinite time, would gradually carve ten thousand times more greatly than this avalanche of the moment had done.

The river would wear the stones away and wash their dust into the far-off plains. It would clear out and widen the valley. It would bring life into this wilderness of broken rock.

Reata, lifting his head with that thought, saw three white columns of smoke rising from the head of the mountain, and near by them, a bright eye was winking.

He understood. He drew a great breath. The awe left him. For it was not the blind hand of nature that had struck at him, but the malice of man again. Up yonder were the men of Dickerman who had seen their chance to start the slide that might bury him, and now the white smoke columns, the flashing eye of the heliograph, joyously told, at last, of their great success.

Reata began to laugh softly. For this time the sun talk would be telling a lie that would vainly warm the heart of Dickerman, that king of rats, far away.

The town of Rafferty Hill was so called because there is a mound of earth some fifty feet high in the middle of it, and because Jack Rafferty was the prospector who first struck gold on the edge of Tin Can Creek.

The gold rush started blindly for Rafferty Hill. All gold rushes are blind. One man in ten is a miner. The other nine are exploiters of labor and treasure—gamblers, saloon keepers, thieves, fugitives who wish to bury their heads in a new human deposit, scoundrels, sightseers, gaping tenderfeet, riffraff of all sorts. A lot of gold was coming out of the black sands along Tin Can Creek, and a lot of it passed over the bars in the town.

Reata came down into the town at its moment of twilight, when the men whose hands were sore with labor wanted to forget the day, and when the men whose hands were full of gold wanted to make the night memorable. The two elements combined perfectly to start the uproar. In the mob, the sightseers drifted slowly, idly, staring, and the thieves moved with sinuous ease, and the gamblers strode with accurate, piercing eyes.

Into that mob descended Reata.

He was happier than men who had made fortunes this day, or who had at least uncovered the face and the promise of great wealth. He was happier than they because he had something better than gold to rejoice about. He had life!

The saying went, in that world from which he had come, that no man could avoid the reaching hands of Dickerman. Time and distance did not matter. But he, Reata, had reversed the old saying.

Back in Rusty Gulch, Pop Dickerman was surely rubbing his grimy hands together, and then smoothing the fur of his long, lean face. His hate and his revenge were being fed full by the thought that, after all, Reata had been taken and smashed as other fools had been overwhelmed by Dickerman's agents. All had gone down, every man who strove to stand out against the dark will of Dickerman. And, among the rest, Reata was gone—buried under the endless tons of rock in Ten Mule Ravine.

But, while Dickerman rejoiced, Reata would be dipping into life again, and there could not be a better place for him than Rafferty Hill. He wanted to see and feel about him endless life, of which he was miraculously still a part.

So he went down into Rafferty Hill and put up his horse at a living stable, and then, with Rags, he went out into the twilight world.

It was bad luck that took him into "Texas Charlie's" saloon. If he had gone to any other place, Bob Clare would have died that evening, and his name would never have sounded in the ears of Reata, perhaps. But chance—or fate—led Reata and Rags into Texas Charlie's.

Of course, it was going full blast, for Charlie's was the best saloon in Rafferty Hill. Through the crowd, Reata drifted from the long bar where the six bartenders were laboring, wet to the elbow in the splash of beer and liquor,

and then through the dance hall, where the music was beginning to hum and squeal and bump, and so back through the gambling rooms, which were really the most famous part of Charlie's establishment.

Perhaps there were other honest layouts in Rafferty Hill, but the honesty of Charlie's faro table and roulette wheel were proven. That was why men who had money to gamble were sure to spend the greater part of their time at Texas Charlie's tables. There Reata saw Bob Clare for the first time.

There should have been some warning in Reata's blood. There should have been an icy touch, benumbing his soul, and telling him that the face of this man was to turn him back into all the dangers which he had left buried in the distance.

But no voice, no murmur in the spirit, suggested to Reata the things that were to be. He wanted to savor life, and Bob Clare was life. He was the symbol of it. He was the smile, the flash in the eye, the heat in the blood.

It made every man feel good to see Clare on a rampage, and he certainly was on a rampage this night.

"Who's the young fellow in the middle of the big noise?" asked Reata of a gray-headed man with a sour face.

"Him? That's Bob Clare," said the other. "The worst fool and the best fellow that ever come into Rafferty Hill. There ain't a drunk or a deadbeat or a bum that he ain't staked. And there's a lot of other gents that have got their chance to work and make a strike because of him."

Clare was perhaps nineteen or twenty. He was not over six feet tall, but looked more than that. Some men are not measured in inches. Even physically they seem to belie their actual proportions. And Bob Clare, as he moved through the crowd with his Stetson pushed well back on his head, stood among the other men like a moose among elk, a blood horse among mustangs. He was handsome not

because his features were regular, but because there was such a strength and brilliance about his face, with his brown eyes full of light. And he was always smiling.

At the moment when Reata saw him, he had just left the faro table with both hands full of money. He stuffed one handful into his pockets, and, since there seemed to be no more room in his clothes, he tossed the other handful of greenbacks into the air.

There was a shout, a flourishing of hands. Men leaped up to grasp at that rain of wealth. Good bills were ripped in two as rival hands grasped for them. And a great roar of laughter made the room tremble.

Reata, according to his nature, having seen a fool in the midst of his folly, should have passed on. But it happened that just when the uproar was the greatest, through the forest of reaching hands he had a glimpse, in the face of Clare, of a devastating weariness. The smile remained, because it was always there, but it was the smile of a man playing a part, sticking to a role in spite of an agony of fatigue.

What was the matter with the fellow?

Now, when that question came into the mind of Reata, he turned to examine the face of Clare again. He surveyed the man. The whole look of the spendthrift and the daredevil was in Bob Clare. One hardly needed to ask questions about him. He was simply one of those who burn brightly. Yet there was the shadow in the midst of the illumination, so to speak, and that was what baffled Reata. There was something which suggested that the fellow was aware of his own follies.

Clare, now at the roulette wheel, was playing the red. A thousand dollars. He lost. He doubled. He lost. He doubled. He lost, and doubled again.

Four thousand dollars over the shoulder, like that. Now eight thousand to be risked—and he won.

And again, a thousand on the red; and he won; doubled; won; doubled; won——

The crowd began to shout.

"How does Texas Charlie stand it, with this fellow winning all the time?" Reata heard a tenderfoot ask.

"Sure," he wins, but that makes everybody else feel lucky—and after watching Clare win, the suckers step in and lose. Twenty of 'em will lose as much as Clare wins. Besides, he gives away most of what he collects. It all gets back into the game sooner or later."

Reata saw a sample of this. A man muttered at the ear of Clare, who instantly thrust half a dozen bills, without counting them, into the fellow's hand and he melted off into the crowd with a grin of foxlike gratification.

A strange impulse moved Reata. He stepped to the side of Clare and said: "I'm broke. Take a chance on me?"

Bob Clare answered, "Sure!" without turning his head. He was extending the money when his eye fell full on Reata's face.

"I don't know you, do I?" asked Clare.

"You never saw me before."

"Well, take as much as you need."

Reata picked out a one-dollar bill.

"Thanks, Clare."

He felt the bright, steady eyes of the other upon him.

"I'll be seeing you later," said Clare.

"You will," answered Reata.

And it was only then that something clicked inside him and told him that he might be lost!

That subconscious warning was sufficiently strong to make Reata go straight out into the bar and put three fingers of whisky down his throat. While the fumes filled his brain, he told himself that it was no business of his if fools threw themselves away. Neither did he care what

mental torment compelled Bob Clare in this foolish path of his.

But something drew him back into the game room. He told himself that it was because he wanted to try his hand at roulette and see his money go with a flash and a gesture, or double and quadruple itself. But he was barely inside the room before he heard a voice cut through the tumult.

"This here game is crooked! It's a fake."

Suddenly the rest of the room was still. Men pulled back, pressing close to one another, and Reata found himself not far from a table where a tall, frail-looking man, with the stooped shoulders and forward-canted head of a student, was rising from a poker table. He was pale, and shaking. The pull at the corners of his mouth was not a smile, but the caricature of a smile.

He had twitched back a hand and brought out the glimmering, blue length of a gun. But no one shrank from the gun. They shrank, instead, from the white distortion of the face.

"A dirty—robbin'—fake!" said the tall man, staring at the other players.

They said nothing. Plainly they were too frightened to move in their chairs for fear lest their first move, misunderstood, might be their last.

For that white-faced man was too obviously ready for anything.

Then another voice cut across the silenced room. It was Clare speaking in a tone full, mellow, easy.

"You can't talk like that about a game in the place of my friend Texas Charlie," Bob Clare was saying. "You'll have to eat that talk—and get out."

There was something like relief in the look of the tall stranger. His grimace of a smile changed a bit, almost

softened and gentled. He had found a target, and that was clear.

"I'm goin' to eat my talk, eh?" he asked.

"Right here and now," said Clare, "and you're going to start by putting away that gun."

"You're goin' to make me, are you?" asked the tall man.

"That's right," said Clare, "I am."

There was no mistaking the pleasure in the voice of Bob Clare. He was almost laughing as he walked straight across the room toward the stricken tableful of gamblers and that one tall, leaning figure. The pain was gone from his features, Reata could see. He was all reality, now. He advanced as a man might come forward to take a drink, or to shake the hand of a friend. There was an instant readiness about his manner that made Reata see that, instead of fearing death, Bob Clare would actually welcome the end of everything.

It staggered Reata.

The muzzle of the gambler's colt jerked up to a level with his target.

Clare simply laughed and strode forward. Death was a whisper, a breath, a gesture away.

Then Reata acted.

Out of his coat pocket came the coiled lariat, slender as a pencil, rawhide-covered. The noose loosened and freed under his rapid fingers. With a subtle under-arm gesture, the lariat shot forward from the hand of Reata. It struck down over the head and shoulders of the tall fellow, and the jerk with which Reata pulled it taut brought the other headlong over the table, spilling the cards, the stacked chips in a rattling, rolling shower across the floor. But even as he was falling, that tall man managed to fire, and at his shot the back-tilted Stetson leaped from the head of Bob Clare.

Reata walked over, loosened the noose of the lariat, and helped the fallen man to his feet. The fellow was staggering. He needed the support Reata gave him. A moment before he had been sober enough to knock the hat off the head of Bob Clare with a bullet that would surely have brained his man, but now he seemed too drunk to stand. Little bubbling sounds came out of his throat with every breath.

He said: "What's the matter? What's happened?"

Reata answered: "There's the fellow you might have killed. The one with his hat off."

"It's Bob Clare!" said the stranger. "I didn't—"

"Get out of here and stay out," said Reata. "There's a lot of angry men in this town, partner, and one of them might want to take a fall out of you. Get out of Rafferty Hill as fast as you can. There's the door yonder. Start!"

"I'll go," he said. And after he'd gone the talk began in a double wave, from each side of the room, and closed in a roar over the head of Reata.

We know a good actor from an amateur by his manner of taking the stage and doing the simplest things. We discover the perfect dancer by the first few steps, simple, plain, gliding, by something of exquisite balance and unpronounced rhythm. And so the men of Rafferty Hill were able to see in Reata a man who had handled death before, taken it intimately up into those slender, active fingers of his, and disposed of it with just such a lightning-fast gesture as they had seen this day.

The thing had been impossible until he had done it. Then it was simply, ridiculously easy, the sort of a thing that every man should be able to do—but, which no other man in that place would have dared to attempt.

That was the reason why they wanted to flatter and cheer and make much of Reata.

But the man they wanted disappeared. While they were reaching out their hands for him, he glided away from the touch of their fingers.

A moment later he was out in the street, cursing himself.

He had done the very thing that he had sworn he would not do. He had stepped out before a crowd and drawn all eyes upon himself.

Messages which traveled by the sun talk of the heliograph by day or through the winking of mountain-built fires by night would swiftly convey, across the great wilderness, to the brain of Pop Dickerman, that the man he wanted was still alive—and in Rafferty Hill!

He could have done the thing in any other way, being among men who were strangers to him and his past, but the use of the slender lariat, thin as twine and heavy as lead, that was the feature by which he would be identified. Dickerman was sure to learn the truth, and perhaps before the dawn gleamed over the next day.

And then he was aware of someone following him.

A wide beam of light struck out through an illumined doorway. On the verge of that light, on the farther side of the bright wedge of it, Reata whirled suddenly about, the subtle noose of his rope in his hand.

Then he saw that it was tall Bob Clare.

"That was fine," said Clare, "what you did. You sure saved my life. Now, partner, why did you do it?"

He said nothing, in answer, because he found no answer that would be easy to make, and Clare went on:

"We're going up the hill. I've got a cabin there. You're going to come up and talk to me, partner."

Still Reata said nothing, but he walked along, keeping step with Bob Clare, rather dizzily conscious of that premonition which he had first felt when he looked into the brown, bright eyes of this stranger. Something bound them together. He had known other men for whom he had

felt a liking suddenly. But never before had his heart gone out to another man as it went out to Bob Clare.

That was the reason for his silence, all the way up the little hill to the cabin that stood on the top, and into which Clare brought Reata.

The ramshackle stove in the corner was lighted, and so was the lantern on the wall. Coffee was made in the same silence and across their cups of coffee, the two stared frankly at one another.

"Now," said Bob Clare, "let's talk."

"All right," said Reata. "There's a thing I need to know."

"And what's that?"

"I need to know what's eating you up inside. What's the matter with you, Clare?"

"With me?" said Clare, surprised. "Why, there's nothing the matter with me. Everybody in Rafferty Hill knows that I'm simply a fool for luck. What could be the matter with me?"

"You're in hell," said Reata. "That's what's the matter with you."

Clare stared at him, as Reata swallowed down his coffee. He needed the hot drink more than he had needed whisky in the saloon.

"What makes you talk like that?" demanded Bob Clare.

"What made you walk up on the fellow with the gun?" asked Reata.

"I didn't think he'd shoot."

"That's a lie. You *hoped* he'd shoot."

Clare rose suddenly from his stool.

Reata said to him: "A man can't lose money—not when he's already in hell. That's what your luck amounts to, Clare."

Bob Clare rubbed his knuckles across the top of the table.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"I'd rather not say just now."

"What put you on my trail?"

"Chance," said Reata.

"Chance never does anything," said Clare, scowling. He hesitated. "It's about time to turn in. From the look of you, you've been traveling a lot more than miles, lately. We'll talk more in the morning."

Reata turned in, accordingly, with a clean blanket to wrap around himself, and a straw tick to lie on, filled with sweet-smelling, sun-cured grass. He was so tired that even the problem of Bob Clare could not hold him. He saw the red blink of the dying fire in the stove, shining through one of the wide cracks. He sniffed the smell of coffee fumes and wood smoke that thickened the air, and then he was asleep.

He wakened to the loud report of a gun. And across his breast dropped a wet, warm weight.

He rolled out of the bed to the floor, sliding away from the loose burden; it was a man with a knife still gripped in his hand. And then he saw Bob Clare, vaguely illumined by the glint of red light from the stove, caught up in a death struggle with a second man in the far corner of the room. Reata acted instantly. His lariat slid with a faint hiss through the air, neatly surrounded both men, and jerked them crashing to the floor.

Reata put his knee on the chest of the second assailant. He saw a broad, red face, a powerful jaw—a face contorted now with fear.

"Harry Quinn!" exclaimed Reata. "I should have guessed it."

His practiced hands took from Quinn a revolver and a knife.

"Take that stool—at the table," Reata said to him.

Quinn obediently got up and moved to the stool. He sat down on it, facing Reata.

"Head of this other hombre is all blood, but he seems to be alive," reported Bob Clare.

"Light a lantern," said Reata.

Clare did so. And Reata saw a man with long black hair lying on his face. The knife the murderer had been about to use was still in his closed hand. There was a red furrow across his head. Plainly Clare's shot had glanced from the skull and merely stunned the other.

"Who's that?" demanded Reata of Quinn.

"You wouldn't know him," said Quinn. He added, with a slight suggestion of humor: "You wouldn't wanta."

The man on the floor stirred, groaned, tried to sit up.

"Tie his hands," ordered Reata. "Wash the blood off his head and make a bandage out of his shirt."

Clare did this. Finally, the other man was seated next to Harry Quinn at the table. He looked like an Indian or a half-breed, his dark skin now a little yellow. He swayed somewhat from side to side, but the natural fire was beginning to come back into his eyes.

"You travel around with some fine looking fellows," said Reata to Quinn.

Harry Quinn shrugged. "What Pop wishes on a gent, he's gotta take up with."

"Sure. I know," said Reata. "What his name?"

"Sam."

"What else?"

"There ain't any more. That's all there is."

"Knife work, chiefly?"

"Yeah."

"In the back?"

"Yeah."

"Nice boy," said Reata. "You're nice, too, Harry."

Harry Quinn said nothing. He lowered his head and stared at the knees of Reata.

"You're damned nice," said Reata.

"Go ahead," said Harry Quinn. "I'll take it. I'd take it even if I didn't have to. I'll take it because it's coming to me."

Bob Clare, who stood opposite to Sam, turned his head a little.

"Old friend of yours, eh?"

"I'm Reata. These boys knew me well enough to call on me. You might as well use the name."

"Well, Reata, I woke up and saw the shadow of that one—Sam, they call him, eh?—leaning over your bunk. I saw the flash of the knife in his hand. I sleep with a gun under the pillow, so I let him have it. I must have aimed high."

Reata stepped to Sam, put a hand under his chin and jerked up his head so that he could see his face. The black eyes glared back at him.

"You're a pretty boy, Sam," said Reata, and drew his hand away.

The head of Sam remained tilted back; the glare continued to be fixed on Reata.

"Are you good with a knife, Sam?" asked Reata.

The breed grinned mirthlessly.

"Stand up, Sam," said Reata.

The breed rose. "Get out," said Reata, "before I kill you!"

Sam went to the door, cast one glance behind him, and then, throwing out his hands to help his speed, leaped away into the darkness.

"Stand up, Harry," said Reata. Harry Quinn rose. "Go with him," said Reata.

But Quinn remained where he was, his head hanging a little, his shoulders swaying.

Clare scowled. "Move, damn you! He's giving you your life. God knows why!"

Quinn made a two-handed gesture, with the palms of both hands turned up, a gesture of pain.

"You dunno nothing about things, Clare," he said. "Reata—I was done for, and he saved my neck. He risked his hide, and he pulled me out."

Clare swore under his breath.

"And so you came in here and tried to—"

"So I came in here and tried to help a breed stick a knife into him," said Harry Quinn. "And damn me to hell for it!"

Bob Clare stared fixedly at him. Then he went to a corner range of shelves, took down a bottle, and poured a stiff drink of amber-colored whisky into a glass. He shoved it onto the table in front of Harry Quinn. The gray eyes of Reata, all this while, never stirred from Quinn. There was pity in his look, not hatred.

Harry Quinn took the drink and poured it down his throat. He coughed, then turned slowly toward Reata.

"You got every right to finish me—and I dunno why you don't."

"You're just doing what Pop ordered you to do," said Reata. He sighed. "Now, get out!"

Quinn stared at him for a long moment.

"Hell!" said Harry Quinn. And he walked out of the little cabin with his head down.

Clare closed the door behind him, went to the stove, kindled the fire, put on a pot of coffee, and brought it to a boil. Reata had not spoken. Silently he accepted the coffee which Bob Clare offered to him.

He rolled a cigarette, and blowing puffs thoughtfully toward the ceiling, he sipped the coffee.

Clare pulled up a stool, filled a second cup, and sat down opposite the smaller man. He had thought Reata was very young. Now he began to find the pleasant brown

face much older than he had thought. Not in years. In experience.

"Now, talk," said Reata.

"Sure," said Bob Clare agreeably. "What shall I talk about?"

"Yourself. Talk about yourself."

"I'd rather not do that," answered Clare.

"Don't be a fool," said Reata. "You need to talk."

He waited. After a silence, Clare said: "About everything, eh?"

"About everything."

"My father liked the booze and the high spots," said Bob Clare, in a casual, cheerful voice. "He hit most of the high ones, one time or another. Once he opened the ground up and pulled a stack of gold out of it.

"About then he lost his head to this pretty Mexican girl named Inez and married her. And they had a boy, Antonio. But afterwards things went sour. He met my mother, and Inez went crazy mad with jealousy and divorced him."

Reata stared at Clare. "Then he married your mother, and they had for a son a rattle-headed fool named Bob, eh?"

Bob Clare smiled, went on: "My father got sick, and he saw that he wasn't going to last long, and he left the gold mine in trust, with me in mind."

"What did he do for Tony?"

"A lot—but he just gambled away every cent. Tony's not much of a man, I guess."

"So when do you inherit the gold?"

"Next month—when I turn twenty-one," said Clare. "But Tony and his mother are going to see to it that I don't live to collect."

"Why are you so afraid of them?" asked Reata. "You act

as if there's no chance in the world of your living another month."

"There's no chance in the world," said Bob Clare.

"That's why you were ready to chuck your money away—and your life after it," declared Reata. "What have they got that's so sure to put out your lights?"

"La Farge," said Bob Clare.

Reata drew in a breath.

"La Farge?"

"And all La Farge's crooks," said Clare. "Inez and Tony, they sold me to La Farge. If I die, the money goes to them. It's an easy deal. Suppose they give La Farge half the loot when I'm knocked over? You see?"

"How much loot is there?"

"Close to a million."

"Half of that? Yes, that might buy La Farge. Just about," said Reata.

"Well, I've talked," said Bob Clare. "I swore that I never would. Not after I decided that the law could never protect me."

"No, not against La Farge," said Reata.

"I've got only a short while left," said Clare. "And I'm making the most of it. Having a good time. And I want you along for the fun!"

"So I can see you laid in Boot Hill, eh?" said Reata.

"Any way you want it," answered Bob Clare.

"You go back to bed," said Reata. "I'm going into town."

"Why now?"

"Never mind why. Just keep that gun under your pillow till I get back."

And Reata walked down into Rafferty Hill.

Overhead were the mountain stars with the summits pricked in sketchily against them. There was the good,

sweet savor of the pine trees in the air. But there was no sweetness in the heart of Reata.

He found Harry Quinn just where he thought he would find him—at Texas Charlie's. Quinn was drinking whiskey at the bar when Reata walked up to him.

"Harry, how long to flash word to Pop Dickerman?"

"Reata! What are you—"

"How long?"

Quinn muttered: "I dunno. Before morning, I'd guess."

"Get word back," said Reata. "Send this message to Pop. Tell him that I'll sell out."

"Hi!" gasped Harry Quinn. "You sell out? To Dickerman? You'd rather die, first!"

"Tell Dickerman I'll sell out, but that my price is high. If he wants me, get the word back here by sun-up. I'll be at Clare's place."

The sun was not half an hour high above Rafferty Hill when a light tap came at the door of the cabin. Bob Clare slept a wink more lightly than a wild cat, and yet he was not sitting up from his blankets before Reata was already opening the door on the wide red face of Harry Quinn.

Quinn was nodding as he said: "Pop will pay the sky for you. What's the deal?" "I've got to see him and talk the thing over," said Reata. "What's the fastest way of getting to him, Harry?"

"With relay hosses," said Quinn.

"There's no line of relay horses between here and Rusty Gulch," answered Reata.

"There wasn't any line, till Pop reached out his arm. There's plenty of nags in that relay now."

"It's a hundred miles to Rusty Gulch," said Reata.

"There's ten or twelve relays to take you there," answered Quinn.

"I can make it by night, then?"

"Sure you can, if you're made of steel and whalebone," said Quinn. "And I guess that's the stuff you're built of."

"Wait outside for me," said Reata. "I won't be long."

He walked over to Clare, who was pulling on his boots.

"What's up, Reata?"

"Have to make a jump that'll take me a couple of days or less. Then I'm coming back here. Mind you, you're not to step outside the shack, and you can spend the time cleaning up your guns, and working some of the nerves out of your hand."

Clare watched him silently.

"You've had enough booze," said Reata. "You're sober now. Stay that way."

"I'll do what you say," answered Clare, his lips tightening. "But what's the game, Reata?"

"You were sitting here waiting for your finish, weren't you?"

Clare nodded.

"Now you're standing up and getting ready to fight. And I figured you could use a little help."

With that he went out quickly from the shack, and down the hill with Harry Quinn. At the livery stable where he had put up Sue and left Rags he found a big, clean-limbed bay tethered near the door.

"That's a Dickerman horse," said Reata.

"How do you know?" asked Harry Quinn.

"Because nothing but crooks and kings rate horses as good as that one, and there aren't many kings in Rafferty Hill," said Reata.

Harry Quinn chuckled. "You called it. This is the horse you'll start with. Here's a chart of the whole way you'll travel, and where you'll find the other stations of the relay. And here's luck to you!"

"Thanks, old son," said Reata. "Be seeing you soon."

The bay was strong, but the terrain was difficult and each mile took its toll on the animal. An hour and a half and eight miles later, Reata dismounted at the mouth of a blind ravine. At his shout a little man with a twisted face under a broad forehead, led a small mustang blue as mud and ugly as sin out of a tangle of brush.

Reata snatched the reins of the mustang and flicked himself abroad. For three torrid minutes, the horse butted holes in the sky and knocked chunks out of the hard rock. As it quieted, Dave Bates shouted: "Reata, are you back with us?"

"I'm only at the entrance to the rat hole," said Reata, "but I suppose that I'll get all the way inside. So long, Dave."

He left Bates half laughing and half dumfounded, and headed into the heart of the mountains.

The blue was a wearier and a wiser broncho before they passed the ravine angle and came to the head of a long valley, six miles and one hour away, where he exchanged the staggering, frothing little horse for a good gray mare with the sort of long legs that a man wants to have under him when there is level going to cross.

The gray and then a tough brown mustang got him through the easy miles of that long valley in all of its windings; and then under the full glare of sun he took a roan, and then two fire-eyed buckskins, to lope over the burning desert beyond.

And a black horse and a gray and then a short-legged mountain climber of a low-geared runt of a pinto to bring him through the hills, and last of all a tall bay gelding, blood brother, it seemed, of the one on which he had left Rafferty Hill that morning, carried Reata into Rusty Gulch in the later heat of the afternoon. He had ridden a hundred miles in ten hours.

His body cried out in protest. There was an ache up his spine, where pounding blows had been absorbed all during those hours. But well ahead of the time he had planned, he was drawing rein at the entrance gate at Pop Dickerman's junk yard, on the edge of Rusty Gulch.

As he looked up to the long, high roof line of the barn which Pop used as warehouse and living quarters, he saw a cat sitting on the top, calmly washing its face in the sun. The cat stopped its work and, with one paw still raised, yawned a red yawn and showed Reata the delicate little ivory needles inside its mouth. Then it went on working, but to Reata it was as though even the cats of Pop Dickerman were laughing when they saw the slave return to the master.

Reata led the tired bay into a long shed and tethered it in a stall. In that shed he had found the roan mare, Sue, and begun his partnership with her.

He stepped out into the junk yard and ran his eye over the rusted heaps. They always baffled and amazed him. The hours that Dickerman spent in collecting this stuff from broken-down, failing ranches and the passion with which he bargained for it and sold it again, struggling over every cent of profit or loss, seemed to indicate that the man was a total miser. Yet he also dealt in thousands, in tens of thousands, taking long chances, risking fortunes. He had, some men said, hundreds of thousands deposited in various banks. He dealt in criminal lives and criminal actions; he was the receiver of stolen goods. A tide of riches flowed to Pop Dickerman from every part of the West.

Reata approached the big sliding door that gave access to the huge mow of the barn. It was ajar, and he stepped inside. A bronze bell hung from a joint. He struck it twice,

heavily, and then three times more so that a rapid, running echo fled after the two booming notes.

Reata looked about him, at the familiar bundles of old lamps and lanterns that hung at the ends of ropes fastened from the rafters. He moved slowly forward. The heaps on the ground, the bundles hanging in the air, fascinated him, and yet there was a sort of horror that followed him. It came from the scent of perfumed tobacco that hung in the air, left there by the fumes from Dickerman's water pipe.

He arrived at the central space where Dickerman's legless couch was in its place, covered with greasy, time-marked brocade. The big double-burner lamp still hung above the couch. And on either side of the lamp were suspended—like grisly decorations for a candelabrum—two huge bunches of knives: Stilettos, hunting knives, bowie knives, common steel kitchen knives, penknives, knives of all the kinds, and the torsion of the rope from which they hung kept the two bundles turning a little, very slowly, so that the eye could always find something new.

Reata lit a cigarette and lay back on a deep hill of rugs on the floor just opposite the couch of Dickerman. That flat position eased and soothed his body.

He blew long, thin streams of cigarette smoke high up among the shadows, and waited.

He knew from experience that it would be useless to watch, for Dickerman would never appear from an expected quarter, and when he came, it would be with a soundless footfall.

So he tried not to be surprised when suddenly, beside him, appeared the tall form of Pop Dickerman clad in undershirt—sadly dirty—and ragged, patched trousers. Two bright little ratty eyes looked down at Reata out of that furred, long, grizzled face.

"Well, well, well!" murmured Pop Dickerman in a deep and husky voice that always seemed to proceed from frayed-out vocal cords. "The prodigal son!"

"Go cook me something to eat, and then come and tell me when the stuff's ready," said Reata.

"It's ready this minute," said Dickerman.

"You mean they sun-talked the news to you, eh, all the way across the hills and the curse of that desert? You knew when I'd arrive."

"No. They only gave me the hour you left Rafferty Hill. I added it up—the hours it would take any other man to ride that distance—and then I subtracted two hours from the lot, and you see I got just the right time for you, Reata. Come along, son. I got some of your favorite things, out there."

"I got some roast pork, and Mexican beans, and corn bread yaller as gold, that'll melt in your mouth, and I got some chicken soup that you'll want a quart of to start with. And there's cheese crackers to eat with the soup, and there's some sweet things, because I wouldn't forget that you like sweet things, Reata, no, sir. I baked you a pumpkin pie big enough for ten, and I've made special coffee. And I've got a fine lot of honeycomb for you that smells like the whole month of May. And I've some Mexican wine you'll have with the roast pork. I've laid out just the dinner for you, Reata, and you're the boy that can eat it!"

Reata was in fact the boy that could eat it. He devoured a mighty meal, smoked one cigarette, and then went back and stretched himself on that pile of rugs and slept for two hours.

The sweet smell of Turkish tobacco, specially scented, was in the air as Reata sat up. He saw the junk dealer

sucking with closed eyes at the mouthpiece of the long rubber tube.

There, too, was a scent of coffee, and he found a steaming pot which Dickerman had just brought. What had made that devil of a man understand the exact moment when Reata would awaken?

Well, if one started asking questions about Dickerman's strange intuitions, there would never be an end of them. Reata poured out a cup of coffee. It was thick and strong, but it was not bitter. Instead of being black, it was a profound but very clear brown. And the taste of it was not like the taste of other liquids. It was to be drunk straight, out of little cups hardly bigger than eggshells. They held one perfect mouthful at a perfect temperature.

"What a cook you would have made, Dickerman," said Reata.

"And what a cook I *am*," insisted Dickerman.

A black cat climbed onto his shoulder. Dickerman put up a hand, and the scraggly creature began to rub itself against the fur along the side of his face.

"Ay, you're a cook and other things," said Reata. "Now we talk about the price you're going to pay for me."

"Ay, ay," said Dickerman. "But I've already paid a price for you! Think of what I've paid out!"

He held up one finger.

"A hundred and eighty thousand dollars of gold out of that claim in Jumping Creek. I have it. It's mine. It's in my hands. And then you come and snake it away and take it back to them that dug it up. Why, I could pretty nigh hate you for that, Reata!"

"You hate me, well enough," said Reata. "And the thing you hate most about me is that you can use me better living than dead, eh?"

He looked at Dickerman with a glimmer of that yellow light coming into his gray eyes. And Dickerman saw the change and noted it well.

"Ay," said Dickerman frankly. He always knew how to appear frank, and that was what seemed, to Reata, his most detestable characteristic. "Ay, you're more to me living than you are dead. But, as I was sayin', you've cost me plenty Reata. It's what gents know you've done to me. You've tied my plans into knots, and you've got off with a hide that ain't been scratched."

Reata smiled at this.

"There was a time when folks hated worse than a gun at the head to back-chat Pop Dickerman. But you showed that I can be slapped in the face, and damn you for that!"

"Well, I'm back, aren't I?" Then Reata asked: "How many men have you got waiting for a whistle from you, Pop?"

"How many?" said Pop. He nodded. "Enough."

Reata smiled.

"It would be a pretty good thing for the world if I threw the noose of my rope over your scrawny neck and hanged you up to a rafter."

"Ay," said Dickerman calmly, "that would be a good thing for a lot of folks. And now, we was talkin' about the way you've made a fool out of me, Reata. I ain't a proud man. I'm a kind of a humble poor sort of gent. I fool around with junk and I put a price on rusty chains, and things like that. But still there's a little mite of a flicker of pride in me, too. And you've sort of shamed me, Reata."

You almost finished me at Rafferty Hill," said Reata.

"I never should 'a' sent out Harry Quinn on your trail," said Dickerman. "He's got an idea that he can't never handle you, and the idea is what sure enough beats him. But the breed was a promisin' sort. What did you think of him, Reata?"

"As good a man as you could find—for your sort of business," agreed Reata. "He looks like murder and talks like murder and he *is* murder. No, you didn't make any mistake about him. He would have finished me off, but his

trouble was that he didn't pay enough attention to the other fellow in the room."

"I've got him wrote down," said Dickerman. "Bob Clare. I'll be knowin' things about him before long."

"Sure you will," said Reata, "because I'm going to tell you. He's the high price that I'm talking about."

"Him?" cried Dickerman, and suddenly his black eyes flamed. "You ain't able to handle him yourself? You want help to get rid of him, Reata? A little cuttin' of the throat—is that what you mean?"

"I mean the other way round," said Reata.

Dickerman sighed and settled back in his place.

"Yeah, it wouldn't 'a' been the way I tried to guess," he said. "It wouldn't be nothin' as easy as that. You mean—to *keep* his throat from bein' carved?"

"Yes."

"Who wants to carve it?"

"La Farge."

Seldom did Pop Dickerman permit himself to show either great surprise or dismay, but he showed both now, and finally, stretching out his long arms, he turned the palms up, as if asking the gods to witness the height of the impossibility which he was required to perform.

"La Farge?" he echoed at last.

"La Farge has to die," said Reata.

"Then go and do the dirty work yourself," said Dickerman. "You killed Bill Champion. If you killed him, you can kill anybody."

Reata smiled.

Suddenly Dickerman shouted: "I won't have nothin' to do with it! I got a respect for La Farge. I wouldn't touch him, not for ten like you!"

Reata kept smiling. Pop Dickerman pulled out a big bandana and mopped his furrowed brow. His eyes kept dodging from side to side as though he were hunting for a way of escape.

"You don't know La Farge," he said, his voice bubbling lower and more huskily than ever. "You don't know nothin' about him or you wouldn't talk foolish like this, Reata!"

"I only know that La Farge is one of the chief devils, like Pop Dickerman. I only know that he's got his hand in a lot of fires. I know that La Farge is doing twenty things at once, from running Chinese over the Rio Grande by night, to peddling hop in Chicago. I know his men are sticking up stagecoaches in Montana and crooking the cards in Tucson."

"And you're asking me to wipe him out?" asked Dickerman, leaning forward and rapping his knuckles against his bony breast. "You're askin' poor old Pop Dickerman, down here in his junk heaps, to step out and wipe the great La Farge off the earth? Why, you fool, I ain't even tempted!"

"You're afraid of him, Pop," said Reata. "But just balance against La Farge what you can do with me. If you help me to smash La Farge and make Bob Clare safe, I'll be your man."

"For how long?" asked Dickerman.

"For three months—after La Farge is dead."

"Three months?" groaned Dickerman. "You're goin' to be my man for only three months—is that any price for La Farge?"

"Think it over," said Reata.

Dickerman actually rolled his eyes toward the doors; but then, sinking back on the legless divan, he began to comb his furry beard, occasionally flashing up a bright, ratty look at his guest. And afterward, he commenced to smile, the corners of his mouth curling up on his face.

"I'm hearin' you straight, Reata," he said.

"You're hearing me straight."

"Because it means a lot," said Dickerman. "Because now I ain't talkin' with any ordinary hobo. I'm talkin' with a gent that might pick a pocket, but that never broke his

word. A promise from Reata is stronger'n toolproof steel, ain't it?"

Reata shrugged his shoulders. He began to sit up very straight.

"This here Bob Clare that saved you from the worms—you wanta do something for him. Maybe I can save him from La Farge. I dunno. I'll try with everything I got, so's it'll be death for me or for La Farge. I'll take the long chance, but I'm goin' to be paid big if I win! Big, big, big as hell!"

Reata took a breath. His heart was pounding.

"Ay," said Dickerman, "if I have you for three months, I'll make you pick the jewels out of the eyes of the devil in hell! You hear me, Reata? I make no bargain except for all of you. Are you my man to do everything and anything I ask?"

"If Bob Clare goes safe and free I—" said Reata.

"I'll manage it, I tell you, or have my own throat cut tryin'. Answer me up bright and strong, Reata. Will you be my man in everything, for three months after La Farge is dead?"

And Reata, sick at heart, put back his head with a groan and answered, "Yes."

"I'll have your hand on it," said Dickerman, stretching out his grimy claw.

And Reata, surrendering, felt that cold and bony grasp crushing his fingers.

"I've got your hand on it, and now that hand is goin' to be my hand as soon as I've killed La Farge. That hand is my hand, that brain is my brain, and the soul in you is goin' to be my soul—to throw away, if I feel like it."

He laughed, and it was as though Reata saw a pit of darkness opening illimitably deep before him.

He lifted his eyes from it and stared at Dickerman.

"I've had my life given back to me, and Clare was the man who gave it," he said. "I've got to pay him back, and

this is the only way, God help my soul. Now we've got to talk. Because I'm starting back before the red's out of the sky."

Indeed, before the red was out of the sky, Reata had started back for Rafferty Hill. He carried with him a keener sense of the dangers of the work that lay ahead of him, because Pop Dickerman had much to say. There were many things which Pop did not know and above all there was that question of primary importance which Pop could not answer. Who was La Farge? "He's only a signature on a piece of paper," Dickerman had said. "Maybe he ain't anybody real; maybe he's a shadow; maybe he's a corporation! We know what La Farge can do, but we don't know what he looks like."

And it seemed to Reata, as he urged the first horse in the relay up the hills from Rusty Gulch, that he was rushing back to save Bob Clare from something fatal, but unavoidable and nameless as a sliding shadow. Even Dickerman, even that king of rats, had winced when he talked of La Farge, the light in his eyes shrinking to glittering points of malice, and of fear.

Weariness began to work in the body and brain of Reata.

The way was very far. Measured in pain, the return would be five times more deadly than the journey to Rusty Gulch had been. Yet when he reached Rafferty Hill, he would be able to use all the wiles and the powers of Dickerman's organization to protect Bob Clare. So Reata maintained his calm and denied the creeping poison of fatigue and spurred on into the cool wind of the night.

There were still long miles of rough country between Reata and Rafferty Hill when the shadowy hand of La Farge began to reach toward the cabin of Bob Clare. It began to work, not long after sunrise, not in Rafferty Hill

itself, but close to a shanty that lay a bit back from the town in the mouth of a gorge that was choked half with stunted trees and half with boulders.

Lodged here in the gorge, it was well sheltered from the storms of winter. It was big enough to be called a house, because in part it was two stories and an attic above, but it was such a confused jumble of logs that it could not be termed more than a caricature of a cabin. The sides were indented; the roof sagged; but still from the chimney a rising twist of smoke announced habitation.

These things were noted by Jeff Miner with a great deal of circumspection. He had left his mustang back in the brush tangle, well out of view, and now from between a pair of tree trunks he examined the big shack. He was one of those men who seem always frowning because there was a heavy line of black eyebrows ruled straight across his forehead. His long, heavily marked face, his strong-boned and spare body, gave him the look of a beast of prey.

After he had studied the shanty for some time, he began to divide his attention between it and his more immediate surroundings. His eyes penetrated deeply among the rocks and trees, sifting through the shadows to find a stir of life.

Even at that, he was half surprised by the sudden appearance of a man on his left, stepping lightly around the side of a boulder. The newcomer was the exact opposite of Jeff Miner. He was not much more than middle height; he looked rather sleek as if with fat—though it might be muscle that covered him so well.

He came straight up to Miner, making on the way a quick and furtive gesture with his right hand, like that of a man snapping a black snake. Jeff Miner darkened his natural scowl and made the same sign in answer.

"Who are you?" asked Miner.

"Name of Tommy Alton," said the stranger. "I'm on the job with you, here."

"Yeah, and how would I make sure of that?" demanded Jeff.

"The same old way," said Tommy Alton, and took out a wallet from which he carefully extracted a one-dollar greenback. He held it close so that Miner could see, scrawled across the face of the note, the signature, "Gaston La Farge."

Miner stepped back a little and then nodded at blond-headed Tommy Alton.

"All right," said Miner. "I guess it ain't the first time that La Farge has sent his orders out through some kid! But what's up for us to do in the shack, there?"

"That ain't a shack," said Tommy Alton, grinning a little. "If you was to look at it right close, you'd see that it's a rat trap."

"Yeah? Is that so? And what kind of a rat do we trap in it?"

"A rat by the name of Bob Clare. Ever hear of him?"

"I've heard of him," said Jeff Miner. "I've seen him, too, and he ain't the sort of an hombre that a man would fool too much with."

"Not unless La Farge said to," said Tommy Alton.

"No, not unless he said to. Look here, when you last seen La Farge, what did he—"

"I never looked La Farge in the eye," said Tommy. "Did you?"

The taller man started a little.

"Me? How would I 'a' seen him?" he asked.

At this, Alton stepped a shade closer and peered hard into the eyes of Miner.

"I'd lay one buck agin' three that you might be La Farge yourself!" said Alton.

"You talk like a fool!" declared Jeff Miner. "Would La Farge be dressed like this?"

He swept a hand down to indicate his coarse blue jeans, worn gray-white at the knees, stuffed into dusty riding boots. His shirt was the toughest and cheapest sort of rough cotton cloth, slowing a dull checking in green and gray.

This did not seem to convince Tommy Alton. He said: "No matter what you are, I ain't fool enough to try to corner La Farge with questions. But whether it was you that wrote out the orders and passed them under my door at night, or not, I've gotta tell you again what they were. We're to get this here Clare down to the cabin, and we're to use Inez Clare as the bait. She's inside that shack."

"What's she? A sister or something?"

"Her?" asked Tommy Alton. "The way I get it, she's his stepmother, but there ain't much mother in her. We'll go in and see."

When they knocked at the door of the house, a man's voice instantly rang out: "It's open."

It was Jeff Miner who entered first. He and Alton could see a big kitchen that had fallen into ruin though the cooking stove seemed in fairly good repair, and at the stove stood a woman in blue gingham, a woman with a fat body and a face that had once been handsome but was now too starved and lean and lined. It might have been the head of a man except for the massive coil of glossy black hair at the base of her neck. In a chair tilted back against the wall sat a big, handsome fellow of not much more than twenty, the dash of Southern blood showing in his olive skin and the dark of his eyes. A silken sash knotted about his hips and the bright metal embroidery on his short jacket gave Mexican flash to his outfit. A great sombrero sat well back on his head, letting the full fine height of his forehead be seen.

He greeted the strangers by shifting his cigarette from his right hand to his left. The gun on his right thigh gave some significance to that gesture.

"Morning, ma'am," said Tommy Alton. "You Mrs. Inez Clare?"

"I'm Benjamin Clare's widow," she answered harshly. "What about it? What you want?"

"Talk," said Tommy Alton, with his small, good-humored smile. He stepped close to her and showed the greenback that held the elaborate signature of Gaston La Farge.

"Humph," grunted Mrs. Inez Clare. "That's it, is it?"

She stepped back to look over Alton, as though the signature which he carried had made him a bigger man.

The young man in the corner stood up and stepped with a musical jingling of golden spurs close to the strangers.

"Tony, g'wan out of the house," said Mrs. Clare, without glancing at him.

"I dunno why," said Tony, in protest.

"Do as you're told," said his mother. "Get!"

Tony considered the strangers with his head back. He smiled a little and wafted a soft cloud of smoke toward them.

Then he strolled to the door, flung it open, and stepped out.

His mother faced the two.

"Set down," she invited, hooking her thumb toward a pair of chairs.

"We'll talk standing," answered Tommy Alton. "You going to do the talking, or me, Miner?"

"You talk," said Miner. "I was always a better hand at listening."

"News," declared Inez Clare, "is what I want, and that's what I hope you got for me."

"I got an idea that oughta turn into news," answered Tommy Alton. "Bob Clare has to die, is what I hear."

"He oughta be dead already," answered the woman fiercely. "I been waiting—but I never hear that he's dead."

"There's a whole lot of him to die. I guess you know that," replied Alton. "But now the time has come to bump him off, and the place is here."

"Where? This house?" asked Mrs. Clare.

"Right here in this house," said Alton.

"It ain't going to be here," she answered. "That'd look pretty good, wouldn't it? Clare found dead in my place? Bob Clare—and Tony the next in line to get the money of Ben Clare? That'd look so good that they'd hang us for it! I ain't going to have it!"

"All right," said Alton. "I guess we slope along then."

"Hold on!" barked the woman. "You mean that La Farge is pulling out of the job?"

"Look," said Tommy Alton, with a casual gesture that put everything up to Mrs. Clare. "Here's the two of us. The deal is all set. Bob Clare can die to-day. But you do it *our* way or it doesn't get done."

"Well," she said, "what's the scheme?"

"You ever been chummy with Clare?"

"Me? Never! What would I waste talk for on a fat-faced pig like him that stands between my boy and his rights of——"

"You're goin' to write him a letter," said Alton. "You can write a letter, can't you?"

"To him? Yeah, if the letter was boiled in oil and poured down his throat. I could write that kind of a letter."

"You could set yourself down and write a letter to Bob Clare telling him that you're sorry for the bad feelin'. You remember he's his father's son. You wanta have good feeling more than you want Ben Clare's money. You say that you want him to come down here and see you, and

then you and him can square up the bad things that've happened, and all the bad feeling."

She groaned. "Writing a letter like that would burn the fingers off my hands!"

"I show you the way, and you take it or you don't."

"He wouldn't come," said the woman.

"Sure he'd come," said Alton. "Clare is a kind of romantic, you see, and if he gets a letter from any sort of a woman askin' him to come, real important, what can he help do but come to her just the way that the letter says?"

Mrs. Clare jerked back her head and closed her eyes. A pan of beans, heating on the stove, began to burn. The odor blew unheeded across her face.

At last she said: "Yeah, and his father was that sort of a fool, too. I dunno—maybe this *would* work, and he'd come. Then what?"

"Then what? Why, it's pretty easy. I take your letter to him, and I ride back with him to this here shack. I come in the door after him, and inside the house there's my friend, yonder, steadyin' a sawed-off shotgun. I guess that would fix Bob Clare, all right!"

"But there'd be all the blood—all over the floor—all over everything! I've seen what a sawed-off can do!"

Alton smiled wolfishly.

"After Bob is dead, wouldn't this here shack be right dry and fine for the starting of a fire that would burn him to an ash?"

Mrs. Clare looked around her, rather wildly. Then suddenly, she made up her mind.

"Wait till I fetch me some paper and a pencil, and I'll write the letter," she said.

She was soon seated at the kitchen table, at work, her face viciously set and eager.

Jeff Miner suggested the contents of the letter: "Write to him that the seein' of your boy, how dog-gone like he is

to his father, and how like that makes your boy to him—write him that lookin' at your boy is what makes you scribble to him, hopin' to get together one happy family, sort of."

Mrs. Clare stared fixedly at Jeff Miner, for a moment, and then nodded.

"You," she said huskily, pointing her pencil at Miner, "you got brains. You got the real kind of brains that keeps hell full and runnin'."

Miner made a cigarette and smoked it with his eyes half closed, as though in deep and pleasant thought.

The letter, written with a pressure the dug the lead deeply into the paper, was soon finished and signed.

"It'll fetch him," said Mrs. Clare savagely. "A happy family, eh?"

And she put back her head and laughed. "I can't wait to see the thing start working," she said. "Go on, go fast. But when you talk to him, remember that every Clare, though they may look dog-gone stupid and careless, has got brains under the surface."

Tommy Alton rode up into Rafferty Hill to get Bob Clare—and still miles separated Reata, reeling with weariness in the saddle, from the mining town.

As Alton jogged into town, he could survey the stir of life and the swirlings of the main street until he got up the little hill itself to the cabin of the man he wanted. Tom Alton dismounted and tied his mustang to the rack in front of the cabin. Before he tapped at the door, he gave a glance around him at the sunlight, and the trees, and the big white clouds that floated through the blue of the sky, and Alton considered this beauty and freshness with a great deal of thought because he knew that he was going

in to face a man capable of thinking quickly and shooting straight.

Then he tapped at the door and was told to come in.

The interior of the cabin was shadowy, when he pushed the door open, but he could see well enough the big fellow with magnificent shoulders who sat at the little central table. There was a rifle leaning beside his chair, and he wore revolvers. And it seemed to Alton, all in all, that he had never seen a better picture of a fighting man.

Bob Clare stood up from the table.

"Got a letter for ya," said Alton. "Important. It's from your stepmother."

Clare scowled. "She's writing to me, is she? Then there must be the devil and all in her brain," said he.

"She's a hard one, all right," said Alton. "But she's changed."

Bob Clare looked earnestly at him, asked him to sit down, and then opened the letter. Alton was already smoking a cigarette when his host looked up.

"She says—you know what she says?" asked Clare.

"Sure. She read it to me. She wondered could I put in any better words," answered Alton frankly. For he knew that a man can tell a better lie when there are grains of truth in it.

"What I wonder is," said Clare, "how the old girl could ever think that I'd be fool enough to come down to her place."

His brown eyes glared with yellow fire as he added: "She doesn't think that I've forgotten a pack of things, does she? A wild cat might stop hungering for red blood, but Inez would never stop hungering for my life."

"Is she as tough as all that?" asked Alton carelessly. "Well, I'll be sashaying along, then."

He got to the door, and as he stood in the brightness of it, Clare called to him.

"Wait a minute. D'you think that she's really changed?"

"Why, I dunno," answered Alton. "I ain't particular familiar with her."

"What reason is there for her changing?" demanded Clare.

"I dunno. Except that she's damn sick."

"She is?"

"You know how it gets the Mexicans. They go quick when the consumption knocks into them," said Tommy Alton.

"Consumption?" muttered Clare. "You mean that she's got that?"

"Yeah. She's kind of all caved in," said Alton. "Dog-gone me if I blame you for not wanting to see her. She's sure a sight, just now."

"Hold on!" commanded Clare. And he laid the grip of his powerful hand on the shoulder of Alton.

"I still don't get it. What could be in her head to send for me?"

"It's the kid, I suppose," said Alton. "I dunno, but I guess it's the kid. She's raised Tony to hate you. Tony ain't a bad kind of a fellow, but the minute his ma was dead, he'd be apt to make a bee line for you and start a fight, and I guess she knows that. She wants you two to be friends before she passes out. There's something like that in her old head, I suppose. She's dying, d'you see, and death sort of softens up the hardest of them."

"All right, I'll see her," said Bob Clare.

He moved fast, kicking off his moccasins, jumping his boots onto his feet. The activity of the man was such that Alton, shrewdly observing, made out that there was never a moment during this process of dressing, when he would

have had Clare at a complete disadvantage. Otherwise, it would have been a great temptation to jerk out a Colt and finish the job on the spot.

However, Alton was the sort of a man who prefers surety to chance. And now big Bob Clare was out of the cabin and, quickly, on the back of a horse which he took from the shed behind the shack.

That was the way they rode across Rafferty Hill and over the hollow and up the gorge to the shack where Inez and her son were staying. They dismounted before the door, and the horses were tethered to the old, eaten beam of the hitch rack.

"Odd kind of a place," said Bob Clare, as he looked up along the front of the house.

There was no suspicion in him. Tom Alton noted this with a grim amusement.

People had found it hard to circumvent Bob Clare, but Alton wondered a bit at the reputation of the big fellow. Clare might be both strong and brave, but certainly he was not cunning in any sense of the word.

Then he saw Bob Clare at the door.

When the door opened, according to the plan, what should greet Clare was a frightful blast of fire and lead that would lift him, at a single blow, across the threshold of his life into eternity.

And fire would then lick up, with its greedy mouth, both the boards and the blood that soaked them.

It should be a perfect crime. There was nothing, it seemed to Alton, to prevent the thing from going through.

But the door itself was suddenly opened, and on the threshold stood tall Tony Clare.

When he saw Bob, his half brother, before him, realization took him like a flame in one tenth of a second.

"It's *you!*" And Tony went for a gun.

Clare tried a short, hooked right. It was a pretty punch, well-devised and cleverly landed. The trouble was that Tony had stepped away from the blow, and it only glanced along his chin.

Now he grappled with Bob Clare. They tumbled to the floor and rolled over, against the side wall. Then Bob's head struck the wall, and there he lay on the floor, stretched senseless, while Tony gathered himself to his knees.

"Get out of the way, kid," snarled Jeff Miner, "while I finish the dummy!"

Tony jerked his head about and saw the executioner standing ready with the gun.

"Put down that shotgun, damn you!" he shouted. "This gent is goin' to die, but it's me that's goin' to do the killing. He's *my* meat!"

When Reata came into Rafferty Hill the bright bay mare that carried him was a-foam from the fierceness of his riding.

In the back of Reata's brain, in the base of it just above the spinal column, there was a steady ache, a numbness that spread forward through his scalp and stretched a band of coldness across his forehead. Below the knees there was no sensation in his legs. Between knees and hips there was a constant ache, and the middle of his body was taut with the pain of ten thousand torsions as the wild mustangs had bucked and twisted and fought their way through the wilderness.

He looked back and saw on the brow of the western hill a quick flickering of light, a thing almost imperceptible except to an understanding eye. But Reata understood.

Pop Dickerman's messages were flying through the air. The long arm of Pop Dickerman now fought on his side!

He got a savage comfort out of that, and he was rallying a little as he sent the bay mare pounding into the stable from which he had started.

Broad-faced, thick-necked Harry Quinn came out of the shadows, muttering, as Reata dismounted and threw the reins to a stable hand. With Quinn moved another man as slenderly built as a cat, and with an air of feline strangeness and pride about him.

The stableboy who took the horse away, looked back with a grin, for it was early in the morning to see a man drunk, and drunk was what Reata seemed to be, with Harry Quinn supporting him powerfully on one side and that slender, sleek-stepping fellow on the other.

"Lookat, Salvio!" said Harry Quinn. "We could take and tie him in knots. There ain't much to Reata just now."

Gene Salvio glanced over the drawn face of Reata and said nothing, but there was a hungry gleam in his eyes nevertheless.

"I'm half-glad to be on your side of the fence," said Reata. "When I was on the other side of it, it was dreaming about you that used to wake me up in the middle of the night with a cold sweat on my face."

"Yeah?" said Salvio, much pleased. "Well, that's finished. Only, I'd sure like to know what sort of a deal you had to make with the old man to get him to switch over to you."

"Get the mare and the dog for me, will you?" Reata said to Quinn. "Get Sue and Rags, Harry. We're going over to look in on Bob Clare. There's where our job is."

Reata slid down on a sack of crushed barley and leaned his shoulders against the wall. He started to make a

cigarette, but the paper tore in his trembling fingers which had been tugging and straining for so many hours against the hard mouths of galloping mustangs. Salvio took the makings from Reata and with a single twist of his sure, swift fingers built the smoke.

"How far did you have to go after you left Rafferty Hill?" asked Salvio. "How far did Pop ride to meet you on the way?"

"He didn't. I went all the way to Rusty Gulch and saw Pop with his cats and his rats," answered Reata.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Gene Salvio. "You mean that you been all the way, and back—as quick as this? I don't want to call you a liar, Reata."

Reata sighed. "I'm pretty tired, Gene, but don't call me a liar."

Salvio noted the sunken eyes of Reata and the steady pull at the corners of his mouth.

"Ay," said Salvio. "You've done it. Nobody else could. But what the hell? You're always doing what nobody else can do!"

The roan mare with the ugly head came out, dragging her hoofs across the floor in her long-geared walking step. Little Rags came from beside her shambling feet and leaped to the lap and then to the shoulder of his master, where he reared up and, with one forepaw resting on the hat of Reata, whined and shuddered with consummate joy. His tail kept lashing and his free forepaw kept making rapid motions of ecstasy in the air. As for the mare, with her flattened ears and her head thrust out at the end of her scrawny neck, she seemed about to go for Reata with her teeth, but she merely tried to thrust her muzzle into his face, whinnying softly.

Reata caught her by the mane and pulled himself to his feet; then he swayed into the saddle, as Harry Quinn and Gene Salvio mounted their own horses, and so the three of them rode out of the stable and across Rafferty Hill. No

one who looked at them could have suspected that the roan mare was worth ten of the fine, shining, dancing horses such as Quinn and Salvio rode; and certainly no one would have dreamed of comparing the rather small and drooping figure of Reata with the slender and dapper alertness of Salvio or with the thick-chested strength of Harry Quinn.

Reata allowed his body to jounce loosly in the saddle, and with every moment, he knew, in spite of the numb agony of his tortured muscles, that he was recuperating little by little. He would soon be able to sleep. He had only to get back to Bob Clare in the cabin in order to relax completely, with Quinn and Gene Salvio standing guard.

Quinn and Salvio? Yes, and there were others! Two men who passed them slowed up their horses with inquiring looks, but Salvio waved them aside.

"How many of you fellows are there in town?" asked Reata.

"How many of *us* are there?" answered Salvio. "You gotta remember, Reata, that you're one of us, now! Aw, I dunno how many Pop has called in. Plenty, I guess. Looks like a big job. Who are we goin' up against?"

Reata lifted his weary head and stared into the handsome face of Salvio.

"La Farge!" he said.

He saw the blow strike home into the very soul of Salvio; and they rode the rest of the way in the silence that Reata wanted. Only, now and again, he could hear the hushed murmuring of Harry Quinn, as that sturdy fellow tasted the name again: "La Farge?" As well speak of the devil, in this part of the world!

They came up the hill to the cabin and found the door ajar—sure proof that Clare must be inside. So Reata dismounted and stepped with uncertain feet across the threshold, saying: "All right, Bob. I'm back with some friends!"

There was no answer. The emptiness and the damp cold of the shadows alone had received his voice. He looked helplessly around him, as Quinn and Salvio pressed in at his shoulders.

"Where's he gone?" asked Quinn. "Where's this hombre that we gotta look after?"

"Maybe in the hoss shed behind—" began Salvio.

"No. He's not here—and I told him to stay—I told him not to budge," muttered Reata.

He went back to the door. The heat of the sun felt weak as moonlight against his face, and there was a chill in the stir of the thin, pure air. Faint noises, dim clamoring of laughter, muffled shouts of command, curses, drifted to him from the town and the mines along the creek.

"He's gone!" muttered Reata. "We're too late. But maybe we can run down the fellows who grabbed him. Get all of Dickerman's agents working. Find out if Bob Clare was seen anywhere in town this morning. Everybody knows him. If he's been seen, then come back and tell me. I've got to get some sleep."

At that word, such an aching flood of exhaustion poured over him that he barely made out the voices of his companions answering. He turned into the cabin, dropped face down on the bunk, drew one groaning breath, and then blacked out.

The mare started grazing in front of the cabin door, and little Rags hopped up on the bunk and lay down at the head of his master. In that way, there was a sentinel placed in front of the house, and inside it; and this double system of mounting guard was perfectly well known to both the horse and the dog.

Little more than an hour went by before a rider sped straight up the slope of the little hill toward the front of

the cabin. As it became clear that he was headed for this place, the roan mare stamped and snorted. She turned an anxious head and winnied.

Inside, Rags was frantically at work on the wakening of his master.

He whined; he barked sharp and small; but he drew only a groan for a reply.

Now Rags pulled at the ear of his master. He caught it very gently in his needle-sharp teeth and whined as he drew back against the flesh. And at that, finally, Reata roused himself and sat up, moaning with exhaustion.

And then, in a moment, hearing the hoofs of the approaching rider, Reata drove the ache from his brain and winked his eyes clear.

Gene Salvio pulled up at the door and flashed down out of the saddle.

"We've spotted a palce where he was seen ridin' close to the creek, headed out towards the gorge," said Salvio. "Come on, Reata, and see if you can pick up the trail for us. We can't make out a confounded thing; ground's all covered with rock and small stones."

Reata nodded. His own senses were ordinarily sharper and keener than most. But sleep had dulled them now. Luckily he could call in an auxiliary force far more acute; he could use Rags.

He took the little mongrel to the horse shed, first, at the entrance to which Rags quickly was put on the hoofprints of the horse of the missing man. Those prints Rags followed around to the front of the house, and quickly found a line down the slope of the hill.

"He's got it," said Reata. "We can take it easy now, boys. Rags is on the job, and he'll do his tricks for us."

They rode toward the mouth of the gorge, well away from the town, where the ravine was choked with vast

boulders and scattering stunted trees. And here Rags began to run in rapid, irregular circles, cutting plainly for the lost sign.

"He's lost it," said Reata, "but don't push in with the horses and ruin the scent for him. You take a fellow like Rags, he likes to work out his problems for himself. If you crowd him too much, he'll just sit down and let you tackle the thing by yourself."

"If La Farge is at the other end of the trail," said Quinn, "then I'm glad that Rags has missed."

It was a good bit earlier when Bob Clare recovered his senses and found, to his bewilderment, that the men in the cabin had not yet poured lead into him.

He heard Tony arguing fiercely.

"He belongs to me! I put him out. I slammed him!"

"The side of the house slammed him," answered Jeff Miner. "That was what put him out. Except for that, he would have tied you in knots, it looked like to me."

"It looked like that to you, did it?" said Tony savagely. "And who are you, I wanta know?"

"I'm a gent that would like to take you apart and see how the stuffing is packed inside."

"You would, would you?" snarled Tony. And he lunged forward.

His mother's grim voice broke in: "Steady, Tony! Steady, son. There ain't going to be no fighting inside of this here shack! We've got another kind of a job on our hands, just now. That crooked fool on the floor. He's comin' to!"

Bob Clare pushed himself up on one hand, and his brown eyes looked deeply into the darker eyes of Tony. Then the half-breed leaned and snaked Bob's gun out of its holster.

"Get up," said Tony. "We gotta do some talkin' together."

Bob Clare rose to his feet silently. With his back to the wall, he looked over the three men, and then he stared at

the woman. Oddly enough, it was her expression that made him surrender all hope. The men might be handled by force or by craft, but it would be hard to reckon with the uneasily shifting light in the eyes of Inez Clare.

She came over to him with a swaggering, slow step, her hands on her hips. The excess of her insolence and her hatred made her look him greedily up and down.

"You're the papa's boy, are you?" said Inez. "Well, even if his ghost was to stand up and start yapping for you, it couldn't do you no good now! We got you, Bobbie!"

He said nothing to this. She snarled another word or two and then turned away from him.

"What are you waiting for?" she demanded fiercely. "You got him, ain't you? Then why don't you get rid of him?"

"Because I ain't done talkin' and I ain't done thinkin'," said Tony.

"You?" shouted his mother. "Hey, are growed-up men going to be stopped by a young brat like you? Knock him out of the way, Jeff."

Tony stepped back until his shoulders were against the breast of Bob. He was a shade taller but slighter, and a man's strength had not yet toughened in him. More important than all else, Tony still held two guns, with which he was patently willing to cover the other men.

He said: "This here has gotta be talked out man to man. You understand me?"

"Tony! You're actin' like a fool!" shouted his mother. "You're throwin' everything away!"

"I ain't throwin' nothin' away," said Tony. "What am I throwin' away?"

"What? Tell me what these two gents were sent here for! Tell me what they're doin', will you? Tell me why I got La Farge into this here deal, with you? To get rid of that—that devil behind you. And now you're playin' the half-wit and holdin' up the game."

The eyes of Tony grew dreamy, and his head tilted back bit by bit. He smiled on the three, and in that smile there was an increased resemblance between him and Bob Clare.

"I'm tellin' all of ya," said Tony, "there ain't gonna be no murder done in here!"

They could only stare at him. For obviously Tony was the pivot upon which the entire plan turned. It was Tony who would inherit the money of the dead Clare the moment Bob was out of the world. And Jeff Miner and Tom Alton, no matter how furious they might be, were able to see that Tony would have to be treated with care.

Alton said: "Look here. You can put up your guns, Tony. We'll give you our word. Nothing is going to happen to Bob till you say so. Does that suit you?"

"What are you talkin' about?" shouted Inez to Alton.

"Leave him be. Leave what he says go," directed Jeff Miner, with a knowing look at the woman. "We'll give our word that nothin' happens till the kid says for us to start it."

"That's straight, is it?" asked Tony eagerly.

"Sure it's straight," answered Alton. "We'll just put a rope on Bob to make sure that he stays put. That's all."

Tony stepped away from the captive. He looked at Bob with a certain relief in his eyes.

"All right," he said. "Hog tie him, if you wanta. I don't care about that. Only, there ain't goin' to be no murder in my house!"

That was why they tied Bob Clare hand and foot.

And because the nature of Tony was proud and stubborn, because he was a thoroughly spoiled young man, Jeff and Tom Alton and Inez Clare had to argue with Tony till dusk before they could manage to hit on a means of disposing of the prisoner.

Small wonder that Rags lost the scent in the midst of the gorge. Even a wolf or a hunting wild cat might well have missed it, but not even a starving wolf in winter would have shown the patience of the small dog.

Shallow rills of water, washing over the rocks, gave a hundred chances for the losing of scent altogether; and the rocks themselves had been exposed, now, for hours to a burning sun. It seemed impossible that the slightest trace of a trail could remain.

Yet Rags kept laboring.

Sometimes he would run a few steps with his nose almost rubbing over the surface of the rocks. And again he would lift his head a trifle and seem to be reading messages that rode upon the wind.

"While we're dead stuck on this trail," said Reata in disgust, "maybe poor Bob is being rushed a hundred miles away from here!"

"You like that gent. You like him a whole lot," said Salvio. "How much cash do you get out of this job, Reata?"

"Cash?" said Reata vaguely. "Not cash, old son. Only a chance to pay off a debt."

"Yeah, I know," growled Salvio. "There ain't anything practical about you, Reata. There's Harry Quinn with a rag around his head from the night when he tried to stick you in your sleep. You don't seem to carry much of a grudge agin' him. But that gent Bob Clare, that dropped Harry—why, you'll spend the rest of your life tryin' to pay him back for a thing that any decent partner would do for a friend, if he could. There's too much gratitude in you, Reata. It kind of softens you up!"

Reata said nothing. He considered this remark for a time, and then, as he often did when he came to a thing which he could not answer, his idle fingers took up the slender length of lariat—and he began to make the rope

form figures in the air. He made it run over the ground in single and double loops; he made the loop rise quivering into the air, spinning with incredible speed; he made it descend again over his head and rise once more until the trembling circle of the noose seemed to be flying on invisible wings. Or, again, with a noose no larger than the grasp of a hand, he caught up small stones and made them fly to a distance, or tossed them into the air and caught them. All of these things he performed with a perfect carelessness.

It was not that he seriously considered that he was engaged in a work of folly. It was simply because the mention of Bob Clare had made him see the big fellow again, more clearly, the laughing face and the haunted eyes. Once more he saw the handful of bills extended to him; once more he seemed to select a single greenback from the lot—as a means by which he might remember the moment!

The day began to close, and as the evening approached and the fires burned up in the west and then circled the entire horizon, Reata felt the last hope running out of him. Only one thing kept him from surrendering, now, and that was that Rags was still busily at work, following the trail for a few steps, losing it, circling for half an hour in a small compass, stepping delicately until he discovered, once again, a fine-spun clew that could be followed.

And then, as the darkness commenced to close—long after Salvio and Quinn had demanded that the waiting stop—little Rags suddenly straightened away and ran ahead through the brush and the boulders, and across the wash of a little rivulet until he brought the men to the verge of a clearing in the center of which stood a two-story shack.

One eye of light gleamed from a window. There was just

enough illumination in the sky to show, rising against it, a pale drift of smoke from the chimney.

Rags, with the face of this building in view, dropped on his belly and stretched like a dead thing along the ground.

For the first time that day, Reata touched the little dog. He dropped to one knee beside him, and ran the tips of his fingers repeatedly over the hot body. At that caress, a tremor of pleasure ran through Rags. He was rewarded.

Reata murmured over his shoulder: "Get the horses, Harry. Take 'em back into the woods. This is the place, all right. Clare is in there, dead or alive. Gene, you cut around behind the house and take a look-see. I'm going to try the front and make out what's going on inside, if I can. Bob Clare's in hell right here under our noses."

Reata, with a whisper, made Rags stay flat on the ground. Then he went straight up to the front of the house.

Stepping closer still, he found that he could look through the lighted window. It had been boarded over, but there were some ample cracks through which the light was shining, and one of these gave him a view of what was inside.

The first face he saw was the dark, gloomily savage countenance of Jeff Miner, and since it was framed alone in the lantern light, at the first moment, it made Reata think of what he had said to Salvio and Quinn. For if this house was playing the part of hell on earth, then the dark-faced man was certainly the chief devil in it! Then he saw the shrewish, embittered face of Inez, and the strangely featureless head of Tommy Alton. He saw Tony, tall and graceful and brilliant in his Mexican outfit. Last of all, he made out Bob Clare—alive!

He was in danger. Yes, he was tied hand and foot to a chair and though he maintained his habitual smile, his face was worn and his eyes deeply hollowed.

An insane impulse swept over Reata to dash the door open and leap in on the scene. Instead, he turned and slipped back to the place where he had left Rags.

Harry Quinn was already there, on the shadowy edge of the woods, and he muttered: "How is it, Reata? The whole day for nothin', eh?"

Reata pointed to a quick-stepping figure that was approaching them.

"Ask Salvio!"

Gene Salvio, coming up at a gliding run, breathed: "He's in there. Rags was on the trail, all right!"

Quinn consulted his thoughts in silence, for a moment, hearing Salvio say: "That ten-headed rattlesnake, Jeff Miner—he's in there, too. And a gent with a smooth mug. Reata, both of them belong to La Farge, and that means that they're hand-picked. And then there's the young one. That's three of 'em. How are we going to reach inside that house without getting Bob Clare killed the first shot they fire?"

Reata sat down on the ground, cross-legged, with his back to a tree.

At last he spoke: "I've got to get into the house. There's an attic over the kitchen. You two get close and wait. When you hear my yell, smash in that kitchen door and start shooting!"

Then he faded into the darkness.

Reata found what he wanted at the back of the old building—a beam that projected out from the edge of the roof, used as a hoist when the place was being built.

Over that beam, at the very first cast, Reata lodged the noose of his lariat, and a moment later he was handing himself up the slender line, walking the logs of the side wall, with the tips of his boots. Once on the roof, it was easy for him to slip through a dormer window and into a room where the air was laden with an odor of rats.

Beneath him, he could hear faint voices in the kitchen. Now he pushed ahead. He found a door. Beyond it were the rough, sharply angled timbers of the roof rafters.

The voices were directly beneath him now, and through the darkness, rays and long slashes of brightness angled upward, touching the rafters and the crosspieces with eyes of light.

But one thing above all else struck Reata. And that was a square irregularly sketched in broken streaks and points of light upon the under surface of the roof. Reata located the source of that square and found that it was what he had hoped—a trapdoor that gave down upon the middle of the kitchen. Very useful, of course, in that kitchen supplies could be cached in the attic and immediately reached at any time by means of a ladder.

The door was there, but it was closed, the light soaking only through the chinks and crevices around the edge of it. The great question was whether or not Reata could lift that door and give himself free access to the kitchen without attracting the attention of the people beneath him. There was still another danger. Unless the door had been opened recently, dust was likely to have accumulated around the edges of it, and a fall of dust through the lantern light was sure to betray him.

With his fingers prying around the sides of the door, Reata gained a handhold and started to lift. He put on pressure very slowly, for by infinite slowness he hoped that not a creak would come from the strained wood.

One thing gave him hope, and that was the tense tone of the conversation beneath him. For he heard the voice of the tall man, Jeff Miner, saying grimly: "Now we gotta have the showdown. We been waitin' too long already. I'm sick of it. Listen to me, Tony. Are you goin' to talk sense, or ain't you?"

"I'll talk sense," said Tony.

Reata increased his pressure on the edge of the door. The long and painful strain made his arms ache to the shoulders.

Drawing the trapdoor upward, he soothed himself by repeating, silently, over and over, that Fate would not let him fail, but that it was preordained that he must succeed. For he had paid the price; he had made his effort; he had rallied strong helpers to work at his side, and furthermore he had bought the brain of Pop Dickerman to aid him.

Now he had the door raised almost straight up. There was no longer that agonizing strain on his shoulders; and a wide square of light shot upward through the gap that had been made in the ceiling. It seemed to Reata that that light was almost as strong as the sun. He had to steady his excited nerves a little before he could realize that the upstriking light was, as a matter of fact, very dim—only such as extended through the porous top of the lantern that stood on the top of the central table in the kitchen, almost directly beneath him.

The heat of the cookery, the rich odors of it, kept stealing up to him.

And then came a sudden exclamation, Tony crying out: "What the devil dropped that dust on me?"

He was there by the table. His wide sombrero jerked back, and he stared straight upward into the face of Reata.

Then Reata understood that what was so very clear to *him,* looking into the light, was all obscured to Tony Clare, looking away from it. Holding his breath, Reata waited.

But the head of Tony remained strained back only for an instant. Then the sombrero flopped forward again as Tony continued to rub his eyes, and swore softly.

"There's a wind comin' up," said Tommy Alton, "and that's pretty sure to knock loose a lot of dust in an old shack like this."

"Well, Tony, what about it?" asked Miner. "Are you ready to let us do the job?"

"I been talked to so long that I'm pretty nigh talked out and talked down," declared Tony. "You all keep tellin' me that Bob is a sneak and a crooked gambler and a man-killer. But he's also my father's son?"

"Hi!" screamed Inez Clare, suddenly alert with anger. "Your father's son! And ain't you got a precious lot of reason to love that there father of yours?"

"Aw, quit it, will you?" answered Tony. His voice fairly ached with weariness.

"Ain't you able to see sense?" demanded big Jeff Miner. "Ain't there any sense in you, Tony? This gent has to go down. You dunno what he's done. Make him answer up about the men he's killed. You tell him, Bob Clare. Admit how many men you've killed."

Bob Clare was perfectly steady. The long strain of the day had told on him, and those fluctuations of despair and of hope as he saw the instinctive affection of his half-brother wax and wane through the hours.

"Lookat here, Bob," said Tony. "How many gents you bumped off?"

Bob Clare merely smiled, and sardonic as it was, that smile made him seem younger again.

"Got a good reason for why he won't talk," said Miner. "There's a list of twenty-odd dead men behind him, and *that's* why he shuts up!"

"Twenty?" exclaimed Tony, in both awe and horror.

"It's a lie!" answered Bob Clare. "Five men—that's all."

"Yeah, he'll admit he's knocked over five," said Jeff Miner. "But there's plenty more. He's a killer, is what he is. He kills for the sake of killin'."

"I've never killed a man tied into a chair," answered Bob Clare. "But I'm through with talking. It's no use. I know

that I'm a dead man, and I'm dead because I was a fool! But I've got an idea, somehow, that this night is one you people are going to remember for a long time."

"Your friends are goin' to trail us down, are they?" Jeff Miner sneered.

A strange smile crossed the face of Bob Clare.

"*One* friend will," he said.

Reata, by this time, had laid the trapdoor flat open and now crouched at the edge of the opening.

"Hell, you got no friends!" said Jeff Miner. "All you got is a lot of hangers-on that foller around after you because you chuck your money away to 'em. There ain't a man of the lot that'll lift a hand for you, and there ain't a one that don't laugh behind your back."

The smile remained on the lips of Bob Clare.

"If you'd said that a couple of days ago," he answered, "I might have been able to believe you. But things are different now."

"Found a partner, have you?" snarled Miner.

"Ay," said Bob Clare gently. "A partner!"

His glance, as he spoke, flashed upward right toward Reata, as though an instinct had told him where to find the thing of which he had spoken. The glance went down again instantly. In the gloom, he had been unable to see the open trap and the man above it, but the words and the look lodged in the very heart of Reata.

With the deadly coil of the lariat in his hand, he could noose one of the men around the throat and then hurl himself at the others.

And after that? Well, there were Dickerman's boys, Salvio and Quinn. They'd join the fight.

But still he waited, since the ultimate moment had not come.

Tony walked over to the bound figure of his half-brother. "You been handy with guns. You've fought your way through a lot of bad scrapes. Now I'm goin' to give you

a chance to fight your way through this one!"

He turned to Miner.

"Cut the ropes and turn him loose, Jeff," he ordered. "There'll be no murder here. Him an me, we're gonna fight it out fair and square. Cut him loose, and give him back his gun!"

There was more than the treacherous blood of his mother in the heart of Tony, that was clear. Something leaped in Reata as he heard the speech.

If Tony were occupied even for a moment with the prisoner, then Reata could strike a double blow with great advantage, from his height. And with his call, he could bring in Dickerman's two wild cats who crouched outside, near the door of the kitchen, ready to respond.

Jeff Miner was saying: "Tom, whatcha think of it?"

Alton sat on the edge of the center table, not far from the lantern. He now shrugged his shoulders, and his calm, good-humored face turned from one brother to the other. "Good a way as any," he said.

Inez glared at them. "I say it's crazy is what it is!"

Miner went over to the chair, cut the ropes, and gave Bob Clare's gun back into his hand.

"I'd take and chuck you into the river, if I had the doin' of it," said Jeff Miner. "But the kid's gotta have his party!"

Bob Clare fingered the gun thoughtfully.

"Stand up!" shouted Tony, with a sudden fury.

"Tony," said Bob Clare "you're remembering that we have the same father?"

"Ay," yelled Tony, the rage loosening and rushing through him. "We got the same father, and a mean one. He hounded ma. He raised hell with her life. But it's because we got some of the same blood in us that I'm givin' you a chance to fight for your life. Stand up!"

Bob Clare sighed. He looked at the sourly grinning faces of Jeff Miner and Tommy Alton. Inez was glaring at them from the corner of the room.

And then the thing was clear to Reata. The ropes that had bound the arms of Bob Clare all the day and shut off at least a part of the circulation, had left him numbed, half helpless in leg and arm. For him to attempt to use a revolver now would be suicidal.

Yet he would not ask for mercy. Reata could guess that beforehand. To point out to Tony that the fight was a murder after all and not a real battle would have tasted, to the fine honor of Bob Clare, like a cowardly appeal for life.

No, he would not make his appeal. Instead, he rose slowly to his feet.

Would he even lift a hand against this man who was half his own blood? Reata doubted it.

They made a magnificent picture as they faced one another, almost of a height and of bigness, with something more noble and powerful in Bob and something more handsome and dangerous in Tony.

The noose formed under the fingers of Reata. He made it ready for the cast. The idea had come to him at last. It was not at one of the men that he would make his throw.

Tony was saying savagely: "Ma was double-crossed. You know that she was double-crossed. It ain't me that I care about. I don't want none of the dirty money of a man that hated me. I don't want it and I wouldn't have it, but ma was treated crooked—and now you're goin' to pay for it!"

Reata saw the lips of Bob Clare part, but the argument that was about to come forth was never uttered. Bob Clare set his teeth and endured the rank injustice of this speech. After all, it would be hard to root out of the mind of Tony a belief in which he had been schooled all the days of his life.

"Tom, stand back there agin' the wall with a handkerchief in your hand," said Tony. "When you drop it, we'll shoot."

Of course, there was a portion of this plan which Tony

could not comprehend, but which was clear enough to Reata. No doubt Jeff Miner and Tommy Alton would take no chance that Tony might be killed. The first bullets would fly from their own guns into the heart of Bob Clare.

And as Jeff stepped back to take up his appointed station, Reata made his cast.

Fair and true the lithe shadow of the thin rope dropped. It whipped over the lantern, gripped it with a slight jangling sound, and then with a strong jerk Reata snatched the light out of the room. The violence of that upward motion put out the lantern's flame.

Below him, in the darkness, there was a moment of silence. Then, before he heard a stir, he yelled at the top of his lungs and dropped through the trapdoor to the kitchen beneath.

He had forgotten the table. It crashed under his feet, and rolled him headlong over the floor.

Pandemonium filled the room. A gun flashed and roared. Instead of pitch darkness, from the cracks of the old stove, red spots and thin slices of firelight flared through the black. Then something smashed heavily against the outside door.

That would be Salvio and Harry Quinn trying to get in.

Reata rolled dizzily across the floor, struck a body and toppled its weight on himself.

"Get Bob Clare! Get him!" the wild voice of Jeff Miner was shouting. Reata's hands were totally filled in struggling with the man he had crashed against.

The fellow was big, weighty, and fast; the grip of his hands bruised Reata's flesh right through the clothes.

A hammer stroke whirred past the head of Reata. He heard the clank and iron crashing of some tool that had missed him and shattered on the flooring. A revolver, perhaps?

He put his left hand under his chin and swung the elbow back and forth. It struck heavily into flesh and

bone. The weight that pressed his down relaxed a little, groaning with the shock of the blow.

At the same time the outer door of the room went down with a crash, and he heard the singular, high-pitched yell of Gene Salvio going into action—like the cry of a mountain lion beset by a pack of dogs.

Guns filled the room with electric, red flashings.

Now the hands of Reata were free. He brought the loop of the lariat over the shoulders and arms of the man who had been pinning him down.

Someone yelled out in a stricken voice; a heavy body struck the floor.

And then swift footfalls were fleeing.

From the throat of the man Reata had just tied issued the ringing voice of young Tony, shouting: "They've got me! Save yourselves, boys! There's too many of 'em!"

"Get after 'em!" yelled Reata. "Gene—Harry—after 'em! One of them may be La Farge himself! Move fast!"

Too late. The noise of hoofbeats was rapidly drawing away from the cabin.

The voice of Salvio panted, at the open doorway, his head and shoulders dim against the horizon stars: "They're gone—the woman and one man. Who's left in here? Harry, who's that groaning on the floor? Get a light."

The jangling of metal on metal, as a lantern was lighted. Reata first saw the set face of Tony on the floor at his feet, and then, near the fallen table, the body of Jeff Miner lying in his own blood.

Smooth-faced Tommy Alton was gone with Inez Clare.

But victory was with Reata. The fullness of it made a tingling of pleasure run through his blood; for now he was gripping the hands of big Bob Clare.

Totally unhurt, though the coat had been torn from his back in the darkness, Clare was now laughing joyously and wringing the hands of Reata.

The miracle had been performed. There was a great red welt along the face of Harry Quinn, beneath the bandage that encircled his head. Otherwise not one of the attacking party had been scratched. Guns could not find their mark in that hurly-burly. Only chance had favored the bullet from Salvio's gun that laid out big Jeff Miner.

His half-brother was leaning over Tony, saying: "Nothing is going to happen to you, Tony! You stood up for me all day, and I'll stand by you."

But Tony only stared at him, with malice in his eyes.

Reata moved to Jeff Miner. "Here's a poor devil bleeding to death. Let's give him a hand."

"Leave me be," said Miner. "I'd rather die than have your hands on me."

"Let the rat die then!" snarled Gene Salvio.

But the rapid hands of Reata already were cutting away the blood-soaked coat of Jeff Miner like the rind from an orange. Only when he saw the purple mouth of the wound on the breast of Miner did Reata desist.

"It's finished, eh?" said Miner, his mouth pulling out to one side in a sneer.

Reata said: "I'm sorry."

"Sorry, are you? Then you're a fool!" said Jeff Miner. "You got me this time—you gents. But it had to be that way. Nobody walked on two legs that would 'a' been able to lay me out in a fair fight with the sun to see by."

He glared at them, silently cursing each face with his eyes.

"Give me your flask, Gene," said Reata.

A pint metal flask was instantly passed to him by Salvio, and Reata put it carefully to the lips of the wounded man. Jeff Miner took a long drink.

Afterward he lay back with his eyes closed, his lips parted, breathing rapidly, audibly. His color was altering now. Through the deep stubble of unshaven hair, his face looked gray-green.

When he opened his eyes, he stared across at Tony Clare, who was sitting up against the wall.

"All because I pampered a young brat," said Jeff Miner. "I could 'a' bumped off Bob and done the job clean and neat. But I deserve what I got."

He centered his gaze on Reata.

"You're him that done it," he said.

"I don't carry a gun," said Reata gently.

"You're him that done it," said Jeff Miner. "The gun didn't matter. That was a tool. You're him that done it."

He nodded his head.

"If ever I'd seen you this close before," said Miner, "if ever I'd had a chance to see the yaller come into the gray of your eyes, I sure would 'a' know'd how to look out for you."

He kept on staring.

"Bill Champion!" he said suddenly.

"Well?" asked Reata.

"You killed Champion! You're the man."

"Yes," said Reata.

Jeff Miner sighed. "It kind of makes me feel better," he said. "—that the gent that done in Champion finished me, too. You're gonna have a name for yourself, one of these days."

Reata said: "Take it easy, Jeff. You're going out, old-timer."

"Will you do something for me?"

"I will," said Reata.

"Then take hold of your damned rope and go and hang yourself."

Reata smiled thinly. Then he said: "You're going to have a proper burial. Tell me what you want on the stone."

"On the stone?" said Miner, his voice growing huskier, with a distinct rattle in it. "Why, put on the stone—"

But here he coughed, and the cough brought up fast-

breaking bubbles of blood to his lips. He choked, and vainly gaping his wide red mouth for air, he caught up a stick with a charred end that lay near him and scrawled rapidly across the floor, a sweeping, flowing signature, "Gaston La Farge."

It was the same signature, to a flourish, that had appeared on the greenback. And Jeff Miner dropped from the elbow on which he had raised himself and lay without a struggle or a tremor, dead.

Gene Salvio, staring at the name, gasped out: "That's his signature. Reata, we've caught the king of them! We've wiped out La Farge!"

Reata slowly straightened to his feet and drew a long breath.

He remembered what Dickerman had said of La Farge. It seemed impossible that in the very beginning of the feud the great La Farge had gone down.

Afterward, they turned their attention from the covered form of the dead outlaw to Tony Clare, and Reata asked him: "Now, Bob, what's to become of Tony?"

"I'll turn him loose," answered Bob. "I would have been a dead man long before the end of this day, except for Tony."

Then he faced Reata.

"It's over and ended," he said. "Inez won't dare lift a hand with La Farge gone. We've won, Reata! A few days ago I was a dead man—a walking dead man. Now I can take a breath and live again. I can stop being a fool!"

"It's a good thing to stop being," said Reata, with a smile. "But Rafferty Hill is going to be pretty down on me, old fellow."

"Why?" asked Clare.

"Because you were a light that shone pretty bright for the town," said Reata. "And now that light is out!"

Crazy Rhythm

Crazy Rhythm *offers a prime example of how Faust would draw from the reality of his life to form the romance of his fiction. The title song in this story was very real to him. After dinner, at his hillside villa in Italy, Faust and his wife, Dorothy, would often retire to the music room, crank up the Victrola, and dance together. Among the records they danced to,* Crazy Rhythm *was a particular favorite.*

Faust made it serve quite another purpose in this hard-edged tale of an ex-con attempting to find a new life within the law. It evokes no dancing here—just the bitter memory of blood and bullets.

For Jimmy Geary, Crazy Rhythm *is a song of death.*

When Jimmy Geary came in sight of Yellow Creek again he sat down on the pine log beside the road and stared at his home town, from the old mill at one end to the house of the Bentons on the hill, with its thin wooden spires pointing above the trees. Best of all, he could mark the roof of Graham's Tavern beyond the rest of the houses. It

was still painted red but the wave of climbing vines had thrown a spray of green across the shingles since he last sat in the cool of the barroom and smelled the pungencies of whiskey and the pleasant sour of beer.

Behind him, following taller than the mountains, around him thicker than the trees, before him more obscuring than the morning mist, he felt his eight years of prison. Eight years out of twenty-six is a long time.

Prison monotony had made everything about those years dim except their length; the distinct moments of his life, so clear that he felt he could mark them in every day of his past, continued to that moment when he had seen the card come out of Tony Spargo's sleeve. Of course he knew that there were card cheats, but it had seemed impossible that big Tony Spargo, so rich in eye and color and song, could actually be doing dirt for the sake of a fifteen dollar pot. Gus Warren, at the same table, too magnificent of brow and manner, or Onate with the wide face of a Chinese idol, might have been suspected, but never Tony.

He had shouted in a voice that tore his throat and cast a redness over his eyes; then he had knocked aside the Colt that Tony had flashed and pulled his own gun. The weight of two bullets jarred Tony Spargo in his chair like two blows of a fist. But they were all in cahoots, the three of them. Onate came in with a knife; Gus Warren's gun had stuck and came out only with a sound of tearing cloth. Geary turned his shoulder to the knife thrust and got Warren right in the middle of the head. Afterwards he had to shift the gun to his left hand to settle with Onate. But those other two gunmen didn't count very much; he got fifteen years for Gus Warren, and murder in the third degree. But the warden was a fine fellow, and for good behavior there is time off.

"You've got a good, clean pair of eyes in your head," the

warden had told him, "but the only way for a man to keep clean is to work. In the old days you worked with a gun. You'd better find different tools now." Well, he knew the feel of the tools he wanted to manage—the rough of a forty-foot rope and the braided handle of a quirt and the oily sleekness of bridle reins. He knew cows pretty well, and now he would work with them. Finally he would have a herd of his own, and on the fat of this land the cattle would multiply.

"I'm going to punch cows," Geary had told the warden, who answered "That's good, but don't try it at home. You'd better not go back there, Jimmy. You know what I mean. It's bad to get a wheel into an old rut."

The warden was a wise man and he meant that it was best for a man with a past to try a new deal at a new table, but now the eyes of Jimmy Geary were taking hold on the picture of Yellow Creek, so confidently that he felt a sort of kind recognition shining back to him from the whole valley.

He got up and walked on with the loose and easy action of a very strong man whose weight has not yet become a burden. He could feel his strength pull at the calf of his leg and bulge along his thighs, and he kept partially gripping his hands to set his arm muscles in action. His eyes shone with the glory of his fitness. Fifteen years of hard labor had been his sentence, but eight years of daily companionship with a sledge hammer had been enough. He had been pretty soft, in the old days, and now he felt softness of the body was like poison in the system or fool ideas in the head, a thing to be purged away. As he swung down the last hot slope into Yellow Creek, he realized that from his sixteenth to his eighteenth year he never had dared to enter any town without at least the weight of one gun under his coat. Now his hands would have to do.

He went happily down the main street's windings. The roar of the creek was off to the left, music for which he had

wakened and harkened vainly through the dark of so many nights. Slater's barn was there near the road, the brown-red of the paint peeling off it in larger patches than ever. The building was a grim outline to him because he had had that half-hour fight with Jeff Wiley behind the barn till Mexican Charlie was frightened by the splattering of blood and ran yelling to bring grownups to end the battle. From that crimson moment, Jeff and he had felt that they were set off from the rest of the boys in Yellow Creek with a greater destiny in promise for them. It was a sign, and perhaps a prophecy when Jeff was thrown by a bucking horse and broke his neck on a Monday; for on Friday there had occurred the triple killing in Graham's Tavern that sent Jimmy up the river for eight years.

Beyond the barn, the houses were closer together. He knew them all by their own faces, and the faces, the voices, the characters of the people who passed through the front doors. Another twist of the way brought him in view of the central section of Yellow Creek, the irregular "square," the flagpole in the middle of it, the boardwalk that ran around the square in front of the buildings. Everything in Yellow Creek was here, from the newspaper office to the *HAY, GRAIN and COAL* sign of Thomas Masters, the old crook! Not very many people were moving about. There never were many people in Yellow Creek except for holidays, and it was hardly strange that no one noticed young Jimmy Geary when he returned at last, not until after the sheriff had greeted him.

It was the same sheriff, on the same roan horse. He pulled up his mustang hard and waved a silent greeting; Jimmy's salute was just as still.

"Staying or passing through?" asked the sheriff, and all the calm virtue of Jimmy vanished at a stroke.

"Whichever I damn please!" he replied. The sheriff said nothing; he simply took in Jimmy with a long look, then jogged on down the street.

When Geary came to Thomas Masters' sign he stepped into the office. Old Masters sat in his usual corner with the same white whiskers bulging out of the same red face. It looked like a picture surrounded with the smoke of an explosion. He put out a fat hand.

"Well, James," said Masters, "what can I do for you today?"

"You can tell me where to find a job."

"There are only a few good jobs and there are a lot of good men to fill them," said Masters.

"Sure there are," admitted Jimmy. "But I don't care what I get so long as there are horses and cows in it."

"And guns?"

"I'm traveling light," smiled Jimmy.

"You try the Yellow Creek air on yourself for a week and then come in to see me," answered Masters, and raised his pen over a stack of bills.

Jimmy left without a goodbye because a goodbye was not wanted. When he reached the sidewalk, Reuben Samuels got hold of him and took him into the Best Chance saloon. He said: "I'm going to do something for you, Jimmy," and sat him down at a small table in the back room. Samuels ordered two whiskies; Jimmy changed his to beer and then looked across the foam past the red length of Samuel's nose into the brightness of his little eyes.

"I've got a good break to offer you," said Samuels. "I've got a place up the line that used to make big business for me. Faro, roulette, or anything the boys want. But I had some trouble up there. Some of the roughs thought the faro layout was crooked, and they started smashing things up. What I need is a headliner to draw the crowd, and a bouncer well enough known to throw a chill into the boys that go around packing hardware. Well, you're the man for both places, so I could pay you double. I mean fifty or sixty a week."

Jimmy Geary shook his head. "Not interested," he said.

"Or seventy," said Samuels.

"I'm not carrying any hardware, myself," said Jimmy.

"Make it eighty, then, for your health."

"Not for me."

"Ninety dollars a week for an easy job, a sitting job, most of the time; and when the work comes, it's the sort of thing that's play for you. Don't say no. I'm not pinching pennies. I'll call it a hundred flat!"

Jimmy looked hard into the little eyes.

"Aw, to hell with you!" said he, and arose.

"Wait a minute," said Samuels, hastily. "Don't run off. I'm going to do you good, I said, and I meant it. My cousin Nat is right here in town. One of the smartest men you ever saw, Jimmy. He's coming here to see you."

Nat was like Reuben in face but his clothes were fitted to the sleek of his body more carefully. They seemed to be painted on him. His collar was so tight that his neck overflowed it and rubbed a dark spot of sweat onto the knot of his tie. At the same time that his fat fingers took possession of Jimmy's hand, his eyes took brotherly possession of Jimmy's heart and soul.

"It's something big," he said to Geary. "I got the idea when I heard that you were turned loose. I burned up the wires to New York. You see, I know Lew Gilbeck of Gilbeck and Slinger. They've put over some of the hottest shots that ever burned a hole in Broadway. They're looking around for a big musical comedy spectacle to put out this fall, and I shoot them this idea over the wires. 'Jimmy Geary, hero of three-man-killing eight years ago, just out of prison. Big, handsome, loaded with "it." Did his shooting eight years ago when the phonograph record was playing *Crazy Rhythm.* Give him a number where he does the thing over again. *Crazy Rhythm* for a title. A real Western gunfight in the real Western way done by one

who's done it before.' I shoot this idea back to Lew Gilbeck and he wires, 'Yes, yes; get him.' I wire back, 'How much? This baby won't be cheap.' 'Offer one fifty a week." And there you are, Jimmy, with one foot already on Broadway and the other ready to step—"

Jimmy Geary went with lengthening strides out of the cool shadows of the Best Chance saloon and in the dazzling brightness of the outer sun, he fairly ran into the stalwart form of Lowell Parker, the rancher.

"Mr. Parker," he said, blocking the way, "you've always got a place for a man on your ranch. Let me go out there and try to earn my keep till I'm worth real pay, will you?"

The sun-lined and squinting face of Lowell Parker did not alter; one expression had been cut into that brown steel long before and it could not change.

"Step aside a minute, will you, Jimmy?" he asked, quietly.

Jimmy stepped aside, and Parker walked straight past him down the street with an unhurrying stride.

Geary was still swallowing his bitterness when he got across Yellow Creek to Graham's Tavern. Even the trees around the Tavern threw shadows ten degrees cooler than those which fell in any other part of Yellow Creek. Ivy grew around the watering troughs; ampelopsis bushed up around the wooden columns of the veranda, swept over the roof of it, almost obscured the windows of the second story, and so poured up on in thinner streaks across the red shingles above. It was all just as pleasant as before, but there was more of it. Therefore it was rather a shock when he found an unfamiliar face behind the bar instead of the fat, pale, amiable hulk of Charlie Graham. This fellow was the red-copper that a man picks up on the open range. He looked as if he had exchanged chaps for a bar apron.

In the old days the hearty voice of Charlie was always booming, making the echoes laugh, but the new man had

reduced his conversation with three or four patrons to a mere rumble.

"Where's Charlie?" asked Jimmy.

"He's in hell with Tony Spargo," said the lean bartender, and his eyes fixed as straight as a levelled gun on Geary's face.

"They don't have the same hell for men and rats," answered Geary. "Give me a beer, will you?"

The bartender paused as though about to take offense; slowly he drew the beer and carved off the rising foam as he placed the glass on the perforated brass drain; slowly he picked up Geary's money and made the change.

"Have one yourself," said Jimmy.

"Yeah?" queried the other, in doubt. But he saved the change and took a small beer.

"The Grahams are out of this, are they?" asked Jimmy.

"The girl's got it. Kate runs it," answered the bartender. He gave a somber nod of recognition and swallowed half of his drink. Jimmy rushed his down with a certain distaste; he wished it had been whiskey because coming into this room had brought about him all the past and all its appetites.

"Where's Kate now?" he asked, thinking back to her. At eighteen, a lad cherishes his dignity; he had only a dim memory of red hair and a spindling body, for Kate had been only sixteen and therefore hardly worth a glance.

"She's out back," said the bartender, so Jimmy went through to the rear. He stopped in the small card room. It was just the same. The little phonograph stood on the corner table where it had played *Crazy Rhythm* eight years before. The same pair of colored calendars decorated the walls. On a chair rose the pile of newspapers from which men helped themselves when they were tired of cards.

Then he crossed to the table.

It was covered with the same green felt; he could remember the V-shaped cut on one edge of the cloth.

Behind the chair where Tony Spargo had sat there was a half-inch hole bored into the wall. Until he saw it, he had forgotten that the first bullet had drilled right through Tony's powerful body. It was strange that life could be knocked out by a flash of fire and a finger's-end of lead.

Then he went out behind the house and saw a red-headed girl of twenty-four peeling potatoes. She should have been very pretty but there was no smile about her. What a man sees first is the light behind a picture; after that he sees the picture itself. Well, you had to look closely at this girl before you saw that she was pretty.

"You're Kate Graham?" he asked.

"Hello, Jimmy," said the girl. "Welcome home. I've got your old room fixed up. Want it?"

She slid the pan of peelings onto a chair and stood up.

"Yes, I want the room," he said, looking at her. "Tell me about Charlie, if you don't mind?"

"A whiskey bat, and pneumonia did the rest," she answered.

Jimmy nodded. "I was mighty fond of Charlie."

"Were you?" asked the girl.

"Yeah, I sure was."

He kept hesitating until it suddenly occurred to him that he had no words for what he wanted to say; he hardly knew what he wanted, either, except that he wished to see that faint brightening about her eyes and mouth.

He left her and went off up the stairs, which creaked in all the familiar places.

When he got up to the room he heard snoring inside. He backed off and looked at the number to make sure. It was Seventeen, all right, so he opened the door softly and looked in. A long man with a jag of beard on the chin and a sweep of mustaches across his mouth was lying on the bed with his mouth open. Doc Alton!

Geary crossed the room as Alton opened his eyes and shut his mouth.

"Hello, Jimmy," he said, quietly. Doc was always quiet. Perhaps that was why he had been able to open so many safes without bringing on the vengeance of the law. He had been one of those aging men of forty, eight years ago; now he looked to the altered eye of Jimmy Geary even younger than in earlier days.

Doc sat up and shook hands.

"How's everything?" he asked.

"All right," said Jimmy. "Thanks for the letters, and the cash."

"They wouldn't let me send much," answered Doc. "Feeling like work?"

Jimmy scowled.

"When I brace people around here for an honest job, they give me the eye and walk straight past. But the thugs come and hunt me up—Samuels, and that sort, and now a safecracker comes and waits in my room."

Doc Alton yawned. "So you feel that way about it? All right. I'll take a snooze here. I'm kind of tired. If you ain't changed your mind before you're ready to go to bed, I won't argue with you any, but I've got a sweet layout fixed up. It's a two-man job and it's fat. There ought to be fifteen, twenty thousand in it."

"No! And be damned to you!" said Jimmy. "I'm going to get an honest man's job."

"Let me tell you something," said Doc Alton. "A lot of people around here remember Tony Spargo."

"A dirty card-sharper!" answered Geary. "To hell with him, and the crooks that remember him!" and he strode from the room.

At the stable he hired a saddle horse and hit out over the rough trails to the ranches. He put in the rest of that day

getting to eight ranch houses and he collected eight refusals.

Two of them stood out. Old Will Chalmers said to him: "What sort of a plant are you aiming to fix on me out here? No, I don't want you or any three like you, either." But at the Morgan place, the girl he had known as Ruth Willet opened the kitchen door for him. He had gone to school with Ruth and he put out his hand in pleased surprise. She simply slammed the door in his face and screeched from behind it: "I've got men in this house, Jimmy Geary. You get out of here or I'm gonna call 'em! I got men and guns here. You get off this place!"

That was his last try. He got off the place and went slowly back to the Graham Tavern, letting the cowpony walk, letting the evening gather off the hills and slide unheeded about him. Darkness, also, was rising out of his heart.

He put up the horse in the barn and went into the saloon. There was no one in it except the bartender, though voices were stirring in the back room.

"Whiskey!" he said, looking down at his watery reflection in the bar varnish.

The bartender set out the drink, and worked a smile onto his face. "There's somebody come to see you. On the back veranda. Been waiting for you."

"With a gun, eh?" sneered Jimmy Geary. And emptied his glass.

The whiskey fired his blood and the sour fume of it was in his nose and his brain. He had eaten nothing since morning. So the danger of guns meant little to the vastness of his gloom, with this red fire blowing up in it. He knocked the rear door of the bar open. Three men were playing poker at the table which was placed most clearly in his memory; a pair of them had dark faces.

"Take a hand, brother?" said one of them cheerfully.

"I've got nothing but chicken-feed," said Jimmy.

"Yeah? All we're spending is time!"

"I'll be back, then."

He stepped onto the rear veranda, letting the screen door bang behind him. A woman got up from a chair and came slowly towards him. As she moved through the light that slanted out of a window he recognized Juanita Allen. She was the half-breed daughter of Mac Allen.

"Hello, Jimmy," she said. "I heard you were back so I came on over. That all right? I wanted to see you."

"And knife me, too, eh?" said Jimmy. "You used to be Tony Spargo's girl, didn't you?"

She put back her head a little and smiled at him.

"How do I look, Jimmy?" she said. "Come here and let me take a slant at you, too."

She pulled him forward into the light.

"The time's only made a man of you!" said Juanita. "But look how it's socked me eight times in the face. You remember Jimmy? I'm just your age. My birthday comes on Monday before yours."

There were some straight lines up and down on her lip. Her smile pulled her face all out of shape.

"You don't have to tell me; I'll tell you: I'm done," said Juanita. "I don't mind too much. But I can't even get a job slinging hash. You'd think I might get a finger in the soup, or something. I'm not good enough for the people around here."

"I like you fine, Juanita."

"Take hold of my arm," she said.

He could feel how thin her arms were.

"Look," said Juanita. "I'm sunk; I'm done. I've gotta get a break and pull out of here. Jimmy, you were always a good kid. Give me a break, will you?"

"What d'you need?"

She held him by the wrists with shuddering hands.

"I don't need much. There's a little bill over at the boarding-house. It's only forty dollars, Jimmy. They'll sock me in jail if I don't pay it. And then a little bit more to keep going. Jimmy, you were always a good fellow. You were always kind. I was sorry when they slammed you for those three. I knew Tony was a crook. You see how it is, Jimmy. I don't need much money, if only—"

"You wait here," said Geary. "I'm coming back."

"I'll wait right here—if it takes you all night. I'll be waiting right here."

He got away through the outside door and up the stairs to Number Seventeen. When he was inside, he wanted a drink.

"Hey, Doc!" he said to the snorer. He lighted a lamp.

"Yeah?" said Alton, turning on the bed. "What time is it?"

"Time for a drink. Where's your flask?"

"Under the pillow."

Jimmy put his hand under and found a gun. Then he found the flask and pulled it out. He unscrewed the top, poured a long shot down his throat. The whiskey choked him. He took another drink and put the flask down.

"Want some?" he panted.

"Not till I eat."

"Got any money?"

Doc sat up suddenly. "Yeah, sure," he said. "Sure I've got some money. Help yourself."

He pulled out a wallet. Alton's wallet was always full. Now the bills were packed into a tight sheaf. Geary pulled out some fifties. There were seven of them.

"Three hundred and fifty," he said.

"Sure, sure, kid," said Doc. "Take all you want. A lot of dirty bums is all I've been able to find since you stepped out of the picture," said Alton. "A lot of dirty, yellow-bellied rats. You and me will burn up the road, kid."

Jimmy got out of the room and down to the back veranda. He heard the girl rise—the whisper of her clothing and the sound of her drawn breath, but she kept back against the wall. He went to her and stood over her, looking down.

"Aw, Jimmy," she moaned, suddenly. "Don't say you couldn't get anything. Don't turn me down flat. I haven't eaten. I'm hungry."

"Here," said Geary. "Here's three hundred and fifty. You pay the damned board bill and get out to a better part of the world. This is the rottenest part of creation. Nobody can go straight here—"

Juanita caught her breath, started to laugh, but tears replaced laughter.

Geary turned away from her and crossed the veranda. He leaned against a pillar there for a moment, and the stars wavered in the sky. Afterwards he went up to Seventeen and found Doc Alton pulling on his boots.

"Ready, old son?" asked Doc, smiling till his mustaches spread out thin.

Jimmy lifted the pillow, took the gun and passed it out of view under his coat. "Wait here," he said, and went down again. He would play a round or two of poker, as he had promised to do, for that would show whether or not luck intended to favor him in the old ways.

The three were not impatient. Instead, they greeted him cheerfully.

He had a very odd and vivid feeling that he had known them before. They opened with a round of jackpots, the man with the lofty brow dealing. The Mexican had openers. Jimmy held up a pair of nines and drew another. He won that pot and six dollars.

Two more hands went by before the dark-faced, handsome fellow opposite Jimmy got up, revealing the bullet hole in the wall. He said they ought to have a bit of music,

so he wound up the squeaking phonograph and put on a disk. *Crazy Rhythm!* The music from the scratched and cracked old record on the phonograph held him; it hurt like the ache of old wounds.

He could feel the eyes of the three on him. The game ought to go on, of course, but they seemed to understand a mystery that was closed to him and they remained half-smiling, watchful.

Time closed like water over his head.

The three leaned toward him. They were not smiling, now.

"You're Onate's brother!" Geary said to the Mexican.

The man nodded and smiled.

"You're the brother of Tony Spargo!" said Jimmy Geary to the man across the table.

"I'm his kid brother," sneered Spargo.

"And *you're* the brother of Gus Warren?"

"Only his cousin, but I'll do to fill out the hand!"

"Aye," said Jimmy Geary, "you make three of a kind."

The needle was scratching with every whirl of the disk; and yet Jimmy wanted the record to continue endlessly, for he knew that he was to die before the song ended. Spargo had a gun and laid it on the edge of the table, leaning so far forward that Jimmy could see, over his shoulder, the hole in the wall. He had an insane feeling that his own soul would be drawn through that same gap in the wall and whistled away into eternity. And there would be nothing in the way of an inquiry, for the gun of Doc Alton would be found on him. Perhaps that was Alton's part in the plot—to see that the victim went heeled to the fight. But there would be no fight. The music poured icy sleep over his hands.

They were going to get him on the down strain of that weary sing-song. He could see murder tightening in the hand and the eyes of Spargo. Then Kate Graham spoke

out of the doorway, deliberately, as though she did not realize that the song was running swiftly to its end:

"The thing's off. He hasn't got a gun. It's murder if you turn loose on him—and I'll give the testimony to hang you."

The Mexican uttered a little soft, musical cry of pain. Spargo's lips kept stretching thinner over his teeth. He said, "Are you gonna run out on this?"

"You fixed the job and got us here!" cried the cousin of Gus Warren.

"Look!" moaned Onate. "I have the same knife for him. Look, señorita!"

"What did I care about your crook of a brother, Onate?" asked the girl calmly. "Or about four-flushing Gus Warren? And I've just been getting some truth about Tony Spargo. It made me send for the sheriff. Are you three going to be here to meet him?"

They were not going to be there. They stood up, with young Spargo running the tips of his fingers, absently, over the bullet hole in the wall. They all looked at Kate as they went out but they said nothing more to her.

That silence continued in the room until after the first pounding and then the departing ripple of hoofbeats. Jimmy stood up, looking at Kate Graham.

"Sit down here," said Jimmy.

Inside him there was emptiness.

"It's no good talking," said the girl, but she came to the table and slipped into the chair where Tony Spargo had once sat. She was only calm from a distance; at close hand he could see the tremor as he leaned across the table.

The song had ended; the needle was scratching steadily in the last groove.

"It was Tony Spargo, was it?" said Jimmy.

"I was just sixteen," she said. "He used to talk to me and look at me with his dark eyes. I never saw the real darkness

in them till this evening. I didn't know till after she'd talked to me."

"Juanita?"

"Yes. Before she left she told me what you'd done for her. And she told me a lot I didn't know about Tony." Kate drew in a breath. "I was a fool."

She folded her hands. The fingers were smooth and slender. But her hands would not stop quivering.

"What are you afraid of?" asked Jimmy.

"You know what I'm afraid of. You're going to say something. Go on and say it and get it over with."

"Hello," said the voice of Doc Alton from the doorway.

"Hello, Doc," said Jimmy. "Come and take this. I won't be needing it."

He held out the gun. Doc Alton took it.

"I owe you some money," said Jimmy Geary, "and I'm going to keep on owing it for a while."

"That's all right," said Alton. "Are you—staying around?"

The mournful wistfulness of his voice left Jimmy untouched.

"I'm staying around," he answered.

Doc Alton went out.

"I mean," said Jimmy to Kate "I'm staying around unless you say no."

She drew in a breath and closed her eyes.

He knew that if he put his hand over hers he would stop their trembling, but he waited. The needle bumped for the last time on the disk and the scratching ended. Another sound rose and moved forward in Jimmy, a rushing and a singing like mountain waters that go on forever.

Dust Storm

Most recently reprinted in Bill Pronzini's definitive genre anthology, Great Tales of the West *(1985), this beautifully-crafted story stands just behind "Wine on the Desert" as Faust's most anthologized piece of short fiction. And, like "Wine on the Desert," it is an in-depth character study.*

First presented in the slick pages of Collier's *in April of 1937, "Dust Storm" examines the enduring bonds of friendship in a realistic portrait of personal desperation set against the bleak landscape of the early West. The story's protagonist, Bob Lindsay, is typical of the remote, often-lonely ranchers who carved a meager existence from the soil and to whom a simple dust storm meant possible extinction.*

A far cry from Max Brand's legendary gunfighter-heroes, Lindsay nevertheless proves himself heroic. His bravery in the service of a friend is genuine and affecting, a true extension of his character.

With "Dust Storm," Frederick Faust was stretching his talent, deliberately working against the Wild West mythology he had so often celebrated in the pulps. Here is a quietly intense study of one man's triumph over cynicism and adversity.

For seven days the wind came out of the northeast over the Powder Mountains and blew the skirts of a dust storm between Digger Hill and Bender Hill into the hollow where Lindsay was living in his shack. During that week Lindsay waked and slept with a piece of black coat-lining worn across his mouth and nostrils, but the dust penetrated like cosmic rays through the chinks in the walls of the cabin, through the mask and to the bottom of his lungs, so that every night he roused from sleep gasping for breath with a nightmare of being buried alive. Even lamplight could not drive that bad dream farther away than the misty corners of the room.

The blow began on a Tuesday morning, and by twilight of that day he knew what he was in for, so he went out through the whistling murk and led Jenny and Lind, his two mules, and Mustard, his old cream-colored mustang, from the pasture into the barn. There he had in the mow a good heap of the volunteer hay which he had cut last May on the southeast forty, but the thin silk of the storm soon whitened the hay to such a degree that he had to shake it thoroughly before he fed the stock. Every two hours during that week, he roused himself by an alarm-clock instinct and went out to wash the nostrils and mouths of the stock, prying their teeth open and reaching right in to swab the black off their tongues. On Wednesday, Jenny, like the fool and villainess that she was, closed on his right forearm and raked off eight inches of skin.

Monotony of diet was more terrible to Lindsay than the storm. He had been on the point of riding to town and borrowing money from the bank on his growing crop so as to lay in a stock of provisions, but now he was confined with a bushel of potatoes and the heel of a side of bacon.

Only labor like that of the harvest field could make such food palatable and, in confinement as he was, never thoroughly stretching his muscles once a day, Lindsay began to revolt in belly and then in spirit. He even lacked

coffee to give savor to the menu; he could not force himself more than once a day to eat potatoes, boiled or fried in bacon fat, with the dust gritting continually between his teeth.

He had no comfort whatever except for Caesar, his mongrel dog, and half a bottle of whisky, from which he gave himself a nip once a day. Then in the night of the seventh day, there came to Lindsay a dream of a country where rolling waves of grass washed from horizon to horizon and all the winds of the earth could not blow a single breath of dust into the blue of the sky. He wakened with the dawn visible through the cracks in the shanty walls and a strange expectancy in his mind.

That singular expectation remained in him when he threw the door open and looked across the black of the hills toward the green light that was opening like a fan in the east; then he realized that it was the silence after the storm that seemed more enormous than all the stretch of landscape between him and the Powder Mountains. Caesar ran out past his legs to leap and bark and sneeze until something overawed him, in turn, and sent him skulking here and there with his nose to the ground as though he were following invisible bird trails. It was true that the face of the land was changed.

As the light grew Lindsay saw that the water hole in the hollow was a black wallow of mud and against the woodshed leaned a sloping mass of dust like a drift of snow. The sight of this started him on the run for his eighty acres of winter-sown summer fallow. From a distance he saw the disaster but could not believe it until his feet were wading deep in the dust. Except for a few marginal strips, the whole swale of the plowed land was covered with wind-filtered soil, a yard thick in the deepest places.

Two thirds of his farm was wiped out, two thirds of it was erased into permanent sterility; and the work of nearly ten years was entombed. He glanced down at the

palms of his hands, for he was thinking of the burning, pulpy blisters that had covered them day after day when he was digging holes with the blunt post auger.

He looked up, then, at the distant ridges of the Powder Mountains. Ten years before in the morning light he had been able almost to count the great pines that walked up the slopes and stood on the mountains' crests, but the whole range had been cut over in the interim and the thick coat of forest which bound with its roots the accumulated soil of a million years had been mowed down. That was why the teeth of the wind had found substance they could eat into.

The entire burden of precious loam that dressed the mountains had been blown adrift in recent years and now the worthless underclay, made friable by a dry season, was laid in a stifling coat of silt across the farmlands of the lower valleys and the upper pastures of the range.

Lindsay did not think about anything for a time. His feet, and an automatic impulse that made him turn always to the stock first, took him to the barn, where he turned loose the confined animals. Even the mules were glad enough to kick up their heels a few times, and fifteen years of hard living could not keep Mustard from exploding like a bomb all over the pasture, bucking as though a ghost were on his back and knocking up a puff of dust every time he hit the ground.

Lindsay, standing with feet spread and folded arms, a huge figure in the door of the barn, watched the antics of his old horse with a vacant smile, for he was trying to rouse himself and failing wretchedly. Instead, he could see himself standing in line with signed application slips in his hand, and then in front of a desk where some hired clerk with an insolent face put sharp questions to him. A month hence, when people asked him how things went, he would have to say, "I'm on the county."

When he had gone that far in his thinking, his soul at last rose in him but to such a cold, swift altitude that he was filled with fear, and he found his lips repeating words, stiffly, whispering them aloud, "I'll be damned and dead, first!" The fear of what he would do with his own hands grew stronger and stronger, for he felt that he had made a promise which would be heard and recorded by that living, inmost god of all honest men, his higher self.

Once more, automatically, his feet took him on to the next step in the day: Breakfast. Back in the shanty, his lips twitched with disgust as he started frying potatoes; the rank smell of the bacon grease mounted to his brain and gathered in clouds there, but his unthinking hands finished the cookery and dumped the fried potatoes into a tin plate.

A faint chorus came down to him then out of the windless sky. He snatched the loaded pistol from the holster that hung against the wall and ran outside, for sometimes the wild geese, flying north, came very low over the hill as they rose from the marsh south of it, but now he found himself agape like a schoolboy, staring up.

He should have known by the dimness of the honking and by the melancholy harmony which distance added to it that the geese were half a mile up in the sky. Thousands of them were streaming north in a great wedge that kept shuffling and reshuffling at the open ends; ten tons of meat on the wing.

A tin pan crashed inside the shack and Caesar came out on wings with his tail between his legs; Lindsay went inside and found the plate of potatoes overturned on the floor. He called, "Come in here, Caesar, you damned old thief. Come in here and get it, if you want the stuff. I'm better without."

The dog came back, skulking. From the doorway he prospected the face of his master for a moment, slavering

with greed: Then he sneaked to the food on the floor and began to eat guiltily, but Lindsay already had forgotten him. All through the hollow, which a week before had been a shining tremor of yellow green wheat stalks, the rising wind of the morning was now stirring little airy whirlpools and walking ghosts of dust that made a step or two and vanished.

It seemed to Lindsay that he had endured long enough. He was thirty-five. He had twenty years of hard work behind him. And he would not—by God, he would not—be a government pensioner! The wild geese had called the gun into his hand; he felt, suddenly, that it must be used for one last shot. As for life, there was a stinking savor of bacon that clung inevitably to it. He looked with fearless eyes into the big muzzle of the gun.

Then Mustard whinnied not far from the house and Lindsay lifted his head with a faint smile, for there was a stallion's trumpet sound in the neigh of the old gelding, always, just as there was always an active devil in his heels and his teeth. He combined the savage instincts of a wildcat with the intellectual, patient malevolence of a mule, but Lindsay loved the brute because no winter cold was sharp enough to freeze the big heart in him and no dry summer march was long enough to wither it. At fifteen, the old fellow still could put fifty miles of hard country behind him between dawn and dark. For years Lindsay had felt that those long, mulish ears must eventually point the way to some great destiny.

He stepped into the doorway now and saw that Mustard was whinnying a challenge to a horseman who jogged up the Gavvigan Trail with a telltale dust cloud boiling up behind. Mechanical instinct, again, made Lindsay drop the gun into the old leather holster that hung on the wall. Then he stepped outside to wait.

Half a mile off, the approaching rider put his horse into a lope and Lindsay recognized, by his slant in the saddle, that inveterate range tramp and worthless roustabout Gypsy Renner. He reined in at the door of the shack, lifted his bandana from nose and mouth, and spat black.

"Got a drink, Bob?" he asked without other greeting.

"I've got a drink for you," said Lindsay.

"I'll get off a minute, then," replied Renner, and swung out of the saddle.

Lindsay poured some whisky into a tin cup and Renner received it without thanks. Dust was still rising like thick smoke from his shoulders.

"You been far?" asked Lindsay.

"From Boulder," said Renner.

"Much of the range like out yonder?"

"Mostly," said Renner.

He finished the whisky and held out the cup. Lindsay poured the rest of the bottle.

"If much of the range is like this," said Lindsay, "it's gonna be hell."

"It's gonna be and it is," said Renner. "It's hell already over on the Oliver Range."

"Wait a minute. That's where Andy Barnes and John Street run their cows. What you mean it's hell up there?"

"That's where I'm bound," said Renner. "They're hiring men and guns on both sides. Most of the water holes and tanks on Andy Barnes' place are filled up with mud, right to the ridge of the Oliver Hills, and his cows are choking. And John Street, his land is clean because the wind kind of funneled the dust up over the hills and it landed beyond him. Andy has to water those cows and Street wants to charge ten cents a head. Andy says he'll be damned if he pays money for the water that God put free on earth. So there's gonna be a fight."

Lindsay looked through the door at that lumpheaded mustang of his and saw, between his mind and the world, a moonlight night with five thousand head of cattle, market-fat and full of beans, stampeding into the northeast with a thunder and rattle of split hoofs and a swordlike clashing of horns. He saw riders galloping ahead, vainly shooting into the face of the herd in the vain hope of turning it, until two of those cowpunchers, going in blind, clapped together and went down, head over heels.

"They used to be friends," said Lindsay. "They come so close to dying together, one night, that they been living side by side ever since; and they used to be friends."

"They got too damn rich," suggested Renner. "A rich man ain't nobody's friend.... It was you that saved the two hides of them that night in the stampede, ten, twelve years ago, wasn't it?"

Lindsay pointed to Mustard.

"Now I'm gonna tell you something about that," he said. "The fact is that those cows would've washed right over the whole three of us, but I was riding that Mustard horse, and when I turned him back and pointed him at the herd, he just went off like a roman candle and scattered sparks right up to the Milky Way. He pitched so damn hard that he pretty near snapped my head off and he made himself look so big that those steers doggone near fainted and pushed aside from that spot."

Renner looked at the mustang with his natural sneer. Then he said, "Anyway, there's gonna be a fight up there, and it's gonna be paid for."

"There oughtn't be no fight," answered big Bob Lindsay, frowning.

"They're mean enough to fight," said Renner. "Didn't you save their scalps? And ain't they left you to starve here on a hundred and twenty acres of blowsand that can't raise enough to keep a dog fat?"

"Yeah?" said Lindsay. "Maybe you better be vamoosing along."

Renner looked at him, left the shack and swung into the saddle. When he was safely there he muttered, "Ah, to hell with you!" and jogged away.

Lindsay, with a troubled mind, watched him out of sight. An hour later he saddled Mustard and took the way toward the Oliver Hills.

The Oliver Hills lie west of the Powder Mountains, their sides fat with grasslands all the way to the ridge, and right over the crest walked the posts of the fence that separated the holdings of Andy Barnes from those of John Street. Lindsay, as he came up the old Mexican Trail, stopped on a hilltop and took a careful view of the picture.

He had to strain his eyes a little because dust was blowing like battle smoke off the whitened acres of Andy Barnes and over the ridge, and that dust was stirred up by thousands of cattle which milled close to the fence line, drawn by the smell of water. Down the eastern hollows some of the beefs were wallowing in the holes where water once had been and where there was only mud now. But west of the ridge the lands of John Street were clean as green velvet under the noonday sun.

Scattered down the Street side of the fence, a score of riders wandered up and down with significant lines of light balancing across the pommels of the saddles. Those were the rifles. As many more cowpunchers headed the milling cattle of Andy Barnes with difficulty, for in clear view of the cows, but on Street's side of the fence ran a knee-deep stream of silver water that spread out into a quiet blue lake, halfway down the slope.

He found a gate onto the Street land and went through it. Two or three of the line-riders hailed him with waving

hats. One of them sang out, "Where's your rifle, brother? Men ain't worth a damn here without they got rifles."

He found John Street sitting on a spectacular black horse just west of a hilltop where the rise of land gave him shelter from ambitious sharp-shooters. When he saw Lindsay, he grabbed him by the shoulders and bellowed like a bull in spring, "I knew you'd be over and I knew you'd be on the right side. By God, it's been eleven years since I was as glad to see you as I am today....Boys, I wanta tell you what Bob Lindsay here done for me when I got caught in—"

"Shut up, will you?" said Lindsay. "Looks like Andy has got some pretty dry cows, over yonder."

"I hope they dry up till there's nothing but wind in their bellies," said John Street.

"I thought you and Andy been pretty good friends," said Lindsay.

"If he was my brother—if he was two brothers—if he was my son and daughter and my pa and ma, he's so damn mean that I'd see him in hellfire before I'd give him a cup of water to wash the cinders out of his throat," said John Street.

Lindsay rode back to the gate and around to the party of Andy Barnes, passing steers with caked, dry mud of the choked water holes layered around their muzzles. They were red-eyed with thirst and their bellowing seemed to rise like an unnatural thunder out of the ground instead of booming from the skies. Yearlings, already knock-kneed with weakness, were shouldered to the ground by the heavier stock and lay there, surrendering.

Andy Barnes sat cross-legged on the ground inside the rock circle of an old Indian camp on a hilltop, picking the grass, chewing it, spitting it out. He had grown much

fatter and redder of face and the fat had got into his eyes, leaving them a little dull and staring.

Lindsay sat down beside him.

"You know something, Bob?" said Andy.

"Know what?" asked Lindsay.

"My wife's kid sister is over to the house," said Andy. "She's just turned twenty-three and she's got enough sense to cook a man a steak with onions. As tall as your shoulder and the bluest damn' pair of eyes you ever seen outside a blind horse. Never had bridle or saddle on her and I dunno how she'd go in harness, but you got a pair of hands. What you say? She's heard about Bob Lindsay for ten years, and she don't believe that there's that much man outside of a fairy story."

"Shut up, will you?" said Lindsay. "Seems like ten cents ain't much to pay for the difference between two thousand dead steers and two thousand dogies, all picking grass and fat and happy."

"Look up at that sky," said Andy.

"I'm looking," said Lindsay.

"Look blue?"

"Yeah. Kind of."

"Who put the blue in it?"

"God, maybe."

"Anybody ever pay him for it? And who put the water in the ground and make it leak out again? And why should I pay for *that?"*

"There's a lot of difference," said Lindsay, "between a dead steer on the range and a live steer in Chicago."

"Maybe," dreamed Andy, "but I guess they won't all be dead. You see that yearling over yonder, standing kind of spray-legged, with its nose pretty near on the ground?"

"I see it," said Lindsay.

"When that yearling kneels down," said Andy, "there's gonna be something happen....Ain't that old Mustard?"

"Yeah, that's Mustard," said Lindsay, rising.

"If you ever get through with him," said Andy, "I got a lot of pasture land nothing ain't using where he could just range around and laugh himself to death. I ain't forgot when he was bucking the saddle off his back and knocking splinters out of the stars that night. He must've looked like a mountain to them steers, eh?"

Lindsay got on Mustard and rode over the hill. He went straight up to the fence which divided the two estates and dismounted before it with wire pincers in his hand. He felt scorn and uttermost detestation for the thing he was about to do. Men who cut fences are dirty rustlers and horse thieves and every man jack of them ought to be strung up as high as the top of the Powder Mountains; but the thirsty uproar of the cattle drove him on to what he felt was both a crime and a sin.

It had been a far easier thing, eleven years ago, to save Barnes and Street from the stampeding herd than it was to save them now from the petty hatred that had grown up between them without cause, without reason. The posts stood at such distance apart that the wires were strung with an extra heavy tension. When the steel edges cut through the topmost strand, it parted with a twang and leaped back to either side, coiling and tangling like thin, bright metallic snakes around the posts.

Yelling voices of protest came shouting through the dusty wind. Lindsay could see men dropping off their horses and lying prone to level their rifles at him; and all at once it seemed to him that the odor of frying bacon grease was thickening in his nostrils again and that this was the true savor of existence.

He saw the Powder Mountains lifting their sides from brown to blue in the distant sky with a promise of better

lands beyond that horizon but the promise was a lie, he knew. No matter what he did, he felt assured that ten years hence he would be as now, a poor unrespected squatter on the range, slaving endlessly, not even for a monthly pay check, but merely to fill his larder with—bacon and Irish potatoes! Hope, as vital to the soul as breath to the nostrils, had been subtracted from him, and therefore what he did with his life was of no importance whatever. He leaned a little and snapped the pincers through the second wire of the fence.

He did not hear the sharp twanging sound of the parting strand, for a louder noise struck at his ear, a ringing rifle report full of resonance, like two heavy sledge hammers struck face to face. At his feet a riffle of dust lifted; he heard the bullet hiss like a snake through the grass. Then a whole volley crashed. Bullets went by him on rising notes of inquiry; and just behind him a slug spatted into the flesh of Mustard. Sometimes an ax makes a sound like that when it sinks into green wood.

He turned and saw Mustard sitting down like a dog, with his long, mulish ears pointing straight ahead and a look of pleased expectancy in his eyes. Out of a hole in his breast blood was pumping in long, thin jets.

Lindsay leaned and cut the third and last wire.

When he straightened again he heard the body of Mustard slump down against the ground with a squeaking, jouncing noise of liquids inside his belly. He did not lie on his side but with his head outstretched and his legs doubled under him as though he were playing a game and would spring up again in a moment.

Lindsay looked toward the guns. They never should have missed him the first time except that something like buck fever must have shaken the marksmen. He walked right through the open gap in the fence to meet the fire with a feeling that the wire pincers in his hand were

marking him down like a cattle thief for the lowest sort of a death.

Then someone began to scream in a shrill falsetto. He recognized the voice of Big John Street, transformed by hysterical emotion. Street himself broke over the top of the hill with the black horse at a full gallop, yelling for his men to stop firing.

The wind of the gallop furled up the wide brim of his sombrero and he made a noble picture, considering the rifles of Andy Barnes, which must be sighting curiously at him by this time; then a hammer stroke clipped Lindsay on the side of the head. The Powder Mountains whirled into a mist of brown and blue; the grass spun before him like running water; he dropped to his knees, and down his face ran a soft, warm stream.

Into his dizzy view came the legs and the sliding hoofs of the black horse, cutting shallow furrows in the grass as it slid to a halt, and he heard the voice of John Street, dismounted beside him, yelling terrible oaths. He was grabbed beneath the armpits and lifted.

"Are you dead, Bob?" yelled Street.

"I'm all right," said Lindsay. He ran a finger tip through the bullet furrow in his scalp and felt the hard bone of the skull all the way. "I'm gonna be fine," he stated, and turned toward the uproar that was pouring through the gap he had cut in the fence.

For the outburst of rifle fire had taken the attention of Barnes' men from their herding and the cattle had surged past them toward water. Nothing now could stop that hungry stampede as they crowded through the gap with rattling hooves and the steady clashing of horns. Inside the fence the cattle divided right and left and rushed on toward water, some to the noisy, white cataract, some to the wide blue pool.

"I'm sorry, John," said Lindsay, "but those cows looked kind of dry to me."

Then a nausea of body and a whirling dimness of mind overtook him and did not clear away again until he found himself lying with a bandaged head on the broad top of a hill. John Street was on one side of him and Andy Barnes on the other. They were holding hands like children and peering down at him anxiously.

"How are you, Bob, old son?" asked Andy.

"Fine," said Lindsay, sitting up. "Fine as a fiddle," he added, rising to his feet.

Street supported him hastily by one arm and Barnes by the other. Below him he could see Barnes cattle thronging into the shallow water of the creek.

"About that ten cents a head," said Andy, "it's all right with me."

"Damn the money," said Street. "I wouldn't take money from you if you were made of gold.... I guess Bob has paid for the water like he paid for our two hides eleven years ago. Bob, don't you give a hang about nothing? Don't you care about your life?"

"The cows seemed kind of dry," said Lindsay, helplessly.

"You're comin' home with me," said Street.

"I got females in my place to look after him," pointed out Andy Barnes.

"I got a cook that's a doggone sight better than a doctor," said Street.

"I don't need any doctor," said Lindsay. "You two just shut up and say goodbye to me, will you? I'm going home. I got work to do tomorrow."

This remark produced a silence out of which Lindsay heard, from the surrounding circle of cowmen, a voice that murmured, "He's gonna go home!" And another said, "He's got the chores to do, I guess."

Andy looked at John Street.

"He's gonna go, John," he said.

"There ain't any changing him," said John Street sadly. "Hey, Bob, take this here horse of mine, will you?"

"Doncha do it!" shouted Barnes. "Hey, Mickie, bring up that gray, will you?...Look at that piece of gray sky and wind, Bob, will you?"

"They're a mighty slick pair," said Lindsay. "I never seen a more upstanding pair of hellcats in my life. It would take a lot of barley and oats to keep them sleeked up so's they shine like this....But if you wanta wish a horse onto me, how about that down-headed, wise-lookin' cayuse over there? He's got some bottom to him and the hellfire is kind of worked out of his eyes."

He pointed to a brown gelding which seemed to have fallen half asleep.

Another silence was spread by this remark. Then someone said: "He's picked out Slim's cuttin' horse....He's gone and picked out old Dick."

"Give them reins to Bob, Slim!" commanded Andy Barnes, "and leave the horse tied right onto the reins, too."

Lindsay said, "Am I parting you from something, Slim?"

Slim screwed up his face and looked at the sky.

"Why, I've heard about you, Lindsay," he said, "and today I've seen you. I guess when a horse goes to you, he's just going home; and this Dick horse of mine, I had the making of him and he sure rates a home....If you just ease him along the first half hour, he'll be ready to die for you all the rest of the day."

"Thanks," said Lindsay, shaking hands. "I'm gonna value him, brother."

He swung into the saddle and waved his adieu. John Street followed him a few steps, and so did Andy Barnes.

"Are you gonna be comin' over? Are you gonna be comin' back, Bob?" they asked him.

"Are you two gonna stop being damn fools?" he replied.

They laughed and waved a cheerful agreement and they were still waving as he jogged Dick down the hill. The pain in his head burned him to the brain with every pulse of his blood but a strange feeling of triumph rose in his heart. He felt he never would be impatient again, for he could see that he was enriched forever.

The twilight found him close to home and planning the work of the next days. If he put a drag behind the two mules he could sweep back the dust where it thinned out at the margin and so redeem from total loss a few more acres. With any luck, he would get seed for the next year; and as for food, he could do what he had scorned all his days—he could make a kitchen garden and irrigate it from the windmill.

It was dark when he came up the last slope and the stars rose like fireflies over the edge of the hill. Against them he made out Jenny and Lind waiting for him beside the door of the shack. He paused to stare at the vague silhouettes and remembered poor Mustard with a great stroke in his heart.

Caesar came with a shrill howl of delight to leap about his master and bark at the new horse, but Dick merely pricked his ears with patient understanding as though he knew he had come home indeed.

Inside the shanty the hand of Lindsay found the lantern. Lighting it brought a suffocating odor of kerosene fumes, but even through this Lindsay could detect the smell of fried bacon and potatoes in the air. He took a deep breath of it for it seemed to him the most delicious savor in the world.

A Lucky Dog

Critics have compared Max Brand's work to the adventure fiction of Jack London. The comparison is quite valid. Indeed, Faust placed several of his best tales in the snow-blasted reaches of the Far North as his characters brawled through Klondike winters and crossed stormbound wastes behind a sled team of laboring Alaskan huskies. Such Brand novels as The White Wolf, Torture Trail, Mighty Lobo, *and* Riders of the Silences *are prime examples.*

"A Lucky Dog" was written directly in this tradition, and although it opens in Old New York and is set mainly in the Colorado mountain wilderness rather than the frozen Klondike, there is definite kinship here to the works of Jack London.

Faust's genuine affection for thoroughbred dogs also places him firmly in the London camp. Next to his constant passion for glorious, galloping stallions, he particularly favored white bull terriers. In 1922, when the Faust family moved to Katonah in Westchester County, New York, Faust became an enthusiastic breeder of thoroughbred bulldogs, celebrating the virtue of these stout-hearted beasts in several of his stories. "A Lucky Dog" features such an animal—and Jack London himself could not have bettered Faust's memorable rendition of the gutsy, half-starved white bull

terrier who lives in the pages of this moving, off-trail wilderness adventure.

After Hagger was inside the shop, he paused and listened to the rush of rain against the windows. Then he turned to the jeweler with a faint smile of possession, for the hardest part of the job was over before he opened the door. He had studied the entrances and exits, the value of the contents of the place; and when he cut the wires that ran to the alarm he knew that the work was finished.

So he advanced, and to conceal any touch of grimness in his approach, he made his smile broader and said: "Evening, Mr. Friedman."

The young man nodded with mingled anxiety and eagerness, as though he feared loss and hoped for gain even before a bargain was broached.

"How much for this?" said Hagger, and slipped a watch onto the counter.

The other drew back, partly to bring the watch under a brighter light, and partly to put a little distance between himself and this customer; for Hagger was too perfectly adapted to his part. The pale face, square about the jaws and lighted by a cold and steady eye was too eloquent.

The young man snapped open the back of the watch and observed the mechanism—one eye for it and one for his customer.

"About two dollars," said he.

"Two dollars? Have a heart!" Hagger grinned. "I'll tell you what I paid. I paid twenty-two dollars for it."

"Believe me, it's a fair price," said Friedman. "There are lots of rascals in the business," and he made a wry face at the thought of them.

"I got it," said Hagger, raising his voice in increasing anger, "right down the street at Overman's. Twenty-two bucks. I'll let it go for twelve, though. That's a bargain for you."

Mr. Friedman closed the watch, breathed upon it, and rubbed off an imaginary fleck of dust with the cuff of his linen shop coat. Then he pushed the watch softly across the counter with both hands and shook his head, smiling.

"You think I want to rob you. No, I want people to keep coming back here. Two dollars. Maybe two-fifty. That's the limit."

He added, pointing. "Look at that case, at that yellow spot. That's the brass wearing through. It'd be hard to sell that watch across the counter, mister."

"Well, gimme the coin. All you birds—you all work together to soak the rest of us. It's easy money for you!"

Friedman shrugged his eloquent shoulders and turned to the cash register.

Hagger struck at that moment. Some people use the butt of a revolver for such work; some use the barrel, or a slung shot of massive lead. But Hagger knew that a little sandbag of just the right weight was fully as effective and never smashed bones; fully as effective, that is, if one knew just where to tap with it. And Hagger knew as well as any surgeon.

The young man fell back against the wall. His little handful of silver clattered on the floor as he went limp; for a moment he regarded Hagger with stupid eyes, and then began to sink. Hagger vaulted lightly across the counter, lowered his man, and stretched him out comfortably. He even delayed to draw up an eyelid and consider the light in the eye beneath. Then, satisfied that he had produced no more than a moment of sleep, he went to work.

He knew beforehand that there was very little value in the material displayed, compared with its bulk and weight. All that was of worth was contained in the two trays of the central case—watches and rings, and in particular a pair of bracelets of bright-faced rubies.

He dumped the contents of the two trays into his coat pockets, and then walked out the back way. The door was locked, and there was no key in it, but he was not disturbed. He braced his shoulder against it and thrust his weight home. There was only a slight scraping sound, and the door sagged open and let the rain drive in.

He paused to turn up the collar of his coat and look up to the lights and the roar of an elevated train crashing past. Then he walked lightly down the street, turned over to Lexington at the next block, and caught a southbound trolley.

At Third Street he stopped, and then walked back two blocks and turned in at a narrow entrance.

The tinkle of the shop bell brought a looming figure clad in black, greasy with age.

"Hullo, Steffans."

"Hullo, Hagger. Buy or sell tonight, kid?"

"I sell, bo."

The big man laughed silently and ushered the customer into a back room.

"Lemme see," he urged, and put his hands on the edge of a table covered with green felt.

"Nothing much," said Hagger, "but safety first, y'understand? Big dough for big chances. I'm going light, lately!"

After this apology, he dumped his loot on the table, and Steffans touched it with expert fingers.

"Chicken feed," said he. "But I'm glad to have it. I could handle a truck load of this sort of stuff every day and the damned law would never bother me."

"Go on," said Hagger.

"You want to make a move," said Steffans. "You're always in a hurry after a job. Look at some of the other boys, though. They never leave town."

"Except for the slammer," said Hagger.

Steffans settled himself before the little heap and pulled his magnifying glass down from his forehead.

"That's right," said he. "You never been up the river. You're a lucky dog, Hagger."

"I got the brains," corrected Hagger. "Some saps work with their hands. Brains are what count. Brains, and crust like yours, Steffans, you robber!"

"I get a high percentage," said Steffans, "but then I always mark 'em up a full value. Y'understand? I'll give you seventy percent on this batch, Hagger."

"Seventy for me after what I've done," sighed Hagger, "and you sit here and swallow thirty for nothing!"

Steffans smiled.

"I've done a couple of stretches myself," said he. "You know the dicks make life hell for me. I'll give you seventy percent on this stuff. Wait till I finish valuing it."

He began to go through the items swiftly, looking aside now and then to make a swift calculation, while Hagger watched in admiration. Of all the fences, Steffans was the king. The percentage he took was high, but the prices he gave were a little better than full. So he sat in his dark little pawnshop and drew toward himself vast loot collected by second-story men, pickpockets, yeggs of all descriptions.

"This isn't so bad, kid," said he, "and I'll put the whole thing down at eleven thousand. That'll give you seven thousand, seven hundred."

"It's more'n I expected," said Hagger instantly. "But how long do I have to wait for the cash?"

"I got a payment in just a few minutes ago. Hold on a minute."

He disappeared and came back with a bundle of paper money in his hand.

Of this he counted out the specified amount and then swept all the stolen jewels into a small canvas bag.

"Is that all, Hagger?"

"That's all."

"Where you headin' this time?"

"I need some clean air," said Hagger. "Denver sounds good to me right now."

He said goodbye to the pawnbroker, and stepping out onto the sidewalk, he crashed full against the hurrying form of one about to enter—a tall young man, and by the light from within, Hagger made out the features of Friedman.

It startled him. Nothing but a sort of magic intuition could have brought the jeweler to such a place in his hunt for the robber.

Or had Steffans relaxed his precautions lately and allowed the rank and file to learn about his secret business?

This he thought of on the instant, and at the same time there was the glitter of a gun shoved into his face, and a hoarse voice of rage and joy sounding at his ear.

"The hand is faster than the gun!" Hagger was fond of saying.

He struck Friedman to the wet pavement and doubled swiftly around the corner.

At Penn Station, Hagger bought a ticket for Denver. There was a train out in thirty minutes, and he waited securely in the crowd until the gatekeeper came walking up behind the bars.

Gatekeeper?

"Oh, damn his fat face!" snarled Hagger. "It's Buckholz of the Central Office. May he rot in hell!"

Past Buckholz he dared not go, and therefore he left Penn Station, regretting the useless ticket; for he was a thrifty soul, Hagger was.

There are more ways out of New York than out of a sieve. Hagger got the night boat for Albany and slept heavily almost until time to dock. Then he dressed in haste and went down on deck as the mass formed at the head of the gangplank. He sifted through until he was among the first near the head of the broad gangplank, and the next moment he wished that he were in any other place, for on the edge of the wharf he saw the long sallow face of Friedman, and his bright black eyes seemed peering up at him.

There was no use trying to turn back. At that moment the barrier was removed and the crowd poured down, carrying Hagger swiftly on its broad current.

Suddenly a voice shouted: "Officer! Look! It's him!"

It was Friedman yelling, that damned Friedman!

"If I ever get out of this," muttered Hagger, who habitually spoke his more important thoughts aloud: "I'll kill you!"

He began to work frantically through the crowd to the side, and he saw the uplifted nightstick of a policeman trying to drive in toward him.

Out of the mass, he began to run, eluding pursuit among the massed street throngs.

When Hagger reached the center of town he picked out a small restaurant and, with several newspapers, sat down to his meal. He had not touched food since the previous morning, and Hagger could eat not only for the past but for the future. He did now.

Looking up curiously, he observed that the waiter was staring at him.

What could be wrong? Then he knew. He had allowed his coat to fall open, and from the inside pocket the wallet was revealed, with its closely packed sheaf of bills!

He was far too wary to button it at once, and went on with his breakfast. Yet from the corner of his omniscient eye he was keenly aware of the tall waiter talking with the proprietor, whose gestures seemed to say: "What business is it of ours?"

He sank deeper into his papers over another cup of coffee. He preferred the metropolitan journals, for by delving into them he picked up—sometimes in scattered paragraphs, sometimes in mere allusions, but sometimes in the rich mines and masses of police news spread over many sheets, the information of the world in which he moved.

So he observed, for instance, that "Slim" Chaffer, the second-story man, had broken jail in Topeka; and that "Pie" Winters was locked up for forgery in Baltimore; and that "Babe" McGee had been released for lack of evidence.

At this he fairly shook with delicious mirth. For what a guy the Babe was—slippery, grinning, good-natured, and crooked past belief. Lack of evidence? Why, you never could get evidence on the Babe! Not even when he was stacking the cards on you!

To think of such a man was an inspiration to Hagger. He finished his coffee. Then he paid the bill and put down a healthy tip for the waiter.

Then Hagger stepped onto the pavement and walked slowly down the street, turning his thoughts.

What loomed largest in his mind was the printed news account of his latest crime:

"The man was instantly identified by Friedman, from photographs. That asserted that it could be no other than Hagger, better known as 'Hagger, the Yegg,' whose opera-

tions in cracking safes and raiding jewelry stores are always carried out with consummate neatness and precision. The simplicity of his work is the sign of this master criminal. The police are now hard on his trail."

Every word of that article pleased Hagger. Especially, he retasted and relished: "Consummate neatness," "precision," "master criminal." A wave of warmth spread through Hagger's soul and he felt a tender fondness for the police who would describe him in such a fashion.

Something clanged down the street; a horse-drawn police patrol wagon. Uniformed men leaped to the ground. By heaven, they actually were hunting Hagger with police patrols!

A familiar figure gestured and shouted from the wagon: "There he goes...don't let him get away!"

Hagger lingered a second to take note of the long, eager face of Friedman.

"I'll kill him!" declared Hagger, and bolted down an alleyway.

Shots boomed, and the zing of the bullets as they passed made Hagger sprint like a hunted rabbit. But as he darted onto the next main street a horse cart passed, and Hagger hooked onto it. At the end of another block, the driver pulled up and began to curse him, but Hagger departed with a laugh.

A block's lead in a crowded city was almost as good as a mile to Hagger. He gained the railroad yards, and there slipped past three or four detectives who, he could have sworn, had been posted there to stop him.

Again the heart of Hagger warmed with a singular gratitude, for the police of Albany certainly were doing him proud.

He laughed, stretching himself on the rods of an express as the train shuddered, and then began to roll. He would have to face freezing cold at high speed, clad only in a thin suit; he would have to endure flying cinders, and

cutting gravel. But he knew that he could meet the pain and endure it.

So he began a journey which eventually shunted him into Denver, and he descended in ragged, greasy clothes but with a light heart to enjoy the beauties of the mountain city. As he came out of the station yard he observed a figure leaning against a lamp post apparently lost in thought.

Friedman?

But it could not be the jeweler! Yet there he stood, wholly absorbed in thought, and his coat was drawn so tightly around him that Hagger distinctly saw the outline of a revolver in a side pocket.

Hagger slipped away toward the center of town, more worried than he had ever been before. At a lunch counter, he meditated on this strange adventure.

Hagger knew something about Friedman, for when he prepared for a job he was as thorough as could be and his questions had brought him much information about the proprietor of the shop. There was nothing in the least unusual about Friedman's rise, for his father had owned the place before him and had educated him in the rear workroom and behind the counter. High school, a little touch of bookishness, perhaps. What was there in this background to prepare Friedman for his feat of trailing an elusive criminal more than half-way across a continent? The detectives had not stuck to the trail. It was Friedman alone who carried danger so close to Hagger time and again, and the yegg touched his side, where the comforting weight of the pistol was suspended. For that, after all, seemed to be the only thing to settle Friedman's hash; he rather wished that he had sent home a shot when he spotted the young man beside the lamp post.

He determined to leave the railroads, for after all it was not so odd that he had been followed here. Had he not mentioned his destination to Steffans? Damn the man!

He'd spilled to Friedman. But now Hagger would put the jeweler to the test.

Hagger left Denver that same day and walked for fifteen hours with hardly a stop. The walk beat his feet to a pulpy soreness, but Hagger had a soul beyond the reach of physical pain, and he persisted grimly. He spent the night in a barn, and the next morning was picked up by a cart carrying milk toward the nearest town. That brought him another twenty miles toward the nothingness of the open range, for it seemed like nothingness to Hagger's city-bred soul. His eyes were oppressed by the vastness of rough mountains, and the mountains themselves shrank small under the great arch of the sky.

To the illimitable reach of the sky itself he looked from time to time and shook his head, for the heavens which were familiar to him were little narrow strips of gray or blue running between the tops of high buildings.

Vague tremors of fear, as inborn as the pangs of conscience beset Hagger; for if pursuit came up with him, what could he do? There was no crowd into which he could plunge, no network of lanes and alleys to receive a fugitive. He felt that he was observed from above as inescapably as by the eye of the moon; and who can get away from that, no matter how swiftly one runs?

He was lost. He was adrift in a sea of mountain and desert, only knowing indistinctly that Denver was a port behind and San Francisco a port ahead. He managed to steal rides on trains that went pushing out like feeble hands into darkness, but so vast were the dimensions of this land that he felt as though he were laboring on a treadmill.

Much had to be done on foot. He bought a rifle, a stock of ammunition, a package of salt, cigarette tobacco, and a quantity of wheat-straw papers; in this manner he felt

more secure in the wilderness, and though he found game scarce and rifle work very different from pistol play, yet he could get enough to live on.

And he had one deep comfort: Friedman was being left hopelessly behind. He laughed when he thought of that tall, frail youth attempting to match strides with him through such a wilderness as this.

Bitter weather descended upon him. All the trees were naked, and he passed small jungles of stripped brush cased in ice. Snow fell, and once the road turned to ice when a sleet storm poured suddenly out of the black heavens. Still Hagger kept on. He had to sleep outdoors, improvising some shelter against the weather.

Once after walking all night, he rested for an entire day at a village; he swallowed a vast meal and then lay with eyes closed for hours. He bought a horse, saddle, and bridle. But he was ill at ease on a horse. The unlucky brute put its foot in a gopher hole near the next cross-roads town and broke its leg. Hagger shot it and carried the saddle into town, where he sold it for what it would bring. After that, he trusted his feet and the trains when he could catch them. He spent as few hours as possible in towns, eating and leaving at once, or buying what he needed in a store and going on, for he knew that idle conversations mark a trail broad and black. He did not realize that his course was spectacular and strange, and that every one would talk about a stranger who actually made a journey on foot and yet was not an Indian. He was living and acting according to his old knowledge; but he was in a new world of new men.

One afternoon, as he was plodding up a grade toward a nest of bald-faced hills, a horseman trotted up behind him.

"I want you!" said a voice.

Hagger turned and saw a sad-faced man with a long, drooping mustache. The fellow was looking at him down the barrel of a rifle.

"Tuck your hands up into the air," said the stranger.

"What d'you want me for?"

"I'm the sheriff, Hagger. You stick up your hands. We'll talk it over on the way to town."

Hagger smiled. There was a delicious irony of fate in this encounter, and he felt that there was laughter in the wind that leaped about him, carrying a dry flurry of snow. That flurry was like a winged ghost in the eyes of the sheriff's young horse, and it danced to one side, making him reach for the reins. Still holding his rifle in one hand, he covered Hagger, but the yegg asked no better chance than this. His numbed hand shot inside his coat; rifle bullet jerked the hat from his head, but his own shot knocked the sheriff from his horse.

Hagger stopped long enough to see scarlet on the breast of the lawman.

"If you'd known Hagger, bud," said he, "you'd have brought your friends along when you came after me!"

Behind the saddle, he found a small pack of food. He took it, and leaving the groaning sheriff behind him he went up the trail, contented.

At the top of the next hill he paused and looked back. The sheriff was feebly trying to sit up, and Hagger thought of retracing his way and putting a finishing bullet through his head. However, it would waste time. Besides, the sheriff had his rifle and might fight effectively enough; so Hagger went on again, doggedly facing the wind.

The wind hung at the same point on the horizon for five days, growing stronger and colder, but Hagger accepted it without complaint. It bit him to the bone, but it

acted as a compass and gave him his direction. Twice he nearly froze during the night, but his marvelous vitality supported him, and he went on again and warmed himself with the labor of the trail.

It now led up and over the roughest imaginable hills and mountains. All trees disappeared save hardy evergreens; the mountains looked black; the sun never shone; and all that was brilliant was the streaking of snow here and there.

He passed cattle, drifting aimlessly before the wind, or standing head down in the lee of a bluff, their stomachs tucked up against their backs, dying on their feet. So he did not lack for fresh meat.

Presently, however, his supplies ran out, and after that he pushed on through a nightmare of hunger. He began to suffer pains in the stomach; weakness brought blind spells of dizziness, in the midst of one of which he slipped and nearly rolled over the edge of a precipice. But it never occurred to him to pause or to turn back. Nothing could lie ahead much worse than what he had gone through.

Then, on the third day of his famine he saw a hut, a squat, low form just visible up a narrow valley. He turned instantly toward it.

Since the sheriff had known of him, everyone in this country might know, Hagger reflected; therefore he made a halt near the hut and beat some warmth and strength into his blue hands. He looked to his pistol; the rifle slung at his back would probably be too slow for hand-to-hand work. But after he had made these preparations, he marched on to the hut, ready to kill for the sake of food.

He knocked but got no answer. He knocked again, and this time he was answered by a shrill snarling. He called; and the dog inside growled again.

This pleased Hagger, for he realized that the owner of the place must have left and the dog was there to guard the shack until the return of his master. When that master

returned, however, he would find something gone from his larder, and something more from his wardrobe!

The door was closed, but oddly enough it was latched from the outside! This puzzled Hagger for a moment, until he remembered that of course the master of the house would have secured the door from that side in leaving; so he set the latch up, and prepared to enter.

Steadying himself, he jerked the door wide and raised the pistol.

A white bull terrier came at him across the floor in a fury; but plainly the dog was incapable of doing damage. The animal staggered, dragging his hind legs; his ribs thrust through his coat, and the clenched fist of a man could have been buried in his hollow flanks. Hagger kicked him. The terrier fell and lay senseless with a thin gash showing between his eyes where the toe of the boot had landed.

There was very little food in the hut. On a high shelf behind the stove, he found two cans of beans, a half moldy sack of oatmeal and the remnant of a side of bacon. There was coffee in another tin, some sugar and salt, and that was all.

Hagger ate the sugar first in greedy mouthfuls. Then he ripped open a can of beans and devoured them. He was about to begin on the second when the terrier, reviving, came savagely at him, feebler than before, but red-eyed with determination to battle.

Hagger, open can in hand, looked down with a grim smile at the little warrior. He, too, was a man of battle, but surely he would not have ventured his life for the sake of a master's property as this little fellow was determined to do.

"You sap," said Hagger, "a lot of thanks he'd give you!"

He side-stepped the clumsy rush of the fighting dog and saw the terrier topple over as it tried to turn.

"You'd show, too," said Hagger, nodding wisely, because he knew the points of this breed. "You'd show and win. In New York. At the Garden, is what I mean."

He stooped and caught the lean neck of the dog by the scruff, so that it was helpless to use its teeth. Then he spilled some beans on the floor.

"Eat 'em, you dummy," said Hagger, still grinning. "Eat 'em, bare bones!"

The sight of food had a magic effect on the starved brute. But still he did not touch it at once. His furious eyes glared suspiciously at Hagger. He was growling as he abased his head, but finally he tasted—and then the beans were gone.

Gone from the second can of Hagger, too.

He went to a shed behind the house and found firewood corded there. He brought in a heaping armful. The stove was covered with rust, and when the fire kindled it steamed and gave out frightful odors; but Hagger was unaware of them, for he was busy preparing the coffee, the oatmeal, and the bacon.

Presently the air cleared; the fumes evaporated, and the warmth began to reach even the distant corners of the cabin.

At length the meal was ready. Hagger piled everything on the little table and sat down to eat.

He was half finished when he was aware of the dog beside the table, sitting up with trembling legs, slavering with dreadful hunger, but with the fury gone from his eyes which followed every movement of Hagger's hands, mutely hoping that some of the food would fall to its share.

It was not generosity that moved the man; rather it was because his hunger was nearly satisfied, and he wished to see the terrier's joy at the sight of food that he dropped a scrap of bacon, and waited.

The dog shuddered with convulsive desire; his head ducked toward the scrap; and then he checked himself and sat back, watching the face of the stranger for permission. Hagger gaped, open mouthed.

Faintly he sensed the cause. Having received food from his hand, the dog therefore looked upon him as a natural master; and being a master he must be scrupulously obeyed. Something in the heart of Hagger swelled with delight. Never had he owned a pet of any kind, and the only reason that bull terriers had a special interest for him was that he had seen them fighting in the pit.

"Take it, you little fool!" said Hagger.

Instantly the morsel was gone. The tail beat a tattoo on the floor.

"Well I'll be hanged!" said Hagger, and grinned again.

When he offered the dog another bit in his hand, it was taken only after the word of permission, and the red tongue touched his fingers afterward in gratitude.

Hagger snatched his hand away and looked at it in utter amazement; then he grinned once more and continued feeding the dog the bacon bit by bit.

Suddenly: "You rascal, you've stole all my bacon!" cried Hagger.

The dog stood up, alert to know the man's will, tail acquiescently wagging, ears flattened in acknowledgment of the angry tone. Already there seemed more strength in the white body.

Tenderness rose in the heart of Hagger at that; but he fought the unfamiliar feeling.

"Go'n the corner and lie down," he commanded harshly.

The dog obeyed at once and lay in the farthest shadow, motionless, head raised, as though waiting for the next command.

But warmth and sleepiness overwhelmed Hagger.

He flung himself down upon the bunk and slept heavily until the long night wore away, and an icy dawn looked across the world.

Then he wakened.

He was very cold from head to foot, except for one warm spot at his side. It was the dog, curled up and sleeping there.

"You're a fresh sap to come up here, ain't you? Who invited you, dumb-bell?"

The terrier licked the hand which was nearest him; then crawled up and tried to kiss the face of Hagger, masked in its bristling growth of beard.

The yegg regarded the dog with fresh interest.

"Nothing but blue ribbons," said he. "Nothing but firsts. Nothing but guts," he went on in a more emotional strain. "Nothing but clean fighting."

The dog, sitting on the bunk, cocked its head to follow this harangue, and seemed to grin in approval.

"So," said Hagger, "we're gonna get some breakfast, kid. You come and look!"

He went out, carrying his rifle, and the terrier staggered to a little pool near by and licked feverishly at the ice. When Hagger broke the heavy sheet, the animal drank long. There was less of a hollow within his flanks now.

Turning from the pond, Hagger saw a jack rabbit run from a bit of brush, followed by another.

Luck was his!

He dropped hastily to one knee and fired. The rearmost rabbit dropped; and the other darted toward the safety of the shrubbery, but Hagger knocked him down on the verge.

By the time he had picked up his first prize, the terrier

was dragging the second toward him, but his strength was so slight that again and again he sprawled on the slippery snow.

The amusement of the yegg continued until he saw the dog reach the end of its strength and fall. Then he strode, still laughing, to the rescue, and picked up the rabbit.

The terrier managed to get to its feet and move uncertainly at the heels of its new master. Now Hagger built another roaring fire and roasted the larger of the rabbits. The second he fed to the dog while he ate his own portion. Then sleepiness came upon him the second time, for nature was striving in her own way to repair the ravages of cold and starvation in him.

When he wakened, his nerves were no longer numb, his body was light, and strength had returned to his hands. He saw that he had slept from early morning until nearly noon. So he hastened to the door and swept the horizon with an anxious glance.

He hardly cared, however, what enemies awaited him, for now that he was himself once more, he felt that he could face the world with impunity. Indeed, he looked out on no human enemy, but upon a foe which would nevertheless have to be reckoned with. The wind which had blown steadily all these days had fallen away at last, and was replaced by a gentle breeze out of the south carrying vast loads of water vapor toward the frozen north. The water fell as huge flakes of snow, some of them square as the palm of a man's hand; now the air was streaked by ten million pencil lines of white wavering toward the earth. The wind gathered strength and sent billows uncertainly down the valley, picking the white robes from upper slopes and flinging them onto the floor of the ravine.

Hagger saw nothing beautiful in the moth wings which were beating so softly upon the world. He cursed deeply, steadily.

"There's no luck," he said. "Only the sneaks and the mollycoddles, they get all the luck. There ain't no luck for a man."

It was time to be moving on, and Hagger prepared himself for the march. His self-confidence rose proudly in spite of the labor which confronted him. In a way he loved great tasks, for what other living was there, compared with these crises when brain and soul had to merge in one flame or the labor could not be performed?

He had cleaned out the cabin of its entire food cache, meager as it had been.

"If there was more than I could pack," declared Hagger to himself, "I'd burn it up—I'd chuck it out to spoil in the wet. Why, such a skunk as him, he don't deserve to have a bite left him—him that would leave a dog to starve."

This raised in Hagger an unusual sense of virtue. For by comparing himself with the unknown man who had left the white dog to the loneliness and starvation of this cabin, he felt a surge of such self-appreciation as brought tears to his eyes. His breath came faster, and he reached for the terrier's head and patted it gently. The dog at once pressed closer to him and tried to rest its forepaws upon his knee; but it was far too weak and uncertain in its movements to manage such a maneuver.

It was time to depart, and Hagger walked to the door lightly and firmly: "Well, I gotta leave now, old pal. You'll make out okay when your boss gets back." And Hagger stepped out the door.

The snow was still falling fast, sometimes heaving in the wind and washing like billows back and forth, so that it seemed wonderfully light and hardly worth considering. But in a few strides it began to ball about his feet and caused him to lift many extra pounds with either leg; moreover, reaching through this white fluff he had no idea what his footing would be, and repeatedly he slipped.

He knew that he had left the narrow trail, and he also knew that it would be hopeless to try to recover it.

All of this within the first fifty strides since he left the door of the shack!

Then he heard a half-stifled cry, like the cry of a child. It was the white dog coming after him in a wavering course; sometimes he passed out of sight in the snow. Sometimes his back alone was visible.

Hagger, scowling, turned and picked up the dog by the neck. He carried him to the cabin, flung him roughly inside, and latched the door.

"Your boss'll come back for you," said Hagger.

He walked away, while one great wail rose from within the cabin. Then silence!

Straight up the valley went Hagger, regardless of the trail now, knowing that he must reach the higher land at the farther end quickly; otherwise the whole ravine would be impassable, even to a man on snowshoes, for several days. He pointed his way to a cleft in the mountains, now and again visible through the white phantoms of the storm. The wind, rising fast, pressed against his back and helped him forward; he felt that luck was turning to him at last.

And yet Hagger was dreadfully ill at ease; a weight was on his heart.

Something wailed behind him.

"Your boss'll come back for you, you sap," said Hagger. Then he added with a shudder: "My God, it was only the wind that yelled then!"

But he had lied to the dog and himself, for he knew that the man would not and could not come back; and when he did, the terrier would be dead.

Hagger turned. The wind raged in his face, forbidding him; all his senses urged him to leave that fatal ravine,

and the wide, white wings of the storm flew ceaselessly against him.

Yet, he bent his head and started back.

It was hard going through the teeth of the storm, but he managed it. He came at last to the shack, and jerked open the door. Through the twilight he had a dim view of the terrier rising from the floor like a spirit from the tomb and coming silently toward him.

Hagger slammed the door shut and stamped some of the snow from his boots; the heat of his body had melted enough of that snow to soak him to the skin; he felt a chill cutting at his heart, and doubly cold was it in the dark, moist hollow of that cabin.

Hagger sat for a long, long time in the gloom of this silent, man-made cave; in his lap lay the head of the dog, equally silent, but the glance of the man was fixed upon eternity, and the glance of the dog found all heaven in the face of the man.

At length Hagger roused himself, for he felt that inaction was rotting his spirit. Blindly he seized the broom which stood in a corner of the shack and swept furiously until some warmth returned to his body and his blood was flowing again.

Then he stood in the center of the shack and looked around him.

Already, as he knew, the snow outside was too deep to admit escape, and still it fell, beating its white wings upon the root. He was condemned to this cabin for he knew not how long, and here he must find his means of salvation.

Well, he had plenty of good seasoned wood in the shed; for that he could thank heaven. He had salt to season any meat he could catch and kill. And he was fortified by two enormous meals on which he could last for some days.

The dog, too, was beginning to show effects from the nourishment. Its eyes were brighter, and its tail no longer hung down like a limp plumb line. By the tail of a dog you read his soul.

But Hagger avoided looking at the terrier. He feared that if he did so, a vast rage would descend upon him. If he glanced at the dog he would be reminded that it was for the sake of a dumb beast that he had made this sacrifice which, in a way, was a sacrilege. For something ordained, did it not, that the beasts should serve man rather than man the beasts?

If such a fury came upon him, he would surely slay the thing which had drawn him back to his fate.

For the salt and the fuel Hagger could give thanks. For the rifle, the pistol, the powder and lead he need offer no thanksgiving. He had brought them with him. With these he could maintain his existence, if only prey were led within his clutches. But first of all he must devise some means for venturing upon the sea of snow. He remembered that some discarded odds and ends had been hanging from the rafters of the shed.

When he opened the cabin door, a white tide burst in upon him and flooded the room.

The wind had shifted and had heaped a vast drift against the door. He beat his way out.

Then he saw that he must proceed with patience. To that end, therefore, Hagger got a broad scoop shovel which, no doubt, had served duty many a winter before. He attacked the snow masses and made them fly before him. He began to dig a prodigious trench. The door of the shack lay at the bottom of a valley, so to speak, and now he could see that the entire roof of the cabin had been buried by the same drift.

Hagger climbed to the roof, which slanted so that he

had difficulty in keeping a footing there, and worked busily with his shovel to clear the snow away.

The snowfall ceased; the bright stars came out; and their glance brought terrible cold upon the earth, much more dreadful than anything that Hagger ever had endured before. He had known extremities of heat, but even the most raging sun did not possess this invisible, thrusting sword.

Sometimes he felt as though his clothes had been plucked from his back, as though he were a naked madman, toiling there.

Numbness, too, began to overtake him; and a swimming mist, from time to time, rose over his brain and dimmed the cruel light of the stars.

Slowly, he worked his way to the ridge of the roof. With difficulty he cleared the chimney and then descended to work on the fire.

Inside the cabin, he laid the tinder and the wood, but when he attempted to light a match his cold-stiffened fingers refused to grip so small a thing. He tried to hold a match between his teeth and strike the bottom of the match box broadly across it. But he merely succeeded in breaking half a dozen matches. He went out into the starlight and shook the contents into the palm of his hand.

There were three matches left. No, no! Not matches—but three possibilities of life, three gestures with which to defy the white death. Now, at last, utter fear engulfed the heart and the soul of Hagger and held him motionless in the night until something touched his leg.

He looked down and saw the raised head of the bull terrier. A new wonder gripped Hagger. After all, he was clad and the dog was thinly coated at best. He was in full strength, and the beast was a shambling skeleton.

He possessed strong hands, and so could labor toward

deliverance. But the beast had none of these things, and yet he made not so much as a gesture of rebellion or doubt; not one whimper escaped from that iron heart of his; silently, now, he looked up to this man, this master, this god.

Hagger stumbled back into the cabin and fell on his knees. He had tripped on the threshold, but he found the dog before him, and he gathered that icy, trembling body into his arms. He felt a tongue lick at his hands. "Christ! Christ!" whispered Hagger, and crushed the dog against his breast.

Perhaps that was a prayer, certainly it was not a curse.

But after those two words had come chokingly from the throat of Hagger, warmth came to his breast from the body of the dog, and that warmth was a spiritual thing as well. Now he stood up and when he tried a match it burst instantly into flame.

Hagger touched the match to the tinder. Flame struggled with smoke for a moment, as thought struggles with doubt, and then the fire rose, hissed in the wood, put forth its strength with a roar and made the chimney sing and the stove tremble while Hagger sat broodingly close, drinking the heat and chafing the neck of the trembling dog.

At length he began to drowse. His head nodded, and he slept.

He had not slept long when the day came; the stove was still warm and the core of the red fire lived within the ashes. The dog was asleep in his arms.

Hagger woke. He roused the fire and began at the point where he had left off in the starlight. That is, under a sunny sky from which no warmth but brilliant light descended, he opened the rest of his way to the shed and there he examined the things which were hanging from the rafters.

About such matters he knew very little, but, probably from a book or a picture, he recognized the frames of three snowshoes and understood their uses; but to the frames not a vestige of the netting adhered.

When Hagger saw that he looked down to the dog at his side.

"Your skin would be what I need now," said Hagger.

"But maybe I can find somethin' just as good."

What he discovered would do very well—the half-moldy remnants of a saddle—and out of the sounder parts of the leather which covered it he cut strips and fastened them to the frames.

It required all of a hungry day to perform this work, and when the darkness came Hagger's stomach was empty indeed. The terrible cold invaded the bodies of beast and man even when the fire roared close by—invaded them, and demanded nurture for the blood.

Hagger strapped the shoes on and went off to hunt. Since the dog could not follow, he was bidden to remain behind and "guard." So, close to the door he lay down, remembering, and resistant even to the glowing warmth of the stove, with its piled fuel. Hagger went out beneath the stars.

The shoes were clumsy on his feet, particularly until he learned the trick of trailing them with a short, shuffling gait. The snow had compacted somewhat, still it was very loose, and it gave way beneath him and let him down into a cold, floundering depth now and again. In spite of this, he made good progress, working in a broad circle around the shack until he came to windward of a forest where the snow had not gathered to such a depth in the trough of this narrow ravine, and where the going was easier.

Other creatures had also found this favorable ground, for as he brushed into a low thicket on the edge of the woods a deer bounded out. Hagger could hardly believe

his good fortune and brought the rifle ready to his shoulder. He had kept his right hand warm and the fingers were nimble enough as he closed them on the trigger. Yet the deer sped like an arrow from the string and at the shot it leaped into the air and swerved to the side out of sight behind some brush.

Hagger lunged sidewise to gain another view, another shot, and so forgot the snowshoes. The right one landed awkwardly aslant on the head of a shrub, twisted, and a sudden fire of pain caused him to go down with a grunt. The agony was great, but he moved the foot deliberately until he was sure that there was no break. He had sprained his ankle, however, and sprained it severely.

And that was the end of his hunting. Perhaps the end of his life, also, unless help came this way!

Walking was now impossible, so Hagger took the shoes from his feet and put them on his hands. Then he began to drag himself forward, letting the whole weight of his body trail out behind.

It is not a difficult thing to describe, and even a child could do it for a little distance; whereas Hagger had the strength of a giant in his arms and hands. However, a hundred yards made him fall on his face, exhausted, and the cabin seemed endless miles away.

He discovered now that he could use his right knee and left leg to help thrust him, fishlike, through the snow, but the first strength was gone from his arms. They were numb.

Yet he went on. When, finally, after an eternity, he gained the cabin door he looked up to the latch with despair, knowing that he lacked the strength to raise himself and reach it with his hand.

Yet, after some rest, the strength came. He fell through the open door and the terrier leaped on him in a frenzy of joy. But Hagger lay at full length, hardly breathing. The

labor across the floor to the stove was a vast expedition. Once more Hagger had to rest before he refreshed the dying fire, and then he collapsed into a state of coma.

When the dawn came, Hagger had not wakened, but a loud noise at the door roused him, and bracing himself on his hands, he sat up and beheld in the entrance, with the dazzling white of the snowfield behind him, a tall figure, wrapped in a great coat and wearing a cap with fur ear pieces. Snowshoes were on his feet, and his mittened hands leveled a steady rifle at Hagger.

"By the livin' damnation," said Hagger. "It's the jeweler!"

"All I want," said Friedman calmly enough, "is the cash that you got from Steffans. Throw it out."

Hagger looked at him as from a vast distance; the matter of the jewel robbery was so faint and far off and so ridiculously unimportant in the light of subsequent events, that suddenly he could have laughed at a man who had crossed a continent and passed through varied torments in order to reclaim seven thousand dollars.

"Suppose I ain't got it?" said he.

"Then I'll kill you," said Friedman, "and search you afterward. Do you think I'm bluffing when I say that, Hagger?"

He ended on a note of curious inquiry, and Hagger nodded.

"No, I know that you're talking straight," he said without emotion. "How did you find out about the money?"

"I made Steffans talk."

"You couldn't," said Hagger. "Steffans never talks."

"He talked," said the jeweler, smiling a little. "And now I'll have the money and get out. If I stay much longer, I'll murder you, Hagger!"

And Hagger knew that the man meant what he said.

"Call off that dog!" said Friedman, his voice rising suddenly.

The terrier had crawled slowly forward on his belly. Now it rose and made a feeble rush at the enemy, for it appeared that he knew all about a rifle and what the pointing of it signified.

For one instant, Hagger was tempted to let the fighting dog go in. But then he knew that the first bullet, in any case, would be for himself, and the second would surely end the life of the animal.

He called sharply, and the dog pulled up short and then backed away, snarling savagely.

Hagger threw his wallet on the floor, and Friedman picked it up and dropped it into his pocket.

"You ain't even going to see what's in it?"

"It's all you've got," said Friedman, "and how can I ask to get back more than you have. God knows what you've spent along the road!"

He said it in hate and malice; he said it through his teeth, as though he were speaking of blood and spirit rather than of hard cash.

"I spent damn little," said Hagger regretfully. "I wish that I'd blown the whole wad, though."

"Good-bye," said Friedman, and backed toward the door. He paused. "Hurt your foot, eh?"

Exhaustion had made Hagger fall asleep the previous night without removing his shoes, and now the swelling was pressing with a dreadful force against the leather.

"I got an ankle sprained so bad that I can't move, hardly. Otherwise," he added savagely, "d'you think that you would have been able to get the drop on me so dead easy as all this?"

Friedman lingered at the door, taking careful stock of the thief. Hagger had no weapon at hand, therefore he admitted carelessly: "It wouldn't have made much difference. I don't have a bullet in the rifle."

"You don't what?"

The jeweler chuckled, and throwing back the bolt, he exposed the empty chamber.

"I lost the cartridges in the snow. I don't know much about guns."

Hagger was touched with calm admiration.

"Friedman," he said, "did you ever do any police work? Ever have any training?"

"No."

"Well, you sure done a pretty job in getting at me here."

"When I heard you'd shot the sheriff and nearly killed him, I just started in circles from that point. There wasn't anything special about it."

"No?"

"It just took time."

"What did you live on through the storm?"

"Hard tack. I still got enough to bring me back to town."

He took a square, half-chewed chunk of it from the pocket of his great coat.

"And what did you live on, Hagger?"

"I found a little chuck in this shack—ate that—shot a couple of rabbits."

"What'll you live on now?"

"Hope, kid," grinned Hagger.

The jeweler scanned the cabin with a swift glance, taking note of the vacant shells, and the moldy, tomblike emptiness.

"Maybe the man who owns this place'll come back!"

"Maybe," said Hagger.

Friedman turned his head and looked over the banked snows, and then at the growing cloud on the southern sky.

"No," he said with decision, "I guess not. This looks to be about the end of you, Hagger."

"Maybe."

Hagger closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Friedman was outside the door.

"Hey, Friedman! Wait a minute! We gotta talk."

The jeweler turned and leaned through the doorway.

"There's no more to say. You got what's coming to you, and that's all. There's a storm coming. I can't wait."

"You'll rot in hell, Friedman, if you don't listen to me!"

"Go on, then," said Friedman, leaning against the side of the door. "But make it quick."

"It's about the dog," said Hagger.

The eyes of the jeweler narrowed a little. "What you driving at, Hagger?"

"You got a liking for dogs, Friedman, I guess?"

"Me?" said Friedman. "Why should I like the beasts?"

Hagger stared. "All right, all right, you don't like 'em, but this is a special kind of a dog. A bull terrier. They're the only dogs worthwhile. These are the kings. Like a gent I heard say: 'What will my bull terrier do? He'll do anything that any other dog'll do, and then he'll kill the other dog!'"

Hagger laughed. It was a joke which he appreciated greatly.

But Friedman did not smile. "You're wasting my time," he said.

"All right," said Hagger, shrugging his shoulders. "Only what I really want to tell you is this dog'll stick by you to the limit. This dog'll die for you, Friedman!"

"He looks more like he'd tear my throat out. Why should I give a damn about a dog, will you tell me that?"

"You're an intelligent, high type of man. You wouldn't have been able to run me down, otherwise. And you want a good practical reason, Friedman. Well, I'll give you one. You take that dog out to civilization, and you put him up for sale, what would you get?"

"Get? I dunno. Twenty-five dollars from some fool."

"Yeah?" sneered Hagger. "Twenty-five dollars, you say? Twenty-five dollars!"

He laughed hoarsely.

The jeweler, intrigued, knitted his brows and waited.

"Maybe fifty?"

"Hah!" exclaimed Hagger. "You know what the best thoroughbred bull terriers fetch when they're champions?"

"Is this a champion?" asked Friedman.

"Sure is!" lied Hagger with enthusiasm. "He's a champion bull terrier. A real world beater!"

"Well," said Friedman, "I dunno—"

"Look here, Friedman, you don't mean to stand there and tell me man to man that you really don't know who this dog is?"

"How should I know?" asked Friedman.

"Well, his name's been in the papers enough," said Hagger. "He's had write-ups and pictures taken of him. I'll tell you who he is. He's Lambury Rex—that's who he is!"

"It seems to me I've heard that name. Lambury Rex? I'm pretty sure that I have."

"Everybody in the world has," Hagger assured him. "A man would be a fool to accept anything less than twenty-five hundred for a dog like this! Think of him taking the first prize—finest dog in the show—a blue ribbon—"

"Did he do that?"

"Ain't I telling you?"

Friedman said coldly: "And you're offering him to me!"

"I see," said Hagger slowly, nodding. "Why should I give him to you, eh? When you've been trailing me, and all that. Well, I've got no grudge against you. I soaked you for seven thousand. You soaked me and got it back. We're all square. But the main thing is this: I know you're not fool

enough to leave this dog behind to starve here in the shack with me!"

"Maybe he won't die of starvation," said Friedman. "Maybe he'll make a couple of meals for you first. Stewed dog for Hagger!"

He laughed cynically, but his laughter died at once, stopped by the expression of disgust on the face of Hagger.

"Anyway," said Hagger, "that's the end of your joke. Take him, Friedman. Take him along and make a fortune out of him."

"How could I ever get him through the snow?"

"You broke a trail to come in. You could take him back the same way. He's game. He'll work hard. And—and you could sort of give him a hand now and then, old fellow!"

Hagger was pleading. He had cast pretense aside, and his heart was in his voice.

"It beats me," repeated Friedman, suddenly.

He stepped back inside the shack. He sat down in one of the chairs and regarded the yegg closely—his twisted foot and his tormented face.

"It beats me," repeated Friedman. "You, Hagger, you're gonna die, man. You're gonna die, and yet you're talking about a dog!"

"Will it do me any good to see a dog starve at the same time I do?"

"Might be company for you, I should think—since you like the cur such a lot."

"Cur?" said Hagger with a dark frown. "Damn you, Friedman, you don't deserve to have a chance at the saving of a fine animal like him, a king of dogs like Linkton Rex—"

"A minute ago," cut in the jeweler sharply, "you called him Lambury Rex."

"Did I? A slip of the tongue. You take me when I get excited, I never get the words right and—"

"Sure you don't." The visitor grinned wide and slow. "I don't believe this dog is worth anything. You're just trying to make a fool of me. It'd make you die happier if you could laugh at me a couple of times while you're lyin' here. Ain't that the truth?"

The yegg suddenly lay back, his head supported by the wall of the shack. Now his strength had gone from him for the moment, and he could only look at Friedman with dull, lackluster eyes.

Vaguely he observed the differences between himself and the jeweler, measured the narrow shoulders, the slender hands and feet, the long, lean face, now hollowed by the privations through which the man had passed. Weak physically, he might be, but he had sufficient force and determination to trail and catch up with Hagger himself—once Hagger had been detained by the dog!

"I tell you," said Hagger, "it's fate that you should have the terrier. If it hadn't been for him, you never would have caught me."

"Wouldn't I?" said Friedman. His head was thrust out, like the head of a bird of prey. "I would have followed you around the world!"

"Until you were bashed in the face!" said the yegg savagely.

"No, it was the will of God," said the jeweler, and piously he looked up.

Hagger gaped.

"God?" said he. "What has God got to do with you and me?"

"He stopped you with a dog, and then he made me take you with an empty gun. It's all the work of God!"

"Well," said Hagger slowly, "I know this—if you ain't

gonna take the dog away with you, then get out of here and leave me alone, will you? Because I hate the sight of your ugly mug."

Friedman, on his clumsy snowshoes, backed to the door and hesitated. He laid his hand upon the knob, then turned back once more.

And with a scowl he sat down in the chair again, and began unlacing his snowshoes.

"What're you takin' those off for?"

Friedman stood up, freed from the cumbersome shoes, and eyed Hagger without kindness.

"Lemme see your foot," said he, "and stop your yapping."

To the bewilderment of Hagger, Friedman actually trusted himself within gripping distance of his powerful, blunt-fingered hands which could have fastened upon him as fatally as the talons of an eagle.

Regardless, apparently, of this danger, Friedman knelt at his feet and began to cut the shoe with a sharp knife, slicing the leather with the greatest care, until the shoe came away in two parts. The sock followed. Then he looked at Hagger's foot.

It was misshapen, purple-streaked, and the instant the pressure of the shoe was removed, it began to swell.

Friedman regarded it with a shudder, then looked up at the set face of Hagger.

"I dunno—I dunno—" said Friedman, overwhelmed. "You talked dog to me, with this going on all the time."

Now that the shoe was off, instead of giving Hagger relief, the pain became tenfold worse, and the inflamed flesh, as it swelled, seemed to be torn with hot tongs. He lay sick with pain.

Friedman poured water into a pot and made the fire rage under it until the water was steaming briskly. After

that, he managed hot compresses for the swelling ankle, and alternately chilled it with snow and then bathed it in hot water, until the pain of the remedy seemed far greater than the pain of the hurt.

Then Friedman sat back to consider his task. The moment he paused, he was aware of the howling wind. Going to the door, he pushed it open a crack and saw that the storm was coming over the ravine blacker than ever, with the wind piling the snow higher and higher.

He slammed the door and turned with a scowl on his companion.

"Well," said Hagger, "I know how you feel. I feel the same way. It's hell; and believe me, Friedman, you never would of caught me if it hadn't been for the dog!"

"If it hadn't been for the dog, I'd've been out of the valley before the storm came," declared Friedman bitterly. "It's got the evil eye, that cur!"

He glared on the white bull terrier, then sat down, his back humped, his thin head thrust out before him.

"What do we eat?"

"Snow," said the yegg bitterly.

"That's no answer. I asked you a question."

"There's deer around here—sloughs of 'em. I potted one last night, and it was the side jump I took to see what come of it that done me in like this!"

He added: "I got an idea that maybe you could get a deer for us, Friedman. For yourself and me and the dog, is what I mean, y'understand?"

"I couldn't hit a deer."

"You can when you have to. If you couldn't hit a deer, how could you expect to hit me?"

"I know," sighed Friedman, "I'll go out and try, Hagger. Maybe I can get one."

Armed with Hagger's pistol, Friedman went to the door.

"Head for the forest right down the ravine and bear left of that," said Hagger. "That's where I found a deer; maybe you'll find 'em using the same place for cover."

Friedman disappeared.

Meantime, Hagger was much more comfortable. The rigorous and patient treatment given to his injured ankle had been effective. Now blood circulated rapidly in the ankle—there was no quicker way in which it could be healed.

The dog pricked his ears and crowded close to his master, and Hagger lay back, smiling. He let an arm fall loosely across the back of "Lambury Rex."

How long would it take Friedman to come to this intimate understanding with the animal?

Indeed, Friedman would probably never enter that door again. Hagger himself in such a case never would come back to the cabin, housing as it did only a man and a dog. An hour passed. The wind was still strong. The snow still fell. Again and again a crashing against the walls of the cabin told how the bits of flying snow crust were cutting at the wood.

They would cut at a man equally well, and no one but a sentimental fool Hagger told himself, would have done anything but turn his back to that wind, and let it help him out of the valley. From that moment the roar of the storm outside and the whistling of the wind in the chimney had a different meaning. They were the dirges for his death.

Calmly he began to make up his mind.

As soon as the wood which now filled the stove had burned down he would kill himself and the dog. It was the only manly thing to do, for otherwise there was slow starvation before them.

Suddenly the door was pushed open and Friedman stood in the entrance.

On his back there was a sight almost as welcome as the man himself, a shoulder of venison of ample proportions.

"It was the deer you shot," said Friedman, putting down his burden and grinning as the dog came to sniff at it. "I found it lying just about where you must have put your slug into it. Almost buried in the snow!"

"Did it take you all this time to walk there and back?" asked the yegg.

"No," replied Friedman slowly, "it wasn't that. When I first got out and faced the wind it seemed to blow the ideas out of my mind. I figured that it was best just to drift with the wind right out of the ravine. And I had gone quite a long distance when there was a howling behind me."

"Ah?" said Hagger, stiffening a little.

"A sort of wailing, Hagger, if you know what I mean—"

"Yes," said Hagger. "I know what you thought, too! You thought that it was the wail of the dog. Sort of his ghost, or something, complaining."

Friedman bit his lip anxiously.

"Are you a mind reader?" he asked.

"No, no," said Hagger, "but when I started to leave the valley I heard the same thing, and I had to come back. Maybe," he added in a whisper, "maybe, Friedman, this here dog is special. He never seemed like any other dog to me, and no other dog could do to you and me what he's done."

Hagger's ankle grew strong again. It should have kept him helpless for a month, but by the end of a fortnight of constant attention he could walk on it with a limp.

It was time to go.

The weather which had piled the little ravine with snow had altered in a single day; a chinook melted away the

snow and filled the little creek with thundering waters from the mountains; the haze and the laziness of spring covered the earth and filled the air. It would be muddy going, but go they must—Friedman back to his shop in far-away Manhattan, and Hagger to wherever fate led him on his wild way.

On the last night they sat at the table with a pine torch to give them light and played cards, using a pack they had found forgotten in a corner. They played in silence.

Speech had grown less and less frequent during the past fortnight. Certainly there was no background of good feeling between them, and all this time they had lived with an ever-present cause for dispute sharing the cabin with them. That cause now lay near the stove, stretched out at ease, turning his head from time to time from the face of one master to the other; and watching them with a quiet happiness.

The dog was no longer the shambling, trembling thing of bones and weakness that had first snarled at the yegg; now, sleek and glistening, he looked what Hagger had named him—a king of his kind. Two weeks of a meat diet had filled the hollows in his flesh, and days of work and sport, following through the snow on those hunts which never failed to send Friedman home with game—for the ravine had caught the wild life like a pocket, the deep, soft snows kept it helpless there, and even the uncertain hand of Friedman could not help but send a bullet to the mark—had made the dog wax keen and strong.

The jeweler, also, was no longer what he had been. The beard made his narrow face seem broader, and the hunts and exercise in the pure mountain air had straightened his rounded shoulders.

Now and again, during those long evenings in the snowbound cabin, the two men would glance at the white

terrier, and every time there was a softening of his eyes, and a wagging of his tail. But those looks seldom came his way; for the most part the pair eyed one another sullenly, and the silent game of cards went on until Friedman, throwing down his hand after a deal, grunted and stood up.

Then, as though by a common agreement, they left the table and turned in for the night.

And the white dog slept on the floor midway, exactly, between the two.

Dawn came, and they were prepared to leave the cabin for good. Hagger jerked his head toward the bull terrier: "Him an' me—we'd both be dead ones except for you. So...he goes with you."

Joy came into the face of Friedman. As they stood at the door of the shack, he said briefly, his face partly averted: "So long, Hagger!"

"Good-bye, Friedman."

They left the cabin then, Friedman turning east, for he could afford to return through the towns; but Hagger faced west, for there still was a trail to be buried by him.

And behind Friedman trotted the white bull terrier. The sight of this made Hagger shake his head, as so often of late he had shaken it, when the pains of body or soul tormented him.

Every day, when Friedman had gone out to hunt, the terrier had trailed at his heels; habit might have accounted for choice now.

In a black mist Hagger limped forward. Then he heard a yelping behind him and glancing back saw that the terrier was circling wildly about Friedman and finally catching him by a trouser leg had started to drag him back in the direction of Hagger.

Friedman would not turn. Resolutely, head bent, he went on through the ravine as if nothing in the world lay behind him.

Then a white flash crossed the space between the two. It was the dog, and pausing midway, he howled long and dismally.

There was no pleading from Friedman, however; but, as though he knew that the dog was lost to him, suddenly he threw out his hands and began to run. Running, indeed, to put behind him the thing that he had lost.

Hagger faced forward.

There was a vast happiness at his heart when the white flash reached him and leaped up in welcome.

Behind his heels the dog settled to a contented trot, and when after another hour of trudging Hagger paused and sat on a rock to rest his ankle, the terrier came and put his head upon his master's knee.

All the weariness of the long trail, and all the pain of the last weeks vanished from the mind of Hagger.

He was content.

The Third Bullet

As readers, we are fascinated with the total transformation of a character, from lamb to lion or lion to lamb. In this unusual novelette, Faust deftly achieves such a transformation within the character of Chris Ballantine. We meet him as a hard-pressed, overworked rancher, beset by financial woes and hounded by a selfish brother and sister. We're sorry for him. He's a man in a pressure cooker—and when the lid blows his entire life is dramatically altered.

In "The Third Bullet," Faust uses character to inspire action, providing solid credibility and suspense as we watch the lamb become the lion. Always testing his own limits as a storyteller, Faust here constructs a strong emotional base from which to project a fresh and arresting version of his fabled gunfighter-hero.

This story offers yet another example of Faust's lifelong obsession with strength, whether it be strength of mind or body. Within each of us, Faust always believed, a giant lies becalmed. When the giant is awakened, almost anything is possible.

Here we witness the awakening of the giant within Chris Ballantine. The results guarantee thrills and surprises in a galloping six-gun saga

that propels us relentlessly toward a bullet-blasted finale of mythic dimension.

It was already the afterglow of sunset before Christopher Ballantine topped the hill.

When he looked into the next hollow, in the muddy margin of the sun-shrunk "tank," he saw the head and horns of a badly bogged cow. This work should not have fallen to him. His brother, Will, back from college for this summer, had been directed to ride the range near the house, and if he had acted according to his duty, he would have seen this bogged cow. But Will, as usual, had been playing truant.

Chris turned the head of his horse and rode down to the tank, making excuses for Will on the way. For, after all, when a boy comes back from college full of his athletic deeds on track and field, full of tales of college eminence, clean-handed, high-headed, it is hard to put him on the range riding at the heels of stupid dogies. No wonder that he had broken off work early.

Christopher Ballantine was used to making such excuses, both for his younger brother and his still younger sister. When his father died ten years before, Chris at the age of eighteen had naturally stepped into the vacant place as head of the family. Sylvia was only nine. Will was barely eleven. To those motherless and fatherless children, it seemed that the world owed special care to make up for their orphaned lives. And Chris Ballantine had taken that duty on himself, gladly, with a heart swelling with high determination. He had put them both into schools. Now, with Sylvia at nineteen and Will at twenty-one, the elder

brother could say with pride that they had been educated as well as any millionaire's children.

If both of them had been pampered into pride and laziness, he dared not open his eyes to that fault, for the education of the two was the only tangible result of the ten years of slavery which Chris Ballantine had just endured. A series of disasters had swept the ranch. At first they were caused by his inexperience, both in raising cattle and in marketing them. Afterward, when he learned the hard lessons which he needed to know, bad luck dogged him. Whatever he did went wrong. Three years before, blackleg had come like a curse on the place. The ranch had never recovered, and, left without a cent of incumbrance at the death of the father, the place was now heavily mortgaged. However, this was the price which had been paid for the education of the youngsters, and the elder brother felt more than repaid. Therefore, he dared not open his eyes to their faults—for it meant opening his eyes to his own failure.

He rode down to the tank and set to work. First he unslipped his rope and shot the noose skillfully over the horns of the steer. But when the pony pulled the rope taut, it was plain that the steer was so deeply worked into the mud that its neck would break before it was drawn clear.

He had to ride to the edge of firm land. First he pulled at the horns of the bogged animal until its fore quarters were drawn up a little. Then he passed the tail over the pommel of the saddle and made the snorting pony heave up the hind quarters. When that was accomplished, he took another pull on the rope. This time the steer drew clear, slowly, with infinite tugging. For it had let its exhausted body lie as a dead weight, hopeless, until it was in a half-leg depth of the mud. Then, discovering that it

had a chance for life, it recovered its strength in a rush, plunged out of the tank, and made at Chris with lowered horns. There was barely enough agility left in the legs of the weary pony to avoid that rush.

And while the rescued steer galloped clumsily away, the rancher turned back toward the house, profoundly thankful. So sadly had the herd diminished that the loss of a single steer would be a heavy blow.

All of this made him late for supper, and when he had finished washing up and scraping mud, the cook met him with a significant shrug of the shoulders as he passed through the kitchen.

"They couldn't wait," said she, jerking a thumb over her shoulder toward the dining room.

Ballantine flushed, angry that they could not delay their supper half an hour on his account. He had to pause at the door of the dining room, for an instant, before he went in. But, when he appeared, he managed a cheerful smile. They were down to coffee and cake. As for an apology, it did not occur to them that one was needed. Sylvia merely nodded toward him, and then stared at the mud stains with which he was covered.

"You're a half hour late!" said Will. Chris was too tired to be angry. His plate was brought in from the kitchen, covered with cold, soggy food. He started eating with no appetite.

"There was a steer in the tank just over the hill," said Ballantine. "Me and the hoss had a tussle pullin' it out."

"You and the which?" asked Sylvia.

"Me and the hoss."

" 'Hoss?'" said Sylvia, arching her brows. " 'Hoss?'"

"What's the matter?" asked Chris.

Will and Sylvia exchanged glances.

"It's no use," said Will. "The habits are fixed on him by this time."

"But good heavens, Christopher," said his sister, "I should think that you could make *some* effort."

"To do what?" asked Ballantine blankly.

"To talk as if the English language were something more than a cowpuncher's lingo."

He stared at her for a moment. She looked very pretty with this flush of indignation in her cheek, and her eyes bright with scorn. He felt a little stab of wonder then, as he had often felt before, that this lovely girl could actually be his sister. She was like dew touching his dusty life. And again he swallowed the faint beginnings of anger at her rebuke.

"Well, sis," he said, "maybe I don't talk the way Shakespeare wrote. I ain't got the time to think about such things. It takes work to run a ranch like this."

"Does it? Yes, I suppose so—to run such a ranch properly."

He winced again; then he looked straight down at his plate, hoping that they would not see his rising color. But, from the corner of his eye, he could make out the malicious little nod with which Will egged on his sister.

"I don't pretend to be the best rancher in the world, Sylvia," he said at last.

She said: "I was talking to Mr. Bannock this afternoon."

"What did old Si have to say?"

"Old Si," she snapped out, "is a very successful operator in cattle."

"He's lucky," admitted Christopher Ballantine.

He was thinking of all the calamities that had dropped upon the ranch and upon his life. He did not see the small, dark dining room, only half lighted by the flame which quivered in the throat of the smokey lamp. He did not see the table, with its worn oilcloth covering, and the heavy, chipped crockery with which it was covered. He was counting the years, the dead years behind him. As for the

future, it would be like this—work, weariness, despair, until Will Ballantine, with his well-schooled brain, made some brilliant business stroke and was able to set them up on a larger scale.

"Lucky?" Sylvia was saying. "Lucky, Christopher? Then I suppose that you've been only—unlucky?"

"There's luck in everything," Chris said, and he leaned wearily, his elbows resting on the edge of the table, which threw back his wide shoulders and made the great, smooth-swelling muscles stand out across his chest.

"Chris," said Will suddenly, pushing back his chair and turning to his brother, "it was from Bannock that we heard some shocking news today. He told us that there's another mortgage on the ranch!"

Christopher Ballantine twisted a little in his chair, with the stinging pain of that accusation. He shoved away his plate.

"I won't deny it," he said.

"After all," said his sister, "one need not dodge the truth. Our share is just as great as yours, Chris. We're each a third owner."

"We could see how things were going on the ranch—though heaven knows you've never told us much!" said Will.

"I've told you all I thought that you needed to know," said Ballantine.

"I understand," broke in Will coldly, swelling with suppressed anger, "that the ranch is now mortgaged for more than it would bring for cash in a quick sale."

"Oh, Chris!" cried the girl. "What have you done with all the money?"

His eyes widened as he looked back at her. What had he done with the money? And this from her?

"Why not make a clean breast of it?" asked Will in his sharp-edged voice. "You've been playing the market or

something like that, Chris. Come out and let's know the truth!"

Speech was impossible, and the head of Ballantine sank on his breast.

"You see?" said the girl. "He practically confesses. It's exactly as we thought. Where *could* it have gone? Heaven knows that *we* haven't cost the estate a great deal—just a little every year for our schooling. And while you had us out of the way, Chris—while you were here as the absolute master of our ranch, what have you been doing?"

Ballantine rose from his chair and turned blindly toward the door.

"That won't do!" snapped Will.

"Tell us the worst of it, Chris. Confession is good for the soul."

The truth Chris was forced to face was a torture to him, but it was nothing compared with the savage intentness in the faces before him.

"It's been just bad luck," he muttered.

"So that Sylvia, poor girl, and I—we are to be beggared? In the very beginning of life—beggared!"

"I've done my best with the place," said Ballantine, hardly recognizing his own voice. "I swear I've done my best. But things have turned out bad. When father died, somebody had to take charge. Who was there except me?"

"Who *asked* you to do it?" said Will. "Why couldn't a competent man have been given the work? Heaven knows it would have paid in the end!"

Ballantine staggered through the kitchen, and in the withered, cunning face of the cook he could see that she had been listening and had overheard everything. And this, in turn, meant that the entire range would know about the scene in a week, at the most. For her busy tongue could never be still when it had such a theme as this to contend with.

He went out into the dark, breathing deeply. Still, through the open window, their raised voices came shamelessly forth to him.

"My heavens, is there no backbone in him? What a shameful thing to have in the family."

"Hush, Will!"

"What do I care if he hears? He's ruined my life—or come close to it. Can I enter a law firm this fall in New York and hold up my end socially without a penny to live on except the paltry two thousand a year that he sends me?"

"What about *me,* Will?"

"It's the devil of a situation for both of us, but a girl doesn't have to have so much."

"Doesn't have to have so much? Go into any decent shop on Fifth Avenue and see what clothes cost. I don't mean extravagant ones, but just plain frocks—"

"And fur coats like the one you bought last winter? Not extravagant?"

"Well, anyone can tell you that a fur coat is a necessity in the East. Why,—you have a fur coat yourself!"

"I had to get it when Van Dyck Thompson asked me on that hunting trip. That was a social opportunity I couldn't give up. You know that as well as I do!"

Ballantine could endure no more. He sneaked out to the haystack that stood behind the long cattle shed, and threw himself down on his back in the spill of chaff and hay that had dropped from the stack. There he lay, fighting the agony of grief and shame which stormed through his heart, watching the stars, and seeing them swirl into tangled lines of fire.

At length his vision cleared. The stars burned singly above him; his pulses stirred again with a regular beat. He

arose and went into the house. He was perfectly calm when he came before the pair again.

"Now," he said, as they stared scowling at him, "I guess I got to put the cards on the table. The Reddick bank has the mortgages. They'll tell you about them. But I want to tell you about Bannock. He wanted to buy that southeast half section last spring, and I wouldn't sell, because I wanted to keep father's place intact. Bannock has hated me ever since."

"Well, however things are, we can't go on this way," Will declared. "I need more money to do what I plan."

"You got law in mind, Will?"

"I even have the firm lined up. Crazy to get me, so they say. One of the finest firms in New York. Ready for me this fall. But Heaven knows how I can do it on two thousand a year. Can you raise that to three thousand, Chris?"

"One minute, if you please!" put in the girl. "I suppose that I have *some* rights, or are the men in the family to have everything?"

"Just what is it you want, sis?" Chris asked.

"I want six months," said Sylvia with a toss of her head. "I want six months to do my piece of work, and do it well. There's only one thing that's worthwhile, money! I can't earn it. But I have the social footing established. I can meet money. And in six months I'll *marry* it and bring it home sewed up in a bag! But I need living expenses—five hundred a month for six months. If I don't win by that time, I give up all claims on the ranch!"

Ballantine could not look into her face. He could not look into his own soul, hearing such words from his sister. He thought of the ten years of his wasted young life, and an agony rose in him.

"I think," he said huskily, "that I can raise five thousand with a last mortgage. That would give twenty-five hundred to each of you. Is that a bargain?"

"A bargain!" cried Will. "If I don't make good in a year, I'll call myself a failure!"

"It's not enough," said Sylvia critically. "But I suppose that I could make do! When would we get the money?"

"Tomorrow, if the bank will close the deal with me."

"Good boy, Chris!" said Will. "Then we won't have to spend the rest of the summer on this damnable ranch!"

Ballantine went out again into the dark. He sat on the chopping block and rested his chin on his fist and tried to think. Sylvia came out to him and dropped a hand on his shoulder.

"Maybe we talked pretty hard Christopher," she said. "But words don't draw blood!"

"Don't they?" murmured Ballantine.

"You'll forget about all this in a month. But now I want to tell you, that if you could give me *three* thousand and Will only two, it will really be worth while. Of course, when I marry, I don't intend to get some small fish out of the pond. I intend *millions,* Christopher. And after I have it, the purse will be open. You understand?"

Five minutes after she left. Will was with him.

"Of course I couldn't say anything while she was there without hurting her feelings. But really, Chris, you understand that twenty-five hundred for a girl is ridiculous. They're invited places. They don't have to pay, the way a man does. Fifteen hundred would be oceans for Sylvia."

Chris dared not consult the evidence of his senses—of the vain, cruel, selfish words of his brother and sister—of their sneering looks, their open contempt for him. If he had been a clever rancher from the first, he could have made such a profit from the ranch that there would never have been any financial worries. And yet, during the past

years, he had poured such a quantity of money upon the two, that he could not but doubt. They were a desert upon which a golden tide was visible only a moment before it sank from sight. They spoke to him only of the actual cash allowance which he had made to them. But there were always extras which must be provided for. There were such things as the fur coat for Will before he made the hunting trip, and the fur coat for Sylvia. And, after all, even with the best of times, it had never been a very great thing, this ranch.

It had kept old Ned Ballantine, his wife, and their three children, very comfortably, but the elder Ballantine had never contemplated anything so dashing as this project of sending the two younger offspring away to expensive private schools and then to great Eastern universities. Too much education, he was fond of saying, was a poison for the mind.

Perhaps he was right. Perhaps, after all, in his desire to help his brother and sister, Ballantine had simply ruined them.

He had thrown away a full decade of labor; he had poured forth all the efforts of body and brain for them; he had educated them perfectly; he had prepared them for advanced positions in the world; but at the same time he had ruined the ranch in doing so.

He went to bed, at last, in the early morning, and by that time, in his exhausted brain, there remained only a dim wonder—a wonder that God could permit a man to struggle so desperately, so honestly, and with so little effective gain.

He had slept only two hours when he was wakened, without the need of an alarm clock, by the flood of early morning light. He got up at once, bathed, and dressed. Then he went down to the kitchen where the cook had not

yet arrived, ate a slice of bread and butter, drank a glass of milk, and was ready to work.

He took a mild comfort in the knowledge of his own peerless physical resources. He could do the work of two or three men from dawn to dark. Exertion did not weary him, and by the immense labors of these last ten years, his tremendous natural strength had been turned into flexible steel. He was clad with the powers of a giant. And now, in the beginning of this day, as he hurried forth to the corrals, he thought of his strength with a faint glow of satisfaction.

He had one passion, and that was the love of horseflesh. To have controlled some dancing, high-headed, fire-eyed stallion, trembling with speed and with deviltry, would have been a perfect delight to him. But he could not afford such a luxury. He must content himself with a string of common nags, grudging the pitiful amount of work which they were forced to drag through, and always ungraceful to the eye. He picked out a tough roan on this morning. It was the ugliest of all his string, but it was also the strongest, and therefore it had endured the labors of the spring and summer better than the rest.

The sun rose higher. The withering heat increased. The sweat began to start out of the body of the roan, and the stench of perspiration was in the nostrils of his rider. And still he rode patiently on.

Chris paused at mid-morning, fighting a fierce temptation in his blood. Then he swerved to the side and entered a by-lane off the main road. It carried him to a pasture behind a big house on a hillside, a house pleasantly shrouded by trees, with huge barns and sheds with painted roofs, spread over the lower hollow. The Holbrook place was famous over the entire range for its

beauty and comforts. And here, by lucky chance, were the two people whom he loved more than he loved any others in the world. Old Tom Holbrook, in spite of his wealth, had never held Chris away at arm's length, and Peggy Holbrook was to Ballantine all that is delightful, all that is serenely sweet in womanhood. He did not love her; he worshiped her.

They were standing under the poplars by the edge of the pasture, watching the big stallion, "Overland." It was Ballantine himself who had named the horse when Holbrook bought the animal as a two-year old, for the sake of ultimately improving the breed of his saddle horses. Because, as Ballantine had said when he first saw the horse run through the fields, he went like the overland express itself, with an eye of fire, a rush of thundering hoofs, and blinding speed that made the fluid miles pour behind him.

They were sufficiently gloomy. When Ballantine came up, they greeted him with a sigh and a nod.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Has something happened to Overland?"

The stallion heard that voice utter his name and wheeled suddenly in the pasture with a snort, tossing up his shining black head. Along the sleekness of his side, Ballantine saw the dark impress where a saddle had recently rested and where the sweat had gathered under the blanket.

"You see, dad?" said the girl.

"See what?" snapped out Mr. Holbrook.

"The way he answers when Chris speaks. Chris can call, and he'll come! I've seen it!"

The rancher grunted. "How the devil have you managed that?"

"Oh, I have the time," said Ballantine. "I only use up about twenty-four hours a day. The rest of the time I'm over here with Overland."

Peggy smiled at this. "You know, dad, that there's only one master, really, for every horse."

"Bosh!" said the rancher. "Infernal bosh! But tell me, Chris, can you actually make that high-headed rascal come to you?"

For answer, Ballantine stepped to the fence and whistled. The stallion hesitated. Then he came with a mincing step, uncertain but eager, toward Ballantine.

"Mind yourself, man!" exclaimed Holbrook, "or he'll take your head off!"

Ballantine grinned, and, turning his back on the approaching horse, faced Holbrook. "There's no danger. He won't harm me."

The horse, in fact, coming up behind Ballantine, offered him no harm whatever, but reaching over the fence began to nose at his coat pockets, and finding nothing there to his liking, put one ear back in anger and one forward with a glint of coltish mischief in his eye. Then he twitched off the hat of Ballantine with a touch of his long, prehensile upper lip.

"You see, dad! Just what I told you!" cried Peggy Holbrook.

"A remarkable thing! What have you done to the brute in this month while I was away?"

"I've come over near every night. He's used to me. Patience is all it takes."

"Patience?" shouted Holbrook. "Bah! I've wasted two years on the idiot. No, sir, there's something odd in this! I suppose you'll be riding him one of these days?"

"Whenever you please," said Ballantine.

"Ha?"

"Chris!" cried the girl. "You don't mean—"

He was already through the fence.

"Don't, Chris!" she warned him. "You're mad. Why, Charlie Pickett was here and he lasted just a minute and a half on Overland!"

"Look at what he did!" answered Ballantine, shaking his head.

He pointed to welts along the flank of the stallion.

"The fool was fighting Overland," said Chris. "I'd as soon fight a nest of tigers!"

"How would you manage to ride him, then?" asked Holbrook, scowling. "Let me see what you'd do. There's a saddle and bridle in the shed, yonder."

"I won't need them," said Ballantine.

And he laid hold on the mane of the big horse, made a short step beside him, and then swung onto his back.

Overland tossed up his head. He was a full sixteen hands and two inches, fitly limbed and fitly muscled for that height. He could have pulled a plow and looked fit for that work, from the bulging might of his quarters, except that the bone of the lower part of his legs was not hampered by any coating of flesh, looking like finest hammered iron. And only the blood of the desert could have fathered that head of his, with the mystery of the far horizon still reflected from his great eyes.

For an instant he stood in this fashion—at attention, so to speak—then he flung himself into the air, his ears flattened, his head stretched forth, his back arched. In the very midst of his leap he seemed to recall that this was not a matter to be fought out. He landed as lightly as a feather, in full galloping stride and swung away through the pasture. And there sat Christopher Ballantine leaning over his neck, guiding him, indeed, with merely the light pressure of his hand, and with the wind of the gallop blowing the mane straight back. Like a thrown spear from a giant's hand, a flung javelin of polished ebony, Overland

sped to the farther end of the pasture. There he swerved and came racing back. He heard the voice of his rider; he pricked his ears, lifted his head. He seemed to be considering the words with a man's intelligence. And so he slowed to a stop where he had begun, and Ballantine slipped to the ground.

"Ten thousand devils!" cried Holbrook. "That horse has been enchanted! I'll swear it! The rascal has had his wits stolen from him, and you've done it, Ballantine." And he added slowly: "You love that brute, eh?"

"I do," said Chris.

"I'll tell you. For half of what I paid for him when he was a colt, I'll sell him to you. I paid two thousand, Ballantine. He's yours for a thousand!"

The eyes of Ballantine shone with a savage hunger. Then he shook his head.

"I can't afford it," he said.

"Chris," broke out the girl, "how can you be so self-contained? Isn't there *any* impulse in you? Oh, if I wanted a horse as you want that one, I'd sell my soul for it!"

"Suppose that your soul wasn't your own?" he asked her.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Nobody would, I guess," sighed Ballantine.

The rancher turned away. "Think it over, my friend," said he. "A one-man horse like that ought to belong to the master who can ride him." And he went off toward the house.

Chris turned to the girl and found that she was resting her elbows on the top of the fence, her abstracted gaze following the horse.

"I've never seen dad talk like that before," she said.

"Like what?" he answered, quite at sea.

"He's not open-handed. Not a bit! But after all, it *is* impressive—what you've done with Overland. Chris, how did you manage to do it?"

"There was a bright moon one night. I came over after supper and went into the corral."

"What did he do?"

"He rushed at me."

"And you mumped through the bars?"

"No, I stood quiet and waited for him."

"Chris!"

"I was too scared to move—I guess!"

"You love him, Chris?"

"There's only one thing in the world that I love more."

"Oh, of course. Your brother and sister. But that's different."

"Not them," he said huskily.

She looked sharply over her shoulder at him.

"What else, then?"

"It's you, Peggy."

A shade rippled over her face; then she broke into laughter. "Chris, Chris, what are you saying?"

"That I love you, Peggy. And you don't care a snap for me. I can see that. But I had to tell you."

"I don't mean to be cruel Chris. But how could I have guessed it?"

"I dunno," said he slowly. "I suppose you couldn't. Except that I been coming over here pretty near every week, for the last year."

"Were you coming to see me?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Chris, I'm terribly complimented that you could care for me, but don't you see—it just couldn't be!"

"Then forget what I've said." He tightened his jaw.

"So long, Peggy. I won't bother you again."

It seemed to Ballantine that he hardly had the strength to climb into the saddle. For in the past few minutes a mirror had been held up before him, and in that glass he beheld the image of himself the rest of the world saw. To

them he was a great hulking fool. He could have endured everything he had seen in the girl's eyes except her pity. But that stabbed him to the heart.

Indeed, there was only a single rock of strength which supported him, and this was the sense that one creature understood him and loved him. That was Overland. The horse, at least, had found in him more to trust and to honor than in any other man.

And he was bitterly shamed that he should have exposed the state of his heart to the girl and been so casually rejected.

This was the second terrible blow in the course of a few short hours. The brother and sister, who were the very cause of his existence, cared no more for him than to use him. He was only twenty-eight. But he had never been young. He had passed from childhood to old age at a step. Fifteen years of careless boyhood and young manhood had been tossed away and exchanged for the bitter duties of mature life. The pity of it was that he did not know the value of the thing which he had lost.

He let his mustang plod on to town. He had intended to go at once to Patrick Reddick and talk to him about the additional loan. But he felt that he did not have energy enough to speak now. He tethered his horse near the watering trough in front of the hotel, and stepped up to the veranda.

There were a dozen men on the hotel veranda. Their faces were all a blank to him. He did not heed their voices, except for the heavy, rolling tones of big Jeff Partridge at the farther end of the porch. Partridge was a strong man. He was reported to have lifted thirteen hundred pounds of dead weight and put it on a scale in the blacksmith's shop. But the rest were nothing to Ballantine until the door of the hotel slammed and some one, lurching out, stumbled against him. He looked into the handsome, flushed face of young Harry Reddick, the banker's son.

Obviously Harry had been drinking again. A little more than usual. Drink always drove him half mad. He was more than half mad on this day. He flew into a passion at once. "Did you try to trip me, you hound?"

The other voices on the veranda were struck into instant silence. Ballantine felt the touch of expectancy. There must be a fight. No man could endure such language in silence. But Ballantine knew he *must* endure. For this was the banker's son, and in five minutes he would be talking to Harry's father.

"I didn't bother you, Reddick," he said quietly.

"You lie!" shouted Reddick. "You're a cur and a damn liar!"

Ballantine hesitated, but it was only for a fraction of a second. Then he turned and walked down the steps toward his horse. He could feel the flesh drawing on his face. He could feel a chill as though a cold wind were blowing over him.

Behind him, he heard something like a groan from many throats, a subdued and angry sound. For it is an ugly thing to see a man so utterly shamed. But he did not look back at them. He twitched the head of the roan around and rode off down the street for the office of Patrick Reddick.

Reddick was one of those men who, having raised themselves from nothing, cannot forget the oblivion out of which they have come. If there were richer men in the world than he, he felt that none had come up from such humble beginnings. Consequently he always made a point of his original poverty, which is usually the case with your true self-made man. Vanity rules him.

He insisted, also, in keeping the bank in its old quarters.

"Fine clothes don't make the man and stone columns don't make a bank," he was fond of saying.

So he kept the bank looking like the façade of a general

merchandise store. Into the bank went Ballantine. He had to wait half an hour to see the president, but finally he was admitted. Mr. Reddick sat with his chair tilted back into the window, and puffed on a cigar.

"Sit down, Ballantine," he said. "What's wrong now?"

Ballantine sat down and told his story. It began with a recital of recent disappointments, including the price for which he had to let that year's sale of cattle go. It continued through other things. And, finally, he made his proposal for a loan.

The banker waited till he was quite done. All the time his bright little eyes, half encased in thick wrinkles, never left the face of his visitor.

"How long you been running the ranch?" he asked at last.

"Ten years."

"What was it worth when you got it?"

"I don't know, exactly."

"Well, Ballantine, I'll tell you what it's worth now—just exactly the total of the mortgages that are slathered all over it."

"Why," began Ballantine, "the land and the cows—"

The banker cut in: "I'll tell you the truth and the whole truth right out. What I'm gunna say to you now ought to be worth a whole lot. Take it the way it's gunna be handed out. No malice—but facts! Ballantine, you begun with a big thing on your hands. Today, you've got nothing!"

"Bad luck—"

"Bad luck the devil! There ain't such a thing as bad luck. I tell you that when I was only the owner of that little place there, I was better off than you are today!"

He pointed, as he spoke, to a photograph which hung upon his wall and showed a little shack on the side of a mountain surrounded by worthless second-growth timber.

It was the boyhood home of the banker.

"I was better off," continued Reddick, "because though I didn't have nothin' else, I had hope. And hope is a great thing—hope and determination and self-confidence and self-respect. I say that all of them are great things for a man to have!"

As he enumerated these qualities, he shoved a stubby forefinger at the face of Ballantine. Behind that finger Reddick squinted as though he were looking down the barrel of his revolver at an enemy. And Ballantine watched him, fascinated. The nail of that right forefinger had been split by a saw edge in a mill in one of Reddick's early business ventures. Now the whole end of the finger was twisted and gnarled, but it looked stronger than ever. Such as the whole man, the whole soul of Patrick Reddick, thought Ballantine—twisted, deformed, but wonderfully effective, wonderfully strong.

"Them are the things that a man needs, Ballantine. For a young gent just starting out in life, each of them qualities is better'n a thousand dollars of capital put out to good interest. A sight better. What d'you think that I had when I started out? Nothing but them qualities. And that was what growed into this here bank!"

He gestured around him to the four ugly, barren walls of the room, as if each wall gave onto a vista of immense beauty, immense wealth.

"Ballantine," he said, "you ain't hopeful, you ain't got determination, you ain't got self-confidence, you ain't got self-respect! Look how you should of come in here! You should of come in wearin' a smile, with your head in the air, and full of your schemes. What are your schemes, Ballantine?"

"Why, sir, hard work—"

"Hard nonsense!" exclaimed the banker. "If a young man under thirty—think of it—a boy under thirty—ain't

got a dozen different plans for pulling the earth up to the moon or hoisting the moon back to the earth, he ain't worth his salt, hardly. Ballantine, I'm talkin' free and hard to you, for your own sake. You ain't nacheral. You ain't normal. You ain't never been foolish—and that's why you're a great fool!"

Reddick had gathered force as he went on; now he had become a resistless avalanche.

"Lend money to you?" he exclaimed, coming to his point at last. "No, Ballantine, I wouldn't lend a copper on that ranch. Not till there's some one else running it. You got about a thousand dollars in this bank—and that's all you have. You got that much cash, but you ain't got a cent of credit. Think about what I've told you, young man. You could go around the world, but you'd never find no more valuable advice. Go along and turn what I've said over in your head. Let it work and grow into something worth while. Goodbye, Ballantine, and remember that they's only one thing in the world that folks look for in a man, young or old—Strength! Strength!"

The echo of his words rolled through the building.

Ballantine went out into the anteroom, stood for a moment with his head bowed, his hat twitching in his fingers.

"You've had a hard time, I suppose."

He looked into the face of Reddick's stenographer.

"He's grouchy this morning—he's like a bear," she said. "I'm sorry!"

"You're sorry?" said Ballantine. "Well, ma'am. I'm not."

What amazed him most was to find that he meant what he said. All the words that the banker had spoken had sunk into his soul like truth out of the gospel.

He could not argue down such bald and certain facts. Everything that the older man said had been said with

authority. And Mr. Reddick stood like a prophet of wrath above the soul of Ballantine, foreseeing his destruction in the very near future.

So that Ballantine, suddenly, cast aside a weight from his mind, and that weight was responsibility.

"I'm bankrupt," he said. "I'm smashed!"

No, there was still a thousand dollars between him and ruin. He went to the cashier's window.

"What's in my account?" he asked.

"A thousand and twenty-four dollars, Mr. Ballantine."

"That'll be just enough."

He called for a blank check, scratched out the sum hastily, and signed his name. Perhaps it was the last time in his life that his signature would mean money. He passed that check back through the window. He would have this money in fifties. Twenty fifties came back to him. All new bills, compressed into a solid little sheaf that he could pinch between thumb and forefinger.

But what he was holding was not paper money, but a mighty black stallion, with a coat like water under the stars, an eye of fire, a soul of pride.

Overland was his!

He leaned for a moment against the wall and took the full glory of that thought home in him.

He had lost his brother and sister; he had lost the woman he loved; he had learned that he was a worthless ruin as a business man; he had been disgraced—but now he was to take in exchange for all of these injuries—a horse!

It was enough, he told himself.

Rather be free with Overland than a slave with human company!

And he *was* free, free as a cloud in the sky. For there was nothing on earth which could make a demand upon him.

He was of no service to his brother or sister. Rather, he was a heavy encumbrance to them. He would go away, and let them have the ranch.

He went out to his horse, mounted the weary roan, and turned it up the street.

He found himself looking at the town with new eyes. It had always seemed to him a great center of power, a mysterious dwelling place of strength. Now he beheld it as a little sunburned village, huddled at the foot of a mountain.

He let the roan go slowly. There was no cause for hurry. He had nothing left to do except to pay the money down for Overland, and there was no chance that Overland would be taken by another man, for the simple reason that no other man could ride the great stallion.

He came again to the hotel, and as he passed, he heard laughter—he heard a great bass voice booming something in his direction. That was Jeff Partridge. He checked the roan and looked across the street. Yes, there was Partridge with his head bent back on his great brown throat, laughing heartily. And those around him were laughing, also.

Once more that wave of emotion swelled in Ballantine as it had before, on this day; but now he recognized it. The thing which made him tremble through all his bulk was anger; the thing which made his eyes clear, his brain cold, was anger. Yonder was Jeff Partridge, a big man and a strong one. But was not he, also, big? Was not he, also, strong? Moreover, he was free, and the sense of freedom like an intoxicating wine mounted to his head and swayed him with consuming joy. He dismounted, threw the reins, and stepped up on to the veranda. Here was Jeff Partridge just before him, lolling in his chair and insolently pointing with his finger. Ballantine leaned above him, and

as he leaned, he felt his power tingling in his heart, in his hands.

"Partridge," he said, "are you laughin' at me?"

Wonder struck the laughter from the face of the other.

"Why, the devil, man; why shouldn't I laugh at you?"

"Here's a good reason to stop," said Ballantine, and he struck Partridge across the cheek—lightly—a mere flick of the fingers, but it made a deep white imprint—a white print that turned instantly to crimson.

Partridge was motionless, but only for an instant. Then he leaped to his feet and struck.

There was no confusion in the eye or in the mind of Ballantine. With the first movement of Partridge, Chris knew that he was the master. For how absurdly clumsy, how absurdly slow were the motions of the huge cow-puncher and miner! He could have struck twice while the other was swinging once!

He put aside that roundabout blow with a raised hand. Then he struck home, to the point of the jaw, and saw the face of Partridge sag into stupid lifelessness—saw him drop heavily to the floor of the veranda.

"There might be somebody else," said Ballantine quietly, "who feels like laughin'. Let me hear him!"

He looked up and down the line. Not a man moved. Ballantine walked slowly before them. He let his eyes rest insolently, freely, on each face in turn. What was the strength and the mystery of these men? Once looked into, they proved themselves hollow, empty cups. But when he had been a slave to necessity, they had all seemed mighty men!

"You snicker and giggle like fools when you think that there ain't no danger. But when danger comes around the corner, you sit fast, you sit tight! Lemme hear you peep! Lemme hear you talk some! You was laughin' large and

loud a minute ago! What's come of all the laughin', partners? Fist or knife or gun, I'm ready and waitin' to hear you!"

Not a sound from them.

"Now tell me where Harry Reddick is hangin' out," said Ballantine. "I'm a free man, now, and he'll hear something that I have to say to him. Where's Reddick?"

"He's gone—inside!" gasped out Lester Jackson.

Chris entered the hotel. At the far end of the lobby he saw Reddick sitting by the window.

"Well, Ballantine," he said, "what'll you have today? Haven't you had enough?"

"The boys are waitin' out on the veranda," said Ballantine. "They are waitin' to see you get down on your knees. They're waitin' to hear you ask my pardon."

"You're turned mad, Ballantine!" cried the other. "Why, you idiot, I'd break you in two! Or blow your head off!"

"Ah," said Ballantine, smiling and speaking in a voice which trembled with the joy of vengeance, "I was hopin' that it would be the guns. Are you ready? Make your play!"

A shadow crossed the eyes of Harry Reddick, a faint shadow of doubt, even though he had conquered so many times in hand-to-hand battles. And Ballantine, seeing that shadow, knew that he had won already.

He stepped slowly forward. "If you pull on me I'll kill you."

Reddick wavered; then he determined on the gun, and jerked it out. Much too late. For Ballantine was near enough to close. With his left hand he caught the right wrist of the other. He felt the tendons beneath his fingers. He heard the dropped gun clang to the floor as the power of his grip turned that deadly hand of Reddick to a numbed, useless thing.

All this he did with his left hand, in a single grip. Then he smote up with his right, sharp and short, and tapped

Reddick under the jaw. It snapped his head back on his broad shoulders. He turned limp, and slid out of the arms of Ballantine to the floor and lay there on his face.

Ballantine looked down at that helpless body; then he leaned, took the senseless man by the long, blond hair, and dragged Harry Reddick out to the veranda.

He was kicking and groaning and struggling half blindly by the time they arrived. The dozen who had been there before had been trebled in the interim. The news was abroad that there was fighting at the hotel, and that was enough to bring the crowd. For humanity has for calamity an extra sense, as buzzards have for new carrion, standing a hundred miles across the misty desert air to find the dead. So the people of the town had gathered in a brief, hurrying rush to find out what was happening at the hotel. The blacksmith stood in his leather apron three or four doors away, holding his sledge still in one hairy arm and shading his eyes against the sun as he stared to the hotel veranda. Every one was out.

And Ballantine, surveying all this, was content. He wished to have every stroke of his work noted.

He flung his prisoner down on the porch.

"Reddick," said the conqueror, "some of the boys heard you talkin' big and broad about me a while back. I didn't have time to tend to you then. But I got the time now to stand by and let the boys hear you tell me that you're sorry that a skunk like you should talk to a man!"

"I'll see you—" began Reddick, groaning with rage and shame.

His voice was cut short, for Ballantine caught his arm and twisted it until Reddick yelled with agony.

"Lemme hear you say it, or I'll break your arm."

The agony made the eyes of Reddick start from his head, and he shouted suddenly: "I'm sorry that a skunk like me should have talked about you, Ballantine."

That was all. Ballantine tossed Reddick from him and turned his back and strode away to his horse.

He turned the roan up the street. He rode slowly. He rode whistling as he went. He was free! Nothing under heaven had any claim upon him! Only Overland had a call for him, heart to heart, fierce power to power!

All the plain, all the hills, and yonder his namesake, Mount Christopher, climbing high into the blue of the sky—shining in the sun which blazed from the bald, polished faces of cliffs—how beautiful were these, how strong, how new, as though created in another form this moment and striking his eye for the first time. The fact that his little ranch was somewhere in this wilderness was of no importance. The fact that he was a part owner of it was nothing to take into his mind. All that he had been was dead!

Hoofbeats sounded behind him. Out of a cloud of dust, Sheriff Joe Durfee drew rein beside him.

"Pull up, Ballantine," he commanded. "I got something to say to you."

But Ballantine did not halt the roan. He let it wander slowly on while he studied the sheriff. Always before, Durfee had seemed to him the very incarnation of the spirit of combat, dry, lean, keen. Now he was less than a common man.

"I'm on my way and I'm busy, Durfee," he said. "If you want to talk ride along with me."

He half expected a storm, but the sheriff merely colored a little and then nodded.

"I see how it is," he said, as much to himself as to his companion. "This here job you've done on Partridge and on Harry Reddick, has got to your head, like red eye. Is that it?"

"I dunno," said Ballantine. "I'm not botherin' with thinking."

"Son," said the older man, "I maybe see more of what's inside of you than you think. You've held in for a mighty long time. Now you've busted loose. I don't aim to have no trouble with you if I can help it. But, Ballantine, don't think that you can ever come into town again and do what you done today and get away with it. I couldn't stand for it twice. Mind you, I ain't threatening. I just want you to watch what you do from this time on!"

"Sheriff," said Ballantine, "what you want ain't of no importance to me. I'll tell you this: I'm through sneakin' and crawlin'. From now on, I'm a man. And if there's ever any trouble that makes you come for me, come with both of your guns out and don't waste time talkin'. Because words won't do no good!"

He sent the roan into a canter, and the sheriff did not follow.

The big house of Tom Holbrook loomed in the distance to the left, above the trees. He made for it at a round gallop, with the roan grunting as its tired forelegs pounded the trail. Then, under the shadow of the thin poplars, Chris dismounted, stripped the saddle from the back of the little mustang, and went to the house.

Peggy met him at the door; and he noted the start of shock and the faint flush on her face as she saw him. She, to his surprise, had not changed in his eyes as the others had changed. She seemed as delicate and as pretty as ever, as frank and as charming.

"Well, son?" said old Tom Holbrook. "Here you are back again! Will you come in?"

Ballantine shrugged his shoulders. "She's told you, I guess," he said, watching the girl.

A guilty flush mounted her cheek.

"Told me what?"

"That I wanted to marry her?"

"Why, Ballantine," said Holbrook gently, "there's nothing to prevent a man wanting to marry any girl he sees."

"Well," said Ballantine, "she'll never have to trouble about that ag'in. I won't bother her. What I've come back for is the hoss. I want the stallion, Mr. Holbrook."

"Ah? I wondered if that wouldn't tempt you, Ballantine! I wondered!"

He held forth the money. "Here's a thousand dollars. Do I get Overland?"

"By all means. He ought to belong to you. Are you coming out, Peggy, to see Overland go?"

"I'm coming," said she, in a very subdued voice.

Ballantine led the way to the corral, dropped saddle and bridle on the fence, and entered that pleasant little pasture where Overland ruled like a solitary king. It was nothing to saddle and bridle him. The big horse stood like a lamb throughout that ceremony. But when Ballantine swung into the saddle, and felt the great powerful body quivering under him, a new and hot temptation ran through his veins. It was easy to rule Overland by love; but how wild and fierce a pleasure it would be to rule him by sheer strength of will and hand!

The rancher was all admiration. He kept nodding and smiling. "Look at that, Peggy! Remarkable, I call it, for a man to rule that horse as Ballantine does."

Peggy frowned. Her intent eyes were fastened upon the rider, not the horse.

"There's something wrong, dad," she said in a low voice, not meant for the ear of Ballantine.

"Wrong with what? With Overland, I never saw him better."

"I don't mean Overland, but Chris. He's different."

"Nonsense!"

"Something has happened to him. Look at his face and his eyes."

She drew in a quick breath.

This was caused by a sudden change in the manner of Overland. For from a gentle trot he had come to a sharp halt and stood, now, with his head tossed high, one ear flattened along his neck, and one ear keenly pricked, the very picture of a horse asking a question, as though he said to himself: "Is this possible?"

For Ballantine had drawn in hard on the curb. It was the jerk of the bit that had stopped Overland.

The soft voice of Ballantine had turned harsh and stern: "Move on!" he commanded. "Get some life into you!"

And he accompanied that word with a touch of the spur. That was enough. Reason fled from the brain of the stallion. For this was the very manner of those other men who came to tear at him with whips and with sharp steel and break his heart and his spirit. He had beaten them all. He would beat this man, also. Bring fire to powder, and there is an explosion. Bring force to Overland, and there was sure to be an explosion also.

He shot into the air, driven from powerful springs. He landed again on four stiff posts of steel that jarred the rider to his teeth.

"Chris!" cried the girl. "What have you done to him?"

"Ballantine, what's wrong!"

This from the father. But Ballantine had no care for their exclamations. His hands were full. First he put on the jaw of the stallion a pressure such as that outlaw had never felt before, a pull that might have broken the bones of another horse. And even Overland had to struggle to

thrust forth his head. His sides, meantime, were crushed by the gripping thighs and knees of Ballantine.

And then he was caught into the heart of a hurricane. For Overland broke forth with all the tricks he had ever used in struggles with a hundred expert riders. He broke forth with fury.

He fought in a reckless ecstasy, blindly, wildly. He hurled himself into the air and smote the earth on stiffened legs. Then up again, down again. He tried to tie himself into a knot in mid-air, and landing with a thump, he cast all of his weight upon one hardened foreleg. Even that whip-snap shock, though it made the rider reel, did not dislodge him, and still the raucous voice into which the gentle speech of Ballantine had been translated, cursed and raved and mocked at him.

The girl moaned in terror. "Dad, for heaven's sake, stop it!"

"There's no stopping it. Ah, you'll never see such riding as this if you live to be a hundred. What devil is cased inside of Ballantine today?"

Overland had burst into a frenzy of bucking. His hoofs beat through the dust and tore up solid chunks of ground and tossed them high above his head. Twice the rider was almost thrown from the saddle. Twice he saved himself by nothing short of a miracle. His head was reeling on his shoulders, his eyes turning wildly in his head. But still the fiend in him made him yell a challenge at maddened Overland.

There was a well-ringed group of spectators, now, to watch that historic battle in which Overland fought for his self-respect, and Ballantine fought to make him a slave.

And, when it ended, it was a white-faced rider who sat in the saddle, with two thin streams of blood trickling down from his nostrils, and his eyes staring from his head.

He shouted hoarsely. Overland broke into a stumbling trot, head down. He jerked on the reins, and the big stallion came to a halt on reeling legs. He was beaten, exhausted, helpless. A child could have ridden him then.

There was not a murmur of applause from those onlookers, much as they worshiped good horsemanship, every one of them. It reminded Ballantine of the silence which had greeted the flooring of big Jeff Partridge and the humiliation of Harry Reddick. He looked calmly about him, wiping the blood from his face with his handkerchief. The men were staring intently, not at the horse which had just been beaten, but at him, with a sort of frightened awe. And yonder was Peggy, shrinking at the side of her father. Even that wise man, Holbrook himself, was frowning in a bewildered fashion.

"Why did you do it, Ballantine?" he asked in wonder. "He was like a lamb for you. Maybe you've broken his heart, now!"

Ballantine scowled down at him. "I'll have a hoss that walks when I say walk, trots when I say trot, that lets me do his thinkin' for him. That's gonna be my way with hosses—maybe that's gonna be my way with men. If a gent can't get on with peace, lemme see how he can get on with war!"

He swung toward the others. "You with the red hair and the fool look," snarled out Ballantine. "Open that gate."

There was not an instant of hesitation. The man jumped as though a leveled revolver covered him. He opened the gate, and through it rode Ballantine. Then Peggy Holbrook confronted him, her face flushed, her eyes shining with indignation.

"We won't sell him!" she exclaimed. "Dad thought he was going to a man who loved him—not to a—tyrant! Get out of that saddle and let Overland go back!"

He grinned broadly down at her.

"You got a lot of men here," he said. "Lemme see 'em do the thing that you want done. Lemme see 'em take me out of this here saddle." He looked at them. "Which one of you starts? Which one of you begins the party?"

He swept their faces with a calm delight. But not a man stirred. That hungry eye ate the power from their souls.

"Dad!" cried the girl.

"Ballantine," said the rancher, "I call back that bargain. It was half a gift, and you know it. Get off that horse."

But Ballantine laughed in the face of Holbrook.

"This hoss belongs to me. Get out of my way."

He started the horse off; then checked it again with a brutal violence that brought Overland sharply back on his haunches. The girl cried out as though the curb had torn her own tender flesh. He leaned above her.

"I've told you this mornin'," he said, "that I love you, Peggy. When I want you, I'll come back for you."

"Back for me?" she cried. "Chris Ballantine, I'd rather be dead!"

The wildness of her rage was a delight to him. He grinned again, drinking in the full sense of it.

"D'you hate me, Peggy?"

"With all my heart!"

"Good," said he. "Then I'll be back for you. By day or by night. You'll hear my whistle and you'll come out to me."

And, laughing loudly, he swept Overland into a reaching gallop.

When he left the house of Holbrook, he went out among the hills until he reached a little sun-covered dell of half an acre, with trees edging it, and with a little brook trickling along one side of it. There he gave Overland water, and after hobbling him, walked at his side, and soothed him

with hand and voice. But Overhand shrank from his touch and quivered.

The work which he had done on the horse that afternoon had been a victory, indeed, but it had been a defeat also. He realized that as he walked beside the stallion. He considered the details of that day gravely.

It was time now, to make amends for the rashness of his actions. Time to heal the wounds caused by his heady sense of new-found freedom.

There was the horse to work on, first of all. And for that work he had the patience of stone. How slow was every step! The afternoon wore late before the stallion would so much as graze in his presence. And it was sunset before the sound of his voice made Overland prick his ears.

Then he mounted. The great black crouched beneath him, ears flattened, trembling with anger and fear. He had crushed Overland once, and that was enough. Now he waited for five minutes, for ten minutes, speaking gently, continually, until Overland stood straight again and arched his neck. And, after that, the big horse cantered smoothly away, still starting at every motion of his rider's hand, but more than half reclaimed from fear.

Ballantine reached the house at dusk. A fine rain had begun to descend, blanketing the earth with a thicker twilight. He put Overland in a stall in the barn, fed and groomed him carefully, and came out to find that it was complete night.

Old Alice, the cook, greeted him with a grunt as he entered the kitchen door.

"Late again, Mr. Ballantine!"

"My business keeps me late," he said sternly.

"Mine keeps me late, too!" she answered in heat. "And early. They ain't no supper here except for them that come on time!"

"Heat my supper again," commanded Ballantine. "And I'll hear no more out of you."

He turned his back on her, but as he strode into the next room past the astonished Sylvia, he could hear old Alice scurrying to obey. He tossed his hat into a corner and dropped heavily into a chair.

"It's whiskey, Sylvia," said Will, with a nod to her. "I think we'd better leave him here! He's obviously been drinking."

Ballantine stretched out his hand and closed it on the arm of the other. Through that wiry athlete's muscles he felt the tips of his fingers glide until they gritted against bone. There was a shout of pain from Will. He wrenched back. As well have pulled against the hawser of a ship. The effort merely served to throw him off his feet, and he fell back into his chair with a crash.

Said Ballantine: "You'll stay there till I'm through talking."

"Why," began Will, unabashed. "I'll—"

"You'll do what you're told," said Ballantine. "Don't anger me, Will. You've needed a thrashing bad ever since the day dad died. And, by the heavens, this evening it won't take much to make me give it to you—for the sake of your soul, Will—your self-satisfied soul!"

"This," said Sylvia through her teeth, "is perfectly disgraceful. Will, if you are not man enough to assert yourself, I'll leave you with him. I certainly don't care to stay!"

"Sylvia," Chris said, "sit down if you want peace. Sit down and listen to me."

"Christopher, have you gone mad?"

He could see that she was almost as astonished and as frightened as she was angered. And all of those emotions in her pleased him strangely.

She slipped into the chair he had designated, while he rolled a cigarette. Alice, furtive of eye, brought in his plate and put it before him. He let it stay where it was and began to smoke.

"Now, Sylvia, and Will, I'm through!"

"Through?" breathed Will. "What do you mean?"

"It means that I've stopped. The ranch belongs to you and Sylvia. Make the most of it. It'll cut short your law practice, I reckon, and it'll keep Sylvia from playin' at society and at getting a rich husband. It'll make you buckle down and work like the devil, here, if you want to get on. But you'll do your work without me. Ain't that clear enough?"

They could only gape at one another, as though each needed the help of the other to add up the full significance of this statement.

It was Will who weakened first. "Chris," he said faintly, "you've taken too much to heart that scene of last night. We all lost our tempers and talked foolishly."

"The man you was talkin' to last night was a coward. He was sick of his life. He was ready to crouch every time anyone raised a hand. Well, sir, I say that man is dead."

"Do you really mean that you give up the ranch?" asked Sylvia softly.

"I give it up," answered Ballantine. "I've worked for ten years for the pair of you. What I've had out of it except trouble and slaving, Heaven only knows. I've tried to make a lady out of you—but I've only made a vain, foolish, rattled-headed young ape. I tried to make a gentleman out of you, Will. I've only made a gent that can't think of nothin' but himself. I've made you into a couple of foxes. All you've got is sharp wits, and no hearts in you. Well, wits is what is needed for the runnin' of this here ranch—more wits than I ever had—it's up to you."

"But, Chris—" began his sister. He silenced her with a raised hand.

"I've taken the last thousand dollars I have in the world and I've soaked it into the buyin' of Overland. It's the one thing that I've wanted, outside of a girl that laughed in my face today when I asked her to marry me. When I'm through with this supper, I'm gonna go out and roll my blankets, and climb on the back of that hoss and ride away."

Sylvia stared at him.

"Of course, Christopher," she said, trying the tack of dignity, "neither Will nor I know anything about the affairs of the ranch."

He said not a word.

"And it would simply be destroying the entire value of the ranch, if it were turned over to us."

He stayed with his silence and continued his supper, slowly, methodically, with a poignant sauce of self-satisfaction in every mouthful.

"Mr. Bannock," went on the girl, still eying him anxiously for a sign of a change, "tells us that there *is* a chance to get something out of the old place, but only by the most careful working."

He spread a large slice of bread with butter and eyed her vacantly. And he wondered at the steadiness of his nerves. For her keen, penetrating glance had been a terror to him before this. But now finally, he was bringing the steel of his revenge into his household and every word, tapping on his resolution, gave back to him only a further proof of the excellent temper of his courage. Nothing could shake him. At a stroke, he had been removed beyond the reach of pity or of compassion.

"Besides," continued the girl, "you must not think that we ever would have called your work here a failure. Even Mr. Bannock, who seemed rather positive about a good

many things, would not have gone that far. Of course, when we broke out at you—like a pair of spoiled children, Chris—we didn't mean what we said!"

Sylvia bit her lip and went back to the attack, casting a single sidelong glance at her younger brother as though to whip him to her assistance. "Mr. Bannock went so far as to declare that, in a way, you'd showed a great deal of intelligence."

Ballantine looked at her with a faint smile of contempt for such foolish flattery.

"I mean," she said, and flushed hotly, "you cleared out the bottom land and made it ready for irrigation. He's one of those who believe that that old dam you built in the cañon will really work. And then, of course, hundreds of acres will be worth thirty times as much as they are now. Of course, Will and I could wait until next spring, when the floods come and the ground is irrigated. And then we could sell the place and get a good deal of money out of it, after people have seen that the irrigation scheme is actually practicable. But what a shame to rob you of all your work. Not that we *would* take any of the reward away. If we worked the place, we'd set aside your share scrupulously every year. You could depend upon that!"

He had finished his dinner. There was only the second cup of coffee, and while he held it in one hand, sipping it, he reached out and turned up the flame in the big oil lamp so that it cast a sudden glare in her face. By that increased illumination he studied her coldly, relentlessly, and she, with slightly widened eyes, endured his scrutiny. But she weakened under it.

"Don't you see that it will be the veriest hell for both of us if we're left out here—alone? We don't know a thing about the ranch. We—we both hate ranch life. We can't help it. You've made us that way, Chris. You've kept us away at school and given us every comfort that we could

wish for while you, poor dear, have been carrying on the struggle."

She glanced at Will.

"It's true," said Will a little huskily. "Every word she said is true. And, confound me if I don't feel more and more like a rat for the way that we've treated you! I can see our comfort—I mean Sylvia's and mine—has been built on your slavery. And if it has to cost us the loss of you in order to understand what you really are, by the heavens I'm glad. If I've lost a brother, I've found a man."

But Sylvia, as she saw all of her dreams of silks and idleness snatched away, all her hopes of social prominence and an easy life gone into limbo, broke down utterly. She dropped her head on her rounded white arms and began to sob.

Chris rose, at last, stepped to the corner, picked up his hat, dusted the crown of it carefully, settled it on his head, and looked around him. On the wall hung his Winchester. It was old but it still shot strong and true, and the fifteen cartridges in its magazine were fifteen strong friends. The revolver ammunition was in the box on the corner table. He went to that box, now, and began to load his revolvers, feeling their eyes watching him as he worked.

Sylvia had stopped crying. She and Will were both keeping hopeless, gloomy eyes upon him. And he rejoiced in their feeling of desertion. Let the steel enter their souls, as it had entered his.

The guns were loaded, now, and one restored to the holster at his hip, one stowed under the pit of his arm, for an unseen weapon is sometimes more valuable than one which is open to view.

Then he stepped through the door, and there was a tug at his heart as he left his brother and sister behind him. At the outer door of the kitchen, when he had thrown it wide, he paused for a moment. Behind him—the voice of Sylvia,

broken and weak like her child's voice which he could remember out of the old years after their father's death, the child's voice which had made him swear to himself to do for her all that his father could have done.

"Chris, don't leave us! For pity's sake, don't leave us!"

He made one tentative step through the door, more than half resolved not to leave the house, but as he did so a wind blew out of the night and carried the scent of sage brush, stinging and clean, and mingled with this, the fragrance of the pines on the farther hills. And as he breathed deep of it, he saw the stars rimming those hills with dots of clear fire, and he heard, far off, the mellow thunder of a lobo baying at the newly risen moon.

It seemed that the night cast a shadowy arm around him and drew him away into darkness.

He left, slamming the door behind him.

He went on, leisurely, enjoying the sweetness of his freedom more and more with every step. And now, through the starlight before him, he saw the glimmering form of one of the horses in the paddock. Might he never return to see its lean ribs by daylight.

"Ballantine!" a voice shouted behind him.

Ballantine knew, instinctively, that the shout meant danger.

He swung around, illumined by the light from the kitchen, and dropped flat to the ground.

Two guns spat fire from the dark of the cedar. His own Colt was out of the holster and extended along the ground. He had hardly touched the dirt, breaking his fall with his left hand, before he fired in return. He heard a scream. He saw a form detach itself from the gloom of the tree, twist around, and fall headlong.

Then he fired at the second man, fired while a third bullet was cutting the air above his own head so close that he thought he could feel the wind of it. His shot missed.

But at least it had come close enough to its target to make the other dodge out of view behind the line of cedar.

He tried a snapshot as the other plunged into the darkness beyond. But the light from the kitchen was streaming straight into the eyes of Ballantine and partly dazzled him. Before he could fire again, he saw the stranger fling himself onto a horse and rush away down the road.

He ran for the barn.

Will was calling, behind him: "Chris! Are you hurt? Answer me!"

"I'm safe!" he shouted and plunged into the dark of the barn.

He tore the saddle from its peg and threw it on the back of the black stallion. In a trice he was out again, with the rush of Overland whipping a strong wind into his face. He went by Will at full gallop, waved his hand and was gone.

He did not follow straight down the road. There was a shorter way from the barn over three low hills. And he took that rough going, trusting to the nimble feet of the stallion.

On a loose rein, his head high, Overland worked out his own course in the general direction which Ballantine selected. And his long, whipping stride put the ground in a steady rush behind him. They darted over the first hill and down into the hollow with a swoop that brought the heart of Ballantine against his teeth.

Over the second hill and over the third, and now, just beneath him, ran the long, white, straight road, growing brighter each moment as the moon climbed higher.

Now he could see the outline of the stranger ahead of him. He had heard the rush of Overland and now was leaning along the neck of his horse to jockey it to the fullest speed.

Ballantine tightened his rein. With a strong wrist and yet with a sensitive touch, he leaned forward and eased his weight onto the withers of the black. In response, Overland gave forth such a burst of speed it seemed that the big animal had taken wings. There was a breathless swoop to every stride. He seemed lengthening and flattening toward the ground as he settled to his work. And the black outline of the stranger drew steadily back to Ballantine—steadily but slowly.

There was still a great gap between the two horses. Might it not well be that, forcing Overland to a sustained sprint to bring him within revolver range of the fugitive, he would be totally exhausted? When a running horse falters, he is done; and the rival may wing away with almost unimpaired speed, simply because it has not been run out so rashly.

So Ballantine drew up a little and took the stallion first out of his wild burst of full-speed running, then out of his secondary sprint into a long, sweeping gallop. His head was no longer strained straight before him. It was raised easily. He raced proudly over the ground, at ease, running well within himself. And, at this rate, Overland held the other without trouble. Ay, and gained a little.

The stranger turned north on the Bingham Road. They passed up long grades into the hills, dipping constantly into easy hollows, and rising again over gentle swells. But the surety of victory was with Ballantine. Overland was hard pressed by that long run. There was no doubt of that by the way his lungs were working, but the horse of the fugitive was in far worse condition. His head was stretched straight forth, a sure proof that he was running to the full of his strength. And even that effort could not shake off Ballantine. Every moment, now, the stranger was turning to look back. He began to open a scattering

fire from his revolvers. But it was only by miracle that a shot could go home, fired in that dull light from the swaying back of a horse at full gallop.

He had only to wait until the gap between them was closed a little more, and then—the finish. He was gathering the life of another man into his hand—gathering it slowly, leisurely, enjoying the taste of the kill before the moment came.

It was not a blind flight, however, this of the assassin. For now, as they topped another hill, Ballantine saw before him a great sweep of second-growth timber where the Bingham Road dips into the upper and rougher hills. Once inside, the stranger could dart off by any of a thousand openings, and if he were followed could turn and shoot his pursuer at leisure. Even now he was jockeying his horse down the slope with spur and whip.

So Ballantine called on Overland again, and this time the rush of the black stallion was hardly less strong and swift than his first burst as he left the ranch. He strained his head forward like an eagle reaching after a fish hawk in midair.

The stranger's horse was done. There was no more strength left.

His head went up and began to bob—a sure proof that he was finished. That flight for the nearby woods was hopeless, now, and the stranger seemed to realize at once that his chances were gone.

He drew rein sharply, then turned back to face the charge of Ballantine. And he came with a sweep, his revolver held stiffly before him, firing fast. He saw the gun flash up in the hand of Ballantine. He saw it spit fire once. Then the stranger reeled from his saddle and lay, spread-eagled, on the dust of the road.

Ballantine found himself looking down into a broad, ugly face, now loose-featured and limp. But the man was not dead.

Ballantine could see the place where the bullet had struck. It had glanced from the bone of the head and left a nasty looking wound. Water and a bandage were all that were needed, and through the stillness of the night, above the noise of the panting horses, Ballantine could hear the trickling of spring water. He lifted his victim, therefore, and carried him toward that sound. He laid the gunman beside a little water-filled basin, and it was the pain of the cold water in the wound that roused him. He swayed to a sitting posture, groaning out a curse.

"Steady," said Ballantine. "Mind your hands, partner. I've followed too far to start takin' chances now with you! Sit tight while I get this cloth around your head."

The crushing pressure of the cloth against the wound must have caused excruciating pain, but only his breathing grew irregular. When the bandaging was ended: "Where to now?" he asked.

"To the sheriff," said Ballantine.

"Was Steve killed?"

"By the way he fell, I guess so. I didn't stop to look."

"It was a low trick—being sent out and told that you was simply a strong-armer and no sense with a gun! It was low, lyin' to us that way!"

Ballantine regarded him with a keener interest.

"Who sent you out?" he asked.

"The judge'll ask the same thing," said the other, and grinned shamelessly at his intended victim.

"Yes," said Ballantine, "but I'll pay for what I want to know."

"What sort of money, partner?"

"Freedom," said Ballantine.

"You mean you'll turn me loose? Is that it?"

"That's it."

"All right then, the skunk don't deserve to be protected. It was Harry Reddick, the banker's son."

"Ah," said Ballantine, "and what reason did he give for wantin' me done in?"

"Said you would shoot him in the back as quick as you'd wink."

Ballantine considered this quietly. He was beginning to see another phase of his new life into which he was stepping. It was not necessary to seek adventure. Adventure would come seeking him without an effort on his part.

He reached into the breast pocket of the smaller man and his fingers closed on the soft, padded warmth of a leather wallet. There was a groan from the gunman as his treasure was drawn out.

The wallet identified the gunman as Harry Nevis. It was fat with folded bills.

"How much of this came from Reddick?"

"Two hundred even."

"As cheap as that?" murmured Ballantine. "Why, you can get a man killed as cheap as you can buy a good hoss! That's all, friend. Here's your gun back. It's a mite shy of bullets."

Nevis shoved the weapon reluctantly out of sight among his clothes.

"I want to know one thing," Nevis said.

"What's that?"

"What sort of a hoss is that?"

"Take a look."

The gunman went to Overland and stood reverently before the tall stallion.

"He's got it," he said at last. "I figgered there wasn't a hoss this side of purgatory that could catch my gelding—not with no fifty-pound handicap. But this big black devil has got it. How much, partner, would you take for that hoss?"

"A bullet through the head," said he, "would buy him. And that's about all."

Nevis grinned at this, and climbed into the saddle on his gelding which, having blown out during the interval, had fallen to cropping the sun-cured grass at the side of the road.

"I guess I owe you," said Hank Nevis.

And he rode off on the gelding.

Ballantine turned the head of the stallion toward town.

It was early dawn when he arrived. The proprietor had not yet come downstairs in the hotel, but Ballantine banged his fist on the desk until he raised a storm of curses from above. The proprietor came down in furious haste, swearing with every step he took.

But when he glimpsed the face of Chris Ballantine, he stopped abruptly and his eyes widened. In his day, Gus Dickson had been a formidable man with weapons.

Many a time his old-fashioned Colt had come into action, and carried the scars of his battles with him. But even Dickson seemed to see in Ballantine more danger than he cared to deal with.

"It's sort of early, Ballantine," he mumbled. "What can I do for you?"

"A room," said the guest, and he was straightway shown to one. Ay, more than that, the proprietor remained to turn down the covers of the bed and bring in fresh towels and draw the shade against the early morning light.

As he was going out, he paused in the doorway.

"Will was in a while back. He brung in Steve Ranger's body with him and then left ag'in. I guess the sheriff will be wantin' to see you, Ballantine!" And, grinning, he went out.

Steve Ranger, then, was the name of the fellow he had shot down. And for that shooting the sheriff was ready to arrest him? However, he was too tired and too satisfied with himself after the greatest day of his life, the only real day of living, to pay any heed to such matters.

He stretched himself on the bed. He could hear the sounds of life beginning in the street. The town was waking up. He listened to those sounds dreamily for a moment. Then he was swept into sleep.

When he wakened, the air was hot and still. He raised his head from the pillow and knew by the heavy, drowsy murmur which pervaded the town, that it was high noon. There was a tapping at the door. Harry Reddick?

He took the time to half dress himself and belt on his revolver.

Ballantine went to the door, at last, with his hand ready at his gun. But when he opened it, he found the sheriff outside, waiting carelessly, leaning against the wall. He grinned in a knowing fashion at Ballantine.

"Takin' nothin' on trust, I see," said he. "Well, after yesterday, I dunno but what you're right."

He entered the room, dropped his hat on the bed, and sat down in a chair by the window. Ballantine raised the shade.

"You got Ranger, then?" said he.

"So I heard," said Ballantine. "Who was Ranger?"

"You didn't stop to ask?"

"Him and another gent blazed away at me from behind a tree last night, out at the ranch. The talkin' that this guy Ranger and me done was with bullets."

"What happened?" asked Joe Durfee, frankly interested, and leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. "How did the trick turn for you?"

"I had luck," said Ballantine. "I dropped on the ground and nailed him. That was all. The other gent didn't like the work. He cut and run for it. I had a long ride to get hold of him."

"You get the second man, too? Who was he?"

"Nevis was his name. Hank Nevis."

"You killed him?"

"No, I only caught him."

"Ranger was enough. You'll get a fat reward for nailing that yegg, but Nevis is worth a dozen of Ranger. Where is he now?"

"He was riding north," said Ballantine, "when I seen him last."

"Ah, Ballantine," sighed Joe Durfee, "there was the chance of a lifetime. How the devil did he get away?"

"I turned him loose."

"What!"

"I wanted the name of the gent that sent him after me. I turned him loose for giving me the name."

"And who was it?"

"After I find him," said Ballantine, "most likely you'll be called in to see him. Until then, him and me have got a secret between us. Y'understand?"

The sheriff smiled faintly. "Tell me flat. What's happened to you?"

"I've growed young," said Ballantine, "and I've got all interested ag'in in toys like this."

He drew his Colt and handled it with a loving touch.

"I never knowed you to be a fighting man or a shooting man. But you got Nevis and Ranger both. I never done a day's work like that in all my life, and me a professional!"

He rose. "How long are you in town?"

"I dunno," said Ballantine. "Until something comes along that takes me out of it, I guess."

"Ballantine," said the sheriff. "I come up here primed to talk. But I see there ain't no use. Only, I tell you this: For heaven's sake go easy. You've made a name for yourself. After this, some kinds of trouble will dodge you. Other kinds of trouble will come along to find you."

After the sheriff departed, Ballantine went to the wash stand and shaved. Then he went down for breakfast, and found that a dozen men were already there. They were busy talking and eating, but a little breath of silence passed over the big room when he entered. Afterward, as he pulled back a chair at a corner table, he could make out a few words.

"That's Ballantine."

"Don't look no different."

"He's turned killer."

Covert whispers, balm to the proud heart of Chris Ballantine. Men had never noticed him, before, except to smile. They no longer smiled. And that was enough.

After breakfast he joined the line of loungers on the veranda, looking up and down the street, and across the roofs of the town to big Mount Christopher, watching the light invade the blue hollows and polish the naked faces of the cliffs with burning light.

The air was close; the sun grew hotter still. A tall, lean fellow with a dull eye stood over his chair.

"There's a little game in the back room. Will you play, Ballantine?"

He barely understood the system of poker, but he went. And when he had been introduced to the four others who sat around the table in the back room, he found, after all, that the playing of a poker hand is very much like a gun fight—in that it is accomplished with all of one's nerve gathered, and with all of one's force in the eye and the mind. He had to look deep into the scheming brains around that table. He had to cover his own emotions as with a mask; and he had to see through theirs. From that thick sheaf of bills which filled the wallet he had taken from Nevis, he lost a hundred dollars in the first hour of play. Then, in the second hour, his growing skill told. He knew when the thin-faced man compressed his lips that he had nothing and was preparing to bet to the sky to carry out a bluff. He knew when the fat man's fingers—usually so active and nervous—became still, that he held a hand worth a bet and a big one. And, in such fashion as this, he learned the earmarks of each of the others. It was not difficult. It was only new. In the second hour he took back his lost money and added seventy-five.

He gained more than money from this game. In casual conversation, he learned that Harry Reddick was back East on business for his father. The time of his return was unknown.

Ballantine would wait.

After the game broke up he went back to the veranda and he sat through the cool of the evening. He had made the wages of six weeks in a single afternoon of not unpleasant play. Ballantine smiled to himself. It was an easy world. But one had to understand how to take it by the throat and make it know its master.

During the next few days, he retired late, he slept late. In the afternoon he played poker. And not once did he

leave the table a loser. He was waiting, during those days, for Reddick's return. He felt that the town was watching him, expecting something from him. The world was lost in a dream; he himself was the only real, wakeful thing in it.

Then, with a shock, came serious trouble on the horizon of his life.

It was a letter, addressed roughly in pencil which the postman brought to him, and inside he found scrawled:

> Ballantine: I've been up North and I just found out that my good friend, Steve Ranger, died by your hand. I'm coming as fast as the train will get me there, which ought to be about a day after this letter gets to you. I hope that we will be able to entertain one another.
>
> The letter was signed: Kincaid.

He took this letter to the sheriff.

"Durfee," he said, "tell me about Kincaid."

Joe Durfee was not an emotional man. But he changed color and stood up slowly from his chair.

"Well, Ballantine, they call some gents devils. Kincaid is two devils!"

"What's he done? Of course I've heard the name."

The sheriff squinted his eyes. "I met a marshal, once, that knowed the whole history of Kincaid. He begun young, learnin' knife work in Canadian lumber camps. He had two dead men behind him when he was fourteen. After that he graduated and got busy with a gun. Ran up quite a string of dead men in a dozen gunfights.

"He found out that in Canada they didn't give a man much leeway. So he shifted down into the States, not because he likes the country better, but because he likes the laws better. Now, some folks do a killin' because they

hate the other man, and some of 'em kill because they get crazy mad, and some kill because they're drunk and don't know what they're doin'. But once in a while comes along a man that kills for the sake of killin'. Once in fifty years one man comes along like that. And that's Kincaid."

"He's a great fighter, then?"

"The greatest. He shoots by instinct the same way as a wolf follers a trail. Up in Lawsonville the three Dawson brothers made up their minds to get rid of him, because they knowed that he was on the trail of Pete Dawson. They come into the barroom behind him, and pulled their guns and started pumping lead at him. Well, sir, he turned around and dropped all three of 'em—killed poor Pete, and wounded the other two. And he didn't get a scratch himself. Now, Ballantine, if you want my advice I say climb on that fancy hoss of yours an' *ride*. If Kincaid's after you, ya ain't got a chance in hell!"

Ballantine turned the matter over in his mind: To saddle matchless Overland and ride swiftly away from danger. And yet there was a temptation gripping him, like that which seizes upon a man on the edge of a cliff. Just as the climber feels a grisly joy in the thought of throwing himself into space, so the desire to confront the terrible Kincaid swelled the heart of Ballantine.

"D'you think," said he, "that I *fear* Kincaid? Not a bit, Durfee!"

And he left the sheriff with those words, and went out to Overland.

His last long ride, perhaps, on the glorious horse! He stretched him out through the mountains, and Overland went like the very personification of the wind. And when, in the evening, he turned back toward town, with the plain a deep sea of rosy light beneath him, and the huge purple

mountains piled against the horizon, he told himself that it was better, far better, to live one free day than to endure weary years of his old existence.

All that had been dreadful with weary labor and hopelessness was forgotten now. He thought of his childhood most of all, and in it the voice and the face of his mother; he thought of the first proud days when he was the "boy rancher" of that district, pointed out and commented upon by older men. And, last and brightest, he thought of Peggy Holbrook. Indeed, she had never been out of his mind in this wild time which followed his re-creation.

He went in through the back door of the hotel and the first person he encountered was the burly proprietor himself, coming out of the kitchen. He caught the arm of Ballantine.

"Is it true?" he gasped out.

"What?"

"About you...and Kincaid?"

"Of course. Why not, partner?"

The eye of the other filled with cold horror, as though he were even then looking upon a dead corpse.

"I'll be wishin' you luck," he muttered, and followed Ballantine with his glance as the latter walked away, then called: "Will and your sister are waitin' for you."

What could they want? They were in his room, and when he entered they sprang up to meet him. How changed they were. All the flippant, self-centered satisfaction was gone from the face of Sylvia. Will Ballantine showed a sun-reddened set of features, and weary eyes. It was Sylvia who ran to him as he opened the door.

"Oh, Chris, dear old Chris!" she said. "They haven't told us the truth, or you wouldn't be so carefree. It isn't true, then?"

"What?" he asked her.

"About that man Kincaid."

"I'm going to meet up with him," he told them. "It'll be good for the range to have him done for. That's all there is to it."

Sylvia, with a moan, covered her face.

The mouth of Will Ballantine set hard; then he said slowly: "It's no use, Sylvia. He's made up his mind. There's only one thing to do, and I'll do it. Chris, I'll face him with you."

"You'll stay on the ranch," directed Ballantine. "I don't need help."

"Sylvia, go out and wait for me," said Will.

"Oh, Chris—" she began, and then, seeing the iron in his face, as though she realized suddenly that words were useless, she choked back a sob and ran from the room. Will Ballantine walked a turn or two up and down, fighting with himself.

At last he said: "For heaven's sake, try to dodge this thing. You'll find a new family life if you'll come back to us. I don't mean that we want you back there to do the work yourself. I'm going to let law go hang for a few years until we've seen this through. Sylvia discharged Alice. She's doing the cooking and working like a Trojan."

"I saw her hands," said Ballantine, with a warm glow of satisfaction spreading through him.

"But we need you—as the head of the family. We need you as our brother. Since you broke out and left us, we've had a chance to think things over, and we can see just how much you've had to put up with. Chris, if you can come back to us, you'll find a different atmosphere. The nonsense is completely out of Sylvia. I hope to God that it's out of me. We needed the whip, and you gave it to us. I only wish that you'd done it ten years ago!"

To Ballantine it was a moment only less great than that in which he had struck big Jeff Partridge to the ground. He took the hand of his brother and wrung it.

"Will," he said, "this makes me feel rich. If there was ever any doubt in my mind about Kincaid, it's gone now. I'm going to beat him because I *have* to beat him. There's too much left for me to live for."

His brother and sister were not the last to come to him on that night. He had hardly finished his supper and gone out onto the veranda, when Patrick Reddick arrived and took him out under the pines for a serious talk. The burden of what he had to say was most strange to one whom the banker had used with such brutal frankness a few days before.

"Ballantine," he said, "the first essential in a business man must be the courage to change his mind when he finds he's been wrong. I was wrong about you. I've come to you tonight to tell you that your credit is good in my bank again. Good for enough, say, to push through your irrigation scheme. Not charity. Simply good business. When I talked to you last, you were not man enough to put through a job of that size. Now you're man enough to put through almost anything."

There followed a strange recital from the banker. He had had a night visit from Hank Nevis, who tried to extract blackmail from him, threatening, otherwise, to reveal that Harry Reddick had hired assassins to attempt the life of Ballantine. And, when the banker refused money, he had ended by declaring that Harry Reddick was done for anyway, because Ballantine already knew.

"I waited two more days," said Reddick, "to see if you intended to let the world know about Harry. You haven't done it. I don't believe you intend to. So I've done two things. I've sent Harry out of the country to try to make his way in a new place; and I've come to you to thank you for keeping silent."

"Reddick, a week ago I was worth about a nickel to you. What's made the difference? A gun fight?"

"A week ago you wouldn't fight. And fighters are what the world needs. Men who fight their way out of trouble. *I'm* a fighter, Ballantine. That's why I understand. There's only one proviso—don't stay here to meet Kincaid. That's suicide!"

But Ballantine shook his head. "Suppose that you was in my boots and my age, and a gent wrote you a letter like he wrote to me. What would you do?"

It silenced Reddick. Ballantine watched him walk thoughtfully away.

He went back to the stable behind the hotel, took out the stallion, and rode toward the house of Tom Holbrook.

He tethered the big black outside the corral and went up to the house. They were both on the veranda. He could see the glow pulse and die in the bowl of Holbrook's pipe, and smell the fragrance of the rich tobacco. He could make out the pale outline of the girl sitting near her father. And, at that, such emotion came over Ballantine that he grew weak—weak as in the old days when the presence of the girl had turned him mute. He paused in front of the steps, fighting for speech. Then came the sudden voice of Holbrook.

"Ballantine!"

The rancher ran down the steps to him, caught him by the arm, and led him to the porch. There Peggy came to him. A flood of questions poured out. About Overland, about the fight with Nevis and Ranger, about his new life, and most of all, the wild tale that terrible Kincaid was coming from the North to encounter him.

Then from Peggy Holbrook: "You won't do that, Chris? You won't fight him?"

"Do you want me to turn my back on him?" he asked sharply.

"Would you stand still to meet a mad dog?" she demanded.

"That's it, Chris," said the older man. "A mad dog, with poison in his teeth. That's what Kincaid is!"

"Mad dogs have to die," answered Ballantine.

"He's right," said the girl. "If he feels that way, he's right to face him. If I were a man—I'd do the same. But, oh, Chris, that it should have to be you!"

It was her manner of saying that simple thing which made it seem to Ballantine the most marvelous of music. And he carried the sound of her voice away with him when they came out to watch him mount Overland.

"No more spur?" asked Holbrook.

"I was wrong," said Ballantine. "I never touch him now with more than a word. Goodbye!"

He went off swiftly through the night.

A wind had risen. A pale half moon was plowing through thin drifts of high clouds, throwing up a steady spray of ghostly white. Now and then it broke through and dappled the ground with the shadows of trees.

And by this light he saw a big man sitting on a horse, a tall rider with a long, thin face. Kincaid!

Chris drew rein.

"Ballantine."

That hard, serene, confident voice withered the tongue of Ballantine at the root. He could not answer. And the stranger continued: "I meet you tomorrow, Ballantine, in the street, in front of the hotel, at noon, when there will be others to watch us and see that there is—fair play!"

And as he spoke, he laughed, softly, like the purring of a great savage cat, and reined his horse away into the blowing darkness.

As he rode to town, Ballantine turned the matter slowly in his mind. Not unless Kincaid were disarmed would he have a chance against this ghoul of a man. But how disarm him?

One thing indeed might madden him: scorn. But who would dare scorn Kincaid?

A plan was half-formed in the mind of Ballantine when he fell asleep that night. It was fully formed when he sprang out of bed in the morning. He went down to breakfast with a cheerful mien. And men looked upon him as upon one already dead.

"Ballantine," said the proprietor, whispering, "maybe I'm takin' my life in my hands to tell you even this much. But the fact is that they's some that says that he's in town already, or hangin' around waitin' for you!"

"Ah, yes," said Ballantine, and he shrugged his shoulders. "I've seen him."

"Seen him? And you're alive, man?"

"I dunno how it was. I was as close to him as I am to you. But he didn't make a move for his gun. Maybe he's lost his nerve. He seen me face to face, and he didn't dare to stir!"

That was all, but perhaps it was enough.

When noon came, he looked down through the crevice at the bottom of his drawn window shade which kept out the flare of the sunlight, and he could see, plainly, the form of Kincaid when he came riding in on his ragged mustang.

He dismounted in front of the hotel, removed his Stetson and carefully wiped sweat and dust from his forehead.

A mist of long, thin, blond hair covered his head, like the hair of an old man. The sun turned it to silver—a cloud of silver fire around that terrible face.

Ballantine saw the hotel proprietor engage the gunman

in close conversation. He was being told the thing that Ballantine had said about Kincaid's having lost his nerve.

The gunman's lean face became a mask of rage. He glared up at the window of Ballantine's room.

Time to move. Chris stepped away from the window and looked to his gun.

He felt very calm. He could not feel his heart beat. And then he went down the stairs. When he reached the lobby, one of the men who stood at the windows turned and saw him, and winced back.

And Ballantine knew, by that, that his own face was ghastly.

He paused, gathered his strength, and set his teeth to force a smile. Then he stepped through the door onto the veranda.

Kincaid was poised there, in the middle of the street. When he saw Ballantine, he uttered a wild cry of fury.

There was no question here of waiting for the other man to draw his gun. Kincaid himself made the first move for all men to see, tearing furiously at the butt of his Colt—and in his haste entangling it. Perhaps it was the friction of the sight against the holster. At any rate, Ballantine saw the split second of delay, and in that instant he dreamed of victory. He jerked out his own gun and fired, fired again; then out of nothingness something struck him over the eyes and he was down.

When his senses returned to him, he saw Tom Holbrook leaning above him. And he caught at the rancher's hand.

"Holbrook, did I—" he muttered.

"The third bullet did it—the one you fired after you hit the ground," said Holbrook. "He dropped in his tracks. It went straight through the brain."

It was the last time Chris Ballantine ever drew a gun. And, of course, it was the last time he ever had to. The

slayer of Kincaid did not need to demonstrate his formidable skill again. But, when he was a prosperous rancher with five hundred acres of irrigated bottom land, he said to his wife, Peggy: "It was luck that saved my life."

And she shook her head. "Luck, perhaps, for the old Chris Ballantine, but not for the man you are today. No, Chris, you beat Kincaid fair and square. You won the battle."

He put an arm around her, holding her close. "I'd say I've won a lot more."

Half a Partner

Printed in Blue Book *in March of 1939, "Half a Partner" had the distinction of being Faust's last prose Western. In fact, due to his full-time writing chores in Hollywood, only twenty more of his magazine tales were printed over the final five years of his career. And many of these concerned young Dr. Kildare. He would write two or three more Westerns for films, but this terse, affecting character study marks his farewell prose to a genre in which he had become a true master. In twenty-two years he had turned out nearly 400 Westerns, a wordage equal to 220 books and now, finally, he was done. Told with clarity and precision, "Half a Partner" examines the special value of a partnership within the unique wilderness tradition of the Far West.*

A fitting end to a fabulous Western career.

Toby Edson dreamed that heavy male voices were carrying on an argument near him; but what wakened him was something between the death-screech of a rabbit and the high whine of a buzz-saw when it comes ringing through the wood.

He sat up, blinking. It was as hot under blankets in the cabin as though the stove were going full blast. He reached from his bunk, pushed open the door, and looked out at the first day of spring.

Up there in the mountains, that was the way it came sometimes, when the sky cleared and the wind blew out of the warm south. The conversational grumbling was the breaking-up of the ice down in Tumble Creek; and that last outcry was the scream of an eagle. Above the brilliant wrack of the land-mist two of them were up there fighting, black against the sun, the bald-headed old veteran from the Sugarloaf, and some ambitious stranger. Now one of the pair folded his wings, dropped half a mile like a stone, and skidded away up Tumble Valley, leaving a scream behind him.

Edson got out of his blankets and stood up. The effort made him dizzy. The winter had walled them in with white iron for five months; and during the last six weeks they had been on starving rations of flour-and-onion flapjacks. Twenty pounds of necessary muscle had been thumbed away from his body by the famine, and by the hard work of drilling in the quartzite of their prospecting shaft. His knees were crazy with weakness, and the blood sang in his head as he called out: "Hi, Marty! It's here. The big thaw is on! We can get through! We can get out!"

Marty rolled from his side to his back and lay still, groaning. His face looked greenish-white. Toby Edson shook him by the shoulder. "Spring! It's spring!" he shouted. "Wake up, Marty!"

"Suppose we get through, what of it? Spring, hell! We're still stony broke," said Marty, without opening his eyes.

That was true. They were flat. They hadn't fifteen cents between them.

"We'll go down and talk some credit out of old Marshall in the store," declared Edson.

Martin Fordyke pushed himself up with his long arms and gaped as he stared at the steaming brilliance which rose over the valley. He was so weak that even when he sat still, he wavered a little.

Edson studied that sick face and the unsteadiness of the head.

The effort of speech twisted the lip of Fordyke into a sneer.

"It's no good," he said. "I'm too done in to make the trip. And if you go alone, nobody'll give you credit."

He shook his head with a slow movement. The sneer of nausea or of doubt was still on his mouth, and Edson hated the sight of it.

He fought against the admission that there was weakness of spirit as well as weakness of body in his friend. Besides, there was a touch of cruelty in Fordyke when he hinted at Edson's damaged reputation.

"You stay here and take it easy," said Edson. "I'll go down and come back on Buster loaded with chuck. I'll raise the wind somehow, or be damned."

"Now don't be a fool," cautioned Fordyke. "You want to get into more trouble?"

People had insisted on building up a legend about Toby Edson. He was too ready with his tongue and his fists. Wherever there was a fight in which guns were pulled, rumor had a way of hitching Edson's name to the trouble. He had taken a certain pride in that dangerous reputation until he started asking Mary Darnley once a month to marry him, and discovered that she really meant it when she said no.

After that, when he wanted to hit anyone, he put his hands in his pockets. Finally he sewed himself up for at least one peaceful winter by staking out a claim with his friend Martin Fordyke on Tumble Mountain.

He had a double purpose in this move, for it not only would enable him to grow accustomed to the ways of

peace, but also it would be tying the hands of Fordyke, who was Mary's most preferred young man. No matter what Mary had said, Edson was not yet licked.

He was perfectly willing to admit that Fordyke was a finer fellow and much more worthy of Mary, but he wanted to study that superiority at close quarters. Perhaps he could imitate it in the end. All winter long he had been trying to reach into the mind of his friend, and all winter he failed to discover the charm which made Mary love Fordyke.

He got into his clothes and took his thoughts outside the cabin.

Old Buster, the white-faced mule, who was down the shoulder of the mountain pawing away snow to get at the bunch grass which grew scantily here and there, put back his ears in recognition.

The thaw was on with a vengeance, and the air filled with a conversational whisper as the snow melted into runlets of water, trickling down Tumble Mountain.

Faint thunder rolled across Tumble Valley, and through the dazzle of the mist he saw Pinckney Falls running a streak of silver down the face of the cliff. Perhaps the ice was already gone from the thousand granite steps of the trail.

He went back into the cabin, started a fire, shook the last flour out of the sack, chopped up an onion, and fried that revolting mess in pork-grease.

"That's every damned bit we have," declared Fordyke. "If you can't get through, we starve, eh?"

"We starve," answered Edson briefly, and helped Fordyke to a major portion of that last meal.

He had put in more time with single jack and double jack, during the winter, drilling at the quartzite, which was as hard as steel and as sticky as gum; therefore he had lost more pounds than Fordyke—but he was fed from a well of extra nerve energy that made him the leader and

gave finality to his decisions. He managed to get down that breakfast before he pulled the saddle on Buster and shoved a gun into the saddle-holster.

"I finished drilling that hole yesterday," he told Fordyke, who leaned weakly in the doorway. "If you want to kill time, why not shoot it this morning?"

"Suppose you find Solomon's Stairway greased with ice from the top to the bottom?"

"Then we'll save time by sliding down," said Edson.

"You'll slide to hell, you mean," commented Fordyke; but there was no real concern in his voice. It was as though the famine had starved out even the strength of their friendship. Edson kept thinking about that all the way to the head of Solomon's Stairway, where more than a hundred broken ledges made a sort of imperial descent into the valley mists. The mule went down with delicate steps, studying his footing with wise eyes, while Edson stared grimly ahead, not at the danger, but at his interview with old Marshall at the store.

Martin Fordyke went up to the shaft which told the hard, hungry story of the last months. There they had broken their hands and hearts for half a year, following a mere ghost of color that refused to widen into a workable vein; but Edson, who found the dim trace of gold, had refused to give up. It angered Fordyke to think how he had been mastered from the first by that dominant nature. Fordyke was a fool for following him into the mountains hunting for the rainbow's pot of gold.

The damp cold of the winter was still in the shaft. He carried a light to the drilled hole which Edson had left; for a week, now, his starved arms had not been able to manage even an eight-pound hammer. He set the dynamite charge, lighted the fuse, and went outside, where the sun gave down a warm rain of strength. Then came the explosion.

It was not a good shot. By the sound of it, he knew that it had bootlegged! Well, it would be the last hole they drilled in that stubborn vein. When he went in, he examined the effects of the shot negligently. The powder had knocked out a hole six inches wide at the mouth and smashed the ejected rock into the opposite wall of the shaft. Fordyke leaned over the little pile of debris with the lantern for a casual glance.

At first he thought that it was a mere yellow glint from the lantern light. But it was more solid than that: He could lift it between thumb and forefinger.

He jumped back to the hole which the explosion had left. Lantern light refused to crawl down the narrows of that little opening. He lighted a match. The sulphur fumes made him cough the flame out. He lighted another. And now he saw it clearly, like a smudge of sunshine on one side of the little funnel. He plucked at it. Something came away, and he ran with it to the sunlight.

The thing in his hand made a jagged streak like a miniature lightning-stroke. It was wealth. If the vein held, it was dollars in tens of thousands!

He held that bit of wire-gold against his breast and shook his fist at the sky. His thought leaped across the blue and dazzle of Tumble Valley into the cushions of a Pullman, into the prow of a transatlantic liner; and all the domes and spires of the ancient world crowded up into his imaginings thicker than the pine trees of the lower valley.

The head of a climbing beast came nodding up over the shoulder of the mountain then; not the long, flopping ears of Buster returned from a vain attempt, but the beautiful bony head of a thoroughbred. He knew the girl by the horse almost sooner than he distinguished her face. It was Mary Darnley, and he blessed the sight of the panniers that her Gavvigan horse was bearing. Now she was dismounting at the door of the cabin, holding up a whole ham by the hanging noose.

Fordyke ran toward her, stumbling, like a lucky sinner toward the gate of heaven.

"Marty, are you sick? Have you been starving? Why didn't you come down to us? Was it the trail?" She was loving him with her eyes as she spoke.

"Partly ice, partly Toby. He's too damned proud to borrow until he's starved half a year."

He remembered that she belonged to him, and stooped to kiss her; then he was lifting the covers of the panniers and peering at their contents. It was hardly necessary to look. All the sweet kitchen fragrances of his knowledge—Thanksgiving and Christmas piled headlong together—set him laughing with a crazy delight.

Something small and bright flashed from his hand to the ground. The girl picked it up. It was a crooked bit of wire, a shining spider-thread of gold.

"Marty, have you had luck in the mine?"

"Luck? Luck?" He looked up at her with suddenly narrowed eyes. "Not a trace. Ghost-gold," he said.

A sudden shadow fell across her heart as she listened to the lie. She stared at him; he seemed to be receding into a new distance.

Toby Edson got safely down into the valley, but the ice was dissolving every moment, and he found muddy trails in the lowland.

He let the mule go on at a shambling trot. The farther he went, the more certain he became that he never could talk ten cents' worth of credit out of old Marshall at the Crowfoot store. Instead, where the trails branched, he took the way toward Tumbletown. He could pawn the saddle, if necessary, and return bareback; but return with food he must. The green-white of Marty's face lay in the back of his mind like the whole horror of the winter,

visualized. Then he came over the shoulder of Sullivan Hill, and saw Pete Doring coming up the trail, two loops beneath him. The instant he laid eyes on the man, Toby Edson knew what he would do—and he dismounted at once.

Doring was an unusual genius who inherited his father's money and talent as a moneylender, together with a special set of vices that were all his own. Among other things, he could forget his gambling debts. Toby Edson, remembering a scene in the back room of Patterson's saloon, spat on the ground in scorn and disgust.

Then he pulled a bandana across the bridge of his nose, close up to the eyes, and knotted it behind his head. He left Buster deep in the brush, and stepped to the trail side as big Pete Doring brought his horse into a canter at the top of the hill. Edson came out of the shrubbery with a gun leveled. Doring wrenched his pony to a stop and slid down from the saddle.

He kept his hands reaching for the sky while his eyes watched the revolver.

Edson reached inside the loose of Doring's coat and pulled out a wallet. Doring groaned. He twisted his body as though his vitals were being drawn out of him.

He pleaded: "Listen to me. I swear to God the money in there ain't all mine. I've got old Doc Shore's cash. You wouldn't want old Doc to be a beggar all the rest of his life, would you? You wouldn't go and do that, would you?"

His knee snapped up as he spoke. It knocked Edson's gun-hand high into the air and sent the revolver spinning away. Doring plunged into a clinch. An animal screeching of delight kept working in his throat from the moment he got his grip on Edson and felt that weakened body crumple. Edson found himself picked up like a child and flung with the weight of Doring crashing down on him.

Half of his life went out on a dark wave. Doring had him by the throat, beating his head against the ground. He struck at Doring's chin. His fist merely glanced across it.

Edson jerked the arm back again, the elbow pointed. It struck home against Doring's temple. A thousand electric wires went jangling up his arm, numbed to the shoulder; but Doring's weight spilled over him loose as water, and lay still.

He rolled that bulk away, then tore free a point of leather dangling from Doring's saddle. That served as a cord to tie the hands of the big fellow behind his back. When he picked up his gun, Doring had not moved. He made a snoring sound as though he were enjoying a peaceful sleep.

Edson opened the wallet, took out a five-dollar bill, and tossed the wallet into the mud. Then he returned to Buster.

The best way was straight back over the top of the hill. He wanted speed, but all he could get out of Buster was a rocking-horse gallop slower than a man could run. Perhaps that was why bad luck overtook him. Besides, he had been a fool. He should have looked on the off side of Doring's horse for the holstered rifle which was fitted there. He was up on the top of Sullivan's Hill when a blow struck him behind the shoulder and ran a long needle of pain through it. Afterward came the ringing report of the rifle....

In the woods just beyond the crest of the hill he stopped. Doring did not follow, so he dismounted and peeled off shirt and undershirt. Hardly any blood came from his back, but plenty ran out of the wider wound in front.

He could move the shoulder without extra pain, which meant that no bone was broken.

Inside the bark of a dead stump he found wood-rot that

pulverized to dust. With that in the cup of his hand, he padded the mouths of the wound. Then with his teeth and right hand he tore the undershirt into strips and bandaged his shoulder. Afterward he huddled into the flannel shirt. Edson unstrapped his short mackinaw coat from behind the saddle, and put that on also. Finally he crawled up the side of Buster and started for the town of Crowfoot.

There were no wits at all in his left arm. He kept the hand in a trousers' pocket as he jogged on. Of course after this he could not show himself at the store; but he remembered old Carlos, who used to peddle gin in the prohibition days. Carlos never spent much time in jail, because he possessed the ability to keep his mouth shut; he kept it closed on this day when Toby Edson, his left hand still in his pocket, stood by the mule and asked for bacon, coffee, flour, molasses, eggs, and half a sack of apples. Carlos brought the stuff out and took the five-dollar bill. He looked at Toby with his old unwinking eyes, smiling. It was not really a smile, but a folding of the lips over toothless gums.

Toby licked the dry of his lips and started back for Tumble Mountain. The pain was bad, and it grew worse. The left arm swelled. He hooked the left hand inside his collar to give it a higher support, but the arm kept swelling. The pain was everywhere, particularly in the wrist, so that sometimes he felt as though the bullet had clipped through him at that point.

He ate two apples, and each one cleared a fainting fit away, washing the darkness out of his eyes. That was the way he reached the cabin, late in the afternoon.

When Edson dismounted and stood in the doorway, his eyes would not believe what they saw. The whole table was heaped with food!

There was a story, somewhere, about the pelican that

gave her blood for her young. Edson had felt that he would be giving life to Marty not as repayment for the long months of their suffering and steady friendship; but because it was the right sort of gesture. And now it was taken away from him. It was an empty hand he offered, compared to what lay on that table.

Martin Fordyke met him at the door. There were glimmering, half-drunken lights of happiness in his eyes. He sang out: "He got it! Good old Toby, he *did* talk credit out of Marshal.... You can wring whisky out of iron, then, Toby. But come on in and sink a tooth in some of this stuff Mary brought. I'll carry in what you got."

Then Mary was holding his hand and examining him with anxious eyes.

"I had an idea you might be short of chuck," she said. "When I saw the thaw had started and heard the water running, I packed up some things and just came along."

He nodded understandingly:

"That's right. You had to get through to Marty."

"And to you, Toby," she said.

"Sure," he nodded, grinning. "Because I'm his partner, and that gives me a share in you. I get some of the shine of your eyes, anyway; he gets the rest."

"You're out on your feet," Mary said.

"I'm a little tired, that's all," he told her. "That damned old mule has more ways of going than you can shake a stick at, and they're all wrong."

He turned to Marty, saying: "Shoot that hole this morning?"

"I shot it," said Marty, his back turned. "Same old story. Drew another blank."

"We'll have to pull out of here," declared Edson.

Marty nodded. "Sit down and take a wallop at that chuck, will you?"

"It looks great," answered Edson. "But first, I'll stretch out on the bunk a minute."

He lay down. Individual weights closed his eyes.

The voice of Mary, far away, said: "There's a brandy flask in my saddle pocket. Get it for him, Marty."

An arm went under his head, and he breathed a thin fragrance.

Edson smiled at her. "I don't have to be coddled."

She kept on lifting his head. Her face was so close to him that he could see only the lips and the chin and the throat. She held the flask to his mouth. He took a swallow.

"What happened?" asked the girl.

"Nothing.... Mountain sickness, maybe.... What do you mean?"

"Don't be such a damned big brave man," said the girl. "You're sick with pain. What's the matter?"

"I'm all right," said Toby. "I'll be taking a whack at that chuck."

He forced himself to the table and sat down. A small roast chicken was half demolished. He took a drumstick and began to eat it. Somehow the meat stuck in his throat.

"Why don't you use both hands?" asked Mary softly.

He didn't answer.

"What's going on?" asked Marty rather angrily. "What happened out on the trail?"

"He's done something," said the girl. "He paid more than cash for what he brought back to you, Marty," she went on. "Is it the arm? Is it the shoulder, Toby? Are you going to make a stranger of me? Do you think that *I'd* talk?"

"Talk be damned!" cried out Fordyke at the door. "Toby, whatever you did, Sheriff Grieve's coming up the trail hell-bent!"

Edson got himself out into the open. He had a crazy

idea of grabbing the mule and attempting flight. Then the reasonable part of his brain stopped him. Sheriff Grieve was dismounting, now, beside them.

He had a gray beard trimmed down sharp, as it were, by the wind of hard galloping.

He said: "All right, Edson. You'd better be coming along with me."

"What's the charge?" Edson asked.

"Assault and robbery," said the Sheriff. "As long as you were assaulting somebody, I'm glad you picked out that skunk of a Doring. But that's no matter." He gathered high heat and anger as he spoke. "You've been handy with your fists and your gun for a long time, young fellow; and now we're going to put you away where you'll have a good long rest. They can have their damned gunmen in New York and Chicago but this is too far West for that sort of work. Get your clothes and come along with me."

Toby nodded and stepped back into the cabin. It was as though the bullet had pierced him again, deeper down through his body.

"How do you know that it was Toby Edson?" asked the girl.

She kept her eyes on Marty, not on Grieve, as she spoke.

"Doring saw that white-faced mule, Buster; and he knew right away who must be riding him."

"Well, Marty could have ridden Buster, couldn't he?" she asked.

Grieve shrugged. "Marty's always been a peaceable sort."

"But he's Toby's friend," pointed out Mary. "And what would you do, Mr. Grieve, if you saw a friend of yours half-starved? Wouldn't you even do robbery to get food for him?"

"You mean that Marty and Toby are as thick as all that?" demanded Pete Grieve.

"They're partners, aren't they?" asked Mary. She kept

smiling, but the irony gave a new ring to her voice. "And partners out West would die for each other, wouldn't they?"

"What about it, Marty?" asked the Sheriff. "Did you go down there and stick up Pete Doring?"

Fordyke narrowed his eyes as though he were looking at something far across the valley. Then he sighed and nodded.

"I went down there and held up Doring," he said.

The girl drew in a breath. Her lips parted, and a brightness was working in her eyes.

"I might've known it was a kind of joke when Doring's whole wallet wasn't taken," commented the Sheriff. "But even if it's a first offense, highway robbery *ain't* a joke. The judge is gonna give you a right smart bit of hell for this, Marty! Get on that mule and come along with me!"

The girl ran up to Fordyke and caught his hands. "It won't be a great thing, Marty," she said. "The judge will only give you a reprimand and a suspended sentence. He would have given Toby twenty years...."

"I've lost you, haven't I?" asked Marty.

She couldn't answer. Tears brimmed her eyes.

"Well, I guess that's the way of it."

And he turned from her, riding away with the Sheriff.

That was why Edson came to the door of the cabin with a saddle-bag in his hand only to see the Sheriff with Marty Fordyke dropping out of sight down the trail. He blinked for a moment at that strange sight before some sort of vague understanding came to him. Then he started to cry out, and broke into a stumbling run in pursuit. The girl caught him and held him.

"They're gone!" she cried at him. "You can't catch them, Toby."

He stopped struggling and looked up into the sky as the whole beauty of the situation came over him abruptly.

"My God, Mary, I thought he was only half a partner,

only half a man. But he's gone in my place! Lend me Gavvigan, and I'll catch up with them!"

"You can't have Gavvigan," said the girl. "And don't you understand? They won't be hard on Marty. He won't get as much as thirty days."

"But why? Why did he do it?"

"He did it because you stood up against guns to bring back food to him. And he'd struck enough luck today to make him big-hearted....Look!"

And she held out the ore-streaked rock.

"Gold!" Edson took it from her, turning it in his hand, staring at it numbly.

"He was keeping it back. The hole he shot this morning ripped open a pocket of it. He was saving it to tell you later, when you were a little steadier on your feet. You understand, Toby? and he's going in your place because he knows that I love you!"

Edson put back a hand and gripped the edge of the door. "Don't laugh when you say that, Mary," he warned her.

"Do I seem to be laughing?" She asked.

"No—more crying," said Edson. He got his good arm around her.

"There's a kind of a God in this, isn't there?" he asked. "And He's a great God, Mary; because He made a man like Marty Fordyke."

The Sun Stood Still

This story was an extremely personal one for Frederick Faust. He wrote it in the summer of 1934, for American Magazine, *basing it directly on his vivid memories of working on a hay press as a bale-roller at the raw age of fifteen. Faust had been orphaned two years earlier, in 1905, and forced to labor on farms and wheat ranches in California's rugged San Joaquin Valley. The work was hellish and exhausting.*

In "The Sun Stood Still," he recreates a typical day of toil under truly harrowing conditions. Faust's heart was permanently damaged by such brutalizing labor.

Here is a literal account of how things really were for young Fred Faust in his painful journey toward manhood. Yet, beyond the pain, this story reflects a stubborn, nostalgic pride in a killing job well done—clear testimony to the triumph of the human spirit.

They spent Monday morning moving the hay press down to the Cooley place and setting it up against the stack nearest the house. It was a good thing to have an easy

Monday morning because everyone except Bill Turner went to town on Saturday night and got drunk. Sam Wiley, the boss, drove to Stockton on Sunday evening and at the cheaper beer saloons picked up his crew. Some of them had to be loaded in like sacks of wheat; the others sat up and finished their drunk with whisky on the way home; and the whole gang went about with sick faces and compressed lips on Monday morning.

But the evening before, Wiley had failed to pick up the most important of his men. That was Big George, the best bale-roller in central California, and his absence was a serious loss.

After lunch, they lay around under the fig trees near the Cooley house and smoked cigarettes and talked about what they might do when one o'clock came. But Bill Turner did not smoke; neither did he join in the discussion. He was only eighteen, and his long, skinny body oppressed him continually with a sense of youth. His position was that of roustabout, at twelve dollars a week, and, since his bed was a shock of hay and his food came from the cookhouse, the money was clear profit. He would need it in the autumn when he returned to school to work again toward that higher destiny which was his pride; but all summer that sense of superiority had to be stifled when he was the least member of a hay-press crew.

"We might get Cooley to roll the bales for one afternoon," suggested Lacey, the power-driver.

Bill Turner moved his head so that he could see the sleek, repulsively self-conscious face of Lacey. The forelock of his long, pale hair was always plastered down with water whenever he washed for a meal. According to his anecdotes, Lacey was an irresistible beau. He had carried his conquests as far as San Francisco and could name the mysterious and expensive places of the Tenderloin.

"Cooley!" said Portuguese Pete, one of the feeders.

"Yeah, Cooley's no good," said Jumbo, the other feeder.

Bill Turner got himself to one elbow and looked toward the pock-marked face of Jumbo. Except for smallpox he would have been an eminently fine-looking fellow, but that disease had ruined his face as a ten-year sentence had ruined his life.

"Why's Cooley no good?" asked Bill.

Jumbo turned his head slowly, after a manner of his own, and looked at the speaker with his pale eyes.

"Don't you know why Cooley's no good?" asked Jumbo.

Bill thought it over. Cooley had eleven hundred acres in wheat and wild-oats hay which ran ten tons to the acre, this year, and it was said that he was going to get twelve dollars a ton. That might mean $20,000 profit, though it was hard to believe that such a flood of money would pour into the pockets of a single farmer. In person, Cooley was sleek and down-headed, and his jowls quivered a little when he talked or chewed tobacco.

"Maybe he's kind of funny," said Bill thoughtfully, "but I don't see why Cooley's no good."

"You've been going to school, ain't you?" asked Jumbo.

"Yes," said Bill.

"Well, keep right on going," said Jumbo.

Great, bawling laughter came from the entire crew, with the piping voice of Sam Wiley, the boss, sounding through the rest like a flute through the roar of a band.

Bill Turner gripped his hands hard and slowly rolled over on his back again. His face was hot. Perhaps he ought to spring up and throw an insult at Jumbo; but he knew that he dared not face the terrible pale eye of the feeder. It was not so much the fear of Jumbo that unnerved him as it was a renewed realization that he was not a man. Others—yes, far younger lads than he—could take an intimate and

understanding part in the conversation of grown-ups, but in some necessary mystery he was not an initiate.

As he lay on his back, he felt his shoulder and hip bones pressing painfully against the hard ground and he told himself that one day, by dint of tremendous training, he would be robed in great muscles; he would be shaggy with strength.

The thin half-face of Sam Wiley came between him and his upward thoughts.

"Listen, kid. You roll bales for this afternoon. Big George, he's showed you how to tie and everything."

"My jiminy!" said Bill, laughing weakly. "I'm not strong enough. Why, I only weigh about a hundred and sixty. I couldn't last it out. Those wheat-hay bales will run up to two hundred and forty."

Sam Wiley drew back.

There was a silence, and someone cursed softly. Then Jumbo said, "Yeah, he's *big* enough. He just ain't got it."

The implied insult was too great to be stomached. Bill sat up suddenly and cried, "What haven't I got?" He heard his voice shrilling, and he was ashamed of it.

Portuguese Pete chuckled. "He wants to know what he ain't got!"

"Ah, hell," said Jumbo, and wearily started rolling another cigarette.

Sam Wiley's face, narrow from chin to brow like the head of a Russian wolfhound, turned again to Bill. He was sun-blackened, except about the eyes, where the wrinkles fanned out in lines of gray. The only thing that was loose was his mouth, which seemed too big for the skull behind it, and that showed all its extra sizes when Wiley spoke.

"You can do it, and I'm gonna give you a shot at rolling bales."

The outfit could average around forty tons a day; at eighteen cents a ton, that made $7.20 a day for the bale-

roller—against the two dollars which Bill made as roustabout! Then you subtracted a cent a ton for wear on gloves.

Wiley said, "I'll pay you your regular two bucks and another dollar thrown in—"

"What!" cried Bill, outraged.

"But if you don't stop the power-driver too much, you get the full rate, kid," finished Wiley, "Better go out to the dog-house and look things over. You been in there before."

Being active and willing, Bill had been favored with a turn at all the important jobs, now and then. He had flogged the power horses around their dusty circle; he had handled the big fork on the stacks or out of the shocks which were run up on bucks; he had stood on the table and built feeds under the instruction of Portuguese Pete or Jumbo; and he had even been in the dog-house of the bale-roller, taught by Big George how to knot the wire in a figure eight with one cunning grasp of the left hand. He looked down at that left hand, now, and wondered if it would betray him in his time of need.

"You get away with it, and I'll keep you on the job," said Wiley. "You're a pretty good kid, and Big George is too much on the booze."

Bill left the shade of the trees. The sun fell on him with a hot weight; his shadow walked before him with short legs. As he crossed the corral, he saw the pigs wallowing in the muddy overflow from the watering troughs. They were growling and complaining; some of them had lain still so long that the sun had caked the mud to white on their half-naked hides. They luxuriated half in heat and half in muddy coolness.

Beyond the barns, Bill crossed the summer-whitened field toward the nearest stack against which the press had been set. The stack burned with a pale, golden flame.

Other great mounds rose among the acres of Cooley, some of them filmed over by the blue of distance. Every stack was heavy wheat and oats and when you lift a 240-pound bale three-high you've done something.

The shadow under the feed table promised coolness in the dog-house, but that was all illusion; it was merely dark instead of flaming heat. The wide shoulders of the stack shut away the wind. The big hay hooks of George lay on the scales, to the top of which was tied the box of redwood tags for the recording of weights. The iron rod for knocking over the locking bar leaned against the door. These were the tools for the labor. Bill was weak with fear. He had no shoulders. His arms hung from his skinny neck. He remembered the gorilla chest and arms of Big George, but even Big George had to groan in the hot middle of the afternoon. And this would be a scorcher. In the cool beneath the trees around the house the thermometer stood now at a hundred; it was better not to guess at the temperature in the dog-house or to imagine the middle afternoon.

Sam Wiley in person appeared, leading the power horses. The boss as roustabout made Bill smile a little. The other men came out. Jumbo and Portuguese Pete paused beside the ladder that climbed the stack.

"When you get the bale out, slam that door and lock it fast, because I'm gonna have the first feed pouring into the box," said Jumbo.

"Aw, the kid'll do all right," said Portuguese Pete. "Look at him. He's all white."

Pete opened his mouth for laughter but made no sound. He looked like a pig gaping in the heat; he had the same fat smile.

Old Buck could be heard off to the left cursing the black derrick-horse, Cap. The power team was being hitched. "Five minutes to one!" called Wiley.

"Watcha want, Pete? The stack or the table?"

"I'll start on the stack. But leave the kid alone, Jumbo."

"Yeah. Maybe," said Jumbo.

They disappeared upward. The boards of the feeding table sagged above the head of Bill. Jumbo let down the apron of the press with a slam. Hay rustled as he built the first feed. So Bill got on his gloves. He left one hook on the scales. The other he slipped over the bent nail which projected from a beam at his right. Sam Wiley was marking an angle with his heel, kicking into the short stubble.

"Put your first bale here, kid!" he called. "Build her twenty long."

It was a terrible distance, Bill thought. If he had to build the stack as big as that, it would mean taking the bales out on the trot and then coming back on the run.

He licked his lips and found salt on them.

"All *right!*" called Jumbo.

Lacey called to his power team. There was a jangling of chains. One of the horses grunted as it hit the collar. The press trembled as the beater rose. It reached the top, the apron above rose with the familiar squeak. The derrick pulleys were groaning in three keys. From far above there was a sound of downward rushing, and the first load from the great fork crunched on the table. It was a big load; a bit of it spilled over the edge and dropped to the ground by the dog-house.

Bill kicked the hay aside because it made slippery footing. He felt sicker than ever.

The beater came down, crushing the first feed to the bottom of the box and pressing thin exhalations of dust through invisible cracks.

Jumbo was yelling, "What you mean tryin' to bury me, you damn' Portugee Dago?"

The apron slammed down on the feed table again.

Bill looked at his left hand. It would have to be his brains. As for the weighing, the tagging, the rolling, the piling, he would somehow find strength in his back and belly for these things; but if he could not tie fast enough, everything else was in vain. The left hand must be the master of that art.

A word struck into his brain: "Bale!" How long ago had it sounded in his dreaming ears? Were they already cursing his slowness?

He leaped at the heavy iron, snatched it up, fitted it in, knocked the locking bar loose. As he cast the iron down, the door swung slowly open. He pushed it wide with a sweep of his left arm. Already Tom had the first wire through. Now the second one slithered through the notch on the long needle that gleamed like a thrusting sword.

A good bale-roller ought to tie so fast that he waits for the last strand and insults the wire-puncher by shouting, "Wire! Wire!" Bill grasped the lower and upper ends of the first one. He jerked it tight, shot the lower tip through the eye, jerked again, caught the protruding tip with his left thumb, pushed it over, cunningly snagged it with the fingers on his left hand, and as they gripped it with his right thumb gave the last twist to the wire. The knot was tied in that single complicated gesture.

The three middle wires were bigger, stiffer. But they were tied in the same quick frenzy—and now he saw with incredulous delight that the fifth wire was not yet through.

"Wire!" he screamed.

It darted through the notch at the same instant and he snatched it off the forked needle.

"Tied!" he yelled, and caught the hook from its nail. He sank it into the top of the bale at the center, and leaned

back with his left foot braced against the lower edge of the box. The beater trembled, rose with a sighing sound, slid rapidly upward.

His strong pull jerked the bale out. He broke it across his right knee, swerving it straight toward the scales. With his left hand he caught the edge of the door, thrust the heavy, unbalanced weight of it home, at the same time disengaging the hook from the bale and with it pulling the locking bar in place. He had had a glimpse, as he shut the door, of the down-showering of the first feed, and knew that Jumbo was giving no mercy but was rushing his work even as he would have done if Big George were in the doghouse.

Bill turned the bale end-up on the scales, slid the balance, found 195. The fingers of his right hand, witless behind the thick of the glove, refused to pick up a redwood tag from the box. At last he had it. The pencil scraped on the wood in a clumsy stagger. Who could read this writing, this imbecile scrawl? His teeth gritted as he shoved the tag under the central wire.

Then he rolled the bale out. He had to go faster. He had to make it trot the way Big George made a bale step out on legs of its own, so to speak. He put on extra pressure. The bale swerved. It staggered like a wheel that is losing momentum, wavering before it drops. Then, in spite of him, it flopped flat on its side, jerking him over with the fall.

Somewhere in the air was laughter.

He leaped that bale to its side again, hurrying it toward the angle which Wiley had marked on the ground.

"Bale!" shouted Lacey.

Well, that was the finish. He was simply too slow. With his first attempt he was disgraced, ruined, made a laugh-

ingstock. And all of those hardy fellows, relaxed in the profound consciousness of a sufficient manhood, were half smiling, half sneering.

He put the bale on the mark and raced back. All was at a standstill. The power horses were hanging their heads and taking breath. Old Buck leaned against the hip of Cap. Jumbo was a statue on the feed table; Portuguese Pete stood on top of the stack, folding his arms in the blue middle of the sky.

The yell of Jumbo rang down at him: "If you can't use your head, try to use your *feet!* We wanta bale some *hay!*"

But the voice of Jumbo and the words meant less than the sneering smile of Tom, the wire-puncher. He was one of the fastest wire-punchers in the world. Once he had been a bale-roller himself, but now his body was rotten with disease and he walked with a limp.

Bill had the second bale beside the first and was on his way back, running as hard as he could sprint, before that terrible cry of "Bale!" crashed into his mind again.

"Don't go to sleep at the damned scales," shouted Jumbo. "Get them tags in and walk them bales! Here's a whole crew waiting on a thick-headed kid. Are we ever gonna bale any *hay*?"

In the dog-house there was a continual cloud of dust, partly trampled down from the feeding table, partly drifted from the circling of the power team as its hoofs cut through the light hay-stubble and worked into the dobe. Hay dust is a pungency that works deep through the bronchial tubes and lungs; the dobe dust is sheer strangulation.

Life is a hell but real men can live through it. He remembered that. His own concern was to labor through that stifling fog and get the bales out of the way of the feeders. He was doing that now. Sometimes he was clear back to the press and waiting with the iron rod, prepared

to spring the locking bar the instant he heard the word "Bale!" The sun was leaning into the west, slanting its fire through the dog-house. He had laid the whole back row of the bale-stack; now he was bucking them up two-high, remembering to keep his legs well spread so that the knees would make a lower fulcrum, always avoiding a sheer lift but making his body roll with the weight.

He laid the row of two-high; the three-high followed. For each of these he had to allow himself a full extra second of lifting time. Big George, when in haste, could toss them up with a gesture, but Bill knew that one such effort was apt to snap his back or knock his brain into a dizziness as though he had rammed his head against a wall. The thing was to rock the bale up over his well-bent knees until the edge of it lodged against his body, then to straighten, lifting hard on the baling hooks, bucking up with the belly muscles and hips and freeing the hooks while the incubus was in full motion. He gave it the final slide into place with his forearms and elbows.

Every one of those three-high bales was a bitter cost. They weighed 200, 220, 240, as the big fork bit into the undried heart of the stack. Bill, himself, a loose stringing-together of 160 pounds. He had not the strength; he had to borrow it from someplace under his ribs—the stomach, say.

Sometimes when he whirled from the stack the world whirled with him. Once he saw two power teams circling, one on the ground and one in the air just above, both knocking out clouds of dust.

When the teams were changed, he caught the big five-gallon water canteen up in his arms, drank, let a quart of the delicious coldness gush out across his throat and breast.

They were baling well over three tons to the hour. That meant a bale a minute tied, taken from the press, weighed,

tagged, rolled, piled, and then the run back to the dog-house with the dreadful expectation of "Bale!" hanging over his head.

It was three hours and a half to four-thirty. He piled three and a half full tiers in that time and then found himself in the dog-house with the great iron bar in place, waiting, waiting—and no signal came.

Tom, the wire-puncher, called the others with gestures. They stood for a moment in a cluster and grinned at Bill.

"You poor fool!" said Jumbo. "Don't you know it's lunchtime?"

The mouth of Bill dropped open in something between a smile and a laugh. No sound came. Of course, at four-thirty there was a lunch of stewed fruit, hot black coffee, bread, and twenty great, endless minutes for the eating. The men went out and sat in the shadow of the stack of bales—his stack. He followed them. As he came closer to the dark of the shadow, he bent forward, his arms hanging loosely, and spilled himself on the ground.

Half a dozen men were putting shakes on the top of the barn, somewhere, he thought; then he realized that the rapid hammering was in his body, in his brain, as his heart went wild. Out here the air stirred, faintly; it was hot on the eyes and yet it cooled the skin; and every moment breathing became a little easier.

A heavy shoe bumped against his ribs. He looked up and saw Jumbo.

"Why don't you sit up and try to eat your snack, like a man?" asked Jumbo.

"Yeah—sure," said Bill.

He got the heels of his hands on the ground and pushed himself up against the bale. The rest of the crew were at a distance; their voices came from a distance, also; and the only thing that was near and clear was Mrs. Peterson, their cook, carrying a steaming bucket of coffee.

"Are you all right, Billy?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Why, sure. Thanks a lot. I was just taking it easy."

"Leave the kid alone!" called the harsh voice of Jumbo. She shrank away. "Women are always horning in!" he added loudly.

Bill was still sipping the coffee when Sam Wiley sang out like a rooster, "Come on, boys. There's a lot of hay waiting."

Bill swallowed the rest of the coffee and got up to one knee, gripped the edge of a bale, pushed himself to his feet. The dizziness, he was surprised to find, had ended. He was all right, except that his feet burned and his legs seemed too long.

And then in a moment, with what seemed a frantic hurrying to make up for lost time, the press had started. He finished the fourth tier, built the fifth, and at the end of it found himself teetering a heavy bale on his knees, unable to make the three-high lift. The terrible voice of Jumbo yelled from the stack, "Hurry it up! Are we gonna bale any *hay?*"

A rage came up in him; he swung the weight lightly into place as Lacey sang out, "Bale!"

The sun was declining in the west and he remembered suddenly that the day would end, after all. He was not thinking of seven dollars; he was thinking only of the sacred face of night when at last he could stretch out and really breathe.

But the sun stuck there. It would not move. Somewhere in the Bible the fellow had prayed and the sun stood still—Joshua, wasn't it?—while the Jews slew their enemies. Now the sun stood still again so that Bill Turner might be slain.

He still could tie the wires and take the last of the five off the needle. He could get the bale out and roll it. But even the two-high lift was an agony that threw a tremor of

darkness across his brain. That place from which the extra strength came, that something under the ribs, was draining dry.

Then, as he came sprinting to the cry of "Bale!" he heard Jumbo say, "He *could* do it, Pete, but the kid's yellow. There ain't any man in him!"

Bill Turner forgot himself and the work he was doing with his hands. He forgot the watery weakness of his knees, also, remembering that somehow he had to kill Jumbo. He would devise a way in fair fight.

And suddenly the sun was bulging its red-gold cheeks at the edge of the sky.

"That's all, boys!" Sam Wiley sang out.

And here were the feeders coming down from the stack; and yonder was the familiar cookhouse streaming smoke on the slant of the evening breeze. Someone strode toward him from the stack of bales.

"Look out, kid," said Tom. "There comes Big George, drunk and huntin' trouble. That means you. Better run."

He could not run. He saw Big George coming, black against the west, but he could not run because his legs were composed of cork and water. He got to the scales and leaned a hand on them, waiting. Lacey, wiping black dust from his face, said, "You poor fool, he'll murder you."

Big George came straight up and took Bill by the loose of his shirt; he held him out there at the stiffness of arm's length, breathing whisky fumes. It was not the size of George that killed the heart of Bill; it was the horrible contraction of his face and the crazy rolling of his eyes.

"It's you, eh?" said Big George. "You're the dirty scab that tries to get my place?"

"He ain't got your place, George!" shouted Sam Wiley, running up. "He only filled in while—"

"I'll fix *you* later on," said Big George. "I'm gonna finish this job first or—"

"You can't finish a job," said the voice of Jumbo.

"I can't do what?" shouted Big George.

"Take off your hat when you talk to me," said Jumbo.

Big George loosed his grasp on Bill.

"Hey, what's the matter?" he demanded. The magnificence and the fury had gone out from him as he confronted the pale eye of Jumbo. "Hey, Jumbo, there's never been no trouble between you and me—"

"Back up and keep on backing," said Jumbo. "Get your blankets and move. The kid wouldn't run from you, but you'll run from me or I'll—"

It was quite a soft voice, with a snarling that pulsed in and out with the breathing, and Big George winced from it. He shrank, turned, and in a sudden panic began to run, shouting, with his head turned over his shoulder to see if the tiger followed at his heels.

"The kid didn't stop the press today, and he won't stop it tomorrow, Wiley," said Jumbo. "If he ain't good enough to roll your bales, I ain't good enough to work on your stacks."

"Why, sure, Jumbo," said Sam Wiley. "Why, sure. Why not give the kid a chance? Come on, boys. I got a heap of fine steaks over there in the cookhouse for you."

They were all starting on when Bill touched the big arm of Jumbo.

"Look, Jumbo," he said. "All afternoon I didn't understand. Thanks!"

The eye of Jumbo, too pale, too steady, dwelt on him.

"Aw, try to grow up," said Jumbo.

Supper went with a strange ease for Bill. No one seemed to notice the shuddering of his hands even when it caused him to spill coffee on the oilcloth; eyes courteously refused to see this, and the heart of Bill commenced to swell with a strength which, he felt, would never leave him in all the days of his life.

Toward the end Lacey said, "About three o'clock I said you were finished, Bill. I waited for you to flop. Well, you didn't flop."

"No," said Portuguese Pete, "you didn't flop, Bill." He grinned at the boy.

"Ah, you'd think nobody ever did a half-day's work before!" said Jumbo.

That stopped the talk but Bill had to struggle to keep from smiling. He was so weak that the happiness glanced through him like light through water.

Afterward he got a bucket of cold water and a chunk of yellow soap. He was the only one of the crew that bothered about bathing at night. Now, as he scrubbed the ingrained dirt and salt and distilled grease from his body, Sam Wiley went past to feed the horses, and the rays from his lantern struck the nakedness of Bill.

"And look at him," said the voice of Lacey out of nothingness. "Skinny as a plucked crow, ain't he?"

Bill got to the place where he had built his bed of hay, under an oak tree away from the circle of the other beds, because the snoring of Portuguese Pete had a whistle in it that always kept him awake. Half in the blankets, he sat up for a time with his back to the tree and watched the moon rise in the east beneath a pyramid of fire. He made a cigarette with tobacco and a wheat-straw paper. The sweetness of the smoke commenced to breathe in his nostrils.

Now the blanched hay stubble was silvered with moonlight as though with dew and, as the moon rode higher, turning white, a big yellow star climbed upward beneath it. That must be Jupiter, he thought. When he turned to the west, the horizon was clean, but in the east the Sierra Nevadas rolled in soft clouds. This great sweep of the heavens made him feel it was easy to understand why some people loved the flats of central California. It had its

beauty, and the breath of it was the strange fragrance of the tarweed which later on would darken the feels with a false verdure.

He had never been so calm. He had never felt such peace. All the ache of his muscles assured him that at last he was a man, almost.

Then a horrible brazen trumpeting rolled on his ears, seeming to pour in on him from every point of the horizon; but he knew that it was the jackass braying in the corral. Before the sound ended, he put out his smoke and slid down into his bed, inert, sick at heart again. Somehow it seemed that even the beasts of the field had power to mock him.

Through his lashes, he saw the lumbering form of Portuguese Pete approaching with a bottle in his hand. Pete was stopped by another figure that stepped from behind a tree.

"What you gonna do with that?" asked the hushed voice of Jumbo.

"It's good stuff," said Pete, "and I'm gonna give the kid a shot."

"No, you ain't," said Jumbo.

"Yeah, but I mean the skinny runt lifting those bales—this'll do him good."

"Leave him sleep," said Jumbo. "Whisky ain't any short cut for him. Come along with me and I'll finish that bottle with you. Tomorrow we'll see if the kid can take it, really."

"You kind of taken a fancy to the kid, ain't you?" asked Pete as they moved away.

"Me? Why, I just been kind of remembering, is all," said Jumbo.

(continued from front flap)

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