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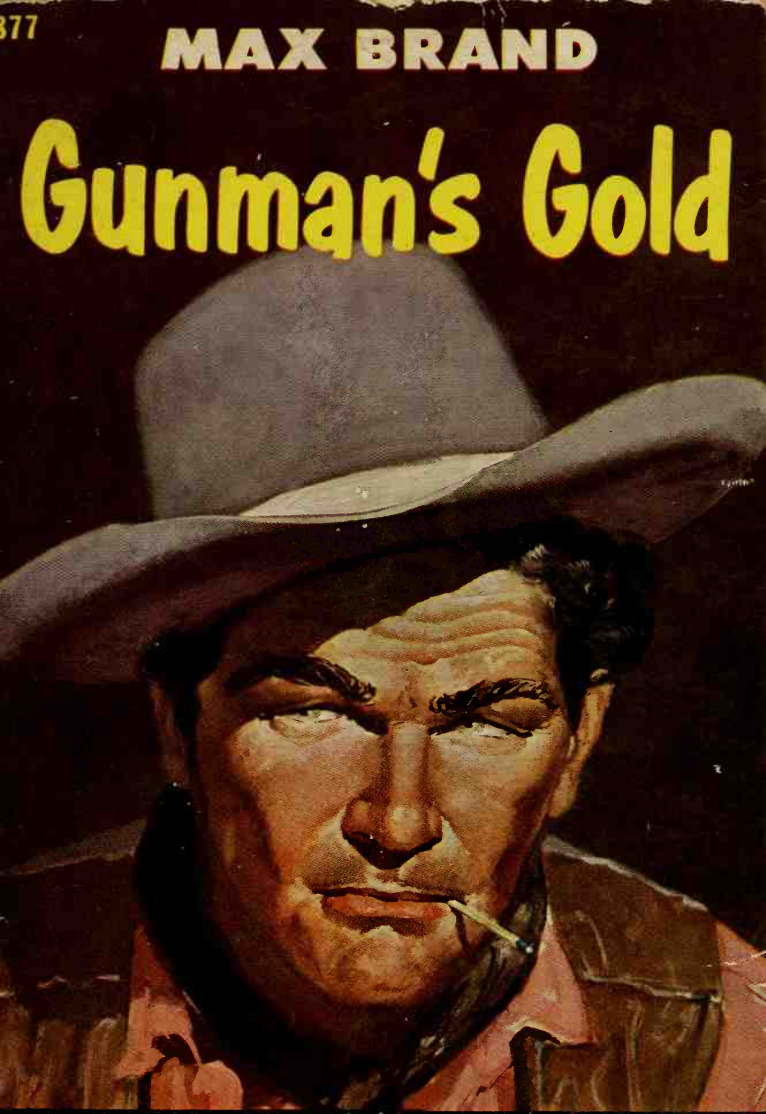
MAX BRAND

Gunman's Gold



A GENUINE POCKET BOOK WESTERN 25c

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A GENUINE POCKET BOOK WESTERN

MOST MEN FIND THAT trouble doesn't pay . . . Sam Shannigan had a chance to make trouble pay him plenty! He had been offered $20,000 to save an innocent man from hanging. There was only one hitch: a gun-crazy mob was shouting for blood, and if Shannigan interfered they would tear him apart and throw the pieces to the buzzards! But Sam Shannigan didn't know the meaning of fear.

Shannigan was fast with a gun and had smashing strength and sharp wit to back any play he made. With $20,000 as the prize for justice, he was itching to spill blood . . . and plenty of it!

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Other books by Max Brand

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*SINGING GUNS
*THE STOLEN STALLION
*VALLEY OF VANISHING MEN
*VALLEY THIEVES

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* Reprinted in Pocket Book editions

GUNMAN'S GOLD

MAX BRAND

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1.

THE strategy of Lee Swain was simple. It consisted in being at the right place at the right time. He had managed to get there, through skillful planning, so often that he had stacked up what he considered a nest egg. He had done that in the Eastern States. When he wanted to make the nest egg grow into a whole brood of thriving birds, he decided to go West.

He picked out Deerfoot, because it was forty miles from the railroad, because there were cattle, lumber, and mining interests in the region around it, and because it was so inaccessible that he expected to find ready money at a high premium. And he was right.

He made a few small investments here and there; he began to be looked upon as a sound and rising member of the community, but he had not yet found the lucky strike that would make him a rich man capable of retiring. It was chance that brought him to the course of action that makes the foundation of this narrative.

It was purest chance from the beginning. Ordinarily, Lee Swain was not one to be bothered by the more tender sensibilities. He was what he himself would have termed a "practical man." A practical man is one hard to define. The fellow who knows that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush is called practical. The man who wastes no time on daydreams is practical. The man who never lets love, friendship, patriotism, or devotion to any cause stand between him and money is essentially practical.

And, in this sense, Lee Swain was a practical man.

Yet it was the surrender to a sense of idle beauty that advanced him, finally, on the trail of a great fortune! Which shows how this silly old world works by opposites!

He was sitting in the back room of the Best Chance Saloon

on the edge of Deerfoot. He was sitting there because he wanted to be alone with his schemes, and because the beer was a shade cheaper than in the center of the town. And now, as he raised his thin face from the hands that had been covering his eyes, he happened to glance out the window and saw, toward the west, a great mountain lifted against a sky of crimson and of gold.

It stirred Lee Swain, in an odd way. It made him think of random snatches of music, of beautiful faces, of noble words that had, in his more careless moments, from time to time invaded his mind.

Presently he rose — since the beer glass was empty — and walking out the back door of the little building, he rested his back against the side wall. He contemplated the flames in the sky and wondered, if they had been real fire, how many thousands of useful factories could have been run by the heat. As his thoughts began to drift on toward kindred reflections, about the vast wastage of energy in this most spendthrift universe, three men entered the front of the saloon, and he heard them speaking to the proprietor:

"Hey, Slim—is the back room free?"

"I think there's Lee Swain back there," said the proprietor. "Wait'll I see."

Presently he said: "No, I guess Swain went home and forgot to pay for his drink."

"One of your charity patients, Slim?" asked a voice.

"Aw, no; Swain's all right. Kind of a sour little guy, but he's as straight as a string. One of these gents with brains *and* money."

Lee Swain smiled and nodded.

The praise was doubly sweet to him, because he felt that it was entirely just. It was the picture that he carried in his own mind's eye, the ideal toward which he aspired. As for "straight as a string," that was a little embroidery that did not hurt the essential pattern of the description. Honesty was certainly the best policy, except on important occasions.

"Bring some beer back in here," said one. "You know my friends, Slim? Doc Halpin, here—"

"Glad to meet you, Doc," came from "Slim."

"And Jack Reynolds you oughta know, if you don't."

"Aw, I know Reynolds, all right. He don't wear no veil over his face."

Slim laughed, and then they all laughed. Said a hearty young voice:

"That's all right, Slim. Now I know where I stand with you."

"Well," said Slim, "I hope you'll always stand *with* me because if you stood *agin'* me, I wouldn't keep my feet very long!"

They all laughed again.

As they pulled out their chairs, and settled around the table of the back room, the listener gathered the third name —Chad Powell.

The beer came in.

Two or three voices presently joined in a groaning chorus of content.

"Yeah, and that's pretty good," said Chad Powell.

"The first drink of beer, there ain't anything in the world like it," said Halpin. "Let's have another."

"No, you don't get another so quick, boy," broke in Powell. "Take a coupla, three beers and you're started, maybe. And you ain't goin' to start today, brother. You save your thirst a while. I guess you're goin' to be able to buy your drinks, one of these days."

"Yeah, maybe I will, too," said the other. "Maybe I'll be able to buy a lotta drinks, one of these days."

He laughed, loudly, as though there were a hidden meaning behind this remark.

"Lock the doors, Chad," said Halpin.

"Yeah, I guess we'd better. Better light the lamp, too. Maybe there's goin' to be something that old boy Jack'll wanta see."

"You fellows struck it rich?" asked young Reynolds.

His voice was big, cheerful, clear. His reputation was big and cheerful, also, but not quite so clear.

With increasing interest, Lee Swain listened.

"You wait and listen, and then look," said Halpin. "It's this way. You take a throw at a stake for us, and we barge out. We got an outfit, and we got some spare cash besides, because we didn't need all that we got from you, Jack. And we decide that we'll cut straight for the Willejee Mountains, and we'll take a short cut. And, like a pair of fools, we head straight out across the Owens Desert."

Some one whistled—Reynolds, perhaps.

Then his voice said: "That's a hot place, this time of day."

"We pretty near died, before the whisky got sweated out of us," put in Powell. "And then we struck one of them little streams that only show their heads and run twenty steps and jump down a hole ag'in, like ground squirrels, and—"

"Say, are you goin' to tell this, or am I, Chad?" demanded Halpin angrily.

"Aw, go on and tell it then," said the other. "You enjoy shootin' off your face such a lot, you do!"

"We filled up with water," said Halpin, "and we were so dog-gone hot and tired that we were half minded to turn back and go around the desert, instead of through it. I mean, lookin' at the boulders and the gravel, it kind of hurts your eyes, and your brain, too, after a while."

"It does," said Reynolds. "Owens Desert is a plain hell hole!"

"But the water bucked us up, a lot, and pretty soon we got up with our canteen full and us full, and the hosses full, and we slogged along, slow and steady, maybe an hour. Then there was a fool of a rabbit that jumped up, and this here Powell, dog-gone his heart, he ups with a rifle and shoots—and the rabbit, it runs faster than ever.

" 'I scared him, anyway,' says Chad.

" 'You done nothin' but hit a rock,' says I.

" 'I pretty near hit him,' says Chad.

" 'You're crazy,' says I.

"We sort of pulled up our hosses, and as we sat there in the saddle, like a pair of fools, talkin' about how close he come to a rabbit, or how close he *didn't* come to it, I looked

and seen a yaller point of light, shinin' like a candle flame on a dark night, and it was shinin' right off of the edge of a boulder. I thinks that it's funny, and I goes and takes a look. And there, mind you, was a fresh chip off the edge of the rock, where Chad's bullet had broke off a chunk—"

"It wasn't my bullet," said Powell, with some energy. "I hit in the sand, right close to the rabbit. I seen the sand splash."

"You seen the sand fly where the rabbit was pawin' the ground," said Halpin.

"I didn't," said Powell. "I got a better eye than you, any day, and I seen where—"

"Wait a minute, boys," said the voice of young Jack Reynolds. "What was it that made the stone shine?"

Halpin answered with a lowered voice: "Gold! Wire gold!"

The words struck electric splashes through the mind and the imagination of Lee Swain, listening outside.

Wire gold! He had heard of pockets of it that yielded thousands of dollars—pockets that a man could surround with his arms.

He heard Halpin going on huskily: "The rock was rotten. It was so rotten it was black. You could pretty near kick it to pieces. We put a blast into it, and we seen that there was driftings and colorings all the way clean through it. Then we took and hunted, and we seen a few other rocks, stretched out in a line, and them rocks had the same stuff. They was lyin' over a fault. They was what was broke off the end of a real strike of ore, we says to ourselves, and we sunk a shaft, and pretty soon—you tell him, Chad!"

"We're rich," said Chad Powell. "The three of us, we're all rich. We're goin' to roll in gold, I can tell you. We can throw it away. We're millionaires. We got—"

"Tell him what we found!" gasped Halpin.

"We got the biggest thing I ever seen—" cried Powell.

There was the smacking sound of a blow against bare flesh.

"I'll knock your head off, you dog!" shouted Powell.

"I'll kill you, Chad," said Halpin, grimly, and through his teeth. "I'll kill you dead, if you talk out loud like that again."

Suddenly Powell was muttering: "Yeah, you're right. I was yelling. I can't talk about it. It drives me crazy. Listen, Jack, you could go and dig it out with shovels, pretty near! It's so rich it makes you laugh, it makes you crazy!"

"It's a foot thick, the vein is," said Halpin. "We seen that, and then we decided that we'd leave the shaft, and jump back here, and get you to see it. Then we'd work some more and open out the real line of the strike of the ore, and then we'd locate our three claims! You hear, son?"

"You boys found it. It's yours. You take it," said Jack Reynolds.

MURDER!

2.

A SNEER of almost fierce contempt curled the lips of Lee Swain, as he heard Reynolds speak. It was the flamboyant generosity of a born fool. It was an absurdity even to conceive of such a folly!

"You fellows worked for it, and sweated for it. I know the Owens Desert," said Reynolds. "I wouldn't grab what you've found."

"Look, you crazy man," said Chad Powell. "Don't you see the lay of the land? There's room for a dozen gents to file their claims, maybe. I dunno. Maybe there's room for a hundred gents to file their claims. And lemme tell you, the three of us will find the cream. We're goin' to find the proper cream, and file, and then we'll pick out the gents we got that are worth a hand, and we're goin' to go and send them invitations to come out and file, and they'll be rich with us. And we'll go and raise the devil all over—we're goin' to all be rich—we can go and waller in gold and—"

"Keep cool, boy," said Halpin.

"Look, partners," said Jack Reynolds, with a proud carelessness in his voice, "I take what comes my way, when I've a right to it. I loaned you boys a few hundreds. I won't come

in for a few hundreds of thousand in exchange. I'd feel like a swine!"

"Why would you?" said Halpin gravely. "You know what the facts are. We were just a pair of bums, floating around. We didn't have a bean. You knew about us. You knew that we were a pair of jailbirds—"

"Shut up, Doc!" broke in Powell.

"I say, he knew all about us," said Halpin. "I know. I heard the sheriff tell him. But he didn't care. I remember what you said, Reynolds. You said you'd had some luck that cost you mighty little, and here was part of it. That's what you said, when you handed us the coin. I don't forget things like that."

"Neither do I!" said Chad Powell.

"Neither do none of us," said Halpin. "You're with us, Jack. And I'm a happy man, and Chad's happy, too, that we can show white for white!"

He banged on his table. Lee Swain jumped a little.

"We start tomorrow morning, and you start with us," said Powell.

"I don't know," muttered Jack Reynolds. "I'll tell the truth —I'm excited. I'll go along, then, if you want me to—only, I don't like to cut in and spoil the game of a friend of mine."

"Spoil it? You'll only make what we haven't hands to hold, that's all," declared Halpin.

Powell exclaimed: "Here's some samples. Look!"

There was a rattle of rocks, a clatter of them falling to the floor.

Then rapid-fire curses flowed from the lips of Halpin.

"What you trying to do?" he demanded in a fierce whisper. "Tell the whole world?"

"Get that stuff under cover," said Jack Reynolds. "Quick! The gleam of that gold in the rock is enough to burn the brain out of a man!"

They scraped up the fragments; then, hastily, they departed.

It was a half hour later that Lee Swain sauntered into the front of the saloon. "I forgot to pay for a drink, Slim," said he.

"That's all right, Swain," said the grinning proprietor. "You don't need to worry about bills in this saloon. Have another?"

"Here you are," said Swain, putting the money on the bar. "I'll take the other one back there, if the room's free. It's a good place to sit and think."

"Yeah, it's cool and easy in there," said Slim.

He himself carried the glass of foaming beer into the back room, needlessly mopped off the top of the table, and drew back a chair for Lee Swain. Then Slim left, and Swain was instantly on his hands and knees.

He found what he wanted almost at once. With a glittering eye it called his attention, and he picked up a mere splinter of rock that had embedded in the face of it a design like a rudely sketched tree—a child's sketch of a tree, and the outline was done in little wires of gold!

Lee Swain went back to his chair, and sat there for a long time, with closed eyes. The world, he felt, had finally rewarded his cunning, his keenness, his patience in running down every favorable opportunity. Now it had poured into his hands a chance to win incalculable treasure.

Only one thing bit him to the heart—that he would have to share the treasure with at least three other men!

He felt savage about it. They were three wastrels. Two were self-confessed jailbirds. The other was known as a gunman.

The pity of it, when there was Lee Swain, a practical man, able to turn everything to the best advantage, able to make the most of every ounce of that valuable ore!

He pushed back his chair and left the saloon.

He had hardly turned into the street when the voice of the saloon keeper wailed from the interior of the building:

"Hey, Swain! You didn't drink your beer. What's the matter? Wasn't there no head on it?"

He walked on, heedless.

Of such small things are our vital mistakes made. He should have remained to drink the beer. Great and strange things were to come upon Lee Swain for that simple omission!

But, when he got to the hotel, he started at once building his kit, and the first thing that he put out for the journey were two good Colt revolvers, caliber .45, double-action, and a repeating Winchester.

He had not been a good shot when he came West, but by conscientious practice he had made himself one in the interim!

When he had finished building the pack, he sat down and considered his plans.

After that, he entered the little lobby of the hotel and talked to the clerk behind the desk.

"Over there in the Willejee Mountains," he said, "I hear there are plenty of signs of gold—silver, too."

"Lemme tell you something, Mr. Swain," said the clerk. "The minute that *I* get a stake ahead, I'm goin' to go to the Willejee in a bee line. You take it from me, there's billions over yonder!"

"I'm starting tomorrow," said Swain, "and I'm crossing the Owens Desert. That's the straightest line."

"It's the hottest line, too," said the clerk. "You take it from me, the Owens is hot. I wouldn't go that way."

"The Owens may be hot," said Swain, "but if there's as much in the Willejee peaks as I've been led to believe, it's worth a little heat to get there before the rush!"

He went back to his room, and lay all night sleepless looking up into the darkness. He had always told himself that the time might come when he would have to step outside of the law. Perhaps that time had come now! If it had, he would be prepared. All night long he lay with jaws gripped hard together, and told himself that he must be prepared.

When the morning came, he rose with the dawn, strapped his pack on a mule, mounted his horse, and rode out of the town on the trail to the Owens Desert.

A mile out, he pulled back behind some brush, and when the trio of Reynolds, Halpin, and Powell passed him on that trail, he fell in well behind them. He did not wish to get close enough to be seen, and he had an excellent pair of glasses for picking out his leaders along the trail.

All that day he followed them, slowly, never gaining, keeping the same discreet distance, until they had entered into the wide-spread furnace of the desert.

Still he followed them. He wondered why the sweat ran down his face, drying in streaks of salt. For his own part, he felt no heat. He had no feeling at all, for he believed that he was at the door of the Promised Land.

Late in the afternoon they encamped in a region where the gigantic boulders were scattered far and wide over the land.

Crouched behind a boulder half a mile away, Swain studied with his glasses the movements of the three men, and saw them delving steadily.

They were at the mine, then. They were opening up the fabulous vein. They were reveling, as they counted untold millions!

It was toward evening that one man took the two horses of his companions, and with his own set off into the distance, riding, no doubt, toward the patch of water that ran twenty steps, according to the prospectors, and then dived into another hole in the ground, like a squirrel.

Carefully Swain studied with his glasses the retreating horseman, and made out, finally and surely, that it was Jack Reynolds.

Swain's mind was instantly made up. It was as clear as a bell, and he acted upon the impulse as though he had known from the first what he would do.

Straightway he stalked the hole of the shaft in the ground. He came to within ten steps of it, and lay quietly in the shelter of a rock, staring.

Presently Powell, a fat-faced fellow, came up, took off his hat, and mopped his forehead.

"Hotter up here than it is down there, boy!" he exclaimed. "And it's—"

That was his last word on earth. Lee Swain had drawn his bead with care, and now he shot his man fairly and squarely between the eyes.

Powell dropped, and lay still, without a struggle.

"Hey, what was that?" called the voice of Halpin, muffled and distant.

Then he was heard scrambling out of the hole on the ground. He, also, appeared, and stood for an instant, frozen.

That instant was enough for Lee Swain. He put a second bullet squarely between the eyes of his victim, and saw the body of Halpin fall on that of his friend.

Everything worked perfectly. It was the plan that had flashed upon his mind.

If he got the two weaker members, he could wait for the famous Reynolds and shoot that unsuspecting man when he returned with the water.

He would stow the two bodies in the shaft, in the first place.

But he would treat himself to a sight of the wire gold, before all else.

With that in mind, he entered the shaft, and was amazed to discover that it was a dead hole! There was not a sign of gold—there was only a certain surface of perfectly uninteresting rock exposed before him!

3.

He now understood, perfectly. Halpin and Powell had developed some theory about the trend of their strike of ore. They thought that the vein would be due to crop out again in a certain place, and when they passed that place, they had stopped with the consent of Jack Reynolds to dig a bit. There was no hurry. Their millions were waiting for them all the time!

So they had opened up a perfectly useless prospect hole. And he, Lee Swain, had killed two men in vain!

He felt no remorse, only a touch of alarm.

He was certain that his idea had been good, but he was troubled because he had worked in vain. He had done every-

thing perfectly, down to the shooting of the two. But luck had played cruelly against him. Somewhere in the distance lay that treasure-trove which the pair had discovered. Not even Jack Reynolds would know just where it was. There were certain black rocks in the Owens Desert, that contained wire gold. That was all any one could say. But there were tens of millions of black rocks in the Owens Desert. How could the treasure be located?

It was all a waste. He, Lee Swain, would eventually begin to prospect the entire surface of the desert for the right place. No doubt the little shaft of the prospectors had been filled in, and the first blow of wind, like that which was beginning now, would promptly sweep away all traces of the coming and going of men.

He went rapidly back to his horse and mule, mounted, and struck the trail for Deerfoot.

The next morning he entered it and called at the sheriff's house. The sheriff was gone!

He thought of another man, grim, stern, ever with a face set toward law and order, a true type of the vigilante.

His name was Pringle, and on Pringle little Lee Swain called.

He said, when he stood in the kitchen, watching the thin clouds of smoke that rose from the griddle on which Pringle was frying flapjacks:

"Pringle, I've run into a bad thing."

"Yeah, there's a lot of bad things around, here and there," said Pringle.

"Two dead men in the Owens Desert," said Swain.

Pringle tossed the flapjacks, and exclaimed with pleasure as they all landed properly on the other side, on the face of the griddle. Some of the wet dough had splattered on the floor, some upon the shirt front of Mr. Pringle, but that did not in the least diminish his pleasure in the proper flipping of the hot cakes.

"Two dead?" said he.

"I was lining out for the Willejee Mountains," said Lee Swain, his thin face very sober. "And I was traveling hard,

with my head down, as you might say, because the Owens is a hot place, and I wanted to get across it as soon as possible. I'd heard a good many tales about gold in the Willejees, and I wanted to have a look for myself."

"Fool's gold in the Willejees, that's all," said Pringle.

"Perhaps," said the other. "And, as I was going, I saw among some rocks, a pile of earth, and beside the pile of earth, two men, one lying on top of the other. I went over and had a look. Men don't lie still in the sun—the sort of sun you have on the Willejee. No, sir! Well, each of these fellows had a reason for lying still. A bullet hole right between the eyes."

"Each of 'em?" said Pringle.

"Yes, both."

"Right between the eyes?"

"Yes."

"Good shooting," said Pringle. "They killed each other, eh?"

"That's what I thought, but there wasn't a gun near either of 'em."

"Hello!"

"No, not a sign of a gun."

"That's funny," said Pringle.

"It seemed so funny to me," said Swain, "that I turned around and trekked back for Deerfoot. I've been riding all night."

"Yeah?" murmured Pringle. "Sit down and tackle this stack of hot cakes, then. I'm one of the champeen flapjack throwers in this neck of the woods. That's what I claim, and that's what I hold to. I ain't got any maple sirup. But I got some brown sugar melted down, that's pretty nigh as good. Lay a tooth into them, and tell me are they tender!"

Lee Swain was hungry, and he sat down to eat. He was thankful that such men as Pringle could be found.

As he ate, he issued new bits of information—such as the fatness of the face of Powell, and the red hair and the scarred forehead of Halpin.

"Well, one thing," said Pringle, "I know who the dead

men are. Another thing. I know who killed 'em. A third thing, I'm goin' to bust myself to catch the hound that murdered 'em."

"You know?" said Lee Swain.

"Coupla jailbirds that I seen around Deerfoot, some time back," said Pringle. "One is Powell, and the other is Doc Halpin. And the gent that killed 'em is the one that rode out of town with 'em yesterday morning. His name is Jack Reynolds!"

"Old enemies, maybe?" said Lee Swain.

"Swain," said Pringle, "you're a smart man. Everybody knows that. But maybe you ain't been around here long enough to understand what a gunman is."

"I have some ideas," said Swain. "But go ahead and enlarge."

"A gunman," said Pringle, "is a fellow who knows how to shoot a whole lot straighter and faster than ninety-nine men out of a hundred. And when he gets to the point where he knows how good he is, he loses his temper easy. And then he happens to kill a man. Self-defense, you see?"

"I see," said Swain.

"And then he kills another, and another, and it's still self-defense. And a lot of half-witted dummies, they look up to the man-killers a lot, and give 'em preference, and pretty soon man-killing, it gets to be a kind of an honorable career for the gent that's fast and straight with a gun."

He finished a second griddle load of flapjacks, and sat down to consume them in his turn.

"And so," said Pringle, "it goes on till a gent, he can't give over the pleasure of just killin' for the sake of killin'. The more that are dead, the better he likes it, and the deader they are, the liver he feels. And it's that way with Jack Reynolds. He wasn't a bad kid when he come out here. But he was just too dog-gone good with a revolver. That made him a killer."

"But why should he kill the pair of them?" asked Lee Swain.

"Why, I dunno," said the other. "Maybe one of 'em said

that it was a hot day, and it was a hot day. And Mr. Reynolds, he didn't think so, and he killed one for holdin' a different opinion, and then he went and killed the other, just to keep his hand in. It don't take much cause to kill a man. Not if you're free and easy with a gun!"

"I'm learning things that may do me good," said Lee Swain.

"That's where you got brains," said Pringle. "Most tenderfeet, you know, think they're old-timers, after they've gone and raised their first crop of calluses, out here."

"Well," said Swain, "I stopped at the sheriff's house, and he wasn't there. So I came here to you, Pringle. You have the name of being the leading man in Deerfoot, when it comes to keeping the place in order. For my part," he added, "I'm used to seeing the law enforced, Pringle, and I don't mind saying that I would bend every effort to that end. The West, I'm afraid, takes the matter of human life a little too carelessly!"

"It does," agreed Pringle. "I'm finishing my breakfast, and then I'm rounding up the best men that I can find in town. I'll need 'em, too, on the trail of that Reynolds. Because he's a mean kind in a pinch. You may be hearin' news, before very long."

Lee Swain went back to the hotel, and told again, and yet again, the story of what he had seen. He said that he was upset, and that he would abandon his idea of a trip to the Willejees, for the time being.

Then he went to bed, and slept the round of the clock.

He was perfectly placid, when he roused himself. There would be no sign of him that other men could trace.

He was thoroughly satisfied, and his satisfaction increased as he ate his breakfast.

As he pondered upon the past event, he decided that perhaps he had done all for the best.

He would prospect the Owens Desert. He would tap every rock, if need be, until he found the right place. And when he found it, he would know how to develop his claim! He

would enrich himself in the course of a single year. He would make himself a figure in the nation.

He was assured, in a deep and heartfelt way, that success could not help but come to a man who planned as carefully as he had planned, and he could not help smiling when he thought how easily he had put Pringle on the false trail.

Well, Reynolds was a gunman, and no matter what happened to him, he would deserve his fate!

Not only was the conscience of Lee Swain clear, but he had a sense of virtue, added to his well-being. Two jailbirds, and a gunman—it really did not matter!

It was not until the next day that he heard of the results of the posses' work.

Very fine results they were, too!

For, heading down the trail toward the Owens Desert, in the midst of a tangle of mountains, the posse had run straight into young Jack Reynolds, who had seemed to expect no enemies, and had ridden straight into the arms of his hunters!

When he was arrested, impromptu, however, he fought with a ferocity that proved his guilt!

He had shot and seriously wounded two men; a third was badly hurt. Then he had been knocked over the head, and so secured.

They were bringing him back to the town of Deerfoot to hang him before the crowd, was the message that the town received from Pringle. But the return trip would be slow, very slow, on account of the wounded men, who could only be carried a few miles a day. In the meantime, let the telegraph carry the good news across the country.

When he heard this, Lee Swain smiled. He almost laughed. For he knew that there is no way to close the book on a crime except to punish with conviction some one supposed to be guilty of the deed.

Not for an instant did he remember that glass of beer which he had failed to drink in the Best Chance Saloon!

4.

WHEN Arthur Howison got to the middle of the bridge, he stopped for a moment in spite of the heat and looked on the two halves of San Andreas. They were as sharply divided in character as though a thousand miles and many centuries lay between them instead of one small stream of water.

The American part of the town was laid out regularly, and over the big roofs rose the trees which had been thriving for thirty years along the streets. A sense of prosperity and comfort exhaled from that part of the town. But on the far side of the river was a confused huddling of little, square adobe boxes, whitewashed until they threw back the full glare of the sun. A few trees rose here and there, but they looked like green boughs cast into a fire and about to burst into flames.

Mr. Howison, staring at this part of the town with squinting eyes, shook his head. However, it was there that he had to go to find the address that was in his pocket, so he stepped on with the steady and measured step which is characteristic of middle-aged men.

Once in the dusty streets and winding lanes of the Mexican village, the heat seemed to redouble. Howison had to lift his hat once or twice and mop his forehead with a handkerchief that was already wet.

Yet in spite of the heat, he found a group of half a dozen youngsters playing about in the fiery dust. He needed more particular directions than he had received before, therefore he hailed them. His Spanish was not good, but it was enough to ask the question:

"Can you tell me where to find Señor Shannigan?"

They were stilled at once. The veiling clouds of dust fell

softly and slowly away from them, and the oldest of the lot said:

"He wants the señor."

"But he cannot see the señor at this time of day," said another instantly.

"I've come a long, long distance," said Arthur Howison, "and I have to see Shannigan. Just show me where his house is."

They showed him. It was hardly a hundred yards from the spot, and it appeared as a long, high, whitewashed wall, with a single door let into the face of it, like a portal into a castle. On that door he knocked, but one of the urchins showed him the knob of a bell pull, and gave it two or three good tugs. Faintly, Arthur Howison heard the bell sound inside the building. The lads scattered, grinning.

Now the door was pushed open, and a blue-eyed girl of twenty stood in the shadow.

She saw the children first, and cried to them in Mexican:

"You worthless little sons of trouble, the next time you bother me I'll give the señor your *names!*"

There was instantly a chorus of plaintive protest.

"Look there! We have only brought his friend!"

She saw Howison for the first time, and nodded shortly at him.

"It's not the señor's time for seeing people," said she. "You'll have to come back again."

"But when?" asked Howison, putting out a tentative hand toward the door, which the girl seemed about to close. He added: "I've come a long distance. Do you speak English?"

"Sure, I speak English." She measured him with a very direct and critical glance.

"The matter I wish to see him about is important, and urgent," said Howison. "The fact is that every second counts, and it may already be a lost cause. If I'm to see him at all, I must see him now!"

"Must you?" said the girl, totally unimpressed. "But this is a time in the afternoon when he never sees people, and he's

already broken the rule once today. He has some one with him now."

"Then while he's still in the way of business, let me see him," urged Howison.

She looked at him again, with a slight shake of the head.

"This may be losing my job for me," she remarked. "But I'll take one more chance. After this I'm going to unhook the bell during his off hours. But come in!"

She motioned him past her into a small room, dark with shadows, but wonderfully cool. A ripple of water passed through it, and now he saw a shallow channel in which the current ran. There were two or three chairs of woven basketry that promised to fit the back of the tired man; there was a screen of Indian feather work in a corner, and the grinning mask of a jaguar on the wall. Not many furnishings, but enough to make Howison feel that he had stepped from the sun-beaten street into a strange little new world.

"What *are* the hours of Mr. Shannigan?" he asked.

"Seven-thirty to eight in the morning," she said, "if he happens to be up, and six-thirty to seven in the evening, if he happens to be at home."

Howison made a gesture of surprise.

"But how is one to know when he's up and when he's home?"

"One doesn't know. One takes the chance," said she. "I'll go tell him that you want to see him."

She opened an inner door.

"No, he's still busy," said she.

Howison looked through the door into a patio which was shaded by several big acacia trees, growing low, with their branches stretching out sinuously and wide. In the center of the courtyard there was a silver pool of water, and the thin spray of a fountain rose high in the air and showered back with a refreshing sound into the pool.

At the same time, a man's voice said harshly in Spanish:

"Do you hear, Pedro?"

"I hear every word, señor," said a youngster's frightened voice.

"You're written down in the book of the police," said the first speaker. "They have their eye on you. I have my finger raised. If I drop it, they come to catch you. Do you think I don't know you, you rascal?"

"Ah, the señor knows everything," said the humble voice of the youth.

"I know your card playing, too, and the tricks you've learned with them. I have my finger raised, Pedro. Now go over there—go into the hall and wait. I have something to say to your father."

There was a hastily retreating footfall.

Then the harsh voice, somewhat lowered, continued: "Now, José, I've threatened him, and if you play the fool any more, I'll have to make my threat good. From this time use your brain, José. Your boy is all right. He's lazy, but all boys are lazy. He likes to gamble. So do all boys that have the nerve to lose their money on a chance. You sit about the house and do nothing but scowl at him. You call him 'bad' to his face. you ought to have pride in him and show it. The next time you wrangle at him I'll wash my hands of the business. You don't understand him. Your wife does. Now go home and tell her that she can manage Pedro from now on."

There was an obscure and humble murmuring, then another rapid footfall retreated.

A door slammed at the front of the house.

"I'll see if Mr. Shannigan can talk to you now," said the girl, and passed on through the door which she already had opened.

Arthur Howison was a man of the strictest integrity in every way, and yet something made him now, some irresistible impulse, follow her, turn the knob at that door, and open it a crack. The sound of the voices came clearly to him.

"There's another one for you, Sam," said she.

"There's no more for me," said the other.

"He looks—" began the girl.

"I don't want to know how he looks," said the man.

Howison put his eye to the open crack of the door and

saw a man lounging prone in a long, low chair with a cushion under his head.

He could have found perfect shade in several parts of that patio, but instead he had chosen a spot where a strong dappling of the sun fell upon his brown face.

He could have avoided it by merely moving his head.

Instead, he chose to close his eyes.

"He's come a long distance," said the girl, "and he looks like big money and an easy job."

"Why does he look easy?" asked Shannigan.

He folded his long, lean hands under his head as he spoke.

The quality of those hands excited Arthur Howison, for they were in contrast with the rest of the man. All else about him was massively made. His shoulders and chest were overlaid with a panoply of flesh that was either fat or good muscle. And his face was arresting through the grossness of the features, and the fineness with which they were finished. It was like the face of an early Pharaoh of Egypt whom the artists blocked out of hard diorite, giving to the head the cold and smiling cruelty of a god, half divine and half brute, but finishing every detail with the most scrupulous and polished care.

It was the ugliest and strongest human face that Howison had ever seen. It seemed to be of bronze, and had the darkness, the metal sheen and polish of that substance. The high, massive cheek bones, the great jaws, the ponderous forehead, spacious and yet retreating, were all, in spite of their bulk, perfectly finished. So were the big, slant, Oriental eyes, and so was the wide, thick-lipped mouth, the most directly brutal feature of that very brutal face.

And—as when one walks around a statue and finds it varying in different lights—with every turn of his head, the big man's appearance varied. Sometimes he seemed a youth in his twenties, with something rather boyish in the delicate modeling about the cheeks. Sometimes he seemed a timeless monster. He had the look of an open-handed man, and again the savage mystery of a sphinx was on him, as though he knew all things, and preferred evil for its own sake.

But most amazing of all were the hands of this man, which, instead of being huge paws, were long-fingered, but powerful as are the talons of a bird of prey. They were the hands of a stage magician, a worker of conjuring tricks.

If it was the most repulsive face that Howison ever had seen, it was also the most interesting.

He ventured only a glance through the door, and then shut it to a crack, for it seemed certain that the all-powerful eye of the master of the house would immediately find out the spy.

He still could hear the conversation, and that appeared to Howison as grotesquely out of place as anything he had ever found.

"Why does he look big money?" Shannigan asked the girl.

"He's got clothes," she said, "that look like the work of a tailor around the shoulders and collar, but he's got the swing of an old cow-puncher. He's got the kind of a tan that comes from riding the range twenty years, and there's a cow-puncher's squint in his eyes. He's a cowhand that's made it and made it big. He's made it so big that he's a regular wow. He's got more money than he knows what to do with, if you take my word."

"You have a good eye, Mary," said Shannigan in a voice which sounded like a soft bass note played on the stop of a great organ, a note that might be swelled until it made the ground tremble. "You've got a good eye, and you've stayed with me long enough to learn how to use it."

"I'd like to unlearn what I know from you," said Mary. "I'd like to throw it over my shoulder to the dogs."

"Now you're weak and silly," said Shannigan. "But now, Mary, my dear, tell me why it's going to be an easy job?"

"Because there's blood in it," said the girl savagely, "and those are the jobs that are always easy for you. They're the ones you have a taste for. They're the ones that you like!"

"Mary," said he, "you're getting so charming that one of these days I'll have to make a choice between two things."

"What are they?" she asked.

"Marry you or wring your neck," said the profound but

soft voice of Shannigan, which left, after speaking, a continuing vibration in the ear of the listener.

"I'd rather have my neck wrung than be your wife," said the girl.

"Would you, Mary?" said Shannigan. "Come here, my dear."

"I won't come near you," said she.

"Come here and give me your hand," said Shannigan.

She shook her head, but presently took a step forward, and he lifted her hand in his.

"It's a pretty hand, and a wise one, Mary," said Shannigan. "It's half-wise woman and half-silly girl. That's why you annoy me—because you're in two parts. If you were all of a kind I'd know what to do about you at once."

"I'll do for myself, thank you," said she.

"You're getting more than half to hate me, Mary, aren't you?" said Shannigan.

There was neither a caress nor irritation in his voice, but a bland, impersonal curiosity that chilled the blood of Arthur Howison.

"I've always half hated you," said the girl.

"Why do you stay?" asked Shannigan. "You can go where you please. There's plenty of money to send you."

"I've had enough of your money," said the girl. "It's schooled me already, and sent me here and there. I'll have no more of your money, Shannigan."

"Well, then, go off on your own. You can pack and be gone in half an hour, eh?"

"I hate you just a little more than ever when you smile like that," said she.

"Because I know you won't go," said Shannigan. "You can't help keeping an interest, eh?"

"I want to see the cat in the trap," said the girl. "And I *shall* see it one of these days."

"That's malicious," said Shannigan, the smile on his thick lips growing more pronounced and more cruel.

"It's not malicious," said Mary. "It's only wanting for you what you want yourself—a situation that will bring out every

strength that you have in you, from teeth to toes, and all your cunning wits, besides. You know that's what you want!"

He half closed his eyes as he smiled up at her.

"Pretty Mary!" said he. "You have thoughts, too, and quite big, long thoughts."

He dropped her hand.

"There's a man waiting," she said. "Shall I send him off?"

"No, you've made me a little angry, and I'll soothe myself talking to this rich man who has the sort of a job that I'll like, according to you. Bring him in. Where is he?"

"In the little room with the screen."

"Then he's probably been listening to everything that we've said. Run along, Mary. Sometimes you're not as useful as you might be."

Softly Howison closed the door and retreated to a chair, where he sat down with hands folded, as one who had been long at rest. He felt not the slightest sense of guilt for his eavesdropping. Rather, he told himself that he had looked in upon the working of a machine so extraordinary that ordinary human rules and morals could be disregarded.

So keenly had his interest been taken that his mind was half diverted from his own problem to that of *Beauty* and the *Beast*, which had just been partially revealed to him.

"Mr. Shannigan will see you," said she. "There he is, in the corner of the patio."

As he passed out, she stepped inside the door and closed it.

Howison paused for a single breath, for he had a vague feeling that he was confined in a narrow, walled area, with the king of beasts.

Shannigan stood up. He was not so very tall, perhaps not quite six feet. And he was not so imposing standing as sitting, but looked rather fat and gross than powerful. As he took a step to meet his visitor, his face changed, also, and on it came a smile so bland, and a look so open and sincere, that most of Howison's preconceptions were scattered from his wits in spite of himself.

He received a firm handshake, and was presently in a chair. Shannigan sat opposite him, perfectly erect, and yet perfectly

in repose. The smile was only on his lips. There was nothing but shadowy patience in his eyes.

"I suppose," said Howison, "that I ought to begin by apologizing for breaking in on your private hours."

"No one should apologize for doing what he wants to do," said Shannigan.

"Well, then," said Howison, faintly smiling as he heard this bit of materialistic reasoning, "I'll break right into the middle of why I'm here. Just to begin with, it's true that sometimes you act as a special investigator?"

"Outside the law—yes," said Shannigan.

"What I want to do is to act decidedly outside the law," said Howison. "You know Jack Reynolds?"

"I've heard of him."

"You know what's happening to him now?"

"They've arrested him at last, and they're bringing him by slow stages out of the mountains and down toward Deerfoot. There he'll be lynched."

"That's what must not happen," said Howison. "I've come to ask you if you can stop it."

"Reynolds has a dirty record. Why should it be stopped?"

"Because his father was my friend. He died and left Jack somewhat in my care. I slacked on the job. Now I find that Jack is about to come to the end of his rope, and my conscience bothers me. I'll pay all the job is worth."

"It's worth the amount of trouble it gives your conscience," said Shannigan.

"My conscience is troubled a lot," confessed Howison.

"It's a big job," said Shannigan. "And it's a mess, too. It means handling a mob. That can be done with time and planning. But we have no time, and we're too far away to do much planning."

"So you think there's nothing to be done?" asked Howison.

"I didn't say that," remarked Shannigan.

"I'd pay ten thousand—no, I'd pay twenty thousand dollars gladly if you can get the boy off this time."

"This is only the first time. He'll be caught again. He's sure to keep on raising the devil, and he'll hang in the end."

"Maybe," said Howison, shrugging his shoulders, and at the same time breaking into a sweat. "But I'll feel better if I can save him once and give him a chance to change."

The other nodded.

"You can name your price," urged Howison.

Shannigan waved an impatient hand, and again the contrast between the man and the hand struck Howison with peculiar force.

"We'll settle the price afterward," said Shannigan. "I never take payments beforehand."

"It's the only way to do business," said Howison. "Afterward it may appear that the value of the work done is not—" He paused.

"It's the only way I work," said Shannigan. "If you want me at all, you'll have to want my entire method."

"I'll take you and your method together."

"Thanks," said Shannigan. Then he added: "I need to know a few more things. What's Reynolds in for this time?"

"They've accused him of murder a couple of times. This time they declare that he has gone into the desert with two companions and come out alone."

"Pretty clear case?"

"So it seems."

"But you like this boy?"

"I loved his father. And I haven't done my duty by Jack."

"Would he inherit any of your money?"

"I have no children. Jack would get a big part of what I have."

"And you're a rich man?"

"I have a good deal of money."

"How much?"

"I don't like to say how much."

"I have to know," said the impassive Shannigan.

"Between seven and eight million dollars, at present values."

"Good," said Shannigan. "That's enough money to make a lot of trouble. Men will kill for seven millions as well as

for seventy. I'm going to like this job." He added: "What's your name?"

"Arthur Howison."

"Go up to Deerfoot, Mr. Howison," said Shannigan. "I'll soon be there myself and have news for you."

THE PLAN

5.

It was thirty miles from San Andreas to the railroad; it was forty miles from the nearest part of the railroad to the town of Deerfoot. There were several hours of bumpy roadbed in between those two points. And therefore Howison started energetically to get to Deerfoot, calmly trusting that his new ally would at least attempt to help him. What could be done, he was not able to guess. But he had a feeling that the accomplishment of the impossible might be a quite ordinary thing for this bronze-faced monster.

He had barely started down the street when Shannigan called to the girl. She came to the edge of the arcade that ran around the patio, and leaned her hand against one of the rough pillars.

"Call your mother, Mary," said he.

"Just what kind of deviltry are you up to now, Sam?" asked the girl.

"Only a little bit of a white kind of deviltry, Mary," said he.

"If you put trouble in her mind, I'll poison the air you breathe, Sam," said the girl.

"I'm going to show you the difference between trust and trust," said Shannigan. "Go call her, and then stand by and listen!"

She shook her head dubiously, but finally she went to a door. There she turned her head and gave him a final glance over her shoulder.

He smiled and waved, and she disappeared at once.

When she was gone, Shannigan laid his long hands on his knees and looked before him into space with his ever cold and undecipherable smile.

Mrs. Tracy came back with her daughter a moment later. She was a very small woman, with snowy hair that made her thin face seem younger than it was. Her eyes and her smile were as fresh as a girl's. She wore a thin black dress that floated about her as she walked, and the color went with something in her face to prove that sorrow was never out of her mind.

Shannigan stood up to meet her.

"Mrs. Tracy," said he, "there's work to be done that needs a woman in it. Will you let me take Mary away?"

The mother looked at Shannigan and then at the girl, her eyes opening.

"Where would you go, Sam?" she asked.

"Not far," said Shannigan, "as distances go in this part of the world."

"Of course you may take her," said Mrs. Tracy.

"What are you thinking of, mother?" asked the girl. "I wouldn't go away from you. Not with any man!"

"Hush, silly girl," said her mother. "Don't you know Sam well enough to trust him? I'd put my soul in his hands!"

"That's well enough for you," answered the girl. "Every one knows that the devil has no power over saints!"

Mrs. Tracy raised a warning hand. "When you're older, Mary," said she, "you'll learn better how to talk. All your schooling has never schooled your tongue. Sam, she may go where she pleases with you. I permit it."

"That's all I want to know, Mrs. Tracy," said he.

She went back across the court.

"For all of that," said the girl, "I'll be making no trips with you, Samuel Shannigan."

"You're going to be a lovely young wife, Mary," said he.

"Not your wife, Sam," she answered angrily.

"The wife of a man you've never seen," said he.

She frowned at him.

"And you have at home two beautiful young children, a

golden-haired lad by the name of Jack and a girl you call Molly," he went on.

She sat down suddenly opposite him, and intently stared into his ugly face.

"Go on, Sam Shannigan," said she. "You were always the one for telling fairy tales."

"You live back in a little Southern town," said Shannigan, "and it's the first time you've ever come West. You hear?"

"What sort of play-acting is this?" asked Mary Tracy.

"It's a play where I'll be on the stage with you mighty little," said Shannigan. "But I may do a little prompting from the wings. You're a soft, sweet, fluffy, charming, adorable thing."

"I couldn't be that," she said. "Not if I had a mile start for the job and a thousand dollars a week for playing it. I couldn't be that kind of a girl."

"You could, though, for the devil of it," said Shannigan. "I know you, Mary."

"Do you? And what do you know?"

"I know that you eat out your heart to do what I do—ride across the world and burn up a part of it now and then."

"I'm to burn up a part of the world, am I?"

"Would you hate that, Mary?" he asked her.

She looked at him, then threw back her head and stared up through the twisting branches of the acacia toward the blue of the pale, bright sky.

"Go on and tell me, Sam," said she, still staring up.

"You'll be a happy young girl mother that's come out from the East to see your young husband and give him the surprise of his life. You're bursting with the great thing you've done! You've come all the way, all by yourself, and your mother has taken the children into her splendid home, and every one has been kind to you on the way, Mary. All the *men* have been wonderful to you."

He paused and smiled.

"Men always are wonderful to you, Mary," he said.

"I need to think a little," said she. "You're tempting me to do a wrong thing, Sam."

"I'm tempting you to save a man from hanging. Is that wrong?"

"Maybe he needs hanging," said the girl, frowning.

Still she looked upward.

"We all need hanging," said Shannigan.

He leaned forward a little, and added: "You'll be the wife that the town will pity! Oh, but they'll be sad about you—and they'll be pitying you. Instead of hanging the rascal at once, they'll stop to think, and while they're thinking, I'll have him out from the shadow of the rope."

"And then you take the check of Mr. Howison. Is that it?"

"I split the check with you, Mary; or if you play the part well enough, I give you the whole thing."

She jumped up from her chair and stamped her foot.

"As if there could be talk of money from you to me!" she cried. "I'm not such an ingrate that I don't count the thousands you've spent on mother and me!"

"Your mother has worked enough to earn everything that she's had from me, and what you've had, too," said Shannigan.

"Stuff!" said the girl.

"She has," said Shannigan.

"Oh, nonsense," said the girl. "Mother is a darling muddlehead, and you know it!"

"She makes this house a home," said Shannigan.

"Sentimental fiddlesticks," said Mary Tracy. "But you've never asked me to work with you in one of your crazy schemes before, Sam. Why have you asked me today?"

"Because," said Shannigan, "it may be a bigger job than I can do by myself."

"That's not the reason," she declared. "I know that you'd tackle the blue hill of heaven and trust your feet to get you to the top of it. What's the reason that you want me in?"

"I thought you were a small girl, Mary," said he. "But I've just looked at you today and seen that you're a woman."

She shook her head slowly.

"Why can't you tell me the truth, Sam?" she asked him almost sadly. "You may talk all around a thing, but you'll never come out with the truth. Does it hurt you to be telling it?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and looked at her with an eye so cold, so cruel, and so calculating, that she winced a little, though no person in the world had had such practice as she in meeting that glance.

She exclaimed: "Very well, then, what's my name to be?"

"Mrs. Jack Reynolds—Mrs. Mary Reynolds."

"Jack Reynolds? The gunman?" she asked.

"That's the one."

"And I'm to be the sweet little girl bride? I couldn't be that, Sam. I'd choke. I'd break down in the lines. I couldn't carry it through."

"Then say so now," said Shannigan, his voice suddenly cold and hard as the expression of his face. "For if you once come into the game with me—you'll never dare to let me down! Go back and talk to your mother about anything but this. And then come back and say yes or no."

She turned her back on him, saying, with her head still turned away: "I can tell you already that I don't want to—"

"Do what I tell you to do," commanded Shannigan. "And then come back and tell me."

She left the patio, and Shannigan sat as before, with his hands laid palm down and the fingers straight out, upon his knees, and the knees sloped together, and his body erect, and his eyes coldly smiling into space.

She was gone for an entire hour, and during that time he did not stir.

The sun, in the meantime, had shifted so far that its slanting rays cut under the protection of the acacia tree and struck against him in a ceaseless torrent of fire. Right in his face poured those fires, but he remained unwinking, unaware of any change.

The girl came back, flinging open the door into the patio, and flinging it impatiently shut behind her again.

To her, Shannigan's face appeared like a massive piece of

dark, shining bronze. And his smile checked her like a hand.

But she gave her head a shake, for her mind was already made up.

He did not stir.

"I'm going, Sam," said she.

He raised one finger.

"To take orders on the way and never to say 'No'?" he demanded.

"Yes, you can have everything your way," said she. "When do we start?"

"Now."

"I'll go pack," said she.

"You'll do no packing. You have a fresh outfit on this trip. And what an outfit for the girl wife, Mary!"

As he ended, he laughed, and the clear sound went ringing across the patio, and reëchoed loudly from the walls.

AT DEERFOOT

6.

THERE was rejoicing in the town of Deerfoot, and merited rejoicing, it seemed. For an hour before, a hard-riding messenger had rushed his horse into the town, whooping at the top of his voice, while he stood in the stirrups, and, swinging his hat, yelled:

"Turn out! Turn out! Reynolds is five miles from town! Turn out!"

Deerfoot turned out with a vengeance.

The career of Jack Reynolds had been largely centered in the range of which Deerfoot was the focal point, whether for the miners, the lumbermen, or the cow-punchers of that district. It had not been a long career, but it had been a brilliant one, and the color for printing it, the only color, was red!

He had been a public danger for a long time, but usually there was more than a fair degree of justice behind his claims

of battles fought purely in self-defense. However, when he entered the Owens Desert with Doc Halpin and Chad Powell, and their dead bodies were found, afterward, in the middle of the great stretch of sand, Deerfoot lost its temper. The sign of young Mr. Reynolds was upon the two dead men—for each had a bullet hole planted squarely between the eyes. And how many men were there, like Reynolds, who dared to shoot for the head instead of the body when it came to a battle where speed and surety both counted so much?

In the meantime, they had sent out their full force of active men, well-mounted, to follow the trail, and their patient trailing had been rewarded. Far away among the mountains they had come on the fugitive, and when he was surrounded he had pretended eloquently that he did not know why he was being trailed. But the instant that they informed him, he had fought like a tiger. There were three badly wounded men before a stroke with the clubbed butt of a rifle brought him down. That was why the return trip had taken so many dreary days—because the wounds of the injured men had to be considered constantly.

Now, after long waiting, the party was returning to Deerfoot—was actually at the gates of the town!

No wonder that Deerfoot turned out to a man. The younger element had cinched saddles upon their best mounts and raced a few times up and down the streets, to get in practice for the reception which it was intended that they should give to the returning posse. The older elements in the town's population remained on foot, but their eyes were bright and their jaws were set.

It was time that a signal blow should be struck on behalf of justice, and what better occasion was there than this? What more notable character could they find and make an example of than the famous young Jack Reynolds?

Among the spectators, the most silent and yet far the most interested of all was that tall man with the lantern jaw and the lean, brown face—Arthur Howison.

He spoke to no one. When the critical moment came, he was gathering himself, he was preparing the words in the hol-

low of his throat, for a final appeal that might at least make the men of the town ready to let the law take its due course. That course might be fatal to young Reynolds, but not if the Howison millions were able to effect anything—the millions and the best of legal talent.

However, as time went on, he saw that his hope was so very frail and light that even a single thread of a cobweb could have supported it.

It was at this interval when the stage rolled up to the hotel, which was the center around which the townsmen had gathered. The six sweating horses came to a halt and failed to receive the usual cheer from the bystanders. Their thoughts were fixed upon other things than stagecoaches, to be sure!

But some one noticed the faces of the men in that coach, and above all, the gloom that was written over Mike Flynn, the driver. Darker even than his was the face of the stalwart guard, "Long Joe" Tucker.

Long Joe leaped a mighty leap from the high seat to the ground even while the stage was still in motion. Bringing himself from a run to a halt in the front ranks of the crowd, he exclaimed in a voice that was heard by twenty armed men standing around him:

"Gents, got the most beautiful girl in the world inside that stage! She's left her beautiful babies to home back East, and she's made a flyin' trip out here to surprise her darlin' husband, which his name is Jack Reynolds! Quick—spread the word around!"

The word was spread, behind the backs of broad, brown hands, none too clean.

And then, as the men piled out of the body of the stage and stood solemn as a funeral cortège, a burly fellow stepped forward—he had descended from the back of the stage beforehand—and took off a hat that revealed a head covered with tight black curls, and saying: "Here we are, ma'am!" he handed down a lady in white.

Her hat was white. Her dust coat was white. Her dress, as she tossed the coat open, was white, also, and as little rumpled as though that stage had rolled not a mile over smooth

pavements instead of bumping and jolting and careening over the rough forty miles from the railroad!

A hoarse whisper passed through that crowd.

"Jack Reynolds's wife!"

One small man in the rear muttered: "It's too pat! There's something wrong about it all!"

His neighbors, right and left, tore their eyes from the vision long enough to condemn the little man with silent glances. Then they stared again at the new arrival.

For what suspicion could adhere to her? Is the sky blue? And like the color of the deepest sky were the cornflowers that decorated her hat, and under the brim of that hat were eyes as blue as the flowers, and a sun-browned face, and rosy cheeks. And, above all, there was the brightly expectant smile with which she stepped forward, rather daintily, and holding up her skirts a little, which made it clear that *her* footfall was rarely in dust so deep.

A hundred men who had considered that town "good enough for real folks," suddenly blushed, and wondered why the infernal street had not been paved!

Now she was touching the arm of Long Joe, while the burly fellow—who must be a mulatto—picked up two massive bags which he made light with the prodigious strength of his arms and shoulders. She was touching the arm of Long Joe and looking up to him with more and more of that delightful smile, while she said:

"Oh, how many of them must be his friends, and I don't know a single one by sight!"

But apparently she was going to make up for that ignorance as soon as possible, for she turned from Long Joe and let her smile drift gradually from face to face. Wherever her glance fell, a sweetness more than spring flowers, or wine, or letters from home, slipped into the hearts of those mighty men.

The servant, for such he seemed to be, said: "I guess this is the only hotel, ma'am. Shall I take the bags in here? It don't look like nothin' much for you, Mrs. Reynolds."

"Of course, it's the only hotel, Sam," said the girl. "And I

know that I'm going to like it. *Jack* has mentioned it in his letters ever so often!"

That looking up, with a slender brown hand against her breast, and always that smile—never the same, but each instant newly delightful!

Sam straightway carried the ponderous luggage and strode up the steps and over the veranda into the hotel.

His mistress would have followed him, but now the spirit of the devil invaded the gloomy soul of Mike Flynn and caused him to sweep off his hat, while a thin cloud of dust spurted out from it, and left the gesture inscribed in the air.

"Excuse me a minute, Mrs. Reynolds," said he. "I'd like just to say a couple of words to the boys, if you'll be so kind as to wait."

"Of course I'll wait, Mr. Flynn," said she.

It sent a shock through all listeners. That Mike should be called "Mr. Flynn"! Aye, but there you are! To a perfect lady, all men are gentlemen. Had she not had her gentle smile even for the mulatto fellow who carried her bags into the hotel?

Now, with nervous curiosity, the crowd gathered closer as "Mr." Flynn handed the girl to the top of the veranda steps and then stood beside her.

"It's like this, gents," said Mike Flynn. "I ain't one to make a speech, and I ain't going to make a speech now. I'm just goin' to say a coupla words that'll save a lot of time to all of you. Because it stands to nature that you gents wanta know the lady that's come way out here from the East to visit our town.

"And I'm goin' to tell you who she is.

"I guess you all know Jack Reynolds."

He made a slight pause, and his fiercely ironic eye rolled across that audience.

The girl beside him was seen to swallow and gasp a little with happy excitement. She looked up to the speech maker with shining eyes, as if expecting many more good things to follow.

A deadly chill went through the heart of every man pres-

ent. With grim glances they strove to catch the eye of the speaker and warn him off the subject.

But Mike Flynn seemed suddenly blind to them as he went on: "I reckon in a lot of ways there ain't a better known man in Deerfoot than Jack Reynolds. I reckon there ain't a man that's more talked about. There ain't a man here that folks would more hate to have for an enemy than Handsome Jack Reynolds. There ain't a man ever come to this here town that ever made a stronger impression on everybody, or ever made it quicker. The hardest-riding and straightest-shooting man on the range we've had ever since Jack Reynolds has been with us.

"And now, gents, I wanta tell you that we ain't the only ones that's been thinking a lot about Jack. There was a wife back East that was always waiting for him to come back home, her and her two little children, that I've seen the pictures of, and finer babies I never seen nowheres. And that wife of Jack's, she kept waiting and waiting, and sorrowing a mite because she knew that Jack had to stay out here slavin' in the mines, and laborin' away on the cattle ranches, and tearing down the trees and getting his hands all calloused up to make a fortune for them he loved.

"And finally she couldn't stand it no more, and she just up and sends the children to her mother's house and throws a coupla things into a grip or two, and takes a trusty old servant along, and away she flies clean across the dog-gone continent, boys. And now, here she is—Mrs. Jack Reynolds, the wife of a gent that all of us know pretty near by heart. And I'm goin' to call for three cheers, and three big cheers, for little Mrs. Jack Reynolds!"

There was a pause, as though of men catching their breath. Then out came the roar of cheers that the driver had asked for. With swelling hearts of pity, with solemn eyes, and with thundering voices, the honest men of Deerfoot cheered "Mrs. Jack Reynolds."

It was a cheer that was noisy, but not very prolonged.

And then every one waited, breathless, and every man standing there could *swear* that he had seen the tears of joy

shining in the eyes of that happy, laughing young girl wife.

They were silent. A whisper could have been heard, and certainly every murmur of her voice, broken with emotion, as she said:

"Thank you, Mr. Flynn, for speaking so beautifully about Jack. And thank all of you, oh, from my heart! But I know that every one loves him—every one always has! And if—"

Here the emotion overcame her. She turned and hurried toward the door of the hotel. But as she reached it, she mastered herself enough to turn and give them one more glimpse of her tearful, laughing face, and to make one gesture that certainly went home to the hearts of every man who saw her—all except that small man at the rear of the crowd, who was seen to shake his head and heard to mutter:

"Too pat! Clever—but too pat!"

Probably some of those standing about him would have given him the full weight of their fists without charge, but they had something else on their minds.

Mike Flynn, having finished his speech, as the girl disappeared into the door of the hotel, strove to make his escape. But he was caught by many hands, strong with just wrath, and pinioned, and thrust back against the side wall of the building.

Their savage faces pressed closely about him.

"You dog-gone, worthless mule skinner," said a foremost member of the crowd, "what you mean by holdin' us up and makin' a speech like that when you mighty well know that we got the ropes already stretched that are goin' to break the neck of Handsome Jack?"

"*You* talk, do you?" said Mike Flynn savagely. "You *think* that you got a right to talk, do you? Lemme ask if any one of you would 'a' liked to have that girl settin' on the driver's seat beside him for twenty miles between here and the railroad? And seein' her laughin' with joy at the lovely mountains, and the lovely birds in the air—which they was buzzards sailin'—and jumpin' up and nigh fallin' off the seat when we come slam on sight of a waterfall back there in the canyon! And her claspin' her hands together and near cryin' with joy

when she found out that I actually knew her husband, and actually had sat and played cards with him, and actually had seen him a lot of times! And her asking: 'Didn't everybody love him? Wasn't he just such a man?'

"And every now and then she bubbled down in her throat, 'My darlin'!' And she popped out the picture of a pair of the sweetest-lookin' brats that ever *I* seen, and told me their names, and how bright they was, and what a lot darling little Jack looks like his *darling* papa! And me settin' right there beside her and saying 'Yes' or 'No,' and laughing till my heart ached, and wondering had the boys already strung up man-killing Jack Reynolds or not! I say, after twenty miles like that, you wonder that I wanta pass some of the poison on to you galoots that been doin' nothin' all day but set around and stretch the rope that's goin' to hang her dear husband, that's been out here so long, slavin' and sweatin', and sendin' home quite piles of money, but never lettin' them have what is more than money, his own self!

"Now, you gents go on and hang your man. Heaven knows that there ain't anybody in the world, I reckon, that deserves hangin', and needs hangin', so much as Jack Reynolds, the gunman, but Heaven pity the ornery skunk that would raise a hand again' the husband of that poor little girl inside there!"

The hands that had captured Mike Flynn had gradually loosened their grasp. And before the end they had quite fallen away from him.

He now said: "You gents, you settle the business to suit yourselves. But him that hauls on the rope that hangs her husband ain't a friend of mine. And he ain't fit to be the friend of no right-thinkin' man!"

7.

WITH that, very roughly and rudely, he thrust his way through the press and escaped from the lot. Those who remained, and there were many of them, stood about, staring at one another.

"Something had oughta be done!" said several voices, and that thought was held and repeated several times. But what *could* be done?

And then a man would speak up to remark: "They ain't so dog-gone far out of town by this time."

Another man said: "It would be sort of sweet, when the boys come gallopin' into town, for the little girl, up there in the hotel, to look out of the window and see Handsome Jack go by with his feet lashed under the belly of his horse, and his hands tied behind him, and a rope tied around his dog-gone neck. That would be sort of swell for her to see."

"Yeah," drawled another, a man with a face of iron, "it would be a good thing to remember. Drivin' her crazy, or killin' her on the spot, would be sort of nice. I'd like to see it, for my part. And the sound of her scream—that would do me a lot of good, too. I'd like to wake up at night and have the thrill of it go crawling down through my spinal marrow. Or what I would like best of all would be to see her crawlin' on her knees and throwin' her arms around the dead man's busted neck. Yes, that would please me a considerable pile. And I want all you man-eaters to remember that the killin' of him ain't all. It's kind of law, almost, for us to kill him. It's right and nacheral that we should do it. But *after* he's dead, there's somebody in this here town that has gotta go and break the news to the poor little widow. And all I gotta say, gents, is that I ain't goin' to be that man!"

This was a speech in which the speaker kept his voice low, until he came to the last words. And as they rang out, a sudden and terrible conviction sank into every breast that no one *else* in Deerfoot would consent to fill the part of the messenger. Yet if they were decent men, the dead body, at least, would have to be turned over to the poor girl.

Another man took off where the tall speaker had finished, saying: "It'd be a considerable pleasure to me, gents, for my part, to think about the buryin' of Handsome Jack. But after that I would like to lie awake for a few nights and think about this here poor girl, that never done a wrong to a soul in her life, that never done nothin' but trust everybody, and love everybody, and give her heart to the dirty world in the palm of her hand. I say it would be a considerable pleasure to me, gents, to lie awake at night and think about her returnin' home, and the carriage from the station stoppin' in front of the old home, and the two little kids runnin' out and jumpin' up and down with joy to see their mother back.

"Yes, sir, that meetin' would be a pretty thing to see, and her with her dead man in her heart, and her babies in her arms. Speakin' personal, I only got one child, and I'd about as soon lay him dead on the ground here, gents, as to see that little widow go home and meet her two little ones. Jack Reynolds may be as guilty as anything, but, gents, it's four lives that we're handlin' when we lay hands on his neck!"

As he ended this speech, a man said:

"Get on a hoss, somebody, and pile out of town and get on the trail, and stop the posse from comin' right into town. No matter what else we gotta have, we gotta have time—we gotta be able to think."

"Half a dozen gents go," said the tall man who had recently spoken. "And I'll be one of 'em. We won't say nothin' about the cause— we'll just say there's *got* to be a delay. And then we'll lead in some of them red-handed possemen and let 'em have a slant of the eye at the girl wife. That's all we'll do."

There was an instant departure of a number of volunteers

to perform this pleasanter duty. Then said a big man toward the rear of the group:

"Look here, boys. Lee Swain has been mutterin' or mumblin' something back here about maybe this is all a frame."

"A frame?" shouted several angered voices.

A stern-faced man with gray hair, a lofty and formidable figure, held up a hand.

"We'll hear everybody," he said. "Swain is a mighty clever man, and a mighty smart man, and he knows a whole lot. And he certainly stepped out and got himself a mighty good gold mine, too, while he was about it. But maybe he ain't *always* right. Let's hear what he's got to say."

Room was made for Lee Swain, who stepped into the center of the clearing that appeared for him, and said:

"My idea, friends, is that this was a very startling coincidence. The young lady did not arrive the day before, or the morning before, but a mere hour before man-killing Jack Reynolds was about to meet justice at the hands of this crowd. I agree with what the other speakers have said that the girl is charming, and that *if* she has two children at home, the heart of every decent man should ache for her. Whether she has them or not, *if* she is the wife of Jack Reynolds, we ought to consider the case a little more carefully, no doubt. For as some one has very eloquently said just now, if he's a married man, we're handling more lives than one when we hang Jack Reynolds."

He had more to say, but the stern-faced man broke in gently:

"What I aim to gather out of this here, Swain, is that you are kind of hintin' that little Mrs. Reynolds is maybe not exactly right—that she's a sort of crook, maybe—that maybe she's been hired for a dirty job and is actin' a part. What you're sayin' is that maybe it ain't as clear as day that she's one of the sweetest, most gentlest, lovin' girls that ever *my* eyes was laid on!"

A deep-throated murmur of agreement answered this outburst.

But Lee Swain was undaunted. He merely said: "You peo-

ple want to believe in the best. I hope you're right. A more charming girl I never saw. She was almost too charming to be real. People off the stage, people who are not playing parts, are rarely so perfectly graceful. However I may be entirely wrong."

"Why don't you go and question her, Swain?" snarled one man. "Why don't you go and shake your finger at her and make her answer a few questions?"

Lee Swain answered him rather sharply, considering his usually mild voice: "As a matter of fact, I wouldn't mind putting a few brief questions to Master Sam, the mulatto. He has a strangely clear eye for a man with Negro blood in his veins. That I must say. Mind you, I don't promise you any revelations. But everything about this arrival of the little lady has been singularly pat—oh, very, very pat indeed!"

The stern-faced man broke in: "Swain ought to have his way. We ain't fools enough to deny that he has brains. Somebody go get the servant. I'll go get him myself. We can tell *him* a few of the facts about his master, at least."

The clerk of the hotel had shown "Mrs. Jack Reynolds" into the best room, the big corner room in the second story which had two spacious windows looking out upon the main street.

As the clerk finished pointing out the features of the room and apologizing for its lacks, and indicating the fine view of the mountains which extended beyond them in great masses of dark forest and shining rocks, he withdrew. The "mulatto" entered the room with the two pieces of baggage.

"Put them down, Sam," she commanded, "and open them for me, please, and then I know that you'll want to have a bath and a rest after the long drive. I *hope* that I won't need you before dinner."

The clerk heard this much before Sam shut the door. But when the door had shut, he could hardly see young Mary Tracy go spinning across the room on her toes until she brought up before the big mirror, which was one of the

prides of the hotel. No less than three times had bullets smashed its predecessors, but always another big mirror had been shipped in at great expense for that best of guest rooms. Now it showed the poised body and the delighted face of Mary Tracy.

She cried out softly: "Tell me, Sam—wasn't I wonderful? Wasn't I almost perfect?"

"This is only the opening of the play," said Shannigan. He had placed the two bags, by this time, and was leaning to open one of them, compressing it carefully with his mighty hands lest he should break the lock before the key was turned.

"But," he added, "a good beginning is a large part of success. You have a talent, Mary."

She took off her hat and threw it over her head. Shannigan had not time to rise. He sprang sidewise, like a four-footed beast of prey, and caught the hat from the air. As he placed it on the bed, she was saying:

"I love you for giving me these clothes, Sam. To say nothing of all the rest in the bags. Every time I looked down at them my heart leaped. That was what gave me the confidence! That was why I could take them in my hands. The big, silly geese! There were tears in their eyes, Sam. Tell me: Did you bribe Mike Flynn to make that speech? Did you rehearse him in it?"

Shannigan was once more at the open bag, unpacking it with rapid skill.

"No, Mary," he answered, "but perfect art brings a response at once, and the simpler the nature, the more profound the answer! Just what did you do to Mike Flynn when you were sitting on the driver's box?"

"I was just feminine and foolish, Sam," said the girl. "When a rabbit jumped out of the brush and turned itself into a gray streak down the road, I hoped that the poor thing would not run itself to death, and I asked Mike if rabbits didn't die of fear sometimes. Then there were a few places where he fed the whip into those wild mustangs, and every time I curled up and shut my eyes, and didn't look out

at the terrible world again for several minutes. Mike was afraid to touch those horses toward the end of the run; that's why we were a couple of hours late, I think."

"Which gives us a pretty narrow margin for saving the neck of your husband," said Shannigan.

"What's in your mind, talking like this?" asked the girl. "What do I care about anything? I see the way to take the world in my hands. You've showed it to me! Look!"

He glanced aside, and saw that she was still facing her image in the glass, this time with her hands behind her head, smiling at what she saw.

"I always knew that I was pretty," said Mary Tracy, "but now I can see that I'm more than that. I'm going to learn more than one role, Sam. I'm going to make a number of hearts skip several beats, old son, and they won't be all west of the Rockies, either!"

He went from the first case to the second.

"Of course they won't," said he. "I can see you traveling on, Mary. You'll do in Denver for a start, and New Orleans, and on to New York. If titles interest you, you could slip across to England. And you'll make Paris burn a little brighter, Mary. You'll taste the cream from Moscow to Madrid, no doubt, while the way gets a little harder and whispers begin to gather around you and overtake you, and all at once you're just outside the law. About the same time, your face will not be what it was. The infernal wrinkles come, Mary, and write the truth."

She whirled on him from the glass.

"Stop it!" said she. "*You* started me playing sham, and now you're moralizing about it."

"The devil is a tempter," said Shannigan, "but every one knows the country he comes from."

"What's in your mind, talking like this?" asked the girl. She drew up a chair, and, sitting in it with her chin on one brown fist, she stared at him.

Shannigan lifted his massive head and turned it slowly toward her. That cold and all-knowing eye was a weight which she could hardly endure.

"Are you talking about being good?" she said. "Are *you* talking about that? You and your dead men? Then why did you ask me to come away with you to save the neck of that rascal, Jack Reynolds?"

"You wouldn't have stayed home very long in any case," declared Shannigan. "When I see the colt hanging its head over the pasture fence and beginning to look at the mountains, I know it is time to saddle it and sell the pet! I took you out for a turn through the world before you took a journey by yourself."

She winced away from him, rising from the chair, and then, closing her eyes, she held up her hands before her as a protection from his smile.

"You've taken the joy out of everything!" she said. "There's no fun left in the game!"

"You're off the stage now, Mary," said he. "The moment the curtain rises for you again, you'll find your fun waiting. But when you're off the stage, you ought to keep your head clear. Don't be stirring the wine all the time, or the bubbles will soon be gone!"

She made a quick gesture across her face, as though to brush away his unflattering words, and the effect of his steady glance.

"Stop looking at me like that, Sam," she pleaded. "You know that I can't stand it. Nobody can stand it!"

"Very well," said he, and turned his head again to the unpacking.

"I'd like to know," she said, "why you ever crawled into such a little out-of-the-way hole in the wall as San Andreas. Why did you do it? You could keep the center of a big stage. You could make men run like rabbits; big men, too. Why did you hide yourself away?"

"I saw you, Mary," said he, "and I knew with the first look at you that it would be worth while to spend some time on you."

"Do you seriously mean that? Of course, you don't! I can see that you're always smiling."

"I'm always smiling when I'm with you," said Shannigan. "That's because you always make me happy."

"Shannigan, sometimes I want to kill you," said the girl.

"Sometime you may," said Shannigan.

"Your horrible sneers—your cold eyes, I mean," said she. "When did you first see me? When did you first notice me, Sam?"

"I'll tell you that when I marry you, Mary," said Shannigan.

"Bah!"she cried out in disgust and repulsion at the thought. "Do you always have to mock me?"

"Fine face to have about, eh?" said Shannigan, turning it toward her again.

She blinked.

"Go on, Sam," she said. "We're partners now. You tell me when you first noticed me!"

"I mean what I said," answered Shannigan. "I'll tell you on the day I marry you, or on the day I die—if you happen to be at hand."

At this she came up close to him, rapidly, and even leaned a little to bring her eyes closer to that massive face of bronze.

"Are you actually serious about it, Sam?" she asked.

His only answer was that smile of carved bronze, with grim eyes, that looked far off beyond her.

She drew in her breath with a gasp and backed away from him.

"You scare me to death, Sam!" she whispered.

"Don't try to exchange confidences with the devil, Mary," he told her. "That's the lesson for today."

A tap came at the door.

She faced the mirror, suddenly forced herself to smile. As she called out in a brightly cheerful voice, the door was opened. A tall cow-puncher stood there against the darkness of the hall.

"When your man's got a minute," said the tall man, "can we talk to him a little? We're arranging a surprise for Jack Reynolds, ma'am!"

8.

SHE insisted that Sam should go down at once. She could manage everything else that had to be arranged. And besides, this was to concern Jack!

So Shannigan went down, and outside the hotel, he was confronted by a curious crowd, and little, keen-eyed Lee Swain.

The latter said: "Now, my friend, we want to ask you a few questions. And it's going to be better all around if you answer them fast, without thinking."

The eyes of Shannigan grew round with surprise.

"Yes, sir," said he. And he tipped his hat.

"Your name is what?" asked Swain.

"I'm Sam Williams, sir."

"Where d'you live?"

"I live with the Reynoldses, sir."

"Where do the Reynoldses live?"

"My Mr. Jack Reynolds, sir?"

"Yes."

"In Virginia, sir."

"Where in Virginia?"

"In the city of Alexandria, sir," said Shannigan. And he touched the brim of his hat again.

"Oh, in Alexandria, eh?" said Lee Swain.

"Yes, sir."

"And what street do they live on, I want to know."

"They don't live on no street, sir," said Shannigan.

"What? They live in Alexandria, and not on a street?"

"No, sir," said Shannigan. "We don't live on any street, sir."

"They don't have streets in Alexandria, perhaps?" asked Lee Swain aggressively.

The crowd showed great interest. It was fairly on its toes with interest, and keen suspense kept it leaning, shoulder against shoulder.

"Oh, yes, sir, they have streets," said Shannigan. "But we live on the pike."

The crowd settled back on its heels, and sighed with relief to see that Swain had not yet scored a point.

"What pike?" said he.

"The Washington Pike, sir," said Shannigan.

"Who's your nearest neighbor?" asked Swain.

"We got no near neighbor, sir," said Shannigan.

"No near neighbor?"

"No, sir."

"Alexandria is a city, Sam!" exclaimed Swain.

"Yes, sir."

"And you live in Alexandria?"

"Yes, sir."

"But you have no neighbors? No near neighbors?"

As he made this point, Swain could not help looking with a point of satisfaction toward the others. Several men frowned and shook their heads. But the ugly face of Shannigan remained perfectly immobile, and his eyes were dull.

"No, sir," said Shannigan. "We got no neighbors."

"Wait a minute, Swain," said the tall man with the stern face. "There's something wrong here!"

"I think there is *decidedly* something wrong," snapped Swain.

"Hold on," said the tall man. "Sam, you folks all live in this here town of Alexandria, eh?"

"It ain't here, sir," said Shannigan. "It's in Virginia."

The tall man laughed heartily, and others joined him.

"Just a poor, simple fellow," said some one, and the other voices joined that judgment with assent.

"Look here, Sam," said the tall man genially, "you live in Alexandria, Virginia, and yet you've got no near neighbors. Who's your nearest neighbor?"

"Doctor Powell, sir," said Shannigan.

"How far away does Doctor Powell live from you?"

"About a half mile, sir," said Shannigan.

"And how far off is Alexandria?"

"About two mile and a half, sir," said Shannigan calmly.

There was a whoop of joy from many throats.

"But you live in Alexandria, you and the Jack Reynoldses?" insisted the tall man, his stern face sadly broken with a grin.

"Oh, yes, sir. We've always lived in Alexandria," said Shannigan.

The former shout was nothing to the one that now arose!

"They live in Alexandria two and a half miles away—that's all right. That's easy," said the tall man of the stern face. He was almost crying with mirth. "Why," said he, "it's just a simple fellow, that's all."

"Excuse me, sir," said Shannigan.

"Go on, Sam," said the tall man.

"Not meanin' any disrespect, sir, I ain't simple," said Shannigan.

"Oh you're not, eh?" said the tall man.

Lee Swain, biting his thin lips, stood back, frowning, studying intently the immobile face of the man of bronze.

"No, sir, I ain't simple," said Shannigan.

"Well, Sam," said the tall man comfortably, "would you mind trottin' out the proof that you ain't simple?"

"No, sir," said Shannigan. "I'm glad that I can prove it, too."

"Go ahead and prove it, then," said the tall man. And he winked broadly at his fellows of the crowd.

Wildly they grinned, and waited in high expectancy.

"It come along of Mr. Jack, sir, that I ain't simple," said Shannigan.

"Tell us how it 'come,' " said the other, more and more pleased with the results that his questions were producing.

"It was this way, sir," said Shannigan. "One morning Mr. Jack was out ridin' with the hounds. It was his father's pack, sir. And he took along with him Bridget, the gray mare, sir, that was by Ptolemy out of Santa Clara, and the big bay gelding that had the strain of Lexington in him, sir. And the

gelding was his second hoss and didn't carry him none too bright. No, sir, he pecked at a jump, and gave Mr. Jack a bad fall, sir. And when the hunt come home, Mr. Jack said to me: 'Sam, go jump this fool hoss in the river, because he's no good.' So I took the gelding to a place where the bank was sort of low, and I jumped him in the river, sir."

A loud yell of delight interrupted.

Shannigan drew back a little, and looked about him with baffled eyes.

The man of the stern face, leaning on the shoulder of a neighbor, and wiping his eyes, asked: "Then what happened?"

"The next morning, sir," said Shannigan, "Mr. Jack sent for me, and he said to me, because he was always very kind to all of us, he said: 'Sam, you're a good boy,' he said, 'but you're too simple!' "

A fresh shout of laughter caused Shannigan to frown in bewilderment, and stare around him at the amused faces of the crowd.

"Go on, go on, Sam," said the tall man, when he was able to speak again, and the sea of noise had somewhat subsided.

"Well, sir," said Shannigan, "after that, he told me that I was to go to school. And I went to school, sir, for two whole years!"

He spoke it on a rising accent that was full of pride.

"You went to school for two whole years. What sort of a school did you go to?" snapped Lee Swain.

"The cook taught me," said Shannigan. "He's a mighty educated man."

The laughter began again. Laughter had become a habit, it seemed.

"Who's the cook?" snapped Swain again.

"The cook, sir, is George Washington Alexander White," declaimed Shannigan, his face beginning to shine.

There was a veritable yell of applause. Only the face of Swain remained grim and set.

"What did George Washington Alexander White teach you?" asked Swain.

"Readin', writin', and arithmetic," said Shannigan.

"Multiplication?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's nine times seven?"

"Sixty-five, sir," said Shannigan.

A fresh whoop greeted the answer.

Shannigan shook his head, and with a proud smile he added: "There ain't any use tryin' to stick me on that multiplication table, sir. I just worked and worked till this head of mine was singin' the answers, sir, and it's always sung 'em right!"

His smile continued. And as the roar of mirth arose again, he looked around, and nodded in sympathy and agreement, as though he were sure that every one was on his side, and appreciated his prowess as a student.

"Look here," said the tall man of the stern face. "Was the cook satisfied with what you learned?"

"Yes, sir, he was mighty satisfied," said Shannigan.

"What makes you think that he was satisfied?" asked the other.

"Well," said Shannigan, "after I'd been workin' every afternoon for two years, the cook says to Mr. Jack, right in front of me: 'Mr. Jack, I ain't goin' to teach this Sam no more.' 'Why not, George?' says Mr. Jack. 'Because,' says the cook, 'I've taught him all that I can teach. It might be that a kickin' mule could get more into him, but I ain't strong enough, Mr. Jack. I'm all wore out!' "

"What did Mr. Jack do?" asked the tall man, now openly and shamelessly weeping with delight.

"Mr. Jack is a kind man," said Shannigan, "and all he said was that education was for some and it wasn't for others. And he said that he thought I'd learned almost too much already. But ever since that day, he never called me simple, sir. And sometimes he called me 'Samuel,' and he used to point me out to gentlemen visitors as an educated man, sir!"

"No," said Lee Swain, when it was possible for him to make himself heard. "I dare say that you're not simple. You begin to seem more and more complicated. I have an idea

that you're as great a rascal as your master, Jack Reynolds!"

Shannigan started. He made a long stride that brought him almost on top of Lee Swain. Then he checked himself, with such a savage rage swelling his face that the men before him all shrank back—all except small, thin Lee Swain. He held his ground.

Said Shannigan, letting out the terrible notes of his deep bass voice: "I hope I know my place, but if you didn't have a white face—I'd tear the bad heart out of you, for that!"

"And right, too," said the tall man angrily. "Swain, you've gone too far."

"Send the mulatto, if that's what he is, back to his mistress," said Swain. "I've something to say that's not for him to hear."

Shannigan, thus dismissed, strode slowly away, looking back over his shoulder with the same dreadful face.

Other men watched him going, and what they saw remained long, long in their memories.

Angry faces were turned toward Swain. Had he been another, he would have been shut off without a hearing; had he been larger, something of a violent nature might have happened to him before he had a chance to speak.

Then he said:

"I suppose that you men are all satisfied that Sam is a simple fellow, and that the girl is everything she seems to be. I disagree. Mind you, before the wind-up, you'll find that I'm right. I want to point out one excessively interesting point. It seems to have skipped the minds of the rest of you. Southern women lead sheltered lives. But here's a delicate girl who suddenly decides to cross the continent, and she does so. And she decides to take a servant with her. Who? Some old and experienced woman working in the family? No, but a man! Very well. Is it an old white-haired Negro who's been around the world with one of the family and knows men and events? Not at all. She selects a fellow who's celebrated even on the home place as a half-wit. Now, that may seem a logical proceeding to some of the rest of you, but I call it a very strange thing. How do you explain it?"

There was a gloomy silence. Then the tall man with the stern face said:

"The gal wanted to see poor Jack. She up and started, quick. She didn't ask no advice. She had to have a servant along—Southerners are that way—and she picked out the one that she was fond of. Kind of stupid, yes, sir, but so dog-gone devoted and true that he'd even jump a hoss off a bank into a river, if he was told to do it. Just a simple fellow, sure; and just a simple girl, too, and I only wish that there was more of 'em in the world!"

There was a rumble of applause.

It was cut short as Swain said: "In twenty-four hours, I guarantee to prove that this whole show is a swindle."

And he turned on his heel and left the others.

As Shannigan went down the upper hall of the hotel, a door opened, and Howison waved him into the room. There the latter shut the door, and said:

"I couldn't swear to it, but I think—no, I'm wrong, perhaps!"

He stared closely into the face of Shannigan as he said this.

"I'm Shannigan," said the big man.

Howison sighed with relief.

"I knew it was you, and yet I couldn't be sure. I'd swear that I'd know your face in a crowd of a hundred thousand, and yet at the same time I was sure that you were a mulatto. I could swear that your lips were too thick and your skin too dark; it seemed to me that you were inches shorter than Shannigan!"

He shook his head, staring with admiration at the other.

"A little dye on the skin," said Shannigan, "and a wig that's well-fitted. They turn the trick for me. Howison, what do you want with me?"

"I want to know how things are going—and is that the girl I saw in your house at San Andreas?"

"It is."

"But she's not Mrs. Jack Reynolds, is she?"

"Certainly not."

"Shannigan, what in the world is up?"

Shannigan smiled, with real joy.

"She's stopped the crowd in its stride, that girl," he said. "Deerfoot is dizzy with her. Deerfoot's heart is wrung. They've sent out to stop the fellows who are bringing in Reynolds to hang him. They'll either turn him loose, or else they give him to the law. Our trick is to have him arrested legally, then we can free him in a regular trial. You have the money to find good lawyers.

"In the meantime, there's a sharp little hawk of a man here in Deerfoot who suspects everything. His name is Lee Swain. He has brains, money, and interest in the case. Besides that, he has every right and justice behind him. At any minute, he may throw in the stone that will wreck our fine machine, smash it to bits. If we're exposed, I'll be shot first, you'll be taken second, and then they'll hang Jack Reynolds to make the day even."

He ended, smiling, as he had begun.

"You seem to like the game, man!" said Arthur Howison, in a sweat.

"I like it well enough," agreed Shannigan. "We're walking on the edge of a high cliff, Howison. We need all the help that we can get. What are you doing?"

"Waiting."

"Get into the town. You've come here looking for investments. You could actually make an investment or two, as far as that goes. You're against allowing the course of justice to go wrong. You go to see Swain and tell him that you sympathize with his position. You even suspect the girl. You're ready to give time and money to keep a rascal from going free. You understand me?"

Howison nodded, then shook his head.

"I'd rather stay entirely in the background," said he.

"You can't," said Shannigan, with decision. "You have to play a part. We need all the help we can get. There are twenty ways in which we can lose this game, and only one in which we can win. If I'm seen coming out of your room, for instance, we've already lost an important point. You

don't know me. You don't know the girl. But like Swain, you suspect both of us. I'll get in touch with you every day, and find out what you've learned."

He stepped to the door.

"Are you pleased with the way things are going?" asked Howison, eagerly following.

"We had one chance in five hundred, at the start," said Shannigan. "Mary Tracy gave us one chance in two or three until little Swain showed up. Now we have about one chance in fifty. But we'll do our best and hope. Good-by for a while."

He was gone instantly from the room and hurried down to the room of the girl. There he knocked at the door. She opened it a bit.

"I'm changing," she said.

He said rapidly: "Be on tiptoe. There's a little fellow called Lee Swain who suspects that everything is wrong. He's been questioning me, and running me down like a hawk in the air. If you have a chance, play your strongest cards to get him over to your side. Offended pride, and tears close behind would be the idea, I suppose. Swain is hard and dry as old leather, and just as tough. You'll have to do your best to budge him. What have they told you about Reynolds?"

"They've told me that they're rushing word to my dear husband. They hope that they'll soon locate him. He's out on a prospecting trip in the hills, they say."

"He's right on the edge of discovering a grave for himself," said Shannigan. "Mark this man Swain. He means trouble. Howison wants to help, but I don't think he can do much. This very moment, perhaps Jack Reynolds is spoiling everything by denying that he has a wife. I've got to get in touch with him. If they ask you for me, you can tell them that you've let me go hunting in the woods. I expect that I'll have to do a lot of hunting while we're here, Mary. Good-by."

That delegation of hard riders which left Deerfoot to carry to the posse the news of the coming of "Mrs. Jack Reynolds" spurred all the way from town, and met the procession a scant three miles out. Two badly wounded men

were carried in horse litters made by tying a pair of long, supple saplings to the saddles of two mustangs, which were then led on at a gentle pace. The third injured man was able to ride, but he, also, had to go on slowly.

It was because of the three that the posse had to return at such a snail's pace. It would have been more comfortable had they left the wounded in a camp, and most of the rest gone on to carry the prisoner to the waiting crowd in Deerfoot. But against this was the fact that the three wounded men were extremely eager to see Jack Reynolds pay the penalty of his misdeeds, and since they had every reason to be consulted, the return had been by the easiest stages.

There were eighteen of the best fighting men from Deerfoot in the cortège that remained with the wounded men and the prisoner, and to them the embassy from Deerfoot came with a rush.

"Doc" Pringle halted them by lifting from his saddlebow the long rifle that was carried there. They spilled around him like currents of water around a reef. At forty years, Doc Pringle was a veteran trapper, miner, prospector, cattleman, and horse breaker. He might have passed for fifty, with his gray beard and shaggy brows, and because he was a book of frontier lore that could always be opened to the right page, he was much respected in even that lawless settlement of Deerfoot.

Now he said: "What's the news, boys? Found the tree to hang him from?"

"You've gotta stop here, Pringle," said the nearest of the panting riders. "Jack Reynolds's wife has showed up in Deerfoot—finest little lady you ever laid an eye on, with a pair of kids back home, all waiting for their darling daddy."

"It's a fake," said Pringle. "He ain't got a wife. It's a cooked-up job to keep him from the rope that's goin' to stretch his neck all out of shape."

"Fake?" said one rider indignantly. "You didn't see her, like we've done. That little lady, she's the most innocent, pretty thing you ever seen, Pringle. You've gotta hold Reynolds out here till the whole town decides what to do!"

"I'm tired of holding him," said Pringle. "We've waited too dog-gone long. The thing to do with a man-killer is to string him up as quick as he's caught. That's the way that we always oughta do. I was agin' putting it off all this while; I always was agin' it, and now things begin to happen wrong. First thing you know, he'll just be in jail, and then he'll be lost!"

"The whole mob in town," said the first messenger, "has talked the thing over. And every man there has decided that we gotta use more time. We're handling four lives instead of one, when we touch Reynolds."

Pringle glared with disgust. Then, making up his mind, he reined his horse suddenly around and rode back to confront the prisoner.

The latter, with his feet tied into the stirrups, and the stirrups lashed together, and with his hands tied behind his back, was securely enough held. To make everything doubly safe, two lariats held the head of his horse to riders on his right and left.

He was a fine big fellow, this Jack Reynolds, with a sea-blue eye and tawny hair which the wind was whipping about under the brim of his hat. He sat as straight in the saddle as though he were riding to a wedding instead of toward his grave. One looked in vain for signs of weak character in him. Perhaps the eye was overbold—that was all.

"Look here, brother," said Pringle. "You a married man?"

"I've been most other kinds of a fool," said Reynolds. "Why should I be a married man?"

"It ain't what you *should* be that counts," said Pringle. "You *should* be a decent gent—and you ain't. Are you, or ain't you a married man?"

Jack Reynolds looked at him with a distasteful eye.

"I'll tell you what," said he, "I'm a little tired of all this mucking around. You boys had the luck to catch me. Why don't you string me up without all the fool talk and argument? I'm ready to die. Maybe I deserve to die. I didn't shoot Powell and Halpin, but that doesn't matter. I've shot other men; maybe it wasn't always self-defense. Anyway,

I'm not trying to split hairs, but I'm tired of this trip, and tired of your talk, Pringle. Hang me if you want to, but shut your face while you're doing it!"

He brought out the words slowly, to increase and underline the disdain with which he spoke them.

Pringle answered: "*I'm* not the one that wants to keep you fresh so long. I'd 'a' made crow meat of you long ago. Answer up, here: Are you, or ain't you married?"

"No, and what's it to you," said Reynolds.

"Well," said Pringle, "I'm goin' to cut short all of these here arguments right here and now, brother!"

THE SHERIFF

9.

THERE were four opinions that counted most vitally, and they were those of the three wounded men, and Doc Pringle. Pringle's opinion had already been given. As for the others, they declared with one voice that the only reason for delaying the hanging of Mr. Reynolds was in order to make a public example of him in a bigger scene at Deerfoot, where more eyes could see what comes of lawlessness. But since Deerfoot itself seemed in doubt as to what should be done with the evildoer, it was far better to make away with him at once.

So they stood Jack Reynolds on top of a five-foot boulder, with a rope around his neck, and the other end of it flung over the sturdy bough of a tree that extended above him.

The evening was wearing on, by this time, as Pringle said briefly:

"Got any last requests, Jack?"

"No requests," said Jack Reynolds.

"Any messages?" asked Pringle.

"No messages," said Reynolds.

One of the eager messengers from Deerfoot called out: "Reynolds, ain't there any heart in you? Are you goin' to forget that poor girl that's yonder in Deerfoot now, and that's

traveled clean across the continent to show you the pictures of your two babies and beg you to come back to them?"

Reynolds turned with something of a start and looked straight at the speaker. His brow puckered, and a rather grim consideration appeared in his eyes.

"Is my wife there in Deerfoot now?" he asked.

"She is," said one of the messengers. "Are you goin' to go out of the picture with no word to her, man?"

Every heart jumped a bit when the youth responded:

"The best thing I could do for a wife would be to stretch this rope as soon as possible."

"All right," said Pringle. "We'll give the rope a haul. Altogether, boys."

He laid a hand on the end of it when a very odd interruption occurred in the form of the sheriff of the county, who appeared around the next bend of the trail, driving before him, on three lariats as many Mexican captives, poor downheaded fellows who trudged wearily along toward the Deerfoot jail.

It was said of Steve Lancing that he was the only man in the world who could manage to hold down that part of the range, because he was the only man big enough to handle any two ruffians at the same moment, patient enough to follow any trail to the end, and wise enough to solve most of the ruses of cattle thieves, gunmen, and other criminals when they fled to the mountains.

But such was his nature that when he appeared, Pringle and the others were by no means embarrassed in spite of the fact that they were obviously taking the law into their own hands.

Sheriff Steve Lancing merely halted his horse, and while his shag-headed prisoners instantly cast themselves down on the ground to rest, he said:

"Hello, Pringle. Hello, all you boys. Glad to see you, Reynolds. Goin' to make a speech to us, son?"

He was a vast man, this Steve Lancing. He had a powerful mustang under his saddle, but his feet seemed ready to trail the ground. His faded shirt of blue flannel was open at

the throat, and showed the arch of a vast and hairy chest. He wore his hair long, like an Indian, and never putting on a hat, he kept the hair out of his face with a broad headband. He was as gigantic in the features of his face as in his body.

And as his appearance was wild and sinister, so was his enforcement of the law. He presided over a hole-in-the-wall country which had been a perfect refuge for criminals from all parts of the nation, in the old days. He had changed all that. The county still had its share of ill-doers, but their numbers were greatly thinned. Criminals do not choose to linger in a district where the law is enforced with streams of lead from a very accurate pair of guns, or where the grip of the law is apt to break a man's neck, as Steve Lancing was known to have broken the neck of a gun-handling ruffian in Deerfoot.

It was no wonder that his attitude was so casual as he looked up at Reynolds, poised for execution.

"I'm not making a speech, Steve," said Reynolds. "But I'm glad to see your ugly mug again, before I pass on."

The sheriff loosened his feet in the stirrups and stepped to the ground, swinging his right leg over the pommel of the saddle, as he descended. He made a cigarette with a gesture, and consumed half of it with a single breath.

"Thought you wanted to make a show of Reynolds for the crowd to enjoy, Pringle?" said he. "And here you are stringin' him up all lonesome and quiet, sort of."

Pringle answered: "Deerfoot has gone and got all heated up because Reynolds's wife has showed up. Deerfoot wants to retire Jack on a pension, it seems like, and we ain't seeing it that way."

"You're right," said the sheriff. "Most of the boys out here can't see nothing at all clear, when a female comes between 'em and the facts of the case."

"Give us a hand on the rope, Steve," requested Pringle, "and we'll let Jack do his little dance in the air, and finish."

Steve shook his monstrous head.

"I can't do that, brother," he said. "I just can't do that.

I appreciate you gents, and I like fine what you done. I tried my own hand at Jack, a coupla times, and he was always too fast on the get-away for me. But I can't help hang him, unless some dog-gone judge and jury up and tell me to. The law has some funny hitches in it. All I can do is to be mighty surprised, when I hear that you boys have strung up Jack."

"There's one lie, and a loud lie, in that," said Reynolds.

"Is there?" said the sheriff. "Go on and tell me, brother. Where is it?"

"I never ran away from you in my life, except when you had a crowd at your back."

The sheriff was not angered. "I like to hear a gent speak right up for himself," said he. "There never was a time in your crooked life when you dared to stand up to me, Reynolds, and you know it. But I ain't here to argue with you. I'm just here to see you hanged, and then to forget what I seen."

"I'm not arguing," said Reynolds. "I simply wanted to state my side."

There was a sudden sweep of the messengers from Deerfoot. Their spirits had been depressed by the attitude in which they had been received, but at the same time, they retained some of the fire that had been in their breasts when they left the town. Now they poured around the sheriff. A stocky little fellow with one eye and a patch over the other grasped the enormous arm of the sheriff and tapped a forefinger upon his arching chest.

"Steve," he said, "if you'd seen what we seen, and heard what we heard, you'd take Jack Reynolds out of that rope, and move him along with you to jail."

"Oh, would I, Shorty?" murmured the big man, looking down at the other.

"You would!" said a chorus.

There was such conviction in it that the sheriff blinked.

"The finest, straightest, cleanest, prettiest girl in the world!" said "Shorty." "Wasn't we all waitin' there with our tongues hangin' out, to see Jack strung up? And then she come in. You know what kind of a gent Mike Flynn is?"

"Yeah," said the sheriff. "He's a tough hombre, is Mike."

"And that tough hombre," said Shorty, "stood up there and made a speech to us, and condemned the sneaks that would hang the husband of a girl like her!"

"Well, dog-gone my hide, but that's surprisin'," said the sheriff. "Because Mike ain't a sentimental gent. I recollect him sayin' his reasons for not gettin' married, once, and the reasons was neither weak nor few!"

"He dog-gone near cried," said Shorty. "And so did some of the rest of us that heard him make that talk."

The sheriff scratched his head, with deliberation.

Pringle, taking alarm, called out: "Give a heave, boys, and we'll make an end to it."

A heave was given, accordingly, and big Jack Reynolds was snatched from his feet into the air, as the rope clamped around his throat.

He did not struggle. But there was hardly time for a struggle, for as he was yanked into the air, preparatory to being given enough sudden slack of the rope to drop him and break his neck, a gun slid from the clothes of the sheriff into his hand, and exploded. The rope parted with an audible snap, and the body of Reynolds fell.

He might well have broken his head on the rocks that covered the ground, in that fall. But his feet, luckily, struck the edge of the boulder on which he had been standing, and as he lurched outward and forward again, the huge arms of the sheriff received him, and lowered his weight to the earth. A moment later, Lancing had loosened the rope, and Reynolds could breathe.

He uttered neither thanks nor curses, but stood there dragging in the air in great breaths, and apparently perfectly composed.

"That's a wrong move, sheriff," exclaimed Pringle angrily. "That's our man. We worked for him, and we got him, and he's ours."

"You oughtn't to crowd me like this, Pringle," said the sheriff. "Maybe he's your man, and I guess that he needs hangin', but you oughtn't to crowd me. That's all. I oughta

have a chance to make up my mind, is all that I have to say!"

"We worked like the devil to get him," said Pringle. "There's three men wounded, here, that he hurt when we caught him. *They* might 'a' been dead, if he'd had his way. And now you bust in and try to spoil things. It ain't honest, it ain't right, and it ain't nacheral."

"I don't wanta be crowded," insisted the sheriff. "That's all I can say. I don't wanta be crowded none at all! You crowded me, Pringle. You don't wanta be doin' that. Now I got a chance to think it all over. I guess you boys better wait a while. You better wait till tomorrow. You're all heated up now. It ain't a good idea to lynch nobody while you're all heated up. You might make a mistake and be sorry about it afterward. I been sorry myself, a coupla times, about gents that I've hanged."

One of the wounded men hitched himself up on one elbow.

"Steve," he said, "it's an outrage, this here is. We oughta have the hangin' of this gent right when and where we please."

The sheriff raised his voice.

"Now, boys," he said, "I'm giving you my advice. I wouldn't hang him before sunrise. You hear me talk? I wouldn't stretch his neck before sunrise—or it might be called murder, d'you see? And I might have to go on the trail after you. That's all. Just you all remember and don't crowd me none. So long! I gotta get these here cow rustlers into the jail before the hide is all wore off their feet."

He remounted, and departed for the town.

BEFORE SUNRISE

10.

It was after dark, and well after, when Arthur Howison paced up and down in his room at the hotel, a thoroughly disturbed and baffled man. A breath of air struck him unex-

pectedly from the side, and turning his head, he was startled by the appearance of Shannigan, in the act of shutting the door behind him.

Howison, with a gasp, hastened to the window and drew down the shade.

"What's the news, Shannigan? What's the news?" he asked.

"You know about the sheriff?"

"Everybody in town knows that," said Howison. "By this time, half of the entire range knows it, and it was wonderful to see that girl in the dining room, tonight, pretending *not* to know. A very wonderful thing, Shannigan."

Shannigan sat down, made a cigarette, lighted it and took a long drag on it.

"Tell me about it," said he, as the smoke passed slowly from his wide lips and rose in a gradual, wavering veil across his eyes.

"Everybody that could get places at the tables was there —to see her," said Howison. "She sat in a corner by herself, and seemed to forget the crowd, and looked before her into happiness, and smiled at it. She took out a pair of pictures and put them beside her plate, and looked at them, for a long time. I could feel that crowd melting, I can tell you. Every one except Lee Swain. He was at the table with me."

"Good man," said Shannigan. "You're close to Swain, are you?"

"Not very," answered Howison. "Swain is a tough little character. He doesn't spread his mind on the table in front of any one, but he was pleased when I went to talk with him. I told him that I saw a future for investments in this town, and that as a probable citizen of it, I wanted to see justice, and strict justice prevail—I hated to see the people become maudlin because of a girl with a pretty face."

"Good," repeated Shannigan. "Go slow with him. That's the way to make the greatest progress. Go slow! What's in his mind? What did he say?"

"Not a great deal. He keeps saying that the whole thing seems wrong. His instinct is against it, and he trusts his in-

stinct. He hates to see justice cheated, and he's sure that Jack Reynolds killed Powell and Halpin. The arrival of the girl was too pat, too circumstantial. He keeps coming back to that."

"I don't blame him," said Shannigan. "But I think he's wrong about the murder of Halpin and Powell."

"What makes you sure? Have you found out something?"

"I've seen him."

"Hello! Seen him? How did you manage that?"

"It wasn't easy. I found the place where they've camped outside of town, to wait for sunrise. When tomorrow's sun comes up, as sure as fate they'll hang Jack Reynolds to a tree. Their minds are more fixed on it than ever, since the sheriff interfered a bit. But I managed to get close enough to see Reynolds."

"He was a fine-looking boy, as I remember him," said the other. "And if there's a scrap of his father in him, there's a bit that's fine *inside,* as well."

"He's a wild young hawk," said Shannigan. "I know that. But he couldn't do cold-blooded murder. He could shoot to kill, and he has, a good many times. But always in a fight, as far as I can make out. I've picked up everything that I can about him. And I had a look at his face. He's got good, cold, steady nerve. Ready to die any second, and his digestion as good as ever. What's the other news about the girl?"

"Nothing except the way she kept the crowd in her hand while she was eating dinner. She ought to be on the stage."

"She's on a stage now," said Shannigan. "And she likes it a little too well."

"Have you any plans?" said Howison. "I mean, plans about what can be done before sunrise?"

"He has to go to jail," said Shannigan. "That's as far as I can see. And I still don't know how I can get him there. Those fellows are guarding him close. Four or five around him, every minute. They're afraid that some of the other men in Deerfoot are likely to raid the camp to take Jack away. And at the first sign of a raid, one of the guards is ready to pump two barrels of buckshot into the heart of Reynolds.

It's a tricky business. I've got to go sit in the dark and do a little thinking."

He stood up and stamped out the cigarette in an ash tray, grinding it down with his forefinger and thumb, as though his flesh were made of metal, insensible to heat.

"One thing more," said Howison. "Swain is interested in you almost as much as he is in the girl. He says that you're not a half-wit. The more he thinks about you, the more convinced he is that you're nothing of the kind—as you made yourself out this afternoon. He's wired to people he knows in Washington to make inquiries in Alexandria about a family by the name of Reynolds, living two miles and a half out of the town on the Washington Pike."

Shannigan nodded. "I thought that he would," said he. "It cuts our time short, and very short, but they're not likely to have the answers before tomorrow night. All our work will have to be done in between."

He paused at the door, and suddenly his smile grew broad and shining.

"D'you like the game, Howison?" he asked.

"As long as my nerves hold out, it's well enough," said Howison. "But I don't think that they'll stand very much more. Have you seen the girl?"

"She's asleep," said Shannigan, with a shrug of his great shoulders. "Women are weak things. They rub right out!"

He opened the door, gave one glance up and down the hall, and closed the door behind him.

There was no sound of a departing footfall. This surprised Howison, for his ear was quick and sensitive. Finally he stole softly to the door himself, and pushed it quickly open.

But Shannigan was not there!

In fact, he was already in the little room that had been assigned to him in the rear of the hotel. There he seated himself in a chair in the corner, beside the window. He looked out into the great, bright face of the night for hour after hour, never stirring. He made no sound. He neither smoked nor moved. But with his long hands stretched out, palm down, on the knees, he examined his ideas, one by one, and

tried hard to come to a conclusion that still avoided him.

The stars had swung through a wide arch of the sky before he at last stood up. He leaned from the window, and inhaled a deep, long breath.

Morning was not far away. Before many minutes, the pink of the dawn would begin to rise in the east, and steal around the wide horizon, putting out the lower stars, and so the light would sweep upward, growing in intensity, until a white pyramid of fire stood up in the east, and under it the sun rose and saw the last of Jack Reynolds!

Shannigan left the window, left his room, and with a soundless step passed along the corridor, keeping close to the right-hand wall, for flooring is less apt to squeak and groan under the shifting weight of a man's tread if he keeps close to the wall, where the boards will naturally have less spring.

He went down the stairs with even more care, putting down his feet tiptoe, first, and gradually transferring his weight to the forward foot.

When he reached the front door, it was locked, but a window at the side of the building was wide open, and through it Shannigan slipped at once to the ground.

He glanced at the street. The stars were so strong and the dust so pure a white that he could mark the rut holes, here and there. There was not a sound. Not a dog was barking, not a human voice spoke, there was not a moan of wind, not the far-off quaver of a wolf's howl from the hillsides around Deerfoot.

But still he did not take the way down the main street, though that was much the shortest for him, in this errand. That dust would take the imprint of feet too easily, and the trail which he left behind him must not be followed.

So he turned back and circled around the houses until he came to that shack which he had marked down the evening before as the residence of the sheriff.

It was a little lean-to, hardly more. The stovepipe that thrust above the roof leaned at an angle, ready to fall in the next gust of wind. But inside that wretched shell of a house

was the only man in Deerfoot who could be useful to Arthur Howison, Mary Tracy, Samuel Shannigan, and, above all, to young Jack Reynolds.

SHANNIGAN'S PLEA

11.

SHANNIGAN knocked at the door, softly. He allowed a considerable interval, and then knocked again. He had hardly finished when the door swung suddenly open. No matter how careless he was about the rest of his house, the sheriff had oiled the hinges of his front door!

But he did not appear. There was only empty darkness for the glance of Shannigan to plumb.

Then the voice of the sheriff demanded: "Who's that?"

He himself was standing just a little to the side of the door. It was a precaution that proved that the sheriff knew something about the dangers that might overlie his place as a hunter of men.

"I'm here, sir," said Shannigan.

"And who are you?"

"Mr. Jack Reynolds's man, Sam," said Shannigan.

"You're the boy that worked for the Reynolds outfit, are you?" said the sheriff. "Whatcha want?"

"I wanted to talk to you, sir. I been hearin' things."

"I need sleep and I need it powerful bad," said the sheriff.

"Mr. Sheriff," said Shannigan, "you'd be doin' a mighty kind thing, if you'd listen to Sam, for a minute."

"All right," said the sheriff, between a groan and a yawn. "Come in here, and I'll give you a light."

As Shannigan entered, the running wires of a lantern chimney screeched against the rusty iron, a match spurted blue fire that turned to yellow, dwindled, increased again, and finally was touched to the straight lantern wick. It ran across the cloth, a thin streak, then mounted to a point from which black smoke shot upward.

The sheriff closed the lantern, and dropped the match to the floor.

The light that spread suddenly and evenly through the room showed Steve Lancing in flannel shirt and underwear, his big, hairy legs braced far apart as he yawned again, prodigiously, throwing back his head, and then giving it a shake to get out more waves of encroaching sleep.

The bunk he had risen from was at one side of the room, with a single blanket thrown back from a straw pallet. There was a stove in a corner, with the soiled tins of the evening meal stacked on top of it. There was a cheap deal table, and two stools beside it, and from the walls hung, like moldering battle flags, old coats, tattered slickers, holsters, and various other odds and ends.

The sheriff was not a neat housekeeper.

He sat down, crossed his legs, and made himself a cigarette.

"Sit down, Sam," he said kindly.

"No, sir," said Sam, "my legs ain't tired, sir. I was goin' to say to you, sir, that I been hearin' some whispers around this town that seem to say to me that Mr. Jack is kind of in trouble?"

The sheriff did not look up. He licked his cigarette, and before answering, he thrust his head out until the cigarette was projected over the chimney of the lantern on the table. It caught fire almost at once, the paper curling away in a crimson little rag that blew up into the air.

Steve Lancing spoke through the first cloud of smoke.

"Your boss is in trouble, all right. A pile of trouble, boy."

"Mr. Sheriff, what's he gone and done?" asked Shannigan.

"He's been too dog-gone free with his lead," said the sheriff. "You know your boss pretty well, don't you, Sam?"

"Yes, sir. I hope that I know him—always minding my place."

"Open-handed cuss, ain't he?"

"Yes, sir. Money was never more'n air, to him," said Shannigan.

"That's right," agreed the sheriff. "His own money or the

next fellow's was just the same to him, Sam. He'll buy you a drink any time, and pay for it out of your wallet. But the money business doesn't matter so much. It's the ammunition that he's so generous with that counts a good deal more. People like to get presents, Sam, and yet they don't get happy when a half-inch chunk of lead is thrown their way hard enough to go through the heart, or smash through the brain."

Shannigan moistened his wide lips.

"Mr. Sheriff, you mean to say that Mr. Jack's been shootin' people?"

"I mean to say that," declared the sheriff. "He's hurt a lot of feelings, around this neck of the woods. And he's started a whole flock of funerals. And that's too bad, Sam. You'll admit that's too bad?"

Shannigan stared at the floor. Then he passed the back of his hand across his corrugated forehead.

"I'm mighty sorry to hear it, sir," said he. "And I know how straight Mr. Jack can shoot. But—" He paused.

"Go on, Sam," said the sheriff.

"They been telling me that he shot two white folks by name of Powell and Halpin, sir."

"That's what people say," said the sheriff.

"And that he didn't give them no chance—that he murdered 'em, sir?"

"That's about the way of it, I guess."

"And out there in the woods, they're holdin' Mr. Jack for sunrise before they hang him, sir?"

"I don't know anything about that," said the sheriff. "I got a position in the eyes of the law, Sam, and I don't know anything about lynchings."

"Mr. Sheriff," said Shannigan, "if you was to arrest Mr. Jack and take him to jail, he wouldn't die at sunrise."

"No, he wouldn't," said the sheriff, nodding his head, and smiling faintly. He watched the brutal features of Shannigan with much interest.

"Well, sir," said Shannigan, "if you was to be pretty sure that Mr. Jack didn't do those murders, you'd likely wanta

arrest him and make him safe in the jail, wouldn't you, sir?"

"I would, Sam."

"I was layin' awake," said Sam, "and thinkin' and thinkin', and finally I seen that as clear as can be—if you knew that Mr. Jack wasn't a murderer, you wouldn't leave him off there in the woods to hang. You'd go and find out what was takin' place, and bring him safe into jail, till folks could see that he was a right man, and not a bad man, at all."

"Go on, Sam," said Lancing.

"And so I come here to tell you, sir, that Mr. Jack Reynolds *ain't* no murderer!"

"How do you know that?" asked the sheriff, suddenly leaning forward.

"I know it in my heart, sir," said Shannigan solemnly, "I know it so well that I could say it with my eyes closed!"

The sheriff leaned still farther forward.

"Let's hear your proof, brother," he said.

"I've known Mr. Jack a long while, sir, and I know that he's got a quick temper, and he ain't likely to be a hard-workin' man. But *murder* ain't what he'd do. He's a lot too high above that!"

"You mean, Sam, that you just feel your boss is too good to do murder?"

"Right in the middle of my heart I know it," said Shannigan.

The sheriff leaned back again and shook his head.

"You're a good boy, Sam," said he. "I'm glad you came and talked for your boss, like this. But I can't do nothin' unless I see my way clear. If I thought your boss was innocent, I'd go and bust myself in two to get him free from the gang. But I pretty well know he's guilty, and so he's gotta hang. This ain't the part of the country that you growed up in, Sam. Sometimes we can't afford to wait for the law, because the law costs time and money, and we gotta go ahead and let folks take their own way with gunmen.

"Gunmen are bad, Sam. They're mighty bad. Even when they're in what they call a fair fight, it ain't fair at all. No, sir. They have the skill. They live by it. They practice every

day. And when they get into a fight with a man who doesn't practice every day—it's really murder, and not an honest fight at all. You understand?"

"I guess I understand, sir," said Shannigan, sighing.

"I have to use guns myself," said the sheriff. "And I have to practice. Every day that I get a chance, it's rifle for a while, and then revolver for a while. I'm a good nacheral shot, which I make myself better all the while by practice. An ordinary gent, he's got no chance against me. And I know it. I try to hold my hand all I can, but there's dead men on my books that I wish was alive and walkin' once more, I can tell you that. As for your boss, I'm sorry for you, Sam, because you love him. But I ain't sorry for him. He's a man-killin' snake, I say, and I'm glad to see him wiped off the books!"

The sheriff was not given to long speeches, and this one fairly winded him.

"You go back and say your prayers for your boss, Sam," he said, kindly, in the finish. "Because I can't help but think that he's no better than dead. There's the morning light beginning out there, now!"

He pointed.

Shannigan caught that hand by the wrist, and the other hand at the same place, as it rose in a startled gesture.

"I'm mighty sorry, sir," said Shannigan, "but if you won't go out there and arrest Mr. Jack by yourself, I guess that I've gotta forget who I am, sir, and *make* you go!"

The sheriff sat as one lost deeply in a dream.

He looked down the length of his enormous arms, at the rather bony hands that grasped his wrists. Then he looked out of the past, in which for so many years no human being had dared to rouse his full might, and into the present, at the black, emotionless eyes of Shannigan.

"Sam," said the sheriff, still gently, "I know that you love your boss well enough to fight for him, and I like you a lot better for being that kind. But if you don't take your hands off of me, you fool, I'd break your head for you, in another coupla seconds!"

The temper of the honest sheriff had risen as he spoke, and now he jumped up from the stool he had been sitting on, and stood towering above the compact form of Shannigan.

"Mighty sorry, sir," said Shannigan, "but you'll have to come with me, Mr. Sheriff. There ain't any other way for Mr. Jack to—"

"Well, by thunder," said the sheriff, and with his full power he wrenched his arms back.

More amazing than all that had happened before, in this strange little interview—though he had twisted his wrists as he pulled back, and laid all of the immense power of shoulders and arms back into his recoiling movement—he was not freed, nor had he drawn Shannigan off balance. The hands that held his wrists had turned to fire, that was all, and the heat was burning into the very bone of the sheriff's arms.

"Mighty sorry, sir," said Shannigan. "I don't know what else to do. I hate to hold onto you, Mr. Sheriff."

The sheriff said nothing. He merely whirled himself to the right with the full force and weight of his body. This time he succeeded in jerking himself free, though it seemed to him that the other voluntarily relaxed a hold that could not otherwise have been broken.

And now, taking a long stride forward, the sheriff poised a fist that was famous through the length of a thousand miles of range country. Many a time it had served in place of a bullet from his guns in making arrests. Fractured jaws, and broken ribs, and noses made level with the cheek bones were the usual result of his blows.

But, as he lunged, Shannigan shifted his head slightly to the side. The burly fist brushed his cheek, and the lurching weight of Steve Lancing brought up against the fist of the smaller man.

It was as though he had run headlong and bumped his chin against a massive wall—yes, against a wall of bronze, falling toward him.

He was not knocked quite senseless.

There still remained to him enough perception to know, as he fell forward limply, that mighty arms received him,

raised him, stretched him at length on his bunk. He was still enough master of his wits to realize that a deft hand had dipped inside the open collar of his flannel shirt and removed the little "last-chance" pistol that hung on his breast, suspended from a slender horsehair lariat.

That gun was still in the hand of Shannigan as Lancing roused himself, and sat up. The sheriff looked first at the weapon, and then at the respectful face of Shannigan, who was saying:

"I wouldn't want to carry you out there, sir. You wouldn't like it. And I guess you'll kindly think things over and go and arrest Mr. Jack for me, sir, won't you?"

THE NECKTIE PARTY

12.

LANCING sat up and looked at his crimson wrists, where the grasp of the other had held him. He felt his jaw, on which a lump was rising. And still at the base of the brain he seemed to have been struck by a ponderous club.

"You're a strong man, Sam," said he, for a simple man was the sheriff, after all, and not filled with false pride and shame.

Shannigan looked down at his hands.

"Yes, sir," he answered. "There's always been something in my hands that ain't in most other men."

"Now," said the sheriff, "it looks like this to me. You've got me pretty helpless, Sam. You got some kind of a fool idea that if I don't want to go out there and arrest Jack Reynolds, you can make me do it. You're too simple to understand, but there's one clean fact—I dunno that I wanta be marched out there at the point of a gun. I'd go and arrest Jack Reynolds—it's kind of my duty to, anyway—but the minute that I get him away from the gang, out yonder, I got an idea what'll happen, Sam. Some of the friends of Reynolds, they're goin' to take and jump in and turn him loose."

"No, sir," said Shannigan. "I dunno anything about any idea like that."

"Suppose that I went out there, Sam, you'd work with me to get your boss straight into the jail?"

"Yes, sir," said Sam Shannigan. "That's the only thing that I wanta do."

"You'd work faithful and true with me, Sam, to land Reynolds in the Deerfoot jail?"

"Yes, sir," said Shannigan.

"We'll shake hands on that, boy," remarked Lancing.

He held out his vast paw, and then closed it over the slender fingers of Shannigan and in a burst put on every iota of power in his grip. It was answered by a gradual flection of the hand of Sam. The flesh that the sheriff grasped seemed to grow harder, to become all bones. It contracted with the force of white-hot iron that shrinks as it cools.

The mighty sheriff was amazed. His hand was growing numb, and he noted, with bewilderment, that in the midst of this effort the face of the other remained perfectly composed. Not a flicker of light appeared in his eyes.

"It ain't any use, Mr. Sheriff," he said suddenly. "There's something in my hands that other folks don't have!"

The sheriff relaxed his effort. Instantly his hand was set free, and he looked down to the white imprint left by the fingers of Shannigan.

"I never seen anything like it," declared Lancing. "But while I been makin' a fool of myself, we've made a promise, Sam, ain't we?"

"We've made a promise, sir," said Shannigan. "I'm goin' to work all my might to get Mr. Reynolds to jail, even if a thousand men was to try to get him away from you."

"Good!" said the sheriff. "And dog-gone good, too. The two of us together, we could manage quite a lot, Sam. You ain't so big as me, but you're younger, and you're stronger. Well, Sam, I see some pink out yonder in the sky, and I reckon that we'd better drift along. We'll just throw a coupla saddles on the hosses back there in the corral, and then we'll start."

"Yes, sir," said Shannigan.

He held out his left hand, with the pistol in the palm of it, the butt toward the sheriff. The latter accepted it slowly.

"Thanks, Sam," said Lancing. "I see you don't think that I'm a hound that'll take advantages that don't belong to me by rights. And the more I see of you, Sam, the more I like you. Dog-gone my hide, we'll make a team, boy, is what we'll make!"

He began to dress, saying: "Step out there and collect the roan and the black mare. That black is a sprintin' fool, Sam, and she'll about fit you. She ain't quite powered up to carry my hulk."

Presently, as he pulled on his boots, the sheriff looked through the window and had sight of Shannigan awkwardly trying to drop the noose of a lariat over the head of one of the desired horses, and every attempt was a failure.

The sheriff chuckled. He was still chuckling when he entered the corral with a second rope.

"Everybody to his own trade. You never was a cowpuncher, son. But watch the way they do it down in Mexico!"

He advanced straight into the milling tangle of half a dozen horses in one corner of the corral. They waited until he was close and then, starting in one mass, they rushed straight toward him, as though prepared to beat him into the ground.

The sheriff waited undaunted, and in an instant the mass divided, three to one side, and three to the other, running at full speed. Then he made one step and underhanded made his cast. The rope flew like a striking snake, low and fast. It struck over the head of the black mare, a long, low-built, powerful animal. At once she slowed and suddenly halted, unwilling to pull against the burn of the lariat.

"There's your hoss for you, Sam," said the sheriff.

"Thanks, sir," said Shannigan. "It's a mighty fine trick, and the like of it ain't in Virginia."

"Well," said the sheriff, "one trick don't make a man, boy. We gotta know each other a pile better than we do! Man-

handling is worth more than rope handling, in most parts of the world!"

His own horse was snagged with equal facility. In the shed they saddled the pair, and when the stirrups had been adjusted to suit Shannigan's shorter legs, they rode out into the rose of the morning.

Deerfoot was already beginning to waken. Here and there a door slammed, or an ax commenced to ring with chiming strokes as some one cut wood for the breakfast fire, and cows mooed with a mellow booming from the pasture lots.

"We got no more than time, " said the sheriff. "That sun is close to pushing its nose up over the sky line, and Pringle ain't goin' to wait a second past time."

So they put the horses to a full gallop, and the sheriff, looking askance, made sure that his companion might be clumsy with a rope, but that he was at home in the saddle, perfectly.

As they rode on, it seemed to Lancing that everything was happening for the best. As for the humiliation of being mastered, the sheriff had fought too many battles not to know that every man will meet a conqueror, sooner or later. And something told him that Shannigan would never boast of his victory. In the meantime, was not he, Lancing, actually doing the thing which his oath of office compelled him toward?

They struck the trail toward the camping ground of the posse. They came to the verge of the wood where the posse lay. And now, in the east, that white pyramid of light was thrusting high above the horizon. The sun would be up in a moment. Inside the trees, as they dismounted, they could hear the calling of voices.

The sheriff ran straight forward, for that was his style and his nature. Shannigan, on the other hand, circled a little to the side, though he ran even faster, and he came out into the clearing among the trees at a point quite apart from that of Lancing.

They were ready for the moment. The rope was already over the branch of a high tree, the small noose dangling down conveniently at the height of a man. Pringle stood facing

the east, with his arms folded, a stern picture of a man, while some of the posse already gripped the end of the lariat, and others were clustered around the tall form of Jack Reynolds.

The young man was magnificent. His head was as high as ever, the color in his face as true, and with a lordly eye he looked over these preparations for his execution.

Shannigan, slowing to a walk, stepped totally unnoticed into the thick cluster of men around the prisoner—for every eye was fixed upon the big sheriff as he came striding on.

"Pringle," called out Lancing, "I've had to change my mind."

"What have you changed it to, Steve?" asked Pringle, frowning.

"You've got a case against Reynolds, yonder," said the sheriff. "And it's a good enough case to try in court. Pringle, he's gotta be arrested, now, and go to jail!"

The answer came not from Pringle alone. Every man of the posse cried out vehemently in a breath: "No."

Pringle waved toward the rest.

"You hear what the boys say, Steve?"

"I've heard what the boys said a good many times," said the sheriff. "But I gotta do the thing that seems right to me. I been waked up to think the thing over, Pringle. Just hand your man over to me plumb peaceable, will you? I don't wanta make no trouble for you-all."

"It ain't my say alone," said Pringle. "I'm only one man, and it took more than one man to catch Reynolds. It took more than one mile of riding, too! Gents, you can all speak up and give Lancing his answer."

Then an elderly man exclaimed: "Steve, you know your business, but we know ours. We oughtn't 'a' let you bluff us yesterday, and we sure ain't goin' to be stopped a second time!"

He who spoke stood straight beside the prisoner, and he freshened his grip upon the arm of Jack Reynolds. His companions pushed a little forward, to present an even front to the powers of the law, and as they did so, Shannigan found himself close behind the captive.

His knife slipped over the cords that tied the hands of Reynolds behind his back, and instantly those capable hands were free. So perfect was the nerve control of the young man that there was not a start or a quiver in his body. Only his two hands contracted suddenly and powerfully.

The sheriff was saying: "You boys, I reckon, dunno just what you're sayin'. I got you all wrote down in my mind, like in a book, and if you wanted to go ahead through with this here lynching, I could make things hot for you, and I *would* make 'em hot, too! Don't forget that!"

As he spoke, he rolled his eyes angrily from side to side, not only at the posse but in search of Sam. And him he located through a glimpse, only, standing unnoticed behind the prisoner.

"The sun's up, and the time's come!" shouted Pringle loudly. "Come on, boys, and get the business over with!"

For a pale, bright gilding struck the tops of the trees, as he spoke, and as the knife of Shannigan cut the leg ropes of the prisoner.

"Take him, fellows!" called half a dozen voices. And they turned to see big Jack Reynolds suddenly break from those who stood around him, and leap away toward the nearest trees.

THE ESCAPE

13.

It was as though a corpse had risen from the swathing clothes of the dead. For one breath, that party of handy gunmen stood entranced, and in the next breath every gun was out.

They saw big Jack Reynolds springing literally for life, close to the edge of the trees, and they saw beside him the shorter form of Sam, the "mulatto," easily keeping pace with the fugitive.

"Get 'em!" yelled Pringle, firing.

Now a very strange thing happened, for it was seen that

the mulatto deliberately tripped Reynolds from behind, and rolled with him headlong on the ground. He was falling with Reynolds as Pringle fired a bullet that clipped neatly through the spot where Reynolds's head had been in the air. They were both rolling as the posse delivered its first blast, in a volley. And they were both lurching to their feet again, untouched, within the limit of the trees as the posse started shooting, each man for himself.

But trees make the worst possible background for accurate target practice; moreover, the sheriff was raging like a madman. He felled men right and left with his massive fists, and the thunder of his voice was enough to make bullets fly wild.

So Jack Reynolds and Shannigan, with Shannigan in the lead and showing the way, reached the verge of the trees, where the two saddle horses were waiting. Shannigan took the saddle of the black with a flying leap, and Reynolds gained the stirrups of the roan in less than an instant later.

Straight across the trail they shot the startled mustangs, and then down the slope through trees, brush, and monstrous boulders that instantly raised a screen between them and the danger from behind.

They rode a scant mile, when Reynolds himself drew rein, and looked back from the shelter of a poplar grove that sprouted out on the shoulder of a hill where a runlet of water had formed a small pool. Jack Reynolds laughed.

"They've tried every direction but the right one, the fools!"

He drew out the rifle that was in the saddle holster of the sheriff's horse.

"They wanted to use the rope on me," said Reynolds, "and before they get me the second time, they're going to have *reason* to hang me! But what on earth made the sheriff come to life on my account? And who are you, partner? And what made you trip me, back there?"

"They was just about to shoot, as I seen from the back of my head, Mr. Jack," said Shannigan, "and I thought they'd be pretty likely to shoot breast-high more'n knee high, so I just went and put the two of us on the ground, sir. Not meanin' no harm, neither."

"They would have peppered us," said Reynolds. "They certainly would have made a sieve out of me. You have a brain in your head, partner, whoever you are!"

He suddenly looked with a devouring curiosity at Sam Shannigan.

"You ain't gone and forgot poor old Sam, have you, Jack?" asked Shannigan.

"What the devil are you talking about?" inquired the other. "What do you mean?"

"Why, sir," said Shannigan, "it seems like you *have* forgot me. And maybe you've forgot even the old home place down there in Virginia on the Washington Pike, two mile and a half from Alexandria, sir?"

Reynolds frowned, and the scowl, gradually, turned into a broad grin. "What kind of a game is this all about, partner?" he asked.

"You ain't calling Sam partner, are you, sir?" asked Shannigan, touching his hat.

"All right, Sam," said Reynolds. "Anything you say goes with me, just now. What's behind all this game?"

"Mr. Arthur Howison, sir," said Shannigan.

"Father's rich friend? Is that the one?"

"Yes, sir. He heard that you was kind of bogged down in the miseries, sir. So he hurried out and begun arrangin' things. And your poor young wife, sir, she and old Sam jumped across the country as fast as trains would carry 'em. And she's back there in town breaking her heart for a sight of you, sir!"

Reynolds scratched his chin.

"The most important thing to me is that there's the sun, yonder, and I never expected to see the full face of it, again. Sam, I thought that I was about to do some fancy steps on the thin air—and then the sheriff showed up in front of me, and you showed up behind. How did the posse happen to let you get that close to me?"

"They couldn't see nothin' but the sheriff, sir, because he's a great big man," answered Shannigan.

"It was beautiful work, beautiful work," said Reynolds. He stretched out his arms, and laughed.

RETURN OF THE POSSE

14.

"I NEVER knew what a grand world it is," said Reynolds. "I never guessed, before, how good it is to breathe. Look at 'em yonder, Sam, hunting that false scent as hard as they can run!"

For the entire posse had apparently decided that the prisoner must have fled back up the trail, and now they were spurring their horses at full speed up the ascent. They were in view for only a moment, and then dipped away behind a shoulder of a hill, and were gone. But they were still so near that thin, flying shoes beat back across the air to the two who listened.

"And Howison was behind it all?" muttered Jack Reynolds.

"Behind the whole thing," said Shannigan. "I reckon that nobody would ever 'a' lifted a finger for you, sir, except for him. You would 'a' hanged yesterday in Deerfoot, and you'd be lyin' under a mound of earth this mornin', Mr. Jack!"

"The girl," said Reynolds. "What about her?"

"Mis' Mary—your poor little wife, sir?" asked Shannigan.

Reynolds laughed.

"All right, call her that if you want to. She stopped the mob, I take it?"

"She stopped 'em dead, sir. She pulled 'em right back and made 'em shy. There is brains in that little lady, Mr. Jack."

"I've got to see her. I've got to see Howison, too," said Reynolds. "I didn't dream that he had the blood in him to do such a thing as this. I still can't understand it! Where is Howison now?"

"Right back there in Deerfoot, sir."

"I'll manage to slip in," declared the big fellow, nodding his fine head.

"That'll be easy," said Shannigan. "You can see them all when you're in jail."

"Jail?"

"Yes, sir."

"What are you talking about, Sam?"

"It needed a good deal of persuading to get the sheriff to take a stand for you, Mr. Jack," said Shannigan. "But finally he come in and agreed to help, if we'd deliver you at the jail, sure enough."

Reynolds stared. "Hold on, Sam," said he. "You mean that I'm to go into Deerfoot and give myself up?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not crazy, boy!"

"You need to stand your trial, and be cleared, Mr. Jack."

"Cleared in Deerfoot? They'd simply raise another mob and lynch me, and the second time, they'd go through with it! What possessed anybody to make such a crazy bargain with the sheriff?"

"You wouldn't wanta be hangin', right now, from off of the branch of that tree back there, with your eyes as dead as the eyes of a rabbit, would you, Mr. Jack?"

"You mean that you had to get the sheriff in at any price?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sam," said Reynolds, "I can see that you're an honest fellow and that you want to live up to agreements. But I can't agree with you as far as that."

"Suppose," said Shannigan, "that you ride away now. Ain't folks still goin' to call you a murderer, sir?"

"What if they do—so long as they haven't a rope around my neck!"

"They'll have it there, one day. Nobody can beat the law very long, sir. One time it'll come sneakin' up and catch you while you sleep. Your friends is goin' to be powerful sick, Mister Jack, to think of you hunted around in the hills, like a coyote."

"Let 'em be sick. I've had enough taste of a crowd and mob justice to last me the rest of my life."

"Mr. Jack," said Shannigan, with a sudden change of voice. "You didn't kill Powell and Halpin?"

"No. But who'll believe me when I say no?"

"There's ways of making the truth come out," declared Sam Shannigan. "There's plenty of ways of makin' it appear. What happened back there in the Owens Desert, Jack?"

"A long story happened back there," declared Reynolds. "But the point of the yarn is, simply, that I'm not going to jail again."

Shannigan looked carefully over him.

"I don't like to do it, sir," said he. "But if you ain't goin' to come dead willing, you have to come dead unwilling, I reckon."

Jack Reynolds snapped his fingers, and laughed.

"Going to have Arthur Howison *order* me into jail, Sam?" he asked.

"No, sir," said Shannigan. "This here is a little agreement that I made all by myself with the sheriff—my word and honor and his word and honor. I'm a tough sort of a man, and a bad sort of man in lots of ways, Mr. Jack, but the one thing that I keep is my word, sir. We'd better start back now."

He was sitting the saddle close to Reynolds and now he laid a gentle hand on the arm of the youth.

Fire flashed from Reynolds's eyes.

"Drop that hand, Sam!" he commanded.

And he turned to knock the hand away.

He suddenly found himself sprawling, face down, across the withers of the black horse. The rifle fell from his hand to the earth. Then he was allowed to slip to the ground. He was facing a drawn and steady revolver.

"What d'you mean, Sam?" he gasped.

"I mean that you go to jail, Mr. Jack," said Shannigan.

"You thick-witted fool!" cried Reynolds, rubbing himself where that terrible grip had seized on him. "D'you want to undo everything that's been done?"

"If it meant the breakin' of my word, Mr. Jack," said that profound bass voice, with the hushed-organ ring in it, "I'd shoot you like a dog, and leave you here to stay!"

Jack Reynolds stared for an instant into the face of the other. He could not endure for more than a moment that glance which met his, and that convulsed and brutal savagery which was stamped in the other.

Then he looked down, fairly dizzy with what he had seen.

"Sam," he said, "you're not what you seem. What are you, in the name of the devil?"

"Why, sir," said Shannigan, instantly smoothing the hardened scowl from his face, "I'm a friend of yours, Mr. Jack, and I'm tryin' to take you the right way out of a bad place in your life."

Reynolds picked up the rifle and handed it butt first to Shannigan.

"Take that and keep it," he said. "I feel as though lightning had hit me. One thing is sure—I've got to go where you want to take me. But I'll tell you this, Sam—you and I will have to have a long reckoning, if I live to come to it."

Shannigan nodded slowly. "I sort of have the same idea, Mr. Jack," said he. "You've had your own way in the world a pretty long time, and when we have the reckoning, maybe they'll be a sort of a big score between us, one way or another! Get back on your hoss, and ride before me all the way to Deerfoot. And mind you, Mr. Jack, I got an uneasy gun hand, and from this time on, if I shoot, I shoot to kill."

Westerners are not patient people, in some respects, chiefly in their dealings with other men. Patience and nothing but patience will bring a reward to the prospector and the cattleman; knowledge and the capacity for long and patient labor are the requisites that go with his career. But when it comes to his dealings with other men, he is apt to take snap judgment and let the matter go. Friendship is not the same thing, of course. A tried friend lasts forever in that part of the world. But in other human relationships the Westerner makes up his mind on the spur of the moment.

The posse made up its mind about Sheriff Steve Lancing the instant that it saw the prisoner escape.

More than half of them streamed away in the vain pursuit after the fugitive, but Pringle and the rest remained behind. And it was from Pringle's hand that the lariat flew that settled around the shoulders of big Lancing and reduced him instantly to helplessness.

As he strove to free his arms, fresh twists of rope showered over him, and he was swathed from head to foot in the rounds of hemp.

He was lying helplessly on the ground as they disarmed him. The debate over him was brief.

It was true that they might hang him on the spot as a rascal who must have taken bribes to set the prisoner free. But it seemed a much safer thing to take him into the town of Deerfoot and there let the whole crowd of the town act as judge and, if necessary, as executioner as well!

So they partially freed him, and got him on the back of a horse. There they lashed him securely once more. The wounded men were put in the litters, and with the scanty remainder of the posse—merely five men in all, exclusive of those helpless with their hurts—the group returned into the town.

They had expected to come with jubilation. They had expected to be met by a rioting populace only that afternoon. Now they found that they were balked of their prey, and it was a bitter, though a true, consolation to take with them in their return some one on whom they could blame their failure.

There was no whooping, no shouting, and the crowd that gathered was not composed of men, women, and children. There were men only, and their tone was stern.

They jammed the street so that progress was more and more slow. At last, exactly by the little jail, they paused. It was not much of a jail, but it was filled, just then, with various malefactors whom the honest sheriff had caught, here and there, and brought single-handed home.

Now there was about him nothing but a sea of grim faces, pressing closer and closer together.

At the halt, some one sang out: "If we can't hang Reynolds, let's hang the crooked sheriff!"

At this, the sheriff thundered: "I don't mind hanging, but who called me crooked? You did, Luke Harrison? Why, you little dried-up shrimp!"

"Oh, shut up, Steve," said some one. "You know you been crooked. Why not admit it?"

"Who says that I been crooked? *How* have I been crooked?" demanded Steve Lancing. "I went out to stop you from a lynching party. Ain't that the duty of a sheriff? And when I tried to stop you, you laughed at me. And the mulatto that was along with me, when he seen that I couldn't handle the crowd, he went and cut Reynolds loose, and doggone me if I blame him! Maybe you'll find that Reynolds'll be turned up here at the jail, as safe and sound as you please!"

It was not a bad speech in the beginning, but it was very unsatisfactory toward the close, and the people let the sheriff know what they thought of it with a derisive howl.

Pringle went three paces up the jail steps and said:

"Boys, it looks this way to me: I always been one to respect and admire Steve Lancing. I would 'a' fought with him or for him any old day. But it looks clear to me that somebody's offered him a pile of money to break Reynolds loose from us."

Now a dozen men, as the sheriff turned his agonized eye right and left, answered gruffly that they agreed.

"*Who* would 'a' offered me money?" demanded Lancing.

"Maybe the girl wife done it," said Pringle. "I dunno. Maybe it was her. If the mulatto knew about the mess that Jack was in, she must 'a' known, too! And wouldn't that make her wanta pay hard cash?"

The sheriff groaned.

"Boys, you're wrong. I never took dirty money in my whole life!"

"You never done it before, maybe," said Pringle. "And

this here is goin' to be the last time that you do it, too. We're through with you, Lancing."

There was another chorus of assent, and the sheriff groaned again, audibly, like a stricken bull. He saw a lifetime of dangerous and faithful service canceled and made of no avail through the bad luck rather than the sins of a single action. He had put his trust in honest men, until this day. Now he began to feel that there was nothing in the world worthy of faith. And the shock of that discovery was clearly stamped in his face.

Pringle said: "Something's gotta be done. We had Reynolds. I wish that we'd soaked a bullet through his head the minute that we got him, and been through with all the trouble. But we didn't, because we wanted the whole town to see justice done on that murdering hound. We got him clean here, and then you fellows sent out and stopped us, because, by thunder, a pretty young woman had showed up!"

He made a pause to emphasize his disgust and contempt. There was not a word of answer to him, not so much as a whisper, for the townsfolk were beginning to feel that they had played wretched parts, after all, and had done things for which they would be hissed and mocked in Deerfoot, thereafter. The whole range would laugh. And nothing is so hated by a Westerner as an incident that tends to make his entire community appear ridiculous.

Pringle went on rapidly: "It looks to me like there's only one thing to be done. The sheriff ain't been so wrong that we can fit Reynolds's noose onto his neck. But dog-gone me if we oughtn't to roll him in tar and give him a coat of feathers and ride him out of the town, because we're mighty well through with him!"

The shock of that idea took men aback. But there were savage and willing spirits in that crowd, and they suddenly began to press forward, shouting.

"All right," said Pringle. "Turn loose and do the work, boys. The next sheriff that takes the job in this here town, he's goin' to know the kind of men that he has to deal with, when he deals with us!"

The sheriff, struggling for an instant vainly against his bonds, looked up with agony into the pale-blue sky.

Then he said: "Gents, I'd a lot rather that you shot me. Pull a gun, Harry," he appealed to a bystander, "and put a slug through me for the sake of the old days, will you?"

But Harry shook his head.

"You oughtn't 'a' done it, Steve," he replied. "And, since you went and took money for turnin' Reynolds free, I dunno that you're gettin' more than comes to you!"

Hands were laid on the sheriff. Leering, savage, rejoicing faces appeared before him, men who never had liked him, men who long had writhed under the heavy hand with which he occasionally bore down upon the rougher spirits in the town. He could guess what mercy he would receive from them.

A sudden outbreak of voices farther up the street startled him and all the others.

The outcry was shrill and tingling, such as women and children will raise, and now a tumbling crowd of them turned the corner close at hand, gathered around two mounted figures, the first of whom was Jack Reynolds, and behind him Sam, the "mulatto"!

The angry men around the sheriff fell back, aghast. It seemed a day of miracles! There was Reynolds riding toward them, with his hands free, and the mulatto to the rear—Reynolds riding straight into Deerfoot as though into a town filled with friends.

He passed through the startled mob, with a wave of his hand to the right and another to the left.

"Hello, Steve," he said to the sheriff. "Have the fools been trying to take it out on you? Did they think that I'd run away from the *law?*"

15.

THERE is one thing which a small newspaper in a small town is capable of doing. It can reflect the tone of public opinion, and that was what the *Evening Messenger* of Deerfoot succeeded in doing. It came out, not in the evening, as its name implied, but in the middle of the day.

It carried the account of the arrival of "Mrs. Jack Reynolds," and of the stopping of the posse, and, furthermore, it told of the strange events of that morning, the action of the sheriff, the escape of the "prisoner of the people," as it chose to call Reynolds, and the voluntary return of Reynolds.

The *Evening Messenger* took a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together and simply praised every one all around!

It praised the posse for its heroic work in making an arrest. It particularly extended its sympathy to the three men who had been wounded in "the execution of a public duty." They had "unselfishly sacrificed themselves on the altar of the public weal," et cetera.

It praised the "magnificent devotion, beauty, and charm" of "the little woman who crossed a continent" and came in the hour of her husband's trouble. It gave handsome space to the sheriff, also, who had rushed out to make regular take the place of irregular law, and who had broken up the posse and arrested Reynolds.

But when the name of Reynolds was mentioned, there was a fine editorial outburst, which included references to "the somewhat extravagant high spirits of some sons of the best families of the South," and, all in one paragraph, glanced at the heroes of the Blue *and* the Gray, and stormed the ridge with the dying men of Pickett's division, and gallantly galloped with Stuart and Morgan.

But, whatever the extravagances of his conduct, the editor pointed out that nothing had been proved against Mr. Jack Reynolds. His voluntary surrender to the officers of the law after his delivery from the posse strongly indicated an untroubled conscience. And if he had wounded three men, he, after all, had been resisting an "irregular arrest."

The editorial wound up with a fervent hope that peace and quieter times were coming to the town of Deerfoot, but it gave warning against a sacrifice of "blood essentially manly, though perhaps too rashly and easily heated."

On the whole, it was just the sort of an editorial to fit the occasion.

The best paragraph of the whole account was that which described how "the unfortunate young wife, hearing finally the true predicament of her husband, hurried to the jail, and when she was admitted, flung herself weeping upon the cold steel bars that separated her from the man she loved, a sight," said the editor, "which caused the sternest eye to moisten."

Yes, it was a very good account, and most of the people of Deerfoot read it at least two or three times through.

It made them feel that they were indeed on the wild and thorny frontier of the country, and that Deerfoot was filled with heroic men and glorious women. It made them feel generous and kindly toward every one. And as for the indiscretions of Jack Reynolds, "Boys will be boys."

"Mrs. Jack Reynolds," who, after the interview at the jail, "lay exhausted and trembling in her room at the Deerfoot Hotel," was now saying:

"It was a great effect, Sam. You would have loved it. Oh, when I collected myself, and drew myself up on tiptoe, as I saw him, and then let my head fall back and in a kind of swooning, gasping voice cried out: 'My darling!' Oh, if you'd seen that, Sam, you would have been proud of me, you scoundrel. The jailer who was standing by had the tears running down his face, the poor dumb-bell, and he couldn't have seen the files that I passed Jack if they had been hand saws."

"He's a darling, all right," said Shannigan. "The finest young devil that ever wore red spurs, is what he is."

"He's something to look at," said the girl thoughtfully.

"He's a beauty," said Shannigan, eying her narrowly.

"What a head!" said Mary Tracy. "And how it's put on his shoulders!"

"Yes. With a whole neck," said Shannigan.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You know what I mean, Sam," said she. "He's like a statue. He's so full of life that he's walking on clouds."

"I know," said Shannigan, more covertly but more anxiously watching her. "Did you have a chance to talk to him?"

"Of course I did. I had my arms around him—through the bars—and I gave the jailer one tearful look that sank his ship. He backed up to the end of the corridor and turned his back on us. Then I told Jack that he was not to use the files. Not until he had word from you."

"How did he act his part when you showed up?" asked Shannigan.

"He was wonderful—simply wonderful!" said the girl. "He threw up a hand before his face and put on an expression of agony. Then he staggered to the bars and grabbed one in each hand, and held on. Oh, it was a great scene, Shannigan, and the jailer really cried like a baby over us!"

"That was a waste, all right," said Shannigan.

"The moment we had a chance to talk, he wouldn't say a word about anything but you, Sam! What have you done to him?"

"We argued a little, that's all."

"Did you argue with your hands?" she exclaimed.

"Tell me what happened," answered Shannigan impatiently.

"He said with his second or third breath, when we were alone: 'Who's that mulatto, Mary? Who's that Sam?'

" 'He's one of the old retainers,' said I. 'He's part of the ancestral estate. Didn't you recognize that?'

" 'I kept my face fairly straight in public,' said Jack to

me. 'But I've got to break down a little here and now. I've got to learn who Sam the mulatto is.'

" 'He's the devil, and he's on wheels,' said I."

"Thanks, Mary," remarked Shannigan, making a cigarette.

"Servants don't smoke in the room of their mistress," she corrected him.

He crumpled the cigarette, and dropped it in his pocket.

She went on: "He told me he knew that you were a devil, well enough, and then he wanted to know who had brought you into the case. I said it had been Howison. He remarked that he hadn't realized Howison knew so many *kinds* of useful men. I gathered that Jack doesn't love you very much, Sam."

"I'm not handsome enough for him," said Shannigan. "But that doesn't matter. It's not his money that hires me."

"No money hires you, Sam," the girl told him. "It's the mischief that hires you—and it can hire me, too, after this taste of it."

She began to laugh, strangling the sound as well as she could, though it still continued to bubble over, faintly.

"Go on," he ordered.

"Where was I? Oh, Jack and his questions about you. I told him that you were a white man, and he wanted to know a lot of other things about you, and I had to remind him that I did not have all the time in the world. I gave him a little miniature of you."

"All right. What was it, Mary?" he asked her.

"I can't tell you."

His brow darkened.

"As long as you work with me on this, you tell me everything," he cautioned her, and lifted a forefinger as he said it.

She leaned forward, deep in interest.

"What would you do to me, Sam?" she asked, her bright eyes studying his face. "What way would you take to discipline me?"

"Mary," said Shannigan, "I know that you're a bright girl, and I don't like to hear you talk like a fool. Go on where you left off. What was the miniature?"

"I told him," said the girl, "that if your eye were slower, and your hand weaker, and your brain stupider, and your heart kinder, you'd be a tiger. But, as it was, it would be a pitiful thing to pit a royal Bengal against you, any day of the week."

Shannigan folded his hands. His eyes were dull and emotionless as he regarded her.

"Good, vigorous language," he said. "I like your imagination, Mary. I always *have* liked it."

"He said that he agreed, and that there was something in you that he never had seen in any other man. You must have let him see you in action, Sam, when you took him away from the posse."

Shannigan waved his hand.

"Go on," he said. "When you finished with me, what else?"

"I told him the plan. I told him everything that you wanted me to tell him. About your hope that a trial could take place in a day or so, or that the case could be dismissed because of lack of evidence. I told him that the one great stumbling-block was that Lee Swain had telegraphed for information, and that his answer might come in time to blow the 'Reynolds of Alexandria' story as high as a kite. Lee Swain interested him, and he wondered what the little rat could have against him. I said that every little man is always hungering to put down some big one. He shook his head and seemed to think that there must surely be something else behind it."

"He did?" said Shannigan, sitting a little straighter.

"Yes, he did. Then I told him that, unless you found a way to intercept the telegram or put another in its place, the cat would probably be out of the bag tonight or tomorrow morning. And after that we would probably have to try to get him out of the jail—which was the reason for the files. But, in the meantime, you hoped that he could be cleared so far that, even after it had been found that I was only acting, nothing could be done to him. He was perfectly cool and easy. He wanted to know if Howison was directing things,

and I told him that Howison was never consulted, but that you were the brains.

"He was only partly pleased. He said that he thought you generally would have your way in the world—that was all he said about it. He asked me to see Howison and thank him. That was about all."

"Nothing to say to you, Mary?" asked Shannigan.

She flushed, and her lips parted, but no speech came.

The inhuman smile touched the lips of Shannigan.

"We don't have to learn about that," he said. "You see that I leave you your essential privacy."

She nodded slowly, as though there were reservations in her mind. Then, starting up, she went to Shannigan and planted herself before him.

"Is there something between you two that makes you hate Jack, and that makes Jack hate you?"

"What could there be?" asked Shannigan.

She shuddered.

"You won't hurt him, Sam, will you?" she asked.

"He's big enough to take care of himself," said Shannigan. "But what do you think? I'm saving his neck—I've saved it from one twisting already, haven't I?"

She drew a breath, but found no words. Her anxious eyes watched her strange employer.

"I'll tell you this," said the girl. "I'd like to know what you think of him, Sam. Do you think that he's right?"

Shannigan looked at her with that smile of old Egypt as he answered: "No man sees another man the way a woman does." He paused. Then he added: "I've hunted up everything that I could learn about him, from the name of his horse to the saloon he liked to drink in. I know a bit about his past, too. He's a wild hawk, and he has a beak and talons. But I believe that he's brave and pretty straight. He's not a saint, and he may not be a hero. Is that enough for you to know?"

"That's all you'll tell me," said the girl. "But you always hold back. You always treat me like a baby. Go away from me, Sam."

"All right," said he patiently.

He rose and went toward the door.

But she followed him with a savage little outburst.

"I should think that you could be human once in a *year!* Sometimes I hate you, Shannigan!"

"Not so loud," said Shannigan, at the door.

"If you smile," said the girl, "I'll go mad. If I see that horrible mocking smile on your face, I'll lose my wits!"

"I'll look in later on," said Shannigan, and, as the door opened and closed after him, she saw the smile, colder and more inhuman than ever.

Instead of exclaiming, she caught her breath, and huddled into a corner where she sat silently for a long time, staring at the door as though it might open at any instant and a monster enter.

AT THE BEST CHANCE

16.

SHANNIGAN went up the street thoughtfully in the heat of the afternoon until he came to the edge of Deerfoot. The forest began a step beyond, the forest and the upward slope of the mountain. At the very base of it was the Best Chance Saloon.

He stood in the doorway and took off his hat. There were half a dozen men, either at the bar or lounging with one shoulder against the wall of the long and narrow room. There was no good reason why it should have been long and narrow, except that Slim, the proprietor, had so conceived it. All saloons, according to Slim, should be long and narrow, with the bar fitted on one of the long sides of the room.

"Beg your pardon, Mr. Connor," said Shannigan. "Is colored folks allowed in here?"

"*You're* allowed in here, boy," said "Slim" Connor instantly. "Come in and name your poison."

Shannigan entered. As he came through the doorway, a

man here and there waved to him, carelessly. There was curiosity and interest in their eyes.

Shannigan bowed to each of them in turn, and seemed to ask their permission one by one as he advanced toward the bar and stepped to the darkest corner of it.

"You ain't so dark, either, Sam," said Slim Connor. "Some of the boys around here, they get blacked up by the sun worse'n you are, a lot!"

"Thank you, sir," said Shannigan. "I *am* kind of pale, some folks say." He beamed on Slim as he spoke.

"Look here," said a bearded man at the bar, turning. "Look here, Sam."

Shannigan came to attention.

"Yes, sir?" said he.

"Aw, take it easy, Sam," said the man of the beard.

"I hope to, sir," said Shannigan anxiously.

The other laughed. They all laughed.

"Look here," went on the bearded fellow. "This morning, at the crack of day, I was out there when you seemed to chuck Jack Reynolds down. Mind you, I ain't bearing any hard feelings about it, neither—but I say, did you really drop Reynolds, or did you both just stumble and go down?"

Shannigan passed his fingers through the woolly black wig that he was wearing.

"Well, sir," he said, "it seemed to me that some of you gentlemen was a mite excited, sir, and when I seen the guns, I had an idea that maybe Mr. Jack and me would do as good on the ground, for a spell, as we would standing up. Them trees was pretty close ahead of us."

"The quickest, the neatest, and the dog-gonedest smartest thing that I ever seen. Look like you had lead in your hand, the way that you bowled Jack Reynolds over!" said the bearded man. "You must be pretty strong, Sam. Stand over here and see can you put my hand down. I'm pretty good at that!"

Shannigan, since his hat was off, touched a woolly forelock.

"Ask your pardon, sir," said he. "I ain't been taught to make no contentions against white folks, sir."

This brought forth a little murmur of applause.

Said Slim Connor, expressing the opinion of the house: "You're a good fellow, Sam. You been raised, is what you been. There's plenty ain't been raised like you been. You know your place, and that's something that makes a hit with me. I'll say this: You're out West, now, where color don't count—it's *men* that figger, out here. But you keep right on the way you're goin'. It won't do you no harm. It'll get you farther forward, in the finish. Name your drink, Sam. You're goin' to drink with me!"

"Thank you, sir. You mean that you're treating me, sir?"

"Yeah, that's what I mean," said Slim. "I'm treating the rest, too. You make a hit with us, Sam. Because you ain't spoiled, and because you're willing to give your skin for young Jack Reynolds. He may be all right. He may be all wrong. We dunno. But we like a boy that sticks to his boss!"

Shannigan rolled his eyes until the big whites of them expanded.

"I was raised a Reynolds, sir," said he, "and I reckon that I gotta die a Reynolds."

"Now, what the devil does he mean by that?" asked the bearded man.

Slim Connor explained: "When they been raised in the South, brother, and raised right, they hitch right onto the family that they live with. They hitch to 'em, and they stay to 'em. Here's to you, boy!"

He raised his glass of whisky, the same drink which had been served to the rest of the loiterers, and tossed it off.

Shannigan had waited until the others drank. Then he lifted his glass of beer.

"Thank you very kindly, Mr. Connor," he said. "Thank you all, very much, gentlemen." Then he swallowed some of the beer—seemed to notice that the other glasses were already empty—and then poured down the glassful with one swallow.

A shout of applause greeted this gesture.

"Where'd you learn my name, Sam?" asked Connor. "It ain't hung outside the door."

"Mr. Reynolds," said Sam, "he told me this morning that the place to drink my beer in Deerfoot was the place of Mr. Connor, called the Best Chance Saloon. He said that Mr. Connor was a very kind gentleman, and he said you had the best place, sir. He said that the last time he had a drink in Deerfoot, it was in your saloon, sir."

"Now, that ain't any lie, neither," said Slim. "Because that's just what happened. He was in here with Powell and Halpin, the poor devils."

"He told me that," said Shannigan, "after I finished beggin' him not to come back to Deerfoot, and to go and run away and save himself, sir. He told me to shut my silly mouth, was his words. He can speak mighty cross, when his temper is up!"

"Yeah, and that ain't any lie," said one of the men sourly.

"You mean that you were tryin' to persuade him away from Deerfoot?" broke in Slim Connor eagerly.

"It looked like kind of dangerous for him," said Shannigan. "That's the way it looked to me. But Mr. Jack, sir, he said that, as long as he was a free man and didn't have no posse hangin' around his neck, he'd go and give himself up to the law, because he never done no murder in his life, and never would do. And he said that the folks in Deerfoot would give him a fair chance, once they got cooled down."

"Did he say that?" asked several voices at the same time.

"He said that, sir," said Shannigan. "And then I reckon that he'd just about as soon die, after seein' Mrs. Jack, as live closed off away from her."

A bald-headed man, very fat, with a sheen of perspiration on his skin, spoke up for the first time.

"A gent gets more out of a simple fellow like this than he does out of the newspaper and a pile of talk," said he. "Dog-gone me if I don't begin to lean toward Jack Reynolds. He's only a kid, anyway."

"He's only a kid, and kind of wild in the blood," agreed another. "That's the only trouble with him."

"I disremember who it was," said a third man. "I disremember what his name was, that I was standing on the off side of, at a bar one night down there at Spooky Wallace's saloon, in the middle of town—"

"I never liked Spooky's whisky much," put in Slim Connor.

"Well," said the narrator, "I disremember which his name was, but he was orderin' a drink, and reachin' in his pocket, when he said: 'Dog-gone it, the cash has run out.' And he started and pulled around to start for the door. And there was Jack Reynolds on the near side of him that said: 'Why, I seen you put your change in this pocket, stranger!' 'Did I?' says the gent. And he reaches in and brings out a twenty-dollar gold piece.

"Well, nobody gets that for *change*. And he takes and gives a look at Jack, and he says: 'Sure, I must 'a' forgotten about the change. And maybe I'll forget where I put my change another time, too. But I'll never forget *you*, Reynolds.'

"That's what he says, and has reason for saying; but, dog-gone me, he *did* forget. And the other day he was one of them that was howlin' Reynolds down!"

"Too bad," said several voices.

"The way I see it," said Slim Connor, "Jack Reynolds had oughta have a chance. And this here town oughta give it to him."

A quiet voice said in the doorway: "He'll have his chance. He'll have his chance to kill more men, and I half hope they'll be some of you!"

THE EXCITED MAN

17.

THAT was little Lee Swain, standing against the glow of the late afternoon. People jerked their heads around and stared at him. They were ready to take rough action, hearing such crisp talk, but the very smallness of the man and his "tenderfoot" clothes gave them pause. Besides, Lee Swain was a

blameless character, and the sort of a fellow that makes a town—a solid citizen, with lots of ready cash to invest in interesting proposals.

So instead of a volley of oaths, he was greeted with a silence.

He stepped through the doorway, and ran his eyes up and down the line of faces.

"One day you boys will taste the edge of him a little deeper," said Swain. "This trick of turning himself up for justice—only a trick, and nothing to it!"

He turned sharply around, and to the bare-legged lad who had followed him to the door of the saloon he said:

"Go back to the telegraph office, and if a message comes for me, bring it up here. I'll be waiting for an hour or so!"

"Now, Mr. Swain," said Slim Connor, "here's Sam, that tried to persuade Jack Reynolds to run for his life, this morning, and Jack insisted on coming straight back to Deerfoot and taking trial."

"Does he say that?" asked Swain, turning abruptly on Shannigan.

Shannigan looked at the boots of the other.

Little Lee Swain advanced quickly upon him.

"You say that you were trying to persuade him to run to save his neck, and that he insisted on coming back to Deerfoot?" demanded Swain.

Shannigan slowly, deliberately turned his shoulder toward Swain, and looked at the proprietor.

"Mr. Connor, sir," he said, "would you kindly talk to this gentleman for me?"

It brought a literal gasp from those who listened. It was the perfect retort, a devastating stroke, the only possible way in which he could have insulted Swain and retained the sympathy of every man in the room.

Slim Connor said instantly: "Mr. Swain, maybe it ain't right to go after the boy, there. All he knows ain't much. But he knows he loves his boss. Right or wrong, I guess that we gotta put up with it."

No matter how acid the nature of Swain, when he en-

countered the gloomy brows that surrounded him, he could not help but understand that they considered him abysmally in the wrong. Their heads were lowered, and they looked up at him like so many angry bulls, prepared to charge.

They would never guess, these fellows, that *he* was armed, and in the most efficient style. They would never dream of the revolver that hung heavily under the pit of his left arm. He hoped, for that matter, that he could keep them in ignorance as to that point forever. But one day, perhaps, he would have to cut his way through a few of them, and then surprise might help him as much as bullets.

He stepped to the bar.

He said, briskly but dryly: "Boys, I've lost my temper. I don't change my mind about Reynolds. And I don't relish the backwash from Reynolds's man. But I think I've been wrong, here. And I hope I'm old enough and wise enough to admit it. We'll have a drink, if you don't say no."

They did not say no. The line of glasses was filled. Only that of Shannigan remained empty, and, with a murmur to the bartender and with a bow that included the rest, Shannigan backed out of the swinging doors to the street.

All eyes followed him, even those of Mr. Lee Swain, with a gleaming side glance.

The drink went down.

"I'm sorry that I broke out," Swain said. "I don't mean to take the fault of the master on the head of the servant. But, boys, there's just something about all this business that's too pat. Mr. Sam, yonder, talks a little too simple to suit me. Maybe I'm wrong. I hope I am. Maybe I'm wrong about Reynolds. I hope that, too. What have I to gain by finding the boy in trouble? But I have to tell you what is in my mind, because I'm afraid that I've made a wrong impression, and a bad impression, here. Slim, give me another glass of beer, if you don't mind, and I'll have it in the back room."

He retired with the drink, accordingly.

The bearded man said: "He made me mad, Swain did. But he's all right. You know what I mean. He's a waspy kind

of a little hornet; but, dog-gone me, I like a man that'll admit when he's wrong. Dog-gone me if I don't."

There was a murmur of agreement. Enough drinks had been circulating, of late, to make every one extremely lenient even to his most bitter enemy.

"Look at the way that Sam backed out," said the bearded man. "Now, dog-gone me, I like him. Take him this morning —he throwed himself right into the middle of trouble. Did bullets faze him? They did not! He run through gunfire like nothing at all, all the while thinking of his boss, not of himself. But here comes along a ruction, and his boss ain't here to fight for, and right away he ducks out, even after he seen that we liked him and that we was on his side. Simple, is what he is, and straight."

"I think a pile more of Reynolds on account of him," said Slim Connor. "I learned in school—you can judge the master by the man. There's something in that, too."

"Sure there is," agreed another.

"Just a plain, common fellow with a good heart in him," said Slim Connor, whisky and sentiment rather mastering him.

The plain, common fellow was at that moment cautiously peering through a crack in the log wall of the rear of Slim Connor's place.

Now and then he glanced inside, and now and then he looked to the side, where two or three breaks in the brush gave him a view of the street, near the saloon, so that he could see any one approaching from the town side.

That was plain and honest Sam!

His interest in Mr. Lee Swain had grown with every meeting, and now it had reached the degree of a passion.

So he stared through the narrow crack, and gradually brought Swain within the easy compass of his eye.

The little man was by no means at ease. He shifted to one side of his chair, and then to the other.

Presently he rose and walked the floor.

He leaned over and scanned that floor close. He reached down and picked from a crack among the boards a small

fragment of something, and then threw it away, as though disappointed. It rattled into a corner.

He sat down again at the table, sipped his beer, lighted his pipe, smoked a puff, and then let the pipe go out while he stared straight before him at his thoughts.

Whatever the thoughts were, they were exciting enough to make him grip and flex his hand a number of times.

Shannigan began to smile to himself. That excitement was not altogether the excitement of an ordinary man. It was that of a man watching a horse race—yes, when he has bet heavily upon one of the contenders, bet more than he can afford to lose.

Lee Swain had a great reputation for scrupulous honesty in the town of Deerfoot, but reputations meant nothing to the man whose eye was fixed upon the little fellow through the crack in the wall.

Presently Swain pushed back the flap of his coat, and from a pocket of his dark-gray worsted suit he extracted a small piece of stone, which he turned this way and that in his fingers.

It was not a jewel. It was too large for that. And yet the expression of Swain was that of a man who is looking down upon the fire of a pigeon's-egg ruby, or flaming diamond, or the impenetrably cool depths of a great emerald.

The interest of the watcher grew apace, and on his face began to appear that inhuman smile which had chilled the blood of Mary Tracy, on this day.

That bit of rock—now he could see that it was no more—had a definite and keen interest to Mr. Lee Swain.

So had the floor.

Because, from time to time, he turned his eyes down toward the floor, and considered it with a sweeping and then a minute glance, with some hope and some fear in his face.

Once he got up, went to the far corner of the room to which he had flung the bit he formerly picked out of a crack, and reëxamined it. He started to put it in his vest pocket, after a critical examination. Then he changed his mind, put the bit into a crack, and then pushed it down with his heel.

Having done this, he snapped his fingers, laughed a little, silently, and then returned to his chair. Keenly and closely the watcher marked that spot on the floor.

Now, in his chair, Mr. Lee Swain drew out again the little fragment of stone. He turned and twisted it this way and that, until finally a ray of light struck on the flat surface of it, and the watcher at the crack saw a golden glint of light.

He winced a little lower in his place, as he saw this. For there was only one explanation. There was gold in the bit of stone!

That would explain the excitement of Mr. Lee Swain. That would explain the gleam in his eye and the tenseness of his voice. Gold!

Well, many things will be done, in this world, for the sake of gold. The mind of Shannigan opened and bloomed like a flower, in the multitude of possibilities that flooded upon him.

He was thinking of Jack Reynolds and the enmity which the little man had toward him. To that thought, Shannigan added the idea of gold. He was not one to try to make everything meet in a moment. He was willing to add evidence to evidence, and let the sum total speak for itself.

He had noticed these things, and had some quick reflections upon them, when he saw, through a gap in the brush toward the street, the same bare-legged boy who had left Mr. Lee Swain at the door of the saloon, now scurrying up the street once more. He rose at once and started to meet him.

THE TELEGRAM

18.

As Shannigan went along, he took from his pocket a telegraph envelope, glanced at the typewritten address, which proclaimed the name of Lee Swain, and then hurriedly replaced the envelope. He hastened onto the street.

As he did so, turning down toward the town, he encountered the scurrying boy. Shannigan tripped, or appeared to

do so, and the ponderous weight of his shoulder grazed the lad and knocked him spinning.

He did not fall, but the telegraph envelope which he carried in his hand dropped to the ground.

Shannigan instantly picked it up, made it disappear with a crunch of his thumb against the palm of his hand, and in its place offered back to the youngster that other telegraph envelope which he had ready in his pocket.

"Mighty sorry, boss," said Shannigan.

The boy caught his breath, for he had run a distance.

"Hey," said he, "you wanta look where you're goin'!"

"Yes, sir, boss," murmured Shannigan.

He turned, with helpless eyes, and watched the lad scurry on.

There appeared before him the bearded man, saying: "I seen that!"

"Did you?" asked Shannigan, with a sudden but strangely subdued interest in his eyes.

"Yeah," said the man of the beard, "I seen it. The kid, he oughta be skinned, bumpin' into somebody, and then blamin' him. I'm goin' to go back in there and hide that kid."

Shannigan stepped before the man of the beard, and raised his hand.

"Don't do that, mister. He didn't mean no harm. He was just a parcel excited. That was all that was the matter with him. Don't you bother him, sir!"

The man of the beard smiled.

"You're a good fellow, Sam," he said. "You got a good nature, too. Come along downtown with me, Sam, because I'm goin' to buy you a drink. I'm goin' to buy you a whole flock of drinks."

"Thank you, sir," answered Shannigan. "But I guess I better be getting back to Mrs. Jack, sir. She might be havin' a need of me—and Sam has had his drink of beer, already!"

So he left the man of the beard, and turned straightway back through the brush, as soon as he saw the other well ahead of him, and circled until he had come to the back room of the saloon.

There he saw Mr. Lee Swain reading a telegram, over and over, and shaking his head, as he considered it.

Shannigan knew well enough how that telegram read, for he had himself typewritten it.

LEE SWAIN DEERFOOT
INVESTIGATED CAREFULLY STOP FOUND THE FAMILY HOMESTEAD OF THE REYNOLDS FAMILY AND ASKED ABOUT THEM AMONG THE NEIGHBORS STOP VERY RESPECTABLE PEOPLE AND OLD FAMILY

SIGNED
BRESFX

He had been able to make up the telegram well enough, according to his own wishes as to how it should read.

The signature, of course, he could not guess. So he had compiled a colossal misspelling: "Bresfx!"

That had no meaning, of course.

He carefully and soundlessly opened the other telegram, the true telegram which he had crumpled in his hand, and which he had purloined from the messenger.

It read:

NO SUCH FAMILY NEAR ALEXANDRIA STOP WENT INTO MATTER THOROUGHLY STOP ADVISE RECHECK EVERYTHING

SIGNED

FAIRFAX

The signature was what delighted him most.

"Bresfx" was a typographical error that might, with a twist of the mind, be contorted into a misspelling of "Fairfax." The more he stared at that real signature, the more pleased he was with things in general.

Then he turned his attention, once more, to the man inside the room.

Lee Swain had risen from his chair, and now, crumpling

the telegram, he hurled it on the floor and actually stamped upon it, exclaiming:

"It's wrong—it's gôt to be wrong! It couldn't possibly be otherwise!"

How wrong it was, only the spy at the crack in the wall could have said, and he was silent.

Finally, Lee Swain rose and left the room, striding out boldly and with a savage expression of disdain and disgust upon his face.

"A man to watch!" said Shannigan to himself.

For always he had found the little man against him, and always he had found Lee Swain in the right, so far as this business went.

Rather grimly he pondered upon this problem.

Then, when he thought that Swain had gone a sufficient distance from the saloon, he rose, walked to the street, and entered the Best Chance again.

The proprietor welcomed him with a wave of the hand.

"Sorry that you backed out, Sam!" said he.

"You know, sir," said Shannigan, "when white folks get all heated up, it's a lot better for colored people to raise a dust and get away, ain't it?"

"You know your own business, Sam," said Slim Connor, with more truth than he knew. "Have a drink?"

"Mr. Connor," said Shannigan, "you mind me askin' you a big favor?"

There was no one else in the saloon. Connor smiled almost fondly on this exemplary Negro.

"I tell you what, boy," he said; "you could ask quite a lot from me, and I really mean it."

"Well, sir," said Shannigan, "they's a back room, in yonder, and maybe I could have a chance to drink a quiet glass of beer in yonder where no one would see me and start askin' questions." He added: "You understand, sir. All the way on the train and the stage there wasn't no beer. Mrs. Jack, she don't drink nothin', sir. Hardly no coffee or tea, even!"

Slim Connor laughed loud and raucously.

"Well, you can make up time right in this place, brother,"

he declared. "Here's a glass of beer for you. Take it along."

Shannigan took the proffered glass and retired.

In the back room of the saloon, he pulled back from the table a chair, and let it scrape noisily. Then he settled down, and remained quiet for a moment, while his eye relocated on the floor the exact spot at which the little fragment had been stamped into a crack by Lee Swain.

When he was sure of the spot, he drew from his pocket a clasp knife with a blade of the unnecessary length of at least four inches.

That formidable blade he opened, smiled down at it with a familiar eye, and then went to the place that he had marked through the chink in the logs.

He drew the point of the knife down the crack, angling the blade to the side, and turning up a stiff little black furrow of moist dust. In that dust were fragments and whole matches, and grains of various sorts—and in it, also, was a perceptible little fragment of stone.

That was what he salvaged and took back with him to his chair. It was only a small bit, hardly half an inch long, and much less than that in thickness.

It was a dark stone, black at the outer edge, and a blackish brown toward the center. He looked at the edges, and then he looked at one side. On the other side he saw a thing that startled him. It was a mere gleam of yellow, but when he looked more closely he was able to make out a very faint indentation that moved regularly across the surface of the shard.

"Wire gold," said Shannigan, softly and to himself.

He lifted his ugly face and repeated, with a strange intentness: "Wire gold!"

And then he laughed, though even in his own mind there was burning up a furious eagerness, a fire of interest.

He could not look at that broken shard for a moment without being willing to swear that it had something to do with this mystery, and certainly he could swear that Mr. Lee Swain was not an altogether innocent man.

How he could connect Swain with the imbroglio, Shanni-

gan could not tell, as yet; but some connection there must be, more vital than Swain's mere angry devotion to law and order.

The gold was behind everything!

He closed his eyes, and began to ponder the matter carefully. The fragment of gold-tainted rock which Swain had stamped down into the crack in the floor, that other bit of rock which he had seen Swain take from his vest pocket—these were things which Shannigan tried to fit together with Swain's curious dislike for the young Reynolds.

But he could not make head or tail of the business. The gaps in it were too great.

He stood up, at last, and walked out into the dimness of twilight, through which he walked down to the jail.

The jailer swiftly patted him to make sure that no weapons or other supplies were being carried, and then admitted him to see Reynolds.

"I'm going down the corridor, here, a little ways, Sam," he said kindly, "so that you can swap lies with your master. Understand? Don't you be trying to pass him no electric drills, nor nothing like that!"

"No, sir," said Shannigan. "I reckon, when Mr. Jack wants to leave this jail, he'll just stand up and walk out, sir!"

The jailer laughed sardonically. Going back down the corridor, as he had promised, he tilted against the wall a chair which was placed near the hanging lamp. There he sat down, and picked up a chunk of Sunday newspaper, filled with enticing advertisements, with pictures of stylish clothes, with prints of the ladies and gentlemen of the land, and with a few details of lurid crimes.

In these things the jailer lost himself, not for the first but the twentieth time; and, biting his nails, with his head thrusting forward, he stared round-eyed at what the print was telling.

Shannigan was standing close to the bars of Reynolds's cell, talking rapidly.

19.

Big Jack Reynolds had been lying down, which is the habit of most cow-punchers. When they are out of the saddle, it is little rest to them to take in a chair practically the same position that they have been holding all day long.

Now Reynolds sat up, reached for his cigarette makings, and waved his hand toward the visitor. He was a graceful fellow, was Reynolds, and the smile with which he met Shannigan could hardly fail to bring a pleasant response in the expression of another man. But Shannigan did not smile in return.

"Hello, bo," said he.

Reynolds shrugged his shoulders. After all, he preferred this sort of talk to the servile lingo which Shannigan had talked to him before.

"Hello, Sam," said Reynolds.

He rose and walked close to the bars.

"You don't have to be too close," said Shannigan. "I'm not going to pass you anything. Just some ideas."

"Blaze away," said Reynolds.

"Where does Lee Swain's nervous system connect with yours?"

"I don't know. I hear the little swine is trying to double-cross me."

"He wants you to take a long rest, is all. You know the bunk that Mary and I worked up about the old Virginia home?"

"They're likely to break through that. Why couldn't you stick a little closer to the facts?"

"We didn't have you to tell us the facts," said Shannigan. "All we knew was that you'd kept your mouth shut about your past. You had to have a wife to weaken the hemp, so to

speak. So we gave you a wife and a happy home in the past, all together. Swain is a doubter. He wired back. He got this answer today: 'No such family near Alexandria. Went into matter thoroughly. Advise recheck everything.' The telegram was signed 'Fairfax.' "

"Then the ground will rise and the sky drop, and the lot of us will be smashed in between," said Reynolds. "This looks like a pretty bad business!" He added: "How do you know what was in Swain's telegram?"

"I got the real one away from the messenger, and gave him a phony one which said that everything was all right and that the Reynoldses were well known."

"How did you know what name to sign?"

"I didn't. I signed a mistake—a telegraphic error. But the misspelling happened to end with an 'FX.' That may make it ride with Swain."

"If it doesn't, can he check up?"

"Of course he can. At the telegraph office."

"And then?"

"And then 'Mrs. Jack Reynolds' will be asked to leave town, or even arrested as an impostor, and you'll be taken out of jail and the lynching party resumed, and I'll be hanged on the same tree beside you."

Reynolds stared. He said not a word.

"What's the first thing that comes into your mind?" asked Shannigan.

"Who is Mary?" asked the other.

"That's the first thing that comes into your mind?"

"Yes," said Reynolds.

"You like her, eh?" asked Shannigan, with an expressionless face.

"Is she your wife?" asked Reynolds.

Shannigan smiled. There was no more meaning in that smile than in the granite lips of an Egyptian colossus. "She's not my wife," said he. "What's your next idea, Reynolds?"

"Who are you?"

"You're full of curiosity," remarked Shannigan. "Better start that mind working on another train."

"Anything you say."

"You might think something about stones."

Reynolds shrugged his wide shoulders again.

"I don't see the point of that joke," he said.

"Don't you?"

"No."

"That black rock, with wire gold in it."

This brought Reynolds, with a jump, close to the bars of the cell.

"Who the devil put that in your mind?" he asked.

"Swain."

"Swain?" A savage look crossed the eyes of Reynolds. "What does Swain know?"

"A lot more than I do," said Shannigan.

"That may be, too. What *do* you know?"

"I know that you're still close to hanging, that Swain has a piece of gold ore in his vest pocket, and that he wants you put out of the way. Does that make a story for you?"

"Swain!" exclaimed Reynolds.

He fell into a study.

"Swain knows something, then," he muttered.

He looked up sharply at Shannigan.

"Look here, Sam," he said. "Did it ever occur to you that *somebody* killed poor Halpin and Powell out there on the Owens Desert?"

"I've had other things to think about, but I've thought of that, too."

"D'you suppose that Swain could have done it?"

"I don't know. He doesn't seem the fellow for violence, but these complicated chaps like Swain may be full of all sorts of possibilities. He might have killed them. On the other hand, he may not even know one end of a gun from the other."

"Somebody killed 'em!" said Reynolds darkly.

"And you didn't, eh?"

"No, I didn't. That's straight."

"I think it is. Anything you can say that will put it right?"

"I can say ten million dollars' worth of words," said Reynolds, flushing.

"Can you?"

"Yes."

"You don't have to say them to me. Say them to anybody you please—if the ten million will help to save your neck."

Reynolds frowned more darkly. "Look here," said he. "Isn't it a fact that you had the wind of coin behind this deal, and that's what brought you out of the dark?"

Shannigan grinned broadly, without malice, the smile of a child filled with pleasure at a thought.

"I can only say yes or no to that," he said. "You ought not to ask questions like that, son. It isn't just wise."

"I'll put it another way, then," said Reynolds. "You knew what Halpin and Powell had found, eh?"

"I know nothing about it. But I guess that it was gold."

"Powell and Halpin found in the Owens the biggest strike of gold that I ever dreamed of."

"Go on. And try to fit the back room of the Best Chance Saloon into the picture."

Reynolds started. "That's where Halpin and Powell took me. I'd loaned them some money. They were jailbirds, but they were all right, in their way.

"I gave them a hand. They called it a prospecting stake. And they came back to Deerfoot and took me to the back room of Slim Connor's place and showed me their samples.

"They'd found an outcrop of black boulders and glint of yellow where a chip had been knocked off. They broke up a stone. It was full of wire gold. They dug and hit the vein. They opened it up a little. It was eighteen inches wide. Not all wire gold. You know, that wouldn't be possible. There were just streaks and pockets full of that stuff—double handfuls of gold, here and there, just to cheer up a hard-working miner. Powell was nearly crazy as he talked about it; so was Halpin. They showed me the samples."

"Something happened to those samples," said Shannigan.

"No, nothing."

"Think back. Something happened."

"No, not a thing. They dropped off the table, some of them. That was all. And Halpin was after Powell for his carelessness."

"You picked 'em all up?"

"Yes, carefully."

"You couldn't be careful," said Shannigan. "You were all blind and crazy with gold fever. When those samples broke, you left a few of the splinters behind. I have one of 'em that I saw Swain stamp into a crack in the floor. Swain has a larger bit."

Reynolds frowned. "That brings Lee Swain closer to the killing of Powell and Halpin," he declared. "Look at it this way: He has the sample. He knew that Powell and Halpin had them, and that I had seen 'em. Powell and Halpin die. They're murdered as they sink a shaft in the Owens gravel. And when I find the bodies and hurry for Deerfoot to report what I've seen, a posse meets me—Lee Swain has found the bodies even before me, even before I have time to get back with water! He's found 'em, and hurried to town to give the alarm and accuse me—because I'd left Deerfoot that day, earlier, with the pair. You see?"

"Not entirely," said Shannigan. "But you have a bright mind, Jack. I like to see it work. Go right ahead."

Reynolds was willing enough to talk.

"It's clear to me. Lee Swain, or men working for him, did the trick. I understand that he started that morning, even earlier than the three of us did. He was heading for the Willejee Mountains, he said, and he intended to take the straight cut across the desert. Mind you, he started before us, but we didn't pass him on the way. And yet he must have been later. He must have been hours and hours later, because we'd reached a place in line with the big strike of ore, and we'd worked a long time at it, before I went to get water and left Halpin and Powell behind me. Now, mind you, he left Deerfoot before us, and headed straight for the Willejees, and we did not pass him on the trail; and yet he came up hours and hours after us, and found the two dead men. Kind of strange, Sam?"

"Strange," said Shannigan. "But there's not a straight trail. After he hit the desert, he might have wandered."

"Yes, a little. But he would have had the Willejees ahead of him all the way, to keep him fairly straight. How did he happen to be *hours* behind us—after starting earlier? That's the point! I never thought of it before!"

"But why would he kill the pair of 'em and leave you?"

Reynolds walked up and down, thinking. And as he shook his head, Shannigan said:

"It's possible to be outside that back room of Slim Connor's, and yet know everything that happens inside it. I know, because I've just done it. If something put Swain there, if he saw you three, and the samples and heard some of the talk, if he were ready to follow the three of you the next morning, if he followed and saw from a distance that you were digging, he would be sure that it was the shaft from which you'd taken the samples, eh? And one of those samples he had in his pocket—wire gold!"

"That's correct!"

"He sees them digging. He sees Mr. Straight-shot Reynolds go off. He takes an easy chance and shoots the other two, close up, so close that he can risk head shots. He goes to the shaft, then, and finds—"

He paused.

Reynolds put in: "Nothing. It was Halpin that wanted to make the try there on the way to the real spot. But he was wrong. At least, we didn't go deep enough to hit the vein."

"Swain finds nothing, as you say. He's killed two men to get the gold mine. He's intended to kill the third man, when the third man comes back. But now he finds that there's no gold mine, after all—and two men dead on his hands. So he uses the third man to carry away the guilt of the double murder. Does that seem logical to you, Reynolds?"

"How could little Lee Swain do these things?"

"I don't say that he did. He may have had a whole gang along with him. But, on the other hand, he's a fellow of resolution, and Judge Colt is sure enough a great equalizer of persons."

Reynolds nodded. "I think the thing is straight as a string," said he. "But how can we hang it on Swain?"

"That needs quiet surroundings and thought," said Shannigan, "and before I leave I want some more hard facts from you."

MARY'S IDEA

20.

SHANNIGAN went out of the jail and almost stumbled over Lee Swain. The little man halted fast in the middle of the sidewalk, and tapped Shannigan's arm as he started by.

Shannigan turned and touched his forehead in salute.

"Yes, sir?" said he.

Lee Swain stepped closer and looked hard and carefully into the eyes of Shannigan—the thoughtful stare of a man who is examining a botanical specimen under a microscope, perhaps?

When he had finished his examination, which Shannigan endured with a patient humility, Swain said sharply:

"You're no more of a mulatto than I am!"

"Have you got some colored blood in you, Mr. Swain?" asked Shannigan gently.

"I have as much as you have," said Swain. "As for your skin—"

He swept his glance over the face of the big man, and then turned on his heel and walked rapidly down the street.

Shannigan did not glance after him. He went on with an immobile face to the hotel, and to the room of Mary Tracy.

She was there—she was always there; it was her rôle to be there, overwhelmed with grief, as long as her "husband" was in any danger.

When Shannigan knocked, a tremulous voice called: "Yes?"

He opened the door without further invitation, and found her stretched on the bed, with her face to the wall, and a handkerchief at her eyes.

"Yes?" quavered her voice, again.

"Are your eyes red, Mary?" asked Shannigan.

She jumped to her feet, smiling.

"They're not red," said Shannigan.

"They would have been before I budged," said she. "One rub from the corners to the center of the eyelid will do the trick. Then, one looks down, and keeps a handkerchief near the mouth, and turns partly away."

"Why do you look down?" asked Shannigan.

"Well, that puts the eyelashes against the cheeks. And any blockhead—or rather, blockheads particularly—can easily imagine a bit of moisture in long, dark lashes like mine."

"You've been adding yourself up, lately, Mary," said he.

"Yes," she answered.

"What's the sum total?" he asked.

"Oh, it's a pretty big sum total," said the girl. "Except for my nose. Confound my nose, Sam. It ought to be bigger. The nose spoils everything. I'd be a big sum total, but if there's one bad figure it makes the whole amount wrong. Why can't I have more nose? You can do anything, Sam. Grow some more nose on this face of mine."

"And you'll be able to catch Reynolds?" said he.

"That's the present idea," said the girl.

"There are better things than Jack, in the world," said Shannigan.

"He'll do," she answered.

"You don't need a new nose," answered Shannigan. "He likes you the way you are. Don't try to change the picture while he's satisfied with it."

"Come here where the light falls on your face, Sam," she begged. "I never can tell when you're mocking me."

"Reynolds knows that he's still only an inch or two from hanging, but he's more interested in you than he is in his neck."

"Do you swear that, Sam?" she asked, delighted.

"I don't swear it. He's too young to know his mind. So are you," said Shannigan.

"You don't like Jack?" she queried.

"He's all right," said Shannigan. "But he's young. That's all."

"You could like him better than you do."

"Yes, I could, but I don't."

"Why not?"

"Because I want you for myself, of course," said Shannigan, with a yawn.

He sat down and made a cigarette.

"You can't smoke here, Sam," said she. "Whoever heard of a mulatto house boy smoking in the presence of his mistress?"

Once more, he pinched the tobacco and wisp of paper together, and dropped them into his pocket.

"What *do* you think of me, Sam?" she asked him.

"I think too much," said Shannigan, with that impenetrable smile which she hated more than anything in the world. "But if you mean the other way—I think you're a little young, Mary, but you have talents. You have some face, too, but quite a bit of talent behind it."

She sat down in turn, and sighed.

"What's the news?" she asked. "Is there any?"

"Some," said he. "Swain's telegram came back. I switched it in the messenger's hand. Swain got the fake message saying the Reynoldses are all right. I have the real message that says they don't exist. I had to fake a signature. Swain may find it out at the telegraph office, and that would break everything. We're walking on a tight wire. We have to get quick action. Lee Swain murdered Powell and Halpin because he had evidence they'd discovered a tremendously valuable gold mine. He intended to get Reynolds, too, but he was thrown off that idea by finding them digging an empty hole in the desert. He threw the blame on Jack."

"I knew he was innocent," said the girl. "I knew it. But I love you, Sam, for telling me so!"

"Sit down," said he. "You're being silly. Swain killed the pair of them, he knows that I'm not a mulatto, and he's on the trail of the gold mine, on the one hand, and the truth about the Reynoldses of Alexandria, on the other. I wish

that I'd picked out a more obscure place than Alexandria. But that's behind us. I tell you that we're still on the edge of the cliff. If this town finds out that you've bamboozled them—you and I—it'll run you out of town, or even jail you. And it'll lynch me and Reynolds. We have to move fast. I told Howison, today, to see the judge and press for action, and now I'll find out what the judge thinks. Keep your nerves steady. Be a thoroughbred. And we still may pull through."

He got up and went to the door.

"Can Swain be such a man as you say?" said she. "I think he can. He has a snaky eye. He has the meanest eye I ever faced, except—"

She stopped herself quickly.

"Except mine?" he asked carelessly. "You have the tongue for pretty nothings, in your talk, Mary. Keep your brain working. Everything may depend on you. If the pinch comes, I may have to break away and leave you in the lurch, while I try to take care of Reynolds. Are you prepared for that?"

"I'm prepared for anything," said the girl. "Anything that will save him. Is he *really* thinking about me?"

"I can't be coming to your room all the time," said he. "If the judge is against Reynolds, I'll come by, presently, and tap once. If he's for Jack, I'll tap twice. If he's practically decided to quash the case, I'll tap three times."

He left her with her last question unanswered and found Howison in the hall, going toward his room with a brisk step. Even through the dim light, his smile was very easily visible.

He paused, murmuring rapidly: "Can't be seen talking in a friendly way with you, man. But I've seen the judge. I pressed in the name of law and order, for a strong procedure against Reynolds. That was my cure, of course. But the judge has made up his mind. He says that there is nothing but circumstantial hearsay against Reynolds and that he won't believe that there is a case against him until something more to the point is brought up against him.

"What counts with the judge was that Reynolds rode out of town with the two and was heading back for Deerfoot

without them. The judge swears that if Reynolds had actually quarreled with the pair and killed them, he would not have been such a fool as to come straight back into the arms of justice. Besides, Reynolds is a steady friend, and he has showed friendship to Powell and Halpin in other days. My dear fellow, the judge is going to quash the case when it's brought up tomorrow; he won't have it for trial unless there's new evidence."

He paused, with a gasp of relief.

"The lawyer I sent for will be here in the morning," he went on swiftly, "and by noon, I expect to see Jack a free man. We'll get him out of this part of the world at once—and no matter what your bill is, Shannigan, I'll tell you now that it will be too small for the service you've rendered."

Shannigan answered: "Maybe we can hold things together till tomorrow. I don't know. Lee Swain is on the warpath. He's the murderer. There's a gold mine behind the pretty little deal. I think the devil will be to pay before the end of things. Go back to your room, and digest that. I haven't time to tell you more. I'm going down to the dining room to have supper in a corner, the way servants ought to, when there's not a servants' dining hall."

Leaving the other fairly staggered, Shannigan went on with his easy, silent step toward the head of the stairs.

SWAIN'S DISCOVERY

21.

LARGE-HEARTED men are not apt to give particular attention to details. Lee Swain was not large-hearted, and his life was chiefly employed in paying the very strictest attention to the very smallest of details.

That which troubled him now, discounting or destroying all of the previous efforts that he had made against young Jack Reynolds, was the telegram which had arrived, announcing that there was such a family near Alexandria.

There was not a flaw except the misspelling of the signature, one of the typical telegraphic errors, it seemed.

No particular thought of that was in the mind of Lee Swain, no doubt of the message's reality, at least, as he turned into the street that led past the telegraph office. That office represented the terminal to which the railroad was planning to build its branch line.

When Lee Swain passed it, he stopped, suddenly, and glared at the window with the red-painted letters stretched across it. He had been specially aroused since encountering Shannigan outside the jail. He felt that he had overstepped himself. In the first place, he could not really be sure that the other was a white man; in any place, he should have kept his thoughts to himself.

Being thoroughly irritated, now, he wanted some one to rage at. That, and that reason only, took him into the telegraph office.

The operator was a youth who had divided his soul between two great aspirations: One was to be a grocery clerk who wore leather cuffs and a pencil behind his ear, and used an order book with carbon sheets between the pages. The second great urge was to be a stenographer, and rattle off thousands of words on a typewriter, faster, almost, than people could speak their sentences.

He had taken a middle course. Of the one ambition, he retained the leather cuffs upon his shirt sleeves, and the pencil behind his ear. Of the other ambition he actually had the typewriter beside him! It could be seen that he was a fellow who would get what he wanted out of the world.

As for the telegraph instrument, he was a master of it, and when he sat at the key, the stations that knew him and his skill never hesitated to send so fast that the ticker made a mere blur of sound to the unpracticed ear. That was not all. He was a sender regular, brilliant, precise and clear, and never hesitating in a way that would confuse the receiver.

He was almost everything that a telegraph operator ought to be. In addition, he kept his long blond hair bright and sleek with a perfumed oil, and kept himself generally very

neat. He had no bad habits, unless gum chewing could be called one. Even in this, he used discretion, decidedly, and had several brands in use at the same time.

He would start the morning with something light, such as wintergreen, and sometimes stay with this till noon. After lunch, he usually took to mint, or peppermint, which is a digestive of force. Toward the evening, he found licorice sustaining. His daily program was not always so exactly divided as this.

At the moment when the nervous step of Mr. Lee Swain came into the room, the operator was enjoying a fresh stick of licorice. He turned with a bland smile, as Lee Swain slammed a telegraph form on top of the counter, and exclaimed:

"Why the devil can't you people get things straight, eh? Why can't you even spell out a name straight? Is that any way to deliver a telegram?"

The operator moistened a forefinger in the corner of his mouth, attached it to the telegram, and lifted the little yellow sheet of paper with the ruled lines and printed information upon it.

He glanced it over.

"I tell you how it is," he said, passing back the form, now only slightly flavored with licorice. "I tell you what—there's some of the boys, even in this job, that ain't very well-educated. The facts has gotta be faced, and them are the facts."

"You're educated, are you?" said Lee Swain.

"Two years high school," said the operator promptly.

He smiled, awaiting comment.

He got it.

"Then what d'you mean by spelling a signature like that?" Swain demanded.

The operator moistened his forefinger again, but that method of attaching and lifting the paper was too slow for Lee Swain. He grasped the sheet himself, and held it quivering with indignation and the current in the air under the nose of the youngster.

"I never wrote that," said the operator.

"You never what?"

"I never received that."

"Maybe you never did, but it's the message that you sent out," said Swain.

"No. Never. I got a memory for the messages that come through this office. You've had twenty or so, Mr. Swain. I could repeat most of 'em by heart."

"You could, eh?"

"Yes."

"And this didn't come through you, eh?" asked Swain.

"No. It did not."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

Lee Swain blinked.

"You got a message for me today—not so very long ago?" he asked.

"Yes. I got one."

"And this isn't the message?"

"No, it certainly ain't the message."

"What message *did* you get?"

The operator shifted the chewing gum to the far side of his mouth. It was well softened, by this time, and he sank his teeth through it with a graceful and a gracious ease.

"Something about no such name being known, and advising you to recheck everything," he said.

Lee Swain caught in a breath, bit it off short, and swallowed it with a gulp.

"That's what you got?"

"Yes."

"And how was it signed?" asked Swain.

"Mayfax."

Swain shook his head, tiptoe with expectancy.

"Fairfax," said the operator, correcting himself.

"Wait a minute. Let me see the message, will you? You've got a copy, haven't you?"

"Certainly," said the other.

He reached into a sheaf of papers, and found what he

wanted, presently. Turning, in his swivel chair, to the typewriter, he quickly rattled the message off again on the sheet of paper.

This he passed across the counter to Mr. Lee Swain. The latter read, reread, then changed color and became a bright red, and then a dusty purple.

He began to tremble. The operator heard him mutter: "This ought to mean hanging! This ought to mean it.

"You've got a brain in your head!" snapped Lee Swain, aloud. "Here's something for you, boy."

He slammed on the counter a coin which the operator, with a smile, reached over and picked off. His smile faded when he felt its weight. It was no larger than a five-cent piece, but its weight—

He opened his fingers and saw in his hand a five-dollar gold piece.

His elation was not unmixed with other emotions. He slipped a little lower in his chair, as he muttered: "Five dollars' worth of poison—for *him* to have. But who gets the dose?"

He even jumped from his chair and stepped to the door, to see Lee Swain turning the next corner at full speed!

Swain went toward a house he knew, but found his objective playing in the vacant lot adjoining.

"Come here!" yelled Swain.

The bare-legged lad detached himself from his companions and came on the run. He had made money from this employer before.

"What you do with that telegram this afternoon?" he asked.

"Gave it to you," panted the boy.

"You lie!" said Swain.

The boy took half a step back, and stared. He was of a family famous for being a little tougher than hard-tack.

"You don't mean that, mister," he decided quietly.

"You put that telegram down on the ground, somewhere on the way," said Swain.

"It was on the ground a minute, because I was knocked

sidewise," said the boy. "What's the matter? Don't it read just as good with a little dust on the paper?"

"What knocked you sidewise?" asked Swain.

"I just happened to run into Sam, as I came close to the Best Chance."

"Sam?" shouted Swain. "Sam, the so-called mulatto?"

"Yeah, Sam—Mrs. Jack Reynolds's man," said the youngster.

DELIVERING THE BLOW

22.

"SAM—Mrs. Jack Reynolds—Jack Reynolds—the whole lot of 'em! They're gone—they're finished!" cried little Lee Swain, teetering for joy on tiptoe! "I got 'em all—in my pocket—in the palm of my hand!"

"Hey, what's the matter?" asked the youngster.

But Lee Swain turned and hurried down the street.

He knew enough now. It was all a sham. He had guessed it from the start.

Bless the mother of suspicion—for it was in him, and he had guessed from the start.

There was a late stage that day, and when he got to the post office, on his hurried trip, he saw that twenty or thirty people, men, women, and children, were standing about waiting for the distribution of the mail.

He paused for a moment, ostensibly to join the line of the waiters. He made his face as calm as a mask of stone. Inwardly he was trembling with delight.

The men, the children, particularly the women, looked upon him with open disgust.

He did not mind that. As a matter of fact, it actually increased his pleasure. It made his face more calm; it gave greater brilliance to his eyes.

As he waited, he said to a neighbor, a big, heavy man, with forward-bending shoulders, bowed by long labors:

"You don't like the news, I suppose."

The other did not entirely turn toward him. He moved his head only, and after a moment of pause, like one who hardly knows whether or not he will answer the question, he remarked:

"I dunno what sort of news would be displeasin' to me."

"No?" said Lee Swain. "Oh, that's all right. I thought you'd been *talking* as though you were one of the poor fellows who believed in Jack Reynolds."

This made the other turn, fast enough.

He merely found that Lee Swain had turned, also, and was carelessly staring out the window, toward the street.

But the heavy man demanded: "Hey, and what's the matter with Jack Reynolds—except that the judge has as good as said that there ain't any case agin' him?"

"The judge said that? He's a good judge. At least, he's a good judge for Deerfoot," said Lee Swain.

"Whatcha mean by that?" asked the big man.

"Why, you've all heard what's happened," said Swain. "But there's no excitement. You'll like Reynolds better than ever, I suppose, now that you know that he and his wife and that precious Sam have all been playing parts and making fools of you."

A fellow who had not spoken, as yet, stepped from the side and confronted Lee Swain with a keen eye and a determined face.

"You've talked agin' Reynolds before, and you've talked agin' him enough," he declared. "But if you ever talk agin' that sweet young girl that's Jack's wife, I'm going to take a hand myself."

"Oh, are you?" said Swain.

"Yes, I am," said the other.

"You're Dusty Wilson, aren't you?" asked Swain.

"Yeah, that's my name. And I hope that you don't keep shooting off your face about the Reynolds family, because one of these days, maybe you'll know my name better than you do now!"

"Will I?"

"Yes. I've said it, and I mean it. And a lot more of decent men here in Deerfoot all feel the same way. You may be only a tenderfoot, but you'd oughta have a decent feelin' about a girl and a lady like her."

"You're teaching me manners, are you?" asked Lee Swain.

He was trembling again, and more violently than ever. He was smiling, and his eyes were gentle, but the devil was in his heart.

"I'll teach you manners, brother," said "Dusty" Wilson. "I don't want to. When you talk about men, it's their own business. But when you talk about women and children, why, it's *everybody's* business."

"Your business, for instance?" said Lee Swain.

He smiled openly. His head went back a little, and his eyes narrowed, and almost closed.

"Yes, my business," said Dusty Wilson.

A dreadful passion to kill came up in the soul of Lee Swain, and nearly closed in a wave above his head.

Men died easily. They were brittle. A stroke knocked them over. And he knew that he could shoot straight. He could find the place between the eyes, and he would not miss it again.

He was right. He was entirely right.

"I'm glad to know that you make it your business," said Swain. "I used to think that there were a good many sensible men in Deerfoot. But I've been finding out the most of them are fools. And I'm glad to meet the champion of the fools."

"Meaning me?" said Dusty Wilson, after a little pause in which every eye and ear turned upon them.

The voice of Lee Swain had not been loud, but it had in it a certain quality that demands attention anywhere and particularly in a community where men carry guns.

"Yes," said Lee Swain, "I mean you and all the rest who have been fools enough to talk about the Reynolds family, when there isn't such a thing, and to talk about Mr. Jack Reynolds, when the girl's been exposed as a cheat."

It was just the way to deliver the blow. Carelessly, casually, and offhand.

That way, it told all the more.

Dusty Wilson said: "You may be a tenderfoot, but I suppose that you know when you've insulted a man?"

"I may be a tenderfoot," said Lee Swain, smiling tenderly on the other. "But also I've learned to carry a gun, since I came out here."

"Oh, you carry a gun, do you?" said Dusty Wilson, who was a known fighting man.

"Yes, I carry a gun."

"Well—" said Wilson, with a rising ring in his voice. "No," he added, "I won't take advantage of you!"

"Don't hesitate," said Lee Swain. "Don't hesitate at all. I wouldn't mind letting a little of the blood of some of you hot-heads. I'm a good shot, Wilson. I'm a very quick man with a gun, too—in case you're afraid you might be doing murder. If you want to invite me to step out into the street, I wouldn't mind going. Just lead the way, will you?"

There was no mistaking him. He meant shooting, and he meant killing. The fire that he had been keeping down had quite mastered him, and the sheen of it in his eyes was greenish, like the eyes of a cat in the dark.

It was not dark there. It was still the rose of the evening. But the eyes of Mr. Lee Swain were plainly filled with green fire.

One big woman gaped, and gasped and fairly ran out through the doorway, as though weapons already had been drawn.

Every one else stood rooted.

Dusty Wilson was a fighting man, but he did not stir, any more than the others. He was thinking. He had taken this man cheaply—as a force in battle. Perhaps he had been entirely wrong.

He kept on thinking, while Lee Swain was saying: "I tried to open your eyes for you. I suspected something was wrong, from the start. I suspected something. It's true that I haven't lived all my days with cattle, or drilling in rock, or chopping down trees. But nevertheless I've been with people, here and there, and I've learned a trifle, even if I can't daub a rope

on a steer. I tried to open your eyes for you. I tried to tell you that Reynolds was a murderer, and this so-called wife was no good, just a crook and a cheat, and that the mulatto with her was not a mulatto at all, just a fake, like the rest of 'em. But you wouldn't listen. The girl had a pretty face. Therefore she had to be all right. A pretty face can't be wrong."

He ended, and he laughed.

There had been half a dozen men flushed with rage as they heard the insults leveled toward the bright beauty of Mary Reynolds. But just as they were ready to step forward to action, that laughter ran into them like ice into the blood. It struck against their eyes and ears and paralyzed them with cold.

He knew something. He was right because he knew something. Not even the devil incarnate would have been able to stand there before them and speak such words and then laugh, unless he was right.

Yes, they had all been fools. The tenderfoot could prove that they were.

He was still laughing, as he looked upon the frozen distaste and anger and doubt in the faces round about him.

He still laughed as he drew out the yellow telegraph form, and slapped it on his other hand.

"The fine old Reynolds family of Alexandria—oh, the best people in Virginia, practically. Good old Sam, the faithful servant. And young Master Jack, the dare-devil—best heart in the world, but a little wild, eh?"

He laughed some more, taunting and wounding them with the calm superiority in his glance. He gathered them in his hand with a gesture, as it were, and then threw them away, as light, worthless things.

"And then there's the girl wife!"

He laughed, and as the fury rose in the eyes of the men around him, again he slapped the yellow telegraph blank on his other hand, with a noisy rattling.

"The darling girl that stepped into the inside heart of Deerfoot! Just a little adventuress—bright little devil—amusing,

too—but just a little rat of a sneaking hired performer. Coming out here with the picture of a pair of youngsters that she hired from a photographer—the little golden-haired, blue-eyed babies that she had rushed away from and come across the continent to see her own, her dear, her ever-loving Jack! That noble boy!"

His laughter appeared to overcome him. He put back a hand that sustained him against the wall, while he still laughed.

And then it went out. It died in his eyes, that laughter, and it died in his throat.

"You fools!" he said. "What a cheap trick, and what an old trick! But a whole town taken in by it. And the fake mulatto, too—the fellow who knew nothing. Who would jump a horse into a river, when his master told him to. Who couldn't tell you the answer to nine times seven. You pitied him, and didn't you? Laughed at him, and liked him, he was so simple, and so devoted. And you don't know that he's a white man and a clever one? That he's a crook, and a famous one? But I know, my fine friends! Yes, I know!"

He was going a little past actual knowledge and using his own imagination, now. But he could not quell the fury that was in him. His words and his tongue were mastering him.

"The judge," he went on, "is going to set Reynolds free tomorrow morning—early. The judge has said so. The sheriff is sold on Reynolds and Sam, the mulatto. Everybody knows that. Nothing can be done. But before I wash my hands of the business, I'm going to the hotel to show up Sam, the mulatto. Then I'm through."

He walked out of the post office without waiting for his mail. And behind him the armed men of the crowd suddenly broke into motion, and began to move in uncertain rhythm, but with a steady progress down the street behind Lee Swain, and toward the hotel.

23.

THERE certainly had been nothing in the talk of Lee Swain to win the regard of the townsmen for him. But nearly any one prefers a thousand sins to be charged against him rather than to be accused of stupidity and have the accusation proved. Lee Swain had made the accusation, and now he was advancing, it seemed, toward the proof.

A little distance down the street, he paused at the drug store. Going inside, he asked the proprietor for some solution, if possible, which would quickly remove from the skin ordinary stains. He got what he wanted almost at once—a small phial which, it was declared, ought to take off most stains at a stroke; it would take the skin along with it, too, if it were left on very long! But Swain was content with it, and he took, at the same time, a small sponge.

With that in his hand, he advanced again, and behind him straggled along that collection of grim men.

Passers-by, who stopped to find out what the silent procession was about, learned in a few words.

The big sheriff, himself, as he came with a swinging stride up the street, was briefly and succinctly informed by Lee Swain; and the sheriff fell in with the rest, frowning, feeling rather out of place, but perhaps more determined than any of the others.

"There's only one man in the town that's shown any sense," Lee Swain said. "That's another business man, named Howison. I'd like to have him with us. He's never had any use for the Reynolds idea!"

They went into the hotel; there, of the clerk, Lee Swain asked briefly where Sam, the mulatto, was to be found, and was told that he was at that moment in the dining room.

Swain turned on his grim followers.

"Now, boys," he said, "the farther you stay behind, the better. I'm going to make a trial. I think you may be able to see something for yourselves. But keep back. Some of you go in, after me, and seem to be about to sit down at the tables. That'll be the best way. If Sam is what I think he is, he may explode and knock the stuffing out of the whole place."

As he spoke, he poured some of the solution from the druggist's on the sponge, and then stepped briskly into the dining room. There were not more than a dozen people in the room, at the time, and in the corner was Sam, modestly eating by himself, with his back turned upon all others.

To him went Lee Swain, briskly.

"Now, Sam," he said.

Shannigan rose instantly to his feet.

"Yes, Mr. Swain?" said he, touching his curly forelock.

"Just a moment, Sam," said Swain.

Reaching across, without haste, he suddenly drew down the face of Shannigan the little sponge which had been concealed under the tips of his fingers.

A streak followed it, a streak of pallor that stood out like a stroke of white paint against the darkness of the rest of Shannigan's face.

He clapped his hand to the wet spot, and wiped it dry. It was still not clear to Shannigan that he had been so simply and publicly tricked, until he took his hand from wiping his face, and saw on his fingers some of the stain that had come away.

Then he understood. He knew, at the same time, why the smile of triumph was on the lips and in the eyes of Lee Swain. He knew why through the door of the dining room men were steadily pouring, and coming toward him.

All his work had been undone, and he was farther away from success than at the beginning.

It was worse, much worse, than if he never had laid hand on the affairs of young Jack Reynolds, for now the poor devil was helplessly held in the jail. And this crowd was not the sort to bungle a lynching. It had been stopped once. It would not be stopped a second time!

There was the sheriff stepping toward him, one hand resting inside his coat.

The sheriff, too, had been his dupe, partly by mental persuasion, and partly by the use of force—*he* would not hesitate to make all sure in this arrest by using a gun!

Shannigan gave one swift glance around him—and dived for the nearest door.

"Stop that man!" shouted the sheriff, and drew a revolver.

But Shannigan had run past the nearest of the three long tables, the only one at which any diners had been seated, at the moment, and as they started up, in obedience to the sheriff's cry, their bodies, in rising, made a screen behind which Shannigan ran low and hard against the kitchen door.

The rubbery muscles at the point of his shoulders were the pad which broke the shock for him, as he struck the wooden panel. It split like paper, ripping and splintering, and Shannigan ran through.

Just as he struck that door, he was clear of the rest of the people in the room, and the sheriff fired twice.

He could have killed Shannigan with either bullet, but purposely he fired a little to the side. In the back of his mind there remained a deep and assured respect for this fellow who had masked himself with the color of another race. Just what Shannigan had done that was wrong, except to risk his neck for the sake of another man, big Steve Lancing was not at all sure.

So Shannigan, bursting through the closed door, lurched to the floor instead.

The Chinese cook, who saw that apparition crash in the middle of the kitchen floor, let out a blood-curdling yell. It was like a woman's shriek and the blast of a steam whistle combined.

But Shannigan already had picked himself up, and was leaping through the outer door.

He heard the uproar pouring behind him, and whipped around the corner of the building like a flash. Out in the street, he looked up, and behind him. There was a light in the windows of the girl's room. She would have to fend for

herself. His own duty lay before him, toward the jail that securely held young Jack Reynolds.

And there was little time, little time before the throng would start lunging for the same destination. It was only that they might pause in order to make surety doubly sure by questioning the girl. If she could hold them up a little, acting her part—whatever part she chose—then there was a ghost of a chance that he might succeed with Reynolds at the jail.

If only he had another moment or two before him, the slightest margin of grace!

At the next corner, he leaped into the shadows at the mouth of an alley, and looked back.

He could see the dark figures of many men swirl out around the corner of the hotel, coming from the night into the shafts of light that struck from the front windows of the building.

As they came, the dust boiled up about them, and made white masses of fog across the lights. Then they hesitated, and finally began to withdraw rapidly inside the hotel.

There was plenty of noise now. All over the town, there was plenty of excitement and shouting.

People at a distance could not tell what was taking place. They began to head toward the noise, the center of the storm. Those near that center were busily distributing information on the one hand, and calling for quick action against Jack Reynolds on the other.

Lee Swain could have led that gathering like an irresistible wave straight against the jail, and the man he wanted to get inside of it. But he hesitated.

He felt that his lucky star had risen, and that he could not make a wrong move, this night. It appeared that now, if ever, he was the master of his destiny, and instead of thinking first of Jack Reynolds, he recurred to the pretty face of the girl who had arrived in time to check all his plans.

She had not exercised her influence very long. Hardly twenty-four hours had been used up by her machinations and the skill of her acting, but now he wanted to strike her down, and expose her, as he had exposed Sam.

Besides, it gave him a chance to exercise his power.

That crowd, which had been condemning him, not very long before, was now willing to do his bidding, instantly.

And just as the leaders were crying out that it was time to march on the jail, he checked them, with a few words.

"We want to be sure about everything, boys," said he. "We want to know where we stand. We won't act in the dark, boys. We'll go upstairs, now, and see the wife of Jack Reynolds, if you don't mind, and learn just what sort of a face she can put on this business. Are you with me? When we've heard from her, then we can take the next step, and take them right!"

They uttered one brief, deep shout of agreement, and in a solid herd they followed Lee Swain back into the hotel.

THE MOB

24.

WHEN that sound which had in it the mutter and the rumble of thunder came up the stairs of the hotel, Mary Tracy, as it drew nearer, was more than half prepared.

A nameless admirer had that day sent to her room a bunch of her favorite cornflowers. She pinned them at her waist, gave a last twist to her hair, and threw over her shoulders a shawl that had an embroidery of red-and-yellow flowers worked into its margin.

She had barely finished that, when the rumble of many footfalls poured up to the door of her room and paused there. Then, after an instant, a hand struck three times, solemnly, against the door.

"Come in!" called the girl.

The door was thrust slowly open, and in it appeared Lee Swain, and over the shoulders of Lee Swain there were many faces.

"Mrs. Reynolds," he said, "we've come up to ask if you'll

tell us a little more about the old Reynolds house near Alexandria, on the Washington Pike. Because that faithful fellow Sam, instead of talking to us, has taken to his heels and run for it, white skin and all."

It seemed to her that all the evil in the world was combined and deeply concentrated on the face of Swain, but beyond his shoulders, pressed close on either side, there were other faces such as she had not known all her life, the lean, brown faces of men of the open range. She looked at them, not at Swain; she thought of them, and not of the acid soul of Swain.

"Will you all come in, please?" she said.

"The lady asks us in, boys," said Swain.

He turned, with his mocking smile, toward the others. And then, seeing that they glanced at one another, he led the way. He had a feeling that they were coming slowly, behind him. And that surprised Swain. For him, it was a simple matter of cornering a crook and forcing a confession. The fact that it was a woman instead of a man made a very small difference.

But it seemed to make a great difference to the men. They softened the fall of their high-heeled boots. They entered on tiptoe, many of them, and dragged off their hats before they passed through the door. With pain and apprehension, although with much curiosity, they stared at the girl.

"I know what's happened," she said. "And you're going to shame me, and then you're going to murder poor Jack, and kill Sam if you can!"

"No, no," said Swain, not at all pleased by this sudden way of putting everything. "The fact is, we just wanted to make a little more sure about the old Reynolds place near Alexandria, and we wanted to ask you about dear husband Jack, and—"

The room was filled with men, now, and that was what she wanted. Before they came, she had kicked off her high-heeled shoes, and stepped into heelless slippers. They made her look smaller than she was. There was not a man there that did not tower above her, and as the pressure of numbers

thrust them forward at her, she stood against the bureau, and shrank from them, and rolled her frightened eyes to this side, and then to that.

She had picked that position in front of the bureau on purpose—because there was a mirror mounted on top of it, and in that glass her image would appear to them all, and every turn of the head would be useful.

"You want to mock and hurt me," said Mary Tracy. "But you are not the sort of man I can talk to. It's true that I've told terrible, great lies. I'm not a distinguished person at all. I'm only a poor girl off the Western range. And I want to talk to some Western man, who'll understand. You—let me talk to you, sheriff!"

Sheriff Steve Lancing came striding through the crowd, throwing off a bow wave of confusion from either shoulder, his weight so battered the men about him.

"You can talk to me, Mrs. Reynolds," he said.

"That's not my name," said the girl.

"Ah, she admits that, does she?" asked Lee Swain.

He was irritated and very angry. He intended to remain directly in the center of the stage, and not to be thrust out of it. But the very first maneuver of the girl had disposed of him for the moment, it seemed.

It was to the sheriff that she spoke.

"Suppose you start in with the name then," said the sheriff. "Looks like we need a fresh start all around."

"My name is Mary Tracy," she said. "I'll tell you the whole story—every bit of it. And I'll tell you at the beginning—I'm not sorry that I lied! I'm not a whit sorry!"

Lee Swain looked over either shoulder with a sardonic smile, but he won no attention at all. Every glance was riveted upon the girl, and these brown-faced, stern men had admiration in their eye, not evil, sneering contempt.

"Nothing fairer than giving us the whole story," said the sheriff. "We'd like to hear that, only we haven't much time."

"No time at all!" said Lee Swain.

He had wanted to crush her and humiliate her. He saw that he was hardly likely to do that. And therefore he wished

to draw them all away from her as soon as possible. After all, Reynolds was the vital prey for him to strike down, using that mob as the weapon in his hands!

He added: "She's confessed that she's a liar and a cheat. Away from her now, boys. We have something else to do. We're not woman beaters!"

He added that last phrase as a happy afterthought.

The girl cried out: "You want to rush them to the jail and take out poor Jack. I know that. I understand it perfectly. That's why I came. To save a man from being murdered!"

"Is he your husband?" asked Swain.

Others had pressed back from side to side, and left a narrow open passage between them. He was delighted. Once more he had thrust the big sheriff aside, and he was in the center of the stage.

"No," said the girl. "He's not my husband."

"Is he your sweetheart then?" asked Swain.

"I never saw him till I met him in the Deerfoot jail!" she answered.

It was a good stroke. And it told.

"Then how much did they pay you to get you to Deerfoot and play this game on us?" Swain snapped.

She reached behind her, where a woman's purse was lying, jerked it open, and turned it upside down. A handkerchief fluttered out and fell slowly, softly to the floor.

"Not one penny!" cried the girl. "I haven't a penny, and I'm not to have any. I'll swear it! I came because an innocent man is being hounded to death! I used tricks, I told lies. It was only to get Jack Reynolds out of the hands of a mob and into the hands of the law. He wasn't afraid to stand his trial. He's there in the jail now, waiting for the courts to give a verdict!"

Lee Swain wished that he never had set foot inside of that room. He felt that she was still playing a part, still half-shrinking, and half-bold.

"She knows her business well enough," exclaimed Swain loudly. "There's no doubt about that. She's clever. In five minutes more, she'll be twisting you around her finger. We've

found out all that we want. We have something else to do, tonight! Come along, boys!"

He turned away from her.

The sheriff thundered: "Mary—if that's your name—what makes you think that Jack is innocent?"

"A thousand things! Powell and Halpin were Jack's friends. Hasn't he always been straight and true to his friends?"

"That's a fact," said several.

Hope came to her. She threw herself into the breach, raising her voice.

"But I was never sure until he swore to me in the jail that he hadn't touched the two of them. He found them murdered. Wasn't he on the Deerfoot trail coming to report what he'd seen when you met him? If he had been a murderer, would he have waited to let the crowd snare him? Wouldn't he have run as fast as his horse would take him?"

Lee Swain was growing hot and desperate. Instead of crushing the girl, he was being cornered by her.

He had retreated until he was close to the door, and now he stepped into the hall, shouting:

"Every man of you that has a brain—are you going to wait there and listen to a hired actress? She's trying to hold you, and all the time Sam, the mulatto, is stealing Reynolds out of the jail under your noses! Follow me! Follow me!"

There was strength of appeal in that voice and in the suggestion of action that lay inside of it.

And at the thought of Reynolds escaping from them again, a sort of fury rose in the breast of every man. To do them justice, the foremost ringleaders, now, were all men who personally hated Reynolds and wanted to do away with him, no matter by what means. They made the first rush, the first stampede from the room of the girl.

Others would have delayed, might have listened to the cogent persuasion that they were hearing. But the active example drew them.

Only the sheriff raised his voice to thunder, shouting: "You fellows, listen to me, and back up. There ain't going to

be no more lynching mobs in Deerfoot. Not while I live! Stand back, here! Boys, stand a minute and listen to reason, will you?"

He actually caught a man in either hand to stop the rush. But so doing, he merely threw himself behind the rest as they streamed out of the room.

The snarling, high-pitched voice of Lee Swain was heard ringing in the hallway:

"They've bought up the sheriff, but we knew that before. There's no law in Deerfoot but the law of the rope! And will we use it?"

"We will!" thundered the chorus.

And then the footfalls were booming on the steps.

The sheriff lunged out of the room, and found the hall already empty, and the stairs packed thickly with the men.

He tried to break through them. They were a solid wall. It was like handling a stampede.

The girl, from the open door of her room, heard the head of the mob reach the street. The shouting filled the street like the roar of water through a canyon. She knew that the mischief was launched far beyond her grasp to check it. Only the skill of Shannigan remained between Reynolds and death!

THE JAILER

25.

THE jailer was "Gorilla" Jones, though as to his last name, very few people knew it. Gorilla was the name he loved, and he did not care if it were shortened to "Gory." He liked that almost as well.

In his ring days, he had been able to get his weight down to two hundred and twenty; now he weighed a bit more, but he had never allowed himself to grow fat. He had had a considerable success in the ring, and was climbing the ladder at a fair rate of speed when a foolish manager agreed to have him throw a fight. There were only five hundred dollars in the

dirty business, but the times were bad, the money was needed, and Gorilla was easily persuaded. The idea was that he would take a tumble in the fourth or fifth. Afterward, he would get a return match.

He performed according to instruction, pulled his punches for four rounds, and in the fifth rammed his chin into the path of a haymaker. Even then the punch did not daze him. But he fell on his face and lay flopped and motionless until his seconds came and dragged his inert hulk to the corner.

It was a very good fake, and a convincing one. Ringsiders stood up and yelled as they saw Gorilla's bulk smash against the floor.

But unfortunately there was at the ringside a clever sporting writer who had seen Gorilla box before and knew quite accurately what he could give and what he could take. He was not convinced, and in two days he had run to earth all the facts he needed. He published a story that took two boxers and two managers permanently out of the roped arena.

Gorilla wandered about, after that, until three drunken lumbermen jumped him in a Deerfoot saloon.

He laid them out like three logs, and threw them through the front door of the place.

There the sheriff collected them. Afterward, he collected Gorilla, and made him jailer. Before his regime, jail breaks had come frequent. Afterward they were entirely nonexistent.

One reason was that Gorilla let the men in jail see him every day in an unusual way. In that little building there was only one square, central floor space upon which all of the steel-barred cells looked. And from the ceiling, Gorilla had built a strong suspended platform to which he hooked either his punching bag or his sand bag.

Every afternoon he gave a show.

He first spread upon the concrete floor a padded ring mat. Then he went through a little exhibition of gymnastics, which included swinging the heavy dumb-bells. After that, he appeared in ring garb, and shadow-boxed, his vast, apish body springing about at a most convincing speed. Then he punched the bag with real skill. But his final exhibition was with the

sandbag, which he smashed with either hand, dealing out terrible blows that seemed capable of driving straight through the body of an ordinary man.

This little show generally lasted a whole hour, and the prisoners all looked on with wonder and undying interest. There was a sort of animal intensity of delight in Gorilla, when he was beating that sandbag, as though he had before him a human body! He was always silent, but his face spoke for itself.

Now, when Shannigan left the hotel as fast as his feet would take him, he went straight to the jail and found Gorilla squatted on his heels at the top of the steps smoking a cigarette Chinese fashion, holding it between thumb and forefinger.

"Hello, boss," said Shannigan.

Far behind him, as he hearkened, he heard a slight rumbling of voices, and with a shudder wondered if the mob had launched out of the hotel again.

" 'Lo, brother," said Gorilla.

"What's the chance of seein' Mr. Jack, boss?" said Shannigan.

He waited eagerly.

Gorilla threw away the cigarette.

"You got an order from the sheriff, or somebody?" he asked.

"No," said Shannigan.

"Well, you ain't going to see him then," said Gorilla. And he thrust out his broad jaw, and rested it on his knee, looking at Shannigan with contented, musing eyes.

"I'd like a lot to see him, brother," said Shannigan. "I'd do pretty nigh anything to see him. They's something that I forgot to tell him, boss."

Gorilla stretched out his vast hand, and Shannigan came to it. It fell upon his shoulder and the thumb and forefinger worked and wormed away into the muscles. They were inert now, but the cords and ropes of them were perceptible to the touch, even when they were passive.

Gorilla kept his hand there, and began to pat the shoulder of Shannigan.

"You got something in you, boy," he said. "They say you got something in you, and you *have* got something. Ever box any?"

"I've boxed a good deal, boss," said Shannigan.

"You come inside and stand up to me for five minutes," said the jailer, "and I'll let you talk a bit to Reynolds. It ain't quite right, but I'll let you do it."

The heart of Shannigan jumped, but he shook his head.

"I couldn't stand up to you for five minutes, Go. ..a," he said. "You're a regular prize fighter. Everybody knows that. You'd about kill a man like me!"

"Five minutes ain't a long time," said Gorilla. "And if you can move your feet a little, Sam, you might last out, pretty good. Besides, the gents inside, they'd like to see the fun."

"Well, Gorilla, all I can do is try," said Shannigan.

Gorilla extended a vast arm around the shoulders of the other, in a caressing gesture.

"You're going to do right fine," he said.

He rose, pulling open the door of the jail as he spoke, then closing and locking it as he did so.

"There's the mat on the floor," he said. "If you was to drop, maybe you'd better drop right there on the mat, Sam. What you been and done to your face? They's a kind of a white streak on it!"

"It's a steam burn," said Shannigan instantly.

"Is it?" said Gorilla. His brutal eyes dwelt on the spot; his right hand moved a little, restlessly.

"There's the gloves, brother," said he. "And you take the first pair that suits you any. I'll take what's left."

They stood under the lantern on the wrestling mat of Gorilla Jones, while he said to the prisoners, as they came to the bars of their cells:

"Sambo, here, wants to talk to his boss. I oughtn't to let him to. But he's willin' to fight me for five minutes. And if he's still on his feet, then, I'm going to let him see Mr. Jack Reynolds, boys. Here's my watch. You take it, Jap, and watch

the minutes, will you? Don't you let that boy stay here agin' me more'n five minutes!"

He handed the watch to a prisoner in the next cell. A ripple of amused, rattling comment came from the other prisoners. Far in the corner, Shannigan saw the tall form of Jack Reynolds, and the gleam of his face, pressed close to the bars.

He fitted the gloves on his hands and gave his wrists to a pair of steady hands that darted through adjoining bars to tie the strings that would hold them on.

"Good luck, boy. Good luck, Sam," said the prisoner, in a whisper. "Beat the face off of him," he added, and chuckled as he ended.

There was no doubt about whose face he expected to see damaged in the fight that followed.

Gorilla was already waiting. He stood on the edge of the mat resting the tips of his gloves on his hips, as he worked his fingers down into the gloves. His head was dropped a little. Under his shaggy brows, his eyes looked up at Shannigan.

"Ready, old son?" he asked. "Ready, brother?"

"Ready," said Shannigan.

"Take it, then!" said Gorilla.

He made one catch step, and with his body leaning well forward, and then with only the slightest excuse of a left feint, he smashed for the head with his right.

It was a killing punch. Perhaps in certain aspects Gorilla was not such a bad fellow, but he had been many months without being able to lure one of his charges onto the mat for a bit of a sparring match, and as a result, he was hungry for a chance to use his strength. All his might was in that blow, all his speed, all his sharpest and keenest sense of distance and timing.

But the hunching of his shoulder telegraphed the thing that was coming, and Shannigan was not there waiting.

He side-stepped, swayed his head so that the hurtling glove brushed his cheek, and slid in with a lifting blow that grazed the side of Gorilla, bruised the flesh against his well-covered ribs.

He gasped, and clutched Shannigan in a clinch.

Then, jerking back his right fist, he tried for Shannigan's heart. A glove was dropped into the bend of his arm. The punch stopped. The glove rose and almost tore the ear from the side of Gorilla's head.

He broke from that clinch with a shower of sparks flying before his eyes and the roar of the sea in his ears.

"Good!" gasped Gorilla, grinning in his pain. "You're good, Sambo. This here is going to be a *fight!*"

He tried a double feint, the left going through for the chin. It was a favorite from the old days, a real winner, and he sent it across like a flash. Shannigan let the force of it slide off his left arm, and chopped a hook with the other hand across the shoulder of Gorilla and down like a trip hammer on the broad jaw.

A bomb exploded with crimson flames in the brain of Gorilla. His knees loosed as they never had been loosed in the ring. And he swayed forward.

Shannigan put out both hands against the chest of the big man and thrust him away. Gorilla swayed back, lost balance, and struck the width of his shoulders against the bars of the nearest cell.

A low-pitched howl of joy arose from the throats of the prisoners.

In every cell, a pair of hands gripped the bars. From every cell a pair of bulging eyes of delight was glaring.

One man cried out eagerly: "Don't yell, boys, or somebody'll come and stop it. Don't make no sound!"

They made no sound, therefore—no loud sound, at least. But a deep moaning voice of pleasure filled the jail.

Gorilla had been badly stung. But one shake of his massive head had cleared it.

He grinned briefly, as though to convince non-existent fans who had bet on him that he was all right. Then he came in more craftily, with his left hand thrust forward, only slightly crooked for jabbing purposes, and his right hand poised for mischief.

He saw that he had made a great mistake. This fellow Sam

was almost as heavy as he, was probably stronger, and was as quick as a flash. Craft, old ring craft, would have to assist him now.

But it was not craft that helped him. Shannigan, stepping back from the advancing, jabbing left, tripped on the edge of the boxing mat and fell to one knee.

He should have been safe, there, but not from Gorilla. After all it was *not* a ring, and there was no referee. That joyous thought was instantly home in the brain of Gorilla. And he came in with a low-swinging, lifting uppercut that struck Shannigan on the side of the head, close to the temple.

It fairly hurled him upward and backward, and his head clanged against the bars of a cell.

"Dirty work!" exclaimed half a dozen voices. "You're a crook, Gorilla. Fight fair!"

Gorilla heard them vaguely, in the distance.

The words had no meaning. He had been met, outslugged, on the verge of destruction. Now he wanted to kill this man, standing or on the ground. He wanted to kill him with the blows of his sledge-hammer fists, and the drunken, horrible desire for murder was in his face as he plunged headlong at his opponent.

Darkness lay before the eyes of Shannigan. As one in a pitch-black room sees, very vaguely, the form of a swift-moving object, so he saw the jailer coming. One thing he knew—that there was no question of rules now. He had been hit when he was on one knee.

Well, for that matter, it was not merely to chat with Reynolds that he had come to the jail.

Even as he stood there against the bars, his ear was hearkening for the babble and thunder of the crowd that must, he thought, soon be sweeping through the street of Deerfoot toward the jail.

If he, Shannigan, were found there with Reynolds, he would be hanged from the same tree. There was no doubt of that.

But he could hear nothing, except a confused booming

sound in his ears, which he knew was the noise of his own pulse.

As that lunging shadow in darkness came near, he ducked suddenly down. He heard and felt the whir of the blow that shot past his head, and then the charging bulk of Gorilla struck against him, and knocked the wind from his lungs.

The long, massive arm of Gorilla had plunged between the bars into the empty space of the cell.

He had to make two efforts to withdraw it, cursing through his teeth.

Shannigan staggered away from that hissing sound.

His knees were unsteady. There was no strength in the front part of his legs. But the darkness before his eyes was turning to gray.

He shook his head violently, and drew in a great breath. The gray was broken by splashes of yellow lantern light. And through that display lurched Gorilla again, sure of himself now, and ready to deal the final blow. He had been overeager before. Now he was measuring and timing perfectly. The point of the chin—that was what he wanted. To see the head of the other whip back almost out of sight, as though he had been decapitated by the stroke of an ax, and then to see the human body turn into a loosely filled sack, slouching forward toward the floor. He would try to hit a second time, while Sam was in the air!

That was in the mind of Gorilla, as he came swiftly in, intent on his work.

"Run, you fool!" advised one of the spectators.

And Shannigan ran, straight forward, with short steps, the life coming back to his legs.

Gorilla, amazed at the charge, halted, braced himself, and then shot a long-range right for the chin. It whirred over the ducked head of Shannigan, and the latter fell into a clinch.

It was like grasping an armful of pythons. He was carried about and dashed here and there. He dropped his head into the hollow of Gorilla's shoulder, and hung on. Blows smashed at his body and failed to find a vital point. Blows glanced off his head, without stunning him.

Rather, they seemed to shake together his scattered wits. Then, suddenly, in a single stroke of chance, as it were, the life returned to him, the full life, as it will do to a stunned man who is in perfect training.

He dropped his elbows into the hollows of Gorilla's flailing arms.

"Now, Gorilla," he said, "I'm going to turn off the music for you. I'm going to turn on the gas. Are you ready?"

"I'll kill you, boy. I ain't half started," said Gorilla.

He tried a lifting right hand for the heart, as he spoke.

Shannigan merely slipped to the right, and out of the clinch.

"How are you, kid?" asked eager voices from the cells.

"I'm going to poison him now," said Shannigan calmly. "Come in, Gorilla. Come right in and take it."

"Oh, I'm coming, son; I'm coming," said Gorilla.

He came in feeling his way with that professionally skillful left, which is the first line of offense and defense for a trained prize fighter. With it he feinted, then stepped in and jabbed at the head of Shannigan.

The blow landed. With hands half down, Shannigan waited, and a calm and terrible joy was in his heart.

There had been one curse on him, since his childhood. Even then, his strength had not been as the strength of other youngsters. His father he could remember sitting before him with upraised forefinger and solemnly shaken head, cautioning him against ever fully using his strength. Teachers in schools had told him the same thing. As for his companions, they would have stood before a thunderbolt from the sky as soon as against Shannigan, roused.

When he was grown, it was even worse. His strength must never be used.

But *now* he could use it!

So he allowed that first tentative left jab to strike him. It was the mere brush of a feather to Shannigan—it would have staggered a normal man.

He would make one concession; he would use his left only, not that fatal right hand.

Again the left jab pecked at him, and then the poised right of Gorilla shot forward. Now Shannigan struck, eagerly, inside the swing of the coming glove. He stepped in. His whole body leaned with the blow, as with the force of the wind. And right against the jaw he drove the punch.

He expected a rigid resistance. Instead, he felt the bone of the jaw suddenly crunch inward. Gorilla was lifted fairly from his feet, and landed heavily on his back, finished.

26.

It seemed to Shannigan, as he glanced down at the fallen man, that he had at last done murder with his hands. But then he saw the slow heave of that great chest. Blood was flowing from the mouth of the fallen man. But it was flowing—and blood does not flow after death.

He kneeled. There was no need to secure the hands of Gorilla. At ease he could dip into the pockets, and rise again with the heavy bunch of keys.

As he did so, he heard what he had long expected.

Over the rattle and clamor of applause from the cells, he could hear the distant roar down the main street of the town.

They were coming at last, and the sound of them meant exactly what he had expected.

He ran to the door of Reynolds's cell and dropped on his knees.

"They're coming for you, Jack," he said briefly.

He heard Reynolds softly swear.

Shannigan began to try the keys in the lock, one key after another.

He wanted to concentrate on that task, but he could not keep from his mind the voice of a man across the aisle.

Other voices were speaking in the jail. The prisoners were talking to one another eagerly. There were here men with hanging offenses against them. But they forgot their own

danger to speak of what they had seen, a stroke delivered by a human hand with the power of a god behind it. Brains will never be worshiped like the talents of the Achilles, the Lancelot, the conquering hero in the fight.

And they were talking of how that left hand of Shannigan had been drawn back, and how he had stepped forward, and how his body had leaned, and how the blow had snapped up, the hand blurring with speed—and, finally, the horrible, crunching sound of a broken bone, as the blow landed.

Yonder lay the victim, still bleeding, senseless. There was no pity for him. It was not his foul tactics in the fight that barred him from the kindness of the watchers. It was merely the savage contempt of barbarians for the defeated.

Now, having ripped off his gloves with his teeth, the victor was on his knees, working to liberate a prisoner from a cell, and that won still further applause.

In the liberation of that man, they felt a stroke on behalf of all of them.

So they talked, and every word was one of burning admiration for Shannigan.

But, of all their voices, only one struck into his brain.

It came from across the open space, from an opposite cell, a high-pitched, nasal, Yankee whine, that said:

"Take your time, brother. Haste makes waste. And the race ain't to the fastest. Not the fastest pair of feet, or the fastest pair of hands, is always goin' to win. Take it slow and easy, Sam. Take it easy, boy."

This voice Shannigan could not shake from his mind.

The roar of the crowd was coming nearer, and there remained before him only three keys!

He tried them rapidly, one after the other. Not a single one worked the lock!

Somewhere there was another key, perhaps, a hidden key to this important cell, this important prisoner?

He looked up with his strange, inhuman smile to Reynolds.

"They're going to hang you, boy," he said. "I can't open this lock."

He saw the hand of Reynolds flash out and grip the bars of the cell.

"That noise down the street—that's the mob," said Shannigan. "They've found out that Mary is a fake—a fake wife. That it's all a fake. They're coming for you."

And for him?

He rose to his feet to run for the rear door.

But his knees seemed to buckle under him.

He was on them again, working feverishly, retrying the keys that he had worked with before. This time, heeding automatically the droning voice across the area, he was working each key more carefully into the slot, more carefully turning it.

But the uproar from the street was sweeping upon them with a terrible speed.

A hallucination rushed upon the brain of Shannigan. It seemed to him that the voices of the throng already were inside the jail and storming at his very ear.

He actually looked over his shoulder toward the front door of the jail, and as he did so he saw it shake with many blows; hands were beating against it. The shouting thundered through it.

"Hey, Gorilla! Hey, Gorilla! Open up! Open up!"

But Gorilla did not stir, where he lay.

Shannigan gave a sharp twist to the key he was holding, for already he seemed to feel the pinch of the rope and the roughness of the hemp against the skin of his throat.

As he twisted the key, he felt the bolt move, and the door of the cell swung open against him.

Jack Reynolds leaped with a cry through the gap, and into freedom!

"Which way now?" asked Reynolds. "The back door?"

"Listen!" said Shannigan.

There was hardly any need to direct the attention of the other, for the back door, like the front, was shaking and rattling under many blows.

And across the area, from the opposite cell, the whining,

drawling voice was saying, cutting through the clamor to the ear of Shannigan:

"Brains is a lot faster than feet ever were!"

Now on the boxing mat, the bulk of Gorilla was coming slowly to a sitting posture. Shannigan ran to him. And, as Gorilla, with a blank eye, drew out a gun, Shannigan snatched it and handed it to Reynolds, who was close behind him.

"If you use that gun when you don't have to," said Shannigan, "I'll take your trail myself, and never leave it till I finish you! That's in trust—not a gift!"

He jerked Gorilla to his feet.

"Come along with us!" he commanded.

Gorilla mumbled. His jaw was badly broken, but it was possible for him to speak.

"You got a sock, man," he said.

Shannigan kept a hand under the pit of Gorilla's arm. So he marched him to the front door, and whispered in his ear:

"Now bawl out that you're trying to open for them, but the lock is jammed. Tell them to take the back door, and you'll open that."

Outside, the uproar was growing. And still the yells for Gorilla were repeated.

The latter opened wide his great mouth.

"Tryin' to open, boys!" he thundered. "You jammed the lock on me. Take the back door. I'll open that."

"The back door!" exclaimed many voices, in answer.

And there was a rushing sound of footfalls as Shannigan turned the lock and jerked the door wide.

He muttered to Reynolds, as he did so: "I'll meet you at the camping ground of the posse, if you can get yourself there."

Then, as Reynolds nodded and leaped through the open doorway, Shannigan followed, at full speed.

There was not a soul before them.

They could see the last of the crowd sweeping around the corner of the jail—or, rather, the dust they raised as they

poured—and they could hear the roaring of voices that collected at the back door of the jail.

But what remained most firmly printed in the mind of Shannigan was the open, hanging jaw of Gorilla, and his blank eyes, filled with amazement.

Reynolds, running like a greyhound, swung beside Shannigan to gasp:

"Each for himself?"

"Each for himself," said Shannigan.

Instantly, Reynolds darted to the side through the dark aperture between two houses.

Shannigan went on to the hotel.

There were plenty of people standing at doors and windows, but they were women and children.

The men were gone. They were up there with the mob at the jail, to join the others in the hanging of Jack Reynolds, or at least to be at the exciting scene as spectators.

Who would be in the hotel? No one, most likely.

At any rate, Shannigan walked straight through the front door, and saw not a soul.

In the lobby, there were overturned chairs, and newspapers scattered about.

He climbed the stairs and went to the room of the girl.

As he opened the door, soundlessly, he saw that she was sitting near the window, dressed for riding, her hat jammed well down on her head, as though she were prepared to face a powerful wind.

As he closed the door, she jumped up and faced him. Shannigan went to the bed and lay down on it, tucking the pillow well under his head.

She pointed toward the open window.

"Is it over, Sam?" she asked.

"Got anything to drink in the room?" asked Shannigan.

"No."

"That's a pity," said Shannigan.

He made himself a cigarette.

"Don't mind if I smoke in here now, do you?" said he.

"What's happened? The devils are still screeching. Listen!"

A wild yelling broke out and began to spread and scatter.

"They're going for horses," said Shannigan.

"Horses? Are they going to take him out of town? You mean that he's still alive, Sam?"

"Last time I saw him, he was running as though he were alive," said Shannigan.

"Running!" gasped the girl.

She dropped on her knees beside Shannigan.

"He's in the jail—how could he be running? Sam, Sam, did you get him free?"

Shannigan lighted his cigarette with deliberation, and then flicked the glowing match out through the window. After that, he inhaled a deep breath of the smoke, and sent it forth in a stiffly blown, thin stream.

"Sam!" she was pleading, her eyes brilliant.

"Yeah?" said Shannigan.

"Tell me! Sam, you—you tell me!"

"Why, he was hitting the high spots, when I last saw him," said Shannigan.

"Tell me in one word—is he out of jail—is he safe?"

"How much d'you love me, Mary?" asked Shannigan, blowing smoke toward the ceiling. "Tell me that, will you?"

"As high as the moon, as deep as the sea," said she.

"Yeah. He's free," said Shannigan.

She threw her arms around him.

"Don't," said Shannigan.

She sprang to her feet.

She was trembling as she demanded: "How did you do it? What does it mean that you're back here? *What* has happened? Where's Swain—that devil of a Swain? I tried to hold the crowd here. I tried to give you more time, but Swain got them all at his heel again!"

He chose to answer only one part of the question.

"I'm here because I'm tired and need a rest. I'm resting now, if you'll stop talking so much, Mary. You have to keep rattling that tongue in your silly head. He's safe. He's on the wing, and I don't think that they can snag him with their guns. Not by this light."

She caught her breath.

"He's free!" she said softly.

"Like that boy pretty well, Mary, do you?" asked Shannigan.

"Yes—pretty well!" said she.

"You're young," said Shannigan. "I'll tell you the trouble with youth is—"

"Tell me what we're to do!" she exclaimed. "That's what I have to know. How do you dare to be back here when the whole town is screeching? Listen! Listen!"

The uproar was sweeping clear across the town. It reached the hotel. The beating of the hoofs of horses started.

"I hear it," said Shannigan.

"What does it mean?"

"It means that they're scattering for horses, and that they'll ride their heads off till they tire their horses, hunting for Jack Reynolds and me. Then we'll go down, when things grow a bit quiet again, and leave town."

She stared at him.

"You mean," she whispered, "that at any minute they're liable to walk into this room?"

"Why, there's one chance in two or three that they might," said Shannigan.

"Then what would you do?"

"Kill a few of 'em," said Shannigan. "I suppose that's what I'd do."

He blew forth more smoke, and regarded her lazily.

"Sam Shannigan!" she gasped.

"Don't be so full of exclamations, Mary," said Shannigan. "You make me a little tired, just now. How long have I been raising you?"

"We've got to move—now! We've got to get out!" she pleaded.

"Answer me," said Shannigan.

"Four years," said the girl.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"You ought to know better then," said Shannigan. "You're really old enough, and I've trained you."

She threw up her hand and dropped into a chair.

"How long are you going to stay here?" she murmured. "Will you tell me that? And where are we going?"

"We're going to meet that darling Jack," said Shannigan.

"Sam—" said the girl, and then stopped herself. "I won't exclaim," she added.

A knock came at the door.

"Hello!" called a stentorian voice.

She jumped from her chair and looked with staring eyes toward Shannigan for directions.

But Shannigan merely shrugged his shoulders, half closed his eyes, and drew leisurely on his cigarette.

She understood, instantly, the demon of the perverse that was in him. She had seen it in him before, but never to this extent. He would not budge, that was clear, until that cigarette was finished.

And if men entered the room before he had ended it—well, those men would die!

She faced the door.

"Hello!" she said.

"Gotta see you, young lady!" said the sharp, keen tone of Lee Swain.

"I'm dressing," said the girl.

"Throw something around you," said Lee Swain. "I've got to see you."

"Just a moment," said she.

SHANNIGAN'S PERVERSITY

27.

SHE sat down, got up again, making the chair scrape loudly back, and looked with terrified eyes at Shannigan. The door of the room was not locked—and Shannigan still lay prone, with sleepy eyes half closed!

There was another brisk knock.

"You hear me?" snapped Swain.

She looked desperately toward the cigarette of the prone Shannigan. It was hardly half smoked!

"Yes, yes?" said the girl.

"I won't be kept waiting," said Swain. "There are things for you to answer, my girl, and you'll answer them to me—unless you prefer to answer them to a judge in court!"

"One minute!" she said.

She ran to the door, and turned the key in the lock, then rattled it prodigiously.

"It doesn't work," said she.

"Yeah, it works all right, if you want it to work," said Lee Swain.

"Ah, I see!" said Mary Tracy.

She glanced over her shoulder.

Shannigan had deigned to lift his head, and, with a faint smile, he was watching her, seeming to drink in her terror and excitement.

"What do you see?" said Lee Swain. "I see that you're trying to make a fool of me!"

"No, no, no," she protested. "It's simply that I tried the wrong key in the lock."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Swain. "Now, look here. I've tried to hold my hand—I've tried to give you your chance—but, unless you open that door immediately, I'll have you behind the bars so fast that your head will swim, my girl! There's penitentiary business in this. Jack Reynolds has been delivered from jail, if you don't happen to know it, and you're part of the plot that broke the law!"

"Mr. Swain, Mr. Swain," she pleaded, almost tearfully, "will you *please* give me a little chance to find the right key?"

"I'll give you ten seconds," said Swain.

She turned, panting, toward Shannigan.

The cigarette was already short, but he was cherishing it, only making a pretense of drawing upon it, and allowing the unassisted heat of the burning end to consume the rest.

She sprang to him, caught the cigarette away, and threw it through the window.

"Well," said Shannigan softly, "you might have done that before!"

"Who's that?" shouted Swain. "Who's in there? I heard a voice."

"Who could there be?" cried the girl.

Shannigan was already with her at the window.

"One moment more! I left it in a drawer, somewhere. I'll open the door to you at *once,* Mr. Swain!"

Shannigan waved her through the window, and as she slid over the ledge he caught her hands and lowered her to the roof of the veranda, below.

"I'm going to break this lock with a bullet and enter," called the voice of Swain. "And after I've done that, I'll teach you some of the resources of a practical man, my lady!"

Shannigan dropped noiselessly beside the girl.

"I'll climb down from the roof," said he. "Follow straight after me, and hang by your hands from the edge, then drop. I'll catch you, all right."

He went down over the slanting roof, Mary Tracy following. She saw him dip over the edge of the roof and disappear. There was a light impact of his feet against the ground below.

And then, as she followed over the edge, glancing down toward the ground, which seemed a dangerous distance below, she heard the muffled voice of Swain above them and far away. It was followed by the sound of a pistol shot, and then a door slammed open with a crash.

The yell of the astonished Swain instantly rang through the air, as Mary Tracy let go her hold on the edge of the eaves of the veranda roof, and dropped.

Great hands gripped her under the arms, and she was lowered to the ground without the least shock.

"That's that," said Shannigan, panting a little at her ear.

A man turned the corner of the house on the run, halted, and exclaimed:

"Who's there?"

"Friends," said Shannigan, and felled him to the ground.

The outcry of Lee Swain reached the window, and the little man appeared above them, clearly silhouetted against the light.

Shannigan murmured: "What a beautiful, what an easy shot!"

He stood there, staring up. The girl caught his right arm.

"If you won't think of yourself, remember that I'm not clear yet, Sam!"

"That's true," said Shannigan calmly.

He walked with her around the corner of the building and back toward the stable.

Other voices were shouting, by this time, inside the hotel.

"Will you hurry, Sam?" she demanded breathlessly. "*Everything* may depend on a second saved, just now!"

"Oh, you'll see your darling Jack soon enough." Shannigan yawned. "Don't worry about that. You'll see the dear boy. And I'm tired, Mary. Tired of work, d'you see?"

He actually came to full halt as he said this. And she felt again in him, without seeing his face, the working of that imp of the perverse.

She said nothing. Silently she waited there in the darkness.

"Well," said Shannigan, "I suppose that we might as well saunter on."

He led straight back to the stable of the hotel.

As they came nearer, two men dashed out of the wide-open, lighted doorway, at the full speed of the horses they were mounted on. They were belated riders in the man hunt, but they were determined ones.

Lee Swain was one of them!

"He's turned his attention from you, at last," said Sam Shannigan. "Think of the state of mind of that poor fellow, Mary! There's a thing to start your pity working in your tender heart. Think of him! A moment ago with you and me and Jack Reynolds all in the grip of his hand, and now without a one of the three. He's left with only a certain reputation in the town as a fellow of insight. And what's reputation in a town like Deerfoot? Why, it's a thing that's here today and gone tomorrow. It's a will-o'-the-wisp. And a little touch of

lead will put it out forever! How did I keep from killing Lee Swain when he leaned out of that window?"

He turned to her, pausing again, as he spoke.

And, once more, something told her that she must not dare to speak a word. So she held silence, though her knees were shaking.

They could hear other voices inside the stable, and yet Shannigan went straight on, and, to the amazement of the girl, stepped into the open doorway, into which two more men were dragging saddled horses.

"That's all right, boys," said Shannigan. "We'll ride them the rest of the way!"

"It's the mulatto!" yelled the nearer man. "We've got him. We've—"

Shannigan picked a gun out of the air while the fellow was trying to draw, and hit him down the side of the head with the long blue barrel of it.

The hat of the man went off. He began to stagger sidewise, tottering off a balance that he could not get again, until he struck against the barn door and fell flat on his back, where he lay muttering and puffing out his breath through a big reddish mustache.

The second man had also moved for a gun, but he saw his companion slapped out of the way and himself covered with the dark and hollow eye of Judge Colt. Therefore, he made no move, except to back up a little.

"Take that bay," said Shannigan to the girl. "That's a neat trick and ought to carry you pretty well."

She gripped the reins at once and flung herself into the saddle in haste. For she was wild to be gone. It seemed to her that at any instant a hundred armed men would come on the run from the shadows about the hotel.

And *still* Shannigan had not mounted.

He was saying to the man in the barn:

"Do you know who owns these horses?"

"I own 'em," said the man, still trying to back up, but hobbled by the cold eye of the Colt.

"I want to rent them for a couple of days. How much?"

"I dunno," said the other. "I—I—I dunno."

"Here's fifty dollars," said Shannigan.

He picked the bills out of a vest pocket, and crumpled them, and threw them at the feet of the other.

Then he added, always without haste: "What's your name?"

"Chuff Watson."

"Watson, you were out to hunt me and the lady and Jack Reynolds, weren't you?"

Watson stared, and moistened his lips, and still Judge Colt enchanted them so that they could not frame human speech.

"Speak out!" said Shannigan, with a stinging lash in his voice.

"I—yes, I was goin' to ride with the rest of the boys," said Watson. "I only meant to—"

"You only meant to help at the hanging of us, if you got a chance. I understand that," said Shannigan. "But now I want *you* to understand something."

"All right," said the wretched man.

"If you pretend that I've stolen this pair of horses, I'll come back and take you out of bed in the middle of the night, and split you in two, and throw both halves of you away. Understand?"

"Yes," said "Chuff" Watson.

"Turn your face to the wall!" commanded Shannigan.

He was obeyed.

And as Chuff Watson, trembling in every joint, turned toward the wall, with a groan of fear, Shannigan leaped into the saddle, looked once behind him, with a laugh, and then joined the girl.

She started at a gallop. But she had to ride the horse back in a quick circle, for Shannigan kept his mustang at a walk.

"Sam! Quick!" she commanded.

"I'll tell you what, Mary," said he. "I've looked at this place a good many times in the daytime, but I've never had a good shot at it in the night. Neither have you. Let's go on

slowly, and see what's what. The night's young. Lots of things may happen before morning."

Once more she knew better than to utter one word.

And step by step, at a walk, the two horses were ridden gradually down the main street of the town of Deerfoot. Which, in the eyes of all, was by far the most extraordinary thing that happened this night.

The gum-chewing clerk of the telegraph office had come out to the edge of the pavement with the flavor of wintergreen in his mouth, and while he was leisurely masticating, he saw the two ride into a shaft of light, and out of it again.

He opened his eyes wide to watch them. And afterward he told how, like phantoms, the two had come from darkness into light, and moved on again, always with quietly walking horses!

THE RENDEZVOUS

28.

THEY were out of the town, at last. The final dreadful shaft of lamplight had swept across them, when a trio of galloping riders went by with a shout:

"Use the spur, boy!"

"Petered out," called Shannigan.

They went on, and Shannigan and the girl rode into the open country.

Finally she could breathe, and cried at him softly: "Sam, what strange kind of devil has been in you tonight?"

"A tired devil," said Shannigan. "Didn't want to move. 'Hurry up,' I kept saying. 'Take it easy,' the devil would always answer. 'Think of poor Mary!' said I to myself. 'Slow and sure does the trick,' said the devil to me. And that was the entire trouble, Mary. I simply couldn't hurry. You understand?"

She shook her head and sighed.

"I know," she said. "When you don't want to talk, nothing will make you!"

She added: "Will he be there, Sam?"

"Jack? Well, what d'you think, Mary? I should say that he'll be there. He knows that we're coming. Not that I matter a whit to him, but he knows—"

"*You?*" cried the girl. "Not that *you* matter? Why, you got him out of the jail; you pulled him out of the very teeth of 'em—you've been the brains or the means of everything that's happened to keep him from dying, half a dozen times, and now he's ready to die for *you*, Sam. I know it! He's that sort of a man!"

"Is he?" said Shannigan. "All right. I suppose he is. But, if he thinks anything of me, it's nothing compared to what he thinks of you, Mary. It's so easy to be terribly grateful to a pretty girl, even if she's not in love with you!"

"Shannigan!" she said.

"Well?"

"Have you said anything to him? Have you hinted anything to him—about me?"

"About how dizzy you are over him? No, not a word—not a word. But bright young fellows like that lad don't need any telling, Mary. They can read the whole story with one look into the eyes of the girl. Take a dashing, handsome, big young fellow like Jack Reynolds, and just think of the number of times he's seen the eyes of pretty girls melt!"

"You're disgusting, Sam," said the girl.

She rode on in a gloomy silence.

Before them, out of the night, lifted the poplar wood, and as they came to the verge of it a rider flashed out into the starlight.

"Hello, Sam!" he called. "I thought you'd never get here. And then—you come along at a dog-trot!"

He jerked his horse to a halt beside the girl, and leaned out to her and over her.

"We've got to get you away from here—quick—quick!" said Reynolds. "You've taken your life in your hands for me. I haven't any way to thank you, but I'll help to get you away.

They'll be insane now—the whole town. They'll comb the hills for us—and they mustn't find you. Sam, just what was in your head to bring her out here!"

"I didn't think that she'd like riding alone," said Shannigan. His voice was drawling and gentle. "Where would *you* have taken her, old son?"

"Anywhere," said Jack Reynolds, "except where the danger is—poor girl!"

"She was raised on it," said Shannigan. "She's never at home except when she's eating fire, Jack. She's a female St. George, is what she is. She wouldn't be anywhere in the world, except out here."

"We've got to get her away at once," said Reynolds.

"We'd better wait a while, hadn't we?" said Shannigan.

"Not a minute," said Reynolds violently.

"Well," said Shannigan, "you're more at home in this neck of the woods than I am. Hark at them whooping, yonder! They've found something—a ghost, or a rabbit, or something!"

There was a distant howling of voices, turned by echo into a wail like the baying of wolves. And the rattle of gunshots was mixed and blended with it.

"You ought to know better than I, in this part of the world," continued Shannigan. "If you think we ought to start on, we'll start. But you might lose a good deal by it."

"How might I?" asked Reynolds.

"Howison will be out here before long. I told him that this was the rendezvous, in case we were ever scattered, the lot of us."

"Howison coming out here?" said Reynolds. "Why, I suppose we could wait a little while. You wouldn't mind that, Mary, would you? The old duffer's done such a lot to get a chance to see me that it's a shame to duck away at the last minute, eh?"

"Don't mind at all," said the girl. "Not a whit, in fact. Of *course* we'll stay here and wait for him. Besides, the Deerfoot people will never dream of hunting for us as close to home as this."

"Listen to her," said Reynolds enthusiastically. "Nothing but generosity—never a thought for herself."

"She's a fire eater, is all," said Shannigan.

He made a cigarette, and then lighted it.

Reynolds exclaimed, as he saw the flame of the match. "Are you crazy, Sam? Want to light up the whole hills for them to find you?"

"This old life is just a long procession of chances," said Shannigan. "No matter how you try to fix it, the chances will always come in. Why not take the little ones, like lighting matches, Jack?"

"Hush," said Reynolds. "There's somebody now—some one riding straight toward the trees. Rein back, Sam. Rein back, Mary. Every man in Deerfoot is ready to shoot at any shadow."

"Not *that* fellow," said Shannigan. "He doesn't ride as though he had a gun, even. I'll bet my money it's your friend Howison."

The single horseman came on slowly. They could hear the creaking of the stirrup leathers now. Presently, when his silhouette was fairly strong, he stopped the horse and called out in a low voice:

"Who's there?"

"It's all right, Howison," said Shannigan. "Here's Reynolds waiting to meet you."

Howison sent his horse along briskly.

Jack Reynolds jumped from the saddle and caught the bridle of Howison's horse to help him in dismounting.

He took the hand of Arthur Howison as the other got to the ground.

"Well, Mary," said Shannigan to the girl, as she listened, smiling, to the greetings that were pouring from Reynolds and the thanks with which he showered the older man, "well, Mary, the gay days are over, for a while. It's the end of the play now. You can see for yourself. Congratulations, thanks, all that sort of friendly business, always means the end of the play. Always, always! By the time the morning comes we—"

"Hush, Sam," she cautioned softly. "I want to hear what

Jack says. See the way his heart runs over! What a fine fellow he is, Sam!"

"Yes," said Shannigan. "One of the very best fellows in the world. He can say more pretty things to the minute—But I was going to say, Mary, that we're at the end of trouble, when the talk begins to sound like that stuff."

"We're not at the end," answered Mary Tracy. "What an idea! There's nothing like that in sight, worse luck!"

"Why," said Shannigan, "we've done our job. We've done everything that Howison asked of me. We've taken Reynolds away from the danger in Deerfoot. And that's all we were asked to do. Of course it's the end, for us. For me, rather. But you'll be going on, Mary. A lot may remain ahead for you."

She dropped a hand on the arm of Shannigan. "Would you leave him in the lurch, Sam?" she asked. "Why, he's barely out of jail. Wouldn't you help him another stroke, now that your job is done?"

"I'm a practical workingman, Mary," said Shannigan. "I take a job. I finish it. And there you are!"

"I don't believe it," said the girl. "You *will* keep helping him, Sam?"

"You think that I ought to?"

"Why, of course I do!"

"That's a good, definite opinion," said Shannigan. "If you think I ought to, perhaps I shall."

She stared hopelessly at him through the darkness. It was irony, always irony, with him, it seemed.

As though he, Shannigan, would ever consult her about anything!

Howison came suddenly toward them.

"You've heard my talk with Jack?" he asked.

"No," said Shannigan. "I was talking myself."

"Well," said Howison, "I've been frank with him. Haven't I, Jack?"

"Straight talk doesn't break bones," said Reynolds.

"My idea is this," said Howison. "If Jack will walk straight and steady for a time—let's say a year—I've agreed that he's

to be heir to an equal half of my estate. I believe in him. Absolutely. But I want him to test himself a little further. There's no harm in that—in proving himself *to* himself. Eh?"

"Not a bit," said Reynolds.

"The idea is," said the older man, "that he's to remain quietly here among the hills, for a time, and after things have settled down, he's to try to start back East. When he gets there, I'm to see him and arrange a trip abroad. Now, then, Shannigan, you've done your job perfectly. It's finished. But I'm going to ask you if you'll care to stay with Reynolds until he's definitely started eastward. You can add whatever charge you wish to the bill."

Shannigan answered: "As a matter of fact, I have still something to do that springs out of this business, Howison. I have to see Lee Swain charged with the murder of Powell and Halpin. But, if you want me to stay with Reynolds, I'll stick for a few days. For that matter, I have to keep Mary under cover for a few days, before I start her back home."

Howison thanked him. He came to Mary Tracy and took her hand.

"You were the keystone of the arch that held up Jack, for a while," said he. "God bless you for it, my girl. If I can ever be of any help to you, in any way, let me know what I can do. You'll have a financial reward for what you've done."

"Sam!" broke out the girl.

Shannigan said: "As a matter of fact, Howison, Mary is not in this for hard cash. She was simply helping in a pinch."

"It makes very little difference," said Howison. "There are things which can't be paid for. What you and Mary Tracy have done are more than money buys. I've been a rich man for years, so I know my real poverty!"

29.

THEY rode off together against the protest of Reynolds, who declared that he ought to be set loose to shift for himself. But Howison put forward the conclusive argument. He could be hard enough and dry enough, when he cared to be, and he said:

"You couldn't get yourself out of the first part of this tangle; how do you know that you can get yourself out of the last part of it? When you're safely on board a steamer bound for Europe, I'll begin to believe that you're actually out of harm's way. In the meantime, let Shannigan take care of you!"

So they voyaged away together through the hills.

When the gray of the dawn came, three weary people were in hearing distance of the waters that sang in Chantry Canyon, a mere waver of sound that hung in the air like the indiscernible mist that penetrates a spring morning.

Shannigan pointed out that it was almost a perfect place. For they could look down from the height of their covert, which was closely veiled around with trees and shrubbery, and see the lower stretches of the Chantry, where the sides of the creek were lined, for a distance, with the new mining town which had taken the name of the creek and canyon, and with the mines themselves, that pock-marked the ground.

And while they had Chantry in view on the one hand, from the same divide, by moving a few steps, they could look almost all the way across the hills to the town of Deerfoot. They were, in a sense, masters of all that lay between, and the strong field glasses which Shannigan had with him would enable them to study at a secure distance every searching party that rode out by day. As for the night, their ears would have to act as sentinels.

So, for three days, they lay low. At least a score of times, they saw bodies of armed men among the hills. And three separate times a posse went by them within hailing distance. Yet the little patch was never entered. The reason was a good one. It looked too open and clear to make a hiding place; but, inside, the ground was hollowed out, and sheltered a man standing for five feet of his length, as long as he kept to the center of the place.

It was nearly an ideal place, for all of these reasons, and here Shannigan and Reynolds built a rough lean-to which they arranged as a shelter for the girl. As for themselves, there was little rain in this season, and a roll of blankets was enough for them.

They had for food nothing but the most haphazard provisions. They made small snares—Reynolds was an expert in the construction and baiting of them—and caught birds. In a flat meadow near by there was a network of rabbit trails, beaten thin and hard through the grass. They set more traps here, and caught sufficient meat to keep them alive. It was not a very pleasant diet, because there was no salt, no bread, no variety of any kind. But they felt that they were merely counting time for a few days, and therefore they endured.

It was on the third day, in fact, that Shannigan suggested that, since the whole day was passing without a posse riding in sight, they might as well move the next morning.

So that day came to an end, as they sat on the edge of the covert and watched the lights begin to gleam and shake in far-away Chantry town.

Shannigan was by himself, sitting with his back against a rock. Reynolds and the girl were together, a step or two in advance of him down the slope. It had been this way from the beginning. From the time she came out of her little lean-to in the morning, to the time she said good night, she was constantly with handsome Jack. Sometimes they were whispering. Sometimes they were laughing foolishly together. Sometimes they were silent, their eyes on one another.

Shannigan watched all of this without seeming to see it. He watched it even when his head seemed to be turned the

other way, with that archaic smile cut upon his face of ancient bronze. He was watching it now.

"Jack," he said finally, "where'd you pick up that chestnut, the other night? You've never told me."

It was a fine horse—a good gelding long in the body and short in the back, with four legs that would have gladdened the eye of any horseman.

Big Jack Reynolds turned from the girl and leaned upon one elbow. The day was almost dead. Stars were pricking through the blue above them, though still a dull flare of smoke and fire was rolled across the west.

Reynolds was chuckling.

"That was a good one, too," he said. "Haven't I told you?"

"No," said Shannigan.

"Well," murmured Reynolds, "I've had something else on my mind for three days."

He half turned his head toward the girl, as he said this, and Shannigan saw her shake her head. It seemed that she did not approve of *everything* that the hero said.

Reynolds went on: "I know Deerfoot. I know the people in it, and I know other things, too. You have to keep an eye in your head, when the crowd's against you. I knew the horses and where they were kept. The best thing in the place is a big black that Colonel Joe West has. The next best thing is the chestnut, yonder."

"Who owns that?" said the girl.

"You'll laugh when you find out," said the hero. "A little measly hunchback of a kid."

"Oh!" said the girl.

"Yeah," said Reynolds, at ease. "I spotted the horse in the corral, one day, and talked to the brat about it. Seems that his old man has a fine mare, half-bred, and got a foal by a thoroughbred stallion out of her. But it was all legs, and the legs knocked together, and it had to be raised to its feet to feed. The old fellow was disgusted. The second day, the mare died. Something had gone wrong."

"Poor thing!" murmured the girl.

"The old chap was about to knock the foal on the head,"

said handsome Jack Reynolds, "and here comes the funny part of the thing."

"Funny part?" said the girl.

"Yes," said Reynolds. "The little hunchbacked kid got down on his knees and begged for the life of the foal. His father was hard-boiled and told the little fool to take the colt if he wanted to, and try to keep it alive, if he wanted to. But if it died, he'd get a flogging and a day without grub. Hard-boiled, you see?"

"A brute," said the girl.

"You know," said Jack Reynolds, "people don't like to have cripples and that sort around. The old boy has always been pretty hard on the kid. You can hardly blame him. A little one-lunged, hunchbacked toad of a kid! Ugliest frog-face that you ever saw in your life! Well, the kid lived with the colt day and night. Fed it with a spoon, by thunder! Then the colt got pneumonia. The old man wouldn't lift a hand. He said the colt was dying. And the kid went to the veterinary in the middle of the night and hired the veterinary by paying him his knife—a knife that had one broken blade in it!"

Reynolds broke off and laughed again.

"Did the veterinary take the knife for his hire?" asked Mary Tracy, suddenly and sharply.

"Why, he seemed to see the joke," said Reynolds carelessly, "and he took the knife. I've happened to see it, myself. He had it in a glass case, and he likes to tell the story. Anyway, he pulled the colt through the pneumonia case, though it was a hard job, and the boy's father said the lungs of the colt would never be any good. But he was wrong. That lad had the luck—just crazy, blind luck. And, though the colt was a spindling, worthless thing as a yearling, it began to fill out as a two-year-old, and as a three-year-old it was a regular thunderbolt.

"The kid was learning to ride it, in the meantime. And toward the end of its third year he entered it in a couple of races at rodeos and pulled down all the money. Now it's a four-year-old, and all the money on the range goes down behind it whenever it starts in any sort of a race. They brought

out a thoroughbred sprinter, a month ago—some of the gamblers did. But the chestnut beat that horse, beat him half a dozen lengths. It can run, let me tell you!"

He laughed again.

"When I left you, outside the jail, the other night," he went on to Shannigan, "I headed straight for that corral. I knew that horse would run away from anything in the mountains, and I think I'm right. I had to spend a minute lengthening the stirrups of the kid's saddle, and then off I went. The chestnut jumped the corral fence like nothing at all."

"Leave anything behind you to pay for it?" asked Shannigan.

"Pay for it?" said Reynolds. "Why should I pay for it? Deerfoot owes me something for the dirty deal that it's given me. I took the horse in part payment, and why not?"

"Yes, why not?" said Shannigan quietly.

He looked keenly at the girl.

She had thrown her head suddenly and stiffly back.

"That's rotten, Jack!" she said. "That's no good."

"You mean that Deerfoot doesn't owe me something for hounding me within an inch of my life?" asked Reynolds sharply.

"Think of the poor little hunchback!" said she.

"Oh, he's a fat-headed brat," said Reynolds. "They're all fat-headed, the dwarfs. Just because they can *talk* like human beings, they get proud of themselves. He'd make you tired. He's always talking about himself and Tommy—that's the horse. Billy and Tommy. He thinks a lot of himself, the brat does. Besides, I'll drop by and leave the gelding for him, one of these days. It'll have a few spur scars to decorate it, that's all."

"It was bad," said the girl. "Poor Billy!"

"Why," complained Reynolds, "if you've ever run for your life, you'll find out that you don't stop to pity the other fellow."

He stood up and stretched himself.

"It's pretty dull, Sam," said he. "I don't see why we couldn't slope, tonight."

"Slope where?" asked Shannigan.

"Oh, I don't know," said young Reynolds. "Why not drop down into the town, yonder? Gives me the jumps, to see those lights tremble like that. There's music—there's something happening, down there, Sam! You and I could drop down. We don't have to stay together. Nobody would recognize us. Not you—now that you've taken the stain off your face. And not me, either, because they wouldn't be expecting me."

"There's only one thing wrong about that," Shannigan said.

"Name it," said Reynolds.

"There's Mary, here—she might be a trifle lonely while we're away."

"Yes, that spoils it," said Reynolds impatiently.

"What an idea!" said Mary Tracy. "I'd be perfectly happy. Run along—if you two want to take such crazy chances!"

"No, we won't run along," said Reynolds.

He walked a few steps away from her, and stood with folded arms, watching the lights.

30.

It was gray morning of the fourth day when Mary Tracy came out of the lean-to where she had slept. She found Shannigan carefully broiling rabbit meat at a fire half the size of the palm of his hand, and built of wood so dry that hardly a single wisp of smoke rose into the air above the level of the brush.

"Morning," said Shannigan, though his back was toward her, and her footfall had seemed silent on the ground.

"Morning, Sam," said the girl. "How did you know that I'd come out?"

He made a gesture to the side.

"Bird flew from that bush, yonder," said Shannigan. "I

thought it might be you. Besides, you could smell the roasting of the meat."

"You know what the smell of roasting rabbit does to me, Sam?" she asked.

"What?"

"Makes me lose pounds. If my figure ever starts spreading, I'm going to live on roasted rabbit for a few days. Where's Jack?"

"Handsome? Why, he's gone to town."

"What!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah," drawled Shannigan. "I guess so."

"What makes you—Sam, he would be so crazy!"

"Boys will be boys," said Shannigan, yawning a little. "Bite into this, Mary."

He extended his hand toward her, offering a twig loaded with small bits of roasted meat.

She waved it away and came to face him.

She was always eager to confront that immobile countenance, little as she ever learned from its expression.

"What makes you think that he went to Chantry?" she asked.

"Well, he's not here," said Shannigan.

"He may be out setting traps," said she hastily.

"Yeah, and maybe not. I heard a horse walk away from camp about midnight."

"You heard—you really heard him leave, Sam?"

"About midnight," said Shannigan, "the fun is just getting ripe in a wide-open town like Chantry. Boys will be boys, Mary."

"Why didn't you stop him?" she demanded. "You know how terribly dangerous it may be for him!"

He looked up at her. Then he pulled three bits of roasted meat from the twig and munched them, slowly, considerately.

"Why?" cried the girl.

"Because I'm hungry, Mary," said Shannigan, almost humbly.

"You know what I mean," said the girl. She added an-

grily: "Sometimes I think that you *want* harm to come to Jack! You don't like him, Sam!"

"Anybody would like a big, handsome lad like Jack," said Shannigan. "He's only a little young. That's all."

"That's what you say of me," said the girl.

"It's true," said Shannigan.

"If he's gone to Chantry—" she gasped.

He allowed the pause to continue, while he drew more of the meat from the stick, and regarded her with blank eyes, eating.

"If he's gone to Chantry, they've recognized him—they've caught him again!" cried the girl.

"Maybe," said Shannigan.

"How can you sit there like that?" she demanded.

"Because I'm hungry," said Shannigan.

She exclaimed, stamped angrily on the ground, and then ran through the brush to the side of the little hill shoulder.

Shannigan continued to eat until his appetite was satisfied. Then he cleaned his fingers thoroughly on dried grass, laid aside enough roasted meat for the girl on some fresh green leaves, made a cigarette, and came out smoking it, to join her.

Before them, the ground fell in long, irregular waves into the valley of the lower Chantry. The stream itself was gleaming, in the mist of the distance, like a tenuous pencil stroke of silver. Off to the left and north, the ground grew rougher, the hillsides sharper. There were more trees, in green sweeps and broken patches. Over there the stream could not be seen. It was in that direction that the walls of the canyon rose hundreds of feet, above the white rush of the water, and it was from the same direction that the voice of the stream came to them like breath blown through a far-away horn.

"Nice picture, Mary, eh?" said Shannigan.

"Yes," she answered absently.

"That's what keeps me in the West," said Shannigan, "the place where you can let your eye slip, like a greyhound, and it has to take a dozen long jumps to get to the horizon. It

does a fellow good to have things like this to look at, eh?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Do you see anything there—away off down there—in the direction of Chantry?" she asked.

"Yes," said Shannigan. "I've been watching it."

"You have? What is it, Sam?"

"Men and horses," said he.

"And one man riding in the lead!" she exclaimed. "It's Jack!"

"Well," said Shannigan, "he has a good horse under him. He has the hunchback's chestnut."

"Where are your glasses?" she demanded. "Sam, fate wouldn't be cruel enough to let it be Jack in more trouble."

He handed her the glasses without a word, and sat down on a hummock, his legs crossed like an Indian.

Presently she exclaimed: "I can't make it out clearly. My hands are shaking. Sam, you take the glasses."

He accepted them, but took a pull on his cigarette before he adjusted the glasses at his eyes, with a hand as rigid as stone.

"Yes, quite a nice little picture. With the whole hunt going full blast. It's so clear, Mary, that you can almost hear the beat of the hoofs."

"Tell me!" she exclaimed.

"About Jack?"

"Yes, yes! *Is* there just one man in front?"

"There's only one man a bit ahead of the others. A good hunt, Mary, when you have a man racing, instead of a fox. Eh?"

"What color is the horse?" she cried.

"There's not much sunlight," protested Shannigan. "But—yes, I think that I can tell by the flash, as they go down that slope. Yes, it looks very much like a chestnut, to me."

"It's Jack!" moaned the girl.

"Aye, and he's gaining ground with every jump his horse makes. Take the glasses, Mary."

She took them. Shannigan watched the shuddering of her body; with a calm eye he watched it.

"They're shooting at him, Sam!" she cried out.

She lowered the glasses, and exclaimed furiously:

"The curs! They're actually shooting at him!"

"Of course they are," said Shannigan. "That's because they actually want to catch him."

31.

"THE cowards! The cowards!" said Mary Tracy, putting the field glasses back to her eyes once more. She continued rapidly: "But he's still riding straight on! Oh, Sam, what a man he is!"

"He's a man, all right," said Shannigan. "And even a poorish sort of a man will keep on running, while the hornets are stinging, Mary. You understand that?"

She seemed not to hear him. "They're still shooting," she said. "They're losing ground. They're despairing. I can see the fellows with the best horses throwing the quirt into 'em. But it's no good. That chestnut—that noble fellow—he's carrying Jack right away from them!"

"The hunchback boy, that Billy—he'd like to see that picture, I suppose," cried Shannigan.

"Good! Good!" cried the girl.

Shannigan sat up a little bit straighter. The running was so fast that already it was possible to look down through the crystal clarity of the mountain air and see with fair distinctness what was happening.

"He's drawing away," said Shannigan. "He's taking it out of that horse, though. Nothing like a sprint uphill to make the best horse in the world say 'No,' after a few minutes."

"They're giving up!" said the girl. "Now the cowards are dismounting and starting to shoot with their rifles from the ground. Oh, Heaven help Jack Reynolds now!"

She added instantly: "No; he's swung in behind a hummock of ground. They are all mounting again to get in sight

of him once more. They'll never down him! He's far, far away from 'em!"

The calm voice of Shannigan said: "Just glance over there to the right, Mary."

For out of the mouth of a gully to the right of the fugitive, came a sudden sweep of half a dozen horsemen, riding with the abandon of men on fresh mounts. How they happened to be there, no one could tell. Certainly they had not left the distant town of Chantry with the rest of the pursuit. Perhaps they were a stray group of those men who had been hunting through the hills for the fugitives from the justice of Deerfoot.

At any rate, there they were, coming with a fine rush!

The girl, as she swung the glasses on them, groaned aloud.

Then she dropped the glasses to the full length of her arm.

"Sam, do something! Do something! You've *got* to do something! They'll have him in a few moments."

"No," said Shannigan, pointing. "There's something left in the chestnut still. Look at him go!"

As a matter of fact, the hunted man was keeping his distance even from this new assault. But, though so far away, the girl could fairly feel the agony of effort which must be put into this fresh race by the gelding.

"He can't last!" said Mary. "Sam, if you don't do something—I'll die as I watch 'em! My heart's bursting—I can't stand it!"

"You really want me to drop down there and take them off his trail?" asked Shannigan, in a voice that the girl was to remember, long after.

She merely cried out: "Quick! Sam, help him—he's gone!"

For certainly, though the chestnut kept on at a good rate, Reynolds was no longer gaining.

The result of the chase seemed obvious even to the main body of the men from Chantry. They were remounting, in the distance, and pouring on toward the hunt.

Shannigan stood up and stretched himself.

"All right," he said. "I'll take the bay. That has some foot."

Mary Tracy was alternately staring through the field glasses, and then snatching them away and covering her eyes with her hand, for she could see that the chestnut was failing at last. Very slowly, the six riders began to gain. They were fresh. They had not been burned out by the long struggle up the grade from the town of Chantry. And they had under them the toughest sort of mustangs, of course, horses that were all wind and leather, with no weakness in them, from head to foot.

Wildly they went on, and the fine gelding fought back gallantly, but now with a losing stride.

Mary could see—she could even see Jack Reynolds turning his head in despair to look back at the fate that was reaching an inescapable hand for him.

Then he swung about, and something winked in his hand.

He was shooting. The riders behind him did not even fan out to avoid the bullets. He was still shooting, and they were merely intent on closing in.

But she knew what that little flurry meant!

It was clear that if they caught him now they would show no mercy. Why should they? He had tried to pick them out of their saddles, and now, when they caught him, they'd kill him on the spot. They'd kill him, as the racing greyhound kills the rabbit!

And now it seemed clear that Jack Reynolds had given up the hope of escaping through the speed and the stamina of the gelding. He changed his course a little to the left, and headed for a grove of trees—a little half-acre patch.

He would try to get to those trees, and then fight off the enemy.

For how long? Why, it was simply a matter of waiting until the main body from Chantry came up, when the grove would be surrounded. Then they could fire the woods on the windward side, and wait for the flame to burn the hunted man out. Nothing could be simpler.

But now it was not a question of a *good* device, with poor Jack Reynolds—it was merely a matter of any device at all that would win for him a few more minutes of life!

She was thinking that, when she saw a red streak go down across the hills—and that was Shannigan!

She watched him almost without pleasure.

That was Shannigan, and Shannigan had done many a great and strange thing, in the course of his life, but he never would be able to manage this case. Two men were hardly any more use than one man. Not the least more use, as a matter of fact. The band that could destroy one was equally competent to overmaster two.

And then it came over her that it was a most gallant thing that Shannigan was attempting.

What was his motive?

Had he already thought out some way of tricking the posse? Was he riding with his sneering smile on his face? Had he conceived a plan that would make all come out well, and would he merely be shrugging his wide shoulders, and sneering, the next time that she saw him?

Whatever was in his mind, it was a gallant thing to look at, the sweep of that fast-running bay horse down the hills, and toward the center of the storm!

He grew smaller, at once. The top of a hill cut him from view. When he came out again, he was very close to the pursuers and the pursued.

A rifle came out of the saddle scabbard and flashed at his shoulder. Well, they would see some shooting, now—those fellows who had come in so gallantly in the chase of Jack Reynolds!

Shooting, indeed!

No one fell. No one seemed to be hurt. But the bullets must have been singing like wasps in their ears. They broke and fanned out to the right and the left.

One man actually dismounted, and began to shoot back at Shannigan from a rest.

But he had a fleeing target to fire at now, for Shannigan had swerved his horse to the side, and right at the heels of Reynolds, he entered the wood.

The posse men straightened out once more on the line. Behind them, coming closer owing to this check, were the

men from Chantry, stretched out over a great distance.

The seconds went by.

Approaching the wood, the leading pursuers checked their horses, and swung out to either side. They were expecting bullets from that rifle which had just set the whispers going about their ears.

Then one man dashed out before the others, and entered the trees. He was the hero—the flag bearer in the rally, the leader in the great moment.

After him thronged the rest.

And still the seconds went by. The men of Chantry were coming up. They would let the leaders drive out the two quarries. They parted in two great, streaming wings. There must have been fifty of them, it seemed to the watching girl. They were encircling the woods.

But where were Shannigan and Jack Reynolds?

Out from the woods flashed the bay horse, now, running like a racer from the start. Shannigan would be safe then; nobody could catch that horse—none of the fagged animals behind it, at least.

But that was not Shannigan's way of riding—no, he was always slouched a little to one side, and the outline of his body was different.

That was not Shannigan. It was Jack Reynolds!

She blinked and gasped.

Shannigan had changed horses with Reynolds in the wood—it was Shannigan, now, who had under him the spent and staggering chestnut!

Still it did not seem to her entirely heroism. One did not expect heroism from Shannigan, but infinite shifts and tricks, a vast resource of cunning.

What trick had he now?

Straight out behind Jack Reynolds and the bay came the leaders of the pursuit, but as Reynolds streaked away on the racing horse, the girl could see the other riders hesitate, and then waver. Some of them deliberately pulled their horses to a stop. Others imitated the good example, after a moment. Some dismounted and started shooting. Well, they would

be lucky to hit the mark. When one has been spurring and flogging a failing horse, it is not easy to shoot straight, even with a rest. Every nerve is jumping. The muzzle of the rifle is trembling like a dead leaf in the wind!

And Reynolds rushed on toward freedom, toward safety! Shannigan had done it again for him.

The girl began to laugh.

What devil inspired him now? Would he run up a tree and take wings? Would he dive like a mole into the ground and disappear? Some such device must be in that incomparable wit of his!

She almost forgot her joy over the escape of Reynolds in her joyous excitement over the devices of Shannigan. What a man—what a devil he was!

Then she saw the bay gelding ridden out on the farther side of the wood and down a shallow draw, under the very noses of half a dozen men!

They pulled their horses around. They drew their guns. But the gelding was already more than half-covered by the rise of the bank of the draw.

And Shannigan was stretched out along a back from which the saddle had been removed.

She thought that she could hear the outcry. Yes, distantly it floated to her through the air like the screaming of eagles, she thought, and like the yelling of far-away wolves. From all around the wood the pursuers swung to the side. Even those who could not see, appeared to know by the carrion instinct of buzzards where the easier prey might be reached.

Now they swept about toward Shannigan. As iron filings instantly point toward the magnet, so they streamed toward him and his tired horse.

Fiercely she focused the field glasses. The shuddering of her hands and the gasping of her breath made it impossible for her to see anything.

She looked again, and now she saw him, at last, the gelding going on down the draw, disappearing from time to time around the sharp curves of it.

With the weight of the saddle gone, with the restriction

of the girth removed, it was running better now, but not well enough. Every man—even those who had lagged most and soonest on the way from Chantry—seemed to be better mounted, at this moment.

Now she saw the truth, as though a mist had been blown from before her eyes.

Shannigan had *no* device, no clever trick, no wile to play against them. He was simply being driven to the wall, and the impassable fence that was to hold him was yonder, the edge of the precipice of the Chantry ravine.

She knew that rocky wall. She had seen many pictures of it. Smooth as glass, and almost sheer down, in every place, the stone descended hundreds of feet to the edge of the white water. No human being could climb down the side of it. That much was certain.

And yet Shannigan was heading toward that point!

Why? Because there was no other direction in which he could go! He had beneath him a failing horse. He was hounded by desperately eager riders. And so he was going where any beaten man would go—to the end of his tether, after which came destruction.

She heard a rattling of gravel to the side.

It was Jack Reynolds, who was jogging the bay horse up the slope.

And now he was actually dismounting beside her.

A bullet hole was clipped through the crown of his hat. She noticed that with hardly a trace of interest. He was waving his hand, and calling out:

"Beat them again, Mary!"

"Shannigan!" she screamed at him. "Shannigan! We've got to do something for him!"

He was beside her, panting, still half laughing as he peered across the landscape.

"Shannigan? Oh, that old fox, he'll manage some way."

"But he gave you his horse!" cried Mary Tracy. "What are you thinking of, Jack?"

"Oh, the horse?" said Reynolds.

He looked rather baffled. Then he exclaimed:

"You see, Mary—naturally I thought that the whole gang would keep after me. It was me that they wanted—not Shannigan. How could I guess—how could Shannigan guess that they'd all take after him? Looks as though they're chasing the chestnut gelding, and not me at all!"

He laughed again, with a great relief.

"They're welcome to the gelding, too. The dog went to pieces under me. Could hardly get a gallop out of him, when I hit the woods. I wouldn't have got him that far, except that Shannigan came in and tickled them up with a little fancy shooting. Oh, I've had a ride, Mary."

She stared helplessly at him. She could not believe her ears.

"But you owe your *life* to the chestnut, and to Shannigan! And what's Shannigan to do?"

"He'll find a way. Trust Sam. He'll take wings, if he has to. There's no catching that fox!"

"They're jamming him against the wall of the ravine," said the girl. "Don't you see? Don't you see what they're doing?"

She handed him the glasses.

"There! Down that draw he's running the gelding!" she explained. "He's almost at the edge of the cliff now. There—I can see him enter the clump of trees and brush beside the cliff. Look at the men of Chantry spread out. They're shooting. And now—Jack, they've lighted the grass—they're going to drive him over the cliff with fire! Jack!"

Jack Reynolds sat down on a rock and mopped his forehead.

"It looks as though the old man were a goner," said he. "I'm sorry, too. But how are you going to do? When you shake up the dice, they don't always turn up all sixes, do they? Shannigan's had his fun. I suppose this is the end of him!"

32.

THAT knowledge which the girl had of the cliff of the Chantry River was missing to Shannigan. He had ridden the failing chestnut down the draw toward the brush that lined the river in the faint hope that he might be able to get down the bank of the stream.

He doubted if he could even get to the edge of the brush. Twice he had to turn and shoot almost into the faces of the men behind him.

That held them back. One fellow was thrown. Out from the pack leaped the riderless mustang and was racing in a moment at the side of Shannigan. He reached for the flying reins, pulled hard back, and in a moment was on the back of a fresh mount.

Oh, to have open ground before him now! But there was no open ground.

He heard the screech of the posse men behind him, as they came to the spent chestnut. This wiry pinto under him, half bucking at every stride, sweat-darkened, was ready to run another fifty miles across any country, it seemed; but all of that courage and fire was in vain.

The draw ended in a narrow little gulley that pointed down at a terrible angle toward the foam and rush of the water beneath the cliff.

Shannigan hurled the mustang to the side and up the steep bank of the draw. The brush and a tree or two formed a clump here. He pitched himself from the saddle as a rifle bullet clipped through the pinto's brain, and dropped it with a crash.

That was his bulwark. Behind the dead body of the horse he lay entrenched, and opened fire with a revolver.

Even now he was not shooting to kill. It was not his way,

and again there was no need. Bullets that kiss the air beside the very face of a man will turn him almost as quickly as a flesh wound.

At the first crackling of his guns, the riders turned right and left. Some dived out of their saddles as though the hard ground had been water, and they were anxious for a swim. In a moment they were out of sight in the grass, or behind rocks or trees. And the rifle bullets began to whir about Shannigan with a deadly whining.

He crawled to the edge of the cliff and looked over. What he saw made even his calm brain dizzy. It was three hundred feet to the edge of the water. And the three hundred feet was of polished stone, weather-rubbed, and wind-ground rock in which a man could almost see his face.

Suddenly the voice of the Chantry, that he had been hearing in the back of his mind all of these days, loomed upon his soul with a new significance. That shouting up the canyon, that booming down it, that rapid and breaking cadence was the death song for Shannigan.

He looked with wistful eyes across the gorge.

It was narrow, not more than fifty feet, or forty, perhaps, from the lip of one cliff to the other, for the stream had cut straight down, hardly wider than the span of its present currents. The farther bank was lower, too—ten yards or so lower. If he could fell the tree that shot up beside him—

He looked up at it with an eager eye.

It was rooted at the very edge of the rock, marking a corner. From the side of it, a deep cleft extended back thirty or forty yards at a right angle from the bank of the stream. An earthquake must have cracked the massive rock open here—or was it some bending of the stone to make a fault?

At any rate, he was cornered perfectly.

All around him were the armed men of Chantry, making their bullets drone through the air. And, in addition, the cliff cut him off on one side, and the profound gulf of the flaw chopped off flight on another. Only one quarter of the circle remained to him, and if he tried to press through here,

he was certain to be riddled with bullets before he had taken two steps.

There was no way out, from the blue of the sky to the white of the water beneath him.

"Time dissolves rocks, even," said Shannigan to himself.

And lying on his side, he made a cigarette.

He had not time to light it before a whiff of smoke reached him. His heart gave a bound, and he sat up. A rifle bullet tore the hat from his head, but he did not regard it. Down the bank to the windward he could see the pale whirling of smoke, and he understood.

No, he would not even have time to think the problem over, for they had fired the grass, and in a moment the rush of the flame would be on him.

Shannigan, after an instant, lighted that cigarette, and drew on it.

Even if the tree were instantly felled for him, it was too short to bridge the gulf. Even if that gulf were bridged, he would be shot from the trunk of the tree when he tried to crawl or even to run across it.

He was amused by the desperation that had forced him even to consider such a device.

He looked down again to the water.

To his eyes, in boyhood, the bank of the old brook behind his home had been just such a profound gulf, or nearly so. With his heart in his throat, he and his playmates were in the habit of swinging over the void at the end of a single swing—an old rope, with a bit of wood thrust through the knot at the end of it to give a place to rest the feet. The wilder, the more resolute boys, used to signalize themselves by hanging from that piece of wood by their hands!

A slight chill at that remembered peril went through Shannigan, in spite of the place he was now in.

Then, in an instant, he was up and at work. The hope was a small one. But hope with the thinnest edge will enter the heart of a desperate man.

He crawled swiftly back through the grass and brush to the place where the pony had fallen, and took the lariat from

the saddle bow. As he did so, he saw a blond-headed youth rise from behind a rock, thirty yards away, and fire with a rifle.

Shannigan put a bullet an inch from the side of the blond head, and saw the young man wince suddenly out of sight.

He would not be shooting again, in great haste.

Some one was shouting: "Steady, boys. Steady, and shoot straight. He's goin' to come on the rush, in a minute."

There was reason to charge out now, if ever, for the heat of the flames was growing greater than the heat of the sun, and the smoke was driven in level sheets across the mouth of the ravine.

But Shannigan was already back at the side of the tree, and knotting the end of the rope about the slender base of it.

The other end of the rope he knotted, passed a stout bit of wood through the knot for a handhold, and then dropped the rope to its full length over the side of the cleft that ran back from the cliff.

Perhaps the rope would let him swing through a thirty-five-foot radius. Perhaps the chasm was fifteen or twenty feet wider. In that case, he had made the experiment in vain!

At any rate, he was instantly down the rope, hand over hand, and hanging from the end of it, he began to work up the swing to motion.

It swayed with a desperate snapping and jerking, as his heavy body pitched forward and then back. Finally, the long, pendulous sweep began.

Through a great arc he hurled forward, and then back, snapping his body with all his might in the midst of each sway of the rope.

The smoke of the sweeping fire beat down on him. That was a help, for it would dim the picture of him in the eyes of any watchers from the bank.

More serious was a certain jerking vibration, which he began to feel in the midst of each wide swing. Looking up at the right moment, he saw that the rope, just below the base of the tree, plucked against the end of a jutting stone.

As he glanced up, he could see a strand of the rope fray and snap, the ends fluffing out.

Far back the rope swung him. He lay straight up, level with the ground and the brush that sprouted from it.

He heard a yell at his very ear, and there was a man rising from the bushes with a revolver pointed, and a face half-desperate and half-frightened.

He began to fire, as Shannigan hurtled downward in the last attempt—and out over the blurred streak of the river, and on with the speed of a flung stone through the smoke.

He was not at the full height of the swing when he let go. He had to use some of the forward motion, and as he still shot forward, the lip of the opposite cliff beneath him, but a dreadful distance away, he loosed his hold, and sped on through the air.

THE WESTERN WAY

33.

He turned in the air, bunching hands and feet under him. The white of the water and the gleam of the cliff's face flashed past him, and he landed with a long, sliding impact on the top of the safe ground beyond the gorge.

Quick presence of mind and most lightning precision of hand and foot could not have taken him rapidly enough to cover out of the rain of bullets that followed him, but his own impetus rolled him through the brush, and behind a jutting rock that was a shield against danger.

There he lay, dizzy, and with a sense of unreality, until his breath came back to him. He got to his knees.

The firing had stopped, from the other bank of the gorge. He could see faces well-known to him, for that hard-riding group of half a dozen that had taken up the chase at the end was composed entirely of men from Deerfoot. He spotted the thin, malicious face of Lee Swain at once, and that was big

Sheriff Lancing, who stood up and shouted, and swung his arms.

There was an instant response. Every man of the searchers rose to his feet and gave three thundering cheers.

Shannigan, watching from behind the rock, smiled very faintly. That was the West that he knew, and these were the men of it.

Then he turned, and scrambled back through the brush, until he was safe from observation.

Lancing was there and others of his ilk, capable of cheering a brave act, whether a friend or a foe had done it. But there was also the outlander, Lee Swain, who would never hesitate to split his head with a bullet, if the chance came to him!

He ran straight upstream, keeping a course parallel to the edge of the gorge, until he came to a place where he dared to cut back closer to it.

The Chantry River was dwindling, and the size of its ravine walls, also. It was no longer a steep-sided gorge, but a tangle of canyons, several tributaries running to the main bed together. There he crossed, taking an arduous half hour of clambering up and down, before he gained, once more, the southern hills, toward the starting point.

To the east of him, he could see no sign of the pursuit. So he struck out at a steady gait. In time of need, he could maintain that pace like an Indian runner, until even a horse would have found it hard to follow him, from sunrise to sunset.

He headed straight back for the point where he had last seen the girl, but he cut around behind it, and came stealing through the brush with a silent foot.

He came into the clearing, and found there that big Jack Reynolds was striding gloomily up and down, while Mary Tracy lay stretched on the ground, with her face buried in her arms.

"What sort of a lookout are you people keeping?" asked Shannigan.

She came to her feet with a bound and ran toward him, with her arms stretched out.

Shannigan took her quietly in his arms.

"I'd kiss you, Mary," he said, "but your face is all wet. You *are* glad to have me back?"

"She's been blubbering and groaning," said Jack Reynolds, as he shook hands with Shannigan. "I told her that you were too tough for them to crack. She wanted to go down, the two of us, and charge right at the whole lot of 'em. Or something like that."

"I *saw* the fire burn over the place where they'd cornered you," said the girl. "Sit down, Sam. Sit down here. What happened? Tell me everything!"

"I lost my hat," said Shannigan.

She laughed at that, and began to wipe the tears from her eyes.

"You're the right stuff, Shannigan," said Reynolds. "I was a goner. I knew that I was a goner, with that gelding pegging out under me."

"You'd have been a goner a good bit before, *except* for that gelding," said Shannigan. "And they were riding for you, those boys from Deerfoot. They certainly want you, Reynolds. They certainly want your hide!"

He nodded, as he said this, and regarded Reynolds with speculative eyes.

"They wanted me—and they didn't get me, mostly thanks to you, Shannigan. I think that Mary, here, holds it against me. She thinks I left you in the lurch, eh? Don't you think that, Mary?"

The girl looked dubiously at him.

"I don't know," she said. "It isn't that I think you'd do a shabby thing, Jack. I know that you wouldn't do that, of course. I'm sure that I know that. Only, Sam says that there's only one thing sacred—and that's a friend. You know, Jack—you *did* take the fresh horse and leave Sam on the spent one."

Reynolds made a gesture of surrender, and made it with both hands.

"You tell her, Sam, will you?" said he.

"Don't be silly, Mary," said Shannigan, already smoking.

"Take a look yonder, Jack. The Deerfoot boys have had a sight of us, again, and they're not likely to give up the trail very soon. They'll be buzzing around here, now, and you know that you're tired of rabbit meat already."

Reynolds exclaimed: "Why, I keep telling her, Sam, that the idea was that the boys were running *me* and not you—and that they'd keep after *me!*"

"No, you rode a little too fast for that," said Shannigan. "In about ten jumps of that little streak of a bay, they saw that they had no chance after you."

"You mean that I should have ridden slower?" asked Reynolds, frowning. "D'you mean to insinuate, Shannigan—d'you mean to say that you think I should have—"

"Here, here, here," said Shannigan, mildly lifting one hand. "Don't be excited. Yesterday evening we were all together here, and now we're together here again. We're minus a horse, that's all. The gelding's on its way back to Deerfoot with some of the posse, I suppose. And the hunchbacked kid will be pretty glad to see him, I've no doubt. Step out there and take a look around, Jack. I'll be surprised if Swain and the sheriff with their friends are not around, pretty close."

He waved cheerfully to Reynolds.

"All right, Sam," the gunman said. "I knew that you'd understand. Of course you understood all the time. It's only that Mary's so infernally suspicious. You ought to have more trust in you, Mary. You really ought to. As though I'd throw Sam down!"

He stepped away through the brush, and the girl looked thoughtfully after him.

"I wonder if he's all right," she said quietly.

"Why, Mary, you're crazy about that big lad, aren't you?" demanded Shannigan.

There was a sort of surprise and irritation in his voice, as he said this, that caused her to look at him, with a start.

"What's the matter, Sam?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Shannigan. "You're out of your head

about him, aren't you? And here you are, wondering if he's all right!"

"I'm a bit in love," said Mary Tracy. "It's the first time for me. Calf love perhaps. And I don't know—maybe this love is like homesickness, Sam. Maybe a fellow can get over it."

"Some people can," said Shannigan. "I don't give a rap for the ones that do."

"Hello!" said she. "You mean that?"

"Of course I mean it," said he.

"Once in love, always in love?"

"Yes," said Shannigan. "Don't talk any more about this rot. I'm tired of it."

"I'm not," said she. "I want you to tell me, man to man, what you think of Jack Reynolds."

"I think he's the finest-looking fellow I ever saw," said Shannigan. "And he's one of the straightest shots, too."

"That doesn't mean anything," said the girl.

"Doesn't it?"

"No. Not what I want to hear out of you."

"You have your own eyes and ears, Mary," said Shannigan.

"I haven't," said she. "Because I'm a little dizzy, when he's around. He makes a change in the air, and things grow a little misty for me. But I want to tell you something."

"Go on," said Shannigan.

"If I lose my heart to the wrong sort of a man, Sam—" She paused.

"Well, well?" muttered Shannigan, reshaping his cigarette.

"If I do that," said the girl, "I wish that you'd tear the heart out of me—and I'll help you to stamp on it!"

"Humph!" said Shannigan.

"I mean it," said she.

"I'm not omniscient," said Shannigan. "I can't see through people as you see through glass."

"You almost can," said Mary Tracy. "Why are you frowning like that?"

"Because I'm tired of all this chatter about your heart."

"Are you?"

"Yes. I'm more interested in my stomach. Rake up a little

fire, there, and roast a bit more of that infernal rabbit for me, will you?"

"Of course I will," said she.

She bowed over the work, gathered some of the twig ends that were dryest, kindled them, and feeding the fire with one hand, and twisting the meat on an improvised spit with the other, she attended to the cookery.

When she looked up at him, he was sitting erect, his hands on his knees, and his stern eyes fixed far before him, as if on the face of a distant enemy.

"Sam," she queried.

"Well?" snapped Shannigan.

"I'm sorry that I'm a weight around your neck now. I know that you're disgusted with me. I only wish that you'd give me some advice. You've been a father to me about everything else, Sam."

"Father?" said Shannigan. "I never heard such rot. You're getting sentimental. Give me that spit before you burn the meat on it."

She handed it to him, and sat with her chin on her fist.

"Why do you do it, Sam?" she asked.

"What?" asked Shannigan.

"Do you hate me and despise me?"

"Hate you? Despise you?" said Shannigan, amazed. "What do you mean by that?"

"Then why do you beat me like this?" asked the girl.

"Beat you?" said Shannigan, opening his eyes.

"Yes," said she, "with words—you beat me with words, Sam. You're a hard man to be with!"

REYNOLDS'S LUCK

34.

JACK REYNOLDS came back, announcing that there was not a single human being in sight, no matter where he looked across the hills.

"What's the matter?" he demanded, immediately afterward. "You look as though somebody's hit you between the eyes, Sam."

Shannigan pointed toward the girl.

"I've been hearing some of her ideas," said he. "That's all."

"What sort of ideas, Mary?" said Jack Reynolds.

"Oh, nothing," said she.

"Come on," said Jack Reynolds. "Be a good girl, and tell me."

He leaned over her, with a possessive smile.

"Run along, Jack," she told him. "Sometimes you're only three years old. Be entertaining, Jack. Tell us about the fracas of last night—or this morning, I should say."

"How did you people happen to be on the lookout at that hour?" asked Reynolds. "I never understood that."

"Oh," said the girl, "it was Sam. That's all. He heard your horse when you went off, last night."

"And you didn't call me back?" muttered Reynolds.

He looked askance at Shannigan, biting his lip a little, in the unsolved question.

"It was your horse, not mine," said Shannigan carelessly.

"I had the lights of the town on the brain," said Jack Reynolds. "I couldn't sleep. Twisted and turned for a while, and then I got up and went for a ride. I only intended to get some air. You know how it is. I went on. The gelding was full of himself. I let him stretch his legs, and when he got done stretching them, we were that much closer to Chantry. So I just went on, and gave him his head, and he took me to town, all right."

He paused, and his musical chuckle sounded.

"That's a wide-open town," he said. "Everything was going full blast, at one in the morning, and nothing let down, hardly, all the rest of the night. Look!"

He pulled a handful of bills from his coat pocket and threw them into the air. They came showering down, some landing on his head, some on his shoulders, some catching the wind and sailing off until the brush stopped their flight.

"I tackled faro for half an hour," he said, "and then I

was heeled for anything to happen. I saw that my luck was in, and that it was going to be my night. So I stepped out a little, and things began to hum."

He laughed again.

The girl, still with her chin propped on her fist, was watching him with a whimsical glance. Her smile seemed half amusement and half observation.

"You know how it is," Reynolds continued. "One good thing leads to another. I ran into an old partner of mine. Fellow by name of Three Card Williams."

"Where'd he get the name, Jack?" asked the girl.

"He got it raking the lawn," said Shannigan.

"He's a great little sport," said Reynolds. "Never out of trouble. He's a lot of fun to shack around with. I've been with him before."

"At cards?" asked the girl.

"Of course. That's his game."

"What does he do?" asked Mary.

"He's at home anywhere," said Reynolds. "He can run up the deck and put two crimps into it. When the wise ones feel their way down and bump into the first crimp, they slip it, and then they're to bang into the second one. It doesn't make any difference to Three Card. He's at home both ways from either cut. Oh, he has brains and eyes in the tips of his fingers!"

"Ah?" said Mary Tracy.

"Of course he has," said Reynolds. "We sat into a little game, and, by thunder, the game got big. And we began to make a lot of easy money. We cleaned out the first set of suckers, and by that time, there were five new ones that had sifted into the game, and one of 'em a youngster of twenty that had struck it rich in the mines. He was simply loaded down with coin, and crazy with it. So he was stuck, and you can believe it.

"There was another couple at the table that were working partnership, like Three Card and me. They got their share of the lot, and pretty soon the rich boy began to be surprised at his bad luck. Three Card dropped a couple of

small stakes to him, and then when the deal came around, ran him up a full house of aces on tens and beat him with four eights.

"The kid sat and pushed in his losing. He kept his eye on Three Card, and all at once, he half rose from his chair and pointed his finger at Three Card, and said he was a crook.

"There's only one trouble with Three Card. He's a little yellow. That's why he wanted to have me for a partner. I mean, he knew that I don't back down very much. So he turned and gave me a flash of appeal. I told the kid that he was a fool and a quitter, or something like that. He took a pass at his hip. I thought he was going for a gun. The clumsy idiot was only swinging back his fist to take a smash at me. I didn't wait to see that, naturally. I would have died a lot younger if I'd always waited to see the end of every move like that. I simply let him have it from the hip, and he fell on his face and went on falling and clawed the table over on top of him."

He paused to clear his throat.

"Did you kill him, Jack?" asked the girl, in a still voice.

"Kill him? Not at all!" said Jack Reynolds. "But his right shoulder is a mess. However, they have good doctors, these days, and they'll be able to straighten him out. They make artificial arms, for that matter, about as good as natural ones. And he has enough gold in the ground to keep him happy the rest of his days. What made the trouble was that the fool wasn't carrying a gun. Imagine playing poker in a place like Chantry without having a gun on you!

"Anyway, when the boys saw that he wasn't heeled, they raised a howl. A lot of cheap skates. They acted as though they'd never seen a gun play before in their lives. That's the trouble with Chantry. It's full of tenderfeet. One of them collared little Three Card. Some more of them were coming for me.

"I kicked the table at them, and while they were falling over it, I shot the lights out and got away. I found the horse, all right, but they found theirs, too. And the whole town

was riding after me before I hit the hills. I suppose you know the rest of it."

He paused, and shrugged his shoulders.

"All because I blundered into a little game in a tenderfoot town!" was the comment of Jack Reynolds.

The girl was rubbing her knuckles thoughtfully over her chin.

"That was hard on you, Jack," she said.

"It was rotten luck," said Jack Reynolds, beginning to pick up the bills that he had turned adrift. "Just my rotten luck."

"Sort of bad luck for the town, too," said Mary, "when a fellow like you cuts loose."

"Why, what's the matter, Mary?" asked Reynolds. "What did I do?"

"Nothing," said Mary Tracy. "A little crooked poker, and a little gun play. Why, nothing at all!"

"You don't understand, Mary," said Reynolds.

"Don't I?" said she.

"Of course you don't. Why, what did I do? Ask Sam, will you? You'll always believe what *he* says is right or wrong."

Shannigan shrugged.

"There's too much talk floating around, and the sun's getting hot," said he.

He walked out to the edge of the brush.

As he left, the young gunman walked to Mary Tracy, and took her hand. "Don't be hard, Mary," he said. "You don't understand. I told you just how everything happened. What d'you mean by crooked poker? Why, there isn't such a thing as straight poker."

"What about the boy that got the dose of lead through the shoulder?" she asked. "Was he crooking the cards, too?"

"He's a poor fool," said Reynolds angrily. "It's fellows like him that always make all the trouble. Fellows who don't understand!"

She nodded, slowly, her eyes looking rather vacantly at him.

"Why, what's the matter, Mary?" he asked.

He put his arm around her.

"Don't do that, Jack," said she.

"Why not? Are you being hostile, Mary?"

"I'm only thinking," said she.

He strode away from her, in anger.

"That's the way with you," said Reynolds. "You've been too long with Sam. He's always thinking about things. So are you. He's the only man you'll ever be able to get along with. You're too much like him!"

He stopped stamping and striding, and went back to face those very thoughtful eyes.

"You don't mean that you're angry, Mary, do you?" he asked.

"No," said the girl. "I was just wondering how you work things out, Jack."

"Why, what's wrong with the way I work things out?" he asked.

"Tell me something," said the girl. "What did Sam say, when he came up with you in the wood, down yonder?"

"What did he say? Why, he simply threw me the reins of the bay, and sang out: 'Grab 'em!' You can believe that I was in that saddle before a dog could wag its tail twice."

He took a great breath.

"Ever on a fagged horse, Mary?"

"Yes," she said.

"Know how it is when they begin to tuck up in the loins a little, and the spring goes out of their gallop?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well, that's the way the gelding was, and when I got on the bay, and felt it as strong as a rock under me, and r'aring to go, I began to breathe new air."

"I'll bet you did," said she. "What did he say as you went off?"

"Nothing. He was peeling the saddle off the chestnut."

"I see," said the girl. "It was a quick shift, then, and off you went."

"You bet," said Reynolds heartily. "A fellow moves with the bloodhounds on his trail, and no mistake about it."

"I wonder how Sam felt on that fagged horse?" said the girl.

"Ask him, and he'll tell you," Jack Reynolds chuckled.

The voice of Shannigan, at that instant came back to them through the brush.

"Saddle up," he said. "And you'd better saddle fast. They're coming. You ought to learn to use your eyes a little harder, Jack. You've let them get on top of us!"

THE TRAP

35.

JACK REYNOLDS said nothing. He got to the edge of the shrubbery in a leap. And, then, at first glance, he could see them coming—a dozen men, riding close together, studiously looking at the ground.

What trail they were following would be hard to tell, but after three days of living in that place, there was undoubtedly a sign pointing toward them.

Reynolds came back with a bound. The saddles were already on the horses.

"We're short one horse—your horse, Jack!" said the girl. "You ride with me. Sam's heavier than you are. He'd better keep his own horse to himself."

"He's not heavier," exclaimed Reynolds. "I'm bigger—"

"He's heavier," said the girl. "You ride with me."

"Take this horse," said Shannigan, running to the head of the bay and motioning back to the powerful animal that he had ridden from Deerfoot. "You take that horse, man. Mary, you take this one."

"And you?" said the girl, as Reynolds, without a word of question, obeyed orders.

"I'm running on foot, until they sight us," said Shannigan. "I can run. It's the one gift that I have. I can run, and keep running."

"But," said the girl, "suppose that they—"

She was lifted bodily. The terrible hands of Shannigan bit through her strong flesh to the bone, as he raised her, and snarled:

"One of these days, I'll teach you to argue with me, when the time comes for action!"

Reynolds was gasping: "They're the picked men of the whole lot—the picked men from Chantry—and the sheriff and Swain, and some more from Deerfoot."

"Don't make noise as you get clear of the brush, and follow me," Shannigan calmly said.

He glided out of the shrubbery, as he spoke, and struck off at a rapid gait, and the others followed him, slowly, lest the noise of rapidly beating hoofs should reach the ears of those riders who were coming up on the farther side of the hill.

They had the disadvantage of two horses for three people; they had the advantage that their horses were perfectly fresh, for the run that the bay had made, though a hard one, had been finished in time to let it completely recover its wind.

Shannigan, in the meantime, ran swiftly on, with long, springing strides.

Far behind him, he heard a sudden crackling sound, like a fire snapping in dry wood, and knew that the enemy had invaded the thicket. Still farther behind him, he heard shouting voices raised.

That meant that they had found the sign left by the three of them at their encampment.

He immediately freshened his pace a little.

He was headed straight back into the higher ground, which extended toward the mountains. Yonder there was a tangle of ravines. And among them, they might lose the posse.

But there were three of them to care for and think of. Three of them, and a dozen men to follow, eager as hounds!

He looked back, and saw the girl and Jack Reynolds trotting their horses.

At the same time, he saw the dozen horsemen come volleying out of the brush on the hilltop, whooping as they saw their prey.

They were half a mile behind—a whole thousand yards, perhaps.

But what does that mean when horses are galloping, and one of the pursued is on foot?

He went over the next hilltop, and down the hollow beyond. Something inside him, something savage, that was born in him with his blood, felt the rejoicing of the posse as, after giving up the immediate chase, with a fugitive in full view, they found the whole trio again as a reward for their persistent and patient hunting.

They would ride madly to make their kill.

As he took to the rise of the opposite slope, and as the grade took the strength from his legs and the wind from his lungs, he knew how desperate their situation was.

He reached the top of the rise as the girl on the bay horse ranged alongside. Big Jack Reynolds was riding a little to her left.

"Catch on, Sam!" she cried, as she came up.

"Go on!" gasped Shannigan. "Go on. I'll dodge in here among the rocks. They'll follow Jack."

She pulled her horse to a halt.

"I'll stay here till they've got us both," she said savagely.

"You little fool!" groaned Shannigan.

But he was instantly behind her on the horse, and heard the bay grunt with effort, as it started again under the double burden.

Reynolds was ranging ahead, looking anxiously over his shoulder.

Shannigan looked back, also, and saw the rush of riders behind them. Like wolves they were coming, extending their horses, sure of their game.

But the strongly built bay was running hard and well. It was holding its own, yes, increasing the distance, a little. But it could not keep to this work for long.

Reynolds increased his distance.

"Is he just a dog?" said the girl, gasping the words over her shoulder. "Is he going to ride on and leave us—like this?"

"He'll stay with us," said Shannigan. "He'll play the game as it ought to be played!"

Right on they galloped, with the ground growing rougher, and still they kept their lead. They entered a gulley filled with tough, tall brush, that flogged them as though with whip-lashes. Coming to the head of it, they found that they were entering a long valley that sloped gradually upward, valleys and canyon mouths emptying into it from either side.

It was a vast temptation to turn to the left or the right and try for refuge. But it was plain that most of these gorges were box canyons, that is to say, narrow valleys, worn as a rule only during the time of the melting snows that poured water down from the heights. And they were a series of boxes with one end knocked out—valleys that came down in great sheer steps. No horse could climb most of the steps. They were from ten to a hundred feet high.

Shannigan found that the bay was losing ground now.

He dropped suddenly to the ground, and began sprinting at full speed while the girl ranged her horse back beside him.

"Sam, if you don't take the horse, I'll dismount!" she shouted.

He gave her a savage side glance.

"You're a fool!" shouted Shannigan. "Ride on! I can dodge 'em—dead easy!"

Suddenly Jack Reynolds came sweeping back, and caught up Shannigan behind him.

And again they galloped ahead, and held their lead.

But it was a question of moments, only, before the others were on them.

The double weight had killed the gallop of the bay; the double burden of Shannigan and big Jack Reynolds would certainly kill the second horse.

Reynolds was groaning: "They've got us—they've got us! Shannigan, they've got us!"

They were passing the mouth of a little valley whose inner reaches were hidden from them by a sudden bend, and into this, without asking advice, Reynolds suddenly twisted the horse.

A fierce yell of delight from behind them told them that something was wrong, and as they rounded the bend, they could see what it was.

Straight before them, the easy, level floor of that little canyon stopped, and a faint trickle of water drizzled over the lip of a sheer wall of rock, a full sixteen feet in height.

No horse could jump it. No man could climb it.

It was as perfectly straight in line as though it had been hewed out by quarry workers.

Above it, the next level of the canyon receded beyond view.

"We're gone!" groaned Jack Reynolds.

"Straight at it!" said Shannigan. "We can get over that. Straight on, Jack!"

He turned, and waved the girl forward, too, as she began to rein her horse.

It was a perfect trap. But as they reached the wall, Shannigan was on the ground, and picking up Reynolds, as the latter dismounted, he thrust him up the face of the rock.

He shifted his grip to the very feet of Reynolds, and muscled him up to the full length of his arms.

Even then, Reynolds could not reach the lip of the rock above. He had to strain on tiptoe from one of those iron hands of Shannigan. Then Reynolds barely found purchase for a grip with the fingers of one hand.

But that was enough.

He was up in the next second. And as he lay flat, and reached down his long arms, calling: "Now, Mary, quick! Up with her, Shannigan!" around the bend of the ravine came the posse.

"Here, Mary," called Shannigan.

"I'll never budge!" said the girl. "Sam, I won't let you—"

"Here!" snarled Shannigan.

She was helpless in his hands.

They had been like iron, before, as they gripped her and swung her up.

They were as hot steel now, and up she went, with a swing

that enabled Reynolds to catch her hands. In a moment she was on the ledge.

It was a wide, deep shelf, littered with brush and boulders. There was shelter here for a hundred men—and as for pursuit, those who followed would have to take their chances, for Shannigan leaped to the nearer horse, snatched the rifle from the saddle scabbard, and hurled it high, into the hands of Jack Reynolds.

Then he turned.

For the thunder of the hoofs was in his very ears.

He could hear, above him, the voice of the girl, as she cried out that she would not go—but Reynolds would handle that.

So Shannigan turned and faced the rush of the riders, and counted their faces, and their leveled guns.

A gun barked. A bullet slugged against the rock behind his head. And then he saw the long arm of the sheriff reach out and tear the revolver from the hand of Lee Swain.

So they came down on Shannigan, and hemmed him against the rock, a helpless prisoner.

A PRISONER

36.

HE would never forget the screeching voice of Lee Swain, as he yelled: "He doesn't matter. It's Reynolds that counts! Get Reynolds, boys! Get Reynolds!"

And then, something stranger still: "Five thousand dollars to the man who gets Reynolds! Five thousand to the man that puts a bullet through him!"

The sheriff paused to drop steel handcuffs over the wrists of Shannigan. The rest of the posse swarmed like wildcats, helping one another up the brow of the ascent. The sheriff himself gave a hand to the last man, and the confused rout poured on, the men firing here and there as they ran.

It left the sheriff with no means to mount the rock; furthermore, there was the prisoner to guard.

So he motioned Shannigan to the shadow of a boulder, and they sat down together.

"It'll be a while before the gang gets back," said the sheriff.

"They'll nail the girl, and they'll nail Reynolds, if he stops to fight for her."

"They won't get Reynolds," said Shannigan.

"Why not?" asked Steve Lancing.

"He's not fool enough to throw himself away in a lost cause. And when it comes to running, he's a deer. If they press him, he'll draw some blood for them. Mark my word. This may be a red day for Deerfoot."

"It may," said the sheriff. "And it may be a bad day for you, Sam."

"Yes," agreed Shannigan. "If they don't catch Jack, they'll come back in a hungry humor."

The sheriff scratched his head.

"Speakin' personal," he said, "I don't feel no meanness toward you, Sam. You done me brown, and trimmed me, one day. You're the only fellow that ever licked me, fair and square. I used to think that it'd kill the heart in me, if I was ever licked. But I was wrong. I don't feel no meanness to you, Sam. I dunno. Maybe I'd better start on toward Deerfoot with you."

"That would be a favor," said Shannigan.

The sheriff rose, and motioned his prisoner to rise, also.

"We'll go on in then," said he. "Will you give me your word to play no tricks, Sam—you're my prisoner, and you stick with me, without no tricks?"

"I'll give you my word," said Shannigan.

"All right," said the sheriff. "And mind you, Sam, word or no word, I'll have to watch you a mite. It's a true thing that you lived up to promises that other day and brung Reynolds into town in time to save my hide. But desperate men do things, and I reckon that this is your day to be desperate. If those hyenas ever get hold of you they—"

He twisted his head to the side with a wry expression in his face.

He mounted his own horse, and carefully watched from

the near side, while Shannigan, gripping the pommel of the saddle with his shackled hands, got up on the big mustang he had "rented" in Deerfoot.

They rode down the valley side by side, the sheriff turning to look back several times.

"Maybe they'll take this hard, too—me ridin' off with you like this, Sam," he remarked. "The boys are getting sort of rough, since Swain started bossin' things. Me, I'm only the straw boss, and what he says goes."

Shannigan drew in on the reins and stopped his horse. They had come to the bend of the valley, and behind them the crackling of gunfire continued, far up the canyon.

"What will they do with the girl?" he asked.

"Swain'll give her some pretty hot talk," said the sheriff, "and then they'll ride her back to Deerfoot and threaten her with the jail. But I reckon that they won't put her in jail. Deerfoot ain't had any women in the jail, and I reckon it won't start with her."

They rode on again, dogtrotting the horses.

It was a very odd journey, that one to Deerfoot, over the hills, and through the groves of trees, and out again into the heat of the scorching sun.

They passed through the heat of the noontide and the greater heat of the early afternoon, still trotting the horses steadily onward.

"I dunno, Sam," said the sheriff after a time. "I dunno but what I ought to turn you loose. If I jail you, Swain is likely to make the boys pretty rambunctious. It all depends on do they catch Reynolds. Swain sure hates him. Maybe I'd oughta parole you, because I've got a kind of an idea that I could trust you to turn up any time I say."

"If you turn me loose on parole, Steve," said Shannigan, "d'you know what would happen?"

The sheriff rubbed his throat tenderly.

"Yeah, they'd come close to hangin' me," he said.

He added suddenly: "You're a fair-minded man to think of my side of it, Sam. You got a tough look to you, and you can

do some pretty tough things, but dog-gone me, you're a fair-minded man!"

"Thanks," said Shannigan. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead. I'll roll you one."

"I can manage," said Shannigan.

And suddenly his hands were out of the cuffs, which he hung over the horn of the saddle, while he made his smoke and lighted it. The sheriff looked on with staring eyes.

"Sam," he said, "you could 'a' done that long ago, eh? And knocked me over the head when I wasn't looking?"

"I suppose so," said Shannigan.

"Would you mind explainin' to me why you didn't do it?" asked the sheriff.

"You forget that I gave you my word," said Shannigan, "back there at the start!"

"I know," said the other. "Only then—"

He snapped the fingers of one big, brown hand, and shook his head. He was greatly baffled.

"Sam," he said, "it would do me a lot of good to know who you are. I don't suppose you're tellin' that?"

"No," said Shannigan.

"Sometimes," said the sheriff, "I've been thinking that you must be Purvis, the Canadian, because the way you manage things so slick. But I've heard tell that Purvis is a smallish sort of a man. And then again, I've had a coupla ideas that you might be Tom Crawford. But Tom's likely to mix up safe-cracking with head-splitting. His trail is too red, for you. Then, I've even had times when I thought that you might be Shannigan!"

"Shannigan?" said Shannigan. "I've heard that name."

"Have you?" said the sheriff. "Dog-gone few ever have. What have you heard?"

"Scraps of things here and there," said Shannigan. "It would take time to collect 'em."

"The same with me," said Steve Lancing. "There ain't many that ever heard his name. Because he works mostly by himself, and they say that he always wears something on his face—a beard or mustache, or something."

"Why should he do that?" asked Shannigan.

"Because he's so dog-gone ugly that he scares people, I hear," said the sheriff.

"Yes?" murmured Shannigan.

"Yeah," said the sheriff. "He's the kind that scares growed-up men, just by lookin' at 'em."

"I see," said Shannigan. "He wouldn't be the sort to get along with women, I suppose."

"Him?" The sheriff chuckled. "A fine hand he'd be with the ladies, him and his mug!"

Shannigan nodded.

The sheriff hastily corrected him: "Not that I mean you're mean enough lookin' to be Shannigan, Sam. No, not that. We ain't pretty, neither you nor me, but we wouldn't figger in the same class with Shannigan. Besides, he mostly works in the night, I hear."

"Does he?" said Shannigan. "I think I've heard that, too. Think that he's got cat eyes, and sees better in the dark?"

"I dunno," said the sheriff. "I've sort of heard that idea put out. But I dunno. It sounds queer, but then everything about Shannigan is queer. There ain't any mercy in him, for one thing."

"No?" murmured Shannigan.

"No," said the sheriff. "All he does is hate the world, and the more trouble that he can make, the better he likes it. He'd kill a man in cold blood and like it fine. He'd shoot you in the back rather than in front. But when it comes to standin' up to the music, face to face, he can do that, too. He's a sort of a crazy Indian, is what he is. But smart. Terrible smart. Well, Sam, I gotta ask you to excuse me for thinkin', at times, that you might be Shannigan. Because I've seen that you're a fair-minded man, all right."

"Thanks," said Shannigan.

He fitted his hands back into the handcuffs, doubling the thumb quite over under the palm.

"You don't need to wear them things," said the sheriff. "Not unless we should meet up with the boys."

"We're going to meet up with them before long," said Shannigan.

He jerked his head toward the rear.

"You hear?" he asked.

"No," said the sheriff.

"Listen hard. Now you can make it out."

Now, distinctly, the sheriff heard the beating of many hoofs.

"We'll spur on, and get you into the jail ahead of 'em," said the sheriff.

"Don't you do it," answered Shannigan. "If we start running, they'll start hunting. If we run into the jail, they'll tear it down to get at me. If we go along slow and easy, they may go slower, too. Be calm and easy, Steve. One wrong move will push me over a cliff as high as all time, I can tell you. Look at them come, like a lot of wildcats!"

With a rush the men of Deerfoot streamed down the trail.

And as they sighted the pair before them, they uttered one prolonged yell, and then came on still faster, without another word.

"Reynolds got away," interpreted Shannigan. "If they'd finished him off, they'd come home slowly, like dogs that have made a kill and eaten their fill. These fellows mean business, I think! And they'll do their business at my expense, perhaps."

SWAIN'S PARTY

37.

THAT sweep of riders picked up the sheriff and Shannigan and rolled them into near-by Deerfoot like two pebbles caught by a torrent.

Lee Swain, the sole ruler of that storm, stopped it fairly in front of the Best Chance Saloon, where Slim Connor had run out to watch the tumult roll by.

With raised hand, Lee Swain shouted: "Boys, I've sworn

that I'd hang him in front of the first place I met on the way to Deerfoot. Here it is, and here's where he hangs."

Some one yelled: "We'll drink good-by to him."

"We'll have one beer and hang him," said Swain, laughing heartily at the merry suggestion.

Laughter made an odd alteration in his face. It seemed made for solemnity only, and when he laughed, it seemed to break up and dissolve into nothing but ugly elements.

They jerked Shannigan from his horse and haled him into the barroom. They heaved him onto the bar, and stood him up on it.

"Give him a beer, and a big one," said Lee Swain to Connor. "The bigger the beer that's in him, the sooner the rope'll strangle him. Fill up a beer for him. I'm treating. I'm buying for everybody. Step up—line up, boys!"

The sheriff called out: "I'm against this, boys! Sam has a right to—"

"He has a right to a rope!" snarled Swain.

He added: "You'd better back out of here, Steve Lancing. You're not wanted here. There are plenty of people who think that you've been bought body and soul by the interests!"

"What interests?" asked the sheriff.

"Those that can afford to hire a smart actress like the girl; those that can afford to hire this man-eater, this Sam," said Swain. "They could buy you, and twice over. They bought you to interfere when the boys were going to do justice on Reynolds before. You're not in a safe place here, Lancing. You'd better get out!"

Steve Lancing stepped to the bar.

"It's no good, Steve," said Shannigan. "The boys have their spirits up, and you can't convince them by telling them the truth."

"I'll tell them anyway," said Lancing.

"You're a fool, but go on," said Swain. "You're not wasting much time. He dies when our beer is gone!"

"I went out and blocked that lynching," said the sheriff, "because Sam came to my house and made me do it. I would

never 'a' been fool enough to tackle that many gents on the warpath. But Sam came to my house before sunup, and he manhandled me. He grabbed me, and took my gun away from me, and the welt of where he hit me is still purple and blue on my chin. Then he said that if I wouldn't *walk* to the spot, he'd *carry* me there. I couldn't stand that. I went out there with him.

"And he swore that day that if I helped him, he'd see that Reynolds was brought back into the jail, if he could. And, boys, you know that that's what happened! It was Sam that brought Reynolds in. It was no wish of Reynolds himself to come, far as I know!"

"That's straight talk!" said some one. "It takes a man to tell a thing like that."

"It takes a fool to believe a fool," declared Lee Swain. "Sam, you've barred and blocked us all enough times, about Reynolds. And today, you've saved his skin twice. And that's enough. That's plenty. We're tired. We could praise you for standing by a man, even though we know that you're only a hired hand—it's your job. But now we're tired. We're going to do to you what's coming to Reynolds, later on!"

He made a pause, and the hot, dusty, exhausted men muttered sternly in agreement.

They had worked hard enough; some one had to die!

Swain's face brightened, as he listened to that growl of agreement. It was as though he were hearing the finest music. He said: "We'll give you a chance to say your last words while you're finishing your beer, Sam. Speak out. Here—somebody throw a rope over that rafter. We can drop him off the bar as well as off a cart!"

A whoop answered, the noose end of a rope shot over the rafter, and Swain himself leaped onto the bar and adjusted the noose around the neck of Shannigan.

Then he stood in front of the bigger man, his whole body quivering with satisfaction.

"Speak out, Sam!" he said. "Any last words?"

"I don't want a man hanged in here!" shouted Slim Connor angrily. "And what's more, I won't have it. I—"

A dozen hands reached for him.

"Shut up!" he was advised by Swain. "Sam, here, wants to talk."

Shannigan raised his glass with his two manacled hands and sipped the beer.

"I won't keep you long, boys," he said, "but I always hate to hurry with beer."

A faint chuckle answered this.

He added: "I'd like to know what you did with the girl."

"We left her at the Wheeler ranch," said Swain. "She'll be better off there than she ever was in your hands!"

Regan, a tall man with a stern face who had made a part of every mob scene, broke out: "You'll wanta know that she begged for you right up to the end. She swears by you, Sam. She says that you're the finest man in the world. Maybe that'll do you a little good."

"It does do me good," said Shannigan with a start. "Are you sure that she said that, Regan?"

"She did," said several voices, chiming in with Regan.

"I'll drink my last drink to her," said Shannigan. "She's the straightest and bravest girl in the whole wide world."

He was about to raise the glass to his lips, when Swain exclaimed:

"Hurry it, man. We've wasted enough time on you."

Shannigan lowered the glass again, and answered:

"You'll use a good deal more time, though. This makes a pretty picture, and you can fill your eye with it, Swain. But do you know why I'm not worried?"

"You tell me, friend," said Swain with a sneer.

"Because I'll not hang here," said Shannigan.

They had clustered closely around him.

It made a very queer picture, in fact—Shannigan big and impassive, standing on the bar, with the ferretlike body of Swain before him, and all the faces of the posse banked about them, lower down. The mirror gave the whole picture back to every eye.

Swain suddenly struck his right hand into his left, with a loud, popping sound.

"You're not going to hang, Sam?" he asked.

"No," said Shannigan.

"Well," said Swain, "we've had a rope ready for Reynolds, and then you saved him. But who'll save you, my friend? Reynolds is not the kind to risk his neck for a friend. The sheriff can't help you. We're the law here in Deerfoot. We're against you, and we've got you where we want you. Tell us who'll break in and save you?"

"I'll save myself," said Shannigan.

"You'll save yourself?" Swain laughed. He added: "How, brother? How will you do it?"

"With a few words," said Shannigan.

A murmur of amusement came from the crowd.

"What sort of words, Sam?" asked Regan.

"A promise to pay," said Shannigan.

"We turn you loose—and then you'll pay, eh?" Swain grinned.

"No," said Shannigan. "There's another sort of a promise. I'll tell you boys where the money is to be found."

Some one whooped, and the entire group laughed.

Shannigan himself was smiling, but with perfect good nature and confidence.

"Go on and tell us," said some one. "How'll we have the money? How much?"

"Millions," said Shannigan.

"Good," yelled some one. "We're all goin' to be rich."

"That's right," said Shannigan.

"How'll you pay?" asked Swain. "Greenbacks or gold?"

"Gold," said Shannigan.

"By thunder," said Regan, his voice cutting through the uproar of mirth, "he means something."

"I do," said Shannigan.

"I'll take mine in twenty-dollar pieces," called one.

"You boys will have to dig it out of the ground," said Shannigan. "Gold mines is what I'm talking."

"Locate 'em!" shouted another.

"In the Owens Desert," said Shannigan.

There was a groan, laughter mingling with it. But Lee Swain was suddenly green and gray.

"We've had enough of this foolery," said he. "It's time to let him step off."

"He ain't finished his beer," called voices. And hands were raised that caught at Swain, and drew him back.

Shannigan nodded, and sipped his beer again.

"Thank you, boys," he said.

"Finish your joke, Sam," called another. "Locate those mines for us, will you?"

"I'll locate 'em for you," said Shannigan. "They're near the spot where Powell and Halpin were murdered."

The words and the way they were spoken struck the laughter out of every face. Something was meant here.

There was a pause. Even Lee Swain, struggle though he might, could not break in. Words were failing him suddenly.

Shannigan said: "About two or three hundred yards from the spot where poor Powell and Halpin were murdered at the mouth of a worthless sand shaft lies their real gold mine. That was why they were murdered."

Swain found his voice. It would not do to allow this fellow to go on. The conviction in his voice and face was winning too much interest from the others.

He called out: "I'm surprised at you fellows. Are you going to let this sort of windjamming have your ear? Sam, you've done enough talking. Now let's have some proof of this gold mine you talk about that Powell and Halpin were murdered for, as you say."

"It's right here in the room with us," said Shannigan.

He could spot the jump of excitement with which each man started, and then glanced at his neighbor, or over his shoulder toward the wall. There was no doubt that their interest was high.

"In this room?" snarled Swain. "Where in the room?"

"There," said Shannigan. "There in your left-hand vest pocket!"

38.

He pointed as he spoke. And as every eye clapped upon Lee Swain, they saw the little man recoil from a shock—recoil with an actual gasp, and jerk his hand toward the pocket indicated.

"Take that hand away!" thundered Shannigan suddenly.

Lee Swain snatched the hand from the indicated point, as though it had been burned.

"What darn foolishness is this?" he asked.

"Something that makes you sweat," said Shannigan.

He was smiling, and as he nodded, every one could see the sweat that poured down Swain's face.

"It's hot in here," said Swain.

"It's hotter in hell," said Shannigan.

"Boys," said Swain, "I guess we've heard enough from this fourflusher. The rope's around his neck and—"

"That rope will fit your neck even more snugly," said Sam Shannigan. "Keep your hand away from that pocket!"

He thundered the last words again, the full roar of his bass voice rising and ringing through the room. It was like a peal from a storming sky. The very glassware jingled softly like a thousand crystal castanets, lightly touched.

Suddenly Shannigan no longer seemed the point of attack, but the assailant.

"You blundering, bluffing scoundrel," said Lee Swain, "there's nothing in that pocket."

"Why are you so green, then?" asked Shannigan. "Everybody's watching you, man. And you look like a murderer, caught with the blood marks on him."

"There's nothing in that pocket," said Swain.

"Let Regan reach into it and see," said Shannigan.

"I'll let no man pick my pockets!" exclaimed Swain.

And suddenly he could tell that he had made a very vital error. Not a soul was turned toward Shannigan, in spite of the rope that was around his neck. It was Swain that they regarded.

"Hold on, Swain," said tall Regan. "Hold on. If it comes to talk, it seems to me that Sam is saying something. What's in the pocket that you're so dog-gone worked up about?"

The face of Swain contorted. He reached his hand toward the pocket.

"Keep that hand away!" thundered Shannigan, the third time.

Swain gasped, as though a bullet had struck him, and torn through his body.

"You feel the lash in a tender place, eh, Swain?" said Shannigan. "Regan, reach into that pocket, and see what you find there!"

"Stand fast, Swain," said Regan. "Whatever I take out, I'll give back to you."

"I won't have—" began Swain.

But he was unsure of himself. To resist seemed folly—to permit the thing to happen was madness. The very wealth of a Midas might be revealed by it.

In his moment of hesitation, the lean fingers of Regan dipped into the pocket and out again. And he held up, in the palm of his hand, a meager shard of stone that was marked with yellow streaks. All eyes beheld it.

"Ore—and full of wire gold!" shouted Regan. "Great jumping thunder!"

"That's from the mines I told you about," said Shannigan. "That's the price I'm paying to you."

"Give it back to me!" said Swain savagely, snatching at the hand.

"Sure," said Regan, and rendered it to Swain readily.

But there was no pleasantry in his face. There was nothing but hard, stern, bright curiosity. New perspiration suddenly was pouring down the face of Swain again. He raised a hand and brushed it away. He wished very heartily, now, that he

had allowed the bit of terrible rock to remain in the hand of Regan.

The grim voice of Shannigan, assured and confident, pursued him, and struck him in his weakness.

"What's the matter, Swain?" said Shannigan. "It's only a specimen of ore. Why are you shaking? Why are you so white? Why are you sweating so? What's the matter with you, Swain? We're all watching you!"

Swain burst out: "Why, what's the matter when a man can't have a specimen of ore on him without—without being held up for it?"

"The question in my mind is, Where did you get the ore?" said Shannigan.

"You mean to say," said Swain, "that I'm supposed to give away a gold mine, like that—for the sake of a question?"

"If you won't tell 'em," said Shannigan, "*I'll* tell 'em where you got that specimen. But first I want another beer!"

He reached down the glass to the bartender, and suddenly men noticed that his hands were free from the cuffs that had held them.

Only Swain yelled with alarm, and reached for a gun.

"Don't budge, brother," said the voice of the sheriff. "I've got you covered, you yellow dog!"

It was another shock all around. Swain slowly thrust back the gun that he had half drawn.

"It's a plot against me!" he said huskily. "Put the handcuffs on that man, boys! You can see that he's worked up a deal with the sheriff to—"

"To hang you," said Shannigan, removing the rope from his own neck, and stroking it.

And still hardly an eye glanced at him.

39.

"FILL them up all around," said Shannigan. "Fill them up, Slim. I want the boys to be drinking while I talk. I pay for this second one. I hope that Swain enjoys it as much as *I* enjoyed the round that he paid for."

"I'm wanting to know," said Swain, "where I got the specimen, if not with my own prospector's hammer."

"You picked it off the floor in that back room," said Shannigan.

"It's a lie," said Swain.

"It's the truth," said Shannigan, "and here's the witness that'll hang you."

He indicated Slim Connor.

"Are you in on this?" snapped Swain at Connor.

"Gosh, no," gasped Slim Connor. "I dunno nothin' about it."

"You remember," said Shannigan, "you remember, Slim, that evening, not long ago, when Powell and Halpin went with Reynolds into that back room?"

"Yeah, sure I do," said Slim, with a gasp of relief at finding firm ground under his feet for at least one step.

"Did they talk as though they were excited?"

"They did."

"Who was in there before 'em?"

"Mr. Swain."

"Then they left?"

"Yes."

"Who came in after them?"

"I don't remember."

"Yes, you do. Think back; you'll remember."

"By thunder," said Slim Connor. "I remember now. Mr. Swain come back again, and went into that back room, and

pretty soon he comes out in a hurry. And when I went in there to get his glass, the beer in it hadn't been touched. I come out and hollered after him. I thought something must 'a' been wrong with the beer. I never knew him to leave a drop before or afterward."

In the pause that followed, Swain looked around him and tried to laugh. He could have cursed himself when the laughter failed wretchedly.

"A glass of beer!" muttered Swain. "Are you boys going to listen seriously about a fragment of stone and a glass of beer?"

"Take your time," said Shannigan. "Take your time, man. You've got some explaining to do. Here's the rope waiting for you. Why did you hurry out of that room?"

"Because I remembered some business—" began Swain.

"Your face is gray, Swain," said Shannigan. "Gray and green. You look sick. You *are* sick. You're still sweating. Why? Every other face in the room is dry enough. What business did you remember?"

Darkness whirled before the eyes of Lee Swain.

"Do you think I have to drag out my private affairs before the crowd?" Lee demanded fiercely. "Who's questioning me, anyway? What—"

"Swain," said Shannigan, "that glass of beer is going to hang you. You should have thrown it out the window, if you didn't want to drink it. And when you threw it out the window, you might have collected yourself a bit and walked out of the place quietly. But the beer will hang you."

"You're a madman!" said Swain savagely. "And if—"

Shannigan held up his hand, and it seemed a magic power that forced the other to stop speaking.

"You'd heard Powell and Halpin giving a third interest in their discovery to Jack Reynolds, who had grubstaked them. You spied on 'em, and you saw the specimens they showed. You saw the stones fall on the floor. Afterward you went in, asking for beer, but you searched the floor and found that fragment that you have in your pocket. That told you how

rich the mine must be. And when you knew that, you decided that you'd have it.

"You knew they were leaving the town next morning. You followed them to the place where they dug in the Owens. You saw Reynolds leave them to get water. You were watching close at hand. You killed 'em both at short range! You entered the shaft they'd started and found there was no sign of ore. Instead of waiting for Reynolds and killing him, as you'd intended, you turned and trekked for Deerfoot. You started the posse after Reynolds. It met *him* riding in to report the killing.

"And the proof that hangs you, Swain, is the little stone in your vest pocket, and that glass of beer you didn't drink —as I see you're not drinking the one that you've got now!"

There was a great distance between Lee Swain and death, if he had used sense, but for once he was not a practical man.

The blood madness flared before his eyes.

A curse screeched from his throat, and he whipped out his gun to fire point-blank at Shannigan.

But it was another gun that spoke. The bullet from the sheriff's Colt struck Lee Swain neatly and fairly between the eyes, and he fell in a broken heap across the bar.

The crowd did not linger. In thirty seconds the barroom was cleared of every one except the sheriff and Shannigan and the dead man. Even Slim Connor had saddled his horse and joined the rush to find the rich ores in the Owens Desert.

"Well, Sam," said the sheriff, "that seems to be that. And a doggone good job you made of it. Only—think of there bein' all that poison wrapped up in that one skin! What's next?"

"The next," said Shannigan, "is sleep for me. I'll be at the hotel. Maybe you'd better go out and get the girl from that ranch where Swain put her."

The street was swarming with riders. The news had spread, and every man was for the Owens.

And as they went by Shannigan, racing their horses, not a man of them failed to give a whoop and a cheer for him.

He would not have found a clerk at the hotel, except that the man was a cripple.

He asked for a room.

"How does it come that you ain't joined the rush, you that started it?" asked the clerk.

"The stuff all belongs to Reynolds, by rights," said Shannigan. "Besides, there's blood on it, if you understand what I mean."

"Blood?" said the clerk, as he hobbled out to show Shannigan to his room. "You mean Powell and Halpin? They're dead and gone!"

"There's blood," said Shannigan grimly. "There's blood before my eyes, and I'd rather sleep till it's gone than have all the gold in the world!"

So he reached the room, dived onto the bed, pulled the pillow over his head, and fell into a sound sleep.

The girl found him there, in the evening of the day. She pushed the door open, and saw the sprawling figure, and then she said to the huge form of the sheriff, that loomed behind her:

"I'd better stay here alone, and wake him up, after a while. He'll be a gloomy sort, I know, till he's had his sleep out. I don't think he closed his eyes, really, all the time that we were away from Deerfoot."

The sheriff looked into the room for a moment, shaking his head.

"He's iron," he said, "and all I hope is that he's never rusted to the core."

The sheriff went down the hall, and she shut the door softly behind her as she entered. She went to the bed first, and leaned over him. He was breathing with a faint groan in every breath he drew. His forehead was covered with a wet tangle of hair, and the pillow cover was pressing back against his face.

She knew that a hostile step in the hallway, even, would be enough to waken him, but that did not prevent her from pushing the pillow back a little, and drawing the hair aside from his forehead.

The groaning stopped, and she smiled down at the huge head and shoulders for a moment. Then she went to the window and sat on the sill, watching the western mountains blacken against the sunset.

Every grown man who could ride had left Deerfoot in the stampede for the Owens Desert, and nothing but children were left. They seemed to have multiplied their numbers, and everywhere they ranged through the town. Their sharp gay voices, as they played, fell like music on her ears, and made her smile again, half sadly.

So the day was darkening when footfalls came up the hall, and the voices of men, which surprised her. It might be the sheriff returning, but with whom?

She was at the door at once, yet not in time to prevent a noisy rapping.

Shannigan, grunting, sat up on the bed. She was opening the door.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Mary!" cried Reynolds.

"Hush!" said the girl.

She stepped back from the reaching of his arms.

"You're bothering Sam," she said. "He has to sleep."

"Yes," said Shannigan. "Can't you brats find a place to spoon in besides my room?"

He saw the smaller, slenderer form of Howison standing at the door, and stood up at once.

"Come in, Howison," he said. "I didn't see you, at first."

Reynolds had advanced on the girl, exclaiming: "But listen to me, Mary. You don't seem to understand! Everything's all right. That chap in Chantry is not badly hurt, it seems. The bullet just glanced off the shoulder and didn't even break a bone. It was the shock of the slug that dropped him, and he whanged his head on the table. He's not prosecuting any case he might have. And the minute I heard that my neck was safe in Deerfoot, I came on the dead gallop all the way to reach you. I knew it didn't matter when they picked you up on the hill, out there, though. They wouldn't harm a girl."

"Hush a minute, Jack," said the girl, with a queer emphasis. "The *men* are talking."

"Light a lamp, Mary," directed Shannigan.

She obeyed, and as the light flared up, Reynolds said eagerly to Shannigan:

"It isn't true, Sam, is it? It isn't true that you spilled the news about the mines? It isn't true that you've thrown my claims away?"

Shannigan looked at him with dull eyes. Then he yawned. In place of answering, he turned to Howison.

"Sit down, Howison," he said. "There you are. Jack, you and Mary be quiet for a minute, will you? You're too young, the pair of you. You don't seem to understand."

He took the place at the window that Mary had occupied before him.

Howison spoke almost for the first time, saying: "I met Jack as he came into town—on the gallop, as he said. And I asked him to come here with me, because I need your advice, Shannigan."

Shannigan made a quick gesture with one hand.

"I intended to go straight on to the East," said Howison, "but the man hunt for you three was too exciting, and I remained here. I've heard the news from Chantry, too, and that news is what I want to talk to you about. Because it makes a difference to me. I'm not as much of a Westerner as you are, Shannigan. You'll understand these things and the Western customs a great deal better than I do. But I want to ask you if the conduct of Reynolds seems to you what's becoming to a man? Will you answer that? I'd purposely like to hear you speak even in the presence of Miss Tracy, for that matter."

And he turned his thin face toward the girl, and then toward Jack Reynolds.

The latter stood frozen in his place.

"Hold on!" he gasped. "Look here, Mr. Howison, you're not going to hold a little frolic like that against me, are you?"

Howison's voice was ice.

"I'm asking for Sam Shannigan's opinion," he said. "However he rules, I'll abide by it."

Shannigan shrugged his broad shoulders.

Then he said suddenly: "I won't answer that. I'm tired of things, just now. I'm even tired of thinking."

He dropped his chin on his lean, hard knuckles and stared at the floor.

Howison, with a frown, scanned him, glanced at Reynolds, and then at the girl. She had her hands clasped behind her, and her face was totally unconcerned, as though she stood among absolute strangers.

Arthur Howison exclaimed: "Miss Tracy, I think your head may be clearer than ours. You've been rather excited about Jack Reynolds, but will you tell me what sort of picture he makes to you now?"

Jack Reynolds laughed joyously. "Don't make the colors too bright, Mary," he said. "Or they won't believe what you say."

"Jack's the handsomest fellow I ever saw," said Mary.

"I can see that with my own eyes," said Howison, his thin lips straightening under pressure. "But what's under the looks?"

"He has nerve enough, in a way," said Mary Tracy. "He's a beautiful rider, and a mighty good shot."

Howison raised his hand.

"You don't seem to understand me," said he. "I want to know something about your opinion of his character. I suppose I'm a fool to ask you, but I want your opinion of his character, and if it's favorable, I'm going through, blindly, with my original intention—he becomes a half heir in my estate!"

Reynolds laughed softly again, looking at the girl with shining eyes.

"Character?" she said. "Why don't you ask me for the character of a bird in the air or a fish in the sea?"

"What do you mean by that?" asked Howison.

"Why, he hasn't any character," said the girl.

"Mary!" cried Reynolds.

She turned a little toward him.

"Does that hurt you, Jack?" she asked curiously. "Not because it's my opinion, though, but because it may block you from a whole lot of money. Yes, and it may sting your vanity a little, but you'll soon get over that."

He was so fairly staggered that he put out a hand and braced himself against the wall behind him, and he gaped like a child at her.

She had turned toward Howison again.

"He's never had a thought, except for himself," she said. "I was pretty giddy about him, but gradually my eyes were opened, bit by bit. It was always Shannigan to the rescue!"

"Be quiet, Mary," said Shannigan.

She paid no heed, but went on: "If there's one thing we know in the West, it's that a man always stands by a friend. But he let Sam trade places with him when there was death half a step away from him. Twice he did it. Well, that's not the Western idea of a man."

"Mary!" shouted Jack Reynolds. "You don't mean that you're throwing me down!"

"I'd like to have a picture of your handsome face, Jack," said she. "But that's all that I want."

"I've had the same idea," said Howison sternly. "Young man, I've made a great effort to help you—I'm glad that you're out of your difficulties—and now I wish to bid you permanently farewell. Your father was my dearest friend. But I find nothing of him in you!"

Reynolds stared all about him, baffled for a moment. Then, gathering himself, he snapped his fingers in the air.

"Well," he said, "I'm glad to be free from it. I'm glad that I don't have to go East and play the smug hypocrite. I'd rather stay out here and be free. It's the life I've wanted, and the life I've loved. What do I care about your money? I'll get along. As for you, Mary—why, I laugh! I was always laughing! I—"

He stopped. Shannigan had risen and lifted his terrible hand.

"You'd better run along, Jack," he said.

Reynolds backed to the door.

"It's a sneaking plot!" he cried. "I wash my hands of the lot of you. And you, Shannigan—you're no better than a crook and a thief! You threw away my mine to save your neck!"

He slammed the door behind him. His footfall went down the hall heavily, and a pause followed.

Then Howison stood up.

"That was painful, but necessary," said he. "Now, Shannigan, I want to talk to you about our accounting. I'm sorry that your incredible work was done in a worthless cause, but the settlement which I wish to make—"

Shannigan shook his head, breaking in: "It's no good, Howison. If Jack had been worth his salt, I would have taken your money—and a pile of it too. I would have sent in a bill that would have made your eyes pop. But as for this job with Reynolds—I charge that all on the wrong side of the ledger. I won't talk money with you."

"You're tired," said the older man kindly, putting his hand on the massive shoulder of Shannigan. "We'll talk again in the morning. I'll let you have your rest, now."

He went slowly from the room, closing the door very softly after him.

"Run along, Mary," said Shannigan. "I'm tired."

She went slowly to the door. He heard the sound of the key turning in the keyhole.

Then she came back.

"What's the matter?" said Shannigan.

"I've been thinking," said she.

"You're too young to think," said Shannigan.

"No, I'm not young any longer," said she.

"What's aged you in the wood so quickly, Mary?" he asked her gloomily.

"Listen to me, Sam," she commanded.

"I don't want to listen to you," said Shannigan. "I want to be alone. I want to sleep."

She stood before him, and putting both hands against his

forehead, she pushed his head back until he was looking right up at her.

"You're not very pretty, Sam," said she.

"That's a shock and a surprise to me," said Shannigan.

"How old are you?" asked the girl.

"Four or five thousand years," said he.

"I know all about that," said she. "You're as old as the rocks you resemble, and all that. How old are you from the day you were born?"

"I don't know. I forget," said Shannigan.

"You start thinking about it. How old are you, Sam?"

"Leave me alone, Mary," said he.

He pulled her hands away from his face.

"Tell me how old you are," said she.

"I'm thirty or forty," said Shannigan.

"What a fool I've been," said she. "You're thirty, are you?"

"I suppose so."

"I thought you were a sort of timeless thing, like the hills. Look at me, Sam."

"I've seen you before," said Shannigan.

"Look at me, Sam," she intently repeated.

"I want to sleep," said Shannigan. "I don't want to waste any more time on sunburned brats. Go on away, Mary."

"I'll tell you something in the dark, so to speak," said the girl. "I'll say my piece without being able to see my audience."

"What piece?" said he.

"I love you, Sam," said she.

"Sure you do," said Shannigan. "You love your mamma and you love your Sam the way any good little girl should."

"Reynolds was just a ladder," said she. "He helped to show me what a real man is like. I've climbed a few pegs, Sam. I love the nails in your boots better than I ever cared for Jack Reynolds."

"Wait a minute," said Shannigan. "Don't be emotional. You make me sick when you're emotional, Mary. Don't talk like a little fool."

"Look at me. I dare you to look at me," said the girl.

"I won't take the dare," said he. "I don't want to laugh in your face."

"I'll take the chance," said she. "I think you're pretty fond of me. You knew that Jack was a hound, but you saved him because you thought I wanted him. Sam, I love you. Tell me what's what?"

"Wait a minute," said Shannigan.

He reached out his great arms, and drew her toward him carefully. He raised his face, but his eyes were closed.

"You're laughing at me, Mary," said he. "Do I dare to open my eyes and look at you?"

"Tell me something first," said she.

"I can't," said Shannigan. "I've got no words. But right from the first, when you were only a skinny kid, I've wanted you more than anything in the world. Is all of you here inside my arms?"

"My whole heart, Sam," said the girl.

"Well, then," said Shannigan. "I'm going to look!"

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