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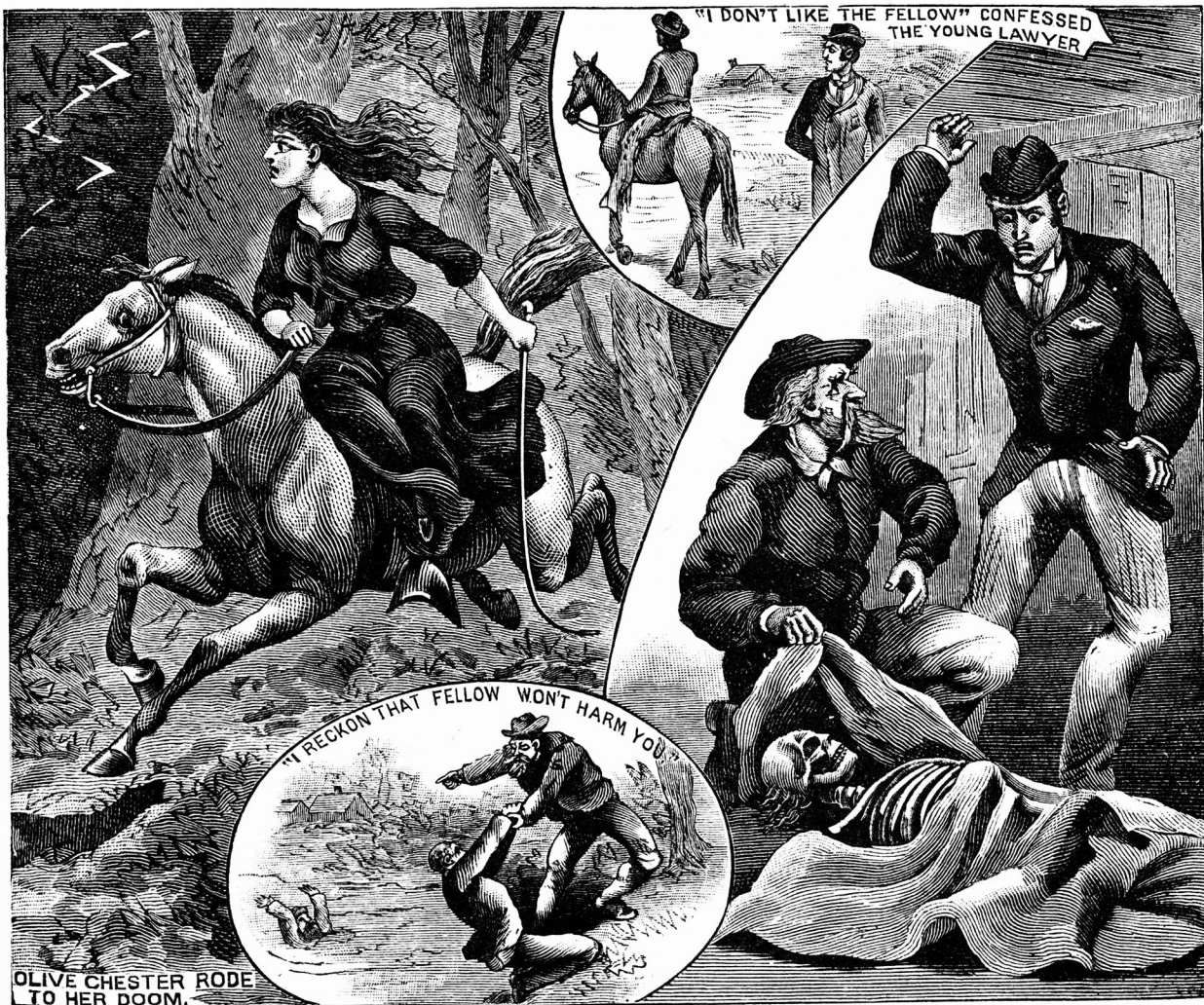
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## THE LAWYER DETECTIVE:

OR,

### The Mystery at Three Oaks Ranch.

BY WILL WINCH.



COLONEL REDHART LIFTED THE QUILT, REVEALING A SKELETON, DARK AND REPULSIVE, "THAT'S ALL THAT'S LEFT OF THE POOR GAL," HE SAID GRIMLY.

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## THE LAWYER DETECTIVE: OR, The Mystery at Three Oaks Ranch. BY WILL WINCH.

### CHAPTER I.

#### AN ECCENTRIC FRIEND.

WHILE Hilton Ragsdale sat at his desk in his uncle's law office in Denver, a messenger boy entered and handed him a telegram.

Hastily opening it, the young man read:

"RAGSDALE,—Olive has been found. Terrible mystery. Come at once.

"FLASH."

A perplexed, not to say startled look, overspread the face of the lawyer's clerk.

The dispatch was dated at a station on the Union Pacific in Wyoming.

"Olive," muttered the young man. "Can it be that this refers to Olive Chester, my cousin, who disappeared so mysteriously more than a year ago? It would seem so. But who is Flash? I don't think I have any friends of that name. I'll telegraph for particulars."

Putting on his hat, the young man left the office and hurried to the telegraph station.

He at once sent a dispatch in answer to the one he had received.

He waited in vain for a reply.

He hurried back to his uncle's office, and communicated with that gentleman, who had come in during the absence of Ragsdale.

The old lawyer scratched his bald pate and reflected.

"I remember the circumstance of Olive Chester's disappearance," said the old gentleman. "My sister married a worthless fellow, who was always speculating and never making anything. He died poor, leaving his wife and daughter to manage the ranch on the Big Horn."

"I s'pose I ought to have communicated with Julia, but somehow I neglected it. Probably she has married again, and is getting on well enough. Let me see, you had met your cousin, I believe, Hilton?"

"Once, sir."

"Rather a pretty girl?"

"Rather; but not so refined as a city belle."

"No, I suppose not, brought up as she was among the hills of Wyoming. Besides, who would expect refinement in one of Ike Chester's offspring?"

At the last the old lawyer indulged in a laugh.

"If you can spare me, Uncle Jared, I believe I will go out to Wyoming and look into this affair."

"Do you wish to go?"

"Very much."

"I am not sure but what it would be a good idea," said the old man. "You can see your aunt, and tell her for me that I have grieved deeply at her bereavement in the loss of both husband and daughter."

"Yes, uncle."

"And tell her—"

"Well, uncle?"

"Tell her that I should like to see her in Denver at an early day."

"I'll do it, Uncle Jared."

Promising to communicate with his relative immediately on his arrival in the Big Horn region, Hilton Ragsdale hurried to his room to make preparations for an immediate departure.

The young man was deeply excited.

He remembered about the mysterious disappearance of Olive Chester, and that whispers of foul play had fretted the air, and now that the mystery of the young girl's disappearance was solved, nothing could keep Ragsdale from looking into the case.

He was soon on the train speeding toward Cheyenne City.

Just before reaching that town he purchased a newspaper of the train-boy, and almost the first words that greeted his vision were these:

### "THE MYSTERY OF A RANCH.

WAS OLIVE CHESTER MURDERED BY HER LOVER?"

Of course the young man was at once deeply interested. He read on down the column:

"Olive Chester, a pretty young girl of twenty, living in Big Horn Basin, left her mother's home on horseback to visit a neighbor one year ago in June, and failed to reach her destination. It was believed she had been drowned in the Big Horn, but the river was searched for miles in vain.

"About a week after her disappearance, Evard Demming, a prominent young man of the basin, left the region, and as he was the girl's lover, paying her attention against her mother's wishes, gossips reported that Olive had ridden to meet Demming by appointment, and the couple had eloped. Demming,

however, returned and denied the elopement story. He sold his ranch and left the country for good. Last Tuesday, Colonel Redhart, the purchaser of Demming's ranch, discovered the body of the girl buried in the earthen floor of a deserted hunter's cabin, in an unfrequented part of the ranch. Coyotes had partially exhumed the body, and stripped the flesh from the bones. The identification was made complete by the clothing, and by a gold ring bearing the initials 'O. C.' The head showed marks of a bullet hole."

—Such was the description read by Ragsdale.

What an awful fate had befallen his pretty cousin!

No wonder the heart of the young lawyer's clerk was touched.

And, naturally enough, a desire to avenge the girl's death filled his bosom.

"This man Demming must be hunted down," avowed Ragsdale, inwardly. "I could never rest with my poor cousin unavenged."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but have you been reading of the discovery made in the Wind River country?"

A man on the seat in front of Ragsdale turned about and addressed him.

"I have just been reading about it," answered the Denver man.

"It was a terrible affair."

"Yes."

"Undoubtedly murder."

"Undoubtedly."

"Yet no one will ever suffer for the crime."

"I do not agree with you there."

"That's because you haven't seen so much of the world as I have, young man. There'll be a few days' talk, then it'll die down, and the mystery of the murder will always remain a mystery."

"Not if I can help it," declared Ragsdale.

"Ah, you are interested?"

"The girl was my cousin."

"So?"

A pair of keen eyes searched the face of the Denver man closely.

"Yes, and I mean to see that her assassin meets with punishment."

"Well, I can't say that I blame you," returned the stranger, who was a short, stout-built man, with a very red face and shock of

black hair, his dress being of coarse material. "I don't wonder that you, being a relation of the girl, feel worked up about it. I imagine I'd do the same under such circumstances. Where do you live?"

"At Denver."

"Ah, I am really glad to meet you, sir, really glad. I am from that city myself, and I'm proud of it. Denver is the smartest town in the West, sir, the very smartest."

"I won't deny that."

"My name is Tribune Tripp. I'm in business west of Cheyenne at present, and may be able to help you, if so be you need any help in this matter. I have means, and should really like to see that upstart hanged."

"Upstart?"

"I refer to Evard Demming."

"Did you know him?"

"Yes."

"What sort of person is he?"

"Young and uppish."

"Did he bear a good reputation?"

"Would so nice a young woman as Olive Chester smile on him otherwise?"

"Perhaps not."

"Not, of course. Miss Chester was a lady, sir, a lady to the core. Being your cousin, sir, how could she be otherwise?" and Mr. Tripp leered at the Denver man in a way that was not wholly pleasing.

The fellow was very presuming on short acquaintance, and Ragsdale at once decided that this man and himself could not be friends.

At Cheyenne City, Ragsdale lost sight of his car acquaintance for a time.

There was no train west till almost midnight, so the young Denverite had ample opportunity to look about the metropolis of Wyoming.

Like many other cities of the border, Cheyenne was the abode of rough characters, and during his wanderings about the place Ragsdale saw many hard countenances.

"That's him now."

Hilton Ragsdale heard a whispered voice.

He was standing in the shadow of a building, not far from a flowing stream.

Instantly he turned.

A club, aimed at his head, fell, and missing the intended mark came down with a tremendous crash on the shoulder of the man from Denver.

The hand of Hilton Ragsdale fell to the butt of a revolver—no, not that, for the weapon was gone!

Before the young man could recover from his surprise, a pair of digits were at his throat, and the next moment two men rolled down the bank of the stream to the water's edge.

"Murder!" cried Ragsdale.

It was not a loud cry, yet it was heard by a passing pedestrian, who ran to the edge of the bank and peered over.

He seemed to take in the situation at a glance.

With the bound of a deer he reached the side of the struggling men, and with a mighty strength tore them apart.

Ragsdale's assailant attempted to draw a weapon, but the man who had come to the rescue seized the villain in a vise-like grasp, and lifting him as though he were a child, held him aloft one instant, the next he flung him far out into the water.

At this moment Ragsdale staggered to his feet.

A hand grasped his arm, and led him up the bank to the level ground above.

"There, I reckon that fellow won't harm you here. I know he won't while I'm around, you can bet your sweet life on that."

Ragsdale started at sound of the man's voice.

"I believe we have met before," he said, trying to read the face of his rescuer by the light of the distant lamps.

A low laugh fell from Ragsdale's companion.

"Met before! Well I should say we had, Mr.— But thunder! you didn't tell me your name to-day on the cars from Denver. I'll have it now if it's all the same to you, sir."

Hilton Ragsdale gave the required information at once, and grasped the Wyoming man warmly by the hand, expressing his thanks at the timely interference of Mr. Tripp.

"Don't mention it, Mr. Ragsdale," returned

Tribune Tripp. "It's a small matter at most. Who was the fellow that tackled you?"

"I do not know."

"Sure?"

"Certainly I'm sure."

"Well, if we had time we'd look into this and have the scoundrel arrested. As it is, the matter must drop for the present. It's almost train time."

This was true.

Ragsdale and his strange friend hurried away toward the depot together.

## CHAPTER II.

### A SURPRISE FOR RAGSDALE.

"You received my telegram?"

"Yes," answered Ragsdale, as he gazed into the face of the man who met him at the depot of the railway station in the western part of Wyoming.

"You haven't forgotten me, I hope."

Ragsdale extended his hand.

"I do remember you now, Benay Flash," answered the young lawyer's clerk. "You were here when I came to the Chester ranch some years ago. You were then in the employ of Mr. Demming. I am glad to see you, and hope really that you can let some light in on this horrible mystery of Olive Chester's death."

"I think I can."

And the young man's black eyes snapped in a way that rather chilled Ragsdale.

"You are still living in this region?"

"Oh, yes," smiling, revealing even rows of white teeth. "It would be impossible for me to go away from the garden of Wyoming, quite impossible. I expect to make my fortune here some day."

"I hope you may."

"Come, Mr. Ragsdale, my buggy waits, and the mustangs are impatient to be off. I am to be your guide to Colonel Redhart's ranch."

"How far is it to the Redhart ranch?"

"Just a hundred miles as the crow flies," said Benay Flash.

"I had forgotten. The distance is greater than I thought."

"It's not far. A pair of fleet mustangs like the colonel's will cover the distance in a few hours."

Ragsdale followed his guide without more ado.

He remembered Flash now as a young factotum on a neighboring ranch, when he had once paid a visit to his aunt's people on the plains of Wyoming some years before.

The fellow was about twenty, with tawny skin, black eyes, and long, straight hair, like an Indian's.

There was something of the cat nature in Benay Flash that did not impress the young Denverite favorably.

He could well understand how the present owner of the ranch, where the remains of Miss Chester had been found, had sent Flash to the railway station with orders to communicate with friends of the murdered girl, and this was how it came to pass that Hilton Ragsdale was summoned hundreds of miles, to aid in ferreting out one of the most mysterious crimes that had ever blackened the annals of fair Wyoming.

As for Mr. Tripp, he had gone on one station beyond the one where the Denverite left the train.

"I'll meet you again some day," declared the burly Mr. Tripp, at parting with his young acquaintance of the journey from Denver.

It was mostly a prairie ride, and to young Mr. Ragsdale a pleasant one.

"Will you go to Mrs. Tripp's or to Colonel Redhart's ranch first, Mr. Ragsdale?"

"I think I will see the colonel at once," said the Denverite. "But you speak of Tripp. Is there a person of that name living in this region?"

"Yes; he lives on an adjoining ranch."

"I was not aware of that. It may be a brother to Tribune Tripp."

"It is Tribune Tripp, sir."

"Indeed! The gentleman said nothing about owning a ranch in this part of Wyoming."

"He's a queer sort of man, anyhow," explained Flash. "You'll hardly know Tribune Tripp if you stay here a year. I don't understand him myself, and I've known him

ever since he came to the Big Horn Valley."

The ranch home of Colonel Redhart appeared built on a slight elevation not far from the bank of a creek which emptied its waters into one branch of the Big Horn.

It was a log structure of considerable dimensions.

A veranda ran the length of the front, and on this sat the colonel himself, smoking a short black pipe, on the day of Ragsdale's arrival.

Hilton had never met the colonel, so an introduction was necessary, which was gracefully performed by Flash, who then left them, and drove away to the stables in the rear of the house.

"Sit down, Mr. Ragsdale," said the ranch-owner, who was a tall, raw-boned man with yellow complexion and a decided Southern twang to his speech.

A little later the young man learned that Colonel Redhart was from Missouri, and that he had been a soldier in the "late unpleasantness."

"I was most afeard you wouldn't come," proceeded the colonel, after Ragsdale had seated himself on the chair his host had placed for him. "Of course you remember what a time there was when Miss Chester rid out to meet her lover and never returned. They do say 'at her mother had fits and sich like, and she couldn't never be reconciled with the man 'at owned Three Oaks after that, and I never felt 'at I could blame her. 'Twas an awful thing to lose an only gal like that, Mr. Ragsdale."

"It was, indeed."

"And to think of the dread uncertainty all them long months, not a-knowin' what had become of the gal."

"Were you in this country then, Colonel Redhart?"

"Not right in these parts, but I heard all about it. I bought this place of the gal's beau; mebbe you hadn't heard of that?"

"Yes. I saw an article in the paper, too, giving an account of the finding of the body of my poor cousin, buried on this ranch. Is this true?"

"True as preachin', young feller."

"You have buried the body?"

"Not yet. I wanted you to look at it—and a detective."

"Have you sent for the latter?"

"No."

"You should have done that at once."

"Mebbe so," grunted the colonel, puffing at his pipe. "I don't know any detectives, and I reckoned you'd know about what to do, Mr. Ragsdale."

"Let us go over to the cabin at once, colonel."

"Yes, indeed."

Colonel Redhart sprung up and waddled into the house.

When he returned to the veranda, his wife, a buxom woman of forty, accompanied him, and was duly introduced to the gentleman from Denver.

"Have dinner on the table for us when we get back, Nancy," ordered the colonel, and then the two men set out in company to visit the spot where the body of the murdered girl had been unearthed.

Two men guarded the tumble-down hunter's cabin, and several plainmen were standing near, conversing in low tones.

The shanty was half a mile from the ranch-house, and hidden from it by a bit of rising ground along the bank of a considerable stream, said rise being covered with a considerable growth of timber.

On entering the cabin almost the first object that met the view was a big, checkered quilt, the light falling on it from a paneless window.

Colonel Redhart lifted the quilt, revealing a skeleton, dark and repulsive.

"That's all that's left of the poor gal," said the colonel, grimly.

The young Denverite gazed at the skeleton and shuddered.

"Right there's where the bullet went 'at took her life," proceeded the colonel, pointing to a ragged hole in the front of the skull. "She never knew what hurt her, I reckon. It was a measly, mean trick, though, and I'd like to see the murderer swing, so I would."

"I suppose it is well understood who killed her, Colonel Redhart?"



"I don't know how that can be."  
"I think the newspaper intimated that the girl's lover, the owner of the ranch on which you are now living, shot the girl."

"The newspaper lied!"  
The words came out, blunt as a stone, from the colonel.

"Perhaps you know the murderer, Colonel Redhart?"

"No, I don't; but one thing I do know, and that is 'at Mr. Demming did not hev a hand in the gal's takin' off. I'd swar to that on a stack of almanacs as high as the moon, so I would."

Ragsdale was surprised at the rancher's earnestness.

"Wasn't it you who furnished the news to the reporter, Colonel Redhart?"

"I reckon 'twas."  
"Why did you intimate that Demming was the murderer?"

"So't the real one wouldn't take the alarm and flee," returned the colonel, coolly.

There might be something in this method of reasoning, yet Hilton Ragsdale was not satisfied. He was shown the clothing that the girl's mother had identified as well as others. The ring was at the house, where Ragsdale could examine it on his return.

"I found the body right there, in the center of this room, where the coyotes had lifted it out of a shallow grave," said the rancher.

"It is terrible!" declared Ragsdale.

"I reckon you're about right, mister."  
After a little the young man examined the skeleton closely. He was determined to make no mistake at the outset. This was surely a human skeleton, and of small size.

The young Denverite resolved to make sure of its identity first, then, if it was the skeleton of his cousin who had disappeared so many months before, he would leave no stone unturned to find the murderer.

Leaving the old cabin, the two men walked slowly back to the colonel's house.

Both men were too busy with their own thoughts to speak often.

"The first move will be to hold an inquest," said Ragsdale, on reaching the house.

"I s'pose so. We've all been a-waitin' fur you," declared the colonel.

"Well, I am here now, and you'd best see the proper persons and set the ball in motion, colonel."

"Yes, I'll do so at once."  
Dinner waited for the colonel and his guest when the two returned to the house.

After it, Hilton walked over to the adjoining ranch to see his aunt, while Colonel Redhart promised to see that an inquest was ordered at once, to be held not later than the following day.

It was, perhaps, a mile between the houses of the two ranches.

The road led along the creek most of the distance.

Hilton reached the house of his aunt in good season.

The woman seemed pleased to meet her relative, and gave him an auntly hug and kiss.

The young man noticed at once how greatly changed was Mrs. Chester since he last looked upon her.

She was a matronly, rosy-cheeked woman of less than forty when he last looked upon her. Now she seemed at least ten years older, and her face was pale and shrunken.

What had wrought the change?  
The tragic fate of her daughter?

Undoubtedly.

"My daughter, Mr. Ragsdale," said the woman, introducing a slender, dark-haired girl who just entered the room.

Hilton stared.

He was too well-bred, however, to exhibit surprise.

He bowed, and as the girl put out her hand—a delicate bit of anatomy—he took it, and felt thrilled at the touch.

She was quite pretty, with dark, luminous eyes and a mouth that was like a rosebud. Her skin was dark, however, and her hair of midnight blackness.

Mrs. Chester was a blonde, as was Olive, who had met with such a sad fate.

Hilton Ragsdale sat and conversed with his aunt on various topics, not speaking of the terrible find on the Redhart ranch.

Each seemed loath to bring up the name of the unfortunate girl.

While they sat talking, the clatter of hoofs fell on the air without.

Mrs. Chester sprang up and trembled.

"He has come," she said, in a low voice.

The door stood open, and before it a horseman halted.

He flung himself from the saddle and strode to the door.

"Mr. Tripp!" exclaimed Ragsdale.

"Exactly," said the man, entering the room.

Then the elder woman turned to Ragsdale and said:

"Hilton, this is Mr. Tripp, my husband."  
"Your husband!"

Ragsdale recoiled as if shot.

#### CHAPTER III. RAGSDALE'S FALL.

THE introduction of Tribune Tripp as her husband was the first intimation Hilton Ragsdale had of his aunt's second marriage.

The young Denverite was quite benumbed at the news.

For once he quite lost his self-possession.

"I told you we'd meet again, Mr. Ragsdale," chuckled Tripp. "A leetle sooner than you expected, like enough."

Had he followed out the promptings of his soul, Hilton would have dealt the man a blow in the face.

Such feelings were not creditable to him, he realized, and he smothered them with an effort.

"It is a little sooner than I expected," admitted Hilton. "I had no idea that Aunt Julia had married again."

"She was sensible enough to do that at the first good opportunity," chuckled Mr. Tripp.

Quite disgusted, Ragsdale turned on his heel and left the room.

He paced up and down in the shade of a tree not far from the house.

His feelings were varied and bitter.

He almost hated this man who had married his aunt. And yet why should he?

The fellow had seemed pleasant enough as a traveling companion.

A step interrupted his musings.

He turned about to see Rena Tripp, the pretty daughter of his new uncle.

Toward her he felt no enmity.

"I could see that you were offended, Mr. Ragsdale," she said, in a low voice. "I am so sorry!"

"Does it concern you, Miss Tripp?" he answered. "I'm sure it was something of a shock to my feelings to learn that my aunt had married again."

"Yet was it not natural enough? Papa and your relative have been good friends for a year; they were married two months ago, and I was quite angry myself at the outset."

"You have become reconciled."

"How could I help it when I came to know dear Julia?"

"I am glad that you like my aunt."

"She is now a mother to me."

There was a luminous light in the large dark eyes of Rena that thrilled the soul of her companion.

"I am sure, then, the marriage was not a mistake. Will you sit down yonder, and explain some things that as yet are quite mysterious to me?"

He pointed to a rustic bench between two large trees not far away.

For answer, she walked forward and sat down.

He did likewise.

"Now, Miss Tripp, I'll come to the point at once. I am out here for the purpose of looking into the death of my cousin Olive."

"I am glad somebody is to investigate," she returned. "There can be no doubt but what murder was done, and the guilty man ought to be punished."

"Suspicious point to some one?"

"Oh, yes; to Olive's lover."

"His name?"

"Evard Demming."

"Did you know him?"

"I have met him. He owned Three Oaks, where Colonel Redhart now lives. I believe the colonel bought the ranch of Mr. Demming."

"So I have been informed. Do you remember the time when Olive Chester went forth on that last ride?"

"I remember it quite distinctly. It was a

warm night in June. Soon after Olive's departure a storm arose and swept this region with uncommon fury. That storm served to give the murderer his chance, and he improved it."

"Tell me all about it, Miss Tripp."

"I can do that in a few words. Olive received the visits of Evard Demming contrary to her mother's wishes. I know at the time the young rancher was paying attention to Olive, most people thought it was a splendid match."

"I know my father declared that Olive would do well if she married Demming. I did not agree with him, from the fact that Demming had once been a gambler, and one of general bad character. I think it was for this reason Mrs. Chester refused her consent to the union."

"Which would seem to be reason enough," said Ragsdale. "I know Aunt Julia always had a sound head."

"True. She is an admirable woman. Olive loved her mother, but it seems she loved this Demming more, and met him clandestinely. At any rate, so 'tis said."

"Exactly."

"On the night in question, I think Olive quarreled with her mother. I know that is the general impression, although mamma will not say, preferring to let the past lie buried."

"The subject must be very disagreeable to her, poor woman."

"It is indeed. The murder was cleverly planned, it seems, since all these months poor mamma has believed that her daughter eloped with the ex-gambler. I think the belief has darkened and soured her life."

"No doubt."

"A few days since, when the body was found on the Three Oaks ranch, Julia was stunned to learn the truth. She's been not quite herself since, so you must excuse any eccentricities you find in her, Mr. Ragsdale."

"Certainly. Poor woman! Poor Aunt Julia!"

"I don't know that there's much more to tell, Mr. Ragsdale."

"What, about Demming?"

"He hasn't been seen since he sold his ranch."

"No one hereabouts knows where the ex-gambler has gone?"

"No one, unless it be Colonel Redhart."

"I'll speak to the colonel about it."

"I'm afraid it will be of little use, sir."

"How is that?"

"Colonel Redhart has all along defended the man from whom he purchased Three Oaks."

"He doesn't believe Demming guilty?"

"He professes not to, but I would advise you not to trust the colonel too far," said Rena, with a queer little elevation of her brows. "Of course nobody knows anything against the present owner of Three Oaks, but his determined defense of a murderer isn't a favorable omen. Father distrusts the colonel, as well as that sleek young man he has in his employ."

"Do you refer to Benay Flash?"

"Yes."

"I was not prepossessed in that man's favor myself."

"One cannot be too careful when dealing with such men," said Rena.

Miss Tripp rose to her feet.

"Are you going?"

"To the stable. Perhaps you have some curiosity to look at the horse Olive Chester rode to her doom?"

"Indeed I have."

He followed her to the log-stable, some ten rods in the rear of the house.

There were several horses here, but only one had attraction for the young lawyer at the present time.

This was a sorrel mare, small and slender-limbed, with an open countenance and pleasant eye.

"This was Olive's horse—her very own, Mr. Ragsdale," said Rena.

"A beautiful animal," returned the young man. "So it seems, the horse ridden by Olive on that night returned home? I did not know this before."

"Yes, it was found at the stable door the next morning."

"I should have thought this would have excited suspicion."

"It did in some minds; but as a faithful

search revealed nothing of Olive, and as Evard Demming was absent, the elopement story was readily believed."

"How long did Demming remain away?"

"About ten days."

"And then?"

"He returned, accompanied by Colonel Redhart, who purchased the ranch, immediately after which Demming disappeared for good."

"Is it known if Mr. Demming was at home on the night Olive went out for a ride?"

"He was seen at home just at dusk on that evening."

"And was gone the next morning?"

"I believe so, sir."

"The case against him is pretty strong," mused the Denver lawyer.

From the stable the two strolled back to the house.

Mr. and Mrs. Tripp were not visible.

"I suppose you will make our house your home during your stay in Wyoming, Mr. Ragsdale?" said the girl.

"I am not sure about that. I shall employ a detective to hunt down this Demming, and it may be that I shall not prolong my stay on the Big Horn."

"Your aunt would be pleased, I am sure, to have you remain here."

"No doubt."

With a polite bow, the young lawyer left her, and turned his face once more toward Three Oaks.

He had entered the woods, and was passing near the bluff overlooking the creek, when a faint murmur of voices reached his ear.

He paused.

The sound seemed to proceed from the creek.

Ragsdale at once walked to the brow of the bluff and looked over.

He saw two persons standing near the water's edge some ten feet below his position.

They were Tribune Tripp and his aunt Julia.

"You must obey me, Julia, else I'll make life too hot for your comfort, remember that."

The words of the plainsman sent an indignant flash to the eye of the listener above.

How dared this man threaten his aunt?

Hilton leaned out a little further, anxious not to miss a word of this interesting conversation.

"You have made life a burden to me already," declared Mrs. Tripp. "The property I own shall never go to any one but my own relatives."

"What do you suppose I married you for?" growled he, hotly.

"I know, now, it was for my property. You will not get it. Olive is dead, and John's relatives are not in need. When I am done with the ranch and the cattle, my nephew shall have them."

"Your nephew?"

"Hilton Ragsdale."

"Insufferable!" hissed Tripp.

The next moment he seized the woman fiercely by the arm.

The listener above could stand no more.

He started to move aside, when a limb broke, and he was precipitated downward with the velocity of lightning, striking Tribune Tripp square in the back, sending that worthy headlong into the water.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE MURDERER COMES.

A SCREAM from Mrs. Tripp rang out as she saw her husband thus summarily dealt with. She reeled, and came near falling, while her nephew fell prostrate, with his limbs dangling very close to the water in which Tribune Tripp was now floundering.

Ragsdale sprang to his feet.

He shook himself, and passed a hand over his limbs to see if any bones were broken.

He seemed satisfied with the investigation, and turning to his aunt, said coolly:

"Don't alarm yourself Aunt Julia, I did not strike you, and as for me, I am not hurt."

"But Tribune? He will drown."

The person mentioned was struggling desperately in the water, and really seemed in danger. Ragsdale held only a feeling of contempt in his bosom for a man who could

threaten a woman, yet he could not forget that this person once saved his life.

It was this remembrance that caused the young lawyer to put out a helping hand to the man in the water.

With considerable difficulty Ragsdale succeeded in drawing Tripp to the shore. Shaking himself, and wringing the water from his garments, Tripp presented a woe-begone sight.

"How did it happen?" queried Ragsdale.

"How'd what happen?"

"Your falling—"

"Death and furies, man! what a question to ask, when you jumped, on to me like a catamount."

Ragsdale saw that Tripp was inclined to be ugly, and he at once resolved to clip his wings.

"It was an accident so far as I am concerned, Mr. Tripp," assured the young Denverite. "I was walking along the path up yonder, when I heard a cry of pain from a woman. I at once sprang to the edge of the bank and gazed over. What I saw angered me, I'll admit—that a big man clutching a woman's arm and threatening her! I lost my footing and fell. You know the rest."

Ragsdale fixed a keen gaze on the face of the ranchman.

The fellow frowned and remained silent. After a moment, however, he turned on the Denver man and said, sternly:

"I thought you'n I were friends, Mr. Ragsdale, but I reckon, after what's taken place to-day, we're the opposite. I'm chilled through and must go to the house. Come on, Julie."

He seized her arm and the twain walked away together, leaving the Denverite standing alone on the bank of the creek.

The situation was not pleasant.

Hilton Ragsdale had learned enough about the character of his car acquaintance to tell him that he was not a good man. The fellow had married his aunt Julia, in order that he might secure to himself and his heirs the property which Mrs. Chester owned, and which must be very valuable.

Did Rena know of the mercenary motives actuating her father?

Ragsdale was not ready to believe so ill of one so gentle and beautiful as Rena Tripp.

Leaving the bank of the creek, the Denverite soon made his way to the road leading along the bluff.

He had not gone far when he met a man riding a mustang. It was Benay Flash.

The man on the mustang drew rein.

"I come for you, Mr. Ragsdale."

"Indeed."

"Yes; you're sent for."

"Sent for?"

"My employer wants you."

"The colonel?"

"Yes."

"I only came from there a short time ago," said Ragsdale. "Colonel Redhart must have conceived a sudden desire for my company."

"That's not it," said the half-breed, smiling till his even white teeth gleamed like a row of pearls. "The colonel was fearful lest you should leave the country without you're seeing him again."

"He knows better than that. I promised to be at the inquest. I shall not leave the country until this affair regarding my poor cousin is settled. The man who murdered her must hang."

"I'm with you there, Mr. Ragsdale."

"I think you so assured me before."

Benay Flash slipped from the saddle and motioned for the young lawyer to mount.

"I prefer to walk, Mr. Flash, although I thank you for the offer of your horse."

"Say, Mr. Ragsdale."

The dark man bent close to the face of Ragsdale.

"Well?"

"You don't want to trust some folks in this region too far."

"Sir! What do you mean?"

"I don't like to call names."

"Then I may misunderstand you."

"Well, of course it seems to be understood that Evard Demming murdered Miss Chester, and I don't say he did not. On the contrary I think he is one of them."

The half-breed looked mysterious.

The lawyer did not like his actions.

In fact, Ragsdale's first dislike for the fac-

totum of Three Oaks was growing upon him hourly.

"I don't think I even yet comprehend," said the lawyer.

"Well, to speak more plainly then, I say that Demming may have been one of the murderers of your cousin."

"Was there more than one?"

"Yes."

"You seem positive."

"I am positive."

Flash glanced keenly about him, a cunning gleam in his black orbs.

A vehicle was approaching from the distance, which seemed to annoy him.

"Not here and now, Mr. Ragsdale," said the half-breed, at length. "I have a revelation for your private ear some time, that may aid you in this hunt for the assassins of Olive Chester."

He turned away then.

Hilton Ragsdale made no attempt to detain him.

The fellow vaulted into the saddle and continued his ride toward the Chester ranch.

Evidently he had not ridden out for the sole purpose of finding and communicating with the Denver lawyer.

"I don't like this fellow," confessed Ragsdale, in a low tone. "There's a treacherous look in his black eyes, and a something in his actions that convinces me that he is not to be trusted."

"Yes, I told Benay that he might tell ye 'at I wished ye to return soon," said the lean proprietor of Three Oaks, when Ragsdale met him on the porch of his dwelling a short time later. "I was afeared you might conclude to stop with the Tripps till mornin', and I didn't like to hev their influence exerted on ye till you'd made a complete investigation."

"I don't think the influence of such a man as Tripp would amount to much," Ragsdale returned; "I don't like the man."

"Nuther do I."

The colonel puffed at his pipe, and tilted back in his chair, assuming a position that seemed to him comfortable.

"He could have no influence over me," avowed the Denverite.

"P'raps not."

"Then why your anxiety?"

"See here, young man," grunted the colonel, removing his pipe, "hain't thar mor'n one pusson at ther Chester ranch."

"Certainly."

"A pair of bright eyes thar 'at ud make a man's mouth water. I know all about 'em, Ragsdale, all about 'em."

Again the black pipe was conveyed to the stained lips of Colonel Redhart.

"And do you know any ill of Rena Tripp?"

The young lawyer felt ready to resent any reflections on the lady in question.

"Nothin' ag'in her, youngster, nothin'."

"Then what do you mean?"

"It's jest here, and this wise, Mr. Ragsdale," returned the colonel, removing his pipe, and laying a hand on the knee of his visitor. "Thar's a strange influence at work tryin' to make sentiment agin one of the finest young men in ther nation. I refer to Evard Demming. You, as a relative of Miss Chester which was murdered, will nat'rally feel like huntin' down the villainous critter 'at did the gal to death. I say this is only nat'l, and I don't blame ye for it. What else did I send fur ye fur? Yer aunt told me whar to send the telegram, though she 'lowed I hadn't better send it coz she argued it couldn't do no good."

"My aunt argued against sending for me?"

"That's a fact, youngster."

"This hardly seems possible."

"Mebbe you doubt my word?"

An angry gleam shot into the eyes of the colonel, and he clutched the tuft of beard on his chin as though he would tear it out by the roots.

"I must believe you, of course, Colonel Redhart. You sent for me, but I thought my aunt had desired it. I am surprised that she did not. Olive was the apple of her eye, and—"

"Jes' so, jes' so," the colonel interrupted; "but she's been infloenced."

"Influenced?"

"Sartin."

"By whom?"

"By the man she married."

"Exactly. I understand it now. This



Tribune Tripp didn't want this murder investigated.

"You have it now, jest as I meant to tell it," declared the colonel. "Tripp's a mean cuss, and he's got that there woman of hiszen under his thumb sleek enough. He, Trib, is bound that one man alone shall suffer, or else there sha'n't be no investigation. Understand?"

"Not fully."

"Wal, I'll try and make it plain. Ef Evard Demming hain't hung fur the murder, they don't mean 'at anybody else shall be—see?"

"Doubtless they think him guilty."

"Don't you believe that?"

"It seems that you think the man from whom you purchased Three Oaks is innocent."

"I do, for a fact."

"Yet the evidence seems to be strong against Demming."

"I don't see it in that light."

"Don't you?"

"No."

"I thought it was almost a plain case against Demming."

"It may seem so to you, but I jest know 'at Evard Demming is too good a man to murder anybody, much less the pretty gal as he was sparkin'. I tell ye, Mr. Ragsdale, there's a lot to this 'ere affair 'at the public knows nuthin' about."

"Likely."

"And ef you're in dead 'arnest to find the murderer, you'll investigate before you jump to conclusions."

"That's just what I mean to do, Colonel Redhart," assured the lawyer.

"Then give us yer hand."

The two clasped hands.

"Now, arter the inquest to-morrow, we'll get down to business, Hilton."

"Yes; that is my desire."

On the morrow the inquest on the remains of the unfortunate Olive Chester was held.

Many witnesses were examined. The identification of the body was complete.

The bullet-hole in the head evidenced the fact that the girl had been murdered.

The inquest lasted nearly all day.

The sun was sinking in the west when the verdict was announced:

"Olive Chester came to her death at the hands of Evard Demming, who shot her on the night of June 16th, last."

Such was the verdict, and as it was given, Colonel Redhart glanced across the prairie and uttered a low ejaculation.

"Thar comes Demming now," he said.

#### CHAPTER V.

##### MORE COWARDS THAN ONE.

"THE murderer comes!" exclaimed Tribune Tripp, springing to an upright position, and drawing a revolver.

Two score pair of eyes followed the gaze of Colonel Redhart and Tribune Tripp.

Across the plain galloped a single horseman.

Ragsdale regarded the coming man keenly. It seemed almost providential that the murderer should return to the scene of his crime at the very moment when that crime was laid bare to the world.

The crowd of people attracted to the scene of the inquest was in a furious mood, and the appearance of Demming was, so far as he was concerned, most unfortunate.

Many of those present were armed, and Ragsdale realized that trouble might ensue.

Colonel Redhart seemed to entertain the same thoughts as did the young Denverite.

The Colonel at once sprung to the front, and said, hurriedly:

"Men of the Big Horn, don't go for to make fools of yourselves now. Yonder comes the man the jury hez said killed Olive Chester, but you must remember that thar's allus two sides to every story. Let us hear Evard's afore we condemn him."

"I agree with the colonel," said Hilton Ragsdale. "No man should be condemned without a hearing. Let Demming have his say before you make any demonstration."

"And are we to go back on a jury of our fellow-citizens who say this man murdered the girl?" demanded Tribune Tripp. "For one, I say out upon such nonsense. The law isn't of much account in Wyoming to-day."

If the citizens who have just now looked on the remains of the poor child done to death by yonder scoundrel have the sand I think they have, the murderer will never live to boast of his crime after yonder sun sets."

A murmur of approval ran through the crowd, and many weapons were drawn.

Young Ragsdale had not come to the far West unarmed, but he did not feel that the moment for action had come.

Forward galloped the horseman, and at length drew rein before the gathered plainsmen about the shanty beneath whose roof lay the mutilated remains of Olive Chester.

The mounted man gazed about him in evident surprise.

Colonel Redhart was the first to greet the new-comer.

He advanced and extended his hand.

"Glad as thunder to see ye, Evard," avowed the Missourian. "There's some black spots out yere 'at needs cl'arin' up."

The man addressed was not handsome.

He was a small man with delicate features and blue eyes—the last man in the world whom one would think of connecting with a murder.

"What is the meaning of this gathering?" queried the gentleman on horseback. "I'm sure something of an unusual nature has occurred."

"You bet it has," cried one of the plainsmen, slapping his thigh to give emphasis to his words. "You needn't come back hyar pretendin' ignorance, for we know ye to perfection, Evard Demming, and ef ther folks do as they'd ought, you'll never go back to chuckle over the black deed ye did hyar a year ago."

A surprised look pervaded the face of the young man on horseback.

He seemed to see many well-known faces among the assembly, yet no one cared to put out a welcoming hand save Colonel Redhart.

"You must explain," finally declared Demming. "I am sure I do not understand this scene at all. Being in this vicinity, I thought I would call on the colonel and others of my old neighbors. In riding toward the house I saw a crowd of people collected here, and at once turned my horse's nose in this direction."

"Exactly!" said Tribune Tripp, advancing to the head of Demming's horse. "Look you, Mr. Demming, at yonder cabin."

"I see it."

"You haven't forgotten it?"

"Oh, no."

"Did you build the cabin?"

"No, it was on the land when I located it. I always supposed it had answered for a shelter to a party of hunters long years ago."

"No doubt. It stands in a lonesome place."

"Yes."

"And was a mighty good place to bury the body of the poor, deceived girl whom her lover struck down?"

The eyes of Tribune Tripp fixed themselves in a terrible gaze on the face of the one he addressed.

Young Demming did not flinch, however, but returned the plainsmen's glances with a look of innocent inquiry.

Ragsdale was watching Demming's countenance as well as others.

He had thought to see him tremble when Tripp uttered his terrible accusation.

The man was certainly a cool one.

Doubtless, if he was guilty, he had schooled himself to appear calm, and had come back to the scene of his crime for the express purpose of warding off suspicion from himself.

"You speak in riddles, Mr. Tripp," declared the returned wanderer.

"Just dismount and come with me."

Demming slipped to the ground, and tossing the rein to Colonel Redhart, the young man followed in the footsteps of the plainsmen, who led the way to the tumble-down hunter's cabin.

Entering, Tripp lifted the cloth that covered the ghastly remains of the murdered girl.

"Look there, Evard Demming, and tell your neighbors what you think of that!"

The voice of the plainsmen rang out, low, yet stern and vengeful.

"My God! what is this?"

Evard Demming recoiled with an awful cry.

What he had seen was evidently unexpected.

The young man's face blanched to the hue of death, and his slight frame trembled from head to foot.

"You do well to ask what it is!" sneered Tripp. "Murderer, your victim stares you in the face, and calls upon the men of the Big Horn to avenge her cowardly and cruel taking off! What have you to say why I shall not send a bullet hurtling through your heart?"

With the words the speaker thrust the muzzle of a cocked revolver against the breast of Demming.

"My God! spare me!" moaned the pallid lips of the accused murderer.

"Confess!" hissed Tripp.

Demming cowered until he almost groveled at the feet of his accuser.

Such abject cowardice was disgusting. Ragsdale saw it all, and at once decided that Evard Demming was the murderer.

With this thought came another.

Since Colonel Redhart had defended Demming, might not he know something about the murder that would be of interest to the public to hear?

"Confess!"

Again the stern demand of Tripp rang out.

"Spare me, Tribune Tripp," wailed the frightened assassin.

"Speak—confess, or by the heavens I'll send a bullet through your coward heart!" answered the plainsmen, fiercely.

This was his answer to the accused man's cry for mercy.

At this juncture Colonel Redhart pushed his way into the room.

He seemed to take in the situation at a glance.

Seizing the accused by the collar, he drew him aside, and himself confronted Tribune Tripp.

"Put up that weepion, Trib."

"Eh?"

"Put up that weepion," thundered the Missourian.

Ragsdale was astounded at the result.

Slowly the plainsmen returned his revolver to his pocket. He seemed now to cower before Redhart.

"There's no use makin' so much dod-blamed foolishness," thundered the colonel. "Ef this young feller's guilty thar's a way to punish him 'thout committin' murder. I can't see 'at two murders is a-goin' to make the fust one solid."

"True enough."

This from Ragsdale.

"But we can't go back on what the jury does," whined Tripp. "The murderer has been found, and I say hang him!"

"Right!"

"Hang the murderer!"

"Hooray!"

The crowd was fast becoming excited. Colonel Redhart glanced at Ragsdale, then at the door.

There was a significant look in the eyes of the old Missourian.

"Stand back!" ordered Ragsdale. "There's no use crowding in here."

He threw himself against the crowd and pressed it backward.

At the same moment Colonel Redhart turned his pistol upon the crowd.

"Git out the room, blame yer picters, or I'll shoot!"

This threat had the desired effect.

The room was soon cleared by all save Demming, the lawyer, Colonel Redhart, and Tripp.

"Now you git!"

The colonel turned fiercely upon Tribune Tripp.

"You ain't using me fair, colonel," said Tripp, hanging his head.

"I'd talk that way ef I was a mean skunk like you, Trib," jeered Colonel Redhart. "Do ye hear me? You git!"

The room was soon minus the presence of the plainsmen.

"He seemed a veritable coward, after all," thought Ragsdale.

"Now, then, let's talk business," said the colonel, turning to Ragsdale and Demming.

"Be ye guilty or be ye not, Evard, my lad?"

"I am not guilty."

"D'ye hear that, Mr. Ragsdale?"

"Certainly I hear it."

"And do ye believe it?"  
 "I am not prepared to say at the present moment," the Denverite returned.

"Then you think Evard guilty?"  
 "I tell you I can't give an opinion just now," Ragsdale persisted. "I confess, however, that appearances are against Mr. Demming. Considering the verdict of the coroner's jury, it seems to me that the one accused will have to stand trial."

"I am willing to do that," said Demming. "I am an innocent man, and consequently have nothing to fear when this affair is sifted in the courts. I fear only the mob, and such fellows as this man, Tribune Tripp."

"Mob-law must not defeat justice in this case," declared the young lawyer. "I think I can persuade these men to depart in peace, but of course we must put you in custody, Mr. Demming."

"I am willing to agree to that, but I don't care to be turned over to a gang of lynchers."

Ragsdale turned toward the door, only to be met by a crowd of men more bloodthirsty than ever, their spirits having been fired by the intemperate talk of Tribune Tripp and the passing of a black bottle.

"Bring out the murderer!"  
 This cry greeted Ragsdale as he stepped to the door, and he at once saw a terrible danger ahead.

## CHAPTER VI.

### UNEXPECTED ENEMIES.

"STAND back, gentlemen," commanded the young Denverite. "You must not enter here."

"Wal, I reckon no white-haired tender-foot's goin' to tell us what we shall do, and what we sha'n't," growled one of the men, at the same time whipping out a six-shooter.

Luckily the young lawyer had provided himself with a similar weapon, and he at once brought it into service.

"Threats won't frighten me, gentlemen," Ragsdale declared. "I am as well prepared to defend the right as you are to commit a crime."

"Hear 'im."  
 "A-callin' us criminals."  
 "Confound his pacter!"

Not all of the plainsmen were armed, but such as had weapons, displayed them at this moment, and an attempt was certainly made to intimidate the man from Denver.

Ragsdale had once faced a mob in his own city, and he knew from experience that such gatherings are usually cowardly.

"Gentlemen, it is of no use," he protested, "you cannot enter this house save over my dead body. I mean what I say, and my death means others among you as well. You'd better think well of this before you proceed to extremities."

The speaker toyed with his weapon as though it would be a pleasure to him to use it on the crowd.

There was still hesitancy among the plainsmen.

"Make up your minds, gentlemen," said Ragsdale. "If we are to have a battle, the sooner it begins the sooner it will be over. I am not the only one you will have to meet. There are two armed men inside who won't permit mob violence to rule in this country."

"Hear him," growled Tribune Tripp. "I don't believe he dare shoot, boys. Let's make one grand rush and down the Denver coyote."

The face of Ragsdale paled a little as he noticed a gathering for a general rush, but he meant to stand his ground and meet force with force.

He knew if the mob hanged Demming, whether innocent or guilty, that would end the whole case, and in such a manner as to leave a doubt in his mind as to who murdered his cousin Olive.

Click—click!  
 "Come on, men of the Big Horn, I am ready."

The hand of the man from Denver shot forward, and held a cocked weapon leveled at the head of Tribune Tripp.

"I shall make sure of you, Mr. Tripp, at the first fire."

"Good Lord! man, don't point that at me; it's mighty careless of you. The confounded

thing might go off!" roared Tripp, recoiling in dread.

"Then call off these men or I'll shot anyhow!" declared Ragsdale, sternly.

"I reckon it's best, boys. The sun's gone down, and it'll soon be dark, and then we can fix the murderer. We'll just lay seige to the shanty."

At Tribune's suggestion, the plainsmen retired some rods away and held a consultation. The men who had constituted the coroner's jury were seen riding across the prairie some half a mile distant. Having performed their duty, they concluded not to remain and see murder committed.

Now was the time for the prisoner to make a move to escape.

Ragsdale turned and re-entered the old house.

He stared in astonishment.

The room was empty!

Where were Demming and Colonel Redhart?

Quickly the young lawyer sprang across the floor and glanced through the little window at the back of the old cabin.

No one was to be seen.

Gloomy shadows hung over the trees without, and a distant moan swept through the leafy branches.

The young man glanced back into the room. There on the ground was the checkered quilt, covering an awful object beneath. Out through the open door, some rods away, were groups of men talking and gesticulating violently.

"The colonel has outwitted the men of the Big Horn," mused Ragsdale. "It is well. I am glad. Demming must live to be brought to trial, and then the truth may come out. I'll not remain here longer, but repair at once to Three Oaks and see the colonel. It's not likely the mob will dare venture to make an assault on the ranch itself."

Lifting the shackley door into place, the man from Denver cast one parting glance toward Tribune Tripp and his followers, then crossed the floor and made his exit through the opening at the rear of the cabin.

Shadows were gathering swiftly.

Without once again looking back, the Denverite walked on through the trees into the open plain, from which point he could see Three Oaks in the dim distance.

Scarcely had the young lawyer appeared in the opening than a form darted from the edge of the timber and confronted him.

It was Benay Flash.

"There's been some hot times, Mr. Ragsdale," said the half-breed in his low, insinuating tones, so displeasing to the ear of the man from Denver.

"Where were you during the time?"

"Not far away."

"Why did you not show yourself?"

"I did not think it necessary. I meant to cover the retreat of Demming if the worst came."

"Indeed?"

"You seem to feel sarcastic just now, Hilton Ragsdale. I think I am entitled to some consideration."

"I hope so, Flash."

"You didn't want Demming hung by a mob any more than I and the colonel?"

"No."

"The man may be innocent, you know, Hilton."

"Possibly."

"Yet you do not so believe?"

"I am expressing no opinion."

The two walked on in company toward Three Oaks.

"How did Demming and the colonel get away without being seen?" finally questioned the Denverite.

"Easy enough. The trees screened them, and they didn't let grass grow under their feet after they left the old cabin."

"Where are they now?"

"I haven't seen them since they made tracks toward Three Oaks."

"Then Demming must be in hiding at Colonel Redhart's ranch."

"Yes, I suppose so, and the more shame that it is so," said Flash.

"People have become excited over the finding of the body of the murdered girl. It is impossible to blame them a great deal. It looks very black for Demming, and—"

"Black for Demming, did you say?" Flash

interrupted, showing his white teeth. "Be careful how you jump at conclusions, Hilton. I beg of you make no mistake when you do secure the arrest of the criminal."

There was such intense earnestness in the voice of the speaker, Ragsdale could not but regard him in surprise.

Why did the half-breed exhibit so much feeling on the subject?

The fellow was not to be trusted.

At any rate, so the man from Denver had decided at the outset, and Ragsdale had made up his mind to keep an eye on the young factotum continually.

"I don't expect to make a mistake," said the self-constituted detective. "I mean to sift this wicked crime to the bottom, and the one guilty must suffer for his crime."

"I am glad to hear you say that, Mr. Ragsdale," returned Flash. "It gives me hope. Once I thought this man Demming guilty, and it may be that I so informed you on one occasion, but truth to tell, I have made some discoveries of late that have turned my thoughts in an altogether different direction."

"Have you really made discoveries, or has the colonel talked you out of your former belief?"

The lawyer detective regarded his young companion keenly.

"Pooh!" retorted Flash lightly. "I have a mind of my own, Hilton, and no influence that is contrary to my convictions could have the least power over me."

"You are more than ordinarily strong-minded."

"I have a will of my own at any rate," declared the half-breed.

"By the way, I suppose you have fixed the murder on some one, Mr. Flash."

"I have."

"His name?"

"I would rather not tell at present."

"You seem to me over cautious."

"I don't mean to make any mistakes. It may be that a reward will yet be offered for the discovery of the murderer of Olive Chester. I am biding my time, Hilton, biding my time."

And the half-breed laughed in a way that chilled the blood of his listener.

The more Ragsdale saw of Benay Flash the more he distrusted him.

And yet, if asked to tell why he had so conceived a dislike for the colonel's factotum, the young lawyer could not have told.

When they reached Three Oaks Ranch, Colonel Redhart sat on the long porch smoking in the dim light.

"Hello!"

The colonel removed his pipe, and laughed immoderately.

Why he was pleased was a puzzle to Ragsdale. The explanation was soon forthcoming when Colonel Redhart grasped his guest by the hand and shook it warmly, all the time laughing from head to foot.

"Talk about tenderfeet," he finally articulated. "Ha! ha! ha! Good gracious, my lad, you out-cowed the cowboys that time. You've got the sand, Mr. Ragsdale, and that's what I admire in a man."

"I had no idea that you and Demming would run away," said the lawyer. "I supposed you would stand by me if the worst came. I'm afraid I can't return the compliment as regards sand."

There was a smile on Ragsdale's face, however, that in a measure disarmed his criticism, and saved the Missourian's good humor.

"Ho! ho! it was delightful how neatly we outwitted the sneaks," declared the colonel.

"I want to express the gratitude of Demming for your act at the old house, Hilton. He thinks you saved his life, and, by thunder, I'm not fur from that opinion myself."

"Don't you think you had as much to do with the saving of his life as I had, Mr. Redhart? I'm sure I would have done as much for the veriest criminal on earth. What I object to is lynch law. No man should be hung without judge or jury. I'm a lawyer myself, and have a great respect for my calling."

"So I was tellin' Evard. He allowed mebbe you mout be prevailed on ter undertake his case if it should ever come inter court. I told him I'd mention it to you incidentally, though I reckon Evard Demming won't never



face a jury in court; 'tain't necessary for an innocent man to do it."

"I think it becomes necessary in this case," returned Ragsdale.

"Oh, yer do?" chuckled the colonel. "I see what yer up to, youngster. Cute, cute, by gracious! but don't let yer anxiety for a job at law get the better o' yer jedgment, boy, don't do it on no account."

Ragsdale's face flushed crimson at the insinuation of the colonel.

"You need not borrow trouble on my account," the man from Denver said testily. "I'm not now acting in the capacity of an attorney. In any event, I should not think of taking up for the assassin of my poor cousin."

"Wal, I didn't mean nothin'," returned the ranch-owner. "Ef you don't want ter be on friendly terms 'long of Evard Demming, yer needn't. I can tell ye one thing, jest the same, howsoever, and that is that there don't no better men run in Wyoming than this man 'at is 'cused of murder. He mustn't be strung up like er sardeen, to please sich carrion as Trib. Tripp. Make a note o' that, Mr. Ragsdale, will ye—make a note out, I say, coz it's ther solemn, dod-blasted truth?"

"Where is Demming?"

Ragsdale asked the question, anxious to change the course of conversation a little.

"You want ter see him?"

"Yes."

"Wal, yer can't."

"Can't see him? Why not, pray?"

"'Tain't necessary."

An angry feeling entered the heart of the Denverite.

He had no thought that the proprietor of Three Oaks Ranch would turn against him in this manner.

For some minutes Ragsdale did not trust himself to speak.

It seemed to him that all those who ought to be his friends were turning against him, in a manner most unexpected. Were all these men in league to defend the murderer? At length Ragsdale ventured to speak.

"I am surprised, Colonel Redhart, that you put an obstacle in the way of justice. I had your solemn assurance, on my arrival, that I should have your influence in favor of finding and punishing the assassin of Olive Chester. You have broken that promise, and now I must go about the hunt for the criminal without your aid. So let it be, but be careful that when the day of reckoning comes you are not caught between the upper and nether millstones!"

Then Ragsdale, hot and indignant, turned and rushed away in the darkness.

He heard the derisive laughter of the colonel following him, and for the first five minutes he paid no heed to his course.

The cool air of night soon quieted his perturbed feelings, and then he shaped his course toward the home of his aunt.

The trail led him into the woods near the bank of the creek, of which mention has been before made.

Scarcely had he entered the timber, when a dozen dark forms gathered about him. His arms were seized, and noose fell about his neck, while a loud voice cried:

"We have the murderer now! Up with him!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE LOCKET.

"MAMMA, what a handsome young man your nephew is."

"Do you think so, Rena?"

"Indeed I do, and he must be as good as he is handsome."

"How do you judge? Surely you have met Hilton but the once."

"True, but hasn't he come all the way from Denver to look up the murderer of his cousin? I tell you there's not many men who would do it, mamma. He leaves a good business, and risks his life to perform a duty. I call that true heroism."

The speaker's dark eyes sparkled, and her cheeks glowed with an enthusiasm that was not acting.

The Denver lawyer had made a most favorable impression on Rena Tripp. No doubt he would have felt flattered had he overheard the enthusiastic remarks we have just recorded.

It was late in the day.

Tribune Tripp was still absent from home, and Rena and her step-mother sat together in front of the house.

The two had been conversing on various subjects, when Rena suddenly brought in the name of Ragsdale.

There seemed to be no lack of harmony between these two, however much there may have been between Tripp and the woman he married.

"I've a notion to go over to Three Oaks, mamma," suddenly said the girl.

"You'll find no one at home. The folks are all over at the inquest."

"Mrs. Redhart will be home, at any rate."

Rena sprung to her feet and entered the house.

When she returned, a short time later, she was equipped for a ride.

"So you will ride, Rena?"

"Yes, mamma. A gallop on the prairie will do me good. I've had the blues all the afternoon. You do not object?"

"No, Rena; get what pleasure you can while you are young. The evil times will come soon enough," returned the step-mother.

After the girl had gone to the stable, Mrs. Tripp entered the house and paced the floor nervously.

"Will it never end?" she groaned. "How long must I live this hell upon earth and make no sign? I believe I must take some one into my confidence, or I shall die. Now that Hilton is here, why not trust him? I'll do it the very next time he comes over and Tribune is out of the way. What a fool I was to marry that man. But for dear Rena I should have died long before this hour."

It will be remembered that Hilton Ragsdale was suddenly set upon in the timber by unknown foes, and a noosed rope dropped over his head.

The attack was so sudden as to quite overcome the young man, and on the instant he believed he was doomed.

"Hoist the murderer up to yonder limb," said a low voice.

At the same moment the hands that grasped the prisoner's arms fell away, and for one brief instant Hilton felt himself free.

That was the supreme moment of his life, and he failed not to improve it.

His hands went up and snatched the rope from his neck.

It was now intensely dark in the timber, so that the movements of the prisoner were unnoticed.

"Quick!" uttered an excited voice. "We must finish the job before anybody comes."

Hilton recognized the voice as that of Tribune Tripp, and toward that individual the Denverite turned, dealing a blow straight from the shoulder.

As the plainsman staggered aside, Ragsdale bounded forward, and was soon beyond the woods running like a deer.

"After him!" yelled a voice.

Then came the crash of feet in hot pursuit. It was now a race for life.

On dashed the Denverite across the prairie, not heeding the direction he was taking, thinking only of escape from the lynchers.

The plainsmen seemed to think Ragsdale was Demming, yet the lawyer dared not pause and attempt an explanation.

The blood of the borderers was up, and fired—as they doubtless were—by whisky, it was not likely they would listen to any explanation, so the man from Denver sped on for dear life.

In a short time he became almost winded, when he realized that his enemies were surely gaining on him.

At this moment a horseman dashed across the prairie, and met the fleeing Ragsdale.

"What does this mean?"

It was the voice of Rena Tripp.

Ragsdale explained while he ran on beside the horse.

She drew rein suddenly, and to the young lawyer's surprise dismounted.

"Quick!" she exclaimed. "Into the saddle, Mr. Ragsdale. You can return the horse to-morrow."

Without waiting to question the girl's motive, the young lawyer leaped to the saddle and dashed away just as his pursuers came up and surrounded Rena.

The pursuit ended there.

Of course, the lynchers realized the utter futility of pursuing the mounted man on foot.

A few shots were fired by way of expressing their rage at losing their victim, and then the silence of the prairie night settled over everything.

Hilton Ragsdale galloped on for at least an hour before he slackened his speed in the least.

Then his eyes caught the glow of a light in the distance.

This was certainly a most welcome sight, since Ragsdale was fatigued, and he had no thought of returning to the scene of his late adventures that night.

Presently a grove of trees loomed up, in the edge of which stood a long, low building, of rude construction.

"Another ranch surely," thought the man from Denver, as he drew rein in front of the house.

A light gleamed through the windows, and as the horseman halted, a loud voice rang out from the interior, giving vent to a wild West song.

His voice was not unmusical, and evidently came from a young, strong pair of lungs.

Bending a little, Ragsdale was enabled to look into the window.

On a stool sat the singer, thrumming on an old banjo, his face illumined with the inspiration of his theme.

"I imagine I shall be welcome here," thought Ragsdale, as he dismounted, and, securing his horse to a tree, rapped on the door.

Song and music ceased.

Presently the door was opened, and a form stood revealed.

"Good-evenin', mister. Come right in," said a cheery voice. "I am master of the ranch jest now, and reckon you're welcome."

Ragsdale entered and sat down on a stool indicated by the speaker.

Ragsdale saw before him a lad of perhaps sixteen, rather stout in build, with an honest, freckled face, big gray eyes and tow hair.

"So you are the master of the ranch," said Ragsdale. "It seems to me that you're rather young to have such a responsibility resting on your shoulders."

"Wal, me'n my brother are both young," said the boy, with a low laugh, "but we reckoned we could keep the Indians and catamounts at bay while mother lived to homestead the best quarter section on the Dead-water. You're a stranger in these parts, I reckon."

"Yes; I have been in the Big Horn country but a few days. I am stopping at Three Oaks Ranch."

"At old Kunnel Redhart's, eh?"

"Yes."

"How'd ye like him?"

"The colonel?"

"Yes."

"I haven't formed any opinion yet."

"Wal, don't trust him too far, that's all."

A serious look took the place of the sparkle in the eye of the boy.

"Isn't the colonel a reliable man?"

"I don't want to say anything ag'inst the colonel," returned the boy. "You see, sir, he's our neighbor, and we want to be on good terms with all of 'em."

"A good idea, my boy. How far is it to Three Oaks Ranch?"

"Ten miles."

"I came further than I imagined," mused Ragsdale. "You say you are alone here, boy?"

"I am alone, whether I said so or not," returned the lad.

"Will you tell me your name?"

"I ain't ashamed to."

"Certainly not."

"We're Gidleys, from Ohio. Father died, and me'n mother 'n Sam allowed we'd better go West 'n take up land, so we came to Wyoming two year ago, and have been roughing it ever since. I like it first rate, but mother gits home-sick for old Ohio sometimes. She 'n Sam's out there now, and I'm left to tend ther ranch. Couldn't all on us go at once, you know."

"Well, you're a brave lad to stay here all alone, I must say," returned Ragsdale.

"Now tell me who you be?"

"Certainly. My name is Ragsdale, and

I'm out here looking into the strange crime at Three Oaks Ranch."

"What crime's that?"

"Haven't you heard about the murder that was done there?"

"Not lately. You don't mean the gal, Miss Chester?"

"Yes, that's the one—"

"Good gracious! did you come out here looking for the chap that killed Olive Chester?"

"That's my business in Wyoming."

For some minutes the boy sat in a thoughtful attitude. At length he sprang up and walked across the room.

Soon he returned to the side of his visitor and placed something in his hand—a small diamond-studded locket.

Pressing a spring the cover opened, and as Ragsdale gazed, he uttered a low exclamation.

#### CHAPTER VIII.

##### THE LAWYER STARTLED.

"DID you ever see that face afore?" queried the boy.

"Yes, it is my cousin's," answered Ragsdale.

"The man?"

The man from Denver had scarcely noticed that opposite the girl's face was that of a man.

He now glanced keenly at the features.

Surely they were not Demming's.

"The girl is Olive, my unfortunate cousin," said Ragsdale, after a moment's silence.

"And the man?"

"I can't place him."

"It ain't the man that folks think killed the girl?"

"Demming?"

"Yes."

"Certainly not him."

"I didn't think it looked much like him," said the boy, who gave his name as Sid Gidley. "I've heard all about the finding of the body of Miss Chester, and I have felt kind of streaked since, bein' here all alone, you know. Sometimes, too, I've thought that maybe this locket might tell a story that the public ought to know. Don't you think so, Mr. Ragsdale?"

"That thought has just entered my mind," returned Ragsdale. "Where did you get this locket, Sid?"

"Found it."

"Where?"

"About a mile this side o' the kunnel's ranch."

"When?"

"Nigh a year ago."

"And you have had it all this time?"

"That's so, sir; but I didn't know who owned it, and so I didn't say anything."

"You knew Olive Chester?"

"I've seen her."

"Then you must have known that this locket belonged to her."

"No, I didn't. Anyhow, Miss Chester wasn't at home, and I might as well keep it till she put in an appearance. Now she's dead, I s'pose it ought to go to her mother."

"Yes; but at present I wish you would let me have the locket."

"Couldn't do it nohow, sir."

"But—"

"See here, Mr. Ragsdale, I'm no tenderfoot, nor you mayn't be one. Anyhow, I shan't give up the locket to no live man. Ef anybody gets it, 'twill be Mrs. Tripp, what was Mrs. Chester, or else the feller whose picter's into it."

And then Sid put out his hand to reclaim the locket, a look of concern on his freckled face.

"One moment," urged the lawyer, still holding fast to the prize. "As you said a moment ago, this may be the means of unearthing the criminal who shot poor Olive. I am at present investigating that crime, and this very locket will, if you let me use it, aid me materially. Of course you are anxious to see the murderer punished?"

"All fine talk, sir," said Sid; "but I ain't to be bamboozled, if I am considered the blockhead of the Gidley family. I can't, shan't, nor won't give up the locket, that's flat, so just hand it over, and make no more talk."

Ragsdale could see that the lad was un-

ning, as well as distrustful of him, and so, with not a little reluctance, he returned the locket to Sid, saying:

"I am sorry you dare not trust me, my boy."

"I don't know ye."

"No, nor I you, but—"

"See here, how'd I know but what you're the very man that shot the girl?" the boy interrupted with a grin.

"Of course you do not. I wish there was some way of convincing you of my honesty," returned the man from Denver. "But let that drop for now, and you tell me all you know about Olive Chester, her beau—Evard Demming—and the circumstances connected with her murder."

"Wal, I can't tell you much, I reckon, that you don't know already, if you've been over to the kunnel's, as you tell me," returned the boy, thrusting the locket into his pocket, and throwing himself at full length on the floor in front of the stove.

"I've seen the two ridin' out mor'n once, and I thought they was a right smart couple, and we all allowed 'at they'd gone off an' got married till the poor girl was found t'other day in an old shanty on the Three Oaks ranch. Folks is mad enough now, at Demming, to hang or shoot him on sight, and I reckon, the best thing he kin do is ter keep out o' this country for a time."

Ragsdale was fully aware of the feeling that was abroad against the young ranch-owner, but he made no comment, waiting patiently for the young plainsman to proceed.

"I allow there's good reason to think he murdered her. They say he was in an awful hurry to sell out after Miss Chester disappeared."

"He did sell out, it seems, and to good advantage I am told."

"You bet he did. He knew all the time 'at the girl was dead, a-lyin' buried in the old huntin' cabin. Oh, I tell you, sir, that man must have a heart in him harder'n Pharo's to murder that girl."

"So you believe with the rest that Evard Demming is the assassin?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why do you think so?"

"Why shouldn't I think so, sir?"

Sid looked up as if surprised at the question.

"Well, for one thing, it doesn't seem natural that a man who was in love with a girl would murder her."

"That's jest why I think he did it, Mr. Ragsdale."

"Well?"

"Demming was jealous."

"Of whom?"

"The face of the man in the locket."

Ragsdale started.

There was much in this reasoning surely. Who was the man whose picture the girl had worn next her heart? To find him might lead to something tangible.

"Sid."

"Well, sir?"

"Do you know who that man is in the locket?"

"No, sir."

"Did you never see him?"

"Never."

"Isn't this somewhat strange?"

"I reckon 'tis, sir, but I can't help it. I don't reckon the man in the locket was a sweetheart of Miss Olive a great while. Ef he had been, some on us would have seen him."

"It would seem so," admitted the lawyer. "There's a deep mystery to unravel, and I mean to do all I can to penetrate it. And, Sid."

"Well, sir."

"I want your aid."

"I dunno."

"You haven't much on your hands just now, have you?"

"Not a blamed sight."

"Then why can't you aid me?"

"Mebbe I can."

"Do you still fear to trust me?"

"Some at."

"You must get over that feeling immediately, else we cannot work together."

"Wal, I reckon I'll trust yer a little," said Sid, grinning.

"Far enough to let me take the locket?"

"No, not so fur as that yer."

"Very well. We'll come to that after a time. I like your frankness, and believe we can get on together much better than any others in the neighborhood. We must make it a point to find this man whose face we have seen in the locket. Once he is discovered, we may be sure of soon putting our finger on the murderer."

"I dunno," said the boy, dubiously, scratching his head. "I kind of opine 'at Demming is the man we want, no matter who the feller in the picter may be."

"Just the same, the man in the locket is an important witness, and we must find him."

"Jest as you say, sir."

Then a short silence fell upon the two. At length the man from Denver said:

"Sid, can I stay here to-night?"

"Certain."

"Then I had better put out my horse. I believe the poor animal is tired, since I rode the ten miles rather faster than most people travel, even on the plains."

"You'd ought ter thought to put the horse out before," said the boy, springing to his feet. "Did yer hitch 'im? Ef yer didn't mebbe he's gone afore now."

"I hitched the animal to a tree," said Ragsdale.

Sid Gidley did not go out immediately, but stood with his head bent, as if listening.

"What is it, boy?"

"Did you hear that?"

"I heard nothing only the whinny of a horse."

"Listen!"

Both did so.

Only the moan of the wind greeted their ears.

The silence, save for this, was oppressive.

Ragsdale now started to his feet and essayed to cross the floor.

At the same moment he raised his eyes and gazed toward the narrow window. Then he paused, rooted to the floor.

A face was glued against the glass—the face of the man in the locket!

#### CHAPTER IX.

##### A STRANGE TRANSACTION.

FOR full a minute the man from Denver stood without voice or motion, glaring at the face glued against the window-pane.

The eyes seemed to glow like balls of fire.

The whole expression of the countenance was repulsive.

It was plainly the face of the man in the locket, yet with a more fierce expression.

Suddenly the face disappeared.

Quickly the young lawyer sprang to the door and flung it open.

It was starlight outside, and almost the first thing the lawyer saw was a man hurrying toward a horse that stood near at hand.

"Hello, there!" called Ragsdale.

No answer.

"Halt or I fire!"

The man from Denver brought his revolver to the front, but even now the unknown refused to heed his summons.

The dark form vaulted into the saddle, something gleamed in the starlight, and then the stranger was off at a rapid gallop.

Angered at this indifference to his repeated calls, Ragsdale fired after the retreating man.

A mocking laugh was wafted to the ears of boy and man.

"Confound him!" growled the lawyer.

And then he made a new and most annoying discovery.

The stranger had taken his sorrel mare.

And he had now made good his escape.

"Who was it?"

This from Sid.

"I can't tell you, only that he's the man we want," returned the Denver man in rage.

"Where is your horse?"

"That fellow took him."

"Then he's a thief."

"Yes, a horse thief."

"We hang such in Wyoming," declared the boy, with emphasis. "'Twon't do to let this villain escape. I'll take his trail and set the vigilantes after him in the morning."

Then Sid passed Ragsdale at a bound, and hurried away to the barn, some rods distant from the house.



In less than three minutes the young homesteader was back again.

"My horse is sick or dead!" he explained, as he entered the house and procured a lantern.

The two now hurried to the stable to find the worst fears of Sid Gidley realized. His horse, the only one on the homestead, lay dead on the floor of the stable, froth and blood oozing from his mouth.

Bending down, the boy examined the horse closely. When at length he rose to his feet, his freckled features were distorted with rage.

"It's as I thought!" exclaimed the young homesteader, "the horse has been poisoned!"

"Poisoned!" exclaimed Ragsdale. "Why should any one wish to destroy the stock of a widow?"

"Dogoned ef I know, but I'll bet a farm 'at old Jack has been duped."

Going outside with his lantern, Sid examined the ground closely.

He was not long in finding footprints in the soil near the barn.

These he examined closely, and bending down, measured with a small rule he took from his pocket.

"You see," said the boy, "there's been a man here besides ourselves, and he's left his mark behind him."

"It seems so," returned Ragsdale, noting with surprise the keenness of the boy. "Do you have the least suspicion of who it could be, Sid?"

"No, I hain't; but I'll make it a pint to find out who the sneakin' ape is, then let him look to himself," cried the lad, springing to his feet.

He at once made his way back to the front of the house, where the tracks of the marauder were plainly marked.

He seemed not to try to conceal his movements in the least.

"What can you do now?" queried Ragsdale.

"Nothin'."

The boy returned to the house, followed by the man from Denver.

The calamity that had befallen each, made them less communicative than formerly.

Ragsdale was puzzled and chagrined at the way he had been robbed.

How could he account for the loss of the sorrel mare to Rena Tripp?

It would not be pleasant to face the beautiful girl after what had happened.

And yet was he in the least blameworthy? It did not seem so to the young man.

Meantime Sid rattled about the house in a mood bordering on distraction.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Mr. Ragsdale," said the boy at length, standing before his visitor. "I'm going to take the trail to-night."

"Take the trail?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, the trail of the skunk 'at murdered old Jack and stole your horse, sir. I reckon you'll be willin' to keep house till I come back?"

"Surely you do not mean this!" cried the lawyer. "You have no horse. It would be simply nonsense to think of trailing a mounted man on foot; at any rate it seems so to me."

"I can get a horse a mile down the Deadwater, and then there'll be no trouble."

"But you don't know which way the thief went."

"Leave that to me. That's a gang of 'em, and it's high time sumthin' was done. All I've got to do is to rouse the settlers. You won't be afeared to stay here till I return?"

"No, but—"

"You may look for me in the mornin'."

Taking a Winchester rifle from the wall, the young homesteader walked to the door.

Ragsdale could see that the boy was deeply worked up over the death of his horse. The lawyer, however, believed it the height of folly to look for a trail in the night, and again so expressed himself.

"Wal, you may be right, mister," agreed the boy; "but I can't rest till I let the people know what's been did. I'll only go over to Catamount Ranch and let the fellows know. I'll come back inside of two hours."

And without waiting to argue the point further, the lad hurried out into the night.

Ragsdale was thus left alone.

He had ample opportunity to meditate on the situation, which he began to realize was a peculiar one.

Why had the sorrel mare been taken, and who was the man who had peered into the window?

"I would give half my prospects in life to meet this strange man and learn all that he knows regarding the taking off of poor Olive."

In the meantime Sid Gidley hurried as fast as his legs would carry him down the Deadwater.

He had no fear, since he carried in his hands a weapon that he knew as well how to use as any man in Wyoming.

The night was not dark, so that he had no trouble in following the trail, which led along a high bluff most of the distance to Catamount Ranch.

The proprietor of the ranch so weirdly named was seated at a table engaged in a game of cards with two young cowboys when Sid burst in upon them.

"Hello, Sid, me boy, what's in the wind now?"

Jack Stonest dropped his cards and stared at the new arrival in a manner that was assurance that the lad was an unexpected visitor.

"Horse thieves?"

"Hoss thieves?"

The three inmates of the ranch sprang to their feet simultaneously.

A dozen questions were hurled at the lad in less than half as many minutes.

"Go a little slow and I'll try and answer some of them questions," said the young homesteader.

"My horse, old Jack, was poisoned by some one not an hour ago, and the horse of a gent who had come to stop with me for the night was stole right from in front of the door. Now, what do you fellows think of that?"

"Outrageous!" exclaimed the rancher.

"Git yer gun, Bill, and let's go back 'long of the boy an' investigate," said one of the cowboys, turning to his companion. "I reckon the gang's at work agin'."

"You came down a-foot, Sid?" queried Stonest.

"I couldn't come no other way, considerin'," returned the boy, trying to laugh.

"I s'pose not. Wal, you jest ride one o' my hosses, boy; I shan't need him till you git back."

The two cowboys had mustangs picketed outside, and soon they were riding back toward the Deadwater in company with young Gidley.

On reaching the house, Sid alone dismounted, and went in to get his lantern.

The light was burning brightly, but Mr. Ragsdale did not seem to be present.

However, this seemed of no consequence at the time, and after obtaining his lantern, the boy hurried outside and led the way to the barn.

One of the cowboys examined the dead horse closely.

He pronounced the manner of death poison, then went with Sid to look at the footprints made by the marauder.

"Ha! here's somethin'!" exclaimed the young cowboy.

"What now, Ellis?"

"I've seen this track afore."

"Who owns ther boots?"

"One o' the gang."

"Then, by thunder! we'll rouse the lads, and make a raid. This thing's gone about fur enough, pard."

"So I say."

The cowboys seemed deeply excited.

"You know the man that stole the gentleman's horse, and poisoned mine, Ellis?" questioned Sid eagerly.

"I do."

"Who is it?"

"I darsen't whisper his name just now, lad," said the cowboy; "but you kin jest rest easy, we'll make the kentry too hot to hold these scoundrels afore another day passes."

After a little further conversation on the part of the three, the cowboys departed, agreeing to return in the morning and take the trail of the thieves.

A little later the boy found himself alone in his home. He had returned the borrowed horse, by the two cowboys to Catamount Ranch.

"Wal, I wonder where Ragsdale is gone. He hain't shown his head since I got back."

The boy finally called the name of the Denver lawyer. He received no answer.

"Good gracious, I wonder if somethin's happened to him, too?"

At this moment the lad chanced to glance toward the table on which stood the lamp. A bit of folded paper caught his eye. Going forward, the lad at once seized the paper, and opened it. Although an indifferent scholar, the lad made out to decipher the few words the paper contained:

"SIR,—Don't worry. I have gone back to Three Oaks Ranch. Will see you again soon.  
"RAGSDALE,"

## CHAPTER X.

### WORK OF THE LARIAT.

"WELL, now," mused the young homesteader, "it seems to me this 'ere's a mighty sudden move for Ragsdale to make. By jiminy! I've almost a notion to believe the fellow was a snide, a horse thief, himself, like enough."

The lad was almost convinced that he had hit upon the right solution of the stranger's visit and sudden departure.

The night passed uneventfully, and at early morning Sid Gidley was up and on the lookout for the promised visit of the cowboys.

They did not disappoint him.

A dozen of them galloped up to the door of Deadwater Ranch about the middle of the forenoon. After examining the tracks of the horse thief the whole party hurried away on the trail, Sid remaining behind, since he had no animal to ride.

After seeing to his few chores, the boy sat down on the door-stone and mused over the situation.

"By thunder!" he exclaimed, after a short time, "I can't stand this. I must see that man agin who acted so awful kind of good last night. I'm going over to Three Oaks."

It was a good ten miles to the colonel's ranch, however, not an enviable trip to compass on foot.

After a little debate the lad hurried his steps down the Deadwater, and soon stood before the proprietor of Catamount Ranch.

"Yes, of course you kin take one o' my hosses, an' keep him a week or longer ef you like, Sid, my boy," returned the honest ranch owner, "but, mind you, don't let anybody steal or pizen him."

The lad made the desired promise, and was soon mounted and speeding across the prairie in the direction of Colonel Redhart's ranch.

The first man to meet Sid on his entrance upon the colonel's grounds was the old Missourian's factotum, Benay Flash.

"Well, it seems to me you're a long way from home, youngster," said the half-breed in greeting.

"I want to see the kunnel."

"You can't see him to-day."

"Why not?"

"He's off."

"Where to?"

"Don't know. Cheyenne, like enough."

The lad's face clouded.

"Was it important, Sidney?"

"Yes and no. It will do as well ef I can see Mr. Ragsdale."

"Ah, then you know that gentleman?"

"Yes."

"Do you know any good of him?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," said the boy. "Is the gent about?"

"I haven't seen him to-day—in fact, not since last night, just after the inquest."

"Where was he then?"

"Over to the shanty where the body of Miss Chester was found."

"Exactly. You know Mr. Ragsdale, I reckon?"

"Yes, quite well."

"Where's he from?"

"Denver."

"What's he up this way fer?"

"Well, he came because I sent for him."

"You sent for him?"

"Yes. The murdered girl was Ragsdale's cousin, and I thought he ought to know that the body had been found. The colonel thought so, too."

"And so you two got yer heads together and sent clear to Denver fer the gent?"

"That's it, Sidney."

"Then this 'ere Ragsdale's an honest chap, after all. You see, Benay, I reckoned mebbe the feller was a-lyin' to me, but I guess he told a straight story. He must be at the kunnels, 'cause he left word 'at he was goin' there."

"We can soon ascertain."

Benay Flash accompanied the boy to the house.

Mrs. Redhart was sure the man from Denver had not been there since the previous evening.

Sid Gidley was disappointed.

"We might go over to his aunt's," suggested Flash.

"Who's that?"

"Mrs. Tripp."

"All right."

But arrived at Mrs. Tripp's, the searchers were again disappointed.

"I'm sure Mr. Ragsdale hasn't been here in the last twenty-four hours," said Rena.

She then called Sid into the house and questioned him.

He told her of Ragsdale's visit, and of his unexpected departure on the previous night. Rena seemed interested, and not a little excited.

"I am afraid something has befallen him," she said, tremulously. "An attempt was made on his life only last night. There are some bad people in this community, and I do wish the honest homesteaders would organize and punish some of the outlaws."

"'Twon't be long," declared the boy, "before you'll hear music in the air. The cowboys are on the trail, and mean business."

"I sincerely hope so."

"And I'm on the trail, too!" exclaimed the young homesteader, laying his brown hand on the shoulder of the beautiful Rena. "I believe as you do, 'at somethin' happened to Ragsdale. He's been murdered, like enough, by them as wants the killin' of Miss Chester covered up. I'm bound to find the gent from Denver ef I hev to go to Mexico."

Then the lad turned and rushed from the house.

He met Flash outside, and expressed himself in similar terms to that individual.

"I wouldn't be silly, Sidney."

"What do ye mean by that, Benay?"

"It's all nonsense to suppose any one has harmed Mr. Ragsdale. He will turn up all right in a day or two, never fear."

"I don't believe it, all the same."

"See here, my boy."

Sid had now vaulted into the saddle, and was anxious to be off.

"I can't stop to argue the pint," declared the young homesteader. "There's goin' to be a big smell stirred up in these parts before you're many hours older, Benay, so just keep yer smell in trim till I see ye ag'in."

And then the lad galloped away.

"Confound him," grated the half-breed, turning on his heel and walking fiercely away toward the creek.

He had not gone far when he heard his name pronounced.

Turning, he beheld Rena Tripp coming toward him.

He was always ready to listen to her, so he at once held his steps.

"Benay, this is strange news I hear."

"What have you heard?"

"About Mr. Ragsdale."

"Well, what about him?"

"You know well enough. He has disappeared, and something must have happened to him."

"Nonsense."

"No, it is not nonsense."

"What is this white-livered fellow to you, Rena Tripp?"

The black eyes of the half-blood fairly snapped as they fixed their gaze on the face of the beautiful girl.

"A friend—my cousin, as you must know," asserted she.

"So!"

The word was a hiss.

"Now Benay, you have no call to be angry," she said, soothingly. "You know what happened near the colonel's house last night."

"Nothing of consequence that I am aware of, Rena."

"It might have been of consequence," she said, sharply. "It was not the fault of the

lynchers that Mr. Ragsdale was not murdered."

"I assure you you speak in riddles, Rena."

"I am quite sure you know that an attempt was made to murder Ragsdale last night in the grove near the colonel's house. Weren't you one of the lynchers?"

She bent a keen glance into his face as she put the question.

"Certainly not," returned he. "I heard some shots fired, but I never once suspected that unlawful work was going on. I am sure I don't see why the lynchers should turn upon the gentleman from Denver. No one suspects him of wrong-doing, that I am aware of. If it had been Demming, now, I should not have wondered. There is a feeling against him since the remains of Olive Chester were found, and he came near being lynched at the shanty just after the inquest. However, he made his escape, assisted by Ragsdale and Colonel Redhart."

Benay Flash spoke rapidly, and with apparent sincerity.

"I hope you were not with the gang, Benay?"

"Really! Pray, why should you care, Rena Tripp?"

He bent toward her, unmistakable admiration depicted in his black eyes.

She recoiled from his intense gaze, and seemed confused.

He put out his hand caressingly and smiled, while his even, white teeth fairly glittered.

"I am glad, Rena, to hear that you do feel an interest in me. I will always hold your friendship in high esteem, and hope you may look upon me in a nearer light than that of friend—"

"Sir, not another word like that."

She brushed aside his hand, and turning, sped back to the house, leaving him standing alone in the narrow path.

"So!"

Again that word came as a hiss.

Turning on his heel, Benay Flash strode angrily from the vicinity.

\* \* \* \* \*

We must not lose sight of the most prominent personage in our story for even a brief space of time.

Hilton Ragsdale felt lonely enough after the departure of his young friend, and for several minutes he walked up and down the floor in a restless way.

He thought of many things during the few minutes of his enforced lonely stay at Dead-water Ranch.

He had, perhaps, crossed the floor for the dozenth time, when a most unexpected catastrophe took place.

His back was toward the door, which stood open, when something dropped as from the ceiling, and fell about the body of the man from Denver.

The object proved to be a lariat, and the moment it reached his waist it was drawn taut at one jerk, thus pinioning the lawyer's arms at his sides.

The whole movement had been so sudden as to give no warning to Ragsdale.

Four men crossed the threshold and confronted the prisoner.

Each face was masked, so that it was impossible for Ragsdale to recognize one of them.

"Not a word!" hissed a voice in the ear of the Denverite.

At the same moment a cocked revolver was thrust into his face.

The masked villains meant business, surely. One of them went through the pockets of Ragsdale, securing his revolver and pocket-book.

And now the young lawyer-detective was glad to know that Sid Gidley had not permitted him to have the locket with its important pictures.

"I reckon we've found all he's got, boss," said one of the searchers.

"All right. Now move out before we are discovered."

Three of the men passed into the open air, leading their prisoner, whose hands they had bound securely behind him with a buckskin cord.

The fourth mask remained long enough to pen the note found by Sid; then he joined his companions, who hurried their prisoner away in the darkness.

## CHAPTER XI.

### STRANGE PROCEEDINGS.

"Now be quiet, will ye?"

Five men, mounted on mustangs, were riding swiftly over the prairie.

One of them was a prisoner, and sat in front of the foremost horseman.

He had ventured to ease his position by a movement, that brought out the remark made at the opening of this chapter.

"I am as quiet as I can be in this uncomfortable position," declared Ragsdale. "I can't see the object in keeping my arms bound so closely."

"You'll find that out soon enough," growled the mask. "You ain't wanted in this country now, and the sooner you git out the surer you'll be to live to green old age. Understand?"

"No."

"I'll soon make it plain to ye."

Ragsdale listened intently to the accents of the voice.

He was trying to catch a familiar intonation.

He was disappointed.

This was easily explained.

No doubt his captors disguised their language as well as their faces.

Ragsdale was not alarmed, since, had these men meant to murder him, they would not, it seemed to him, have taken the trouble to carry him such a long distance.

What, then, was the motive for this forcible abduction?

It was impossible for the young man to conjecture at this stage of the proceedings. He might be able to understand later on.

It was a long ride before the marauders came to a halt among the hills, no doubt the outskirts of the Wind River Mountains.

Entering a dense copse the men picketed their horses, and Ragsdale was permitted to dismount, or rather, he was assisted to do so, for, with his hands securely bound, it was impossible for him to help himself to any extent.

The prisoner was led past a small log-house into an open spot, where the bare rock glistened in the now morning light.

Just beyond his position was a black hole, from the depths of which came the murmur of water.

"Here we are," said the leader of the masks. "We may as well proceed to business at once."

"The sooner the better it will suit me," said the prisoner, "for I am a business man myself, and hate delays."

"Hear 'im!" exclaimed one of the masks.

"A business man, eh? Wal, mebbe we've made a mistake, but we 'lowed you was a peeler."

"I am an honest citizen I hope."

"Ef you was you wouldn't come so many hundred miles ter snoop inter other people's business."

"I am not doing so."

"Hear 'im!"

"This is nonsense," declared the first mask.

"Hilton Ragsdale, we know your business in Wyoming, and we hain't the gents to hesitate when our necks are in danger. Understand?"

"Not yet."

"Wal, 'twon't take me long to make it plain to you, my man. You have friends in Denver?"

"Yes, a good many of them, and some in Wyoming, I hope."

"Not enough to save your neck if you refuse to do as we tell you, young man."

"I am listening."

"You must leave Wyoming."

"I shall be glad to do so."

"That is sensible, and will save us much trouble. You will depart this day and never return—this you must swear to."

"I could not think of going so soon," said Ragsdale. "I have some business to transact before I go that may require a month's time, perhaps longer. I'm not in love with Wyoming, however, and will get out of it as soon as my business will permit, so I think, with this little exception, we can agree."

"You are determined to misunderstand me, I see," growled the mask, exhibiting impatience. "You must leave Wyoming at once, and swear to never return. Isn't that plain enough?"



"Yes."  
 "Will you obey?"  
 "I don't see how I can."  
 "It is a matter of life or death."  
 "To whom?"  
 "To you."

The last was uttered sternly.

Ragsdale realized that he was in a dangerous situation.

Evidently these men were desperate fellows, and yet they might be only attempting to frighten him.

"I cannot make the required promise," finally said the man from Denver.

"Then you force a terrible alternative on us, Hilton Ragsdale."

The mask drew his revolver and cocked it with great deliberation.

"You must either leave Wyoming or die. So it has been decided, and I shall not hesitate one moment."

Ragsdale was really alarmed now.

"Just hold on a minute. Don't knock a fellow out on such short notice," cried the prisoner. "You ought at least to be willing to tell me why you desire my absence from this territory."

"I cannot enter into explanations," said the mask. "We have decided to spare your life if you will leave the territory at once, and swear never to return, or to send any of your friends into this country."

"But hold on, sir. You are making the conditions harder and harder!" exclaimed Ragsdale.

"And you must accept them or die!"

"You will offer no explanation of this strange proceeding?"

"None."

"Strange—"

"I'll give you just three minutes to make up your mind," the mask interrupted, drawing out his watch.

The young lawyer started.

His gaze was fixed on the hand that held the watch.

There was something familiar about it, he was sure.

The little finger was gone at the first joint—the little finger of the left hand.

"One minute!" said the mask, solemnly.

He was too busy regarding the watch to note the prisoner's start of surprise or the direction of his glances.

A dead silence reigned.

"Two minutes!"

Only another minute between him and eternity.

And yet the prisoner could not take his fascinated gaze from that mutilated hand.

He had seen it somewhere, he was sure, but where?

This question he could not answer.

"Three minutes!"

The words rung out like a death-knell.

A new light seemed to glow in the eyes of the mask who held the revolver.

The gentleman from Denver was not ready to die without making a struggle for life.

As the man returned the watch to his pocket, Ragsdale bent his head and darted forward, his head striking the would-be murderer in the stomach, doubling him up like a jack-knife.

Spang—spang!

Two sharp reports rung out, and Ragsdale disappeared into the gulch.

When the mask, who had fallen before the onset of the prisoner, had regained his feet, he was trembling with rage.

"Where is he?" he demanded in a loud voice. "He shall die now, surely."

"He is already dead, pard."

"Show me the body."

"You will find it at the bottom of Satan's Gulch," and the speaker pointed to the black opening into which Ragsdale had plunged.

"I heard shots."

"Yes, we fired upon him the moment he attempted to escape," said the second mask. "I think it is better so. No one will ever be the wiser."

"True. His blood be on his own head, we are not to blame. I can't rest till I know that we are safe, however."

"Would you go into the gulch?"

"Yes."

"I move that we partake of breakfast first, cap'n," said one of the men, who had not yet spoken. "It'll take a good hour to go into the gulch by the path, and you know as well

as I 'at no man can tumble sixty feet onto solid rock and come out alive. Besides, this man has two bullets in his body."

Plausible reasoning, surely.

The leader of the masks consented to first partake of food ere exploring the gulch.

The whole party repaired to the log-house in the woods near at hand, where a stock of provisions was disclosed, and soon the masks were enjoying a substantial morning repast.

Not a man removed his face covering.

Each addressed his neighbor by number instead of by name.

Evidently these men were engaged in unlawful work, and believed they could not be too cautious.

Day had fairly dawned when the last man moved from the table.

"Now for the gulch!" exclaimed the leader of the masks.

At this moment, however, a diversion took place, that changed the plans of the outlaws somewhat.

A single horseman rode into the copse, and dismounting at the door, called loudly:

"Number Ten!"

The leader of the masks at once left the room, and stepped aside with the new-comer, who was masked like the others.

The conference lasted half an hour, and was of a most earnest nature on the part of the new arrival.

"Boys," said Number Ten, on his return to the house, "we must scoot."

"What's up?"

"Danger."

A buzz of excitement followed, and a little later the grove about the log-house was deserted.

The last man to go was the one who had been the bearer of important news.

"I scattered 'em," he chuckled, as he leaned against a tree and peered about him keenly. "The next thing is to find out if a murder has been committed."

Removing his mask, the man exposed a rather handsome face for a brief moment, while he wiped the perspiration from his brow.

Restoring his mask, the man walked through the timber and stood on the spot where the late tragedy had been enacted.

"I hope, for the girl's sake, he isn't dead," muttered the mask.

He was soon making his way along a narrow trail that led into the gulch by a circuitous route.

The distance was great, and the difficulties of the way rendered the movements of the pedestrian slow and laborious.

At length he arrived at the bottom of the gulch, and turned his steps along its base, toward the spot where the man from Denver had plunged to his apparent death.

Presently the searcher came to a halt.

He listened intently.

A groan assailed his ear.

"The fellow is alive, surely," muttered the masked searcher.

He was not long in finding Ragsdale, who lay in a clump of alders at the foot of the declivity.

"Insensible," decided the searcher, as he examined the young lawyer, "and likely to die. Now what had I better do? Leave him here, or try and find a shelter and help for the fellow?"

After a few minutes of reflection, the masked man lifted Ragsdale in his arms and staggered down the gulch.

Scarcely had the mask disappeared, when a third man burst through the bushes and glared about him.

He wore no mask, and we have met the man before.

It was Tribune Tripp.

His eyes glowed like coals of fire, and his strong hands were clinched in a way that denoted terrible passion.

Suddenly drawing a revolver, he darted swiftly after the masked rescuer.

## CHAPTER XII.

### A STARTLING REVELATION.

WHEN Hilton Ragsdale again opened his eyes, he was aware that he was experiencing considerable pain. The ceiling above his couch was rough, and one glance about the room assured him that he was in a frontiersman's shanty.

How came he here? What had happened to bring it all about?

"He has opened his eyes. See, mother!"

A rather sweet voice fell on the ear of the ear of the injured man, and a moment later a pair of dark eyes looked into his from the face of a brown yet pretty girl.

"Are you better, Mr. Ragsdale?"

She seemed to know his name. Would wonders never cease?

At this moment an elderly woman entered the room and bent over Ragsdale. She smiled and drew her daughter aside.

"You were badly hurt, sir," said the woman. "I suppose you know how you came to fall into Satan's Gulch."

"Ah, yes, I remember now," said the young man, passing his hand over his brow. "I was fired on. I made a leap for life, and went into the gulch, that is all I remember."

"It is quite enough for the present. You must remain quiet till you feel better."

"How long have I been here?"

"Three days."

"Is it possible?"

"You must be quiet now."

"No, no, I can't keep quiet till I hear an explanation. Who brought me here? How came you to know my name?"

"You were brought here by a man whom we do not know. Our cabin being the nearest to the gulch we took you in."

"You were very kind."

"Not at all," declared the woman. "In this wild country one is quite apt to get into trouble at any time. We must be ready to aid one another when occasion arises."

She then left him to his own reflections.

Three more days passed before the young lawyer was able to be on his feet again. He had now been absent from his friends a week.

Ragsdale was well pleased with the apparent refinement and gentleness of the girl and her mother.

On the seventh day Ragsdale said that he must not tarry another hour.

"Where do you live, Mr. Ragsdale?"

"In Denver when at home," he answered the girl who had put the question, "but I am here looking into the murder case at the Three Oaks ranch."

"My brother told me about that," said she. "It seems that the people generally think that the girl's lover murdered her. It was a terrible affair, and after we learned of the finding of the poor victim's body, I didn't sleep nights for a long time."

"I do not wonder at it."

Just then a clatter of hoofs announced the approach of a horseman.

"It's my brother!" exclaimed the girl. "I'm so glad he has come before you went away. I want you to know each other."

Ragsdale was glad, too.

"My brother, Mr. Ragsdale."

The man from Denver started as he found himself looking into the face of the new arrival—Benay Flash!

Although the woman had given their family name, Ragsdale had not thought to connect it with Colonel Redhart's factotum. He was disappointed.

Flash was his aversion.

And, too, he could now account for the deep tint on the cheek of Miss Mindora Flash.

There was Indian blood in her veins.

He hated the race, and the feelings that had become suddenly aroused in his bosom fell as suddenly to zero.

"So this is where you are keeping yourself, Hilton," cried the half-breed, something like a sneer curling his lip. "I had no idea you were acquainted with my people. Do you know, you have created as much of a stir by your running away as Miss Olive did a year ago. I shall demand an explanation at once, sir."

"Demand away," retorted the Denver man, "I am not obliged to explain to you, Benay Flash."

Mindora gazed at the two men in evident astonishment.

As Ragsdale was turning away, he noticed the girl's blank surprise, and deigned to say: "I have met your brother before, Miss Flash; he and I are friends."

"The very best of friends," emphasized Benay, with a low laugh.

He then dismounted and entered the house.

"We're homesteaders like many others," declared the half-breed, in a pleasant voice,

at once disarming Ragsdale. "I never mentioned my home to you simply because you never inquired."

Explanations followed, and Benay was very profuse in his congratulations to the young lawyer on his lucky escape from the clutches of the outlaws.

"I suppose you will get back to the colonel's soon, Hilton?"

"I am going this day."

"Then we will keep one another company."

And so it was arranged, although there was but one horse between them.

"We can ride and tie," said Flash, showing his milk-white teeth, as the young lawyer took the first mount.

"Just as you say," returned Ragsdale. "How far do you call it to Three Oaks Ranch?"

"Thirty miles."

"It's further than I thought."

And then the young man rode on. He did not know the way to the Big Horn, so it was finally decided not to "ride and tie."

The journey to Three Oaks was unaccompanied by any adventures.

One of the first to greet the returned lawyer was Rena Tripp, who was at Redhart's on the evening of the Denver man's arrival.

"It is a glad surprise to us all," declared the beautiful girl, as she turned her brilliant eyes on his face. "We all feared something terrible had happened. Your aunt has been well nigh distracted at your prolonged absence. The boy, Sid, was over and told us of your disappearance, and the letter you left behind telling that you had come to Three Oaks."

"So they left a letter purporting to come from me?"

"Yes."

Rena then explained.

She also informed him that a posse was even now out scouring the country in search of him.

Soon after this Rena returned home, accompanied by Benay Flash, while Ragsdale entertained the colonel with an account of his adventures.

"Seems mighty cu'rus," grunted the Missourian. "Dod blast ther picters, I don't see what they wanted to tackle you for, Mr. Ragsdale."

"I cannot explain it myself, since I meditate no harm to any one but the murderer of my unfortunate cousin."

"I think I will spend the night at my aunt's," said the young lawyer, after he had discussed the situation with the colonel for some time.

"Dod blast it, Hilt, you hadn't better go through them woods after dark ag'in alone."

"Do you imagine the lynchers are still on the lookout?"

"I dunno. That there Tribune Tripp don't stay to home much these days. He's hatchin' some mischief, yer kin bet yer pile."

"I am not armed, either," said Ragsdale. "Haven't you an extra pistol in the house, colonel?"

"A grist on 'em. Come to my room an' take yer pick."

The young lawyer accompanied the colonel to a room in the upper part of the old ranch, which seemed a veritable armory, so filled was it with guns, pistols, knives and other weapons of war.

"I'm allus perpared for an emergency," chuckled the Missourian, as he flashed his light over the glittering array on the walls.

"I should think as much!" cried Ragsdale.

"Pick out yer weepion, Hilt, my boy."

Selecting a good-sized revolver, the young man expressed himself as satisfied.

Cartridges were found for it in a box, and once more the man from Denver felt himself in a condition to proceed with his investigations, which had been cut off by his late adventures.

Ragsdale was anxious to meet his aunt, and talk with her more at length about her daughter Olive, and about Evard Demming.

"I will call again in the morning," said the young lawyer. "I want to go over the ground near the old shanty where the body was found, and I want you with me, colonel."

"All right."

Then the two separated.

Hilton did not avoid the woods along the creek, although he did not follow the same path that came so near leading to his death on a former occasion.

Once through the woods it was an open way to Mrs. Tripp's home.

But the young lawyer had not reached the open ground ere he came to a halt.

A murmur of voices fell on his ear.

This sound seemed to proceed from a spot some yards to the left.

Ragsdale at once left the path and crept toward the sound.

Soon he could distinguish words, and then he came to a halt and listened.

"Benay," you cannot frighten me by your threats."

The young lawyer started.

The speaker was none other than the beautiful Rena Tripp.

"I am not trying to frighten you, my girl, but I am talking business. If you don't do as I wish I'll blow the whole thing to the Wyoming winds."

"The scoundrel!" muttered the concealed listener, through clenched teeth.

He was wise enough, however, not to make his presence known.

"Why do you persist in this, Benay? You and I have always been friends, and can be nothing more—"

"See here!" interrupted he, fiercely. "Don't I know the whole scheme? You and I were more than friends once, till two things happened. Shall I tell you what the two things are, Miss Rena Tripp?"

"I am not particular."

"Your father's marriage, and the coming of this white-livered fellow from Colorado. If I'd known what a fascinating fellow he was I'd never have sent the colonel's dispatch."

"Sir, I beg—"

"Stop. Let me finish what I was to say," he cried louder than he meant. "It was a scheme, this marriage of your estimable father with the widow of Chester. I have reason to know that up to the present time the murder of Miss Olive and the marriage of her mother hasn't panned out well to the conspirators. Now, what a snap it would be if you could only secure Mr. Ragsdale. He's wealthy, and so handsome. But hear me, Rena, I swear that you shall not win the man from Denver, that part of your little plot will not succeed. As for the murder of Olive Chester, you and he realize that it was a mistake."

The man in ambush could scarcely contain himself.

He trembled with excess of excitement. He realized that he was about to hear something of the utmost importance.

"You know, my girl, that Ragsdale is here to investigate the murder of the girl whose shoes you are now filling. When he finds out the truth, what show will you have to win? Ah! you wince and tremble, as well you may, for I swear that you cast me off at your peril, Rena Tripp."

"Oh, Benay, be quiet."

"I'll not be quiet. There is but one alternative, my girl, but one."

"Oh, Mr. Flash!"

"You shall be mine, else I turn against you, and will show no mercy to the assassin of Olive Chester!" he hissed, in words of horrible meaning.

### CHAPTER XIII. A NIGHT HORROR.

HILTON RAGSDALE stood rooted to the spot like one in a dream. What he heard was of a most startling nature.

What did it mean?

Was Benay Flash accusing the beautiful Rena of the murder of Olive Chester?

It certainly had that appearance, and the concealed lawyer could scarcely restrain himself.

With an effort he remained calm enough to catch the next words that fell from the lips of one of the twain.

"Hush, Benay," she said. "You are mad now and know not what you say. I must go at once to the house; mamma will be anxious on my account."

"Mamma!"—with cutting emphasis. "How much you think of the woman your father married to further the whole damnable plot."

Rena Tripp, I will do as I tell you, and blow the whole scheme, if you smile again on this man from Denver. You belong to me, and I will suffer no man to come between us. My people saved this man's life. If he dares to come between us let him look to himself."

Then the concealed listener heard them walking on, and their further conversation did not reach his ear.

Ragsdale was surprised to learn that the young half-breed was madly jealous of him.

The idea that he—Ragsdale—should care for Rena Tripp was preposterous.

At any rate, now that he had learned her true character, it would be impossible for him to even respect her.

There was an awful meaning conveyed in the words of Benay Flash.

Perhaps they were to prove the entering wedge to evidence that was soon to reveal the secret of an awful crime.

The young lawyer walked on slowly, giving the young couple in advance ample time to reach the Tripp ranch ahead of him.

Benay and Rena sat in the front room when Ragsdale arrived.

The half-breed cast a glance at the Denverite that pierced like the sting of a serpent.

Such a look Ragsdale had never seen flash from human eyes before.

It warned him to be on his guard.

"Is my aunt still up?" questioned the young lawyer of Rena.

"I will see."

At this moment, however, the woman in question entered the room.

She was overjoyed at the return of her nephew, whom she had mourned during the past week as one dead.

Explanations followed.

"I owe my life first to a stranger, and lastly to the Flashes," said Ragsdale, in conclusion.

At the same time he glanced at Benay, who seemed not to notice his words.

"It seems that you have enemies in Wyoming as well as I, Hilton," said Mrs. Tripp.

"It seems so," returned Ragsdale. "Of course, it's barely possible that a mistake was made, as in the case of my attempted lynching."

Again the lawyer glanced at Benay Flash.

The half-breed seemed not to notice these remarks, so deeply was he engaged in conversation with Miss Rena.

The feelings of Ragsdale were more resentful toward the colonel's factotum than ever. He realized now that the sleek and oily fellow was his enemy, and likely to make him trouble.

Presently he turned to his aunt and said:

"You spoke just now as though you have enemies in Wyoming. Is this true?"

"It is true, Hilton."

"Who are they?"

The pallid-faced woman glanced uneasily toward the couple across the room. The black orbs of Rena were fixed on her face, and Mrs. Tripp looked aside and trembled.

Ragsdale noted all this, and wondered.

"I will not call any names," at length murmured the woman.

Ragsdale could see that she was cowed and fearful. Could it be that Rena was the cause?

The young Denverite resolved to learn the facts at the first opportunity.

His time did not come that evening, however. Benay Flash persisted in staying late, and as the man from Denver was not feeling well, he told his aunt that he would retire for the night.

"I hope you will remain with us during your stay, Hilton," said Mrs. Tripp, as she took up a lamp to show him to his room.

"By the way," called Benay Flash suddenly, "if you're feeling badly, Mr. Ragsdale, I'll send you a medicine-man if you don't object. We've a good one in the neighborhood."

"I do object," returned the lawyer. "I shall feel all right in the morning."

And then the aunt and nephew left the room. She showed him to a cozy apartment up-stairs.

Before going out of the room, Mrs. Tripp laid a hand on the arm of her nephew, and in tremulous accents said:

"Whatever you do, my dear boy, beware of Benay Flash."



"Ah! then you know him well?"  
 "I know and fear him, Hilton."  
 "Why do you fear him?"  
 "Let it pass now. He is not a good man, and he may do you harm, should his mind run that way."

The young half-breed's mind did run that way, as Hilton knew, but he did not make mention of it to his aunt.

He could see that she was already deeply troubled, and he did not wish to add to that trouble in the least.

"Don't alarm yourself, Aunt Julia, I can take care of myself," said the young lawyer, reassuringly. "But tell me your troubles, aunt."

"Do you think I have troubles?"  
 "That I do. I know you are not happy, and I should like to hear all about it. Is Rena undutiful?"

"No, no, Hilton, not a word can be said against her. She is one of the best and noblest girls I ever knew. I believe I should have died before now but for Rena's love and kindness."

"Can you trust her?"  
 Ragsdale remembered what he had heard in the grove an hour before, and to say that he distrusted Rena since that would be putting it mildly indeed.

"I would trust her with my life, Hilton, and it is for this reason that I am sorry to see her with Benay Flash so much."

"You might speak to her about it," suggested the young man.

"I do not like to seem officious or meddlesome."

Then she turned to go.  
 "Won't you tell me about your troubles, aunt?"

"Not to-night. I wish to speak with you before you go away, however, Hilton. I have much to tell you."

Bidding him good-night, she went out, closing the door gently after her.

She seemed kind and gentle now, as he remembered her in the past, and yet he could see that her last marriage had been a sad mistake.

Poor woman! She trusted her step-daughter fully, when, as Ragsdale now believed, that young lady might be working in secret against her.

Benay Flash had spoken of a plot, a conspiracy in connection with Mrs. Tripp and Olive Chester, and Rena had not reproved him. It needs must be that the beautiful young girl was a party to some unrevealed crime, perhaps to the murder of his unfortunate cousin.

"I shall constitute myself a detective from this time on," decided the young lawyer, "and I shall trust no one until I know him to be worthy."

It was a late hour before Ragsdale disrobed and fell into repose on the bed under the eaves.

The window to his room was up, and a faint breath of night air stirred the curtains and fanned his cheek.

With this for a benison, the lawyer-detective visited the land of nod.

How long he had slept the young man did not know, when he was aroused by a strange sound.

Rising to a sitting posture, the lawyer snatched his revolver from under his pillow, and glared toward the window from whence the sound seemed to proceed.

Again the sound—an awful, hair-lifting yawl, that seemed to chill the marrow in his bones.

Then a body was dashed against the window-sill, which fell back to the floor with a dull thud. After this an awful silence.

"What in the nation is it?" cried Ragsdale.

He waited a few minutes, then sprang up and drew on his clothing. Then he lit the lamp and proceeded to investigate.

On the floor under the window lay a large cat, quite dead, with wide-open, staring eyes that sent a shudder all over the young lawyer.

"Mercy!" he exclaimed, "I wonder what ailed pussy. She looks as though she had suffered awful agony—ah!"

Ragsdale recoiled suddenly.

He had discovered the cause of all the trouble—a hideous-looking reptile, that resembled a lizard, yet was different from anything the young Denverite had heretofore

seen. It was of a dirty brown color, slimy and glistening, about six inches in length. This reptile had fastened itself on the feline's throat, and to the lawyer's horror he saw that the dead body was fast swelling, indicating poison.

Ragsdale glared about him.

It was not pleasant to occupy the same room with a poisonous reptile. His eyes fell on a stick in one corner of the room.

Seizing this he dispatched the venomous lizard with a well-aimed blow.

During all this time no one stirred in the house, although it seemed to Ragsdale that the inmates could not have remained asleep during the noise.

"I'll not sleep any more to-night," thought he, as he glanced at the dead cat.

After a few minutes given to reflection, he lifted the dead animal and flung it out into the night.

Consulting his watch, Ragsdale found it almost morning.

He had not long to wait ere day dawned in the east.

It was soon light enough for him to make a thorough investigation.

Under the window lay a large-mouthed empty bottle, which he was sure had not been there when he retired to bed.

This at once suggested a horrible thought to the amateur detective.

Some one had brought the poisonous reptile and placed it in his room for a purpose.

Naturally enough the young lawyer thought of Benay Flash.

There was no knowing what a jealous man might do, and yet Ragsdale could lay his hand on his heart and say honestly that the colonel's factotum had no cause to be jealous of him.

However much the man from Denver had been attracted toward Rena Tripp at the outset, he was now deeply, and he believed justly, prejudiced against the beautiful young girl.

Dropping the dead lizard into the bottle, Ragsdale went below when he heard some one stirring.

The first person he encountered was Tribune Tripp, who, it seemed, had returned home during the night.

"Hello, Hilton! I'm glad to see you," and the plainsman put out his hand.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### DETECTIVE SHADE.

RAGSDALE did not take the proffered hand.

"Be you mad at me, Mr. Ragsdale?"

"After your attempt on my life that is a superfluous question, Mr. Tripp," returned the lawyer, coldly.

"Well, well, I don't understand you now. The idea that I should attempt to murder anybody. You must be crazy, young man, absolutely demented. I've as good a reputation as any man in Wyoming."

"You must have a short memory, Mr. Tripp."

"Explain. Confound me if I know what you're driving at. I do remember that I saved your life once in Cheyenne, when we were coming North in company; but that I ever attempted to harm you is preposterous, absolutely preposterous, my boy," and the plainsman slapped Ragsdale's shoulder in a really hilarious and friendly manner.

"Have you forgotten the lynching party?"

"No, by gracious! I haven't, and I have you to thank for permitting the murderer of poor Olive Chester to escape. He's safely out of the country now, and I'm afraid will never be brought to justice," roared Tripp, his face becoming more rubicund than ever.

"I am not convinced of Demming's guilt," answered Ragsdale. "In fact I have good reason to believe that he is innocent, and that the real murderer is still on the Big Horn."

"What an idea."

And yet the keen eye of Ragsdale detected something in the face of the man confronting him that told of deep uneasiness.

"I think I could put my finger on the assassin, Mr. Tripp."

"Eh?"

"Did you not understand?"

"Don't think I did."

The man from Denver repeated his words.

"Confound it, young man, if you can do

this, what are you waiting for?" demanded Mr. Tripp, bluntly, almost defiantly.

"I'm biding my time."

"Bosh!"

"You may not think so when the hand of justice falls."

The keen eyes of the young lawyer-detective fixed themselves in a penetrating gaze on the face of the bluff plainsman.

That worthy became suddenly confused.

"I have something to show you, Mr. Tripp."

Ragsdale held up the wide-mouthed bottle, in which was the dead reptile.

"What do you call that?"

The speaker glared at the bottle; and the lawyer could see that he was agitated, a sure indication that he knew something of the infamous work of the night.

"I want you to tell me what you call that, Mr. Tripp," said Ragsdale, sternly.

"Well, I'd call it a specimen," said Tripp.

"Some doctor left it, maybe. I'm sure it's nothing but a harmless lizard, anyhow."

"Do they grow in plenty around here, Mr. Tripp?"

"Plenty of them."

"And they are not poisonous?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am."

"Would it be possible for this little reptile to bite anything and cause death?"

"Didn't I tell ye 'twasn't a poisonous varmint?" growled Tripp, somewhat testily.

"Where'd you get it, anyhow? It seems to be stone dead."

"Yes, it's dead enough now," returned the man from Denver, "but it was lively enough last night. Some one was kind enough to turn the reptile loose in my bedroom after I had retired. I have an idea the one who did it supposed it to be of a poisonous species, Mr. Tripp, and to tell the truth, I have the proof that it is a venomous thing. If you'll accompany me up-stairs I will prove it to your entire satisfaction, sir."

The plainsman, being under suspicion, as he could not but know, went with the lawyer to the room the latter had occupied during the night, and there saw the dead feline where the young man pointed it out through the open window.

"I flung it out there," said Ragsdale, "but the work of death was done right here in this room."

"Kinder strange."

"Yes, it is strange."

"I don't see how it came to be in this room. Did you see them when you come up to bed?"

"No. The bottled reptile was not here then."

"Do you think 'twas put in by some one after you come to bed?"

"I am sure it was."

"Then this must be investigated."

"I mean it shall be."

The two men descended to the lower regions once more.

"Better not say anything to the women about this, Mr. Ragsdale," suggested the plainsman, as they went down-stairs. "Tain't necessary to frighten them."

"I agree with you there."

And so Mrs. Tripp and Rena were not informed of the cowardly attempt on the life of their guest.

While Tripp was at home Ragsdale knew it would be out of the question to seek an interview with his aunt, so, immediately after breakfast, the young man walked over to Three Oaks, promising to call again soon.

Ragsdale was sore over the theft of the sorrel mare, and could not help thinking it extremely kind in Rena not to censure him in the least for the loss.

He had offered to make up the value of the mare to his aunt, but she refused to permit it.

Colonel Redhart had finished his morning meal, and sat in his accustomed place smoking his ever-present pipe when Ragsdale put in an appearance.

"Come and set here, lad," said the colonel, motioning toward a chair at his side. "I reckoned mebbe you went off mad last night, and, dum me, ef I'd blame ye much nuther, for I reckon I wasn't in ther perillest mood last night."

"I shall not dispute you, colonel,"

"No? Wal, it's well ye don't. I've got a consid'able to tell ye."

"I am all ears, colonel."

"It's about the murder of yer cousin."

"Yes?"

"You hain't made no discoveries, I reckon, bein' as you've been in the hands of the cattle thieves so long."

"None to speak of, colonel."

"I reckoned not"—removing his pipe: "but I hain't been idle, my boy, not by a long shot. I've been 'vestigating."

"I am glad to hear it."

"I know'd you would be. We buried the dead in the nearest cemetery, my boy, and then I set about 'vestigating. I know'd 'at Denning wasn't guilty, so I looked for some other way to account fur Miss Chester's death."

"It is well enough to look at the case in all its bearings," returned the young man, as he seated himself at the side of the Missourian.

"Do yer know, boy, 'at I've erbout come to ther conclusion 'at thar wasn't no murder, after all."

"How can that be?"

"Easy enough."

"But there was a bullet in the head of the dead girl."

"True as preachin'; but mightn't the gal have did it herself?"

"Shot herself?"

"That's it, plum center."

The colonel removed his pipe and laid his hand on the young man's knee, while he looked sharply into the face of his guest.

"The idea might be plausible but for one thing, colonel."

"Wal?"

"Although it would be no hard matter for a girl to commit suicide, it strikes me that she would have a good deal of trouble in secret-ing the body so that her friends could not find it for a year."

For half a minute the colonel sat silent, a dazed look shooting over his face.

"Dod blast my picter!" he finally exclaimed.

"You see how utterly impossible it would be for the suicide to cover her crime."

"Of course I do, but—er—ye see that blasted detective muddled my brains. He said 'at the gal mout a-killed herself, and I, like a blamed fool, thought so myself."

"What detective?"

"Didn't I tell ye 'at I'd got a man down from Cheyenne to look into this whole dod blasted business? Mebbe I didn't, but it's true all the same. I went to ther station myself, and communicated with ther Cheyenne authorities, and they sent me this man Shade. He comes highly recommended, and I believe he'll git to ther bottom of this murder, ef anybody can."

"So you distrusted me, colonel?"

"Why, dod blast it, man! how'd I know 'at you'd ever turn up ag'in? You was gone, and fur aught I knew mout be as dead as Miss Chester. I reckoned, ef you was, 'at Nat Shade could look up both murders. I didn't think 'twas good policy to rest on my oars, lad—no, I didn't."

"So you thought I was murdered?"

"I didn't know."

"Where is this detective?"

"Here."

"I should like to see him."

"I reckoned you would. You two can counsel together, and mebbe you can help Shade; or, ef yer like, you kin send him back to Cheyenne. Now you're on deck ag'in, I let you take charge o' this business," avowed Colonel Redhart effusively.

"I shall expect you to aid us, colonel," returned Ragsdale.

"Of course. I reckoned you would," and the colonel chuckled.

At this instant a step was heard, and the next moment a man came through the open door, and confronted the colonel and Ragsdale.

"So here you be now," said the colonel. "Mr. Shade, this 'ere's my friend Ragsdale, from Denver. I told ye about him yer remember."

The man from Denver stood up and took the proffered hand of the detective.

Eyes looked into eyes, and each seemed to study the other for one brief moment keenly.

The inspection on the part of Ragsdale was not wholly satisfactory to him.

Shade was rather undersized, with an abundance of dark hair and beard. A pair of intensely blue eyes were set deep under a rather narrow brow. Truth was, the man from Denver was not prepossessed in favor of Mr. Shade on first acquaintance.

What struck him most forcibly, was the abundance of hair on the face of the detective. Usually such men shaved smoothly.

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Ragsdale," said Shade. "The colonel has told me about you, and of the mission that brought you to the Big Horn country. I shall be happy to cooperate with you in ferretting out the murder of your unfortunate cousin."

"Thank you."

Shade lit a cigar and leaned against a post, and talked in a low tone for some time.

"We should have no secrets from each other, Mr. Ragsdale. If you have breakfasted, suppose we walk over to the scene of the murder together."

"Certainly."

The two men walked away in company. Soon after Colonel Redhart went to his stable, saddled and mounted a horse, and rode over toward Tripp's ranch.

"I read of this case in the papers," said Shade, as the two men walked along. "The evidence seems to point to Evard Demming."

"It seems to."

"Have you made any discoveries?"

"None of importance."

"Well, the least thing may be of importance," declared Shade, glancing keenly at his companion.

"I don't think I have learned enough to warrant my speaking," returned Ragsdale. "I am quite positive that more than one had a hand in the murder."

"More than one?"

"Yes."

"You surprise me."

They had reached the shanty now, and Ragsdale pushed his way in at once.

"Tell me what you have discovered, Mr. Ragsdale."

"I cannot tell anything just yet, since all my discoveries are of a vague and unsatisfactory nature," returned the Denverite.

Soon after this Ragsdale left the cabin, and began examining the vicinity.

He had meant to do this at the outset had not circumstances worked against him.

Here, there and everywhere Ragsdale moved, examining the ground closely.

Soon he found himself in a little thicket several rods from the cabin.

He kicked up the leaves with his toe, and then uttered an ejaculation.

He had turned out something of a tangible nature.

He bent quickly and gathered it in his hand.

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE BROKEN PENKNIFE.

"WHAT have you found?"

A voice uttered the words in the ear of Ragsdale.

Quickly his hand closed over his find and he thrust it into his pocket.

Then he turned about and faced Detective Shade.

"A mere trinket."

Thus did the man from Denver make reply.

"It may be of importance. Let me look at it, please."

But Ragsdale made no move to comply with the request of the stranger.

He had been so many times deceived, the young lawyer resolved not to be caught napping again.

"I do not understand these actions, Mr. Ragsdale," said Shade, in a voice tremulous with anger. "If I am to conduct this investigation, I must not be handicapped at the outset."

"Mr. Shade, you are a stranger to me. However good a detective you may be, I do not conceive it my duty to hand over everything to you. I did not employ you. If you succeed in tracing out the assassin, no doubt you will be amply rewarded. You must look to the colonel for clues, I have none to offer."

Why did the lawyer-detective speak thus? He could scarcely have told himself, only that

he had conceived a strong aversion for this man Shade, and inwardly vowed he would not make a confidant of him.

Ragsdale realized that he was making enemies in the Big Horn region much faster than he was friends, and yet it was not his fault. There were really but two persons in the whole region that he could call friends—his aunt and Sid Gidley.

Once he would have included Rena Tripp among his friends, but since the revelation of the previous night, the lawyer looked upon the beautiful daughter of the plainsman as little less than a murderess.

In fact, his investigations might prove that it was she who fired the fatal shot on the night of June 16th, one year before.

"Don't you mean to co-operate with me in this investigation?" demanded Mr. Shade, in a voice low with suppressed emotion.

"I may in time," answered Ragsdale. "At present I prefer to work on my own account."

"Very well."

The Cheyenne man turned on his heel and hurried from the vicinity, thoroughly enraged, as Ragsdale could see, at the snub he had received.

"Go," muttered the young lawyer. "I'll trust no one until he proves of good stuff. I've proved Sid, and I know Aunt Julia, the others are all on the list marked 'suspicious.'"

Ragsdale walked to a point where he could watch the movements of Mr. Shade.

He saw the gentleman disappear over a rise of ground toward Three Oaks.

"He'll paint me in high colors to Colonel Redhart, I've no doubt," mused the young man, "but I can't help that. A man who dresses like a fop, and wears kid gloves, can't be much of a detective in my way of thinking."

The lawyer took out his find and examined it. Nothing of much consequence after all perhaps—only a pearl-handled penknife.

It was not a perfect knife, however. The larger blade was broken near the haft, and on this was a spot of rust.

"It's a lady's knife," mused Ragsdale, "and before this tragedy no lady resided at Three Oak Ranch. Now, the question arises, who dropped this little knife here? May not Olive have used it to defend herself from assault on that fatal night? If so, the broken blade indicates that she must have wounded her assailant, who then ended the struggle by shooting her through the head. I may be nearer the solution of this mystery than I imagined when I came over to the lone cabin with Mr. Shade."

A clatter of hoofs caused Ragsdale to look up and away through the trees.

He saw a horseman approaching.

In a minute he drew rein beside the lone hut. Ragsdale recognized the horseman, and hurried forward to greet him.

"I am glad to see you again, Sid, my boy."

"What? You, Mr. Ragsdale? Land o' liberty! I've been lookin' for ye for mor'n a week. I jest heard 'at you was back again, all right. Did ye find the sorrel mare?"

"No."

"Nor the thief?"

"No again."

"Never you mind; there's men a-lookin' it up. The thief'll be a smarter man than I take him to be ef he gits away from our vigilantes."

"Has a committee been formed?"

"I'll tell ye how 'tis, Mr. Ragsdale; there's been a heap o' stealin' goin' on fur nigh 'bout a year now—cattle and horses mostly—and the ranchers and homesteaders is mad clear through, and they've organized fur work. I reckon you fell amongst the thieves, and maybe they feared you was a government detective, or somethin', sent out to aid the settlers. See?"

"Yes, I see."

Ragsdale had explained to Sid how he had been captured and left for dead in Satan's Gulch, and the lad surmised that it had been the work of cattle-thieves.

Hilton may have thought the same, but he did not say as much.

"I've wanted to see you, Sid," the lawyer said. "You are thoroughly acquainted in this region, and can pilot me anywhere I may wish to go."

"You bet I can, sir."



"Have you learned enough about me, so that you do not fear to trust me, Sid?"

"Yes, I have," said the boy. "I've found out 'at you ain't no impostor, and I'm goin' to trust you till the cows come home. I've seen Mrs. Tripp, and she says you're all right. I know that woman, sir, and I'd believe anything she might say. She made a mistake when she married old Tripp, though. The Lord only knows what she did it for."

"I'm sure I don't understand it, my lad. I am glad I have found one person in Wyoming whom I can depend on. We must figure out this whole thing, Sid, without the aid of any who are at present pretending to hunt down Olive Chester's murderer."

"Then you're a-goin' to trust me?"

"Yes."

"Put it thar, Mr. Ragsdale."

Sid Gidley stretched forth his grimy hand, and Ragsdale clasped it warmly.

"Can you stay right with me, Sid, or must you go back to the ranch and look after the cattle and other things?"

"I've hired a feller to stay there and do the chores, for I wanted to be free awhile anyhow."

"Good; then we'll travel in company when it's necessary."

"And now, what's the fust thing?"

"I want to ask you a few questions."

"Go ahead, Mr. Ragsdale."

"Call me Hilton. I shall call you Sid, as we stand on even ground, you know. I wish to ask about a new-comer. Perhaps you have met him—a Mr. Shade, of Cheyenne?"

"I've seen him."

"How long has he been here?"

"I saw him with Colonel Redhart yesterday for the first. They was both down the Dead-water inquirin' about you."

"Of course I couldn't give 'em any information then."

"Of course not."

"I didn't like the fellow from Cheyenne."

"Why not?"

"He's got a bad eye in his head, and he makes me sick with his style."

"Exactly."

"You've seen him?"

"Yes."

"How do you like him?"

"About as well as you do, Sid."

"Wonder what he's here for?"

"He is a detective from Cheyenne."

"No?"

An incredulous look swept the face of the young homesteader.

"So I am told."

"Who told you, Hilton?"

"The colonel."

"The kunnel, eh?"

"Yes."

The boy looked steadfastly at the ground for some minutes.

"I dunno, but it seems to me thar must be some mistake," he finally said. "That man ain't no detective."

"He doesn't look like one."

"Wal, I never saw but one, and he was a sight likelier feller than this one from Cheyenne."

"We won't trust this man Shade till we know he is honest, at any rate," decided Ragsdale.

"No, that we won't."

At this moment another horseman rode up from the direction of Three Oaks.

It proved to be Benay Flash.

"You're wanted over at the Chester ranch, Mr. Ragsdale."

"Who wants me?"

"Mrs. Tripp."

"Very well."

"I will go with you," said Flash, casting a sharp look at Sid.

"And I will ride up the creek a ways, and see you later, Hilton," said the boy, giving his horse free rein.

After they had gone a short distance, the young factotum drew rein and said:

"I wanted to be rid of the boy, sir. Your aunt did not send for you, but I have something of importance to reveal."

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE HALF-BREED'S STRANGE STORY.

RAGSDALE regarded the speaker in surprise. "Then you lied to me," he said, with blunt frankness.

"That's a harsh name, Mr. Ragsdale," said Flash, "but I won't kick. Let it pass. I was sorry to see you with that young scapegrace of a Sid Gidley. Don't you know that he is supposed to be connected with a gang of thieves? His father had to run the country, and his brother, 'tis said, was noosed two years ago."

Ragsdale remained silent.

"You did not know the boy, I guess, Mr. Ragsdale?"

"As well as I know others here. He is my friend, and I shall not go back on him on account of what people say."

"Indeed."

"Was it to prejudice me against Sid Gidley that you led me out here?"

"No."

"Well?"

"I have something of importance to tell you."

"I am listening."

"And I want you to believe me when I tell you that which will pain you deeply," said the half-breed, slowly.

"Is it about Rena Tripp?"

"Not exactly."

"Go ahead."

"It's about this murder case, however, Mr. Ragsdale. Let us move along to the shade of yonder tree, where we will be more comfortable."

To this the man from Denver agreed, and once here, Benay Flash dismounted and secured his horse.

A rustic bench had been placed under the lone tree, and on this the two men found a comfortable seat.

"I have been investigating on my own hook, Mr. Ragsdale, and I have made some startling discoveries."

"Exactly."

"I have learned why Olive Chester was murdered."

"I think I have known that for some time," returned Ragsdale.

"Have you?"

"Yes; it is all comprised in the one word, 'jealousy.'"

"There's where you are mistaken."

"I do not think so."

"Of whom could Miss Chester be jealous, or Demming either? They were a loving couple, and had she lived, no doubt the two would have one day wed."

Ragsdale thought of the face in the locket that had once belonged to his cousin. He was wise enough not to mention his thoughts aloud, however, since, as the reader knows, he thoroughly distrusted the half-breed.

"What you say may be true. How, then, do you account for the murder? Would a man be apt to shoot the girl he loved in cold blood without cause?"

"No. No man shot Olive Chester."

Instantly the lawyer-detective thought of the talk he had overheard between this man and Rena Tripp.

"Do you imagine a woman committed the murder?"

"I do."

"Have you the proof?"

"It is at hand."

"Then Evard Demming had another sweetheart?"

"I will not deny it."

"Her name?"

"It does not matter now."

"Was it Rena Tripp?"

"You are good at guessing, Mr. Ragsdale,"

and Flash showed his teeth in a smile.

"And she was jealous of Olive?"

"A good guess again, sir."

"And you mean to tell me that the plainsman's daughter fired the fatal shot on the night of the sixteenth of last June?"

Ragsdale was considerably moved now. He remembered how the girl had cowered before this smooth rascal, and he felt that Rena knew something about Olive's death that she had not given to the world.

"On the contrary, I make no such accusation," said Flash, deliberately.

"What, then, do you mean?"

"If you will hold your temper I will tell you."

"I promise that."

"You remember once of my meeting you when you were returning from the Chester ranch to Three Oaks?"

"I remember."

"I then warned you about the people at

Chester Ranch. I promised to tell you some news when the right time arrived."

"Yes, yes. Go on."

"Well, there were reasons for the removal of Olive Chester of which you little dream. It is only of late that I have found out the facts. There's a cool hundred thousand at stake, sir, and the lives of two persons stood between the murderers and the money."

"This is Greek to me."

"I shall soon make it plain as the nose on Colonel Redhart's face, and that's the plainest thing on the Wyoming plains."

"Get down to facts. Don't beat about the bush so, Flash," said the lawyer, impatiently.

"The facts will startle you."

"I am ready to be startled, then."

"Do you know how Mr. Chester died?"

"No."

"He was found dead in bed one morning, some time before the death of Olive."

"Well?"

"At his side lay a vial labeled 'strychnia.'"

"Twas said he committed suicide."

"Indeed! This is news to me."

"I thought it would be. I have learned enough since to satisfy me that Chester was murdered."

"Impossible!"

"Oh, no, it isn't. I said I'd surprise you, and I'm going to do so still further if you still decide to listen."

"I am listening."

"Some time later Olive Chester was missing, and word was sent out that she had fled with her lover. It remained thus for a year, when the horrible truth came out, and I was at once requested to send for you."

"By whom?"

"Colonel Redhart. I told him of you and your uncle in Denver. He seemed not to know what was best to do, and so the upshot of it was the dispatch that called you from your lawyer's duties to Wyoming."

"Exactly!"

"And now it has become known to me that a large fortune was in the hands of the Chesters, and that Olive was the sole inheritor."

"Indeed!"

"You had no idea how wealthy your relatives were?"

"I supposed them poor."

"Exactly. You will now see that money, and not jealousy, caused the death of Miss Chester, as well as that of her father."

"I am not yet convinced."

"You will soon be, however," assured Benay Flash. "I don't know who left this money to Olive, only that a hundred thousand was so left, and that it is now the sole property of the mother. Tribune Tripp learned the truth in some way, and he married the widow to get it."

"Has he succeeded?"

"Not yet."

"He never shall!" exclaimed Ragsdale, half rising to his feet, his face white with deeply stirred feeling.

"Sit down, Mr. Ragsdale."

And the low-voiced Flash plucked at his companion's sleeve.

The lawyer-detective sank back to his seat once more.

"I am not through with you yet, Mr. Ragsdale," said Flash. "The gist of the thing is yet to come."

"Go on."

"It was this money that caused the murders that I have been telling you about," proceeded Flash. "Now, is it not natural to surmise that the one benefited by the death of Chester and his daughter committed the crime?"

"Such a surmise would not be unreasonable."

"So I thought."

"Who was the beneficiary?"

"Who but Julia Chester?"

Ragsdale bounded to his feet, white and trembling.

"Benay Flash, this is infamous!"

"Keep cool," urged the half-breed. "Remember your promise not to lose your temper."

After a moment the young lawyer calmed himself, and resumed his seat.

"I will keep cool, Flash, if only to refute your suspicions in a quiet way. Let me tell you that what you say regarding Aunt Julia has no influence with me whatever."

"I feared it would be so," returned Flash; "but I deemed it my duty to tell you what I had discovered. The evidence is strong against your aunt, while that against Demming is purely circumstantial."

"I have seen or heard of no evidence against Mrs. Chester."

"Then you doubt what I tell you?"

"Frankly, yes."

"What object do you think I could have in thus maligning a woman?"

"I do not know."

"You will be satisfied with proofs?"

"You have none."

"Don't be too sure of that. The colonel and I have been investigating as well as you. There's a keen detective on the trail, Mr. Ragsdale, and he will not let even high relationship interfere with his duty."

"Do you refer to Nat Shade?"

"Yes."

"I believe him an impostor."

"Then the colonel must be one as well. He procured this man-hunter from Cheyenne. I am sure of that."

"Are you?"

"I am."

"Very well. I shall not borrow trouble over this remarkable discovery of yours. I mean to investigate for myself," declared Ragsdale.

"Exactly what I want you to do," assured Flash. "Go right over to your aunt now and question her about this money. It's on deposit in a bank at Cheyenne. You'll find I have told only the facts, Mr. Ragsdale."

"Facts are stubborn things sometimes. Now, why is it that you and the colonel secrete Demming? I understand he has not left the country."

"I have nothing to do with the young man whatever. As for the colonel, he is able to speak for himself."

"True. We may as well part now, Mr. Flash. I will see Aunt Julia on this subject this very day."

"Do so, and when you find that I have not told the half, come to me. I shall then have a proposition to make."

Benay Flash remounted his horse and rode away.

Seeing nothing of Sid, Ragsdale turned his steps in the direction of Chester Ranch.

He was glad enough to find his aunt at home, and alone, for the revelations of the half-breed had a depressing effect upon him, and he wished to assure himself that Flash had spoken falsely.

"I am so glad you have come, Hilton, dear boy," said Mrs. Tripp. "We can have an hour to ourselves now."

She led the way to a small back room, closed and locked the door, and pointed to a chair.

"Sit there, Hilton," she said, in a low, tremulous voice. "I have a revelation to make of the utmost importance, and want no listeners aside from yourself."

## CHAPTER XVII.

### AN UNEXPECTED WINDFALL.

"No doubt," said Mrs. Tripp, after her nephew was seated—"no doubt you have wondered a good deal at finding me married to Tribune Tripp?"

The young lawyer confessed that he was surprised at such an event.

"I did not care for him in the least, and yet I was led toward the man by what seemed a deadly fascination. But let that drop now, and let us come to something of more interest to you, my dear Hilton."

The woman seemed nervous at the outset, but as she proceeded she gained courage.

"I believe you never met my first husband but once, Hilton?"

"I met Uncle Isaac on two occasions, Aunt Julia," returned the young man. "I believe he died soon after my last visit to you here?"

"Yes, that is true. Isaac died rather suddenly, and I felt grieved nigh unto death. Olive was company for me, however, and a brave girl. We managed the ranch very well till she was taken, and then troublous times came, and I foolishly consented to marry again. I have since learned that I was a fool."

"Not that, Aunt Julia."

"I can use no gentler term," said the

woman, evidently determined not to spare herself in the least.

"You have heard of people marrying for money, Hilton?"

"Yes."

"But you never heard of one marrying to get some one to take care of her money, did you?"

"I don't call to mind such an instance."

"Nor are you likely to; but when you look at me, your foolish aunt, you see one who did that very thing. I had so much money I did not know what to do with it—a hundred thousand dollars, Hilton."

The young man started.

"You are surprised?"

"Yes, indeed, Aunt Julia. I know Uncle Jared always spoke of you as poor."

"Of course he did. My brother never quite forgave me for marrying Isaac Chester, whom he dubbed a 'good-for-nothing jack-plane.' Isaac was a carpenter when I married him, but I loved him, Hilton, and never regretted my choice, even though he was not a man of much energy. But I am prolonging what I wished to tell you, and must hurry, for some one may come. It is about this money that I wish particularly to speak, Hilton. Brother Jared does not know that I am possessed of it, nor would I communicate with him on the subject. I know Jared well enough to know that he would come to see me at once did he understand that his sister, who married the despised mechanic, could buy him out twice over."

Nobody understood this trait in Jared Ragsdale's character better than the nephew.

"I understand," said Hilton, who saw that he was expected to put in a word at this point.

"It's about this money that I wish to speak," proceeded the woman. "It came to me in a singular manner. My husband, it seems, had a rich relative—a distant one—in England."

"The man was a bachelor, and decided to leave his property—mostly money—to a distant relative, rather than to strangers."

"Which was natural enough, I'm sure."

"Perhaps so. The gentleman came to visit me once, Hilton, when Olive was a child. He was deeply interested in the little girl, but we thought nothing of it till John Marchmont came to die. Then we learned that Olive was his sole legatee."

"Indeed?"

"And that is how I come to be possessed of such a fortune."

"Did Olive know of this?"

"Yes, and I fear others found it out. The dear girl had lovers in plenty after that, and strange as it may seem, she fancied the most objectionable one."

"Evard Demming?"

"Yes. That man never made serious advances till he learned of the fortune that Olive was to have at the age of twenty-one. Meantime my husband was constituted executor of the property."

"Exactly."

"The money came to hand after the usual lawful proceedings."

"Will you permit a question?"

"All you please, Hilton."

"You are now the sole possessor of this magnificent fortune, Aunt Julia?"

"Yes; on account of the death of my husband and Olive."

"Was the money willed in that way?"

"Yes. If Olive died before coming of age, Isaac Chester inherited all. In case both he and she died, then I was to have the whole sum. You see I am quite wealthy now."

No smile touched the sad face of the speaker.

"You are, indeed. Truly, I wonder at your marrying again. You must have known that this man, Tripp, was a fortune-hunter?"

"I think I might have known it but for Rena. I felt a fondness for her from the first, and she has filled in part the place that my poor Olive once occupied."

"Do you still trust her?"

"As the best-loved friend on earth," declared she, warmly.

The young lawyer could see that his aunt was firm in the belief that Rena Tripp was true and noble, no matter how villainous her father might be.

His aunt had confirmed a part of the story told by Benay Flash. Was it likely that

she would confirm the whole? He was very anxious to learn more.

"We heard of Uncle Isaac's death," said Ragsdale, "but none of the particulars. Can you give them to me?"

The pallor deepened on the woman's face, and she trembled visibly.

This fact did not escape the notice of the young lawyer-detective.

"The subject is painful to me," she said, after a moment of hesitancy, "and yet I suppose I ought to tell you all about it."

"Certainly you had, Aunt Julia," he assured her.

"I am afraid that your uncle's mind became turned on account of the great good fortune that had come to him. At any rate, he died very suddenly."

"Yes?"

Ragsdale regarded her eagerly.

She did not proceed, and he questioned:

"Did he take his own life, Aunt Julia?"

"Did Isaac commit suicide? Do you mean that, Hilton?"

She seemed startled at the young man's suggestion.

"That is my meaning."

"I cannot tell you."

"How is that?"

"I never knew, Hilton. I was gone from home on the night Isaac was taken sick. When I returned he was too far gone to speak, and the doctor who was summoned said that he thought your uncle had been poisoned."

"And this is all that you know about it?"

"That is all, Hilton."

"Was there no investigation?"

"None. Of what use? A bottle of some deadly poison was found near at hand, and it seemed that my husband had drunk of it. I always believed, however, that he took the stuff by mistake."

"Exactly; and on the death of Uncle Isaac, Olive alone stood between you and this fortune of a hundred thousand?"

He eyed her keenly.

She did not wince, however, as he expected. In fact, she did not seem to understand the dark hint he had thrown out.

Surely this coolness indicated innocence of any wrong-doing.

"That is true, and after poor Olive left me I became a rich but an unhappy woman. I have more than once wished that the money had never crossed the Atlantic, for it seems to entail misery on its possessor. I am glad, however, that the fortune enables me to do one thing. I can at least aid a kind friend and relative. In spite of the close watch that has been kept upon me, I have succeeded in a plan I have long contemplated."

She rose to her feet then, and went to a small bureau. Unlocking one of the drawers, she took therefrom a folded paper, and laid it in the hand of her nephew.

"Do not look at it now, Hilton," she said, as he drew the paper out of its covering.

"Take it with you, and never let other hands touch it till the proper time comes. Will you promise me this, Hilton?"

"Certainly; but what is the paper?"

"Curb your curiosity till you are alone, my dear boy. Now I have one word to say about Rena Tripp."

"Well?"

Ragsdale thrust the paper into an inner pocket, and turned his attention to his aunt.

"How do you like her?"

"She is a very pretty girl."

"That is not answering my question, Hilton."

"Well, what do you want me to say?"

"I want to know how you like the girl. Could you learn to love her?"

"Why, aunt, that seems to me an absurd question, I scarcely know Miss Tripp. She befriended me once, and naturally I have a soft spot in my heart for her, but—"

"But you cannot love her well enough to make her your wife?"

"Certainly not. Nor do I believe she would accept me did I offer myself. I am not out here on a love mission, my dear aunt, but in the interest of justice. I have resolved to hunt down the assassin of my unfortunate cousin if it takes a lifetime."

"Nobly spoken, Hilton, I am glad one person at least has interest enough in justice to work for that end without hope of reward."

"One moment, aunt."



Both were on their feet now.  
 "Did you ever see that before?"  
 He showed his aunt the penknife he had found near the scene of Olive's cruel murder. One glance seemed sufficient.  
 "Why, that was my daughter's knife," said Mrs. Tripp. "It was a present from a friend. You will notice the initials W. R. on the plate."

"I noticed them."  
 "The first owner's, I presume. Olive did not tell me her friend's name. Where did you find it, Hilton?"

He explained.  
 "Ah, it is a part of that awful night's tragedy! Heaven give you strength to succeed, Hilton! I hear horse-hoofs. Some one comes. We must call this interview at an end for the present. I have much more to tell but must leave it for another occasion."

Hilton Ragsdale left the house and turned his steps toward the colonel's ranch. He had been given a room to himself here, and it was to this that the young lawyer repaired.

Once alone he sat down and produced the paper his aunt had given into his keeping.

Drawing it from the wrapper Ragsdale opened it out on his knee.

"Last will and testament of Julia Tripp," he read in surprise.

As he ran his eye down the page his astonishment increased.

"My soul!" he exclaimed, "she has made me her sole heir!"

At this moment a sharp rap fell on his door.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### AN ACCIDENT.

BEFORE the young lawyer detective could secrete his precious paper, the door was opened and Benay Flash crossed the threshold.

His keen black eyes rested on the document on the knee of Ragsdale.

A queer, uncanny expression shot into those eyes, and for one brief instant the even, white teeth showed themselves, a milky streak between dusky lips.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Ragsdale," said the half-breed. "I had no idea you were busy."

"You seem to think I have nothing to do but play," retorted the man from Denver, ungraciously, as he folded the will and thrust it into its covering.

"What have you there?" questioned Flash, not once removing his gaze from the paper in the hand of Ragsdale.

"A matter of my own."

"Which does not concern me, you think?"

"It does not."  
 Ragsdale returned the document to his pocket and glanced frowningly out of the window.

He was deeply annoyed at the untimely visit of Benay Flash, and did not attempt to conceal his feelings.

"I beg your pardon again for intruding, Mr. Ragsdale," said the half-breed, in his smooth, oily tones. "I saw you return from your aunt's, and was anxious to learn if you had consulted her on the subject I spoke to you about a short time ago."

"You seem to be in a great sweat, Benay Flash."

"I confess to being in something of a hurry, but it is all on your account I assure you, Mr. Ragsdale."

"Indeed!"

"You saw Mrs. Tripp?"

"I did."

"What did you learn?"

"Some things that surprised me."

"I thought as much."

"Now what do you want to know?"

Ragsdale was on his feet now, looking anxious and worried. He did not like the inquisitive methods of the colonel's factotum.

The fellow was putting his nose into Ragsdale's affairs on every possible occasion.

"I wish to know if your aunt did not admit of having a fortune in a Cheyenne bank?"

"Suppose she did?"

"What of it, eh?"

"Yes, what of it?"

"A good deal. How did she come by so much money?"

"Honestly, I assure you."

"I am sorry to have to differ with you in this respect, Mr. Ragsdale."

"It is a matter of indifference to me, sir," retorted the young lawyer.

"You may not feel so indifferent when you understand the case more fully," said Flash, meaningly.

"I do not care to listen to threats, Benay Flash. If you have nothing further to offer, you will please consider this interview at an end."

"I have a good deal more to offer, sir," retorted the half-breed, again showing his teeth.

"If you value the safety of your aunt you will give me a respectful hearing."

"I am listening. Speak up at once, and to the point."

"I will do so in a few words, Mr. Ragsdale. I told you that it was suspected that Mrs. Chester poisoned her husband a long time since?"

"I believe you did."

"Furthermore, it is now believed that it was Mrs. Chester who put Olive out of the world on the night of the 16th of June last year."

"Sir!"

The young lawyer turned upon his visitor with clinched hands.

"Keep cool, my friend," said Flash, in a low voice, a smile opening his lips. "I am only repeating facts."

"It is preposterous! outrageous! malignant slander of a good woman!"

"It may be, yet, unless all signs fail, your good aunt will be brought to the bar of the court to answer for the crime of a double murder."

Soft as the purr of a cat fell the words of Benay Flash.

They entered the soul of the lawyer-detective like points of barbed steel.

An awful dread rested like an incubus on the spirit of Ragsdale.

He tried to shake it off.

He could not.

He gazed out of the window, and stood without uttering a word, when he felt that he ought to throttle his visitor for his base insinuations.

"You saw Detective Shade. He has been following some clues that lead him directly to Mrs. Tripp. It seems inevitable that she must face a court and answer certain questions. I am afraid she cannot do it. The evidence is strong, and the more the affairs of the past two years are investigated, the darker does it look for your aunt. I am not to blame for this. I feel as sorry that it is so as any one can. It lies with you to say what shall be done, Mr. Ragsdale."

The young lawyer listened to the low murmured words of the half-breed like one in a dream.

When at length he ceased speaking, Ragsdale seemed to awaken suddenly.

"My aunt is innocent!" declared he in an angry voice. "There may be a plot to effect her ruin, but it will not succeed. This man Shade hasn't sense enough to detect anything. He could not follow a clew if he tried."

"All very plausible," said Flash; "but do you wish to see your aunt arrested for these murders?"

"No."

"Then why not do something to prevent it?"

"I do not understand you."

"Must I speak plainer?"

"You must."

"Then I will point the way out."

"Go on."

"If you will leave this country, and let the past rest, I think all will be well."

The young lawyer glanced at the speaker in evident surprise.

"I don't think I quite comprehend."

"Return to Denver, and report that Olive Chester met her death at the hands of Indians—anything that will hush up the affair—and your aunt will be saved. Can you understand that, Mr. Ragsdale?"

"I think I can."

"And you will go?"

"No."

"What?"

"Benay Flash, you have put your foot in it now!" exclaimed the lawyer-detective, piercing the half-breed with a look that made him quail. "Your proposition is the same made to me by the masked horse-

thieves. It seems that an investigation of the murder of Olive Chester is the last thing desired by some people on the Big Horn. When you and the colonel sent for me, you imagined that I would merely look over the ground and return home without a thorough investigation. You have found out your mistake, and now you take this method of closing up the search for the criminal. You cannot turn me from my purpose, neither you nor your fellow conspirators."

Benay Flash seemed to quail at first, but as the young detective proceeded, his look changed, and at the last his milk-white teeth were disclosed by a smile.

"Go dness!" exclaimed the half-breed.

"The idea that Colonel Redhart is a conspirator against his neighbor. I only mentioned a way to save your aunt from arrest and prosecution. I don't say she is guilty, but I do aver that it'll puzzle her and her friends to keep her out of the penitentiary, now that her very dear nephew goes back on her. I've said more than I intended. I shall not lift a finger to save your relative after to-day."

Benay Flash turned to go.

"One moment, Mr. Flash."

"Well?"

"Does Colonel Redhart know of this?"

"Of my proposition to you?"

"Yes."

"He does not."

"You were sent by Mr. Shade?"

"I will answer no more questions," said Flash. "I hope we shall be friends in the future, Mr. Ragsdale, although you have tried to make an enemy of me."

And then the man departed.

Closing the door, Ragsdale stood alone in his room.

The proposition of the half-breed suggested a strange chain of thought.

Many questions flitted unanswered through the brain of the lawyer.

What was the motive that led the half-breed to make such a proposition to the man who was engaged in ferreting out a most heinous crime?

The fellow surely had a motive.

Was he alone in this, or was he but the agent of others?

Why had Flash unbosomed himself in this way with regard to Mrs. Tripp?

Was there a conspiracy to destroy his aunt, and save the real murderer?

The young lawyer-detective could find no satisfactory answers to these questions.

Another thought troubled him not a little. Might it not be true that Julia Chester had murdered her relatives to obtain the fortune?

The thought was horrible and repulsive.

By making her nephew her heir, the woman had, to Ragsdale, disproved her connection with the crime laid to her by Benay Flash.

It seemed conclusive now, to the man from Denver, that Evard Demming, however guilty he might be, was not alone in his criminality. There loomed up a vast conspiracy, that made the unraveling of the mystery at Three Oaks Ranch more difficult than Ragsdale had expected.

There was more than one element of mystery about the whole affair.

"I'll see Sid Gidley, and obtain possession of the locket," decided Ragsdale. "After that I must find the man whose photograph occupies one side of the locket. He is certainly a factor in the case that must not be ignored."

Full of these thoughts, the young lawyer left the room.

He met the colonel below, who informed him that it was the dinner hour.

After the meal Colonel Redhart suggested a ride down the creek toward the Big Horn, where he had a large drove of cattle.

After a brief hesitancy the young Denverite accepted the invitation.

When they were ready to start Ragsdale discovered that the detective was to make one of the party.

This arrangement did not please the lawyer, but he had too good sense to let his feelings be known.

The ride was a much longer one than Ragsdale expected.

It was almost night before the colonel was ready to return to Three Oaks.

The horse ridden by the lawyer was a skittish animal, and had more than once shied at

some object by the roadside, and nearly unseated his rider.

"I'd about forgot old Tom's coltishness," declared the colonel, but he made no offer to exchange animals with Ragsdale, and the latter was too proud to mention such a thing himself.

Darkness had fallen.

Colonel Redhart was in advance, while Ragsdale brought up the rear.

They were crossing a ridge, through a rather dense cluster of timber.

Of a sudden a loud snort was heard; then the cry of a man in alarm, followed by a crashing of brush and twigs.

"Hello!" cried Colonel Redhart, drawing rein. "What's up behind there?"

"I guess an accident," said Shade. "I see nothing of our friend, Ragsdale. His horse has fallen over the ridge!"

"Then he's done for!" exclaimed the colonel.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE FACE AGAIN.

It was true.

Ragsdale had gone over the ridge.

Horse and rider had rolled down an embankment some forty feet, and both seemed to be dead, since neither stirred.

Colonel Redhart and his companion dismounted, and securing their horses proceeded to investigate.

"It war all old Tom's doin's," said the colonel, as he descended the steep in advance of Shade, the detective. "I oughtn't to have let the young feller ride the or'nary critter."

"I hope he is not killed."

"It'll be er miracle ef he ain't."

The two men soon reached the foot of the declivity, and stood quietly listening.

It was too dark here in the woods to see anything.

Presently a groan assailed the ears of the twain.

"That's him," said the colonel.

"He isn't dead, then?"

"No; I'm glad on't. Hello, Ragsdale! Where are you?"

To this call no answer was vouchsafed.

However, the two men were not long in finding the spot where man and horse lay.

Matches were brought into requisition, and an examination made.

The horse was stone dead.

His neck had been broken.

"Confound ther luck," growled the Missourian.

"What now, colonel?"

"That horse," declared Redhart. "He cost me two hundred, and now he's dead. I'm dumbed sorry."

"Never mind the horse. How is it with the man?"

"He's dead, too, I reckon."

Shade bent over the prostrate young lawyer, and placed his hand on his heart. In order to ascertain if life remained the detective removed his glove.

"Hold a match this way, colonel."

Redhart did as requested. He even went further, and ignited a bunch of weeds and twigs, thus making a torch that burned for a considerable time.

He held the light so that it lit up the face and form of Ragsdale.

"Wal," said the colonel, "is the young fellow dead?"

"No."

"He may die though?"

"Time enough. It's a bad accident," agreed Shade. "You've lost a valuable horse, and the community may have lost a very smart man."

There was something like a sarcastic ring in the speaker's voice at the last.

It was quite evident that Detective Nat Shade did not think highly of Hilton Ragsdale.

"There's no use talkin'," declared Colonel Redhart, "the Denver feller is smart and I hate to have him die in this ere way. We must git him home some way, Nate."

"We'd best go home and send some one out with a team. It might be the death of him if we tried to carry him on our horses. If he dies it isn't your fault or mine, colonel."

"That's true, I admit."

The light was burning low now, and its

faint flashes revealed a weird picture—two men, half bending over a prostrate form on the ground, a dead horse near, tall trees looming up in shadowy outlines on every side.

Slowly the picture faded out, and a solemn darkness covered all.

The wind moaning through the trees sounded like a dirge.

One of the men shuddered.

Perhaps he was superstitious, or perhaps he had a guilty conscience that makes cowards of men.

"Come," said Shade in a low voice, "let us go."

"And leave Ragsdale?"

"Yes. I'm sure he can't last long. The body can be carted in to-morrow and shipped to his friends—that will end it all."

A heartless remark.

It did not seem to affect the Missouri colonel, who signified his willingness to depart.

The two men climbed the hill, remounted their horses, and rode swiftly away.

"Where's Ragsdale?"

It was buxom Mrs. Redhart who put this question the moment her husband and Detective Shade entered the house on their return.

"He's hurt," said the colonel.

He then explained.

"Oh, dear! that's too bad," sighed the woman. "A gentleman was here, soon after you left, a-lookin' for the Denver man."

"Eh—is that so?"

The colonel seemed interested at once.

"It's so. Do you think I would lie about it, colonel?"

The woman looked indignant.

"No. Who was he, Nance?"

"I dunno."

"Whar was he from?"

"Don't know that nuther."

"Wal, you're smart. Why didn't yer find out who he was, whar he was from an' what he wanted?"

"He didn't give me time. He was in a powerful hurry, and rid off jest as soon's he found you'n Mr. Ragsdale had gone."

"Sho!"

A troubled look overspread the face of the colonel.

At length he said:

"What sort of a lookin' chap was he, Nance?"

"A likely young feller."

"Can't you describe him?"

"I might."

"Do so, then."

"A trim-built young man, with a smooth face, chestnut hair, and dark eyes."

"His clo's?"

"Neat as wax."

"Store clo's?"

"Yes."

"By thunder! it was some tenderfoot from Denver, I'll bet a hoss."

The colonel seemed troubled, however, and went to his smoking-room, whither he called Shade, and the two talked long and earnestly, not separating till almost the morning hour.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the meantime what of our Denver friend who had been left to his fate at the foot of the wooded ridge?

He was not dead.

Nor was he injured so deeply as Colonel Redhart and his companion supposed.

The moment the two men departed there was a movement on the part of Ragsdale.

He sat up.

It was too dark to see objects, but the young lawyer knew about where he was. His nerves had received a severe shock in more than one particular.

He had made a discovery that tingled to the very tips of his fingers.

It will be remembered that Shade, in order to make an examination of Ragsdale's condition, had removed his glove. Under the glare of the colonel's torch, the hand of the detective was plainly revealed to the prostrate young lawyer.

It was the sight of a missing little finger that had startled Ragsdale.

After that the man from Denver lay quite still. Once this man, then in mask, had attempted to take his life. He believed the fellow was none too good to make sure of the

job now, did he suspect that Ragsdale would live.

And so the lawyer-detective had "played possum" to good advantage on this occasion.

He had made a most important discovery.

Nat Shade was a villain!

He certainly was not what he purported to be. Did his employer, the doughty Missouri colonel, know the true character of Shade?

It was this unanswered question that troubled Ragsdale more than aught else.

It was with some difficulty that the lawyer regained his feet. When he succeeded in doing so he felt weak and faint.

"So they will send for my body in the morning," mused Ragsdale, with a grim laugh. "I'm thinking they'll not find it this time. I presume it's a steep climb up yonder hill, but it must be made, and then I'll rest under a tree till morning, when I'll pounce down on some people I know and give them a surprise party."

The lawyer detective waited till he felt a little stronger, when he began the ascent of the hill. It proved a toilsome climb for one who was yet weak from his tumble down the ridge declivity.

When he reached the summit of the ridge he sat down and listened.

Far away on the trail he heard the metallic click of iron-shod hoofs.

His two late companions were making good time on the return to Three Oaks Ranch.

"I'll surprise them in the morning," thought Ragsdale, and in this reflection he seemed to find a good deal of comfort.

Presently he started to his feet, and stepped aside from the trail.

Why this movement?

He had heard a sound that assured him of the approach of a horseman along the trail.

This was a surprise to him, since he supposed his friends, who had so considerably left him to his fate, were far away on the return to Three Oaks.

A flash of heat lightning lit the night for an instant, and in its glare the concealed man caught a view of the approaching horseman.

"Ah!" exclaimed the young lawyer.

A moment later the traveler had passed on.

"That face!" exclaimed Ragsdale. "There's but one such in the world, and he is an important factor in this strange case."

Even while he soliloquized, the sound of horse-hoofs fretted the evening air. Once more a flash of distant lightning lit up the trail, revealing the face and form of a second horseman.

"Glory! glory!" exclaimed Ragsdale, in an ecstasy of delight.

The next instant he sprang into the trail, and uttered a name that brought the horseman to a halt—the name of Sid Gidley, the boy homesteader.

"Good land! is that you, Hilton?"

"It's me for a fact, Sid, my boy," returned the lawyer, "and I'm very glad to see the face, and hear the voice of a friend once more."

"And I'm dreadful glad to find you, Hilton!" returned the lad. "I've been looking for you. It's kind o' strange how we git separated so. I don't think we've traveled in company much after all. I found out you'd come to the old kunnel's cattle range, and so pointed this way myself."

"Did you meet the colonel and his man Friday?"

"Who'd ye call Friday?"

"Mr. Shade."

"No, I didn't meet 'em."

"You must have passed them."

"I didn't follow the regular trail," said the boy, "and must have missed 'em in that way. How'd you come to be separated from 'em, Hilton?"

The young lawyer explained.

"I told you Shade was no good."

"I don't believe he's a detective," declared Ragsdale, "and what's more, I'm afraid the colonel isn't sound."

"It looks that way."

"And, Sid."

"Well, Hilton?"

"I saw that face again just now."

"What face?"

"The face of Olive's other lover—the face of the man whose photograph is in the locket you found, Sid."



## CHAPTER XX.

## ROBBING A THIEF.

BENAY FLASH, accompanied by a cow-boy from one of Colonel Redhart's ranges, drove away from Three Oaks on the following morning, in the direction of the ridge where it was supposed Hilton Ragsdale had met his fate.

They rode in a two-horse wagon, intending to bring the body of the unfortunate lawyer to the ranch.

The colonel's countenance wore an uneasy expression during the day.

He rode out in company with Detective Shade in the morning, and the twain halted at the lone cabin where the body of the murdered girl had been found.

The two dismounted and searched the cabin and vicinity thoroughly.

They made no important discoveries.

"There's not a clew left here, Nate," said the colonel. "I've an idea the fellow who shot the gal won't never be found."

"You don't have much faith in the detective you have employed, then, colonel," returned Shade with a low laugh.

"Well, you know how it is, Nate: the young feller from Denver's gone under, and he was the most interested in findin' out their facts."

"Of course, but I sha'n't rest easy till some one hangs for this."

"So?"

"Yes, colonel."

A queer expression shot from the eyes of the speaker.

"So you're goin' to hunt some one to the gallows, Nate?"

"That's the size of it, colonel."

The ranch owner said no more on the subject then.

Remounting his horse he faced toward home.

Shade kept him company.

"You seem troubled, colonel."

"I be troubled, Nate."

"Why should you be?"

"It's about the young feller."

"Ragsdale?"

"Yes."

"Are you to blame for an accident?"

"No, I s'pose not; but the feller trusted me like I was his father, and 'twan't usin' him right ter gin him that hoss, Nate, I swar 'twasn't. Dum my skin, ef I don' believe his spirit'll ha'n't me allus."

The colonel drew his rough sleeve across his eyes.

"Crying, as I live!" exclaimed the Cheyenne detective, mockingly.

"Don't laugh, pard, yer hurt my feelin's," said Colonel Redhart.

"The idea that you should think so much of Hilton Ragsdale. I thought you had more sand, colonel."

To this speech the Missourian made no reply.

Half an hour later the colonel was pacing up and down the porch in front of his house.

"It's bad bizness, mighty bad," muttered the Missourian. "I'll hev to send a telegram to Denver and inform the uncle, I s'pose. Dod blame me, why'd I consent, why did I? Fust I know the gallus'll be yawning for my carcass, sure's the notion. I never did a bad deed in ole Missouri, and it's er shame 'at I should come ter Wyoming and go into iniquities."

That the colonel was in an uneasy state of mind was to be seen at a glance.

He entered the house, and procuring his pipe, filled and lit it, returning to the porch, where he sat down and smoked vigorously to drown his troubled conscience.

In the meantime Nate Shade retired to his room on the ground floor at the rear of the house.

He sat down and drew an envelope from his pocket.

From this he removed a long, legal-looking document, and proceeded to examine it carefully.

"Last will and testament of Mrs. Julia Tripp," muttered the man. "An important document, truly. It was lucky I went through his pockets last night. This may lead to something, and I may be able to feather my nest at your expense, Mr. Ragsdale."

He examined the paper carefully.

"So she's made the Denver man her heir," mused Mr. Shade. "I can see through this

like a mice. You're euchred this time, Mr. Tripp, sure's the world. You got the widow, but not the money. Ha! ha! ha!"

The man from Cheyenne laughed till his sides shook, so pleased was he over the situation.

"Now, if my very dear friend Ragsdale was living, I should not touch this paper, but since he has joined the majority, there's no harm in my seeing to it that his heirs do not profit by this legal document. Let me see, who are the witnesses? What!"

Shade bent low and glanced at the paper, his eyes shining like glass beads.

"That man's name signed to this!"

The fellow trembled visibly.

He was truly deeply moved, and in a way that betokened the most intense anger as well as alarm.

"I had no idea that he was in this country, yet I notice that it was only a few weeks ago that this document was made out. I believe that man, whom I hate above ground induced Mrs. Tripp to make this disposition of her property. Should she die suddenly, the money in Cheyenne Bank would go to the relatives of Ragsdale—providing this will is ever found!"

There was a deep meaning in the last words of the pretended detective, and the gleam in his eyes was something unpleasant to see.

Lighting a match, Shade held it under the paper.

Of a sudden, however, he threw away the match, a new thought having dawned on his brain.

"What a fool!" he exclaimed. "This paper may be worth more to me in my possession, than it possibly could be, destroyed. I don't mean to play into the hands of Tribune Tripp and his ilk; I'd much rather deal with the heirs of Mr. Ragsdale. I'll keep the paper till such time as it becomes necessary to use it."

Refolding the important document, the schemer thrust it back into its envelope and shoved it into his coat-pocket.

He then lit a cigar, and sat and smoked for half an hour. The room seemed close and stifling.

Shade drew off his coat and threw it over a chair.

He still smoked.

He was in deep meditation, when a sound attracted his attention.

He rose languidly and went to the window. What he saw caused him to start and change color.

A score of mounted men were less than half a mile distant, riding toward Three Oaks at a gallop.

"Cowboys," muttered Shade. "I wonder what they want with the colonel?"

For some moments the man from Cheyenne stood watching the coming troop. He soon satisfied himself that the party meant to halt at the ranch.

"I'll step out and see what's in the wind," muttered Shade. "There's nothing like putting a bold face on matters of this kind."

Shade left the room, locking the door after him.

His coat still lay on the chair, and that stood near the open window. Scarcely had Shade left the room, when a hand was thrust through the open window, and seized the coat.

Soon the garment was tossed back, and the hand withdrawn.

Immediately thereafter a man crossed an open space near the house, and glided into the grove near at hand.

All this was but the work of a half dozen minutes.

Meantime the troop of horsemen galloped up to the front of the house and halted.

The men were a hardy set, all armed to the teeth, and well mounted.

Colonel Redhart removed his pipe and stared at the new arrivals.

The leader of the troop rode right up to the steps, and leaned from the saddle.

"Helloa! Jack, is it you?" cried Colonel Redhart, springing up and extending his hand.

The man on the horse did not seem to notice the friendly greeting, but said:

"Have you a stranger in the house, colonel?"

"What d'ye mean, Jack Stoneset?"

"Jest what I say."

"I don't reckon I hev."

The stalwart homesteader, whom we met on one occasion at Catamount Ranch, turned to his followers.

"Boys, I expect you'll hev to go through the ranch."

"Hold on," objected the colonel. "Jest explain a leetle. Do yer 'magine I've got a criminal in my housen?"

"That's it to a T, colonel."

"Git off yerself, then, Jack, and go through the old trap. Who yer lookin' fur, anyhow?"

"Fur a man on a sorrel mare—a young feller in store clo's and calf boots."

"Who is he?"

"A hoss thief and a coyote."

"Wal, he ain't here."

At this moment Nate Shade appeared.

He was looked over keenly and curiously, but was not molested.

Jack Stoneset went through the ranch, and returned to the outside satisfied.

"Now, see here, Jack," said Colonel Redheart, after the search was over, "did yer 'spect I wor in their low, dirty business of hidin' hoss thieves?"

The colonel's voice rung out indignantly.

Jack Stoneset did not seem to scare, however.

Tapping the irate colonel on the shoulder with the butt of his revolver, the stalwart homesteader said:

"Colonel Redhart, gittin' mad don't skeer ther boys, nor your's truly, wuth a cent. Thar's a good many men 'at we've trusted as hev did wuss nor hide hoss thieves, and ther Big Horn homesteaders has stood all their agoin' ter of sich devilment. Thar's goin' to be a rattlin' mong their dry bones, colonel, and all I've got to say to you is, jest thank yer stars ef you hain't a wuss skeleton in yer closet nor the one you mentioned. Mebbe we'll call again some day. Till then, good-bye, *au revoy, adieu*."

With a mocking bow the leader of the vigilantes turned, sprung to the saddle, and rode away at the head of his command.

"So that's the way the wind blows," said Shade. "You're suspected, colonel, as I live."

"Dod blast ther picters!"

This was all the remark the Missourian made at this time.

That he was deeply moved, however, was plain to be seen.

He refused to discuss the affair with the detective, and the latter soon returned to his room.

He took up his coat and felt in the inner pocket. An alarmed expression visited his face as he felt rapidly from pocket to pocket. "Great Heaven! the will is gone! stolen!" he exclaimed.

## CHAPTER XXI.

## DON RAMON ARRIVES.

"I THINK myself that is the best way."

"The people about here will think you are dead, or gone home, and you'll be able to do a heap more huntin' out the vagabonds 'at would screen a murderer."

A boy and man sat under a tree not many miles from Three Oaks Ranch.

Near by was a horse nipping the short prairie grass.

The two persons were Hilton Ragsdale and Sid Gidley.

The twain had ridden a long way since their night adventure in the woods on the ridge.

Ragsdale was feeling almost himself again, and took a more rosy view of the future than he had done in a long time.

Sid was a boy of resources, and he had made many valuable suggestions to his new friend.

His last was that Ragsdale drop from sight entirely, and pursue his further investigations in disguise.

It was this suggestion of the boy that brought forth the words opening the present chapter.

"The next thing will be to procure a suitable disguise," said the young lawyer.

"That won't be much of a trick."

"I'm thinking it will."

"Just you go home with me, and I'll see you up," declared Sid.

"I'll do that. And, Sid?"

"Well, Hilton?"

"That locket."

"Yes, that's a fact. I left that at home. Let's hurry and get there soon's we can."

"I am agreed, and we must be careful not to meet any one on the way."

The boy insisted on Ragsdale's riding the horse, and so, without parley, the lawyer mounted, and his boy friend trotted along at his side.

It was not far to the Deadwater ranch. Just before reaching it the lad halted.

"We mustn't be seen, or you mustn't, Mr. Ragsdale, so I'd best go on ahead and send Pete Gorman away till we git you fixed up."

"Who is Pete Gorman?"

"The man I've hired to run the ranch while I'm helpin' you."

The boy rode on in advance, leaving Ragsdale concealed in a clump of trees on the creek bank.

In the course of half an hour the lad returned, announcing that the coast was clear. The two men hurried to the house.

"We've got two hours to work in," said Sid. "Before that time we kin have you fixed so yer mother wouldn't know ye."

Sid was enthusiastic at the outlook, and his companion soon caught some of his enthusiasm.

The blonde mustache of Ragsdale was sacrificed, Sid using a razor to good effect.

Next the chestnut hair had to go, close to the head.

"Now, then, bring on your false beard," said the lawyer.

"I haven't any."

"Good heavens! then you've disfigured me without effecting a disguise," exclaimed Ragsdale, in trepidation.

"Don't fly off their handle too sudden like, Hilton," returned Sid. "I'm running this business jest at present. You jest leave it to me."

"All right."

From a cupboard in the room the young homesteader produced a mug half filled with a dark paste.

A brush stood in this, which Sid began using freely on the face of his friend.

"Be careful what you do, boy. You'll ruin my complexion forever."

"No; but fur a short time only," and Sid laughed merrily as he stood back and contemplated his work. "There, I reckon you're changed a little, anyhow."

Then Sid returned the mug of stain, and brought a glass for Ragsdale to contemplate himself in.

The change was remarkable.

The blonde face of Ragsdale was now the dark, sallow one of a Mexican or Spaniard.

"Well, Hilton, how d'ye like the change?"

The boy grinned with delight as he contemplated his work.

"Very good, only—"

"Wal?"

"My hair doesn't correspond with my countenance, nor my hands."

"I forgot your hands. I'll fix 'em in a minute."

Once more the mug was brought into requisition, and the fair hands of the lawyer were stained a beautiful brown. Returning the mug to its place, Sid left the room.

When he returned, he carried a suit of clothing and a wig of long, straight black hair.

"Sam used these once," explained the boy, "when he went among the redskins. I reckon they'll fix you out in good shape."

"So you would make an Indian of me? I'm afraid I cannot fill the bill, Sid. You have made a mistake."

"No, I hain't. You ain't no Indian, but a Mexican gentleman or a Spanish, up from the South buyin' cattle—see?"

"Yes, indeed!"

The boy's idea was a good one, and the man from Denver was well pleased.

He donned the wig and suit of clothes, and then saw at a glance that his disguise was complete.

"It's just the thing!" exclaimed Ragsdale. "I believe you are a magician, boy."

"You must have a name."

"True."

"What shall it be?"

"I can think of none. I still trust to you, Sid."

"Wal, how'd Don Ramon do?"

"Excellent."

"Very good. Don Ramon 'tis then. I

reckon we'll fool the enemy yet," declared Sid, laughing.

Just at this moment the door opened and a man looked in.

It proved to be Pete Gorman.

"Senor Ramon, Pete," said the boy, quickly.

"A cursed greaser, eh?" muttered the squatter, under his breath.

Aloud he said:

"Good-morning, senor."

The Spaniard bowed coldly.

"Now get up dinner quickly, Pete, for me'n Don Ramon have got to be on the move again."

After the meal, and Pete had gone about his duties, Don Ramon asked the boy about the locket once more.

"Yes, I forgot about it. I'll git it, senor, and you shall carry it hereafter, if you choose."

Sid went to his room.

He was gone a long time, and Ragsdale became impatient, since he had resolved to visit Three Oaks at once, and learn how the matter of his disappearance affected Colonel Redhart and Detective Shade.

"You were gone long enough to take a dozen photos, Sid," said the *pseudo* Mexican, when the lad returned.

A serious look rested on the face of the young homesteader that did not escape the notice of Ragsdale.

"I couldn't find it, senor."

"Couldn't find the locket?"

"That's the truth, sir."

"That is bad," muttered the lawyer. "You see, now, if you had intrusted it to my keeping this would not have happened, boy."

"I'm not so sure of that," returned the boy. "You tell me that you lost a valuable paper last night."

"True, but the penknife I found near the scene of the murder was not touched, and the locket might as well have been left undisturbed. Have you any idea where the locket has gone?"

"No."

"I am sorry this has happened."

"So am I."

"You might question Pete."

"I will."

Sid went out.

When he returned he shook his head.

"It's no go," he said.

"Well, you may be able to find it soon. I am anxious to get my hands on that stolen paper. I know the thief, and would get it before he thinks to destroy it."

"The thief's the feller 'at the kunnel 'as taken to his bosom."

"You mean Mr. Shade of Cheyenne, of course?"

"Yes."

"He's the man, and I mean to learn more of him."

After a little further discussion Sid furnished Don Ramon with a horse, and the latter mounted and rode swiftly toward Three Oaks Ranch.

The young lawyer-detective had now entered fully into the spirit of the case he had in hand, and began to enjoy the situation.

He was so fully disguised, he felt not the slightest fear of detection, and realized that he could work to much better advantage than heretofore.

Making a detour, the Denverite reached the vicinity of Three Oaks without being discovered.

He left his horse in the grove at the rear of the house and walked forward on foot.

He discovered Nate Shade in his room, and looking through the window, saw him examining the stolen will.

"The scoundrel!" muttered the watcher, quite overcome at the sight.

When Shade essayed to burn the paper, Ragsdale darted forward and came near betraying himself.

He paused just in time.

A little later he saw Shade leave the room. Creeping forward, Ragsdale secured the precious document as we have seen.

He regained his horse without being discovered.

Waiting till the troop of vigilantes had departed, Ragsdale rode boldly from the timber and halted not till he was at the door of the house.

Colonel Redhart was still on the front porch.

He had not resumed his pipe, however, and paced up and down with nervous strides.

"Dod blast the luck! ef here don't come another stranger—a dumber greaser at that!"

"Senor Redhart, I believe," and the horseman removed the wide-rimmed hat Sid had furnished him, as he spoke.

"Colonel Redhart!" retorted the Missourian, bluntly.

"Beg a thousand pardons!"

"Wal, yer needn't. What yer lookin' fur, anyhow? Not ther man on er sorrel mare, with store clo's, and er dandy look gin'rally?"

Ragsdale started.

The mention of a sorrel mare called to mind the animal he had lost.

"I had two men in mind, Senor Colonel," returned the horseman—"the one you speak of, and an American from Denver."

"Eh?"

"A young man—Senor Ragsdale."

"You lookin' fur this man Ragsdale?"

"Yes. He promised to aid me a little in buying cattle. I haven't seen him in many weeks, however. I heard he was stopping with you."

"Wal, he was."

"I am pleased. Then I can see him."

"I'm afeared you won't see him—I'm afeared on't, pardner."

"What do you mean, colonel?"

"Hilton Ragsdale's dead."

"Mercy! this is sad news."

The Mexican threw up his hands.

"Never mind, though. Come in and make yourself comfortable like. Mebbe I kin help yer in ther cattle buyin' business."

"Thanks, colonel."

The Mexican dismounted.

Colonel Redhart called a boy—one who sometimes took the place of Benay Flash—and ordered him to stable the gentleman's horse.

The disguised lawyer gave his name, and stated that he had come many miles to buy cattle and horses.

He was stocking a ranch in northern Mexico, and desired a large number of Northern cattle.

"You mout a-found 'em nearder home," suggested Colonel Redhart.

"True; but I had a desire to see this country. I knew the Ragsdales. Stopped off a day at Denver, and learned that Hilton Ragsdale was your guest, and so came on here. I am shocked to learn of his death. How did it happen?"

"An accident."

The colonel then explained.

At this moment Nate Shade appeared, looking pale and troubled.

"What's up?" queried the colonel, after he had introduced his companion.

"I've been robbed."

"Robbed?"

"That's it; robbed of a valuable paper while I was here a short time ago. Some one entered my room through the window and stole a paper from my coat pocket."

The speaker glanced suspiciously at Don Ramon.

"Dod blast the luck!"

The colonel made no further comment.

Shade beckoned his host aside.

"Colonel Redhart, who is that fellow yonder?"

"Don Ramon, of Mexico."

"Sure?"

"I reckon."

"Confound him! I believe he is the thief!"

## CHAPTER XXII.

### A BAD "BREAK."

THE man who was thus being denounced by the Cheyenne detective sat smoking a cigar, apparently unconscious of the way his name was being bandied by those near at hand.

He had keen ears, however, and he had caught the import of the detective's words.

"Dod blast it, Nate, this is nonsense," returned the colonel. "This man's a Mexican gentleman."

"I don't believe it."

"Wal, don't speak so loud, or he'll hear ye. Dod blamed if I'm going to go back on the



feller till I know more about him. I've got some cattle to sell, you understand, and you mustn't insult the chap while he's my guest."

"Just ask him to turn out his pockets," urged Mr. Shade.

"No—no, that one won't do, Nate. Let me manage it. I reckon you're mistaken, anyhow."

The colonel now advanced and sat down beside Don Ramon.

Casting a fierce scowl toward the Mexican, Shade turned on his heel and walked away, entering the grove and disappearing.

"The gentleman seems annoyed," said Don Ramon.

"You heard him say he'd been robbed, of course?"

"Yes."

"He lost a valuable paper, and feels sore about it, naturally."

"And does he suspect anybody?"

"I reckon so. But let Nat go fer ther present," said the colonel. "Come indoors and crack a bottle o' wine long o' me, senor."

"Certainly, colonel."

Tossing aside his cigar, the seeming Mexican followed Colonel Redhart into the house. He was shown to a room where a card table and utensils for gambling seemed the most prominent part of the furniture.

"Brought these ere things from ole Missouri with me," explained the colonel. "I don't fetch every coon 'at comes along in here. This is my private sanctorum whar I entertain my friends. Sit up and hev a friendly game of yer like."

"Not now, colonel. I want to talk cattle."

"All right."

A bottle of wine was "cracked," however, and while the colonel seemed to drink deeply, Don Ramon partook very sparingly. Ragsdale was somewhat suspicious of the colonel, and did not mean to be caught napping.

"I've got plenty of steers, senor, and am blamed sure I can suit yer."

"We'll look them over in a few days, sir."

"Why not at once—to-morrow?"

"I'm in no hurry," returned the Mexican. "I shall remain in this vicinity for some time."

"You'll make yer home long o' me?"

"If it pleases you, colonel."

"Wal, it do please me. I've got the best grade o' steers on ther Big Horn, bet yer life on thet, senor, the prime lot."

Colonel Redhart smacked his lips over a second glass of wine.

It was not cattle that Ragsdale was after, but something of far more importance. He was anxious to learn the true character of the gaunt Missourian, to learn if possible whether he really desired the murderer of Olive Chester captured. Furthermore, this man Shade, who seemed a good friend of the colonel's, Ragsdale knew to be a villain, the leader in fact of the masked outlaws who had come so near murdering him on a certain occasion, as the reader remembers.

The man's mutilated hand had given him away to the lawyer detective on the previous night.

Now, if Colonel Redhart was an honest man, why had he introduced this villain to Ragsdale as a detective from Cheyenne?

Possibly Shade had deceived the colonel. Probably he had not, however, and as Don Ramon, the Mexican, the man from Denver expected to learn much of importance ere he turned his back on Three Oaks Ranch.

He was well aware that it was necessary to move with caution. He must be careful not to excite the suspicion of the gaunt colonel. As for Shade, the amateur man-hunter did not care.

"Colonel, I once had a friend who lived in the Big Horn basin somewhere," said Ragsdale, after a free exchange of opinions on various subjects. "I wonder if you didn't know him?"

"Like enough, though I hain't been in these diggin's more'n a year. What was his name?"

"His name is Demming."

"Eh?"

"My friend's name is Demming," repeated the Mexican.

"Not Evard Demming?"

"The same."

"Good Lordy!"

"Did you know him, colonel?"

"Did I know him? Wal, I sh'u'd smile. Why, dod blast it, senor, I bought this ranch o' that ar feller, 'bout a year ago now. I did, fur a fact. So you know'd Evard Demming! Wal, that's news, and good news, too, blamed ef 'tain't."

"It makes us seem like friends, or rather old acquaintances, don't it, colonel?" returned Don Ramon, as he sipped daintily at his wine.

"Wal, rayther."

"Is Mr. Demming still in the basin?"

The keen eyes of the disguised lawyer peered mildly up from under his brows at the man on the opposite side of the table.

For an instant Colonel Redhart hesitated.

"I dunno," he finally said.

"I should like very much to meet him."

"I'll see; mebbe I kin arrange it," said the colonel reflectively.

"You don't know where he is, you say?"

"Did I say that?"

"I so understood you."

"Wal, I reckon I mout put my finger on the youngster, ef so be I took it inter my head to do it, senor."

"Then you know where Senor Demming is?"

"I reckon I do."

"Then, surely, you will let me see him."

"I'll try'n arrange it. You see, ther youngster got inter a leetle trouble, and has ter keep kinder shady fur ther present."

"Indeed! I'd not expect Demming to do anything very bad."

"Wal, 'twan't nothin' wuss'n murder," said the gaunt Missourian, laughing grimly.

"Murder!"

"That's it," senor."

"Do you tell me that Senor Demming committed a murder? I thought him a fine man."

"I said he was 'cused of murder. Thar's a blamed sight o' difference atween bein' 'cused and bein' guilty, senor."

"True enough."

The colonel then entered into an explanation that seemed to satisfy the Mexican.

"I'll look up Mr. Demming and tell him about you," finally agreed the colonel.

Toward night the wagon returned from the scene of the late accident.

Colonel Redhart hurried to meet it, accompanied by Senor Ramon.

"Whar's the body?" demanded the colonel, when he looked into the wagon and saw it empty.

"You didn't expect us to bring the dead horse, did you, colonel?" queried Benay Flash, grimly.

"None o' your jokes, Benay."

"We found but one body, colonel—that of your horse."

"Then, mebbe the young feller wasn't dead?"

"I'm of that opinion myself," returned the half-breed. "You can't kill Hilton Ragsdale, Colonel Redhart. He'll turn up smiling as a basket of chips before you are aware of it."

"Dod blast him!"

"You wanted him dead?"

The black eyes of Flash fixed themselves in a steady gaze on the countenance of his employer.

"No, I didn't; but I'd a-liked to have fetched him here and nursed him if he was bad hurt," declared the colonel. "Did ye s'arch the neighborhood, Benay?"

"We did."

"And heard nothing from Hilton?"

"Not a word."

"Cur'us."

"He must have been only stumped," said Flash.

A troubled look visited the face of Colonel Redhart. Don Ramon watched him narrowly. He read in the Missourian's countenance disappointment, if not alarm.

Finally the colonel turned away without introducing his companion. This made it necessary for the disguised lawyer to introduce himself.

Benay Flash was communicative, and gave a complete account of the coming of Ragsdale, of the accident that had befallen him on the previous night, and of his (Benay's) going out after the body.

Colonel Redhart must have thought very much of the man from Denver," said Don Ramon.

For answer Benay Flash laughed.

"Don't you think so?"

"No."

"How is that?"

"The colonel likes only his friends."

"Wasn't Senor Ragsdale his friend?"

"No."

"No?"

"Again I say no. Colonel Redhart got sick of the fellow's hanging around, and I believe he's sorry now that we didn't bring a dead body instead of an empty wagon."

Flash showed his teeth.

"The colonel must be a queer man."

"He is."

"I've heard that it was he who sent for Ragsdale to come and look into a murder case."

"That's true."

"Why did he send for him if he did not wish him to come?"

"A pertinent question. The colonel had to make a splurge before the public. Ah! he's a keen one, Senor Ramon. As for there being a murder, I doubt it some. Anyhow, if the girl, Olive Chester, was murdered, the man who did it will never suffer for it."

"You seem positive?"

"I feel that way."

"Perhaps you suspect some one?"

"Of course I do. I know well enough who shot the girl."

"Do you mind mentioning the name?"

"No."

"Well?"

It was with difficulty the young lawyer could restrain his eagerness.

"It was one of two men."

"Yes?"

"Either Evard Demming, or—"

"Well?"

"The girl's other lover."

"And she had two lovers?"

"She did. Look at this?"

Benay Flash, who stood leaning against a tree, now advanced suddenly to the side of Don Ramon, and drew from his pocket a locket!

Pressing a spring it flew open, and Flash held the open sides up for the Mexican's inspection.

There were the faces of Olive Chester and her lover.

The lawyer was quite overcome at the sight, and forgetting himself in his wrath, he snatched the locket, crying:

"Scoundrel! you stole this!"

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### TREACHERY.

QUICK as a flash the half-breed was at the throat of the Mexican.

The latter, however, threw him off violently, and Flash fell to the ground.

The next instant the half-breed whipped out a revolver and leveled it at the heart of the lawyer.

Before Flash could press the trigger, a form sprung between the two, striking up the revolver, which was discharged in the air.

"Benay Flash, what's the use makin' a fool of yerself?"

"It was Colonel Redhart."

"He has robbed me!" exclaimed the factotum, trembling with rage.

"How's this, Don Ramon? Seems mighty cur'us you can't git on the fust day 'thout gittin' inter a racket long of my men here. What's the trouble, anyhow?"

And now the disguised lawyer was forced to explain.

He found that he had made an awkward blunder in thus pouncing upon his cousin's locket, which he was most anxious to obtain, and which he at once concluded the half-breed had stolen from the house of the Gidleys.

"I beg pardon, senor colonel," said Don Ramon. "I lost my temper at seeing a locket in the hands of this man, that was but a few days since stolen from a friend of mine."

"You're a falsifier," growled Flash. "If you don't return the locket I'll shoot you on sight."

There was an awful look in the eyes of the speaker.

The young lawyer realized his hasty work, and said:

"I am sorry to have angered you, Senor Flash; but, as I said, this locket belongs to a

friend of mine, and I was enraged at the thought of its being stolen. Perhaps Senor Flash can explain *how* he came to possess the locket, which is of much value."

"I don't propose to answer impertinent questions," sneered Flash.

"Then I shall keep the locket."

"You do it at your peril!"

Benay Flash showed his teeth.

"I will leave it to Colonel Redhart. He shall judge between us," said Don Ramon, deliberately, not willing to resign the precious trinket without a struggle.

"I make no compromises," growled the half-breed, turning on his heel. "We'll meet again, greaser!"

And then Benay Flash hurried from the vicinity.

The young lawyer-detective had secured the coveted prize, yet it was at a terrible cost.

He had made an enemy of the half-breed, and this fact alone was a grave one.

Dropping the locket into an inner pocket, Don Ramon said:

"Your man has a most violent temper, colonel!"

"I reckon. I didn't know he was a thief, though. I kinder guess you'll hev ter prove that afore ye leave ther ranch, senor—prove it or git out!"

There was a queer look in the eyes of the Missourian, that boded no good to the Mexican.

At one stroke the latter had made the ranch-owner and his factotum enemies. Surely this was not making progress in the right direction very rapidly.

"Do you wish me to prove him a thief, colonel?"

"If you can?"

"I hope you won't urge it," said Don Ramon. "I know the locket was stolen, although Mr. Flash may be an innocent purchaser. I mean to return the precious relic to its rightful owner some day."

"Let me take a squint at it, Senor Ramon."

The colonel put out his bony hand.

Anxious to keep on the right side of the Missourian, Don Ramon could not well refuse.

He drew out the locket and laid it in the hand of Colonel Redhart.

The latter opened it.

"Wal, I'll be blanked!"

"What now, colonel?"

"Where in nature'd this ere come from, don?"

"From down on the Deadwater."

"Wal, wal, I'm dod blamed ef I hain't seen one o' them faces afore."

"Which one, colonel?"

"The man's."

"Who is he?"

The Missourian shook his head.

"Don't you know him?"

"Dunno. Seems like I did, and yet I cayn't jest place him. Let me take it in and show it to Nancy, mebbe she'll know the young feller."

Don Ramon did not object.

He was deeply anxious to learn something about the man who might be the murderer of Olive Chester, and so he accompanied the colonel to the house, and to the presence of Mrs. Redhart.

"Why, Lordy, pa!" exclaimed the colonel's wife, "that there's the man 'at was here yesterday."

"Not the galoot with the store clo's and fine boots, Nancy?"

"The very chap."

"Wal, I'm blowed!"

Colonel Redhart scanned the face closely, wrinkling his brows.

"He's the very feller them cowboys 'at Jack Stonest headed was a-lookin' fur. He must be a ornary cuss. Do ye know the gal's face, Nance?"

"I reckon not."

The colonel handed back the locket, and nothing more came of it at the time.

Just after sunset Colonel Redhart came to his guest, and said:

"I've got news fur yer, Don Ramon."

"News?"

"You bet, senor."

"I am anxious to hear it."

"I've located yer old friend, Evard Demming. Yer kin see him ter-night ef yer like."

"I should like it ever so much."

"All hunkey. We'll go to him arter supper."

"Go to him?"

"Yes, senor."

"Where is he?"

"Not far away."

"Why not bring him here?"

"It mout not be safe."

"Senor Demming is, then, in hiding?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps it would be best not to disturb him, colonel—"

"Look-a-here, senor, I've promised to bring yer, and yer said as how yer was drefful anxious to see Mr. Demming. No backin' out now—not a bit on't."

"Very well. I will go."

Immediately after supper two mounted men left Three Oaks Ranch, and rode slowly down the creek.

It now began to dawn upon the mind of the lawyer detective that he had made a mistake in claiming Demming as his friend.

Of course, when brought face to face with the suspected murderer, that individual would deny all knowledge of Don Ramon, and then the situation would prove most awkward.

In fact, it would require all the young Denverite's tact to explain.

However, he felt that he was in for it now, and he might in the end turn the adventure to good account, so he resolved not to borrow trouble.

This starting off just at night did not exactly please Ragsdale.

Once such a ride had nearly led to his death.

At length he ventured to speak to his companion on the subject.

"'Twouldn't do to go in the daytime, senor."

"Why not?"

"Wal, one thing, thar's a lot o' cusses on ther lookout. The people imagine that I'm friendly to Demming, and Tribune Tripp's watchin me. He thinks Demming killed the gal, and he wants to help lynch 'im."

The explanation seemed satisfactory, and Ragsdale said no more on the subject.

Following the creek bank about two miles, the twain entered a rather dense strip of timber.

"How much further is it, colonel?"

"Jest a little ways."

"Is Senor Demming alone?"

"I reckon."

"He must have an unpleasant time of it hiding away from the people."

"Wal, that may be; but what's the poor feller goin' ter do? He don't like ter die fur a crime 'at some one else did."

"Certainly not; and yet it seems to me he might make his way to the county seat, and give himself up to the authorities. He certainly could have nothing to fear by standing trial, providing he is innocent," said Don Ramon, deliberately.

"Mebbe you think he ain't innocent?"

"I know nothing about it, of course."

"You've heard of the murder?"

"Yes, I read of it in the American papers."

"I reckoned so. Now, mebbe you ain't here a-purpos to look inter this 'ere affair?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said, and the colonel laughed grimly. "You mout be a detective, yer see; moun't yer, now?"

The Missourian had drawn rein and looked about.

Ragsdale could almost fancy he saw his eyes gleaming like living coals.

Was the man about to assault him? Had Ragsdale run into a trap?

Quickly the pseudo Mexican drew a pistol. On the instant several sharp flashes illumined the night.

"My God! I'm shot!"

It was the colonel's voice, and then Ragsdale heard a heavy fall.

Before the lawyer-detective could make a move, a lariat fell about his waist, and he was jerked from his horse with violence.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### A MOMENT OF SUSPENSE.

"Don't shoot him. No blood must be shed, you know."

Ragsdale lay helpless on the ground.

He was not badly injured, but he had lost

his pistol in the fall, and the lariat pinioned his arms to his side.

When he attempted to free himself, several hands were laid upon him, and he was secured.

His hands were drawn to the rear, and bound in spite of his struggles.

"Now look after the colonel," said a voice.

"He fell from his horse; mebbe he's killed."

"No, no, that must not be," returned the other. "No blood was to be shed, remember."

Soon it was ascertained that Colonel Redhart lay bleeding and insensible on the ground.

At any rate this was the purport of the conversation, and Ragsdale felt sorry that he had misjudged the Missourian.

"Come," said a voice in the ear of the prisoner, "you must jog along with us."

"What is this outrage for?" demanded the young lawyer, indignantly. "I am a Mexican gentleman. My government shall hear of this."

"Bah!"

The prisoner was lifted forcibly to his feet. And then he was led away.

The outcome of his visit to Demming was humiliating in the extreme, and Ragsdale was sure now that he had made a mistake in accompanying the colonel.

It was too late now to think on these things.

Ragsdale soon discovered that they were in a rough region, since he stumbled many times, and came near falling.

At length the prisoner found himself pushed into a low cavern in the side of a steep hill.

A moment later a light flashed on the scene—a dark lantern held in the hand of a masked man.

The prisoner glared about him.

He counted six men, all in masks.

"Now, then, my Mexican gentleman, we intend to make yer show yer colors," said the leading mask, at the same time laying a hand on the arm of Ragsdale.

The hand of the mask was plainly revealed in the glow of the lantern.

It was the left hand, and the little finger was partly missing.

This was the same man who had once before attempted the life of Ragsdale, and the man who had posed as Nate Shade, detective.

"You say you're a Mexican," said the mask. "Do you know what I believe?"

"No."

"I believe you're an impostor."

"You have no reason to think so."

"Yes, I have. You claim to know Evard Demming. Now I have seen that gentleman, and he says he knows no Don Ramon; in fact, he is unacquainted with any Mexican, so you see you've put your foot in it wonderfully."

"It seems that a mistake has been made," returned Ragsdale. "It may be that there are more than one Demming in the world."

"That sort of argument won't go down."

"Why have you brought me here?"

"To keep you where you won't do any damage to my friends and myself."

"So you fear me, then?"

"It's well enough to be on the safe side," returned the mask, laughing grimly. "Hold yer light a little nearer, pard, and we'll examine this rascal."

Of course Ragsdale was helpless.

The mask tore off his hat and flung it down, then he pulled sharply at the wig of black hair.

"Ha! I thought as much."

The wig had come off in the hand of the investigator.

"By my life! I've seen your face somewhere before," declared the mask, scrutinizing the features of his prisoner closely. "By Heaven! it's my old friend, Ragsdale."

Not a word said the prisoner.

His chagrin was terrible, however.

"So!" ejaculated the mask in a terrible voice, "you did not leave the country as I once ordered you, it seems. Do you know that you have returned to die?"

"I hope not."

"Your hopes are ill-founded. You had sufficient warning, and ought to have profited by it. You did not, and now you shall never see the spires of Denver again."

"Do you propose to murder me?"



"Not so harsh a deed as that, but we must be rid of you."

"In what way have I harmed you, Sir Mask?"

"In more ways than you imagine."  
"Did you murder Olive Chester?"  
It was a blunt query, bluntly put.  
The mask started and clutched at his throat.

A significant movement.

"Furies, man! what a question to put to a man who is above harming any one not his deadly foe. I came here on purpose to—"

"Hunt down the assassin?"

The eyes of the prisoner peered sharply into the masked countenance, as though he would read therein some familiar lineament.

"You have guessed right," said the mask.

"I knew it. You are the tool of Colonel Redhart."

"I am his friend."

"Did he have a hand in this villainy?"

"The colonel knew nothing about what was to come. He intended to guide you to Demming, but I did not desire to have it so. The ranch-owner is badly hurt, for which I am sorry."

"Perhaps it was your intention to murder the colonel as well as myself?"

"No, but the old man was in bad company."

"You refer to me?"

"Exactly."

"You are complimentary."

"To you, yes. But this confab may as well end."

"One moment, Sir Mask."

"Well?"

"You are an impostor."

"What?"

"I know you, Nat Shade!"

"Eh?"

The mask started and trembled.

"I know you," repeated Ragsdale. "You robbed me of a precious paper, and left me for dead at the foot of a ridge in the night. Was that fall of mine an accident, or was it an attempt at murder? I know my horse was frightened by some object in the woods. I now believe it was a plan to murder me."

"Nothing of the kind. At any rate I presume it wasn't. My name is not Shade, so of course I can't judge of the intentions of that gentleman."

However, Ragsdale could see that his captor was not easy in mind, and the Denverite was fully assured that he had made no mistake in his man.

Before Ragsdale could speak further, the masked leader turned to his companions and addressed a few words to them in an unknown tongue.

It was doubtless one of the numerous Indian dialects of the North-west.

Ragsdale was seized and hurled to the rocky floor of the cavern.

Then strong hands proceeded to bind his legs.

After this his body was wound with ropes, until he was as jointless as a stick of timber.

"Now put in the gag."

At this the prisoner demurred.

"Let me retain my power of speech," pleaded Ragsdale.

His request was unheeded.

A gag was thrust into his mouth and securely fastened.

Then he was placed on his back, in a position where he could not move, and only look straight upward at the low ceiling.

"There!" said the masked leader, "I guess that'll do. I've only this to say to you, Hilton Ragsdale: you have brought this fate upon yourself. Your late disguise condemns you as a man to be distrusted. Nobody will ever think of looking in this lonesome place for you. The mouth of the cave is completely hidden by vines, and you will have a long time to think over your past life, and of the evil you have done."

"You made a sad mistake when you consented to act the spy on better men than yourself. You see how it ends. I am sorry for you, but necessity knows no law. At the end of a week I will visit this spot again. If the coyotes have not picked your bones, I'll see that your body is decently buried. Time presses, and I must bid you farewell."

With a mocking bow the man in the mask turned away.

Soon the light faded out, and the sound of footsteps died away.

The silence and darkness was terrible to contemplate.

The brutal masks had left Ragsdale to a fate most horrible.

They had shot Colonel Redhart, and visited a worse fate on the young lawyer.

Strange emotions shot through the mind of the helpless Denverite as the minutes waned.

At every step in his investigation of the murder of his cousin he had encountered opposition, and it began to look as though the whole Big Horn basin was anxious to have the investigation squelched.

Hark!

What sound is that?

A step, or rather a stealthy tread, in the darkness.

A cold chill shot down the spine of the helpless man. He imagined that one of the masks was returning to send a knife to his heart.

Mayhap Nat Shade himself, who feared to trust to time and the wild animals to deal with his prisoner.

Nearer and nearer drew the steps, creeping along in a careful manner.

Was it an animal coming to make a meal off the helpless lawyer?

It might be.

With a mighty effort the bound man tried to burst his bonds.

Not a particle of effect was made on the knotted cords.

Great drops of sweat oozed out on the brow of the bound man.

He felt that his doom was sealed.

He tried to cry out.

The gag only choked him and smothered his voice.

Ah! the second of doom has come!

Something touches his breast!—a human hand!

It feels for his heart!

Ragsdale understands now.

The villain, Shade, has returned to make sure of the murder he dare not commit before his companions.

"I'll find them somewhere on his person, I'm sure," muttered a voice.

After a minute the roving hand pressed aside the binding rope and entered the prisoner's breast pocket.

"Ha! I have it!" exclaimed the searcher.

And then he drew forth a paper.

The searching hand continued its work till the locket was also procured.

"I neglected to get these things sooner—come near forgetting it as it was, my dear Ragsdale," chuckled the voice.

Of course the bound man could make no reply.

Having secured his booty, the mask hurried away in the darkness.

He had left the cave, and was moving away in the gloom, when something dropped as from the sky upon his shoulders.

The next instant the masked outlaw was hurled violently to the ground.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### TWO LETTERS.

"MERCY!" gasped the fallen man, who felt a cold ring of steel press against his temple.

"I oughtn't to show you any," growled a voice. "You are a cowardly outlaw, who has deceived the good people of the Big Horn long enough."

"Don't shoot me, sir."

"What have you been doing?"

"Nothing to harm any one."

"I know you lie now," retorted the other.

"You had a prisoner."

"He escaped."

"Truly?"

"As true as that I live."

"I do not believe you."

"I never uttered a truer statement in my life."

"Then you will never be convicted of honesty," retorted the man's captor, who proceeded to make sure of his prisoner by drawing his wrists together and inclosing them in handcuffs.

"Good heavens! do you mean to make me a permanent prisoner, sir?"

"Yes," uttered the man's captor. "Not another word now, but lead the way to the

spot where you have concealed Hilton Ragsdale."

"I tell you he escaped."

"I know that to be a lie. Have you murdered him?"

"No."

"I am inclined to think you have, and so I may as well avenge his death now."

Again the naked muzzle of a revolver touched the temple of the masked villain.

The contact of cold steel sent a shudder through his frame.

"Mercy! Don't shoot, and I'll tell you where Ragsdale is."

"Very well."

"He's in a cave not far from here."

"Alive?"

"Yes."

"You must lead me to him."

The speaker arose to his feet, and assisted his prisoner to rise also.

"Now move on, and mind, no treachery, or you are a dead man."

Again the ring of cold steel touched the face of the masked outlaw.

Tremblingly he led the way to the mouth of the cave.

"He is in there."

"Go in."

The prisoner obeyed.

Once inside the cavern, the strange man who had captured the leader of the masks, turned on the light from a dark-lantern, thus illuminating the whole interior of the room.

The bound form of Ragsdale was seen on the floor of the cavern.

"Tis well," muttered the stranger. "Remain where you are till I release the fellow."

Soon the man who had come to the rescue of Ragsdale was bending over him.

He had some difficulty in severing the bonds.

When he had succeeded in doing so, and removing the gag from the mouth of Ragsdale, the latter uttered a cry of joy and amazement.

"Who are you, sir?" cried the late prisoner.

"A friend to justice," answered the man.

"I have seen your face before."

"Perhaps."

"Once, at the house of the Gidleys, the night I lost my horse—"

Before Ragsdale could finish his remarks the stranger turned and dashed away, leaving Ragsdale alone—in total darkness.

The move was sudden and wholly unexpected.

"What had caused it?"

Was the man the one who stole the sorrel mare, and had he taken fright at what seemed an accusation from Ragsdale?

This could not be the solution of the strange movements of the man.

Ragsdale remembered that a second person had accompanied his rescuer, and doubtless he had discovered that his prisoner had fled, and had gone in pursuit.

This was the real explanation of the stranger's sudden departure.

For some minutes Ragsdale stood immovable in the darkness, debating what move to make next.

At length he began to grope his way toward the mouth of the cave.

Once here he passed out, and stood silently surveying the gloomy surroundings.

"What had I best do?" mused the young lawyer man-hunter. "Perhaps, if I remain here, my friend (or enemy, which?) will return, and then I can interview him, and learn who and what he is. I am sure he is the man of the locket, and the man who stole the sorrel mare."

"He befriended me to-night, for which I ought to thank him. If he is a bad man, why did he come to my assistance? Perhaps it is a part of the plot. Who knows?"

Every movement of the stranger was involved in mystery.

Ragsdale did not recognize the person who accompanied his rescuer into the cave.

Had he seen the handcuffs on the wrists of Nat Shade, the young lawyer might have formed an opinion nearly correct as to the situation.

"My disguise has been penetrated," mused Ragsdale, "so there's no use sailing under false colors longer, at least not as Don Ramon. I'll remain in this vicinity for a time, and see

if my stranger friend does not put in an appearance."

In a somewhat confused state of mind, the lawyer found a comfortable seat under a tree, and was soon drowsing.

In a little time he was fast asleep, and did not wake till the sun was rising.

Ragsdale finally started up, rubbed his eyes, and gazed about him in a sort of dumb amazement.

"Well!" he exclaimed, "I've slept all night it seems. Of course my friend of last night's adventure has come and gone, and I am now no wiser than before."

Somewhat chagrined at the situation, Ragsdale began to look about him, anxious to find his way out of the gulch in which he found himself.

Soon he decided to follow what seemed a southerly course, between high bluffs.

He pushed on slowly, and was glad to note that the bluffs became further apart each moment.

Soon he would be in the open country.

Presently a low whinny fell on his ear. The sound at once stayed the steps of the lawyer detective.

"A horse, by the powers!" exclaimed Ragsdale. "I need such an animal bad—very bad just at this time."

He proceeded to investigate.

In a little thicket he found a horse tethered.

One glance at the animal brought a loud ejaculation from Ragsdale.

The animal was none other than the stolen sorrel mare.

It was indeed a lucky find.

The mare seemed pleased to see Ragsdale, who petted her and rubbed her brown muzzle with his hand.

Across the saddle lay a coat.

Ragsdale did not wait upon ceremony, but at once released the beautiful animal and vaulted into the saddle, tossing the coat across the pommel in front of him.

In a little time he passed beyond the hills, and was in the open country of the Big Horn basin.

In the distance he could see the faint outlines of a belt of timber, which he judged to be that along the creek at Three Oaks Ranch.

"I'll ride directly there," declared the young lawyer, "and astonish my friends who think me dead."

Ragsdale had ridden perhaps half the distance, when he bethought him to examine the coat he had found with the mare.

He went through the pockets in a hurry.

He found but little save a package tied with a blue cord. It seemed to be a package of letters.

Ragsdale undid the string and opened the paper.

Letters, indeed!

Many of them in a feminine hand.

As may be supposed, the young lawyer examined them with no idle curiosity.

He was destined to make a most interesting discovery.

One of the letters in particular attracted the Denverite strongly.

He was sure he had seen the chirography before.

With unsteady fingers the young lawyer detective slipped off the envelope.

He read the brief contents with bated breath and gleaming eyes.

"DEAR WORTH,—I am deeply grieved that you should persist. I admitted my love for you, but I must marry another to save a friend. Duty is my guiding star in this. You must not see me again. When this reaches you I shall be on my way from this country with Evard, as his wife.

"Your grieved friend,

"OLIVE."

This was indeed a discovery.

More than one mistake had been made with regard to Olive Chester's love affairs.

From the tone of this letter it was quite evident that his pretty cousin was not, as had been intimated, in love with Evard Demming, but that the man to whom the letter was addressed (Worthland Rivers) was the favored one.

The letter, however, was a sad one, dismissing her lover, that she might marry another in order to perform a duty.

Rather a strange condition of affairs the young lawyer thought.

From the lips of Mrs. Tripp, Ragsdale had it that she was opposed to the suit of Evard Demming.

Who, then, was urging Olive to marry this ranchman against her will?

Certainly her first duty was to her mother, yet here was she writing to a man she loved, professing to still love him, yet saying that her duty compelled her to wed another.

Ragsdale was certainly puzzled.

However, he began to see light in one direction.

What more likely than that this rejected lover met Olive on that fatal 16th of June and remonstrated with her against her course; she persevering in her determination, he became enraged at thought of seeing another carry of the prize, and sent a bullet through her brain.

This, then, was the secret of the man of the lock.

He was the murderer of Olive Chester.

It was an astounding discovery that Ragsdale had made.

It made his future course more plain, however.

There were some things that puzzled him still.

Especially the several attempts on his life, which, so far as he could judge, were not instigated by the murderer.

Once more Ragsdale turned his attention to the package of letters. The second one read:

"DEAR WORTHLAND,—You are a regular Don Quixote in your imaginings at least. Don't become a misanthrope, but come home and see how I can make up your loss by a more devoted love. I want you with me all the time, I am so lonely. Why don't you come? Don't brood so bitterly. Every cloud has its silver lining; yours must have one surely. Come to one who loves you better than all others.

"Your dearest friend,

"RENA."

Still another important and mystifying letter.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### A MADMAN'S SHOT.

"GREAT goodness! who's that one?"

Colonel Redhart removed his pipe and stared at a horseman who was approaching the ranch at a leisurely pace.

"I reckon he don't know who he is himself," said the lad who sat near the colonel—Sid Gidley, who had come to the ranch inquiring after Ragsdale.

"He's a queer-lookin' chap, anyhow."

"By crockie! I've seen that horse afore, kunnell!" exclaimed the boy, springing to his feet. "As I'm a sinner, it's Ol' Chester's sorrel mare!"

"Eh! is that so?"

"He's comin' right up here, kunnell. We'll soon know who he is. If he's a hoss-thief we'll soon make him wish he'd never been born."

"I reckon he ain't no hoss-thief," grunted the Missourian.

The rider of the sorrel mare proved to be our friend Ragsdale, and he rode directly up to the veranda, and, bending from the saddle, peered keenly at Colonel Redhart.

That individual stared in puzzled amazement.

Sid recognized the lawyer, but he said nothing, only stood and grinned.

"Dod blamed ef I don't believe I've seen you afore," said the colonel, after a moment.

"I think we have met before, on several occasions, Colonel Redhart," said Ragsdale. "I am here now to pick a bone with you."

"Ho! I know you now. It's Hilton Ragsdale, or I am a thief!"

The colonel seized and wrung the young lawyer's hand till he cried out with pain.

"There, that'll do, colonel."

"Wal, I'm powerful glad to see ye, Hilton. Dod blame me ef I didn't s'pose you was dead. How in nater'd ye git out o' that are gulch alive t'other day?"

"You mean last night, don't you?"

Ragsdale eyed the colonel keenly.

"Las' night?"

"You and I were out on a little lark last night, colonel," said the lawyer, grimly. "I got into a bad scrape, and I thought you were shot; it seems 'twas all cry and no wool."

"Bless my eyes! what's the man talkin' about?" grunted the colonel.

"Don't pretend ignorance," said Ragsdale, sternly.

"Wal, I don't pertend, 'cos I am ignerent," declared Colonel Redhart, "though I 'low summat has happened ter make yer look like er scarecrow. You don't look like yerself nohow, though how in nater yer got so transmogrified's more'n I can guess."

The astonishment of the colonel seemed to be genuine.

Was it so?

Ragsdale could not believe it.

The man from Denver did present a somewhat unique appearance, with his hair cut close, his mustache gone, and his hands and face colored to represent a Mexican.

"Where is Nat Shade?" suddenly questioned the lawyer.

"He's gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes, he went this morning. He said he reckoned he'd go furder west ter look for the man he wanted."

"Whom did he want?"

Ragsdale eyed the colonel keenly.

"Why, that would be tellin' who killed poor Miss Chester," returned Colonel Redhart. "Dod blamed ef I know."

"Indeed!"

Ragsdale plucked at his denuded upper lip nervously.

"No, I dunno that, Hilton."

"I think you might guess."

"Wal, yes, I mout."

"Try it."

"I don't want to hurt your feelings, Mr. Ragsdale."

"You cannot do that."

"Wal, I'll be dod blamed ef some folks hain't a suspicionin' the gal's mother. Yer aunt."

"Some people are fools!" exclaimed the young lawyer hotly.

"There! that's jest what I said—you'd git mad ef I told who was suspected," remonstrated Colonel Redhart.

The young lawyer calmed himself with an effort.

"This is something new, I take it," he said.

"Wal, not exactly. Nat Shade got onto it the fust day he come here."

"Nat Shade is an impostor."

"Eh?"

"I say the man calling himself Shade is an impostor, and a villain of the deepest dye. It was he who assaulted us last night, Colonel Redhart, and he meant to murder me, and perhaps you."

"You don't say?"

The colonel's jaw dropped.

"You and I may as well be on square-toed terms, colonel, and I don't mind telling you that I personated Don Ramon yesterday. My disguise was penetrated by your friend Shade, and he fixed a trap for me—mayhap for you. Need I continue?"

"Yes, yes, go on, Hilton."

And then Ragsdale gave a complete account of his past night's adventure, watching the colonel's face furtively meantime.

He detected no change in the countenance of the Missourian, however.

"Wal, dod blame me, ef this ain't a how-de-do!" exclaimed the tan-colored ranch-owner, when the lawyer-detective had concluded his story. "We've both been badly euchred by that mazy coyote, and it remains fur us ter git even, Ragsdale. We'll do it, too, ef we hev ter foller ther cuss to ther end o' ther world."

"I mean to get even when the right time comes," said Ragsdale.

"Wal, dod blamed ef the right time hasn't come now. The coyote can't be fur from here now, and I'll git out the hosses, and we'll take his trail," declared the colonel, springing to his feet.

He had subsided into a chair while listening to the story of Ragsdale.

"Don't get excited, colonel," said the young lawyer. "You and I will not ride off in company again very soon. I've run into two traps in your company, and I beg leave to excuse myself from a third scrape of the kind."



"Wal, dod blamed ef I don't want to git even with that sneak who said he was a detective."

"You can go after him if you like, but I propose to look out for number one hereafter. You've been altogether too kind in the past, colonel."

"Don't mention it, youngster; it's a way I have."

"I suppose so. Will you oblige me by telling me who this man calling himself Shade is, Colonel Redhart?"

Again the young lawyer pierced the Missourian with a penetrating glance.

His distrust of the colonel now amounted to belief that he was in league with his—Ragsdale's—enemies.

"Wal, now you've got me, youngster."

"Got you?"

"Dod blamed ef you hain't. I sent out to Cheyenne fur a detective, and this man Shade came. Ef he's an impostor, as you think, I didn't know it, I'll swar to that."

The colonel spoke with seeming earnestness.

"See here, colonel," cried Ragsdale, severely. "You induced me to take a ride with you last night, promising to lead me to Eward Demming, the presumed murderer of my cousin, Olive Chester. I went with you, honestly, blindly. You know what happened."

"I do."

"You fell from your horse, crying out, 'I am shot!' Now here you are, at home and unharmed, only a few hours later. What am I to think of such things?"

"I see. You're mad 'cos I left ye in the lurch. Wal, I don't blame ye one bit. Ye see, a bullet jest grazed my cheek, and I dodged and fell. I'll swar to yer, youngster, 'at I thought I was shot. Be I to blame ef it didn't turn out a fact? Jest yer show me the men 'at got up ther rumpus last night, and ef I don't skin 'em alive, then call me a dum liar and a traitor!"

Colonel Redhart seemed terribly in earnest, and doubt once more held sway in the mind of the self-constituted detective from Denver.

"I don't know that we need quarrel," said Ragsdale finally. "I should like right well to know why so many men in this country are anxious to have my life. I was a stranger here till a very short time since. In what have I offended? Can you tell me that, colonel?"

"Dumed ef I kin, Hilton."

"I can, though," put in Sid Gidley, who, up to this time, had been an interested listener to the confab between his friend and the Missouri colonel.

"Well, Sid?"

"It's the durn horse-thieves."

"Horse-thieves?"

"An' cattle-stealers, too," declared the boy. "There's a hull gang on 'em, and when they're hunted to ther holes there'll be some folks 'at will be surprised. Mr. Stonest won't take a back seat for no man, Mr. Ragsdale, and he says 'at something's goin' to drop, and that mighty heavy, before many days."

"Pooh!"

This from the colonel.

"You needn't pooh, kunnel," cried the boy angrily. "I know what I'm talking about, and a good many folks thought to be honest will go up to the limb of a tree when the vigilantes strike, as they mean ter do in a few days."

"You dum leetle weazen," snarled the colonel, catching Sid by the arm and shaking him fiercely. "You kerry the idee 'at folks 'at's present may be no better'n horse-thieves. Yer insult Mr. Ragsdale an' me!"

"Let me go, kunnel—let me alone," yelled Sid, struggling in the Missourian's clutch.

He could not escape, however, and, bending down over the bony hand that held him, the boy inserted his white teeth in the yellow thumb.

Colonel Redhart uttered a yell and dropped the boy, who darted down the steps, not halting till he thought himself at a safe distance from the irate colonel, who danced about, wringing his bleeding hand, and howled with rage.

The whole scene rather amused the man on the sorrel mare.

"Confounded little snipe!" roared Colonel Redhart. "Ef I had yer here I'd wring yer neck!"

"Ha, ha!" laughed the boy. "Got yer dander up jest 'cos I said some high-toned folks was hoss-thieves. Wal, mebbe the kunnel's one of 'em—who knows?"

Then the boy danced out of sight toward the rear of the house.

"I believe I will stop long enough to get some of this stain off my face and hands," said Ragsdale, after the colonel had cooled down somewhat.

"All right. Yer allus welcome, youngster."

Securing his horse, the Denverite dismounted and entered the house.

An hour's work failed to fully remove the color from Ragsdale's hands and face, yet the young lawyer looked a little more like himself when he once more appeared on the porch, where the colonel sat smoking.

"Some one's a-comin'," said the colonel the moment the young lawyer appeared.

A horseman was seen approaching. He was riding at a furious pace, nor did he halt till he had drawn rein at the foot of the steps, within a few feet of the colonel and his companion.

The new-comer was no less a personage than Tribune Tripp. His face was more rubicund than usual, and his whole manner indicated a disturbed state of mind.

"You infernal old villain!" yelled Tripp, his face almost bursting. "It's your doings, and I'm going to make you smart for it! Do you hear me, you yellow-faced Missouri ape? Stand up—stand up and die like a man! for I'm going to have your life!"

With the words, Tribune Tripp thrust forward a revolver and fired full in Colonel Redhart's face.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### AN ARREST.

CRACK! crack! crack!

Colonel Redhart was on his feet now, exchanging shots with Tribune Tripp, and the deadly leaden pellets were flying too near the head of our friend Ragsdale to prove comfortable.

Since the young Denver lawyer was not particularly interested in the duel between these two Western cattlemen, he concluded to retire till the conflict was over.

He therefore glided into the house.

The conflict was all over in a very short minute.

Mrs. Redhart came rushing to the front of the house, no doubt expecting to find her liege dead or dying.

She carried a huge iron poker, with which she thought to take part in the conflict.

The sounds of strife suddenly ceased, and an ominous silence reigned.

"Got enough?"

"I reckon. Hev you?"

"Yes."

"Wal, let's talk this 'ere over. What yer mad about, anyhow?"

Ragsdale now ventured to look forth upon the scene of strife.

Both men were there, apparently unharmed. There was something strange about this, thought Ragsdale.

"You know what I'm here for, Colonel Redhart. My wife was the apple of my eye."

"Oh, yes, of course," and the Missourian indulged a coarse laugh.

"Don't you laugh at the misfortunes of a devoted husband, Colonel Redhart, or I'll make you swallow teeth."

"Wal, git off'n yer hoss and come in and take sunthin'. You'n I has been friends in the past; I don't reckon I've did anything to change the aspect of affairs."

"You hev, though."

"Explain."

"Julia's gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes."

"When did she go?"

"Not two hours since."

"Dead?"

"No, worse than that."

"How could it be wuss, Tripp?"

"Well, it could be. Honor's worth more than life—a woman's honor especially," said Tripp. "You know well enough what I mean. My wife has been taken forcibly from home."

"Yer don't say?"

"She has been arrested."

"Arrested?"

"Yes."

"Fur what?"

"For murder."

"Great Jehosephat! yer don't tell me!" exclaimed the colonel, in a voice of astonishment.

"Didn't you know all about it, Colonel Redhart?"

"Not a thing."

"Truly?"

"True's gospel, Trib."

"Shake!"

The two clasped hands.

"I'm sorry I got mad at you, Colonel Redhart; but as your man, Flash, was along, and the chap that has been staying here with you for the past week made the arrest, I naturally thought it was you who had put up the dirty job. I'm glad to hear it wasn't."

"I never knew a thing about it," answered the colonel. "So Nat Shade's made an arrest. Was it fur the murder of Olive Chester, Trib?"

"Yes."

"Awful!"

"My wife a murderess! It makes me mad clear through."

"For once I honor you, Tribune Tripp," said Ragsdale, now stepping forward. "If my aunt has been arrested by Nat Shade, a most villainous crime has been committed. He had no authority to arrest any one. Have they taken Aunt Julia from home?"

"Yes."

"Where will they take her?"

"To the county seat, I suppose."

"Where's that?"

"Forty miles south, on the Sweetwater," said Tripp.

"The name of the town?"

"Atlantic City."

"Have these men already gone with my aunt?"

"They have."

"It was an outrage. Why did you permit it, Tribune Tripp?"

"I wasn't at home at the time. When I heard that Benay Flash was one of the men that made the arrest, I at once set it down that the colonel here was at the bottom of the whole thing, and it made me mad clear through. If I hadn't been so excited I should have aimed better, and the colonel would now be a dead man."

"No doubt."

There was something in the glance that the speaker gave Redhart that set the young lawyer to thinking.

It did not seem possible that two such experienced plainsmen could fire at each other half a dozen times, at point blank range, and neither receive a wound.

When he had more time to think the young lawyer was sure all was not on the square.

Without waiting to discuss the situation with the two men further, Ragsdale hurried from the house, and mounting the sorrel mare, he galloped rapidly away toward the Tripp ranch.

"There goes a tenderfoot idiot," sneered Tripp, as he gazed after the Denver lawyer.

"Come, Tribby, let's take sunthin' on the strength o' this last," said Colonel Redhart, thrusting his thumb between his visitor's short ribs.

The two adjourned to the wineroom, where they had a jolly time for the rest of the day.

No one was at home when Ragsdale arrived at his aunt's ranch save Rena Tripp.

Her eyes were red from recent weeping, and she seemed in distress.

The young lawyer had never seen her looking more beautiful before.

"It's a wicked thing," declared the girl. "Poor mamma, it will kill her, I am afraid."

"It is true, then, that she has been taken away?"

"Quite true."

"Arrested for murder?"

"Yes, Mr. Ragsdale."

She did not seem to notice the young lawyer's altered looks, so deeply was she affected by what had so recently occurred.

Ragsdale stabled his horse, then returned to the house and sat long in conversation with the beautiful Rena.

He realized that it would be useless to at-

tempt a rescue alone, and so he resolved to move with calmness and precision.

"How did Aunt Julia take it, Miss Tripp?"

"First she was indignant and ordered the men away, but when the handcuffs were put on she broke down and cried," said Rena, flushing hotly at the recollection.

"Did you know the men?"

"Two of them."

"Well?"

"Benay Flash and Mr. Shade, a detective."

"The latter had worked up the case, I suppose."

"So he said; and that there was ample proof that my dear mother had committed two murders."

"What is your opinion?"

"That it is all a villainous plot to rob mamma."

"I am glad to see you so strong an advocate of my aunt's innocence," said Ragsdale, gazing admiringly into the hot, beautiful face of Rena. "Now I want you to give me all the information you possess with regard to this matter. That my aunt is innocent there can be no shadow of doubt, but if it is as you say, a plot to ruin her, it may be so well laid as to endanger her life, and we must use every honorable means to defeat the schemers."

"I am ready to do all I can," said she quickly, putting both her soft brown palms in his, and looking up confidently into his face.

"Thanks. Now I shall expect you to be frank with me, Miss Tripp, and tell me all you know of this plot against Aunt Julia."

"I will do so, sir."

"I am listening."

For a moment the girl seemed to hesitate. "I hardly know where to begin," she finally said. "I know really but very little. Much of it is surmise. I know that Mrs. Tripp has a large sum of money somewhere, and that more than one has set his avaricious gaze on the pile. I am very much afraid that father is one of them. I beg you to pardon my willingness to expose his wickedness. You may think it unnatural, but when you know the whole truth, I believe you will forgive me."

"You are already forgiven."

"Thank you, sir. I have learned enough to satisfy me that father married your aunt for mercenary motives. I have seen him in conversation with different people, some of them questionable characters. He and Benay Flash have been much together, and that is not a good sign."

"Truly not."

"Flash is a villain."

"I believe so."

"I am convinced that he is in the plot to secure a fortune. Do you know, the fellow had the impudence to ask me to marry him."

"Indeed!"

"He has kept his distance of late, and I think he has given up all hope of handling a part of mamma's money through wedding her step-daughter."

"I admire your good sense in this," said Ragsdale, feeling really pleased.

"I almost hate the man now. It's a feeling I cannot help, although I know it is not a credit to me."

Thus far the girl had not given any very tangible proof of the conspiracy that Ragsdale believed existed.

He questioned her further, but she could only say that her belief was in a plot to secure her step-mother's money, and that her father and Benay Flash were among the plotters, and very likely the detective, Shade.

"I have one more question to ask you, Miss Tripp," said the lawyer, after a brief silence.

"I am ready to answer if I can, Mr. Ragsdale."

"I am glad to hear you say that. It is about Worthland Rivers that I would ask."

"Worthland Rivers?"

The girl started and trembled.

The lawyer-detective could see that she was deeply excited.

"That is the man about whom I seek information, Miss Tripp."

He fixed a keen, questioning gaze on her face.

"I—I really can tell you nothing about such a person," she faltered.

Her manner, however, convinced him to

the contrary, and he was now determined to push his inquiries rigidly.

"Remember your promise."

"My promise?"

"You agreed to tell me all you knew."

"About the plot, yes—but—"

"Hasn't this man Rivers a hand in the villainy?"

He eyed her keenly.

She trembled and looked away from his gaze.

"Answer truly, Miss Tripp."

"No, he has not."

"Be careful."

"I have told you the truth."

"You do know Worthland Rivers then?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about him. Where is he at this moment?"

"I do not know."

She started to her feet.

"Stay, Miss Tripp," cried Ragsdale.

"Not to talk of him."

She would have fled had he not sprung up and caught her hand.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### RAGSDALE FINDS HIS MAN.

"RELEASE me, sir!" exclaimed Rena, indignantly.

"Not till you tell me about this man, Rivers."

"I will tell you nothing."

"Miss Tripp, what am I to think from this acting? Do you mean to stand between a criminal and justice?"

He regarded her sternly.

Her form trembled visibly.

He could see that she was deeply excited.

That she knew much about Olive's other lover was evident, and the lawyer-detective was determined to make her divulge, if possible, what she knew.

"In the interest of justice I order you to speak, Miss Tripp."

"I have nothing to say."

"But this man, Rivers—you know him, do you not?"

"Yes."

"He was Olive Chester's lover?"

"I suppose so."

"He shot her in a fit of jealous rage. I have the proof! My aunt shall be saved, and the true assassin brought to justice!"

"Oh, sir, you are mistaken. My—Mr. Rivers did not do it. No, no, he could not—he could not!"

Rena bent low over the hand that held her fast, covering her face and moaning as though her heart would break.

Poor girl!

How he pitied her!

What was this Worthland Rivers to her that she should defend him so stubbornly?

A sweetheart, perhaps!

The thought was not a pleasant one to the young lawyer.

"Calm yourself, Miss Tripp. If this man is innocent there can be no harm in his coming forward and proving it. I know he was my cousin's lover, and that they would have married but for one Evard Demming. He came between them. There may have been a quarrel, but I am convinced that Rivers did the shooting."

Ragsdale thought of the second letter, the one from Rena to Rivers, and realized that there was another girl in the case, as well two men.

Of a sudden he remembered the conversation he had overheard between Flash and Rena, in which the half-breed accused the girl of being privy to the murder of Olive Chester.

Then came the thought of a conspiracy, with the beautiful Rena as one of the plotters.

It was not a pleasant picture, yet it seemed a truthful one, and Ragsdale believed he must act upon it if he would save his aunt.

No urging on his part could break Rena's resolution to say nothing about Rivers, and Ragsdale was at length forced to give over the attempt to make her speak.

"Miss Tripp, this obstinacy on your part convinces me that you would shield a criminal, and it may rebound to plague you in the future."

He flung her hand from him and strode to the door.

"Are you going?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Where to?"

"First to Atlantic City, next to hunt down the murderer of my cousin—the immaculate Worthland Rivers!"

He spoke with ill-concealed bitterness.

He left the house, then, and hurried to the stable.

Five minutes later he appeared, mounted on the sorrel mare once owned by his cousin Olive.

Rena stood in the door looking dark and solemn. He drew rein and glanced toward her.

He could see that she had not relented, and so he lifted the rein, and was about to urge the sorrel mare forward, when the girl suddenly left the house and came to his side.

"Mr. Ragsdale," she said softly, "don't go away angry with me. The man you seek is innocent of murder. If it is necessary, to save my step-mother, send for me, and I will do it. Please don't forget now."

Something like a sob choked her utterance at the last.

She puzzled him.

"Haven't you something to tell me, Miss Tripp?"

"Yes. Don't go to Atlantic City. Your aunt was taken to Brandon, where she will be imprisoned till the trial comes off."

She then turned and entered the house.

Puzzled at the girl's strange acting, Ragsdale finally gave his animal the rein and galloped away.

He knew the trail to Brandon, or thought he did, but would have missed it, had not Sid Gidley overtaken him and consented to act as guide.

It was midnight when the twain entered the county town of Brandon.

Nothing could be done till morning.

At early dawn Ragsdale was astir, and looking about the streets.

He soon learned that his aunt had been taken to Atlantic City, so that there was yet ten miles to compass before he could see his wronged relative.

He was now more suspicious of Rena Tripp than ever. She must have known that the officers had taken her step-mother to Atlantic City, and yet she had sent Ragsdale ten miles out of his way.

Arriving at the "City," the young lawyer was at once permitted to interview Mrs. Tripp in jail.

He found her quite cast down.

"Heaven knows that I am innocent!" declared the woman, "but there is a plot to ruin me, all on account of that money from the old country. I am glad that it is beyond the reach of the mercenary. I made out the will none too soon, Hilton. I do not expect to live beyond this disgrace many days, but I want you to take the news to your uncle in Denver, and tell him that I die an innocent woman."

"Don't talk of dying, Aunt Julia," said the young lawyer drearily. "I shall not permit you to do anything of the kind. I have a clue to the assassin, and you will be honorably acquitted. Of this I am as certain as that the sun shines at noonday."

The lawyer-detective left his aunt in a somewhat calmer mood than he found her.

Ragsdale had thought to effect the prisoner's release on the ground that her arrest had been an illegal one, but he found that the conspirators had not left such a loophole open.

Shade was not the one who had arrested Mrs. Tripp, but a lawfully constituted officer from Atlantic City.

Shade and Benay Flash, however, were on hand to assist.

"Now to find Worthland Rivers," thought the lawyer-detective. "He is the assassin, as the letters in my possession will prove. Although he did me a good turn on two occasions, yet it is my duty to send him to the gallows for murder."

In the line of duty Ragsdale could be as hard as adamant.

If Rena was a sweetheart of Rivers, as now seemed likely, she might have a guilty knowledge of the crime that had sent poor Olive to an untimely grave.

Walking along a by-street, Ragsdale ran suddenly upon Benay Flash.



The half-breed smiled on him with the utmost coolness.

"So we meet again, Hilton," said the factotum of Three Oaks Ranch. "You see now that I made no idle threat some time ago."

"It will prove idle in the long run," retorted the lawyer.

"Do you think so?"

"I know so."

"Don't be too sure, Mr. Ragsdale," retorted the half-breed. "We have laid a train that, when it is touched off, will blow you and your aunt to kingdom come."

The fellow laughed grimly.

"Benay Flash, you are a villain!"

"Pooh!"

"You are a scoundrel from the ground up, but your plot to win a hundred thousand will not succeed, and within six weeks I will see you behind prison bars!"

For once the thick skin of the mercenary half-breed was pierced.

He actually trembled under the gaze of the Denver lawyer.

"I mean what I say, Benay Flash. Your plot has been pierced, and you and your companions will fall into a dungeon before you are aware of it."

"Bah! I've heard sheep bleat before," sneered Flash. "Your aunt will hang for a double murder. She is the one who has plotted to win a fortune, not I."

Then the factotum turned on his heel and rushed away, evidently not pleased with the manner of his reception by Ragsdale.

He had gone but a little way, when he paused, turned about and shook his clinched fist at the retreating form of the Denver lawyer.

Ragsdale walked on a little further when he caught sight of two men riding into the city from the north.

Both men had come under the eye of the young lawyer before. One man was Jack Stoneset, the leader of the vigilantes; Ragsdale found time to wonder what business the leader of the criminal hunters could have here, before he turned his attention to the other?

One glance into the face of the second man sent an ejaculation from the lips of the lawyer-man-hunter.

Springing to the side of the horseman, who had now halted, Ragsdale cried in a stern voice:

"Dismount, Worthland Rivers, you are wanted."

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### STRANGE DEVELOPMENTS.

THE man thus rudely addressed by Ragsdale, was young and handsome. His face was unburned, and his clothing somewhat the worse for wear, yet he had about him the air of a gentleman, not to be mistaken.

"Ah, I think I know you," said Rivers, as he glanced into the face of the man from Denver. "You and I met in a lonely cave up in the Big Horn country. I lost a coat and a horse at the time, and surmised that you might give me some information that would lead to my finding them. Was I wrong?"

"No. I found the animal, but it was one that had been stolen from me at an earlier date, and so I appropriated it."

"Very well. No hard feelings on that score, Mr. Ragsdale," returned the man, with a forced laugh. "You spoke just now as though you were anxious to talk with me. I am in something of a hurry, yet will not refuse you an interview. Jack, ride on to the hotel, I will see you later."

The leader of the vigilantes did as requested, and Rivers dismounted and walked to an open space under some trees, where they found shelter from the rays of a hot sun.

"I am ready now to hear what you have to offer, Mr. Ragsdale. Please be brief about it, as I have much business on my hands to transact before night."

The man's cool, business-like manner quite disarmed Ragsdale's venom.

"Do you know the Tripps, Mr. Rivers?"

"Intimately."

"I thought so."

"Well?"

The young lawyer hardly knew how to proceed. At length he said:

"Mrs. Tripp is in this town, accused of a

double murder. What do you know about it, Mr. Rivers?"

"All about it."

"I mistrusted as much. You are, then, one of the conspirators who hope to gain a fortune by sending an innocent woman to the gallows. Let me tell you, Worthland Rivers, it won't work."

Ragsdale spoke sternly now.

He saw Rivers recoil and tremble.

"You mistake me utterly, Mr. Ragsdale," declared the other, in an unsteady voice. "I know of the plot you speak of, but, as Heaven is my judge, I had no hand in any of the villainous work. Don't interrupt me, please, till I am through. I know that Mrs. Tripp has been arrested. I know, too, that she is an innocent woman, the victim of a plot, which, Heaven helping me, I mean to thwart. My business here to-day is, in part, to save Mrs. Tripp."

"I wish I could believe this."

"I am sorry you distrust me, sir," returned Rivers, coldly. "I am sure that you have no cause to doubt my friendship for you. On two occasions I have rescued you from the Philistines, and now you turn upon me with accusations. Isn't this a poor return for past favors, Hilton Ragsdale?"

The rebuke in the man's voice the young lawyer felt was merited, and yet how could he overlook the fact, brought out by the letters that had been found in Rivers' coat? A fact that, in the eyes of Ragsdale, branded the man before him a murderer!

"I am much in your debt, Mr. Rivers, and had I only to consult my own feelings, I might be lenient; but a foul murder was committed on the night of June 16th, last year, the victim being my own cousin, an innocent young girl, whose blood cries from the lonely grave on the prairie for vengeance. Would I not be a dastard did I not pursue the murderer to the death?"

The eyes of the speaker fixed themselves in a penetrating gaze on the face of the man before him.

Again Rivers started and trembled, a fact that did not escape the notice of his accuser.

"I have hunted the prairies and gulches of Wyoming in my search for the assassin, Worthland Rivers. I have made discoveries of a most startling nature within the past few hours."

"In fact, you have been acting the detective to some purpose."

"I think so, Mr. Rivers."

"You turn upon me, imagining that I harmed Olive Chester?"

The speaker's face was as white as death when he put the question.

"I have the proof, Mr. Rivers."

"No, no, that cannot be."

The young man trembled more than ever under the accusing words and gaze of Ragsdale, a fact that only confirmed the lawyer-detective's worst suspicions.

"Rivers, I did not know when I came here that my poor cousin had two lovers. I have learned this fact lately. The whole world has looked upon Evard Demming as Olive's lover and murderer."

The young lawyer paused, but as his listener made no effort to speak, he proceeded:

"I assisted in saving Demming from the hands of a mob of lynchers, and am satisfied that I saved an innocent man. I am glad of that act. It was by accident that I discovered that Olive had another lover. I have since pursued my investigations till I found that the finger of fate points to Olive's second lover as the one who fired the fatal shot. I am sorry for you, Rivers, since I know the deed was done in the heat of passion, and that you have since repented it; but nothing in the law can excuse you. My aunt must not suffer for the crime of another."

"True, true!" exclaimed Rivers, in a hollow voice. "You speak truly when you say that shot was fired in the heat of passion, Hilton Ragsdale. I would give all my life to undo that one fatal blunder."

To the young lawyer's surprise the accused man was admitting his crime. He had looked for indignant denial.

"Confession in open court may aid you, Mr. Rivers," said Ragsdale, his voice now assuming a sympathetic tone.

"Confession of what?"

"Of the murder of Olive Chester."

"No, no, I make no such confession. I

murder the woman I loved better than my life! It is false, I could not do so wicked a thing. I shall not remain here to be accused of this crime. Back! you touch me at your peril!"

A gleaming revolver was thrust into the face of Ragsdale, while the young plainsman retreated to his horse near at hand.

"Halt, Rivers."

The hand of the lawyer-detective fell to his hip, but he dared not draw, since his enemy had him covered, and he could see by the gleam of the fellow's eyes that he was a desperate man.

Reaching the saddle, Rivers rode swiftly away toward the open country.

And thus had the confessed murderer escaped.

Ragsdale was in a heat.

Now that Rivers knew he was discovered, he would doubtless flee the country, and a long chase would be necessary before the murderer was captured.

The lawyer watched the murderer till he was lost to view in the distance, taking note of the course the man pursued.

Returning to the town, Ragsdale consulted with the authorities, and learned that his aunt must lie in jail two weeks before trial.

In that time the young man resolved to hunt down the real assassin.

He went to his aunt and told her the cheering news that the real murderer had been discovered, and then he mounted the sorrel mare, and accompanied by Sid Gidley, set out on the trail of Worthland Rivers.

This was found to lead directly to the Tripp ranch.

It was night when the two friends arrived.

Rena was there alone to receive them.

"Mr. Rivers has not been here!" declared the girl. "I might find him, however, if it is of importance."

"It is of the greatest importance," declared the young lawyer, regarding the girl admiringly.

He thought her brave to remain at the ranch alone, and he was learning to care for the plainsman's daughter in a way that he little dreamed of a few days before.

"Mr. Rivers will not leave the country without seeing me," returned Rena, "and I will tell him you want him."

A smile touched the face of the lawyer-detective.

"I hardly think he would come on being told that he was wanted," said Ragsdale. "Truth is, he has fled."

"Fled?"

"From justice."

"Sir, what do you mean?"

"I mean that Rivers confessed to me that he murdered my cousin Olive, and then mounted his horse and fled, thus leaving an innocent woman to suffer in his place."

"My soul!" gasped the girl, clinging to a chair for support, her face blanching. "This cannot be true. Worth never, never committed a murder. He shall not be accused of it. I will die myself sooner! Poor boy! poor Worth!"

Then she sunk limp as a rag into a chair, and covered her face as if to shut out some horrid picture.

Ragsdale clinched his teeth.

Rena loved this man Rivers.

There could be no doubt of this, and the knowledge sent a stab of pain to the heart of the young lawyer.

He must not spare on account of this beautiful girl's love.

He was more than ever determined to hunt down the assassin.

"I have spoken only the truth," said Ragsdale, after a moment. "This man Rivers is the assassin, and he must not be permitted to escape. If you know where he is, tell me at once."

"I do not know."

She looked up into his face, her own white and ghastly.

He could see that she suffered more than tongue could tell.

Her love for Rivers must be deep and abiding.

"If you cannot aid us, we must trust to our own resources," declared Ragsdale, turning to depart.

As he reached the door Rena Tripp sprang to her feet, and tossing back her midnight

hair confronted him with an awful look on her face.

"Mr. Ragsdale, listen one moment."

"Certainly."

"This is an awful accusation you make against my—Worthland. It is possible that he, in a moment of surprise, confessed to this deed. Don't look for him. If you do you will not find him; but go back and look after your aunt, and when the day of trial comes trust me the guilty one shall be there, and my poor mamma shall go free. Heaven help me, and bless you, Mr. Ragsdale. Till the day of trial, farewell."

She turned from him then, and soon he door closed between them.

Ragsdale went out into the night and joined Sid.

He was deeply moved by the words and actions of the beautiful Rena.

He paid no heed to her words, however, but went on the search for the murderer.

Unavailing search.

When the plains and hills were scoured for scores of miles around, the young lawyer returned to Atlantic City, tired and discouraged at his ill-success.

It was on the eve of the trial.

The town was full of strangers.

Colonel Redhart, Benay Flash and Tribune Tripp were there, anxious to be at the trial.

A continual smile rested on the face of the half-breed, and Colonel Redhart seemed almost as much elated.

Ragsdale was downcast.

He had employed an able lawyer to defend his aunt, yet he was apprehensive of the outcome.

Once he met Jack Stoneset, whom he had come to know well.

The homesteader touched the young lawyer's arm and said:

"There'll be more'n one surprise afore this trial's over, my boy. Hold yer hosses and keep still."

Further explanation the man refused to give.

The first surprise was, to Ragsdale, the most astounding.

In the morning, the moment court opened, the prosecuting lawyer rose in his place and said:

"May it please the court, I think it will be wholly unnecessary to go on with the case of the People *versus* Mrs. Julia Tripp."

He paused.

All eyes were fixed on the prosecutor.

Even the haggard prisoner deigned to gaze in his direction.

"Proceed," said the judge.

"It has transpired," said the prosecutor, "that justice in this case has overtaken the murderer in a most strange manner. His conscience has scourged him to make a full confession."

At this moment a man arose, and pushing past the rail, stood before the court.

"I am here to save the innocent," said he. "I here and now confess that it was my shot that killed Olive Chester on the night of the 16th of June, one year ago."

The speaker stood pale yet calm, facing the audience.

It was Worthland Rivers!

### CHAPTER XXX.

#### REVELATION.

"DIDN'T I tell ye so?"

A hand tapped the arm of Ragsdale two hours after the scene in the courtroom.

The young lawyer looked into the face of the leader of the vigilantes—Jack Stoneset.

Ragsdale's aunt was free and at the hotel, while Rivers, the self-confessed murderer, was in jail.

"What is that, Mr. Stoneset?"

"I told ye I'd surprise ye."

"Yes. Was it you that brought Rivers to the confessional?"

"Not much. A gal did that, I reckon. This 'ere's somethin' more important. Come 'long o' me. I want to show you some o' yer friends."

Ragsdale followed the homesteader to a large building, before which a crowd had gathered.

The leader of the vigilantes had no trouble in passing the guard at the door.

Within a large inner room, Ragsdale met

four men face to face, men who had been more or less identified with the young lawyer's fortunes since he came to Wyoming on a man-hunt weeks before.

Each of the four wore handcuffs and shackles; besides, all were fastened together—a chain-gang of rogues truly!

Who were they? the reader asks.

Benay Flash, Tribune Tripp, Nate Shade and Colonel Redhart.

The man from Denver was certainly astounded.

"A nice lot, eh, Mr. Ragsdale?" chuckled Stoneset.

"So!" ejaculated Ragsdale, as light began to dawn upon his brain.

"Dod blast it! this 'ere's a go, and no mistake," growled the colonel. "Ye'll stand by me, won't ye, Hilton?"

"What have you been doing?"

"Nuthin'."

"Hoss and cattle stealin', the last one on 'em. Caught 'em all in mask once, but let 'em come to the city afore I gobbled 'em," declared Stoneset; "and I want to say just here, Mr. Ragsdale, 'at we wouldn't a-got onto the cusses at all, ef't had not a-been fur the feller 'ot confessed to a murder this mornin'."

"Do you refer to Rivers?"

"Yes."

"What had he to do with it?"

"He spied 'em out by joinin' 'em," returned the captain of the vigilantes. "He's got ther names all on his list. I tell ye, youngster, 'at Worth Rivers is one o' the best detectives west o' Denver. I'm powerful sorry he's got inter trouble, fur a better man don't live, I believe."

"Rivers is fool."

Ragsdale started.

The voice was a familiar one, and he glanced toward the man who uttered the words.

"Did you speak, Shade?"

"I said Worthland Rivers was a fool to confess to murdering that girl. Look there"—holding up his hand—"there's where his bullet went, curse him!"

The man's little finger was gone.

Turning to Stoneset, the lawyer said:

"That man is in disguise. I wish you would take off that false hair and beard."

Shade bent a terrible look on Ragsdale, and he rattled his manacles furiously.

"Dum fool!" growled the colonel. "You've put yer foot in it now, young feller."

Stoneset, who suspected the pretended detective was in disguise, lost no time in complying with the request of the visitor.

Both hair and beard came off readily enough, revealing a head of close-cropped blonde hair, and a face to match.

"I suspected as much," declared Ragsdale, as he saw in the humbled cattle-stealer no less a personage than Evard Demming.

The man's remark about how his finger came to be gone caused the lawyer-detective to question Demming closely, but that individual refused to talk on the subject.

He seemed quite broken up over his downfall.

Hilton Ragsdale went from the room in a thoughtful mood.

Somehow in his heart he felt sorry for the man who lay in jail, a self-confessed murderer.

Mechanically he turned his steps toward the lock-up.

"You cannot go in now," said the jailer, in answer to his request to interview Rivers.

"Why not?"

"He's got a visitor."

"Who is it?"

"A woman—his sweetheart, I presume."

The lawyer-detective thought of Rena at once.

For a moment he stood in a thoughtful attitude; then he turned suddenly upon the keeper, whom he had known in the East.

"John, I've an idea."

"Well?"

"Let me go in unbeknown to the prisoner or his visitor. If he makes any revelations regarding the murder it will surely be to his sweetheart."

"True."

After a little reflection the jailer agreed to the proposition, and the two entered the corridor of the jail in a noiseless manner.

Soon they stood, unseen, near the grated door of Rivers' cell.

It was Rena's voice that both heard at this moment.

"In the sight of Heaven you are an innocent man, Worth. I do not see what tempted you to confess to a crime like this that, you did not commit."

"But I did commit it, Rena. Why have you come here to tempt me to fight longer against fate? I fired the fatal shot, and God knows the knowledge has nearly killed me, for you know I loved that girl, Rena."

"Yes, I know, and let me tell you something more, Worth," said the girl, in a tense, low voice.

"Your argument cannot shake my determination, Rena. I was an ingrate to permit that good woman to be arrested. I fled like a coward, and my conscience has tormented me since."

"Will you listen to me, Worth?"

"I suppose I must."

"You and I rode to the Chester ranch on the night of the 16th of June—that fatal night of blood."

"Yes, yes! but why speak of that?"

"Because I have something to tell you, something that I saw that you may not know."

"And you have kept this from me all this time?"

"Yes, I thought it best. I know how angry you were when you learned that Olive had ridden out to meet Evard Demming. I'm afraid you lost your senses in a measure, for Olive had promised to be your wife. You rode from the vicinity in a heat, and I heard something about shooting him on sight."

"Yes, it may be. I loved Olive so, and to think he should step in and steal her from me."

"Be quiet, Worth," urged Rena. "Let me tell you what I saw that night just as the storm was rising and the lurid flashes of lightning lit the heavens. I followed you, Worth, and witnessed the fatal meeting near the hunter's cabin on Three Oaks plantation."

"Then you know that I did not fire at Olive," he breathed huskily.

"I know how it all happened. You arrived on the ground in time to see the two meet. The sight maddened you, and you stepped forward and spoke to Evard Demming, calling him a coward and a sneak. I heard the words, and saw what followed."

"Oh, Rena!"

"Quick as a flash Demming drew a revolver, pushing Olive aside, and with an oath, said:

"'I've been laying for you, Worthland Rivers. Draw and defend yourself.'"

"You drew your own pistol and raised it. At this moment Olive uttered a scream and rushed between you two. It was a fatal move on her part. Both pistols cracked. Olive fell. The bullet meant for another had slain the girl. A lightning flash revealed it all to me who stood near. I saw you toss aside your weapon and stagger, falling upon the body of the poor girl. I thought at first that you, too, had been hit. I soon heard you calling on Olive's name, upbraiding yourself as her murderer, but you were not, for it was wholly an accident."

"I had cooled off some when I reached the ground, Rena," said the prisoner at this point.

"I only drew my weapon to defend myself against Demming. I meant to harm no one."

"I know that," returned she. "I fled from the vicinity and have kept my secret for a year. I meant to talk to you about it, but you disappeared, and the body of Olive was not found. I suppose Demming buried it in the old house. I have good reason to believe that Benay Flash saw the affray on that night, as well as myself. I think it will be easy enough to prove it an accident on your part."

A groan alone answered her.

"You must look on the bright side of this affair, Worth," proceeded the girl. "No murder was committed."

"But, don't you see, the secreting of the body makes it all look bad."

"You did not do that?"

"No—"

"Then Demming, who did, is really the guilty man. Further, it is more than likely that his bullet, not yours, struck the girl."

"I had not thought of that."

"I have."



"But it cannot be proved in any event."  
 "I think it can."  
 "How? You bid me hope. Oh, Heaven! if I only knew that my bullet was not guilty of slaying poor Olive I should feel like a new man."

"The proof can be found," said Rena. "I saw the tragedy, and when you two men fired, Olive Chester stood between you, with her face turned toward Eward Demming."

"Yes, yes, that is true."  
 "Well, then, the location of the bullet tells who shot Olive Chester."

"My soul, this is true. The body must be exhumed. Oh, Rena, if it should prove that I am guiltless, I shall feel like one let out of Hades!"

At this a strange thrill shot over the listening Ragsdale.

"Open the door," he said to the jailer. "Be quick about it, too, John."

The key grated in the lock, and the next minute the lawyer-detective entered the cell, confronting Rivers.

"I have heard all," said Ragsdale.

"Then you know I meant no harm to your poor cousin when I fired in defense of my life?"

"I know that, and more."

"More?"

Rivers trembled as he gazed eagerly into the face of the speaker.

"The bullet that found Olive Chester's life was buried in her forehead."

"Just Heaven! I thank thee."

The prisoner sunk weak and trembling to the floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few weeks later, and four men were sent to a western penitentiary for a term of years.

"I am glad that Worthland Rivers is free," said Demming, as he stood ready to leave on the train for his prison-home. His words were addressed to Ragsdale. "No murder was done that night when your cousin was killed. I fired at Rivers, but hit the girl. I knew this all the time. His bullet cut off my little finger. When I come out of prison I promise you I shall run off no more cattle and horses. 'Twas the colonel got me into it."

Ragsdale learned that it was the masked league of cattle-stealers who had made so many attempts on his life, since they feared he would learn their secret if he remained in the Big Horn basin.

With the thieves the murder mystery cut but a secondary figure.

Of course the mob scene at the hunter's shanty was all a farce, engineered by Tribune Tripp and the colonel.

With the mystery of Olive's death cleared up, our story is at an end. Mrs. Tripp was easily freed from her criminal husband, and went to live in Denver, where she has a happy home. From her Ragsdale learned that Rena was not Tripp's daughter, but a step-child.

"Her real name is Rivers," said Mrs. Tripp.

"Rivers!" exclaimed Ragsdale.

"Yes. She and Worthland are own brother and sister."

"The thunder! you say."

It was a glad revelation to the young lawyer, however.

He sought out Rena, and payed devoted court, winning her after a six months' siege.

Worthland Rivers is doing business in Denver, and seems to enjoy himself, since a black cloud has been lifted from his life.

Mrs. Chester—she goes by that name now—has altered her will in that a portion of her money she intends to have go to Rena's brother.

Ragsdale's detective experience in Wyoming was his last.

[THE END.]

The next number of the OLD CAP. COLLIER LIBRARY will contain, complete, a splendid detective story by that Prince of detective writers, GILBERT JEROME. It is entitled **"THE PARISIAN DETECTIVE IN NEW YORK; or, Solving the Mystery of a Stolen Corpse."** It is a rattler and will be published as No. 380 of the OLD CAP. COLLIER LIBRARY.