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He Rode in a Six-Gun Handicap

HELL ON HOOFS

(QUARTER HORSE)

GORDON YOUNG

Complete and Unabridged

A gunman's bullet slammed into Bill Helgar's chest the moment he first set foot in Reseda, a slug that had been intended to stop another man's scheming heart. The original target was Dan Trusand, a slick and cunning gambler, and when Dan nursed the youthful Bill back to health he had something more on his mind than mere gratitude. He had a very special role in mind for Bill to play. . . .

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Hell on Hoofs

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BY GORDON YOUNG

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CHAPTER ONE

THE KID RODE into Reseda bareback and barefooted, with a rope bridle, and that hurt his pride; even the horse was a bony pinto and he didn't like pintos except as he liked all horses. They were all he knew, for he had been saddle-cradled, and couldn't remember when there wasn't the smell of leather, a horse to step on—or kick—him, and a rope in his hands, at first for play and then for work; and also rough-teasing busters to torment and make him mad just for fun. They hadn't always found it fun. He was a mean little devil when he got mad.

He didn't know about towns and had never seen a lot of people in a bunch except at the fort where his dad used to sell horses: wild horses that had been rounded up, branded, and broken. The busters that helped were a bad lot, but his dad was a grim ex-cavalryman who knew how to handle men and horses, and he lived out in the open, the kid with him, about like an outlaw on the dodge, but he never dodged away from anybody—except women.

His dad hadn't liked women. "They do a man no good," he said, and never mentioned the kid's mother.

Here in Reseda he saw that men were grouped in doorways or peering around porch posts; and, though they looked anxiously up the street and scarcely noticed him, he didn't realize that they were watchful and uneasy. As far as he knew, townfolk were like that all the time.

He rode by a corner saloon with a bull's head painted on the high false front, and just beyond the cross street there was a watering trough before a saddle shop. The trough was half empty with a ragged green scum fringing the sides and a film of dust lay on the water.

He slid off and pumped to fill the battered tin cup on a chain; and, as he drank, he eyed two men who were under the porch at the saddlery doorway. He let his horse stand and went to the sidewalk's edge and lifted his voice in a thin, forced effort to ask, "Can you fellows tell me where a man named Joe Helgar is?"

One swore at him, saying, "Fresh kid!"

The other man was crosseyed and grinned squintily as he drawled, "Well now, bub, we don't rightly know, but"—a long arm lifted—" see that man by hisself across the street up yonder? You go ask that gambler. He'll tell you!" The grin widened. "What you scairt of, bub?"

Here was something wrong; the kid knew it, but "scairt" was the kind of thing he couldn't swallow, and he scowled distrustfully at the squinting eyes, then faced about and cut catty-cornered across the dusty street toward the man who stood at the edge of the board sidewalk and peered along the street toward the livery stable.

The sidewalk was some two feet above the street level, and when the kid stopped and stared up, the gambler told him, "Get the hell away from here!"

"Fellow 'cross the street said you'd tell me where Joe Helgar is!"

The gambler's eyes flashed down as if the kid had said something he oughtn't; they were blue-gray eyes, hard as polished pebbles, and not pretty pebbles. His long face was narrow, and the bones showed under the skin and the skin wasn't sun-darkened. "A fool's joke! You get the hell out of here!"

The kid was used to hard words and hard men. He got up on the sidewalk and stood stubbornly before the man, who was tall and wore a long black coat though the day was hot, and his shirt was white and clean, his boots polished.

"Mister, I got no folks only this Joe Helgar, who is my uncle. I don't know him—only that he's in this town. So why's it all so wrong for me to ask?"

The gambler stared searchingly, and the kid's eyes didn't waver; he was brown as an Indian and as dirty; his clothes were ragged, his long hair scraggly on his neck, and he had a thin, half-starved leanness, but the eyes were a clear blue and straight as sunlight through a knothole.

The gambler's mouth twitched into a crooked smile. "I'll be damned!"

"Mister, what's all so wrong?"

That was all the kid remembered. He didn't hear the gun go off, at least not clearly, and he fell from the sidewalk into the dust with a bullet in his back.

A man up the street crouched and shot again before the

gambler's gun came out with a full arm's reach, sighting; and when he had fired the crouching man up the street lurched forward and lay still.

The gambler thrust his revolver into the holster under his coat and jumped from the sidewalk to pick up the kid.

2

It was night when the kid opened his eyes and he was feverish; everything moved through a transparent haze like the desert's shimmer, and pain chewed at his shoulder; but that was all right. He'd been brought up not to whimper. "Grin and bear it!" his dad had often told him. "If you live, good; and if you don't, it's maybe better!"

A woman came noiselessly into the lamplight and, when she saw that his eyes were open, hovered over him with a hand to his forehead and smiled in saying that he was all right, would be all right. Her voice made him think of flowing water in pine-shadowed hills, and the thick, dark hair was loose and curly and fell about her shoulders. She asked gently, "What is your name?"

"Bill Helgar."

Her brown eyes clouded at the sound of "Helgar," but she took hold of his hand, squeezed it, and smiled, not easily, saying, "You'll be all right, Bill. Dan Trusand never in his life before got himself mussed for anybody—like when he picked you up out of the dust!" Then, "He's humaner than I thought!"

"W—who are you?"

"I'm Kate Trusand. His wife."

3

The kid never knew how many days he was in bed but Kate seemed always near him. At night there was faraway music and sometimes laughter and sometimes roaring shouts, and he listened wonderingly but never asked.

There were times, too, when he went out of his head and the cuss words that he had grown up with came like the crackle of dry wood, wickedly. When Trusand stood by and heard, he'd nod and seem amused; but Kate's eyes would snap

and she put her feelings into the way she said, "You think it funny, you!"

'. The shaggy rawboned doctor who had taken out the bullet came frequently. His hat was rusty, his clothes strong with tobacco from the pipes he carried, and he concealed his kindlines under a rough tongue that made fun of the kid for wearing a woman's nightgown, all muslin and lace with sachet on it; and when he said that not many fellows could run Dan Trusand out of his own bed, or would try, the kid's only response was a hard and unrevealing stare.

Trusand fingered the gold-link chain that dangled across his vest and commented, "Already poker-faced! What a short card man he'll make!"

The doc said, "Bah!" not liking the gambler anyhow, but Kate's dark-eyed glance went to Trusand's face like something thrown.

Trusand's long hands were smooth and pale and he patted the kid's good shoulder. "What happened makes us sort of pardners all the way! You got hit with a bullet meant for me. You're my good luck, Bill!"

The kid peered solemnly, not saying anything. He was as untamed as a wild colt, as reluctant in his friendliness. He knew now that Trusand had been waiting for a fellow who had to come and kill him on the hour and Trusand had waited, challengingly. The kid's dad had brought him up to feel that being brave was what made some men better than others.

Kate, or "Miss Kate," as nearly everyone called her in the manner of Southwestern politeness, found him a strange boy; sometimes he seemed merely a sick child, but sometimes a man-grown look shadowed his thin face, and though, in a woman's way, she questioned him, he wouldn't reveal much even to her, and she was a little unsure of his feelings until one evening when she was embroidering in the rocker by the lamp, and the faroff music jingle-jangled, when suddenly he said:

"Miss Kate, if anybody ever hurts you, I'll kill him!"

He said it as quietly as if asking for a drink of water. The emphasis lay in his eyes; they were as blue as turquoise and unyieldingly straight.

Kate flinched, her lips parted in a frightened gasp, then

she laughed with a tight throat. "Why, Bill, nobody would hurt me! Why do you say a thing like that?"

"It's how I feel!"

4

The kid awakened in the twilight and listened to low voices across the room; Kate was retelling what he had today told her about himself, and he could scarcely see her, but Trusand had his coat off and in the dusk the white shirt was vivid where he straddled a chair, his arms folded across the back.

"Dan, he's lived out in the open like an Indian, and can't read or write but he can count. That's from handling horses. They are all he knows."

The tip of Trusand's cigarette grew cinder-bright near his mouth. "Then he'll make a good rider for Blue Chip."

"But, Dan, you don't know anything about horses, and you ought to sell her back to Allentyre anyhow. It wasn't really his horse to lose, and the girl wants Blue Chip back."

"Go on about Bill."

Kate told that the kid's dad and the men—and the kid counted as a man—would work for weeks building a strong corral with wide wings to funnel in the wild herd they were after. Not long before they had caught a bunch and were breaking the horses; a latigo snapped on his dad's saddle and his dad died without recovering consciousness.

The kid then said that he would run the outfit like his father had and the hands laughed uproariously. They'd got in the whisky jug and made fun of him, told him nobody owned wild horses. He made for his rifle to lay down the law, but they took it from him, told him to "Git!" He fought and tromped on feet and kicked and so maddened them that, drunkenly, they pulled his boots and gave him only the old pinto packhorse, a rope, and no grub, and threatened that if he ever showed up again they'd tie him across cactus and leave him there.

Kate's was an angered pity, but Trusand merely asked, "But what about this uncle of his?"

"The only person he could turn to! He knew Joe Helgar was up here and he wanted help to go back and run those men off. Dan, he has a fierce streak in him that almost scares

me! And how he didn't starve in riding all the way up here from Texas I don't know and he won't say, except that cowboys fed him sometimes.

"Dan," she went on, soft-voiced and urgently, "let's go away from here and take him with us. We owe it to him! Don't you feel that way—after he was hit by a bullet meant for you?"

"Oh, sure, sure," Trusand replied complacently. "I'll be good to him. He'll bring me luck and I'll teach him things."

Quick temper flared in Kate's tone. "You'll never make a gambler out of him!"

"Hm, from you that's funny! You mean you don't want me to." The room was now completely dark. Trusand took his time before he said slowly, "And we are not going to move anywhere. I like it here. I've got strings out."

"But, Dan, we can't stay on here, or even in this part of the country! He's sure to find out!"

"Find out what?"

"That it was his uncle you killed!"

The kid stirred on the bed, sitting up as his thin voice lifted. "I been hearing you! I don't care about him 'cause he shot first and when you wasn't looking!"

An oath flew whisperingly from Kate's mouth as she turned in the darkness, rising, as startled as if caught in something that wasn't honest. Trusand took a match from the receptacle on the wall by the door, plopped it against the sandpaper striker, and lit the lamp, then held it shoulder high by the bedside.

The kid moved only his eyes, looking from one to the other as he sat bolt upright, his arm in a bandage against his breast to steady the healing back muscles.

Light played over the polished coral about Kate's neck and her eyes were as bright as the coral when she said, "Dan, that settles it!"

Now that Trusand's coat was off, a big knife in a sweat-darkened sheath could be seen strapped high on his side, the hilt almost at the pit of his arm; and his face, pale as marble, was as hard and had no more expression. "Settles what?"

"We're going to have a home for him! Not live over this joint!"

Trusand looked slowly about the big room, his glance flicking at the chairs and the dresser with its perfume bottles, at the whatnot cluttered with gay trinkets, at the newly papered walls. "I like it here."

The music box on the dance-hall floor below had been fed a quarter, and now it was as if all three listened to *Turkey in the Straw;* then Kate thrust her fists rigidly down at her sides and came up on tiptoes with face lifted, and at that she didn't stand much above Trusand's shoulder, but she said defiantly, "This time I will have my way! Beat me or anything else, but I won't back up and you can't make me!"

Then from across the room they heard the kid's voice: "He ever beat you?"

Kate spun about. The kid's eyes frightened her; the devil looked out of them. "Oh, Lord, no!" she cried, and went to him, stooped with an arm about his neck, and patted his cheek as she laughed, "I just talked wild! Dan and me row without getting mad, don't we, Dan?"

The gambler smiled crookedly, asked, "Me strike a woman?"

"I ain't talking about just any woman. I mean her!"

Trusand stared at the kid, then looked toward Kate and said, "I believe he would jump me, or try it!" And that was commendation.

CHAPTER TWO

MISS KATE was dressed for the street and looked slightly taller in high-heeled shoes as she walked around the kid in the center of the room, making sure he was trigged out to suit her. "Stand still!" she said, sounding cross. She lifted his hat, pushed at his hair, poked dents out of the crown, placed the hat on again, and studied its slant. "And keep your hands out of your pockets!" It wasn't the fragrant powder that made her pale.

Trusand, up early for him, yawned before the mirror. He had shaved; now his red suspenders dangled as he put

links into the fresh shirt's cuffs. Seven white shirts a week went to Mrs. Summers, the widow washwoman.

'. Kate was as nervous as a cat in a strange barn with dogs about. She got before Trusand, leaned close to the mirror, and used a ragged handkerchief to wipe more red off her mouth, then tossed the rag into the slop jar.

Trusand eyed her, amused. "Why fix up so plain? The judge knows what you look like."

Kate was tight-waisted in a dark gingham dress that brushed the floor and had tried on three hats before she jerked the yellow daisies from a black straw and pinned it on her knotted hair; now she studied herself critically in the glass as she drew on long black cotton gloves.

The kid, mystified and uncomfortable, could tell that things seemed all wrong and he didn't know why. His hair was cut short and his coat and pants were crisply new, the shoes stiff. He still favored the hurt shoulder, and Kate had thoughtlessly yanked it in turning him about to see how he looked, but he didn't let on. Anyhow, he knew that she wasn't mad at him.

They walked abreast down the narrow sidewalk, the kid unhappy in his new togs, more unhappy because Miss Kate's face was as hard set as if trying not to show pain. They went south along Main Street to where Kate led the way up the dim stairs; her back was stiff, and in the hall her heels clicked with the sound of driving nails.

Judge Trumbull got up bulkily and held out his hand, speaking with a warm rumble. "Miss Kate! Howdy, Dan. And this is the boy? Hm! Looks older'n I thought from how you talked."

Kate's fingers sharply prodded the kid, and he gave his hand to the big brown-jowled man as he had been instructed to do.

"Take chairs, folks." The judge moved a chair for Miss Kate.

A young man sat in a corner of the office with his hat in his lap, a spurred boot over his knee. He stood up and bobbed his head at Miss Kate, who eyed him aloofly; but Trusand tipped the lanky fellow a poker-faced wink and the man rubbed his mouth, concealing a smile.

The kid sat on the edge of a straight chair, and Miss Kate

was erect in her chair, with her gloved hands stiffly locked in her lap. The judge fiddled at his littered desk, then faced about and sat down, his eyes kindly and thoughtful on Bill Helgar. Trusand, with legs crossed, leaned back like a disinterested spectator.

Kate pointed without looking toward the man in the corner. "What's John Grant here for?"

John Grant, suddenly embarrassed, slid his foot from his knee. Trusand looked at his fingernails, rubbed them along his leg, looked again. The judge drew another long breath and rumbled benignly, "Miss Kate, you can't keep this boy! Not here in this town. Not after what happened to Joe Helgar. Not living over the Palace."

"I've got the promise of a house for rent at the edge of town." The words were strained and husky, her eyes desperate. "We'll move tomorrow! Won't we, Dan?"

"Whatever the judge says," Trusand answered quietly.

The judge sighed and shook his head and absently fingered the buttons of his open vest. "Now you know, Miss Kate, 'tain't fitting." He avoided her eyes.

Kate leaned forward. "If I go to church?"

Trusand's eyes flicked at her with as much surprise as he ever showed; it was like a trump card he hadn't known was out. John Grant squeezed his mouth, again covering it with a hand. The judge avoided her stare and drew a blue bandanna and wiped under his chin. It wasn't funny, not with that anxiousness in her dark eyes, that gray strain on her face.

"Church or not, Miss Kate, you are worthy to take care of any child! But it's circumstances, like I spoke of." The judge then gazed somberly at Trusand, who looked with unconcern toward cobwebs in the ceiling's far corner. Trusand's plausible explanations had fitted in with some of the town's disapproving talk, and he had arranged with the judge to have the kid taken away, had arranged with John Grant to keep him.

The judge tried to be kindly about it. "Miss Kate, there is already some complaints. I thought just talking it over between us here would be better than maybe having trouble in court. John's a fine, honest young fellow who lives all alone and will be good to the boy."

She looked coldly at John Grant. Not a bad fellow but

not much account either: good-natured, shiftless, weak, but everybody liked him.

"Judge," she begged, "he's never had a chance even to read and write and—"

Grant said, "I'll learn him good, Miss Kate."

The kid stared from the corners of his eyes at the gangling Grant. The jumble had fallen into a pattern now: he was being taken from Miss Kate and given over to this stranger, and the kid's was a resentful feeling that, maybe excepting Trusand, he was as much man as any of them here; and the scornful thought lay behind his eyes: *Keep me where I don't want to stay?*

Kate stood up haggardly and was resigned even if bitter. "Judge, I've been cold-decked! I thought you'd listen. But your mind was made up. And you"—she turned on Trusand—"you haven't opened your mouth! And you promised! You always promise! Come on, Billy!"

2

Men on the street turned in wonder at the look of Miss Kate's face; her short steps clicked like hail, there was a stilt-like rigidity in her haste and the kid didn't quite keep up. She came under the porch before Mark's restaurant and was nearly across the alley when the tow-headed son of the washwoman saw her. Kate had once slapped his face on the street for mimicking an old crippled woman. Now Whitey had his back against the alley side of the restaurant and an awed smaller boy was watching him smoke a cigar butt he'd picked up. Whitey threw down the cigar butt, ran to the alley corner, shrieked, "Yahh, yahh, yahh!" and was mimicking Kate's stiff walk when a thunderbolt hit, or so it seemed.

The kid struck as hard as he could. His shoulder was stiff, not yet strong, but he closed furiously, butting and kicking and tripping. Whitey was nearly half grown and big, but he squalled as he went down and he was on the bottom. The kid had wrestled wrathfully with his father's rough men who teased him as they might have tormented a bear cub, and now he fought like one.

Men gathered, gawkily pleased; nobody but his hard-

working mother and the livery-stable loafers had much use for Whitey. The kid sat on Whitey's belly, rammed fingers into the colorless hair, furiously beat the head up and down in the alley dust; then suddenly he scooped up dust, gouged it into Whitey's mouth, nose, eyes, rubbing and pounding to get it in good.

Whitey squawked. Help came, a whirlwind in skirts, and Kate's voice brought the kid to his feet, but he gave Whitey a parting kick, then marched off with Kate's hand on his shoulder.

She grimly didn't say a word to the kid about the fight, but made him wash up and brushed his clothes, making him ready to go with John Grant, and she left the room when Trusand came. Kate felt that much like crying.

Trusand said, "All right, Bill, let's be on our way. You and Grant are taking Blue Chip with you."

3

Blue Chip nibbled at the corral's hayrack. The black mare was short-bodied, standing at fifteen hands, with powerful back and loins and graceful legs that were almost too slender for her weight, and a happy intelligence glowed in her eyes; kitten-gentle and, John Grant joshed, "woman-spoiled." She tipped her ears to watch the kid come up; they were already friends, but his eyes were all over her again, and his hand rubbed muzzle and nostrils.

Grant and Trusand paused briefly at the carriage shed and talked in mutter-quiet voices. The gambler's hat was cocked forward over an eye; even now he had the look of appraising another man's stud hand. Grant nodded a promise and grinned, then he went up and put a hand on the kid's shoulder, saying they would have lots of good times together, and got back an unresponsive stare.

When the kid had mounted bareback, Trusand reached for a parting handshake. "Bill, you are working for me and John Grant. I'll sell your pinto one of these days, but just in case—here." He held out a five-dollar gold piece.

They rode from town and headed slowly up the road between the Twin Humps. Grant began to sing about a yaller-haired girl. The kid stayed alongside, his face sullen;

there was loneliness in him, like the beginning of sickness, and he had never been lonely before. He didn't want to go away from Miss Kate.

"You like my singing, Bill?"

"It's a'right."

Grant drew a harmonica, knotted and dropped the reins over the horn, rocked in the saddle as he played. "You like to dance, Bill?"

"Never did."

"Why, at your age I'd ride twenty miles a night to swing the girls! A man's the right to what fun he can get, don't you think?"

They were between the Humps, and the kid looked afar and didn't say anything. The ruts here were deep; freighters had to crowd through this pass, but in muddy weather they would swing wide on the lower roads.

Grant said, "Guess you know it was on account of Blue Chip your uncle got killed?"

"Yes."

"He was a jim-dandy with horses, but—" Grant broke off.

Miss Kate had explained to the kid that his uncle swore to kill Trusand for intimating that he had thrown a race; she didn't know whether or not he had thrown it, but Blue Chip lost.

Grant now went on: "Your uncle used to work for Allentyre—Joel Allentyre. Big rancher out near my place. Thinks the world and all of horses. Keeps a funny little Englishman out there that rides like a frog on a stick. Last spring Joel brought Blue Chip into town for a shoeing and got mixed up in a card game. Next morning he gave Dan Trusand a bill of sale for the mare.

"Joel tried to buy the horse back, and why Dan kep' her instead of taking money—Dan says he don't rightly know his ownself, unless it's on account of the name. He wants all the Blue Chips in sight!

"Your uncle was working for Harlow there at the livery stable and Trusand had him train and ride her. Fellows that called themselves Texans drifted in with a quarter horse and some money. Trusand lost a pile but didn't bat an eye, not till after the Texans pulled out. Then anybody's got to admit

it did look funny for your uncle to get likkered and show as much money as if he'd bet on the winner. Trusand made some remarks and your uncle got mad. He had to get mad or leave the country. That's how it come he got himself killed."

The kid acted as if he hadn't listened.

It was late afternoon when they rode toward timbered bottomland and waded the shallow Willawaw, letting the horses drink. A few minutes later Grant pointed ahead to a 'dobe house off the road and said, "Crosby's."

Horses, with reins trailing, stood in the shade of the scarlet-to-yellow sycamores and dejectedly switched at flies. Grant, knowing the horses, said, "Red Sanger's here and Mike Eads and——" He dismounted, pushed back his hat, and told the kid, "You wait out here. I won't be long." Then he went into the house.

The kid got off and dropped the halter rope and squatted down, having a look at the horses. Good ones, strong and rangy. He looked longest at the narrow-headed big-shouldered sorrel under a large, worn, hand-stamped saddle with tapaderos and a rope-burned bright horn. A rifle was in the saddle boot.

He heard a woman's shrill laughter and sauntered around a corner of the house, betting with himself that he wouldn't stay long with John Grant. A rain barrel had fallen to pieces and lay like the ribs of an animal long dead. He appeared to be studying the staves but listened to voices that hummed through the open window. He moved and took a quick look inside. The room was dark to his eyes but he caught the lumpish outline of four or five persons in the dimness, and saw the bright splotch of a Turkey-red tablecloth. Then he squatted down with his back to the wall where dock was trying to go to seed. He could overhear better now.

Grant was laughing about how Miss Kate had been tricked. "Dan sure stacked the cards on her!" A muddle of mixed voices then pitched up words that the kid didn't catch, but presently Grant was explaining, "Dan and me are going cahoots on racing the mare. Figure on Election Day. We'll clean up!"

A heavy voice answered, "You'll lose your shirt too. I like Trusand and you, too, John, but"—the heavy voice went on

with factual unconcern—"Joel Allentyre can outsmart any man in a race."

"But, Red," a man said hotly, using oaths, "you don't like Allentyre!"

The heavy voice replied, "Don't have to like a man to know how tall he is!"

The kid left the window, anger burning inside him. His resentment toward Grant for having laughed at how Miss Kate had been fooled was greater than toward Trusand for having fooled her. Fooled the judge too. Grant said Trusand had admitted on the quiet to the judge that he and Kate weren't proper people to keep the kid. That, Grant had laughed out, was because Trusand felt she would make a sissy out of Bill.

The kid savagely drove his new shoe's toe at a rusty can partly buried in the loose earth, then took up the can. There were bullet holes in it. His dad had been able to keep a can rolling from fifty feet quite a ways. That had helped tough fellows not to want trouble.

When he turned the corner the kid stopped short. A small horseman under a big hat and in bright new dungarees had ridden up quietly on a golden horse and, from the saddle, was fiddling with Blue Chip's head. The horseman was skinny, with a wide silver-studded belt and small bright spurs; and he felt jealous at having anybody, especially a stranger, pet the mare.

The kid didn't like it, so he backed up and sat down at the corner, pulled off his hat, peeked; then he saw the skinny fellow look warily toward the house and start off. A saddle rope had been tied to the halter's end and Blue Chip was being led at a walk. That didn't look like a thief's way until the kid guessed the mare was being walked slowly so hoofbeats wouldn't be heard and draw somebody to the door.

He jumped up but choked down the impulse to yell. Crying "Halt!" didn't mean a thing except at the point of a gun; now it would only give warning and set the thief into a lope. He had no confidence in John Grant; the others were strangers, and it didn't occur to him to run to the window and yell for help. All his life he'd acted with self-reliance; he'd had to because there'd always been horses' hoofs and

men's boots to avoid, and he'd done a man's work, at least on horseback.

The kid headed straight out for the big sorrel where there was a rifle, but the watchful thief saw him and leaned over and came down with a quirt, starting Blue Chip, then lashed the slim golden horse, and they were away with dust flying like smoke from under the hoofs. The kid scrambled catquick to get up into the big saddle where his feet didn't come anywhere near the stirrups, but he hunched forward, struck with his heels, and the rangy sorrel gathered speed with bound on bound, and the stirrups flopped, pounding softly.

The wild hoofbeats brought people crowding through Crosby's doorway.

The kid swiftly knotted the reins against the time when he would let them fall over the horn and kept his eyes on the thief's back while tugging one-handedly to lift the rifle from its scabbard; but suddenly the kid's hand left the small of the rifle's stock as if it burned his fingers. The thief's hat had blown off, swinging down on the loosened chin thongs, and no man had hair like that. It streamed out with a wavy glitter.

A woman in pants hadn't been thought of, but there she was; and, woman or not, she was stealing Dan Trusand's horse which had been given over to his care, and even if he couldn't shoot he'd get that horse back.

"Come to it!" said the kid to the sorrel, and leaned low to one side of the horn, knees gripping, as he took a shorter hold on the reins. The powerful sorrel had speed in him and knew that a horseman was asking for it, and he gave it.

Blue Chip was out in front on the lead rope and the girl saw and heard the sorrel gaining; but she was stubborn and rode low in the saddle, holding reins and rope in one hand, swinging the quirt with the other. For a long moment she was out of sight on a sharp turn where red sumac tossed up a screen. The kid's shoulder ached from the pull as he flattened down, bringing the sorrel around the curve; and he flashed by where Blue Chip was coming to a stop with the lead rope dragging. The girl had flung it away, hoping to escape, but the kid drove on, going headlong; and when he got head to rump he braced a knee against the base of the horn, and,

as the sorrel moved up alongside the golden horse, the kid reached out and snatched the reins from the girl's hands.

She hadn't expected that, and rose in her stirrups and swung the quirt; it rained down on his bare head and shoulders. Fierce, tawny eyes blazed at him as the horses pounded on, momentarily side by side. When the sorrel drew in the lead, the kid pulled the reins over the golden horse's head and swung off the road in a wide, slowing circle.

The girl rode helplessly but didn't look helpless and was poised to swing the quirt if she got close enough. As the horses came to a stiff-legged jolting stop she demanded haughtily, "Hand back my reins!"

He flung the reins and was contemptuous. "Horse thief! Or trying to be!"

"Blue Chip's my horse!"

"Liar too!" said the kid. Except for her hair she looked more like a boy than a girl, a boy of about his age; and the biting tips of her quirt still stung. He wanted to rub at the back of his neck where she had lashed, but he wouldn't, not in front of her. He wished she were a boy, and hated her as much as he would have hated any boy; but he couldn't hit her. "Only your being a girl, I'd have shot you!" He tapped the rifle butt.

Her derisive voice went up. "I'm a better boy than you'll ever be! Horseback or afoot, I am!"

"Then how'd I catch you?"

"Red Sanger's horse caught me! Anyhow I oughtn't run Blue Chip on the road. Hadn't been for that, you'd never caught me, you peewee!"

The kid hated his small size, hated anybody that made fun of it. Fury boiled inside him but his face was too sun-darkened for the flush to show; then he said with willful untruth, "You ride like something tied on, loose!"

The girl opened her mouth as if slightly stunned, and in a way she was; then, "Why, you measly little nester brat, you! Oh! That to *me!*"

"And ugly as sin!" the kid went on, scowling. He wanted to hurt. "Don't even look like a girl!"

The man loping up from Crosby's on Grant's horse was thick-bodied, heavy, his big face bristly with red stubble, and his hair was red; the small, deep eyes even looked red,

and he had a neck like a bull. When he reined up, the girl challenged his stare, and he didn't quite smile, but his heavy voice was almost gentle with: "So little Bobs Allentyre has turned hoss thief, um?"

Bobs Allentyre threw up her head. "Not enough to be one of your bunch, Mr. Sanger!"

Red smiled slowly and there wasn't any anger in the small, unflickering eyes. "Now if I was a horse thief, I wouldn't want better help than you could give!"

"You know Blue Chip's mine by rights! Joel turned Injun-giver when I was off to school. He never thought how I'd feel. Anyhow, I wouldn't trust that Dan Trusand to win honest!"

Red looked at her steadily before he asked in a quiet rumble, "Joel happen to have the same feeling about it?"

"No!" she flung back. "He thinks if Miss Kate's his wife, a man'd have to be honest! Miss Kate's all right, but that old Trusand gives me the creeps to look at him! And Blue Chip's mine! You've got a right to recover wherever you find your horse."

Red chuckled; his laugh was as smooth and muffled as water out of a bung hole. He had ease and rough dignity and bigness, but the deep-set small bright eyes didn't reflect his pleasantness. "Your uncle gave a bill of sale. If your uncle's bills of sale don't mean anything——" He left it there, and she was out on a limb, and he smiled at her.

Bobs's face got as hot as fire. Red Sanger was too big for her to handle, so she piled out of the saddle, parted the reins for her horse's neck, then, back in the saddle, she pushed her horse close to the kid. "You! You little saddle tramp! If you ever get in my way again, I'll ride you down!"

Off she went, head high, back straight.

Red placidly told the kid, "That's how it is, son. The littlest of 'em is too big for us men to manage. I'm surprised you overtook her, even on my Sorrel Top. I couldn't've!"

And the kid liked this big man.

CHAPTER THREE

THE KID LED Blue Chip and rode back to Crosby's with Red, and right off got sulky, not liking to be looked at and talked about by strangers. Crosby was a small, bald man and his lank wife stood a head taller and wore men's shoes. "Wears the pants too," Grant was later to say.

Another and younger woman was called "Belle." Good-looking if you didn't look at her face. Belle Hart was the name, and she was visiting from over near the Bluffs; and when she grabbed and kissed the kid he struck at her as hard as he could. Her body had a sweat smell and her nose wasn't straight and teeth stuck out in front; she squealed laughingly at the kid: "I like my men mean!"

That seemed true, because she was trying to make up to one that the kid thought had a mouth like a snake. This was Tom Roper, one of Sanger's hands, and he talked a lot in a half-quarrelsome voice as if just aching to fight a buzz saw. *Blow hard!* said the kid to himself. The Hart girl edged up close to Roper, put her hands on him, smirked. Grant later told the kid that she was a hellcat. "Ugly as sin and as wicked!"

Red and Grant soon went off toward the stables for a talk and presently others left the room, and the kid was alone with a tall, long-nosed man who lay sleepily in a rocker with his feet on a chair before him. The kid didn't like his looks either; he seldom liked strangers. Mike Eads was also one of Sanger's hands. For all of Eads's sleepiness, the kid noted that he had hard, quick, watchful eyes, and the kid bet with himself that Eads would be a worse man to fool with than the truculent Roper.

Red called from the house and Eads and Roper went out. Grant came in, dragging his feet with the look of not feeling good, and was thoughtful; but Mrs. Crosby brought him a glass of wild-cherry wine. The kid sat stiffly and stared at the Turkey-red tablecloth and thought about the Allentyre girl and wished she'd been a boy. There were welts on the back of his neck where the quirt hit.

Both Mrs. Crosby and the Hart girl made fun of Grant for being friends with Joel Allentyre who now owned most of the ranch that had been left to Grant by his father. "He's hornswoggled you, John. All along, he has!" said the Hart girl viciously. Grant squirmed but protested, "No law to make me sell if I didn't want. No, I can't feel mad at Joel."

"You're too easy-goin' for your own good!" Mrs. Crosby screamed. "We're all your friends, and Allentyre don't like any of us. 'Specially he don't like Red!"

It was dark when they went on to Grant's place, and in the starlight the kid could see they were going over hilly ground that was thinly wooded; and Grant said that he used to own a pretty good-sized ranch, with bunkhouse and corrals, but times got bad. Now his cows ran with Allentyre's, and he lived where his father had first settled. "Same cabin."

When lamplight showed in the distance Grant was puzzled, then, before a word was spoken, he recognized the bulky shadow-shape in the open door as Red Sanger, and called with surprise and no welcome, "However did you get here?"

"I left the boys and thought I'd come and spend the night with you."

"Yeah, sure. Glad to have you." Grant strained his voice to say it.

The smoky lamp with a chipped chimney showed that the cabin was bachelor-barren and untidy; the front door sagged and had to be heaved to open or shut; a grain sack was stuffed in a broken windowpane. Cans were shelved behind the stove and the stove's broken leg had been replaced with a chunk of wood. A pantry box dangled from chain traces fastened to rafters—that was to keep rats out. The flour tub, lined with tin, had a weight on top—that was to keep rats out too. Double-deck bunks were against the wall.

Sanger laid a hand on the kid's shoulder, not patting, and peered at him with studying interest, not saying a word, and after that he tipped a chair against the wall and sat there silently while Grant stirred up supper. Grant's was a moody quietness, and now and then he gave his head a shake as if thinking things over and deciding against them. The kid hunched wearily with legs drooping from a lower

bunk. He looked furtively at Sanger, a big, thick-necked fellow and not awkward. The kid liked him.

There wasn't any talk as Grant stirred up the supper in a skillet; it was stale cheese and bits of ham, some pieces from a chunk of dried bologna mixed in browned flour and grease. The skillet was placed on the table; they helped themselves at the same time as if each scrambled for the most; but Sanger added to what the kid had taken, saying, "Always grab all you want, son." He made it a pronouncement that went far beyond food.

After they had eaten, Grant got off a stool and shook up the hay mattress of the top bunk, tossed blankets there. "You pile in, Bill. Me and Red'll do the dishes—or leave 'em!"

The kid undressed down to his newly bought underwear. The mattress was lumpish and prickly, too, the blankets had an unaired smell, but he fell into sleep as if falling off a cliff.

Sanger laid an elbow on the table, hunched toward Grant. "Well?"

"I haven't had time to think yet, Red," Grant said uneasily.

"You've had days."

"But like I told you back at Crosby's this afternoon, the kid makes some difference now." Grant's eyes sagged down and the cigarette went out between his fingers.

Pressure lay behind Sanger's quietness, and he was quiet for a long while before he said, "John, you cottoned to the idea when we first talked. Now you're thinking money'll come some other easy way, uhn? Looks to me like you're foolish—banking on that horse."

"The kid'll ride her like the wind! You saw today—he don't know how to fall off!"

Sanger glanced toward the upper bunk. "Good kid! But there's more to a quarter race than just sticking on. Allentyre'll take your pants and Dan Trusand's too."

Grant eyed him, looked off again, and in a kind of half mumble explained, "Dan's got it figured, he says. We can't lose."

Sanger thought it over, decided, "I'd still back Allentyre." Pause, a long one, and all the while his eyes were on Grant's averted face; at last he said calmly, "I don't see how you

figure a crooked horse race is worse'n—you know." Again Sanger waited. Power was in his quietness and patience too. Then, "You're purt' near down to the bottom of the barrel, John."

"Still got this home place left."

"It'll go next—at Allentyre's price."

"I've got some cows too."

"How many?" Red's soft chuckle mocked him. "They run with Allentyre's stock. With his bulls. On his grass. He rounds them up and brands! I bet he keeps the tally! And what cowman ever eats his own beef on a roundup?"

Grant muttered stubbornly, "Allentyre's always treated me white."

Sanger's eyes kept up the pressure. Small, bullet-straight, deep—the hardness of a powerful man who was also cunning bore in on Grant. "Let's get down to cases. Are you—yes or no—going to throw in with me?"

The smoky lamplight flickered on their faces. Grant had an imaginative dread of being found out if he moved crookedly; he was flattered but uneasy, and he said, "Honest to God, Red, I don't see why you pick me. I never done anything like that before. I've always been honest and——"

"I know it. You'd be one nobody would suspect. We have to plan this slick. But I wouldn't bear down so hard about being honest if I was you, John—not when you're in with Dan Trusand to rig horse races!"

Grant looked sick and studied, then he turned on Sanger and made the confession: "Just thinking about it sort of shrivels up my belly to a knot! I must be a coward!"

No smile met him, no frown either. Red considered; then, after tapping the table to ask for close attention, he said: "I size men up good. I'm pickin' you. You'll be squeamish but"—he opened his big hands—"you'd stick where Tom Roper would quit!"

"Me?"

"To hear Tom tell it, he'd fight his weight in wildcats, barehanded. Flies off the handle at the drop of a hat. Mean as hell, but he's scared all the time and so'll do worse things than me or you to prove he's not. He makes his brag, and then is just mean enough to stick to it if it kills him. You're more like Mike Eads, and he's an old hand. You'll get hot

and nervous but you won't back down. Put Tom Roper in a corner and he'll come out with his hands up."

"Why do you keep him, Red?"

Sanger drummed on the table, looked at his fingers. When his eyes lifted his big face was solemn. "I stick to them that stick to me. Never let a friend down in my life as long as he played square. I never will! You and me'll get on good, John."

Grant tried another cigarette; it was tasteless. His fingers closed on the cold dampness of his palms; the mulligan had gone sour in his knotted stomach, and his mouth was so dry he sucked the last drop from the coffee cup and crunched the grounds.

2

In the morning Grant was frowsily tired and not talkative, but he was still nice to the kid. Sanger had gone without sleeping here.

Grant went to the well and heaved up a bucket of water on the chain of ungreased windlass; it screeched like a hurt animal. Breakfast was coffee, flapjacks, sorghum. Last night's dishes were unwashed and the kid helped. Grant wore an unfocused, faraway stare and didn't say much of anything until he flung the dishwater out of the front door and was wiping the pan. "If I go away for a few days do you reckon you can manage alone?"

"Being alone don't bother me."

The pan clattered on its nail behind the stove. "I don't want Miss Kate to know. If she told the judge they mightn't let you stay on. I promised to look after you good, but Red's asked me to help him out. We're going over north to Niadora to pick up some cattle."

The kid felt glad that it was that way and not a quarrel with Red that troubled Grant. "I'll be all right," he said, and as an afterthought, "I won't ever tell her."

Grant's smile stretched tiredly. "You're a good kid." After that his voice had a worried slowness. "Stay that way, Bill! Don't ever do anything you know is wrong. It don't pay." There wasn't any smile.

He showed the kid about the place and apologized for the

run-down look of things, mentioning hard times and bad luck. When he got a little money he'd put everything to rights, he said, sounding as if he expected the money soon but wasn't eager about it.

The blacksmith shop was empty; anvil and forge and tools had been sold. The grindstone frame was broken. The water trough leaked and had been caulked with rags and whittled plugs but a continuous drip kept the ground soggy. The stable was swaybacked and shakes were scaling off the roof; stalls were thick with old manure, and the corral hadn't been scraped in no knowing how long. The kid didn't like it. His ex-cavalryman dad had raised hell when there was any slovenliness about horse care.

"You putter around however you want, Bill. I'll ride out and get some meat." Grant saddled up and took the rifle from its notched pegs beside the door and headed north toward the Bluffs.

The kid went to Blue Chip; she nuzzled him, nipping with her lips, and he apologized in telling her: "I couldn't see how dirty it was by lantern last night! You're going to be kept clean!" Her feet were muddy to the fetlocks from reaching into the leaky trough and her coat was blotched with dirt because there'd been no straw for her bed. He scowled sullenly, turning this way and that, then took her out of the corral and rubbed with a moist gunny sack until the black coat was clean, and after that with a handful of damp hay until it glistened. In the grain room he found about a peck of oats in a tin washboiler with the lid weighted down, and he could hear rats squeak and scamper.

Grant returned a couple of hours before sundown with a small buck tied behind him on the horse and hallooed for the kid. A gnome-black figure appeared from the stable shadows, and Grant said, "Whatever the hell have you been into?"

The kid's new clothes were ruined. He had cleaned stalls, forking and scraping and shoveling; he had run the manure out in a heavy wheelbarrow and his shoulder hurt; he had trenched under the trough to drain off water; and he had spread clean hay for Blue Chip's bed. Now he was dog-tired and wouldn't talk, and besides, his day's labor had been a kind of rebuke to Grant's shiftlessness.

Grant went into his trunk for some sweet-smelling soap that he used when readying up to go to a dance, and he drew water on the windlass and it didn't squeal. Axle grease had been daubed on the journals.

The kid stripped and washed up by the well. His thin, unbrown body showed the ribs as plain as a washboard's ridges, and Grant soaped the kid's back and splashed on water and said earnestly, "Sure wish I didn't have to go to help Red!" Then Grant pitched in and chopped wood, swinging angrily, as if trying to kill something. "You sure are a good kid! I want to leave you enough wood till I get back." The kid didn't reply.

After supper Grant oiled and cleaned his revolver and got out shells from the small round-topped iron-bound trunk and stuffed them into the loops of a belt. He hadn't worn a gun in town. The kid drowsily watched, then: "Your rifle shoot forty-fours too?"

"How do you know about guns?"

"My dad cut down a Winchester carbine for me. Shot the same bullets as his Colt's."

Grant let the hammer down on an empty cylinder, shoved the revolver into its holster, stood up, notched home the buckle. His stomach was throbbing. "I'll have some money pretty soon, then I'll get a rifle for you too."

Mentioning money reminded the kid, and he held out his gold piece. "Only a dab of grain left. I want some for Blue Chip. Will you bring it?"

Grant drew away from the gold piece. "You bet I'll see that grain is brought! And remember now, if anybody asks where I am, say I'm off helping a fellow. Don't say who, or how long I've been gone. Now you pile in. I'll blow out the light."

3

The kid lost track of how many days Grant had been away; three, five—more. It didn't matter. His dad had often stuck him into a camp and left him alone, and the kid was more contented here by himself than with Grant around.

He picked out a straightaway in what had been the pasture behind the corral, but the fence was down in places so it was

now no more pasture than a sack with holes in it is a sack. After sighting on stakes to get his course he cleaned off rocks, firmed in holes, hacked out yucca, cactus, sage, finding it a job. But Blue Chip grazed on a trailing rope and was company enough; besides, there was much to think about. That tawny girl who looked like a boy kept staring out of his thoughts. Also that Whitey Summers. The kid hated the girl and he hated Whitey, but it wasn't the same feeling; he could have killed Whitey. The girl was stuck up and ugly. Even remembering the glittering hair, the kid insisted that she was ugly, and he had a jealous quirk because, though a girl, she rode like a trooper.

The course wasn't finished when he led Blue Chip over it, letting her peer and sniff, then he got on her back and rode back at an easy lope and pulled up short before a stranger who squatted there under a piñon, the reins over his shoulder, a cigarette between long, brown fingers.

The kid slid from the mare as if caught doing something he oughtn't. "You lookin' for John Grant?"

"Not 'specially." As he arose he dropped the cigarette, scrunched it with a toe. A tall, straight man, weatherworn; quiet with authority in his quietness and the look of firmness about him, and patience. "I'm a neighbor. Allentyre. You are Bill Helgar?"

Right off the kid was embarrassed and ready to be sullen, but said, "Howdy." He guessed that tawny girl had told her uncle things, things that weren't so. Be like her! He looked toward Allentyre's horse. The kid felt that when unsure of a man you judged him by his horse; this one was a long-legged beautiful roan with silk-sleek coat and a show of temper in the restless eyes. There was nothing restless about Allentyre. He stepped close, letting Blue Chip nibble at his fingers, and when she took his loose vest between her teeth he said, "Spoiled girl! As bad as Bobs!" To the kid, "You're training for Dan Trusand, I hear."

The kid felt proud to say, "Yes," but grew wary lest this man was trying to find out things; he ran horses too. At first the kid thought he was an old man, then saw him gradually seem younger and younger, and Allentyre's eyes went lingeringly over the straightaway. It was about a hundred yards or a little more. "Did Grant help you?"

"He lets me do like I please."

"Good." Allentyre gazed down into the kid's face. "Bill, supposing we have a good look at the lady's nigh fore foot."

"All right, 'f you want." The kid then put his left hand on Blue Chip's shoulder, stooped with the other hand running down along her leg, and she raised the foot. Allentyre pretended to examine the shoe and said, "Thanks." Not many horsemen, even among stablemen, knew how to bring up a horse's front foot without yanking at the fetlock. He pointed toward the mare's knees. "They're not all they ought to be, Bill. Not weak, but she's heavy for her build. Don't run her on hard ground. Even trying to steal her, didn't Bobs keep her in the dust?"

The kid felt his tenseness collapse inside him; he wasn't getting blamed. *"Steal,"* Allentyre said, as if he knew the truth. "I didn't notice, mister," the kid told him.

"Did you ever ride in a quarter race, son?" The kid shook his head. "Ever see one?" Allentyre asked.

"Not like I've been told you run 'em up here."

"Set down, Bill, and we'll talk it over."

They got down on their haunches together and the kid felt this was man to man. Allentyre said, "I lost her in a poker game. Four sixes. They weren't big enough. She was mine to lose, all right, except that whatever I have that Bobs wants is also hers. That's how it comes she claims the horse."

The kid thought it over and didn't say anything, but if he had spoken it would have been to declare that Bobs had no business touching Blue Chip; he knew about poker—when you lost, what you had bet wasn't yours any more, and that was that.

Now Allentyre lifted a finger toward the mare. "No matter who owns her, she's still part of my family, so to speak. I don't want to see anybody make a tramp out of this girl. She has to be handled with care or she'll get stove up sure. She's as gentle as a pup and nearly as playful, but she's got a fighting heart. And her legs won't stand rough work." Then his look was steady. "Your uncle was a good horseman, Bill."

The kid snapped bluntly, "Did he lose that race a-purpose?"

Allentyre fingered his cheek, looked out over the course. "Honest, I wouldn't know. He liked likker and he didn't

like Trusand, and there are many ways to lose a race if you don't want to win it."

"He shot when Trusand wasn't looking."

"So drunk he didn't know who was looking."

The kid had the dissatisfied feeling that Allentyre was trying to make it easy for him; and he halfway liked that and halfway didn't, being unsure of the truth; and he knew that this tall man was sidling around the subject when he arose and scratched between Blue Chip's ears, saying, "This lady can spin on a dime and go like an arrow. She's willing and fast. Bobs has never forgiven me!"

Then Allentyre cocked an ear and the kid listened too. Somebody was coming.

"I make it a team and buggy, Bill."

4

Kate looked a little drunk as she wearily lifted out the weight and snap-strap for the off horse's bridle; her straw hat had been jolted over to one side, her legs were buggy-tired, she was small and the too-big linen duster got in the way of her feet. A tall, dark, lazy-looking girl had a full-arm reach on the lines and called anxiously, "Whoa, boys! Whoa!" though the horses were too tired to run, and anyhow they weren't boys.

Allentyre took the reins from the dark Doris and cramped the buggy. "You ladies are a long way from home."

Kate flung out her arms toward the kid, but he said merely, "Hello!" and grinned a little, and instantly she pretended not to notice though she was hurt. Nevertheless, her "We brought your grain, Bill!" was cheery even if forced. Then she waggled her arms. "They feel pulled from their sockets! Dan wanted to be a hero and rode off with the sheriff after the fellows that didn't rob the stage!" Kate's voice rang with satisfaction on the "didn't!" "You heard about it, Joel?"

"Yes. And killed Old Mundy! They ought to have known he'd fight."

"But how could they know the gold would be on that stage, Joel?"

"Why, Miss Kate, somebody in town must have told them."

Doris's dark eyes lingered slant-wise on Allentyre; he was good-looking and young and wealthy, and scarcely noticed her; so she called purringly, "Hello there, Bill!"

"'Lo."

Nobody offered to help, and Doris backed out of the buggy cautiously, reaching a foot for the step; then at once she took off the duster and brushed at her long skirt, straightened her hat, patted her glossy hair as if making ready to have a picture taken.

Kate asked, "Where's John Grant?"

The kid swung a hand vaguely. "He rode over the hills to help a fellow."

"You mean gab! He sent in word by Crosby about grain, so when Dan left town I decided to bring it myself. With overalls and shirt. You look like a tramp!"

The kid thought, *You're prettier even than I remembered!* Nothing of the thought was on his face and a sullen steadiness rested in his eyes. Allentyre was a stranger, the languid Doris wasn't a friend, and the shy kid withdrew tensely inside his shell.

Kate's vivaciousness was all put on; she'd come this long way through sun and dust to hold the kid in her arms and he didn't even act glad to see her. But she laughed. "I promised Doris we'd drive back today, but if we go we'll walk! Be easier! Anyhow, fresh air will do us good—I hope!" Kate slipped from the duster. "You fellows may as well put up the team. We're staying. Bill, you and John Grant can sleep in the haystack!"

She and Doris trailed toward the cabin: Kate, being small, wore high heels, and the ground was uneven, and her heart weighed a ton.

When Allentyre slung up the harness on pegs higher than the kid could reach, he commented, "I see you and John have cleaned up around here." The kid's "Some, a little," was protective; after all, he and Grant were a kind of partners.

Allentyre shouldered a grain sack from the back of the buggy and brought it to the stable. He put it down and waited at the door while the baffled kid stood in the dark grain room. Another sack was to come and the washboiler wouldn't hold it all. Even now the bolder rats lurked near

their holes and peered with cunning malice; they'd feast on what wouldn't go into the boiler.

The kid spoke resolutely. "I know what!" And he crowded by Allentyre, saying, "You come on and help me carry something!"

Joel Allentyre, who owned many thousand heads of cows, obediently followed to the cabin where Kate fastidiously held her skirts ankle high as she turned around and around in the center of the room, and her nose was wrinkled with disgust. "I've seen cleaner pigpens!"

Doris gingerly poked at a mattress. "We'd better use the haystack!"

Allentyre stopped outside the door and the kid pointed within. "John Grant's told me to do whatever I wanted, so I'm going to take that trunk. If it's locked, I'll bust it open!" It wasn't locked; Grant confidently never locked anything.

Kate marched stiffly to the door; her laugh was rueful, but liking for Joel Allentyre showed through her annoyance. "We didn't bring even a toothbrush!" She believed that he was one of the finest men she had ever known, yet felt she didn't understand him, and though he was pleasant he seemed always to stay beyond arm's reach of anybody—excepting Bobs.

A shadow came over Kate's eyes as she pointed behind her. "And he isn't even glad to see me!"

Allentyre looked up steadily. "You may know men. You don't know kids!" His voice became more quiet. "Why did you plant him here?"

"Dan cold-decked me! The judge too—so the judge says! Leave it to Mr. Trusand to have his way! He likes Bill but wanted to get him away from me; says I'd spoil him. And Dan's taking John Grant in as a racing partner!"

"Why Grant?"

"A smarter man would want a bigger whack! Dan thinks the horse will be a mint."

The trace of a smile came to Allentyre's mouth, his eyes didn't move, and he murmured, "Mint, hm?" There was more to racing than running a horse.

"Joel, if I'd known in time," she said with a lilt that was meant to conceal how much her regret really hurt, "I'd have

asked you to take the boy. But maybe it's better you didn't. Your Bobs would eat him alive!"

"Bobs tried—and lost!"

"Oh no?" Kate wheeled and looked toward the kid. He was down on his knees, emptying the trunk, removing everything, and now was being careful with Grant's good clothes that had been folded away tightly. Doris hovered over him with faint curiosity; there was nothing better to do than watch. "Joel, what happened?" Kate asked.

"Bobs tried to steal Blue Chip at Crosby's. The boy jumped Red Sanger's horse and rode her down. She used her quirt on him but he hurt worse when he told her that she rode like something tied on!"

Kate's quick flutter brought her feet down to the stoop, and she caught at him, and her brown eyes strained beseechingly. "Joel, Judge Trumbull would let you have him! Won't you? John Grant's not a bad fellow but no man to bring up a boy! And Dan's all right—in his way. But I don't want him to make his way Bill's. Can't you? Won't you?"

He watched her, and she thought that he was considering, then knew that he was choosing the words to back up the shake of his head. "Just a little bit too late, I'm afraid. The judge and Mrs. Summers and two or three others have badgered me into taking Whitey in hand. He's out at the ranch now. No holds barred! You'd think butter wouldn't melt in his mouth and I'm even 'Uncle Joel' now. Which is all right. His mother is a very fine woman, so it may be that Whitey will turn out better than we expect."

"I hope so," Kate said quietly, but the frustrated wish that Bill had Whitey's chance nearly choked her.

Allentyre could easily have carried the trunk alone, but the kid wanted to hold up his end, and when Allentyre suggested offhand, "But maybe John won't like it," the kid's eyes lifted. He said, "Mister, I'm runnin' the part of this ranch that has to do with what's good for Blue Chip!"

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN ALLENTYRE had gone, Kate told the kid to carry the bunk mattresses and blankets into the afternoon sun, give them a good shaking, leave them to air. She had never, she said, slept in such a filthy place, and wouldn't.

Kate searched out an old bunch broom, removed her shoes and stockings, pinned up dress and petticoats. The lace ruffles on the white petticoats made the kid think of froth in a pool after water has tumbled downhill. Kate tied a cloth about her head, sprinkled water on the floor, shoved chairs, table, boxes about, and swept. As she gouged briskly into corners the kid asked: "Thought you was tired?"

"Nobody ought ever to be too tired to want to be clean!"

Doris in languid good nature had told Kate what a fool she was, and now leaned on the low window to look inside and said, "Bill, no graveyard will ever hold her. She hates dirt too much!"

When the floor had been swept the kid brought in water and sloshed it about, and Kate scrubbed with the broom. It took lots of water. The bone-dry floor sucked it up and a fragrance, as after a summer shower, filled the room; the kid wiped with a burlap sack to dry the spots where water stood on the worn boards. He got a splinter in his finger and Kate held his hand tightly as she drew it out.

That night the kid didn't understand why Kate told him to go to sleep in the haystack. He didn't want to go; it had been all right when he was sick to stay near her night and day; and Doris looked toward the upper bunk, saying, "Oh, let him sleep up there!"

Kate turned on her. "And have the men tease him? No!"

And when Doris asked if he wouldn't be scared off by himself, he looked into her lazy, soft eyes and was perplexed. "Scared of what?"

"Of the dark? Wild beasts. Indians! Burglars! I can think of lots of things to be afraid of when I'm alone!" She smiled but wasn't joking.

"Oh, hush, you!" Kate's voice was sharp, and she adjusted the wick, not looking toward him with, "Good night, Bill."

Doris drawled, "And if John Grant comes stumbling in here?"

"He can stumble out!" Kate said.

And when the kid had gone Doris laughed softly. "You two are funny! If you're not looking, he stares at you, open-mouthed, just worshiping! And you act cross with him because he's not in your arms!" She stripped off a long black stocking and laid it carefully over a chair, then looked around and saw that Kate was trying not to cry.

2

The kid roused up blearily from the foot of the old haystack and in the thin moonlight he saw that the lamplight was falling through the cabin door like something spilled, and quick, restless shadows sprawled across it, and voices reached him in the stillness.

He grabbed for his shoes and then cast them aside and ran barefooted.

Two horses stood near the door as if the weight of reins was too much for their necks. Grant was home; the other was Red Sanger's sorrel, with the silver-horn saddle, and both horses had a foundered heave. The kid's heart thumped because only men's wild work or crazy drunkenness did that to horses.

He swung to the door. The ground was moist from the water that had been swept out, and he slipped and went down softly on the step, and peered with his face at about floor level. Red Sanger wasn't here, and the kid felt a quick relief, not wanting it to be like Red to ruin a horse; then relief left him, blown away by the frantic guess that Grant and Tom Roper were drunk. They looked it. Kate looked like she thought that, too, though Roper was declaring in high, whining quarrelsomeness that it wasn't so.

Grant was all in; he sagged on a forearm against the window sill, and the nearby lamp was harsh on his hollow-eyed and subtly bearded face. He fumbled at his face and kept pleading, "Let's get out of here. Let's get out."

Kate stood facing Roper. The white petticoat that served as a nightgown came to her ankles, and she one-handedly held the colored waist up to her neck. She was furious and silent now, and a hand was clenched stiffly down at her side. Her high and high-heeled button shoes stood up in prim neatness against the bunk's leg. Without the high heels she wasn't much taller than a half-grown girl.

Doris sat up in bed, pulling at the blankets; her eyes were big with a fear-struck brightness, and her hair was partly out of its pins. "Please go! Please go!" she pleaded, and held the blanket as if meaning to escape by hiding under it if they didn't go.

The kid sidled in and backed up flat against the wall and no one noticed except Kate; she was facing the door and her glance throbbed toward him and went back to Roper, who slouched before her, saying "I tell you we ain't drunk. Ain't had a drink!" When it came to temper he was a sore thumb, edgy, quick, insulting; and now his shoulders drooped forward as he jeered, "Kiss me if you want to find out!" He blew in her face. "Don't smell nothin', do you?" He moved, and his feet weren't steady, and he put a hand to a chair. "We're dead on our feet 'cause our horses got away and we had to walk all over hell to catch 'em!" His tone dared her not to believe. "Ask Grant! Ain't that right, Grant?"

Grant's head bobbed and he looked at his hands and said huskily, "We didn't know you ladies was here and—hungry—tired—Tom, let's get out!"

Roper's voice went up as if Kate were deaf. "I don't budge till I've had coffee an' somethin' t'eat! That is unless,—" A grin split his face and he stumped nearer with a manner that coaxed, and whatever it was that he said brought Kate's hand into his face. The smack was like a blown-up paper bag being burst.

Roper rocked back. "You think 'cause you're Dan Trusand's wife! The hell with him an' just for that—" He swung his arm out to a full reach behind him, making ready to throw his fist as a man throws a ball.

The sharp tug at his holster brought Grant around and he straightened up in blurry astonishment; the kid had his revolver. The long-bowed butt was big for his hands, the seven-inch barrel heavy, but he had thumbed back the ham-

mer; and Grant suddenly saw how much a cocked hammer was like an open-mouthed snake's head with fanged firing pin poised to strike. The kid crouched to hold it out and one eye was closed as he sighted down on Roper's back.

"Touch her and I'll kill you!"

Doris's scream was wordless. Kate's was, "No, Bill, don't!" in an agony of pleading.

Roper swayed about, jangling spurs, and his hand went down, reaching toward his holster before he saw that he hadn't a chance. The gun was now leveled on his belly, and Roper's hands flew up, covering his stomach, and his stomach flinched inward, dreading the bullet blow. "Ow, now listen, kid!" he yelled.

Grant mumbled, "He'll sure shoot!" and stared in haggard suspense. The rim of the kid's lips were white and his bared teeth showed edge to edge, and the gun was as steady as if across a log. His eyes hit Roper's face and froze there and didn't waver as he ordered, "Miss Kate, get away from close to him!"

The kid meant to shoot, and instantly Kate moved closer and pleaded, "Bill! For my sake, no! Please!" She strained to see if the kid would yield, and couldn't tell, and her memory flashed back to what Trusand had said of his poker face, and she knew that Roper's life right now was as uncertain as a spinning coin. For this kid to kill a man, any man, on her account—just mustn't be! Her voice softened, begging, "Bill! Bill, if you love me, don't!"

The silence dragged; he didn't seem to have heard or care until at last he said, "Then git, you! Hit your saddle and go!"

The words carried a jolt. Grant blinked helplessly and Kate quivered inside, startled by feeling that all along she had mistaken a man for a boy; even she didn't know that it was merely the echo of how his dad had lifted some tough, troublesome fellow out of camp.

Roper, unbidden, now thrust his hands palms out and shoulder high, but called wildly, "Grant, get that gun!"

The kid was right there close by Grant; a kick or a swift sideswipe would have knocked the muzzle aside, made the discharge harmless, but Grant's arm hung with a broken dangle and he didn't move; looked as if he couldn't.

Kate put the flat of her hands against Roper's back and

her voice got away from her. "Get out, you fool! Go!" Her shove made him stagger forward.

The kid turned warily, until Roper's back was to him, then he stalked Roper to the horse, watched him mount, warned: "You pull that gun ridin' off and I'll kill you!" He looked on as Roper labored the dead-beat horse into a staggering lope.

It was now near daylight.

3

Kate waited at the stoop and wasn't conscious that she had slipped on the colored waist and was now buttoning it. The kid squeezed by her, not looking up, and all he said was "Watch out!" as he turned the revolver to hold it so it wouldn't point at anyone.

She searched his face in the torment of having lost something; and his fierceness had frightened her, and made her feel bruised deep down inside; that he did it for love of her didn't requite her dread of how readily he would kill.

Grant huddled in a chair and a weary silly grin was smeared on his face; then he slapped his knee and let the hand slide off and hang loose. Kate's eyes went over him, up and down in puzzled scorn. "What's so funny?"

Grant gestured and began to laugh and couldn't speak when he tried. He waggled a finger out toward where the kid was letting down the hammer as carefully as if handling fuse-lit dynamite. He had turned the muzzle to a corner and held his thumb below the firing pin when he released the trigger. The ex-cavalryman still looked over the kid's shoulder whenever he handled firearms.

Now he offered the revolver butt first to Grant, and Grant drew his hands away and stood up with a laughing howl, then bent over and slapped his leg. He seemed a little crazy; and the haggard shadow stubble on his gaunt face increased the daft look until he cried: "Bluffed Tom Roper with an empty gun!" He laughed so hard that tears began to dribble along his nose.

Kate frowned and couldn't make sense of this, for he was laughing as a man does when he gets drunk to ease wretchedness, and Grant's wretchedness had been as plain on

him as a wet blanket. Now he wasn't joyous, he was just noisy, with overtaut nerves going to pieces.

The kid turned the revolver muzzle up and peered into the cylinder chambers. There was no lead. His eyes slid along Grant's cartridge belt. Many of the loops were empty; all had been filled when he rode away. The kid slowly opened the gate, prodded with the ejector. An empty bounced on the floor, rolled with brassy tinkle; then another, and still others.

He turned on Grant with an angered, "Why ain't it loaded?"

Grant braced himself uneasily, then sat down; the chair seemed inches lower than he expected, and his "Unh?" had a foolish emptiness. He began to mumble and his hands squirmed. "W-why I—uh—I done some shootin' from the saddle—at a mark—just to see. You can't reload ridin' fast and—well, I forgot!" He tried to smile at the kid. "I nearly died when you put my gun to Roper! Afraid you'd snap and then he'd kill you!"

"Wear a gun unloaded!" The kid was toneless about it, confused. It was all right not to wear a gun, but to carry an unloaded gun—that just wasn't done. He looked rigidly at Kate in a way that asked her to help guess why.

She turned quickly to the door and was trembling inside, and might outwardly if she didn't keep tense. She leaned from the door, looking up. Dawn was in the sky. "Bill," she said, trying to sound casual, "go hitch the team. Doris and I'll start for town. And we can stop at Crosby's and have breakfast."

Grant waited until the kid was out of sight, then said, "I'll go help," but stood in awkward distress, his hat in his fingers, to mumble abjectly, "Miss Kate, I'm sorry about—things."

Her back was to him and she didn't turn in saying, "You wait!" and took up her skirt, gave it a shake, slipped the hem over her head and lifted her arms, shook herself, letting the skirt slip down. Then she swirled about, her fingers working at the hooks, and her eyes were bitter. "You're a fine one to take care of Bill, you are!" She came near Grant, staring, and dread overlay her anger. "Tom Roper's mean and I'm afraid for Bill! I want him away from here! I'd take him but he won't leave that horse. Then I'd have it all to go through with Dan again!" Contempt blazed in her eyes as

she asked, "And if Roper does come back here, what would you do? Nothing!"

Grant's head bobbed in a way that undefensively admitted she was maybe right, and he twisted his hat, and seemed a little fuddled as he told her with halting thoughtfulness, "Miss Kate, you don't need worry much. Roper's goose is cooked if he don't get the hell-and-gone out of the country. Him and Red Sanger are at outs. He stole Red's horse and Red'll kill him sure!"

CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN THE WOMEN had gone Grant gobbled breakfast, staggered to the bunk, yanked off his boots, and piled in as if drunk, sleeping till late afternoon; then he ate prodigiously again, but was glum and went back to bed. During the night the kid heard him moving about, but he was still sleeping after the kid left his bunk. Cigarette butts over the clean floor showed how long Grant had been up worrying during the night.

It wasn't sunup when the kid went to the well, and Red Sanger sat on an upended chunk by the woodpile, looking tired but clean and freshly shaved.

The surprised kid asked, "Why didn't you holler?"

"Sleep's good for friends," Sanger said. He was a big man in an attitude of weary patience; there were no angles about him, no more than to a bear on its haunches.

"Where's your horse?"

Sanger pointed toward the stable, then his heavy voice droned unrevealingly: "I hear you had a run-in with Tom Roper."

The kid's "yes" was stubborn. He stiffened and waited; so far as he knew, Sanger and Roper were still friends. Sanger eyed him up and down, nodded, and said that Mrs. Trusand had told about it at Crosby's, and he made no other comment.

The kid heaved on the windlass, lifting; the chain coiled slowly about the log drum and the splatter of water sounded

in the well. He reached for the sodden bucket and swung it out with a quick jump back from the slosh.

Sanger walked over, took the gourd dipper, drank, and flung the leavings as far as he could, then he hooked the gourd over its nail and let his hand rest for a moment on the kid's shoulder. That was all but enough; the kid knew now that Red was for him.

Grant came out stiff and sleep-frowsy, a veiled unwelcome in his eyes. Their hands met wordlessly, then Sanger returned to his upended chunk, rested both hands on his knees. His rifle lay within arm's reach on the chopping block. Uneasiness was on Grant like a too-tight scratchy undershirt. The kid, now at the wash bench beside the cabin, wasn't quite beyond earshot. He ducked his face into the basin and seemed careful not to get wet behind the ears. Grant's subdued, "Anything new?" was as if he held his breath to ask.

"Just another day," Sanger rumbled.

Grant squatted before him, took up a litter of chips, tossed them away; then he smoothed the ground by his toes and his forefinger wrote aimlessly in the dust.

"Was that gun empty?" Sanger had doubts.

Grant nodded, eying the kid's back. "We'd whooped some cows over the Swayback to cover our tracks. I just didn't reload. He give me hell!"

Then they both stared toward the kid; he was now combing his hair with his fingers. After that Sanger eyed Grant, who tried to meet the enigmatic steadiness of the small, hard eyes, but it wasn't easy, and he fingered the dust, making a circle, then he put a cross in the circle and the cross was lopsided.

Sanger said at last, "I'm waiting." Grant looked up, then down, and he rubbed out the marks in the dust. Sanger was withholding judgment until he had heard.

There wasn't much sound to Grant's voice and the voice shook. "Honest to God, Red, I didn't know he'd stole your horse and left you afoot, maybe to be caught. You'd told me to light out, you know. Then Roper overtook me and said you'd been shot, so we come on together. When we got to that little pockmarked fellow's mountain ranch, he said you

and Eads had already come by and gone. Roper acted so scared I guessed how it had been."

"Did, uh?"

"I had to stick to him, Red. I don't know that country down there. And we come in over the Swayback 'cause he was afraid you might be layin' for him the other way."

"The Swayback! When you know nobody rides it but Allentyre's men!"

"That's why we sent some cows along to hide our tracks, Red."

Sanger peered at him then shook his head. "You're not very forethoughtful, John. A bunch of cow tracks like that would make a man suspicious quicker'n a couple of horses. I'm not blaming you—much. Next time you'll do better." The voice was heavy, slow, carrying weight.

Grant fumbled out a protest that he didn't want any next time, but Sanger wasn't listening and overrode the remonstrance with: "Nobody knows I'm here. I tied my horse out of sight. I set here at the side of the house so I can't be seen from the road. Mike Eads is telling that I'm home, sick abed. That's to keep him from high-tailin' in a hurry." Grant knew that "him" meant Tom Roper.

Sanger paused, considering, and he watched the kid, who was on his way to the stable and Blue Chip, and now Red lifted a hand, pointing after him. "Knowin' Roper, I know he'll come back to kill that kid. And you too. The way the country's goin' to laugh over that empty gun, he'll maybe have to kill some more to prove that he's really a bad man. When he shows up here, I'll be waiting. I don't mind waiting for what I want. Night or day, I don't mind."

Grant stood up and wiped hard with the back of his hand at his dry lips; words stuck so tight in his mouth that they came out like something pulled from a hole: "Red, you've got to deal me out from now on! I'm no good at doing things I'm afraid to do!" He gazed pleadingly into Sanger's small, deep eyes.

There wasn't a smile or frown as Sanger peered back at him and studied; then quietly, "Let's have breakfast."

2

The kid was shining Blue Chip's coat out in front of the stable when two cowboys rode in: thin wiry men, obviously brothers. They said, "Hi-ya, fella!" in wide-open friendliness, dismounting with their eyes on the kid.

Grant scuffled from the house, overeager in his greeting because he was perturbed; it was near noon and Sanger was inside, not wanting to be seen, yet if the Jones boys lingered they ought to be asked in to eat. Their two-bit ranch lay across Mendoz Canyon, at the foot of the Swayback, and much of the time they worked for Allentyre. Both now nodded questioningly toward the kid and grinned, and Grant's sober nod confirmed that this was the boy and what they'd heard was true.

After some talk about Roper they squatted rump to heels and Harmon Jones inquired, "Joel been over to see you lately?"

Grant was cautious with, "Not lately. Why?" and helped himself to Harmon's makin's.

"He sent word for us to cut the high-line trails."

Grant's "Unh!" was as if he had bumped against something in the dark.

"Yeah," said Cy Jones, "and we found a funny to-do on the Swayback. Somebody'd pushed cows along to hide horse tracks! That's one roundabout way of coming up from Risto."

Grant sat dully, trying to pretend that it was all news to him, as the Jones boys rattled out an account of the attempted stage robbery. They knew only hearsay but told it zestfully. The kid drifted up and sat on his heels beside Grant, who listened as a thirsty man drinks.

Coin in mining camps was at a premium, and the robbers had somehow got wind of a shipment going across the mountains to Risto, and they waited in the dark for the stage to come up the snake-crooked road at Eagle Roost Pass, not knowing, or maybe not caring, that a mining party was camped about a mile below.

When the driver pulled down to rest his team the call, "Put up your hands!" came out of the night, and the guard's shotgun banged right at the sound of the voice. Old Mundy was a famous stage guard, and he wouldn't palaver with

road agents, not at any time. Another gun blazed back out of the darkness and Mundy tumbled off dead. Which was bad. He was not only a respected old-timer but the sheriff was married to his sister.

Three robbers on foot—four, in fact, because one stayed with the horses and the horses were kept out of sight. The men wore long dusters and pulled-down hatbrims and handkerchiefs over their faces. The boss robber was a big fellow and cool; he told the passengers to stay quiet and they wouldn't be touched, and he ordered the driver to heave over the express box. The driver said it was bolted down with the nuts inside of the box and the box was padlocked.

The boss robber took a lantern and climbed up to have a look. He fired into the lock but it didn't break; he tried again and merely piled up lead in the keyhole. Then he sang out coolly, "All right, boys. This beats our hand. Let's go!"

One of the robbers ramped and cussed, wanting to line up the passengers, but the boss robber said, "I give my promise not to. And I won't!"

The mining party had heard the stage go by, then heard the shooting. They had grit and got on horses and went up; there was some shooting, but, so far as known, nobody was hurt.

Rumors ran about the country telling how the robbers had headed this way and that; and the sheriff was said to figure that they had made, or would make, a break to get out of the mountains. Lots of ways out; one would be over the high line behind Mendoz Canyon, across the Swayback.

Grant scratched at a kind of goose-pimple itch and his voice was husky-tight: "Anybody suspicioned in partic'lar?"

Cy shook his head, not knowing; then, "Come on, Harm, let's be moseyin'."

As Harmon turned to his horse he said, "Must be somebody new to the country or they'd never tackled a stage with Old Mundy on guard!"

Grant squirmed and suggested, "Maybe they didn't know who was on the seat."

3

Sanger stayed on for a couple of days and never said an

impatient word, but he and Grant often had their heads together, carefully talking things out. Then one night there was a faroff halloo, and Mike Eads rode in and drawled, "Red, from how I hear it, you might as well get up out of your sickbed. He's gone." Eads placed a pint of whisky on the table. "Dan Trusand sent it out," meaning both the whisky and the report that Tom Roper had high-tailed.

The bottle passed and Grant made such a face over his swig that Eads droned, "You don't like likker any better'n powder smoke, eh?" Sanger said that would do, and Eads shut up and sat with legs dangling over the side of the bunk. There was more talk, and when a pause came, Eads eyed the kid, who hadn't opened his mouth, and drawled softly.

"You're goin' to have some of the swellin' taken out of your head, come Election Day. You're goin' to ride against Doc Burrows' Rain Drop, with Whitey up."

Grant couldn't believe it, and grumbled, "She's beat Rain Drop twice! Be no money up on that kind of race!"

"Never beat Rain Drop with Whitey up! Anyhow, third time's the charm." Eads went on, "Give odds, you'll always get money up." He stared at the kid, used an unfavorable inflection: "Who's ever seen him ride? People know Whitey Summers is good. I'd bet on him myself!"

The kid sat tensely and held his tongue because Red Sanger told Eads, "And I'd bet you'd lose." Sanger's quiet liking lay over the kid like a sunny warmth; and when the talk got around to the stage robbers, the kid wanted to know how men could ride wild through the country and not be hard chased, surely caught.

Mike Eads looked down his long nose, and Grant jabbed in nervously, "Takes luck! Lots of luck!" But Sanger explained as carefully as if showing the kid how to add up a column of figures that robbers not only had to know the country, they also had to have friends scattered around, lots of friends, and places where they could hole up; and also the friends would give the pursuers wrong information.

The kid blurted, "Damn a man that'll help a thief!" His small fist bounced on the table in front of Sanger.

Nobody moved or spoke right away; silence crowded in on them, then Sanger's big head nodded a little. Eads's look furtively sideswiped Grant and Sanger, fastened with dislike

on the kid's thin face. Grant began pulling at his fingers, making the joints crack.

Then Sanger got up with bulky slowness. "Mike, we may as well make a start." His heavy hand went to the kid's shoulder, lingered gently. "You've got right ideas, son. Stick to 'em!"

CHAPTER SIX

THE NEXT MORNING Grant said to the kid, "I'm going to turn over a new leaf." He didn't say it very heartily, but with earnestness. For days now he had been glum and moody, looking sick, but he had been carefully good to the kid; and last night the way the kid slapped down his fist under Red Sanger's nose with, "Damn a man that'll help a thief!" made the boy look taller in Grant's eyes. He assured the kid that they would sure train Blue Chip right for the race.

Grant rigged a drag and hitched it to his saddle horse and hauled it over the straightaway; the work made him feel good, and he pulled his sweat-soaked shirt away from his breast and really laughed. The kid rode the drag to give it more weight, which wasn't much, and he kept tumbling off, but always came up with a grin, and that made it like a game. And Grant wondered how on earth he had ever been damn fool enough to go get himself mixed up with things like he had. His solemn self-promise was, from now on I'm going to walk a chalk line!

It was past noon when Grant said, "Let's go wash up and eat, then you ride the Chip," and they were at the table when horsemen came, riding slow.

Grant jumped for the door, saw who the men were, and said bleakly, "I'll be damned!" and felt that it was Gospel truth. He stumbled on the stoop as he went out bareheaded and gave his greeting with an overloud eagerness: "Hello, Joel! You, Cutts! And Sheriff! How about some dinner? Won't take a jiffy. Always glad to have comp'ny!" Against their grave unresponse his voice had a meaningless empty

sound, and collapsed apprehensively into, "What's all wrong, Sheriff?"

It was the man with the deputy's star who said, "Lots, John. An awful lot!"

The kid had stopped in the door, standing there until Allentyre, now on another fine tall horse, a Roman-nosed bay, rode away from the others to come up close, and he peered hard at the boy before he left the saddle to shake hands. There was a rifle on Allentyre's saddle. As they shook hands Allentyre again looked steadily into the kid's blue eyes and drew a slow breath, smiling quietly to say, "Sure glad to see you, Bill!" The inflectional inference was that he hadn't quite expected to see him. "Bill, come along over here and meet a friend of mine, Sheriff Fields."

Two men were with the sheriff; one wore the deputy's badge and the other was a lanky fellow with the scar-deep wrinkles running to the corners of his loose mouth, and the malicious cross-eyed squint. The kid remembered that this was the man who had sent him across the street to Dan Trusand as a kind of joke. His name was Cutts, he was a cattle buyer, and rode often with the sheriff; now he called familiarly, "Hello there, Bub!" The kid stared sullenly and made no other reply.

Sheriff Fields came out of the saddle. Sheriffs were pretty big people to the kid's way of thinking; this one was chunky, gray, brown-faced, looked tired inside and out and, though straight in the saddle, when on foot his shoulders were a little stooped. A thick mustache bracketed his mouth, and there was something dogged in the way his big nose jutted out. His clothes had a worn bagginess, as if he had lost weight since they were fitted, and he seemed to look at things and people with careful distrust. As his big hand closed firmly on the kid's small fingers he said, "I'm glad to meet you, Bill."

The deliberation in the sheriff's voice and eyes made the kid tighten up inside; it wasn't fear but had much the same smothery pressure because something was wrong and these men were tense. Even the loose-mouthed Cutts, still in the saddle, had a heedful quietness. The deputy was now down on his haunches and thoughtfully broke up twigs.

The kid glanced questioningly at Allentyre. A swarm of

gnats spun out of the shade, encircling his hat, and he moved aside with leisurely slap of hand at them and said, "It's bad, Bill. But we feared worse!"

Cutts nodded. The deputy flung down his twigs and stood up, rubbing his palms on his hips. Grant couldn't stand it any longer and asked, "What in hell?"

That brought everybody's eyes from the kid to him, and the sheriff asked, "John, are you sick?"

Grant looked it and pressed his hands to his belly. "Been having spells with my stomach."

The sheriff's deliberation may have been weariness, but Grant felt that it was suspicion; then the sheriff droned in a somber, dead-beat voice: "Tom Roper's turned mad-dog bad! Last night he killed Harmon Jones and Cy's not likely to live. Was stealin' a horse out of their stable!"

Grant, dying himself, couldn't have looked more drawn and pallor-stained.

The sheriff droned on: "By happen so, Bobs rode over early this morning and found Cy on the ground where I guess Roper'd left him for dead. She drug him into the house and lit for home. We'd spent the night at Joel's to have a look on the Swayback at something he'd sent word about. Joel here has some boys go over with the buckboard to fetch Cy, and Harmon too. But he was anxious about you fellows, now that Roper's out to kill; and we come fast until we seen the smoke out of your chimney."

Then the sheriff talked to the kid: "Roper's crazy mean. What you done will make him lay for you sure! He was born in this country and'll be hard to catch. Folks that aren't his friends'll help hide him out of fear."

And after that the sheriff pondered, eying Grant: "John, just what about you and Roper the other night when you two showed up here? Him, I hear, on Sanger's Sorrel Top. Where'd you been? What was wrong?"

The gnats were now about Grant's bare head; he slapped at them and that gave him a little time to brace up. His story was pat, or so he thought; he and Sanger had talked it over to make their tales jibe and put Roper in a bad light.

"Why, some days back," Grant began, and stopped to wet his lips and swallow a time or two. "Y'see, Red hired me to go along with him and Eads and Roper north to the Niadora"

—Risto, near where the stage had been attacked, lay to the southwest—"to see about dickerin' for some steers to feed on his range down there. I was to help with the drive if he made a deal.

"It turned out a kind of wild-goose chase, and I wanted to come back on account of the boy being here alone. So Red told me to light out. Before night Roper he overtook me, said Red had give him his horse to hurry back word to a fellow here. I ought've known he was lyin', but never thought; not right then. He'd rowed with Red and stole the Sorrel Top and turned his own horse loose so Red couldn't chase him.

"We showed up here dead tired and found Miss Kate and her friend had come out to see the boy. Roper got mean and the kid grabbed my gun and made him go. That's how it was, Sheriff."

"Empty, I hear." The sheriff's frown was incredulous. "How'd it come you wore an empty gun?"

Grant cleared his throat and swallowed some more, then went on: "That day Roper got to braggin' about how he could shoot from horseback. So we'd ride toward something and bang away, and the last time I just plain forgot to reload."

The men eyed Grant, not quite believing, and he felt his hands tremble and rammed them into his pockets. The sheriff said "Uh?" and took a cigar and bit off a piece to chew on. The kid sensed that their suspicious silence questioned Grant, but he believed all that Grant had said, and whatever Grant's slackness, they were a kind of partners. The kid got tense about speaking up before a sheriff and these other strange men, yet he meant to be heard clearly, so his voice went higher than he wanted as he spoke directly to Allentyre. "Stands to reason, mister, he'd done nothin' wrong or he wouldn't have forgot to reload! You don't forget when you're scared!"

Allentyre gazed at the kid and considered, then murmured, "Sheriff, that seems to be about the size of it!" The sheriff grunted unwilling assent, and even Cutts grinned in agreement; but the deputy, again down on his haunches, kept snapping twigs and dropping them as if he didn't care one way or the other.

The old sheriff's tight stare stayed on Grant's face; even

when he spit his eyes didn't move, and he wadded the chew in his jaw, gave one side of his mustache a slow pull. "Wild-goose chase, hm?" His tired voice had a straight-from-the-shoulder firmness but no temper. "John, I can't guess why they took you or went themselves. Not for the reasons you give, anyhow. So far as I know, you haven't done anything wrong—yet. Except not be very smart! Bringing in cattle to feed, hm? Red Sanger don't hold enough private range to swing a wide loop on!"

Grant mumbled, "I just never thought."

The sheriff went on in the straight-from-the-shoulder way: "I've known you near all your life, John. And liked you. I can't believe you'd want to tie up with the wrong kind, but you're liable to let them tie to you, which adds up to the same bad thing. Roper's no man to be friends with, ever! Mike Eads, for all his quiet ways, is a killer. Red Sanger's even worse for you because he's got brains and nerve and so far"—the pause was meaningful—"so far he's been smart enough to explain his way out of shady deals. And now," said the sheriff, disgusted, "you are goin' in for horse racing! Why don't you hire out and work for a living?"

The sheriff abruptly took his reins and walked off toward the water. The deputy and Cutts skimmed Grant's face with brief stares and followed, but Allentyre lingered for the chance to say something more, and said it quietly: "John, you'd best walk wide of Sanger from now on. Keep clear away from him!"

From a tight throat Grant jerked out, "Why, Joel, what's known now?"

Allentyre coolly didn't say, but with quiet severity continued: "And I don't know, and won't ask, what kind of deal is on between you and Trusand. So far as I know, Trusand is a square gambler. And a smart man. But he doesn't know anything about horse racing. Neither do you. Nor the boy here. Yet all that you and Trusand are after is the money. That gambler doesn't want a horse to run for fun. And that is all the Election Day race against Doc's Rain Drop will be if —*if* Blue Chip wins!"

Grant had to say something and he tried hard against the steadiness of Allentyre's eyes. "Why, honest, Joel, I don't know what you mean!" He sounded as if lying. He was.

Allentyre gathered the reins of his Roman-nose and walked over to the water.

Grant went to the doorway and in loneliness sat there, and fears of different shapes surged at him; and he wished these men who tiredly stood together without much talk would ride off, yet dreaded to have them go. Roper even now might be lurking behind yucca on the slope.

And when they rode off, would it be toward the Sway-back? Too late for today, but tomorrow? Wind would have scuffled the dust there and nothing definite could be learned —maybe.

It was sickening to think of the Jones boys. Had Roper killed them because he knew what they had reported? Or was he out to show the countryside that it was wrong to laugh at him for having been lifted into the saddle by an empty gun in the hands of a kid? Red Sanger had foretold that Roper would turn mean and kill, "mad-dog bad" was the way the sheriff put it.

The kid was scrouged up close to the wall, an arm's reach away from Grant, with a hard-faced look at nothing; but to Grant this seemed a kind of loyalty after the way the sheriff and Allentyre had talked. Grant wasn't resentful toward them; he was plain hurt and scared, and lamented, *I'll never do anything like it again!* Maybe Sanger was actually suspicioned. The old sheriff himself wasn't very smart, or so people —that is, some people—thought; but he was dogged, and Mundy, having been his wife's brother, made it worse.

Another shadowy fear now tormenting Grant was the ominousness of Allentyre's "if the mare wins!" Grant and Sanger knew what was going to happen in that race, or knew at least what the gambler planned. Grant, thinking of the kid's feelings, didn't like it, but easy money was hard to come by. Just this once, he told himself, and he'd never do anything like it again. Anyhow, the kid would never know the truth about why Blue Chip lost, and Grant meant to make it up to him by buying a rifle or something. Yet it gave Grant a shaky feeling to see that even before the betting started, Joel Allentyre seemed aware of what was intended.

Grant saw the men coming toward him again, leading their horses. The sheriff spoke first. "Joel here has something to say."

Allentyre talked to Grant but looked at the kid. "Like we were saying a while ago, John, Roper will lay for the boy. A safe place as any will be for Bill to go home with me. And you oughtn't to stay here, either. The sheriff's riding back to town and you can go along with him, or come with me. You're always welcome at my house, John."

Grant wanted to say sure, he'd go, but had to consider how it would look. Sanger didn't like Allentyre and would think things. Grant meant to walk wide of Red Sanger, but it wouldn't look right to walk that wide all at once. Red was a suspicious man, and Grant knew that Eads didn't like him anyhow.

"You'll take Blue Chip too?" Grant asked. And when Allentyre said, "Of course," Grant decided, "Then, Joel, maybe I'd better go in and explain to Trusand about her being over to your place. Bill, you go along with Joel."

The kid got up, looked hard at Allentyre, then blurted: "That girl hates me!" He was trying not to reveal that he also hated her.

Allentyre thought it over, carefully not smiling as he explained, "Bill, she's too good a horseman to really hate anybody that can ride her down!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT WAS AFTER nightfall as they approached the ranch house and two big dogs came bounding a half mile down the road to meet Allentyre; and he said, "I don't know how they know, but they always do and meet me!" He had ridden slowly to protect Blue Chip's knees and there hadn't been much conversation; the kid wouldn't talk to him.

When they dismounted before the house a small man with a curiously springy step clumped toward them through the lighted doorway, a thin shadow-shape with spidery legs and a hurried jangle of small spurs, and he spoke somberly: "Aye, it's bad, sir! Cy died on the way in, and the boy's been sent to head off the doctor." The voice was quick and jerky, with

a tone strange to the kid's ears, and the smell of the stable and liniment was strong about this man.

One of the big dogs forcefully poked his head against the kid's hand, wanting to be petted. Allentyre stood for a long moment, deep in thought, then he said, "Boran, this is Bill Helgar, and you know Blue Chip. They are staying with us for a while."

"Eh? And glad to meet you, lad, that I am!" Boran leaned close through the darkness, shaking hands.

"The sheriff won't go to the Swayback," Allentyre explained. "We talked it over. The trail's cold. Besides, Roper's on the loose. And Boran, keep Blue Chip up but turn Roan out. And come back after we've had supper and take Bill with you for the night."

Allentyre led the way indoors, and the dogs came, too, walking through a wide hall lighted by a lamp on chains and into a big room; and the kid remembered Miss Kate's instructions about pulling his hat when indoors where there were women. No women were in sight, but the tidiness and nice things meant they were near; however, Allentyre kept his hat on.

"Set down, Bill. I'll be back in a little while, then we'll wash up and eat. Ranger can keep you company."

Ranger was a young dog, brindled, short-haired, full-grown, but not filled out; he acted hopeful that the kid would play. Ranger's mother had tagged Allentyre's long stride from the room.

The kid sat on the edge of a big chair and felt lost. The room seemed bigger than most houses. Overhead were black rough-hewn beams; Indian blankets were on the floor, framed colored pictures on the walls, and the windows had heavy drapes that were so darkly red they looked almost black. The fireplace was high enough for the kid to stand in, and the table was wider than he could reach across. One place was laid at the head of the table, and a tall cruet stand shimmered with glass bottles that made him think of Miss Kate's perfumery.

Ranger got up with tail awag to meet the girl as she came from the hall; but she wouldn't notice him or the kid, that being her way of acknowledging the kid's unwelcome presence. And in spite of himself surprise fluttered in the kid's

eyes; now in a flowing dress, the bottom heavy with ruffles, she looked like a girl, and she moved quickly with sharp tap, tap, tap of heels, her straight back stiffening against the stare she knew must follow her. The copper-colored hair was bunched like a grown lady's, and it wasn't often worn that way because a splotch of untanned whiteness showed on the nape.

She disappeared through a dark doorway and jarred the door with angered closing behind her. The dog had gone with her.

The kid sat rigidly and peered toward the elk antlers above the fireplace, not seeing them. He had no words for his feeling, but it was much as if she had played an unfair trick; except for the hair, he had remembered her as nothing but a skinny boylike girl. "Ugly!" he had insisted within his own thoughts. He forgot that word now, but didn't like her any better; she didn't want him here and he didn't want to be here, and meant not to stay.

2

Boran's quarters were near the stable and colored prints were tacked on the walls, all of lean, sleek horses, some at the extended gallop with red-coated peak-capped riders on saddles like the one that hung by a stirrup above Boran's bed. The kid had never seen such a flat saddle before and wondered but wouldn't ask. Boran spread blankets, lots of them, for a pallet on the floor, then lit a storm lantern and took the kid into the stable, showing the huge medicine cupboard, the tin-lined granary bins, and the big draft-proof rooms that he called "loose boxes." Again the kid wondered, but wouldn't ask questions.

A horse clattered up and stopped outside.

"Wait a bit," Boran said; "Helen's back." He went outside.

The kid couldn't understand what was being said at the stable entrance except from a raspingly petulant voice: "Nobody but Uncle Joel can tell me what to do! A furriner can't!"

"Helen," Boran had said, and the kid thought some wom-

an had returned; but that wasn't a woman's voice. Boran identified horses rather than their riders.

He came back now, leading the saddled, sweat-covered golden horse that Bobs had been on when the kid gave chase; and Boran was in a fuming splutter as he walked Helen about until she cooled. The word "furriner" had also made him mad. He began to rub her down and the kid helped; Boran could see that there was love of horses in the kid's hands, and tirelessness too. When they were through, Boran fetched a blanket and buckled it over Helen. The kid had never seen a horse blanketed before.

The next morning he was roused from his pallet in the dark with, "Fold your blankets, lad. Stir quickly!" After that Boran led the way, lantern in hand, with springy steps that seemed about to stumble but never did. The kid drowsily sniffed the warm ammoniac smell, the horsy odors, the scent of leather, and felt happy. Boran hurried from horse to horse, having a look, and he talked to each as to a pretty child. Three had been kept in stalls and were turned out to water, and he gave the kid a bucket of oats to distribute in feedboxes, and the kid began to think that he would like to stay on here.

A Mexican came in and languidly forked manure into a wheelbarrow.

The horses trailed back to eat, and the kid took a brush, softer than any he had ever seen before, and a leather pad, to rub down Blue Chip. "Dressing," Boran called it when he brought a moist sponge to wipe the mare's eyes and nostrils. He told the kid that Mr. Allentyre raised fine horses because he wanted them rather than because he wanted to make money out of them.

Boran went jogging off about something and the kid rubbed, proudly adding luster to the mare's black coat; then he heard the girl's voice call in lilting eagerness, "Oh, Boran, where's my Blue Chip?"

Boran was somewhere out of hearing, and she ran along the dim stalls and came to Blue Chip, but stopped short, seeing the kid. It was now daylight, but the lanterns hadn't been put out and one hung there, throwing down its glow on her; and again she wore bibless overalls with the silver-studded belt as wide on her waist as the kind some busters

used to keep their insides from being churned. Her stiff-brimmed hat hung by thongs at the back of her head, and the hair was loose on her shoulders, and wrath came into her face.

The kid gave her a sulky stare. She didn't like him, and he didn't like her, and he jealously didn't want her making over Blue Chip. Bobs backed away slowly, an angered silence about her and the look of thinking up something mean to say; then the voice of someone coming up asked what was the matter, but she wouldn't speak.

The kid saw Whitey Summers glaring at him.

"Oh, you, heh?" Whitey hitched up his trousers and poked thumbs into his belt and spread his shoulders. Big spurs were on his boots with the pants legs stuffed in, and he looked like a full-fledged cowboy. The kid stared sullenly, not moving, and Whitey took that for fear.

"Tellin' folks you bluffed Tom Roper with an empty gun!" Whitey jeered.

The kid now knew it was Whitey's voice he had heard last night saying that nobody but Uncle Joel could tell him what to do; and the kid felt out of place, with no rights here, not even the right to get mad and do what he'd have liked. Whitey's bigness didn't bother him; the kid had gone head-first into the bellies of rough-taunting men who played as if fighting and he'd hurt them any way he could. But this wasn't his stamping ground, and he had the aloneness of being in a strange, unwelcome place; all he could think about was to get away, not running off—just leaving.

The girl stepped inside, her look narrowing on Whitey's face, then it moved with cool up-and-down disdain as if she herself didn't know which of these boys she disliked the more.

The kid wasn't showing fight, and that encouraged Whitey. He had an old hate of the kid, and new spite because the countryside marveled at what the kid had done to Tom Roper. Whitey saw a chance to show off in front of Bobs, who also had it in for the kid; so, growing bold, he jeered, "Yanh, yanh, yanh! You liar, you!"

The kid crowded up near Blue Chip's head, placed the brush and pad on the small shelf above the feedbox, then fastened the rope to the halter Blue Chip wore, and backed

her out, and all the while Whitey mocked him with, "liar!" and also "coward!" daring him to fight.

In the runway the kid grasped Blue Chip's mane and jumped, squirming up, belly down. Whitey ran forward and gave a shove that sent the unbalanced kid clear over the mare's back and off on the other side. As he fell he dropped the halter rope, and he fell flat on his side, and he didn't rise, but turned over and scrambled swiftly on hands and knees right between Blue Chip's legs, going under her belly to get at Whitey.

Whitey kicked out and the kid, knees down, clutched the foot and jerked, trying to bring Whitey to the ground. Whitey yapped and grabbed the end post of a stall for support as he kicked again. Bobs plucked at the halter and led Blue Chip some feet away, clearing a space to let them fight it out.

Whitey's boot came off in the kid's arms, and the kid tossed it aside and was crouching to get up when Whitey dropped on him. He had weight and was on top and hammered the kid hard. Both their hats were off, and the kid squirmed and heaved and twisted, striking with fists, elbows, butting furiously. He didn't mind having the worst of it as long as he could hurt, and Whitey used threats and oaths, but the kid fought like a mute, not saying a word.

Bobs's small fists were knotted, too, her face as tense as if she were in pain; she hated the kid but despised Whitey, and somehow there was an ache within her because she wanted to see the smaller boy on top; and she knew that he was hurt and tiring and he wouldn't quit. The kid's fierceness put fear in Whitey even while he was getting the better of it. "Got enough?" Whitey yelled. The kid's answer was an elbow into Whitey's face. Whitey cursed, half blinded, and snatched the loose boot near the ankle and began to bang it heel down and clublike on the kid's head; and when the spur rowel struck it ripped the kid's scalp, and everything got dark and that was all he knew.

Whitey, with his back to the girl, never knew what hit him. The Mexican stableman had gone off to breakfast, leaving an unemptied wheelbarrow in a stall, with the pitchfork stuck in the manure. Bobs caught it up and ran at Whitey and thumped the handle down on his head as

furiously as if killing a snake. She cried out, "Fight fair, you! 'Specially somebody that's littler!" But Whitey didn't hear.

When Whitey opened his eyes and sat up Allentyre and Boran were coming in. Bobs had pitched the fork back into the stall, and she coolly pretended not to have had any part in the fight. The men saw blood about the kid's dirt-encrusted head and he looked dead. Boran got down on his knees beside him, while Allentyre gazed in calm sternness from Whitey to Bobs and asked, "What happened?"

Bobs threw back her head stiffly, pointed without looking toward Whitey: "Ask him! If he won't tell it straight, I will!"

Allentyre said, "I asked you!"

Bobs's father and mother were dead, and she'd grown up about as she pleased except for being sent off to school. She could wind Joel around her little finger and go scot-free from anything as long as she frankly didn't try to wiggle out of blame and told the truth; but she just couldn't admit, not here and now, that she had knocked Whitey over the head to help that kid.

Boran's, "It's best that I do something!" was only half heard and, small man that he was, he carried the kid with a springy lurch down to the granary room where the medicine cupboard filled half of a wall.

Bobs looked toward Whitey and said, "He told the Helgar boy it was all a lie about him bluffing Tom Roper!"

Allentyre's voice wasn't sharp but was full of meaning with, "Whitey?"

Whitey got to his feet and stood in the cringed twist of being badly hurt as he put a hand to his head. "Why, Uncle Joel, that's what fellas say! I only told what fellas say!" His look lifted toward Bobs, hoping for help. He didn't get any. Then Whitey groaned a little, trying to sound as if bravely in great pain.

"Was that how it started?" Allentyre's somber quietness laid its weight on Bobs. She knew to the nth of an inch how far she could go with Joel, and this was one of the times when she had to stand and answer straight out.

In a tone of crisp indifference she said, "After Whitey called him a liar, the Helgar boy backed Blue Chip out—

why I don't know. When he tried to mount, Whitey pushed him off. Then they fought. He'd pulled Whitey's boot and Whitey used it for a club."

" 'Cause he hit me with a rock!" Whitey whined.

"Rock? No rocks in here!"

"Uncle Joel, with something then! Just look! You can feel!" Whitey lowered his head and touched the bump.

Bobs met Joel's inquiring gaze and shrugged a shoulder. She was dangerously near to lying, or at least falsification, with "I didn't see a rock!" He motioned. Bobs understood and, glad to go, marched down the runway, slowing a bit as she passed by the granary door but didn't stop.

The kid sat on a stool and Boran sopped cleansingly.

Allentyre pushed back his hat and gazed at Whitey. "Come here." The command was quiet, without anger. Whitey limped closer on the bootless foot and propped himself at the end of a stall and tried to look badly used.

"We had a talk the other day when you came here to live, Whitey. I promised you a thrashing if I ever caught you in a lie."

"But I ain't lied, Uncle Joel! Honest I ain't! He hit me with something! My head's near busted, and if 'twasn't a rock then——"

"Who told you it was a made-up story about Tom Roper?"

Whitey squirmed, saying "Oh?" So that was it, and not the rock. Then, earnestly, "But if I told, I'd get somebody into trouble! I ain't goin' to do that, Uncle Joel! No sir!"

Allentyre put a hand to his cheek and pondered without taking his eyes from the boy. The repetitious "Uncle Joel" annoyed him but he kept the annoyance out of his judgment; and he would have liked to tell Whitey, "You're through!" and send him off, but that would be turning the boy back to the town's livery-stable loafers, and Mrs. Summers was an anxious, hardworking mother and highly respected. Whitey's knack with horses was extraordinary. He had grown up with them. He wasn't really lazy when he was interested. But he was deceitful, and, even worse than lying, was the way he had beaten a smaller boy over the head with a spurred boot.

Allentyre knew that now he must send Whitey off, and be through with him, or try what a hard lesson would do,

and there mustn't be anything halfway about it. He said, "Put on your boot, Whitey."

Then he marched Whitey out to the carriage shed and reached the buggy whip from the buckboard socket, and the boy shrank away, begging.

"You lied, didn't you?" Allentyre showed no temper, his voice was not unkindly.

"I won't do it again! Honest I won't! I didn't mean anything wrong! I was just joshin'—honest I was! Oh, Uncle Joel, please don't whip me, an' I won't——"

"Turn around!"

Whitey cringed but wouldn't turn, and the whip whistled down from a full-arm swing. It struck across Whitey's shoulder, puffing dust from the shirt, and Whitey crumpled up on the ground and writhed and squalled. Allentyre calmly laid on the whip. To his way of thinking, a thrashing didn't do a boy or man any good unless it was given in justice—and was one that would be remembered.

3

The kid's fingers were clamped to the seat of the stool while Boran, in busy intentness, used scissors and horse clippers to shear spots on the gashed scalp; and he soaped and washed the head, then with a needle and thread from his sewing kit, he took stitches. He was smearing on nitrate of silver and lard when Allentyre stepped in, and Boran said in a hurried aside, "Not a peep out of him!"

The kid peered with feverish stubbornness, and all that Allentyre could think of to say was, "How do you feel, Bill?" He wanted to break up that frozen stare, and didn't.

"I'm a'right," the kid muttered.

Allentyre stepped closer and looked at Boran's dressing. Pretty messy, but probably the best that could be done this side of town. He glanced keenly at the small Englishman; horses were Boran's passion, he loved them as a mother loves children, and his hovering solicitude over the kid was mostly because he had recognized that the kid loved horses too. He took out tobacco and papers absently. He wished the kid could know that he had thrashed Whitey, but he

couldn't speak of it himself; that was between him and Whitey.

The kid looked right at him and said, "You heard me and Whitey had a fight in town?" Allentyre admitted it, and felt the reproach and also that it was just as the kid told him, "But you never said he was here. So I'm goin'!"

"Going where, Bill?"

"Town."

"Quite a ways. Be hard on the mare." Allentyre scratched a match on the sole of his boot and Boran jerked around, surprised. Smoking wasn't allowed in the stable. Allentyre shook out the match, acknowledged, "I wasn't thinking." He felt at a loss, and held the cigarette carefully, as if he wanted to save it. You didn't get anywhere by meeting this kid head on, so it would be useless to talk of burying the hatchet with Whitey; and he tried to think of what could be done to induce the kid to stay. Nothing short of making Whitey go would probably influence Bill, but it was too late now to do that; the thrashing itself had been a kind of promise to let Whitey remain and try again.

So Allentyre said in a casual sort of way, entirely to Boran, "Black Dot's a half sister to Blue Chip. I wonder if she'll make as good a quarter horse? About time we began to work with her."

"Aye, Black Dot!" Boran nodded.

"When I was about your age, Bill, I knew an old Mexican who had the best luck with quarter horses of anybody. He always trained them at night. Folks thought he was trying to hide some secret he had, and spied on him, and didn't learn anything.

"He took quite a liking to me. I found he trained at night so the horse wouldn't get overheated. But he always started about 2 A. M. As far as I know, any other late hour would be as good. But that was his hour. It's still mine." Allentyre smiled a little; the kid was listening tensely but didn't smile back. "I had it in mind that you and me and Boran would train Black Dot and tune up Blue Chip for her race. Boran could show you just how we run our quarter races."

The kid remained doggedly quiet, but thoughts were moving about in his eyes, and when Boran had stitched on the bandage, the kid returned to Boran's room. All day he

lay on the bed, and his head hurt, but he dozed some, and that night went to his pallet.

The next morning Boran got up quietly in the dark and slipped out so as not to awaken the kid, but when he went into the stable he saw right away that Blue Chip had gone. Boran ran back to the room and found that the shape under the blanket was merely another bunched-up blanket.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE KID slowly retraced the direction Allentyre had brought him across the range that rolled out of Mendoz Canyon, knowing his way as a bird would know it and without attention to the confused crisscross of cow trails that lay dimly in the starlight. Landmarks, once seen, were ever afterward signposts for him. Sometimes dark lumpish shapes shuddered to their feet and moved aside, watching him go by, their cow faces ghostlike from the Hereford blood Allentyre had mixed with his cattle.

His head ached; he hadn't a hat or coat, and it was chilly. For some reason he brooded less on Whitey than on the girl: whether she ignored him or looked at him, she hurt, and there was no way to get back at her. He could kill Whitey; that was a simple, uncomplex feeling, but he couldn't imagine what he would like to do to get even with Bobs. The coming race was a kind of fight that he must have with Whitey, and his throat squeezed shut, making it hard to swallow when the fear came that he might lose it. It wasn't, he reasoned, up to Blue Chip so much as up to how well he cared for her.

Therefore he rode slowly. He knew how to get to town from Grant's and was returning there, and would let the mare rest before going on.

He took his horse into the dark stable and didn't have a match, and besides the lantern was at the cabin. Rats squeaked and pattered when he groped out grain into the bucket, measuring by the handful; and he kicked savagely

in the dark and felt a weight lift from his foot and heard the thump against the wall.

He found his gunny sack and in the dead blackness of the stall he patiently rubbed Blue Chip; he wasn't going to risk her having a chill just because he himself was tired. He had seen Boran blanket the golden Helen and heard why. The kid trudged up to the cabin; his horse would have a blanket too.

When he found that the sagging door wasn't closed he called out, thinking Grant was there, then he went in and stumbled over things on the floor as he made his way to the tin-covered matchbox behind the stove. The match flared and he started to reach for the lamp on the shelf, but peered so long from under the upheld small flame that the fire nipped his fingers. He flung the match down and took another.

Lamplight showed that the cabin had been ransacked. Grant's good clothes, cut to rags, lay scattered on the floor. Every windowpane was broken. Coal oil had even been poured in the flour tub; that more than anything stirred the kid's fury. Befouling a man's food was a low thing, lower than thievery.

He couldn't tell what all had been stolen but the butcher knife was gone, and he missed that because he wanted to cut a rope for the blanket that he would put about Blue Chip. The best he could find was a dull case knife, so he took it, the lantern, and a blanket.

Now in passing the door with a light in his hand he saw that a ragged piece of brown paper had been stabbed there by the point of the butcher knife. It was a piece of torn paper sack, and he studied the scrawl. He couldn't read, but he tore off the paper and folded it into his pocket, then pulled out the butcher knife and took it with him.

2

It was well past sunup when he reached Crosby's.

The lank missus screeched through the door, "If Tom Roper sees you!" and clumped out at him in her man's shoes as if expecting it might happen any minute. "You pile right off and hide the horse and come in the house! Crosby ain't here and you've got to stay still he gits back! Red'll take my head

off 'f I let anything happen to you!" She looked and sounded ready to grab and struggle with him.

That made the kid tighten up and tell her sulkily, "I'll go on to town!"

"You plumb idgit, you! Tom Roper ramped in here half drunk last night and threatened to murder us if we didn't tell where you an' John was! He'd been up there layin' for you! So you git right down an'——"

"Has the sheriff been told?"

The missus slapped back her straggling hair. "That old fool! We don't want no truck with him!" Then she reached up and took hold of his arm. "You git right down!"

The kid jerked loose and frowned at her in stubborn challenge. She wanted to know why his head was bandaged, and he said merely, "I hurt it a little." And when she asked why he'd left Allentyre's he said because he wanted to and wouldn't tell more.

She misguessed his feelings with a shrill, "I don't wonder! Joel Allentyre is one of the meanest men in the country, and oh, so slick! Just about robbed poor John Grant of house an' home! And he's got it in for Red and us Crosbys too!"

The kid rode on, and she cupped her hands to scream after him for being a fool.

He slid from the mare to drink in the Willawaw, then stooped over the tracks coming out of the moist earth at the water's edge. Two horses had crossed at the lope but not at the same time. The calk imprints of the fresh-shod horse right beyond the water had almost dried out, while close by and at the same distance from the water was a hoofprint that retained a trace of moisture. Shade protected them equally.

He followed the road watchfully and began to see that the fresh-shod horse had been ridden as only a man who felt the devil's breath on his neck would ride; and there was Red's wind-broken Sorrel Top as an example of what Roper's cruelty would do to a fine horse. The kid guessed that maybe after Roper lit out Crosby had followed, taking word, if not to the sheriff, then to Red Sanger.

That was merely a guess; but he was sure that the hard rider must have been Roper. The man hadn't pulled down on the upgrade and did worse in running his horse down-

hill. About three miles on the kid saw where the horse had left the road at full tilt to cut down the long slope through the sparse bunch grass.

Taking a short cut or heading for a hide-out? No knowing. There wasn't the sign of a house anywhere. A few cows munched here and there, all far away, and the rest was the emptiness of a hot morning where heat waves were beginning to shimmer.

He scanned the far side of the valley. Barren hills, known as the Bluffs, rose jaggedly, and shadows lay deep in their weather-torn sides. *Good hiding, bad riding,* he said to himself, quoting his dad. He looked all about as he studied for a description of this place, and absently rubbed his head. It was beginning to hurt and the sun was hot.

The kid thought he never would get to town, and when he slid off in the livery stable he looked the next thing to drunk, and felt it, too, being dead-beat and pale around the gills. The sun had made him dizzy, and he was a little sick at his stomach. He hadn't pulled from the road into the shade anywhere along the way because it seemed important that he get word to the sheriff; and he wouldn't hurry Blue Chip because Allentyre had told him never to run her except on soft earth.

Now he said to withered old Harlow, "I got to see the sheriff, quick!" Then he passed out on his feet, and Harlow pounced at him steadyingly.

3

The kid moved on the couch and the shaggy doc, with sleeves rolled up, grinned down at him. "What'd you do? Go headfirst at a buzz saw?"

The kid gingerly lifted fingers to his head. The bandage was gone; his head didn't feel cool, but the leaden throb had lessened, and the pungent smell of camphor and carbolic filled the room. He knew where he was because he had often been up here in the doc's office over the drugstore when recovering from the bullet in his shoulder; but he didn't like this doctor, who hadn't seemed nice enough to Miss Kate; and, since Whitey was to ride the doc's Rain Drop, they

must be friends. The kid regarded that coming race as an encounter in a hateful feud.

Now he staringly didn't reply, and the doc took a pipe and put a match to the bowl and asked between puffs, "Who patched you up?"

"The Allentyre stableman."

"Well, you're tough as a horse! Here, swallow this!"

The kid obediently drank the small glass of bitter stuff, and the doc tried some rough friendliness, but all he got back was an unwinking, sullen stare. The doc placed the glass on the desk of a tall chipped secretary. Its shelves were cluttered with bottles and jars and books. The battered pill-bag, with shoulder strap for horseback, sat on the desk, ready to be caught up. The doc went when sent for, night or day, whatever the weather and, being careless of whether or not he got paid, he used a rough humor.

"What do you want to see the sheriff about?"

The kid said tonelessly, "I'll tell the sheriff."

The doc walked into the front room and leaned toward the door. The hum of talk continued out there. Seemed like half the town had traipsed upstairs and downstairs, wanting to see and hear about this kid. Next to Roper he was the most talked-of fellow in the country. The doc had asked the squint-eyed Cutts to stand outside and not let anybody in until the sheriff came; that is, anybody excepting Miss Kate. The doc liked her and he detested Trusand; and he thought it strange that she hadn't shown up because certainly somebody had run to tell her that the kid was in town, and was sick and hurt.

John Grant still hung around out there in the hall. Trusand had come, coolly certain that he would be admitted, but Cutts wouldn't let him by. Cutts was smarter than he looked and lots tougher.

The doc now came back and filled another pipe and pulled a chair close to the open window and put his heels on the sill. The kid's eyes were wide open and stared at the ceiling and didn't move when he asked, "How is Miss Kate?"

"Far as I know, fine as silk."

The doc got up and went to the front room to meet the

sheriff and saw the closing door blot out Grant's troubled face.

The sheriff moved with a tired plod. Strain and sleeplessness and long hours in the saddle had pulled the fat out of his face, making his heavy nose look bigger. The doc thought of him as the tortoise type, solid, slow, dogged, and maybe too honest to be very smart.

"What is it, Doc?"

"A touch of sun bowled him over, but he's all right—though his head looks like he's been butting at a bobcat! He wants to talk to you. So just shut the door in there."

The kid was sitting up with his feet over the couch that the doc used as a bed, and the sheriff came close and silently held out his hand; and after that he brushed at his mustache, leaned toward the spittoon, then drew up a chair. He sat down slowly, laid his hat aside on the floor, put his hands palms down on his knees. "I been told you asked for me, Bill."

The kid looked at the tarnished star on the brown vest. Being sheriff was something like being colonel at the fort. He stared at the tired face. The hatband, from being pulled down hard against the sun and wind, had left a scarlike mark on the sheriff's forehead. Now the kid felt shakily doubtful of what had seemed important just a little while before.

"Just tell it your own way, Bill. No hurry. I got lots of time. Lots."

Even then the kid didn't say anything, but he groped in his pants pocket and drew out the lump of brown paper. Words stuck in his throat. He didn't want to talk about Allentyre's at all, so he began right off with: "Somebody raised hell at John's cabin. Even poured coal oil in the flour! And this here was stuck on the door with a butcher knife. Roper left it, I bet, 'cause the Crosby woman said he'd been up there. I can't read and I ain't showed it to nobody. I thought you ought to know first." He thrust out his arm stiffly.

The sheriff's big hands slowly unfolded the piece of paper bag and revealed a badly spelled scrawl and some of the evilest words a man could use. It wasn't signed.

The kid's patient stare asked what it said, and the sheriff put on a puzzled frown and reread. "Kind of hard to make

it all out," he explained concealingly. "No name signed to it, but Tom Roper all right. Un-hunh." It was difficult to read. "Tom must have been a little likkered when he wrote it. Un-hunh. Don't think he'd ever wrote it sober." He gave the kid a searching look. "Bill, you say you haven't told anybody else about it?"

"Not a soul."

"I'm asking you, Bill, don't! Nobody. Not even John Grant. Nor Trusand. No, nor Miss Kate." The sheriff took lots of time in refolding the paper, and stuffed it down in his inner vest pocket, poking hard to make sure that it went deep. "This is to be just between you and me, Bill. When do you figger Roper was there?"

"Had to be yesterday and in daylight. He tore up John's clothes and busted things, but the lamp was still on the shelf like it wouldn't have been if he'd used it to see by. The Crosby woman said Roper come to their place last night, half drunk, and swore he'd kill 'em if they didn't tell where me and John was!"

"Sounds like him."

The kid hunched forward, eager now because the sheriff was pleased with him. "When I crossed the Willawaw I found tracks where a fresh-shod horse was run hard not long before. Too hard for honest ridin'. He left the road lickety-split to the north right where there wasn't any trail about three mile from the river."

"Ah?" said the sheriff encouragingly. "Fresh-shod and cross-country north?"

"I lined up the place the best I could so as to tell you. Then better'n that I piled off and drug my foot in straight lines across the road three or four times where Roper, if 'twas him, cut down the slope. So if you keep looking down in the dust, you can't miss where I made my marks."

The sheriff said, "I already got a purt' good idea of about where, Bill." After that he ran his fingers into his thick gray hair and pondered. He didn't tell the kid that it was a newly shod horse that Roper had lifted from the Jones boys, or that Belle Hart lived over there in the Bluffs, and the Harts were a bad lot.

"How come you left Allentyre's, Bill?"

The kid looked at him trustfully. "Whitey Summers was

there and we had a fight and I won't stay anywhere I can't kill him if I get a chance!"

The sheriff's glance lifted to the top of the kid's head. "What'd he hit you with?"

"Spur on the boot he used like a club!"

"I'm afraid Whitey won't turn out much good till somebody skins him alive. How'd the fight start?"

The kid told, making no mention of Bobs, yet as he talked his thoughts went 'round and 'round her, and the sheriff nodded stolidly. "Bill, I see how you feel. And I'm going to give Whitey a dressing down that'll make him let you alone."

The kid said sullenly from behind level eyes, "I don't want him to let me alone."

"But I do!" The sheriff spoke with straight-from-the-shoulder calmness. "It's part of my job to take care that there ain't trouble. Between boys as well as men! If you an' Whitey have any more trouble, I think I'll see to it that you don't ride in that race. And I sure do want you to win!"

Then the sheriff shook hands again, and he went to the front door and opened it and called in Cutts; and the sheriff's voice was quiet, deliberate. "We are ridin' right off. Get Handley. I know where Tom Roper cut 'cross-country, so I know just about where he headed for. It's where we've looked before. And my orders are changed, Cutts. I don't care what chances we've got to run, I want him took alive!"

CHAPTER NINE

LATE-AFTERNOON shadows lay warm on Main Street and the kid marched along the sidewalk beside Grant and gazed toward the upper front of the Palace where the windows with their curtains drawn were like shut eyes. His thoughts were on Miss Kate, and Grant knew it and took his arm, urging, "Come on." Trusand had told Grant to fix the kid up fine at Poppa Hartmann's so he'd be happy, and not to let the kid out of his sight, especially not to let him get to Kate or there'd be hell to pay.

Poppa Hartmann ran the general store, and sold clothes,

candy, guns, shoe buttons, or cookstoves, and had prospered so greatly that he was building a new store in the same block where he and Mama would live upstairs instead of at the back. He was a small gray man and bubbled in togging out the kid, who didn't seem to care about new clothes. Grant tried for an appreciative response with, "Ain't this a fine rig-out, Bill?" The best he could get was "They're a'right."

"What's the matter, Bill?"

The kid had a lot of deep-down feelings behind the droned "Nothin'."

Mike Eads dragged his spurs with lazy slouch through the front door and passed the round-faced Mrs. Hartmann as he pointed. "Just lookin' for a couple of friends." He sauntered to where the kid was putting on a pair of new boots, and Eads drawled, "Trusand allowed I'd most likely find you here."

Poppa Hartmann pushed at the kid, urging him to walk about, try the boots, see how well they fitted; and when he moved up along the counter Hartmann went, too, calling, "Come look, Mama! He is such a big boy but has feet no bigger than a little girl!"

At the sight of Eads cold sweat needle-pricked Grant's back. Eads didn't like him and Grant knew he hadn't come out of friendliness. The pinch-faced Eads had an unanxious steadiness, and when Hartmann and the kid were out of the way he muttered, "Red sent me for you!"

Grant sagged haggardly. "Now what?"

"Roper was at Crosby's, likkered and mean. Bragged he wasn't scairt of being caught. Bragged that if us fellows didn't come to his help that we'd all—" Eads slowly drew a finger clear around his neck, let his head loll. "So Red figgers we'd better get to him before the sheriff does!"

The kid was clumping back, and his face was too tanned to show the flush that burned within him. The motherly Mama Hartmann had exclaimed over what fine boots they were, the kind and size that Mr. Allentyre ordered for the little Bobs. The kid's impulse was to get out of them, not have them; then something inexplicably turned over inside him and the feeling was changed and he did want them.

It was just dark enough for lamps to be lighted when they went into Mark's restaurant, where Eads casually joshed the

freckled waitress while Grant, weighted down with worries, enviously wondered how Eads could seem untroubled and enjoy food. The kid was wretchedly embarrassed in being stared at, and he ate with his head low, keeping his hat on.

Grant's food was tasteless, dry, hard to swallow. Eads made it worse by talking about Blue Chip and the money Grant was said to have bet today against the fool "miners" who thought she'd lose. Trusand had assured Grant that Blue Chip couldn't possibly win though the odds on her were two to one. It was well known that Grant had a small bunch of cows running with Allentyre's, and the banker had let him have $500, and Grant had turned it over to the gambler. Now that the kid was with him again, Grant's conscience began to hurt; he thought the world and all of the kid, yet was joining in to double-deal against him.

Supper over, Eads led the way out to the sidewalk where men loitered with toothpicks in their mouths, and the warm air was heavy with the day's dust smell. Among other talk there was some about the Election Day issue. The kid heard, but didn't care then or afterward, that the voting was to determine whether or not to take the county seat away from Reseda here and transfer it to a place called Linton; to him, Election Day meant only one thing, and that was the race.

Jogging hoofs and the soft thud of a light wagon's wheels sounded in the dimness of lower Main Street. Allentyre was driving, and Bobs, on the golden Helen, rode alongside, high-headed in the saddle and looking straight before her. A fellow commented on her stuck-upness and the kid thought it was true, but he didn't like hearing anybody say so.

The buckboard rolled by with Allentyre's Roman-nose on a lead rope behind; and a voice spoke up with harsh solemnity: "He's bringing in the Jones boys for the church burial tomorrow!"

2

Grant's room was upstairs at the back of the hotel and he put a match to the tin lamp and set it up on the shelf and told the kid, "You get ready and climb in bed."

The kid didn't say a word but laid his bundles from Hartmann's on the floor, sat down, kept his hat on, and looked broodingly at nothing. He was full of things to think about,

and they were secret things, not to be talked of, and he wasn't going to be put to bed. He didn't say so; he didn't say anything; he just wasn't and that was that.

Eads sagged up against the wall, sucked the toothpick, eying Grant. "Red said to come arunnin' and he meant quick!"

Grant pulled a long breath, let it out with, "Whew!" and tramped across the room to lift the heavy pitcher from the washbowl and pour a little water into a glass, wetting his mouth. After that he sat on the bed, pointed toward the kid, and told Eads, "Soon as he rolls in we'll go out back and talk."

"I done my talkin' when I said Red sent for you!"

Grant fumbled out a crumpled cigarette paper, began to smooth it on his knee, mumbled, "I can't just go off and leave the boy."

The kid had hitched his chair around and was staring through the window that was rather like a black mirror; and Eads studied out what he could safely let the kid overhear, then snapped, "Roper's loose, fella!"

"Like a flea in a blanket on a dark night!" Grant said, not being funny.

Eads turned a chair with his foot and straddled it, facing over the back. He had a low opinion of Grant anyhow, but spoke reasoningly. "You listen close. He told Crosby that sure as hell's a foot deep he was goin' to have company when he got hung! See what a hand he holds?"

Grant looked uneasily toward the kid, poured tobacco on the paper, muttered, "And Red thinks he judges men good!"

"If I was you, I wouldn't remind him of it!" Eads's eyes narrowed. "And if I was you, I wouldn't do anything to let him think he'd made the same mistake twice!"

Grant rolled his cigarette, not smoothly, and now scratched a match on the sole of a boot. "What's all the rush?"

Eads had another look at the back of the kid's head, then told Grant, "The sheriff's gone out toward Crosby's." It was Eads's guess from what he'd just heard here in town that this kid had told the sheriff something to make him ride out that way; and Eads added in sinister quietness, "The sheriff may be just lucky enough to catch Roper. And my bet, fella, is that hell's more than a foot deep!"

Grant's stomach squirmed into a tight knot and it was as hard to breathe as if he had cotton in his mouth.

Eads added cautiously, "Knowin' Roper so well, Red's purt' near sure he knows now where to look."

"Then why the hell does he want help?" Grant said it without thinking. "He's not scared of Roper, is he?"

Hardness glinted in Eads's eyes. "Is that what I'm to take back to say to Red?" Then, sarcastically, "Maybe you've noticed that most houses have two doors, front and back! Sometimes a window at the side! Nearly always takes about three men to surround a place. So what about it? Comin'?"

Grant nodded yieldingly and walked to the slop jar, dropped the cigarette, watched after he dropped it. He was wishing a lot of things all at once, none very coherently, but they made distracted feelings that pulled and hauled. And he was remembering that flat warning that both Allentyre and the sheriff had laid down about being friends with Red Sanger. It wouldn't look good to go man hunting with Red when he ought to have joined up with the sheriff. Grant groaned at himself, *Why can't I do like I ought and stick to it, no matter what?*

He came back to the bed and kneeled to pull his rifle from under it, and then slowly ran his hand down along the barrel, wiping off the cobwebby lint picked up from the floor. He laid the gun on the bed and sat down heavily. His revolver that he didn't wear in town was slung over the bedpost, and he reached up but his hand fell back empty. His spurs were under the edge of the bed. He said, "Oh, damn!" in discouraged weariness, and bent over, took up a spur, slowly buckled it on a foot across his knee, then his hand paused on the strap end. A moment later he gave a jerk, pulled the spur, flung it down, and got up defiantly. "I'm not goin'!"

Eads said angrily, "The hell you're not!"

"That's right, and I don't care what!"

"Don't?" Eads strode forward with fist drawn back.

Grant stood his ground and glared and said wrathfully, "I've been like a steer in a loading chute that you fellows prod and prod! I'm climbin' out!"

"Climbin' out—where?"

"I don't give a damn—just as long as it's out!"

Eads sneered, "I've told Red all along you're yaller from your heels to the back of your neck!"

"I've told him purt' near the same thing myself!"

"Why, damn you!" Eads again looked toward the kid. He had twisted about and eyed one then the other in sober puzzlement. Smart kid. It wouldn't do to say more in front of him. Eads snarled, "Kid, you get the hell out of here! We want to talk!"

The kid didn't move; he frowned sullenly and looked as if he wouldn't say anything, but he did. "I won't and you can't make me!"

"Get out of here, I tell you! I've got something to settle with this—" The name he scornfully called Grant was about as bad as a man could use. Grant hit him, swinging as hard as he could right on the lank jaw; all his pent-up desperation gushed into a kind of relief that made the ache of his hurt knuckles feel good, though as an unquarrelsome fellow he didn't know much about fighting.

Eads's head went back and he landed from a sidling stagger up against the wall. He was as dazed by the surprise as by the smash; ferocity blazed on his face as he made a fumbling reach for his gun. Grant's "You would!" had reckless wrath, and he dived nearly headlong with a fist at Eads's belly and the other hand grasped Eads's gun wrist. He held on and went to his knees and clawed with both hands to keep Eads from getting that gun from its holster.

The kid yelled, "Get up an' butt him!"

Grant did, and their bodies lurched up against the thin wall; it squealed from the jar. Eads used up some of his breath to curse out threats with a kind of furious contempt because he knew, or thought he did, that Grant didn't have grit and hardness and wasn't a fighter. Eads slugged hard and jerked to free his gun. Grant held on, head down, using both hands to pin Eads's arm, and their trampling made the floor shake. He took a beating, not fighting back until the kid screeched, "Stomp on his feet!"

Grant drove a spike-pointed heel at Eads's foot and Eads yelled; he spun his head about to lash oaths at the kid and the oaths died in his mouth. The kid was knees down on the far side of the bed with the rifle in his hands, and he couldn't put it to his shoulder because the stock was too long,

so he held it alongside his thigh, pointing the rifle like somebody who'.knew how, and his face was set with fierce intention. Eads's rage momentarily swept back toward Red Sanger for liking this kid as well as for having picked Grant as a good man. Now Eads felt caught in a mess of Red's own making, and knew that if he got his revolver free the kid would shoot him down.

Grant was stamping again and again like a man awkwardly learning a new jig. Eads jumped this way and that as he struck out left-handedly, not contemptuous now, though Grant had a kind of helplessness and clung to Eads's gun arm, and was sure he'd be killed if he didn't hold on. Hard breathing wheezed in their open mouths and the floor shook as they went round and round with lurch and sway. When a chair overturned they stumbled on it. In falling, the tension went out of Eads's arm so that it came free in Grant's two-handed grip on the wrist, and he held to the wrist as they crashed down, the chair between them. Eads landed backward with his arm stiffly out across the chair; Grant's weight was on his arm, and the snap was as if a rung of the chair had broken.

Grant rolled over and wasn't yet on his feet when he pounced, drawing Eads's revolver, and whaled it muzzle down over Eads's head.

The pound of feet in the hall reached the door and it banged open.

The kid slipped the rifle down between the bed and the wall and nobody saw it. Then men who were grouped at the door thought that Eads had been shot; he looked dead. The Negro porter's eyes bugged out in the gasp of "He done kill Mike Eads!"

The kid said, quick and savage, "Nothin' of the kind! He buffaloed him—and with his own gun!"

Poppa Hartmann, always shocked by violence, groaned lamentatiously, but withered old Harlow bent down for a close look. "Sam, that sure as hell is it!"

Sam Malloy, who ran the Alpine Hotel, was pudgy and not excitable, and he said, "Good!"

"Out cold!" Harlow affirmed.

"Well, I'll fix that!" Malloy, short and fat, moved with

a businesslike strut to the washstand, brought the pitcher and flooded Eads's face and head.

Eads sat up and swore at them and his right hand wouldn't move; he wiped with his left at his face and looked at his wet fingers, expecting blood. They helped him to his feet. His right arm dangled, and he hugged it to him and snarled at Grant, "You broke my arm!" And they all knew that he meant, "Someday I'm going to kill you!"

His menace left a hush until the kid, still on the bed, shouted, "Ought've been your neck! Try to pull a gun on a man bare-handed!"

Sam Malloy's was an incredulous, "No?" Then he asked, "Is that right, Mike?" But Eads wouldn't say. Harlow, returning Eads's gun to its holster, told him, "You'd better get to Doc Burrows." Eads cursed out that he didn't need a damn' doctor and gazed balefully at Grant, then said, "Get the hell out of my way, all you!" He tramped through the door, and the thump of his heels faded down the length of the hall.

Sam Malloy gave Grant a looking over, up and down, before he grinned and thrust out a stubby hand. "John, I never thought you had it in you! Come on down, ever'body! Drinks are on me!"

The kid sat quietly, not included, not wanting to be included, and watched them go. Three to four minutes of brawling had done much to give him a better opinion of John Grant.

3

The kid washed carefully around his neck and face and ears and, opening up the bundles, got into his fine new checkered shirt and crisp overalls. Then he wiped the dust from his boots, and after that tried to fix his hat at a dressy angle before the small looking glass that was as wavy as if water flowed over it. New clothes always made him feel uncomfortable, but he was going to see Miss Kate, and it would please her to have him spruce.

He blew out the lamp and went down the hall, not liking the rasp of the overalls' stiff legs as they rubbed together, but he did like the forward tilt of the new boots' high heels.

He was partway down the stairs when he met Bobs coming up, and her eyes went straight over his head and stayed there. The lamp above the narrow landing made it clear as moonlight, and he didn't want to stare at her but he did, even glancing toward her boots. As she went by her lips didn't move, but she said, "Coward!" Just that, not giving a glimmer of recognition.

He boiled up and whirled about and tried to speak out something hurtful and couldn't make a sound, so he stood there like a stick in the mud with his eyes on her straight back. She was near the top of the stairs when she turned, and in the dimness he didn't clearly see her face but he knew that she looked back.

That brought him to life as if caught in something a little shameful, and he thumped on down. His feelings were muddled yet one thing was clear: he hated that girl! He hated her so much that he liked to think about her and wish—he wasn't sure just what he did wish, only if he could ever do something to make her like him it would then be great satisfaction to ignore her disdainfully.

4

It was late enough for the street to look deserted and he walked wide of such lamplight as fell through doorways and windows. Turning along the dark side of the Palace, he opened the door and dodged up the stairs two at a time. He had never in his life knocked on a door; he flung this one open and stood still because it was dead-dark within.

Kate snapped in alarm, "Who is it?" and the kid said, "Me! you been asleep?"

Her voice wasn't the same, but it was eager, and she told him to come in and shut the door and be careful not to bump into things. Hurriedly she explained, "I've such a terrible headache I can't stand the light, but come over here where I can touch you!"

She groped out and touched him and pulled; but when he didn't give way instantly Kate let go. She wanted to hug him but wouldn't beg, and concealed the hurt she felt. "Tell me about everything, Billy."

"John Grant just licked hell out of Mike Eads!"

Kate didn't want to hear about that; she wanted to hear about the kid and said so. He fumbled stiffly for a chair and sat ill at ease and knew that something was wrong. Her voice was muffled, slow, hadn't a lilt, and how she talked and acted was so unlike his Miss Kate that it was almost as if he had rushed into a strange place and found somebody else. Maybe it was the dead-black darkness. He told her tonelessly, "I brought Blue Chip."

"Why did you leave Joel Allentyre?" There was reproach in the question.

"That girl acted like I smell bad!" He hadn't in the least intended to refer to Bobs, but that was how he felt and out it came. Then, "And Whitey Summers was there too!"

"I know." Her voice fell, letting him understand that she didn't wish to hear more about Whitey.

"I found Tom Roper'd been at Grant's place so I come in and told the sheriff, but I wanted to see you!" All constraint gave way and he blurted, "I like you best of anybody in the world!"

Miss Kate didn't make a sound. It was quiet for so long that he wished he hadn't said it because the dragged-out silence maybe showed that she wasn't pleased; then he heard a queer, muffled sort of gasp as if her hand had slipped on her mouth; and the first thing he thought shocked him into saying, "You're tryin' not to laugh at me!"

Then he realized that it wasn't laughter that she was smothering; it was a sob-sound, and that was more of a shock than when he thought she had been laughing at him. He left the chair, reaching out, and his hands closed on her as he begged, "What's hurt you to cry?"

Kate patted his hand and told him, "It's just a woman's way—when she has a headache—and is happy too!" Her words struggled to be gay but weren't, and he breathed in sighs that shook her. She clung to him as if he mustn't try to move, and she didn't say anything more.

The door opened and Trusand said sharply, "Bill?"

The kid said matter-of-factly, "It's me."

"What're you doing here?" Trusand's tone had a queer sound. The open door let in a glow from the bracket lamp on the wall outside, and his body held an angular rigidity that wasn't like him.

The question puzzled the kid into silence; he had no idea of not having the right to be here any time he wanted, and would have said so, but Kate spoke quickly with strained lift of voice: "I've told him I have a sick headache and can't stand light."

"Oh. Well. Hm." Then Trusand straightened, losing the startled, angular silhouette, and his voice was smooth. "Yes, she's been pretty sick, Bill. Oughtn't to have company. Somebody downstairs thought they saw you come in back and, naturally, I wanted to see you too. How are you? And did Hartmann fit you out? And where's John Grant?"

"He licked Mike Eads good! Broke his arm and gun whipped him!"

"Grant did?"

"And fellows took him down to buy him drinks. But 'f Miss Kate's sick, why ain't the doctor been up here?"

Trusand said at once, "She has these spells and medicine don't help." He came nearer and touched the kid, patting him and pulled a little. "She's sick, so you go back to your room. Maybe she'll be better tomorrow. And tomorrow we must have a talk over plans for the race. Some miners from Risto have put up a sack of gold against Blue Chip, so—"

He walked downstairs with the kid and quickly came back. He didn't speak until he had put a match to the big brass lamp; then, from behind a crooked smile he said, "I thought you were going to tell him—show him!"

Kate stood up and threw back her loose hair, keeping her face stiffly lifted as the blind do. With hands out in vague groping she made her way to the bureau mirror, then bent forward, peering. Both eyes were discolored and nearly closed and her mouth was cut and puffed.

Trusand watched in the mirror. "You might have been just crazy enough!"

"And make him make you kill him? He would—and you wouldn't care!"

Trusand turned the wick down a bit to cut the smoke, and said, "I'd care a hell of a lot! He's my good luck!"

Kate's fingers moved aimlessly about her face. "You can't keep that boy from seeing me if I stay in town. So take me out to Rock Creek. Sadie knows what you do to me. But if Billy ever finds out— This is the worst you've ever done!"

Trusand smoothed at his hair with both palms. "Brought it on yourself, my dear."

Kate leaned in fascinated distress to the mirror. "If he ever saw me like this! You think you can talk yourself out of anything, but you couldn't then!"

The gambler's pebble-hard eyes shimmered mockingly. "Don't be so sure! You can get drunk, you know, and fall downstairs!"

Kate whirled about. "A thing like that!" She couldn't see except through a fuzzy haziness; her face had a distorted peering and there was fury in her voice. "You cold-blooded lying blackleg, you! Tell—drunk—me! Be like you!"

Trusand said coldly, "It would!" He didn't quite laugh. "And I hear that Joel Allentyre thinks I must be an honest man because you're my wife! Though Grant says he is suspicious about that race." Then in a cold savage tone that had made many a hard man shrink, he added, "And if you tell Allentyre, I'll kill you!" She had furtively overheard him cajoling John Grant into a belief that the race would be safely crooked, and it had taken quite a lot of rough handling to make her promise to keep her mouth shut.

Kate started in groping unsteadiness for the door, and when he asked, "Where do you think you're going?" she screamed back at him: "Right downstairs to show men there how you beat me blind! And tell them you're a dirty swindling blackleg—and you are!"

Trusand's long stride carried him to the door as she fumbled it open. He pulled her hand away and banged the door to. He jerked her back and got before her, and he swung with the flat of his palm as hard as he could, smacking her blinded face.

CHAPTER TEN

GRANT RETURNED late with some whisky in him and lay abed after the kid, up and dressed, stood in the sunrise at the window, looking out back toward the shadow-blocked alley door of the carpenter shop and listening to the throb-

bing beat of a hammer. When the sun rose high enough to throw a dazzle of light on Grant's face, he sat up, blowsy and dull. The hammer was falling, tap, tap, tap. He grumbled, "How can a body sleep?" and strode barefoot to the window with a hand absently rubbing at his sore face. After a look at what showed on the trestles he turned away with a humbled mutter. "Coffins!" Then he took a drink of lukewarm water and, lifting his vest from the floor, fumbled out the makin's and sat on the side of the bed to smoke. The Jones boys were to be buried this noon.

Grant had a brooding heart-heavy wonder as to what would happen to him now. He tried to think that he didn't care, but he did care; yet his thoughts jolted down into the hardness of, *All right, they can kill me!* Meaning Eads and Red Sanger. *I'm through with them!* Even as he struggled to be sure he meant just that and wouldn't back up, he was unsure; he peered at the kid and wished to the Lord that he had his kind of headlong stubbornness and straightforwardness. Which also brought a wearying shame to Grant because he was in the scheme to have Blue Chip lose and couldn't figure any way to get out of it. Trusand would jeer and mock and refuse, even threaten.

At last Grant said he supposed they'd have to go eat, and the kid told him soberly, "Folks stare like I'm a two-headed calf!"

It was already sultry in the hotel's dining room where the half-dozen men made a hasty clatter; and the kid, not wanting to feel like a two-headed calf, wouldn't look at anybody and so didn't see Bobs until Grant spoke to her.

She sat alone near a window two tables away and her tawny eyes were leveled studyingly on the kid. He felt trapped. She had come to town in dungarees but now wore a dark green dress. She was cool and fresh and at ease, and the copper-colored curls fell about her cheeks and neck. One time she'd look like a scrawny, long-haired boy and the next time just crumple a fellow up by being pretty. Bobs now stared as long as she pleased before she looked away and the kid ate, scarcely knowing which was the oatmeal and which the fried sowbelly.

Joel Allentyre walked in, pitched his hat to a chair, asked if she'd waited long, then stepped to the kid's table. "John,

they tell me you made mincemeat out of Mike Eads!" Grant began to smile and stopped; Allentyre seemed to be withholding approval until he knew what caused the fight, and Grant couldn't say.

And when Allentyre asked, "How are you, Bill?" the kid braced himself in straight-eyed sullenness, dreading questions about why he'd run away from the ranch. There weren't any questions. Instead, warmth was in Allentyre's voice as he told the kid, "I had a good look at Blue Chip last night by lantern, and a better one this morning. You sure are easy on a horse, Bill!"

"I ain't loped her once, not a step!"

"Shows it! And, Bill, I hear there's money being bet against you."

"Folks think I'll lose!"

"Somebody has to think wrong or you won't have much of a horse race. That right, John?"

Grant mumbled, his face fell haggardly, and guilt swelled up inside of him as Allentyre asked, "What about these miners that are backing Rain Drop? Did you see them?"

Grant put a knife and fork together, pushed them away, moved his feet with a harsh scrape, then looked up as if lifting a weight. He repeated the story as Trusand had told him to tell it: "Why, as I hear it, Joel, a couple of 'em come to town and learned about the race. They got bad likkered, I guess." He tried a laugh that broke brittlely. "You know what drunk miners are! Said they'd take odds of two to one on any horse race, and left a sack of dollars there at the Palace."

"I hear you've borrowed on your cows. Going to bet that?"

Grant sheepishly admitted, "Have a'ready."

"All on Blue Chip, hm?"

He labored out the lie and thought he'd choke. "Ever' dollar on Blue Chip."

"Feel pretty sure, don't you, John?"

"Wouldn't you at two to one on Blue Chip?"

Allentyre's eyes were aloof; he studied Grant's face as he might have studied a blotted brand. "Why, no—if I didn't know who was betting against me!" He turned away abruptly.

The kid sat stiffly on a straight-backed chair in the crowded barbershop; the funeral was to be at twelve and men were getting haircuts and shaves. Grant, down in the dumps, waited his turn. Allentyre had made him uneasy, and now sickened regret was again dragging itself around and around inside of him.

Tony, the little barber, flapped his cloth and said, "You're next, John." He plucked a cigarette from a big man's fingers, took a long drag, and gave it back with, "Thanks, Jeff."

The slab-sided Jeff, who wore bib overalls and had the smell of fresh wood about him, dropped into Grant's chair beside the kid. "So you're the rabbit-sized feller that made Tom Roper turn tail?"

The kid looked up fiercely, then looked down, and wouldn't say a word, but Grant twisted about in the chair. "Oh, don't rile him, Jeff!"

Jeff wasn't a bad fellow; honest and hard-working and well-liked though his humor was rough and raw. He thought this kid would be easy to tease and said, "You've got about as much chance of beatin' Whitey as of me dyin' rich!"

The kid's fingers squirmed against the edge of the seat, holding tight, and he kept his mouth shut and wouldn't look up. Jeff's nods and winks got some of the other fellows to chime in, and they, too, began to brag about how Whitey could kick speed out of a sawbuck. And they said Doc Burrows was smart; you bet! He'd been holding back Rain Drop, letting him lose, waiting for suckers.

Then Jeff announced that he was going to bet his pants on Rain Drop, and explained that he'd just come from Harlow's and seen Blue Chip all stove up and stumbling around like with blind staggers.

The kid's feet hit the floor and he doubled his fists. "You're a big-mouthed liar!" He looked willing to fight, and it would have been funny except that he wouldn't shut up. He gave a fierce look toward the other men who had joined in teasing him. "Put up or shut up your glandered mouths!" He turned on Jeff. "You beller like a sick bull calf, talkin' big and not a dime in your pocket!"

The barber lifted the razor from Grant's face and said: "I

guess you've caught yourself a bear by the tail, Jeff!" Laughter turned on Jeff until his face had the color of an underdone steak and he frowned aggressively at the kid. "You willin' to cover all I bet?"

"You can't bet enough to make me not!"

"Two to one?" Jeff demanded.

"Two to one!"

"A'right, put 'er up!" said Jeff, showing the ten dollars Allentyre had paid him for making the coffins. And when the kid readily stuck his hand into his own pocket, Jeff turned on the other fellow who had helped tease the kid. "Come on, you galoots! You got to shell out too! She's maybe a good bet anyhow!"

The pleased barber wasn't too busy to lay down his razor for pencil and tablet, accepting the stakes, jotting down names and amounts; when he had toted up, he said, "Boy, you've shook sixteen dollars and a half out of this bunch! That figgers to thirty dollars even for you to put up—on account of I'll chip in three for myself!"

Grant raised up and turned with a hopeless stare, afraid the kid would ask him to cover the bet, but the kid rammed his arm out stiffly at the barber and opened his palm. There lay his five-dollar gold piece. "That's to hold the bet. I'll be right back!"

He started out, and men's teasing laughter followed, pretending that they thought he wouldn't come back.

3

Harlow, standing at the sidewalk's edge, called when the kid clumped by and wasn't answered. Poppa Hartmann spoke cordially from the store entrance without a sign of recognition in return. Judge Trumbull moved in benign bulkiness toward his office and stopped with, "Why, howdy, Bill!" The kid circled him and went on, not looking up. Judge Trumbull's gaze followed in grave puzzlement. Dan Trusand had worked it pretty slick in getting the kid away from Miss Kate; too slick and cute, if you wanted the judge's opinion.

The kid swerved at the Palace, going along the narrow walk to the side door. He lurched against the door, then sagged back on the railing. It was locked. Miss Kate had told

him never to go into the saloon, but if he couldn't get upstairs this way, he'd have to do that.

He came from sunlight through the swinging doors and felt blinded until blurred objects quickly took shape in the big saloon. Chairs were stacked on tables and a frowsy man with a push broom swept the damp sawdust into windrows. The painted face of the tall music box loomed from afar through the dimness..

The fat saddle maker, a couple of fellows having their morning tipple, and a bartender, known as Blacky with greasy dyed hair rubbed down flat as a bat's wing, were talking about the miners who'd left money to bet on Rain Drop.

The kid pounded straight for the rear and Blacky leaned over and shouted, "Hey, you! Runt! Where d'you think you're goin'?"

"I got to see Mr. Trusand!"

The bartender recognized the kid and changed his tune a little. "He ain't here, Bill."

"Then I'll see Miss Kate!" the kid said, and started on.

"She's gone too!"

The kid stopped short, and his scowl was rebellious, not wanting to believe; and something within him seemed to shrivel at the thought of not covering that bet after he had talked so big.

A man at the bar spoke up: "That's right, boy. Malk told me that Dan Trusand ordered out the pole buggy about three o'clock this mornin' and——"

"Who's Malk?" the kid asked.

"Night stableman. Dan's took Miss Kate some'eres to rest. Malk guessed it was to the Willets', over on Rock Creek." He was telling it now to the men at his elbows, but the kid listened. "She waited outside the stable with a veil on even in the dark an' sure acted sick, Malk says. Dan had to purt' near lift her in the buggy. That Sadie, you know, used to work here till Ned Willets married her an'——"

There was only one place left where the kid felt that he could get the money, but he didn't want to pass the barbershop with empty hands, so he avoided Main Street by going between buildings and turning down the alley.

When he had dodged around front into the hotel the

colored porter was slinging a wet mop in the lower hall and he paused to tell the kid with informative pride that maybe Mr. Joel was upstairs. It would be Room No. 2, right overhead.

Upstairs, the kid flung open the first door he came to. It was No. 3, and Bobs looked up from across the valise on the floor where she knelt, putting things away. She gazed steadily at him and didn't move.

"I got to see Mr. Allentyre!"

Bobs's mouth tightened; the kid saw, and thought it was her dislike of him coming to the surface again; but it wasn't that. She merely clamped down on the impulse to say; "Joel's not here," and, instead, told him, "Well, come in and shut the door."

Then Bobs thoughtfully folded in the overlapping nightgown and closed the valise. She stood up and put her hands on her hips, pushing the dress smooth. She hated this Bill Helgar, of course—but despised Whitey Summers, and Tom Roper had always made her feel about the same as when she smelled a rattlesnake. And she was glad for what this Helgar kid had done to both of them. Moreover, she and Joel had met Sheriff Fields and his men on the road late yesterday, and she'd overheard enough to know that this kid had done something new that the men commended—something to do with a piece of paper which the sheriff had. Joel wouldn't say what it was.

Now she told the kid again to sit down, and he sidled onto a chair, holding the hat between his widespread knees. The cool, deep-green dress flowed about her slender, straight body, and again he had to wonder how such a skinny boy-shaped girl could, when she wanted, be so nice to look at.

Bobs asked carefully, "What did you"—she checked herself, and stuck in "wish" instead of "want"—"to see my uncle about?" "Uncle" now, aloofly, instead of "Joel."

"It's between me and him!"

It annoyed Bobs to act like a "lady"; her impulses were slam-bang, direct as a blow, but she gave him an arrogant look up and down, shrugged a shoulder, assumed a quiet, reserved manner with, "Uncle is so busy I don't like to say where you can find him until I know what you want."

The kid stared at her. "I want to borrow money!"

"I see," she said, without seeing in the least. "How much?"

"First, I'd have to tell him about if I can't pay it back!"

Bobs sat down to listen, and spread her knees as when she wore overalls, but at once remembered how ladies sat and put her feet together, let her hands lie in her lap. "What do you wish to tell him?"

"That I'll work it out for him as long as he says, any way he wants, but I just got to have thirty dollars quick!"

Bobs considered; then, "Something would depend on what you—wished—it for."

"To bet on Blue Chip!"

Her "Oh?" was pointed inquiry.

"Down in the barbershop fellows started to poke fun at her and I was so sure I could get money from Dan Trusand I offered to bet 'em. But he's out of town, and Miss Kate, too, and John Grant's near broke, and 'f I don't get that bet covered they'll laugh!"

"But Joel isn't at all sure she will win!"

The kid snapped, "I'd bet 'f I knew she'd lose!"

Bobs studied her hands, then gazed at him from under lowered lashes while he nervously turned the hatbrim through his fingers and watched the fingers. She glanced toward the bureau and studied some more, then got up and looked out of the window; after that she went to the bureau and had a fleeting glance at herself in the mirror. A long black purse lay there. Bobs opened it and took out gold coins, then returned to the center of the room and laid the money on a corner of the table.

"It's my money, but don't tell anybody." Hurriedly, "I'm doing it for Blue Chip too!"

The kid grabbed the gold pieces and bolted, then Bobs went back to the mirror and stared at herself. Unsmilingly she shrugged a shoulder, and this time meant it, because she again opened the purse, took out the mail-order list of what she had planned to send away for, and tore it up.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AT NOON a bell began to toll, and the kid and Grant joined one of the straggling lines that moved across lots to the small white church near the edge of town.

All morning men had been riding in; some were T D's from the Lower Sink, and more were the tough Squared-Circle boys, and others were a scattering from the small outfits that nestled in the Three Points where, like Cy and Harmon Jones with Allentyre, they worked for some big rancher about as much as for themselves. And townsmen and women, many in Sunday clothes, came too.

The kid watched the women but didn't see Bobs. It had finally got into his worried head that he had borrowed her money on the same conditions he had meant to offer her uncle. And he had a heart-heavy awareness that Bobs was truthful in saying that Joel wasn't at all sure Blue Chip would win. *If she don't, I'll want to die!* was how the kid felt about it.

The women went straight into the church, but many of the men stood outside in the bleak churchyard where there were piles of fresh earth; they would walk up and gaze into the deep, smooth-sided holes and look away and be silent. Some loitered in muttering groups even after the singing began and, when the preacher stood up to talk, they clustered about the door, trying to listen but not going in.

The kid was on the outer edge and couldn't see, but he could hear a little. A heavy hand dropped softly on his shoulder and Red Sanger asked, "Son, where's John Grant?" Red needed a shave; his big face was haggardly tired and dust was thick on him, but the small eyes were as alive as flame.

Grant looked around and froze. The faraway preacher was reading Scripture with a solemn drone, and Red's deep voice was also solemn in saying, "John, it's for us to have a talk." After that he told the kid, "Son, you stay and listen to the sermon."

Red turned and walked off with tired clump of heels and Grant followed, slow and nearly stumbling; when they got to the fence enclosing the graveyard, Red stopped and let Grant pass first. At the hitching rack Red said, "This'll be all right," and he stood with hands on hips and peered at Grant with the small, deep-set eyes like bullets about to be fired. His blown horse stood there among a dozen others that hadn't been left uptown; his rifle was on the saddle, and he had taken off his belt and revolver and hooked them over the horn, not going into the churchyard armed. Some of the men hadn't been so punctilious.

Red said, "Tell it to me your own way!" and his hardness had the cold weight of ice.

Grant put his hands into his pockets with a slump-shouldered stoop and studied dejectedly; then he straightened a little and faced Red and said weakly, "You've got only yourself to blame for picking me when I told you I've not got the kind of grit it takes!"

Red's thought withdrew behind the mask of tiredness, and after some pondering he said quietly, "You've got plenty of grit. Purt' near too much! Why didn't you come along with Mike?"

Grant's shoulders slumped again as he looked away. His hand went into a pocket and he drew a knife, opened the frog-sticker, gouged at remnants of bark on the hitch-rack post. When he looked around he saw Red's questioning glance, and Grant said, "Hell, no! That's not why I took it out!" and he snapped the blade to and put the knife in his pocket.

"Church service goin' to be over right soon, John."

Grant drew a breath, spoke with weak recklessness: "Red, the honest-to-God truth is that Joel Allentyre and the sheriff act like they know something bad about you. They told me to stay clear away from you or they'd figure we're tied up together. You can get mad now if you want, but that's how it is!"

Red thought for a long time and finally murmured, "I see," as if it didn't much matter one way or the other. What really mattered came out, tonelessly quiet: "Roper's been caught!"

All Grant did was to look at him and nod. Now he

seemed to have known all along that this would happen, and here it was, and he asked resignedly, "That fixes us?"

"Depends. But me, I don't give up easy." He stared levelly at Grant and went on in unangered, quiet hardness: "I'm not much of a fellow to fly off the handle. But if they'd shot Roper this mornin', I'd most likely come in and beat hell out of you! You let me down! But, as it is, you do like I say from now on and it'll be for you and Mike to settle things between yourselves. Will you, like I want?"

Grant managed a reluctant, "What's to do?"

Red moved the neckerchief about his face and took his time in looking at the horses, most of them ground-hitched close to the rack. If he didn't know the horses, the brands helped to tell who had come. Then he stared back toward the church where men were clustered at the narrow entrance.

"John, I guessed that Roper would head for Hart's on account of it being a near place to Crosby's. That girl's sweet on him and old Hart don't like the law. They'd probably keep a youngun settin' on the bluff through the day, so we'd have had to go in at night. When Mike fin'ly got back with his arm busted I went alone but couldn't make it before sunup.

"From under the pinions on the bluff I looked down and saw 'em put Roper's hands up when he went to the stable. They'd left their horses in an arroyo an' waited the night out, and got him—alive! It puzzled me some by how they stayed on and on—till I remembered about this funeral. They don't want to hurry him into a town full of men that have just been to the Jones boys' funeral. After a little likker they'd wade through fire to get their hands on Roper."

Grant shuddered out, "But if he's talked a'ready!"

"Could be," Red admitted, and thought it over. "But we won't know that till it's too late to cut and run." He paused and let Grant do some worrying, then said, "We're just bettin' our necks that he won't be in a rush to tell how Mundy come to get shot. The only hope he's got left is that we'll get him loose on account of the cards he holds. He as much as said that to Crosby. But he can't lie out of killin' the Jones boys. Their horse was at Hart's. That's our ace in the hole!"

Grant couldn't see how it happened to be an ace. "I'm maybe not very smart, Red."

"Yes, that's right, John. You're not. So you pay close attention."

People were beginning to stir before the church and some were filing out, the men with heads bared to the sun; they bunched about the graves, then opened up to make way for the pallbearers.

Red's low, rumbling voice droned on: "The sheriff'll sneak Roper into town after dark and try to hide 'im. All the rest of today it's for you and me and Dan Trusand to mix with the crowd and buy drinks and stir up feelin's so the town'll be reckless-mad when it learns Roper's within reach of a rope!"

Grant had a sensation like the beginning of nausea, but he couldn't say so, not under the cool menace of Red's bullet-shaped eyes. He gulped out, "But why'll Trusand help?"

"Don't ask again, but he will, all he can, 'cause I tell him to! We want Roper hung and quick!"

"But Lord A'mighty, Red! He'll be sure to talk his head off to the mob, then where'll we be?"

Red's smile was slow, thick-lipped, hard. "You ever see a well-likkered bunch hang a man? Haven't, eh? The man don't do much talkin'—and what he does ain't heard!"

From about the grave, where the clods were now falling, thin, uncertain voices were tremulously lifted in singing:

"Just as I am, and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot,
To Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!"

2

A sweating horse loped to a stop at the far end of the hitching rack. One of the flat-faced Knolds boys threw away the reins and left the saddle, then vaulted the fence and went with clumsy dog-trot toward the crowd that was beginning to break up, shuffle into groups, and move slowly toward the gate.

He found Allentyre with a couple of men and in excited

importance the Knolds boy called him aside and talked hurriedly. While he listened Allentyre moved his hat forward to shade his eyes in peering beyond the fence where John Grant, now alone, was again fiddling at the bark with the frog sticker. Red Sanger had come and gone, and Grant hadn't been knocked down, and Allentyre wondered. Now he asked, "You coming along back with me, George?"

"I'm stayin' in town awhile."

"Keep a tight mouth!" Allentyre said sternly.

"Oh, I will, you bet!" George Knolds answered, and went off toward the gate.

Allentyre's gaze thoughtfully followed him. Then he looked about and saw that the kid stood by himself with hands behind his back and feet apart as, in solemn fascination, he watched men with shovels throw the dirt and other men smooth and stamp it down. The graves were nearly ground level now. The tired distress of not understanding the why and wherefore that men must be put away in the earth lay deep in the kid's eyes as he stared up at Allentyre.

"I'm riding out of town a little ways, Bill. Like to go along?"

Grant saw them coming and prepared to fall in step, but Allentyre's voice was short. "I'm taking the boy with me for today," he said, and went on. That Joel would speak and act in such a way with him let Grant understand that he, definitely, was under suspicion.

Doc Burrows, with his coat over his arm, angled into their path, ordering gruffly, "Whoa up a minute!" He lifted the kid's hat, bent over, had a look. "Your scalp would dull an Indian's knife!" Then, "Joel, you betting on my horse?"

"Hadn't intended to."

"Seem to be a lot of damn fools that are! I told Trusand I'd pick you as my judge. He can have the other two."

Allentyre walked on silently until he decided, "I don't think I want to serve."

"Because you used to own Blue Chip? I'd let you be my judge if you still owned her!" The doc waved an arm and moved off on a short cut toward his office.

The pent-up question within the kid popped out: "Why do you think maybe Blue Chip won't win, Mr. Allentyre?"

He looked up tensely, not watching where he stopped, and stumbled, almost falling.

Allentyre didn't know what to tell him, certainly not the truth and it wasn't Allentyre's way to be evasive, much less lie. Blue Chip, among people who knew horses, was by far the favorite, deservedly; but there were many tricky ways to let the poorer horse win. He guessed that the "miners" were a put-up job to conceal the source of the money that was being bet on Rain Drop, and suspected that Trusand meant to throw the race. One thing sure, it would have to be planned without the kid's connivance. The boy knew horses but he didn't know racing.

Now Allentyre told him in quiet kindliness, "Bill, sometimes I have hunches. Sometimes they're wrong. I'm going to do what I can to help you make this hunch of mine come out wrong. Why didn't you come to me for the money to cover that barbershop bet?"

"Couldn't find you. I looked."

"Who let you have it?"

"Promised I wouldn't tell."

"Did, hmn?" In spite of the troublesome things on his mind Allentyre felt a bit like smiling. Bobs had told him that she did it, and why. She disliked Bill Helgar so much, she said, that it was nice to make him take help from a girl. That, Allentyre thought, was typical feminine logic.

3

Blue Chip was being kept in a stall. Today the corral was filled with horses, some as scrappily mean as men, and the gentle mare didn't know how to fight back. The kid fondled her and whispered, examined her tender knees, lifted each foot and rubbed his thumb over the clinches to see if any were raised. He went through mane and tail for burs, let his hand linger on her soft, warm flank, and made sure the manger was filled with bluestem. The kid's dad had been a first-rate farrier.

Allentyre saddled his Roman-nose in the runway, then Bobs's golden horse, and the kid knew that it was Bobs's saddle that Allentyre lifted across the horse.

"Hop up, Bill. Let's see about the stirrups."

The kid was proud to find them short. Bobs looked so straightly tall, but the stirrups meant that he was taller, at least longer-legged. And the quirt with which she had whipped him hung on the horn; he didn't lift it off. He did finger the coil of long rope. He'd grown up with a lariat in his hands, and even his taciturn dad had been proud of how the kid could rope.

Red Sanger swung off before the runway's wide door and walked in, leading his tired horse. He was a tired man, too. "Nice day, Joel," he said heavily, his look lingering, and it meant, *If you've got anything to say to me, Allentyre, say it!*

Allentyre did. "Sanger, when you went up to Niadora after cows, what ranches did you visit?"

Red ignored the question and gazed toward the kid in the saddle. "Why, howdy, son!" What Mike Eads had told about the kid being on the bed with a rifle hadn't changed his feelings at all about the boy, though he was more than merely sorry Eads's arm had been broken.

Then Red's small, deep eyes went back to Allentyre steadily. He drew a plug of tobacco, and as his strong teeth bit through it his look didn't waver; he chewed slowly, leaning to one side to spit, not moving his eyes.

"Why, now, Joel, ord'nar'ly I'd say right out to you or any man. But you don't like me. You've caused me harm, speaking suspicious, sort of. Always in a roundabout way. Nothing to put my finger on. But hintin'—like now that maybe I wasn't up in the Niadora. I sure as hell was, but just why'd you ask, Joel?"

"If you say, it might shorten miles for somebody!"

Red's thick lips moved in a slow smile. "Am I supposed to care?" He spit again, and his deep voice deepened: "Now listen, Joel. I'm just a little rancher 'longside of your size. My friends are little folks, too, and you don't appear to think they're nice. You're a big fellow, Joel. You and the sheriff are friends—like he is with all the big fellows! You can make it hard on us if you want, and sometimes I think it's what you want. But right here and now seems as good as any time to tell you, Joel, that me, I'm just as honest as any man in this whole country! Don't you think so, Joel?"

Allentyre drew his eyes together with the look of taking careful aim. "No, Sanger, I don't!"

Maybe Red hadn't expected Allentyre to knuckle under but it was a try. Red drew the back of his hand across his mouth, spoke coolly: "Then ain't it only fair that you up and say why? Give me the partic'lars, Joel?"

Allentyre turned aside and motioned for the kid to ride out. That had the look of evading the showdown Red was asking for, and Red wasn't going to have it. So he dropped his reins and moved closer, spoke to Allentyre's back: "Maybe you didn't hear, Allentyre! I said give me partic'lars!"

Menace weighted the words, and the kid reined back with his heart in his throat. Allentyre hadn't worn his gun to church; Red was armed and forcing a quarrel. A couple of punchers lurched into the runway, talking loudly, and now fell into tense silence as they hauled off to one side.

"Particulars?" Allentyre faced about, wide at the shoulders and straight up and down, and he didn't tighten his voice but made the words slow: "Suppose the Jones boys saw who came in over the Swayback, whooping a bunch of cows along to hide tracks! Could it be that's why they had to be killed?"

Red's little eyes clouded in a peering daze of thoughtfulness. This could be bad, and probably was; Allentyre held the tension now and relentlessly searched the big, tired, stubborn face, looking for chinks. Red's deep voice was careful with, "I'm afraid I don't see the point, Joel. No, I just don't understand what you're driving at."

Allentyre had brought up Niadora at this first chance meeting with Red so he could take a shot in the dark. Watching closely he couldn't tell whether or not he had hit, but he said, "No?" in a way that nearly called Red a liar. Pause. Then, "All right, if that's the way it is, I wouldn't overworry, Sanger!"

Allentyre gathered the reins, the Roman-nose stepped forward, following him, and Red moved aside to keep from being shouldered by the horse; then he faced about to watch Allentyre's back, and he was troubled.

Red had fixed it up with men in Niadora, who sometimes needed a little help of the same kind themselves, to say he'd been up there and they'd talked with him; he could coolly face and taunt Allentyre or anybody on that score. And of course he hadn't been seen returning over the Sway-

back—but maybe his horse had. Everybody now knew that Roper had stolen Sorrel Top, but men who could prove that they had been up in Niadora would have a hell of a time explaining how a horse stolen up there would happen to cross the Swayback in coming home. He tried to think that Allentyre had thrown a bluff; but it couldn't be wholly bluff since it implied knowing what to bluff with.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ALLENTYRE left town as if returning toward his ranch. He and the kid rode out between the Humps, the kid solemnly proud as Punch. The golden Helen was the kind of horse that Bobs was girl, only gentler.

As they lingered in a resting pause the kid saw the smoke drift of dust hover a mile away to the south around Little Knob. It moved too fast for a wagon, too slow for loping riders, too dense for men at the trot, so, though unseen, he figured it out as a buggy and team. "Maybe it's Mr. Trusand coming back?"

"May be," said Allentyre, and swung from the road and headed downhill, letting the horses pick their slow way on the slope.

Presently they reached a trail that led them to a thin road winding among the broken strip of rough red rock which marked a part of the Sink's rim; then the thin road split to encircle the old low log-and-stone Knolds house under sycamores, and the kid knew they weren't more than five or six miles from town.

Cutts was lazily on the lookout for them and leaned over a low, crooked limb. He stepped forward with a squinty grin and jerked a thumb across his shoulder but shook his head in reply to Allentyre's "Has he talked?" Then, "Not much more'n a peep, except to cuss!"

A smothery windless heat beat through the shade. Cutts greeted the kid with "Hi-ee, bub!" and seemed admiring. Allentyre stepped from the saddle, pushed back his hat, hearing Cutts explain: "The sheriff's in a kind of pickle, Joel.

You know it's not long till 'Lection Day. Sheriff's afraid to take him in 'cause if there's hell to pay, it'll give our town a black eye. Afraid not to because then them Lintoners'll say what kind of county seat is it where the sheriff's afraid to take a prisoner?" He grinned in lazy weariness. "It'll sure hurt property there in town if Linton wins!" Allentyre nodded. Then Cutts told him, "Roper's around back. Wagon shed."

A heavy, flat-faced woman leaned on her elbows from the kitchen window. "Joel, did George come back with you? Drat his good-for-nothin' hide, I told him to! On'y reason we didn't go to the fun'ral is Pa and the other boy are workin' over at Harrison's mill. Be gone a couple of days. You goin' to keep that stinker here over night?"

"That's for the sheriff to say, Mrs. Knolds."

The sheriff saw them coming and left the open wagon shed and trudged forward a few steps, but stopped and took off his hat, fanning a little at his face. He was dead-beat, sag-shouldered, without elation. "I'm getting old," he sighed, but beamed tiredly at the kid and shook hands. "Only for you, we wouldn't have found him like we did, Bill! Cutts, take the boy over and let him see."

The sheriff drew a broken cigar, bit into it, said, "Swelterin'!" He wiped under his heavy jaws with a wadded handkerchief, breathed out, "Whew!" Then in a deliberate, slow voice, "Says he wasn't near Grant's place. Says the note's not his. Lyin', of course. Let's get out of the sun."

They moved toward the low rock ledge and sat in the splattered shade of the sycamore where not a leaf moved. Though the evening before on the road to town Allentyre had examined the torn paper bag that the kid found stabbed on Grant's door, he now again studied the scrawl.

It was a puzzle, wretchedly misspelled. Leaving out the filth and such, the scrawl seemed to say: "John Grant, I'll kill you and Red and Mike but——" Then the words "fim cot," which Allentyre thought must be construed as, "If I am caught," and that would make it read, "I'll tell where we was and what we done if you let me get hung."

Allentyre remarked that there was no mention of the kid, and guessed that Roper's fears had blotted out his sense of revenge. "You see, Sheriff, he feels he has rightful claims

on Sanger, Eads, and Grant. I'd guess that is because they've all been mixed up in something bad together."

"He wrote it drunk, Joel. Don't you think?"

"Sounds like him sober too! What does he say about Harmon and Cy?"

The sheriff groaned disgustedly at the way of a liar: "Says he rode up to the Jones friendly, and they started shootin'. Makes no difference what he says. We've got the Jones' horse. Think we ought to take him on to town?"

Allentyre's "Yes," was negligent, and he added, "After dark," scarcely thinking about it. Nothing more was said until he murmured "John Grant," just the name, ponderingly. More thoughtfulness followed before Allentyre summed up: "Easy-going, shiftless, but not really lazy. Would help out any neighbor, work good, and wages didn't matter. Honest to the dollar, or used to be. And he is good-hearted. I've always liked him." Allentyre studied before he pronounced a final judgment: "Now he's gone to the bad!"

"Sure, Joel?"

"But last night he fought Mike Eads, broke his arm, gun-whipped him!"

The sheriff grunted, incredulous. "That don't sound bad! What over?"

"Something to do with Sanger wanting him to come and help catch Roper, so Bill told me. Yet this morning Sanger called Grant out of the churchyard and they didn't quarrel. To my way of thinking Sanger's 'catch' would mean 'kill'! I met Sanger at Harlow's and hinted that he hadn't been up in the Niadora. He stood pat but looked worried."

"You want to talk to Roper, Joel?"

"I'd have nothing to say except I'm sorry the law's so slow about hanging such as need it. When we get back to town we'll talk to Grant. He's worried sick and he'll cave in. Also I think he's mixed up in a fake horse race. With Trusand. And I never thought that gambler was crooked. Miss Kate's too honest to live with a man that's not!"

The sheriff's eyes were weary and troubled, and he touched Allentyre's knee and questioned, "Mundy?"

"If they weren't up in Niadora, where were they?"

"Sanger's never been suspicioned of stage robbin', Joel. And how'd he know what stage would carry the gold?"

Deputy Handley was on his haunches and whittled with the look of spiraling shavings as thin as he could. "Howdy, Joel." He didn't rise but merely pointed with the knife blade toward Roper, adding: "It was that Belle Hart we purt' near had to shoot this morning! She come rampin' out at us with a butcher knife long as her arm. Loves him, she says!"

Roper sat on the ground, his back propped against the high stone foundation on which the stable was built. His hands and feet were tied with the same rope, his hands behind him, and he glared malignantly, expecting talk. There wasn't any, not from Allentyre, whose look brushed him with indifference. Roper's hair was in a stiff tangle, his shirt was partly out of his trousers, and he looked as skinny as a winter-starved steer, with a crazed meanness frozen in his eyes.

Allentyre turned on a heel and walked away from the shed and he studied the sky; they'd have to wait for night and ease quietly into town.

Cutts spraddled the wagon tongue that rested on an up-ended doubletree and he jeered, "See, Tom? You're not bad man enough for Joel to waste breath on!"

Roper snarled for him to shut up, which was as Cutts wanted it; and, indicating the kid, taunted: "He's your Joner, Tom! Tracked you from Crosby's to where you cut for Hart's—to hide behind that woman's skirts!" Roper cursed and Cutts grinned enjoyingly. The deputy went on whittling, seeming deaf.

Then the glow of a new idea brightened Cutts's malicious grin, and he tittered mockingly. "Guess now that you're caught, it's a'right to tell you that John Grant and the sheriff made a deal. The sheriff he put Grant up to joinin' in with you fellows and see what you're up to. Grant'll go scot-free. He was workin' all along for the sheriff!"

"You're lyin'!" Roper snarled, but there was something uncertain in the way he said it.

"Oh, no, I'm not!" Cutts drawled. And when Roper scarcely moved his snake-shaped mouth to ask, "You swear to God on that?" Cutts said, "Sure will, Tom!" and got up and

sauntered away, hiding his grin. He thought that maybe now Roper would soon cave in and confess.

The kid wandered off aimlessly. He didn't want to horn in on the solemn-seeming talk between Allentyre and the sheriff, so he went around the stable yard, off by himself. A mica-streaked rock glinted. He took up the rock and scowled at the glitter, recalling how once fellows had soberly coaxed him into believing that such glitter-stuff was gold, and he had labored his hands raw, piling it up, before his dad told him it was worthless. Reminiscent anger made the kid draw back to heave the rock as far as he could, but it didn't leave his hand. Across on the ledge side something had flashed vanishingly among the weathered boulders where mesquite clung to the sparse soil. He had caught only a fleeting glimpse and now strained watchfully. The silence was so heat-heavy that it hummed. Man, dog, or coyote? Maybe nothin', he decided, and flung the rock to see what he could flush. It fell far short of where he aimed; nothing stirred.

3

The afternoon wore away tediously. Without being told, the kid labored at the pump, filling the watering trough for the unsaddled horses. Cutts moseyed up, his eyes curiously not straight, and he pushed the kid away in friendliness, pumping himself. "Someday," he said, "you'll grow up and be a man. Makin' a purty good start at it, bub!"

As the shadows thickened and darkness began to creep down the rocky slope they saddled up. The kid overturned a sawed-in-two whisky barrel that was used as a tub, and he stood on it to do his own saddling. Allentyre watched the kid press his small foot against the tricky Helen's side, making her let out her breath, and he thought resolutely, *I mustn't let that gambler ruin or even fool this boy!*

Mrs. Knolds came to the kitchen steps, her spraddled fingers sticky with dough. "You just ain't goin' till you eat, Sheriff. All you!" It brightened her heavy face to lay down the law to the sheriff. "You can even take a bite to that Tom Roper after you've et, but I won't have him set at my table!"

Cutts was left on guard under the shed though he un-

protestingly declared, "A snake could crawl out of how I've got him tied!" They straggled to the bench, washing up outside by the lamp set in the window, using one small towel among them. The kid, last to file in through the kitchen door, turned and saw a ragged spot of light flare on Cutts's face as he lit a cigarette.

They tramped on through the kitchen, and the sheriff sat at the head of the table. A hot night, but every bite of food on the table, excepting pickles and jam, was hot, the coffee scalding. They ate without words, reaching and passing. The sheriff held knife and fork upended, with elbows on the table, as he chewed somberly with an air of doing his duty. The deputy leaned head down, hurrying, as if determined to finish first. He did, and stood up, scraping back the chair. "I'll go send Cutts in."

He tramped out and they could hear his call: "Come on an' eat, Cutts!"

Mrs. Knolds was passing biscuits that were nearly as hot as the coals that had baked them. "Joel Allentyre! You a grown man an' don't eat no more'n a——"

Heavy feet were pounding from the yard into the kitchen. "Sheriff!" sounded out wildly, then spurred boots hit the kitchen floor with heaving stride, and the deputy's hoarse shout came upon them: "Roper's gone an' Cutts—dead!" The deputy lurched against the doorjamb, his breath gone, face bewildered. Biscuits slid softly to the floor from Mrs. Knolds's plate.

"Dead!" Allentyre was up, overturning his chair.

"A hatchet!" said the deputy.

Then the plate slipped from Mrs. Knolds's hand, clattered into pieces.

The sheriff sat like a wooden man, knife and fork straight up, elbows spread. His drooping head began to move to and fro before he laid the knife and fork on the edge of his plate and got up with the slow lift of effort, not looking at anyone. The deputy stepped back, letting him pass, then followed.

The kid had moved only his eyes, watching one, then the other, but mostly Allentyre, who was cool with grim thoughtfulness.

Mrs. Knolds mumbled, "Hatchet?"

"We can use a lantern, Mrs. Knolds."

"Behind the stove in there, Joel." Gloom darkened her heavy face, but she was unflustered with, "I'll get it."

The kid went along after them, treading carefully in the feeling that, if noticed, he might be told to stay back. Allentyre raised the chimney and pinched the crusted wick before he applied the match.

"Who, Joel? Who could've done it? Nobody knew he was here!"

"You mean nobody was supposed to know!" Allentyre stepped outside and walked in a pool of light and she followed, winding her hands in her apron. The sheriff, fifty yards away, knelt under the shed and struck matches, and she hurried toward him. The kid bolted along before her.

Allentyre swung the lantern among the horses. His Roman-nose was gone and, of course, with saddle and rifle. They hadn't heard a horse leaving. Wouldn't have heard if the horse were walked west of the stable; then wouldn't have heard him loping down through the pasture that was thick with clumped chapparal and cross-laced with beaten paths.

The sheriff got up off his knees, a finger still down-pointed. Allentyre was there with the lantern. The kid leaned forward in a shuddery stare. It was fascinatingly horrible: Cutts lay face down; the hatchet blade had gone through his hat and the handle stuck up. Mrs. Knolds turned away and threw the apron over her face. "From behind!" the sheriff said.

Deputy Handley looked ready to rush in any direction. "Can't be far off! We wasn't twenty minutes eatin'!"

"Five minutes is too far," said Allentyre. "He's on my horse!"

"Where'd that hatchet come from?" Mrs. Knolds broke in. "Pa took the on'y one we got with his tools!"

The sheriff circled the lantern about the shed, and he picked up, looked at, dropped pieces of the rope that had been cut from Roper's hands and feet. He lifted the lantern face-high and spoke in dreary, slow rage: "Joel, George Knolds got to drinkin' there in town—an' talkin'! Less than six miles. Somebody come out! Come and waited!"

"Who?"

"Sanger!"

Allentyre's head moved contradictorily as he rolled a

cigarette; it was tight and even, and he twisted the end firmly. "Roper'd be dead himself too!"

"Yes, I reckon. Then who the devil?"

Allentyre's match lingered before the cigarette tip, not touching it until he asked, "Who'd bring a hatchet if he had a gun?" The match was shaken out. "Sheriff, I'd say that this morning there at Hart's you talked about waiting the day out here at Knolds's—and got overheard!"

"Might've. Might've, Joel. But you can't mean—not that Hart girl?"

"Why not, Sheriff—if she calls it love?"

4

The sheriff's jaw was locked in dogged stubbornness; he refused to go near town because he felt blame, even disgrace, that Cutts had been murdered, the prisoner had escaped. He would trail back to Hart's, again wait out the night, get some sleep on the bare ground. He hadn't any hope that Roper would be there, but he could at least learn if Belle was there, ask questions, demand the hatchet, and see what happened.

"It's whatever you say, Sheriff," Deputy Handley agreed, dully indifferent to toilsome work and loss of rest.

The sheriff mounted, laid his forearm on the horn, wearily leaned forward. "Joel, have somebody care for the body." He rode off at a plodding walk, old, tired, dutiful.

Allentyre used the saddle that had been on the Jones's horse. Roper's. It was from this saddle that Cutts had taken the lariat to tie him up. Mrs. Knolds, not eagerly, lent her son's cowpony to the kid. "I'll bring him back first thing tomorrow," the kid promised. Allentyre rode the golden horse.

The pony, small, quick, wiry, a trained roper, made a few stiff-legged jumps under Bobs's saddle just to see what kind of rider was on him, and the kid's pants didn't leave the leather. The pony knew it and was satisfied.

The blob of a half moon came up, brightening the starlight. Less than halfway to town, about where the Sink's rough rim began to flatten out into even slopes, they met George Knolds. He was sober and displeased to see his horse being ridden, but grew sheepish when Allentyre curtly told

him what had happened. George said, honest, he hadn't been uptown at all, though he guessed it was pretty lively; there was some yelling and riding about; now and then a gun went off. He'd gone out to see his girl and stayed for supper and now was hurrying home.

The kid and Allentyre rode on, and outside of town they heard the yelling: somebody whooped up and down Main Street's dust, not angered, just making a noise. And this somebody charged headlong clear to the edge of town at them, then halted rump-down from almost full tilt, and shouted in amiable disgust: "Damn't, Joel, you ortn't fool a fella like that! Thought you was the sheriff bringin' in that"—he used hard names—"Roper!"

He was a Squared-Circle rider, instantly friendly and loud in explaining that it was his turn to stand watch in the street so as to let the boys know when the sheriff came. They were going to hang the— He used the same hard names. And he hadn't any notion that lynching might not meet with Allentyre's approval. When asked how he knew that the sheriff had caught Roper, the young cowboy mumbled: "How'd I know?" and looked toward the moon, looked toward the ground, scratched under his hat as his face lapsed into studying perplexity. "Joel, damn' 'f I know 'cept—hell, ever'body knows it. We're goin' to hang him from the rafters of that new building of Hartmann's." Then, gleefully, "We got the marshal full as a tick! The town's ourn!"

"Looks that way, Toby. Do you know where John Grant is?"

"Don't, Joel. Nope. Drunk, I guess. Near ever'body is."

Toby turned his horse, going off at a trot, and he sang loudly:

"Oh, hell is deep and hell is wide,
Got no bottom and it got no side . . .

Whee-ee! Room for all of us!" And he was off at a lope again.

Allentyre told the kid, "Come along," and pulled from the road, meaning to take the inconspicuous alleyway across town to the stable, but he stopped close to the old Kramer house, the last one on the street, and sat thoughtfully.

The kid, patient and incurious, put his horse head to head

by Helen and fiddled with Bobs's heavy quirt that he hadn't yet lifted from the horn. He seldom lashed a horse; he could get speed without whipping. Now again he was remembering how Bobs had used this quirt on him. Strangely, he didn't feel so mad at her any more, but he didn't like her. Stuckup. Snooty.

Allentyre was trying to imagine how it could possibly be known that Roper had been caught. Young Knolds hadn't told or a likkered bunch would have streamed out to the ranch, knowing where to look. None of the Harts had come and told, not to a town full of the Jones boys' friends! That made it a worrisome puzzlement.

The town was quiet, at least outwardly. Timid people weren't nosing about and the others were in saloons. It was also quieter now that Toby's voice had tired, and he had put his horse on the sidewalk in front of the Alpine Saloon. He pushed the swingdoors, insisting that it was time for somebody else to stand watch. Across town, north, Harlow's hound bayed some kind of challenge at something; maybe the moon. Another dog, nearer, began to yap excitedly. A gun went off uptown, its report unsharp, blunt.

The kid shifted in the saddle and stared across toward the distant Humps; they seemed to float out of shadows and hang motionless in the thin moonlight. Then he turned and lingeringly looked toward the white splotch that was the church, off by itself with an unsteady fence guarding its mounds from the feet of stray horses and cows. Behind him, some two hundred yards off, lay the grove where picnics were held and races were run, and where soon he must ride Blue Chip. He wasn't really thinking; his feelings drifted about in a wordless haze.

Then his head moved with bird-quick listening as he heard a far-off muffled patter become the dim thud of a horse that was running hard.

Allentyre also cocked an ear. "Toby, coming back! But if so, he's lost his voice!"

The kid strained to judge and ventured, "Not his horse!"

Both now knew that the horse was coming down along the weed-filled alley past stables and the backs of chicken yards and sheds; it was coming faster than an honest man, unless drunk, usually rode.

Then Allentyre's Roman-nose pounded into view from behind the Kramer stable with a huddled shadow low in the saddle. The rider saw Allentyre and the kid and tried to veer away, going headlong to the west and toward open country.

The kid knew the horse before "Roman!" exploded on Allentyre's mouth.

The horse meant Roper to them; and the Roman-nose, hard-ridden from Knolds's, and lashed on the way out, ran powerfully still. Roper's hot, unheeding meanness must have brought him to town. Now he was fleeing again, and was armed; at least a rifle had been on the saddle. That was what Allentyre thought, and his immediate impulse was to give chase; then, realizing that he was wholly unarmed, he made an instant decision. Horsemen filled the town, and horses that had been rested were at the racks, more in the corrals. Bands of hard riders could soon be racing through the fair moonlight and out over the open country about the town. Roman was tired and maybe would be overtaken before he reached the rough shelter of the Sink's rim. To give an alarm seemed the only possible thing to do; and Allentyre shouted, "Come on, Bill," as he swung the reins to head for the street and struck with his spurs.

But even as the golden horse leaped under him he jerked her down and swayed far back in the saddle to yell, "Bill! For God's sake, Bill!" Then he wheeled and rode as hard as he could to follow the kid who, without a word, had given the reins a shake and lurched in the saddle as his spurless heels hit the pony's ribs. From a standing start the pony buckled bound on bound on bound, tearing cattycornered toward where the alley frayed out into the open, and he was chasing the Roman-nose.

Allentyre's instinctive and now half-angered purpose was to stop that crazy kid who was sure to be shot when he closed in; and, if not shot, what could he do empty-handed? But even the blooded Helen couldn't overtake the pony in such a short distance, not at the furious speed the kid was getting out of him.

Allentyre wasn't far behind when he saw a dim circular shadow rise and begin to swirl above the kid's upraised hand; he had loosened Bobs's rope, made a loop, and was

swinging it. For the next three seconds Allentyre rode like a dead man strapped upright in the saddle; dread numbed him, and every muscle was braced against the gun flash that must come backward to knock the foolhardy kid off the pony that was closing in fast.

The kid's arm was up and slightly back and moved in just enough of a whorl to keep his loop afloat as he bent so low that he merged into the horse's neck; and the pony knew what was wanted and hit the dirt like a bounding whirlwind.

Then the loop flew. Allentyre couldn't see it go, but he could see the kid's arm straighten forward as if pointing the rope on its way. A toss to decide his own death wouldn't have had a more strained anxiousness for Allentyre.

The kid's left hand swung up in a quick yank at the bit, telling the pony that the throw was good; and the pony simply sat on his haunches, forelegs in a skittering brace that splattered gravel. The kid had spun his dally and he left the saddle before the screaming shape that came off Roman-nose thudded to the earth, rolling over and over; he ran forward and hovered down with the shotted butt of Bobs's quirt reversed, ready to strike. There was no movement and no sound; and the pony, trained to rope, kept up a tight haul, and gave no slack.

As Allentyre's feet hit the ground he felt he had never been more shaken in his life. He didn't know what to say or whether he could say anything to a boy who had bolted straight for Roper and dragged him out of the saddle. Roman straggled to a stop, reins down, and heaved tiredly. Allentyre's arm fell about the kid's shoulder and he stooped for a look, beginning some awkward compliment; then he broke off with, "But that's not—Why, that's not Roper!" His tone had an unintentional sharpness.

"I don't give a damn who it is!" the kid said sullenly. "Somebody on your stole horse!"

Allentyre crouched and pulled the averted face into fuller view. It was Belle Hart. He said, "And you didn't know!"

"In pants and hat?" the kid snapped.

"I mean you couldn't know. I didn't know! I thought it was Roper and that he'd shoot! He would have!"

"Never thought. Anyhow, scared men don't shoot good!"

"The hell they don't!" said Allentyre, and he added warmingly, "Bill, I don't think I ever in my life saw a roper leave the saddle as fast as you did!"

The kid told him, "I've always had to—like that. Throw a colt, I've got to be on his neck before he gets up. I ain't big enough to rassle him down again." His voice changed and was troubled. "Maybe I broke her neck."

"Maybe not too! The way you brought her out of the saddle would knock anybody out!"

"That's how I meant it!" But he sounded a little unsure of whether or not that had been the right thing to do, vaguely mentioning, "Woman."

Allentyre gave reassurance with, "Don't let that bother you, son! She's Roper's kind and size!"

Belle Hart lay like a corpse. The noose had bound both arms, breast high, to her sides, and she was still unconscious. Allentyre took off the rope. "We've got to bring her to! I'll take her across to a friend of mine near here, and she must talk. Roper's been in town, may still be!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ALLENTYRE lifted Belle Hart face down across his shoulder as negligently as a sack of grain; and the kid led the horses, following him a couple of blocks over to a side street where lamplight showed through the window of a low square house.

Mrs. Summers peeringly opened the door. "Why, Joel!"

Trusand's white shirts, freshly ironed but yet to be folded, hung from a string across the room, and a clothes basket full of dried wash waited to be sorted. Mrs. Summers had bowed too much over washboards ever to stand straight any more and her hands were blanched and shriveled from soapy water. The greatest fear she could have banged at her when she saw the body across his shoulder: "Whitey's hurt!"

"No, nothing of that kind, Mary! This is Belle Hart. She fell from a horse just now."

"Don't put her on the floor, Joel! Bring her into a bed!"

"The floor'll do. Cleaner than she is."

The kid stood spraddle-legged in the open door, his face set with the unrevealing tenseness that covered over feelings and thoughts when surroundings were strange. Allentyre told him, "Bill, go see if you can find Doc Burrows. Near as I can tell, she's barely not dead, but I don't want to leave her unwatched. And let Bobs know we're staying on overnight. She'll be wondering."

2

The kid mounted the Knolds pony and cut back to Main Street. As he neared the center of the town a disturbance, like that around a prodded anthill, was going on. Men were streaming from the Bull's Head; they were splattering across the street and jammed up on the raised sidewalk before the Palace where they met and mingled with another bunch that had stamped out of the Alpine bar in a straggly race. Some were pushed from the sidewalk, some fell unsteadily and got dust covered and had fingers tromped in trying to climb back. Others, three or four, raced on foot down from Harlow's stable, having heard news that changed their minds about riding for home. When the crowd had surged inside the Palace the street seemed deserted.

The kid got off before the hotel and put his pony at the hitching rack beside a horse that he recognized as Toby's.

The little barber, two doors up, called, "What's goin' on?" He slept in a back room and now stood in the unlighted shop's door. The kid went toward him and asked, "Don't you know?"

"No, because I won't monkey out when them fellows are in town! They make you drink, and the next day you're broke and wish you was dead!"

Then the kid heard his name called, and he didn't know from where until Bobs said, "Up here!" She was leaning into the moonlight from a window. "Bill, what on earth's the matter?"

"Don't know! But your uncle sent me to say he was staying in town!"

The bartender came rushing out of the Alpine bar's front

door. His apron was off but he was bareheaded, and he swung the big street door shut and bent over to fit the key.

The kid clumped close. "Mister, what all's the matter?"

The bartender was trying the door's lock as he said, "They caught Tom Roper up to the Palace!" He turned about and began to run there too.

The kid shouted at Bobs, "They caught Tom Roper!" The barber said, "Ever'body thought the sheriff already had him!" Then Bobs yelled, "Bill, you wait for me!" and vanished from the window.

Wait for you! the kid thought, feeling flustered. She sounded bossy. *Wait for why?* he wondered, facing toward the Palace, two blocks up and across the street. The voices there were strident but muffled by being indoors; many voices with the angered hum of a disturbed bee tree's hive—man-sized bees.

Bobs came thumping from the hotel in high-heeled boots with small silver spurs; the wide belt was about her, and she was again in overalls with hat pulled low, having dressed to ride back to the ranch and waited endlessly. "They're going to hang him!" she told the kid right off, sounding eager and shocked. "It'll be awful, but I've got to see!"

She looked like a boy now and acted like one of about his own age, and was friendly, but he snapped, "You can't go in no saloon!"

"I'm going to see!" Bobs said, and yanked at him. "Come on, Bill!"

The little barber came, too, all three on the run, their feet clattering echoes into the street's stillness. As they got nearer, the muffled tumult in the Palace became a high, ominous babble with some screeched voices intermittently breaking above others. They stopped, hesitant, across the street. The saloon's swing doors were bumped half open time and again by the jostle. Then the doors opened and a blast of voices came louder though not more distinctly, and there was a surging movement.

A big man was being shoved outside, not violently though his arms were held and he was forced along. Somebody set a mussed-up hat on his head, then turned back into the Palace. From across the street Bobs recognized him. "Why, it's Judge Trumbull!" Two men were pushing the judge, their

hands on his arms, and they were carefully not discourteous. Lanky cowhands, with guns swinging to their hips. They brought the judge across the street and helped him to the sidewalk, and one cowhand said severely, "Judge, this ain't no time for law! And you're makin' us miss the show!"

" 'Show'!" the judge thundered. "A fine thing to call murder!"

The cowhands' voices rattled back at him: "What you call killin' the Jones boys?" "An' old Mundy!" "We're goin' to hang em!" " 'F the law wouldn't, too, it's no good!" "An' 'f we do what the law orta, what call you got to fuss!"

The judge resignedly drew himself erect, jerked at his out-of-shape hat. The kids were close about him, and the barber, too. He saw them without taking notice, and implored the cowhands: "Boys, for God's sake don't rush them madly to the rope! You can always hang a guilty man, but—" The cowhands were already halfway back across the street.

Bobs went at him with both hands out. "Who, Judge? 'Them,' you said! Who's them besides Tom Roper? Tell me, Judge!" Her heels bounced an impatient tattoo before him.

He gazed at Bobs with delayed recognition, then, "You, eh? And Bill! What are you children doing here at a time like this? And you, Tony?" Then the judge gazed toward the Palace entrance. "Awful! Awful!" he groaned. Except above the doors the light was quite blocked out by the press of bodies. He was badly shaken and spoke half absently: "But for Trusand, they'd have been hanged by now! All three! I have misjudged that gambler. He was magnificent!"

" 'Three!' " Bobs screeched, clawing at him. "Who, Judge? 'Three!' Who?"

"Be quiet, Bobs. I'll tell you." The judge removed his hat and mopped at his sweating face with a bunched-up handkerchief and shook his head dishearteningly.

Tom Roper had carried a keg to stand on and fired into the crowd through a side window of the Palace and nearly hit John Grant. Then Roper fell, or the keg slipped; anyhow, he had sprained an ankle and was caught and brought into the Palace and beaten by every fist that could reach him, and he would have been rushed out and hanged right off except that the judge—anything to delay the lynching—thundered,

"Let the man talk!" And some yelled no and some yelled yes, but the judge stormily demanded fair play.

Roper's mouth bled as he snarled viciously that they could hang him and be damned! But swing John Grant, Red Sanger, and Mike Eads too! They'd all held up the Risto stage. And he swore—just as if not lying about it—that they'd all cut cards to see who'd kill the Jones boys because they knew too much!

Roper said he'd come to town, not caring if he was killed if he could kill John Grant, who'd gone over to the sheriff, trying to save his own hide. And the likkered crowd right off accepted accusation as conclusive fact. Grant and Sanger were seized and disarmed; and, almost as quickly as if grabbed out of thin air, ropes appeared in men's hands. The yell went up to hang 'em all!

Then the judge thundered at stone-deaf ears; but Dan Trusand jumped to a card table, drew his gun, and stood cold, pale, and straight until the crowd had quieted enough to hear.

"Gentlemen, Red Sanger and John Grant are friends of mine! I don't know what they've done! But before you hang them on the say-so of a lying coward like Tom Roper, you'll have to give them their chance to talk."

And the mob, with the fickleness that mobs have, cheered.

Grant mumbled, nearly blubbering, but Red Sanger was mighty cool. His arms were tied behind him and some cowhand had mockingly slipped a noose over Red's thick neck. He was helped to stand on a chair and calmly waited until it was quiet except for the hazy mutter and jabber of the more drunken. At last he spoke up clear and slow, but all he said was:

"Thanks, Dan. Fair play's a mighty precious thing! There's nothing much that I can add to what you said about a lyin' coward's say-so. When you set in a game you play the cards you get. I won't welsh! But, fellows, I'm an honest man and never done wrong on purpose in my life an'——"

That was an unfortunate statement. All afternoon and evening the crowd had been getting into a mood for a lynching; and now likkered men yapped at Sanger over this and that and jeered about him being honest and having never done wrong. The cowhand yanked on the noose and Sanger barely escaped falling from the chair, being caught and helped off.

"Rustler!" he was called; and more than one yowled, "Damn' ol' horse thief anyhow!" and there were shouts of, "Hang 'im too!"

Again Judge Trumbull tried to break in on the crowd's wrath, pleading for law and order, the judgment of a court; and he might as well have puffed his cheeks to buck a windstorm. Men shouted to throw him out—and he was put out, but with a kind of deference even then because he was so well thought of.

The judge had related scarcely anything of all that detail before the kid was at him, desperately trying to tell him that John Grant had played in with them only to help the sheriff and would go scot-free; before the kid could say how he knew, Judge Trumbull seized his arm powerfully.

"Tony, you keep Bobs back!" he ordered, then jumped from the sidewalk and pulled the kid along on the run. The judge's big shoulders hit the swing doors and jolted men aside, thudding them up against one another.

He strode in. Anger now, and justice, deepened the roar in his voice. "You all—every man jack of you!—know this boy, or of him! Bill Helgar! Stand him on the bar! He'll save at least one honest man from being hanged!"

3

Talk of hanging was thirsty work; men who had already drunk too much swayed at the bar, wanting more. Others reached demandingly over shoulders. Money splattered down. Business was good. Two bartenders, one the sleek Blacky, snatched and slapped coins into the drawer, hurrying and forgetful of change. The air, fouled by men's hot breath and gush of sweat, was cloud-thick with smoke.

The kid, now on the bar, was scared sick by the strangers' upturned faces and the noise. He didn't hear what was shouted at him; he just saw holes in faces where mouths ought to be and couldn't speak a word. No need to try. He wouldn't have been heard. This was the kid who had chased Tom Roper with an empty gun and the crowd was in a mood to cheer him.

John Grant sagged in numbed hopelessness and, inwardly weak from guilt, there was a broken-back look about him.

He had meddled with bad crookedness, knowing what would happen if caught, and now inertly awaited doom. His empty face had lit up with hope when Dan Trusand got to the table and spoke from behind a drawn gun; then his face dulled soddenly. He felt that nothing would come of it, nothing could come of it because they were all guilty as hell. Grant's was a stupor of acceptance.

The kid tried to talk in a weak, scared voice and couldn't be heard. Shouts of "Speak up!" and "Louder!" sent his thin tone up breathlessly. "The sheriff had him today!" the kid yelled, pointing toward Roper. Roper's eyes glittered; he was the same as crazy if not just that. "Knolds' place!"

Then the kid's look fled about, finding nowhere to light until among the faces he saw the gambler. Trusand's hat was off, his hair mussed, his clothes rumpled, and a hard anxiousness shimmered in his mud-colored eyes.

The kid began telling it directly to him, letting the others overhear, and he didn't see Red Sanger's stolidly upturned face. It was as unrevealing as ever with the small, deep-set eyes shadowed in their sockets and the thick lips firmly together. The rope's shadow hadn't scared him; and even in the presence of the hostile mob he had cunningly reassured Trusand. No one but Sanger knew who had watched the bank and tipped him off as to what stage would carry the gold-coin shipment; and Sanger's "I won't welsh!" was a promise to be hanged without bringing Trusand into it.

Now the kid was yelling at Trusand, "Cutts his ownself said John Grant would go scot-free! John's done what he could to help the sheriff! Told Roper so—Cutts did! I heard him!" Words were coming easier now and not so loud, and the saloon's listening hush deepened. "We was eatin' supper when somebody—that Belle Hart, it's thought—sneaked up and sunk a hatchet in Cutts's head! He stole Joel Allentyre's horse an' rifle—"

Men confirmingly remembered how Roper had shot at Grant tonight, risking capture and willing to die if he could kill him. They remembered, too, that Grant was a good-natured, honest fellow, never in trouble before, and well liked; Roper's malice in itself seemed a kind of vindication. And Cutts, alive, hadn't been popular, but Cutts, murdered, was a respected man, worthy of summary vengeance.

"Hang 'em!" burst with rocket sound here and there. "Them" now meant only Roper, and Sanger—damned old horse thief at least!

Grant's bewildered tongue was going round and round what Cutts had said, trying to make out that he'd been in with the sheriff all along; and he swore that was the way of it, said he'd tried to say so before but nobody would listen or believe. Only those who were close about Grant heard him now, and clear heads would have known he lied because there was such a tangle of contradictions. But there weren't any clear heads; and even Red Sanger guessed wrong with a deep and blasting curse:

"Bought off your neck by selling ours to the sheriff and that damn' Allentyre!"

That was confession enough even if one were needed from Red Sanger. Though the exoneration blackened Grant, it was exoneration of a kind. Grant's hands were loosened.

The cry was, "Hang 'em!" "Hang 'em!" in a fierce-throated chant. Then all at once the crowd was a determined mob, suddenly in motion and surging for the doors, front, back, and side, their feet in a stormy trample. Now only the more drunken yipped fitfully; others were grim, implacably rushing out to hang these men and have it over with.

4

Poppa Hartmann's new-store-to-be stood raw and unfleshed, a skeleton of studs and joists and rafters, its lumber unweathered. Thin moonlight sifted through and a few men moved busily among the bar-shaped shadows. Long boards clattered down to give a more secure footing to those who rigged the gallows. Big Jeff, as carpenter, gave orders; he wasn't sober but he was hoarsely regardful of what seemed duty, and he moved with secure reach and step where other men would have missed or slipped.

The crowd pressed near to the foundation, raggedly half encircling the front of the building, the line denser in the street; their low, awed mutter was like many tongues astir in one mouth. Impatient, drink-dazed fellows who tried to yap were told, "Shut up!" and did. Men craved solemnity now as something that would make their crime more just.

Shadow-ague movements set up two sawhorses on the unnailed flooring, and a two-by-six plank was laid on them. The doomed men were helped up there, the ropes already about their necks. Roper kicked and cursed the man who went about tying his ankles. The rope ends of the nooses rose and fell from an upward toss over a ceiling joist, and grew tight, being knotted to a studding's X-brace with the slack taken out. Roper stopped kicking but his curses became wilder. Death had his throat, ready to squeeze, and he was afraid, though even now he covered his fear with frenzied threats of what he'd do when he met these men in hell.

Sanger's deep tone was scornful. "You squeal like a stuck pig!" Then Sanger's voice lifted, unshaken, cool as a rider in the saddle: "All right, you fellows, let her buck!"

The plank was jerked; an end came from a sawhorse, rattling down. Roper's shriek vanished like a flame sound, puffed out. Two long, squirming shapes that were dying men hung with slow turning among the bar-shaped shadows.

The street was suddenly as quiet as if a rope were about every man's throat.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ALLENTYRE waited, not patiently, but there wasn't anything to do except remain with Belle Hart. She was in a chair now and talked, not caring, even if she realized, what she said. She had hidden through the day at Knolds's place, watchful for any chance, and removed her shoes to slip up on Cutts and knock him cold; then Roper had seized the hatchet and killed him for sure. Roper couldn't be dissuaded from coming to town to kill John Grant, who'd gone over to the sheriff; Belle came with him, still hopeful that they might get away together and head out of the country where they weren't known. She had waited beside the horses in the alley and heard the outcry that let her know that Roper had been caught. Then she switched to Allentyre's horse and tried to get out of town.

When the kid rode back to the Summers house Allentyre,

on watch at the door, was sharp with, "What's kept you so long?"

The kid trudged slowly up the walk from gate to porch, and he stood still, blinking in the lamplight, and droned as if thinking of something else: "Doc Burrows ain't in town but I told the judge. He's coming with some fellows." Then, staringly, awe-touched, the kid said, "They hung Tom Roper and Red Sanger too!"

"Sanger?"

"And purt' near John Grant."

Allentyre faced about quickly. Belle had got to her feet, almost toppled forward but dropped back into the chair. Her hot, glassy eyes had a burned-out stare, her arms flopped down, and her mouth was open; she held her breath until her lungs sobbed for air and the hoarse gulp was like a strangled cry.

Judge Trumbull, the squat Sam Malloy, and three other townsmen came with slow clump and shuffle of feet, overcrowding the small room. Mrs. Summers was flustered though she called them all by their first names.

They didn't know what to decide on; the marshal was drunk, the sheriff out of town, and Belle Hart had to be held. The judge rumbled haltingly that no woman had ever been put in jail. He felt that none ought to be. Sam Malloy shook his head at talk of having her removed to the Alpine.

Mrs. Summers wiped her face with the bottom of her apron. "She can stay right here the rest of the night and some of you can stay and watch her if you want." Then she told the men, "I don't believe folks are bad because they want to be. It's 'cause somehow they can't help themselves!" Allentyre studied her tired face and thought she must have worked that out as a kind of pardon for Whitey's being such a disappointment.

The judge shook his head at Allentyre, spoke solemnly. "Joel, just what kind of deal has the sheriff made with John Grant?"

"Deal?"

"A man who took part in old Mundy's murder can't go scot-free!"

"What makes you think the sheriff will let him, Judge?"

"Eh? He's promised, hasn't he?" And when Allentyre shook

his head the judge turned and bent severely. "Boy, you said the sheriff promised to—"

"I said what Cutts said!"

"What did Cutts say to you, Bill?" Allentyre asked.

"He said it to Roper. Said John Grant would go scot-free because he'd helped the sheriff catch 'em. I stood right there an' heard, an'—"

Allentyre's hand moved silencingly. "It was like Cutts! Judge, he made it up out of whole cloth to worry Roper. Bill here didn't know. Where's Grant now?"

"Nobody knows," said Sam Malloy. "And the town quieted down in a hurry. People pulling out like they wanted to get away quick!"

2

When the kid tagged along into the Palace he wasn't like a two-headed calf any more; he was scarcely noticed. Men spoke with gloomy praise of Red Sanger who died like a man ought, but curses were dribbled over John Grants' name. Even the kid couldn't clear his feeling that Grant had been treacherous. Sanger, about to die, had said so with tremendous force.

The kid lurched into a chair; he was tired and hurt through and through. No games were going and the music box was still. Blacky, now alone behind the bar, meticulously made change. The more likkered had wandered away or sat soggily in chairs, sleeping it off. Soberer men had a dejected weariness as they sagged about the bar and in brooding monotone said the same things over and over.

Judge Trumbull asked, "Where's Mr. Trusand?" "Mister" now, respectfully.

"Upstairs for a minute, Judge."

Jeff wasn't sober but he was somber. He mumbled in Sam Malloy's ear and Malloy shook his head; then he tugged Allentyre aside, wanting to borrow. He got some money and weaved back to the bar, offering to buy a round of drinks.

Trusand came out of the shadows at the rear, again as if from a bandbox. The rumpled look was gone, his boots were wiped clean of dust, his hair smoothed. His paleness was like a mask when Judge Trumbull strode up heavily and stopped,

then said with earnestness: "Sir, I never saw a finer thing! You are a brave man, Mr. Trusand!"

"I tried for what I thought was right," Trusand replied, and felt that he'd been lucky. His cold face had a prideful lift until his glance collided with Allentyre's studied watchfulness, and it wasn't Allentyre's eyes that moved first.

Trusand tapped the bar for a round of drinks. Glasses came up and the bottle; while it was going from hand to hand he stepped across to where the kid had slumped in a chair. "Look, Bill," the gambler said, "you're all tired out. Go upstairs and pile in. I'm alone."

The kid dragged himself off, and Trusand's gaze followed. He wanted the kid well away from there. The gambler knew that men were for him tonight, and this seemed a suitable time and place to force a showdown and make Allentyre draw in his horns.

Drinks were lifted; some said, "Luck, Dan!" and some, "Your health!" with deference in their manner. The judge put down his glass, bunched the handkerchief back into his pocket, said, "Good night, gentlemen," and turned toward the door, Allentyre with him.

Trusand called, "Joel?" And when Allentyre paused, Trusand said, "There's something I'd like to ask you about, Joel?"

Allentyre stepped nearer, sensing the challenge. "Go ahead."

"Among other things, Joel, I believe John Grant is a damn' liar!"

"Possibly."

Now a hard seriousness showed in the gambler's eyes. "This race that's coming up. Grant says you told him it would be crooked!" He stopped as if he had said all he was going to, and men's jaded nerves tightened. But Trusand coolly offered a way out, his voice friendly with, "I don't believe you ever said anything of the kind. Did you?"

It was a strong play, edged with danger. Grant hadn't said it like that at all, but the gambler purposely gave Grant's words a distorted twist so that Allentyre might the more easily make his denial. And daring to bring talk of a fixed race out in the open would do much to make men sure that it wasn't to be fixed.

Allentyre eyed the gambler, studied a bit, and his nod seemed unconcerned, his tone too. "Well, yes, that's about the size of it, Trusand!"

That was like blowing on the glow in a powder keg. Men's feet moved with nervous scuffle, giving room; and Judge Trumbull protested, "For God's sake, gentlemen!" Blacky stopped wiping glasses to stare across the bar like a dark owl.

Whatever counterplay Trusand may have expected, he hadn't foreseen that one, nor rightly judged the tough hardness under Allentyre's quiet way. Their eyes met and struggled, neither wavering; and it was Trusand now who had only one way out, and he summoned an astonished wrath to demand, "Why damn your soul, sir! You call me cheat!"

Allentyre eyed him with a smile that was as cold as a crack in ice. "I don't—now! I don't think you'll dare let her loose—*now!* I know that if Blue Chip's in shape, Rain Drop can't beat her except in a fixed race! And she'll be in shape when she comes to the starting point, or I'll see to it that the race is scratched! Do you understand, Trusand? Anything else?"

Blacky now looked like an owl dazed by sunrise; as he saw it, Trusand had come to grips and lost, ruining the sure-thing setup. Men's eyes flickered uncertainly between the gambler's cold, staring face and Allentyre's unyielding indifference to the menace with which Trusand silently threatened him. Sam Malloy's pudgy face dripped cold sweat.

Something had to come. Trusand could think fast and coolly even when angered; he had no scruples, and now he said: "You're pretty damn' smart, Allentyre! You don't know and couldn't know if anything crooked was planned in that race! It isn't! But you've said so! Said it here before my friends! You want to ruin my good name, Allentyre! Now when Blue Chip wins, you'll tell people you made an honest race out of it! And leave my name blackened! Do you think I don't know why you want to ruin my name?" Trusand paused, then, furiously, "Say something!"

"You're doing the talking!"

"I'm no fool!" Trusand spoke with wicked coolness. "You've said more than once that I must be an honest man— or my wife

would leave me! She's such a fine woman! You'd like to have her leave me, wouldn't you, Allentyre?"

Allentyre's half-smoked cigarette fell from his fingers and hadn't touched the floor when his fist rocked into the gambler's face, knocking him back, and Allentyre came on to hit again but Sam Malloy got between them. Trusand staggered off balance, his hand going up inside his coat, and when the hand came out the knife was lifted.

Men yapped their fright. Judge Trumbull snatched in ponderous haste for Trusand's arm. Blacky yelled, "Dan, no!" Men overbore Trusand, and the drunken Jeff's words were the most sobering: "Knife him unarmed—there'll be another lynchin'."

Allentyre stepped in close, leaned forward. "Trusand, if ever you mention my name with your wife's again I'll kill you!" Then he turned on a heel and went out.

3

The kid slipped from bed in the dark of the morning and pulled the curtain aside; a faint dawn haze was coming, and he stared down the street toward the unfinished Hartmann building, though he knew that Red Sanger's body wasn't there, knew that Red Sanger wasn't dead.

The night before, when the kid left the saloon, he hadn't come straight upstairs to bed, but went from the side door, being morbidly drawn back to the Hartmann building; there he ventured closer and closer in fascinated dread as he saw that one of the long, lump-shapes hung perfectly still but the other moved.

The thin moon laid blobs of candle-dim light among the crisscrossed shadows, and the kid's voice choked up in the hushed call of "Red?" No answer; but the big dangling shape seemed to sway as if being called into life. The kid scarcely knew what he was doing as he crept with frightened slowness onto the planking that had been thrown down for the sawhorses to rest on. His heart beat so hard he could hear it.

A slant of light now fell on Sanger's feet. His toes rested on the four-inch back of the sawhorse. When the two-by-six had been jerked from under the doomed men there had

been no more than the two-inch fall, and they had been left to strangle. But Sanger's was a powerful, bull-shaped neck, his weight stretched the rope a little, and by luck he had been placed directly over a sawhorse and his toe tips could reach it and ease the choke of the noose. Nobody had noticed, and the crowd withdrew and Sanger helplessly held on to life. The moon had moved and now its slant through joists and rafters showed why he lived.

The kid felt his way to X-brace. Two or three turns had been taken around it before the end was slip-knotted; when he loosened the knot and let the rope slip, Red's feet thrashed out feebly, groping to keep their painful balance. The kid let him down until his feet were on the planking under the sawhorses, but Red couldn't stand, and as the rope was eased he sank down and lay still. The kid tore the noose from about Red's thick, swollen neck and untied the lashings about his wrists and legs. Then he shook Red and spoke his name.

Dead now for sure, it seemed. The kid didn't think of running to call anybody; he didn't even think of Red being an outlaw who maybe deserved hanging. He didn't think at all; he had liked Red, and Red had been hurt and now needed help, so the kid raced across the street to the water trough before the saddler's shop. He jerked the cup from its chain, dipped up water, and carried it back on the run.

Red had raised himself to an elbow and held a hand to this throat, breathing hoarsely. At first he took no notice of the kid who tried to force the water on him. Then he made an attempt to swallow some of the water and couldn't, and he couldn't speak, but he splashed the water against his face, and held out the cup, seeming to ask for more. The kid went for it, and when he returned Red had gone.

And that was the nightmarish remembrance that the kid had this morning. The secret weighed on him, and with it the feeling that maybe he had done wrong. He wasn't regretful, though, and he was stubbornly resolved to tell no one. He wanted to get out of town before talk about it began. Anyhow, he had promised to return the Knolds's pony the first thing this morning.

He fumbled into his clothes quietly, so as not to awaken Trusand, who liked to sleep late. Miss Kate's scented powder and perfume still pervaded the room, setting astir the home-

sick wish to be with her. He wondered where Rock Creek was and the Willets place.

There wasn't a soul in sight on the street as he ran up to Harlow's, but Bobs was standing in the livery-stable runway while the lumbering Malk saddled her golden horse. Under the lantern glow she glumly studied her fingernails, and her face was sleep-swollen and rebellious, too, because she was mad at being sent home. Sam Malloy had awakened her long before sunup and told her that she had to light out for the ranch. "Joel's orders, honey."

Sam had babied her from the time she could walk. He had proudly told her what Joel had done to the gambler; it was over Blue Chip, he said, not mentioning Kate. Joel had picked up a man to go with him and had ridden out to try to catch Mike Eads before he got wind of how things were and dodged away. Joel expected that just as soon as he returned to town he would have more trouble with Trusand, and didn't want Bobs around.

The kid felt that he and Bobs had buried the hatchet last night, so now he marched up to her and said, "Hello," but Bobs frowned staringly. She knew, because Sam Malloy had told her, where the kid had spent the night; then, right off, she blazed out: "Are you going to throw in with that gambler or stand by Joel?"

He hadn't an idea of what she was talking about, but anger was all over her and boiled in her voice. Why she should be like this after last night he couldn't imagine, and suddenly didn't care, and scowled to say: "I'll do whatever I damn please!"

"To please that gambler!"

"Anybody I want—'cept you!" He went on past her and felt his way into Blue Chip's dark stall.

Malk parted the reins over the horse's head. "All ready, Miss Bobs," he said, and offered his hand to her foot as a help in mounting.

Bobs went from the stable into the cool dawn with a flush on her face that looked like sunburn. She rode slowly, too, obstinately not wanting to go home and wishing for some excuse to disobey. Joel might whip her; he never had, but he might. Somehow she felt she didn't care. She wasn't going straight home.

The kid pulled out shortly afterward on a livery horse and saddle, leading the Knolds's pony; and he took the direct road, not the cut from the Humps which Allentyre had used.

As early as it was when he reached the Knolds place, he found that some neighbors had already come to look around and talk about the way Cutts had died. And cowhands who had stopped here and there through the night had told of the lynchings in town.

The flat-faced George looked his pony over and grumble-muttered about other fellows riding him; but his mother reckoned that no great harm had been done, and she brought the kid into the kitchen to give him breakfast. The kid now knew that the Willets place wasn't far from the Knolds's because Malk, there at the stable, had said so; but when he asked, Mrs. Knolds glanced around sharply. "What you want to know for?"

"I've heard it talked about some."

"I bet! There used to be a lot of talk. But I reckon that Sadie is makin' Ned a wife that suits him—though nobody has neighbored with her yet! He married her out of a saloon! Ned Willets is purt' near simple-minded but a steady, hard worker."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE MID-MORNING sun was warm on his back and he kicked the sluggish livery-stable horse at a trot along the level winding trail where shadows were pocketed back in the red rocks.

He couldn't get Bobs out of his mind, and remembered his dad's "Women do a man no good," and so it seemed. Now again he wished that she were a boy instead of merely looking like one sometimes. He'd bang her on the nose and hate her about as much as he hated Whitey. *Ugly thing!* he thought, but knew that he was trying to lie to himself. Her features were as even and sensitive as a high-bred filly's, and she had a wild cat's tawny eyes and directness. Temper too! And she didn't play fair in being nice sometimes for

no reason at all, then turning mean with the same lack of reason.

He saw the sloping field of ripened hay, and the wind lay over it and got up and moved on and the grass flowed back, upright, not even tousled. The Willets fence showed what a power of back-heaving and patience it had taken to raise that rock-and-split-log barrier against the drift of range cows that would come toward the Sink's rim for water. Dead stumps stood along bottomland where Ned Willets had felled his timber; they were undercut as slick as a knife through cheese, with no roughness but the splintered ridge of the break when the tree had toppled. The kid had seen men haggle trees and brush for his dad's corrals and knew that this was smooth ax work.

Below the hayfield the creek flowed with shallow murmur among the boulders. The horse drank and turned back to the shaded path, dribbling water on the rust-dark sand, his slow feet nearly noiseless. The Willets house wasn't far now. A small pasture came down and crossed the creek and a colt stretched at the fence and tipped its ears.

The kid followed the fence across the creek and was leaning to peer under branches up toward the house when right close by he heard, "Why—why, *Billy!*"

He would have gone by without noticing that Kate sat there in a dark dress, on a sloping rock that water purred against. Branches dropped low from above her. A handkerchief that she dipped into the stream to bathe her eyes had left the look of tears. Sadie Willets's witch-hazel packs and Ned's beefsteak had lessened the swelling and she could see better, but blotches of purple-black overlay her puffed face.

The kid's eyes stretched wide, frozen in disbelief that this bruised wet face peering up out of the shade was Miss Kate's. He wouldn't have known her, not at once, except for her voice; even her hair was knotted tight on her head as if in an effort to be wholly ugly. He spoke with stunned slowness. "You—hurt like that!" Then he hit the ground as if thrown from the saddle and leaned toward her. "Who hurt you?"

A flame seemed to burn in his eyes, and she knew what it meant, for that was how she had seen him look over the revolver that he held on Roper in the cabin. Kate covered

her face with her hands and put her head down and tried to think, but was only frightened.

"Who hurt you?"

It was all he said, but enough, and she mustn't tell him; whatever else, not that. Trusand was cold and quick and without pity.

"Who hurt you?" he asked again—just the singleness of one question, a spaced hammer-blow of a question, direct and numbing.

Fear shuddered through her, fear for him; somehow he must be satisfied that no one had hurt her, for she believed that if he had any inkling of why or how he would jump Trusand and be killed. And it didn't matter now what Trusand had done; she was through with him, meant never to see him again, and felt contemptuous of herself for having once thought Trusand handsome and gracious. In two years he had changed, or perhaps not changed at all except that she had seen his mask slip, disclosing what she had never suspected when she married him.

He had been generous with money and she believed that he was brave and honest; and, since everything in this world can't be as you wish, she had stayed by him, endured his conceit and the periodic ill-usage, but never before had she suffered anything like this.

Always she had trusted his cool, easy boast that he never in his life turned a crooked card but judged men and studied the play. She had held to a believing pride in that, but now she knew that it was just another of his mask-guarded lies. A man who planned to throw a race, cheat friends and a boy like Bill Helgar, too, was nothing but a blackleg and she had told him so. And that knowledge of him was now a befouling secret that she had to keep to herself because Trusand would kill anybody that threw it up to him.

"Tell me! Who hurt you?"

There it was again, the low tense, question that wouldn't be denied and Kate had to answer. She looked up and shook her head and opened her hands and said slowly, "Nobody has hurt me." He didn't believe her; he wouldn't say so but, as he stooped and frowned, his eyes said so.

Kate tried a rueful smile. "I'm ashamed, Bill, but—but honest, I don't—not often—drink!" She couldn't tell what he

thought, his face was as unchangingly set as Trusand's himself—just a questing stare that frightened her by what seemed disbelief. She went on in desperate half-pleasantness with, "I look frightful enough to scare Old Nick! You see, Billy, I tripped on the stairs and fell on my face. That's why I wouldn't light the lamp the other night. Didn't want you to see me! Didn't want anybody to see me! I had Dan bring me out here. Sadie is an old friend and knows—well, she knows how it is sometimes."

He was believing now, and sat down with crossed feet on the sandy side of the rock and poked at the sand with a forefinger and wouldn't look up as he said, "I'd thought maybe he hit you."

No doubt as to whom "he" meant; Kate felt that dying would be easier, but she had to go on now and put Trusand clear beyond any kind of suspicion. "Oh no! Dan's stood a lot from me at times. And you know that nice women don't drink!"

The flame-brightness was now out of his eyes as he looked up and said levelly, "They do if you do! All I care about is you being hurt!"

She was breathing easier. "My own fault! A wonder I didn't break my neck! And why did you come out here? Didn't Dan tell you not to?"

The kid shook his head. "I come 'cause I wanted to. It's like being hungry not to see you!" Consideringly, "Joel Allentyre is all right too—if he'd get rid of that girl!" Then, "Do you know about Tom Roper and them?"

2

When they heard the toot of Sadie's cowhorn Kate said, "Dinner," and took him toward the house the back way and through the pole gate below the stable. Chickens were snugged in the barnyard dust and two fat pigs lay in their pen's wallow. Ned Willets was a farmer, nothing else.

While the kid unsaddled, Kate hurried on to the house, then met him outside the summer kitchen's back door with a tall mug of fresh buttermilk. A chunky bare-armed woman in a short skirt was by her. "This is Bill, Sadie."

Sadie thrust out a hand and said heartily, "Welcome,

Bill!" She was blonde and sunburned, with a robust untidiness that broke out at the seams, and her Swedish face glistened with good health and cheerfulness.

"What's keeping that Mr. Longlegs of mine?" Sadie said, and took up the horn again. Her cheeks swelled out like a ripe pumpkin for the hoarse blast. It died away and was answered by a distant shout that let her know Ned was coming.

The kid sat stiffly at one side of the room as Sadie bustled, and when she went back to the summer kitchen she didn't stop talking but lifted her voice. The windows in the house were open for the breeze and flies droned, and wind rustled the narrow strips of newspaper that dangled with strings above the table to keep the flies away. Kate moved from place to place pouring buttermilk into mugs.

A window was nearly filled by heave of shoulders as a young giant leaned through, his face big and wooden and work-strained. He called slowly, "Sadie, we got comp'ny!"

The answer came clear from the kitchen. "You bet we have! Hurry, wash, old slowpoke, and get in here!"

The man hesitated before he left the window; then Sadie rushed in with a platter of steaks and a laughing pride in how her man could eat. The front door opened and the big bowed man stood aside with clumsy feet to let Bobs come in first. She met Kate face to face right in the window's full light, and her breath rasped in her throat.

"Oh, Ned—you!" Sadie's voice told him that he had played the devil.

He stood in dull willingness to be blamed though he said, "I called out that we had comp'ny."

Sadie pointed toward the kid. "I thought you meant him!" Then, "Spilled milk!" she said, and pulled Ned out of the room and hurriedly explained to him what Kate had told the kid about herself and why.

Bobs had been nervously prim when she came to this house because the much-talked-of Sadie was a stranger and Joel might be mad, but she threw her primness away and cried, "Oh, Miss Kate!" and pounced. Malk had told her that Miss Kate was sick out at the Willets place; and now Kate was caught and helpless, and Bobs's voice was stingingly fierce. "That gambler!"

"Oh no, no, no!" whirred from Kate's lips as she tried to twist away without struggling, and she looked anxiously toward the kid. "You mustn't think that! It isn't so!"

The kid squirmed forward on the chair's seat and then turned rigid and eyed Bobs. She had seen him when she came in but ignored him; he would have been mad if she hadn't been nice to Miss Kate, yet he didn't like the feeling that she was as much Miss Kate's friend as he was.

Bobs insisted, "Then who did it?" and scrouged up her own face in sympathetic pain.

"Nobody, honey! Honest and——" Kate's protest was a little frantic.

But Bobs had seen a woman's bruised face before. Mrs. Summers's. And she had been begged into the secrecy of not telling Joel on Mr. Summers. Kate's was just the same, only worse. And now Kate's words were a confused mumble as she tried to tell her story, and when her flurried glance saw Sadie staring through the door she called, "Sadie!" with the sound of wanting help to save her life.

"Sadie will tell you!" Kate said, and pushed at Bobs roughly enough to get free, and ran out of the house. The kid rose up, craning his neck to watch from the window. Miss Kate held her skirts high before her and ran away from the house.

Sadie moved in slowly. At each step she seemed afraid the next might set her foot into a trap, and she pushed down at her short dress which the countryside's skirt-hampered woman thought immodest. Her red face was dull and tired, and stubborn, too, about lying to protect Dan Trusand, whom she had never liked.

Bobs didn't know Sadie, merely knew who she was; and the best, but also the worst, Joel had ever said of her was, "If she sticks by Ned she'll be all right." Bobs wasn't comfortable either, not with that kid's eyes on her, too, so she got ladylike with a stiff back and a high head that put her nose in the air.

Sadie splashed a hand across her forehead and didn't look at Bobs but talked toward the kid. She hadn't said six words before Bobs quit being ladylike and broke in defiantly, not believing a word—not a word of it; and she glared at the kid, somehow blaming him.

Sadie's face lit up, startled and pleased at being called untruthful, but she had to insist on the story as to why Kate was ashamed, and Bobs kept right on saying, "I don't believe it! I just don't!"

Ned walked in, the comb marks in his wet hair like the small picture of a freshly plowed hillside. His face had a stupid, deaf look as, with eyes down, he scraped back his chair and sat there. Bobs had known him for a long time; before his marriage he cut winter hay for the ranch. Now she marched up close and put a finger near his face and demanded shrilly, "Ned Willets, do you believe Miss Kate ever got drunk and fell downstairs?"

He stared woodenly. Sadie signaled over Bobs's shoulder but he wouldn't see, so she hurried around behind him and in the pretense of moving a dish with one hand, she jabbed the thumb of the other into his ribs. Ned lowered his head and pulled his plate near, and took up a fork, not looking at Bobs. "It's what she says," he mumbled, then his slow, long-armed reach stabbed a steak out in the center of the table and it dribbled between platter and plate. "Set down, folks, and eat."

Sadie began breathlessly, "Ned here knows that Dan's too much of a gentleman to——"

"Gentleman!" Bobs screeched as she jerked her hat and swung it in a vague gesture toward town. "He drew a knife on Joel last night and got knocked down! Joel wasn't even armed!" That triumphantly settled the "gentleman"; and it wasn't quite the way Sam Malloy had told it, but it was how Bobs's pride in Joel remembered.

"Whatever over?" Sadie gasped.

"Joel knows Blue Chip's being rigged to lose and said so!" Bobs's hair fairly swished as she turned about on the kid and let her temper fly. "And of course you've got to be in on it! That's why you're standing by him! A pair of cheats, both of you!"

The kid froze sullenly, then snapped, "You're lying and you know it!"

"I'm not!"

"I'd bet on her like I did—wouldn't I?"

"To fool people, yes! You little unbranded saddle tramp, you!"

The kid got up and stomped through the front door. Sadie ran there and called, but he wouldn't hear, and she watched and saw him head around back for the stable.

In a few minutes he rode by the house, not looking toward it, and he went out over the wagon road on his way back to town.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE KID shouldered through the Palace swing door as if just lately he had outgrown being too young to do as men did.

Blacky, late for his shift, was reaching hat and coat to the pegs above the safe. Then he tied on his apron, patted his oil-wet hair, and answered the kid by pointing overhead. "Yes, but walk light! He's sour as milk after a thunderstorm!"

The kid didn't walk light; he clumped on the stairs, tramped in the hall, and flung the door open.

Trusand had heard him coming and didn't stir from the stretched-out sprawl in Miss Kate's rocker, fingertips touching across his belly. He wasn't dressed but had shaved; the tender spot on his jaw ached deeper than flesh. Except for his eyes, Trusand's might have been a dead man's face.

The kid looked right at him. "You and me got to have a talk!" He pushed the door to, and only Trusand's eyes moved, followingly, as the kid brought up a straight-backed chair and plunked it alongside the rocker, then he flung off his hat and sat down. "I took the Knolds's horse home, then went on to Rock Creek and seen Miss Kate!"

Too bad, too damn bad! the gambler thought, not moving. He studied the kid's small, set face and found it unreadable; yet he didn't seem so mad, at least not mad in the way Trusand would have expected.

"What I want to know is about you and Joel Allentyre's fightin' and why it's said Blue Chip won't run honest."

Trusand murmured quietly, "As far as I know, Blue Chip will. What about Kate?"

"She's black and blue and hurt. Did she fall downstairs from being drunk?"

Trusand thought that over. Was this fool kid trying clumsily to trap him? He thought, *So Kate's said that's what I'd say, and he's trying to see if I do!* He got up and reached to the table for the makin's and, with his back turned, asked, "Wouldn't be a nice thing to tell about your wife, would it?"

"That's how she says too!"

Trusand reflected with eyes vaguely aslant. He could think fast, but this time wasn't sure, and looked around to ask, "What do you mean?"

"That she's ashamed and don't want anybody to know."

"About being drunk?"

"Yes."

The gambler thoughtfully made his cigarette. Now he understood how it was and could have laughed, but instead said quietly, "Makes a man feel bad to have his wife go on periodic jags."

The kid flung back, "She's all right!"

The way he said it let Trusand know that Kate had been woman-smart in covering up because this fool kid sure would have jumped him. Trusand scratched a match under the table top. "Yes, Bill, she is all right," he agreed. "But women are hard to understand sometimes. You'll find out as you grow older."

"I know now from that Bobs girl!" His voice went up excitedly in telling. "She was there and called you and me cheats, and said Joel Allentyre said the same to your face and licked you when you pulled a knife!"

There wasn't a wisp of change in the gambler's face as he asked, "And you believe that?"

"No! I told her she was lying and knew it!"

That pleased Trusand a lot. *Good kid!* he thought; and said, "She was lying. As a matter of fact, Allentyre hit me when I wasn't looking. I'd just told him that he was a damn' liar in hinting that there'd be anything crooked on our part about that race."

The kid came right out with "I've liked him."

Trusand pondered, then admitted, "So did I, once." He sat down and laid a hand on the kid's knee and talked con-

fidentially. "That Allentyre is a pretty slick fellow. He fools you at first. Now he's got it in for me." Trusand blew smoke and watched it drift before he decided, "You're enough of a man that I can talk plain. Will you promise not to repeat what I tell you?" The kid nodded, then Trusand said, "Well sir, Bill, he's in love with Kate!"

"Her with him?" bounced back like an echo.

Trusand went deep to consider that, then shook his head because, no matter what, this kid would take up for Kate. He played his words as carefully as cards in saying, "Kate is all right. True blue! But if Allentyre can make people think I'm a damn crook— Don't you see? It will turn her against me."

A heavy thoughtfulness shadowed the kid's face. He felt luckless in being right about people. There was Red Sanger whom he had liked a lot. And John Grant who had almost turned out to be a good man. And Cutts whom he hadn't liked at all. And Bobs who kept him jumping from one side to the other, now liking her and now hating her. But he had liked Joel Allentyre and it hurt to find that he was slick and sneaky.

"And you say Bobs was at Willets's, hm?" Trusand asked. When the kid nodded, the gambler went on, "A nasty little thing, Bill! Why, I'll bet that she goes around telling that I struck Kate, blackened her eyes!"

"I bet it too! I heard her try to make Miss Kate say so!"

"I never laid a hand on her in my life, Bill, except in kindness!"

After a time Blacky came upstairs, his apron still about his fat waist, and uneasiness crawled around in his eyes. He lit a half-smoked cigar and wondered at the kid who watched at the window, impatient for sundown. Blacky said that so far nobody had seen hide nor hair of Red Sanger and the town didn't know what the hell to think. John Grant was gone too. Some guessed that maybe Grant had found Sanger alive and helped him off. No word yet about Mike Eads either.

Blacky furtively jerked his thumb, wanting the kid out of the room. So Trusand told the kid to go along up to Harlow's and order the pole buggy and team for sunset and wait there.

The kid left the room, but Blacky didn't say anything, and he let his cigar die and chewed on the stale butt, and had a kind of envious dislike as he watched Trusand put links and studs into a fresh shirt. The gambler was cold, so damned cold he didn't even sweat on hot days like other men. At last Blacky ran a slow hand over his hair and asked, "Changed your mind, Dan?"

"Why should I?"

"There'll be hell to pay if you lose that race after how Allentyre talked!"

Trusand slipped into the white shirt, faced the mirror to button up. "I never yet threw away the winning hand because somebody might get mad if he lost!"

"Everybody and his brother is trying to bet on Blue Chip now!"

"That's how I want it!" Then Trusand faced about, cold and rigid. "It's a horse race. After the gun is fired, all bets stand! The mare has tender knees. Allentyre's said it lots of times. That kid doesn't know a thing about training a quarter horse, so will it be crooked if he stoves her up?"

2

A few loafers had drifted in through the dusk to squat and whittle and tell smut-colored stories at the stable entrance. Trusand, already in a duster, drew on soft gloves as he waited. The overgrown Malk brought out the team and the kid sat in the buggy, rope in hand, leading Blue Chip. Trusand's was a cool, unfriendly air, yet when the kid said, "If you make her trot, I'll get right out!" the loafers overheard Trusand's submissive reply: "Whatever you say, son. It's up to you to train and ride our horse. I know nothing about it."

Then he took the lines from Malk and stepped into the buggy and drove off at a walk. The kid hunched over, proud and troubled that it was all up to him. He hadn't expected that, but wouldn't shirk. Sometimes now Blue Chip walked close alongside the buggy, head asway in light-footed walk. *Be all my fault!* he reasoned, staring at her. Sometimes he gazed at the star-speckled sky, not thinking of stars.

Trusand sat straight and silent, locked up within himself,

and he watched his thoughts as carefully as he had ever watched the cards fall from a stacked deck, making sure there wasn't a misdeal. Except for the tender spot on his jaw he hadn't a regret, not one. The quarrel with Allentyre had been a good thing, increasing excitement about the race, and men would back Allentyre's judgment, believing it was the sure-thing bet.

Nobody but Kate could knock the props out from under him. He realized now that the threat he'd made to keep her from telling wasn't enough. If she loved this kid enough to make up a disgraceful story about her black eyes, she loved him too much to let him lose the race, especially to Whitey Summers. Lucky thing the kid had found her today! Trusand knew how to fool Kate. He smiled thinly to himself. Nobody would ever know why Blue Chip lost her race—and she would lose it! People wondered, perhaps, why he was doing so much buggy driving these days. He was making sure that he could make a horse go lame, and nobody could tell why before or afterward; that is, if he worked it right. And after Blue Chip lost, the worst that could be said was that he oughtn't to have let an inexperienced kid train the horse.

On the curve around Little Knob the team's ears pitched forward. The cut-out road was narrow here, and the red dirt had weathered away from the bank side, piling up. Be a ticklish place to meet a wagon. Trusand strained, listening, and there wasn't a sound.

The shadowed bank lay like a long, slanting slab at a blind angle across the road just ahead, and when the team rounded the angle they halted without being checked.

Three horsemen waited in line there on the drop-off side; they had heard the buggy and stopped, giving the road. The nearest was Allentyre on a horse the kid had never seen before; next was Mike Eads, without a hat, his arm in a sling, his feet tied to hobbled stirrups. A man named Fulsom, with a rifle across his saddle, was behind.

The motionless horsemen were outlined above the drop-off. Only Allentyre was straight in the saddle. His look hit the gambler studyingly before it moved to the kid, and in the dim light the kid met Allentyre's gaze and tried to think,

You're no good! but the thought stuck like a fishbone crosswise in his throat.

Allentyre said, "Move ahead, Trusand. You're blocking the road!"

Instead, Trusand drew the slack from the lines and, with no sound of anger, said, "I've been thinking it over, Allentyre. You're a bigger scoundrel than I suspected!"

That was a cool play, and Trusand confidently made it and kept both hands in sight. He knew that with the kid in the buggy here beside him Allentyre wouldn't pull a gun. And Allentyre didn't say anything at all, so the silence was heavy and hot and hard to breathe in.

Trusand continued, speaking slow and clear: "You act like you expect and want my horse to win, yet you are putting Whitey Summers, a boy you have practically adopted, up on Rain Drop! You know Rain Drop is fast and tough. Doc Burrows is your friend. It looks to me like you're doing everything you can to beat my horse, yet are all set to say then, 'See? I told you it was rigged for Blue Chip to lose!' That's the kind of whipsaw you've put me up against, Allentyre! So just what have you got to say now?"

"Move ahead! You're blocking the road!"

The team moved with a cautious pull to keep from crowding the horsemen, and the off wheels rose on the slide drift from the high cutout bank.

Mike Eads called down sourly, "You damn' kid-Joner, you! Look out for him, Trusand!"

3

The road into Willets's ran through the pasture. The kid got out and opened a pole gate, then a quarter of a mile on another. They were heavy for his small hands. He had already struggled with them earlier today, walking his horse over the bottom poles.

The buggy drew up under the trees before the dark and silent house, and Trusand didn't "Hello the house." The kid felt it was bad manners not to, but wouldn't say so.

"Come along," Trusand told him, wanting the boy close by to insure a quiet welcome. Kate, here among friends, might lift her voice if she didn't see the kid.

The doors and windows were open for coolness. Trusand's gloved knuckles struck lightly, not wanting to hurt his hand. Sadie called, "Who's there?" Then the kid could hear her hushed anxiousness trying to awaken her sleep-dead husband.

Ned stumbled to the door with a lamp in his hand. The long summer underwear gave him a skinned look, but only partly skinned, because the shirt was wide open and his chest was black with thick hair. Sadie gathered a wrapper about her, peered from behind him for a moment, then whirled away. "What're you after?" Ned grumbled, not wanting any truck with this man.

"A little business to talk over, Ned." Trusand stepped so close that Ned, in unwilling awkwardness, moved aside and let him come into the room, where Trusand leisurely laid his hat aside, pulled his gloves, unbuttoned the duster. He didn't ask Ned anything about it, but simply said that he was leaving Blue Chip and the kid to board until the race. A dollar a day, he told Ned; and, drawing a purse, added, "In advance."

Ned watched the yellow glint; "cash money" was hard to come by, and Trusand laid fifteen dollars on the table. " 'F Sadie says so," Ned mumbled.

Trusand sat down with the quiet ease of waiting. Ned still held the lamp and was fuddled; this gambler's smooth, slippery coolness left nothing to take hold of and push against. And Ned wasn't quarrelsome but he didn't like him and wished he'd go.

Women's voices whispered furiously. Kate was coming in from the summer kitchen where a couch had been made down; then she appeared in the doorway, small and straight and somehow hard though she asked wearily, "Now what?"

Trusand's was a studied politeness of a play actor on the stage as he stood up and made a slight bow. "I am sorry about—everything!" he said gravely. Kate was all ice and steel inside and her clouded eyes stared angrily, but her look followed Trusand's hand toward the kid. "I have brought him back to you, Kate. I want you to know that everything is changed. Just turned around completely!"

Kate alone knew what he was talking about and she had a baffled distrust; for the kid's sake she would have liked

to believe, but there was no believing this man. She was bursting to say what she felt, what she thought, and so tell him to go to the devil and never come near her again, that he was as dead to her as Judas and despised as much. But the boy stood there, all eyes and ears and eagerness.

Sadie moved on noiseless bare feet and took the lamp from Ned as from a stupid child, set it on the table, and saw the gold, "What's this for?"

"To board the boy and horse until the race," said Trusand.

"Mister, you've made a deal!" Sadie's voice hadn't any friendliness but she clenched the gold pieces as if seizing a much-needed weapon. Ned's giant-sized body sagged to the wall and he scratched his breast and yawned, wanting to get back to bed.

In crossing the room Kate passed close to the kid, and her arm flew out like something that moved by itself and drew him to her; now he didn't squirm, but went along with her and stood by her as she got up close and stared at Trusand.

"I know you're bighearted, but after all—just what has changed you?" Kate demanded.

Sadie understood the sarcasm and held her breath, but Ned's slow brain didn't know sarcasm from sour apples, and he gawped wonderingly that a woman would call a man who had beat her up bighearted.

Trusand saw how it was and coolly judged Kate's feelings. Blarney wouldn't do, not now. Her words would claw him to pieces if he tried anything very apologetic. It had to be something that would fit in with her hateful opinion of him and of his motives. "You have the right idea, my dear," he said, and smiled crookedly. "After what's happened in town —John Grant, Sanger, and all!—things are changed and call for a new deal. Blue Chip's got to win or I'll be worse than broke! Now do you understand?"

Kate murmured bitterly, "Of course! Looking out for A number one!"

Trusand nodded. "That's just how it is, Kitty. Always!" He took up hat and gloves, then held out his hand to the puzzled kid. "I won't see you again, Bill, till just before the race. I'm going to rent the Kramer stable there at the edge of

town. Close to the track. And remember, Bill, we've got to win!"

Trusand's eyes sliced past Kate's stare as he turned, leaving. She was convinced in a way, but she knew him so well that there was still a kind of doubt; and when he had reached the door she called sharply, "Dan!"

Trusand faced about and Kate raised her hand. "Before God!"

Trusand's hand went up at once. "Yes," he said solemnly, "before God!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

NED FROWNED at the sky, smelling rain. Rain would mildew his unstacked hay. So Sadie went into the hayfield, barelegged, in short skirts and heavy shoes, with one of Ned's broken straw hats flopping about her red face.

George Knolds came by looking for a stray, and he leaned from the saddle to tell her that Joel Allentyre had told Dan Trusand he'd shoot him if he threw the race. Which was how the story had been churned about before it reached the Knolds place.

At noon Ned set Sadie on one of the broad-rumped horses, with harness jangling; but, figuring that the other horse was more tired than he was, Ned walked back from the field. Kate was doing her best at a dinner for them when Sadie bounded to the door. They went out to the washbench to talk over what George Knolds had told. That seemed to explain Trusand's abrupt change of plans, and Kate exclaimed, "Bless Joel's heart!"

That night it did rain but not hard, and Ned and Sadie went out to fork hay over so it would dry. The meadowlarks sang as if the dust had been washed out of their throats, and Bobs rode down through the pasture, taking lots of time to replace each heavy pole in the gate slot after she led the horse through.

Bobs wore a spurious look of coolness as she walked her horse up to where the kid, in the shade near the house, was

rubbing down Blue Chip, and he wouldn't let on that she was within miles of him. Her breath labored slowly between set teeth and it hurt to swallow; she'd get set to speak, then give a little gasp and wait. The kid moved so as to keep his back to her.

Bobs took off her hat and pushed angrily at her hair and wanted to bawl, but she was so mad and humiliated that tears would have sizzled on her cheeks. She'd told Joel all about coming to the Willetses, what she had seen and thought and said, and he made no comment on what she had seen and thought, but he sent her back to apologize for what she had said. "And do it proper!" he warned with a sternness that she understood.

Bobs gathered her strength, lifted her head, but the very best she could manage was a thin, weak, "Mr. Helgar?" If she had to apologize she'd do it as ladylike as she could. The kid heard, of course, but paid no attention. She tried to study out if it would be all right just to say, "I'm sorry I called you a cheat and a saddle tramp!" then wheel and lope off. But she looked ahead and saw how it would be when she related details to Joel. Of course Joel couldn't ever know more than she told him, and she was horribly tempted; but his way of bringing her up had made Bobs scornful of untruths and she'd always told him everything, right out, frankly. And she'd never in her life been punished for the truth—not like this. A whipping would have been easier because Joel had been angry with her for calling the kid a cheat and saddle tramp, and had sent her back.

Bobs wasn't allowed to swear, not out loud, but something very like, "Oh, damn!" now formed on her breath before she lifted her voice a little and with ladylike imperiousness called, "Bill!"

The kid acted deaf, and before Bobs had said anything more he caught up the halter's end, clucked, and trotted off with Blue Chip following. He went past the barnyard's wooden-hinged swing gate, then crossed the barnyard and vanished through the sunlit door into the stable's dimness.

Bobs slid from the saddle and petulantly slapped her leg with the hat. *All right, you can't say "I'm sorry!" to somebody that won't listen, can you?* But if she said that to Joel it would be like him to send her back again. Bobs fretfully

flung the split reins, one this way, one that, then she walked slowly toward the house. What she thought of that kid would have shocked a mule skinner.

Kate put down the pan of unpeeled potatoes. "Why, Bobs!"

Bobs dropped grumpily on the kitchen stoop and blamed Joel. Kate said, "You mustn't!" Then Bobs fussed, "I don't know what you and Joel see that's so wonderful in that Bill Helgarl And I'm not going out and chase and rope and hogtie him so I can say, 'I'm sorry, you miserable little brat, you!' " Kate advised her to wait till dinner, then he would come in and have to be mannerly.

Kate couldn't blow the cowhorn but she clanked the iron bar that Ned hung from a limb for her. It rang like a tocsin. Dinner passed; Ned and Sadie went back to the hay, now dry again and ready for stacking, but the kid hadn't come to dinner.

"I'd stay on a week if I thought he'd starve!" Bobs said.

Kate promised that when the dishes were done she'd go find him. Her fingers were nicked and sore and blistered; cooking for harvest hands was something new, and scrubbing with an iron-ring washrag broke fingernails and skin, too, but there was a new pride in her tiredness. She'd work her fingers to the bone for people like Sadie and Ned and the kid.

Bobs hated doing dishes and said so, but she wiped for Kate; and she wanted to know how a woman who'd been where there was music and dancing and lots of men could marry Ned and scrub and cook and pitch hay and get sunburned and be cheery about it.

"Love!" Kate snapped, sounding cross.

Bobs gave her a look that glinted, then asked innocently, "I couldn't love a man that wasn't good to me. Could you?" And when Kate said that nobody could, Bobs sprung her trap. "Then you don't love that gambler!"

"Bobs!"

"All right, you just couldn't do what you said and get bruised like that! I know, 'cause I played drunk and got on the stairs head down—like I fell on my face—just to see. Your nose is not even skinned!"

Kate started through the door. "I'll go after Bill now!" she said, and hurried away.

2

Kate paused in the dim stable and gasped for breath. She was hot and sweaty and scared. The idea of that child playing drunk and lying face down on the stairs, just to see!

Blue Chip was in her stall, so the kid couldn't be far, and she wanted him and in a hurry; then Bobs would go away. Kate called softly, coaxing a little, and after that more loudly and with an edge of impatience because she felt sure that he could hear her.

A chicken came cackling from under a manger, and Kate reminded herself to look for the nest later. Sadie wanted all the eggs she could get, sending them to town to trade for coffee and sugar. She envied Sadie, lovingly; Ned, though a pretty dull fellow, was worth it. Maybe it took some dullness to make a man all right! Looking backward, the past two years seemed an empty space through which she had fallen uselessly; just a gambler's lazy wife, fretting with clothes and perfume and needlework. A crooked gambler at that! She wondered how Joel guessed the race had been planned crookedly, and she had a greater and more admiring wonder of how he dare to threaten Trusand, who was a dangerous man.

Now she laid her hands on the wall ladder that went to the low loft and stepped two rungs up, then, pretending to know where he was, she called, "Bill, you come right down from there!" Her head tilted back, listening.

Kate heard a stir, but not in the loft, and looking across her shoulder she saw a tall shadow moving up with hurried, slouching stride from the rear of the stable. She jumped and shrank back into the corner by the ladder. The man was lanky, unshaven, looked wretchedly fierce, and carried a rifle. She was frightened. He avoided the slant of light through the door and stooped toward her and when, in the dimness, she said, "John Grant!" it was half guess.

"Yes ma'am." His voice was weary and gentle.

Kate sat on a box, not frightened now but felt as though her knees were broken.

"I've been waiting to talk to you, Miss Kate." Grant got down before her, sitting haunch to heels, the rifle laxly

across an elbow. His belt was heavy and glinted with shells. "Bill lit out back up the creek when he saw you coming. I didn't want him to see me. Nobody to! And I couldn't go up to the house because Bobs is there. But I know you won't try to have me caught when you know why I've come."

Kate shrank deeper into the dusty shadows and put a hand to her bruised face, hoping that he wouldn't notice. He misjudged her movement and protested, "Don't you be afraid of me, Miss Kate!"

"I'm not. But, John, you do look starved!"

He thought awhile, then he said, "I'm hungry for how I used to feel. To laugh easy and make a little music!" Grant shook his head regretfully, then poked a finger about on the ground and without looking up told her: "You maybe won't want to believe me, but Dan means to fix that race so the kid can't win and I just had to tell you!" Now he looked up steadily. "Anybody but you would try to have me caught!"

He went on to tell her as much as he knew of what Trusand had planned, and Kate listened as if she had known nothing about it before; she wanted him to feel that the risk he had taken in coming here was appreciated and would cause the race to be run honestly. He himself, he said, had already bet all the money he could raise on Rain Drop. Two to one was big odds, and Trusand meant to clean up! Grant said he didn't care about the money now, and he wasn't trying to spite Trusand. He just didn't want that kid to be tricked!

"So I come and waited for the chance to see you, Miss Kate, because—like Joel says—you'll not stand for anything that's not honest if you know about it!"

Kate felt a pitying warmth for this man she had never liked, and in kindliness she said, "John, I am sorry for you!"

"I'm sorry too. But I got to monkeyin' with something I knew better than to. Now I got no friends at all. The Crosbys said for me not to show up there again. It was them told me last night that you and the kid were here. My horse is staked out back. 'My horse,' uh? One I stole! I'm an outlaw, I guess. A man can't walk, and I'd be hung sure anyhow. So I'll be going," he said, but he didn't move and gazed down thoughtfully for a long time.

The hot silence hummed; sunlight blazed through the front stable door, and Blue Chip rattled her halter and stamped.

3

Bobs began to feel that it was taking Kate a long time, so she came from the house and shaded her eyes toward the stable, then started beyond to where the shallow creek drifted among the rocks and trees. She barely caught sight of somebody stooping along the shadowed rocks as if trying not to be seen, and guessed that it was the kid hiding out to keep watch on when she left.

A speckled hen's explosive flutter and squawk broke the stillness, and other chickens hurtled out from under the garden's currant bushes in hop-flying panic. Bobs's heart leaped into her throat and stuck; the crouching man who had frightened the chicken was now moving away with stealthy intentness along the far side of the garden's pickets. She lost sight of him but pole beans that were yellowing to ripeness grew there, and the vines stirred, betraying where he was. He pushed slowly through the home-split pickets and she could hear their brittle snap. Then the man went on hands and knees far down the barnyard fence until he was nearly opposite the north side of the stable. There he rose to a stoop and raised his hand, signaling before he crouched again, and he had a rifle.

Bobs swung about toward where he had signaled and saw that another man was now going over the fence that joined the pasture. He also had a rifle and, when he hit the ground, he didn't pause but lurched forward on the run, keeping the old haystack between him and the stable. Her thoughts raced in fear and wonder.

Then she saw that a third man, whom she hadn't known about, was already behind the stack; and when he appeared she recognized him even at that distance, and the fear died away, but wonder jangled every thought. He stood up with slope-shouldered sag and began to move with heavy stealth, rifle in hand, for the southwest corner of the stable. Bobs screeched and tore down to the swing gate and ignored the sheriff's exasperated arm-waving that told her to shut up

and get away. She jumped up and down, crying out: "Miss Kate's in there! Don't you—any of you!—dare shoot! Oh, Kate! Miss Kate! Men—rifles—sheriff!"

Kate gathered her skirts and leaned anxiously through the blaze of sunlight at the wide stable door, and the sheriff lowered the rifle he was holding hip high.

"We know John Grant's in there!" he told Kate, and flopped a hand toward where Bobs, now staringly quiet, had ruined his surprise. All a part of the law officer's worrisome luck. "We didn't know about you. You've seen him?" Kate's admission had pity in it. The sheriff rumbled slowly, "Now it might help if you'll step back and tell him he's surrounded. Not a chance! And tell him, please, ma'am, I don't want to have to shoot a boy I've known so long and liked so well."

Kate turned back out of the sunlight and called pleadingly, and there wasn't a reply. The most dreaded of all things had come to Grant now, and he stood erect in the shelter of a stall, his face moving with a kind of tense rhythm to and fro, back and forth, as he watched in two directions. She came close and spoke again, and he said, almost trance-like, "You better get out."

Then Kate edged into the stall and stood a little behind him, and put a hand to his shoulder. "You heard, John! Won't you give up?"

"No!"

"But you haven't a chance!"

"I know it." His voice had no emphasis; and she talked hurriedly, pleading with him, but he wouldn't reply and pushed at her without looking around. "You go now! They can't say I kept you here to hide behind!"

Kate left him and began to run up between the stalls, and a gun that wasn't close banged. The bullet came through the propped-open rear door and splintered wood from a rafter above her head. Somebody had mistaken her hurrying shadow. She stumbled through the door and went to her knees but jumped up and called out that she wasn't hurt, then ran as hard as she could toward the house.

The sheriff backed away from the stable until he could see clear down to the pole gate near the creek, and he bel-

lowed wrathfully; "Damn you, Crosby! Stop that shootin' till I say so!"

Bobs had the gate open and clutched at Kate, and kept by her and shrilled to know who was there, who was it the sheriff was after? But she wouldn't go in the house with Kate, and ran back to scrouge behind logs at the woodpile, then got right up for fear she might miss something.

The sheriff was now near the stable's front door, standing in grizzled doggedness, and Bobs could hear him saying, "John, you ain't got a chance in the world to get away! Come on out and I'll take care of you. You'll have a fair trial!" The sheriff's shadow lay black against the front of the stable as he stood in listening patience, waiting for Grant to think it over.

Grant's rifle opened up but there weren't any bullets coming toward the sheriff. He was firing through the rear of the stable and toward the creek. The sheriff nodded in weary understanding; he himself had revealed that Crosby was there, and it was Crosby who had informed the sheriff of where Grant was likely to be found. The sheriff hadn't believed that Grant would shoot anybody, but of course Crosby made a difference, having pretended to be a friend.

The sheriff got back to the corner of the stable just in time to see the kid jump the lower fence and cut catty-cornered straight for the back door of the stable where Grant's rifle was cracking through fast. He shot only toward Crosby who was flat down and out of sight, safe behind rocks from head-on fire; but Grant had him pinned and splattered lead on either side, trying for ricochets.

The kid yelled in anguish that Blue Chip was in there, and said he was going right in after her; and the sheriff told him not to be a fool, but to wait a minute and he could get his horse out.

Sheriff Fields walked up near the stable and called with authoritative coolness, "John, hold up your fire! The boy's coming in to take out his horse!" The shooting stopped, but Grant was silent, and the sheriff said, "Come on, John! The boy has a right to his horse!"

Grant called back cautiously, "You won't play tricks?"

"No tricks! But won't you let me come along for a talk?"

Grant's voice went up, thin, sharp, afraid: "You stay

out!" He knew that face to face the old sheriff would persuade him to weaken and give up.

The kid whipped breathlessly to the back door and stopped stock-still as if blinded; in a way, he was, since he came from full sunlight. Grant said, "It's all right, Bill. For you, anything! If I'd thought, I'd turned her loose myself!" His voice strained pleadingly for a bit of friendliness, but the kid scurried by him and in a minute was backing Blue Chip from her stall.

The front door was now the nearest, and he went there and passed through and out of sight.

Grant stood up and looked toward the wide, empty door where the hot sun slashed, and he was forgetful that pointed rifles might be slipping nearer and nearer, and almost didn't care. A loneliness that was utter and bleak came upon him. He hadn't a chance. It was the law's right to kill him to take him; also to take him, then to kill him. And the law would. He couldn't escape. And he hadn't a friend.

The weariness within him was an ache to give up, to lie down and sleep, and awaken and find it was all a shocking dream, and that he was really back at the cabin with the kid and the horse. But even then the crooked shadow of that gambler would be over him. And would the kid ever know that he had risked all this so that the race would be run honestly? His prayer-shaped thoughts begged hopelessly even now for the chance to turn over a new leaf.

Then the sunlight was blocked out. The sheriff stood there, and his deep, slow voice called tiredly, "John, this can't go on! I'm empty-handed and comin' in for a talk. We'll fix it up somehow!"

Fear exploded within Grant, and he set himself to shout back a warning that wouldn't come. "No, Sheriff, no!" was all he could say, and it was a shrill admission that he couldn't meet the sheriff face to face, even in friendliness. His hands began to shake. He wouldn't so much as point a gun at this man who had always been his friend, and the sagacious old sheriff had decided that that was just how it would be and started to come in.

Grant yelled, "Wait! Wait for a minute!" and he was begging. With a quick stoop he laid the cocked rifle on the ground at his feet and began to back into the deeper dimness

of the stall. Then he drew his revolver and sat down in a corner, propping himself against the slope of the manger. He cocked the revolver and put it to his head.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

FOLKS SADIE had never seen before came to the farm for John Grant's funeral; they overran the barnyard, grouped at the stall where Grant had killed himself, and poked among the rocks down by the pole gate to see where bullets had hit. One family had driven eight miles in a farm wagon, expecting to make a day of it, but Sadie didn't set a dinner and invite people in.

Quite a bunch gathered at the grave across the creek. A preacher had been asked but didn't arrive; so, as something ought to be said, the sheriff took off his hat and repeated the Lord's Prayer. After that, Ned and George Knolds shoveled in the dirt.

During the night Kate heard the kid trying not to cry and she tiptoed near and listened to him; then, feeling it was the kinder thing, tiptoed away.

No one had come from Allentyre's. When Bobs loped off in excitement she hadn't yet spoken to the kid but she wasn't sent back; and of course Joel wouldn't come anywhere near Kate, not after how Trusand had talked in the Palace; and Kate, having heard how her name had been used, felt that she must avoid Joel or people would make even more misuse of her name.

A couple of days later Boran jogged over to Willets's place on a tall horse and in a stock saddle that somehow didn't fit him; however, even in that kind of saddle he had a smooth sort of bounce, as easy as breathing. The kid had never seen anybody ride that way before and the stirrups looked too short. Boran fingered a light switch as he talked in the field with Ned about buying hay for the ranch.

When the cowhorn sounded Boran came along for dinner, moving with the alert slight shoulder stoop that some horsemen have on foot. Ned slouched heavily into place at the

head of the table, reached afar for the boiled potatoes, saying, "Take seats"; but Boran didn't sit until the women were in their chairs. His spurs tinkled faintly on the neat boots, and his quick words were sometimes not easily understood. He talked about the horses over at Allentyre's stable as if they were people. Ned ate like a hurrying deaf man, and all the while the kid kept his face down, leery of Boran, wondering if he had come to snoop. The gambler had convinced the kid that Allentyre was slick, deceitful, and would help Whitey win that race.

But after dinner Boran cornered the kid, and his talk was still of horses, of the seat and reins and hands; and which foot does a horse move first when starting into a walk? "A hind one," said the kid.

Boran talked to Blue Chip as to a sweetheart, using a tenderness that the kid felt but was too shy to put into words, and they led her with them into the shade down by the creek. Boran's pipe was fragrant. He went over the "girl" with fingers that searched like a fine-tooth comb. The knees, he said, were sound as knots but she must be shod before the race.

Boran spoke of Whitey but didn't tell the kid that he had been sent from the ranch, never to set foot on it again. Allentyre had caught him striking a horse in the face with his fist.

The kid heard that Whitey was a good rider though hard on a horse's mouth; most Westerners were. Boran screwed up his face in talking about cowboys. They did ride with knee and thigh, and didn't hang onto the bridle to balance themselves, but their seat was hard on a horse, their hands were worse, he said. Good riders never used a high-handed yank to jerk a horse down. The kid scrouged up tight within himself; he yanked reins that way. And Boran was sure that the devil himself had put his own ideas into the design of the stock saddle, yet off the ranch he rode one of the monstrosities because everybody made such taunting fun of the pad. In the Old Country a stirrup was thought to be about right when it touched the rider's anklebone before the ball of the foot was set in it; that gave a man a chance to ease and distribute his weight on the horse.

It made the kid heart-heavy to learn that Whitey was a

wonder in the bareback quarter race, though the quarter race, as run in this part of the country, wasn't a race at all in Boran's eyes. It had developed, so he'd heard, through cowboys bragging about how fast their cutting ponies could turn and go from a standing start. Whitey was good at it, also quick and tricky. On the whirlaway his weight rolled with the horse, never throwing one off stride; and in such a short race it was the horse that spun the fastest that was nearly sure to win. The race was over in less than half a minute, much less.

"How about you, Bill?"

The kid's eyes fell as he mumbled that he'd never tried it, and he looked up with mute request. Then Boran mentioned that just by happen-so he had a racing surcingle in his saddlebag; by the same coincidental happen-so he had a pistol in the saddlebag too. So how'd it be if they picked out a course over there in the sandy pasture and ran the girl about sundown? He thought Allentyre's 2 A.M. was a little extreme; the important thing was to keep the horse moving afterward until she cooled.

They tied Blue Chip in the shade with nothing to graze on and went into the pasture, carrying Ned's spade and hoe and rake. The kid tried hard to do as much work as Boran, who trotted about in the hot sun, picking up and tossing field stones aside, kicking with his heels to loosen some, taking the spade to dig out others and tamp in dirt.

The kid thought Allentyre might not like it if he knew Boran was helping him. He'd have liked to ask if Allentyre really wanted Rain Drop to win so people would think bad things of Trusand; and was he in love with Miss Kate? But he wouldn't ask. The kid knew how to keep his mouth shut; for instance, not once to anybody had he mentioned Red Sanger.

The Willets's colt regarded them inquisitively and kept barely beyond hand's reach, but he ran to the fence and whinnied toward his mama when she came from the field, plodding before Ned. Ned went about his other chores before he called the two cows from the pasture and, with a bucket over his arm, followed them to the shed. His only interest in horses was how well they helped a man at his toil.

The sun was down and there wasn't a whisper of a breeze,

and it was hot when the kid drew up his knees for Boran to fasten the surcingle firmly about them; he felt the warmth of Blue Chip's body come through his pants, and thought maybe Allentyre's 2 A.M. was proper.

Blue Chip knew right off what this meant; her head lifted, she glanced from side to side with ears stuck out. Boran said it made no difference which position she drew, she'd turn away from the other horse. Better, he thought, to use a halter than a bridle; and no need to guide her around because she'd go faster than anybody could tell her. Just hold her steady until the gun signaled, being sure she wasn't off balance. "Or that you aren't either!" Boran said.

A thing to watch out for was that Whitey didn't fret her by backing up from the starting line, seeming to steal a couple of feet. He was tricky at that sort of thing. Of course he couldn't really steal them; the starter wouldn't signal unless the horses stood nose even. But Blue Chip didn't know that; she'd fidget, look around, want to back up, too, sometimes try to break before the signal. And he warned the kid to keep low, hold his temper, not to look around to see what was going on. "Lad, keep quiet and trust the starter to get you away fair."

Boran stepped aside, raised the pistol overhead, and fired. Blue Chip swirled with cat-quick flurry of hoofs. "Can spin on a dime," Allentyre had said. The kid felt that she turned on a pin point. He had thought that he knew all about what it was like for a horse to turn fast under him, but this was different: he felt the webbed surcingle strain against his light weight, and there was something of the same whip-cracker snap in his neck as when a horse pitched because he hadn't had his head low enough. And he had been holding the halter rope too tight, and her sudden swirl made him overpull and her head flinched.

The kid knew all that and felt bad about it, and Boran was gently silent as he unfastened the surcingle. When the kid was off the horse, he looked up through the dusk at Boran and said humbly, "Now I see why some folks think I won't win. I wish you'd learn me good!"

2

Two days later Boran came back leading another horse, as black as Blue Chip and nearly as heavy and just as gentle. By happen-so, Boran also had another surcingle; and again he and the kid took the spade and rake and hoe and widened the course, clearing away rocks so two horses could run.

Kate came into the pasture just at sundown. After Boran had strapped the kid on Blue Chip, he mounted the other horse and Kate cinched him on. Then she took the pistol and stepped aside but wasn't to fire until Boran whistled.

In no time at all Boran's horse had Blue Chip fretting and backing; and when they'd get on the line again, she'd half turn her head with ears laid back, mad; the kid got all goose-pimply himself with an angered set to his jaw.

Boran whistled, the gun fired, and when Blue Chip turned, Boran was a half length ahead.

By lanternlight down at the stable that night Boran talked to the kid about horses and racing, about the cool head and gentle hands; then they climbed to the loft and slept side by side without undressing. Boran roused the kid in the cool predawn, before even Ned was up, but not before Kate was already waiting.

In the gray of the morning it was Boran who rode Blue Chip, and the kid on the other horse backed up and sidled off, trying to make Blue Chip fidget and break; and the kid saw what "hands" mean on the reins or even the halter, and he heard Boran's low voice hum soothingly. She showed confidence that Boran wouldn't let her be cheated, and stood braced, quivering alertly. This time it was the kid who gave the signal and, when Kate fired, Blue Chip turned and went so fast that the kid was again a half length behind.

That afternoon the kid sat on a log at the woodpile and hugged his knees and looked as if he didn't have a friend in the world. Kate came and sat by him and smiled to say, "Don't worry, Bill. Mr. Boran is proud of you. Joel has sent him over here to stay on until you learn."

The kid made her repeat that and he tried to think. Allentyre had sent over his trainer and horses to pay board to the Willetses, all just so Blue Chip would be well ridden. He

pondered and got muddled, then jumped headlong at the guess. "He's doing it just because you want him to!"

"Why, Bill, whatever do you mean?"

"Didn't you ask him to?"

"Of course I didn't! What's put a thought like that in your head?"

The look in the kid's eyes as he said, "Joel likes you better'n me!" made Kate flush, and she snapped at him, and he shut up. She knew what he thought, and it hurt her and frightened her a little too; she scrutinized him as her thoughts pounded wildly. It seemed that even this boy believed a thing like that of her and Joel.

3

Trusand had a passing rancher leave word for the kid to come into town; when he was ready to set out Sadie grabbed him with a sweaty wrestling sort of good-by hug. "I'll make Ned take Election Day off!" she said. Kate held to his hand for a long time, and promised, "You'll win, Bill. I know you will!"

He hadn't started until the cool of the evening, and he let Blue Chip go at a drowsy walk, so it was late when he slid off under the lantern at Harlow's. Malk hulked sleepily from the shadows and told him, "Doc Burrows'll mebbe call off that race, I hear!"

The kid's heart plunked down against his stomach; and on his way to the Palace he noticed a light still burning in the doc's office, which he used also for living quarters; the kid came near to going up there right then.

As soon as he was in the Palace, Blacky grinned down over the bar. Business was slack and Blacky had been taking a few by himself. His dark face was bleary, and he said, "No, don't know where Dan is. Ain't been in all evenin'. Here, have a bottle of pop." His movements flickered with unsteadiness, and as the pop foamed into a glass, Blacky said, "Dan's scared the race'll be called off."

The kid stiffened. "Why would it be?"

Some lonely fellow strolled up and dropped a quarter in the music box; there wasn't any dancing, there wasn't anybody to dance with. Blacky lifted his voice against the

jingle-jangle and made the owlish pronouncement: "'F you afraid you can't lick somebody you won't fight 'im, will you?" A poker game dawdled and one of the players called loudly for a round of drinks.

When Blacky carried the bottle and glasses to the poker table the kid put the pop back on the bar and hurried out, running along the street. He groped up the drugstore's dark stairs and opened the door.

Doc Burrows said, "Eh? Oh, you?" and took his stocking feet off the table, laid the book aside, picked up another pipe. "What you looking so mad about, Bill?"

A question burned in the kid's tight blue eyes; he put it into words with, "You scared to run your horse?"

"Hm? Oh, I see. Set down, Bill." The doc's fingers went through his shaggy hair. "Maybe in a way you're right. Why?"

"Why yourself?"

The doc's forefinger and thumb pulled at the corners of his mouth reflectively. How tell this boy that he was "scared" Rain Drop would win, not honestly? Too much money, too damn much money was showing up. A horse race was a horse race, and odds invited bets. Rain Drop wasn't a slouch but Blue Chip was blooded stock, and ought to win if properly ridden. Also he believed that Trusand was crooked as a dog's hind leg. But more than anything else the doc was afraid the race might bring on another quarrel between Trusand and Allentyre, and that gambler was dangerous, quick, mean. The doc had talked frankly with Allentyre, who insisted that the race must be run, and said that he didn't believe the gambler was a good enough horseman to get away with anything crooked, no matter how cunningly he tried. "Doc, you'll be on the watch. So will Boran. And I mean to keep my eyes open too."

Now the doc's lips went plop-plop-plop on the pipe. "Yes, Bill, I guess I am a little scared. Yet I reckon I'll let my horse run. But, son, you watch out close! There's a hell of a lot of ways to lose a horse race!"

Down on the street the kid now saw a thin glow of light filtering around the edge of the drawn curtains over the Palace. It hadn't been there before. Trusand was home.

The kid found the Palace side door locked, so he had to go through the saloon again, and he went with slow feet,

moodily, his ears burning from how the doc had talked. Upstairs he hadn't reached the doorknob when he heard a woman laugh in Miss Kate's room, and he recognized the languidly lifted voice that said, "Dan, darling!"

Anger hit the kid; the jar of it maddened and weakened him, and took his breath. He'd always liked Doris. Now he gathered himself with panted breathing to fling open the door and spill the wickedest words he knew upon their heads; yet he stood still. He quivered with the strain of wanting to do just that, but he knew that if he did, Trusand wouldn't let him ride Blue Chip. It was a new thing for the kid to wrestle with his impulses, hold himself back; always, what he felt like doing he had done—or tried. But more than anything else on earth right now he wanted to ride that horse and have her win!

At last he tiptoed in deliberate furtiveness down the hall, down the stairs, and, letting himself out at the side door, he stamped savagely to Harlow's and climbed into the hayloft, mad, hurt, confused.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

OLD HARLOW gave the kid an awakening shake. "Dan's below with some fellows." It was near noon and hot. The kid had sweated while asleep but his mouth and nose were dry and, as soon as he was enough awake to remember, sourness settled within.

"You look mighty peaked," Harlow said.

Three or four strangers were about Trusand. He studied the kid's face and asked, "Are you sick, Bill?" The kid said, "Sort of," sullenly, his eyes hot and tired.

Harlow nibbled on a twist of tobacco, worked it into the side of his cheek, then told the kid it wasn't anything but being anxious, and he offered to lead the horse out himself for the men's inspection.

The kid wouldn't have it and put a long rope on Blue Chip's halter and led her into the weedy vacant lot behind the corral. Trusand stood apart, his pale face as blank as an

unprinted page, while the men trampled among the dry weeds, walking around and around the mare, feeling her muscles, comparing her with Rain Drop. They praised Blue Chip, thanked Trusand, and said they'd sure bet on his horse, then went away.

Remembering Doris's laugh and "Dan, Darling!" made it hard for the kid to talk to Trusand, but he did snap, "Why'd you care who bets on her?" For an instant Trusand's dark eyes hardened with a faint glint, suspiciously. "You're a little out of sorts this morning, Bill. Better get some rest and sleep." He smiled crookedly, as if guarding a secret, but confided, "I want enough money up so those fellows betting against us will be skinned alive."

2

The kid took his horse to the stable Trusand had rented.

A family had moved into the Kramer house which Kate had once wanted to rent for a "home," and a scrawny woman came out to the stable with two baby towheads hanging to her skirts. She was tired and sickly looking, with a screech-sound in her pleasantest tone, and she thought Mr. Trusand was a mighty fine man.

Trusand had probably given the carpenter no more than ten or fifteen dollars for work and material, but the box-shaped shed at the rear of the yard had a new flooring in the stall and the door of the unglassed manger window had been repaired. Hay was in the yard, grain in the woodshed, and there was a new water bucket, a lantern, and a filled oilcan. The kid had wrangled a blanket out of Harlow—for Blue Chip.

When the woman said that Mr. Trusand had fixed it up for the kid to board with her, he said, "I'll eat maybe, but I'm goin' to sleep out here!" His voice was unfriendly.

He put down a thick bedding of hay and made a pallet for himself right up under the manger's slope. Blue Chip wouldn't step on him.

That night he hadn't any idea what time it was when he awakened, but he led the horse out into the starlight. She didn't need exercise, not after the long walk in from Willetses; so he squatted down and looked toward the grove

where the race would be run. His world was all broken up; it seemed that nobody stood fast to what he had thought of them, nobody but Miss Kate. Now he hated even Trusand; and never before in his life had he felt hate without showing it, defiantly. And not showing it somehow made him ashamed, as if he were cowardly. He was hurt and lonely and troubled, and when he couldn't stand it any longer he went to the horse and put an arm around her head. "Just you, and Miss Kate and me!" he said.

3

The next morning a man drove a farm wagon down to the grove, lifted out a harrow, put his team to it, and dragged the harrow up and down the quarter mile straightaway; the kid's heart jumped as he watched from afar. Two days more now.

That afternoon a covered wagon hauled into the grove; two men and a woman got out and went into camp. During the day men drifted from uptown and tried to question the kid, and they straggled off, carrying word that there must be something wrong with the damn' horse; the kid was so sullenly tongue-tied and wouldn't bring her out or let them in.

Near sundown Joel Allentyre rode by on his way to the race course; and there he got off and walked about, trying the ground with his heel.

The kid broodingly watched. A slick fellow and in love with Kate, Trusand had confided; also, "If he can make people think I'm a damn' crook—don't you see?" The kid hated Trusand all right, but his thoughts were still entangled with the gambler's words; they had been so plausible and seemed straightforward, especially that night on the road. Allentyre had swallowed them like a man who didn't know what to say back, and the kid then believed that it was just as Trusand said.

Now he didn't quite have disbelief. His head wasn't very clear but his feelings were, and his feelings wanted the assurance that Allentyre was an all-right man. *I've got to know!* the kid thought. Certainly it wasn't true now that Allentyre hoped Blue Chip would lose. *I ain't all fool!* the kid told

himself, knowing that he had somehow been fooled; lied to, maybe. He promised himself, *I don't care how it sounds, I'm going to ask—right out! First chance I get!*

It was faintly dark when Allentyre, in returning from the grove, rode from the street and stepped out of the saddle where the kid waited before the stable. "How are you, Bill?"

The kid's chest tightened. He had promised to ask questions and he would because he did what he promised himself, but this was going to be harder than he'd thought. "I'm a'right," he half mumbled, keeping his face lifted. "And me that rode nearly before I walked—Mr. Boran taught me things I didn't know about!"

That pleased Allentyre, and he said, "Me, too, Bill! And I'd thought I was quite some man on horseback!" He motioned toward the grove. "I'm sending that harrow back tomorrow. Blue Chip's close to a thousand pounds. That's heavy for her build, and I don't want her knees strained." The reins fell and he took out tobacco and papers.

The kid pumped in his breath slowly, making ready to ask the question. But Allentyre was saying, "I'm told the blacksmith'll shoe her the morning of the race. I want to have a look as the shoes go on. Send word to the hotel for me when you go to the smith's shop, will you?"

The match rasped along Allentyre's pants leg, flickered up, went to the cigarette. He shook out the match, broke it, reached for the reins and parted them over the horse's neck. "Boran says you ride like a two-legged leech, and the mare loves you! So long, Bill. And luck!"

He turned away; his hand was on the horn and his foot lifting to the stirrup as the kid blurted desperately, "You in love with Miss Kate?"

Allentyre's hand slipped from the horn and the reins fell again. He faced about and asked softly, "What was it you said, Bill?"

The kid wanted to mutter, "Nothing," but it was too late to wiggle out. Allentyre had heard clearly enough, so the kid pulled a long breath, lowered his voice sulkily, "I asked are you in love with Miss Kate?"

Allentyre put the cigarette to his mouth, took it away, then set his hat back on his head and gazed toward the night-darkened Humps that loomed through the twilight.

"Why do you ask?" The kid shut up and wouldn't say anything, so Allentyre turned and came near and spoke quietly: "You've used man-sized trouble-making words, son. Where'd you get them?" No reply. Then Allentyre said with a firmness that wasn't to be denied, "Answer me!"

"I promised not to!"

"Not to what?"

"Tell anybody!"

"Then why'd you bring it up?"

"I got to know 'f I been lied to!" the kid said savagely.

Allentyre again looked off into space. No need to ask whom he had promised. The earnest kid unwittingly had revealed everything but the name, and the name was implied; and Allentyre now half damned himself for having left this kid within poison-reach of the gambler. The cigarette died between his fingers. He couldn't, of course, say, "Yes"; and almost any other reply would inform the kid that Trusand had lied to him, and it would be like this kid to tell the gambler so—and there'd be hell to pay. Allentyre had it in mind to do the paying himself, all of it.

So at last he said with reproving gentleness, "Bill, I'm a little surprised that you ask a thing like that of me. After all, Miss Kate is married!" He stepped quickly into the saddle and cantered off.

4

The night was so hot that the kid left the manger window open, lay down, dozed off, and was awakened by something that bounced against the stable. Blue Chip took up the halter's slack in a backward bump that jarred the building. The kid peered from the window and it was dim and quiet outside. The campfire had died down in the grove. Another rock struck near the open window, not far from the kid's head, and right away he guessed that somebody who didn't know he was with the horse was trying to scare her, worry and maybe hurt her. Lots of people didn't want Blue Chip to win. *Plunk!* Came again. A heavier rock than the others, striking low and thudding to the ground.

The kid swelled up to yell wrathful curses, then swiftly changed his mind because he wanted to do more than scare

the fellow off unhurt, and he wished for a gun. Another rock cracked on the boards, and Blue Chip snorted and jerked at the halter rope.

The kid inched open the stable door into the alley and slipped out, taking the pitchfork with him. He crouched low at the side of the building and edged along to the corner where he hovered down, straining his eyes in the bright starlight. His blood seethed but he held himself motionless, as patient as an Indian in ambush and as savage.

About a hundred feet off he saw a figure rise and an arm heave in a throwing motion. Then the figure dropped flat, and a stone thumped on the sloping roof of the stable and rattled off. The kid leaped out and charged in barefoot silence, and the use-polished steel tines glittered wickedly.

Whitey jumped up and squawked and ran, but he ran in boots. The kid was barefoot and he didn't feel the weed stubble, sandburs, hard spines of dried tumbleweed; he knew it was Whitey and meant to kill him.

Whitey knew that, too, and he shrieked as if he were being killed as he cut through vacant lots along the thinly built-up street toward his mother's house. His boots had a crashing lope, and he squawked at every jump. Lamplight flared here and there in windows after the runners had passed, and hasty voices began to call from porches. Whitey crossed a sidewalk, whipped into the street, turned, and ran along a fence that was breast high. His over-the-shoulder glances let him know that the hurtling shadow was closing in behind him, and Whitey yelled, "Maw! Maw! Maw!"

The kid stabbed out and missed and was off stride as Whitey swerved around the fence corner into the alley behind the Summers's house, and screamed for help while he jiggled frantically with the snap catch of the back-yard gate. He went through and the gate hadn't snapped back to its latch when the kid knocked it wide, following hard.

A thick spread of washing hung on the lines and Whitey dashed among it with head down, and the kid gathered himself into a sprint and stabbed out again. His fork went into a shirt that dangled there with arms down, and the kid scarcely paused as he lunged against the clothespins and went on, carrying the shirt along on the tines.

Whitey disappeared through the open door, but Mrs.

Summers stood on the stoop, her back to the light, and she held a flatiron menacingly. Mrs. Summers shrilled, "You little wretch! You'd pitchfork Whitey!"

The kid sullenly pulled the shirt from the fork and threw it down and he told her, "'F he ever comes near my stable again, I'll kill him!"

And the next morning the kid hadn't finished breakfast when the sheriff got off in the alleyway, looked in the stable, plodded on up to the back door. The woman, uneasy at the sight of the star, let him in. The sheriff took a chair across from the kid at the kitchen table, and the woman shooed the towheads out and then came back to listen.

Mrs. Summers and Whitey had already been over to the sheriff's house; and the sheriff now eyed the kid somberly. "She says you laid for Whitey and tried to pitchfork him, and swore you'd kill him!"

"I'll die trying 'f he comes throwing rocks at my stable again!"

"Uhn?" The sheriff slowly pulled his mustache as he listened to the kid tell how it had been, then he muttered reflectively, "So that's the way of it?" He had, of course, suspected that Whitey had been doing something more than merely walking along toward home when the kid waylaid him. Nobody, however, would ever make Mrs. Summers believe that.

"But now see here," said the sheriff gravely. "You didn't have to take a pitchfork to him! If you'd have hollered, he'd have stopped. And didn't I say something about if there was another fight between you two I wouldn't let you ride in that race?"

The kid looked right at him to ask with wide-open earnestness, "Do you think I done wrong?"

Then the sheriff cleared his throat and pulled harder at his mustache, sighed wearily, and told the kid to go ahead and eat. The sheriff had seen Trusand's white linen shirt that had been stabbed and torn. Presently he said, "Mrs. Summers is a fine, hard-working lady, Bill. Who's going to pay for that shirt?"

"Don't keep me from ridin', and I will."

The sheriff pushed back his chair and got up, put on his

hat, and, after pretending to study a little, he decided, "All right, son." Then he plodded out, tiredly dreading tomorrow's Election Day.

5

Another covered wagon pulled into the grove; others would come before night, and many would have a horse or two tied to the endgate. Race horses of a kind, and men would dicker among themselves for matches. The harrow went back to the course, its iron teeth biting deeper into the soil.

The kid was rubbing Blue Chip as if the satiny shine of her black coat would put speed into her legs when a buggy, with its top down, pulled into the alley and stopped.

Trusand had Doris beside him. He sat stiff and stylish in a high-crowned black hat, the brown duster about him, and his gloved hand held a whip for show. Those high-steppers, that Harlow rented only to people he knew, didn't need a whip. They were too spirited to be tied here or left in Doris's hands, so he called, "Bill!" and his voice was up in a sharp lift.

The kid almost refused to go out, but he did, dragging his feet. They were sore from pricks and bruises of last night and he'd had trouble drawing on his boots. Doris sat up prettily with a thin laprobe over her knees, and her gloved fingers toyed with the fringe as she smiled at the kid. He looked back at her with hurt, hard, dry-glittering eyes.

Trusand's voice was edged. Fellows had been coming down to look at Blue Chip and were the same as told to go to hell. "I won't have that!" the gambler said, showing hardness. "Why, there's talk that she's not in shape! Hints that we're afraid to show her! That makes men bet against her!"

A look like death came into the kid's face. "Ain't that what you want?"

Trusand didn't say anything right away, but the pebble-hard shimmer brightened his eyes, and, if he'd done as he felt, he would have slashed the whip down over the kid's head.

Doris exclaimed, "Why, Dan, the boy's sick!"

"Yes—or worse!" Trusand murmured, cold and quiet. "Are you going to do as I want? Show the mare! Tell people to bet on her! She's a race horse. That's what she's for—to be looked at, talked about, bet on!"

The kid didn't hesitate an instant, but walked up to a front wheel hub and stared at Trusand as he said: "You told me that I was to do like I wanted with Blue Chip. That you don't know about horses. And you don't! I ain't going to fret her around in the sun for ever' half-drunk man with a dollar to squint at and play like he can tell by lookin' what horse'll run the fastest!"

The buggy team tossed their heads and stamped but Trusand held them steady without taking his eyes from the kid's face. The gambler showed a studying coldness before the crooked smile twitched, and his voice was slow and hard: "It's just possible that somebody else may ride that horse tomorrow. She's mine, you know! Now will you do as I say?"

The kid right off said, "No!" Just why he said it, he couldn't have told, but he was angry, and defiant, and hated Trusand, and was about ready to tell him so and why.

Doris even looked a little pleased at the kid's answer, but she was anxious, too, and her dark eyes trembled between the back of Trusand's head and the boy's set face.

The gambler didn't move an eyelash as he seemed to peer from behind his pallor-mask. He had forced a showdown and now coolly realized that he had lost. He'd like to have batted the kid about the head, teach him a thing or two, but that wouldn't do. It wouldn't do to pull the kid and put up another rider at this last minute, either. Trusand was caught in a kind of whipsaw and knew it. He wanted all the money possible to be bet on Blue Chip, but he didn't want it to look as though he had planned for her to lose, and it would if the kid didn't ride her.

So he laughed. Doris's hand closed approvingly on his arm when he said, "You do beat the devil! All right, Bill, have it your own way! And if we don't win it'll be nobody's fault but yours!"

The buggy rolled on swiftly and Doris looked back and fluttered her hand at the kid.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE BLACKSMITH had sent word to have Blue Chip at the shop by sunup sure. In the dawn the kid walked her along the alley behind the Alpine Hotel where the colored porter was dumping spittoons at the back door of the saloon.

"Yassuh, I'll go tell Mistah Joel right off," he said, his eyes glowing at the sleepy horse.

Jeff's carpenter shop wasn't open, probably would be open today, but in passing it the kid remembered Jeff, and the barbershop bet, and the money borrowed from that mean and ugly Bobs—ugly now again in his remembrance.

He trudged on up the alley and was glad that people weren't yet astir, then he rounded the block and went to the blacksmith shop that sat back from the street. The blacksmith greeted him with rough impatience. "I said by sunup! I ain't got all day to fool around!"

The kid noticed that the forge was still cold, and he saw, too, that, early as it was, a couple of miners were hunkered beside the door. Their hands were grimy and calloused, and one had a speckled cheek where grains of powder were embedded, and they chewed tobacco and sidled glances toward the horse.

The blacksmith's leather apron rustled on his legs when he walked quickly around Blue Chip, having a look at the set of her feet, and all the while he nervously whetted the square-tipped hoofknife on the heel of his palm. When he took up the clinch cutter and removed the shoes he had an air of hurrying that the kid didn't like.

"Oh, I've shoed her lots of times," the blacksmith told the kid reassuringly. And he also told him, "Don't get in my way!"

The kid was standing close to watch as the blacksmith scraped a rear foot's sole and frog, and when the smith let the foot down from between his knees, the kid pointed. "You ain't done that right!"

The smith glowered and boomed truculently, "What d'you know about shoein'?"

"Lots!" said the kid, whose ex-cavalryman dad had often shod such horses as had to have a rope around each leg and be snubbed up short, too, while he worked on them. "And you ain't even got your forge fired—like you mean to cold fit my horse with a damn' rasp! You ain't goin' to!"

The blacksmith's jaw dropped as if caught dead to rights in his trickery. It didn't take much of a misfit to throw a horse off stride in a race, and if he could have hurried through before onlookers gathered nobody would have been the wiser. The miners had offered to cut him in on a good-sized chunk of a bet if the favorite lost; and it hadn't occurred to the blacksmith that the kid would know or notice anything wrong.

Now one of the miners called in a droned offhand, "Somebody's comin'!"

Allentyre had left the sidewalk, striding up, and the blacksmith greeted him with an eager politeness that offered to attend right away to whatever was wanted. But Allentyre said, "No hurry. Go ahead with Blue Chip. I'll look on. I always learn something." After that, with aloof casualness, "Morning, Bill."

The blacksmith took up the hind foot again and painstakingly cut away all the scaly overgrowth the kid had complained of, and there wasn't any hurrying now. Presently the two miners got up and glumly sauntered off. The blacksmith felt that he might somehow have fooled that smart-aleck kid, but he wouldn't try any monkey business with Allentyre looking on. He stirred the forge's banked coals, set the bellows breathing into them, and carefully shaped the shoes for Blue Chip's feet.

When the last nail was clinched, the kid straightened up and there was Bobs.

Early as it was, she had trigged herself out in ladylike daintiness and come running, and now she snuggled Blue Chip's lips against her cheeks. Her eyes went around and through the kid as if he wasn't there. Mean, snooty, stuck-up—but not ugly now. Bobs had elaborately seen to that. In the warm morning sun her hair shimmered as if it had been shredded from a polished copper pot, and her tawny bobcat

eyes were kitten mild. The tops of high patent-leather button shoes disappeared under the new dress she had waited up for at the dressmaker's last night. It was green, of course, and almost fluffily thin, with rows of tiny pleats running from the hips and about the long, slim waist; and her small hat had a brim that flared and a green feather was on it.

She thought that she was mighty grown-up, and the kid thought so, too, and he had a kind of heart heaviness about it without knowing why. He stalked up to lead Blue Chip away and he wouldn't look at Bobs; but she glanced swiftly aside, then clutched the kid's shoulder, leaned to him, hissed, "Don't you ever dare let on I told you, but Joel's betting his head off on *you!*" Then she turned him loose with a push, and when he looked around she was coolly walking away, head up, nose up, back stiff as a board.

The kid stumbled along in a kind of ecstatic anxiety, proud and uneasy too; and all the warmth that he had been withholding from his feelings about Allentyre was loosened within him.

2

He returned Blue Chip to her stall. The race was set for three o'clock, and the day would drag endlessly. Already some of the covered-wagon race horses were loping along the track, showing off or warming up. Beginning at eleven, there would be all kinds of races, and one was for four miles to settle a long-standing argument between some Three Pointers and the D T outfit.

The woman called the kid to breakfast, but he said he wasn't hungry, and he hoped Blue Chip wasn't either because she couldn't have anything to eat until after the race. Her drowsy quietness pleased him.

The woman brought out a ham sandwich and a cup of sweetened coffee; before he had finished, Deputy Handley rode up the fence and from the saddle said, "Trusand asked me to tell you not to go near the track till he comes. Nothing ever starts on time, and he don't want her to fret out there in the sun, waiting."

The deputy rode on toward the grove for a look about. Vendors had begun to set up shop on boxes, and boards

across barrels, the more fancy having muslin tacked to the boards.

Lots of cowboys were coming in. They'd jog ten, fifteen, or more miles, then ride into town whoopin' and hollerin', and some of them thumbed revolvers overhead. The old sheriff was to sit in his office, where he could be readily found, most of the day. Knowing that the marshal couldn't hold this bunch down, the sheriff shrewdly deputized some of the steadier cowhands and miners. "Fun but no fightin'!" was his hopeful order.

A bunch of miners hired a farm wagon, put four or five planks across the sideboards for seats, and, with the seats crowded, drove up and down Main Street under a long banner: "To Hell with Linton!" Linton campaigners had made the mistake of calling the lynching an outrage. For once cowmen and miners were in agreement; both thought it had been proper—at least for Roper. As for Red Sanger, who knew? Rumors were plentiful, but there was nobody to say whether he was alive or dead.

Cowmen were backing Blue Chip, so it got into nearly everybody's head that Rain Drop represented the miners. And on one trip to the end of Main Street the miners halted their wagon and yelled derisively toward the Kramer stable.

Tony, the little barber, also brought down words that the kid was not to take Blue Chip to the track until Trusand himself came and said so; and the kid surlily thought, *How many times he have to tell me something I wouldn't do anyhow!* The barber was dressed in his Sunday best, which included a red tie, and he jingled his pocket, showing that he had the bet money along to pay off.

Jeff stopped on his way to the grove and grinned at the kid and said, "Listen, you little sore-tailed bear! I've borrowed money to hedge on that bet you got me into, so you'd better win!" The kid glowered and wouldn't say a word. But when a couple of cowboys rode up and called, "Hi-ee, kid! Is Blue Chip all set to win?" the kid said, "Yes!" fiercely.

"That's all we want to know!" they told him, and loped back up town where, with cow-country faith, they bet their shirts right down to the last button.

Before noon the woman fixed a bite to eat and left it on the

kitchen table for the kid, then she went with her two towheads to the grove; but the kid forgot all about his snack.

Harlow had his old hack running back and forth from town to grove, but Trusand came in a covered spring wagon, with well-dressed men and women in it, and they waited in the street until after he had walked to the Kramer stable and told the kid, "I want to make it clear, Bill, that you are to stay right here till I come for you!"

"I been told three times now!"

"No matter who comes, don't you take that horse out till I say so!"

"I won't budge," said the kid, wondering what all of a sudden had got into Trusand to make him so thoughtful about Blue Chip.

8

It was afternoon before Sadie and Kate showed up, and Ned tagged them and was bored. Sadie felt hotter, she said, than when pitching hay. Kate's was an eager anxiety for the kid, and when she put an arm about him he didn't pull away, and she could see that his face was taut and felt the tenseness of his body.

They heard the crack of a starting gun, and Sadie dragged Ned on toward the grove, but Kate remained. Sometimes two horses ran, and sometimes more, and often merely by "lap and tap." The crowd would yell and swarm in on the course after the horses passed, and when the crowd wasn't roaring the vendors were calling. There were lots of little Fourth-of-July flags that Poppa Hartmann had unloaded on some enterprising salesmen.

Kate went into the house many times to look at the clock, and once she brought back a piece of apple pie from the snack that the woman had left for the kid, but he wouldn't eat it. "I feel I'll die 'f I don't win!" he said.

When Kate told him that it was two-thirty the kid brought Blue Chip into the shade of the back yard and hand-rubbed her just to be doing something. The walk down to the grove would be enough to limber her up. Three o'clock came, and no sign of Trusand, but the kid saw that the harrow was being drawn over the course again.

Then, somehow the crowd knew that the four-mile race was about to end, and people began to surge with a running jostle, like something spilled and flowing, to where the finish would be better observed. The homestretch was down Main Street and on to the grove. The kid heard the muffled hoof-thunder, then the D T horse appeared, well in the lead, and the kid's heart jumped in recognizing Boran. The little Englishman rode with short stirrups, without even a whip, and his weight seemed to float with the horse rather than on him. The Three Pointers' man was flogging hard, but Boran effortlessly lifted his untired horse into a sprint for the finish. And the kid watched with a trance-like daze. There just couldn't be that much difference between two good horses—the difference lay in the riders; and Bobs's words came back to the kid with new and startling significance: "Joel is betting his head off on *you!*"

Trusand engaged an old farmer in a one-horse buggy to drive him back from the grove to Kramer's and wait; when he came into the back yard with a stiff stride and a bony tightness around his mouth that Kate knew meant the worst kind of anger, she thought it must be because he had found her here. For the kid's sake she walked out to meet Trusand and spoke pleasantly, but he passed right by her, jerked the halter from the kid's hand, and swung up the rope's knotted end to strike. But he didn't.

The kid stood steady, utterly mystified, and boiling with hate as the gambler almost ground his teeth in saying: "I told you not to take this horse out of the stable till I said so!"

"You never anything of the kind!" said the kid.

"Don't lie to me!"

"I don't lie to you or no damn' man! All you told me was to stay right here, like I have!"

Trusand flung down the halter and pointed toward the stable. "Take her back in there, tie her up, and get out!"

The kid sullenly obeyed; then Trusand pointed. "Go out there and tell that old man in the buggy to wait for me. And you stay there till I come. And I mean *'stay'!* Understand?"

The kid stood stock-still, a scowled puzzlement darkening his face until Kate touched him gently and murmured, "Go on, Bill!" And when the kid was beyond hearing she turned to Trusand. "Sometimes I think you're crazy! I mean just

insane! Senseless, like now! No reason on earth for you to act like that toward him!"

Trusand was removing his gloves and merely glanced up. "This is as good a time as any to tell you that we are all through, completely!" He looked down at his glove again, and Kate said, "I am very glad!" and meant it.

"Just a drunken woman that falls downstairs!" Trusand murmured, not looking at her again until the gloves were off. He expected rage, but she stood quietly, and her dark eyes had an untroubled stare as she wondered that she had ever cared how this man looked, or what he said or did. She hadn't any anger at all, just relief. And the kind of beauty that hadn't been on her face in a long time came and glowed, and she turned away, proud and relieved to be done with him. She went out of the yard and to the buggy where the kid was glowering.

Trusand hurried into the stable, and was still a little shaken at having found Blue Chip standing out in the yard. Everything he owned in the world was up on this race, and he would lose if Blue Chip won. Long ago he had heard of the trick, and with gambler patience he had tried it on horse after horse that he drove out from Harlow's. Now he threw open the manger window for a better light and made sure that the kid was still by the buggy, then he dropped to his knees by Blue Chip's right foreleg and he held a ten-inch length of strong, thread-fine black wire. If he made it too tight she might limp at a walk and there wouldn't be a race; but it had to be tight enough to pinch and cut the ligaments when she ran. The slightest faltering, he was sure, would be enough to make her lose in a quick, short race. Yet within a few minutes after the wire was removed there would be no sign of weakness, and there would be no way on earth for anybody to know what had caused Blue Chip to go lame.

He put the almost invisible wire around the pastern joint and twisted the ends to just the right tension, then drew a small pair of scissors and cut the twisted end short, bent it down and rubbed the hair. The thin black wire was concealed in the black hair. *She's weak-kneed anyhow,* he said to himself.

Trusand straightened, carefully adjusted his dress before he stepped out and called to the kid, then acted frank with,

"Bill, I'm sorry I showed temper. But it was to teach you a lesson. Now bring her out. And you can ride in the buggy with me. We'll go at a walk, slow walk."

"I don't want to ride in a buggy!" the kid snapped, then led Blue Chip into the alley.

Trusand stood and watched: it was like the turn of a card when the pot is big, damned big in this case, but he had tried the wire over and over on so many buggy horses and got just the right tension that he was sure of himself. He saw now that all of Blue Chip's drowsiness was gone, her head lifted and the short ears were stuck forward, interestedly. Now she didn't even flick a foot from the wire's pressure, but after three or four plunging jumps with that chunky body of hers she would limp and be out of the running. Trusand's eyes glinted narrowly as he smiled.

Kate had cut away from the buggy, holding her skirts high as she hurried to meet and go along with the kid, and while Trusand was watching her a man came at an easy lope from the grove, reined up, and stared before he asked, "You that gambler man?" The horseman was small and pockmarked, looked weather-tough and tougher than that, with bold, unflinching eyes.

When Trusand nodded coldly, not liking the fellow's manner, the horseman said, "I've looked all over hell for you. Here!" He thrust out a folded piece of wrapping paper, then trotted off, returning to the grove.

Trusand carelessly unfolded the note. "Trusand, I'm telling you, don't trick that kid." The pencil had nearly scored through the stiff paper in underlining those words. Then: "If you do, I'll kill you. Red Sanger."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A MAN with a dirty ribbon fluttering on his vest rode to meet the kid and bawled, "Hurry up there! You're late!" "Official" was printed on the ribbon, but the kid had a smothery dread about going into the crowd and he wouldn't

hurry. Kate's dress rasped the dry weeds as she walked by him and murmured reassuringly.

He saw Allentyre's calm face loom out of the crowd, heard his quiet voice say, "Here's Boran," and the kid felt Boran take charge of him with, "Don't see or hear them, lad! Everything is fine!" The trainer chattered on, easing the kid's tautness.

Whitey slowly walked Rain Drop among the cluster of admirers and, wanting the kid to hear, bragged cocksurely, saying he'd win hands down. "That little runt never rode in a race before!"

The shaggy Doc Burrows sucked on a pipe that wasn't burning. He liked horses and liked to see them run, but he wasn't much for betting. His Rain Drop was a heavily muscled bay, thicker in the legs and feet than the mare, sturdier but not so fast. Both horses stood at fourteen hands with about the same weight, but Blue Chip's was the finer, more intelligent head, and she had far more grace.

The honest doc was worried; there was too much money up, too damn' much money, and he kept close to Blue Chip and looked for any signs of such tricks as he knew about. She was eagerly nervous now, and alert; she breathed easily without wrinkling a nostril, so there wasn't a sponge up her nose. Her eyes were bright, her ears out; no indication of drugs. Allentyre had watched her shod; couldn't be anything wrong with her feet. Boran would make sure there weren't tacks or wire points in the halter. The doc felt pretty sure that the gambler, even if he tried, couldn't put over anything that would get by two such horsemen as Allentyre and Boran. Maybe, after all, men had grabbed the odds to bet that the experienced Whitey could outmaneuver the green kid. A tricky boy who knew how to worry the other rider and horse had a big advantage in a short race.

Boran held his hand for the kid to mount, then tightened the surcingle, cinching against the kid's drawn-up legs, and after that he replaced the long, heavy halter rope with one that was shorter and soft. Kate crowded by Allentyre without looking at him to reach up and squeeze the kid's hand as she smiled warmingly, then went off alone.

Already people were drawing away, stringing out for a better view along the course, and men rode up and down

to make them stand well back, keep clear of the track. Bets were still being made, some of them half quarrelsomely as men argued about the boys and horses.

Many of the old-timers remained near the starting point; it was here that races of this kind were usually won, and they liked to see the boys handling their mounts on the get-away. Allentyre, however, led his horse to one side of the crowd and rode almost to the end of the course, on the lookout for that gambler who certainly failed to show an owner's interest.

Trusand, with friends about him, was right at the finish line, and one of the friends was Doris with her hand looped around his arm. Bobs was near there, too, keeping close to a judge who held the roll of ribbon that would be stretched across the track; she wasn't talking with anyone, but stood like a proud lady who didn't want to be mussed among strangers. Allentyre knew how tense and anxious she was, and he felt the strain himself; now he would stay near the end of the course and watch that gambler watch the race.

A tired old roughly dressed man, wearing an often-used ribbon that said "Starter," held Rain Drop's bridle in his left hand, Blue Chip's halter in the other. He leaned between the horses' heads and spoke patiently to the boys.

Whitey sneered, "You don't need to tell me anything. I know all that. But he ain't ever rode a race before! I'm goin' to learn him good!"

The old man's look and voice were unchanging as he droned on that this race would be from a standing start, rumps straight toward the track, and nobody could stand at the horses' heads to hold them steady; that was up to the riders. The horses would have to be nose even and all feet down when the starting signal was given. At the sound of the gun they were to turn and go. A horse could wear a halter or bridle, and the rider might use whip and spurs. Whitey had both but the kid was without either.

The old starter then asked, "Any questions?" There weren't any, and he said, "All right, you boys. It's yours from here on!" and he stepped aside.

Instantly Rain Drop went back and half turned under Whitey's tricky pull and Blue Chip swerved nervously. Boran called, "Steady, lad! Steady!" and Whitey laughed.

The kid nudged her back to the mark and lay low, a hand moving with soft firmness along the glossy neck; but Whitey stayed where he was until the starter calmly told him to come up. Whitey did with a plunging jump that again made Blue Chip break; but the kid's hands firmed on the halter, and he talked to her softly and watched the flickering ears as Boran sang out, "Steady, lad! Steady!"

Whitey now dawdled until Blue Chip was set, then in backing he tried to angle Rain Drop's rump against the mare's face, but the starter stepped out and pulled at Whitey's bridle as he droned patiently: "Try something else, Whitey! And don't try that again! No bumpin' on purpose!"

Whitey laughed and flipped his whip toward the kid. "Just because he's a baby, have you got to wet nurse 'im?"

Instantly almost all the blood in the kid's body went into his neck and face, and he wanted to jerk his knees from under the tight surcingle, hit the ground, claw Whitey off the horse and give him a licking—then they could ride. But the chant of "Steady, lad! Steady!" was in his ears, and the sudden remembrance of "Joel is betting on *you!*" kept the kid quiet. His breath was as tight as if he had been running hard, though, and his muscles ached with tenseness and hate of Whitey.

Whitey suddenly backed up again and wheeled, but the kid outguessed him this time and with voice and hands he held Blue Chip so firm that she didn't even swing her head; an applauding murmur came from some of the old-timers, and Boran's chant changed: "That's the way! Make her trust you, lad! Keep steady!"

Now high voices down the course were calling for the race. "Get 'em off! What you waitin' for?" Some of those near by began to taunt Whitey, asking if he was afraid to get set; and Whitey didn't like that sort of talk.

"I'll show you!" he yelled, and came to the line, reining up short; but he was leg to leg with the kid as he shouted, "All right, let 'er go!"

The starter calmly shook his head. Whitey was so close that he could sock a spurred heel into Blue Chip's flank at the sound of the gun, and it would make an awful rumpus

if he won the race and was disqualified. "Get over where you b'long, Whitey!" the starter droned.

Then a hand that the kid didn't see signaled; the gun fired and Blue Chip whirled like a flipped coin and was a half length ahead on the first bound, nearly a full length on the second, and the crowd roared.

Doc Burrows sighed with relief and, feeling that the race was as good as over, silently gave his hand to Boran; he knew that he'd never let Whitey ride a horse of his again. He was too rough and mean.

They were off with hurtling clatter, but right away another kind of sound screeched through the crowd's voice as they passed: the throat-ripping squeal that rises when a horse is coming up from behind. After losing the start, Rain Drop held on head to flank, then under whip and spurs began to close up for the lead as the bound of his feet outreached Blue Chip's. Men howled and women screamed as the horses passed, then the crowd surged into the course under the flying hoof-scattered earth with a look of trying to overtake the horses.

Kate, standing alone in the bed of a farm wagon at the edge of the grove, saw Rain Drop take the lead. She put her hands to her face and looked away and shuddered. Aware that Trusand had fooled her again, she sat down in the wagon and tried not to sob, for she knew what this race meant to the kid, and he was losing.

Boran had jumped his horse and rode wide of the crowd to get to the finish line as fast as possible; and Allentyre joined him and was grimly sure that somehow he had been tricked by the gambler.

Rain Drop was a long neck ahead with blood on his flanks as Whitey furiously lifted him with spurs and whip; and now it was Blue Chip that hung on, not giving another inch, but not gaining, and their feet pounded the harrowed earth into a rain of dirt behind them.

The kid lay along Blue Chip's neck and voicelessly pled with her, his thoughts praying in utter bafflement; and the agony of *What have I done wrong?* lay on him because Boran had said that if Blue Chip got away right, she'd never be caught. The kid's whole body caressed her without one thought of blame. It was all his fault, whatever the

fault; and his heels tightened and every muscle he had was driving ahead, trying to infuse his own strength into her body, and he strained as hard as if he were on the ground, heaving. He couldn't tell whether she gained; he couldn't see anything but the blur of horse and boy sweeping on ahead.

And now people were frantically closing in, narrowing the course near the finish. They screamed at the riders. Sadie's cry passed over the kid's head unheard as she jumped up and down; unknown to Ned, she'd bet all the "cash money" they had.

Blue Chip was driving her utmost; the kid could feel her strain as he had never felt her sleek, hard body labor, and an emotion like hot joy came with the knowledge that she was trying, fighting, head out, nose out, ears back—licked maybe, but not quitting. And Allentyre, tall in the saddle, looked on and could sense that she was gathering length into her stride; but she couldn't win, not now with scarcely more than a stone's throw to go. The judges stood at the finish line with their dirty white ribbon stretched across the course.

The kid heaved with Blue Chip, trying to give his own strength to her. His eyes were open but he really didn't see a thing, and his heart was an aching prayer. Now the crowd began to squeal and screech, fling hats, tear clothes, beat strangers over the head and back. Blue Chip was moving up, and she came on until she was neck and neck with the plunging Rain Drop and only yards to go.

Dead heat for sure, it seemed; then Whitey's whip lashed out at the kid's face. People saw, and a kind of horror bubbled in their screams; but even louder roaring went up and had the sound of triumph. From somewhere within her tough heart Blue Chip drew on the will to win, and flung speed enough into her tired legs to hit the ribbon a good long-nosed length ahead.

She plunged on, but now as if falling, and slowed down with a heavy limp that rocked the kid. He jerked his knees out of the surcingle, hitting the ground and running with her before she could come to a full stop; then he threw himself at her lifted leg. She wouldn't even touch the hoof to the ground as her sides heaved like a gasping bellows; he

thought right off that her leg was broken, and his hands went up and down the leg in frantic gentleness.

An arm swept chokingly about his neck. "Oh, Bill! Oh, Bill, you're wonderful. To come from behind on a hurt horse!" Bobs had bolted out toward him as soon as he crossed the line, and she was the first of the moving crowd to reach Blue Chip. She went down on her knees in the dirt beside the kid and her swift fingers rubbed and squeezed, her eyes boiling with tears.

2

The crowd had broken into a flowing run and Trusand, for once not cool, ran with wide fling of arms and shouted for people to stay away from his horse, stay away. He came up and jerked Bobs aside with a force that tore her waist, then pushed hard at the kid, really striking him. Trusand dropped down and hastily tried to get at the twisted ends of the wire and he couldn't. When the buggy horses, with which he experimented out on the road, had been driven hard and began to limp, it had been no trouble at all for him then to disengage the wire; but Blue Chip had pounded through, not quitting, and now the wire was embedded in the swollen ligaments. He had cut the twist short and he couldn't unwind it, not with bare fingers, and he didn't dare take out his scissors, not with people all about and hovering near.

Trusand was desperate. He had to think, do something and be quick, and fury roiled about in him; a part of his rage was the feeling that he, somehow, had been tricked. He had never imagined that the damned Blue Chip could win or even finish; he'd expected her to falter, limp, and maybe stop; then he could call it a sprain, lead her away from the crowd, and a half minute later nobody could possibly know why she had limped. That was how he had planned.

Some loud voice shouted the guess, "Broke her leg!" That report swept along as a fact and clouded faces, making men swear in pity that Blue Chip must be shot. Trusand saw his chance, or thought he did. "Leg's broke!" he said. "Too damned bad!" He drew a revolver. Men muttered,

swearing, and Bobs screamed, but the kid grabbed the gun with both hands and hung on. He swore at Trusand and kicked his shins and tromped on his feet and screeched, "Her leg ain't broke!"

If Trusand had thumbed back the hammer the kid would have been shot. The gambler would dare almost anything, but not that, not in this crowd, not after the kid had made a finish such as the crowd had seen. The kid fiercely wouldn't let go of the gun and Trusand couldn't jerk it from him; then Allentyre roughly shouldered his way through the crowd and thrust the kid aside and stood before the gambler.

"How much for that horse you want to shoot, Trusand? A broken leg, you say? I'll pay five hundred dollars as she now stands!"

The gambler's eyes had hell in them, and there was a gun in his hand, but he was trapped under the stare of a crowd that swelled and was thickened by people hurrying up. Even now his eyes seemed peering through a pale, skin-tight mask; nothing else in his face looked alive as he studied and was again cold about it. He would have shot the horse and prevented anybody from examining the leg until she had been dragged away, then he'd have left her with a broken leg for doubters to come and look at. But no chance of that now; probably never had been, though, desperately, he would have tried.

He knew, of course, that Allentyre meant to expose him and would anyhow. Already that man Boran was down with the horse's leg in his hands. Trusand wanted to get away from here; the crowd was thick with cowmen and none of them were his friends and might soon grow dangerous. Five hundred dollars was just that many dollars, and he was broke and owed everybody that would lend. Then, as suddenly as if the devil whispered to him, he knew what he would say as soon as he got far enough away from Allentyre. And people would have understanding of, if not indeed some sympathy for, what he had done. After all, Blue Chip had won; her backers wouldn't be out of pocket, and those who had bet against her had almost won. Now he smiled crookedly at Allentyre and thrust the revolver back into the holster, then held out his palm. "Cash!" he said.

Allentyre looked toward an old rancher. "Mack, go along with this fellow to the Alpine, will you? Tell Sam Malloy to take a bill of sale and give him five hundred dollars."

The crowd made way to let them pass through.

Boran found the leg swollen, hot, tender, and he called it a sprain, mentioning the "perforans tendon". Allentyre eyed him with a grim, hard-lidded smile. "That gambler was scared, and so mad he wanted to shoot his horse when she came from behind to win—and you call it a sprain!"

The kid and Bobs were down on the ground again with Blue Chip's foot almost in their laps, and the kid was calling the horse's injury, and Trusand, too, wicked names. His fingers had found where the wire had been twisted tight and bent; so Boran looked again and there it was. The little Englishman stammered out that he had never heard of a thing like this before, and he had thought that he knew a little something about all the tricks. He took nippers and a bandage roll and needle from his saddlebag, and he cut the wire and gave it to Allentyre. Then Boran tightly bandaged Blue Chip's leg, and Bobs and the kid trudged back toward the Kramer stable, petting the horse as they led her.

Bobs's new dress was torn and earth-grimed, her hands were black and her face tear-smudged, her feather was broken and her hat dangled askew, but she was beautiful; and the kid, dazed by her adoration, heard:

"Never was done before, Bill! Never in a quarter race! To get away first then fall back, but come on to win with a crippled horse, all in a race that short! She did it for *you*, Bill! And now that Joel's bought her, she's ours! He's going to adopt you! He told me so, and we'll be cousins!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BY SUNDOWN the kid was alone with Blue Chip in the Kramer stable. She had perked up and was enjoying her oats, though she gingerly favored the swollen ankle. Before leaving for the ranch Boran had replaced the tight bandage with one of loose wool, and the kid was to keep it wet with

hot vinegar and salt. Rest for a few days was what she needed most.

Now only covered wagons with people about their supper fires remained at the grove; but folks were still straggling out of town, heading for home, curling up dust in the still air.

A solemn unhappiness overlay all of the kid's pleasure, overlay even the generous and humble warmheartedness with which Bobs had flung herself at him. The kid's thoughts went around and around that gambler; there was no getting him out of mind, no wanting to get him out. He had hurt and crippled Blue Chip, and that alone would have made the kid vengeful; but now the kid knew how he had been fooled and lied to and wronged. And on the way to the stable Bobs, in telling everything bad that she could think of about Trusand, had said fiercely that Miss Kate never got drunk and fell downstairs. She didn't drink anyhow; and she had just pretended that because the gambler would shoot anybody that took up for her.

The kid was weary and could have dropped in his tracks and slept, but he spooned hot vinegar onto the bandage and kept adjusting Blue Chip's blanket. All the while he brooded on the promise he had made to himself: *I'm going to kill him! Fair and to his face, I'll kill him!*

Nevertheless, some of the trifling events of the day kept jumping up in his thoughts, were briefly remembered, pushed aside. Doc Burrows had stopped by to shake hands all around. Young Toby, sober as a judge ought to be, loped up and grinned as he pointed to the star on his vest and called it a hell of a trick for the sheriff to play on a fellow at a time like this! The little barber looked as rumpled as if he had been in a fight, and he joyfully stuffed money into the kid's pocket. When the kid wanted to repay Bobs she couldn't take it, she said, because she hadn't a purse or a pocket.

Sam Malloy came, red-faced and puffing, ostensibly with the bill of sale, and he talked in a mutter with Allentyre. Then it was that Allentyre told Bobs to hurry to the hotel, get into her togs, and head for home.

"But why, Joel? Why?" she asked stormily. "Why tonight? Now?" And when he said that she could overtake

Boran and have company through the dark, Bobs hooted at the idea of caring about the dark, and she turned on Malloy. "Sam, you've just told him something that makes him want me to leave town! Haven't you? What was it?"

Malloy carefully looked down his nose and pretended to examine the wire off Blue Chip's ankle. When Bobs at last yielded, it was with a sarcastic, "All right, Mr. Allentyre!" Then she pulled the kid into a corner of the stall and whispered, "I'm not going! You'll see!" But she made the pretense of obedience by marching uptown with Malloy.

Allentyre stayed on at the stable to rebuff the curious and meddlesome who stopped in clusters on their way back from the grove; the kid could see that his manner had been changed by the coming of Malloy. Something impatient and hard was moving about under Allentyre's quietness; he grew taciturn even toward friends who paused, and he often looked at his watch. That slick-tongued gambler was telling uptown that he had never thought of throwing the race until he learned how heavily Allentyre had bet on Blue Chip; then he had been willing to ruin even himself in order to keep Allentyre from winning so much as a dollar; Allentyre was in love with his wife, and she with him, and that was why she had left her home. "And a lot of the damn' fools believe him!" Malloy had groaned.

Now, left to himself, loneliness put its weighty shadow on the kid, and he was tired and tense and missed not having seen Kate after the race.

Her warm hug and joy were what he wanted.

Kate had come hurrying to be near him, but Joel Allentyre stood in the alley, so she turned quickly and went on uptown alone. Ned and Sadie, thinking of farm chores, had pulled for home as soon as the race was over. Uptown, Kate found there wasn't a room to be had. She wouldn't return to the Palace but thought of Doc Burrows's office, and sat there and looked out over the Main Street jostle, mostly around saloon doors, until the doctor came.

He was solicitous and unbantering toward her now, not like himself; when she asked what was wrong, he growled, "Human nature!" and unlocked the door to the room where he slept and told her to use it. He grumbled that he wouldn't go to bed anyhow on a night like this because he was sure

to be pulled out to hunt for a bullet or sew up some heads. He was almost sorry, he said, that it now looked like Reseda would remain the county seat.

2

It was dark when the kid hung up the lantern and went into the kitchen. The woman had dragged her tired tow-heads back from the grove and gone to bed with a headache herself. The kid stirred up the coals and laid on pieces of a broken pine box. He liked the smell of the vinegar and tried its heat on the back of his hand.

When he returned to the stable the alley door was open and a small pockmarked man lounged there, reins in his hands and a horse's head behind him. The kid challenged him instantly with "What d'you want?"

"Friend of yours wants to have a talk, alone. You all alone?"

The kid said that he was, and the man stepped back into the alley and whistled, then moved out of the light. Another horse came up and Red Sanger got off and stood in the door. He had lost weight and a tired haggardness was all over him, but he was still big and calm, and he peered with an eager reaching look as he said, "I never forget when I owe something, son. I owe you a lot!" The kid shook his head denyingly.

Then Red's deep voice had a slow, hard sound: "I hear you purt' near didn't win your race."

The kid put his hand to Blue Chip's shoulder. "She won it, crippled!" he said proudly. And after that he stared at Red and used man-sized curses on the gambler.

Red listened without any movement or expression, and the kid shut up, standing glum and tense, uncomfortable that this outlaw was here. Then, without thinking, he blurted, "Why're you back in town?"

There was still no change on the haggard bristly face. "For a little business that'll be finished pretty soon—I hope. Though I reckon I won't have time to do ever'thing I'd like. But I sort of wanted to say howdy and good-bye to you, son. And I've heard what Trusand done to your horse—done after he knew better too! So I thought maybe it would be

a good thing for you to let the sheriff know it was him who told me when that gold was going through to Risto. He was as much one of the bunch as anybody! The sheriff then can check back and tie things up. 'Tain't often I turn on a friend, son. But this time I got my reasons. That'll be about all, so good-bye."

Red Sanger held out his hand and the kid took it, and Sanger read the kid's face and nodded. "I'm sorry too. But somehow crooked trails are narrow and you can't turn back —leastwise, till you get a long ways off."

He faced about and went into the alley and closed the door quietly; then the kid heard the two horses leave at a walk. They were going back uptown.

After that the kid sat with his head between his hands and wondered if he ought to tell the sheriff that Red Sanger was in town. He thought that he ought but he knew he wouldn't, and it was a worrisome thing when thoughts and feelings met head on.

Then a horse ramped up at full lope and stopped suddenly. Toby flung the stable door wide, striding in, and Blue Chip flinched with limping sway. The kid jumped up and swore at him, but Toby reached out, caught the kid's arm, pulled. "Joel's been shot an's asking for you! Come climb up behind me! They took him up to the doc's office."

3

A lot of men were bunched up on the sidewalk near the Bull's Head Saloon, and Toby, riding with the kid behind him, pointed. "That's where it happened!"

They dismounted at the drugstore and squeezed by men who were using the stairs as seats. It was too dark to see faces until they reached the hall, and there Toby jammed through the small circle about Sam Malloy and thrust the kid forward.

Malloy's pudgy body sagged worriedly. He looked at the kid, looked at his cigar, took another puff, threw it down and stepped on it; then he opened the door for the kid and went in with him.

No one was in the outer room but Jeff, and the big carpenter looked through the inner door and had a bowed

quietness. As the kid went by Jeff silently patted the boy's shoulder.

The curtains were down and one lamp was on the table but Kate held the other one for the doc, and she put a finger to her lips and warningly shook her head at the kid. For him it was like coming to the side of a grave because everybody was so quiet and looked despondent. Bobs cried with a choking sound as if trying not to be heard.

Malloy rose on tiptoes as he approached the couch and whispered, "Any hope?"

"If you believe in miracles!" Doc Burrows growled unbelievingly, and his eyes didn't lift. He held a long, glittering something that was shaped like narrow scissors with flat tips and he looked at it distrustfully.

Malloy stepped back on tiptoes to where Bobs was huddled in the big worn chair and he crouched with an arm about her and didn't speak.

The kid thought Allentyre was dead. He lay on his back and had been stripped to the waist and his eyes were closed; a blue puckered spot scarred the left side of his neck and another was more vivid on his breast. Kate's hand began to tremble as she watched the kid, and the doc growled roughly, "Hold that light still, can't you?"

The kid's voice flew up in startling loudness: "Who shot him? That gambler, I bet!"

The doc's voice was harsh. "You'd lose! Now get out of here!" Then Kate pointed toward Jeff, and the kid understood and went back to him.

Jeff rested a hip on the table in the front room and twisted one button after another on his vest, and his words stumbled in telling that Joel had gone to the Palace just about dark and asked for Trusand, and nobody knew, or would say, where he was. Joel had looked at his watch. "Tell that gambler I'll be back at eight o'clock, and I'll come straight from across the street!"

No need to ask why he was coming back; and by announcing which way he'd come people would know and could keep out of the line of fire if the gambler waited to meet him.

At five minutes of eight Joel walked out of the Alpine and started up, and men hung in dark doorways to watch.

Jeff himself was under the porch of the hardware store next to the Bull's Head when Joel passed. Joel didn't look to the right or the left, but kept his eyes fixed ahead toward the Palace doorway. Somebody shot him from the narrow space between the hardware store and saloon.

The fellow fired three times and was so close that it looked like the muzzle blast was hitting Joel. He went down, and Jeff was the first man to reach him. Since the doctor's office was so near, Jeff and Toby had at once carried him up here.

"That gambler!" the kid said accusingly.

Jeff gauntly shook his head. No, Trusand had been playing stud, and when somebody told him it was about eight o'clock he nodded and went right on dealing, cold as a dead man sitting upright. "Anyhow," Jeff said, looking the kid up and down, "nobody much bigger than you could squeeze through between the buildings. Somebody little was layin' for Joel!"

The kid had an angered stubbornness in declaring it was somebody that the gambler had put there, and again Jeff shook his head; Trusand had never been known to dodge a fight.

The kid went back on tiptoes and again looked into the room. Now Kate was holding a basin and with a wet, red-stained rag kept wiping while the shaggy doc bent over and looked as if trying to poke carefully. Sam Malloy held the lamp and seemed to be holding his breath too. Bobs was crumpled up in the chair, her overalled legs drawn under her and her head was down, and her hair had fallen forward.

The kid tiptoed back and pulled at Jeff. "You come with me!"

"For to do what?"

"What ought to be done!"

4

Men still hung about the sidewalk where Allentyre had been shot. From across the street the kid could recognize the sheriff, a dogged lump of a man, listening to talk and hoping that somebody's chance guess might be helpful.

The kid wouldn't tell Jeff what he was up to but trotted along in a way that made the carpenter stretch his legs. They stopped before Hartmann's General Store; it was closed but a lamp burned in the rear where the Hartmanns lived. The kid beat on the door until the squaw-shaped figure of Mrs. Hartmann appeared. Poppa Hartmann was somewhere about town, lamentatiously talking with men.

Mama Hartmann wouldn't open the door until she knew who it was, and the kid had Jeff remain outside. When she heard that he wanted a gun, refusal gathered on Mama's worried face. "Gun? You don't need a gun! Too many guns in this town now! You're just a boy!"

But it made some difference after he explained that he wanted a rifle, she gave him the grease-packed carbine that he asked for, and also a ramrod and a box of shells. He paid her from the money that the barber had put in his pocket.

When he left the store Jeff eyed the rifle and asked questions, and the kid said, "You've got to cut it down to fit me."

Jeff wanted to know why, and the kid said that he had been eager for this carbine from the time he had first seen it, and winning the bet had permitted him to buy it. "Tomorrow I'll fix it for you," Jeff promised.

"Right now and I'll pay what you say!" The kid jangled his pocket, but the word "pay" made Jeff snort. "Who wants pay? Anyhow, I owe a boy like you something for making fun of him that day like I did!"

They cut across the street and went through the alley by Mark's restaurant, empty now and dark, and turned down behind the Alpine where Jeff opened the back door and hung up a lantern.

The gun was a Winchester lever action .44-40, with a twenty-inch round barrel and a tubular magazine that held twelve shots. The kid explained, "My dad cut four inches off one just like this for me. I'm bigger now. You take off three."

Jeff scratched his head doubtfully, but placed the gun in a vise between pieces of wood, and cut three inches from the butt. The butt plate now wouldn't fit where the stock had been sawed, and with a carpenter's care he rasped and

sandpapered the rough edges of the black walnut until they were smooth. All the while the kid hung over the workbench. Jeff loosened the vise and gave him the gun with, "There you are!" and reached for the lantern.

"You've got to wait!" the kid said, and Jeff watched him clean the gun. He wiped out the barrel and magazine, then dug with stick and cloth to get the thick grease from the action: after that he worked the lever and snapped the hammer before he loaded the magazine and with the butt to his hip began throwing the cartridges out and they came fast.

"You shoot that way?" Jeff asked.

"If I have to," the kid said, then put the gun to his shoulder, cheeked the stock in sighting, and threw out the remaining shells even faster.

"Damn' if you don't know about guns!" Jeff admitted, and stooped and poked about to help pick up the scattered cartridges, and the kid wiped each one before he reloaded, then took others from the box to replace those that couldn't be readily found among the floor's shavings and sawdust.

The kid moseyed toward the door, saying, "Now you can put out the light."

Jeff turned back to the workbench and reached up; something caused him to look back over his shoulder, but the boy had gone. His running feet were heard, then lost, and Jeff didn't know whether he had gone up or down the alley.

Jeff felt hurt and mad too. He had been as nice as he knew how to be to the kid, and for him to act like this! Then Jeff quit being mad and had a cramplike sick feeling as Trusand lurched into his thoughts. That kid would try anything, and he believed Trusand had planned to have Allentyre killed. Jeff was suddenly cold, then hot and weak. He'd have taken the gun away if he had suspected anything of the kind, and the kid knew it and dodged off so that Jeff wouldn't come along with him.

Now Jeff didn't stop to put out the lantern or shut the door; his big feet pounded up the alley, and cut back alongside of Mark's to the street. Men were shouting and riding and running, and Jeff thought the excitement was because of something the kid had already done. But the little barber, who wouldn't mix in any of the town's night-wildness, was

again peering from the unlighted door of his shop, and he told Jeff that folks had just learned how Red Sanger had come to town, laid for the jailer, and made him turn Mike Eads loose; then he had gagged the jailer and locked him up in Eads's place.

5

Music was going in the Palace and smoke wreathed men's heads, making a blurrish swirl against the lamps. A thick jostle stirred along the bar with voices going up and down, some in sharp, disputatious wrangling over events of the day. Knuckles rapped, bottles passed, and glasses were overfilled greedily; Blacky's bar cloth sopped up spilled liquor. Sweat was all over Blacky's greasy glum face; he had dug deep to bet on what Trusand promised would be a sure-thing win. He knew that the gambler had been badly shaken by the way things were turning out, and Blacky was glad of it and wished him worse luck.

Fellows who formerly hung around Trusand and felt complimented when he used their names were keeping away from him now as from a stranger they didn't care to know. He'd been in a head-to-head stud game with a half-drunken miner, and not a person stood by, looking on. The miner went broke and got up with a fuddled stagger, but Trusand continued to sit there. He shuffled the cards, pressed the edges even, and he felt the loneliness.

It was something like a chill draught from an unseen window blowing through him. He thoughtfully went over everything he had said and done, studying for what had been wrong. To do it over, he didn't see how he could do it any better, even though he hadn't done it well. His somber explanation of why he had tried to throw the race hadn't been questioned, not openly, but he sensed a lack of sympathy and some disbelief. Men eyed him queerly and looked away with evasive quickness. One tough Squared-Circle rider came the nearest to challenge with "Mister, we bet on a horse race—not on whether your wife loves you or not!" And Trusand let it pass.

Nobody yet had intimated that he had had anything to

do with Allentyre's being shot, but he sensed the feeling that it was just a bit too damn' lucky for happenstance, and men were showing him the kind of avoidance that meant misgivings.

Now his pale fingers moved together, tightly interlaced, and he pressed his thin lips with an effort to keep the mask-like look from slipping. He was thinking of Red Sanger. After all, perhaps, it hadn't been completely unlucky that Blue Chip won. He had thought that Sanger sent the note in from a distance, and so believed that there would be time enough to take his winnings and get safely away; but Sanger had been in, or near, town and would have killed him without sending any word as to where and when—as Allentyre did.

Trusand coldly reviewed the bad luck and felt that he had learned his lesson. From now on he'd stick to cards and cards only; he knew them as well as any man. No more stage robberies or horse races. They'd been a mistake. Of course he'd have to leave this town, this part of the country, and go at once. There was too big a risk in staying on, and he wasn't taking Doris. She'd be an added expense and, anyhow, women as pleasing were easy to find. Trusand's thoughts squirmed about and hurt him; he couldn't hide from himself that he had lost his nerve today. He'd had enough already without having to face Allentyre, who was a resolute and dangerous man; and the gambler had felt such dread of meeting him that it became fear.

And the fear lingered until he decided that the thing to do was to make a start right now. Get a horse at Harlow's and ride off and keep going. Be uncomfortable and tedious, but he could foresee that it wasn't safe to remain here even another day. He stood up, adjusted his vest, coat, hat, and started toward the far end of the bar for a last drink and a bottle to take along.

Doris left a cowboy standing on the dance floor and ran close to Trusand and said eagerly, "Dan, I hear that Kate is up there nursing Joel!" Her dark eyes filled with guilty hopefulness as she added, "So maybe it *is* true about them!" If true, that would make it all right in every way for Doris to go away with her friend's husband.

"True? Of course it's true!" Trusand said staringly. Then he added, "I never lie!" and went on.

Doris returned to the cowboy to finish the dance, and he pointed through the smoke haze toward the front of the saloon. "Would you look at that little devil standin' over yonder by the door! Stiff as a froze fence post!"

The kid was close up to the wall and in line with the bar, which ended about two long steps from the wall; he had both hands behind him, and he stood with grotesque stiffness. Doris thought that he had a lost, pathetic look. Then a low cry leaped in her throat as she saw the kid's hands come from behind his back where he had been rigidly concealing a rifle. The rifle went to his shoulder, aiming down along the bar, and his thin voice tore through the rackety saloon chatter: "Get away from between me and that gambler! All you, git!"

Voices stopped as suddenly as when a rattling wind hushes, and the row of men along the bar twisted and hunched forward or stepped back for a look; then oaths popped in their mouths and with panicky trample they flung themselves from the bar and scurried out across the floor. Blacky flattened himself against the shelves of bottles and looked to right and left and back again, and his eyes bulged and had a greasy shine. Thirty feet away, at the other end of the bar, Trusand faced the kid's leveled rifle and kept both hands in view on the bar, knowing that if he made a move the rifle would bang.

Then the kid called out shrilly, "I'm going to kill you—fair!" And he brought the gun from his shoulder and held it across his breast, muzzle up, giving the gambler a chance to defend himself.

Trusand didn't move. Foreboding lay upon him. A man could stand only so much strain; that race, Sanger, Allentyre, and now this kid; and the kid was swift and dangerous and not afraid, not in the least afraid. But Trusand knew him inside and out, and now chose his words with as much care as he chose cards when secretly arranging for a stacked deck.

There was a breath-held quiet while men in lurching postures waited with muscles braced against the bang of

guns. Trusand's face was unchanging as he lifted his voice for everyone to hear: "Bill, I wouldn't hurt you! No matter what! You know that!"

"You done worse! You hurt my horse to make her lose!"

The gambler went on playing his hand with studied calmness, and said quietly, "Go ahead and shoot me if you want! I won't shoot back at you!" His hands lay on the bar, fingers together and palely vivid against the dark liquor-polished wood, and nothing in the taut set of his face resisted or flinched. He merely waited.

The kid pondered from under an angry frown, not knowing what to do or say. He felt that he was somehow being tricked, but just how he couldn't tell; and he couldn't shoot a man who stood quietly and said that he wouldn't shoot back. Rage was boiling around in the kid and he let fly with, "You blue-blacked Miss Kate's face too!"

Trusand barely shook his head. "Bill, you know that isn't so! You've been lied to!"

"All right then, if you won't fight me, put up your hands!"

"My hands? Why?"

"You told Red Sanger when the Risto gold was goin' out, and you're one of the bunch! I'll turn you over to the sheriff and he'll figger things to prove it!"

Trusand remained perfectly quiet, his eyes tightening into a stony shimmer, and after a thoughtful pause he asked with cool remonstrance, "Who ever told you a thing like that?"

"Red Sanger hisself! 'Twas me that took the rope off his neck when I found him alive after he was hung!"

"He's a liar!" Trusand said, and slowly lifted his hand to his hat, pushing it back a little; then, with an air of tiredness, he let his hand fall. Because he was standing close at the end of the bar no one could see that he moved his coat aside and that his fingers closed on the revolver, which he lifted just enough to cock the gun in its holster.

"So I'm a liar, am I?" Red Sanger's deep voice came from the street's swing door that he had pushed open, pausing there to see and judge.

Now, as he moved in with unhurrying plod, his small eyes had a bullet-straight look on Trusand, and he walked toward the kid without glancing at him. Whether he was

speaking to the boy or gambler no one could tell. "I was clear safe out of town but come back. A man can't ride easy with broken promises behind him!" Then, "One side, Bill, one side!" Sanger added, and in saying that he looked aside and with a slow reach twisted the rifle out of the kid's hands. "This," Sanger said with a belly-deep rumble, "is my show!"

Trusand fired. The bullet thudded into Sanger's bear-shaped body. He grunted hoarsely, dropped the rifle, and was pulling his revolver when Trusand fired again.

Sanger, hit again, swayed as if a little drunk and peered with the look of gazing afar as, with unhurrying movement, he drew his revolver, raised his arm.

Again Trusand fired. Again Sanger was hit, but his stub-born, ox-strong body stood the shock and he held his gun with a full-arm reach, sighting carefully when he fired. Black smoke rolled between them like a thick floating wall.

The gambler staggered backward, his revolver clattering on the floor. His arm rose gropingly toward his breast before he crumpled forward, face down, dead. Sanger peered unsteadily until Trusand fell, then he sank quietly to the floor, hand down to catch his weight, and he huddled on his side and closed his eyes, seeming to sleep.

6

The next morning a little before noon the sheriff got off his horse in the alley behind the Kramer stable and plodded with heavy drag of feet to the open door; and the kid said, "You look awful sick, Sheriff!"

"Am." The sheriff turned unsteadily for a place to sit, then slumped on a box and didn't move except to pull at his mustache, and after that he took a bandanna and blew his nose hard. "Son," he mumbled, "I got the worst job to do I ever had in my life!"

"You mad about me and Red Sanger?"

The sheriff looked directly at the kid and shook his head. "No, I reckon not. And I'm glad he killed that gambler!" He took off his hat and fanned his face sluggishly, then he put the hat on a knee and ran fingers up through his gray

hair. "I'm on my way over to tell Mrs. Summers it was Whitey shot Joel! Best friend she ever had!"

The kid lurched forward. "Where is he?" He made the short sentence just one whirring word; the sheriff knew what he meant and said, "Locked up in jail." Then he shook his head at the kid and spoke firmly. "Much as you won't like it, son, one thing you've got to learn from now on is that the law has a right to fiddle and fool around before it does justice!"

"How'd you catch him?"

"Boy senseless enough to do a thing like that ain't got sense enough not to be found out! He was brag-showing some five-dollar gold pieces this morning. Five of 'em. More money'd he'd ever had in his life! And Malk, there at the stable, is not very bright but he was bright enough to wonder what the gambler wanted with Whitey last night. So I drug Whitey over to my office. He whined and lied and bawled and fin'ly told how he had a grudge against Joel because Joel had thrashed him, and kicked him off the ranch, and was going to take you instead of him to raise—and I don't know what all, and don't care! Trusand had coax-promised to take Whitey off with him, learn him to be a gambler—be pardners, the two of 'em. Ugh! We found the gun where Whitey said he hid it. Trusand gave it to him last night—and twenty-five dollars! I'd like a drink of water, son. Then I've got to go over and— Well, it'll about the same as kill that poor woman!"

7

Bobs and the kid sat on the rail of the Alpine's alley balcony with a twenty-foot drop below them. Jeff was hammering in the back door of his shop and called, "You kids be careful you don't fall off!" But they weren't speaking, not even to each other.

Bobs eyed the side of the kid's downcast face. She wasn't mad at him except that he always made her feel a little helpless when he pulled the thin muscles of his jaw into a hard lump and had a faraway stare at nothing.

Joel was going home tomorrow. He was nearly well

though not yet able to walk up and down stairs, and a bed would be made down in the buckboard for him. Every time Doc Burrows looked at Joel, the doc would shake his head: he had been sure that death would get him. After Joel had been removed to the Alpine, Kate and Bobs and even the kid had taken turns, staying by him night and day; and the doc, in his rough way, said that it was nearly as much a miracle as Lazarus.

Now Bobs swung her legs thoughtfully before she asked, "Don't you know Joel will do everything he can for you?"

"As much as my dad!"

"And don't you like me?"

"Next best to anybody!"

Bobs's face softened and she coaxed, "And Blue Chip's half yours. Boran will help up; he said so! A race horse with a heart like hers—she'll start a breed good as the old Morgans or Steel Dust! We'll raise the best quarter horses in the world! So won't you come?"

The kid stubbornly shook his head, not looking at her. "I won't leave Miss Kate, no matter what! She's alone and was good to me. I won't go away from her for anything!"

Bobs looked long and hard at the side of the kid's face before she threw her legs over the rail and ordered, "You wait right here!"

She tramped the length of the upstairs hall with frowning intent to have it out with Joel, knowing that he loved Kate, but that he wouldn't say so or show it because he was too proud to let the town think that the gambler's lie about them had been the truth. *Pooh for what anybody thinks!* Bobs told herself.

She opened the door, and stopped short; her jaw dropped and she wasn't noticed. Bobs left the door partly open as she backed away, then ran to the balcony and told the kid to come quick. "Don't make a noise," she whispered, "though I bet they wouldn't hear it thunder!"

With their heads together they looked through the half-open door. Joel was so much the taller that he had to stoop to keep his arms about Kate as they stood near the center of the room. Her hat was half pushed from her head, and her lifted face glowed as if sunlight were on it. Joel was

telling her softly, "I sent for you because I don't care now what people think or say! We've the right——"

A half minute later Bobs was back with the kid. She pulled the door to quietly, then she got up close to the kid and whispered fiercely, "*Now* are you happy?"

The kid grinned at her and Bobs laughed back at him, then put up her cheek. "Go ahead!" she told him. "If you don't, I'll get mad!" So he did, timidly.